

Broken

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/20562179) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/20562179>.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warnings:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence , Rape/Non-Con
Category:	F/M
Fandom:	Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling
Relationship:	Hermione Granger/Draco Malfoy
Characters:	Draco Malfoy , Hermione Granger , Blaise Zabini , Pansy Parkinson , Harry Potter , Ron Weasley , Ginny Weasley , Narcissa Black Malfoy , Lucius Malfoy
Additional Tags:	Heavy Angst , Comfort/Angst , Angst and Tragedy , Angst and Hurt/Comfort , Slow Build , Slow Burn , Extremely slow build , long fic , Draco Malfoy is confused as hell , Angry Harry , The Golden Trio , The golden trio is no more , ex friends , Lots of Hurt Feelings , seriously everyone is angry , Romance , Eventual Romance , Post-Second War with Voldemort , Not Epilogue Compliant , Post-Hogwarts , Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence , Past Hermione Granger/Ron Weasley , Background Harry/Ginny , Suicidal Thoughts , Graphic Depictions of Illness , Child Death , Violence , Domestic Violence , Insanity , Arguments , Healing , Draco is an asshole , i cannot stress that , Hermione is a mess , Minor Pansy Parkinson/Blaise Zabini , It Gets Worse Before It Gets Better , that goes for everything , Hermione lives on a lake , Awkward Romance , Slow Romance , Angst and Romance , Curse Breaking , Not Harry Potter and the Cursed Child Compliant , Moving On , Forgiveness , Explicit Language , flawed Hermione , She makes bad choices
Language:	English
Collections:	HarryPotter14 , dm fanfics , hp fics i could read endlessly , Dramione Fics That Live In My Head Rent Free , dramione to read , ultimate dramione rereads , the very best , dramione , Best of Hermione's , dramione favs , Dramione Stuff , Elite Dramione , Dramione Tea Room , Bea Has Read These Already , Finished Reading , GOATED DRAMIONE , dramione ff i'll read one day , I want to read this , Inventive Dramione , International Fanworks Day 2022 - Classic Fic Recs , Dramonie that destroyed me , More Addictive than Dark Magic , Pensieve , Dramioneotp , Harry Potter Faves , Dramione TBR Wanna read when the time comes , ToReadHD , fics that... transcend , dramoine , Fav Dramiones , My (infinite) Dramione TBR , golden trio era favorites , Dramione Best Fics God Tier Dramione
Stats:	Published: 2008-04-04 Completed: 2019-09-23 Words: 297,014 Chapters: 37/37

Broken

by [inadaze22](#)

Summary

Draco felt something close to pity for the woman in front of him. While that disturbed him to no end, what really disgusted him was the fact that something had broken Hermione Granger's spirit beyond recognition.

Notes

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

- Translation into Русский available: [Broken // Сломленные](#) by [stanpool](#)
- Translation into Español available: [Broken by Inadaze22 \(Traducción al Español\)](#) by [Isa_Lovegood](#)

we lie best when we lie to ourselves

Chapter Summary

She didn't expect to get back what she'd lost.

Prologue

We Lie Best When We Lie to Ourselves

When Hermione was young, someone once told her that life was the best teacher. Each lesson it taught, each test it handed out, would remain etched in her mind for eternity.

It sounded like a riddle at seven years old, but the words stuck with her. What they meant, however, she wouldn't understand until much later.

Eleven years later, precisely.

By eighteen, life had taught her many unforgettable lessons: good triumphed over evil, everything you needed to know could be found in books, not everything was what it seemed, what didn't kill you made you stronger, it was always darkest before the dawn, and not everyone that passed through your life was meant to stay.

But those weren't the only lessons that she learned.

Hermione also learned that honesty was a treacherous thing. And for that reason, she stopped being honest for the next five years of her life. Nothing good had ever come from telling the truth. "*The truth hurts*," her mother had said, but she'd never fully believed that statement; it was too vague to be considered an infallible truth. In the end, though, her mother had been partially right; the truth was a painful thing. As the years wore on, it seemed that the truth also had an awful way of reminding Hermione of her own insignificance in the grand scheme of things.

Okay, so the truth hurt, but lies... *lies could kill*.

Lies were like a thief in the night, cloaked in stealth. They waited for the perfect opportunity to pounce and punish someone for their sins. It seemed that, no matter how far a liar ran or how they tried to clean up their mess, lies patiently waited to exact their pound of flesh. Lies had a way of making the liar constantly look over their shoulder, paranoid and restless. Even when they thought they were safe, they weren't.

Hermione considered herself smarter than the average liar; she had eluded capture better than the best. For that and that alone, she was proud. Hermione had been brought up to be truthful and noble, a champion of all that was good and just. Her actions and decisions five years ago had been a metaphorical slaughter of the morals and values instilled in her by her parents, but her dishonesty wasn't the only problem. Now that she had returned, she was exhausted from the charade; it was wearisome to keep up with which lie she'd told to whom.

Hermione couldn't forget the truth: her lies were pleasant to others' ears, but brutal on her own heart. And her heart... Well, she wasn't sure she had one left. It still thumped in her chest, pumped blood, but it was hollow, drained, possibly beyond repair. It couldn't feel much, just the hopelessness that grew out of her utter despondency.

She couldn't stomach feeling any sort of remorse for the things she'd done, nor did she need to feel the consequences or repercussions of her actions, because she already knew what her lies had cost her.

Everything.

Her life as she had known it.

And she held no misconceptions of regaining what she'd lost.

For that reason, she lacked the motivation to stop. After all, liars didn't care about motivation or consequence. They appreciated the quick fix that their lies furnished and then promptly left. But Hermione knew that quick fixes didn't last, especially not in her case. It was like using tissue to clean an oil spill.

Five years ago she'd packed up her entire life and left because she couldn't clean up her mess. But there was no need to run any longer. Now that she was back, all she had left were the lies she'd lived and breathed for so long.

Sometimes she felt almost guilty. Hermione supposed that a conscience wasn't something a liar had. She was sure her conscience was long gone. The ironic thing was that her lies didn't hurt them as badly. They lived happy, blissful, ignorant lives wherein they hated her, and for good reason. She, on the other hand, was left to carry the burden alone. They had each other and she... She had no one.

But those lies weren't the worst.

No, the worst were the ones she told herself.

No, it didn't bother her last month in the Ministry when Harry refused to speak to her, much less acknowledge her existence. It was fine that hardly anyone noticed that she'd been back for over seven months. When she saw pictures of Ginny with Harry and Ron, it didn't upset her that she'd been replaced in their lives. And when she thought of her parents, the fact that they'd died not remembering her didn't break her heart. No. Not at all. It didn't even bother her that she would spend her life alone in the prison of her own creation. She was fine.

Lies. Lies. Lies.

There were countless others lies that she told herself, each just as painful as the last.

The fact that she had coerced herself into thinking that she was okay—now *that* took talent. What took even more talent was telling herself that life would get better now that she was back in Britain. It was a rather brilliant talent that she'd picked up along her path of self destruction.

She lied best when she lied to herself.

These days, it was as easy as breathing.

Any given day, she could lie a hundred times to herself, all the while ignoring the truth that she was dying inside.

two solitudes

Chapter Summary

If she had stayed, maybe she would've had the life that she wanted, the children that she dreamed of, or even the contentment that she longed for, but there was no time to think about that.

That was torture at its finest.

Chapter One

Two Solitudes

Part 1: Tangerine robes

August 14th

Cleaning house was one of the necessary aspects of his newfound—hopefully long-term—domesticity. Too bad he hated it all the same. Outside of work, Draco had never been one of the cleaner, more organized people. He was a pampered, spoiled child who had grown into a man, and with the number of girlfriends that he'd had in the past five years, Draco had never had much of a reason to be organized. But as of two days ago, he was single. And it felt good. No, it felt *brilliant*.

Draco Malfoy stifled a disinterested yawn, ignoring his rumbling stomach.

He was beyond tired and just wanted to go home to continue on his quest of ridding his house and life of lingering evidence of his latest ex-girlfriend.

Fate, Mother, and Pansy Parkinson, however, had other plans. Plans that included a scheduled dress robes fitting in Diagon Alley... Oh, and mild to moderate torture to his person. Yes, he had been dragged along—literally.

"Draco, love, don't you want to come along for my fitting?" His mother's saccharine tone sounded, oddly enough, almost malicious.

Pansy pasted a sweet grin on her face as well.

Sweet wasn't a word he would typically use to describe Pansy or his mother. He was mildly suspicious.

"I'd rather Stupefy myself."

Before he could kick them out, Pansy told him that he had something on his back, and after trying to brush it off to no avail, Mother decided to lend a helping hand by grabbing him and Apparating to Diagon Alley. Because he was too lightheaded from the unexpected Side-Along to become indignant before the cameras started flashing, it took Draco a full minute to realise that he didn't have his wand to Apparate back. *Fuck*.

He felt stupid for falling for the ruse, but sometimes simplicity was the key to stealth. Simplicity, after all, was Pansy's forte. Mother, alternatively, was anything but. When she schemed, she schemed big, but Draco still couldn't quite rule out his mother as the mastermind. After all, she was quite conniving, but only when she felt it was necessary. Sometimes, she could still convince him that *he* was the one who came up with an idea that she'd, in fact, implanted. Which was how he'd ended up carrying their bags like a bloody house elf—err, good son.

His presence was also generally required to perpetuate the facade of their noble, yet normal family. Draco scoffed at the word. The Malfoys hadn't been *normal* for a long time. The Second War had greatly diminished their wealth—thanks to heavy war reparations and fines—but not enough to remove them from the upper echelons of society. His mother spent enough Galleons to make damn sure people never forgot that they were still part of the wizarding elite. If that meant dull shopping trips to Diagon Alley where he made certain not to sneer at the photographers, so be it.

"Tangerine?" Pansy offered, sitting with her legs crossed primly. When his eyes narrowed in suspicion, he *had* been tricked once already that day, she let out a dramatic sigh. They were in Madam Malkin's - and had been for the last hour. Bloody hell. "I know you're hungry."

Draco glared, but snatched the lone piece of fruit from her hand and devoured it. Still chewing on the juicy fruit, he glowered. "Don't think food is going to get you off my shit list, Parkinson."

She yawned, disinterested. "Am I supposed to be shaking in my Jimmy Choos?"

"Yes." His clipped reply hung in the air for a moment.

She peeled off another slice and lazily popped it into her mouth. Gracefully, Pansy leaned back in her seat and looked at her perfectly manicured fingernails. "You always seem to forget that while your boorish sneering scares the hell out of most people, it doesn't do a thing to me."

Draco almost smirked – *almost*.

He was still in a foul mood, but he cut his eyes in her direction anyway.

If a superlative existed for '*Most Changed Since Hogwarts*', Pansy 'Pug-faced' Parkinson would win it, hands down. Draco didn't know if it was the atrocities of war that had claimed her mother's sanity, her father's life, and her own sense of composure during her nervous breakdown after his death, or if she'd just grown up. Either way, loathsome Pansy Parkinson was no more. In the last five or so years, she'd grown into her looks, elevated herself in society to the point where nobody cared that she'd once tried to sacrifice Harry Potter, and managed to gain an incredible amount of poise and maturity. Furthermore, Pansy had abandoned the old pureblood beliefs simply because she had somehow gained a great deal of respect for Muggleborns, and would hex anyone who let the word '*Mudblood*' slip from their lips.

Including him.

He had the bruises to prove it.

Their friendship had experienced far more lows than highs. Pansy was there during the worst of times and he had to respect her for that alone. Even though life as the Senior Editor of the most popular high fashion magazine, *Magical and Stylish*, kept her extremely busy and away from London, Pansy made it evident that she wouldn't walk out anytime soon. Most times, Draco knew he needed all the support he could manage.

"What do you think about this?"

Draco looked up at his mother, who had just walked out of the fitting room wearing bright green robes. He kept an even expression as she spun around once in the mirror to give them the full view.

It was fleeting; if he'd blinked, he would've missed it, but Draco saw his best friend's brow jump. She didn't approve. Elaine, the designer, proudly looked at the robes on her customer, probably hoping they'd win Pansy's approval—she'd been trying since they arrived, to no avail. Pansy had used her influence to convince management to shut down the shop to outside customers for three hours while they had a private audience with their best designer. It allowed Mother to pick out dress robes for the end of summer gala in peace. Her current set of robes were the twelfth he'd seen—and although he didn't say it aloud, they were quite atrocious.

"They're simply *ghastly*," Pansy fussed. "She looks like she was dunked into minced Gillyweed."

Her harsh reaction didn't surprise him. Pansy spent her days working with only the best designers. She rated their clothes and flipped through photographs of models wearing said designs. Her opinion and expertise apparently weighed heavily on his mother, who frowned, and the employee, who looked crestfallen.

The employee spoke up, albeit timidly, in her own defence. "If you don't mind me asking—"

"Ask away."

"What's wrong with it, Miss Parkinson?"

"That's an excellent question, Elaine." She sat up straighter and Draco massaged his temples to assuage his mounting headache. When Pansy took a sharp breath, he knew the employee had asked the wrong question. "First of all, the colour you chose does absolutely *nothing* for her skin tone; it makes her look like she's about to vomit. Second, the cut of the robes has aged her more than a hundred years—nobody relevant wears that cut anymore. Lastly, the robes nearly touch the floor and look frumpy on her. In fact, the *entire* outfit looks old. You made Mrs. Malfoy look like a patch of grass that needs tending."

Well, she wasn't lying.

His mother looked peeved. Pansy ate the last slice of her tangerine and another clerk immediately had a moist towelette ready for her to clean her hands.

Ridiculous. Draco rolled his eyes.

Elaine blushed. "I-I-I can fix it—"

"Calm down." Pansy lazily lifted her hand, her voice authoritative and comforting, a feat only she could pull off. "There's really nothing to fret about. A mistake like this is common for the untrained eye, and it's easy to correct. See, Elaine, you're thinking *ordinary*. I don't blame you, this *is* an ordinary dress robes shop, and I'm sure your choice is acceptable when you're working with everyday people." At that, Elaine's face brightened. "But I want you to get out of that humdrum pattern of thinking right now and find something *extraordinary*. Can you do that for me?"

The employee nodded so vehemently Draco thought her neck would snap right off. "I-I can do that, Miss Parkinson. No, I *will*." Her fearful demeanour morphed into sheer determination.

Pansy smiled at the young witch. "Splendid! That's the spirit. First, you need brighter robes. I happen to know that Mrs. Malfoy's skin tone looks utterly stunning in magenta and any shade of orange or peach in the summertime." Narcissa agreed with a nod and smile. "Next, I think we should try something that doesn't look so frilly or elderly. Something that hugs her figure, but doesn't cling to it. Something that represents her age without overdoing it. Finally, you should find something that falls gracefully at her knees. It *is* summertime here."

With an obedient nod, Elaine left to grab robes that matched Pansy's vision in Narcissa's size as his mother shuffled back into the dressing room, shutting the door behind her. Pansy dismissed the other clerk, who was currently hovering like a bird of prey, with a wave of her hand.

Thank Merlin.

Once she was sure no one was in audible range, Pansy leaned over. Her voice was barely above a whisper when she asked, "How's your father? Your mother told me he had another breakdown two days ago and he's back in St. Mungo's."

Draco's face immediately hardened. When he wasn't having psychotic breaks that forced them to check him into The Janus Thickey Ward at St Mungo's, Lucius Malfoy spent his days

wandering around the Manor, crazed and delusional from his two-year stint in Azkaban for war crimes. It was not a particularly enjoyable memory or topic, nor was it one he desired to discuss in Madam Malkin's.

"He tried to skewer himself with the sword from one of the suits of armour. I saved him by turning the weapon into stone. He has an ugly bruise and a slipped disk in his back, but at least he wasn't impaled. The injuries don't seem to slow him down much though."

"Oh, Draco." Pansy laid her hand on his.

"I've got half a mind to let him succeed one day."

"You don't mean that."

He extracted his hand from her loose grip as he cut his eyes at her again. "Oh, I don't?"

"You love your father."

Draco scoffed. "Don't mistake my respect for love."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Draco leaned back in his chair. "Love and respect are two different things, Pansy."

He caught a brief glimpse of Elaine as she ran through the store, looking for the right items. It amazed him that a store that didn't allow their patronage four years ago was putting up such an effort now. It was pathetic, but he understood what was at stake for Elaine. If Pansy approved, her life would never be the same. Good luck with that. Pansy was notoriously hard to please.

"Exactly how are they different?" She arched a brow.

"You respect the ones you love, but you don't have to love the ones you respect."

Pansy didn't have an immediate retort. He counted that as a win. "I suppose you have a point."

All discussion ended when Elaine appeared. Pansy examined the robes she'd retrieved, all but frowning, then told her not to return until she found another set of robes that she approved of.

Draco didn't have very long to revel in the silence because, when they were alone again, Pansy went right back to the dreaded conversation. "Does he still talk to you?"

He had sense enough to keep his face as neutral as possible. Since his father had returned from Azkaban three years ago, Draco had spent every weekend at the Manor with his mother, but not once did he sleep. Instead, he sat in bed and listened to his father outside his bedroom as he scratched at his door like a cat and stuck bloody fingernail-less fingers under the door as if he were trying to reach for him. His father had become living proof of the hollow shell someone became without a single happy memory. Draco's stomach turned as thought of his

father's last visit. Lucius spoke constantly and passionately of creatures called veagles. Apparently, they infested his father's mind—controlled him, told him the future, told him to kill himself and his entire family to spare them all from their own tragic futures.

...The veagles told me that the Mudbloods are coming...

...You can't escape your destiny, Draco. They're coming for you next, son...they always get what they want...

...I can smell it in the air...that smell, the smell of death, decay, and blood...can't you? Can't you smell it, Draco? It's wonderful...oh how I miss the blood...

He paled at the recent memories, but answered Pansy's question. "Yes."

If Draco had his way, his father would be locked in St. Mungo's psychiatric ward until he either died or recovered. However, his fate was not in Draco's hands. His mother's love had blinded her into believing that he would make a full recovery someday, and she wasn't about to give up.

Love , Draco thought dispassionately, love will break her heart.

He knew the truth. Accepted it. Father wasn't going to make a miraculous recovery; he was too far gone, too sick. His organs had begun failing, one by one, as the yelling matches between Draco and his mother only strained their relationship further.

She wasn't listening . More than ever, he wanted to shake her and force her to see reason.

Narcissa Malfoy sat calmly on the couch, watching her only son pace the length of the room.

"You're in denial," he argued, hot and angry. "Trying to hang himself with tapestries isn't a sign of improvement."

"What do they know? What do you know? I will not give up my faith just so you can prove some bloody point, Draco. Miracles can happen."

"Yes, they can, but this isn't a fairy tale."

His mother had begged him to stay with her permanently at the Manor in the weeks following his father's homecoming, but he'd refused. He kept a flat near The Ministry, Mother stayed at the Manor, and though he often thought of it, Draco hadn't abandoned her to her lost cause.

Never.

Truthfully, Draco respected his mother, more than he'd ever respected another woman in his life. She was just as strong as she was stubborn, and she had almost single-handedly pulled their family out of that deep, Voldemort-engineered hole after the war. He wanted to trust her instincts about Father, despite his own bad feelings, but he wasn't sure anymore.

"I'm sure this will work out in the end."

Draco smirked. "Have you been sipping my mother's optimism potion again?"

"You need a sip yourself." Pansy chuckled. "You've gotten rather dull since you became the head of the Malfoy family."

Draco fought back the urge to glare.

Head of the Malfoy family.

It wasn't a title he had wanted at twenty-four, but thanks to his psychotic father, the burden rested squarely on Draco's shoulders. Sure, he had help from the only one of his uncles he liked, but at the end of the day, it was his responsibility to better their family name.

Everything he did, everyone he associated with, every woman he publicly dated, and even in his job at the Ministry—*everything* reflected back on the Malfoy family name.

Much to his intense displeasure, Narcissa required Draco's presence at every social function she attended, every charity ball she hosted, and every ribbon-cutting ceremony. He didn't have a choice. He did what was best for the family. It never mattered that Draco despised parties, or that he would much rather jump from the top of the tallest building in London than spend another night in a room with the upper echelon of society. It didn't matter that he hated bringing his 'girlfriend-of-the-moment' to parties. They all, without exception, made lusty eyes at any man richer than he.

And his mother wondered why he hadn't settled down yet.

He was allowed to maintain public friendships with Pansy Parkinson and Blaise Zabini, which kept him sane. Growing up, they'd all believed in old pureblood traditions—Pansy more than Blaise, who dated anyone during school, blood be damned. But the Parkinson and Zabini families weren't allied with Voldemort in either war. It was a good look for them. Though, because of their neutrality, Pansy's father and Blaise's mother had died during a last stand by the surviving Death Eaters about a month after the war. After that, everyone stopped crucifying Pansy for trying to give up Potter. Unbeknownst to anyone at the time, it was the beginning of her meteoric rise in society.

Speaking of Potter, his Mother constantly pushed him to make an alliance with him and Weasel—for the good of their family. Not a chance in fucking hell would he ever stoop so low as to forge a treaty of sorts with those morons. To appease his mother, however, and do his part in reviving the Malfoy name, Draco was as cordial as possible when he ran into them, the She-Weasel, or any other Weasel for that matter. His mother should've been pleased with his attempts at civility; being polite to them was about as enjoyable as being tortured.

Still, he persevered.

Draco didn't see Weasel or the She-Weasel very much, thankfully, but he saw Harry Potter every day at work; he'd even had to work with the Auror on numerous cases. And the entire wizarding world was damn lucky that he'd been blessed with an impressive amount of self-control or he might not have been so civil every time Potter got an attitude with him.

Sometimes he wanted to hex the git so bad it hurt, but he always refrained. It was not because of his quest to restore his family's name, but because Draco loved his job.

Following the war, Draco, initially at his mother's insistence, became a barrister. He'd absolutely hated it at first, but after winning a tough case he'd worked hard on, he realised just how much he enjoyed it. It put all of his talents to good use. Prosecuting was something he excelled at, and something he could be known for instead of being the son of Lucius Malfoy and the only Death Eater who never killed anyone. It helped him make a name for himself.

He spent five days a week trying cases in front of the Wizengamot, sending captured Death Eaters the Ministry was *still* rounding up along with members of Voldemort-sympathizing hate groups to Azkaban. Every win gave him a feeling of control, control that he felt he'd lived without for his entire life.

"Mr Malfoy? Miss Parkinson? Is there anything you need?" The arse-kissing, towelette-holding clerk sounded far too polite.

"A wand would be nice." That way he could Apparate himself home to eat in peace.

Pansy punched him in the shoulder. "No, there isn't, but thank you for asking."

When she left again, he made sure to slam the lid shut on his irritation. He hated when people called him Mr Malfoy. It made his heart pound and his eyes scrape the room for his deranged father. Of course, he wouldn't tell her that—or anyone else that for the matter. Pansy excused herself to assist Elaine and his mother in picking final dress robes. As soon as she disappeared into the dressing room, one set of dress robes was thrown out.

His stomach growled again and Draco winced, hoping no one heard.

He cut his eyes over to the clerk and he was relieved to find her hanging up dress robes. It was time to wrap up this shopping trip from hell.

"Pansy, can you please hurry up and pick out a set of robes."

She was wholly unperturbed. "Just a few minutes, Draco."

"Mother?" His chair was becoming more uncomfortable by the minute.

"Be patient, Draco," his mother called back, her voice slightly muffled.

He couldn't stop his face from twisting into a sneer. Patience was one attribute he did not have, especially when he was *starving* to death.

"And don't sneer either. It makes you look all pointy like your father."

Draco's face fell.

He heard Pansy giggle.

He checked his watch after his stomach growled again. It was two o'clock. "For the love of—Mother!"

"Yes?"

The arse-kissing clerk was picking up an electric pink set of robes that Pansy had discarded. Draco involuntarily winced at the horrific colour. His eyes were literally ablaze from the mélange of yellows, hot pinks, lime greens, electric blues, and bright lavender dress robes he'd seen.

"Are you all nearly done? I'm famished."

Pansy emerged first, with a smile, then Elaine, with a relieved look, and lastly, Narcissa stepped out of the dressing room wearing tangerine dress robes.

His anger and annoyance were temporarily mitigated when he saw her. He couldn't deny that she looked nice, even if she was his mother. She had an elegant look about her that had never faded, even through time and war. She spun on her heel., "What do you think, Draco?"

The tangerine robes made her look younger and more vibrant. When she smiled, she actually looked genuinely happy. Draco knew that deep down, though she never talked about it—Malfoys weren't known for sharing their innermost thoughts—his mother worried herself senseless over Father's condition. He never liked it when she was sad. It reminded him too much of his teenage years.

Though he fussed and complained, Draco had stayed just because he didn't want to see her sad. A sad woman wasn't something he could deal with. But now, she was smiling and it wasn't false. He would take it.

"You look lovely, Mother. You should get the robes and join me for lunch." He smiled and then gestured to Pansy, who had her hands on her hips in almost a demanding manner. "You too, Pansy, I suppose."

Part 2: Torture at its finest.

Diagon Alley.

Hermione honestly had no idea why she kept coming Saturday after Saturday. The place was a burning, fetid cesspool of bad memories and nostalgia placed on cobblestone streets. Being there always made her feel a longing deep in her belly, one that she blamed on hunger pangs, but that, again, was a lie.

After the war, Diagon Alley was restored to its original splendour, more beautiful than ever. She hadn't been there during the reconstruction era, but had heard all about it. Diagon Alley had turned into a bit of a ghost town in their Sixth Year. In their assumed Seventh Year, the streets were literally swamped with Muggleborns who were persecuted by the new system that was in place during Voldemort's reign of power, horror, and destruction.

Those hadn't been the best of times, but now they were a thing of the past. Hermione quietly hoped that there would never be another Voldemort, but she'd read *Hogwarts: A History* enough times to know that history always had a way of repeating itself. She walked out of The Leaky Cauldron and let the summer breeze blow in her face and through her hair.

It was mid-August and Hermione already knew what that meant: school shopping was underway for the proactive witches and wizards who were eager for classes to begin. The more reluctant students would probably complete their shopping during the major rush. Hermione made a mental note to avoid Diagon Alley next week. As she looked around, she took a walk down memory lane, back to a time when she eagerly awaited September first.

Harry. Purchasing Crookshanks from Magical Menagerie. Seeing Malfoy in various shops around Diagon Alley. Hogwarts. Ginny. The confrontation between Mr Weasley and Lucius Malfoy in Flourish & Blotts. Ron. Buying her first wand from Ollivanders. Dean and Seamus. Buying quills, ink, and parchment. Fred and George. Pulling her parents through the arch—*no*.

She had to stop doing this to herself.

Her head spun and heart ached; she squashed them before they became too much to handle. Reminiscing had never done her any good anyway. Truthfully, she would've Obliviated herself years ago if she knew she wouldn't lose *everything*.

She shook her head clear of darkness, tapped the correct bricks, and watched the archway open. As she walked through the entrance, Hermione fanned herself. Even with the breeze, it was a sweltering hot day. London, and the rest of the world, seemed to be in some sort of heat wave.

It didn't deter businesses one bit.

Diagon Alley greeted her with incredibly crowded cobbled streets, bustling commerce, chatting people, happy kids skipping in and out of various shops, children begging for assorted treats and pets, vendors trying to make a profit with random and often second-hand items, and everything else that encompassed the overwhelming sights, sounds, and smells. It should have felt comforting and familiar, but it didn't—not anymore.

Cameras started flashing; something that only made her more anxious. In a haze, she bumped into a few nameless people, muttering apologies as she pressed on to the restaurant with her hardback clutched tight to her chest. Hermione only looked up three times to determine how close she was to her destination. It was hard, but she ignored all the eyes on her, the discreet photos, and her name being whispered by more than a few.

"Is that Hermione Granger?"

"Do you think the rumours were true?"

Though she tried to remain unaffected, Hermione bristled at the mention of the rumours.

"Bless my stars, it really is her. She looks different."

Hermione picked up her pace, cursing herself for not Apparating straight into the restaurant like she usually did to avoid the crowds.

"Hermione Granger? Is that really you?" Hermione stopped and looked up at the familiar voice. She flashed a weak smile and supplied a wave to Hannah Abbott as she approached.

The old friends exchanged polite, light hugs before Hannah started filling her in on the last five years of her life. She married Terry Boot the year after the war ended and wore her gold wedding ring proudly.

Hermione started to tell her about living in Venice and Italy, but Hannah already knew about her sudden move. "It was all over the papers. Everyone wanted to know why." Hannah's expectant pause made it pretty obvious that she *still* wanted to know.

"I needed a change of scenery after the war." It was a lie, of course, but Hermione hoped it would quench Hannah's curiosity. "Venice seemed like the perfect place to go and have some peace and quiet. I knew that if I didn't leave immediately, I never would."

When she smiled and said that she understood, Hermione inwardly sagged in relief.

"How long have you been back?"

"Seven months."

Hannah looked shocked. "That long? You could've written or something."

They had never been close enough for letters so Hermione allowed another lie to slip from her tongue. "I keep really busy with my new job." A lie, yes, but not a complete one.

Her position as one of the leading Curse-Breakers in Europe, and the fact that she worked for a privately-owned company, aptly called Curse-Breakers, allowed Hermione the luxury of working three days a week. She didn't care for money, but couldn't complain; she made more in three days than some made in a month.

"What do you do?" Hermione asked politely.

"I own a childcare centre for magical kids. It's something I've always wanted to do until I decide to have kids of my own."

Hermione maintained her brittle smile. "That's great, Hannah. Sounds like you have it all together." She hoped that those words hadn't come out as strained as they sounded in her head.

Of course, the modest Hannah swiftly came to the rescue. "It's not perfect, but that's life, right?"

She couldn't agree more.

"Oh! Merlin! It's nearly two o'clock. I have to go meet Susan at the Apothecary. It was really nice seeing you again, Hermione. Owl me sometime, okay?"

She wouldn't, but nodded anyway.

Hannah gave her another pleasant hug that was probably captured on camera and walked briskly down the street towards the Apothecary. For a full minute, Hermione stood there, sighing in relief that the conversation was finally over. Somehow, a simple conversation was harder than making the decision to move back to Britain.

She gathered the last of her composure and walked briskly in the direction of the restaurant. The hostess was a sixteen-year-old girl named Charlotte. "It's a little hectic here." She flashed a pearly white smile at Hermione. "I'll see to it that you get seated quickly."

Charlotte attended Beauxbatons Academy, but worked at the restaurant during the summers. During the summer, she earned enough so she didn't have to borrow any from her parents for school supplies or frivolous spending while she was at school. She was the oldest of six and her parents were poor. Even though she knew she didn't have to tip the hostess, Hermione always gave her a little bag filled with about twenty galleons every Saturday—just to help her out. Call it cleansing the soul, call it whatever, but Hermione felt better about herself after helping the young witch.

"Is that okay, Miss Granger?" Charlotte questioned curiously.

"No problem, not at all. Take your time, I have nothing but." She offered a kind smile that the young girl returned before quickly rushing off to help one of the waitresses with a large party.

Without thinking twice, Hermione took the only empty seat and considered reading.

"Hermione Granger!" She almost cringed at that voice, but slowly turned her head.

Lavender Brown—with a baby.

So far, she was two-for-two on bumping into old classmates she didn't care to see.

Who next? Draco Malfoy?

"Hey." Hermione's smile was weak. "How are you?"

"Great. Seamus and I got married last year and this is Chase, our son. He's six months old."

The baby, nicknamed 'Chubby Chase' didn't look the least bit happy—quite miserable, actually.

Hermione empathized. It was as though everyone she had gone to school with was married and settled comfortably in their lives; even those who weren't were still closer to happily ever after than she was. A feeling of dread washed over her—the same feeling that used to overwhelm her when she dreamed about missing the train back to Hogwarts.

Condemned.

Despite her best efforts, Hermione couldn't ignore the jealousy and sadness that rose while observing the mother and son. She felt like she was stuck, waiting for her own train to come. Even after five years, Hermione felt like the same girl she was at eighteen, waiting for her life to begin while everyone passed her by.

When did it all go wrong?

Oh, she knew. Of course she did.

Hermione knew the date and the hour that everything fell apart. The tenth of September. She didn't get out of bed that morning with the knowledge that it would be the last day of life as she knew it—the beginning of the end—but it was. If she had stayed, maybe she would've had the life that she wanted, the children that she dreamed of, or even the contentment that she longed for, but there was no time to think about that.

That was torture at its finest.

"What have you been up to?" Lavender asked.

Hermione gave her the same answer she'd given Hannah. "Working. You know how I am." And she gave her a self-deprecating smile that felt hollow, but Lavender never noticed. Lying, she realised, was always easier when she didn't give a damn about the person or their opinions.

"Of course," she replied with a bright smile.

Lavender initiated the dreaded *remember whens*.

During the first D.A. memory, Hermione kept her lips from lowering into a frown. By the third one, she smiled because it was all she could do to keep from screaming. She hated talking about old memories more than she hated discussing the war. She couldn't drag herself back into old memories. Not now. Not with Lavender, of all people. It felt odd, like a strange and bitter taste on her tongue. After all, they were little more than strangers.

Chase started wailing at the top of his little lungs. Hermione winced at the shrill of his cries, but watched as Lavender tended to him, showing off her still-awkward mothering skills. Hermione tried, but she couldn't tear her eyes away from the child, even once he was calm again and gnawing on his balled fists. He really was a chubby little thing, with his sparse light brown hair and brown eyes. Simply adorable. He looked just like his mother, especially when he pouted, but Hermione still saw a bit of Seamus in him, too.

She watched as Lavender bounced the boy on her knee, trying, to no avail, to make him laugh for Hermione. After a few moments of cooing and trying to coax a laugh, she gave up. "He's been in a sour mood all week."

"Kids his age only scream for a few reasons: they're either hungry, tired, in pain, or teething. Maybe Chase is teething."

Lavender paused, as if considering the suggestion, then smiled. "That would explain his gnawing and foul mood. Hermione, do you *really* know everything?"

She shrugged again, weary of the conversation. "Of course not. Just a—"

"Miss Granger," Charlotte interrupted as she approached the sitting women, flashing a friendly smile. Hermione had to stop herself from jumping up and running away from Lavender as fast as her feet would carry her. "Your table is ready. Right this way. Mrs Finnigan, your table is almost cleaned and I'll be right back to show you to your seat."

Lavender nodded.

"Thank you." Hermione hoped she didn't sound as relieved as she felt.

After farewells, and another set of empty promises to keep in touch, she followed Charlotte to her table.

Charlotte always seemed lost in troubling thoughts, her brows furrowed and wrinkles appearing on her forehead. Hermione took the thoughtful girl's hand and placed the little bag of galleons in her palm. "Here. And don't tell me you can't take it."

She smiled and nodded, slipping the bag into her pocket. "You're really too kind."

No, she wasn't, but Hermione kept her mouth shut.

Charlotte always made sure the table at the end of the first row in the front of the restaurant remained open every Saturday around this time for Hermione. She would miss the girl when she left for Beauxbatons next Wednesday.

The location of the table was perfect: in the corner, slightly isolated, and a few feet from the window. It was the perfect seat to avoid all the eyes that constantly watched her whenever she came to Diagon Alley. During this time of day, the sun was at an angle in the sky, just lower than its peak, where the rays poured into the large window in the direction of her table, keeping her warm and comfortable while she read and ate.

"Ready for school?" Hermione asked as she set her book down on the clean table.

"Yes, I have my books and clothes packed." Charlotte chewed her lip seconds before resting her hand on Hermione's shoulder. "I just... want to thank you for everything you've done for me this summer—all your support, kindness, and advice. I really appreciate it. You're a lot different than what the rumours would lead someone to believe."

Hermione didn't know how to feel. "You're welcome."

“Write to me at school, okay?” Her eyes sparkled in a hopeful way.

“I will,” she promised, even though she knew she wouldn’t.

Charlotte smiled, nodded, and turned to leave.

When Hermione sat down, she ordered a glass of white wine and a piece of quiche that she would never finish. When her waiter left, she exhaled and looked around at the busy restaurant. It was noisy, but Hermione had the uncanny ability to flourish in complete chaos. It kept her mind clear and her thoughts from wandering into uncharted territory.

The lunchtime rush was upon the restaurant and the waitresses looked about as haggard as Hermione felt, but at least *they* managed to hold a smile. She'd failed in that mission as soon as she sat down. Right then, all she wanted to do was leave, but she wouldn't. Hermione closed her eyes, hoping to hold everything in just a bit longer.

She could make it. She would make it. She was *fine*.

All lies.

Hermione opened her novel right where she'd left off, and her eyes fell on the old photograph she used as a bookmark. The longing she felt nearly shattered the last bit of her resolve, but she delicately unfolded the tattered edges.

It wasn't all she had, but it was the last shred of it.

She didn't even know the identity of the man who had taken it or exactly what day it was, but it was the one of the last times she remembered being truly happy.

Weeks later, everything had fallen apart and so had she.

Once the edges were smooth, her fingers delicately grazed the image before she put the photograph face down on the table and picked up where she'd left off in her novel about a woman who had lost her way.

the crossing of parallel lives

Chapter Summary

“Don't look like that, Draco. You look like you did right before you pounced on the cat when you were two.”

Chapter Two

The Crossing of Parallel Lives

Part One: The coattails of heroes.

To say that the restaurant was merely busy would've been an understatement.

It was loud and crowded almost to capacity. Draco couldn't distinguish one voice from another; they all were jumbled together in his ears, rendering him incapable of concentrating on anything. Frazzled waitresses went from table to table, taking orders, delivering food and drinks and even dessert with smiles and professional attitudes; but they looked drop-dead tired. Even the young hostess looked jittery from the number of patrons waiting to be seated.

Draco was agitated. Not because they weren't seated immediately, but because they had run into that pompous prat, Percy Weasley. He was waiting patiently for his own guests and upon seeing him, his mother fired a stern look in his direction before the sneer could fully form on his face. Pansy had made the fastest exit he'd ever seen; she snickered at the pinched look on his face, excused herself, and went to the loo.

It was bad enough Draco was forced to endure his presence every day in the Ministry and occasionally worked with him periodically, but Percy Weasley invading his weekend with his pathetic attempt to charm his mother with his drawn out, tedious explanation of the intricate and mind-numbing details of his job as an undersecretary in the Department of International Magical Cooperation...now *that* he couldn't stand.

"The best part is that we work with wizarding communities all over the world."

Blah, blah, blah.

All that ever heard came out of Percy Weasley's mouth was bullshit.

When his stomach growled again, Draco winced and wished they would hurry the hell up. There was only oh so much of Percy Weasley that he could endure on an empty stomach in one day, and he was rapidly reaching his limit.

"Oh, Percy. That sounds *so* interesting." His mother sounded so genuine even *he* was almost convinced. *Almost*. Draco knew that his mother didn't give two Knuts about Percy's job. She barely gave a damn about *his*. The only time he'd ever told her about his day, she'd responded with disinterestedly, "*Yes, dear, wonderful,*" and hushed him so that she could read the article about her soiree in Witch Weekly in peace.

His mother just wanted *someone* to see them. Perhaps they would take a photo and spread the word that the Weasleys and Malfoys were socializing, building bridges, turning a new leaf – and all that jazz. Draco knew her game. Being friendly with Weasleys was advantageous in a way it had never been before. It would single-handedly further Draco's career; if he ever decided that he *liked* politics and ran for a position. However, the chance of the two families *actually* becoming friends was next to impossible, no matter how optimistic people were.

The Weasleys had made it out of the second war as heroes, and the Malfoys hadn't. It was simple logic. Ride the coattails of heroes to attain their means. And, well, she'd been riding Percy like a damn donkey every time she'd seen him in the last year. He was, after all, the most attainable and ambitious Weasley. It didn't make Draco less irritated by Percy's presence.

He'd pay good money to live one damn day without seeing a Weasley.

And maybe he was being too callous. Okay, he was. For all his faults and red hair, Percy was the least infuriating of the Weasley lot – at least in his opinion. Honestly, he'd take the pompous prat over his git-for-a-brother Weasel any day of the bloody—

"Oi!" An infuriatingly familiar person called. "Percy!"

This was *not* happening.

Draco knew that damn voice anywhere and fought like hell to keep the sneer off his face when Weasley, Potter, and the She-Weasley entered the restaurant, dressed in Muggle attire. The latter two held hands and Draco bit back the smart comment rising in his throat. But he took four cleansing breaths and relaxed, pasting a cool and disinterested look on his face like the proper Malfoy. He was mature. He above childhood rivalries. He was a damn professional.

Yes, he *was* above it.

Weasley greeted his older brother with a stupid wave. "How are you?"

"Quite well," Percy's eyes moved from his brother to Draco's mother, "I'm sure you all remember Mrs. Malfoy."

The three of them nodded slowly, Potter even smiled. Draco took another cleansing breath. Of course they were familiar with her. After all, his mother had lied to Voldemort when asked if Potter was still alive after he'd hit him with the Killing Curse. She'd had saved his life. And gods, he was so tired of people reminding him that her lie was the only thing that had kept them both out of Azkaban. That, and Potter's testimony about his visit to Malfoy Manor.

His mother politely greeted the three. "It's wonderful to see you all again."

Draco was not pleased at all.

Why don't you drop to your knees and kiss their arses right there, it's more effective, he thought sourly as he stood. He tried his best to keep the corner of his lip from dropping into a frown; and that frown from turning into a sneer.

Percy continued his conversation with his mother, leaving his brother and two friends to stare at Draco. And Merlin did they stare – well; the She-Weasel did. Draco locked eyes with her and smirked inwardly when her cheeks flushed a particular shade of pink and she looked at her feet, willing herself to stop blushing in his presence. Potter regarded him with annoyance, but there was no hate in his eyes. Weasley outright glared because he had the tact of a bull in a china shop.

"Malfoy," Potter greeted coolly.

"Potter, Weasley, and...." His eyes flickered to Ginny's bare left hand, "Weasley," Draco drawled in a bored voice as he shoved his hands in his pockets and looked away as if they weren't worth more of his time. They weren't.

Several awkward minutes passed. They didn't want to speak and Draco sure as hell didn't want to respond. So, there they stood in blessed silence. Potter whispered something into She-Weasel's ear and she smiled. Weasel still ferociously glared at him.

No foam yet. So disappointing.

"What are you doing here, Malfoy?" There was just a hint of politeness in Potter's tone, which was an improvement from Draco's first year in the Ministry when he'd accused him of being evil. Every single day.

Draco stared at him as if he'd gone mental. "Did you *really* ask that stupid question?"

He merely shrugged. "I was merely making conversation."

"*Poor* conversation," he added with a roll of his eyes.

All was silent until She-Weasel spoke. "So, Malfoy, I heard you broke up with Astoria."

I bet you did, he thought with a smirk, casually taking in her appearance. She was pretty, for a Weasley. She wore a sundress with white flowers and sandals. "I did," was Draco's absent reply.

"You seem to be going right through them," Potter commented with a snort. She-Weasel looked at her boyfriend sternly.

"Does it bother you?" he asked coolly.

Potter didn't respond, but Weasley did. "What I don't understand is why witches even waste their time on a git like *you*. You're just a vile, evil little ferret...git."

"And we're back to name-calling," Draco yawned with disinterest. He ran a hand over his hair, smoothing it down. "I would've thought that the years would've matured you, but alas, I was wrong." He just wanted them to *go away* and take the headache he had from just speaking to those wankers. Draco rubbed his temples in clockwise rotation.

Where the fuck was Pansy?

That bint had just left him with Potter and his goons.

Weasel just scowled. "Something the matter, Malfoy?"

Draco had just about had *enough*. "Now that you mention it, yes, there is, Weasley. If you would so *kindly* shut that bloody trap of yours, maybe I could regain the intelligence points that I lost when you opened your fuc—your mouth."

She-Weasel looked taken aback, Potter looked unaffected, but Weasel was furious. His face was turning a pleasant shade of tomato red. "You—"

Draco cut him off rather nastily because he was on a roll. "Where the hell is *Granger* when you need her? If I'm going to be insulted, I'd rather be insulted by someone with a larger vocabulary than mine. Someone who doesn't use the same hackneyed insults like 'ferret' and 'git'. You get turned into a ferret once and *nobody* lets you live it down."

During his rant, he noticed with great interest that the She-Weasel had tensed to the point of breaking, Potter's face went all dark and angry, and Weasel looked like he was about to have a conniption...all at the very mention of Granger's name. Hmm. Interesting. Very interesting. Maybe those rumours swirling around weren't as far off base as he'd originally thought.

Is it the end of 'The Golden Trio'?

Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley: "It's over."

Mystery swirls around the abrupt departure of 'The Brains of the Golden Trio'.

Remaining 'Golden Trio' members refuse to discuss Hermione Granger in interviews.

Where in the world is Hermione Granger?

Draco started to open his mouth to mention Granger again, just to watch their reactions closer, but Pansy thwarted his plans by gracing them with her presence. "So sorry for leaving you all here, I ran into a chatty reader who decided she wanted to—" she trailed off upon noticing the two Weasleys and Potter standing with him. The smile that she pasted on her

face was strained and phony. "Ronald Weasley, Harry Potter, and Ginny Weasley, it's a pleasure to see you all again."

That was obviously a lie.

The She-Weasel dropped her boyfriend's hand and gave Pansy an awkward half-hug as a greeting. Draco observed with rapt interest. Pansy famously *hated* to be touched and tried to side-step her, to no avail.

"Pansy," she greeted far warmer than she'd greeted him. "It's *great* to see you again! I was just telling Harry that I'd hoped you'd be in Diagon Alley today and here you are, in the same restaurant. It's fate."

The sight in front of him was strange, but it wasn't the first time she'd approached Pansy in public. After all, Pansy had something She-Weasley wanted: influence in an industry she was trying to enter. Following the war, Girl-Weasley turned down every offer to play professional Quidditch, in favour of—well, he wasn't sure. She dabbled here and there, first as a Quidditch commentator, then a photographer for The Cannons.

She'd quit that recently because she didn't want to travel so far from home—or Potter. Draco had read between the lines on that one. She'd publicly declared her interest in photography and started a wedding photography company, which was a notoriously hard industry to enter with little to no relevant experience. That why she was in Pansy's orbit when she hadn't so much as looked in her direction in years. She wanted the magazine to advertise her work.

"...the last issue of the magazine was simply phenomenal. I don't know how you do it..."

If Pansy gritted her teeth any harder to hold her smile, they would've shattered.

Potter looked a bit uncomfortable.

It was no secret that Pansy abhorred the redheaded witch with a blazing, uninhibited passion and could hardly stand to be in her presence for any amount of time. He didn't know why nor did he question it. He didn't have the energy to witness Pansy rant and rave in the rampant Portuguese she'd picked up after spending months at a time on the island of Madeira, which was the Wizarding World's Mecca of fashion, or something.

"I'll see if we're going to do a wedding edition for the autumn brides."

Draco hadn't expected that.

"Really?" Seemed that She-Weasel didn't either. She was excited and flushed, turning back to Potter who gave her two thumbs up, but that seemed lacklustre.

Pansy crinkled her nose. "Only if you let go of my arm."

The youngest Weasel jumped away as if she'd been scalded. "Oh, right, I'm so sorry."

The entire time, his mother and Percy remained aloof and in their own conversation. His mother was still listening pleasantly and Percy still droned on and on about himself. All was

right in their world. Pansy shot Draco a dangerous look with a lot of eyebrows that clearly said that if he didn't *do something*, she was going to start throwing curses. Or something along those lines. For the first time, Draco was rather pleased that he'd been conned into the trip to Diagon Alley.

In the end, he didn't have to intervene.

The young hostess appeared in front of them. "Mr Malfoy, your table is ready."

Although he bristled at the title, the timing couldn't have been better.

He offered Pansy his arm and she eagerly accepted.

Part Two: Ashes, ashes, we all fall down.

Hermione was definitely hallucinating.

Someone must've tampered with her pumpkin juice and *that* was the reason why they were there. Close, but so far away. Mirages. Figments of her overactive imagination. They *couldn't* be real.

Discreetly, she sniffed her white wine. Maybe it was odourless? Colourless?

Then Ron laughed loud, throwing his head back, and Hermione paled.

It was real. *They* were real.

She finished her wine quickly. She needed the liquid courage or an idea that would get her the hell out of there unseen. With the exception of Harry, who had likely kept their encounter to himself, Ron and Ginny didn't know she was back. The news was spreading though, with each outing. It was inevitable. She knew it. And as much as she wanted to pay for her meal and slip out the back door, she found herself inconspicuously watching them.

They looked good. Happy, even. Ron was more built than she remembered, Harry too, and Ginny positively glowed as she talked to Harry. Try as she may, Hermione couldn't help but let her mind wander into dangerous territory; couldn't stop from inserting herself back into their orbit, envisioning herself next to Ron.

Would she glow?

Ginny would be watchful around her. Or maybe she wouldn't. Maybe she would have matured as she cemented her position in Harry's life. She wasn't sure. Hermione would probably be arguing with Ron over something silly. Harry would smile at her and Ron would

be holding her hand under the table – when he wasn't shovelling food into his mouth like a bloody savage.

She couldn't allow herself to forget that they would've celebrated the five-year anniversary of the Final Battle that past May. Ron would've been talking about marriage and she would've been reluctant. He was impatient, but that was his charm. It was her job to keep him from bouncing off the walls whenever he got a little nervous. Hermione secretly wondered who had done her job since she had left, but tried – without avail – to convince herself of her own apathy.

It happened so fast Hermione didn't even have time to plan for it.

Ginny's eyes met hers.

After she looked down and away, Hermione watched on as the now flustered woman recovered and promptly hid her shock before she smiled lovingly at Harry. He was observant, noticing the change in her mood, but he had a tendency to miss the obvious so he didn't think to look in Hermione's direction. Most likely he had asked her if she was okay because she gave him a poised nod and kissed his cheek, rewarding him for his concern.

She didn't look in Hermione's direction again.

When everything returned to normal (or as normal as things would ever be), Hermione stared at the photograph in her hand. As she fingered the picture, she understood that it was best not to lose herself in what could've been. It was over. Their friendship was done. That chapter in her life was finished. She couldn't change the past any more than she could predict the future. She was fine. It was okay. She was happy. Everything was *fine*.

And there she was, lying again.

It was such an easy defence mechanism.

Deceit was better than dealing with the reality of the situation.

Hermione missed them so much it ached and burned. She felt tortured just being in the same room as them. That truth had hurt worse than the hundreds of lies that she had told herself. A very small, almost microscopic part of her wanted to swallow her pride, walk over there, and confess; to explain that every decision she made, right or wrong, had been for—*stop*.

She had to stop.

Closing her eyes, Hermione took one slow breath after the next. She didn't stop until her head stopped throbbing and the burning sensation in her throat was no more.

Harry and Ron were in deep discussion and Ginny...was staring at her, face expressionless.

Their relationship had always been complicated.

At one point, Hermione had thought they were friends. Maybe they were at one point, when they were younger and drawn together due to circumstance. Hermione was the only child and

Ginny was the only girl amongst six boys. It bonded them for a time. They weren't the best of friends like everyone had thought; they had their differences in opinion and tactic, but neither challenged the status quo. She often wondered why Ginny watched her so carefully, why as they got older, she held her at arm's length. It wasn't until the end of Sixth Year, when they'd made plans to find all the Horcruxes and Harry broke up with Ginny, that Hermione found out the truth.

It turned out Ginny was diseased.

And jealousy was the cause.

She was envious of Hermione and her position in Ron and Harry's lives. Well, not Ron so much as Harry. Ron was like a brother to Harry, but Hermione...they were closer than friends, but that was all they were. By the time it was time to find all the Horcruxes, their trust in each other was total; their knowledge about each other was complete. It was hard on Ginny, Hermione later realised, being shut out of their circle. It didn't help that the three of them were together the following year and that she wasn't allowed to come.

Hermione wasn't a hero's girl, she told her the day before Fleur and Bill's wedding.

She quickly got the impression that Ginny didn't believe her.

Nothing eased her jealousy.

Not the kiss Harry gave Ginny after he found her after the final battle. Not the news of Hermione and Ron's relationship, which should have been the confirmation of the platonic nature of her relationship with Harry. Nothing helped – except Hermione's sudden departure from London. She and Ginny had been writing each other since she left; just two letters a year. Hermione wasn't sure if their communication meant they were friends again, but doubted it all the same.

In her letters, Ginny didn't seem to hold any malice. But Hermione figured she'd finally gotten what she really wanted: Hermione's place at Harry's side. Ginny had kept her up to date about the happenings in her life, about her wedding photography business, her aspirations, and her family (except Ron). In general, she was vague about her relationship with Harry and any details of his life, in general. They were together and in love, that much Ginny told her, but that was it. And Hermione did the same in her replies, telling her about life in Italy and the work that kept her away from Britain.

Nothing more – nothing less.

Ginny's letters were detached; as if she were reluctantly writing a pen pal. Hermione didn't understand why. It wasn't as if she'd asked Ginny to write. In fact, Ginny had written her first. Right after everything had gone to hell. The letter came as a shock a week after she arrived in Venice. So much that Hermione had nearly shattered a glass when the owl dropped it on the table. She had only answered to be polite.

Well, it didn't matter anyway, not really.

Hermione made sure to maintain that same distance with Ginny in her responses, only answering her questions and occasionally including pictures, none of her, just beautiful, Italian scenic shots that Ginny seemed to like. Like one of those stupid postcards that said, *wish you were here!*

Only she didn't.

Bitterness rose in her chest when she saw Ron smile—*really* smile. She hadn't seen him smile in over five years. And it did something rather unexpected: it sent a painful jolt through her, like someone had shocked her with electricity. Her world spun. Heart raced. Her breath quickened.

They were doing fine without her. They looked happy. Hermione couldn't squash the pain, hurt, rage, and resentment lodged firmly in her chest, begging to be released. She had a dark thought that perhaps she wasn't good enough for them to begin with. She knew that she had to get out of there before she exploded.

Now.

Right now.

Without another glance in the direction of their table, Hermione rose from her chair. With her head lowered, she walked in the direction of the loo. She tried to mentally calm herself down, without much success. It hurt to breathe. Everything hurt. Her hands shook; from what, she didn't know. She just had to get to a priv—she collided with a hard body.

It seemed that time decelerated as she staggered back and fell on her bum rather hard. Pain shot up her spine and Hermione's face twisted.

Everything stopped. Customers stopped mid-order, someone gasped, waitresses stopped mid-sentence, chairs moved, but no one moved to help her up. She was the one who had fallen, but she was ready to apologise.

That was until she lifted her head and her eyes fell on the frigid green eyes of Harry Potter.

Part Three: Curiosity killed the ferret.

The entire restaurant watched with slackened jaws as Saint Potter stepped over Granger and returned to his table.

Draco was lost.

He didn't know whether to be intrigued or confused so he settled for astonished. It was a good middle emotion. And in midst of it all, he'd missed Pansy's exit from her chair. One second she was sitting next to his mother and the next she was halfway across the restaurant yelling at Potter and defending Granger.

"What the hell is *wrong* with you? You didn't even have the decency to help her up!"

Then Pansy helped up the fallen witch and hustled her in the direction of the loo. Draco didn't miss the embarrassment on Granger's face as she accepted her kindness.

Draco repeatedly pinched himself in the arm because he was sure...no, he was absolutely *positive* that he was in his bed dreaming.

No, he wasn't in denial. He was just selective about the reality he accepted.

What he was experiencing wasn't reality.

He wasn't the only one stunned by Pansy's actions. The entire restaurant, already stunned by the interaction between the two war heroes, waited until they disappeared behind the corner before everyone returned to what they were doing with a renewed frenzy. No doubt, the news was spreading.

For the first time in a long time, Draco was truly baffled, and it wasn't a comforting feeling. Why did Pansy go to Granger's defence? What had happened between Potter and Granger? Hell, what happened between Granger and the world?

"What was that all about?" His mother had asked after what seemed like hours of silence.

"I'm as confused as you are, Mother," was his honest reply, but he was going to find the answers.

Soon.

"That *poor* girl," His mother sympathized, looking over at the table where Weasel, She-Weasel, Potter, and Percy were still sitting, quietly talking (or arguing) amongst themselves. She fired a scandalized glare. "I just *can't* believe he didn't even apologise or help her up. And Pansy, I didn't know they were close enough for her to defend her."

Draco bit into a piece of sirloin steak, chewing thoughtfully. He didn't know what the hell to think anymore with all the impossibilities happening.

Mother's moment of anger chattering was far from finished, "I didn't even see her in here. Do you think she's here with anyone?"

He chewed on another piece, not supplying her with the answer that he already knew.

Granger was definitely alone.

Almost the instant they'd been seated, Draco spotted in her corner table by the wall, engrossed in her trusty little book. He acknowledged her presence and that was that. He'd

known that she had been back for a while – the Auror department had been using Curse Breakers for weeks to either gather evidence after raids or testify in front of the Wizengamot. He thought the rumours were rubbish. Their friendship seemed unbreakable.

Obviously, he knew nothing.

The collision and Pansy's wild reaction would be in the papers by tomorrow, Draco was certain. He felt a twinge of sympathy for Granger. *Not much*, just a twinge. Nothing Earth-shattering. He didn't hate her as much as he hated Potter and his Weasel. Truth be told, he *only* hated her in the past because of them and the fact that she—a Muggle-born—had bested him at everything.

Oh, and that time she slapped him.

He could hold a grudge with the best of them.

But now, he didn't know enough about her to even bother. That never stopped him before, but Draco was older; no longer sixteen, desperate, and angry. And sometimes, he was even capable of maturity. He had a Patronus and a conscience he actually listened to – if it yelled or made him feel guilty enough.

"...did you even see her when we came in?"

He never answered his mother, but he'd seen her. It was kind of hard *not* to. Albeit greatly diminished, Granger still had that *smartest person in the room* aura about her. When they had first been seated, Draco hadn't been able to see her face from behind her book and hair, but *knew* it was her.

It was strange. Draco hadn't seen her since the Battle of Hogwarts. She disappeared into thin air months after the battle. Credible rumours put her in Italy working as a Curse Breaker. And now she was back, all hell had broken loose, and Draco was...intrigued.

He observed the Potter table for a few moments, gathering all the information he needed. Potter appeared to hate her. Weasley appeared to hate her more than Potter did, if that was possible. She-Weasel looked kind of flustered as she tried to calm her boyfriend and brother down. The other Weasley was indifferent; he just watched as his raged with bored eyes. He said, "*I can't believe she has the nerve to show her face in London after what she did*," before his sister hit him with a silencing charm, much to Draco's utmost dismay.

But still it was a good place to start.

"Don't look like that, Draco. You look like you did right before you pounced on the cat when you were two."

He frowned at his mother and finished the last of his mashed potatoes, feeling every bit of full as he was intrigued by the silent confrontation and the Weasel's words. Leave it to a mother to ruin his thought process and plotting with an appallingly embarrassing memory from his childhood.

Mother scanned the dessert menu. "Have you found a date for the event tomorrow afternoon?"

Draco played around with his vegetables and debated on whether or not he was going to eat them, "I'll probably take Pansy."

"I think she already has a date. Blaise, I think."

"Oh..." Well, that was news to his ears.

Nevertheless, it was all the more reason to go alone.

He decided to test his luck on a piece of broccoli. Not bad.

"I know Astoria didn't work out, but I can find you a suitable—"

"No." He said louder and more abrasive than intended.

A waitress stopped mid-step and a few people from various tables nearby regarded him with wide eyes. His mother looked stunned and a bit hurt by his outburst. Draco didn't know why; she had done a damn good job of fucking with his dating life with her choices of 'suitable witches'. He was pretty damn certain that Mother was the sole reason he never wanted to get married.

That, and his inability to repel social-climbers.

He resigned himself to a domestic life as a single man.

And with a sigh, he recognised that he'd been a bit harsh. "Apologies. What I meant to say was that now that I know Pansy has a date, I thought about maybe going alone...or with you."

His mother's face brightened, excited by the idea of her son escorting her to the event. Draco ate his broccoli while she rattled on, but when she suggested he wear a tangerine tie to coordinate with her, he nearly dropped his fork in horror.

Ten minutes passed before he caught the first sighting of Granger post-incident and his curiosity hit a new peak. After all, her arm was linked with Pansy '*I don't like to be touched*' Parkinson. The only logic he could find was that something deeper had transpired between the two of them and he was rather shocked that he didn't know about it. Pansy never kept secrets.

Oh, how wrong he had been.

Without being caught, his eyes followed them back to Granger's table where they sat together and had what looked like a serious conversation. Pansy looked concerned—*something* she was not known for—and Granger shook her head sadly, eyes locked on the table.

Granger looked completely different: thin, pale, exhausted, with empty eyes; a hollow shell of the person he remembered. She wore loose white gabardine twill pants and a plain

turquoise short-sleeved shirt that looked a bit large on her skinny frame. Her hair was tamed in wavy, unruly curls. It was an improvement, but she certainly had a long way to go.

When Pansy patted her shoulder and rose from her seat, Draco decided that he'd waited long enough to find out answers. He started to excuse himself, but his mother had other ideas when she asked, "Where are you going?"

His answer was too quick, yet so smooth. "To see if Pansy would like to bring her new friend to join us for dessert."

Mother looked impressed. "Oh, that's a *wonderful* idea, Draco. That poor girl. Good thinking."

With a small smile, he excused himself and approached Granger's table. But before he could even make it, he came face-to-face with a displeased Pansy. And before he could open his mouth, she grabbed his arm and the next thing he felt was the familiar and uncomfortable pull of Apparition.

They landed in the alley next to the restaurant.

If there was one thing Draco Malfoy hated it was surprise Side-Alongs, "Son of a—!"

She started in on him before he could recover from the disorientation. "Don't tell me you were about to approach Hermione."

Draco shrugged. "Then, I won't."

That wasn't what she wanted to hear. "Whatever you're planning—which I *know* you are so don't even pretend you're not. Leave her alone. She's been through enough."

"Oh, *really* now," Draco smirked. "Why don't you convince me of how life has been so unfair to Granger, Pansy."

"It's not my story to tell, nor do I know all of it," was her indignant response.

He stepped closer. "Well then, we obviously need to talk about what you *do* know."

"There's nothing to discuss, Draco," Pansy looked away.

When Pansy lied, she couldn't look him in the eye. Perfect. So, he pushed. "I beg to differ."

"Why do you care?"

"I don't."

"Then leave her alone."

"Since when did you quit your job take up a post as Hermione Granger's bodyguard?"

Pansy glared at him as she folded her arms. She squeezed her lips together in frustration. "I'm not as selfish as you think, Draco. Maybe I have a heart and I refuse to see someone get treated that way..."

He considered that for a full second and stamped a firm 'denial' on that excuse. Pansy was indeed a selfish woman. She didn't defend just anyone. No, there had to be a reason. Slowly, he lifted her chin so she met his gaze with defiance. "Sounds like you're not telling me something, Pansy."

She slapped his hand away. "You're a manipulative bastard."

Draco was unapologetic. "I am who I am."

"I'm doing you a favour. She's something you don't want to get involved in."

"Let me determine that."

"Draco," Pansy almost pleaded. "Leave it."

When he said nothing, she Apparated them back into the restaurant where he pretended to sit back down while she excused herself from lunch with the excuse of work. After sending another threatening glare his way, she left.

He thought about listening for one moment before disregarding everything and approaching Granger's table. She hadn't noticed him. He watched as she stuck what looked like a tattered photograph inside of the book she had been reading and sat it down on the table with a small sigh. Then he said her name, "Granger."

She regarded him with empty, indifferent eyes. The colour was different, but he'd seen them before. Rocked by the similarity, Draco almost faltered and retreated, but didn't.

Granger blinked at him in confusion. "Is there something you want, Malfoy?"

Draco cleared his throat. "M—"

She never let him finish, cutting him off with a dull wave of her hand. "If you're here to insult me, save your breath. I already feel wretched enough as it is. I don't need you to stomp me into the ground. I'm already there."

The hollow edge and raw chill in her voice gave him pause, but he never showed his unease. Draco never thought of Granger as fragile or one for self-deprecation. He expected...more. Not the person in front of him. She had always been vibrant and strong; so tough he almost forgot she was human.

But she was human.

And to be human was to struggle.

Draco finally found his voice. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me, Malfoy," Granger's tone was as dead as her eyes and her expression. Her shoulders slumped ever so slightly. Defeated. "I'd like some peace."

The next words were out of his mouth before his conscience could stop them, "You look like you haven't left the war."

Her face twisted slightly as she chuckled dryly. "The war isn't over for everyone."

Draco didn't know who the hell she was, but she was *not* Hermione Granger.

The real Hermione Granger was noble and an almost intolerable know-it-all, but the woman in front of him was almost too pathetic for words.

When he didn't say anything in response, she retreated back into herself, ignoring his presence completely. She stared out the window with her dead eyes, unseeing and unfeeling. It was disturbing how still she became, how pale she got, how small she looked at the nearly empty table. The real Hermione Granger once infuriated him to no end, but Draco felt something close to pity for the woman in front of him. While that disturbed him to no end, what really disgusted him was the fact that something had broken Hermione Granger's spirit beyond recognition.

Draco wasn't sure why he'd asked. He had no interest in her lifeless eyes, but the question was out before he could shove it back in. "May I join you?"

Granger kept her focus on whatever the hell she was staring at, but she responded, gesturing to the empty chair across from her. "It's a free country."

He sat down before she could object because it felt strange standing over her. Draco couldn't help but watch her closely until she started blinking, moving, reaching for her beaded bag that was on the table. The large coin purse was nearly bursting with money, but she meticulously counted the exact number of Galleons, Sickles, and Knuts. Then she categorised and stacked the coins neatly on top of each other. Granger didn't even grace him with a casual glance when she said coolly, "It's very unlike a Malfoy to sit in silence, what exactly is your purpose? I doubt Pansy sent you over here."

They were on a first name basis. Interesting. "You're right...she was adamant that I leave you alone."

Her eyebrow rose, but quickly her face returned to its previous blankness. "Let me guess, curiosity overrode all."

"Ah, but you're not completely correct in your assumption."

Finally, she looked at him. "Oh, I'm not?"

"No, my mother wanted to invite you to our table for dessert." It was the first thing he could think of, but it was true enough.

"Really?" She did not believe him in the slightest. She began drumming her fingernails on the table rhythmically. "And she sent you over here to convince me?" The more she spoke; the

more Draco saw the real Hermione Granger shine through. "She would have had better luck sending Voldemort over here to chat me up."

"Or Potter," he baited.

It was something he did all the time while interviewing criminals to determine if they were lying or telling the truth. And she easily took the bait. Draco watched her entire demeanour change as a maelstrom of emotions washed over her features. She went from looking shaken, to wounded, to anguished, to resentful. He noticed the changes in her breathing, the changes in her rhythmic tapping, the changes in her posture. For a second, he thought Granger would lash out, but she never did.

Instead, she spoke with a shocking amount of passion and vehemence. "You know *nothing*."

"I know you disappeared for over five years, moved to Italy to take a job as a curse-breaker for an Italian bank, your childhood friends hate you, and something happened between you and Pansy...something that makes her *very* loyal to you and something that makes her keep secrets from me."

"Well, congratulations, Constable Jackass," she sneered sarcastically.

He ignored her, mildly intrigued by the mass defence she launched against him. Granger wanted him gone, it was obvious. But he refused to stand down, not to *her*. Because deep down he enjoyed getting under her skin. "I was wonder what would bring the lioness out of her den."

"Go away, Malfoy."

He leaned forward just a bit, keeping his voice low and tone even. "As you stated before, it's a free country. I can sit where I want."

"Then *I'll* go." She gathered her things and started to rise sharply from her chair.

Draco caught her by the arm before she could fully stand, not squeezing, just holding. His hand easily wrapped around her arm. She was almost gaunt. She couldn't be healthy. "Let's not cause another scene, Granger. I confess I'm weary with them." He kept his voice smooth, but it held an underlying strength and coolness that made her eyes lock with his in alarm. "As much as you'll *love* being in the papers thanks to your idiotic ex-friends, I have no desires to see myself in this evening's Prophet."

Granger glared at him with barely contained fury. "Then let me go."

Of course, he didn't grant her wish, but his grip softened further. Not because she asked, but because Draco could feel her bones. "But we have so much to discuss."

She wrenched her arm away finally, but didn't immediately leave. "I can't think of two things to discuss with you."

"Let's talk about *who* or *what* made you run to Italy."

Granger twitched in such a way Draco knew the next words that came from her mouth would be a lie. "You're delusional, Malfoy. I don't know what you're talking about."

It was almost impressive. Granger was a better liar than he ever anticipated or remembered; she must've honed her skills in the past few years. She tried to look calm and unperturbed, and if he wasn't good at his job or reading people, he would've completely missed the look of panic that had flickered across her face. It was quick and fleeting, but spoke volumes. He mentally patted himself on the back for a job well-done and added that to the growing list of things he knew.

Her move to Italy had been a rash decision...and now he had to find out if it was a "*who*" or a "*what*" that made her run. Draco had a suspicious feeling that the journey to Hermione Granger's truth was going to be a bumpy ride. And that was fine.

It made for the perfect distraction.

life changes everything

Chapter Summary

"Oh, do call me Narcissa."

Chapter Three

Life Changes Everything

Part One: Sharing Is Not Caring

Narcissa Black Malfoy loved her son; a fact very clear to Hermione the moment she sat down.

She doted on him when he said or did something pleasing, scolded him when he acted like the prat Hermione was familiar with, and smiled proudly as he spoke at her insistence and to his obvious annoyance about his job and many accomplishments.

Hermione ate her treacle tart and tried to listen, but her brain was in overdrive. One afternoon. Four conversations with four classmates; all of whom had changed for the better. And where was Hermione? Still at the same place she was at eighteen: lost, hurting, guilty, and lacking purpose.

Malfoy had grown from the ashes of the terrified boy she had seen in the Drawing room of the Manor into a mature, but overconfident man. Try as she may, she couldn't look at him as the slimy git from school. No, all she saw when she looked at him was the man, who used to be a boy—a boy who had lied about their identity at great personal cost and saved their lives. Hermione all but cringed at the memory before she pushed it to the dark spaces of her mind where it joined all the other painful memories from her past.

It was a terrible time for them all, she didn't forget about the rumours of Voldemort's wrath after they escaped and knew the woman and her son seated with her were lucky to have made it out with their lives and freedom. Hermione was glad to see that at least on some level, the war had changed them for the better.

"Can I have a spoonful of your Banoffee pie, Draco, love?" Mrs. Malfoy asked with a smile.

"No."

The first twenty minutes after she joined them were spent idly listening to their idle chatter about various topics ranging from the beauty of ancient runes to the purpose of swatches. It

was easy to ignore Malfoy's calculating looks, but deep down, Hermione was paranoid to the point of raw anxiety. The Malfoy's invitation for dessert had been a trap. She knew it. There was no telling what they were capable of.

She waited for the other shoe to drop for so long that she wondered if it would fall at all.

Perhaps their intentions were honourable.

At least Narcissa's.

Hermione shifted in her seat. Even after accepting that they weren't going to interrogate her, she still felt tense and miserable. The deep embarrassment the incident with Harry caused made her brittle and restless, and her conversation with Pansy had left her raw. And even though she was beyond weary, Hermione kept her guard high and never let her true feelings show. She spoke confidently when spoken to and voiced her opinion when asked, but remained pensive and quiet for the remainder of time. The brave front she'd put up was beginning to hurt.

"Please, love?" Mrs. Malfoy smiled at her son.

"No," Malfoy repeated and rolled his eyes. With perfect table manners, he ate another spoonful of his pie.

The corners of her lips lost the fight to gravity and slid into a frown. "Why not?"

"Because every time I let you take a bite, you eat the rest of it."

If a Seer had told her just yesterday that in twenty-four hours, she would be sitting in public with Narcissa and Draco Malfoy, eating a treacle tart while listening to them bicker about Malfoy's refusal to share his Banoffee pie, she would've laughed in that person's face and had them committed.

"Oh, you can't talk. Who ate the entire Opera cake before anyone else could have a piece?"

Despite her unease, listening to them argue as if her presence didn't matter was comical.

Malfoy frowned. "I was ten, mother. Why do you insist on dredging up every memory and throwing it in my face?"

"Because," she replied with a hint of coyness in her voice and eyes. "That's what I do best."

He muttered something under his breath that was likely impolite before he focused on his dessert. They were odd...and yet, so natural. Real. Like a family. A bittersweet pang hit her square in the chest and her slight smile waned into nothing. She didn't have a family anymore.

She almost choked on air.

"Oh, don't be selfish, just one bite." Mrs. Malfoy huffed.

They argued over pettiness and had immature moments, loved and respected one another, and had issues just like everyone else. The war had changed them, for the better, but they probably had their own reasons for said change. More than likely, the Malfoys had altered their elitist opinions and beliefs about blood status to help rebuild the family name in the now more tolerant wizarding society. It made sense. More sense than them changing because of some altruistic reason.

Altruism was highly overrated.

Hermione looked at her half-eaten tart and admitted something to herself. Despite her wariness and the fact that she knew Malfoy's intentions were less than honourable, their invitation was probably one of the nicest things anyone had done for her since she'd been back.

"How is your treacle tart, Hermione?" The older woman asked.

She'd successfully stole a bite of her son's dessert and proceeded to confiscate the entire plate, as predicted. Malfoy was still grumbling bitterly under his breath while he sulked—in a manly way, of course.

"Wonderful, Mrs. Malfoy."

"Oh, do call me Narcissa."

Hermione froze.

Malfoy's brow disappeared into his hair.

All was silent for a few, tense moments.

She didn't care how real they were, there was no way in the world she would ever loosen up enough to call her Narcissa. She just couldn't do that. There were still some very clear lines between them. Lines she couldn't ignore simply for the sake of pleasantries. This was the sister of the woman who had tortured her relentlessly. Yes, Hermione had recovered, but the thought of being anything except proper to her was definitely not happening.

Unfortunately, Mrs. Malfoy was staring at her expectantly, so warmly that it hurt.

"I would just like to thank you," She stared at her plate for a moment, trying to calm her nerves before she finished. "Thank you for the invitation. It was very kind of you. You didn't have to."

"Oh," she waved her off. "Don't thank me, thank Draco. It was his idea to invite you."

Malfoy paled, stiffened, and dropped his spoon on the white tablecloth. The look on his face confirmed Mrs. Malfoy's claim. Hermione's eyes nearly bulged from their sockets. Luckily for her, she was between bites of her dessert, because if she weren't, she would've choked on her treacle tart.

She slowly looked at the blond man sitting immediately to her left. She wasn't stupid. She couldn't—nor would she allow herself to—believe he invited her out the kindness of his heart; that would be too good to be true. He still was Draco Malfoy after all; the war had made him tolerable and less of an elitist, but it hadn't turned him into a bloody saint. Not once had she lowered her defences around them and he was partly the reason. She knew his motives, knew them as soon as he had asked her to join them, and carefully watched her own words and actions conscientiously up until that point because she knew he was observing her like a doctor would their patient.

"Let's talk about who or what made you run to Italy."

Hermione hoped he hadn't caught her panicked reaction before she buried her emotions and lashed out in a pathetic attempt to end the conversation. In fact, Hermione only agreed to join them for dessert to shut him up, but she had an inkling that a bit of schmoozing with Malfoy and his mother wasn't enough to divert his curiosity.

Today wasn't the end.

Only the beginning.

While she hid it perfectly behind a façade of confidence, she was anxious about every word she spoke and made sure her replies were vague enough so he wouldn't read too much into them, but not too vague so they'd know she was being vague. But, of course, she wiped that stupefied look from her face quickly because she had a part to play and a slackened jaw wasn't exactly becoming. "But you—"

He never let her finish.

Malfoy shot a look so severe that it took Hermione back to Second Year when he called her a Mudblood for the first time. His words weren't as harsh as his look; in fact, they were rather composed and sensible when she thought about it. "Do you honestly think you would've come if I said I'd invited you?"

Good point.

"I suppose not."

"And are you glad you came to have dessert with us?" Narcissa oddly looked hopeful.

That was strange.

Hermione felt strange enough to be honest. "I was a little wary at first, I still am, but I don't regret accepting the invitation."

Narcissa looked pleased to the point where Malfoy shot his mother a peculiar glance. Hermione didn't recognise—not that she recognised any of his looks to begin with. The look seemed to instigate a non-verbal conversation between mother and son that she watched suspiciously while finishing the best treacle tart she'd ever had.

It ended with a firm look from Narcissa that morphed into a smile when she looked over at Hermione. "Well, it's been a pleasure having dessert with you as well, right Draco?" she goaded him with a smile too cheery for there not to be any malice.

"Right," he said. It must have been a struggle for him to be decent.

She wanted to laugh at the awkward look on his face, but she felt exactly like he looked.

As he sipped his water, Hermione found her attention drawn to Malfoy for the first time. In school, at least before the fall of his father in Fifth Year, he walked the corridors with a swagger that some of the girls found attractive. Hermione never understood his appeal; she barely ever saw him without a sneer on his face and hate on his tongue. But he was an adult and she had to remember that even people like Draco Malfoy were capable of change.

He was dressed casually in grey trousers and a short-sleeved cream shirt. Prim and proper as always. He changed his hair to a style she'd seen on a male model in a Muggle magazine and it looked rather good on him—shockingly—he looked good, though she'd cut her own tongue out before she ever admitted it aloud. But with the way he smirked at any gawking female, he knew how good he looked.

Naturally.

"So, Hermione, what do you do?" Mrs. Malfoy asked.

"I work for Curse-Breakers. Are you familiar with the company?"

"Yes, I am. I hired them about quite a few years ago to lift the curses on a ring Lucius' mother didn't want me to have. I hear they're extremely selective about the curse breakers they hire so you must be very good at what you do."

She shrugged modestly. "I'm not terrible at it. Working at the Venetian bank really helped me hone my skills." She hadn't wanted to say that, but it didn't matter in the grand scheme of things. Everyone knew she worked at the bank in Italy apparently; it was no big secret.

Mrs. Malfoy sighed. "I haven't been to Venice since I was a little girl. Did you swim in the sea?"

Hermione shook her head vehemently. "Oh, no. I can't swim."

"You can't?" she sounded surprised.

"No. I never learned. I never had a real reason to."

Or the time.

"You should give it a shot. My son is an excellent swimmer." She stated proudly, gesturing to her brooding son. "Perhaps Draco could—" Hermione's eyes widened in something akin to horror, knowing what was coming next. "Teach you."

Malfoy promptly choked on his drink.

"Draco!" Narcissa cried out, drawing attention to their table.

As Malfoy sputtered and coughed violently into his napkin, Hermione whipped out her wand and with a flick of her wrist and a silent spell, Malfoy stopped choking and shot her a grateful look as he mouthed, 'thanks'. The shock of his gratitude rendered her speechless. All she could do was nod dumbly.

"Are you all right?" his mother asked, genuinely concerned.

"Yes. A little water went down the wrong pipe. No worries, I'm perfectly fine," he replied convincingly to his vexed mother as grey eyes shifted from her to Hermione as he asked, "So, what was it like to live in Italy?"

Hermione knew perfectly well what he was doing. Changing the subject to anything except the ghastly swimming lessons topic was the best idea she wished she'd had.

"The city is absolutely beautiful and rich with history, both wizarding and Muggle, and even though I lived there over five years, I don't think I saw it all. There was just too much and I never had time. The people are simply amazing; the people I worked with regularly were really patient with me while I learned Italian. I just think they were shocked I actually attempted it." And that was the second honest thing she'd said that day.

Mrs. Malfoy's interest was piqued. "Do you speak Italian well?"

"Fluently."

"Oh, please say something," she swooned while her son remained silent; the look on his face was almost pensive. Hermione knew that a pensive Malfoy wasn't a good one.

With a nod, Hermione pushed the dread aside and obliged the older woman and started telling an Aesop's fable called The Fox and the Grapes in perfect Italian. The tale was about a fox that tried, without avail, to reach grapes that hung high on a vine. He gave up and retreated after saying, "The grapes are sour anyway!"

Moral of the story: it is easy to despise what you cannot have.

It started a bit rough and rusty; she hadn't spoken Italian aloud in over seven months, but she quickly got back into the swing of things, telling the quick story with confidence.

She'd read it so many times that it was committed to memory.

All the while, she watched Narcissa's fascination grow, even though she had no idea what she was talking about. Hermione looked over at Malfoy who looked to be following along, sort of. He looked confused at some of the words she said and asked her to repeat a few things. Malfoy knew Italian? That was new news to her. Everything he said and did, today, was new news to her.

When she finished, she said in English, "The end."

Mrs. Malfoy clapped. "Oh, that was beautiful! I haven't the slightest idea of what you said, but it was marvellous. Do you think you could teach me Italian? I'm thinking of going on vacation down there next August and I want to be prepared."

"Sure," Hermione said without thinking.

Oh no.

But it could have been worse. She could be receiving swimming lessons from Draco Malfoy.

Teaching Mrs. Malfoy Italian was nothing in comparison. Besides, the more she talked; the more at ease Hermione was. The more she became partial to her. It hadn't built up to 'like', but it could with time. Mrs. Malfoy was agreeable, polite, and the closest thing to a mother-figure she'd had around her in a long time.

It was nice.

After shedding her initial regrets, she said, "Just let me know when you want to start and I'll be happy to start teaching you."

Hermione wondered if Malfoy knew how lucky he was to still have her in his life. Probably not. That saddened her. She tilted her head to the side and asked, "Do you speak Italian?"

Malfoy made a face. "I know a lot of words and I can write it better than I understand it, but I'm far from being fluent."

"Who taught you?"

"Blaise, but he's an awful teacher apparently," he offered with a quick glance.

After a moment of confusion as she tried to remember that name, she finally came on the right one. "Zabini? The Auror?"

He nodded.

She'd seen him in the Auror Department a few weeks ago, and he'd actually struck up a conversation with her about life in Italy. He'd heard the rumours, and it was refreshing to talk about the country, instead of why she'd gone in the first place. He'd just gotten back from a classified mission in Poland and looked rather exhausted—and yet still attractive, according to several brazen witches. Hermione would've never guessed in a million years that Blaise Zabini would've turned out to be an exceptional Auror, but anything was possible, right?

He was different than what she expected.

He told her about his time in Łódź, well the part that he could talk about, and did a mini demonstration of the Polish he knew. It was very poor, but she'd smiled at his attempts. She had told him about her historical visit to Warsaw for an ambassador's summit her Muggle school had sent her on when she was ten. He seemed genuinely interested in her adventures in Poland and about her life in Venice, so much that he invited her out for coffee to continue

the conversation. She'd politely declined, stating that while she had business to tend to back in her office, he looked like he needed a kip.

"Did you plan on staying in Italy forever?"

Mrs. Malfoy's question took her by surprise and she couldn't hide it, much to her own annoyance. Hermione had every intention on staying there forever, living out the rest of her days in beautiful Venice, but it seemed that fate wouldn't allow it and that hurt deeply. With two phone calls and a letter, she'd left Italy as abruptly as she left London after the war.

"Yes, I did, but things change."

Part Two: Not my father's son.

Draco's mind was clouded with thoughts by the time they had parted ways with Granger. As he took tea with his mother in his sitting room after they had left her outside of Flourish & Blotts, his mind wandered aimlessly as his mother chattered on about the party they would be attending together tomorrow.

"...it's going to be marvellous..."

He listened intently to every word Granger had said from the moment she sat down, trying to excavate the clues that she had tried to hide between the lines. So far, he was absolutely sure he had no idea why she had left Britain or what had brought her back. Furthermore, not once did they mention Pansy in conversation, so he couldn't at least find out how they knew each other. He just knew she'd kept Pansy out of the conversation on purpose.

Not surprising, but still brilliant on her part.

And yet, Draco wasn't deterred by his lack of knowledge, not in the least. He hadn't expected her to trust him enough to spill everything after one polite dessert. No, she had walls so high they probably were visible from space. He didn't expect her to open up, not to him, especially with his mother present.

It was obvious Granger was terribly uncomfortable around her.

Hell, his mother had been so pleasant, even Draco felt a little unnerved.

Even hours later, he was still stunned the three of them had managed a decent, if not pleasant, conversation where the war, the Dark Lord, and blood status weren't brought up. Not that he still believed in that garbage anymore.

"...I think orange is a wonderful summer colour..."

He gathered a few clues about the time she spent in Italy, even when she deliberately kept her words vague.

"...I think the gazebo idea is a little Muggle, but splendid..."

If there was one thing that was made perfectly clear today, it was that he shouldn't underestimate Hermione Granger. She was nothing like those brainless moronic witches Draco dealt with on a regular basis, as much as it pained him to admit. She was damaged, but still smarter and craftier than he'd anticipated.

"...and I think white is so unbecoming..."

Draco saw a few flickers of emotions in her eyes at certain parts; mainly when his mother asked her if she had planned on living in Venice forever. He saw flashes of pain briefly before she shut down. Something was there. He knew it.

"...I think you should drop by the manor in the morning before we go, is that fine, Draco?"

"Yes," was his absent and noncommittal reply.

His mind continued to race.

To say that he was surprised to find that Granger was far more genuine than he ever expected—or gave her credit for—was a strong understatement; he was flabbergasted, not just by her words, but by her apparent lack of judgment. She was polite to his mother after being slighted by her in the past, pleasant to him after their obviously rocky history, and he didn't detect one shred of phoniness in her voice or actions.

Draco learned more about her in an hour than he had in six years: she had a dry wit about her, spoke Venetian and Italian fluently and German with trouble, only listened to classical music, couldn't swim but lived on a large lake, and liked to travel and learn about the history of each place she visited.

"...I think they have charms up to prevent that so we shouldn't be worried."

Also, Granger had managed to do something no female outside of Pansy had ever done.

She impressed his mother.

"...Pansy told me that she was wearing lavender robes..."

Draco was thrown by a few of his mother's curve balls. When she asked her if Granger was glad that she'd come to sit with them, he had been positive she was using Granger to better them in society. Ex-friend or not, she was just as well-known as Potter. But Draco soon realised he was wrong about that.

She genuinely liked Granger. And Granger seemed to warm to his mother. He'd seen her face. It was much like giving a thirsty man water. She almost didn't understand his mother's

kindness, but drank it up all the same. His mother walked off after giving Granger a rather soft smile and a promise to write her within the week to set a time to meet.

Draco followed after a pitifully awkward goodbye.

That was an understatement and he knew it.

It was horrendous.

"Err, it was, umm, well, interesting to see you again, Malfoy."

He just nodded briefly and hurried—gracefully—after his mother without glancing back.

"...I was thinking about maybe a blue..."

If he didn't know any better, he'd say Granger was lonelier than she was afraid.

Isolated and in need of a little kindness.

"Draco?" Mother snapped her fingers in front of his face repeatedly.

He blinked about ten times before looking over at his mother. "What?"

"Did you hear anything that I said?"

"I'm sorry, but not much." At the suspicious look on her face, he added, "I was thinking about a project for work." His apology was sincere, even though the reason for his distraction was a lie.

He took a long sip of tea.

"Oh, it's all right. I suppose I was boring you to bits anyway." She smoothed down her dress robes, "So, what do you think of Hermione Granger?"

For the second time, Draco nearly choked, thanks to her. Where the hell did that come from? He shouldn't have been so surprised by her bluntness. Mother didn't beat around the bush, so to speak. "She's okay, I suppose." His answer lacked emotion, but it was the truth.

His mother made a face he didn't like; it was a conniving one. "She's a gem. So intelligent and accomplished. Yes, she was defensive and quiet, but who wouldn't be if they were in her situation? I think you should try getting to know her better."

Draco agreed, albeit silently, with everything she said until that last sentence.

He could literally hear the wheels in her head as they rolled; the wheels and her words made him suddenly very uncomfortable. Try to get to know Granger?

"Excuse me?"

Clearly, he'd been hearing and seeing things.

Draco didn't mind that his mother liked Granger; he just wanted to be kept out of it. Getting to know her better would screw with that plan to find out what happened to 'The Golden Trio' and move on. But for some reason, Draco had a strong feeling it was easier said than done.

"You heard me. It may be worth your while."

He laughed until he realised that she was serious. "Obviously, you've taken leave of your senses."

Mother just smiled, not evilly, just good-humoured, and rose from her spot. "I have to go. The Healers are coming by to observe your father and change some of his potions. Be at the Manor by eleven tomorrow morning so we can leave together for the event."

He looked at her a little alarmed. Healers? In the Manor? "Do you need help with father tonight?"

Aggressive nights always followed Healer visits and adjustments to his daily regimen of potions.

"Not at all," she patted his shoulder lovingly. "Nothing to worry about. All of them are as strong as they are discreet. There are no worries about any of this getting out and they are staying for the next two nights to see that he adjusts to the potions well."

"But—"

"I've got it all under control, Draco, I'll write you if I need assistance," Narcissa dropped a kiss on her only son's cheek and left him, by Floo, with his thoughts—no longer on Granger, but on the man who had been an important part of who he was as a person.

To say that Draco idolised his father while growing up was a gross understatement. He literally worshiped the man, the awe and admiration always evident in his eyes. At a pliable age, Draco had placed him on a platform, openly fostering desires to be just like him when he grew up. Seeing his father in his current state of insanity was especially hard for his inner child to cope with.

His father's fear and loyalty to the Dark Lord had ruined their lives, yet Draco still respected him, now only in the way a son should respect his father...oh, but believe it took him a long time to erase the bitterness and return to that earlier point.

Draco Malfoy had gone from respecting to hating his father in about twelve seconds.

It was right after his Sixth Year had abruptly ended. He was sitting in the presence of the Dark Lord, secretly frightened out of his wits (but hiding it for Father's sake) while watching him torture and murder someone in the drawing room. His eyes darted over to his father and there it was. Blatant fear. The same fear in his eyes that he'd always told Draco to hide. That hypocritical act was the spark that ignited a feeling of pure hatred; hatred directed at his father. It rose in his chest swiftly and raged through him like a wildfire.

He didn't comprehend it at the time, but later, Draco realised that seeing Lucius as something less than the strong, fearless Malfoy man he had forced Draco to be, it just made him lose all respect for his father. And then it deteriorated from there. Hatred bubbled and scalded his skin. It made his hands shake vehemently and his breathing change. It made him realise things about his father he'd never seen before.

Lucius Malfoy was a selfish bastard. He didn't give a damn about what would happen to him or his mother when he made his decision to openly follow the Dark Lord. He didn't give a damn about how it ruined and altered their lives forever. He didn't give a damn about the repercussions of his actions. He didn't give a damn about anything. No, he just did what he wanted, damn the consequences, damn him and his mother, damn it all to hell. He'd certainly damned them for the longest time, not just in society, but in their own minds. And then, his father had the nerve to be afraid of the Dark Lord after inundating Draco for years with stories of all the great and powerful things the Dark Lord was capable of.

Bullshit.

All of it.

And Father?

He leaked bullshit.

Draco had wanted to punch him in that moment because the hell they lived in the following year, the hell he'd been through that year; all of that was his fault. Instead of being left out of the entire thing because he wasn't of age, Draco was branded with alacrity, initiated, and dragged into his father's world, literally. Oh, how he resented his father for dragging them all down with him; for setting the path that led Draco to being used as a fucking guinea pig in a sadistic man's games, a mission that nearly cost him his life and his sanity...and when the Dark Lord found out he couldn't complete the task on his own—it had taken him weeks to recover.

It was a long road following the war, but Draco finally came to respect his father once again, even if he was insane. It took three years to see his father's own lack of choice in the matter and understand why he did the things he did. Three years, but Draco learned more about his father than he ever had when he was sane.

Of course, Draco never completely regained the same admiration he'd had for his father as a child. No, he was too old, too changed by war, and too brutalised by a sadistic Dark Lord to maintain the same childish dreams and goals.

In a burst of green flames, Pansy Parkinson stepped out of his fireplace.

As she dusted the soot from her cloak, he tried to figure out why she was there, but didn't have to wait long for his answer.

Pansy looked around before she coolly asked, "I thought your mother would still be here, is she?" She hung her robes on the charmed coat rack and ran a hand down her blue dress to smooth out the invisible wrinkles.

"She left about twenty minutes ago."

Pansy picked her robes back up, preparing to Floo over to the manor. "Well, I guess I'll be—"

"Stay."

"I don't think I should."

Draco rose from his seat on the couch, crossed the room, and stood in front of his friend, "What? Are you scared of me now?" he asked in gentler tones. The last thing he needed was for her to be fearful of him. Not after everything they'd gone through together as friends.

Pansy stared at the floor. "No, of course not."

He ignored the slight feeling of relief that coursed through him. "Then why won't you look at me?"

"I don't trust being alone with you right now."

There was nothing said for the longest time because Draco didn't know what to say. Having Pansy there went against his plans to give her a few days to calm down and approach her about the Granger situation over a pleasant lunch and a few drinks. Pansy always loosened up over drinks. It was a brilliant plan, but now he had to start from scratch. "Is this about Granger?"

"Yes."

"Why are you protecting her? I just don't understand."

Pansy backed away from Draco one step at a time until she was near the armchair. "Someone has to."

"It's not like you to be self-sacrificing, and you know it. Her burdens aren't yours to carry."

The light that set her temper ablaze was turned on. "Look at her. Really, take a look at her. She's wasting away because she can't even carry her own burdens. I don't know everything that's happened, I don't know the secrets she's kept from me, but she's a lot worse off than when I saw her seven months ago—" with a small gasp, Pansy's hand flew over her mouth and her eyes went wide.

She'd spoken too much.

His mind spun with the new information he'd been unintentionally given.

Pansy had seen Granger seven months before. In Italy, he assumed.

He was in full interrogation mode. "Why were you in Italy?"

"I can't tell you."

"When did you see her?"

"Don't ask me questions I can't answer."

"What does she have on you?"

"She has nothing on me."

"Then why are you protecting her?"

"I already told you."

Draco's face twisted into a sneer any of his ancestors would be proud of, "You're lying to me, and I hate being lied to."

"What does it matter? You lie to me all the time. You say this thing with your father doesn't upset you, and it does. I know it does." Pansy folded her arms in an accusatory manner. "Why do you even care? You're not going to help her. That's not like you." Draco opened his mouth to argue, but she didn't let him get a word in edgewise. "You're a selfish bastard, just like your father. You don't care about anyone other than yourself, Draco. I know this, you know this, Blaise knows this, and your mother even knows this, so why start caring now?"

Rage bubbled inside him, his body went red hot, and his eyes darkened. Draco stalked back to the other side of the room to stop himself from lashing out at her. His hands shook; he wanted to curse her so bad it made him ache. But that wasn't who he was. He wasn't abusive. He wasn't evil. His father had been all of those things from time to time. Not him. Right. Not him.

"Nothing to say?" she shot back angrily.

And that set him back off. "Oh, I have something to say, Pansy. How dare you compare me to him? I thought you knew me better than that. Fuck Pansy, I'm nothing, nothing like him. I'm nothing like—"

"You are, Draco. You try not to be, you try to act better, you try and try and try, Draco, but you are. You're just like him."

"No, I'm not!" he yelled; the desperation in his voice was shielded by the blazing anger residing in his chest.

"You can sit here all day and deny it, but you are. While you're not everything he was in his prime, you're manipulative and you sure as hell don't care about anyone other than yourself. You want something from her, and you'll stop at nothing to get it. Sound familiar? It should." She defiantly met his gaze. "You can get angry, you can throw me out, you can even refuse to speak to me, but the sooner you accept the truth, the better off you'll be."

Draco wanted to hex the hell out of her because deep down he knew she was right and he hated her for it.

It muffled his anger.

Slightly.

"Go to hell, Pansy," he seethed.

Another painfully long silence passed before she muttered. "I'm sorry. That was out of line."

"Damn right it was."

"I want you to leave Hermione alone," Pansy told him coolly.

"So, it's Hermione?" he spat distastefully, "Is she your new best friend, now?"

"It's nothing like that," she shook her head slowly, still flushed from the argument, "We're not even friends. She doesn't even like the word."

"Then why protect her?"

When she sighed, he knew he'd worn her down. "I don't want to fight you."

She hated when they fought almost as much as he did.

"You're keeping things from me, Pansy. I thought we were beyond that."

"Draco," she said, voice suddenly thick with emotions. "There is a lot I'm keeping from you."

"Then tell me."

"I can't." Her eyes watered. It had been so long since he'd seen her display some sort of emotion that showed just how vulnerable she was. Draco almost wanted to hug her, apologise for pushing her to that point, but she wasn't the sort that wanted comfort. And neither was he. So, he stood and watched as she fell apart. And his guilt was almost tangible. "I want to tell you everything, but I can't."

"Pansy." There was a touch of empathy in his tone that made her look at him.

Draco didn't like seeing her hurt; and that was the startling difference between him and his father. Father didn't hesitate to chastise his mother for spoiling him too much nor did he think twice before kicking Draco down for "un-Malfoy behaviour" as a child. Draco himself, refused to kick Pansy while she was already down. He refused to repeat history because he'd learned from it. After all, there was only so much someone could stand before they grew weary and the thought of Pansy ever growing weary with him left him with an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach. Merlin only knew how long it had taken her to get to the point where she was today.

And it wasn't time for a relapse.

"Don't force it out of me, Draco," she pleaded through tears. "Just trust me when I say that what she's hiding is something you really don't want to get involved in. I wish that fate had a better plan for me. For us."

There was another pause before he asked, "What do you mean?"

She chuckled ruefully as she rubbed mascara-streaked tears away. "I'd sleep better at night if I didn't know at least part of what she's been through, part of what plagues her. If I didn't see her horror-stricken face in my worst memories or her cries in my dreams. I'd sleep better if I wasn't the only person who knew the reason she left London over five years ago."

the rise and fall of one-worded questions

Chapter Summary

"...I want to conquer my demons so I can help you conquer yours."

Chapter Four

The Rise and fall of One-Worded Questions

Part One: Them.

October 20th

Hermione slowly swirled the brownish-red liquid in the glass; the world slowing on its axis as she brought the glass to her lips.

The liquid burned in her throat as she swallowed and she found herself praying it would set fire to everything, if only for a moment. She would take relief wherever she could get it. When the glass was levelled again, Hermione looked through the liquid. The world was rose-coloured and vaguely translucent and that simply would not do.

Hermione did not wear rose-coloured glasses.

She was a realist; more than she had been at eighteen. There was no escape from an often harsh world. She no longer told herself out of ignorance or fear that everything would be fine if she willed it so. Realism was the only reason she hadn't completely crumpled. Deep down, the pragmatist in her knew that pessimism was just as destructive as blind optimism. It was about balance; there was a time and a place for both. But life seemed so hopeless, her loneliness felt so overwhelming that it was easier to sink rather than swim.

Because, in the end, nothing would change.

As she looked through her rose-coloured glass, Hermione realised that it wasn't about optimism or pessimism. Perhaps it was just the act of grasping onto that last shred of integrity with both hands in hopes of fighting off the truth. Because the truth was nothing simple. She lifted the glass to her lips and drank the rest in one gulp. It burned, but she didn't wince. Instead, she relished in it and continued to hope that it would cleanse her sins.

"Surely you didn't start without me," a snooty voice came from the doorway.

Hermione didn't need to turn to identify the speaker. It was the same voice that had whispered, "*Potter's a prat,*" and dragged her in the direction of the loo.

Pansy Parkinson.

"It's my first glass. You know where the glasses are."

"I do." And she left the doorway, walking in the direction of the kitchen.

Hermione watched her go with memories of their first real conversation. It was on an airplane, oddly enough.

"What are you doing here?" Pansy tonelessly asked from above.

Hermione looked up from her book at the speaker. "I believe we're here for the same reasons, Parkinson. I'm travelling to Australia, although I'm confused as to why you're travelling the Muggle way."

Pansy checked the ticket, sighed, and sat down in her assigned seat, right next to Hermione. "Don't presume to know me, Granger."

"*Touché.*"

"I've travelled this way plenty of times."

Now that was surprising, but Hermione knew not to let her shock show.

An hour later, Pansy asked. "Why are you going to Australia?"

Hermione exhaled her frustration at being interrupted. "Why are you talking to me? We are not friends."

"I'm just making conversation...it keeps my mind off...things."

Hermione knew exactly what she meant. She had been there when Pansy Parkinson's pampered life changed forever. It came as a great surprise and the perfect opportunity for the revenge-seeking Death Eaters that the Parkinson and Zabini families were in talks to unify their neutral families. They were attacked in the middle of one of their 'marriage talk' meetings. It was a well-planned attack, but they hadn't planned on Mrs. Parkinson's Patronus.

Aurors and the Order arrived on the scene almost immediately and what took place was a battle that reminded Hermione of the final battle at Hogwarts two months prior. The battle waged on and Hermione, fresh from defeating a Death Eater in a duel, spotted a hysterical Pansy sobbing over her father's obviously dead body. When a Death Eater pointed their wand at the grieving girl, she did the first thing that came to mind.

She saved Pansy Parkinson's life.

"How is your mother coping?"

Pansy wore a mask of indifference; one Hermione had seen on Draco Malfoy's face often through the years. "My mother was tortured into insanity like Longbottom's parents. We weren't close so it doesn't matter."

"It does. She's your mother."

"Don't act like you care, Granger. You probably think I got what I deserve."

"No one deserves that."

"We're eighteen," Pansy whispered. "But why does it feel like our lives are already over?"

She should've known then that their paths would cross again. Brisbane was only so large.

"I didn't hear you come through the Floo."

Pansy, with a fresh wine glass, sat on the opposite end of the sofa with the bottle she'd retrieved from the kitchen, pouring a generous amount of the amber liquid into it. Pansy quickly downed it in several gulps, wincing as the liquid burned in her chest. "That's because I didn't." She answered when she finished and before she poured herself and Hermione a second glass. "Your wards let me Apparate right in. I hope that doesn't mean you consider me a friend," she chuckled ruefully.

"No." Hermione snipped. Truth be told, she had no set wards over her house.

"Good." And her response sounded hollow even to Hermione's ears.

"Why are you here, Pansy?" The better question was why she kept coming, but she knew better than to ask.

"Blaise told me that Draco asked him to dig up your Ministry records for him."

Hermione wasn't surprised. In fact, she'd expected it. Leave it to Malfoy to send someone else to do his dirty work. He would never leave well enough alone, but Hermione hadn't expected him to wait so long. Patience, thy name wasn't Draco Malfoy.

"Let him have it." She waved her hand absently and sipped her wine.

"But Hermione—"

"There's nothing of importance in my files. I made sure everything was removed."

Silence passed over them like a thick fog and each of them had their second drink in peace; peace that was broken by Pansy's anxiety. "He's going to find out." When Hermione tried to argue, Pansy cut her off. "Don't underestimate him, Hermione. When he wants to know something, he'll stop at nothing until he gets it."

"I've never underestimated him."

Malfoy's relentless ambition was almost legendary. She'd known he would never stop until he had what he wanted. A perverted part of her wanted him to find out since he wanted to know so badly. Punish him like she'd been punished. But not really. Secrets were terrible things to carry on one's own, but sometimes secrets were worse when they were out in the open. It was the reason she clung to hers so tightly. It was bad enough that Pansy knew, she'd told her everything in a moment of vulnerability, but Hermione didn't need Malfoy finding out.

"You need to tell *someone* what's happened. Your secrets are killing you."

Pansy never told her what she wanted to hear, but rather what she needed to hear.

And it grated her nerves.

"I don't need your nagging, Pansy."

"No, what you *need* is some help," berated Pansy as she poured another shot, "You need to talk to someone about Australia, about Italy, about everything, including them."

Hermione tried to hide it, but her face betrayed her and she winced.

Them.

"I don't want to talk about them."

"You never do, Hermione, that's the problem. You never talk about anything, you've never mourned, but you've never let go either. Don't think I don't know what's in your attic. You can't lock them away forever. You can't hide the fact that they existed."

Her anger was hot and bright. Before she knew it, she was yelling, "I know! I know they existed! I don't need you to tell me that they existed!"

"Do you?" Pansy remained deadly calm. "Because to me it seems like you're doing everything in your power to forget."

Hermione shook her head bitterly. "Just because I don't broadcast my pain, it doesn't mean I've forgotten."

How could she when they'd already left their mark on her soul?

"You don't talk about it. Not to me, anyway."

"What good does talking do? It won't change anything. It won't bring them back. It won't stop the nightmares."

"Depends on who you talk to..." she trailed off to finish her wine. "I've talked to Blaise."

The blood drained from her cheeks and she stared at Pansy in horror. "You—you told Blaise?"

Pansy nodded solemnly. "Before I checked into St. Mungo's."

"At least I know why he's so nice to me." She hated how resentful she sounded. More than that, she hated how every kindness had a price.

"It's not just that, Hermione. He understands. I doubt you'll find someone who won't."

She ran her finger around the rim of the glass and sighed wearily. "I'm glad you've got someone you trust—"

"You could too let someone in. You don't trust *anyone*; you don't even trust me and you know I would give my *life* before I ever stabbed you in the back. I've forgiven you for lying to me and I've kept quiet, I've done everything you asked—everything in my power to show you that you can let me in, and you still don't. You suffer in silence."

Hermione closed her eyes. Pansy was right, but she just couldn't take the plunge. "One day," she told her honestly. "One day, I will let you in. I'll trust you, unconditionally. Just not today."

Silence fell between the two women. It was tense and thick with unspoken words. Pansy scooted closer and hesitantly reached out, brushing tendrils of Hermione's hair behind her ear. She rested her head on Hermione's shoulder and they breathed together until their breaths matched. Time came to a standstill. Everything was silent. Hermione relaxed, touching her heads together.

"Maybe," Pansy whispered. "Maybe by the time you're ready, I'll be strong enough for the both of us."

Hermione said nothing.

Pansy sat up straight and poured herself a third glass of wine, spilling a little on the wood table because her hands shook so badly. "I'm telling Draco about Australia." And she drank the contents of her glass.

She looked at her solemnly. Hermione wasn't upset or surprised. Anxious, of course, but she couldn't tell her no. After all, it wasn't just her secret. Pansy was there, too. And Malfoy was Pansy's best friend. He'd stood by her side at her father's funeral and, without knowing, he was there for her when she'd had her breakdown in the months after Australia. Pansy had written about him in her letters. Honestly, Hermione was surprised she hadn't told him already. "Have you thought about it?"

"Only every day for the last two months. He deserves to know what Blaise knows." But she was scared, which explained her heavy drinking. Hermione would probably have to open a second bottle before the night ended. "I'm ready to move on with my life. I don't want to be like you. I don't want to have secrets and I don't want to tell lies anymore. I want to sleep at night without hearing your voice or mine in my head. I want to conquer my demons so I can help you conquer yours."

There was a faint tap on the window in her kitchen.

Against her better judgment, Hermione quickly got to her feet and let the owl in. Pansy followed out of curiosity. Automatically, she knew its owner: her boss, Gregory Kingston. After Pansy fed the owl a treat, she watched as it flew back out the window, destination: home.

"Who is it from?"

"My boss."

"This late? I thought you were on holiday."

Hermione opened the letter. "I am, and it's not that late."

Miss Granger,

I understand that it is your day off and I understand that it is later than expected, but we have an emergency on our hands. Can you please come into the office without delay? Thank you.

Gregory Kingston.

She glanced at the clock on her wall and gave a sigh with thoughts of simply ignoring the letter; her gut told her to crumple it up and feign ignorance Monday when she returned to work. But the owl was gone. "They want me to come into work."

"You're not going, are you?" Pansy questioned softly.

"I have nothing better to do."

Pansy snorted, but Hermione knew better than to think she was offended by her comment.

Outside of drinking herself into a stupor with Pansy, worrying herself with thoughts of what Malfoy would say when he found out about Australia, and letting the depression rot her to the core, she had no other plans on that Wednesday night. It was only seven in the evening.

Besides, she was curious about why she was being summoned.

Curiosity won the battle.

She found her wand buried between the cushions of the couch and summoned her work bag from the front closet. Pansy was seated on the couch, tapping her foot nervously when she returned to the living room. Anxiously, she looked up when Hermione crossed in front of her and stood instantly. "Her—"

"Tell him," Hermione smiled weakly at her, resting her hands over Pansy's that were clutched together. The shaking stopped. "You're right. You deserve to be free."

"You deserve it, too."

Hermione shook her head sadly. "No—no I don't."

Pansy hugged her, but she just stood there with her hands at her side. "You have to forgive yourself for everything."

"I have to go."

The two left together by Apparition, but in different locations.

Part Two: Marquette Manor

Something was definitely wrong.

A feeling of dread washed over Hermione as she peeked into the main conference room. Her mood didn't mitigate the feelings in the pit of her stomach. The air in the room was stiff and smelled faintly of tobacco and coffee; nauseating, but bearable. It was a little bright—the lights in the room were bright enough to give anyone a headache, but she wasn't one to complain. Nine polished, cushioned chairs were situated neatly around a gleaming mahogany circular conference table room.

One was empty, but the other eight weren't.

Three were occupied by Ministry officials: Minister Shacklebolt dressed in splendid robes, his undersecretary, and the Assistant to the Undersecretary. One, the chair next to the Minister, was being occupied by her boss. Three were being taken by Aurors: none she recognized, but knew that one was the head of the Auror Department. She'd seen his face in The Daily Prophet a few times since she'd been back. The last was being occupied by none other than a perfectly-dressed Draco Malfoy, who looked to be combating disinterest and vague annoyance. Annoyance was likely winning because his blank look turned to a small scowl when the person next to him said something about Wizengamot trials.

She didn't want to know what they were talking about.

"Miss? Would you like something to drink? Coffee perhaps?" asked a short brunette with wire-rimmed glasses.

Hermione blinked a few times, trying to remember her name, but only knew she was the Assistant to the Undersecretary. She shook her head. "No, but do we have any tea?"

The woman didn't answer; instead she turned, busied herself making a cup of tea, and presented it to Hermione minute later. After a soft whisper of thanks, Hermione made her presence known.

Minister Shacklebolt gave her a kind nod from his spot before gesturing to the last empty seat between the head of the Aurors, Robert Dorchester...and Draco Malfoy. The Head of the

Aurors received an urgent owl and went to handle the matter at hand, leaving them to converse before the meeting began. She sipped her tea and hoped Malfoy wouldn't say anything to her.

They had nothing to discuss.

"You want to explain why you smell like a winery," Malfoy drawled impassively in a voice only she could hear.

Hermione glared, "It's my day off and I was summoned, not that what I do on my own time is any of your business, *Malfoy*."

"No need to be so bloody defensive, *Granger*," he mocked with a smooth roll of his eyes.

She muttered something rude under her breath. After all, she had every right to be defensive around him.

The smug smirk increased to something that resembled a smile. "My, my, what has your knickers in a twist?"

"Kindly bugger off." She took a sip of tea before extracting a quill and a piece of parchment from her bag.

He pretended not to hear her. "How are Italian lessons going with my mother?"

Despite herself, and the company she was temporarily forced to keep, Hermione smiled. The more time she spent with Narcissa Malfoy, the more she came to genuinely like the woman. A family emergency had kept them from starting lessons for a full month, but once the initial lesson was out of the way, things had been smooth sailing from there.

The previous Saturday, they had done something different and met at a restaurant in a botanical garden. Naturally, Hermione was wary, but there ended up being no need. For six hours, they'd just talked and walked around. Hermione taught her the names of all the plants in Italian. She fussed over Hermione's slim figure, telling her to eat something other than salad. Hermione told her that English food tasted rather bland after years in Italy.

After that, there wasn't any further personal information exchanged, at least on Hermione's part – in fact, she didn't talk much at all. Mrs. Malfoy took control of the conversation, but she did something that shocked Hermione to the core. She apologised.

"There are so many things in life that I wish I could take back, but I know I can't. All I can do is move forward and ask for forgiveness for the past."

Hermione blinked. "You want forgiveness...from me?"

"Yes."

"I forgave your entire family a long time ago. I didn't have the energy to be hold on to that hate then, and I definitely don't have it now."

Narcissa looked surprised. "You truly are remarkable."

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are. I know a lot more about you than you think."

She tried to swallow the horror that built in her chest at those words.

"We don't have to talk about it, forget I even said it. I will never tell a soul. However, if you need something, I'm just an owl away."

Narcissa's quest for redemption was real; she didn't need Pansy to tell her that. And though she wondered exactly what Mrs. Malfoy knew about her, Hermione decided that it was best not to worry because neither of them mentioned it again. For some reason, she felt she understood Narcissa Malfoy. There were, after all, so many things in her own life that she wanted to take back.

So many.

"Great. She's a natural," Hermione finally answered.

It was silent for a moment before Malfoy said, "She likes you."

She stole a glance at him. "She likes you, too." And she did. She spoke of him often during their lessons. A bit annoying, really, but she was a proud mother. Begrudgingly, Hermione admitted that she finally had good reason to be. Malfoy was tolerable, she supposed...when he wasn't being a nosy, baiting, records-stealing prat.

He smirked arrogantly. "Everyone likes me. They can't help it."

With a snort, Hermione rolled her eyes. "I see you're still a cheeky bastard."

"And you're still a know-it-all bookworm; it's good to know some things don't change...well, except your status in Potter's Army of Minions. Tell me Granger, why is it that my mother and Pansy are the only witches in London who like you?"

She nearly choked on her tea.

Malfoy had always been a bit too blunt for her liking.

Just when she thought that she could have a pleasant - okay, a passable - conversation, he went and cocked it up. "It's a misunderstanding." That was vague enough.

He ran long, nimble fingers through his freshly cut hair. "A misunderstanding is when you get tomatoes on your sandwich when you didn't ask for them. Whatever happened between you and the Potter Brigade is a bit more than a simple misunderstanding, so don't insult my intelligence any further with your lies."

The cool tone he spoke in made her anger and defences rise on their own accord, but there were others in the room and she couldn't raise her voice. "What does it matter to you,

Malfoy? Last I checked you didn't give a damn about anyone other than yourself or the purity of your blood."

"Really?"

"Yes, just like your father."

The offended - and positively savage - look Malfoy shot made her feel cornered. "Is that what you think of me?" he spat caustically. "You think – you think I'm like my father?" Malfoy didn't even let her answer, much less blink before he spoke again; his voice was low and furious, "Newsflash Granger: I am *not* like my father. I wouldn't be sitting here talking to you if I were him. I would've used Legilimens to access the memories you've hidden and lied about for the last five years, the Imperius curse to force them out of your mouth if you *dared* to block me from your mind, and if you resisted further, I would've used the Cruciatius curse...that is, *if* I were like my father."

"N—"

Malfoy raged on, but his voice was cold and even, "Don't you dare presume to think you know me, and don't you dare presume to think you can simply pass judgement against me and group me in the 'evil Death Eater' category with my father. It doesn't work like that. Let's make one thing abundantly clear, Granger: you don't know *shit*. You don't know shit about me, about my father, or about my family and what we've been through...and it would be wise if you shut your fucking mouth." He'd kept his voice low and controlled the entire time, but she knew just how angry he was.

Stunned, she just sat there, blinking rapidly as she kept herself contained. Perhaps he had a point about everything and maybe he wasn't like his father, but he started all of this.

"You spent nearly half of our lives thinking I'm some prejudiced arse, and you were right to, but who's the prejudiced arse now?"

"Don't sit there and act wounded, Malfoy." Hermione accused defiantly as she picked at her own skin. "I have every right to think ill of you. It isn't like you've given me a reason to think otherwise."

"I think being decent to you is enough of one."

She scoffed like he'd told a joke. And it was just that: a joke. "You think *this* is you being *decent*? Ha! Malfoy, you wouldn't know decent if it *sat on you*. Besides, when were you *ever* decent? In utero? Although from the horror stories your mother told me about her pregnancy with you, I seriously doubt that as well."

Malfoy looked like he wanted to snap the quill in his hand, but something held his temper in place. "I'm not terribly surprised, Granger, that you don't know me half as well as you think you do."

"True, but I'm rather surprised that *you* actually care about what *I* think of you, Malfoy."

He went very pale and started to retort, but Robert Dorchester returned to his seat and Minister Shacklebolt started the meeting.

Perfect timing.

"As some of you probably know by now, there was an Auror raid on the Marquette Manor this evening and we apprehended all two hundred members of a Voldemort sympathizer terrorist group founded by former Death Eaters, during an interest meeting our Aurors did a wonderful job of infiltrating. The group, responsible for minor attacks on Muggles and Muggleborns alike in the last four years, were promptly rounded up and sent to Azkaban."

For the life of her, Hermione couldn't figure out why she was here, but made dutiful notes.

Malfoy, she curiously noted, was writing with a pen.

Strange.

However, she wasn't surprised by the Ministry's presence at her place of work. Curse-Breakers did a lot of contract work for the Ministry; they broke curses on seized artefacts during Auror raids, sold them at auctions for a ridiculously large amount of money, and gave the Ministry half of the profits. In addition to that, Curse-Breakers worked with various wizarding banks all over Europe. The company did private jobs for families willing to pay, purchased cursed items from those who wanted to be rid of the items, broke all the curses and sold them to museums if they were valuable enough, or auctioned them off.

He droned on and on for a few minutes about the significance of the raid on the terrorists and gave credit where credit was due. He discussed trial information with Malfoy, who nodded at all the Minister's requests and made suggestions of his own.

Well, that certainly explained why *he* was here.

Still, it was a rather boring meeting and she felt her eyes get heavy.

That was, until he said, "It appears as though the house is not only heavily warded with spells that our Aurors aren't qualified to take down, but cursed using out-dated magic. The evidence that is in the house is also cursed, albeit with fairly simple curses. The issue is that the house will not allow anyone who isn't blood-related to remove anything or attempt to break the curse on anything inside the house."

Hermione's eyes widened ever so slightly. No matter how many times she saw this sort of thing, she still found herself impressed with the lengths people went to keep their secrets. She wasn't alone.

"I've heard from your boss, Miss Granger, that you are very familiar with this kind of curse."

Instinctively, she nodded, but was too busy with her notes to look up, much less speak.

Oh, she was definitely familiar. Many of contract cases that she'd done in Italy on her days away from the bank involved such curses; she was already composing a list of spells in her head that could be used to breach the wards as well as to break curses on and in the house.

"Wonderful!" He handed over the blueprints to the mansion, which were filed away at the Ministry, and finished, "Mr. Dorchester will take you to the scene as soon as we conclude here. Now..."

Part Three: Abandonment

Marquette Manor looked like something out of a gothic novel she'd read as a small child; the fact that it was nearly dusk when she and Robert arrived by Portkey just added to its creepy appeal. It was swarming with Aurors and rather noisy, but for some reason Hermione didn't feel very safe just entering. The blueprints had already been memorized; she'd studied them for the duration of the meeting and even in the ten minutes she'd had after the meeting's conclusion. Malfoy, who was no longer plotting her demise with his eyes, stuck around and, to her utmost shock, had answered every single one of her questions about the location of Marquette Manor.

Coincidentally, it was approximately situated thirty-two kilometres from Malfoy Manor. He'd been staring at the blueprints since her acquisition of them and pointed out a few key locations of where the Manor may be weakest. Then Malfoy spoke of how his family used to visit the Marquettes when he before he was old enough to attend Hogwarts and how all the kids with wands used to practice hexes and spells on the house elves - to her horror. Most alarming, however, was the fact that Malfoy had *warned* her that the house elves were fiercely loyal to the family and would probably try to tamper with the investigation.

At that piece of advice, the first thing she told the Aurors on site was to remove all the house elves.

"Is the scene secure?" Robert Dorchester asked someone.

Hermione's head snapped up from the list of spells she'd planned to use on the house to not only breach the wards, but break the curse; her eyes fell on the tall Blaise Zabini, the person at whom the question was being directed.

"Yes, sir. If Miss Granger will follow me." He made a smooth gesture with his right hand.

It was the first time she'd seen him since their conversation at the Ministry, as well as the first time she'd seen him knowing he knew about Australia. Needless to say, Hermione was fairly apprehensive in his presence.

Initially.

Quickly, she came to the conclusion that Zabini was no ordinary Auror. "It was a good idea to send the house elves away," he spoke up rather calmly as they strolled through the sea of

Aurors in the direction of the heavily-lit mansion.

"Well, I can't take the credit for it. Malfoy told me. I don't know how house elves can be so loyal to a family that allows their children to use them as target practice for spells they learned at school."

"No, I suppose you wouldn't."

Her head snapped in his direction. "And what's that supposed to mean?" She couldn't keep the pique out of her voice. He had started to sound like the sixteen-year-old Malfoy and Hermione wasn't in the mood to deal with another prejudiced bastard.

Zabini's dark eyes flickered over to her momentarily before he used his wand to open the massive front door. "I hope you don't take offence, but I was merely pointing out that outside of Dobby, Winky, and Kreacher, you don't have very much experience with house elves."

"How did you know—"

"I've worked with Potter for the last five years. We talk...*sometimes*."

That was enough to make her lips snap shut, eager to change the topic.

Zabini took the hint of her silence as permission to continue. "Anyway. Imagine having this one diamond ring in your family. It's been passed down from family to family, from generation to generation, and now it's yours. It's priceless. It means more to you than the world itself because it symbolizes your history and your future."

Hermione wanted to see where this line of reasoning went and folded her arms, feet rooted in place in the large, but far from grand, foyer. The last of the Aurors and Ministry workers were bustling around, but they went undetected by the pair that had just walked in.

"Let's say that hard times fall on you and someone tells you that you have to sell the diamond. Would you?"

"Most certainly not!" She'd kept everything that belonged to her parents. They were all treasures to her. Priceless treasures - albeit still locked in her attic because they still were too painful to look at.

"That's how it is for the house elves. Their families are like that diamond ring in the sense that they usually have been with them for hundreds of years; there's loyalty in them that not even the noblest Gryffindor can fathom. The house elves of the Marquette family have been with them since the fourteenth century. I think I'd be a little protective of something I've been part of for the last seven centuries."

He had a very good point, but she never had a chance to say comment or respond.

"Oi, are you two done chatting?" the question came from behind them made Hermione's entire body go rigid. "If so, can we please get to work, so I can go home sometime before next week?"

Hermione didn't have to turn around to know who had spoken.

"Yeah, we're all done here, Potter. She's all yours."

What was that supposed to mean?

"Well, Granger, it was fun."

"You're leaving?"

A feeling of desertion rose in her chest, and for a split second she almost wanted to grab Zabini's hand and beg him not to leave.

"Potter's been put in charge of your safety while you work on the house."

Her eyes flickered over to the man who was supposed to protect her. He didn't look at all thrilled by his assignment. In fact, he looked rather angry – okay, livid; much like he'd been at the restaurant when he had completely stepped over her. Hermione cringed at the memory – and at the article in the Daily Prophet about the incident the next morning entitled: *The Official End of the Golden Trio and Pansy Parkinson's Role By Parvati Patil*.

"It was nice to talking to you, Granger, as always."

Hermione watched helplessly as Blaise Zabini walked out the door and out of sight.

She was doomed.

The next two hours were sheer torture as she worked. The now empty Manor was as beautiful as it was creepy, but she didn't feel the least bit safe under a supposed protection shield Harry provided; her spells got out, but anything the house threw back couldn't get in. Instead of the normal warm shield, hers was bitterly cold; so cold her teeth chattered and her muscles ached. Hermione knew what a cold protection charm meant, and that made working almost unbearable.

Nevertheless, she successfully nullified all but one of the mansion's wards. The only thing that was heard was the rumbling thunder outside; a sign of an impending storm. It was a metaphor of her life at the moment.

Tension in the room was tremendous, but the tension between them was excruciating. Had she not been so frigidly cold and numb, she would've been able to feel the heat from his glare...and the hole that he had drilled into the back of her head with his eyes. Hermione was sure that he had reached grey matter half an hour ago. Now she waited for the dam of tension to break and mar the beautiful floors and high ornate walls.

It happened rather quickly and with one soft yet harsh word from his lips: "Why?"

The first time he had said it, she pretended to be ignorant to his words. There was nothing they could have to discuss. Or at least that was what Hermione told herself. So, without answering, she continued to mumble spells under her breath with shaky hands, diligently

trying to breach the last ward so she could attempt to break the curse on the house and go home.

But then he asked it again: Why?

A bubble of anger formed in the pit of her stomach. The nerve of him to stand here *now* and ask *her* why. He'd never bothered to ask questions before, at least not when it truly mattered. He just reacted. He always took things at face value and never bothered to look deeper. He just took over seven years of friendship and threw it in the rubbish bin without even - Hermione took a deep, cleansing breath to calm herself down, but tears threatened to prickle at the corner of her eyes.

She refused to let one slip in his presence.

Harry's voice rose as he asked for the third time: "Why?"

Little things assaulted her senses. The chiming grandfather clock just outside the ballroom; it was a new hour—the eleventh hour. The thunder outside was louder than before; the storm was closer. Faint voices from the last of the Aurors on the scene; the rest had been sent home to rest up for the night because the next day was going to be a long one for everyone. Harry's uneven breathing. The sound of rain on the roof; it was now coming down with no end in sight. The sound of her own teeth chattering as the cold of his protection charm tore through her skin.

Still, she ignored him.

Ignorance was always better than bliss.

Crackles of lightning met with booming thunder and with a wave of her wand, the last ward fell down. All the events joined forces and brought the hostility in the room to its peak.

The volume in Harry's voice echoed through the room as he roared: "*Why!*"

Hermione froze in trepidation, she didn't move a muscle, not that she could. The cold and strain and mounting anger made her tense. It hurt to move. It ached to breathe. She felt weak. More than anything, she wanted to scream back, but words would not come. Instead, she stood there, feet firmly planted on the floor. She didn't know if her body was shaking in fear, from the cold, or from the anger that had made its home in her chest.

Lightning flashed through the windows and a moment later she heard the thunder that sounded like it was right outside the window. It did little to block out Harry's incessant and deafening word. "*Why?*"

Hermione didn't understand him, but it was safe to say that the still shouting Harry didn't understand anything, either. She didn't speak a word to him. No matter how much his yelling hurt. There was, however, a pressure in her chest. It was intense, so much that she could barely breathe as he screamed the same word over and over: why.

It all fizzled, crackled, and foamed inside her, and before Hermione realised what was going on, she spun on her heels and shouted back, voice shrilled from frustration and the chill.
"Why what? Harry! Why what?"

"Why are you here?" he spat bitterly, face flaming red. If he clenched his fist any harder, his wand would have snapped.

Despite the fact that she was completely numb from the cold, Hermione remained calm.
"Like you, I'm just here to do my job. Let me do it in peace."

For a few blessed moments, there was silence. Then she heard him mutter, "I can't believe I got stuck here with you."

That was her breaking point. "You think I *want* to be here with you?" Hermione stared at him defiantly. "You think I want to be in the same country as you, much less the same *room*? I would've taken Zabini over you *any* day. I don't want to be here as much as you don't want me here!"

"Then, leave!" he threw his finger toward the door. "Get out! My life was much better without you!" he fumed; his messy hair practically electric. "You played us all for fools and I hate you."

Her lips quivered as anger turned into sorrow. It was a vocalization of everything she already knew: Harry hated her.

"Join the club," Hermione mumbled so low he couldn't hear. Join the club, because she hated herself, too. And seeing him—seeing all of them—was a harsh reminder of that truth.

Tears built up behind her eyes and his next breaths came out raggedly. For a moment she listened, trying to calm herself down. She was not going to cry. Not in front of him; her tears were like oxygen on a raging fire, it would only fuel his wrath. There was only one more spell to cast, and she could leave the coldness of his protection charm, leave the ballroom, leave the Manor, and leave him. It was more than enough encouragement to force the next words from her lips. "Thank you for expressing yourself so eloquently, Harry, but I have a job to do and you have one, too. So, grow up and let me finish my job. Then you can be free to hate me as much as you want from a distance."

She expected him to tame his temper, expected him to agree, and expected him to back down.

What Hermione didn't expect him was for him to abruptly take the protection shield off and storm out the room, slamming the large doors behind him so hard the room shook.

Hermione reeled. Disbelief: that was the only thing she felt as she stared at the shut doors, pure disbelief.

He had actually walked out.

It turned out the room wasn't much warmer than the protection charm. She found herself shivering again, but she had a job to do, and she was determined to finish so she would never

have to return. With a quick glance at her list of spells, she pointed her wand and said the first one.

Nothing happened.

Hermione yelled another one.

Nothing.

Slightly put off, she muttered the third one.

The next thing that happened came so fast and so hard she didn't have a moment to throw up a quick shield to protect herself from the fallout. With no defences or wards, the curse on the mansion broke in a hailstorm of white, raw magic that poured from all four walls. She could hardly see, the lights were so bright.

The room - the *house* - shook with a force Hermione had never experienced. There was nothing for her to grasp for protection as she fell to the ground. The walls weren't being spared as balls of magic gouged holes in them. As she tried to blindly crawl to the exit, light and magic shattered all the windows high above her head. Glass rained down on top of her, and Hermione had just enough time to close her eyes. She felt glass in her shirt, on her hair, and on her hands.

After the dust of glass settled, Hermione carefully opened her eyes and jumped to her feet. She wondered briefly how long it would take for the magic to break through them and for the room to collapse on top of her.

There was no time to calculate because the ground shook, again.

All she felt next was pain as she landed on shards of glass.

No one would find her. They wouldn't know she was there. No one would—the ground suddenly stopped moving.

The torrent of light continued to shoot from the walls all around her. She heard, but didn't witness, the door as it fell into the room, landing less than ten metres from her. Hermione quickly ignored the pain and shook the glass from her hair. There was no time to think. Only time to run.

She had to save herself.

A bolt of light blew past her hand, knocking her wand from her grasp. The next one missed her completely. She dropped down to the floor to avoid the third. The fourth made her jump up from her crouched position. For forever, it seemed, she dodged the bolts of light the walls hurled at her with alacrity and speed as she inched closer and closer to the open doorways.

But it was too good to be true.

The first beam of raw magic struck her with the with enough force to take her breath. Adrenaline denied her the right to feel the pain, but the second hit gave Hermione her first

taste of true pain.

And it never stopped.

With every hit, magic swept Hermione's body further and further off the ground. For what felt like forever, her body helplessly twisted and turned, undulating in the air. Head over feet, and feet over head. The pain was indescribable, but there was no point in crying out. Not for help. Not for anything. No one could help her. No one could save her.

When the house released a strong surge of energy and magic that angrily flung her across the room, Hermione braced herself for the impact that was sure to come. The sound of breaking bones sang in her ears as her body crashed high on the wall.

And then she fell.

The sensation of falling was just like it was in a bad dream, only worse because she knew she wasn't going to wake up before she hit the ground. This was reality. And she accepted that she would not walk out of this room just before she landed, crumpled and broken, like a rag doll.

Everything stopped.

Quiet and calm.

Hermione thought she was dead, but when she opened her eyes and saw the destroyed room, she realized it wasn't. She was afraid to try and move or breathe too deeply, but she tried anyway.

Pain.

Excruciating pain, unlike anything she'd ever felt in her life, tore through every cell in her body. She wanted to cry out for something, someone to help, but it hurt to move her lips. Tears wanted to pour, but it hurt to cry. It hurt to think. It hurt to breathe. *It hurt.* Everything hurt. So she laid there. Laid there and cried silent hysterical tears. She laid there and tried to convince herself that none of this was her fault.

But maybe it was.

Hermione knew the risks before she took the job, and all she could do was blame herself for not being more careful, for not stopping, for being so reckless with her life. Hermione silently vowed that if she made it out, she would never to be so careless again. She would never-

The thought came to a screeching halt when she felt something wet on the back of her neck. Hermione instantly knew it was blood.

Her blood.

The room spun without abandon. Hermione almost felt sick from all the movement. She knew that she had to keep her eyes open, but they closed anyway.

And that was when she heard footsteps...and voices.

"We found her!"

"In the ballroom!"

Footsteps closed in on her. She opened her eyes, but couldn't identify anyone.

"Where's Potter?" a gruff voice asked.

Just the mention of his name sent a stab of pain through her.

"He's not here."

"Did he leave her here?"

Yes, he had, but she figured it was payback from when she abandoned him.

There was more movement and she knew someone was on their knees next to her. Hermione used the rest of her strength to focus on the dark, terrified eyes of Blaise Zabini.

His was the last face she saw before everything faded to black.

the personification of innocence lost

Chapter Summary

"She saved me...twice."

*****WARNING NOW APPLIES: Non-con/rape*****

Chapter Notes

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

Chapter Five

The Personification of Innocence Lost

Part One: Sleep-deprivation

Draco knew something wasn't right the moment he stepped out of the Floo.

Nothing was visibly different; it was a feeling, and his were never wrong. It appeared to be a normal day in the Ministry of Magic. He'd already seen two Weasleys, much to his annoyance. Percy was in a rush for some reason and gave him a stupid wave similar to his brother's. And Mr. Weasley just gave him a polite nod as he passed by, also too busy to chat.

Not that he minded.

Draco had worked half the night on the Marquette case, reading their files and writing notes for the case. All he had to do now was patiently - okay, semi-patiently - wait for the evidence to arrive. If there was any testament to Granger's abilities as a curse breaker, she would've already broken the curse on the house and the team from her company would be checking the evidence before he got his hands on it.

As he strolled through the Atrium, passing through the long rows of fireplaces, Draco looked around. Everything was still the same; same old hustle and bustle, same old Ministry full to the brim with faces he still didn't recognise. The same people still greeted him politely, and visitors from other countries still marvelled at The Fountain of Magical Brethren, while those

who'd seen it every day passed it without so much as a lingering glance. Inter-Department memos still flew over his head - although there was quite a bit more than usual - as he stepped into the lift to go to his office located on the second floor of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

Nothing was different, but he had a feeling.

When he walked through the doors of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, his suspicions were confirmed. He'd stepped out of the lift and into total chaos. Bedlam. Any other synonym that fit the occasion. More than anything, he really wanted to turn around and hightail it out of there before anyone noticed his presence and requested his assistance.

He had better things to do.

And those things were in his office.

Damn.

So he took steps forwards rather than backwards. People talked; loudly, angry voices were heard; employees ran around with files and lists and boxes and other assorted crap. Some gossiped and pretended they were working. Some wrote on parchment with wide eyes.

There were even people he didn't recognise, zooming around like they knew the place better than he did, like they actually worked there. Coffee and breakfast pastries were being dispensed like candy. Draco snagged a cup from a charmed tray hovering in front of some tired-looking bloke and gave his best sneer when said bloke had the nerve to tell him to get his own. Inter-Departmental memos flew around the room; they were being sent off as fast as they were being read.

At nine in the morning, it looked like everyone had been there for a long time.

Those poor, underpaid sods.

Oh well, Draco thought with a mental shrug, better them than him.

As he fought through the chaos in the direction of his office that seemed like a kilometre away rather than seventy metres, he overheard what sounded like a rather exciting meeting going on in the main conference room. With the shouting and pandemonium occurring, he still heard someone yell quite clearly, "Of all the selfish, despicable things—she was your responsibility, a bloody civilian, and you let her get hurt! She's in the hospital because of you and your bloody grudge!"

That was all he heard before someone placed a strong silencing charm on the room.

Unfortunately.

The second conference room was filled with boxes, which let him know that Granger was good at her job. The boxes were being magically transferred to a private room, probably deep in the Department of Mysteries, where curse breakers were probably diligently checking them with Unspeakables. He had every intention of seeing that process through as soon as he

put his stuff down in his office. Nothing was going to happen to anything in those boxes without his say-so.

Politely, he greeted more than a few people with a nod, including the secretary of the Wizengamot Administration Services, Shannon Marcela, who gave him a funny look before reaching up for a memo hovering over her head. Draco opened his door—

And nearly jumped out of his skin when he saw the sight of Blaise Zabini sitting at his desk - in the dark.

He half-expected to see a half-empty bottle of Firewhisky, but didn't. The only thing that illuminated his office was the match Blaise used to light up a cig before he took quite possibly the biggest drag Draco had ever seen in his life. Draco coughed as he stepped through the doorway; it smelled like a fucking ashtray. Speaking of the ashtray, it was filled to capacity; Blaise had been a pack, at the very least.

Wait a second.

"Didn't you quit smoking three years ago?"

"Fuck you," his best friend mumbled before taking another drag.

Smirking, Draco turned the lights on and with watery eyes, he opened the room's lone window because he was about to die from second-hand smoke. They winced at the same time, but obviously for different reasons. Blaise winced at the light, and Draco because Blaise looked like he had been thrown from the top of the Quidditch Pitch. Blaise still had on Auror robes that had a disturbing amount of blood on it. He'd aged thirty years in one night.

"What was her name?" Draco joked in an attempt to lighten the mood. He removed his cloak and hung it on the enchanted coat-rack.

Blaise, who was in the middle of another long drag, shot a dazed and confused look his direction and blew smoke out his nose. "What the devil are you talking about?" his voice was gruff probably from the cigs.

"The woman who kept you up all night, mate. You look like you got trampled by a herd of maniacal centaurs, and that's being polite. She must've been bloody good." He opened his briefcase and took a long drink from his coffee, then frowned. Awful coffee.

A small snort came from the man behind his desk, "I'm well aware of my appearance and no, I didn't get any sleep at all last night. Oh, and her name was Hermione Granger—"

Draco unceremoniously spewed hot liquid everywhere.

Blaise looked borderline humoured as he watched his best friend choke and took another drag. For that, he received a nasty glare from Draco, once he'd recovered and sat his coffee down on the desk. "Granger? You spent the night with Granger?" his voice was disbelieving, at best. Not that he cared, but it was *Granger* for Merlin's sake. Blaise didn't have high

standards, but he wasn't aware that he lacked standards altogether. Besides, he wasn't even over Pansy yet!

Most importantly, it was obvious Granger was in a vulnerable state. His mother, who'd had her third Italian lesson with her that previous Saturday, called her a 'fragile little thing' and confessed in private that she felt rather sorry for her because she seemed to be in a lot of pain. And, not only did she suffer in silence, but she suffered mostly alone because she felt like she didn't deserve help.

"Not technically..." he trailed off as he snatched up Draco's abandoned coffee and finished it.

Draco stared at him, alarmed. Not only did Blaise *not* smoke anymore or drink coffee, but Blaise hadn't drunk after him since they were at Hogwarts—something about *germs*: a term he learned from one of his Muggle-born girlfriends in fifth year.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean? Either you spent the night with her or you didn't. It's not a hard concept."

"And *that's* where you're wrong," he tossed the cup in the trash. "I spent the night with her, but I sat in the waiting room."

"Waiting room?" Now he was definitely confused. "What the hell are you going on about?"

Blaise put out his cigarette and fished in his robes for another pack. "You know about the Marquette Manor raid, right?"

"Of course. I spent half the night reviewing their files. They don't have a chance in—"

"Stay on topic, Draco. Anyway, you know she was sent out to take down the wards and break the curse on the Manor, right?"

"Yes, I knew. Did she listen to me about the house elves?"

Blaise nodded solemnly. "She did. That was the first thing she did when she arrived." Draco smiled smugly. "Anyway," he rolled his eyes. "The point is she was injured when she took down the final ward that let us remove evidence from the house."

"Injured how?"

"Injured rather seriously."

As Draco listened to his best friend recount the events of the previous night, he stared at him in disbelief.

"The entire house was shaking. We couldn't even get in; we had to wait until it stopped. We found her alone, on the floor against the wall. She must've been thrown across the entire length of room."

"Where was her handler?"

"Potter? Oh, he *left* her," Blaise explained heatedly and lit another cigarette. "The sod abandoned her. I could tell she didn't want to be left with him and I left her anyway."

Blaise Zabini lost his temper, and all Draco could do was listen with rapt attention. He never lost his temper.

"He left her and went home without saying anything. He was at home when Johnson found him after we got Granger to St. Mungo's. He was sitting on his couch with his girlfriend and watching a bloody Muggle movie about a talking chimp! Chimps, Draco, talking chimps! Not a bloody care in the world!"

And then he realised just why Blaise was so livid.

The story so far had invoked the strangest emotion in Draco; an emotion he never thought he'd ever experience on Granger's behalf. Draco saw *red*. He rose from his chair and paced the length of his office as Blaise continued, unable to sit down any longer.

"Granger's wand was broken in several pieces and her leg...the blood...Tarsiers threw up at the sight of her..."

There was a small 'umph' from Draco. "He always *was* a wuss. I don't know how—"

Blaise shook his head and crushed another cigarette in the full ashtray. "No, you don't understand, Draco. I thought *I* was going to be sick and *nothing* disgusts me to that point."

True.

"Draco, her leg was...we knew it was beyond simple magical repair. And her arm," he shuddered at the memory and took another long drag before explaining, "She looked *mangled*. There was so much blood coming from her head." He shuddered again, "We're not trained to deal with that kind of stuff. I don't know what happened to her in that room, but I'm shocked she was as conscious as she was when we found her."

"She was actually *conscious*?" Granger was stronger than he ever thought.

"Barely. She was moving her lips, her eyes were bleary, and she was talking about how it was her fault. I could've *cursed* Potter for having her think it was her fault."

"How did you find her?"

"We saw the sparks of raw magic from outside. It looked like a battlefield; or like someone set off fucking fireworks and trapped her in the room...and *Potter*. It wouldn't have been that serious had she not been alone, she could've been excavated safely. The protocol...the fucking protocol."

He took a moment to process it all.

It was one thing to embarrass her in front of everyone, but was something entirely different to ignore the code of ethics to his job and blatantly disobey orders that led to a *civilian* getting injured. Draco had worked with Potter quite a few times and that type of unashamed

disregard didn't seem like him at all. He was bloody noble, annoyingly so, but when he did his job, he did it well, and he never set a toe out of line.

Until now.

"She looked at me, whispered my name, and her eyes rolled to the back of her head and she started shaking. None of us knew what to do. We're not bloody Healers or Muggle doctors or anything like that; we're *Aurors*. I just picked her up, she was still shaking, and I Apparated to St. Mungo's. I thought I'd Splinched her..." Blaise took a long drag of the cigarette that was nearly burnt to nothing as Draco held back the queasiness that wanted to rise in his chest.

For several minutes, Draco watched his best friend fidget with his clothes; he'd gone through another cigarette and his hands were shaking. It was obvious that the thing with Granger had scared him shitless. Not that he would ever admit it aloud, but it probably would've scared Draco too had he witnessed something like that.

Even after hearing it all, he just couldn't believe it had happened.

He'd been furious at her for comparing him to his father before that damn meeting, but Draco took everything he did seriously and if it was his job to protect her, it would be a cold day in hell before he'd ever abandon her like Potter had.

Hell, he wouldn't even leave the Weasel like that and he *hated* him.

As a personal rule, he never let his feelings towards someone affect his job.

He sent the parents of some of his best friends growing up to prison without thinking twice and he was about to do it to the Marquette family. It was his damn job. The fact that noble Potter abandoned his integrity because of Granger made him realise that whatever happened between them was more serious than he ever anticipated and that made him only more interested in the truth...and a bit wary at the same time.

"Is she okay?" Draco questioned in noncommittal tones.

His conscience wanted to know more than he did, or at least that was what he told himself.

"The bones in her arm and leg broken in several places, she had a skull fracture, five broken ribs, and two slipped disks in her back, and a broken jaw...what do *you* think? I don't think she'll be okay for a few weeks, if ever. They spent all night fixing her up, re-growing bones, and fixing some internal bleeding. They called in a few Muggle specialists, but yes, she's alive at least, but not conscious. They put her out for her own good."

"Well, I'm sure her family and friends are hounding her."

Those bloody Gryffindors stuck together through thick and thin, no matter how they felt about each other at the time.

Blaise looked at him as if he were out of his mind. "What are you talking about? She doesn't *have* family or friends and she sure as hell doesn't have a next of kin that's related to her. I know. I had to send the Patronus—that was the only reason I stayed. Her boss came by,

but he was so livid they had to escort him out. So, he came to the Ministry this morning and continued his tirade, which I'm sure you heard."

Well that explained who the yelling man was and who he was yelling at, but that realization was overshadowed by his words. Granger? Alone and friendless? That didn't seem right. Draco dismissed that crazy notion. After all, Blaise was sleep-deprived.

In the wake of that dismissal, there was a question that pressed to get asked, "Who was her next of kin?"

"Pansy."

And the plot thickened.

Part Two: Fifty-seven minutes

It took Draco seven minutes to set his affairs in order for the day. It took seventeen minutes and a well-aimed jinx was to pry the cigarettes from Blaise's hand and send the haggard man home by Floo with a dose of Dreamless Draught before he smoked himself to death. He'd be better with some sleep. It took twenty-seven minutes to make up an excuse as to why he had to leave early. It took thirty-seven minutes to find tea and seek out Pansy Parkinson. It took forty-seven minutes to gain access to the floor where Granger was being held.

And it took fifty-seven minutes to knock on the already ajar hospital room.

It was only then he realised he had no real devious plan up his sleeve.

Oh well, he was already there.

When he wasn't immediately hit with a curse, Draco slowly pushed the door open all the way.

He didn't have to see her face to know Pansy was upset; the fact that she didn't hear him enter the room was a testament to just how upset she was. Pansy wore the same clothes which she'd worn the previous day at lunch and he watched as she tentatively rested a careful hand rest on Granger's gauze-covered forehead that remained obscure to him.

"Damn Potter for leaving you," she mumbled audibly; her voice did nothing to hide the anger that practically radiated off her skin. "Damn you for naming me your next of kin. What were you thinking? You think I *like* seeing you like this?" Pansy snapped her lips shut and heaved a heavy sigh.

She was tired.

There were a lot of things Draco remembered as he stood there and observed the scene before him.

He remembered her telling him that Granger needed protection, that he needed to stay away to avoid being sucked into the hailstorm that was her life, and that the two women weren't friends. The last one was beaten down by the raging contradiction before him.

Pansy's affection for the comatose Granger was undeniable.

"Would you like to explain how the hell you got up here, Draco?"

Draco was almost amazed she identified him without turning around, but not surprised.

He kept his answer vague. "I have my ways."

She turned in her chair and calmly rose. Her pink-tinted cheeks and her lack of mascara gave her secret away; she'd been crying at some point. Still, she squared her shoulders in an attempt to retain her façade of strength. "Great. You have ways. Use them to strut your arse right back out that door."

"And we're back to the guard dog routine. It's terribly old."

She took a deep breath; like she was seriously trying to refrain from smashing his face in or breaking down in tears, he didn't know which. "I don't need this right now, Draco. I just *don't*. Be my best friend and don't start a fight with me, stop whatever you're planning before you start it, and—and," her shoulders sank and her features softened. "Just be my best friend."

There were exactly a hundred and twenty-seven comebacks in the works, some were already on the tip of his tongue, but the drained look on Pansy's face made him suppress every single one of them. Damn his conscience, damn her pitiful words, and damn him for actually *caring* about Pansy.

Draco withdrew the cup he kept behind his back and held it out to her.

"I brought you tea. I figured you might need it. It's ginseng."

Pansy let him stay and made sure the door shut behind him.

However, as soon as he saw Granger, he wished he'd left the moment Pansy had sensed his presence. Blaise had been right. The sight of her had the same effect that acid rain has on rocks; only now it was his rock of indifference towards her that had eroded. No, it wasn't enough to corrode it completely; it just ate away at it. A lot.

What happened to her wasn't something she deserved, nor was it fair. Draco knew the injustice wasn't going to stop. He'd heard hints and rumours that the head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement wanted the incident buried with as little fallout as possible, and though he didn't believe the Ministry would stoop so low to protect its hero, he wasn't at all surprised.

Not another coherent thought crossed his mind as he stood over Granger's bed, because all he could do was stare. Pale, bruised, and beaten; the sight of her chilled him to the bone. The only reason he knew she wasn't dead was the slight rise and fall of her chest as she breathed.

Due to the warmth of the room, blankets were draped lazily at her waist and he saw her bruises. They had covered almost every inch of visible skin. Granger's hair, though clean, was positively atrocious and matted – more than usual. The dressing on her head wound needed to be changed because bright red blood slowly started to stain the white gauze. She had a black eye, a split lip, and a bruised cheek, probably from where they'd fixed her broken jaw. Dressed in the standard St. Mungo's gown for comatose patients, he quickly noticed her left arm was encased in a cast of sorts and the other was covered in light bruises.

"Thank you for not probing and for the tea; it was just what I needed."

Draco's eyes were still locked on Granger when he mumbled, "You're welcome."

"She looks a lot better than she did this morning," Pansy appeared at his side, fresh from throwing the Styrofoam cup away.

Draco found that impossible to believe.

"Potter is a foul git for leaving her like that, and the *second* I see him, I'm going to eviscerate him."

Silently, he agreed and slowly turned his eyes away.

All was silent as Pansy dutifully straightened the blanket that covered Granger. The kind action threw him off. He was about to comment when she spoke up, "I just called a Mediwitch to come and change her head dressing. Hopefully, they'll let me do something to that hideous head of hers. It's already tangled enough. It'll look like steel wool when she wakes," she rambled as she used her wand to open the curtains in the room.

"How long will she be out?" Draco didn't mean to ask, but the damage was already done.

"They don't know, probably another day or two, but not any more than three days. Well, I don't think. They're not done healing all her bones; they spent most of the night trying to mend her leg and her arm. The swelling has gone down and I think they're going to finish after the Mediwitch checks her out in a few. I hope they do, so she can wake up."

Pansy rambled when she was worried and she needed to get her mind off what was going on.

"They told me to talk to her because they said she can hear me, but I think that's complete rubbish...where is that Mediwitch? I told them to come *now...*"

For a moment, Draco just stared at his best friend. Never in his life had he seen her take an interest in anyone other than herself, him, Blaise, or her father when he had been alive. "You care for her, don't you?" His voice wasn't accusatory, it wasn't curious, hell, it wasn't even in a questioning tone.

It was more like a statement of the obvious.

Pansy froze and looked at him. With a sigh and a moment of silence, she admitted in soft tones, "We're not friends."

"Bull—"

She cut him off. "Not because I don't want us to be, but because she doesn't trust me enough to believe that I won't stab her in the back. I suppose I don't blame her, because she's still in so much pain and it's still so soon. You're right, though. I do care for her greatly. I would do anything for her; I'd do anything to take her pain away."

"Why?"

"She gave me back my life, Draco, and I trust her, almost as much as I trust you and Blaise, even if she doesn't feel the same way about me."

"I don't think that's true. After all, you are her next-of-kin."

"I'm the closest thing to family she has here. It makes sense."

"But why?"

"She saved me...twice." There was a knock on the door. "Finally!"

As he watched and listened to Pansy fuss with the Mediwitch over Granger's hair from his chair in the corner of the room, he allowed her words to repeat.

"I just want to straighten it or something."

"Miss. Parkinson, I don't think I can—"

"You *can* and you *will*. Look at it! It's absolutely *atrocious*! It's going to be a tangled mess when she wakes up."

"I don't know any charms..."

"What the bloody hell do you *mean* you don't know any charms? Are you some kind of idiot or something?"

Twice? Granger saved her life twice?

"I—I apologise, Miss. Parkinson," the Mediwitch stammered.

"Damn right you need to apologise. For Merlin's sake, do I have to do your job *for* you? Step aside, Helga."

"Umm—"

"Move!" Draco didn't hear the charm she used, but he heard her smug words, "See, *that's* how you do it."

"It *is* rather pretty and it doesn't interfere with the dressing on her head."

"I know, Helga. I used my brain. You should try it sometime."

He knew about the first time, but what was the second?

Draco was immediately snatched from his thoughts when a team of Healers walked in, conversing amongst themselves. Pansy, who appeared in the chair next to him out of nowhere, rested her hand on his shoulder before she gave him a little shake. "We have to go, they're about to take her in to finish mending her bones now that the swelling has gone down. I need a shower, lunch, and then, we need to talk."

Part Three: The Catalyst

A few minutes later he found himself in Pansy's home that she'd inherited from her parents.

While she showered and changed, Draco sat in his living room and collected his thoughts. He tried to figure out just how he would approach the topic without getting hexed into the next year. There were fifteen ideas in his head by the time they finished lunch, but he didn't have to use a single one.

"I visited my mother." Pansy told him quietly as the plates were cleared by one of the three house elves in her possession.

Draco said nothing. There wasn't anything he could say.

Pansy was her father's daughter to the core and wasn't close to her mother, not at all. During her teenage years they had fought about everything from school to marriage. Though she wasn't the brightest or the most dedicated student, Pansy cared about her education and thought of her seven years at Hogwarts as a great learning experience. Her mother felt the opposite and always emphasized the importance of getting married and settled as soon as possible.

"She had no idea who I was, and I suppose that's for the best. If Mother knew I hadn't visited her in over five years, there would be no Silencing Charm strong enough to shut her up." Pansy chuckled ruefully.

The entire engagement idea to Blaise had been her mother's, and Pansy blamed her mother for inadvertently causing her father's death. After all, she had no one else at who she could point her finger and so used her mother as a scapegoat. After she was tortured into insanity and housed with the Longbottoms', Pansy rarely spoke of her, never visited, and Blaise's attempt at helping her bury the resentment towards her mother ended with a cataclysmic row between his best friends that Draco had observed with tired eyes.

Soon, Blaise left the topic alone and hoped she'd find solace on her own.

"And...I think...I think I'm finally ready to let go."

Draco looked at her, but said nothing; he figured she just needed him to listen.

"It wasn't her fault, and, if anything, she saved all our lives with her Patronus. I've known that for a long time, but I've been stuck on my own pain. But I think I'm finally ready to let some things go. With that said, I need you to do me a favour."

"What?"

"Use Legilimency."

His eyebrow instantly went up. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me...use Legilimency on me."

"Pansy."

"Look," she huffed, "Even though I've gotten over it with *years* of intense therapy, I still can't actually talk to you about it. I'd rather show you the memory through my eyes."

And that was how he found himself in her living room, Floo blocked and lights dimmed. As he stared at Pansy, who now sat in an armchair waiting patiently, he wondered just how badly he was going to regret it. As confident and as at ease as he appeared, Draco wanted nothing more than to Floo away from her house and drink himself silly.

But running never accomplished anything, as much as he wanted to believe otherwise.

He had wanted to find out Granger's secrets, not Pansy's. Granger's secrets were easier to handle; he didn't care about her. Draco did, however, care about Pansy. There wasn't a doubt in his mind that what he was about to see was the reason why she'd had that massive breakdown immediately after returning from Australia. It had taken him and Blaise nearly five months to convince her to check herself into St. Mungo's.

"Hermione saved my life twice," she told him when he pointed his wand warily; "I know I told you that, but I needed to repeat that. The first time was the night my father died. And the second was about a month later in Australia. She calls the memory I'm about to show you 'the catalyst', the beginning of the end. It took me years to understand why, but now, I think I do."

As she spoke, Draco remembered when Pansy showed up on his doorstep in the middle of the night, begging him to take her to the airport. Her father's estate had just been turned over to her and she said she needed to escape London, needed to leave because everything reminded her of him and it was too much to deal with. She needed a break, so she left. Nobody knew she was gone until the next day. Blaise was understandably upset.

"Are you ready?" he asked, still wary about the memory she was letting him witness.

He was interested about the memory being the catalyst in Granger's life and he was interested in why and what followed the events of that night, but he really was uncomfortable about knowing Pansy's role in it all.

"Yes."

"Legilimens!"

The next thing he knew, he was reliving a memory through the eyes of Pansy Parkinson.

Part Four: Green

The faceless man caught her around the waist as she tried to run and threw her body into the brick wall of the building directly next to the alley. The impact was brutal and she moaned in pain as speckles of black blurred her vision. And then, there he was, pushed up behind her, so close now.

She smelled his alcohol-laced breath on her face and it almost made her gag. Something poked her in her lower back and the vomit that was lodged in her chest nearly completed its quest to the surface. She knew what it was and it sickened her.

"You're such a pretty girl, how old are you?" the faceless man whispered, running his fingers through her black hair as she trembled in fear.

Pansy wondered just how she had found herself in that particular situation. It was supposed to be a shortcut to her hotel.

She hadn't expected to be grabbed...

She hadn't expected to be wandless...

She hadn't expected to be quickly overpowered.

Suddenly, his grip on her hair tightened and she moaned in agony, "Answer me, kitten..."

"E—eighteen."

"I wouldn't define what we're about to do as 'hurting you'. It may hurt a little, but you'll enjoy it as much as I do. I promise," he whispered in her ear and inhaled her scent, "Mmmm, you smell heavenly, kitten. Like strawberries, fruity...you're gonna be more memorable than the others," he dropped a sloppy kiss on the side of her neck and husked, "Tell me, kitten, have you ever been with a man before?"

Pansy didn't answer; she was too focused on her escape attempt to really pay attention.

She jerked her head back suddenly. It connected with his mouth and he let out a stream of curse words as he covered his bleeding lip with his hand. Pansy didn't hesitate one moment before she stomped on his foot and took off running down the alley, screaming at the top of her lungs for help. But she didn't get far before he caught her by the hair and threw her on the hard ground.

She couldn't breathe.

His voice was calm as he smiled in all his bloody-lip glory.

And he kissed her. He kissed her and she couldn't breathe. The bile rose as he forced his tongue into her mouth by grabbing her throat and squeezing. She let out a strangled gasp and his tongue plunged in. Pansy grunted, tried to push him off, even got a few hits in, but it was useless.

Finally, he pulled away, breathing heavily, "How did you like that, kitten?"

Pansy spat in his face and immediately regretted it.

"You bitch!" Seizing her by the throat, the faceless man lifted her off the ground. She kicked furiously, gasped for air, and tried to force his hand from around her neck. Nothing worked.

She was going to die. She was going to be with her father.

But then he threw her back the ground instead and when the pain swept through her, she wished he would've just killed her. He punished her mercilessly; kicking her, stomping on her back, punching her, choking her to the brink of unconsciousness and actually slapping her awake when she actually passed out.

The violence was something she'd never experienced in her life. Pansy screamed, apologised, shielded, scrambled; she did any and every thing possible to get away. It was worse than being cursed, worse than Crucio, worse than anything she ever experienced in her life. And she cried, she pleaded for mercy for the first time ever, she pleaded for her life.

But he didn't listen. He was too busy tearing her clothes off. He didn't care. He hurled all kinds of names at her. Cunt. Bitch. Whore. Slut. He spat on her and she never felt so low in her life.

"I won't tell anyone." She promised through her sobs, clutching to her stomach with one hand and kept him at arm's length with the other; though just barely.

"You won't tell anyone anyway. Not when I'm done with you. You'll be like all the others..."

When he lifted her skirt and dug his nails into the skin of her thighs roughly, she screamed until her voice gave out. She fought until she had nothing left. It was then that Pansy accepted her fate. She wasn't destined to win.

He unzipped his pants with one hand while the other kept her firmly in place. Her legs wiggled around, scraping against the concrete. They felt raw. "Please stop," Pansy begged almost in a whisper.

"Shut up you little bitch and stop squirming or I'll kill you right now rather than wait."

His pants were bunched around his knees and it was only then that he gained control of her squirming legs. He pried them apart. Pansy let out a howl. "I—" her words were cut off with the delivery of a hard punch that nearly rendered her unconscious. There were bigger black spots in her eyes and she stared at the Australian sky.

Blood seeped from her mouth and the sound of fabric ribbing was all she heard.

Too tired and beaten down to fight him off any longer, Pansy thought of it as karma for all the wrong she'd done in life. And she cried for all the things she'd lost along the way and for what she was about to lose.

The faceless man just smiled, positioned himself at her entrance...and then he destroyed her innocence in one thrust. Pansy's head collided with the ground as she groaned in pain, too disoriented to do much else. He didn't stop. No, that would be too nice. Her vision blurred as she teetered closer and closer into sweet unconsciousness.

But then the world went green and the faceless man fell on top of her, dead.

Initially, she didn't know what to do. He was still inside her and her body was in shock. Convinced he was going to get up and resume, she didn't move a terrified muscle.

That was when the shock broke and she regained her senses.

Pansy screamed with renewed terror and cried with relief; she didn't know which overrode the other. With laboured breathing, her body trembled and her stomach wretched at the sight of his body on hers. Coincidentally, the faceless man's face was positioned dangerously close to hers, enabling her to look directly into his unmoving dark eyes for the first time.

Her body shook uncontrollably as heaved him off of her, and sat up with much pain and discomfort, immediately searching the alley for her torn clothes. All she wanted to do was run away because leaving London was the worst idea she'd ever had. She wanted to forget about everything, go back to her hotel, take a shower, and sleep until the end of time.

Instead, she came face-to-face with the person that saved her.

Hermione Granger stood there; her wand still pointed at the dead man. Silent tears ran down her cheeks as she whispered, "Oh, god, what have I done?"

When Draco fell to his knees in the middle of Pansy's living room once he broke the connection.

His only coherent thought was that they both were the perfect personification of innocence lost.

Chapter End Notes

Literally the hardest thing I've ever written. And the hardest thing to edit this long after writing it.

the breaking point

Chapter Summary

What was happiness anyway and what was it like to be truly happy? Did one laugh harder? Did one smile like every moment was genuine and real?

****Warning: triggering event, near sexual assault****

Chapter Six

The Breaking Point

Part One: Time stood still

"What's a pretty girl like you doing in a place like this?"

Hermione looked at the man with dark eyes who had just sat down in the empty chair beside her. He placed the empty beer container down with a small clink and ordered another from the wary-looking waitress before flashing a smile that made Hermione uncomfortable.

He was drunk, reeking of beer and some odd musky scent she couldn't quite identify. It smelled like a woman, but she wasn't surprised. He was half-smiling with that glazed look she recognised as that of a man satisfied.

"Minding my business. You should try it," she clipped coolly, shifting her chair away from his.

"Oh, don't be shy, kitten," he ran his finger along her jaw line, "You feel so soft, so innocent."

Immediately, Hermione slapped his hand away. "Consider this your first and final warning. Don't touch me."

He leered closer. "You're a feisty kitten, aren't you? I really like that...you could be good."

Disgusted, she paid for her meal and hopped off the stool, eager to get away from him.

She didn't know that he'd followed her out of the Bar & Grill until she had turned down an alley that was in the direction of her hotel. It was a particularly clear and cloudless night, which had followed a stunning sunset, and she found herself transfixed. The alley that she

was walking through was partially lit and empty, save for a few homeless dogs that had made her a little uncomfortable.

"Here kitty, kitty," came a menacing voice just behind her.

Months and months of being on Moody's 'Constant Vigilance' kick had come back full-force as she whirled around - only to come face-to-face with the jerk from the bar. Hermione slightly relaxed in the presence of the Muggle and reconsidered hexing him within an inch of his life.

Her wand remained in her back pocket.

"Why are you following me?" Hermione asked with her hands on her hips.

As if he didn't hear her question, the stranger replied, "You smell heavenly, like fruit... peaches," and moaned softly as if he'd just bitten into a perfectly ripe peach.

Disturbed, she turned, ready to flee, but he was much faster than she anticipated.

Before a surprised yelp could escape her lips, Hermione was violently yanked backwards by her hair and forced against the wall of the building from which she had just left. It had hurt, she had known that much, but her adrenaline was in overdrive and she didn't feel anything, except the dire need to escape.

Fight or flight...she chose to fight before she took flight. Hermione didn't quite know how to fight, she hadn't been in a physical fight with anyone in her life (if one didn't count slapping Malfoy), but instinct had quickly taken over. She fought, clawed, and tried to knee him; she didn't care what happened, but she'd be damned if she didn't go down without putting up the fight of and for her life.

Initially, he seemed surprised by her sheer strength. He took a few blows before he subdued her hands with his. "Now, now, kitten, you're going to play nice," his voice was breathless; he'd winded himself trying to subdue her.

"Let me go!"

He smiled and it was only then she realised she couldn't see his face anymore, thanks to the moonlight. "So feisty, kitten. I may have to keep you around and not dispose of you like I did the others."

Hermione's blood ran cold.

"Mmm, kitten, I can't wait to conquer your spirit."

In true Hermione Granger fashion, she'd planned her escape in exactly nine seconds, and all she had to do was get him to release her hand.

"How old are you?"

"My age is irrelevant to you."

As she planned, his arm came up to slap her; but he never got the chance. The moment his hand released hers, Hermione grabbed her wand from her back pocket, hit him with a Revulsion Jinx that made him release her quite suddenly, fired a Trip jinx that sent him on his arse with a surprised and angry yelp, and was halfway down the alley before she cast a quick Disillusionment charm on herself and stepped against the wall, trying to catch her breath.

She heard his angry cursing, heard his feet as he ran down the alley in the direction in which she had fled, and when he stopped less than ten feet from where she stood under the Disillusionment Charm, Hermione slowed her racing heart and breathing so that she wouldn't be discovered.

"Where the hell did you run off to so fast? We were going to play..." he kicked over a few trash cans to see if she was behind them.

Hermione covered her mouth to muffle her gasp.

After he turned over quite a few trash cans and empty boxes, his tone became more menacing. It had chilled her to the bone, "Come out, come out, wherever you are," came his sing-song voice. "You don't have to be afraid of me, I won't hurt you."

She doubted that.

There was more clanging around as he moved from non-threatening to savage. "Look, you little bitch, when I find you, I'm going to make you pay."

All he heard in return were angry barking dogs.

"Fuck!" He cried out in frustration, making Hermione jump a little, frightened. "Now I have to go find another one to replace you, kitten. It's your fault! Dammit!" and then he stormed off, out the alley, and down the street.

It was only then that she relaxed. It was only then that Hermione sank to her knees, shocked to the core. For fifteen minutes, she sat there, trembling in fear. She just couldn't believe that that had happened, she couldn't believe that she had escaped; the entire experience had terrified her.

*What if she hadn't had her wand?
What if her plan hadn't worked?*

Hermione shuddered; she didn't want to think about what would've happened because she already knew. It was only then that she realised, to her horror, that he was on the prowl.

And the next girl might not be as lucky as she.

Before Hermione could think, plan, or consider, she was sprinting down the street. She hadn't gone more than two blocks when she heard a pained moan coming from another alley.

A pained moan...a grunt...a cry...a slap...then a strangled scream.

It was as if the girl's scream had awoken something inside of Hermione and made her blindly tear down the alley in full on rescue-mode. But she froze at the sight before her. He'd found another girl and she hadn't been as lucky, as strong, or as fortunate as Hermione.

She had wasted fifteen minutes when she could've been preventing another from being hurt. She had done nothing and he'd taken his anger and frustration out on someone else. It was irrational, she knew, but it didn't make her feel any better. The girl screamed again and Hermione's heart crumbled helplessly. Instantly, she knew that scream. What had she done by allowing him to leave that alley?

Pansy.

And time stood still.

Hermione opened her eyes.

Part Two: Awake My Soul

October 24th

Fresh from a horrible memory, Hermione woke from her four-day induced coma.

She was a confused and frightened mess, but then she'd heard Pansy's voice as she read aloud from a fashion magazine; an article about how to tame frizz without magic. She wasn't funny.

Hermione couldn't speak so she groaned low and annoyed.

In a flash, Pansy was at her side, insisting in soft tones that she remain still. She then barked at someone—Hermione found out later it was, oddly enough, Blaise Zabini—to get a Healer, quick. Hermione took one look at her sympathetic face, thought of the constant nightmare that she had relived in her sleep, and promptly burst into hysterical sobs. Pansy, who was uncomfortable with tears that weren't her own, stepped aside and someone else stepped in her place.

Narcissa Malfoy.

Her tears instantly stopped due to the shock of seeing her 'student' at her bedside.

There was absolutely *no* reason for Mrs. Malfoy to be there, but she dried her tears and willed her to remain still. Her voice was like velvet, so soft and caring, so motherly. She hadn't felt so protected in so long that she silently revelled in it, not truly allowing herself to relax. Hermione was not her daughter, not even a close friend; she was only her Italian tutor. There was no emotional bond between them and she had no clue how Mrs. Malfoy even knew about what had happened at Marquette Manor.

Probably Pansy.

Hermione, in that moment, didn't care who she had told. She was just grateful that, for the first time in a long time, she hadn't felt bitterly alone.

Narcissa hadn't stayed long after Hermione had regained consciousness, Blaise either. The Healers cleared everyone out, except Pansy, and she hadn't expected to see either of them again.

And she hadn't, for that day at least.

Hermione was subjected to a battery of tests: walking, talking, a few basic spells with Pansy's wand—which had been surprisingly yielding—and other tests. They had asked her basic questions. They had asked her about what had happened and Pansy had nearly snapped the quill in her hand at the details she'd given. They had asked her questions about magic, its history, curse-breaking, Arithmancy, Potions, Ancient Runes, and a number of other subjects; questions she'd answered perfectly.

It was like an oral test, and though a lot of things had changed, Hermione Granger still enjoyed tests.

Part Three: Ten Months

October 30th

Mrs. Malfoy and Blaise had come together.

It was early in the morning when she opened her eyes and spotted them talking to Pansy by the door. They sat with her while Pansy ran home to shower and change. Blaise had brought them both breakfast and awkwardly stood at the door while Narcissa sat fresh flowers from the Malfoy gardens on the windowsill to brighten up her room.

Soon after, they left together.

Blaise returned that afternoon with lunch while Pansy attended a meeting for her job; she hadn't been very hungry, but ate a slice of lemon cake, much to his amusement. They hadn't talked much, maybe twenty-three words combined.

"How are you feeling?" Blaise asked out of the blue.

"Like I got blasted across a room." She saw that he winced a bit. Hermione took a breath and reached for him with her good hand. It landed on the one that rested against the bar on her bed, "Blaise?"

Their eyes met. "Hmm?"

She fidgeted a bit, but the words had come easy. "Thank you for saving me."

"Anytime, Hermione."

Hermione had a feeling that he really didn't know what more to say at that point. And that was fine, because she really hadn't wanted him to say anything, at all. She and Blaise were practically strangers, with Pansy being the mutual bond between them. They'd shared a few conversations in the past, nothing deep or meaningful. The fact that he had continued to check on her, even with no further obligation on his part, had spoken more than words ever could.

Narcissa had returned that evening, right before the end of visiting hours, and tested herself on the Italian alphabet and numbers that Hermione had taught her in their previous lessons, just so they wouldn't have to sit in silence...and then she had dropped a bomb on the bed-ridden witch.

"Pansy told me..."

"Pansy?"

"I was the person who had to calm down when you sent her the letter. She felt betrayed by you, Hermione. She was hurt that you couldn't trust her with that knowledge, and that you had kept it from her for over four years. Pansy didn't understand, and I had to help her understand that there were more important things than her. As much of a sweetheart as she is, sometimes she needs to be reminded that the world does not revolve around her."

Hermione sighed, "I wanted to, but I just couldn't. It was hard enough to accept it on my own. We got there that morning for the appointment, I went in, and I just couldn't do it. I'd just lost my parents, I'd just killed someone, and I knew I would lose everything because of it, but I couldn't. I couldn't give it up. I was ashamed, but I thought some good could come from all the devastation."

"I understand why you didn't tell Weasley, but why wait and tell Pansy when you did?"

"I needed her, simple as that...I lied to her and everyone for years, and because of that I had no one when I needed them most." Hermione's throat was thick with emotion. "You had to know I was desperate."

Narcissa touched her shoulder. "You don't have to go through this on your own; your loss is so recent."

"Ten months, twenty-eight days, fourteen hours, and twelve minutes," she recited.

"You can talk to me about it. I understand—"

She shook her head, bitterly, "No, you don't understand...you didn't have to bury your son."

Part Four: Demented Way

November 2nd

The first person she saw was her boss.

After almost two weeks since the incident, Mr. Kingston's anger was far from being assuaged. He was still so furious at the Ministry and Aurors for what had happened, that he had shouted for two hours straight.

"I still can't believe this happened! You won't be fit to work for weeks and I won't have you straining yourself any more than you have to. I care for my employees, even though the Ministry doesn't."

Hermione tried to get a word in edgewise, but gave up.

"You know what? I'll pull out of the contract with the Ministry. It's not even a dent of our fiscal earnings, but it'll destroy them! I'll tell every curse-breaking company in all of bloody London and hell, all of Europe, not to let the Ministry of Magic hire them for anything because they like to hurt Curse-Breakers! That'll teach those fuckers to cover up..."

Hermione stopped listening.

Not only did he swear in English, but she detected a little Spanish and German, as well.

Mr. Kingston had brought her flowers, but was so irate that he had accidentally destroyed the vase, spilling water and Peruvian lilies all over the floor. If it hadn't been for Blaise's arrival, with breakfast for her—because food at St. Mungo's left something to be desired—Hermione was sure Mr. Kingston would still be there, a full day later, ranting. Still, it was nice to know that he cared for him—in his own way.

That time, she and Blaise had talked as if the awkwardness of the previous day had never happened. He was honest and she envied him.

"Pansy has some emergency in Madeira; something to do with a problem with one of the models. She had to take a Portkey there and said she'd owl you as soon as she could."

She'd gotten used to Pansy fussing with Medi-witches and Healers over her so it felt odd she wouldn't be there. She would miss the humour that she had provided. "Umm...oh, okay..."

It was silent for a few minutes before he asked, "What do you miss most about Italy?"

More than anything she wanted to say *my son*, but all the came from her lips was, "The food."

He chuckled. "I miss that, too. Mother moved back to London when I started Hogwarts; took me three years to get past the blandness."

She kept her voice soft when she asked. "Do you miss her?"

Blaise shrugged. "We weren't close. I was practically raised by our house elves while she gallivanted around the world with her many husbands."

"She died that night at Parkinson Manor?"

He nodded. "That was the night I decided to become an Auror. I didn't need the money. I still don't, but I wanted to ensure that no one ever had to suffer the same losses that...well, almost everyone experienced."

They fell into another silence.

"This may be personal, but are you and Pansy going to get married still? I remember her telling me that you two were promised to each other after the war ended."

Blaise looked uncomfortable for a moment before he sighed. "I'm in love with Pansy and I probably always will love her. And if she so much as hinted at it, I'd marry her tomorrow. However, she's not ready so I'll do what I do until she's ready."

"You know, she loves you, too...in her own demented way."

He nodded. "She told me about Australia, and what you did for her. Thank you, for saving her. I've wanted to thank you ever since I saw you in the Auror Department that first time, but I didn't want to scare you."

It was Hermione's turn to become uncomfortable.

"What you don't understand about Pansy is that as much as she says she's healed and moved on, I know she hasn't, completely."

"What do you mean?"

"She flinches sometimes, and she hates to be touched. She's always very acutely aware of her surroundings, to the point where nobody can walk into the room without her noticing. She has horrible nightmares. She doesn't go out alone at night and she sleeps with every light in her house on because she's terrified of the darkness. Australia doesn't exist in her mind and she won't take the Leaky Cauldron entrance into Diagon Alley because of the alley."

"I'm not a big fan of alleys after that night, either, to be honest." Hermione mumbled.

Blaise stared at her for a few moments before he continued. "I'm not going to rush her back into a relationship. When she's ready, she'll know where to find me."

Conversation had moved to lighter topics and Blaise had made her smile for the first time with his dead-on impersonation of her boss. He had brought Hermione her broken wand in a plastic bag along with her purse, and she quietly expressed her appreciation.

"Why do you still come here, bring me food, and sit with me for an hour?" She wondered.

Blaise shrugged. "I figure that since the Ministry wasn't treating you fairly, I would."

It was the last thing that he had said before Mr. Dorchester stuck his head in the room. Blaise greeted his boss coolly, and said something about still being on vacation before he left the two of them alone. Mr. Dorchester had brought flowers, told her they'd suspended Harry for

two weeks without pay, and that he until he could secure her forgiveness, he'd be on desk duty.

She didn't have to tell him that Harry would be on desk duty until the end of time, as far as she was concerned.

Of course, his visit had another purpose.

"We just got the notice that your company is pulling out and if it's not a problem, please ask your boss to reconsider. If this goes through, it'll cost the Ministry over half a million Galleons...and me my job."

After due consideration, Hermione bit her lip. "I'll try, but I'm not making any promises."

Minutes after Mr. Dorchester left, Blaise had stuck his head in to say goodbye.

Part Five: London Bombs

November 3rd

There was a hole that was deep inside her...so deep that Hermione couldn't pinpoint exactly where it was, but she felt it. That was where she buried her guilt. She thought of it as a place that changed rapidly. Hot to cold. Snow to rain. Hail to sleet. Calm to windy. Dry to wet. All at the same time. It never stopped. The only thing that remained constant was the painful exhaustion; it was a fatigue that no amount of sleep could cure.

When the exhaustion was especially strong, she found herself staring into space. She stared and wondered if this was really her life or some sick, twisted dreamland she was trapped for all of eternity. Hermione had wished that that were the case; that she was stuck between worlds, dreaming – or nightmarining, it seemed. Then she would wake up as a seventeen-year-old.

Seventeen.

When the world was in the palm of her hand and she wasn't so miserable. There were some things that she'd change, but others she wouldn't. There were roads that she'd travel, and some from which she would steer away.

Hindsight was always twenty-twenty.

Life hadn't been simple. It was hell, but it had certainly been better than the present.

She had friends then to lean on, to talk to, to hug, to—*love*. Where were those friends? She Pansy, but that wasn't a friendship; only a bond that had been forged out of desperation on a horrible night.

Harry's abandonment had hurt almost as bad as being blasted across the room. Almost. On top of all the other pain she felt, she knew that if she let herself feel the pain of his desertion, she would surely die.

So, Hermione allowed herself think about life at seventeen.

It was one of the more pleasant times in her life; right before everything went to hell in a gasoline canister. Seventeen had been a large adventure. It had been frightening, and though they had been at war, life had been promising. Her life back then had been much better than sitting in a bed in St. Mungo's, trying to con herself into believing that one day she would wake from the nightmare and begin living. Life at seventeen hadn't been so depressing.

She felt a hand on her shoulder that she quickly ignored; she would not break her gaze from the window.

It felt like a sin to be trapped in there, because it was so damn nice outside, pleasant. The autumn sky was perfect and cloudless, a rich azure blue; the sun was shining, but it didn't look too hot or cold. Just...nice. There was a breeze; she only knew because the trees in her line of vision had swayed ever so gently.

The hand joined with its partner and gently pushed her hair from her face. Hermione blinked, just once, and scratched at the skin on her arm as if it didn't fit right. Nothing fit right, it seemed, and all she wanted to be was numb. Numb to everything. Numb to guilt. Numb to the pain. Numb to it all.

God, she needed a drink...and *bad*. That would numb her up just right. However, with all the potions that Hermione was currently taking, getting stupid drunk was a harrowing thought at best. In her life, she'd seen a few glimpses of the depths that people had experienced; the utter lows that had driven them to substances to numb the pain and substitute it for something else.

The hands pulled her tangled hair back into a messy ponytail.

Hermione winced involuntarily; her head, although healed, was still tender and sore.

Deep down, Hermione knew that if she didn't stop now, if she didn't get help, if she didn't free herself from the immense amount of guilt that suffocated her, she would end up just like those depressed and benighted souls. But, right then, she chose to ignore that truth. What did it matter anyway? If she had got help, she'd be fixed, and then what? She'd be happy?

The hands moved and she felt them again as they put socks on her feet.

She hadn't even realised that they were cold, but she was too lost in her own thoughts to speak.

What was happiness anyway and what was it like to be truly happy? Did one laugh harder? Did one smile like every moment was genuine and real?

And after that smile had faded, then what?

Hermione hadn't been truly happy in so long she didn't even know if she was capable of feeling that way again. She knew that she could lie and say that she didn't want to feel it, but that was ridiculous. Everyone wanted to be happy, right? Maybe happiness eluded her for a reason—

"Hermione?" the owner of the hands spoke rather softly, "I think it's time for potions."

Her eyes wandered to the speaker and she gave a little nod. She never thought she would ever admit it, but she was eternally grateful for Slytherins.

Outside of annoying mediwitches and Pansy's letter, Blaise's goodbye was the last contact she had had with anyone; that was, until Narcissa showed up extremely early that morning looking flustered. Hermione started to ask just how she got past security before visiting hours, but didn't. Her greeting was kind, but Hermione had a feeling that the woman was rather upset; tears stained her pale cheeks.

It was the only clue she needed.

"Hermione?"

"Sorry," she mumbled in response, looking over at her for the first time. "I was lost in thought."

"It's perfectly okay, I seem to be lost in thought today, too," the older woman smiled weakly as she handed her the vial and went back to setting up the new bouquet of flowers that she had brought. When she finished, she looked around, proud, "It looks lively in here...drink that," she instructed in a motherly tone.

There was a hint of a smile on Hermione's face as she drank the contents of the vial, but it immediately twisted into a foul look as she balked and frowned as it went down. It tasted absolutely *horrible* and she accepted the cup of juice that Mrs. Malfoy had extended to her, chugging it down in a few gulps. There was still a bitter taste on her tongue, but she was used to it.

She sat in the chair. "How are you this morning?"

Hermione frowned and stared down at her arm that was tucked comfortably in the sling.

Though she walked with a little bit of a limp (hopefully temporary), Hermione felt that she was lucky that they were able to heal everything else...well, except her arm. Apparently, the damage was so severe even after they re-grew the bones, the lower portion of her arm was fragile to the point where she had to wear a Muggle cast for protection for a month and take revolting potions to strengthen her bones.

So, there she was, with a cast that went from above her elbow to her wrist...and even with the anti-itching and drying charms it was still very uncomfortable. Hermione figured that she shouldn't complain. It could've been much so much worse. That was what she had told herself when she felt low.

"Better than yesterday," she answered with a small shrug.

"That's always good. I'm about to leave, is there anything you need?"

Hermione shook her head. "Thank you so much...for everything."

She gave the younger woman another weak smile. "It's not a problem. I always take care of the ones whom I care for." Involuntarily, her heart soared. "My offer still stands. If you want to talk about your—"

Hermione cringed and it took everything in her power to keep the tears suppressed. "No."

Narcissa empathized and didn't mention it anymore. "I'm not going to be able to drop by for the next couple of days, but I think Blaise is coming by." She picked up her wand and with a small pat on the arm, she left. She was less than a metre out the door that was in the midst of shutting when she heard Narcissa's voice. It was laced with surprise, and to Hermione's absolute horror, she gasped, "Mr Potter?"

She had really hoped that there was another person with the last name Potter...maybe a Melvin or a Courtney Potter. She'd even take the reincarnation of James Potter. Anyone except Harry.

But it was unlike her to get what she wanted so she braced herself and watched as the door was reopened by none other than Harry Potter.

She felt as if a Dementor had entered the room; every shred of happiness that she had felt was sucked straight from her body. And then everything went cold, just as cold as it was the night he'd left her. Anger and hurt bubbled in the pit of her stomach as she placed her arm over the injured one, as if she were protecting it from the chill in the room.

Everything was still and silent.

Harry cleared his throat.

Hermione ignored him.

Harry approached the side of the bed.

Hermione turned her eyes away and out the window.

"Hermione?"

She couldn't hide the brittle anger for another moment. "Come to break the rest of me?"

He looked slightly taken aback. "No."

"Why are you here?"

There was a deep, patient breath taken by him before he said almost reluctantly, like a child being forced to apologise for a prank gone wrong. "I came...to apologise."

"Apology not accepted." Hermione waved her good hand dismissively. "Get out."

"Look—"

She cut him off before he could start. "No, *you* look, Harry. I don't want to hear your coerced apology just as much as you don't want to deliver it. Spare us both, and get out."

He looked insulted, "What makes you think it's coerced?"

"If you had meant it, you wouldn't have waited so long to come. I may have been gone for five years, Harry, but my brain didn't fall out my ears along the way," Hermione clipped. "Let me guess, they told you to secure my forgiveness so they won't extend your suspension..." she trailed off, staring at his rapidly changing facial expression.

Harry's expression morphed from insulted to stunned.

Full marks for Hermione Granger.

For a silly split second, she stupidly thought that he would deny it, say he came here on his own accord, tell her he didn't mean to leave her, and apologise for allowing her to get hurt because of his anger and immaturity. She felt stupid for thinking such a thought.

"Well," she spoke rather flippantly, despite the turmoil that went on inside of her. "I hope you enjoy life behind a desk. I hear it's fascinating."

Those words made him turn a nice shade of red that reminded her vaguely of Ron at his most epic.

"This entire thing is your fault!" Harry yelled.

Hermione had come to the decision that he could go right on ahead. He could scream until his lungs collapsed, curse at her, tell her it was her fault that she was in St. Mungo's. He could talk about how she had broken all of their hearts. She could take his criticism; she took more from herself than he could ever dish out.

She maintained her cool demeanour. "And how is it my fault?"

"You show up here after five years thinking that you can just invade my life—well you can't, Hermione. You messed up our friendship. I was doing great without you around."

He could go ahead and accuse her of causing each and every one of his problems. Hermione didn't care. But the sooner he realised that part of this was his fault, as well, the better.

"I don't know what any of that has to do with the fact that you left me defenceless."

"I—"

Her voice quivered as she spoke, "No matter what you use as your defence, you were in the wrong, not me."

"You're the one—"

"I think your memory of that night is severely flawed," she shakily interrupted Harry, "I didn't do anything except suggest we finish the job so that we could leave. Hate me all you want, Harry, but you buggered this, not me. You deserve every day of desk duty that you get."

"What!" He roared.

Hermione shot a glare at him and, despite her own feelings, spat coldly, "You're lucky you have your bloody job because if I wanted to, I'd file charges on your arse so fast that your head would spin in circles. You wouldn't even be able to *spell* Auror when I got finished with you." Her last words were met with silence from Harry and she used that silence to pull herself together; she was two seconds from falling apart in his presence, but she kept her tears at bay.

Regardless to what she had said to him, she still blamed herself for a lot of things that happened between them. They both had done so much wrong.

"I see you're getting along wonderfully with Pansy Parkinson and the Malfoys," he noted distastefully, like he'd ingested a piece of rotten fruit. "I wonder what your mother would say about her only daughter being friendly with two prejudiced—"

Every bit of reserve that she had grasped onto in the previous minutes was instantly shredded into little pieces that would never fit together again. "Don't," she said in a low whisper, showing every shred of fury and passion. Suddenly uncomfortable with the sling, she snatched it off her arm and flung it across the room.

There was a pause, one that she used to take a rasping breath as she choked out the next words, "My mother would be happy that I've made such an alliance, that I've done my job in bridging the gap between old prejudices. Pansy and the Malfoys are better people than you or I could *ever* strive to be. They've been better to me than anyone else. If you want to see a prejudiced, heinous person, look in the mirror, Harry."

He looked taken aback by her words, their volume. "You're just their little charity case. They don't care about you. They're just using you to make them look better."

Hermione shook her head pathetically. "You're *such* a hypocrite."

"What?!" Harry yelled.

"You're using me, too!" Hermione yelled, weary of this conversation. "That's the reason you're here asking for my forgiveness, Harry. I'm just a means to *your* ends, too, so don't sit there and act like you're the patron saint of everything that's good and right in the world, because we both know that you aren't."

"Oh, and you're Miss Perfect, huh?"

"Far from it." He started to say something else, but she wouldn't let him. "I've been through hell, and I'm tired of your attempts at picking a fight."

Harry made a frustrated sound. " I just want your forgiveness so I can get on with my life."

There was only so much she could take of him. There were only so many times she would let him hurt her simply because she felt guilty about what she'd done to him. But this was the end. There were so many things she wanted to say to him. She wanted to tell him about Australia, about her parents, about everything she'd done and the lies that she had told to them all, but all she could say were two words: her voice low and demanding...

"Get out."

rooftop confessions

Chapter Summary

He liked to think he was stuck in the middle of 'pleasant' and 'Voldemort'.

Chapter Seven

Rooftop Conversations

Part One: For reasons he didn't understand

After overhearing Granger's last two muffled words, Draco knew that he had to hide quickly. Since there was no time for anything fancy, he settled for a poorly executed Disillusionment Charm that blended him into the white walls just as the door to room 211 was thrown open haphazardly.

A furious Potter shot out and stalked past him, so irate that he hadn't noticed that the walls outside of the room had looked slightly different...and there was a random pair of expensive black shoes awkwardly positioned on the floor; one firmly on the floor, the other raised on the wall.

For the ignorance and overall stupidity of Saint Potter, Draco was thankful. For what Potter said about his mother and best friend, the git was lucky that he hadn't hexed him. The door slammed rather loudly behind him, and less than thirty seconds later it opened again. A hobbling Granger shot out the room in the opposite direction, audibly crying in hospital issued garments and hideous orange socks his mother knitted up for her using charms.

Despite everything that Draco had heard, and despite knowing the truth about what she had done to save Pansy, he still was torn between doing what was proper and what was painless.

In the end the proper choice had won, but only by a whisker. Damn him for having a conscience.

After placing a better Disillusionment Charm on himself, one that hid his shoes, Draco followed Granger, making sure that he kept ample distance. For the first time in his life, Draco felt like a deranged stalker. He wondered just when his life had hit that particular new low.

It was everyone's fault, he concluded.

Why he was even *in* St. Mungo's was his father's fault.

Father had another meltdown in the middle of the night and tried to throw himself down a flight of steps. A house elf had stopped him by levitating his body. The act alone had earned him a few days in his private suite at St. Mungo's where he paced miserably and talked to veagles when he wasn't doped up on potions.

After, he had taken the day off and stayed with his upset mother, who tended to her husband until he fell into a troubled slumber at daybreak. Instead of resting like a normal person, she'd gone for a quick visit to check on Granger.

Why he had stood outside Granger's room while she argued with Potter was Pansy's fault.

"I'm going to be out of town for a few days...promise me that you'll check on her."

"Blaise and Mother sit with her every day."

"Just check on her...please."

He couldn't deny her.

After seeing her worst memory firsthand, he really hadn't known what to say, so he had said nothing at all. The memory replayed in his mind for three days straight. It had made him violently ill on few occasions, and still he said nothing.

It was a miracle she had even turned out as normal as she-well, that wasn't exactly the truth. She had suffered, privately and publicly. She teetered over the ledge of sanity for a long time after she returned from Australia. Draco remembered when Pansy had snapped. He remembered a highly destructive and hedonistic Pansy, who went on rampage after rampage, trying to erase something out of her life. He remembered an angry Pansy who had destroyed everything that had anything to do with her mother.

Back then, he hadn't understood her behavior, but now—now it all made sense. She was simply transferring the anger she harbored from the rape onto her mother. As much as he empathized, more than ever, he wished he had seen the signs earlier.

Blaise had, but he simply ignored him.

After all, they had the emotional connection.

Well, she and Granger had one too.

And as for her, well, that rock of indifference in his mind had been obliterated.

He couldn't say that he cared for Granger, no, but he held a newfound respect and appreciation for her.

Her words had haunted him.

Draco had a similar thought when he fled with Snape from Hogwarts after the Sixth-Year fiasco; the look of horror and dread on Granger's face had mirrored his almost too perfectly.

She'd done something he hadn't had the courage to do and for someone who had never given a damn about her before that moment.

So, for the last three days he had checked on her.

Usually she was asleep when he had stuck his head into her room. He never stayed long because she always stirred in her sleep when he came in the room. It was as if she had subconsciously known that he was there, watching her. Draco wasn't sure how he would pull it off that day with his father being in the hospital without looking suspicious, but Mother had given him the perfect opportunity.

"Draco, Harry Potter's up there with her now and I'm worried. Go make sure that she's all right."

Her worries hadn't been completely unfounded.

Draco still couldn't fathom her being alone and without her friends. However, after three excruciating minutes of mindless flirting with the witch at the check-in desk, he had come to believe the tales of his mother and best friend. Outside of Pansy, mother and Blaise, there had been three people who had visited her.

Three.

And none, he knew, had visited just to say hello.

Since the Marquette Manor incident, there had been a lot of hush-hush drama occurring in the Auror Department. Outside of the department's employees, the Minister himself, and those he had trusted emphatically, no one else knew about the post-incident fallout in the department. The Aurors had been enraged at his punishment, or lack thereof, and things had been tense in the department. As much as he had tried, Draco found it impossible to steer clear and wait for it to mull over.

Not when it had involved a blatant hush-up attempt.

Granger just *had* to be abandoned by the most popular, although not highly ranked, Auror in the Ministry, didn't she? If it had been anyone else, they would've been terminated immediately and horrible stories would've been written about them in The Prophet; stories so scathing that they would have never been able to acquire another job in the Ministry. But no, it wasn't an ordinary bloke who had abandoned their post. No, it was Harry fucking Potter, boy-wonder, and saviour of the wizarding kind.

While that had infuriated Draco, what really made the steam shoot from his ears had been the decision to approve the use of Memory charms on any Auror suspected of disclosing information about the incident, which had been suddenly filed as top secret, to reporters. It really had meant that they were approved to Obliviate all the Aurors who had rescued Granger on mere suspicion and without evidence.

Once he had heard about it, he had seen to it that Blaise had made it out with his memories. Thanks to nearly three months' worth of vacation time he had built up over the years, his best

mate had made it out, though the other Aurors hadn't been so lucky.

But as Draco followed the weeping woman, he found himself seething at the egregious injustice done to her. It had been almost two weeks since the incident, and the effects of Potter's abandonment were still visible.

While she hobbled around and was bound to a cast as well as a hospital bed, Potter got to spend two weeks at home on administrative leave, resting and spending extra time with friends and his girlfriend, no doubt. Potter slept in while everyone in the department had to work overtime to cover his mistakes before anyone in the media had caught on. They'd Obliviated so many to protect *him*. And so many hours of the last six days of Draco Malfoy's life had been wasted doing damage control instead of working on his cases.

It was all because him.

And that disgusted him to the extreme.

If anyone wanted to know why Draco Malfoy hated Harry Potter, the last two weeks explained it better than words ever could. He got away with everything short of murder because he was the most popular orphan in their world and because he had rid them of a bloodthirsty maniac. Well, congratulations! Draco didn't give a damn if everything he did in school was for the greater good or even that he was predestined to fight the Dark Lord since infancy. The Dark Lord was gone and Potter still broke the rules...and rule-breakers were supposed to be punished.

That was how it worked.

Potter had rarely been punished for a thing in his entire life simply because he was *The-Boy-Who-Lived*. It had always left a bitter taste on Draco's tongue, but for some reason it was bitterer these days.

Two weeks of administrative leave, which had been blamed on the need for a vacation when asked, and desk duty, blamed on the heavy paperwork load, were the sorriest attempt at punishing 'The Wonder Git' that Draco had ever seen.

Draco followed her up the stairs to the roof of the hospital and watched as she pushed open the doors forcefully. He was stunned, but slipped through the door just in time.

The roof was like a garden, full of flowers, vines, bushes, and grass; all charmed to stay green and beautiful all year, no matter what the temperature was outside. Today, the weather was cool and the wind blew through her baggy garments without mercy. He instinctively pulled his jacket closer to him, chilled, but she didn't seem to be affected.

He figured that her anger kept her warm.

From his spot near the door, he watched as Granger hobbled a few feet from the edge. She sat on the grass, groaning in pain and clutching her leg after making a few adjustments. Then Granger rested her face in her hands and sobbed. He wanted to turn around and leave her to

cry alone. A sobbing woman had become a weakness that he acquired with his new conscience.

But for some reason, he didn't walk away.

One step after the next led him right to where she was. He removed the Disillusionment charm and chose his words carefully. "Please don't tell me you're wasting your tears on a git like Potter?"

Part Two: Conspiracy

Granger went from tears to alarmed *and* standing, eyes wide with disbelief. However, instead of the typical, '*What are you doing here, Malfoy?*' she lifted her head to the heavens and shouted in a shrilled voice, "God! Have I *not* been punished enough?"

Confused by her declaration, Draco folded his arms and said. "I don't know who this 'god' is that you're talking to, but you sound barking mad for yelling at someone who isn't here."

She looked as tired as she sounded. "Why are you here, Malfoy? Come to taunt me? I know that this is a perfect situation for you, especially with your penchant for kicking people when they're down." Hermione looked down. "Get your fix and move on. I'm so tired of fighting everyone."

His response came from his subconscious. "Then don't."

Granger's eyes bugged. "What?"

He didn't answer her question immediately. Draco wasn't surprised that she'd thought so ill of him, but had to concede that his behaviour towards her hadn't been the best. The surprising part was that her scathing tone had burned in *his* chest. Draco wasn't supposed to care what she had thought about him; she was as insignificant to him as dust on a bookshelf.

Or so he thought.

"You're right, Granger. It's not like me to pass up such an opportunity." Draco chose his next words with more care than usual. "But alas, I've grown up and my intention for foll—" He cleared his throat. Never would he admit to stalker-like behaviour. "Coming up here."

"Then why are you here?"

An uncomfortable moment passed between them as Draco scrambled for an answer to her question. It was complicated. Not exactly black and white. And in the last two weeks, Draco

began to realise that she wasn't either. "To say thank you, I suppose...for a few things. Defending my mother, for starters."

Her eyes widened and her already pale skin went nearly translucent. "You mean—"

Draco waved his hand dismissively because in the grand scheme of things, it didn't matter that he'd overheard their argument. "Yeah, yeah, I heard it...it was hard not to, you were practically screaming at him and everyone knows the only rooms that have Silencing Charms are the ones in the mental ward—" He'd spoken too much.

If she caught on to his faux pas, she didn't mention it. "I-I forgot," Granger dried her eyes quickly with the sleeve of her shirt. She looked nervous, but at least she wasn't crying anymore.

Mission accomplished.

Wait, was that really his mission?

Draco turned to pay special attention to the blooming pink hibiscus to his left, while she stared down at her ridiculous orange socks, sniffling and shifting her weight from leg to leg. It was pretty obvious that it pained her to stand so long and he wondered why she didn't just sit down. Well. It probably had to do with the fact that she didn't feel comfortable enough around him to let down her defences low enough to even sit; not that he'd ever given her reason.

His conscience screamed for to speak, but Draco stood his ground. At least for the moment. He wasn't at all surprised by the high level of awkwardness that surrounded them. Everything about their interactions, since the first, was uncomfortable and every single one of them usually ended with one of them in flight mode.

Granger broke the silence with a pensive stare in his direction. "Why were you standing outside of my room?"

Draco comprised a forty-item list of all the excuses he could use in his defence; a nasty little habit he had that his conscience didn't like. And while it screamed for him to tell her the truth, he skimmed his list of lies; none of them were good enough to be uttered. Reluctantly, he went with a variation of the truth. "Mother was worried about what would transpire between you and Potter and sent me to check on you."

"Oh..." her voice trailed off as she looked off into the distance, fidgeting with the last button on her shirt.

"You *can* sit down, you know."

Her brow went up, but she didn't meet his gaze. "I prefer to stand."

Granger was such a stubborn, proud thing and while it was still irritating, he was oddly relieved to see that side of her shine through the haze of depression that seemed to smother the life out of her. But she was hurting. It was obvious. And Draco was annoyed. "Your leg

is *clearly* bothering you. Quit being daft and stubborn, and sit down before you hurt it worse." To prove his point and show her he meant little to no harm, Draco whipped his wand from the holster in his jacket and conjured a chair. Pointedly, he glared and hissed, "Sit."

After a visible examination of said chair for dark artefacts or anything malicious, she complied cautiously and grimaced; it was as if she expected the arms to suddenly grab her and hold her captive.

Of course, Granger didn't relax, not even once she realised that neither he nor the chair were out to get her. Draco thought she looked quite foolish.

"I'm not going to do anything, you *can* relax."

She muttered. "I beg to differ, you're an opportunist and this is the perfect opportunity."

His attention went to a rose bush less than five feet from her transfigured chair and then drifted back to Granger, watching as she massaged her leg with her good arm and a pained expression.

"How are you?" It was out his mouth before he could stop it. Draco immediately wanted to jump off the building to avoid her reaction to his question, but knew there were all kinds of charms that kept him from fulfilling that want.

Granger's head shot up. "As if you care, Malfoy."

Really, he didn't...right? The question was an innocent slip of the tongue, but it had been asked and damn it all, he wanted a response. "Maybe I don't, but just answer the bloody question."

After regarding him with a strange glare, she sighed wearily and told him the truth. "I'm the furthest thing from 'fine' and the fact that you're sort of *not* acting like a loathsome git is rather alarming."

That was fair. Draco wasn't the same boy from Hogwarts, but he didn't win Witch Weekly's annual '*nice award*' either; he wasn't even on the ballot. On quite a few occasions, he purposely made comments that cut people to the bone and said things that he *knew* would hurt. He'd done that to Granger more than he could count. He had lied and didn't care about the consequences until his conscience tackled him. He wasn't a nice person, but he wasn't a Dark Lord in the making, either. He liked to think he was stuck in the middle of '*pleasant*' and '*Voldemort*'.

"Apologies for being *decent*, Granger, you'll never have to worry about that happening again," was his automatic response as he calmly swept past her and took a seat on the edge of the grass.

"That's not exactly what I meant."

A few minutes passed in silence before she stood up and attempted to sit next to him with such great difficulty he almost helped her. Draco already knew how poorly that would turn

out, but she kept trying to calculate her trajectory and it was annoying him. So he grabbed her hand and provided the leverage she needed to sit, ignoring just how little effort it took to help her. Granger let out a surprised and strangled noise, looking at Draco with such wide eyes he was starting to get a complex. But he stubbornly didn't let go until she settled next to him; her injured leg stretched out while the other was bent at the knee.

"You've never been decent to me, not for honourable reasons."

She had a point, but he wanted nothing more than to change the topic. "What happened with Potter? I came into the picture when he started talking about Pansy and my mother."

The shrug she gave meant she didn't want to discuss it thoroughly, but she gave him a vague answer all the same. "He came to ask for my forgiveness about the Marquette Manor incident and I told him in more or less words to shove it."

Draco was impressed; he half expected Granger to cave and forgive Scarhead the moment he walked into the room. Everyone forgave him immediately anyway so it felt good that his quest for forgiveness from Granger was presented, not considered, and denied. Not everyone got what they wanted; now even the Boy-Wonder knew that.

Sweet vengeance at its finest.

Part Three: The Conscience of Draco Malfoy

He'd lost count of how many uncomfortable silences fell between them. He took to focusing on everything else except the woman next to him. It was easier that way, especially when her hand brushed against his leg and he could feel just how cold her fingers were. Annoyed, he thought about taking off his jacket and giving it to her, but thought she would pass out from the gesture.

For the life of him, Draco couldn't figure out why he was still there. He'd done what his mother had asked of him. Actually, he'd gone far and above his duty. She wasn't getting hexed to bits by Potter, so why was he still there?

"Blaise told me about your wand. Can they fix it?" He asked just to make conversation.

Remorsefully, her eyes lowered to the ground and her hand reached into the right pocket of her hospital garb and pulled out her broken wand; it was in three pieces. "No, but I'm not ready to part with it. It took me ages to find it after the final battle."

Draco started to ask her why, but he understood the link between a wizard and their wand. After Potter disarmed him that night in Malfoy Manor, he'd felt completely empty. He sought Potter out after everything calmed down following the final battle and asked the git for his

wand back. He'd gotten it via owl two weeks later and it took almost a year before it yielded to him again.

A gust of wind blew and while Draco shivered, Granger didn't seem to notice.

He figured it was now or never.

He took a deep breath. "Thank you for saving Pansy in Australia."

Her face was as white as the hospital garments she wore. "H-how—she told you everything, didn't she? She said she would. I just didn't think she'd do it this soon."

"She let me use Legilimency on her."

Granger stared up at the sky and he stared at her.

"That night easily was in the top five for the 'Worst Night Ever' award, right in front of the night in Godric's Hollow with Harry and Nagini," she said, her voice raw and quiet.

Draco understood all about the 'Worst Night Ever' rankings. "You did what you had—"

She shut her eyes. "Don't say that, Malfoy." There was a pained expression on her face and he knew she was reliving the night all over again. A lone tear rolled down her cheek. "Pansy's been saying that for over five years. Use of magic on a Muggle is a crime that could have landed me in Azkaban. I could've stunned him, but—but when I saw what he was *doing* to her, when I heard her cries..." her voice grew cold, "The Killing Curse was relatively minor in regards to what I *really* wanted to do to him."

He understood.

Granger took a shaky breath and opened her eyes, wiping the tears from them. "She doesn't blame me for it, but I blamed myself. He came after me that night first and all I did was a Revulsion Jinx and a Trip Jinx to throw him off and hid under a Disillusionment Charm. It took me fifteen minutes to pull myself together enough to go after him, but it was too late. I heard Pansy and lost it. I don't remember speaking the curse, Pansy said she didn't remember hearing it. All I remember is a flash of green that came from my wand and...everything stopped."

Draco couldn't figure out why he wanted her to keep talking. He didn't want to hear it. Seeing what Pansy went through was enough, but listening to Granger's account just made it harder.

"What happened after that?" He only asked because she looked like she needed to get it all out.

She looked at him as if she didn't quite understand why the words were spewing from her lips. "We just stood there, staring at each other. And then the gravity of the situation dawn on me and I just lost it, right there in the alley. I don't know if I felt guilty about killing him or if I was guilty that I used an Unforgivable, but I didn't have time to figure it out."

"Why not?"

She shook her head and stared out into the distance. "Pansy snapped out of her trance and started screaming."

Draco cringed. He'd heard it in Pansy's vision. He never wanted to hear her scream like that again.

Granger continued; her voice was thick with emotions. "I had to tackle her to get her to stop before any Muggles came running. I wouldn't be able to explain how he'd died, so I fixed her clothes, set his body on fire, and erased all evidence that either of us were there. By then, she was unresponsive so I brought her back to my hotel and I put her in the tub," she closed her eyes again, remembering it all. "All I wanted to do was leave and mull things over alone, but she had a fit when I so much as adjusted on the floor next to the tub. She clung to me for the rest of the night."

As he internally reeled, Draco found himself staring up at the sky.

She shifted next to him and he could hear her scratch at the skin just beneath her cast. "Pansy stayed with me in my room for the rest of the time she was in Australia and didn't speak a word for the first three days. I had to convince her to talk, for her sake. And when she caved, Pansy sobbed for hours."

Really, he didn't want to discuss Pansy's tears.

Or discuss anyone's tears for the matter.

"Did anyone find out?" He asked just to change the topic.

"Not that I know of; I'd probably be in Azkaban right now if they did. The next morning, they found his body right where we left him, burned beyond recognition. They identified him by his dental records within the week. Turns out he was some fugitive serial rapist from the States. He'd raped and killed more than ten girls in Australia alone, which didn't include the two girls they found the same night I killed him. They were raped and strangled before they were tossed in a dumpster in the same alley the attack occurred in."

"Merlin." Draco realised Pansy and Granger had been lucky to escape with their lives.

"I think they were just glad to see him dead. After they initially announced his identity on the news stations, we never heard about it again..."

Draco remained silent, just shocked by what they'd been through.

"Sometimes I dream about it," Granger confessed almost in a whisper.

"You shouldn't. He was a monster—"

"Don't you think I know that, Malfoy?" Her voice was cold. "I don't dream about *him*. I don't care about him. It took a while for me to understand, but he deserved what he got. I dream of all the different ways I could've saved her."

"Granger," He spoke, unsure as to why he was trying to comfort her. He wanted to stop there, but something wouldn't let him. "I think you need to take a page from Pansy's book and let it go. It's not your fault. Pansy doesn't blame you and I sure as hell don't. You saved her."

She stared at him as if he'd sprouted another head.

Draco felt like he had, but kept talking anyway. "Years of being a Gryffindor have left you with a Hero Complex like your old best friend, who shall not be named because I *really* want to push him off the top of a Quidditch Pitch at the moment. The thing is that you can't save everyone; no matter how many lifelines you throw out. Don't be so hard on yourself."

Granger looked at him as if she was seeing him for the very first time. "I've been told all that countless times—"

"I'm not Pansy," he snapped, "I don't give a shit if you choose to listen to me or not."

"You never let me finish," she growled in response. "I was about to say that it makes a lot of sense the way you put it—"

"I always make sense."

She sighed. "You're impossible to talk to."

"And yet, here we are."

"And here we are."

Another gust of wind blew through them. Draco didn't have the faintest clue why either, but he had mixed feelings about the result of their conversation. It was getting harder and harder for him not to feel some sort of empathy for her. After all, she'd been through a lot, but he just knew she wasn't telling everything. He *knew* there was more to her story. It was getting harder for him to dive into her past because if that was the catalyst, he didn't want to know what else had transpired. It was getting harder for him to remember just why he launched the investigation in the first place.

"I have no idea why I told you all that," Granger told him quietly.

But as they sat in a silence that was almost companionable, there were twenty-seven things the conscience of Draco Malfoy wanted to tell her. Though he never spoke of it, he understood at least some of her struggles. He had terrible nightmares about what happened in the Astronomy tower, and he too sought redemption for the things he'd done in the past. But that was where it was. The past. It was over and she couldn't change anything. After all, dwelling never did anyone any good. His conscience wanted to tell her that she had to first forgive herself before any kind of redemption could be found.

He wanted to say so much more, but never got a chance.

Part Four: A stare that could end wars

The door to the roof creaked as it opened.

Granger was the first to turn her head. He heard her muttered curse and turned to investigate. Perhaps it was Potter again; rearing and ready for round two.

But no, it was a Weasley—the girl.

Nothing made sense anymore.

Draco was just as shocked to see her as she was to see him, but not for a moment did he show it. She-Weasel blinked, eyes darting back and forth between them, her walk in their direction slowed as she became more and more confused. Hermione Granger and Draco Malfoy outside, sitting next to each other, and talking without hexes or curses? An impossibility, but there they were.

Besides, he really didn't *hate* Granger.

When Granger used his shoulder as a prop to help herself back onto her feet, he should've been angry with her. But he wasn't. She was hurt, after all. But that didn't mean he liked the way her thin hands gripped his shoulder. Draco stood after she did because the tension was back and he didn't think he needed to be sitting.

That tension fell over them like a mist, colder and more intense than it had been before.

The only thing that he felt was the wind as it blew through Weasley's red mane and did nothing to Granger's frizz ball. It looked like a scene in one of those cheesy western movies Blaise had introduced him to a few years back. All they needed was the horrible theme music. Granger's defensive walls that had slowly lowered during their conversation were back and higher than ever.

It was quite obvious that She-Weasley and Hermione Granger were not fans of one another. It was a cat-fight in the making and Draco didn't know who to place his bets on. She-Weasel was an ex-Quidditch player with six brothers; she had to be strong and athletic. But Granger, well he very well couldn't sleep on her. After all, she had a weapon on her arm and a stare that could end wars.

"Malfoy," came the cool greeting from the redhead.

His response was impassive as ever. "Weasley."

Clipped and unemotional, the she-Weasel greeted Granger. "Hermione."

"Ginny." She wore an impressive poker face, calm and even. "Should I deduce that Harry sent you?"

Draco's brow twitched at the mild, but scathing tone of Granger's voice. He still saw the tears that shone in her eyes from their previous conversation, but they were well-hidden and the glossiness could be blamed on the wind.

"You shouldn't assume anything," the redhead's hands disappeared into the pockets of her Muggle denims.

"Why are you here?"

"I'd like to start over."

Granger's brow rose faster than his own. He'd always assumed the youngest Weasel and Granger were the best of friends at school. They were always seen together, even as early as his third year. Draco quickly realised that he knew nothing about the Gryffindors he teased mercilessly at school.

"Excuse me?" Granger stared her hard.

The youngest Weasley squirmed under her intense stare, looking everywhere except at her. She even looked at Draco, who kept his face carefully blank, folding his arms across his chest.

"Now that you're back in town, I think you and I should bury the hatchet between us."

Of all the bullshit he'd heard in his life, the peace treaty that came from She-Weasley's mouth ranked at number one. He secretly hoped Granger wasn't stupid enough to accept.

And then she said something that made even him smirk: "That's complete bullshit."

Offended, She-Weasel scoffed. "What's that—"

Granger never let her finish, "I was gone over five years, Ginny, and everyone seems to think my brain has *evaporated*. I know why you're here and what you want—and it's not my friendship."

"Y—"

Draco stood there and beheld the sight of a raging Granger; her hair and skin seemed to crackle with raw magic. Finally, he was seeing the know-it-all he remembered. "Ginny, don't think for one second that I don't know what kind of person you are. You know at least part of the reason why I left; I could tell that you knew based from your first letter."

"Well—"

"It's not that important. The truth is you've had plenty of opportunities to express your wishes for friendship in the letters you wrote over the years, so please don't insult my intelligence with your lies. You're here because Harry told you that I refused to forgive him and you thought you'd use the promise of an alliance to accomplish what he couldn't. You know him, he's going to badger me until I relent and you're using the promise of friendship to keep him away from me."

Draco wanted to laugh, but his mind was too busy processing her words. He had to hand it to Granger; she always knew just what to say to put someone in their place.

She-Weasel blushed. "I—"

"You may have filled the hole I left, but you're *not* the 'Brains of the Golden Trio', you never will be. I hope you've enjoyed trying to live up to my legacy."

Draco whistled lowly, but neither of them heard him.

"I just don't understand you, Ginny." She shook her head and stared at her cast as if it were a difficult Rune she'd spent hours trying to master.

"What do you mean?"

Granger looked at her old friend. Were they friends? "You've gotten everything you wanted. He's yours. You have him and I don't want him; his behaviour as of late has told me loud and clear that he doesn't want me. You have no reason to be jealous anymore. Why can't you be content with that?"

To say he was mildly shocked by her words wouldn't have been a correct assumption; Draco cycled between at least three emotions.

She-Weasley stared daggers at Granger. "If that's what you think this is about then you're wrong. You should've stayed gone, Hermione. I won't let you hurt them again."

For a moment, Granger looked like she was about to cry, but her face never broke and Draco really understood that under that almost too-thin frame was a person who was stronger than he ever anticipated. He was used to seeing her so broken, dejected, and beaten down by life. But today, she'd faced not one, but two of her old friends and put them in their places effectively.

He was just as proud of her as he was *fucking confused*.

"I'm not here to hurt either of them, again. Matter of fact, I left to avoid hurting them, especially Ron. There isn't a day that goes by that I don't regret what I did to him."

"And I hope you never forget because he hasn't," she spat.

Granger only nodded, cradling her casted arm against her chest. Her features softened and she looked as if she was struggling to save face. "I think you should know that leaving Ron was the hardest thing I've ever done." She sounded so worn. "We weren't perfect, but I was happy. I think you should also know that I left London very much in love with him."

Draco's mind was working hard. Why leave?

And then it hit him like one of Pansy's hexes.

"Is that supposed to mean something to me?" She-Weasley asked blandly.

Draco wanted to shake her and force her to understand what Granger was saying. She left because she didn't have a choice; something *made* her leave suddenly.

"Nothing, Ginny, nothing at all. You know, there's something that I still don't understand."

"And that is..."

"When did I become your enemy?"

She-Weasel set her jaw. "When you left my brother, Hermione. *That's* when you became the enemy. Blood before water, Hermione, you should know that."

"No," she shook her head sadly, "I've been your enemy long before that and you know it just as I do." Granger chuckled as if someone told a sad little joke, "The funny thing is, Ginny, there was a time when I wished we were friends."

"And now?"

"I'm glad we aren't."

they all thought wrong

Chapter Summary

"When you decide to stop staring at me like you want to tear my clothes off, your breakfast will be waiting for you on the table."

Bit of violence in this chapter.

Chapter Notes

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

Chapter Eight

They All Thought Wrong

Part One: Sleepless nights.

November 27th

"How long will he be unconscious?" Draco asked the Healer as he peered down at his resting father.

The span between father's psychotic breaks had been rapidly decreasing in the past few months. He'd had three in the last two weeks, and it was making Draco antsy. More than ever he implored Mother to see reason and put him in St. Mungo's permanently where he could have constant care and safety from himself.

Anti-psychotic potions weren't working.

Muggle medicines weren't working, either.

Nothing worked.

His organs were slowly deteriorating, and his magic was becoming more unstable. It was pretty obvious that Lucius Malfoy was either going to commit suicide or deteriorate right before their eyes.

The Healer didn't sound too confident. "Maybe a day or two."

"Which is it; one day or two days?" he snapped.

"Draco," his mother said wearily.

His shot over to the little couch where his mother sat with a stoic Blaise; she was close to tears and the sight of her muffled his rage. Other than the bruises on her arms, her black eye, and dishevelled appearance; she was otherwise unscathed from the latest incident with Father.

Draco sighed heavily, pulled himself together, and listened to the Healer prattle on about the effects of the potion that he'd put his father on. "Mr. Malfoy." Draco visibly bristled at the title. "Excuse me, *Draco*, but the thing about these potions are..."

Earlier that evening, Mother found him trying to stab himself with a dagger. She spelled the dagger to disappear, but hadn't expected his father's rage. Savagely, he launched at his wife, screaming words in what she said sounded like an invented language as he tackled her to the floor, slapping her brutally. Draco refused to think about what would've happened if he hadn't come into the room when he did. It was as much of a painful thought as it was an angry one.

"So that's why I can't tell you whether the potion lasts one or two days." Draco hadn't listened to a word, but nodded as if he had, and the Healer continued. "I'm going to heal your mother's bruises, if you have any more questions, don't hesitate to ask." With that, the young Healer turned and walked towards his mother.

There was a small exchange between Blaise, his mother, and the Healer before the latter two left the room together. It wasn't until the massive bedroom door shut that Draco looked at his best friend. Blaise, of course, relaxed on the futon as if he instinctively knew a Draco Malfoy tirade was about to occur. He'd been witness to enough of them in the past to know the signs: slightly flushed cheeks, a typical Malfoy sneer, and flashing eyes.

"I've just about *had it* with this nonsense," Draco raged as he irritably paced next to Father's bed. "What does he have to do to make her listen to me and put him in St. Mungo's for good? Does he have to go and kill us all in our sleep before she *believes* me?"

Blaise rose from his seat suddenly. "Draco—"

"No!" he raged on. "He could've killed her and there wouldn't have been anything that I could've done about it!"

"Draco..." Blaise cautiously reached in his pocket.

"He needs to be put in a hospital, someplace where they can look after him and make sure he's not trying to dangle himself off bloody chandeliers!"

"For goodness sake, Draco!" Blaise yelled a bit brusquely.

"What?" He yelled back.

"Your father's hand is moving," he said cryptically.

What the hell? Draco turned around and sure enough, his left hand actually was moving; opening and closing, clenching and unclenching, like a reflex. Actually, it looked as if he

were using his hand to dramatize the human heartbeat. His eyes drifted up slowly where they rested on his shut eyes. He looked peaceful...as if he were dreaming.

With a smirk, he turned back to a worried yet stoic Blaise. "Don't worry, he's still asleep."

The grandfather clock chimed.

It was midnight.

All the light in the room died and plunged the room into darkness.

All hell broke loose.

"*Lumos!*" Draco heard Blaise call out and a little beam of light erupted from the end of his wand, but it wasn't enough for him to see well, "Draco?"

"I'm right—" Draco felt the hand on the calloused hand on the back of his neck. Instinct had him swing back in the darkness, but all he met was air.

"*Nox!*"

The hand returned. He swung back again; only air. Blaise was yelling every light spell he knew in hopes that one would make the lights cut on. A strangled yelp escaped Draco as he was pushed to the ground from behind.

"Draco, are you okay?"

It wasn't as if he could answer.

He hadn't had a moment's notice to brace his body for the fall, and he fell...hard. Pain gripped each of his senses. He searched and searched, but couldn't find his breath and rolled on his back in hopes to regain the thing he'd lost. Faintly, he heard Blaise through the humming in his own head, but he couldn't focus too long. All he could focus on was the rush of blood to his head and the woozy sensation he felt in his stomach.

"Draco, answer me!"

He tried, he really did, but as he tried to muster enough strength and air to answer Blaise's almost desperate command, he felt as if he were trying to inhale from a thin straw; there simply wasn't enough air getting into his lungs and they burned horribly.

In the back of his mind, he heard a crash and Blaise's colourful cursing. "There's like a shield, I can't get through it."

Draco knew he was screwed.

A soft voice spoke above him; cryptic, calm, and lacking all emotion, "The veagles want your soul, Draco...they want your soul and your life. Don't be afraid. I'll be with you every step of the way," and then that calloused hand wrapped around his neck again.

And they clenched, cutting off his air supply completely. Draco, though he flailed and kicked with all his might, felt powerless for the first time in a very long time. And when Lucius Malfoy put force behind his squeeze, in an attempt to keep him from getting away, he actually feared for his life.

"Father, please..." he rasped out as his eyes burned.

In a last ditch effort, he wrapped his hands around his father's wrist, trying desperately to pry his hands off his throat.

They only tightened more.

"*Shh*...let go...accept it. I have."

It was a fight he was rapidly losing.

Snape once told him that he wasn't afraid of death; that it was the stakes that one put up in order to play the game of life. Well, that was complete rubbish. Snape was always too mysterious and philosophical for his own good. And Draco was *terrified*.

Draco didn't want to die. Not that way. Not that night.

Lucius' hands squeezed his son's throat tighter; it felt as if he were crushing his windpipe in his vice grip. Draco's mind screamed in pain, his head throbbed from the lack of oxygen, and he felt his heart slow. Weakening more and more by the second, Draco felt his legs slowly stop jerking about wildly, just twitching sporadically as his eyes rolled around, unfocused.

His mind screamed at him to keep fighting, but he just didn't have it in him.

"*Shh*, everything is going to be fine, you'll see...I'm saving you, son, I'm saving you..."

Draco eyes shut, he'd stopped kicking and fighting; his mouth was partially open as if he still tried to draw in air.

"*Finite!*"

Nothing happened.

"All your life you've never known what it's like to be free...here's your chance. The veagles want you. They want your pure blood," and he sniffed at the skin of his neck. It was as he could smell the blood that slowly pumped through his son's arteries.

Draco released an internal grunt.

"*Shh*, don't fight it, son. You're going to be like us, Draco."

"*Finite Incantatem!*"

The lights came back on, the door busted open. He faintly heard his mother's terrified scream.

"Stupefy!"

Lucius' body unceremoniously slumped over next to his son.

Yes, the pressure of his hands was gone, but Draco felt like he was trapped in a dream of sorts, neither here nor there. He heard a lot, but felt nothing; and all he could wonder if nearly being strangled by his deranged father for the second time in three years was really what his life was all about.

"Don't just stand there, you daft Healer, get some help! Send a Patronus, do something!"

He heard a door slam.

Weakly, he heard his mother say through strangled tears, "Oh Merlin, Blaise, is he breathing?"

"Barely. Look, I'm going to do something I learned a while ago...I'm going to tilt his head back and I need you to pinch his nose and breathe into his mouth, can you do that?"

There was no doubt about the fear and worry in her voice. "Yes..."

His chest burned as he inhaled sharply.

Merlin, it hurt! His head throbbed miserably, body ached, and his neck hurt like hell. With his head turned to the side, Draco coughed for what seemed like hours until he regained his breath, and even then he gasped like crazy. It was as if his body couldn't capture enough air to sustain him. His emotions ran wild; he was happy to breathe again, but he was mad as hell that he was put in that situation. Draco heard his mother weeping horribly and it was the water that drenched the flames of his anger.

Draco started to move, but felt Blaise's hand on his shoulder, forcing him to stay down. "Don't."

But he opened his eyes slowly and they settled on his mother.

She looked incredibly shaken and more dishevelled than before.

"Mother," he whispered, unable to find his voice.

Narcissa's body shook as she cried miserable tears, not just for her son and husband, but for herself and the choices they'd been forced to make along the way; choices she would take back in an instant if she could if that meant getting her family back.

After the Healers carted his father off to St. Mungo's for a week in his private room where he would be under a suicide watch, his mother begged him to stay at the Manor, but he couldn't. He arranged for her to stay at a friend's and paid for the two to spa together for the weekend. There was nothing like a weekend with friends to get her mind off reality.

Blaise offered to stay at his house, but Draco declined. He needed time alone, but all he really wanted was a night; a night under his own covers, in his own bed, in his own room, in his

own house where he could reflect on the night and sleep in peace.

Of course, when he settled under the covers, he tossed and turned for a minute, unable to sleep.

But insomnia wasn't new to Draco.

After the war, even with a heavy dosage of Dreamless Draught, he used to wake up screaming and shaking in a cold sweat; his nightmares used to make him sick. All the death and torture, the constant threat of being eaten by Nagini, the Dark Lord, and the guilt he felt from the things he'd done to save his family; no amount of potion could stop him from reliving everything when he closed his eyes.

His first solution following the final battle had been to not sleep at all. Draco had spent months wandering the halls of the Manor all night until he collapsed somewhere. The house elves had taken him back to bed where he'd sleep about an hour before he woke up in a cold sweat and restlessly walked the Manor again. It had been a vicious cycle that had lasted over nine months before Mother intervened with all sorts of potions that helped him sleep through the night.

But he'd been wise enough to sense that taking potions every night was an addictive habit and curbed it before it became a problem. The nightmares had never eased, even after all this time, but he was used to them.

He had no other choice.

He thought that one day they would pass and he'd sleep peacefully.

With a snort, Draco rolled over on his back and stared at the ceiling, touching his sore neck.

After over five years, he realised that he'd thought wrong.

Part Two: The Unopened Letter

It was midnight on *Day Fifteen* since she'd been release from St. Mungo's and Hermione was wide awake, thinking and hurting.

Her father always said: "*Time heals all wounds, Hermione. Nothing stays the same forever.*"

Now she choked out a bitter laugh at those words. Time *had* passed. She had tried and did everything possible to start the process of healing and turn things around now that she was back in London, but now she believed firmly in the fact that not even time could heal some bruises.

She'd spent almost a month in the hospital thanks to a night at Marquette Manor with Harry and words couldn't express how thrilled she was the day of her release. It didn't matter that she had a limp. Sure, her arm was in a cast. Okay, she couldn't perform strenuous tasks or work for the next three weeks and she had to go to a Muggle physical therapist for her leg and then for her arm when they removed the cast. Hermione Granger was even okay with the fact that she was still on enough potions to make an addict sick.

Nothing mattered.

She was grateful to be out of that bed, out of that room, off that floor, and out of that hospital.

Goodbye to surprise visits from Ginny with her personal agenda. Goodbye to odd rooftop exchanges with Malfoy where she almost found him pleasant to talk to...until he said something that reminded her of who he was. Goodbye Medi-witches or 'Medi-Bitches' as Pansy called them. Goodbye horrible hospital food, and hello to her own bed.

When she left the hospital fifteen days ago, Hermione felt like she was skating on top of the world. Somewhere along the way she found out she was a poor skater, tripped, and fell flat on her face. Apparently, she should've paid more attention to the Healer's final message.

Hermione had no clue that relax for fifteen days really meant that she couldn't leave her house for fifteen days because the sheer amount of potions she was on would render her unable to do menial tasks. There were worse things, but really, she felt trapped like a caged animal, in her own home.

And there was no Pansy to take the edge off.

She had work in Madeira and left Hermione with a newfound respect for prisoners in Azkaban, even the evil ones who had lost their sanity along the way. She understood why. Being trapped in one place never sat well with her, but she slept away most of the first three days away because of the potions and it diverted her attention from the solitude.

Everything was fine until she became strong enough to walk around the house following a dosage. She wanted a drink, but instead she spent the next three days cleaning everything from ceiling to floor the Muggle way because she still didn't have a wand. She made sure everything was up to date, organised her kitchen, watched all the movies she'd missed in her absence, sat out by the lake, polished her floors, considered hiring someone to landscape her property, organised her books by title and author's last name, cleaned her fireplace, wrote Charlotte back, wrote Pansy and Mrs. Malfoy, and sat and waited for someone to write her back.

No one did.

Hermione paced the rest of *Day Seven* away on floor right in front of her fireplace, deep in thought. There was no saving her. Poor blue rug; it'd been worn down quickly and she needed a new one. For hours, she paced back and forth on that little rug, not eating, not drinking, not sleeping, not blinking.

Just pacing.

The memories overwhelmed her on the eighth day.

For the fourth time since they arrived at the airport Hermione assured Pansy. "I'll be fine. My flight leaves in an hour."

"I can go with you to Venice, to make sure you settle in. I mean, I'd completely understand if you didn't want to be in a foreign country after everything that's happened with your parents and—"

"I'm fine," Hermione stressed. It wasn't a topic she particularly enjoyed discussing, in fact it was still quite painful and hard to believe. "You need to go home; to London. You need to take care of yourself. It's been a long six weeks for the both of us."

"And here I was thinking that I was taking a vacation," Pansy chuckled ruefully. There was a last call for Flight 390 to London and Pansy hugged her again. "I'm putting myself into therapy when I get back, I keep on having nightmares about a lot of things—you should do the same."

Hermione brushed her words off and prayed she'd hurry up and leave before she saw through the lies she'd been telling her for days. "I told you Pansy, I'm absolutely fine. Go, or you'll miss your flight."

When Pansy disappeared through the terminal, Hermione turned on her heels and walked away.

Her flight to London left three hours later.

It was a futile hope at best, but Hermione spent the ninth and tenth day hoping that someone would drop by, even for an hour. Mrs. Malfoy had had a family emergency that kept her busy and Pansy was still inundated with business. Hermione felt very lonely without both of them. It was an odd feeling. No one else knew where she lived; she wasn't even connected to anyone on the Floo network.

She felt restless, trapped, and incredibly sad.

It was the same depression she still felt tonight.

Ron just stared at her as if she'd gone bonkers, but she paid him no mind. After all, she had a lot to do and she was still jet-lagged from her flight from Australia. The trip to the Burrow should've been over ten minutes ago if she wanted to keep up on her schedule.

Not to mention, she had to close a chapter in her life that she didn't want to end. "What do you mean you're leaving, Hermione? You just got back."

Tears welled in her eyes, but she bit them back before he saw and unemotionally responded, "I'm leaving, Ron. I'm moving to Venice. I've got an excellent job offer as a curse breaker, the company is paying for me to have a private tutor so I can sit for my NEWTs in a couple of months. It's the best opportunity and I have to take it. My flight leaves in tomorrow. I've just come to say goodbye. Don't talk me out of this. It's something I have to do."

He reminded her of a tomato, anger was evident on his face and she knew she was in for the biggest row of their entire seven-year friendship and brand new relationship. But then he sighed and crossed the room, approaching her from the front.

God, she was tired and she didn't want to fight, but it was all rather inevitable.

Ron was right there, inches from her face.

Hermione was cognizant to the fact that she was literally backed into a wall and Ron towered over her. Instead of anger, he spoke with emotions that broke her heart, "'Mione," he breathed softly against her forehead before kissing it softly.

All the reserve she'd built up melted in a pool around her feet and Hermione fisted his shirt as his lips moved down the side of her face, down to her chin, and up, where they grazed over hers. Where he acquired such gentleness, she didn't know, but he was making it hard for her to do as she planned. And when he captured her lips in a kiss, he'd made it damn near impossible.

Then it all came back to her.

Slowly, she pulled away, hoarsely muttering his name. "Ron-"

He rested his forehead against hers. "You're right. I know that I can't stop you from doing what you want, it wouldn't be fair and I love you too much to hold you back from your goals. If Italy is where you want to go then I can't stop you. All that I can do is hope that you will reconsider." Because she was going to a place he couldn't follow. After all, Puddlemere United had already made him an offer to play.

"Ron, please don't make this any harder than it has to be." She begged, seconds from tears. She didn't want to leave, she didn't want to leave him, but he wouldn't understand. "I really don't want to talk about it right now. Venice is an amazing opportunity for me, I've considered and thought it over and I'm saying yes. I'm utterly exhausted right now and I'm not changing my mind."

He sighed and released her, leaving her suddenly cool.

It looked like it took him a lot to leave the topic alone and she loved him more for it.

Silently, Hermione thanked him. "It's been a long six weeks in Australia-"

It was like Ron was on a mission to converse to get his mind off everything. "Did you find your parents?"

After clearing her throat, Hermione prayed her broken voice wouldn't betray her. "Yes. I did."

He made hand motions as if he wanted her to elaborate and when she didn't he took the liberty, running off at the mouth for what seemed like forever. "Well, where are they? How are they? How did it go?"

She chose her words carefully. "They're still in Australia, and they're fine. They seem to be at peace with everything."

Ron didn't notice just how vague she'd been. "That's great news, Hermione. I know you were worried that they would be upset with you about the whole 'Memory Charm' thing."

The clock chimed and Hermione took a deep breath, turning to her soon-to-be ex-boyfriend. She rested her hand on his shoulder and looked him straight in the eyes, "Ron, there's something I need to do and it's probably one of the hardest things I've ever done in my life, but it has to be done..."

By Day Thirteen, Hermione had finally figured it out.

Being at home had given her too much time to think about everything that she'd told Malfoy on the roof that day, and about all the things she hadn't told anyone.

Her thoughts wandered.

Pansy stared at her as she held open the door. "Do you think you can do this on your own?"

Shrugging, Hermione walked out on the sidewalk and inhaled the Australian air. It was beautiful here. It was a pity she didn't get to enjoy it because she'd spent every waking moment looking for her parents. In a flash, Pansy was right next to her. "I'm not sure," was her truthful reply.

"You don't have to do this alone. There are other choices, like telling the father."

"The war made a mess of everything, and I can't make a mess of him, too. We've been through too much together. He'll want to marry me out of duty and then what? We'll grow old together? No, somewhere in the crevices of my mind, I'll blame him. I'll blame him and this baby for missed opportunities. I don't think I can live with that."

"What about you and your dreams?"

"Who says my dreams will be stopped by this?"

"It's a baby, Hermione-

"Who says I'm keeping the baby?"

Pansy gasped.

"This is something I have do on my own, no Ron, no Harry, nobody else—"

She took Hermione's hand in hers. "I won't let you do this on your own... you have me."

Yesterday, Day Fourteen, Hermione had thought that she was literally going mad from thinking so much.

"I'm sorry Miss Granger, there's nothing we can do."

She was hysterical. "What do you mean nothing? You can do something."

"No, we can't. He's too weak to fight off anything."

"You're giving up?"

"No, of course not, but you need to start making arrangements, just in case..."

In the previous days, Hermione had cried, smashed dishes in anger, rocked back and forth on the floor, sat outside on her patio and stared out at the lake behind her house until she couldn't see two inches in front of her face, and then she had continued to sit out there, even though she had been freezing cold.

Funny how the cold couldn't numb her more than she already was.

It was 4:38 PM on *Day Fourteen* when Hermione Granger reached her breaking point.

The entire conversation with Ginny had left her cold inside. The second she'd turned on her heels and left without another word, an incredible layer of guilt had settled on her spirit. It had been a weight that was impossibly heavy to carry; a burden that needed its release.

Despite Malfoy's, "*She deserved every word of that,*" which left her a bit unsettled for the rest of the day, Hermione had known better than to listen to Draco Malfoy.

Ginny, though her reasons for approaching Hermione were shoddy at best, hadn't deserved her anger. Ginny had every reason to be angry with her. Ron had been devastated to speechlessness when she'd broken up with him. It had taken everything in her not to take it all back and throw her arms around him. It had taken everything not to tell him that she loved him, that she always would. It had taken everything not to tell him the real reason why she was leaving him. It had taken everything within her to not look back when she'd walked out of his life.

But she hadn't.

She'd broken his heart and left him standing in the middle of the drawing room, wondering just where he had gone wrong. If there was anything that she regretted more, it was that - it was him. It was what she did to him.

He hadn't deserved to be hurt by her. None of them had. Hermione had known that she couldn't change what had happened, but she could at least start the process. She was tired of the war between them, tired of the rumours, and tired of them not knowing the truth.

There was no reason to hide it anymore; the truth was...dead.

So she'd swallowed her pride, pulled out a piece of parchment, found her favourite quill, and spent the rest of *Day Fourteen* drafting a letter to Molly Weasley. After all, it had seemed like the appropriate place to start in her quest for redemption. Harry, Ginny, and Ron were too hard; the wounds between them were too deep.

Mrs. Weasley was, after all, the last Weasley that she'd spoken to before she left five years before.

"*Hermione, dear?*" Mrs. Weasley's voice was soft as she approached the crying girl from behind, "*Is everything all right?*"

"*No. It's hopeless. It's all hopeless.*"

She tried to comfort her. "Maybe-"

"I broke up with Ron. I'm moving to Italy."

Mrs. Weasley gasped. "But why?"

"I can't...I can't tell you, but I'm so sorry."

"You have nothing to apologise for-"

"If only you knew..."

"I know that you may feel that way, but it's not the case."

"But-"

"Don't hesitate to write me, okay? Just to let me know how things are going for you...and if you need any advice, I'm just a Fire call away." Hermione nodded, but doubted the invitation would stand for long.

The letter of apology to Mrs. Weasley didn't include just an apology for her lack of communication over the years, but an apology for Ron, for the way she left, for all the pain and suffering she'd caused them all. Hermione didn't ask for forgiveness; she didn't want it. Even after all that time, there was nothing, *nothing* that she would take back.

No, she only asked that she read her letter with an open mind and heart.

But what had happened next that had made her realise that taking the high road was rough. Perhaps seeking redemption wasn't worth the pain that it had caused. Today, *Day Fifteen*, the last day of her house arrest, Hermione's letter was returned—unopened.

It felt like the biggest slap in the face she'd ever received.

For the last three hours Hermione had stared at the letter on the coffee table as she cried. She cried until she could no longer speak. She cried until she could no longer see the neatly printed 'Mrs. Weasley' written on the cream-coloured envelope. What the hell was she thinking?

Opening the lines of communication was a desperate move on her part.

More than anything, she was sick and tired of being miserable. Hermione had lost her humanity, determination, and will to keep living the way that she was. The problem was that

there was no escaping that life, because it was one of her creation. She couldn't escape, not without some sort of forgiveness from a source that would immediately reject her.

It was mission impossible and it was all her fault.

Pain. The pain from the truth, pain from her sorrow, and pain from Mrs. Weasley's obvious sign of rejection hurt more than shattered body parts ever had.

Pain was such a strange concept to someone who had never felt it, someone who didn't know what it actually meant. It was odd to the naïve and the lucky ones who couldn't feel it. The word, when said to them, probably brought the obvious type of pain to mind: physical. The kind of pain that drew blood and left bruises; the kind of pain that left marks on the body to prove it had been marred. Sometimes it left scars and sometimes those scars healed and disappeared, forgotten.

But Hermione, who had experienced more physical pain than most, never forgot.

She remembered every mark, every cut, and every sore.

There was no way she ever could forget.

But physical pain wasn't the worst, not even close. There was another type of pain: emotional pain; the one and only aspect of pain many couldn't, or most likely, didn't *want* to understand. Most didn't think of it the way she did and maybe it was because they'd never experienced it the way she had. Most said that pain was a physical sensation, something you only felt with the body, but not the heart.

And that just wasn't true.

When your heart suffered, your body suffered too. Emotional pain was physical, too; her broken heart was just as physical as her broken arm.

Hermione tossed the unopened letter in the fire and watched through her tears as it burned.

She thought that an apology was like superglue; it could repair anything.

Obviously, she'd thought wrong.

Part Three: Where in the hell are her parents?

November 28th

Draco Malfoy awoke in a familiar bed to the smell of eggs...and bacon.

For a moment, he thought that he was at the Manor and the house elves were bringing him breakfast in bed like they always had every Saturday. He took a deep breath. He definitely wasn't in his bed at the Manor, but rather in his bed in his own house. Buried in a sea of pillows and under a thick comforter, Draco slowly lifted his head to look around.

He sniffed the air again, muttering, "Eggs?" under his breath.

Draco didn't even know that he *owned* eggs; he sure as hell couldn't cook them.

He rolled over and sat straight up in bed. His neck ached, but overall he'd recovered from the previous night. Well, everything except his pride. Throwing the covers back, he winced as the cool air of his house hit his bare chest and decided that he needed a shirt, but it could wait. Once he made the bed, stuffing the sheets in the corners just the way he liked them, Draco yawned and stretched his long body high above his head; a relieved groan escaped his lips when the bones in his back and shoulders popped.

Next, he sought after a shirt, which he found in the dirty clothes hamper in the laundry.

After three failed attempts to figure out the spell to do his laundry magically in between his bi-weekly visits from his housekeeper, Draco made a quick mental note to con Pansy into doing the deed for him and walked back into his master bedroom where he found his wand right where he left it. He brushed his teeth, ignored his hair, and stared at the visible bruises on his neck where his father's hands had been.

With a frown, he sighed. Life went on. He refused to think about his near-death experience.

One problem at a time was all that he could handle, and with a convincing nod, he decided it was time to go handle the intruder.

It wasn't a real intruder anyway.

With all the wards and protection on his house, they had to be friends with him to get inside his house. Still, Draco put on an intimidating sneer and stalked down the steps, wand in hand, still looking dishevelled and slightly bleary-eyed, but no longer shirtless. But what he found, standing in the middle of his kitchen, was a well-dressed Pansy Parkinson with a lecherous grin and a frying pan in her hand.

He didn't know that she *could* scramble eggs, much less boil water. The sight was almost scary.

"Morning sunshine!"

His eyebrow rose gradually as he observed her with a mix of fascination and curiosity.
"And *exactly* what are you doing here?"

Her blue eyes cut from his to the pan, "Isn't it obvious?"

Apparently, Pansy's look went for the modern-day, Muggle Susie homemaker. She wore a quarter-length black shirt and a short, but classy little black skirt that fit her form, accentuating her perfect hips and showing off great, bare and slightly tanned legs. Pansy was

blessed with probably the best legs he'd ever seen on a woman. And the fact that she wore black heels made them look longer, better. She was beautiful. She always had been. During times like these, he wondered why they didn't date—

"When you decide to stop staring at me like you want to tear my clothes off, your breakfast will be waiting for you on the table."

Inwardly, Draco groaned.

Of course, she had to remind him by opening her annoying mouth that he felt nothing but platonic vibes from the woman in question. Well, that and Blaise's threat to kill him in seventy-five different ways if he *dared* to date her. Blaise wasn't possessive over anything like he was over Pansy.

"I wasn't staring at you because I wanted to tear your clothes off, gods forbid *that* shit ever happens," he countered with a bit of almost playful malice in his voice. "I was *staring* because I was wondering who the hell Polyjuiced you. The Pansy I know can't even boil water without magic."

She glared and it was cold and nasty and made her look like a pug before the corners of her lips slowly curled into an evil, but pretty smirk. "You're right," Pansy remarked in a cool drawl, "I had a house elf come in here and cook. Merlin forbid I waste my time on something as silly as cooking, I'll leave that to Hermione," she informed before dropping the pan into the sink as if it were burning her hand and made an unpleasant face.

A house elf stood by the table when they walked into the dining room together.

"Binky," she addressed, "I'm sure that Draco has some laundry that needs tending. Can you and Doxy please go handle it, and clean up a little?"

The house elf nodded and, with a snap of his fingers, disappeared to follow orders.

Draco only smiled at her as she removed the apron and took a seat at the table, crossing her legs as she elegantly picked up her coffee mug and took a quiet sip from it. No slurping, because she was poised like that. She then gestured to his plate of steaming food with a flip of her wrist. "Sit. Eat."

It sounded like a command, but he did it anyway.

He was about halfway finished eating and a quarter finished with his coffee laced with a pain potion - just in case - when Pansy asked. "Blaise came by last night. I'd only been back for an hour and was about to go to Hermione's, but he was upset and was chain-smoking. My living room now smells like cigarettes now. I had to lace his drink with Dreamless Draught to get him to go to sleep. What the hell happened last night - and what the hell is that on your neck?"

Draco snorted in his coffee mug and set it down, explaining everything that happened, as much as it pained him. When he finished, Pansy looked worried. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he assured thinly, patting her manicured hand.

"You know if there's anything I can do—"

"Know any Glamour charms?"

Pansy smiled. "Of course, I do."

There were a lot of things he loved about Pansy Parkinson.

The first was her unfailing loyalty. Draco had known Pansy since before he could remember; their mothers were good friends and openly fostered hopes that the two would grow up and marry each other. Obviously, with the war and everything, *that* hadn't happened and he was pretty damn sure that it never would. Now that he thought about it, he could laugh aloud at the idea of him and Pansy getting married; they would murder each other in the first day.

Scratch that, the first *hour*.

Pansy was beautiful, but he wouldn't marry her, much less date her for all the Galleons in the universe. Even though she was self-confident and quick to curse him out if he acted like a git, when it boiled down to it, Pansy was bred to look and behave as the perfect pure-blooded bride: dutiful to the point of being submissive, loyal to their family's honour, and amazing at saving face during hard times. Her breeding had become painfully obvious whenever they were around her surviving family members.

Definitely not what he was looking for. Not at all.

Honestly, Draco didn't fully know what he was looking for in a wife, much less a companion. He had no real time for that aspect of his life. Sure, he had dated a multitude of women, but only to keep up appearances. He hadn't care for any of them, and hadn't bothered to get to know them, either. They eventually had served their purposes, and left. He didn't care. They weren't what he wanted.

But what *did* he want?

After thinking about it, Draco knew he wanted someone intelligent enough to hold her end of a conversation, someone independent that spoke their mind freely. Other than that, he didn't know, but above all else there had to be a spark.

No matter how stunning Pansy looked in heels, there definitely wasn't a spark.

But he'd gained something more important than a wife from his relationship with Pansy. He had a loyal friend; one who looked after him and kept his best interest at heart; one that would never damage or deceive him in any way. She was a friend who would kill, yes *kill*, anyone who tried. As with Granger, Pansy was fiercely protective of him, almost to the point where it annoyed him to no end, but unlike Granger, Draco's trust in her stretched out to the boundaries of the universe. It was limitless. And the loyalty she had to him was reciprocal.

He would kill anyone who hurt one black hair on her pretty little head and deep down it pained him that someone had. That man was lucky that Granger had killed him because what

he would have done had he been the one to find her - it would've been infinitely worse.

"So," Pansy, fresh from using a Glamour charm to cover his bruises, leaned over and stole a piece of his bacon. "What are you doing today?" she asked with her hand politely covering her mouth as she chewed.

Draco glared. "Working on the Marquette case."

"You work too much."

With a shrug, he confided. "Keeps my mind off things."

"You need to get out, Draco, and I have the perfect plan. I'm going to Hermione's..."

Draco's thoughts about the previous night had shattered the moment Pansy said her name.

"She's been alone since she left the hospital and she seemed rather down in her letter. I want to make up my absence by taking her out to dinner tomorrow."

If he was going to be honest with himself, Draco would admit that she'd been on his mind more than usual as of late, but didn't know why. He could easily blame it on Mother who wouldn't stop talking about her, the job where he just finished Operation Cover-up, Blaise who asked about her the previous night before the fiasco occurred, or his memories from their rooftop conversation.

But he didn't.

Honesty, although highly overrated, was probably necessary in the case of Hermione Granger. So, yes, he thought of her, not constantly, but a few times when his mind wandered or someone brought her up.

Like right then.

She was a wonderful distraction from his problems. Unlocking the mysteries to Granger's fucked up life was a good distraction from his personal domestic hell.

But everything that he'd learned about Granger's life thus far had the opposite reaction from what he expected. While he expected her story to interest him to no end, Draco didn't expect the things she'd overcome in her own life to make him respect her. He didn't expect it to make him think more about his own life. Of course, it hadn't waned his curiosity about why 'The Golden Trio' had fallen apart. In fact, his curiosity had swelled to capacity after their rooftop conversation and her argument with the Weasley girl. He was intrigued, almost to the point where it consumed his thoughts when he was bored or when he had free time.

There were a lot of pieces to fit together, and he wanted to make sure it was right.

But there were some major loopholes that needed to get filled:

Like why she was Australia in the first place. Why did she leave the Weasel if she (gag!) loved him? He knew it was out of desperation, but what would make her so desperate that

she'd leave the country? Why did the She-Weasel and Granger not get along? He'd picked up little hints, like how it was the She Weasel's goal to keep Granger and Potter apart? But why? Granger was all Potter had in his pocket at school; the whole world knew that she'd saved his arse on *plenty* of occasions with her vast knowledge and repertoire of spells. Why was Pansy the only person who knew why Granger left London?

He had more questions than answers.

And what made Pansy visit Granger nine-no *ten* months ago? That little faux pas on Pansy's part plagued his thoughts, but he figured it was something he'd have to wait to get answered; there were more important potholes to fill. For example: the question that ran through his head constantly.

Where the *hell* were her parents in the whole ordeal?

He obviously knew very little about Granger and what he thought he knew was very far off base, but Draco figured that she loved her parents. She just seemed like the type that would do any and everything to protect her family; she was a lot like him in that sense. It seemed rather odd that she didn't talk about them, at all. But it was stranger that not once had he seen them, not even after her stint in the hospital following the Marquette incident.

There wasn't a story about them in the paper so he knew they were alive.

All those unanswered questions left his head in a fog, but it kept his mind off the pain in his neck.

"Draco?" Pansy's concerned voice snapped him from his thoughts, "Are you okay? You blanked out there."

He pasted a fake smile on his face. "I was thinking about the case," He lied with ease, "You were saying?"

After giving him a funny look, she pressed on. "I was thinking about taking Hermione out for dinner tomorrow to celebrate the end of her medical house arrest and I wanted to know if you wanted to come - it's my treat," she grinned.

Casually, he asked, "Is Blaise coming?" He didn't want to sit with a quiet, defensive Granger and a chatty Pansy without Blaise.

"Yes. We're, well," she stammered and blushed a bit, "We've decided to start trying to fix us. I'm ready to get on with my life."

Draco smirked at that bit of news. "It's about time."

Pansy smiled giddily, "It is, isn't it?" and she finished her tea, "So, will you come?"

"Fine," he ate a slice of bacon, chewing thoughtfully before speaking: "I have a question."

"And perhaps I have an answer," was her smart-assed response.

"Ha, ha, you're a riot, Pansy," Draco deadpanned and drank from his mug. "I was wondering how long you've known Granger."

Pansy regarded him with a rather odd look. "I've 'known' her since we were eleven."

His face twisted into a tame version of a sneer. "I mean, when you actually started treating her like a human being."

There was a change in her; he'd seen the shift every time they discussed something serious. The haughtiness was gone, the playfulness was gone, and before him sat a serious-looking Pansy Parkinson. She sipped her tea and stared at the table for a full minute before answering, "She came to my father's burial." Her voice was barely above a whisper.

Granger was at the burial? He hadn't seen her.

Pansy shut her eyes as if she were trying to remember the day and even after five years it made her miserable when she thought about it, "She stood several feet away, on the left by some huge oak tree. I just so happened to glance in her direction as they lowered him in the ground, she gave me a little nod, turned and walked away." She opened her eyes and smirked sadly at the memory, "She didn't have to come, she probably wouldn't have been welcomed by some of my older, more prejudiced family members, but she did. That took guts, and it showed me that she cared. And then I saw her on the flight—"

"To Australia?"

"Yes. My seat was right next to hers and started talking."

"Why was she going to Australia?"

The witch looked uncomfortable with his questions all of a sudden. "Why do you care?"

Draco replied flippantly, "I'm just curious."

There was a long pause and he knew she was trying to figure out just what she could say, "She was there to find her parents."

"Find her parents?" Draco drank more coffee, eyebrow raised.

A small sigh escaped her lips. "I shouldn't tell you this. Merlin, she'd kill me if she knew I told you, but Hermione altered her parents' memories sent them to Australia to save them after Sixth Year, just in case Death Eaters decided to attack them. She went to Australia to find them, to reverse the memory charm and bring them back to London."

He nearly spewed coffee everywhere as it all came together in his head.

The prominent question in his head was finally answered, "They're dead, aren't they?"

Pansy's gasp was all the answer that he needed. "But how did you—"

"She doesn't talk about them, *they're* not her next of kin, *you are*." He replied grimly. "Either her parents hate her, which I doubt." Draco sighed. "Or they're dead."

A long silence fell between them before she finally sighed, "They died."

"How?"

"That, I can't tell you, but I can tell you that September tenth was probably the worst day of her life."

Even though he'd figured it out, Draco was still stunned at the admission, but didn't let it show.

The strange thing was that he hadn't heard about their deaths, not during the year they trounced all over the English countryside and not in the years after the war ended. How did the news of their deaths go over his head? Blaise had acquired her file for him the morning of the Marquette Manor incident, but it had taken another week for that file to reach his hands. The sad thing was he didn't find anything particularly interesting, to his frustration. In fact, Hermione Granger's file was impeccable—oddly so.

Draco's brow rose at the memory.

It included basic information about her: full name, where she was born, address prior to her move, birthday, parents' names, age, height, approximate weight, O.W.L and N.E.W.T results (she'd done phenomenal, as expected), a few awards and honours bestowed to her before and after the war, etc.

There were three articles: one was about her departure to Italy after the war. The second was about how she'd risen to the ranks of one of the most elite female Curse-breakers in Europe. The third was a vague exposé the Italian wizarding paper wrote about her (he spent hours trying to translate it, gave up, and asked Blaise for help, much to his best friend's confusion) that included nothing about her home life both before and after her move to Italy, which made him more curious, if that was possible. Nowhere did it mention her parents' deaths—or even the fact that they existed, which he knew they did. He'd seen them before Second Year. Surely The Daily Prophet would've printed up *something* about it if they knew—which meant one thing.

They didn't.

No one knew except Pansy—and him.

Draco drank the last of his coffee, "Why didn't you tell me any of this before?"

Pansy shrugged. "I didn't think you cared."

He was pensive for a moment and then the most alarming thought flew through his mind.

She thought that he didn't care?

Well, she'd thought wrong.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Snape's idea of death is a quote from Jean Giraudoux's *Amphitryon 38*.

absolution and blurred lines

Chapter Summary

It was her imperfect catharsis, her release, and the only thing that brought her to her knees.

Chapter Nine

Absolution and Blurred Lines

Part One: What more is there to lose if you've lost it all?

Hermione stared.

Not at anything in particular, she sat on the lounge chair on her patio and stared at the lake and up at grey November sky. It was supposedly cold, but Hermione couldn't feel the chill.

The wind blew her messy hair in her face and she calmly brushed it behind her ears. Her eyes caught the sight of migrating birds, and her mind carried her away. She began to wonder just what her life would be like if she were a bird, but then she snapped out of it. There were pleasant memories in her life, memories she wouldn't trade for the world; memories that she clung to desperately as she stared.

She ruffled his unruly brown hair, softly raking her fingers through it. His hair always felt as soft as it looked and even though he stirred a bit, she couldn't help but touch it one last time before standing. Before she turned to exit the room, her lips curved heavenward, smiling at the sleeping toddler on the bed.

It had been a long day for them both, but it was well worth all the pain they'd endured for so long. The war was finally over and they were victorious. She couldn't believe it. They'd won.

And now she could breathe.

Hermione closed her eyes and listened.

She sat with her eyes shut and her ears open, listening to the world around her. She could hear the wind howling, birds squawking, and branches crackling. Hermione could hear the sounds the parting water as birds skimmed the surface on their quest for food. She even heard the sound of her own heartbeat.

But more than anything she heard the hate in Ron's voice the night of their fight...the night that she left.

"Don't you see what you're doing to me?" Ron's voice cracked.

"I'm sorry," her shoulders shook as she sobbed. "I hope that one day you forgive me. I hope that one day you'll understand that my intention wasn't to hurt you...never to hurt you."

And she used the rest of the strength in her body to Apparate from the room.

Destination, determination, and deliberation.

Sometimes, Hermione wished she were deaf. Then she wouldn't hear the rumours that surrounded her name or the things that people whispered when they thought she wasn't listening.

If she were deaf, she wouldn't hear the agony in his voice.

"But, I-I love you, Hermione," he sounded panicked, anguished tears filling his eyes.

"I'm sorry."

"After everything we've been through, you can't just say that, Hermione."

"I can—and I just did."

And Hermione longed.

She sat in her chair with her eyes opened and ears firmly shut. Realism be damned, she longed for comfort; for someone to tell her that everything would be fine. No matter how many times she said it in her head, she didn't believe her own words. She longed for peace, for a shoulder to lean on, a hand to hold. She didn't *care* where it came from or what the stipulations were; she would *pay* for company at this point.

Hermione wanted something better. For the day when everything would finally even out and breathing wouldn't hurt so much.

Sunset was already underway when she arrived with a bouquet of flowers and one heavy heart.

The private service was held earlier that day and she couldn't bring herself to cry in front of the three others who stood at her side, dressed in all black. She held her tears as she stood over the casket and peered down; he didn't look dead, just sleeping. She kept control over her voice as she gave the eulogy to the small audience; when the nanny asked to speak, Hermione kindly refused.

No one knew him like she did. No one.

Hermione sat in silence during the ride to the cemetery, staring out the window and fighting the urge not to hex the Muggle driver who tried to cheer her up. Her life was over. Her pride

and joy for the last four years was dead and he wanted to tell jokes. It was all she could do not to break.

She stood there as the priest spoke the famous lines, "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust..." She kissed the mahogany casket gently after resting her rose on top of the casket, muttering, "I miss you already."

And she held it together as she walked away.

But she was back. Hours later, she sat at his headstone. Her fingers traced the markings on the headstone. Matthew Granger. Named after her father. The dirt was still loose and if she closed her eyes hard enough, she could still hear him, could still feel him, but hearing and feeling didn't ease the heartache that she felt.

Nothing could.

More than anything, she wanted them all back: her parents and her son. She wanted everything to be back to normal, and not to be alone. She wanted to know that death wasn't the end, and there was something more out there. She wanted to know if they all knew just how sorry she was, and if their souls were at peace. She wanted to know if she had a reason to live past that hour, that minute, or that second. She wanted to know if her heart would ever ache as bad as it did at that moment.

But the moment of fanciful thinking and wanting had come and gone, leaving darkness in its wake.

The only sounds that could be heard in the cemetery as the sun sank below the horizon were the sobs of a hopeless woman who had everything.

And the memory made Hermione ache.

She ached so badly that her head spun. She ached because she knew the truth. She ached because she'd lost so much in her short life. She'd lost her parents, her friends, her identity, her home, and her son. It was all too much of a burden to carry alone.

She felt as if she were destined to be hated by everyone for the lies that she'd told; to be pitied and to feel alone and hollow. Every harsh action and condescending look was a cut right through her; another wound to hide behind her silence. It was hard. It was getting increasingly harder to hide that kind of pain now that she was back.

"Are you all right?" Pansy asked once they sat down at her table.

Hermione looked down, still horribly embarrassed. "About as well as I can expect to be."

"Don't let Potter get to you. He doesn't know...none of them do."

"And it's nobody's fault except my own."

She started to scream - silently.

Her eyes filled with tears as her head spun. She screamed inside for someone to hear her, but no one could. Hermione had been screaming so loud for so long that she didn't think she could do it anymore. She wanted to be heard, needed to know that someone was listening, and that someone cared. Yes, she was asking for help, screaming for it, but she was screaming silently because she knew better than to do it aloud.

"If you stay like this, Hermione, you'll lose your mind."

She stared at the blank wall, not blinking. She clutched the picture frame to her chest as if it was the most important possession she owned. And it was. "Lose my mind? Do you think I care about my mind?"

Her voice was pleading. "Her—"

"What more is there to lose if you've lost it all?"

Hermione's eyes filled with tears and she started crying.

She sobbed because she knew no one would hear her, because the pain she felt was so intense that sometimes it made her want to drop dead. The grief she felt, no words could express it. So many tears she'd wasted; so many soft and loud sobs that nobody knew about. It was her imperfect catharsis, her release, and the only thing that brought her to her knees. Hermione needed to cry. It was the only proof she had that she was still real.

"You've been a walking zombie for days, my therapist—"

"I don't care about your therapist," she snapped bitterly.

"Hermione," she sighed.

"Pansy," Hermione mocked, but there was a hollow edge in her voice.

"You can't live life like this. You can't live life holding on to everything. Not once have you cried, Hermione. Not once. I cry about the people I've lost all the time, it makes—"

Hermione tuned her out.

At night, Hermione prayed.

She wasn't quite sure how, but she opened her mouth and prayed for someone to finally give her their hand and pull her out of the hell she lived in. It was the only thing that she prayed for when her eyes were closed tight and tears spilled from them.

Hermione wanted someone to teach her how to feel again.

She wanted redemption and forgiveness so she could forgive herself and release some of the guilt she held on to for so long. She wanted to sleep decently at night. She wanted compassion and understanding, she wanted to smile at her past and not weep from it, she wanted to be honest with everyone including herself, and she wanted to feel all the things and all the emotions she'd forgotten along the way.

Yes, then she would be fine.

Then, she could look back on her past and not be haunted.

She could have the peace she longed for. Just the thought of having that kind of peace filled her up and made her feel more hopeful than she had felt in weeks.

"Now, I wonder just where that cute, little Matthew boy has run off to?" Hermione asked her 'empty' room rather loudly as she placed her hands on her hips. She knew he loved it when she put on the dramatics and she loved it, too. She'd told him after their breakfast of chocolate chip pancakes - a Saturday morning delicacy - that they needed to get dressed to go to the doctor for his treatment.

As always, he was a bit reluctant.

Hermione had turned her back once and when she turned around, he was gone, and she knew just where he was. Playing, she figured, was Matthew's way of getting his anxiety out before their trip to the doctor. It was better than the tantrums that he'd had last year.

There was a little squeak from under the covers in her unmade bed.

Innocently, she asked the room. "Is he in the closet?" She peeked into the closet. "No, he's not. I wonder where he is," she said in a sing-song voice.

Another squeak.

Smiling, she crept across the room towards the bed. "Is he under the bed?" Hermione dropped to her knees and peeked under the bed, "No, he's not there either. Oh, where is he?" she sighed dramatically.

Hermione tried not to laugh at the three-year-old's muffled giggle as he wiggled around under the cover. He was horrible at anything that involved hiding. He was a constant bundle of energy, so much so that he could hardly remain still and quiet for very long. Well, except for the first days following his treatments, but afterwards he was right back to normal.

She shook her head, still trying with all her might not to chuckle at his attempt at remaining still.

"Is he in the drawer?" she didn't have to even reach for it because the little boy in question popped out the covers; sparkling eyes, superhero pyjamas, messy hair, sticky fingers, and all.

"Here, mummy, here!" and he jumped into her open arms.

Laughing, Hermione hugged him close, burying her fingers in his hair as he held onto her so tight. She was familiar with his vice grip. He always hated to see her go in the mornings and would bounce off the walls when she came back in the evenings, smothering her with hugs and sticky kisses that she adored. He was her heart, her soul, her pride, her joy, and the reason she lived each day.

He was her everything.

With a jolt, she pulled herself out the chair, feeling better than she had in months and looked at her watch.

12:45 PM.

Hermione ran inside to get dressed.

She was not going to sit around on a day like this.

It was time for a change of scenery.

Part Two: Descriptions of a Stalker

Draco Malfoy just wanted to point out that stalking wasn't a trait typical of a Malfoy, and he was *not* stalking.

Stalking was such a negative way to put something that had happened so innocently. When he thought of stalkers - not that he thought of them often - images of a sinister, deranged, and not to mention, shady character popped in his mind. He was none of those things—except sometimes he really had a shot at being sinister. However, right then, he wasn't. Not even close.

Draco didn't have a good perception of stalkers; the only ones he'd ever seen were in the Muggle movies he'd been forced by Blaise to watch. Stalkers crept around, followed a target, and jumped into the nearest set of bushes only moments before being caught. Stalkers were always dressed in black and clothed in stealth, wore lecherous grins when they spotted their target looking around with the feeling that they were being watched, wrote love letters to their targets and sealed them with a kiss, and often searched their trash for weird things like old underwear and empty bottles of perfume that helped the stalker get to know their victim better.

Okay, so maybe his idea of stalkers was skewed thanks to a fair share of shoddy movies, but there was a point. What he was doing didn't fit into the stalking category.

Following? Maybe – if anyone wanted to be technical.

Watching? Perhaps – but only out of intrigue.

But Draco was *not* stalking. He was merely a people-watcher—and she was his subject.

That didn't sound much better.

Actually, it was due to chance that he had seen Granger in Flourish & Blotts; coincidence and accidents that brought them to the same place at the same time. Beside, he had been there first, so he couldn't be stalking her.

Draco had gone to Diagon Alley for a light lunch with Blaise, only to be stood up because of some emergency meeting at work. Since they were supposedly going to dinner later with Granger and Pansy, he only had dessert, in peace, and casually strolled into Flourish & Blotts to purchase a book for Pansy.

As soon as he stepped into the bookstore, it started raining.

Ten minutes later, *she* walked in out of the rain, looking just as gaunt as before; only now she was wet. Quite a sad sight, actually. Then she opened the box that she held, performed a drying charm on her clothes with her new wand, and suddenly, she didn't look so horrible anymore. He watched her for a moment as she took in the bookstore with a book of her own tucked under her arm.

Draco could've sworn that he'd seen her sigh in relief, like she'd run a marathon and just crossed the finish line. When she glanced in his direction, purely by accident, of course, Draco raised the book he was looking at over his face so Hermione wouldn't see that his eyes were on her. When he'd lowered his book, she had disappeared.

Of course, Draco didn't have a reason as to why he wanted to find her, nor did he know what he was going to say in the event that he was caught, but he launched a mini-quest to find her. It was only after wandering up three aisles, bumping into four witches with curly brown hair, and finally getting directions from a clerk, that Draco found her.

He'd walked past the aisle that she stood in, but saw her bushy hair and backtracked.

She was standing at the other end of the Historical Magic aisle, scanning the rows of books. Draco watched as she reached for a book that was too high. The book that she'd come in with had slipped from her arm, fell on the ground, and popped open. A little picture fell out, and before Granger could reach for it, someone else did.

Mrs. Weasley.

Draco didn't know what the hell he was thinking when he immediately walked down the next aisle, which was the Magical Culinary section; all he knew was that he *had* to hear their conversation.

So, he pretended to look for a book as he listened:

"Oh dear, you dropped some - Hermione?"

Granger sounded faint. "Mrs. Weasley?"

The other woman sounded positively elated. "My goodness! It *is* you! Percy told me you were back in town, and I couldn't believe it! You need to come by the Burrow sometime, you look positively thin, child – I'm going to fatten you right on up. I sent you a letter a few

months back when I found out you were back, but you know Errol, he couldn't find you. He's really getting too old to deliver letters. Arthur and I were just discussing that we probably need to retire him, but he's been in our family for years. I just thought that maybe we'll just keep him for a pet. He's had a long life you know. I really do love him, but nevertheless, I figured that if you wanted to contact me, then you could. I figured you needed some time to settle back into London. As you see, Diagon Alley is back to its original splendour..."

Draco was already weary with the rambling woman.

Granger sounded confused. "But - but I sent you a letter yesterday, and you—"

It was Mrs. Weasley's turn to sound confused. "A letter?"

"Yes," she took a breath. "A letter."

"No, I didn't get a letter from you. Ginny gave me all the letters the owls dropped off. I didn't see your letter. Oh, but what does it matter? I'm seeing you now."

All was quiet for a moment as Draco wondered about the letter and what it had entailed. He knew that if Granger had really sent Mrs. Weasley a letter, the She-Weasel was the reason it never reached her mother. Oh, he was all kinds of intrigued at that realisation.

But of course, the chatty matriarch ended the silence.

"Oh! I forgot to give you back your picture." There was a pause. "Is this—?"

Granger sounded breathless. "Yes, can I have it back?"

Mrs. Weasley sounded as if she were in awe. "Of course, dear. He's just too handsome. What's his name?"

She spoke with great difficulty. "Matthew."

Draco wondered who the hell Matthew was and why Granger said his name as if it caused her so much pain. Probably an old boyfriend, he mused with a roll of his eyes.

"You know, 'Matthew' is English, the Muggles say it means—"

"Gift from God, I know. My father's name was Matthew."

"Well, where is the ador—"

"Molly," the infamously cheerful voice of Mr. Weasley interrupted, "There you are. I was wondering just where you'd gotten - Hermione! Splendid! I was wondering when we'd get the chance to see you! You should come by the Burrow sometime! Molly will make your favourite, chicken and dumplings, won't you, Molly?"

"Of course! We'd love to have you over. I can make sure that it's just the three of us," she paused, "Oh, how I've missed you so." There was a little shuffle and Draco swore the woman hugged Granger, but couldn't see it for himself.

Granger sounded so uncomfortable. "I'll - I'll see if I can. It's terribly busy work schedule, you know." He knew that she was lying, but the Weasley couple didn't.

"Just send me a message whenever you get the chance, okay? I don't want another five years to go by without seeing you..." her voice lowered and filled with emotions, "I know that you aren't on terms with Harry, Ron, and Ginny, but I'm not part of the war between you four. I'm neutral." she assured. "I've always thought of you as one of my own, Hermione. And if you want to talk to me about Matthew, or anything else, you can. I'll always be here for you. Just remember that, Hermione, okay?"

There was a small gasp, but when Granger spoke, he knew she was close to tears. "I w-will, thank you so much."

He knew Mrs. Weasley was hugging her, again, when he heard her comforting voice, "Oh, there, there, now, don't cry - there's nothing to be sad over. This is a reunion."

"I'm not sad," was Granger's muffled response. "I'm so relieved that you don't h-hate me."

"I could never hate you, Hermione, never. I think I'm beginning to understand why you left, and I just want you to know that it's not your fault. You did what you had to do for yourself and your own. I only wished that you would've let us been a part of it, but I don't hate you—not for a minute. Never."

Silent moments fell over them where Draco listened to Hermione's broken sobs with an odd feeling in his chest.

"Molly," it was the concerned voice of her husband.

"I'll meet you outside in a few, dear."

Draco briefly saw Mr. Weasley walk by his aisle, but his head was cluttered with thoughts and his chest, well, it felt funny. Matthew, whoever the bloke was, had destroyed Granger; that much he knew. But he was still confused. Granger didn't seem like the type to get broken up over a man. She was rational, always had been. It was reason before emotion.

What had made her change?

Something told him to walk away, but he knew the truth. He was in too deep to stop himself.

The investigation, which had started under the premise of curiosity, had taken a life of its own. In that moment, he'd realised that this was more than curiosity and more than a distraction from his own problems. It had morphed into him actually *caring*. About what? He wasn't sure.

He didn't know a lot of things anymore.

Draco rubbed his temples.

Granger's problems really had a way of putting his own with his father into perspective. He'd internalised a lot when it came to his father, but there was no way he'd be able to suppress as

much as she had. It just wasn't possible. Granger was as much of a ticking time bomb as she was the puzzle that he was putting together at great and personal difficulty.

And what would happen once he finally put all the pieces together?

Draco hadn't thought that far ahead. It seemed eons away.

He pulled himself out of his inner soliloquy, and was met with silence. That was odd.

Draco removed a rather large book from the shelf he'd been staring at, hoping he'd see through to the other side. And he did. No one was there. Well, that was rather—

"Malfoy?"

Busted.

Draco had tried to remain suave and graceful, but he'd nearly leapt out of his skin at the sound of Granger's voice. Ungracefully, the book slipped from his hand and hit the floor with a resounding thud. Quickly, he snatched it up, and shoved it in the spot from which he'd taken it.

It was time to get out of this situation.

It had only taken him ten seconds to think of a hundred and twelve lies that he could tell her.

That was enough.

Finally, his eyes slid in her direction. "Granger," he greeted and allowed his eyes to meet hers. And of course they were narrowed in suspicion, but also red from shed tears. He had been right. Other than that, Draco couldn't tell that anything was wrong. Expertly, he hid the nervousness in his voice. "I'm not surprised to see you here. You're still a creature of habit."

"It's true," her voice was defensive and much stronger than he ever expected from someone who'd just cried her heart out minutes before. "I *am* a creature of habit, and maybe that explains why *I'm* here. You, on the other hand, well—I confess that I'm a bit surprised for a lot of reasons. I didn't know that Malfoys were interested in honing their culinary skills, but then again, I didn't know that they stalked, either. Must be a new thing that you're implicating in the Malfoy doctrine, yes?"

He refused to let his face betray him. "I wasn't stalking."

"*Right,*" she tucked the book into her beaded purse as she rolled her eyes. He noticed there was a picture in her hand, and concluded that it must've been the picture that she'd dropped. "Following me around Flourish & Blotts and listening to my conversation aren't two clues that I'm being stalked. Forgive me for my grievance."

"You're forgiven." Draco replied arrogantly, hiding the fact that he was annoyed with her snappish behaviour.

"How much did you hear?"

"Not much," he replied flippantly.

Granger's eyes narrowed. "You're lying."

A blond brow rose just a bit. "I guess you'd know all about that, huh?"

"I don't know what you're talking about, Malfoy."

She must've really thought that he was some idiot savant like those Weasleys. He knew damn well when he was being lied to. Well, he'd show her. All plans for an exchange and a quick exit were gone, and it was replaced with the urge to banter her into telling him the truth about her tears, about the Weasleys, and about Matthew. She wanted to play rough.

Two could play at that game.

"Your eyes are red, Granger, have you been *crying*?" he questioned with a half-sneer on his face.

Her eyes narrowed until they looked like two slits.

"Don't bother lying," he frowned distastefully. "I *heard* you."

Her features changed, morphed into something else. Slightly wide eyes, silly cast, shaky wand hand, shifty eyes, tense body—Granger was nervous in his presence and not good at hiding it.

Draco tried not to smile at his small triumph, but inside he was doing a victory dance.

Granger tried to slip past him on the right, but he was faster, and blocked her way. With a huff, she tried on the left, but he blocked her, again. She didn't think to turn around, but he was ready for the moment that she did. He found it funny how the tables had turned on her. She'd caught him, and now, she couldn't get away. Apparently, the irony of the situation dawned on her. Draco watched as a wide array of emotions washed over her face before she barricaded herself back up.

Almost defiantly, she raised her eyes to his. They were still so empty, but her voice was harsher than expected, "What do you want, Malfoy?"

"Just to talk."

"Last I checked, we didn't have anything to discuss."

Granger tried to slide past him again, but he was ready for her. "We have *plenty* to discuss—like why you were crying on Mrs. Weasley's shoulder."

"That's none of your business."

"Well, I'm making it my business."

She was getting frustrated, he could tell. "What do you want from me?"

"I told you. *Conversation*. I can see why you're so apprehensive to discuss your tears, so let's start by discussing that picture in your hand."

Her eyes widened then narrowed defensively. "Nothing."

Draco was angered by her lying and her presumption that he was too wrapped up in himself not to see right through her. "Well—"

She glared up at him boldly, "Your mother always said that you were too nosy for your own good."

Draco looked dead in her eyes. His next words weren't spoken maliciously, but rather indifference, and they were out before he could stop them. "Well, at least I *have* a mother."

It seemed that time stood still as they both reeled from his words.

He could safely say that he'd known that he'd made a grave mistake the moment they had come out. Whatever progress he'd unconsciously made with Granger was gone. For the first time, he felt horrible for something that he'd said, even if he hadn't meant it. Draco opened his mouth to say something, but he found that he couldn't.

What little colour left in Granger's face had drained. The visual confirmation that Draco struck gold and hit a sore spot with his words was shown the instant he saw tears build behind her eyes. They coursed down her cheeks, built under her chin, and dropped onto her navy shirt.

Draco had won.

He won a game she didn't even know she was playing.

But at what cost?

She'd gone from dreadfully pale and silent to openly crying. Draco paled at the sight. He wanted to take his words back, and the miserable sob that escaped from the back of her throat made it all the worse for him. Without further thought, Draco grabbed her arm and Apparated her to an alley outside the Leaky Cauldron before she could protest.

Part Three: Famous last words

To say that Malfoy had hit a sore spot would've been the understatement of the century.

Hermione had tried. She really had tried her best to hide behind a blank face, but she couldn't. The barrage of emotions and realisation had collided with her at full force.

He knew.

He knew about her parents, but how?

Only a handful knew the truth about their deaths; not even the new and improved 'Golden Trio' had known, and Hermione wanted it that way. She didn't need anyone's pity, and she didn't need to see her parent's faces splashed across the front page of The Daily Prophet. She didn't need anyone diving into her life, trying to figure out what she did to her parents and why they were in Australia. No, she'd done what was best for her own sanity and her parent's memory and kept it a secret, kept her loss bottled up.

During the days following her parents' death, she and Pansy had Obliviated quite a few Australians and had them buried them in plots number 17834 and 17835, under the names Wilkins. She then purged them from her Ministry file the moment she returned to London.

After all, she had no parents.

Now, all her hard work didn't even matter, Malfoy knew the truth, and he was going to shout it from the rooftops. He would hurt her worse than she already was, if that was possible. And why? Because that was the type of person he was. But Hermione had always prided herself with being reasonable with her emotions. No matter how many times her feelings had been hurt, and no matter how many times she'd been humiliated, insulted, scrutinized, or even talked about, she always managed to keep control over them because deep down, no matter what, she was still a reasonable woman.

Not just any stupid thing made her cry.

But there was just something about his words, the coldness and detachment in them that really got to that sore spot. Something that made her spiral down from the high that she was on from her talk with Mrs. Weasley to an all-time low; something that moved her to cry tears she swore she would never cry in front of him. Hermione wasn't stupid; she knew Malfoy's words weren't spoken in malice, but in indifference.

Hermione would rather have his cruelty over his apathy any day.

It served as an example of why she kept everyone at a distance. Another reason she constructed those fortified walls Pansy criticized her for. Evidence that no one really gave a damn about anything other than themselves and the destruction of others.

That truth had broken her heart, and before she'd lost it completely, she had felt that familiar pull of Apparition. The unexpected side-along had made her stumble and drop to her hands and knees on the cold, wet ground.

And right there, wherever the hell she was, Hermione lost it.

She wasn't one to show her tears to anyone, but she didn't care. She was hurting and dammit, she was going to cry, because that's what real people did when they'd been wounded. She didn't give a shit if Malfoy was present for her downfall or if he watched her cry with a smug look on his face because he thought he'd finally broken her.

Well, he'd thought wrong.

She was broken long before he got there. So she let herself cry for her parents, for her own corruption, for her dead son, and for all the things she hid; her warm tears rained on the already wet and cold pavement. But she didn't let herself cry forever. No. She was stronger than that, stronger than drowning in tears, stronger than letting Malfoy beat her down verbally.

It took a few minutes, but Hermione collected herself, though just barely. She moved to a sitting position, drawing her knees to her chest, and resting her head on them for support. She rested her casted arm on her stomach and held the picture in her grip. Hermione wanted to open it and remind herself of happier times, but she couldn't. The only support she was going to get right then was from herself—and that hurt more than she ever expected.

More than ever before, she'd just about *had it* with life.

They could have hers back. It fucking sucked, and she was through fighting for it. She was sick and tired of living a life where everything hurt. She was sick and tired of being sad all the time; it was draining and she had nothing left to give. The pain she was in had become part of the fabric of who she was as a person.

First Harry's abandonment, then Ginny's behaviour, and now Malfoy's cruelty - should she be looking around corners for Ron?

She just couldn't take it anymore.

All that hope she felt when she got dressed that morning was gone; all the happiness she felt while she was in Mrs. Weasley's arms had vanished. It was all replaced with the harrowing temptation to just stop; to just give up...

Hermione was so deep in her own pain that she'd almost forgotten that Malfoy was there until he spoke in a voice that did little to hide his unease, "Granger, look, I—"

"Don't," she interrupted darkly, not looking up at him. "Don't you say another *word* to me, Malfoy. Don't say another goddamn word, not about me, my parents—not about anything."

Of course, he didn't listen. "Look—"

She glared up at him and let every ounce of misery she felt show. "Congratulations, Malfoy! Twenty points to Slytherin for putting me in my place! Good job!"

He looked slightly taken aback from her words.

The anger and hate rose in her chest as tears continued to spill from her eyes. "Why are you still here? You've won! You've gotten your prize. Go tell all your little friends at The Daily Prophet about how the Mudblood lost her parents. Tell them that she is the reason they're dead!"

His next words were very sombre and low; the tone made his voice almost sound like rolling thunder. "Listen to me, and don't speak. If I was going to tell anyone, Granger—which

I'm *not*—I would've done it already."

She should've been elated, she should've asked him how, and she should've cursed him, but all she could do was stare at the ground. All she could feel was smouldering anger and pain. "You're cruel, Malfoy. You only enjoy the misery of others." Hermione stood to her feet, ready to storm off or maybe Apparate back home.

"Maybe at sixteen, yes, but not now. What I said...was in poor taste. You're already sad enough—"

Hermione felt like she'd been slapped. "Sad enough? You dare speak of my sadness when you know nothing. You've probably never felt that emotion in your entire life."

Malfoy's face burned. "I know enough."

She snorted. "Hardly."

"As I've expressed already, you don't know shit about me, Granger."

"I know that you've lived this privileged life where your mother luckily kept sheltered to the horrors of the world." Hermione retorted angrily. "She really did you a favour. I know that if Sixth Year hadn't happened you would've continued on your blissful—" her words were cut off when he backed her into a wall forcefully.

Neither of them saw the picture fall from her hand and into his jacket pocket

She was too angered to feel the fear or pain from his actions. It was probably a good thing.

"I'm warning you, Granger," he spoke lowly, face inches from hers. "Quit while you're ahead."

Defiantly, she stared into his eyes. "You can push me all you want, I'm not afraid of you. I'm not afraid of anyone."

"Because you're afraid of yourself." He spat, hot and angry. "And one day, you won't be able to hide behind the walls you've built up around yourself. One day, your lies will be out and on display for the world to see."

Hermione's face didn't change, but her heart fell to her ankles. She wasn't so much frightened by his proximity as she was the frankness in his voice. Because he was right, and she didn't like that one bit. There would be a day when she wouldn't hide anymore, and she had a feeling that day was approaching fast.

"Why do you care about my lies?" she asked in a bitter tone, curiously staring into his eyes.

"I'm not so sure anymore," was his simple yet complicated answer.

She stared at him, emotions blanketed by confusion, "What the hell does that mean?"

Malfoy looked like he wanted to kick a small animal in frustration. "I don't know."

"So you don't want to know my lies so you can mock me?" Hermione thought her voice sounded oddly strangled, but she blamed it simply on nerves—and because she was currently trying to mould herself into the wall to get out of contact with him.

He looked thoughtful for a half a second before stepping away. His voice came in a rough drawl, "I'm appalled at you, Granger. I never thought you were capable of being wrong so many times in one sentence."

"Wrong?"

"Yes, wrong. I know you don't know what that word means because you've rarely been wrong before, but Granger, you're wrong. You see, I don't *care* about bringing you down a notch or two, that's not my goal. After all, it looks like life has done a good job of that."

Malfoy's words hurt and she couldn't even hide it. Hermione staggered, "I don't need—"

"No, *you* need to cut the bullshit, Granger," he cut her off with a pointed statement.

She lifted her gaze to meet his, shocked and confused, "What—"

"Stop with the lies."

All Hermione could do was stare at him, her voice was quiet and almost calculated as it delivered each word slowly. "I don't know where you got the idea—"

"You're lying." And his anger was palpable. "You're lying to me, to your old friends, to the woman who thinks of you as her own child, to Pansy—"

"I have been *nothing* but honest with Pansy!"

For some odd reason, his voice didn't rise with hers. "But what about everyone else, Granger? Why is it that no one knows about your parents when it's obvious that at least the Weasley parents care? Why the hell is it that *no one* knows *anything* about you? Not just about your parents, but what the hell you've been doing for the last five years and—"

"Because I don't want them to!" she exploded, "Because it's none of their business! Because —"

Malfoy flared. "It's because you were wrong and you feel guilty about your parents and ashamed about all that other shit you keep inside. That's the reason you're lying. That's the reason you're so depressed."

"Shut up," her voice cracked horribly.

"I'm not going to shut up. You're not the only person who has suffered in life, Granger. You're not the only one who has to deal with shit they can't control. You need to get the hell over it and move on. You need to own up to whatever the fuck makes you feel so damn guilty, because I'm sick of it! I'm sick of Pansy babying you, I'm sick of your defensive attitude, I'm sick of you thinking you can lie to me and get away with it."

Her voice was cold. "I'm not—"

"Don't you *dare* say what I think you're about to say," Draco warned. "Like it or not, you're a liar. You can flaunt it and accept it, but don't kid yourself for one moment into thinking that you can fool me, because you don't. And that's from one liar to another."

Every emotion that she'd hid, all the pain that she'd felt, *everything* had just culminated in something that Hermione could only describe as a—it was indescribable. She couldn't see, she couldn't speak, she couldn't even hear—everything had gone white, but only for a moment.

But colours came back and she could see Malfoy staring at her blankly. She still couldn't think. Her mind was literally turned to mush; her nerves were shot and all she felt was this incredible upheaval of emotion. She wondered if she really was as transparent as he'd made her think she was—or maybe he read her a little better than she had ever expected. And both of those options frightened her more than anything.

The tears fell and the words were out of her mouth before she could push them back down, "You're right." And she sobbed into her hands.

"I know," but he sounded awfully smug.

And it just reminded Hermione who she was talking to. She closed herself off again. "Just go away," her voice was shaky. "You've said all you needed to say."

He didn't move, in fact, it felt like he'd gotten closer. "You're just upset that I'm rattling your chains."

He was wrong.

The truth hurt more than his presence ever could.

Once she glanced up, she realised he *was* closer to her.

Her knees knocked together; she was having difficulty standing straight. She needed to be alone so she could pull herself together, so she could think of something witty to make him angry so he'd back off, and so she could get away while she could.

"Is there anything you want to say, Granger?"

"What else is there to say? You've made a wonderful observation. I'm a liar. That's nothing new to me. I live in my lies every day. Everything I touch turns to dirt. Is that what you wanted to hear?"

"I—"

She couldn't help it, the words just kept rolling off her tongue, "I'm twenty-four Malfoy and I feel like nothing, *nothing* will take away the pain. I know there are people who care, but I can't care for them because there's *nothing* left in me to allow myself to care about them.

Malfoy, I'm twenty-four and I feel like I'm eighty. I'm twenty-four and I feel like I've been stretched beyond my means. There isn't anything left. I'm twenty-four, and I'm broken."

His voice had taken that uncomfortable tone, the same tone that he'd had when he'd sat with her on the roof and when he walked her back to her room hours later after they sat in silence, "Granger—"

At that point, she was hysterical. "What else do you want me to say? I won't apologise. You don't deserve it. Do you want me to tell you everything? That's not going to happen, either."

"That's not what I want, Granger—"

"Then tell me what you want!" She yelled at him because yelling was easier. "Would you like me to conjure a brick so you can beat me down physically as you have done mentally? You can call Harry, Ginny, and Ron to take part in the festivities of beating me down, I can wait. I have *nothing* but time. Maybe you four can bond over all the reasons you hate me over tea and pastries after you're done."

"I don't hate you, Granger."

Really? Well that was news to her.

"What do you want from me, Malfoy?"

"The truth."

Hermione stared at him, shaking. "Why do you care?"

Malfoy breathed. "Fuck if I know."

"I can't deal with this or you today so go away."

She pushed at his chest with her casted arm, but he wouldn't move. "I think Pansy's right." And when she pushed him again, he stood stronger. "You've been left alone far too long."

Hermione no longer knew why she was crying; only that she was and there was nothing she could do to stop the tears. It seemed to be a mix of reasons. She cried from the truth and because his words were spoken in a tone Hermione wasn't familiar with.

"Stop crying," he said rather softly, but there was this edge in his voice she didn't understand.

Of course, that had only made the tears fall faster. "My tears too real for you?"

He said nothing, just looked at her with a frown marring his features, until he said again. "Just stop."

"Go away," she was desperate. "Please. I'm so sick of fighting you and the world."

There was a long pause before he uttered, "Then don't."

Before she could process his words, Malfoy stepped back and turned to walk away. And no, he didn't look back. But if he had, he would've seen Hermione staring after him with wide, disbelieving eyes.

a peaceful paradigm shift

Chapter Ten

A Peaceful Paradigm Shift

Part One: Illusions of the mind

Hermione tried to assure herself that it would be easier to breathe, it would get better, and the rigidity in her chest whenever she thought of Matthew and her parents would vanish. She tried to trick herself into having faith in the belief that it would get easier to keep her eyes focused on the future rather than look back at her bleak past.

But no, it wasn't.

She set and lit a red candle on the counter of her bathroom in memory of them. It glowed and twinkled against cream walls and ceilings. Wax oozed, slowly trickling down the side of the candle like a fresh tear. Red reminded her of just how thrilled her parents were when she got into Gryffindor. Red reminded her of happier times in Italy with Matthew. She used the colour to brighten the sorrow-filled life that they'd seemed predestined to live. Red made everything tolerable. Even after an entire lifetime of illnesses, doctor's visits, operations, chemotherapy, shots, and Healer visits.

Red was Matthew's favourite colour. It was the colour of the flowers Hermione brought home every Monday from the market, the colour of Superman's cape he ran around in, the colour of his toothbrush she charmed to sing his favourite song while he brushed his teeth, the colour of his favourite sippy cup, and the colour of his favourite security blanket...

And Hermione knew she couldn't leave the room for dinner; not when her mind was filled with memories of him. Wax tears fell from the blazing candle as it melted slowly. She stared sadly at the flickering flame, wanting to reach out and touch it, the way she wanted to reach out and touch him.

Hermione vividly remembered the last time she touched his hand.

They had been taking him away with a sheet covered his face...and she'd stopped them, just to see him one last time. His little hands were cold as ice and his face was white as milk. He looked to be sleeping, not dead. And she wanted to scream at him in hopes that if he just heard her voice, he'd come back.

But she was more sensible now than she was then.

The grief that she'd felt after losing Matthew had been incomparable to the grief that she'd felt after losing her parents. And even after almost eleven months, their deaths five years before still didn't hold a candle to the loss of Matthew. True, it hurt, but it was a different kind of pain. The pain of losing him had stemmed from watching her hopes and dreams crumble. It was the pain that came from watching the end of a life that she had created, nurtured, and sacrificed everything to protect.

It was too soon.

Even now, her longing for him was so strong that she couldn't breathe.

Music lapped over her memories of him, like a soundtrack. It drowned out the bad memories, but, to her dismay, it didn't erase the the pain. Sometimes, Hermione wished that he'd looked more like his father. She wished she could look at *his* face and see Matthew looking back, hear his voice speaking to her, and see his eyes looking back. She would watch Matthew grow as *he* grew. She would see what Matthew would've looked like as *he* changed, as *he* developed.

Perhaps then she could fool herself into believing that he was still there with her.

Before she could stop herself, Hermione reached out for the candle. She couldn't refrain—almost like she could never stop herself from feeling sad whenever she thought of him. The flame of the candle rose upwards to lick at her fingers.

Pain.

She should've felt pain when she held her hand over the flame, but there was nothing. Nothing in comparison to the loss of him. Hermione sat on the side of the tub. Her fingers gripped the edge and her eyes skimmed over everything in the room—including the mirror. She looked *lost*. It wasn't a new look, just one that she was tired of seeing each day. Merlin, she didn't even look like herself anymore.

Magic couldn't heal everything. She'd learned that the hard way.

Moving away from the mirror, Hermione sat with her back against the wall opposite to the counter. She shut her eyes and watched as memories of him swirled in her head. He was almost real. So close to touch, so beautiful to listen to, so fragile to look at. She began to reminisce. She began to remember him.

"And what do you think you're doing, little man?"

Caught in the act, Matthew froze in all his fudge-eating glory and slowly turned to face his mother. There were fudge smudges all over his face, clothes, and hair—how it got in his hair, she'd never know. And in his hand was a hunk of half-eaten fudge bar. It looked like he'd gotten more on his face than he did in his mouth, and Hermione found it was getting harder and harder to maintain the stern look she wore.

"I share..." he extended the hand that had the hunk of fudge out to her.

Hermione smirked and scolded lightly, "Don't think sharing can get you out of this one, fudge boy. I thought I told you to wait until after dinner."

"I sowwy, mommy," Matthew pouted and poked out his bottom lip.

"It's okay," her eyes wandered to the open cabinet above the refrigerator where he'd retrieved the hidden fudge bar from then they shot down at her son, "How in the world did you get up there?" There was a mischievous gleam in his two-year-old eyes as he proceeded to show his mommy just how he climbed up there.

It took Hermione an hour and a cleaning charm to get the fudge handprints off her counters.

Hermione forced herself to think about everything; when he was full of life, when he laughed, when he cried, when he stared at her with those doe-like eyes of his. It always made her smile, no matter how sad she felt inside.

There was determination in his eyes as he held on to her hands.

"You can do it, Matthew...." Hermione encouraged the almost pensive baby as she released his hands. The thirteen-month old boy stood there for a full minute, almost swaying back and forth. His lips were pursed, showing off his adorable dimples, and the look on his face was almost a stubborn determination. He was going to walk, even if it took all day.

Hermione encouraged him on a little more, "That's it, baby."

Matthew took one wobbly step...then another...paused...got the hang of it...and took off.

Those memories started to strengthen. They screamed at her, pounded into her head, and forced her to remember every detail about him: his hair, his eyes, his facial expressions, the animal sounds he liked to make, how he stared at her with such love and affection, everything. Was it selfish for her to want him back, illness and all?

Hermione knew that he was at peace, but was it bad that she selfishly wished his peace was here?

Alone in her bathroom, Hermione allowed one single tear rolled down her cheek. The rest followed soon after. Her throaty sobs echoed through the room, but she was alone. Minutes passed before she moved from her spot on the cool floor. Hermione weakly ran her fingers through her tangled, wet, and coarse hair as a rasping and painful sigh escaped the back of her throat.

She winced.

Thanks to Malfoy, she'd yelled and cried so much in the last few hours that it hurt to even breathe. She was utterly exhausted, but more than anything, she knew that he'd had a point. When had he taken the time to learn her? Had he read her mind when she wasn't paying attention? It sure as hell felt like it. And it felt like he cared.

Hermione shook her head.

Malfoy didn't care—he was just—dammit, she didn't know what he was doing, but she knew that he didn't care. Right?

Hermione shook all thoughts of him from her mind and forced her stiff body off the floor and into a standing position. She took a moment to lean on the counter for support. The pain in her joints and muscles were dull. Her eyes fell on the candle that had burned out long before; the wax was cool and hard once again. She ran her fingers over the beads of dried wax and sighed.

She then smelled her damp clothes and came to the conclusion that she was overdue for a bath.

As the water rose in the tub, Hermione dropped a few crystals and poured some oil in the water in hopes that it would loosen her muscles. She was about to take off her shirt when something in the corner of the room caught her attention.

It was a little boy with unruly brown hair and greenish-hazel eyes; a little boy about five-years-old. Blood drained from her face as her entire body went rigid. Her breathing became scarce, and her heart started thudding in her chest. Her feet were frozen to the floor. Only her eyes moved, observing and gazing at the little boy in disbelief.

He was hugging his knees into his chest, and had an almost curious gleam in his eye as he stared at her. He wore jeans, a yellow and red shirt with a flag in the middle, and untied football cleats. The boy, she noticed instantly, was healthy and strong with a brilliant smile and flushed cheeks—like he'd just returned from playing outside. His knee was skinned; the flesh around the wound was puffy and red. It was a nasty bruise that was turning purple and blue right before her eyes, but the little boy didn't seem to care. In fact, it was as if he'd worn it as a badge of honour.

Boys, Hermione mused with a soft shake of her head.

She knew that it was a hallucination, a figment of her fucked up imagination. There really was no little boy in her bathroom, but he looked real. Hermione found herself lost in a trance as she took a tentative step towards him. The boy, he lifted his head off his knees, wordlessly staring at her with inquisitive eyes.

She blamed it on the lack of sleep in the past fifteen days, on the sorrow in her heart, on her mind, on Malfoy for some reason, on everything. She blamed it on being cooped up in the house for the last two weeks without eating, drinking, or sleeping much. She blamed it on herself; she blamed and blamed, but she still took another step towards the imaginary boy.

Another step...and another.

The little boy was a familiar stranger. It felt as if she *should* know him, and Hermione had never been more confused in her life. All she could do was stand over the boy who was peering up at her with a mystified look on his face. All she could do was squat in front of him.

He stared at her, right into her eyes, almost into her soul, it seemed.

The little boy fixed his lips and spoke in a small yet familiar voice, stammering as if he were unsure of his own words, "M-mummy?"

She was too stunned to even speak at first, but she opened her mouth and spoke the first word that came to mind, "Yes."

Reaching out, he tried to touch her arm. All she could feel were the hairs on the flesh of her arm pricking up. "I really miss you," he said, sounding so sad. Tears filled his eyes.

Hermione's cheeks were wet. "I miss you, too."

Pathetically, his little head dropped back down on his knees, "No, you don't."

She reached to ruffle his hair, but stopped herself short, "I do," she argued softly.

The little boy sounded hurt, "You don't talk about me. You don't visit me."

Realisation dawned on Hermione and her body began to shake uncontrollably. *Matthew*. Her legs gave way as grief, shock, and the truth overwhelm her. She drops to her knees. There were no words and no excuses she could offer; so instead, she offered her tears and hoped he would forgive her.

"Don't you love me anymore? Was I bad? Don't you want me?"

"No!" she sobbed hysterically. "I loved you more than I loved myself. I never stopped. Never. You weren't bad. You were—" Hermione stopped crying long enough to stare at the boy. She wanted to reach for him, hug him close, and never let him go, but something stopped her. "You were the best little boy, so brave and strong. I wanted you, more than I've ever wanted anything in my life. There is nothing in the world that can replace you. There isn't a part of me that doesn't ache when I think about you. I would've done anything, *anything* to keep you alive, but I let you go so you wouldn't hurt anymore."

There was a smile on his face when he reached for her again and whispered, "Mummy, it really doesn't."

Hermione blinked in confusion. "What?"

"It doesn't hurt anymore."

And he disappeared right before her eyes....

For the first time, Hermione woke up in peace.

Part Two: Someone to save you

The last time Draco had come close to having a panic attack was when he was eleven. He had been preparing to leave for Hogwarts for the first time, and while Mother had said his reaction was normal for a boy of eleven, Father had told him that Malfoys didn't have trifling little panic attacks.

Malfoys didn't panic at *all*.

Yeah, well, Draco Malfoy was seriously panicking—and no, he didn't fully understand why.

Another thing he didn't know why he was doing: jumping in after her.

Okay, so maybe he knew and *maybe* he was getting ahead of himself....

After he'd left Granger in the alley, Draco had gone to the closest Muggle pub for a drink – a stiff one, the strongest one that they could fix legally. He'd re-enacted the entire argument in his head three times from start to finish – and needed a new drink every time he felt his own shame. He had never felt sorry for the things that he'd done. Draco had hurt her – no, he'd *crushed* her. And as he had walked away his damn conscience had unleashed a fresh wave of foreign and unknown feelings and emotions he couldn't push away. He'd almost fallen over from the sheer force of it.

It hadn't been until he reached into his pocket for his wallet to pay his tab that he'd found it, folded up and slightly wet.

The picture.

It had looked worn and old. Draco had unfolded it carefully, thinking it was going to be of Granger and some man that he'd never seen in his life. Instead, he'd received the shock that turned his world upside down and firmly secured his spot as the number one asshole in London.

Yes, the picture was of Granger, but it wasn't the same hollow, skinny, sad witch with that horrible frizz that she called hair that *he* had been familiar with.

No, the woman in the magical photograph had been almost glowing. She'd worn Muggle jeans and a black jersey with one orange and one green stripe that ran down the short sleeves; her curly brown hair was tamed and pulled back from her face with a pair of sunglasses and she had a bright smile on her face. Granger had looked extremely happy, even though she was on her knees outside a Venetian football stadium, called the Stadio Pierluigi Penzo. In the picture, her arms had been wrapped loosely around another person—and then Draco had realised why she looked so happy.

Standing partially in front of her, leaning back on her, wasn't a man, but a child.

The little boy had unruly brown hair and bright eyes had worn a matching football jersey with the emblem of a winged lion with his paw on a soccer ball blown up on the front, like Granger's, little jeans, and untied shoes. He had been busy making funny faces at the camera,

and Granger had deemed it her mission to get him to smile. And she'd succeeded, only after pointing to the camera and whispering what looked like, "Smile," into his ear, which he did – radiantly.

Draco had nearly fallen off the barstool.

For nearly half an hour, he'd just stared at the moving photograph in amazement.

Granger had had a child. A child – *a son* – that no one knew about.

Except for....

It was at that point that Draco had quickly settled his tab, rushed out to an empty alley, and with a crack, he'd Apparated straight into Pansy's living room for what had been a very informative and horrific argument where he had learned more, so much more – too much more.

Pansy wasn't surprised by his intrusion. "I thought we were meeting at your place in four hours."

Draco dropped the picture in her lap. "Who the bloody hell is that?"

Pansy shot him a nasty look, unfolded the picture, and stared at it for a moment. Just a moment was all it took for her eyes to widen with recognition. "Where did you get this?"

"Does it really matter?"

"Yes, it does," she sounded a little panicked. "Hermione will be looking for this."

"Then you give it to her. Problem solved! Great, now tell me who – the hell – is the boy?"

Draco had no idea why he was asking. He already knew the answer. But a part of him had wanted Pansy to tell him that the boy was a cousin, a brother – something other than her son. Part of him wanted her to tell him that he was justified for screaming at her the way he had.

But none of that happened.

Pansy stared at the picture with a sad smile on her face. "His name is Matthew – he's – he was Hermione's son."

He shut his eyes and shook his head.

But she went on, "She told me about this day. She took him to a Muggle football game because he loved Muggle football about as much as he loved Quidditch. She was able to take him herself without being recognised. He had a blast. She didn't understand it, but she would do anything for him."

Well, it was one thing to assume something and another thing to have someone confirm your assumption. Draco had been stunned to silence, but it didn't last forever. "She had a son?"

It really wasn't a question, more like he'd accepted another truth of Granger's past for what it really was. The truth.

"Did I stutter?"

He ignored her because, really, there was a more pressing matter at hand, "How long have you known?"

"A year or so."

"But he looks like he's about four in the picture?"

Pansy stared at him blankly. "He was – I didn't find out about him until Granger sent me a letter a week after this photo was taken saying that she needed me; that her son was dying and there was nothing anyone, magical or Muggle, could do to prevent the inevitable. After your mother calmed me down after my fit of rage because she fucking lied to me about him for four bloody years, I was left via Portkey." Pansy paused and looked thoughtful for a moment. "And Matthew was gone a month later." Her voice had softened and broke as she whispered those last seven words with her gaze firmly set on the photo in her hand.

He couldn't think straight, and Pansy wasn't making it any better. Tears had welled in her eyes, and for the love of Merlin, Draco had had enough of everyone's tears.

Before he could speak, the dam broke and she started talking, "I was there when it happened. I was sitting at the table watching them as they baked cookies and sang some kiddie song about being a good helper together. She'd just finished drawing whiskers on his face with flour and he was making cute lion cub noises...." Pansy looked as if she were lost in a nightmare. "And then he stopped all of a sudden, looked up at her, whispered "mummy", and collapsed. And Hermione – she held him in his arms as he—" she couldn't finish.

And Draco didn't want her to. He felt wretched enough for the things that he'd said to her. He felt wretched for her. She'd been through hell with her friends and her parents...and on top of that, she'd lost a child. He wasn't a father, but he simply couldn't imagine how hard life had been on her. Not knowing what else to do, Draco wrapped his arms around Pansy and held her as she cried over the little boy that she had only known for one month.

A little time passed before she whispered through her own tears. "I've n-never seen someone so broken. Sure, I lost my father, but she lost her son – her son, Draco. And all I could do was stand over her and watch as he died. I-I wanted to call for help, but Hermione stopped me. She said there was nothing they could do, that he was t-too sick and the Healers couldn't do anything for him there except make him more comfortable as he p-passed on. She said she didn't want her son's body to be r-ripped apart at some Muggle hospital, either. She said she didn't want him to die in some emergency room, but at home – w-where he was most comfortable. So she held him, she talked to him, she told him how much she loved him, she told him how sorry she was that she couldn't change places with him, she told him that she was sorry he never got to meet his father and l-live a life worth living, and she sang to him an Italian lullaby as his breathing slowed and eventually stopped."

He didn't want to hear anymore. "Pansy, stop."

But she wouldn't. "Hermione had held it together through the entire funeral. She didn't cry. She was calm. I don't know how she did it. I'd only known him for a month and I sobbed during the entire funeral while she held me. But I knew, Draco, I knew that she was gone. I knew. I found her the night of the funeral—"

"Pansy," his voice betrayed him. His chest felt horribly tight.

"No," she cried, "You have to listen to me, Draco. You're the first person I've been able to talk to about this, and I have to get it out." And he sighed, reluctantly allowing her to finish, "I found her, in the graveyard. She was just staring at his headstone. She didn't hear me come up behind her, didn't feel me touch her shoulder. She didn't feel anything. So, I sat there with her all night. I didn't say a word."

"What happened?" Draco reluctantly asked.

"The next day she told me to go back to London, but three days later she called me and told me that she was moving back. She told me if she stayed there one more day she would die. I could tell she was contemplating ending her life – and the horrible thing was that I understood why. While everyone's life was just beginning, hers, she felt, was over."

For the next hour following Pansy's narrative of Matthew's death, Draco had sat on the sofa, miserable and pensive. He didn't think about the fact that she was just nineteen when she'd had him. He didn't think about who the father was. He didn't think about anything.

In fact, he was done trying to dive into her life. It was horrible and filled to the brim with nothing except suffering and pain. Draco wished that he'd never started his damn investigation. He could live his life without the knowledge that hers was so much worse. He could live his life without the knowledge that she'd gone through things that made his own issues seem like child's play.

He felt low and his chest hurt from the strain.

"Draco," her voice was grave and stern, "I'm going to ask you this again. How did you get this picture?"

"It slipped out of Granger's hand and into my pocket during our fight."

Pansy's voice filled with red-hot rage, "You picked a fight with her? Damn it, Draco, I told you to leave her alone! Fuck, I have to go to—what the hell did you say to her?"

Draco stood in a huff and snatched the picture from her grip. "I don't want to talk about it! Fuck, Pansy. Just shut up and give me her address. I'll take the picture back to her myself."

Upon obtaining her address from a very upset Pansy, Draco had Flooed back to his flat and sat for a while, thinking and contemplating in silence about whether he would go to her place right then or wait.

Growing up, he usually felt very little, if at all, about all his wrongdoings. It was all about self-preservation, and there had been too many sins in his past for him to give a damn about.

If guilt had been an emotion that he'd felt as a kid, Draco would've killed himself during Sixth Year, for certain. But now, he had a protective Pansy and conscience on his back. He wasn't supposed to feel ashamed or guilty about any of the things he'd done or said. But he felt it, exceedingly.

So Draco decided to get it over with before dinner to avoid any further awkwardness and Apparated to her house with a crack.

When Draco had imagined the type of home in which Granger lived, he'd always thought of a modest house with a garden. She probably would've grown herbs and tomatoes in a little greenhouse that she kept tidy.

However, what he'd seen when he arrived at her front door wasn't even close.

Hermione Granger lived in one of the most isolated home in Britain. It was located deep in the outskirts of London where she didn't have a neighbour for miles. A little, modest lake house with an untended garden of flowers and a few untrimmed rose bushes. Trees were plentiful and dead, rain-soaked leaves covered over her lawn. And then he noticed the little, modest blue car in her driveway. It looked as if it hadn't been driven in a while; leaves covered it almost completely.

Draco supposed that it would've been a nice home, had it been taken care of better.

His stomach had been in knots when he rang the doorbell, but he blamed it on the weather. It seemed that in the past few hours, the temperature had dropped nearly thirty degrees. After knocking three times and ringing the doorbell twice, Draco had waited...and waited.

She was home. The lights were on.

Curiously, he'd gone around the side of the house and spotted the gate.

With a silent unlocking spell, he pushed the gate open and walked into her tree-less backyard, letting the gate shut behind him with an audible slap. There had been a slight downward slope that almost made him stumble, but he didn't because he was the ever-graceful Draco Malfoy. The wizard had been so focused on finding her backdoor that he hadn't see her initially, but when he had, his eyebrow rose slowly.

Granger had been standing on the dock, peering out at the water almost pensively with nothing but a pair of grey pants and a tank top. In the freezing cold.

And Draco's mind had wandered as his feet had brought him closer to the long pier.

For the most part, he hadn't expected her to be affected by him. She was Granger, after all. She had gone toe-to-toe with him in the bookstore almost as if it were natural—*easy*. She wasn't supposed to be swayed by anything that he'd said or done, because even though he hated it, he really was an ass.

True, he'd wanted to bait her into screaming the truth at him. True, he'd hit her way below the belt. True, he'd been tired of her lying to him. True, he'd insulted her in the worst possible

way. True, he'd meant every single word he said to her. But she wasn't supposed to take his words to heart.

Women like Granger didn't give a shit about the words from men like Draco Malfoy. Right?

But Draco had forgotten one key thing about her. She was a human being with feelings....

Feelings that had been crushed by the cruelties of life.

Feelings that had been hurt by her supposed friends.

Feelings that had been beaten by him.

And when Draco had remembered all that, it had only made him feel worse.

So, when she threw her arms up in the air, Draco wasn't alarmed. He'd figured that she was—well, he didn't know what the hell she was doing. He had stood patiently at the other end of the dock and waited for her to notice him. She hadn't. Granger looked as if she had been completely engrossed in her own thoughts.

When she'd taken off her shoes and socks and stood on the edge of the pier, Draco figured she had been trying to relax. After what happened between them, Granger probably needed to relax some anyway.

It would make his first-ever attempt at an apology easier if she was calm.

When she had peered into the lake, he'd thought that she was trying to get a better view. Draco had taken the moment to look around at her property. With some work, it could be very nice. He could see why she picked the place and wondered just how much she spent—

When Draco had heard the yell then a splash, his head jerked up to find her gone—*gone*.

And that had been the moment. The moment that had brought him back to the present and changed everything.

She couldn't swim.

His heart had started to race as the thoughts and panic swirled in his head.

She couldn't swim, and she jumped without her wand.

And Draco did the first thing he could think of: he ran down the dock and jumped in after her.

To say that he hadn't known why would've been a lie. He jumped because didn't want her death on his conscience. It had been hard enough dealing with one; he couldn't take a second. He jumped because he felt bad for her and the role he played. Pansy Parkinson would eviscerate him if she drowned. He jumped because he was fucking mad as hell at her for taking the coward's way out.

But mostly, he jumped because *he* didn't want her to die.

So Draco searched for her in the murky waters of the lake, thanking his mother mentally for forcing him to take those swimming lessons as a child. The water was deep and dark and fucking *freezing*. His body was already numb and he'd only been in the water for a minute. Draco couldn't see her initially and had to come up for a quick breath of air. Thanks to his quick-thinking, he'd had enough sense to put a Bubble-Head charm on himself before diving back down into the cold water, wand in hand.

The lake was deeper and colder than he'd ever anticipated. Draco had prided himself in being a good swimmer, but he wasn't the best, and his limbs were actually starting to hurt from the frigid waters.

But still, he kept going, diving lower and lower, silently blasting floating plants and fish out of his way. And then, he saw her. She was on the bottom of the lake, her eyes were shut, and she wasn't moving. When a little air bubble escaped her mouth, Draco had wanted to shout in relief, but was too tired and in too much pain from the cold.

He was going to save her, he was determined – and then he was going to kill her himself for scaring the shit out of him. When he grabbed her by the arm and started the journey to the surface, Draco was still a mess of foreign emotions and very much in a panic.

Oh, and still pissed the hell off at her.

He pointed his wand and the next thing he knew, they were landing back on the edge of the lake in a heap.

"Son of a bitch!" he yelled in pain as he landed on his side, "Bloody fucking hell!" Pain radiated off every part of his body, but his eyes shot over to Granger and he quickly discovered she wasn't moving or breathing.

She looked dead; ashen and ice cold, even to his touch. His wand hand trembled slightly when he muttered a spell to unclog her airways, and he was relieved when Granger's eyes flew open. She inhaled sharply and started coughing horribly as she curled on her side, disoriented and shivering hard. The wind howled as nature decided to unleash not rain, but snow on them. Draco hadn't noticed.

It took her a few moments to finally look up at him. "M-Malfoy?" she rasped.

And that was enough to let him unleash his anger, "In the flesh!"

"What are you—?"

"Saving your goddamn life, Granger! *That's* what I'm doing here," he raged, completely oblivious to everything except his own fury. Snowflakes landed in his hair, but they all melted away the instant they touched him. When had it started snowing? "What the fuck were you *thinking* jumping off that pier? Brightest witch of our year decides to do the stupidest thing I've ever seen in my fucking *life!* I could strangle you right now!"

All she did was stare at him with wide, blinking eyes as she shivered hard. "Y-you—"

Draco couldn't stop yelling. He knew that he should've, but he just couldn't. He didn't understand where all the anger came from, but he'd unleashed a demon and it wasn't being put down anytime soon. "Do you know what would've happened had I not come by to apologise? Do you know what would've happened had I not come here to give you what you'd dropped? Fuck! You would've – I can't believe that you would do something so goddamn stupid and selfish—" He threw his arms up; completely inundated with emotions that he couldn't explain. There was fury, relief that she was still alive, confusion as to why he cared, and rage for her being so stupid.

He was torn between his want to hex her silly and his want to almost hug her. He cringed at the thought.

"Y-you came to apologise?" she rested her head back and looked up at him, still violently shivering. The only thing he could hear over his own voice was her teeth chattering.

Was that *really* all she had gotten from his almost psychotic ranting?

Draco was incensed. "Yes! As a matter of fact, I did, but I don't see the point in wasting my apology on stupid women who like to try and commit—" he stopped dead when her eyes turned vacant and her body gave off a great shudder before it went limp. Immediately, he dropped to his knees next to her and shook her "Son of a – c'mon Granger, wake up!"

She didn't move. Her breathing was shallow. And Draco was torn between shaking the hell out of her and pulling her into his arms. But he did neither. Muttering obscenities under his breath, Draco scooped her freezing body off the ground, grabbed his wand, and Apparated to his flat with a loud crack.

What he didn't expect was to find Blaise and Pansy inches from locking lips on his living room sofa. While Blaise smirked, Pansy shot off the sofa as soon as he'd arrived. "I thought we were meeting here at seven, it's now eight and Hermione's going to—" His smile and her anger faded as soon as they saw the state of wet that he was in and the pale and limp woman with blue lips in his arms.

Blaise shot off the sofa as Pansy screamed, "Draco, what the f—you killed Hermione!"

"She's *not* dead, j-just cold. Move. Got t-to get her warm," he replied numbly, teeth chattered from the cold. He hadn't realised that he was, in fact, freezing. The adrenaline that had been born from his anger and from saving her life had died. Draco's body ached as he laid her on the sofa rather haphazardly. Blaise quickly started a fire and he swayed on his feet, fighting against his own unconsciousness, while Pansy had a conniption.

"When I told you to go over and apologise, I didn't mean—"

"Pansy!" Draco screamed, completely enraged. Every vein in his face had made an appearance as he almost staggered. "Go get some fucking blankets and some fucking clothes for the both of us."

She turned on her designer heels and went upstairs to grab blankets.

Draco panted in rage as his teeth chattered. He closed his eyes for a moment to regain control over himself and the desire to just collapse. If one more person said anything to him above normal speaking tones, he was going to use the worst Unforgivable curse. He felt Blaise move him out the way as he pulled off Granger's shirt before he went for her pants.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

His other best friend spoke rather calmly as he haphazardly pulled the clothes off her, eyes shut, "She's ice cold to the touch and her body is in shock, Draco. She'll get hypothermia if she stays in these wet clothes much longer. We have to get her dry and warm – you too – so strip."

The words that came next sounded like they had come from someone else, "We'll deal with me later. Her first."

Part Three: Sometimes you have to let go in order to find yourself again

November 29th

What caused life to change? It seemed that everyone had a theory all their own about it.

The religious-type believed that change, in general, was the workings of a higher power. The scientific-type seemed to believe that change was a naturally occurring process that some were comfortable with and others weren't. While the more cynical-type believed that it was the situations that someone placed themselves into and the decisions that they made along the way that caused their life to change.

As for Hermione, while her slight idealism led her to believe that a higher power was involved, the more sceptical and logical part of her had guided her in the other direction towards the cynics. But overall, she felt differently. While Hermione believed that change not only happened because of the situations and decisions one made in their lives, she believed that it was also about the people that one met along the way.

Every person that passed through someone's life changed it. It didn't matter if they've knew that person all their life or if they could hardly remember their name. Every person that someone came into contact with had the potential to change everything. How someone's life turned out was partially in the palm of someone else's hands.

When Hermione opened her eyes and realised that she was on a mat in Draco Malfoy's sitting room, she had immediately known that something was different. When she realised that she was stuffed down in thick blankets and wearing unfamiliar clothes, she realised that something had changed. When Hermione rolled over and saw Pansy sleeping on the mat with

her, curled into her back like a child, she realised that her life would never be the same. When she saw Blaise sleeping on the sofa next to her mat, Hermione realised that she would never recover from it.

And, Hermione didn't know if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

She knew that sometimes change bettered someone's life. Sometimes the change and the person stayed forever. Sometimes the change was horrible and someone was forced to regret it and that person forever. But then again, sometimes, though the change may be wonderful, the person who brought them was meant only to briefly touch that person's life—they were not meant to stay.

Hermione had experienced all of those changes at one time or another in her life. She thought of herself as some sort of expert. And the one she was currently experiencing was big.

Like a paradigm shift.

She sat up slowly and was immediately greeted by a face that she wasn't ready to see.

Draco Malfoy – and he didn't look pleased.

"So," he sneered. "The jumper arises and decides to grace us with her presence."

Hermione stared. She would've been mad, offended even, but she didn't know what the hell he was talking about. But she'd never seen him in such a state of undress before. Malfoy wore grey lounge trousers and a black shirt, no socks, no shoes, messy hair, and an omnipresent scowl that marred his porcelain face.

Attractive, minus the scowl. She couldn't believe that she'd just thought that.

"Umm..." Hermione trailed off, looking around, her mind hazy with confusion, "What am I doing here?"

"I couldn't leave you out there to freeze to death, even though death seemed to be your plan."

Stunned by his accusatory tone, Hermione threw the rest of the covers off in a rush. "What in the he—"

"You jumped." He sounded far angrier than he should. "Of all the stupid, selfish things to do
—"

Hermione would've laughed if she remembered how, but sadly, all she could do was stare at him like he'd grown an extra tongue. Malfoy, who had never seemed to give a damn about her, was blazing mad. At her. His face had turned a rather disturbing shade of red as he waved his finger around as if it were his wand. He was mad at her...because he thought that she had jumped?

Definitely a strange turn of events.

"I just can't imagine why you care about whether I live or die, Malfoy."

"I don't!" he bellowed heatedly.

"Then why are you yelling?"

She watched with interest as his jaw dropped and his face fell. He didn't seem to have an answer. In fact, Malfoy glared very sharp daggers at her and sank back into the Ottoman, folding his long arms rather like a stubborn child. Confused eyes wandered to Pansy, then Blaise. The former was still snoring lightly and the latter had his eyes open, observing them with a sort of mature detachment. And Hermione realised that she liked Blaise simply because of the amount of self-control that he'd been blessed with.

If only he could pass some on to his friend....

And Merlin, either Pansy was an expert at fake sleeping, or she was dead tired.

"She stayed up with you all night," Blaise told her rather calmly.

Hermione looked over at him again. "She did?"

Blaise nodded as he rose to his feet. "Yes, she did." And before he lifted his want to Disapparate, he added, "Draco did, too."

Her eyes widened from shock, and when Malfoy didn't deny it, Hermione asked. "Why did you save me?"

"I don't know," he replied coldly and fired back a question. How typical. "Why did you jump?"

"I didn't," was her simple and truthful reply.

Malfoy snorted, "Bullshit. I was standing there when you did it."

That was something she hadn't known. He'd been there when she'd fallen and he'd still saved her? Strange.

Nevertheless, her questions would have to wait because she needed to vindicate herself. "I went out there with every intention to calm myself down...."

After Malfoy had walked away, Hermione calmed herself enough to Apparate straight home without Splinching herself. She'd had a few drinks – more like an entire bottle of wine, but he didn't need to know that. Then, she'd fallen asleep, had a dream that had awoken her both physically and mentally, and had finally decided that she really needed to think her life through. The lake had always been the only place, outside of a bookstore, where she felt comfortable enough to let her mind work.

"I was warm from the wine that I'd had before my nap, so I went out there without my jacket."

Hermione had stood on the edge of that pier for what seemed like hours, just watching the water and the fish surface to snack on a few hapless flies hovering over the water. The longer

she sat, the less she felt the effects of the wine. The less she felt the wine, the more lucid she became. The more lucid she became, the more she realised that she *refused* to continue on the way she had been.

It was time for change.

"First and foremost, Malfoy, I'm not suicidal. Well, not really. I'm not going to lie, it's crossed my mind a couple of times, but I've never succumbed to selfish urges. I have negative thoughts, but who doesn't? I'm human. I bleed. I hurt. I cry. I laugh. I have good days. I have bad days. We all don't have it perfect, and yesterday was bad. Believe it or not, you told me exactly what I needed to hear: the truth. Everything you said was the truth, from the guilt to the drinking to everything. So, I don't want your apology."

Malfoy just nodded wordlessly.

"After all, I already knew it, but it's much harder to hear it from someone else. It stuck with me."

She'd come too far already to lose herself, again. She'd made it almost a year without Matthew. She'd made it over five years without her parents. She was a survivor and it was time to start acting like one. And by the time she'd reached that point of her epiphany, she was tired and stretched her arms over her head. Hermione silently guessed that had been the point where he'd seen her for the first time.

"I decided to put my feet in the water. I knew that it was cold, I knew that *I* was cold, but the lake was calming. I took off my shoes and socks, but one of my socks fell into the lake. I stood over the edge to see if I could grab it, but it was well beyond my reach and I didn't have my wand. I never do. I'm always afraid that it'll fall in. And I was about to turn and leave, when I slipped and fell in. *I didn't jump.*"

Malfoy said nothing for ages, looking as if he were processing her story in his mind, using his own memory of the event to try and tear holes in her account. Finally, he looked at her with a small nod that told her that he believed her.

Not that she cared. She just didn't want him spreading it around.

She didn't need the rumours that had her throwing herself off a pier and him diving in and saving her out of the goodness of his heart. She was trying to move forward, not backwards. He may have saved her life – for a reason that *he* didn't even know – but he was still Malfoy. She was ready to change her life, but there was no reason to let her guard down around him at that moment.

"Why were you there?" Hermione asked curiously, "How did you get my address?"

Malfoy grumbled, almost as if he didn't want to admit it. "To give you something you dropped. Pansy gave your address to me."

She should've figured that much. Pansy and his mother were the only people in Britain that had her address, just in case of emergencies. Well, Hermione was grateful she'd given them

the address. She was grateful that Malfoy had decided to apologise rather than waited for another day. "I should probably thank you – for saving me. You didn't have to. I know you hate me, but—"

"Like I said before, I don't hate you."

"The feeling is mutual," she said truthfully, but inside she was swimming in the sea of confusion. "What did I drop that you needed to give back?"

He looked thoughtful for a moment before he reached into his pocket, pulled out what looked like note of some sorts, and handed it to her. For a moment, she stared at it, but then opened it.

It was the picture of her and Matthew. Her favourite one.

Shocked, her eyes darted back up to Malfoy, "How did you—"

"I'm not sure how, but it ended up in my pocket."

"You're not going to—"

"Your son isn't anyone's business except yours and who you choose to tell," he shot back gruffly and looked away from her. Malfoy rubbed the back of his neck before he muttered, "I'm sorry for your loss."

She couldn't believe it; she just *couldn't* believe it.

It was as if some cool understanding had fallen between them at that moment. It wasn't perfect or even harmonious, just an understanding. There was no need for yelling or cursing. Words weren't needed, either. He knew about Matthew, and he wasn't going to use it against her. He knew about his death, and he wasn't going to tell a soul. Maybe everything she believed about him was wrong. Maybe he was nothing like his father.

"Malfoy?"

He looked at her blankly, "What?"

Hermione stared at the picture. She wanted to pull herself together and purge the guilt from her soul...for him. And for herself. She would use that picture, the memories of him, to remind her of that when she felt like quitting. When she spoke, her voice was quiet and grateful, "I don't know what to say, but thank you for giving this back. There are others, but this is the last one. And – and thank you for saving me."

There were no more words exchanged between them.

After all, there was no need.

With a short nod, Malfoy rose from his chair and left Hermione to stare at the picture of her smiling son – in peace.

the domino effect

Chapter Summary

"I'm not just the brains, I'm a person, and people make mistakes. We made a mistake. A large one."

Chapter Eleven

The Domino Effect

Part One: Enemy I've become.

December 4th

Hermione wondered about a lot of things.

She sat at the table, lost in thought, and wondered if she was as bad as she thought she was. But the answer wasn't as clear. Hermione dug her fingernails into the back of her hand. She figured that she could blame her new therapist for that. It had been two hours since the conclusion of her first therapy session, which had gone rather awkwardly.

"So, Miss Granger, tell me why you're here?"

She stared at the magical therapist for forty-five minutes straight before responding with a soft, "To live."

"You already are."

Her voice cooled considerably, "Just because I'm sitting here doesn't mean that I'm alive." And she got up, calmly, and walked out, letting the door shut behind her with a click.

And while she didn't feel horrible, she just felt drained from the short session. The words that she had told her therapist were so honest that the mere fact that she'd spoken them at all was a huge step.

She sighed the sigh of someone much older than twenty-four. And while she wasn't as old as she felt or as young as she looked, if there was anything that Hermione was – it was definitely *tired*.

That wasn't a lie, but it made her think about all the lies that she had told.

Temporarily, she had convinced herself that they were worth it, even though she wasn't quite sure that they were. At one point, Hermione thought that she could lie forever and had planned to, but then again, it'd been so long since she'd done anything different, so she couldn't be sure of that either. She wondered what she'd be doing at that exact moment if she had never left, if she'd gone to Matthew's father initially, if she hadn't lied to him, if none of that had ever happened. She never let her mind wonder about that for too long because, really, what sense did it make to wonder about what might have been and what could have been?

A waste of time.

Hermione, though she felt ready to change her life, stayed busy protecting herself well from the pain others could inflict. After all, she was still fragile, and she knew it. She stood behind sturdy defensive walls, frumpy clothes, and horrible hair, but all of it was her costume and it was worn like a shield; to protect herself from her old friends and a very confusing Malfoy.

"What did Draco say?" Pansy asked eight days after she told her about Malfoy giving her the picture back.

"He hasn't said anything at all. He went upstairs ten minutes before you woke up and suggested that we have breakfast at your house because he doesn't have anything in his cabinets. He didn't say anything through breakfast or even when you left us alone to answer a letter."

She was pensive for a few moments as she sucked on a sugar quill. "That's strange."

Hermione stuck her sugar quill back into her mouth and mumbled. "You're telling me..."

And he still hadn't said anything. Well, other than, *"I'm sorry for your loss."*

He'd had plenty of opportunities, but he hadn't used one. She didn't know if she wanted him to ask. She probably wouldn't have any answers for him. Still, his silence was as relieving as it was perplexing. Were she and Malfoy suddenly...friends? Oh, Merlin no. That was completely ridiculous. Hell, Hermione didn't even consider Pansy a friend.

But she had her reasons.

After all, when she thought of friends, the first word that came to mind was replaceable.

The second: recyclable.

The third: removable.

It was what she was to her old 'friends', as well as the reason she refused to consider Pansy a friend. People who were friends with her always left in the end—it was something she'd come to terms with. Even though she tried her hardest at keeping in touch, the few childhood friends that she had had abandoned her after she'd started at Hogwarts. They had changed, and so had she. And her friends at Hogwarts...well, over the years, even before the war,

they'd abandoned her and treated her poorly more than a few times, and for completely selfish reasons.

They'd abandoned her Third Year when she told McGonagall about Harry's Firebolt; Ron treated her poorly that year when he thought Crookshanks ate his rat; Ron had abandoned her during their Fourth Year when he found out she was going to the Yule Ball with Viktor. And there were so many other times, but she didn't feel like delving any further into her past. After all, they were petty offences, to be sure, but deep down, she had always thought that they would drop her the moment they had gotten everything they needed from her.

It was kind of ironic that *she* had abandoned *them* in the end.

But what hurt was the fact that they appeared to have gotten over it and *her* rather swiftly—well, swifter than she had. Hermione didn't know what she would do if Pansy had ever 'got over her'. The thought made her sick to her stomach. So, she kept her out of the 'friend' category altogether.

She closed her eyes and forced a little pumpkin juice down her throat.

Oddly enough, the memory that calmed her was simple:

"...*I love you, Hermione.*"

Her eyes flew open as the fleeting memory faded.

I love you.

Those were three words that she never wanted to hear again. They'd caused so much hell in her life – so much misery and pain. She didn't know how the hell anyone could say they loved her; they didn't know her. And how could they know her when she didn't know herself? And how could they love her when she didn't even love herself?

Hermione's entire body tensed.

She wondered if she shouldn't be that way, but knew the truth: she was who she was and while she was working her way to healing, there were some things that would take longer to heal than others.

Hermione didn't think that she'd ever fall in love again; everything about it was so screwed up and when it didn't work, it hurt too much. And even when it did work, it hurt. Everything hurt, but love, love had left heart as empty and jaded. Drowning in a lover's voice, craving their touch, wanting to be with someone every second of every day; it wasn't normal. She remembered all those years ago, after fights with Ron, when she wondered if true love really existed, because maybe some part of her warped brain may have misconstrued facts and theories of love and happiness...none of it was very rational.

Ah, sweet rationality.

She rationalized everything, because she could; because it was always what she did.

Hermione was blessed with a gift. She could talk herself into or out of anything mentally. She'd talked herself out of bed that morning and into her therapist's office. She'd talked herself into walking away from London, from Ron, from everything. She sometimes hated that gift. Because of it, her life was completely different and full of rumours.

The fucking rumours.

She heard what people said about her. She wasn't deaf. Blind, sometimes, but not deaf. She knew exactly what people said. She'd lost weight. She'd lost her friends. She'd returned to England and didn't look happy anymore.

Pansy's laughter ripped her from her thoughts, "And then he said..."

Hermione suddenly felt miserable and all she wanted to do was leave. But she wouldn't. After all, Pansy had been adamant about them going to dinner that night. All of them. Together. She said something about them all needing a little positive in their lives. And then she had pouted until Hermione agreed.

So as she sat in silence at the semi-circular booth with chatty Pansy on her right, an attentive Blaise next to Pansy, and an aloof Malfoy on her left, she wondered why she allowed Pansy's pout to override reason.

Despite her freedom from the confines of her house, and the actions she'd taken in the past few days to put herself back together, Hermione wasn't in a particularly good mood. The pain was still there, lodged in her chest and she found herself tapping her chest with her fist as if she had indigestion.

Malfoy shot her a funny look that made her glumly stare at the table littered with appetizers.

Appetizers she hadn't wanted, but Pansy had insisted they all share.

Food, Pansy mused, always mitigated awkward situations...and dinner was definitely an awkward affair. It was probably her fault anyway. After her first physical therapy session earlier that day and the first emotional therapy session two hours before, she was tired and sad and hadn't said a word since she'd arrived in Diagon Alley. They were about to be seated when she arrived and she barely managed to grumble a greeting to a bemused Pansy.

Blaise and Malfoy had only received a collective wave.

"Wasn't that funny?" Pansy asked her in a gleeful laugh.

Hermione wanted nothing more than to not be there.

Pansy's smile fell and worry etched her face, "Are you all right, Hermione?"

The emotions she currently combated in her chest somehow escaped from her lips in a broken, "Yes. Just a little tired."

She wasn't shocked that Pansy didn't believe her; for the life of her, she couldn't quite get the lie out in a convincing manner. It was evident that something was wrong with Hermione and

initially, Pansy was relentless in her quest to figure out just what bothered her so while Hermione shook her head.

"How did they go?"

For a moment, Hermione considered cringing at the mention of the word 'they' because she knew what she was asking about. Her eyes flickered to a distant Malfoy that didn't appear to be paying attention, then over to Blaise who was. "I don't think we should talk about it here."

"Very well."

"Are you sure you're all right?" to her surprise, it was Blaise who asked, not Pansy.

With more conviction, because it was easier to lie to him, Hermione answered, "Yes."

To her relief, they left her alone and Pansy continued her ramblings about a horrible shoot she'd had on the island. All was well until the aloof man spoke, "You're quiet tonight, Granger," Malfoy drawled, but it lacked something she couldn't put her finger on.

Before Pansy had interrupted her thoughts with words, there had been a thick silence that hovered over Hermione and Malfoy; a silence that was almost impenetrable. Not only had they not spoken to one another, but they hadn't spoken to anyone else at the table. Of course, their silence had allowed Pansy to completely dominate the conversation with tales of... *something*, and neither had wanted to get involved. Thank Merlin for Blaise and his unrelenting patience with his girlfriend's idle chatter.

"Indeed, I am. I have a lot on my mind," that sounded even funny in her own ears.

For the life of her, she couldn't quite figure out why she said that to him. Oh, right. She had decided to curb, but not completely stop, her senseless lying.

"Like what?"

Since when did he care about the inner workings of her mind? Hermione knew that he didn't hate her, but they weren't exactly friends who spilled their secrets over tea and pastries. That being said, a blind person could tell that something had shifted between them; that something had been shifting between them ever since the afternoon that they had spent on the roof together. Hermione was rather confused about *what* had changed, but she couldn't help but think about how far they'd come.

Draco Malfoy and Hermione Granger weren't friends; Merlin no, they weren't anything. They flopped between war and peace so often it made her head spin. Hermione wished she could say that she was indifferent to the man, but he just crawled under her skin sometimes and she currently hated being in such close proximity to him.

It was rather confusing.

She was so confused by him. She didn't know what he was thinking, planning, or feeling. Pansy had always said that Hermione was an enigma; well apparently Pansy knew more about Malfoy because to Hermione, he was the enigma, not her.

All in all, she was freaked by his cool but pleasant behaviour. It made her infinitely more protective of herself. "What do you care, Malfoy?" she asked, and even though her eyes, her voice didn't have the same bite as it did before.

Rather than argue, to her immense shock, he stared at her for a moment and sat down the menu that he'd been scrutinising. Clearly, it was his way of telling her that she wasn't worth the words. It made her feel bad about the tone that she'd spoken to him.

Using his fork, he scooped a crab cake off the appetizer platter and onto a smaller one. Rather than picking at it himself, he sat the plate in front of her with a little 'clink' that made her look down. Offhandedly, he spoke in that dull, aristocratic voice that grated her nerves, "You should eat something, Granger."

Wordlessly, she stared at the steaming crab cake.

Was she dreaming or was he being decent?

Nightmares *were* a side-effect of one of the bone-healing potions she was on. But then she pinched herself and it hurt, so that wasn't the case. Draco Malfoy was being decent – to her – for no malicious reason, it seemed. All the more reason to be slightly wary, "Will it kill me?"

"I try not to hurt those I – don't hate."

Hermione snuck a glance over at the pale man, who'd just lost what little colouring he had. The tension on Malfoy's face was perceptible to Hermione, but not to chatting Pansy and attentive Blaise. It was obvious those two only had eyes for each other. Finally. She had no idea what ran through his mind, but nevertheless, to erase the horrible feeling in her stomach from his almost – whatever the hell it was, she ate the crab cake.

And it didn't kill her.

He helped himself to the last crab cake on the platter. About two minutes went by before he asked, "Good?"

Hermione merely nodded, feeling horribly uncomfortable.

Pleasant conversation with Malfoy was about as awkward as talking to Snape about love potions.

Apparently he felt the same way. "So, did you like the physical therapist my mother recommended?"

Again, her eyebrow shot up as she regarded the blond man with wary curiosity. "Are you trying to converse with me, Malfoy?"

"It's not like we have much of an option, what with motor-mouth over there."

"Point."

Another silence fell between them.

"You're not making it terribly easy, Granger," he said, sans emotions.

"Yes, well, forgive me for being a little wary about you."

"Really, Granger," Malfoy drawled, "You shouldn't be so bloody paranoid."

"I have every reason to be, when it comes to you," she coolly replied.

Malfoy fell quiet after that statement and together they finished their respective crab cakes in silence.

Part of her knew that he was right; she *was* paranoid and defensive when it came to him. It was a natural reaction to keep herself on guard because of their past—and the fact that she knew that the moment she lowered that guard, he'd give her a reason to keep it up—like he did last time. It was rather wearisome. Part of her wanted to tell him that she felt miserable: her leg ached a bit after the therapy session, and she was ready to leave. However, she said nothing and felt guilty for treating him as if he was evil incarnate simply because she was insecure and uncomfortable with his non-prat behaviour.

Part of her wanted to apologise for her accusatory tone.

But she didn't say anything marginally close.

Hermione peeked over at the open menu in his hands. "I think I'm going to have the grilled salmon with the brown rice and mixed vegetables."

Malfoy glanced in her direction momentarily before his eyes roamed the menu. "I'm getting the steak and potatoes."

"They say that too much red meat can kill you."

"We're all dying anyway, Granger. I'd rather not have any regrets."

He had another point.

Once the food arrived, Pansy finally stopped her incessant, awkward chattering. A few minutes before, she'd dragged both Hermione and Malfoy into an uninteresting conversation about how funny some Muggle movie was...and then, much to Malfoy's obvious consternation, proceeded to tell *all* the jokes from it. Needless to say, both were uniform in their relief when Pansy quit that topic and started on another.

Instead, Pansy discussed the sensible topic of 'Christmas plans' between bites of her garden salad. Hermione felt a little better after eating nearly half her plate and casually listened to Blaise discuss what he could about his recent mission trip to Quebec. Malfoy still seemed a bit quiet as he ate, but politely entertained Pansy with his mother's holiday party plans. And Blaise flipped between two conversations with ease as he ate chicken.

The tension between them seemed to decline as dinner progressed and Hermione found herself cracking a smirk when Malfoy expressed his passionate hatred for parties, Pansy discussed the Parkinson Christmas party when she was ten where she had been pushed into

the lake behind the manor by Malfoy (something he vehemently denied with a smirk on his face), and Blaise just laughed at his best friend and girlfriend's petty banter. But the easy atmosphere didn't last. Dinner went downhill with nine words from Blaise: "For everyone's information, Ginny Weasley is coming this way."

Immediately, Hermione tensed.

Just when things were getting better, something always had to interfere.

Unperturbed, Malfoy was the first to mutter. "I saw," as he whipped out his wand, muttering, "*Muffliato*," under his breath.

Forget the spell; for the life of her, Hermione couldn't quite figure out how Blaise had seen anything that far off to the side when his eyes had been set on them. Maybe years of being an Auror had significantly improved his peripheral vision.

About a second after those words spoken, her eyes were drawn to the approaching redhead with the unreadable expression on her face. For some strange reason, she reminded Hermione of the human version of the Hogwarts Express as she steamrolled towards their table, ignoring curious looks from other patrons.

Malfoy's eyes flickered up and then he went back to cutting another piece of steak, as if all were right in his world. Blaise looked rather calm and impassive, but there was a twinkle of intrigue in his dark eyes. Pansy's baby blues locked with hers and a quick, non-verbal, 'Are you okay?' passed between them. Hermione gave a swift nod as she sipped on her water. After all, she doubted Ginny had anything to say to her after their last conversation.

And she was right.

"Pansy!" the younger witch gushed in that aggravating tone of hers, "I thought I saw you sitting over here—"

Before Ginny could finish, Pansy said. "Ginevra Weasley, we simply have to stop meeting this way. What is this? The third time I've run into you this week alone? And it's just Wednesday! Amazing how the fates continue to have us cross paths. If I didn't know any better, I'd say you were stalking me." Her voice was a blend of attitude and conceit with a hint of annoyance; it was a tone that Hermione had never heard Pansy use on someone else.

For a moment there, Hermione was tempted to smirk.

It was a true testament of Pansy's loyalty. She didn't just dislike Ginny Weasley because she was an ass-kisser, she didn't like Ginny because of the bad blood between her and Hermione.

The obnoxious and annoyingly fake laugh Ginny emitted made Malfoy release an annoyed grunt that Hermione only heard. "Of course not! I'm here with a few of my friends. They love your work and they're dying to meet you...would you care to join us? Only for a few minutes, I promise."

Hermione felt about as surprised as Pansy looked. What was Ginny playing at? It was *obvious* Pansy was in the middle of dinner. She wasn't just about to leave them high and dry in the middle of their dinner. "Well, as you see, I'm here with my boyfriend, Blaise," he gave a little nod as a greeting, "And with my friends; I'm sure you know Draco," Hermione instantly noticed Ginny's cheeks flush red when Malfoy gave her a casual smirk and was confused. "And Hermione, my best mate in the *world*."

At the mention of her own name, Hermione didn't know if she should've been more confused by Ginny's blush or Pansy's bizarre declaration. Best mate in the world?

She clearly hadn't received the memo.

And then it made sense. Pansy was trying to piss Ginny off, make her leave them alone, and show where her loyalties were—all at once. Brilliant, really, Hermione had to give it to her on that.

Ginny's face fell. "I didn't realise you two were so close," the witch in the black dress robes said as her face twisted into a mild scowl.

"We are," was Pansy's haughty reply as she draped her arm over Hermione's shoulder, "And have been for the last five years or so."

Cryptically, the redhead spoke with eyes narrowed. "You should be careful about who you let in and who you don't. A person like you shouldn't keep—"

"A person like *me*?" was Pansy's loud admonishment as she finally removed her arm from around Hermione's shoulder, "A person like me? What the *hell* is that supposed to mean?"

Ginny Weasley looked like a deer in headlights.

Hermione considered transfiguring her fork into a shovel so that Ginny could have a proper tool to dig her own grave. Malfoy, she noted from the corner of her eye, pristinely chewed on his steak, watching the verbal exchange with cool eyes that darted back and forth. He appeared to be entertained, but she wasn't sure.

"Let me make something perfectly clear to you, Miss Weasley," Pansy clipped with such a blazing passion it made even Malfoy's eyes widen. "You shouldn't stick your nose where it doesn't belong."

She took a defensive breath, "I—"

"If you're as smart as you think you are, you won't open your mouth to speak another word about my friends, Weasley. You don't know them and you haven't tried to know them. I won't sit here and let you make hasty rationalisations about them based on nothing but rumours," she spoke with such vehemence and gritted teeth.

The flickering lights in the restaurant let Hermione know just how out of control the situation was about to get.

Blaise looked around and started to open his mouth to calm his girlfriend, but Hermione beat him, "Pansy," she called softly and willed in a desperate voice, "Calm down."

"Fine."

Just at the sound of her voice, the flushed Ginny turned her attention on Hermione, who was trying to remain invisible. Just great. "I wonder how many lies you told to gain her trust."

"I wonder about some things, too, Ginny," she snapped, "Like why you sent my letter back unopened."

Hermione stared at the rapidly paling witch who was staring. Pansy smirked.

"Now," Hermione drawled after a few moments of silence, "if there isn't anything else that you wanted, I think it would be wise if you returned to your own table."

She heard Malfoy set down his fork with a small clink.

"I think I can do whatever the hell I want, Hermione," spat the angry redhead, who'd quickly recovered from being found out, "After everything you've done, I don't think you have the right to speak to me in any kind of manner."

"You're disturbing my meal, Miss Weasley, and to be frank, I'm sick of your voice," Malfoy told her rather gruffly, voice laced with hints of annoyance and conviction, "Take the hint and *leave*."

With a huff, Ginny shot them all nasty glares and stormed back to her table with her friends.

Pansy, of course, was the first to speak: "Oh, I want to hex her so *badly*. She's only kissing my arse because my boss is thinking about running a spring wedding theme and feature her company."

Blaise chuckled.

Malfoy returned to his steak.

Hermione stared at Malfoy.

As everything returned to normal, the lingering question in Hermione Granger's head was: *did Malfoy defend me?*

The question ran through her mind continuously for the conclusion of dinner, while Pansy paid and tipped the waitress, when Blaise asked them what they were planning to do the rest of the evening, when Pansy told him they were going to the Apothecary to pick up more pain potions, when Blaise asked if he and Malfoy could tag along because they had nothing better to do, when Malfoy scoffed and muttered something smart under his breath that she didn't catch, when Pansy suggested they leave so they could get there before the stores closed in an hour and led the way with her arm looped through Blaise's, and when she followed them outside, walking beside Malfoy.

Her question remained unanswered halfway down the street in the direction of the Apothecary when Malfoy spoke for the first time since the Ginny incident.

Their eyes were locked on Blaise and Pansy who walked a few feet in front of them, hand-in-hand, like a regular couple who didn't want to get separated in the crowded Diagon Alley. Malfoy, due to her annoying little limp, resigned himself to slow his strides a bit so she could keep up. She was almost positive that he hadn't realised it, because if he had, he would've sped off in spite.

"Pathetic, isn't it?" Malfoy drawled without ire, looking at his two best friends.

Hermione was quiet for a moment before replying, "Not really. She deserves it...they both do. I—" her words were cut off when she bumped into a hard body that would've sent her sprawling on the ground of the busy Diagon Alley sidewalk had Malfoy's reflexes not enabled him to instinctively catch her around the waist.

She looked up to apologise to whoever she bumped into, but for the second time in almost four months, she came face-to-face with someone who considered her the enemy.

That time, it was Ronald Weasley.

Oh fuck.

Part Two: Out of body experience.

Draco needed a wand, but an alcoholic drink would do just fine...preferably something that tasted like petrol, burned like pure acid, and had enough alcohol to aid him in his quest to forget everything that had just transpired.

Unfortunately for Draco, thanks to Blaise and the Healers at St. Mungo's, he didn't have any of that.

As he sat in his uncomfortable chair in the waiting room, surrounded by screaming babies, witches who openly stared at him, and a lot of sick patients, Draco was sure that if he'd had a wand, he would've hexed everyone in the room, just to mollify his own out-of-control rage. With one hand holding the other, he tapped his foot on the floor in a rather irritated manner; a scowl marred his face.

It was in that moment that he realised that Mother was right when she said that hindsight was a bitch.

Looking back, Draco realised that the decisions that he'd made without thinking had led him to his current reality. He should've had sense enough to walk away when he had had the

opportunity or when the Weasel immediately lashed out at Granger. He should've left Granger with Blaise and Pansy when everything had gotten out of control.

And it had, very quickly.

The moment Granger bumped into Weasley, time stood still for Draco. It was like he'd stepped out of his own body and watched the events that followed while on some cloud. Instinctively, his hand shot out and grabbed her around the waist, setting her right immediately.

He wasn't sure why he had done that; hell, he wasn't sure why he had done a lot of things that night: sitting next to Granger, talking to her, acting polite with her even when she was acting defensive, defending her against the Weasley girl, and walking next to her instead of leaving her behind because she was rather slow— thanks to her leg.

She stared blankly at Draco just for a moment before her eyes flickered to the man that she'd run into.

Weasley.

Ever the polite person, Granger apologised. "Excuse—"

"You should go back to Venice, if you can't walk without running into people."

Out of nowhere, Pansy appeared at his side. "That was uncalled for, Weasley. She was about to apologise, but clearly a Neanderthal like you can't possibly grasp the concept of an apology." Her hands were at her waist. Before she could advance, Blaise wrapped an arm around her waist, keeping her in place.

Blaise's voice was stern, "Pansy—"

Weasley's eyes narrowed as his face reddened, obviously ticked that he was being berated by a Slytherin, "Parkinson, I don't know who the hell—"

"That's quite enough, Ron," Granger's voice was oddly cool when she spoke to the man she once loved. "I ran into you by mistake, I apologise. Let's just move on. This isn't the place to start a scene." She turned to Pansy and gave a rather pleading look, "Come on, I have to get my potions before they close."

Pansy shot the Weasel another hateful glare before she smiled thinly at Granger, "Fine, Hermione, but you're lucky—"

"You're friends with *them*," Weasley glared at them with distaste. "What ever happened to your loyalty?"

She tensed and whirled around, furious. Her frizzed hair almost stood on end. "And who are you to question me, Ron? We are not friends. You've made that quite clear." Each word was more shrilled than the previous.

He saw Blaise whip out his wand and mutter a quick spell. *Muffliato*, probably.

It always worked like a charm.

"I just thought you always had standards."

Before Granger could even fix her lips to respond, Pansy seethed, "Standards?" Luckily, Blaise's grip around her waist tightened. "You want to talk about standards when your sister kisses my arse all the time, just to get a spread in a magazine? You want to talk about standards when your best friend—"

"Enough," Granger threw her hands up. "Let's go. Now!"

Pansy huffed, still steaming, "Fine."

"You know, Hermione, I wonder if your new friends know what you are." Weasley taunted.

"I think that's enough, Weasley, I'm rather sick of you and your sister starting drama," Draco heard himself say, though he couldn't quite believe it and neither could anyone else, according to the looks that were shot his way.

Pansy's mouth hung open, Blaise looked interested, Weasley looked positively enraged, and Granger looked like someone had finally stumped her.

That was at that moment he knew he should've turned on his heels and walked away, but he stayed. "I thought you were an adult, Weasley. Apparently, I was wrong."

Weasley just stared at him briefly and, to everyone's surprise, chuckled. "It's a mad world.:

Granger's voice broke a little, but she remained strong. "Ron—"

"You're a liar," he spat bitterly.

Pansy looked ready to throw hexes, "Leave—"

"Stop," she cut her off smoothly. She'd gone deathly pale and Draco didn't understand what was going on in his mind at that moment. Rage shot through him, unexplained anger. He felt compassion for her and it burned his insides, just as it had since she'd fallen into that lake. It made his hands shake.

"He's right. I'm a liar."

"Hermione—" the witch reached for her, touching her shoulder softly.

Draco saw the affection, the loyalty, and the silent strength Pansy hoped to transfer with just her touch.

Weasley stepped closer, "You're a liar...and a cheater."

A what? Draco's mind spun with the new information presented. Hermione Granger? A cheater?

"Ron, listen to me, I'm trying to tell you that—"

"No, I've kept quiet about this for over five years, Hermione...five years! So don't plead with me, I don't care about anything you have to say to me! Why should I care about someone who fell in love with someone else and left me to pick up the pieces?"

Draco's eyes widened, Pansy's narrowed, Blaise's remained impassive, and Granger's filled with unshed tears. He felt annoyed as they rolled down her face and collected on her chin. Draco was aggravated as her shoulders shook and her breathing became erratic.

He felt irritated that he cared as much about her tears as he did.

Goddamn, he just wanted her to stop crying before she even got started.

"I—I lied to you about—"

Weasley's voice rose as his anger rose, "I gave you all of me, everything! I loved you and you ran off with—someone else. I hope he hurt you like you hurt me. I hope it tears you up."

And Granger numbly whispered words he'd never forget, "It already has."

The Weasel laughed, it was bitter and cold, devoid of all emotions, "Oh, how the mighty have fallen."

She ignored him, looked at the sorrowful Pansy, and took her extended hand. "Let's go. I don't need anymore negativity." The other witch just nodded and they walked away, ignoring spectators who stared openly. He and Blaise exchanged bewildered looks.

Weasley looked after them and growled, "You're a bitch, Hermione."

And all hell broke loose.

Draco wasn't quite sure what happened after that. He could blame it on an out of body experience where he looked down and cursed at all the things his body was doing. All he remembered was a simmering fizz in his head throughout the conversation and how it careened and stacked. Then, it snowballed at those last words.

One second he heard Weasley call Granger a bitch and the next thing he knew his fist came out of nowhere, connecting with Weasley's jaw and sending the man backwards. He tripped on something and ended up on the ground, swearing hotly.

The consequence of his stupidity was immediate.

He knew his knuckles were broken as soon as they smashed into his jaw. Really, it wasn't surprising. He'd rarely struck anyone the Muggle way; he'd hex the daylight out of them before he resorted to such barbaric methods. Draco, for the first time in his life, had struck someone without even thinking...and his hand hurt like a bitch. "Son of a—"

"Malfoy!" Granger appeared out of nowhere and dropped on her knees next to Ron, who was still groaning in pain and clutching his face, "What the hell is wrong with you?"

There was something about Granger defending Ronald Weasley that set him off. "What the hell do you mean? I gave the git what he deserved. He called you—"

Her voice was oddly soft when she asked, "Why would you care?"

"I—" Draco froze.

Thankfully he'd stopped the words from leaving his lips. Truth be told, he respected her greatly for all the things that she'd been through, cared slightly, and understood the bond between her and Pansy. All he saw was her pain, but he also saw her strength.

"Ron?" her voice was even. "Are you alright?"

The redhead tensed and halfway shoved her hand away from him. "Don't you touch me, Hermione. I hate you."

"It's obvious that the Weasel doesn't give a shit about you, Granger." Draco spat. His conscience screamed at him to stop, but he refused to relent. He was about as furious that she had scolded him for punching the Weasel as he was confused about why he had defended her. Furious and confused were not the two emotions Draco ever wanted to feel at one time.

"Shut up, Malfoy!"

Twice, he'd put himself on the line for her and defended her. He saved her life, kept quiet about her secrets, and left her alone after finding out about Matthew, and what did she do to repay him? She berated him for hitting her old flame. Draco wanted to torture something. Anything.

The rage that flowed through him like a raging river was about to consume all rational thoughts. She treated him as if it was his fault! And beneath the anger, beneath the offence, beneath it all, he felt a twinge of pain and betrayal. And that further set him off. Though he still didn't understand why he felt pain, all Draco Malfoy knew was one thing.

He was mad. Beyond mad. He was torturing-kittens, kicking-gnomes, feasting-on-flesh angry.

And he was rapidly losing control as Granger raged on, "You don't care—"

"Don't you dare," he shot pure, verbal venom, "I've had enough with your judging me. I'm not the one who lied to my friends. I'm not the one who ran away. I'm not the one who pushes everyone away. I'm—"

She sprang to her feet, and rushed over to him, pained leg be damned. Draco didn't see her draw back, but felt the sting of her slap as her good hand connected with his cheek. He stumbled a bit, but kept his bearing. It took everything in him not to wrap his hands around her neck. She went to slap him again, but, that time, he had his wits back and grabbed her arm. Granger struggled against him, tried to slap him with her other hand, but he grabbed it as well.

She yelled and screamed at him, cursed no doubt, but something muffled it out in his head. He jerked her body particularly hard when the next words came out his mouth, "You may have gotten away with that today and all those years ago, but the next time you slap me, I won't hesitate."

Draco released her arms just as she pulled especially hard and Granger stumbled backwards a few steps. She would've fallen had Blaise not grabbed her around the waist and righted her.

"Hermione! Draco! Stop!" Pansy roared and immediately dropped her voice, "Mind your surroundings."

For the first time, they looked around and every person on the streets of Diagon Alley stared at them inquisitively.

"They can't hear you, but they don't need to hear anything to know that all hell has broken loose over here."

"Ron, we really need to talk. I need to tell you the—" she said in almost a whisper as she stared at the redhead.

"Stay away from me, Hermione, I mean it," and then Ronald Weasley Disapparated out of Diagon Alley.

Granger stared at the spot where he once stood, blinked twice, and promptly burst into sobs; there was no doubt in Draco's mind that she was hurt, but he didn't know if her pain was mental, physical, or emotional. Her tears, combined with the lashing his conscience gave him, rendered him incapable of shifting his eyes elsewhere. It was enough to make him forget about his hand momentarily.

Draco turned on his heels and promptly Disapparated.

"Well, thanks to my twenty-five year friendship with Rita Skeeter, the fight of the century will remain out of the papers."

He groaned internally as his mother claimed the chair next to him as her own. Crossing her legs in an elegant manner, Narcissa Malfoy smoothed down her son's hair, much to his annoyance. Draco didn't need any of her 'man of the house' or her 'don't disgrace us' lectures right then.

He just needed a strong alcoholic drink and a nice 'Obliviate' for his troubles.

"Mother, I—"

"You care about her, don't you?" she asked him softly.

Another internal groan, but that one was accompanied by a visible sneer and a harsh, "Mother —"

It amazed him that she always remained so calm and rational during his belligerent moments; it was a talent that shocked him as much as it annoyed him to bits. "Draco, I'm not here to let

you drag me into an argument just to prove that you're still you. I'm not even here to lecture you about your duties as the head of the Malfoy house. I'm here as your mother. I'm here because I know you better than anyone...and I know two things. One: you hardly *ever* lash out at anyone without magic. Two: you wouldn't have punched the Weasley boy if you didn't care for Hermione a little bit."

She was right. She was *always* right. Shit. But under no amount of torture would he ever admit it, much less to her. But the omnipotent smile on her face, however, told him that by saying nothing he'd said everything.

And in behaviour typical of his mother, she changed the topic with ease. "What did they say about your hand?"

He held it up, stretching long fingers out as much as he could, "It's healed, but they told me I shouldn't try to Apparate for the rest of the day, thanks to the pain potions they had me take."

Narcissa nodded, absorbed the information, and they sat in blessed silence for a few minutes.

Draco found himself transfixed with the patterns on the floor while Narcissa hummed a little tune and tapped her foot. He wanted to yell in frustration, not at his mother, but at how extraordinarily things had gone wrong over the last four months.

More than anything, he wished he'd listened to Pansy. It was bigger than he, it was more than he could or wanted to handle. He wasn't supposed to care about her; he just wanted to find out what happened, satisfy his curiosity, and move on. Then he had to fuck it up by actually *caring* about her.

A pair of shoes entered his sightline.

Shoes that looked an awful lot like—he looked over expecting to see his mother, but she was gone.

That meant.

He raised his head and there stood Granger.

"What are you doing here, Granger?"

She took a breath, obviously apprehensive under his cool gaze.

Granger licked her lip, shifting her weight from her hurt leg to the other, and cracked her knuckles, "Malfoy," she took mother's abandoned chair and massaged her leg, "I figure I owe you a 'thank you'...you know, for defending me...." It obviously took a lot for Granger to apologise. She fidgeted horribly, pulled at her clothes, messed with the skin on her arm, and kept popping her knuckles.

"Whatever," grumbled the annoyed Draco as he looked away.

Silence overtook the two, but it didn't last long.

"Over five years ago, I lied to Ronald Weasley."

"I don't care about your drama, Granger. I only care about myself, remember? That's what you were about to say."

"I was angry and I lashed out at the wrong person. Pansy gave me a big tongue-lashing about that, too, after you Disapparated."

Pansy had argued with Granger about him? He couldn't believe it.

"You've done a lot and you've kept quiet about a lot of things, too. You didn't deserve it. I apologise."

He nodded, accepting her apology for reasons he didn't understand. "Why didn't you lash out at him?"

She sighed, "Because—I can't. He has every reason in the world to be ill with me, and it's mainly my fault."

"Did you really cheat on him?"

"In a way, yes...but you have to understand that we were in a *war* and we were frightened."

Draco snorted. "I think I understand that more than you think."

Blushing, she ran a hand over her fluffy hair. "Oh, right. Sometimes I forget you were affected by it, too."

He shrugged and stared at the ground again, "It's easy to forget about the people who were on the wrong side. It's easy to forget about the evil."

"Malfoy," she said his name in a way that made him look at her oddly, "You weren't evil then—maybe a little misguided, prejudiced and cruel, but not evil."

It felt odd, hearing those words coming from her, and suddenly, he didn't want to talk about evil or the war or what kind of person he was, not with her anyway. Not with Hermione Granger: war hero. So he said nothing and they sat in another silence that she broke once again.

"I think it's only fair that I tell you why Ron thinks I'm such a bitch. I think it's only fair to tell you the truth. I *didn't* cheat on Ron. I slept with someone else, yes, but it happened before Ron. *Way* before we got together. In fact, I was furious with Ron and frightened for my life when it happened the first time...and I was confused about him and overwhelmed by the aftermath of the final battle when we slept together the second time."

Draco shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

"We were so stupid. Our actions were inexcusable, and I'm not even going to try," she sighed. "People think that I'm perfect, and that incapable of making mistakes, and that's just not true. I'm not just the brains, I'm a person, and people make mistakes. We made a mistake. A large

one. We agreed to end it after that time. He started dating someone and I started dating Ron. Ron and I didn't wait before we...got intimate," Hermione blushed a bit and looked at her feet uncomfortably before she pulled herself together. "In all honesty, things between Ron and I were fine, until I found out I was pregnant in Australia. I was about to turn nineteen and I was scared of being rejected, so when I decided to keep Matthew, I—I didn't know exactly who the father was so – so I told Ron that I cheated on him while in Australia, fell in love, and I was moving away with the guy so he wouldn't follow me to Italy." She shook her head. "I don't know what I was thinking. I was panicked, and I didn't want him to come after me. It worked like a charm," her last words were bitter.

"So why lie?"

"Honestly, the truth will hurt him more."

Draco glanced over at her, "Who was he?"

She met his eyes, "I thought you didn't care."

With a shrug, he said, "I don't think whether I care or not matters. You've told me this much. You can tell me the rest."

Thoughtfully, she stared at her hands before looking over at him, "Pansy doesn't even know." Granger looked at him with pained eyes, "Who do you think it was?"

Draco looked at her for a moment as thoughts ran through his mind. Who else was she around during the war? A list of names flashed in his head and he crossed each of them out until one was left. And then everything made sense.

The name came out in a whisper, "Potter."

Granger nodded.

Draco paused for a moment before his next question escaped his lips, "And Potter is Matthew's—"

There was a lot of pain in her voice when she answered, "I didn't believe it until Matthew opened his eyes the first time, but yes."

nothing at all

Chapter Summary

"..."I've done so much wrong, I've lied so much, and now I have to fix it. "

Chapter Notes

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

Chapter Twelve

Nothing At All

Part One: Fourteen minutes

December 10th

From the corner of her eye, Hermione discreetly watched as the clock above her therapist's head inched closer to the next hour.

Fourteen minutes left and she thought she had a good chance at grasping the win in that day's staring contest. She'd lost the previous battle and Hermione was determined not to lose this one, too.

After all, she wasn't a loser.

It was the third appointment she'd attended and other than a few irritated exchanges after the therapist, Katherine Shepard, had asked that particularly annoying '*why are you here?*' question, they hadn't spoken more than two words outside of "*good morning*" and "*until next time*". Hermione watched as Ms. Shepard shifted in her comfortable chair, scribbling notes as she stared back.

How she did it, Hermione didn't want to know, but apparently she'd had practice.

Maybe Hermione wasn't the only one who just stared at her therapist during their sessions.

She found herself wondering how many success stories Katherine Shepard had under her belt. Probably none...well, one, if she counted Pansy, but she was still a work in progress. Hermione couldn't see a broken person being fixed by Katherine Shepard. She was young, having only been five years ahead of her at Hogwarts, and a Hufflepuff; and while Hermione

knew that being a young Hufflepuff didn't mean she hadn't experienced much life, it still didn't reassure her. It still didn't make her want to open up to the witch and place her trust in her.

Trust.

Everything seemed to boil down to that little five-letter word, as of late.

It seemed that Hermione had put faith in a lot of people she wouldn't have considered before.

Twelve minutes left.

For example: Draco Malfoy.

Hermione didn't know what in the hell had possessed her to tell him as much as she had, and she berated herself once she left him sitting there after fifteen minutes of silence. It was as if she couldn't stop once she started. The more she talked, the lighter she felt; the pressure on her body seeming to ease. No, of course she didn't tell him everything, but she had a new appreciation for Pansy's advice to '*get it all out there*'. Although, Hermione hadn't expected to test that theory out on Malfoy, she felt better about the entire conversation after she blamed her revelation on the residual shock of him outright defending her twice in one afternoon.

And like before, he didn't say a word after she finished.

Talking to him was different than talking to Pansy, Hermione realized almost instantly.

She didn't trust him nearly as much as she trusted Pansy, but she *could* say that she trusted him somewhat. She kind of *had* to, thanks to their previous conversation. And besides that, he'd given her plenty of reasons to put her trust in him.

Pansy was a bubble of optimism; she always provided comfort, advice, and a shoulder for her to lean and cry on. Her constant claim was that everything would get better and brighter as time passed. Merlin, Pansy *always* had something to say. But sometimes, Hermione didn't want her words. She didn't want her comfort. She didn't want her advice. The shoulder was fine, but everything else she could keep. She just wanted someone to sit and listen, without words.

Malfoy had done just that.

It wasn't as though he could do anything else, however. It wasn't as though he was going to placate her with his optimism; that just wasn't his style or character. It wasn't like he going to inundate her with wisdom and personal experiences; she was sure he didn't have any to which she could relate. It wasn't as though he was going to berate her for all the wrong she'd done; he was just as flawed as she was. Draco Malfoy wasn't going to do anything at all, except listen.

And that had made her feel better than she had in a long time.

Eleven minutes left.

She could tell the staring contest was like a little game to her therapist, a childish game Katherine Shepard was determined to win. Hermione thought it was rather sad she could read her therapist better than her therapist could read her. She would've laughed if Katherine wouldn't have seen it as some sort of critical breakthrough.

Her hands rested on the arms of the chair as the game continued.

And then it happened.

Katherine looked completely away from Hermione, down at her notes, then back up...only to meet the faint smirk of the winner. She could almost hear her therapist huff with annoyance. Katherine must've thought she must've hidden it well, but she hadn't. She could sit there and wait all she wanted, but Hermione refused to answer the same question for the third time in a row. It was rather redundant and irritating.

So Ms. Shepard could play with her quill; let it enthrall her. It was the only action that was going to happen in that room.

Nine minutes left.

Hermione stared at her therapist. She looked...normal. Like life had treated her kindly. Her eyes narrowed as bitterness rose in her chest.

"Hermione," she'd started calling her that during the previous session, "What is on your mind right now?"

Katherine put her notebook on the end table next to her chair, got comfortable, and adjusted the thick frames on her face.

Well, at least it was a different question, but she felt too belligerent to respond.

Silence.

The woman of the question sipped on her bottle of water and the therapist resumed scribbling on her notepad. Merlin, how many notes could she take on a person who wasn't speaking? Perhaps she was scribbling her grocery list or maybe her to-do list.

That was plausible.

Hermione leaned back in her seat, drumming her fingers on the arms of the chair.

Eight minutes left.

"Can you tell me what you're thinking about?" she asked again, scribbling more notes.

She found her therapist's voice disagreeable partly because she sounded like the female version of Malfoy. Of course, it was in the sense that her voice was disgustingly calm, lacked emotion, and contained hints of arrogance and boredom which struck a familiar chord.

With a sigh, Hermione replied, "I'm questioning why I'm paying you to sit in silence."

That certainly got her attention. Calmly, she peered over the frames of her glasses and replied, "We're sitting in silence because you refuse to tell me why you're here."

Extremely annoyed, Hermione retorted. "Only because *you've* asked the same question three times already. I've given you my answer three times. What more do you want?"

Seven minutes left.

Of course, her voice remained sickeningly calm, "This isn't about what I want, Hermione. It's about what *you* want and to be perfectly honest, I'm not sure if you're ready for therapy."

"How can you say something like that?"

She shrugged. "Easy. You...are...not...ready...for...therapy. There, I said it. Hermione, you're not ready to open yourself up. You're not ready to talk...about anything. And until you are, we'll sit here. Believe me; this isn't easy for me. I'm good at what I do, I've gotten through to a lot of patients, and you wouldn't have been referred to me if I wasn't as good as my clients say I am," she paused for a moment and told her, "For the last three sessions I've considered referring you to another therapist, but I haven't, because even though you've tested my patience, my stubbornness is about as legendary as yours. I *don't* give up on people and I'm *not* giving up on you. So we'll sit here, each week, until we're old and grey and senile... or until you decide to lower the defences around you."

Dumbfounded, Hermione just sat there and stared at her. She was absolutely stunned by the raw honesty and determination in her therapist's voice.

"I can only help you if you're willing to help yourself, Hermione."

She sat up straighter in her chair. "I am willing."

"Then prove it, talk to me...tell me *something*. You hide behind your well-constructed walls. I can't get in unless you let me...no one will be able to get in unless you let them."

Six minutes left.

Her thin hand patted down her fluffy curls, "What do you want me to say?"

"You could start by answering my question: why are you here?"

And Hermione Granger detonated.

She was a woman on the edge and she'd just about had enough with being asked the same question repeatedly.

In a flash, she was on her feet. "Because I'm a mess inside. I'm *sick* of hating myself! Because I have dreams about my dead son where he tells me he's happy and he wants me to be happy, too. I feel like I've failed everyone because I used to know everything, but I can't remember *anything* about my parents anymore! I'm here because I don't know what to do and I'm afraid I'm going to fail my son like I've failed my parents. I'm here for me." Her voice cracked.

Katherine watched her client with an even expression as she jotted down a quick note.

"I just—" Hermione's voice broke and the tears finally came, "I want to love myself, I just...I can't do it on my own. And that's why I'm here."

There was a pregnant pause before she said, "You're *not* a failure, Hermione. In fact, you are so much stronger than you think you are."

Everyone had told her that and she was quite sick of those words. "Well, I've been so strong for so long...I'm just tired of being so strong. I was strong for my friends before and during the war. I was strong for Pansy. I was strong for my parents. I was strong for Matthew. I just don't have any strength left for me."

"You do, and I'm going to help you see it, but the thing is you have to change your mindset before any real changes can occur. As long as you think negatively, everything's going to be negative...and you're going to miss out on all the good things and the good people you already have in your life because you're so caught up seeing the bad in everything."

"I only see the bad because that's all that's happened to me."

"Do you consider the years with your son as bad?"

"No," she shook her head, "Of course not."

Three minutes left.

Quietly, Hermione whispered, "This is going to be my first Christmas without Matthew. It'll be a year since he died soon enough."

Katherine jotted a note.

"Pansy is determined not to leave me alone for a moment, but that's all I want."

"She's just trying to help you."

"I know, but it's just too much," Hermione responded miserably.

"Why don't you tell her? Why don't you talk about it with her? You obviously trust her."

And there it was again: *trust*.

She'd be lying if she said she didn't trust Pansy. As the months passed, she found herself trusting and depending on Pansy more and more, but couldn't open up to her about the inner-workings of her mind. She didn't want to; that was, unfortunately, how things stood, at the moment.

It was probably because Pansy had witnessed some of the hardest days of Hermione's life (and vice versa). Hermione could tell there was some lingering damage she'd hidden, just to be strong for Hermione. She didn't want to add any weight to Pansy's shoulders. Sure, she was working to pick up the pieces, but Pansy, like her, was delicate. She didn't want to be a

burden, she didn't want to be a weight, and she didn't want Pansy to leave because she couldn't handle all the sadness in Hermione's life.

Two minutes left.

"You're quiet again, are you angry?" her therapist asked after a full minute of silence.

The honest and cold words escaping from her own lips chilled Hermione to the bone, "Yes, but not at you."

Katherine crossed her legs and jotted a little note. "At whom are you angry, Hermione?"

She met the blue eyes of her therapist and muttered, "The list is too long for me to disclose it all in one sitting."

"Where do *you* rank on that list?"

She didn't even have to contemplate her response for a moment, "Number one."

The therapist made a few notes, "Why?"

For some strange reason, she felt it was okay to say her next words, "I've done so much wrong, I've lied so much, and now I have to fix it. If I would've told the truth, things would've been different."

"You don't know that."

"But *I feel* that way. I feel like I'm the reason my parents died...if I hadn't taken them to Australia, if I had thought to put wards up on their house, if I had thought of all these things, they would still be alive. I feel like I'm to blame in my son's death. All I had to do was call his father, I know he would've been in Italy by the next morning and he would've helped in any way he could...but I didn't."

One minute left.

"Hindsight is always twenty-twenty, you know that."

"Yes, I do."

She checked her watch, "We have less than a minute left, but we've made a lot of progress in the last fourteen minutes."

Katherine picked up her wand and waved it in the air, swish and flick.

Hermione was too emotional to ask her what she was doing.

"I have all my patients keep a journal," as if on cue, a book zoomed into the room and Katherine caught with perfected ease, "Once a day; I want you to write how you feel. It can be just words like 'sad, depressed, happy, and frustrated' or it can be detailed. You don't even

have to write in it at all," she handed her patient the book and watched as she leafed through the empty pages, "I just think that it may make you feel a bit better."

There was a familiar chime that let Hermione know the session was over.

"Same time next week?" asked the hopeful therapist.

Hermione nodded, cradled the journal in her hand, rose from her seat, and walked out. She had half an hour before Italian lessons with Narcissa and she would need every minute to pull herself back together again.

Part Two: The Fox and the Grapes

The air in the upscale London coffee shop was thick – a pleasingly thick air, filled to capacity with the scents of coffee beans, scones, jams, honey, and sweet pastries. The melodic sounds of a classical guitar poured from the Muggle speakers placed high on the walls.

Overall, it was rather quiet, only the music, light chattering from other patrons, and the soothing sounds of machines grinding coffee beans could be heard.

Draco Malfoy sat in his table for two in the back corner of the restaurant. The position of the table gave him a perfect view of the bustling streets of downtown London. He sipped his Colombian espresso and bit from his scone as he looked out the window.

While it was nice in the restaurant, outside, it was another story.

A streak-free wall of glass separated him from the rest of London and for that he was grateful. The heavens grumbled with the anticipation for another winter downpour. It had rained a lot in the past few weeks, but other than the flurries that fell nearly two weeks before when he saved Granger's life, it hadn't snowed once; much to Mother's consternation. She was anticipating a white Christmas.

Snow, she said, made the Manor look like one of those old mansions in the stories she had read as a child. He'd have to take her word on that because he didn't give a damn. In fact, he wanted it to snow so she would stop complaining. He wanted it to snow so she wouldn't talk about how much she couldn't wait for Lucius to return from the hospital tomorrow. He'd been in St. Mungo's since the night of the choking incident that left very light residual bruises on his neck that he hoped no one would notice. To his dread and her thrill, Father was returning home, just for the holiday season, to be with his family.

Five Healers cleared him, claiming he was no longer a threat to others on the current regimen of potions he taking.

Draco's neck thought differently.

The puffy white clouds over London darkened to a pitiful grey. Murky smog settled on the city like a fog on a summer morning. The combination of grey clouds and smog made it look like dusk rather than forty-five minutes past noon.

He thought of it as some strange and twisted premonition of the future.

He glanced at his expensive wristwatch. She was fifteen minutes late. Draco frowned and took another long drink from his cooling mug. He'd like to say it was of no consequence to him that she was late, but he found himself a bit annoyed with her unpunctuality; especially since it was uncharacteristic.

Well, it didn't matter, Narcissa Black Malfoy was the reason he was there.

"Oh no! I forgot that I have to meet Hermione at that nice coffee shop we go to all the time for Italian lessons. Draco, can you do me a huge favour?"

"Depends."

"Could you go in my place and have a cup of coffee with her?"

*He looked up from reading an article in the Prophet; a blond brow rose inquisitively,
"Umm...why?"*

"I didn't have time to write and cancel our Italian lesson. She lives so far out and I hate she has to come all the way into London when she doesn't have to. At least she can get a cup of coffee out of it and decent conversation as well."

*Her excuse was weak at best. Draco folded the paper carefully and rested it on the table. He had a resolution in mind that didn't have him travelling into Muggle London on his day off.
"Okay, well, I'll send my eagle owl. The message will get to her within the hour."*

Narcissa narrowed her blue eyes. "Would it kill you to have a cup of coffee with her?"

With a shrug, he replied, "It may."

She then threatened him with a few hexes before he caved.

Draco wouldn't mind if she never showed up at all. His pleasant day wouldn't be ruined by her arrival. He could finish his coffee and scone without seeing Granger's miserable face and her sallow features, without hearing her voice, and without looking into her hollowed out eyes. He'd heard, seen, and felt enough of her misery in the last four months to last him a lifetime.

And then she walked in, umbrella in hand. She wore a jacket, jeans, shoes, and the same tired expression he was all too familiar with.

Draco sighed.

Naturally, there were books tucked under her arm. Italian books, he assumed.

Immediately her eyes wandered around the entire shop until they fell on his. He half-expected for her to turn on her trainers and walk out, but she didn't. Instead, she took a deep breath and approached him. Courageously, albeit very slowly; it looked as if she were approaching a wild animal. Draco rolled his eyes and bit into his scone, chewing thoughtfully as she came to a halt right in front of the table.

The confusion written on her face and in her voice sound similar to the confusion in his head whenever he thought of her. "I thought I was supposed to meet Narcissa here."

He drank a bit of coffee and replied, sans emotion, "My mother couldn't make it today and sent me in her stead."

Concern melted into her features and voice when she asked, "Is she all right?"

Part of him wanted to explain that his completely psychotic father was returning home and Mother was at the manor driving the house elves up a wall with her outrageous plans for his '*Welcome Home*' dinner that he probably wouldn't eat because he'd either be too busy wandering the corridors of the Manor or completely catatonic. Part of him wanted to tell her that Narcissa was busy planning the extravagant, invitation-only Christmas Eve dinner scheduled in twelve days; a dinner to which, Granger, was already invited.

But he decided against everything that popped into his mind.

He knew her secrets and struggles, but she didn't know his. Draco wanted to keep it that way for as long as possible. "Yes, she's fine. Something came up and it was too late to write and cancel. Would you care to join me?" His voice was polite, as always, but there was a detached edge in it. Draco wanted to make it clear that he didn't care either way.

Granger stared at him. "What?"

Draco rolled his eyes at her lack of eloquence. "I promised her I'd have coffee with you."

She stood stock-still, but set the books down on the table. One was an Italian book and the other looked like a journal of sorts. "Why would you do that?"

His nose flared as he released a frustrated breath. "Because she *asked* me to," he snarled hot-headed, "Like it or not, I prefer not to be hexed by my own mother. So sit down."

It took a hundred and seven ticks of his wristwatch for Hermione Granger to settle into her seat across from him. It took another hundred and fifty before she decided to order a small hot chocolate and a vanilla pastry.

Draco ordered another Colombian espresso and told the pretty waitress to put her selections on his tab. He didn't know who he hated more; defensive Granger or lying Granger. It was a real toss-up. They both clawed their way under his skin in the worst possible way. Finally, he decided he could handle defensive Granger, but it was only after he realised, she was

defensive because she felt threatened and apprehensive around him. She had a few reasons to fear him, he realized.

But didn't she have more reasons to trust him? Draco pushed that thought from his mind. After all, he could care less about securing her trust.

"I can pay for my own food, Malfoy." Granger said lowly.

"Nobody said you couldn't. Stop being so bloody defensive, Granger," he bit out with gritted teeth, "It's rather annoying."

She huffed, but thankfully, said nothing further.

Ten minutes of silence rested on them much like the cloud of smog rested on the city. Draco spent his time alternating between glancing out the window and drinking the last of his cooling coffee. When he glanced in Granger's direction, he found she was busy staring out the streak-free window; her fingers rhythmically tapped to the beat of the guitar track, but her rhythm was slightly off.

For the first time since she walked in, he examined her closely.

She sat across from him; her posture was a bit rigid and uncomfortable and her legs were crossed. Granger's bushy hair was pulled from her face, highlighting her unblemished skin. Looking at her brought back memories of what she had told him at the hospital. He hadn't allowed himself to think about Granger and Potter's relationship (or whatever it was) or even the conception of Matthew; in fact, he didn't want to think about it at all. It was probably a lot more complicated than the story she told; everything else in her life proved to work that way. Still, he narrowed his eyes at her, not in malice, but as if she were a maze, he was trying to navigate for the first time.

From what he remembered from the picture he'd returned to her, the two things Matthew inherited from his father were part of his eye colour and his dark messy hair. Everything else came directly from his mother. Yes, he was his mother's son in every way and the jury was out on whether he found the Granger sitting across from him as attractive as the Granger from the photo.

The thought was alarming enough to jerk him from his mental reverie.

His eyes darted once again to Granger just to see if he'd been caught staring and found she was oblivious. Whatever she was looking at must've been highly interesting because she didn't glance in his direction. And when she did, it was only because the waitress delivered their orders.

Granger sipped her hot chocolate and took a bite from her pastry. She looked as if she'd waged an internal battle only moments before she said, "Why aren't you at the Ministry today?"

"Took the day off," he replied casually.

She nodded and gave a small, "Oh," in response.

"Why aren't you at work?"

"I don't work on Thursdays."

Draco's brow creased as he asked, "Well, why not?"

"I only work three days a week, Monday through Wednesday." She told him. "It's only because I'm either doing private jobs or field work; both are taxing on the body. In deference to the Marquette incident, my boss has completely taken me off field work until I'm done with physical therapy and I've recovered all my strength. I don't think he likes it much, but he's paying me too much to send me out in the field where I can get hurt even worse than before."

"Have you forgiven Potter yet?"

"No."

The inner teenager in Draco Malfoy chuckled with glee while the adult man sipped his coffee and asked, "Will you?"

She shrugged stiffly, but spoke calmly, "One day."

"Why does he hate you so much?"

"It's like that fable I told your mother that very first day at the restaurant; the fable about the fox and the grapes."

Draco didn't know what the hell she was talking about. He remembered the story, but he had been too busy trying to process every word she'd said that afternoon to grasp it fully. Another silence settled on them. Draco remained pensive while Granger tapped her fingers to the music. Eventually, he gave up trying to remember the full story about the fox and the grapes.

Instead, his mind wandered into another direction. He'd read the article in her file about how she was one of the top-ranking curse-breakers in Europe. "If you don't mind me asking, just how did you gain so much prestige in the curse-breaking business when you had Matthew at home?"

Granger stared at him blankly for a moment before inhaling.

"I'm not going to say it was easy and that I floated into motherhood with practiced ease, I'm not even going to tell you that it was all sunshine and daisies. I was eighteen when I found out I was pregnant and nineteen when Matthew was born. I was, in some way, a child myself. I had alienated myself from everyone, even Pansy."

"Why didn't you at least tell Pansy?"

"She had her own issues to overcome, and that's the truth."

Draco sipped his fresh cup of coffee.

Granger sipped her steaming hot chocolate before she continued, "I was alone and scared, but determined to do right by him." She told him with a determined gleam in her eyes and quickly continued, "I don't know what would've happened had I not gotten the offer from the Venetian bank before I left for Australia. I had every intention of turning them down, but when I decided to keep Matthew, I quickly accepted their offer."

He found he was very impressed with her. "What did you do for them?"

"They hired me as an apprentice, paid me next to nothing, and I studied for my NEWTs with a tutor they provided.

"But what did you do for money?"

"I'd depleted my personal savings during the Horcrux hunt the previous year, but my parents had set up a little trust fund for me that I could obtain when I turned nineteen. So I used that money to buy a house, furnish it, pay for all the medical expenses because I'd decided to only go to a Muggle doctor, and prepare to have a child. I put some away for a rainy day and once I had Matthew, we lived on my apprentice pay. It was very tight; I only had enough to pay for Matthew's things and a nanny, who just happened to be a witch. I almost had to fire her at one point because I didn't have the money to pay her, but she took pity on me and stayed on for free...and when I was hired as a permanent curse-breaker, I paid her back everything I owed and even more."

There wasn't much he could say.

Outside, the thunder crackled again.

"I was there for him in the mornings, she stayed with him during the day, and I came home every night at the same time. Nobody, except my boss, knew about Matthew and I wanted it to stay that way. I loved my job, but I loved my son more and I didn't take on any assignments that would keep me out late. It seemed that every few months I was getting another promotion and by the time his second birthday rolled around, I was in charge of all the bank operations *and* I was doing private contract work on the side."

Draco nodded.

"To be honest, I don't know how I balanced it all, but I managed. *We* managed through everything, sickness and all." She finished, but her voice had lost its earlier strength. Brown eyes stared into her hot chocolate mug. He could tell she battled to keep back the tears.

Draco cleared his throat uncomfortably. "I'm s—"

"I don't want your pity, Malfoy. Other than the fact it's an extremely painful topic, that's the other reason I don't talk about him or my parents. I don't need your pity; I don't want it. I have enough people in this world that pity me, including myself, and I don't need you jumping on the bandwagon."

Stunned by her vehemence, he looked across the table at her. His response came out cool and brusque, "I wasn't giving it, Granger. I don't pity you. If anything, I empathize. I'm sure that your big brain can wrap around the concept that pity and empathy are two completely different things."

Granger looked stumped, "Y—"

Draco lowered his voice and eyes, "Again, stop being so bloody defensive. It's rather annoying."

Another silence fell between them. Granger stared at her mug while Draco finished off his scone.

"When did he get sick?" He asked and as always, for the life of him, he couldn't figure out why he asked that question.

Of course, she was back on the defence. "Why do you want to know?"

He'd had about enough. "I think we're past the distrusting and I think we're past the conspiracy theories," Draco spat coolly and continued in a tone that was a mix between annoyance and detachment, "I think I've proven that I'm not going to run around spreading tales about your business. I think we've gotten to the point where I can safely say that I don't hate you. Besides, Pansy and my mother would *invent* hexes to use on me if I ever did."

The next silence was a bit more uncomfortable than the previous. Granger bit into her pastry and chewed with difficulty while Draco polished off the rest of his warm coffee.

A sad smile appeared on her face as a single tear rolled down her cheek and dropped into her hot chocolate. "I almost died having him and he was *born* sick...he had a heart murmur and they did surgery on him immediately. They told me I should give him up for adoption; that a nineteen-year-old girl couldn't possibly do it alone, but I refused. What kind of mother gives up on her child because he's not perfect?"

His mind, he realized, wandered back to his own mother and all the sacrifices she'd made for him...and he understood. He just understood.

"We got past the heart murmur remarkably fast. He recovered so well – better than they anticipated. They said he wouldn't be able to walk without being winded, but he ran around constantly when he learned. They said he wouldn't be able to do anything, but he did *everything*. He played football and rode his tricycle constantly, once he learned. All was normal until he turned two."

"Two?"

"Yes, it seemed like he was deteriorating right before my eyes. He was so tired, uncomfortable, and weak. The nanny took him to the park and he fell; the bruise didn't go away for a month. He started losing weight, he couldn't walk straight, and he had blurred vision. And one day he had a seizure and was rushed to the hospital. All it took was one blood test to tell me everything. He had acute lymphocytic leukaemia and he needed a bone

marrow transplant. I tried to go about it the magical way, but their way is pretty much the same as the Muggle way. So I stuck to what I knew."

Draco shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

"I wasn't a match and I just *knew* Harry was. I thought about writing him, confessing everything, and begging his help, to save our son, but I couldn't. Anyhow, I didn't have to, because they quickly found a match; he got the marrow he needed, and they started him on chemotherapy, and three months later, he was in remission. I thought we were in the clear, and we were...from leukaemia. But we weren't safe from the tumour."

"Tumour?"

She nodded solemnly, "You see, the seizure before was caused by the tumour, *not* the Leukaemia; they caught the Leukaemia first. So when they found the tumour just a few weeks after his third birthday, they started him on radiotherapy. He was as reluctant as any three-year-old would be, but he was really brave about everything. I could hardly tell he was sick, nothing about him had changed very much. By that time, I could afford to bring in a private Healer to help and I did. The Healer helped prolong his life and kept his hair on his head which would've been gone. But the tumour never stopped growing. It was in a dangerous part of his area, they couldn't operate, and soon they told me to start making arrangements. And that's when I wrote Pansy."

And he knew the rest of that story. He didn't need to hear it again.

It seemed that his respect for her quadrupled in the last half an hour and if he was going to be honest with himself, he couldn't fathom everything she had experienced. Nor did he want to.

Parenthood hadn't crossed his mind when he was nineteen. Life was all about rehabilitating the family name, recovering from the war, dealing with a father in Azkaban, and struggling to get a decent night's worth of sleep. Not only did Granger have to pull herself back together from the war and the personal tragedies that followed, she had to put herself second after a child. She was a mother, but not just any mother; she was the mother of a sick child.

And she hadn't given up on him. It was a testament to her character.

Tears ran absently down her cheeks as she stared out the streak-free window. She didn't bother to wipe them away.

All was quiet between them.

The thunder rumbled, the sky flashed with light, and everyone outside scrambled for shelter as the heavens opened and cried with her. Draco looked across the table and thought about saying something, but thought it best if he said nothing at all.

A/N: Matthew's suffering is based on actual events (well, minus the heart murmur; that was taken from my little cousin...who is doing great now). Matthew's life was based off a boy I went to school with growing up. He and his parents went through a lot with his tumor and the Leukemia. He was older than Matthew when he died (he was 10), but I don't remember him because of his sicknesses or the way he died...I actually remember him because of his strength, his courage, his determination, his sense of humor, and his smile. I hope you all enjoyed the chapter.

whispers in the night

Chapter Summary

"Jealousy is a disease," she sneered and insincerely added, "I hope the tramp gets well soon."

Chapter Thirteen

Whispers In The Night

Part One: Never leave home without your wand

December 24th

It was Christmas Eve and Draco was bored to bits, but he sipped his wine and listened to the idle chatter of the older heavy-set wizard whose name he could not remember if his life depended on it.

Was it Stamford or Samuel or Stanford? Oh hell, he didn't know.

"...the elves did a splendid job on the ballroom..."

And they had, Draco admitted with a casual nod of his head.

The party was going great. His mother had enamoured everyone so much with the spectacular beauty and splendour of the ballroom that not a single one of their one hundred guests had asked about his father's whereabouts, to their utmost relief.

But the night wasn't over.

The lively, conversation-filled ballroom screamed of the Malfoys' level of sophistication and their dedication to their Slytherin house, decorated in a silver and green theme with hints of holly red.

It was the soirée of the year and everyone dressed to impress. Witches and wizards, donned in the most expensive and prized robes, looked around the room in complete amazement.

Entertainment and distractions abounded for all: dancing, star-gazing on the terrace, gossiping about other witches, catching an unsuspecting sod under enchanted mistletoe, making new acquaintances, conversing amongst themselves, and making donations to one of the charities the family endorsed. Charmed candles hovered high above the ground and gave the room a more intimate feel. Garland wreaths of different types and styles hung on the walls. Christmas-themed ice-sculptures were strategically placed by the full bar. Plates of desserts and Christmas treats floated around the room. Music poured from the ten-piece orchestra they had hired to provide live entertainment for the event.

And then there was the traditional Malfoy blue spruce Christmas tree that stood twenty-five feet off the ground. It was heavily and beautifully decorated with silver bulbs, white lights, and silver garland.

The entire room looked like a Christmas decorator's wet dream.

And Draco Malfoy was ready for it to be over.

He hadn't seen his mother since the soirée began, but that wasn't unusual. Everyone sought his mother out for a variety of reasons: extending their compliments, conversation, and seeing to it that their name rose in high society. It was the whole '*ride on the coattails of someone else to achieve their means*' mentality. Draco knew a social climber when he saw one. Stamford or Samuel or Stanford or whatever the hell his name was, fit the definition of a social climber.

"...where is your father? I haven't seen him much in society."

Draco nearly cringed, but held it together as he repeated their constructed cover story for the very first time in a refined and superior tone, "He's in Sicily on a personal sabbatical. I trust he'll return to the Manor in the morning."

There was a pregnant pause as the man processed Draco's excuse, but then he smiled understandingly, to Draco's immediate and internal relief. "I, too, go on a sabbatical every year to Denmark. It's the home of my ancestors."

Draco fought off the urge to yawn. He was highly bored with the conversation, but never let it show.

"...I must say the pastries are exquisite..."

Somehow he hid his disgust at the stout man who had grabbed an entire tray of treats and helped himself to quite a few. There were sixteen things he wanted to say to the man, but he said nothing. After all, as the acting head of the Malfoy family, he was to be on his best behaviour.

"...my personal healer says I shouldn't eat too many sweets, but I can't get enough of them..."

Clearly.

Instead of verbally voicing his opinions to the heavyset man, Draco nodded along.

He was on a pedestal for all to see and he had to act accordingly. He was being watched like a hawk and surveyed like cattle, but Draco was used to it. Even though his successful job as a prosecutor had boosted him up on the respect ladder, Draco was used to people staring at his arms when he wore shorter sleeves to see if the dark mark was still there. As if he'd show them the gradually fading mark with pride, rather than keep it concealed under a glamour charm. Did they think he was some sort of idiot? Time had changed him. Time had turned him into a wiser man.

Not that it mattered.

Not that anything mattered.

No matter how many leaps and bounds he'd made over the years, the wizarding world seemed split on how they felt about him. Some thought he was still like his father, both in appearance and character. Some thought he was responsible for the death of Albus Dumbledore, despite his vindication. Some thought of him as an innocent boy who got caught up in correcting the sins of his father. Some people liked him. Some hated him. Some thought he'd done remarkably well, following the war. Some criticized him for his distant demeanour. Some didn't care. Some cared too much.

Nevertheless, no matter what the public thought of him, Draco understood quite a few things.

Everything he and his mother did tonight would be judged by the rest of the upper-class families, as well as everyone in the wizarding world. Everything they said would be repeated, dissected, and scrutinized by every person in the room; not to mention the press. Every person he associated with, especially Draco's date, would be watched closely for any sign of tactlessness and impropriety. Pansy and Blaise were subjected to the same level of scrutiny, but Draco never worried about them.

They could hold their own and they would never disgrace his family or their own.

"...next year, you all should have life-size Gingerbread men as waiters..."

He cocked his head to the side as if he was considering the idea, "I'll have to run that by my mother."

Narcissa Black Malfoy would curse him into non-existence if he ever uttered that suggestion aloud.

"It would be wonderful. You could nibble on *them* if you didn't want anything on their trays..."

In general, Draco wasn't overly impressed with the human race as a whole. And while he tolerated some, there were only a select few that he genuinely liked. Stamford or Samuel or Stanford...or whatever the hell his name was, wasn't part of the proud few. And after being subjected to a battery of questions and mindless chatter, Draco was ready for him to find a suitable dance partner and disappear. Didn't the man have a date—

Wait, where was *his* date?

He polished off the rest of his wine and nodded at the gentleman, "If you'll excuse me, I have to find my date."

The man looked over Draco's shoulder and smirked, "I think she's already found you."

His head whirled around at that and sure enough, there she was; his date for the evening.

Her name was Natalie Christenson and while she was a stunning beauty in Slytherin green dress robes, she was also very insipid. She was a half-blood witch from an extremely wealthy family he'd met at the beginning of a charity ball months before. They exchanged a few letters and he took her out to dinner the previous evening with Pansy who immediately hated her and told him that he should take Granger to the soirée because Natalie wouldn't know how to conduct herself. Then there was that disaster of last Sunday's brunch last week on the veranda at Malfoy Manor with his mother.

"What do you think?"

His mother stared at him evenly, but the glint of annoyance in her blue eyes was visible, "You can't be serious about taking her to the Christmas Eve soirée."

He really wasn't serious, but defiance was his middle name. "And why not?"

"Why not?" she repeated as if she couldn't believe he was as blind or shallow as he was; that he'd been raised better. Draco thought she shouldn't have been surprised by his apparent shallowness.

"She's vapid, Draco. She has poor table manners. For Merlin's sake, she slurps! Not only that, she has the bloody nerve to look down on everything that she determines is beneath her...and she obviously has no room to talk. That girl is nothing but a menace, a lush, and a liability in the making."

"Don't you think you're being a little dramatic, mother? It's just a party."

"It's not just about this party and you know that," was his mother's haughty response, "I just don't want you to get too smitten with that little savage." It took everything in him to keep his face impassive and not snicker, but the smirk grew from the ashes of his scowl. Of course, mother went on, "And you may not see it now, but Hermione is twice the woman she is."

The smirk fell.

After all, he already knew that. That day at the coffee shop was the jumpstart to their...whatever the hell they were.

They just watched the rain fall in silence for another hour before she mumbled that she had to leave for an appointment to get her cast removed. They still weren't friends when they parted ways, but things between them had definitely changed by the next morning when he received a letter from her asking if he wanted to meet at another coffee shop just outside the Ministry at noon.

He said yes.

It was the start of something new for the both of them.

For the last week, Draco had met Granger at noon in various coffee shops in Muggle London where they tried something different off the menu each day. She stuck to hot chocolate, while he stuck to coffee.

Nothing had changed. They still were who they were.

But at the same time, things *had* changed.

Granger still had her defensive moments and Draco still got angry. She still looked at him strangely when he asked questions about topics that she deemed personal, and he still had choice words for her. Granger infuriated him and he annoyed her. But she'd reached out to him, for some unknown reason. He thought of it as the extension of an olive branch.

And they talked.

Once they talked about her childhood with her parents and he watched as tears rolled down her cheeks in silence. Once they talked about his childhood, but Draco was more hesitant to discuss his parents. When he got defensive, Granger picked up on it rather quickly, and left it alone. In that moment, he understood why she fought him tooth and nail when he'd pushed his way into her world. Letting someone in was hard enough, but not when it was almost forced. And he felt more than ashamed as their talks continued.

For the most part, they sat, drank their beverages, looked out the window, and said nothing at all.

"Fraco! Oh, *Fraco!*!" The odd French and German mash-up of his date's shrilled and slurred voice tore him from his thoughts, "Oh zere you are, Fraco! I wuz looking for you!"

Draco cringed.

Was she *drunk*?

Well, she sure as hell wasn't French *or* German, that much he knew...son of a bitch.

"Looks like *someone* went a little overboard with the Elf-wine," the gentleman snickered.

Draco scowled.

Natalie threw her arms around his neck and sagged against him, dropping all her body weight on him at once. "Fraco, I missed you so mufch."

Instinctively, he wrapped his arms around her and steadied her, but she reeked of wine to the point where it almost made him nauseous. Her face was inches from his when she drew her head up. Natalie flashed a lazy drunk grin that sort of reminded him of that time in Fifth Year when they smuggled in Firewhiskey and Daphne got so pissed that Millicent and Tracey, who were equally as drunk, had to carry her up to their dorms, with extreme difficulty.

Fun times.

"You smell gwreat, Fraco, mmm..."

But having a drunken date at the most important soirée of the season wasn't fun, not at all.

The gentleman was seconds from laughing when he made his parting words, "I'll leave you two. Enjoy the rest of your evening, Fr - *Draco*."

Draco seethed in rage, but there was no time for a well-executed *Obliviate*. Even though the old git deserved it, erasing his memory was a risk he didn't want to take and plus, he didn't have his wand. Mother, knowing how he was, had forced him to leave it in his room. No matter, there were more pressing issues at hand. He had to think and he had to think *fast*. Draco needed a course of action that wouldn't implicate him, and he had about ten seconds to figure it out.

Of course, the gentleman departed for a larger group of catty older witches.

Draco knew what his future held if the git told them about the drunken Natalie Christenson on his arm. The entire party, including his mother, would know *everything*. And he just couldn't allow that to happen. No, he *wouldn't* let that happen.

"Fraco, you have de most boutiful eyez I have efer scene."

Draco made a face.

She'd gone from beauty queen to liability in the blink of an eye.

Once again, his mother and Pansy were correct.

"Boutiful eyez," she sang.

He groaned inwardly, holding back his own urge to vomit from the horrible smell of her breath.

Immediately, Draco flashed his trademark Malfoy smirk at the confused onlookers and made the excuse that she was light-headed from all the excitement from the evening. Stupidly, one guest said she too felt a little light-headed from the splendour and the rest of them accepted his excuse before falling back into their own conversations.

One second, he was standing there smirking with the half-conscious date on his arm and the next he was half-dragging, half-carrying the witch out the ballroom while she babbled nonsense and tried to pluck his eyelashes with her nimble fingers.

Draco just *knew* he was in the clear when he shut the giant ballroom door behind him.

"As remarkably clichéd as this is," the slightly humoured voice of Pansy Parkinson drawled, "Can I *please* be the first to say, '*I told you so*'? It would give me the greatest pleasure."

It was at that moment Natalie promptly blacked out. The combination of Natalie and the sound of Pansy's voice forced Draco to unceremoniously let her body drop to the ground in a heap of silky emerald robes. She broke her heel. Draco cringed, but the drunken woman

didn't appear hurt. And if she was, big deal, she shouldn't have gotten pissed on Elf-wine after he *specifically* told her to stay away from the bar.

A female chuckle rang out and Draco cut scathing eyes in the direction of the beautifully dressed and done-up Pansy. Had he not been accustomed to Pansy's beauty, it would've pacified his annoyance with the witch, but he was.

"No, but can I be the latest person to tell you to '*shut the fuck up*'? That would give *me* the greatest pleasure." He mocked, highly aggravated.

Blaise, adorned traditional black robes, dropped his chuckling girlfriend's hand and stepped forward. He only had one thing to say, "All joking aside, this isn't good Draco."

"I *know* this isn't good," he snapped harshly as he paced in front of the doorway. "I pulled her out before she made a fool of herself and me, but a few guests saw her. I got away with the excuse that she was light-headed from all the festivities, but that can't last forever. Not when she's unconscious and reeks of wine!"

He was very lucky that they'd spent the majority of the evening apart, so hardly anyone knew they were at the soirée together. And those who did had probably forgotten because Natalie, although very beautiful, was very forgettable in the eyes of their guests. She reminded racist purebloods of all the reasons they looked down of those with diluted blood. She knew nothing about high Pureblood society and had very little decorum. She always wanted him to dance with her when he specifically expressed that he had no inclination to dance, ever. She never wanted to talk to the guests and hated standing at his side. And when she spoke, nothing of substance came out.

Draco realised he would've been better off taking Granger, like Pansy had suggested.

Granger probably knew nothing about high society, but she was intelligent enough to make up her ignorance with intelligent conversation.

Blaise stood over the unconscious body of Natalie and looked around. "Draco, we need to figure out what to do with her before someone comes out."

"Disillusionment charm?" he suggested tersely. Honestly, he was too angry to care.

Of course, Blaise wordlessly rejected the idea and eyed his girlfriend expectantly. After all, Pansy had always come up with the best ideas at school. Draco watched as Pansy's smirk vanished and was replaced by a serious and calculating look. She removed her silk black gloves like a vicious killer who'd just completed a job and shoved them into Blaise's pocket.

After she snuck a glance at her boyfriend's watch, she spoke, "It's half past nine. There's two and a half more hours left so I suggest we put her in one of the lounge rooms to let her sleep it off for the rest of the party. No one will find her there. Earlier, your mother and I set up wards so that no one could go past the bathrooms. After all, we don't need any wanderers with your father here."

True.

Draco smirked at his best friends. It was good to know that they always had his back and kept his best interests at heart, no matter what.

"So," the only conscious witch in the hall said as she too stood over the unconscious disgrace at her feet, "I think the better question is: which one of you got your wands past security?"

Blaise and Draco exchanged looks, and shook their heads no.

Pansy's annoyed huff escaped her lips as she thrust her purse into Blaise's chest, "Don't you all know that you're supposed to keep your wand with you at all times. To hell with security." She hiked up her black dress robes up to her mid-thigh and pulled her wand out the holster. "I never, *ever* go anywhere without mine anymore...you never know what can happen. Even in a secure environment."

They all knew exactly what she meant.

"Now," she pointed her wand at Natalie, "*Mobilicorpus*."

The drunken woman didn't stir once as Pansy transferred her to the heavily furnished and decorated lounge room at the end of the massive hall. However, the moment Pansy let her body drop mercilessly on the plush couch, Natalie's hazy blue eyes opened and a silly grin spread across her flushed features.

Draco was sure he wanted to murder Pansy at that moment.

Natalie made a disorderly lunge for Draco, but missed. She ended up sprawled on the Floor on her hands and knees. Her hair and her entire appearance looked like she'd just finished shagging the daylights out of someone. She flashed a lazy, playful smile. "Fraco, von't you come sit wit me?"

Pansy giggled and whispered, 'Fraco?' under her breath, which earned her a scowl.

"I need you, I need your body. It's callin out to mwe...*Natalie, Natalie*, take mwe I'm yours."

Blaise's left brow slowly began its hike heavenward, an amused smirk played on his lips.

She crawled on her hands and knees as best as a drunken woman could, "Fraco, I wove you."

Pansy busted out laughing.

Draco Malfoy had just about had enough. He was tired, he was annoyed, and he was ready for this bullshit soirée to conclude so he could leave. He snatched the wand out of the laughing witch's hand and pointed it at Natalie. Without thinking, he uttered the first charm he could think of that would put her out of his misery. The bolt of light hit her square in the forehead and she collapsed on the Floor.

In a huff, Draco shoved the wand back into Pansy's awaiting hand and walked out.

The smirking Blaise and the giggling Pansy followed behind him quickly.

"You're not just going to leave her there, are you?" Blaise asked once they returned to the entrance to the ballroom.

Draco pushed open the double doors and looked over his shoulder at his friend, "And let her drunken behaviour sully the soirée and anger my mother, no thanks. If either of you want to revive her, that's fine, but I'm not. She's of no consequence to me." And he walked through the door, grabbed a glass of Elf-wine from a levitating tray, and re-joined the party.

It took him thirteen minutes, two very dull conversations with old pure-blooded wizards, three dance offers from uninteresting witches, and a traditional holiday pastry from a floating serving tray for Draco to notice Granger's presence.

There were two things that surprised him.

The first was his initial thought upon seeing her. *Wow, she looks ama-healthy. Yes...healthier.* In a room full of witches dressed in black, silver, or emerald robes, Hermione Granger stood out from them all. He'd seen her earlier that day when they met at a new coffee shop just on the outskirts of London, but she didn't look *anything* like she looked at that moment. Draco almost didn't recognize her, and when he did, he nearly spewed Elf-wine everywhere.

Dressed like the perfect high-society witch, Granger adorned flowing Floor-length dress robes that hugged her upper body and slightly flared at her waist. It was the first time he'd seen her in something that showed off the figure she was gradually regaining; the figure she had in the pictures with her son. The amethyst colour of her robes, he noticed, seemed to both offset and breathe life back into her pale skin. Her horribly bushy hair was pulled up into an intricate hairstyle that he didn't understand, but it was far better than usual. Granger didn't wear much jewellery, just a set of large amethyst studs and a matching bracelet. It was simple, elegant, and Draco instantly knew she didn't dress herself.

But that realization was ignored in response to the second surprise.

She wasn't alone.

No, Stamford or Samuel or Stanford...or whatever the hell that hefty idiot's name was, was chatting with her. Draco watched as she declined his invitation to dance and the glass of Elf-wine he offered in a very dignified manner.

"She looks beautiful, doesn't she?" Blaise stood next to him, holding two glasses of wine.

"Ye - she looks healthier." He deadpanned.

He met the dark gaze of his best mate and watched in annoyance as his lips curved into an amused smirk. "Whatever you say, *Fraco*." Blaise chuckled.

Draco grimaced. "Let's treat the 'Drunken Natalie Incident' like the time you threw up in my mother's favourite plant and blamed it on the house elves; let's never talk about it again."

"Your mother looks spectacular in those emerald and black robes," Pansy remarked as she approached her boyfriend's left side. "She has the entire room enamoured with her sense of style." A smug grin appeared on her face when she finally said, "Makes me feel kind of good that I'm the one who designed those rob-oh, Blaise, is that for me?"

He nodded and handed her one of the wine glasses.

She kissed his cheek, "Thanks, love."

Blaise flashed a rare smile.

Draco rolled his eyes at the couple and watched as Granger nodded in apparent boredom at something the gentlemen said. He rested his stubby hands on the small of her back and Draco watched with borderline amusement as she subtly brushed his hand away, without showing her disgust. He saw it, of course, but the gentlemen didn't. Draco realised yet again that Granger was excellent at hiding her emotions from everyone else except him.

"Stare any harder at Hermione," Pansy's drawl rang in his ears, "And you'll burst a blood vessel."

Draco frowned, "I wasn't staring at *her*."

"Whatever you say," Pansy swirled her gloved finger around one the ringlet that fell in her face. "You have to admit she wears my dress well," Pansy remarked smugly only moments before she went on a mini-tirade, "Too bad I had to practically *wrestle* her arse into it. And don't get me started on that horrible hair. I used an *entire* container of Sleekeazy's to get her hair like that. Merlin, it was *horrible*." She gave a great, dramatic shudder.

Blaise smirked.

"That's wonderful and all, Pansy," Draco drawled in response, "But I was just trying to figure out the name of the gentleman she's talking to."

"Stephen Winther: retired Auror, recent widower, and lover of younger women." Blaise informed almost mechanically.

Draco eyed him, "How do you know that?"

He smirked. "He trained me. He told me during my Auror training that he used to fancy my mother when my mother was in her Sixth Year at Beaubaxton. He was nearly thirty at the time, but it seems he's found a new and *younger* object of affection."

"Oh, that's just disgusting! She's like forty years younger than him and he's absolutely old and *ghastly*." Pansy made a face, downed the rest of her drink, and set it down on the empty tray that appeared in front of her. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to go rescue my friend from the hairy mountain troll-"

Blaise cut her off by gently wrapping an arm around her waist, preventing her from leaving.

She emitted a reserved, yet annoyed grumble before she argued in a low voice, "What are you doing? I have to—"

"No," he cut her off with little effort, "You have to dance with your boyfriend. Draco will handle it."

Draco smirked. Pansy Parkinson didn't have a shot in hell at getting away from Blaise.

Pansy continued to protest, "But—"

He cut her off smoothly, tipping her chin up to meet his intense gaze. "No buts, love. I saw Vivian Pennington glaring at us when we walked in—" Of course, he'd appeal to her slightly repressed catty nature.

Pansy snorted and looked over her shoulder where Pennington heiress stood, glaring at the couple. She locked eyes with her and the other witch looked away, intimidated. "That little imp is just jealous because she's wanted you for years and I've got you...again. Jealousy is a disease," she sneered and insincerely added, "I hope the tramp gets well soon."

Blaise leaned in closer and audibly spoke in her ear, "Well, let's go give her more of a reason to be jealous." His lips then moved closer as he whispered more words Draco couldn't hear. And judging from the blush that crept across Pansy's face, he was glad he couldn't.

Seconds later, they were gone.

Draco watched as Granger shook her head at something Stephen said. Draco could tell she was uncomfortable; her eyes kept shifting around the room, but she hadn't looked in his direction. When the older wizard brushed his rough hand on her cheek and she blanched in obvious discomfort, Draco decided it was time to intervene. With a plan in his head, he grabbed a water goblet off a levitating serving tray and approached the pair.

He was three metres away from her when their eyes met.

"I hear they have a warming charm on the terrace," Stephen pointed out as he shovelled a cookie into his mouth with his free hand. When he finished chewing, he continued, "It's just through those double doors. It's a clear night and the stars are out, would—"

Draco made his presence known with his familiar aristocratic voice. "Ah, Granger, there you are." He handed her the glass and she looked at him curiously, "Water."

They weren't exactly friends, but she looked relieved for his interruption. She mumbled a quiet, "Thanks," and sipped on the water.

He merely nodded.

"Mister Malfoy, it's *wonderful* to see you again." Stephen didn't sound very convincing. In fact, he looked rather irritated by Draco's intrusion on his plans. "Where is your *lovely* date?"

"You're looking at her," He politely gestured to the witch next to him. "I'd introduce you two, but I feel like you two are already acquainted."

Granger shot him a wild look from the corner of her eye, but other than that, she kept her walls high and her face blank. Stephen Winther, on the other hand, visibly expressed his confusion. "I thought you were with the—"

Draco squared his shoulders, and spoke with little emotion and an overdose of haughtiness, "The slurring blond? She mistook me for someone else. All the excitement from the soirée and the wine must've gone to her head. I set her right and lost my own date in the process. I'm thankful that you've kept her entertained, but if you'll excuse us, sir. I wanted to show her the terrace before everyone decided to start crowding out there for the midnight fireworks." He gestured in the direction of the double doors.

Granger quickly hurried towards them; her amethyst robes flowed behind her gracefully.

It was a remarkably clear but windy night in Wiltshire, and Draco relished in the almost solitude of the well-lit terrace. The sky was a deep navy, and dotted with stars that varied in brightness; the moon was half full and high in the sky. It cast a wonderful, yet dim light on everything. After years of nightmares and night terrors, Draco wasn't a particular fan of the darkness or the night. All it did was remind him of the darker times in his life, but this night was rather decent.

From his vantage point, he saw the expansive Malfoy gardens that were decorated with ornate white lights for the occasion and the season. The music from the orchestra filtered from the ballroom, as well as the voices of the chattering guests.

"It's nice out here."

He hadn't realised Granger was standing next to him until that moment. "It is."

She stood close to him, still sipping her water.

A comfortable silence washed over them while he looked out at the gardens and she look up at the heavens. He was used to the silence between them; it was a pattern that he didn't want to disrupt with words.

So, he let her break the tradition.

"Thanks for saving me from Mr. Winther."

Draco nodded, accepting her gratitude in silence.

"Are you enjoying the soirée?" He asked minutes later.

"It's very nice, but I confess I don't like parties very much."

He looked at her seriously for a few moments and smirked. "Me either."

And when she smiled, it was real.

Part Two: Soul-grabbers

After the death of Albus Dumbledore and Voldemort's infiltration of the Ministry of Magic, nearly every rich and powerful aristocratic family in Britain fled to various parts of Europe to wait and see who came out victorious in the Second War. Most of them had heard stories about *The-Boy-Who-Lived*, but they knew nothing about those who helped him stay alive.

The name Hermione Granger was about as foreign to them as the name of the Muggle President of the United States of America. For that, she was rather grateful. It made the introductions less awkward.

The next two hours of Hermione's life as Malfoy's impromptu date was a whirlwind of conversation with very important members of the Wizarding World's high society, blatant stares from ambitious and jealous witches, and absolutely no dancing. It was a good thing because, thanks to the two-inch heels Pansy forced on her feet, she had no desire to dance.

She learned a lot about herself and the man whose arm hers was locked with.

Hermione learned that she could be as detached as Malfoy when it came to conversing with those who tried to kiss her arse just because she was on the arm of the Malfoy heir. She smiled and thanked those who insincerely complimented her attire, expressed her opinion to those who thought of Muggle-borns as inferior, and impressed even the staunchest witch with her vast knowledge about high Pureblood society.

She'd done her research.

It took a while to get used to the attention being on Draco Malfoy's arm brought, but once she did, all bets were off. And as for what she learned about her "date", well, in the world of Draco Malfoy, people were classified into three groups: family and friends, people-he-needed-to-be-pleasant-to, and everyone else. He was pleasant to friends and family, decent to those he needed to be pleasant to, and aloof with everyone else.

Hermione wasn't sure where she fit into all that, and she didn't care.

He explained the entire fiasco with his original date, to her utmost humour and his aggravation, and she volunteered to be his pretend date in pure gratitude for his previous actions. Hermione half-expected him to ignore her presence while he chatted with fellow pureblooded wizards and half-expected him to expect her to play the role of the docile female.

But she had been wholly wrong.

Malfoy surprised her. Really. He was agreeable and polite, but reserved and almost distant with her.

How he managed to do all that at once, she didn't know.

Sometimes, there were moments when she thought he was impressed with her, but he quickly hid it behind a mask of indifference. And sometimes, there were moments when Hermione thought that he smirked at some of her opinions, but she never caught him in the act. And as they watched the beautiful midnight fireworks display on the crowded terrace, she listened in extreme fascination as he explained the entire history behind the traditional Malfoy Christmas party over the amazed gasps of the guests. He told her that his mother had started the charity aspect of the party after the second war. Furthermore, he informed that in the last seven hundred years, they'd only had to cancel one.

She immediately knew which year.

Traditionally, he told her, the Malfoy Christmas party concluded at exactly midnight with the conclusion of the fireworks display. Hermione found herself almost smiling when the last spark shot up into the night sky.

It truly was amazing, but she was exhausted.

It was ten-past midnight when the last guest, Malfoy's original date, left by Floo.

The only people left were the Malfoys, Blaise, and Pansy. Narcissa and Pansy were busy chatting about the party as they kicked off their heels, while the two wizards were having a quiet discussion on the far side of the room. Hermione felt a bit left out and decided it was time to leave. She was extremely tired and knew Pansy wouldn't allow her the luxury to sleep in on the hardest day of her life; the first Christmas without Matthew.

Her hand reached for the Floo container, but Narcissa's voice rang out, "What are you doing?"

Hermione turned around suddenly, "I was about to go—"

She smiled. "I guess my son forgot to tell you about the midnight breakfast that follows the Christmas party."

"No, he didn't."

Malfoy looked over at them, but said nothing.

Narcissa wrapped an arm around her shoulders and led her away from the fireplace, "As my son's *rightful* date, you simply *must* stay for it. After all, you were simply phenomenal tonight. Everyone was raving to me about you."

Hermione was shocked. "They were?"

Pansy nodded in affirmation as Blaise took her by the arm and headed in the direction of the dining room. She looked over her shoulder at Malfoy, who walked behind them in silence; his face was an unreadable mask.

Typical.

Conversation during the extravagant midnight breakfast was dominated by Narcissa and Pansy, while Hermione and the men ate in near silence. It was midnight, but she found she wasn't very tired. The food was wonderful and she felt stuffed by the time she ate the last of her food. Half an hour later, Blaise and Pansy excused themselves from the table to go to their respective houses to rest for a few short hours.

Unlike Narcissa, who spent her Christmases at various places and celebrated the holiday at various parties, Blaise Zabini wasn't much for traditions *or* holidays. He had invited Hermione to spend the holiday with the three of them in Paris. And she accepted.

He'd gotten an approved Portkey that would take them right inside his flat in the heart of Paris. Much to Malfoy's vocal consternation, he had allowed Pansy to schedule the entire day and Hermione knew she'd be too exhausted to think by the time they returned to London. Visits to the Louvre and Chateau de Versailles, shopping at the Marais, dinner at the finest restaurant in Paris, ice skating in front of the Hotel de Ville, and the list went on and on.

Pansy was determined to make sure she was too busy to be sad. But there wasn't a day that passed that she didn't think of Matthew; that she didn't feel longing for him or her parents. Christmas would be no exception.

However, she really appreciated Pansy's concern and determination.

Ten minutes after the couple left, Narcissa retired to her room, feigning exhaustion. However, before she left, she insisted that Malfoy saw to it that she returned home safely. After a silent conversation (which could've been interpreted as an argument), Malfoy relented.

"Shall we?" he asked coolly with just a hint of aggravation, gesturing in the direction of one of the dining room's doorways.

Hermione nodded, but felt uncomfortable with his tone.

Narcissa smiled, pleased, and left out a different door that apparently took her to her quarters.

She started towards the wrong door, but Malfoy placed his hand on her lower back and guided her out the correct door. Stunned into silence due to the placement of his hand, Hermione just let him guide her back to the grand parlour as she blinked with large, wide eyes.

The house was a labyrinth.

She hadn't really had time to absorb the magnificence of the Manor during their walk to the dining room because she was too busy listening to Narcissa rave about the party. However, as they silently sauntered down one of the many hallways, Hermione found her wide eyes absorbing everything. To say their home was merely beautiful would be ludicrous; it was a palace fit for royalty...or a Malfoy.

What started as him merely escorting her to the Floo in the main parlour, ended up turning into a mini-tour of sorts where he allowed her access to a more than a few rooms. There were elegantly decorated with high walls. She peeked inside a splendid downstairs library with

wall to wall bookshelves made of the most expensive woods in existence. She wouldn't mind spending several hours in there with the books. Even the hall they walked down was marvellous with its elegant and rugs and ornate walls with family members who silently sneered at her, thanks to Narcissa's charm.

Great.

With Malfoy's hand still absently on her back, she wasn't in the mood to be called a filthy Mudblood, or any other creative name they thought of - she was uneasy enough.

"Is there a bathroom nearby?" She asked rather suddenly.

"Just upstairs, thirteen doors down."

She stared at him.

Malfoy's brow rose. "Do you need an escort?"

"No." She frowned, spun on her heels, and walked off in the direction of the stairs with her dress flowing behind her. By the time she reached the double staircases leading upstairs, Hermione's annoyance with Malfoy was subdued and she found herself overwhelmed with uncertainty.

Damn. Did he even tell her which way to go? Left or right? She had no clue. The thought of turning around flashed in her head, but they'd made so many turns she could hardly remember where they came from. Turning around? Yeah, that wasn't going to happen.

She was literally at a fork in the road...and chose to go left. She climbed the staircase quickly before she could change her mind, but the moment her foot set on the last step, Hermione knew she'd made a bad decision. It was shockingly cold and eerily silent; so different from the rest of the house, which was warm and almost homey (well, as homey as a mansion could be). Hermione felt for her wand through her robes, and was comforted when she felt it as she crept down the dimly lit hall, counting the doors she passed.

"Five...six..."

A phantom wind blew down the hall; all reason and sense told her to turn back, find Malfoy, and make him lead her to the parlour so she could Floo to the safety of her own home, but she didn't. She was stubborn to think she didn't need his aid; he was probably going to be a git about it and make her feel stupid. No, she'd rather do it herself, just to say she could.

The lights dimmed.

"Seven...e-"

A grandfather clock in the distance had started its ritual chiming sequence.

It was one o'clock.

She felt the breath in her ear before it spoke in an eerie whisper, "We've been waiting for you, Hermione Granger."

The colour bled from her face and all she felt next was indescribable pain.

tragic irony at its best

Chapter Summary

"Because we're different than we were in August or October or even last week."

spot of violence*

Chapter Fourteen

Tragic Irony at its Best

Part One: Trust is a two-way street

Finite Incantatem.

The walls were shaking. The high ceilings of Malfoy Manor would probably come crashing down at any moment...

Merlin, Hermione only *wished* she could've been that lucky.

Okay, so the walls weren't shaking. The Manor's ceilings weren't going to collapse on her and end the dread and terror that gripped her overwrought senses. No, that would be just too simple. That would be too painless. *Nothing* was simple or painless, at that point.

Finite Incantatem.

Every muscle in her body throbbed; it was a sharp pain that no healing charm could alleviate. Once again, she was in a situation where she needed to be rescued. And fast.

Lucius Malfoy's guerrilla warfare tactics had worked effectively.

He had overpowered her quickly and without much fuss; the blow to the back of her head came instantly and without mercy. She was on the ground, writhing in pain before walls could absorb the sound waves of the grandfather clock's lone chime.

And what was worse, as soon as she willed her body to roll onto its back, she couldn't move. It was as if she was stuck to the floor with a permanent sticking charm, and then bound by invisible ropes. She thought about kicking, fighting, and punching. However, all options were out of the question simply because each time she tried, Hermione felt as if her skin and

muscles were being ripped off her bones in a painstakingly manner. She just knew that any hasty movement on her part would end in patches of her skin missing, but she tried to detach her left arm again anyway.

Hermione nearly wept. It was like someone was slowly pulling a stubborn piece of tape off her arm and nothing was happening. It was torture, pure torture, but she wouldn't cry out simply because the burning pain that radiated from her body had stunned and terrified her into silence. It was a curse, she knew it, but she was defenceless. Her wand was currently in its holster in her robes.

All attempts at wandless magic were a bust; she'd already tried. Quite a few times.

Finite Incantatem.

She found it was next to impossible to concentrate when she was one with the floor and listening to the cackling man. Non-verbal wandless magic was, obviously, out of the question.

Finite Incantatem.

"We can smell your dirty blood racing in your veins," Lucius menacingly whispered above her.

It was then that she finally could put a face on the creepy voice, and her eyes grew wide.

This man wasn't the same Lucius Malfoy from that night in the Department of Mysteries or even the man from the final battle. He looked like an addict that had been left to his own devices for years.

He was completely emaciated and the bones were visible under his rubbery skin. His grey eyes were almost identical to Malfoy's, but they were hollowed out, crazed, and red-rimmed. His skin wasn't just pale; it was as white as undisturbed snow and every vein was visible even in the dim light of the hallway. There was hardly anything left of his once long platinum blonde hair, except large patches that surrounded reddened bald spots where it looked like the hair had been savagely ripped from the scalp. The wasted-away Lucius wore nothing but baggy white pants and a white, cotton, button-down shirt that hung off one emaciated shoulder.

He reminded her of one of those mental patients she saw on television, only worse.

Much worse.

He was absolutely terrifying.

Hermione wanted to scream, but her voice just wouldn't come.

Lucius Malfoy circled her stationary body, slowly, as if she was his prey and he was trying to decide just what he wanted to do with her once he finished feasting off her flesh.

"I think we'll just take our time with you." Lucius sneered with an insane glint in his eyes.

Before she had a moment to wonder about the existence of the other person he spoke of, he dropped to his knees and straddled her suddenly.

His face hovered close to hers.

Hermione quickly closed her eyes and held her breath. He smelled of expensive soap and sweat, but there was something about his scent that is positively putrid. He touched the piece of hair that fell into her face, and made a face as if merely touching her hair disgusted him.

And that was when he brandished the dagger that made her lose her breath.

He ran the dull end against her cheek and asked sadistically, "Have you ever experienced the euphoric high that seizes your body when you've killed someone?"

She gave no answer.

Lucius' steel eyes narrowed at her silent insolence and he pushed the dull end of the blade into the tender flesh of her neck, "Answer me, you *filthy* Mudblood."

"Can't—" Fearfully, she choked on her own words, "Can't say that I have...will you let me go?" Her voice came out softer than intended. She wanted to demand that he release her; she was full to the brim with raw courage, but couldn't find the words to prove it. Above all else, she was a sensible person, and sensible people didn't demand anything from anyone who wielded a knife.

Hermione wasn't aware of what he was capable of, and she didn't want to find out.

She just wanted to go home.

Her nerves were shot, and her pulse raced beyond belief.

Lucius Malfoy gave a twisted, maniacal laugh, "Not until the veagles are finished with you, you *filthy* little Mudblood."

Veagles? What the hell? She'd never heard of veagles before.

Bravely, she laid there with an unnervingly calm look on her face.

Calm.

She would've laughed if she weren't about to vomit all over the expensive rugs. Hermione wasn't even close to calm. She was more like a flimsy wall that could crumble to the ground with a single breath; all she could do was keep waiting...waiting for Lucius to exhale.

"Not until I sacrifice your soul to them."

Hermione's terror level slammed into the glass ceiling.

"Not until they ravage your spirit."

She had to get out of here.

Finite Incantatem.

Hermione tried to move her arm again.

The blinding pain that shot up her arm made her whimper; it was more than she could stand.

"The veagles," he purred as he stroked her cheek lightly with the dagger, "They tell me that you're in control of everything when you're taking someone's spirit."

As best as she could, Hermione craned her neck away from the cold blade, barely breathing. Beads of sweat rolled down her face and she realised she was sweating almost as much as Lucius. Their eyes met and an inexplicable emotion seized her. For some reason Hermione was drawn to him. As if there was some gripping force manipulating her body, she stared...much like a deer in headlights. Looking into his eyes was like looking into a fun-house mirror at the fair; the emptiness in Lucius' grey eyes was disturbing and left her with a bitter coldness in her chest.

His sadistic voice shook her from her thoughts, "You control it all. How fast they're going to die."

Lucius stared at her.

"It's magnificent...how I long to feel that power. How I long to hear the screams."

He nicked her skin and Hermione hissed in pain, shutting her eyes tightly as a tear escaped down her cheek. She would not give him the satisfaction of making her scream. No, she wouldn't.

"I long to feel the very moment someone leaves their body..." He brought the dagger back to his nose and sniffed the blood on the edge of the blade. He made a face as if it was the most putrid thing he'd smelled.

Hermione's lip quivered.

"...all that was warm will suddenly be cold." He said in a sing-song voice as he dug the dagger into her skin right next to her ear, cackling maniacally.

The pain she felt when he dragged the dagger from her ear to the corner of her mouth was unbelievable.

Calmness flew out the window at the realization that yes, this was really happening to her. He really was going to hurt her and there was nothing she could do to save herself. She'd survived everything, only to be killed by a cackling maniac. Hermione felt the blood run into her ear. He was going to carve her face like a sculptor carved marble and Hermione screamed until she no longer had air in her lungs.

Lucius only cackled harder and positioned the dagger on the same cheek.

"*Evanesco* dagger."

The pressure on her cheek immediately disappeared and Hermione sobbed freely and in relief.

Playtime was over and Lucius Malfoy was not pleased.

She saw his head jerk up, ready to explode in rage, but then something happened that she didn't expect. A knowing smile crept across his pale cheeks. Through her tears, Hermione heard footsteps and Lucius cackled harder, clapping his hands like an eager schoolboy who was about to be given a treat.

"Ah," Lucius sounded excited, "You've come for the show, Draco...let's spill her more of her blood and see just how *dirty* it is. We'll sacrifice her to the veagles. She'll make them happy. She will save us all."

Malfoy.

Instead of being worried, she found she was relieved. Well, that was a turn of events.

Things were different. One of them had thrown the olive branch, but she didn't know who had done it first. There was a level of understanding and peace between them; it was awkward, but she found herself somewhat comfortable in his presence. Talking to him was easier than she ever expected, and listening to him was even easier.

He wasn't there to hurt her. Only help.

He hadn't failed her before.

Hermione shut her eyes, willing herself to stop moving.

She just knew...*she just knew*.

"We'll carve her-

"Stupefy."

Lucius' emaciated body landed next to hers in a heap of cloth.

Her eyes opened when she felt a cool pressure on her face and when their eyes met, Malfoy seemed almost anxious. Before she knew it, he held a damp towel to her wound to control the bleeding. Malfoy hadn't said a word, but there were so many things she wanted to do at that moment, but couldn't breathe or thank him properly. She hadn't heard the spell, but suddenly the invisible bounds were cut and the invisible superglue that held her down melted away. She didn't know what hurt worse, being trapped on the floor or being set free. Every muscle in her body was rigid and drawn tight. Her mind was hazy and confused as it tried, without avail, to process what just happened. But she couldn't focus; her heart was still racing, mouth felt incredibly dry, and she was still sweating.

It was over.

Malfoy helped her sit up, but the act alone caused pain to wrack every muscle in action. "I-I can't."

"Onyx!" he called.

A little house elf appeared, "Yes, sir?"

"Please take Father back to his room," he instructed in an authoritative voice, "Ask Mother to put up stronger wards tonight because, *somewhat*, he managed to break through the last ones. See to it that he doesn't escape his bedroom again. Also, set up a room for Miss Grang-"

Hermione vehemently shook her head, ignoring the pain that surged up and down her spine. "I can't stay here. I *won't* stay here." Her eyes cut over to the stunned man. "Not with him here. I just want to go home. Just take me home."

There was a quiet moment of understanding before Malfoy spoke. "Just take him back."

"Yes, sir." And with a crack, the elf and the stunned Lucius were gone.

Malfoy healed her cut to the best of his ability. It was a lot deeper than she thought and the only thing he managed to do was stop the bleeding. It didn't matter. More than anything, she was grateful for him; more than words could or would ever express. Who would've thought ten years ago that she would be appreciative for a Malfoy in any respects?

Hermione certainly didn't.

"Did he hurt you anywhere else?" Malfoy asked, still kneeling next to her.

There was something amiss with his voice. He almost sounded about as frightened as she felt.

She heard him shifting his weight from one knee to the other.

"No," she shook her head as she stared at the intricate patterns on the rug, "Other than the cut, he barely laid a hand on me."

"Lucky you."

Hermione didn't know what he meant by that.

"Why-"

"Can you walk?"

Disoriented, she replied, "I-I think so."

Slowly, she pulled herself off the floor and though her muscles ached after being rigid for so long, she took a few steps. Without another word, Malfoy wrapped with his fingers wrapped around her upper arm gently and he led her down the steps and into the grand parlour.

She leaned on him heavily for support and he bore her weight as well as his own.

The next thing she knew, she was sitting in a bubble bath she'd drawn for herself. Clothes discarded, she sat there and thought about what had transpired at the Manor. She didn't understand and didn't know if coffee with Malfoy would help her understand better. They'd agreed to go to their respective houses, shower, and change before he came by her house for coffee.

With the Portkey to Paris leaving in a few hours, there was no point in trying to sleep.

Not that she could.

After changing into comfortable attire and making sure she had everything packed for Paris, she went downstairs and started a pot of hot water. A casually dressed Draco Malfoy stepped out her fireplace as soon as she pulled out two mugs from her cabinet. They greeted each other with a little nod, but no words. Hermione fixed their drinks and joined him on the living room couch where they initially sat in a semi-comfortable silence.

"How's your cheek? I see you managed to heal it a little more."

She shrugged, unable to answer his question verbally.

There was a lot on her mind and her facial wound ranked very low on the importance scale. True, it still hurt, a lot, but she'd managed to heal it to the point where it looked like an angry welt. The most important question on her mind had nothing to do with her face, his rescue, or anything; it was quite simple. "Why did your father attack me?"

Malfoy immediately tensed, sipped his coffee, and sat the mug on the coffee table.

It wasn't the first time he looked uneasy about something so personal. It was obvious he didn't want to talk about it. It was obvious he wanted to change the topic. "I don't—"

She sat her mug next to his and looked over at him. "As much as I've told you about my life and as much as I've trusted in you, I don't think it's fair that you don't trust in me."

"You *chose* to confide in me—"

"One time. And under duress."

"Why should I—"

"Because we're different than we were in August or October or even last week."

Malfoy rose from his seat and started a fire with his wand. Neither of them spoke for a long time as they listened to the wood crackle. Both of them watched as the smoke rose up from the flames. After a few more minutes of silence, Malfoy started pacing on that poor little blue rug and she watched his face as it twisted into something that made her eyes widen. She knew the look; it was one she'd worn plenty of times in her life.

It was the look of a troubled person.

It was the look of a person who'd braved through their own storms.

It was the look of a person who was just a little bit tired.

It was only then that she realised there was a lot more depth in the enigma that was Draco Malfoy.

With a strong sigh, Malfoy began, "My father is...not himself."

Not himself? Hermione thought indignantly and said aloud, "He's bloody mad!"

"Ten points to you, Granger, for your *wonderful* observation skills, truly brilliant," he rolled his eyes and continued silkily, "You wanted me to talk, so let me explain."

She nodded slowly, blushing.

"Despite changing his loyalties before the demise of the Dark Lord, my father was sentenced to Azkaban for two years for war crimes; Mother and I were spared, for reasons you should already know." He stared at the blazing fire for a few moments before he pressed on, "I remember Father being worried before he started his sentence. You see, the Ministry had allowed the Dementors to go back to guarding the prisoners of Azkaban."

Hermione remembered reading about that particular decision in the Prophet. It was a horrible idea. It was obvious that the Dementors were not loyal to the Ministry, even after the final battle.

"The Dementors knew him as a traitor to the cause and to their fallen lord. Father begged the Ministry to allow him to serve his sentence at another prison, one in the States, but they refused. He went in just after Blaise and Pansy's parents were killed and it took just one week for the Dementors to pay him back for changing his allegiance to the Dark Lord at the last minute. They sucked all the happy thoughts out of him rapidly, leaving nothing except his worst memories and most frightening nightmares. But they didn't kill him."

She already understood everything.

In her mind, she heard Lupin's words about the Dementors and how they fed off every happy thought and memory, and only left behind bad memories. She understood that awful things happened to the minds of wizards and witches who had their happy memories sucked out too fast. It was some of the worst torture someone could experience and it was said that it had horrible effects on their magical capabilities.

Malfoy's voice was distant and hard when he said, "The Dementors tortured him almost non-stop for two years."

"Did you-"

Malfoy shot her an aggravated look, "We knew after the second day that he needed to be taken out. The Aurors who were at Azkaban checking everything out said that they could hear his screams over the roaring ocean. I'd just started my job as a prosecutor and I wasn't in the Minister's inner circle at that point. I tried everything to get him moved, but my hands were tied. I was in no position to bribe anyone, no one cared about the Malfoy name, and half

the Ministry wanted *me* in prison with my father. There was nothing I could do. And Mother tried everything possible to get him moved, but she was unsuccessful."

Hermione reached for her mug, listening intently.

"By the time he was released, Father was completely insane. He was filthy, pale, and gaunt; close to what he looked like tonight, but a bit worse. He had the magical talent of a savage child. Other than locking people to the floor and cutting the lights off, he couldn't perform simple spells or complex magic. And other than that, he talked constantly about creatures called—"

"Veagles?" she supplied with a shudder.

Malfoy nodded solemnly and met her slightly disturbed gaze. "He told you about them?"

"He said they were telling him how a euphoric high seizes a person when they were in the process of murdering someone."

His tone matched hers, "That sounds familiar."

Silence met those words and he stared at the fire, seemingly lost in thought. She didn't understand what he was going through, and she wondered how many times he'd heard those words from his father.

"Perhaps, the Ministry could help—"

His face twisted into a sneer, "Do you honestly think the Ministry gives a *damn* about Lucius Malfoy? He's a convicted Death Eater. They'll probably say justice was truly served and move on with their lives."

Hermione paused.

He had a very valid point.

"You know," Malfoy began, "I was even desperate enough to go to Potter for help maybe two months after he started his sentence, but Potter had taken an emergency Portkey out of Britain. No one knew where he was."

She tensed and wanted nothing more than to change the topic, "Why isn't he in St. Mungo's?"

"He's *been* in St. Mungo's since he tried to strangle me."

For some reason, she was having a hard time digesting his words. Malfoy? Attacked by his father?

"He-he tried to strangle you? To death?"

"Yes, and he nearly succeeded." Malfoy snipped as he stared at the fire.

The words of consolation couldn't come, but she truly empathized with his situation, "I didn't know—"

He touched the side of his neck with his open palm and spoke with little emotion, "Glamour charms are the reason I've been able to keep it a secret. The bruising finally went away last week."

"Why is he even at the Manor? He's not safe!"

"Mother wanted him home for the holidays." Malfoy spoke as if he were explaining the rules to a game he didn't particularly enjoy, flippantly throwing his hand around. "They said that he wasn't a threat anymore and could come home for a short period of time, but they were obviously wrong."

Hermione tried not to feel sorry for Malfoy's father, she really tried, but she couldn't help it.

All she saw were his hollow eyes staring at her and she empathized with everyone involved, "Oh, it's all so horrible."

She didn't like Malfoy's father, but she didn't hate him. At one point she almost feared him, but having all the happy thoughts sucked out by Dementors was a fate she wouldn't wish on anyone, not even on her worst enemy. She clung to her happy thoughts during the tough times and didn't know what she would do without them. Honestly, she'd probably be as mad as Malfoy's father without them.

Of course, she didn't harbour any ill-will towards them for keeping Lucius' condition a secret from her. Who better than her knew about destructive secrets? It must've been hard on him to watch his father deteriorate in such a horrible way. Malfoy practically *worshipped* his father growing up. Every person in Hogwarts knew he had aspirations to be just like him. Obviously, that dream was lost along the way.

He'd lost his father and his life as he knew it, just like she'd lost her son and her parents.

Life hadn't been kind to him, either.

Hermione understood the ramifications of his father's secret illness on his life as a Pureblood. He had to walk, talk, and act a certain way; had to represent and improve his family's name in everything he did. She understood that it was terribly important that he (and anyone else that he associated with) refrained from making any mistakes in society.

If Malfoy was upset about his father's condition, he didn't show it, "It is, but life goes on and we deal with it as best as we can. We *are* Malfoys after all."

He was pacing again and she could tell he was extremely uncomfortable talking to her about his father.

"Maybe they can help him at St. Mungo's, maybe he'll make a full recovery." it was a hopeful thought at best.

He snorted and replied rather bitterly, "I doubt it. They say he's too far gone to make a full recovery, but that doesn't stop my mother from having faith." He paused and added, "When someone invents a potion that gives someone back their happy memories and their sanity, let me know."

Hermione frowned, "How is it that no one knows about his condition?"

"No one knows because we've paid a lot of Galleons and used the Minister's guilt to ensure that it remained that way...I'm sure you know *all* about that, right?"

Of course, he would turn the tables on her.

She knew he was referring to how she kept the news of her parents' deaths out of the papers.

"I do," she nodded evenly.

Malfoy turned rather suddenly and her eyes met with his, "I think it's only fair that since I told you about my father, you should tell me about your parents."

She knew that was his way of saying he didn't want to talk about his father anymore.

Hermione took a deep breath and fixed her lips to speak, surprising herself with just how calm she felt discussing her parents with him, of all people. But Hermione figured that if he trusted her enough to answer her questions, she could trust him enough to answer his.

Besides, listening to him talk about his father made Draco Malfoy more authentic...more human in her eyes. Contrary to popular beliefs, he *hadn't* made it out of the war unscathed. Lucius' condition just proved that it was and had been a dark time for the Malfoys. She wasn't alone in her suffering and that was oddly comforting. She found herself wondering just how they kept it all together so well, but quickly realised the mother and son had each other to lean on during dark times.

"After Dumbledore's...death," Hermione began slowly, noticing that Malfoy slightly winced at the very name of their old Headmaster, "I altered my parent's memories so they would forget about me and sent them to Australia for their safety, but looking back, it seemed like they were destined to die," her voice sounded rather cryptic and she took a sip of water.

Malfoy sat down next to her, "What happened?"

"After I saved Pansy, she decided that she wanted to help me find my parents. So together, we looked all over Brisbane for clues and then, on September ninth, we found their house and I found them. But I didn't knock on the door. I'd been sick for the entire week before we found them, and that night I felt especially horrible. So I decided to wait until the next day to approach them, not *just* because I was sick, but because I was scared, too. I mean, I used a memory charm on them, without their permission. Not only is it illegal, but it could ruin my relationship with them. So we went back to the hotel, went to sleep, and when I woke up the next morning and cut on the news-their faces were on the screen."

She paused and closed her eyes, replaying the newscast she still held in her memory.

"I didn't think to put wards on their house. I wasn't thinking at all about that. Everything could've been prevented with the proper wards-" her voice broke.

His voice was still distant, but much softer when he asked, "What happened?"

Trembling, Hermione started telling him what she remembered, "Two teenaged burglars broke into their house in the middle of the night after they mistakenly thought that no one was home."

Malfoy shifted uncomfortably in his seat next to her and at that simple act made tears fill her eyes.

"It was random. I didn't find out the details until much later, but apparently my father heard a noise and came downstairs. He saw them trying to steal their television, picked up the bat at the base of the stairs and started yelling. Well, the bat struck one of them in the face and knocked him unconscious, and the kid they caught said he panicked and shot my father in the chest. And when my mother came running down the stairs, he said she took one look at him and tried to run back upstairs, but he shot her in the back. And then he called the police and ran. They caught him two days later."

Malfoy stared at his hands; the glass of water was on the table.

"My dad died en-route to the hospital, but my mom died on the operating table."

Bent forward, she hugged herself around the stomach because that was all the comfort she expected to get at that moment...that was until she felt Malfoy's hand on her back, patting her awkwardly.

"If I'd just gone in there and reversed the Memory charm, if I'd put up protective wards on their house the day I found them, if-"

"Granger-"

She didn't care about the awkwardness, she didn't care that he didn't want to hear anymore, she didn't even care if it was from Malfoy and not one of her so-called old friends; the hand on her back equalled *compassion* in her books. She hadn't genuinely felt it from anyone in so long that she didn't even know what it felt like.

Pansy coddled; Malfoy *cared*. It was simple as that. And it felt good. The minimal comfort he provided was enough to make her calm down.

"You know, I found out I was pregnant six hours after I saw that newscast."

His awkward patting stopped instantly, but his hand never left.

"You mean-"

"September tenth was the worst day of my life, I'm sure of it."

Hermione wiped her eyes.

"It was worse than the day Matthew died," she admitted softly, "I was eighteen, I was a week and a few days away from my nineteenth birthday, and all of a sudden, everything changed. Just like that," she snapped her fingers for effect. "I knew Matthew was going to die, I prepared for it, and it *still* hurt like hell. You can't even imagine how I felt. For the first time in my life, I didn't have the answers. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't go back in time and fix anything with a Time-turner." She shook her head with regret, "I made a lot of poor decisions out of grief and anger and confusion-so many poor decisions."

Finally, her eyes travelled to Malfoy.

"Isn't it funny how life works?" she shook her head bitterly, "Isn't it funny how your father, who was once a tower of strength and dominance, is now weak and controlled by imaginary demons...and isn't it funny how I managed to survive a war and lose everything in the process. Isn't it just funny?"

"It's a tragic irony as its best."

His eyes remained downcast and his hand, well, his hand remained on her back for a long time.

Part Two: I can't sleep

The sleep that had suddenly found Granger, hadn't quite found him.

And it didn't look like it would in the next two hours before the Portkey left for Paris.

Draco found himself staring out the patio doors into the darkness while she was sprawled on the couch, deep in what looked like a troubling sleep. He sipped the last of this third cup of coffee and absently sat the mug on the counter, listening to Granger's soft mumbles and groans. He couldn't figure out if telling Granger about his father's condition was a good thing, or a very bad thing.

More than ever, telling her everything certainly made him think about the state of his life at that moment. If he wanted to be honest, he never really talked about his father simply because he didn't care to be reminded about his state or the state of his family. It was all a mess in his eyes, and it wasn't getting any better with time. And all he wanted to do was ignore it, but it was becoming clear that he couldn't.

The incident with Granger had scared the living shit out of him, not that he would ever admit it. It was all the evidence he needed. How long could they hide him from the world? How many close calls could they stand?

Who was next?

What if he hadn't remembered that the wards had come down at the conclusion of the party and allowed anyone in the house to wander past the forbidden points? How in the hell would they be able to explain just how she died at Malfoy Manor on Christmas? What would Pansy have done without her best friend? How would his mother handle the guilt? What would he —how many more sacrifices would they have to make because of the sins of his ambitious father?

Ambition.

Draco knew all about that word. It was, after all, the very reason for their downfall.

Father always had been an ambitious man; it was a trait Draco had picked up along the way, but he didn't let it get out of control the way Father had. No, he was different.

He'd learned from the sins of his father.

Still, he didn't know his father's ambition would lead Draco down the path it had; the path to the Dark Lord and two years in his service. No, Draco didn't know much about his father's Death Eater activities; granted, he had an idea, but it wasn't confirmed until he was arrested for the Ministry fiasco in Fifth Year. Draco was furious: furious at Potter, furious at his little clique, and most of all he was disappointed and furious at his father for not being the man he had thought he was.

The thought of his father following a lunatic Dark Lord who was *constantly* and *consistently* beaten by children made him furious. The fury only festered when the Dark Lord gave him the suicide mission to kill Dumbledore to punish his father for not retrieving the prophecy.

He may have boasted to his friends about having a task given to him by the Dark Lord, but inside he was terrified from the start; ever since his initiation into his father's lifestyle. It was supposed to be everything he'd ever wanted, his dream to be like his father, but as soon as it began, Draco wanted his damn life back.

Dreams were cheap, anyway.

He remembered sitting in the Room of Requirements for hours, sometimes for even days, working on the Vanishing Cabinet, and wondering just how his life had gotten to that point. He didn't sleep for days, he lost weight, he couldn't concentrate, he cried to a ghost, he alienated everyone, even Blaise and Pansy, and for what? To be like his father and do his duty as a Malfoy, to redeem them in the eyes of a 'man' who lost a fight to a baby?

There was nothing he wanted more that year than a new name...*nothing*.

And that desire hadn't changed much over the years.

Draco had made so many damn sacrifices to save the name he'd used to get his way in the past.

He'd told so many lies to cover the truth.

He'd been so damn strong and so damn silent for so damn long that just the thought of it all made him bitter, angry, and restless. Some people thought he hadn't paid for his sins in the war, but if only they knew. Draco Malfoy had given up the rest of his teenage years to be the man of the family, he'd given up all but the two friends that knew of Father's condition, he'd given up carefree post-war years that could've put his restless mind at ease, he'd given up all sense of normality once his father returned home from Azkaban, he'd given up his home, he'd given up a few relationships by making sure no one got too close to the truth.

Yes, Draco was sure he'd paid for everything he did to save his family from a ruthless lord in Sixth Year; he'd paid it all, ten-fold. Blinking, he turned away from the door and wandered around the lower level of Granger's house until he found the bathroom. Standing at the mirror, Draco hardly recognized himself; bitter bags of exhaustion were beneath his eyes and concave crescents for cheeks that looked like his heart felt-not quite whole and in dire need for sustenance.

He needed sleep, but he knew that was out of the question on a night like this one.

Not when his mind was full and his chest ached.

His shoulders slumped with resignation and he bent tiredly at the waist.

The Malfoy Christmas party was the eighth party he'd attended in the last nine days. Holiday seasons were especially hard on him. Not only was it just another reminder that his family was in shambles, it required him to spend too many hours out in the tiring upper-class society. It required too many lies about Father's whereabouts and too much pretence on his part.

It required too much of everything.

It all was for the good of his family's name, but he'd been stretched beyond his means.

And he was tired.

He realised he had good reasons for his exhaustion.

Work. Family duties. Mother. The whole Granger situation. Healers and doctors. Life. Nightmares. Father... Sometimes he didn't feel like the war was over, especially when it came to Lucius Malfoy.

His mother *had* to understand that putting him in St. Mungo's was for the greater good. It was the best thing they could do for him...and for themselves. She had to understand that. Mother said she did, but sometimes Draco had the feeling that she didn't understand. Not at all.

Draco twisted the knobs, cupped his hands beneath the faucet, and splashed his face several times with the tepid sink water. He'd relinquish his inheritance for that water to cleanse his entire *life* of the sludge that had flooded it.

But the water didn't do anything, it never did.

Even water had its limits.

Letting the water drip from his face, Draco watched as it rushed down the drain. And for just that moment, he wished he too was a drop of water, so he could disappear and be lost in a sea of namelessness.

Maybe then he could really ignore just how bad everything was. Maybe then he could ignore the fact that his father had just tried to sacrifice someone else for purification purposes. Maybe then he could forget, and maybe then he could sleep.

Draco's body sank to the floor. The faucet still ran, but he used the sound to block out any and everything that might've assaulted his ears. His arms slung over his bent knees and his head was balanced in his hands. For the first time in what felt like forever, he allowed himself to feel *something* about the miserable state of his life.

Granger was asleep. He was alone. It was perfect. He could finally feel.

He'd never admit it, but at that moment he ached to be a kid again. He wanted to return to a time when all he had to do was run to his mother's arms to find comfort and safety. A twenty-three year old man shouldn't have as many regrets as he did; a twenty-three year old boy shouldn't feel as old as he often felt.

And thinking about everything just made him feel older.

His life had become so scrutinized that he almost didn't feel attached to it any longer.

"Malfoy?"

Draco's head shot up. Granger looked a mess. Her clothes were loose and her hair was everywhere, thanks to the nap she'd taken. She was wrapped in a heavy woollen blanket, but her lips slightly chattered, anyway. "Was there something you wanted, Granger?"

She frowned, "I thought you'd gone home until I heard the sink running. It's nearly five, now. The Portkey leaves in an hour."

He nodded, but said nothing until he rose to his feet. "I thought you were asleep."

Awkwardly, she told him, "I had a bad dream. Why are you still awake?"

Malfoy stared at her for a long time before he muttered, "I couldn't sleep."

She looked at him as if she really understood before she turned and left him to his thoughts.

Draco cut the water off, ran his fingers through his hair, and sighed before fixing his mask of indifference.

It was going to be a long day.

And he still needed sleep.

a lose-lose situation

Chapter Summary

Not convinced? Flip the page.

Chapter Fifteen

A Lose-Lose Situation

Part One: Rumours

January 5th

To Draco, the worst thing about taking a holiday was returning to work.

Holidays always left his mind shot and his meticulous routine ruined. He couldn't concentrate, couldn't work, required a copious amount of coffee just to get through the day, and often spent large amounts of time daydreaming instead of tending to business. That was the reason why Draco rarely took holidays.

It took every ounce of his willpower to force himself from the bed when his alarm clock said, "*It's time to wake up, Draco,*" in that soft, melodic voice with which he was so familiar. Kicking back the covers angrily, he rose from his bed and wearily glanced at the talking clock that he silenced with a wave of his hands.

It was nearly seven o'clock, and while that was his usual time for waking, he couldn't help but yawn. He hadn't been able to sleep. He'd drifted off around four in the morning, but was rudely awakened by a nightmare an hour and a half later.

His insomnia was getting worse. But it made sense because he had a lot on his mind.

The most prominent thought that ran through Draco's mind was rather simple. He hadn't had the time to discuss with Granger the importance of keeping his father's condition to herself. It wasn't that he thought she would tell. No, he trusted her enough to know that she'd keep her mouth shut. It would just put him at ease if he verbalised his request.

But perhaps some things were better left unsaid.

He thought about his holiday in Paris while he showered. Christmas in Paris turned into New Year's in Paris, and New Year's in Paris had turned into another four days of touring and enjoying the city. Draco had returned home the previous evening, but only been because they all decided that after nearly two weeks, it was time to re-join the real world.

Life was rather hectic for everyone, it seemed.

But Draco hadn't wanted to return. Being away gave him the normal existence he secretly craved. In Paris, he wasn't the son of Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy, he wasn't even a wizard; he was Draco Malfoy, the twenty-three year old who just wanted to have some fun with his two best friends...and one almost-friend.

Almost-friend, he snorted as he lathered his body for the second time.

Had he and Granger really come *that* far?

Rather than mentally answer that question, he pushed it from his mind.

However, she drifted back in while he fixed his hair.

Christmas night in Paris was too cold and windy to be outside without a jacket or a decent warming charm, but there she was on the patio that overlooked the well-lit city. She was staring at the lit Eiffel Tower; the wonderment that had been in her eyes during their day-long escapades around the city was still there.

But there was something else in her eyes as well.

Tears.

She looked like she was experiencing a bittersweet peace with the change of scenery, and he found that he didn't want to disturb her. Draco almost turned away, but stopped because he remembered why he had come outside in the first place. Pansy was currently terrorising every living thing in earshot with an off-key rendition of all the Muggle Christmas songs she knew, while her boyfriend smirked patiently.

Granger had escaped first, using the excuse that she wanted to watch them turn on the lights on the Eiffel Tower. He had to admit that he understood her fascination with it. Draco, too, found himself out there shortly after they had arrived by Portkey and eaten Christmas breakfast with the rising sun.

So he stepped out and shut the doors behind him with a small, yet audible click. If she was anything like Pansy, he knew better than to approach without announcing his presence first. As soon as the door clicked shut, he saw Granger quickly brush the tears from her eyes. She exhaled before looked over her shoulder. Granger's eyes widened when she saw him standing there. He took in her features, but barely noticed the scar Pansy hid under glamour charms. Not until she fully turned around.

"Oh, I thought you were Pansy."

"She's still in there, annihilating the holiday spirit, one off-key Muggle Christmas tune at a time."

A ghost of a smile appeared on her face, but it faded quickly as her eyes became blurry and distant. "It's been a long day, don't you agree?"

Draco spent most of the day trying to ignore just how much agony she was in. She started out strong, really strong, but her strength had faltered as the day droned on. As they toured the city and enjoyed Christmas dinner at the most expensive restaurant in the city, he witnessed the slow crumble of her façade as she retreated further and further into herself. Her pain was palpable, hard to ignore despite his attempts. By the time they sat down for dinner, the colour had disappeared from Granger's face and she looked one wrong word away from a nervous breakdown.

He decided to be as honest with her as she had been with him. "It doesn't feel very much like Christmas."

She turned her head back towards the Eiffel Tower, but he saw the silent tears cascade down her cheeks. "No, it doesn't."

Normally, he'd tell her to stop crying, but that night, he stopped himself. Every Christmas would be hard for her. Draco wondered if dragging her around was really in her best interest. And then he wondered why he suddenly cared about Granger's best interest. He'd rather listen to Pansy screech Christmas carols, than listen to Granger sniffle. Draco took a few backwards steps before he turned his back to her. His hand had just covered the doorknob when he heard her faintly whisper, "Stay."

"Why?"

"Please don't ask me why. Just stay."

So, he didn't. And he stayed.

He was putting on his shoes when he noticed the time.

It was nearly nine o'clock.

Breakfast be damned, he was going to be late. With the schedule the department's secretary had Owled him the previous night, he couldn't waste a single minute if he wanted to catch up on two weeks of work before nightfall. An impossibility, but he would try between the meetings and the trial preparations for last wizard captured in the Marquette raid. Draco gathered his files, stuffed them into his briefcase, and Flooed to the Ministry.

For the second time in almost three months, the moment he stepped out of the fireplace he felt that something was amiss. The last time that feeling overwhelmed him, he'd found a chain-smoking Blaise in his office in the darkness, rambling about rules and protocol.

He hoped that wasn't the case today.

He also hoped the feeling had nothing to do with Granger.

Draco had been jaded by Granger's life. The issue with his father was frightening and stressful, but he had support through his mother and friends. And furthermore, it paled in comparison to her losses. There were so many of them. But Draco knew better than to compare their pain. That would marginalise everything they both had been through on their individual journeys. Pain was pain. Suffering was suffering. It wasn't a competition.

And if that wasn't personal growth, he didn't know what was.

Draco proceeded towards the elevators. As he passed by the endless rows of fireplaces and the Fountain of Magical Brethren, Draco weaved his way through the throngs of Ministry employees and visitors alike. After a quick glance up, he duly noted that there were a lot of inter-departmental memos flying overhead.

Not uncommon for a Monday, but *much* more than usual.

What the hell was going on?

When he lowered his head, he realised something else.

People were blatantly staring - at him.

Now, people always stared. The entire Wizarding World had been staring at him since the war, it seemed, or perhaps even longer. It wasn't like the looks Potter received, but it was close, and for completely different reasons. But there were two things that were very different about today's stares:

Number one: *Men* openly stared at him, in addition to the women.

Number two: The three different looks he had caught people firing at him: puzzlement, intrigue, and doubt.

Draco didn't know what the hell to think.

As he proceeded onward and stepped onto the elevator, Draco kept his face masked with bored indifference. Internally, he was nervous and he didn't like it because he felt out of control. After all, control was something he prided himself on having. Having it meant the chance of something going wrong was limited. And he'd had so much go wrong lately that it almost made him weary. So, Draco silently confirmed with himself that the people he cared about were fine.

Everything was fine.

But he had a feeling.

When Draco walked through the double doors and into the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, he confirmed that something was going on and he didn't like it one bit.

Naturally, the department was a bloody zoo.

Some of the employees worked diligently in their cubicles in hopes of seeing their families before sunset, but for the most part, there were a lot of witches standing around; mainly the department's multitude of secretaries and assistants. All he heard were the sounds of chattering from the clusters of witches, a tame Auror meeting in the main conference room, another meeting in the second conference room, and the dull Apparation cracks of Magical Law Officers who were responding to some mild emergency.

It couldn't have been serious; after all, the Aurors were still there.

But as he walked through the main area, eyes fell on him and conversations ceased. There were a rather large group of witches who regarded him with a variety of looks that ranged from intrigue to bashfulness. He had half a mind to ask them what the hell they were staring at, but decided it was best to greet them with a nod and continue down the corridor that led to the Wizengamot Administration Services and to his office.

The secretary, who was magically filing her fingernails when he approached her desk, gave him a funny look before she spoke. "Good morning, Mr. Malfoy."

Draco didn't think twice about it.

"Morning," was his concise greeting. Pulling his wand from inside his cloak, Draco nearly walked away before he remembered something and backtracked. "Do I have any owls?"

Shannon looked up from her nails and cocked one perfectly-arched brown brow. A wry smirk grew on her face as she snidely asked, "Did you have a nice holiday in Paris, Mr. Malfoy?"

It seemed like a simple enough question, but something about her tone made his fingers instinctively clench around his wand. "As much as I would like to stand here and amuse you with stories from my holiday, I don't have the time, and with the department's quarterly evaluations coming up, you don't have the time, either."

"But—" she tried to interject, but was denied.

"Do I need to remind you just how important it is that all the paperwork be perfect for the quarterly evaluation?"

"No, of course you don't."

"I'm sure your superiors would love to see what you do on Ministry time..." Draco trailed off when the colour ran from her cheeks. Shannon quickly stopped filing her nails and put away all of her magazines. Draco was feeling relentless so he posed his original question again and added as an afterthought, "Please."

"No, Mr Malfoy," she shifted uncomfortably in her plush chair, "You don't have any messages. You haven't had any since last week because the Minister put a stop to all of your incoming letters."

He started to ask her why, but decided against it. He was rather weary with her presence. "If you could bring me a cup of coffee and the Daily Prophet." Again, Draco added, "Please."

And then he went into his office.

Draco pulled the files out of his briefcase and sat them on his desk before he sat down. He had every intention of preparing himself for his first meeting of the day, but couldn't help but wonder why the Minister stopped anyone from sending him owls. Was it the same reason why people were staring at him? Suddenly, Draco leaned back in his chair and swirled around so that his back was facing the door.

That was a plausible theory.

"Mr Malfoy?"

Draco swung his chair back around only to watch as Shannon set a cup of coffee and a folded paper on his desk. Immediately, he picked up the mug and took a sip. It was nice and hot and relaxed him just a bit. Exactly what he needed. "Thanks, Shannon."

"Is there anything else you needed?"

He shook his head and the door clicked shut behind her moments later.

Part of him wanted to get a jump on re-familiarising himself with the case he was presenting the next day, but the overwhelming majority relented against all forms of work. Draco took another sip from his mug and his eyes fell on the Prophet. He was in the midst of a larger sip when he decided to enjoy a few minutes of distraction. Draco unfolded the Daily Prophet to read the day's headlining news – and promptly spewed coffee everywhere.

Everything made sense.

The blatant stares from everyone, Shannon asking about his vacation, and the uneasy feeling he had when he stepped out of the Floo. It all made sense.

Bloody hell.

DO OPPOSITES ATTRACT?
By Parvati Patil

Draco's eyes scanned the headline a dozen times; eyes narrowed in partial disbelief.

In the case of Draco Malfoy and Hermione Granger, sources say yes.

"Shit, shit, shit."

He ignored the rest of the article, but perused the front page. Sure enough, there they were, at the bottom of the page – pictures. Four pictures. Taken the previous week, during their holiday. The first was taken at a Wizarding restaurant with Pansy and Blaise. Even though they were sitting next to each other, Granger and Pansy were in deep discussion. He didn't remember the subject because he was talking to Blaise. They weren't even looking at each other.

The second was of them walking down a Parisian street together; she was looking down at her feet and he was looking ahead. She only looked up once to say something to him that made him nod.

The third was of them from behind. They were standing in front of the Eiffel Tower, looking up at it. They looked at each other for a moment because he'd spoken to her, but that was it.

The last picture was taken at the Christmas party. Granger was talking to some elderly witch whose name he couldn't recall at that moment, and he was listening quietly.

All in all, nothing special or damning. Now that he thought about it, they were just pictures that were misconstrued to make them appear closer than they actually were. That was fine. He could argue it. After all, they had mutual friends. And then he read the words at the bottom of the page.

Not convinced? Flip the page.

Draco obediently flipped the page.

When he peered closer at the two photos on the page, he instantly knew that they were forged.

The distance between them was apparent in the real photos, but the fake pictures were absolutely ridiculous. The first forged picture was from the Christmas party; they were dancing and smiling at each other. He thought it looked rather silly. He didn't smile very much at those parties, and he sure as hell didn't dance with Granger. The second forged picture was taken in Paris; they were depicted in a deep embrace on a street corner.

Obviously, he'd never hugged Granger.

Never.

She'd probably hex him if he tried.

Not that he would.

Draco tossed the paper in the trash, blocked his office Floo, drank the rest of his coffee, and began plotting the demise of everyone involved in the bogus pictures and the article. Starting with Patil. Now that he was back, he knew that he had to act promptly. Draco had no idea how many articles had been published in his absence, but he had the feeling that this wasn't the first.

Or the last.

It was one thing to be falsely tied to some witch that he'd never met in his life; it was another thing to be tied to Granger. True, a connection to her would be excellent for him. It would render some of his family's strongest critics speechless because she was a Muggle-born War Hero, but for the first time, he didn't only think of himself.

He thought of her.

Granger was notorious for her privacy. She had too much to hide and being linked with him would make people dig in ways that got too close to the truth. Just as he fixed his lips to call Shannon into his office and grill her about the articles, there was a deafening crash, two yells, and then an ominous pause.

Draco pulled out his wand, just in case.

Then someone pounded on his office door.

When the door flew open before he could tell them to come in, Draco rose from his chair in anger. His lips were fixed to curse them out for invading his office without his permission, but they snapped shut when he saw a well-dressed Pansy Parkinson standing there with an even look that masked the homicidal rage underneath.

Wasn't she supposed to be on her way to Madeira?

Everything quickly made sense when she stepped aside and the haughty Parvati Patil walked into his office, looking as if she owned the entire Ministry of Magic in her frilly magenta robes. Her hair was pinned up professionally, but she had this ridiculous flapping fake bird in her hair.

Shannon came running in, breathing like she'd just run a marathon. "I-I tried to tell-I-"

"It's fine." Draco held up his hand and shooed her away dismissively. "Leave us."

When Shannon shut the door behind them, Draco leaned back on his desk and folded his arms and stared at Parvati. While he found her twin tolerable because she was the Lead Unspeakable, Draco detested the gossipier of their Year, and she hadn't improved on him in the years. Parvati Patil worked under Rita Skeeter, but had a tendency to go rouge in an attempt to make a name for herself. Skeeter was one thing—she was half-retired, acting as more of a figurehead in the Entertainment department of *The Prophet*—but Patil was a younger, more obnoxious version who used their society's obsession with photographic proof to sell papers.

It didn't matter if the photos were real or forged.

Draco didn't have her friendship or loyalty like Mother had Rita's. That would never happen

"Parvati Patil, long time, no see." He didn't bother to hide his contempt. The last article she wrote about him had been when he was dating Astoria Greengrass and she had some fake photos taken of him shopping for an engagement ring that were so convincing even his mother had asked to see the non-existent ring. He'd just about threatened her life to force her to recant, but when she did, the damage had already been done.

Perhaps he would fare better because the stakes were higher.

Draco returned to his chair and sat down, gesturing for them both to take a seat. He gathered and moved the files off his desk because they were confidential and he didn't need the

compliance issues. Parvati quickly took a seat in one of the two chairs in front of his desk and stared at him.

"It would've been even longer had I not been dragged from my office by a raving lunatic." She shot Pansy another death glare. Pansy merely shrugged, unperturbed by the offences laid on her, and took a seat in remaining chair.

"I thought the last time we spoke would be our last," Draco frowned.

"Just a second. My fans would love an update this evening with a quote." Parvati whipped out her pink quick-quotes quill and a piece of parchment. "You may begin."

Pansy wore a look that told him that only a small portion of her self-control held her back from blasting the offending quill into a million pieces.

Draco eyed Pansy. "Don't you have a flight to catch?"

"It leaves in three hours—"

"With all the security measures Muggles have, I'm sure you want to get there early—"

"I'll take a Portkey to Madeira."

"You hate them."

"I'll manage."

"Pansy," he said sharply, which made her glare at him. She meant well, but he wasn't Granger. He didn't need her guard dog routine. "I can take it from here."

She rose from her chair. "Fine, but I need a quick word with you outside." She gestured to the door. "Now."

"If you'll excuse me, Patil." Draco stood up and gestured to the door.

Pansy shot the Patil a lingering glare before she turned on her designer heels and walked out.

He was about to shut the office door behind him when he looked back, "Oh, and Patil," she looked over her shoulder at him in response. "There's an anti-snooping charm over all the files in my office. If you want to keep your smooth skin for your lifetime, I advise that you don't touch anything."

It wasn't a complete lie. The anti-snooping charm only sounded an alarm if anyone other than him opened his desk, but it was worth it to see her face change with worry. Draco shut the door behind him quickly and faced the not-so-pleased Pansy. He looked around for any eavesdroppers or their devices and cast a quick *Muffliato*, before he leaned in a little.

"Exactly why did you drag her here?"

"You already know."

Draco folded his arms across his chest.

She didn't even waste another moment. "I found out about the two articles this morning. The first article was printed last Wednesday, but not newsworthy because we've all been photographed together a lot lately. The second one was printed two days ago. Two of the pictures aren't even real—"

"I know that already," he interjected. "How is she getting away with forged photos?"

"As you know, it's not illegal. There aren't any consequences to her actions. She just has to recant her story, but she's done what she already intended and that's to get people to talk, speculate, and sell papers. She's been mixing true stories with fake for so long that everyone believes her and if she has to recant a story here and there, it won't mess with her credibility."

"Who forged the photos?"

"A photographer she always works with, but he's not important. She is, So, I went to The Prophet, presented the evidence of the forgery, and dragged her here."

That explained just about everything he needed to know.

"Your mother is showing the article to Hermione during their Italian lesson this morning."

"I'm certain Granger understands how rumours work." Draco frowned.

"I think you understand how bad this can be if a journalist gets an idea to go to Venice and starts asking questions about Draco Malfoy's new girlfriend."

Draco was thoughtful. "I'm honestly surprised no one has."

"Because they don't have a reason to look further than her career. As far as everyone knows, it's why she left. Everyone knows her and Weasley broke up before she left. She's never been tied to anyone else before. They're going to wonder how you two became close. They'll ask Potter, Weasley, or gods forbid, Ginny Weasley, and I don't trust a single one of those idiots not to say something that will make someone curious."

Which was fair.

Potter's actions alone had made Draco's curious. And both Weasleys' had only made it worse.

Pansy's voice turned cold. "I'll be damned if I let that happen so either *you* handle it in your way, or *I'll* handle it in mine." Pansy finished with an air of finality, indicating that the conversation was over.

She left soon after.

Draco shook his head and re-entered the office.

Patil hadn't moved a muscle.

He sat down in his chair. "Let's make this quick, shall we? We're both very busy people."

She licked the feathers of her quill, her face aglow with excitement. "Are you going to give me an interview?"

"No," he replied with little emotion. Draco put on his most intimidating look, leaned forward in his chair, and locked eyes with Patil. "But you're going to listen to me and you're going to listen closely, because I don't like to repeat myself."

"W—"

"Don't interrupt me, Parvati."

Parvati stared daggers at him.

"You're going to run back to your little office and stop the press on this morning's paper. Then you're going to write an article for both the midday paper and the evening paper that recants everything you said in this article."

"And if I don't?" She sneered contemptuously. "I've done nothing illegal."

"True, but I'll bring in Granger and we'll sue you and the Daily Prophet for libel; since your gossip articles will, and probably already have, defamed her character." And Draco that was a real shot in the dark, but it sounded good.

She nearly jumped out of her chair. "You can't sue—"

"Oh, but I *can* sue, and I *will* win. You can quote me on that, since you love your little quotes."

Patil's face hardened.

"You have three seconds to decide exactly how you want your future to pan out." He held up three fingers.

"But—"

"Three!" Draco called out.

She looked thoughtful. "You—"

He dropped his ring finger. "Two!"

"Malfoy—"

Draco dropped his middle finger. "One!"

"Okay," Parvati caved. "I'll recant."

A wry smile spread across his face and then he checked his watch. "You made a good decision." Draco pointed his wand and the door magically opened. "Have a wonderful day."

He didn't mean it. Parvati glared at him with smouldering hate for a few seconds before she rushed out.

The door shut behind her and Draco sank back into his chair, rubbing his temples in slow circles.

Part Two: Easier To Hate

For hours, Draco poured over notes, interviews, files, and evidence in preparation for the next day's hearing in front of the Wizengamot. It was the final case from the Marquette Manor raid, and no one was more thrilled than him.

Despite the fact that he had divided the cases up with his colleagues, he still prosecuted ten in almost three months. Of the ten cases he'd tried, he'd won nine of them. The tenth case was of a scared, sixteen-year-old boy who had only been there because his father, one of the leaders, had pressured him to join. Draco saw too much of himself in that kid and recommended probation. Someone had done the very same thing for him thanks to Potter's testimony, even though it had been a wildly unpopular decision at that time.

There was a knock on his door.

"Come in," he called absently.

"Mr Malfoy?"

Draco's head shot up from his mound of paperwork at the sound of the Shannon's voice.

"Yes?" he replied, rubbing his shoulder.

"Mr Potter is here for your one o'clock."

Shit, he'd forgotten about Potter.

Apparently, she'd interpreted the look on his face. "I can reschedule."

Draco shook his head. "It's fine." He started clearing the unnecessary documents from his desk.

He'd seen Potter several times since he broke his knuckles on Weasley's face. After all, Potter was the Lead Auror on the Marquette raid and he had time since he was *still* on desk duty. They never spoke of the incident. They never spoke of anything outside of work. And that worked for them. Outside of the Granger debacle, Potter was the consummate professional and Draco refused to allow personal feelings to interfere with his work.

Draco wasn't expecting anything different that day so when Potter came into his office, he semi-politely gestured to the chair across from his desk. "Have a seat."

Potter silently took the seat, dressed in regular robes with his Auror badge. Potter always wore an unpleasant look when he was in Draco's office. Obviously, he didn't want to be there any more than Draco wanted him to be there. "Let's get this over with, Malfoy. Ron's waiting outside."

He nodded absently. "Fine, the sooner we start, the sooner we can finish."

"That was the best thing you've ever said, Malfoy."

Draco almost sighed audibly, but stopped himself when he remembered where he was and who he was with. It had already been a long day. He hadn't had lunch and likely wouldn't because Granger's Italian lesson with his mother. He was in no mood for Potter so Draco ignored him, opened the file, and started making sure he had even the most minuscule detail correct. It took a few huffs and annoyed grunts, but Potter fell into the routine.

For the next half an hour, Potter answered every question with extreme detail. He was good for something and good at his job, regardless of how Draco felt about him. As with all of his cases, he wanted a smooth trial and guilty verdict; Potter shared his sentiment. It was the culmination of a year of hard work for the Auror department.

When the meeting was finally over, Potter slowly gathered his things and Draco was ready to see him go. Potter was about to rise from his chair, but he stopped and eyed Draco curiously. "Are the rumours true?"

Draco's fist clenched almost instinctively, but he maintained his decorum. "What rumours?"

He knew damn well what he was asking.

"The rumours about you and Hermione dating," Potter replied, his face was almost unreadable as he absently straightened his glasses. "Are they true?"

That wasn't he expected Potter to ask him.

"Why do you care, Potter?"

"I don't."

Draco didn't believe him for a moment. "Then for what reason are you asking about our relationship status?"

"Conversation," Potter replied lamely.

He just blinked at him in true Malfoy fashion: slow and deliberate, essentially calling his bluff without a word. They would never be on a level where they made conversation with each other for no reason. And he was sure Potter knew that, but he just stared back at Draco, jaw set. It was a look of sheer determination he hadn't seen from Scarhead in a long time.

Potter wanted an answer.

"What does it matter to you?" Draco rephrased his question because it was almost impossible to talk to him when he was like that.

He shrugged with a frown. "I'm curious."

"Let me be perfectly honest," Draco said harshly. "I don't give a shit about satisfying your curiosity."

If looks could kill, Draco's funeral would be held before sunset that day.

"You know, when Ron told me what happened and that you had defended Hermione, I didn't believe him. It just seemed impossible. Hermione would never, ever associate with the likes of you."

Draco shrugged off the offence and didn't take the bait. "Don't be so bold as to think that you know her, Potter."

"I've known her since I was eleven," he scoffed and rolled his eyes. "I think I can safely say that I know Hermione better than anyone." Draco leaned back in his chair and shook his head. Potter didn't know shit about Granger. If he had, he'd shut his damn mouth. "I know her a lot better than you think, Malfoy."

"I seriously doubt that. If you only knew..." Draco trailed off ominously.

Potter's eyes narrowed in response. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"Exactly what I said, Potter - if you only knew."

"I don't need you to tell me anything about Hermione, I already know."

Because he could no longer help himself, Draco said, "Well, inform me of the kind of person that you think Granger is – since you think you know everything."

"She's a liar."

"Oh." Draco rolled his eyes sarcastically. "Now *that's* original. Big deal, she left Weasley—"

"The reason that I think she's a liar has nothing to do with the fact that she left."

Now he was intrigued.

He'd always assumed that Potter hated Granger for the sake of Weasley. He was loyal like that, but with everything he'd learned about them as of late, Draco considered recanting his statement about the unfailing loyalty Gryffindors had for one another.

Maybe Blaise was right - the most loyal house really *was* Hufflepuff.

"Then do tell, Potter, what the hell did Granger do that was so unforgivable?"

Potter's voice was ice cold. "Not only did she abandon us all after the war when we needed her most, but she killed Ron's baby and she lied about it. Then, she hid from us for years."

Draco kept his face completely devoid of emotion, but his brain was working at full capacity.

Well, now he understood why Pansy was so adamant for him to kill Patil's story.

Potter was a nightmare, but Granger...

It seemed that Granger had personally crafted a lie for each of them; a lie of omission effective enough for them to cut her out. Weasley was emotional so she told that she fell in love with someone else in Australia, and she told Potter—who was as noble as they came—that she aborted Weasley's child.

It was actually *brilliant*, if clumsily executed.

With the amount of stress that she was under and the fact that they were fresh out of war and *bloody children*—it was excusable. Not necessarily right, but who was he to judge?

But lying like that didn't leave any room for error, which was good for someone like Granger. After all, she was always several steps ahead of everyone, even in her grief. As their best friend, she had a deep understanding of how Potter and Weasley functioned as humans. Her lie couldn't be too elaborate or else they wouldn't have believed her, nor could it be too vague or else they would have followed her to Venice. Lies mixed with half answers and partial truths; enough for them to form their own conclusions and—well, if Potter was famous for anything, it was for jumping to conclusions.

It had to be perfect.

Effective.

Logical.

And it only worked if there was another liar in their midst.

So, Draco reacted the only way he knew how. He laughed. The sight was unnerving because Potter shifted on his feet and stared at him as if he were the second-coming of his aunt. Merlin forbid.

"Why are you laughing?" Potter asked slowly.

"Because you're a damn fool."

Potter took a step back in disbelief; almost as if he expected Draco's reaction to be different. And it would have four months ago, but—things had changed. "Is that so bloody hard to believe?"

He refused to answer his question. Draco was busy mentally working through the problem at hand. There was no way in hell that *he* would've believed that shitty story she told Weasley or Potter.

Draco had learned a lot about Granger in the last few months, but even he knew that she was far from impulsive. Every idea and decision, good or bad, Draco suspected that she thought long and hard about them. And the predicament she found herself in was almost impossible. A true lose-lose situation where there were no winners. It was either tell the truth and all three of them lose everything...or lie in hopes that the truth would not surface. And while Granger still lost, at least those she cared most about would be spared.

How fucking noble.

The problem with secrets and lies was that they never stayed that way forever.

"Like I said before, you don't know anything about Granger."

Potter looked positively livid. "And you think you—"

Draco didn't let him finish his statement. "Potter, do you *honestly* think of Granger as the type of person who leaves for no reason at all?"

"I used to know that she would never leave, but then—"

He gave off another snort. "That just lets me know that I know her better than you do. See, while the rest of us had to change and grow up after the war, you didn't—"

"I grew up, too!"

"No." He shook his head. "You may have grown up in *years*, Potter, but you haven't grown up in mentality. After six years, you still see everything as black and white, right and wrong, left or right, good and evil. There's no middle ground with you. With everything you've been through, I thought your view of the world would have changed, but alas, it hasn't. You don't read between the lines. You don't ask the right questions, you don't look, you don't *see*. You just make these wild assumptions and jump to your own conclusions. *Nothing* has changed."

"Everything has changed!"

"No," Draco's voice was a little more forceful, "It hasn't. You still harbour resentment towards me because of my past, even when it's obvious that I'm no longer the same person. But this isn't about me, the truth of the matter is that say you hate Granger because you think she abandoned you all and aborted the Weasel's baby—"

"I *know* she did! I was there, in Australia, Malfoy!"

Every ounce of his willpower was used to hide his surprise, but Draco let him finish.

"I saw her walking out of the clinic with Pansy Parkinson at her side. I waited until Pansy ducked into a drug store before I approached her. She was sitting on a bench, looking at a bunch of papers, and she was surprised to see me standing there."

Draco could almost picture it.

"Hermione asked me what I was doing in Australia and I asked her what she was doing in the clinic. She told me it was none of my business. I told her that she was making a mistake. I knew what she was doing. I grew up around Muggles, Malfoy. *I knew it.* I told her I was going to tell Ron everything and that he would hate her for what she was planning to do. And she got up, screamed at me, and ran off. When she came back to Britain, I asked her about the baby and she looked at me like I'd lost my mind and asked, '*What baby?*'"

Potter's eyes darkened with bitterness.

"I've never been more disgusted at someone. I thought I knew Hermione. I thought she would never stoop so low as to murder an innocent baby. I thought she knew that we would've stood by her side. Ron—" he took a breath and awkwardly continued. "He loved her. He would've married her. He would've taken care of her. We all would've! But she just went off and did that on her own. And then she never told Ron, she just ran and left us. She ran because she knew that I was going to tell him the truth. She left us all before we could leave her."

Dear Merlin, Harry Potter really *was* an idiot.

Now, Draco might've been an insensitive prat at the age of eighteen - okay, he *was* - but at that point in his life, he was a little more understanding about hard decisions. He'd been forced to make so many decisions that were grossly above his maturity level. Draco knew better than to threaten someone at such a difficult point in their life; he knew better than to try and bully someone into making a decision that affected the rest of their life.

A lot of people had bullied him into making hard decisions and it wasn't fair.

She'd probably weighted out her options and felt trapped like a rat in a maze. "No wonder she left Britain," he said with a shake of his head. "You have no earthly idea what kind of shit she was going through at that time."

Potter's voice rose. "We *all* were going through a lot of shit at that time, Malfoy! I'd—"

"Did you even stop and ask her what was going on?" He asked harshly. It was a stupid question; he knew the answer, but he was getting mad for Granger. "Or what she was going through? Or where her parents were? Or why *Pansy*, of all people, was with her?"

He was stammering, but Draco refused to allow him one word edgewise.

"No, you didn't think to ask her anything because you believed what you wanted to believe; you jumped to some bloody conclusion and threw out a bunch of threats that she didn't need." He shook his head and dryly added, "You were her best friend; the person she trusted most. Not only did you attack her judgment, but you attacked her character." He let loose a rueful chuckle. "If I had friends like you, Potter, I wouldn't need enemies."

Potter looked ready to spew liquid hot rage everywhere. "And who's being the judgmental prat now, Malfoy? You don't have any clue as to what was going on between us! Everything was a mess after the war was over, you know that. I was trying to recover. I was trying to get my life back—"

Draco had just about had enough with him and his bullshit.

He abruptly rose from his chair, head almost pounding from anger. "It's just like you to be so selfish and inconsiderate, Potter." He snapped and tried not to do the same to Potter's neck. Granger would kill him. "You think you're the only one who had to mend after the war? You think you're the only person who wanted their life back?"

The quill in his hand snapped in half as Draco almost shook with rage.

"You may have had him in your head, Potter, but he was in *my* home, killing and torturing people over meat and potatoes. There wasn't a damn thing I could do. I couldn't block him out the way you could." He took a breath to calm himself while Potter stared at him wide-eyed. "You think you're the only one who suffered? You think you're the only person who has *bled*? There were others there, too, Potter. Weasley was there, hell, he lost his brother!"

Draco was hotter, madder than he wanted to be. It felt like he was losing control. He took a moment to compose himself. "Granger was there too, and you don't know anything about her life or the lengths—" He stopped himself before he blurted everything out.

Potter looked like he'd been hit in the gut with a train of mixed emotions.

"What don't I know, Malfoy?"

"It's not only is it not my place to tell you, but also you don't *deserve* to know the truth. You've done nothing but treat her like shit when Granger spent *years* saving your arse, and the first time she does something you don't like, you follow her to Australia and treat her worse than you treat your enemies."

"But she—"

Draco glared. "Even *I* know that *everything* she does is for some noble and selfless reason. It's disgusting the way she protected you—the way she's *still* protecting you even though it almost *killed* her."

Potter was obviously confused. "What in the bloody hell are you talking about, Malfoy?"

He wanted to scream the truth at him in frustration, but couldn't. Granger would never forgive him. Since it was obvious to Draco that he wouldn't get any further with Potter, he decided to switch gears. "Why did you abandon her the night of the Marquette raid?"

With almost a challenging look on his face, he watched Potter's face twist into the angry look he was very familiar with, but hadn't seen in so long because he was trying to be polite. Screw that. Seeing Potter fuming was much more gratifying than seeing him in any other mood.

Potter hadn't changed much; still had those bloody glasses and that scar, and he hadn't learned to check his emotions or keep them under control. He had a temper, even without Voldemort. He always knew exactly which of Potter's buttons to push; apparently, he'd pushed a more difficult one labelled *Hermione Granger*.

"That's none of your business, Malfoy," he spat with a glare. "Don't ask questions you know nothing about."

"Sadly, I know a lot about this situation, Potter," he shot back, voice still even, but very curious as to why he went so rigid so fast. "I got the blow-by-blow of what happened that night. You left her alone and defenceless. Had she died, her death would've been on your hands."

Harry Potter looked unconvinced. "She wasn't going to—"

"Granger managed to dodge a few beams of raw magic after you left, but then one hit her. She said that it swept her up into the air and they kept hitting her, over and over. Granger said it was some of the worst pain she'd ever felt. And then, she was thrown across the room."

The colour in Potter's face was rapidly leaving.

And as he spoke, Draco found himself getting angry all over again. "She said she didn't know how far she fell, but her wand was destroyed long before then so she couldn't Apparate out. No, she had to wait and *bleed* until they found her. Blaise said his partners threw up at the sight of her. She should have *died*."

Potter looked sick and disgusted, and Draco was far from thrilled.

It didn't feel like a victory.

"She was bleeding from the head, her leg was twisted in the wrong direction, and the broken bones in her arm had sliced through her skin. Blaise picked her up and Apparated to St. Mungo's. He said that he thought he'd Splinched her when they got there, but it was the sound of two of her broken ribs rubbing together."

Potter's eyes widened. "Malfoy! I - stop!"

Of course, he was on a roll and refused to listen. "I saw Granger the next day. I saw the bruises, the faded cuts, and the black eye. The bones they couldn't heal—"

Saint Potter looked ready to vomit. "Don't—"

Draco couldn't stop. He wouldn't. "They had to heal her in sections. And even then, she wasn't completely healed. Not only did she have to take a potion to strengthen her bones, she had to wear a Muggle cast for a month and she had, no, she's *still* seeing a physical therapist to regain the strength in her arm and correct the limp she walked with following the *accident*. And let me just say that I use that word very liberally, because we both know that was no an accident."

"Stop!"

"Stop? Stop what?" He taunted. "If you want me to stop talking, that's not likely to happen. I don't give a shit about your feelings, Potter. I'm not about to sit here and kiss your arse like everyone else. I'm not going to tell you that everything was her fault when it was really *yours*."

He obviously didn't want to hear anymore and shot up from his seat, red-faced and angry. "Shut up!" Potter screamed at the top of his lungs and Draco thanked every deity that his office was charmed or they might have made the Evening Edition. "Shut your fucking mouth! I don't have to sit here and listen to this, Malfoy! And I won't!"

"Then, get the hell *out!*" He yelled back, pointing at the door. "You started this! Not me!" Draco slammed his fist on his desk. "What's the matter? Don't like hearing about your handiwork or the consequences of your temper?"

Draco thought he'd sent Potter over the edge. Either he was about to get hexed—again—or he was about to storm out of Draco's office and slam the door so hard the damn door might fall in. But Potter did something that he didn't expect. The rage, which had been on display since the beginning, deflated from him like air from a balloon. Potter's eyes went distant as his posture slumped. "I-I didn't." His voice dropped to almost whisper. "I didn't mean for her to get hurt. I—"

Oh, he felt bad about it?

Good.

"But actions have consequences, and she was." Draco said hotly, but he wasn't yelling. Only just barely. "And what disgusts me is that she blamed *herself* for you leaving her. All you do is constantly make things worse and she *still* protects you." Potter looked at him and Draco saw something that looked close to regret, but he wasn't finished. "You let your personal issues with Granger get in the way of your job, your duties, and your oath. You may be a hero, but you're a disappointment to the Auror Department. You deserve every *minute* of desk duty. I hope she *never* forgives you."

All was silent as Potter reeled from Draco's words and half-collapsed into his chair.

"But I *do* wonder, Potter," Draco spoke calmly in the aftermath as he returned to his seat. He watched Potter carefully as he took in everything. "What did she say that was so bad that you had to react the way you did?"

He said nothing, closing his eyes momentarily. It was reluctant, but Potter did respond. "She didn't do anything - she was a complete professional." He stared down in his own lap, morosely. "Was she really *that* hurt?"

"She spent almost a month in the hospital and another three weeks at home."

Didn't anyone tell him?

"Merlin, I had no idea." Potter spoke as if he'd heard Draco's mental question. He dropped his head in his hands. "I had no idea she was injured that badly. They didn't tell me any specifics about what had happened; only that I needed to secure her forgiveness before I could be permitted to go back to the field." Potter sighed and it sounded painful to Draco's ears. "No wonder she wouldn't. I nearly *killed* her. I nearly killed one of my best friends."

"Best friend?" Draco blanched. "You hate her, and everyone knows it. Even she knows it."

"No, I don't." Potter sighed miserably. He took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. "I try and try, but I can't. Even after everything she's done, even after she left us, and even after she didn't return my letter, I just can't hate her. I just can't."

Draco stared at the downcast features of his childhood nemesis for a long time. There were a lot of questions running through his mind, but he put them all on hold. Barely hidden self-disgust and loathing marred Potter's features, and Draco thought about what had transpired during their screaming match. Potter was actually disgusted with himself for what he'd done to Granger - so much that he hadn't even wanted to hear about it. That was odd. Especially for someone who treated her like shit.

Maybe, just maybe things were deeper than he thought.

"I get the feeling that your anger towards Granger isn't just because you think she abandoned you all and aborted Weasley's child."

Potter's head jerked up, his face was a mask of panic and suppressed anger. And then it hit him, in a memory.

"It's like that fable I told your mother that very first day at the restaurant; the fable about the fox and the grapes."

Everything else was still muddled, but the fog was clearing as everything Granger had been hinting at hit him full-force.

The fox and the grapes.

It is easier to despise what you cannot have.

And Draco realised who the other liar was.

"I don't think this is about that, at all."

"What the bloody hell are you talking about, Malfoy?"

"You're not mad that she abandoned everyone else; you're mad that she abandoned *you*."

Of course, Potter denied it. "That's ridiculous!"

But Draco shook his head knowingly. "Everything makes sense now. I thought it was over, but now I realise that it's not. That it never ended, at least not for you."

"Malfoy, you're barmy in the—"

"You never told Weasley about your trip to Australia. It's obvious he didn't know about it the night I punched him. Or else he would have said something else other than call her a—"

"M—"

"Also, no one knew where you were and you never said a word about your sudden disappearance once you returned. Why is that, Potter?" Draco frowned thoughtfully. "You never told Weasley a thing about Granger's pregnancy and you never told him that the shit story she told him wasn't true."

"It would hurt him to know what she did."

Draco nodded along, but his mind was still clearing. "It would, but Weasley loved her. He would have been angry, but eventually he would have forgiven her for lying to him." Draco met Potter's eyes and hypothesised. "Perhaps you didn't tell him because Granger isn't the only liar."

Potter looked so confused he was almost angry. "What the hell are you going on about, Malfoy?"

"I should've figured this out a long time ago." Draco berated himself with a quick shake of his head. "Shame on me for ignoring the hints that were laid out before me, but shame on you for being such a good liar."

"I—" He snapped his mouth shut.

Draco stared at him curiously. "Does your little girlfriend know that you're still in love with Hermione Granger?"

end of a belief

Chapter Summary

"It would be more scandalous if it were true."

Chapter Sixteen

End of a Belief

Part One: Skeeter

When Hermione approached the table in the quaint Muggle café during her lunch break at eleven o'clock, she immediately spotted Rita Skeeter sitting at the table with Narcissa Malfoy, sipping tea and lifting a scone to her bright red lips.

Her first thought was a very depressing, '*This just isn't my day.*'

She actually wanted to sob at the injustice.

It was as if the cosmos were having fun harassing her.

After returning home from her holiday in Paris the previous night, she climbed into bed for a good night's sleep - only to toss and turn for the majority of the night. Finally, at four o'clock, she gave up on sleep completely and paced on her little blue rug until she fell asleep on the couch an hour later. She dreamed of her little boy - and it was the best dream she'd had in so long.

Hermione was literally startled from her catnap when a small and shy voice whispered, "Mommy?"

She hadn't planned on closing her eyes but for a moment; she hadn't slept in over two days. Matthew had undergone a nasty round of radiation therapy and she'd spent the entire night watching over him as he tossed and turned in his bed. Then, she had gone to work for the entire day, while the nanny spent the day with him as he lulled between sleeping and vomiting uncontrollably. Instead of coming home and resting, Hermione came home to a frustrated nearly four-year-old who wanted to play, but was too fatigued to move. The nanny was leaving that night to go out of town for a wedding, so there was no possibility of sleep, at least until he was better.

She didn't know when she nodded off, but scrambled off the couch the instant she heard Matthew's voice.

"Yes, sweetie," Hermione whispered, not bothering to hide her extreme exhaustion, "Are you feeling okay?"

Little Matthew nodded and smiled, "All better." His eyes twinkled when he asked in hopeful tones, "Story-time...please?"

Always the polite child, Hermione smirked; she'd taught him so well.

Despite the fact that she wanted to climb into her bed and sleep until noon, she knew she couldn't. It was half past seven that Friday evening: Matthew's bedtime. He loved going to bed on Fridays. There was a routine: he'd brush his teeth, wash his face, change into his favourite nightclothes, and find her. He was always so eager for his bedtime story. Hermione always read him stories, but on Fridays, she told them from memory with sound-effects galore. Sometimes she made them up from the top of her head, sometimes they were stories about Hogwarts Quidditch matches that were full of action, but sometimes she let him tell her what stories he wanted to hear.

"Uh-huh," She flashed a wry grin, "Race you to my bed."

Matthew gave off a little squeak and bounded into her room, Hermione was hot on his heels. They settled under the covers after a tickling match and he snuggled against her as if all were right in his little world.

It was moments like those that her love for her son grew by leaps and bounds; she couldn't want more out of her life than what she already had. If she could, she would take his pain, bleed for him, and sacrifice her life to ensure that he lived a happy and fulfilled life. It was moments like those for which she thanked God that she was alive. It was moments like those that she would remember for the rest of her life.

"What story do you want to hear tonight, love?"

Boldly, he said, "I want - hear bout my daddy."

Hermione nearly choked. He'd never requested stories about Harry. She saw no reason not to tell Matthew about his father; the legend of Harry Potter hadn't come to Italy quite yet, which enabled them to live in anonymity. That was a huge relief. One day he would find out that he was the son of a legend, one day he would find out that he was the son of the boy who defeated the darkest lord of their time, one day she'd sit him down and tell him everything - but that day wasn't today.

Until then, she would entertain him with stories of a father that had no idea he even existed.

"Well, it's a good thing you want to hear about your daddy." She stated in her best storyteller voice, "I happen to have the perfect story for you, but first, would you like to know a secret?"

Matthew nodded enthusiastically.

"Your daddy used to play Quidditch."

With an enthralled look only a child could master, Matthew whispered, "He did?"

Hermione nodded, grinning, "Yep, he did, and he was a great player. I'm going to tell you how he caught his first snitch..."

An hour later, she rubbed her son's sleeping back as he breathed deeply in his sleep. After cheering uncontrollably, laughing, grinning, clapping, gasping, and making any other sounds an excited and entertained child would make, Hermione had no clue how he managed to fall asleep so fast. She ran her fingers through his soft and messy brown hair. Matthew snuggled closer and whispered a single word that made her eyes water uncontrollably.

"Daddy."

If Pansy hadn't Flooded over to check on her, Hermione was positive that she would still be sleeping on her couch, lost in her dreams.

During their last session, days before Christmas, she begrudgingly confessed to her therapist that she slept as much as she could lately. Not because of depression, but simply because she always had the most vivid dreams of Matthew. Katherine had said that while that behaviour wasn't exactly healthy, it was usual for bereaving mothers to cling to their dreams of their deceased children - and then asked how dreaming of Matthew helped her mend.

She didn't exactly know how to answer that question.

Besides the dozens of home movies that she hadn't been brave enough to watch and her pensive, dreams were Hermione's only place to see Matthew. If she could, she would sleep forever and a day just to see his face, hear his laugh, touch his hair. It didn't matter that she was sleeping and those dreams were just memories from the past - nothing mattered. Dreams brought back some of the memories and the days that she couldn't quite remember anymore. Though they didn't completely eradicate the constant pain in her chest from missing him, they temporarily filled her with peace.

As long as he was in her heart and dreams, he wouldn't be gone for real. The same thing went for her parents; although the dreams of her parents weren't as frequent or as vivid as the dreams of her son. In her dreams, Matthew was so real and so vibrant in her mind that almost she forgot that he was no longer there.

It was a reminder that she could live without.

Pansy, she recalled, shook her from those thoughts, snatched the Daily Prophet off the table as soon as the owl delivered the morning post, and left in a burst of green flames.

Odd, but Pansy wasn't known for being normal.

Hermione had brushed off her weird morning and prepared for her day.

It was going to be a long one, she was sure. She would be late if she didn't hurry.

During her attempt to fix a quick breakfast, she nearly sliced off her finger while cutting strawberries and then she rammed her fingers into the drawer. She released a stream of violent epitaphs that made her look around for Matthew; her mouth was quick with an apology and a "*mommy didn't mean to say that bad word*", but then she realized he wasn't there.

And any decent feeling that she woke up with that morning was gone in an instant.

Suddenly morose, Hermione abandoned all plans for a wholesome breakfast and Flooed into the office.

Her fingers continued to throb in pain for over an hour - but her heart throbbed far worse and far longer.

To the immense shock of her co-workers, for the first time since joining the company, Hermione Granger missed out on the distributions of assignments during their weekly meetings simply because she was ten minutes tardy. She ended up being assigned to spend the next three days at the Ministry, doing basic undemanding curse-breaking.

It was her first day back out in the field, and while she understood it was best not to push herself, she really didn't want to spend the day at the Ministry. Obviously, Gregory had his initial misgivings about her assignment. After all, she'd had a bad experience with Ministry assignments. However, Hermione, first and foremost, was a professional. Furthermore, she was a professional that *refused* to spend another day inside her office.

Without any delay, Hermione Flooed into the Ministry, and immediately, every eye fell on her. She had assumed their stares stemmed from the fact that she was Hermione Granger, but the longer she spent in the Atrium, the more she realized that she was wrong.

It was confusing and almost hurtful the way they glared and frowned in disapproval, but she hid her emotions well and kept a blank face. Now *that* was something new. Looks of reverence, envy, and adoration were familiar to Hermione; looks of disappointment, repugnance, and mistrust were not. Positive that she had done nothing to the witches that glared at her, she ignored them all, held her head as high as she could, and stepped onto the elevator.

She didn't need any of this today, she really didn't.

Quickly, Hermione found herself in a private room deep in the Department of Mysteries, confused and aching. While the spells came easy, it took nearly an hour for her to get back into the swing of things. It took nearly as long for her to break a single curse, but she gathered her wits, pushed down feelings of angst that bubbled in her belly, and focused all her magic and attention on the matter at hand.

Or, at least, she tried to.

"Then, leave!" He threw his finger toward the door, "Get out! Go away! My life was much better without you!" He fumed and stared at her for a moment before he spat words filled with so much poison it made her insides freeze, "You played us all for fools, and I hate you."

It was just past nine in the morning when the first backfired spell whizzed past her head. With a small shriek of fear and surprise, Hermione immediately fell to her knees; her body shaking uncontrollably at the memories that flooded her mind.

What the hell was wrong with her?

She was not a scared novice.

Since when was she afraid of something she loved doing?

Adrenaline denied her the right to feel the pain, but she knew she was hurt.

Since her passion had nearly killed her.

Hermione sat on the ground and relaxed, but not for long. She had a lot to do and little time. She'd gotten an owl from Narcissa, reminding her about their Italian lesson at eleven. Hermione hadn't forgotten about their arrangement, but she was a little nervous about this lesson in particular. It was the first one following the entire fiasco with Lucius and she didn't know what to expect.

Normally, she anticipated and enjoyed her weekly lessons with Narcissa. The woman was extremely driven and a very fast learner, not to mention the fact that she always took time to ask Hermione how she was doing with everything. She was probably the only person who asked her that on a regular basis - well, besides her therapist.

But she was paying her to ask such questions.

Narcissa simply asked them because she cared.

It took a lot, but when she asked her how she was doing during their last lesson, Hermione decided to be honest with her from that point on.

"I'm fine - wait. I'm sorry, that's a lie. I'm actually doing quite terribly."

She hadn't elaborated, and Narcissa hadn't pressed. But the woman nodded with understanding.

And understanding was all Hermione needed at that point.

Hermione focused everything on the task at hand and then pointed her wand.

It hurt to think. It hurt to breathe.

The second backfiring spell bounced off a mirror across the room and Hermione dropped to her knees. Unlike the last time, she had enough of her wits to throw up a quick protection charm that saved her from getting hit by the spell. That time, Hermione stayed on the floor for a long time. Her eyes were shut as she inhaled and exhaled laborious breaths.

It was half past ten when she decided that today would be the last of a lot of things: it would be the last day that she allowed the Marquette incident to enter her mind, the last day that she

worked without an Auror present (next time she would *demand* that someone stay near her, and not merely nod when they said they didn't have enough on staff that day), and the last day that she would allow fear to enter her heart when it came to her beloved job. Her job had gotten her through the hardest points in her life and she would be damned if she became afraid of it because of one incident.

With a determined grunt, Hermione pulled herself back onto her feet and stared down the little box down in question, eyes narrowed in concentration as she circled the item in search for its weak point.

Hermione Granger was unwavering in her next thoughts. The box.

To someone else: it was a little cursed box. To her: it a representation of her life.

The box was something else that she had overcome, another issue she had to rise above, another hill to hike, another mountain that to conquer. And Hermione was exhausted. It was to the point where she couldn't figure out which process was worst, sinking into depression or trying to mend. Merlin, she was so damn tired of combating all the demons that ran rampant in her life, tired of climbing over hills of oppression and depression, tired of - well, she was tired of everything. All she wanted to do sometimes was quit and shrivel up and bleed, but Hermione knew that quitting equalled failure...and failure was not an option.

She couldn't quit - no, she *wouldn't* quit.

She'd conquer this bloody box and everything else in her life; she'd conquer the world if that meant she would find her own peace. She was determined to breathe for the first time, determined to find harmony, and determined to stop running and hiding from everyone. Hermione was determined to keep each memory of her son and her parents in that special place in her heart, determined to finally live because the life she'd been living wasn't fit to be called a life. She would do all these things - and she would come out on top in the end.

Hermione pointed her wand, muttered the correct incantation, and the curse broke instantly with a small crackle and a little flicker of light.

It was anti-climactic, but for the first time, in a long time, she allowed herself to smile.

The minutes following that revelation passed in an uneventful cloud of busy work.

By the time her watch beeped to tell her that she had to meet Narcissa in ten minutes, she'd broken the curses on half the items in the room; far more than what they had asked of her. Hermione felt very accomplished when she vanished all the fixed items to the correct room and noticed that her work area was much cleaner. Then she decided that she really deserved an extra long lunch and left to meet Narcissa for Italian lessons.

And that was how she found herself in her current predicament; quietly sitting across the table from the two women who represented two extremes in her life.

After a quiet greeting, Hermione ordered a cup of red zinger tea and a breakfast pastry from the pleasant waitress. Next, she found herself glancing at the quietly chatting women across

the table.

With a sigh, Hermione focused on the newly delivered treat and tea.

She couldn't win, could she? She couldn't have *one* good day without something - or someone - interfering. Today's interference was just the icing on a bad day. She didn't need this.

With a snort, Hermione thought that she'd have to write that thought down in her journal, whenever she had the time. She didn't use the journal as much as Ms Shepard wanted, but she hadn't tossed it into the fire yet. She saw that as some sort of improvement.

"Miss Granger," Rita Skeeter began in that familiar, taunting tone that made Hermione's fists clench reflexively, "You're looking rather - *thin*. My readers want to know all about your diet plan."

Hermione was damn sure that she looked like she'd been hit with a full-body bind.

Yeah, it's called the 'Lose a child' diet, you should try it. Works wonders.

"Don't even start that, Rita," Narcissa's voice was firm and concise, her eyes were narrowed fiercely as she continued, "Now isn't the time for your word games and I refuse allow you to bully her in my presence; especially since she has said nothing to you. You know *nothing* of her life and I will be damned if I allow you to ridicule her."

Needless to say, both Rita and Hermione were stunned into silence.

Tension at the table elevated gradually in the following moments. It felt as if a boa constrictor were slowly coiling around them, clenching its muscles around their necks, and cutting off their air supply.

A shallow breath escaped Hermione the moment Rita mumbled, "Fine, but let it be known that I don't like you."

"The feeling is absolutely mutual."

"And let it be known that the only reason I'm here is out of service to a friend, who is very loyal to you. If I had the choice, I'd make the current situation a million times worse, believe me. I would enjoy making your life miserable. It would be the perfect revenge for everything that you did to me."

Oh, she believed that Rita Skeeter would use her limitless media power to make the very best situation seem dire and to pay her back for trapping her in that jar. But as for the current situation she was talking about, Hermione didn't have the faintest clue of what she was talking about.

"You are lucky to have Narcissa as an ally...and a friend."

"I know." She was no longer looking at Rita, but at Narcissa, who flashed a caring, yet small smile. Hermione was well aware that Narcissa knew about her son; they never discussed it in

any detail, but the woman knew just how much pain she was in and did everything possible to make her life easier.

Words couldn't explain just how blessed she felt to have a woman like Narcissa Malfoy in her life.

The two women exchanged unreadable looks before Rita Skeeter grumbled into her cup of tea and Narcissa rested her hands on the table delicately and very aristocratically.

Hermione gulped. It looked like they were ready to get down to business.

"Now, Hermione, I know that you are wondering exactly why Rita is here, but let me assure you that regardless of your past relationship, she means no harm." Narcissa spoke up in a tone that would've comforted her - had she not been so bloody nervous all of a sudden.

Wisely, Hermione remained silent, but gave a slow, hesitant nod.

Narcissa took her silence as a confirmation to continue, "I know you two don't have the best history."

At that, the frowning Rita Skeeter snorted, as if to say that her statement was the understatement of the century.

Narcissa shot her a nasty glare. "What did I say before? Play nice, Rita."

Rita slightly sulked for a moment before she squared her shoulders; always wanting to be the proper lady, that one.

Too bad she was a vicious witch.

Hermione looked at the two women in almost amazement. Both were obviously cognizant of their need to blend in while they were out in Muggle London, but one clearly wanted to stand out more than the other. Narcissa wore a knee-length black dress with sheer stockings and expensive high-heeled shoes; while Rita wore an expensive looking tan dress that had little purple, orange, black, and grey designs on it. Hermione thought her dress looked like someone had pulled it down from the tapestries in a hotel thirty years before, made the necessary adjustments, and sold them to Rita Skeeter.

"I need to show you something before we continue."

Hermione did not like the sound of that, but watched in a tense silence as Narcissa went into her handbag and pulled out a newspaper. It wasn't any newspaper; it was The Daily Prophet. Before she could wonder what was in the paper that was imperative for her to see, Narcissa opened the paper, laid it on the table, and slid it across for her to see.

There were a dozen emotions that ran through her head and heart when she saw the article and the pictures.

But not one of them was anger.

She should've been angry at a lot of things.

But she wasn't.

Well, not *completely*.

Funny thing was the simple fact that the reigning emotion in her head wasn't anger, or even misery; not it was an emotion that bordered on apathy. Seriously, what were a couple of pictures and an article in respects to everything else in her life? She had been in hell. The only reason they even ranked on her importance scale was because of the backlash that was already occurring.

Hermione stared at the meaningless pictures and heaved a sigh.

In her heart, she knew that it was only a matter of time before the press linked them together, not just as friends, but as romantic partners. Men and women, after all were not capable of platonic relationships, or that was what she was told. Hermione might've been a little out of touch when it came to the press, but she wasn't stupid. Not in the least. She and Malfoy had been spending a lot of time together, and they'd been very careless about openly defining boundaries.

The Christmas party and the near weeks in Paris had added just enough fuel to the rumour fire for it to become a blazing inferno. Never mind the forged photos, the minor detail of the distance between them in the photographs, and the fact that they were never spotted alone together in Paris; people were going to say and believe what they wanted.

That was something that Hermione knew very well.

Rita Skeeter's annoyingly snooty voice broke through her thoughts, "Scandalous, isn't it?"

"It would be more scandalous if it were true."

"You have a point there, Miss Granger. *Are* they true?"

"Read the article yourself and tell me what you think," she snapped in annoyance

"I'd rather hear it from your own lips."

"Rita," Narcissa warned. "This is not an interview and if you want to turn it into one, I suggest that you leave now." She turned to her friend, "You are supposed to be here to help me, as my *friend*, not the heartless journalist."

Stubbornly, she frowned, "How can I help her if she hasn't denied it?"

"Does that really matter? Regardless of whether or not it is true, you know what she's up against if this article is not quickly snuffed out of existence. They'll dig into all facets of her life and they'll publish anything they find."

Those words made Hermione's blood cool considerably.

Matthew. Her parents. Australia. Pansy.

"And what does *she* have to hide?"

Narcissa eyed Hermione sadly, "What she has to hide is her own business, but life has not been kind to either of us."

Rita sipped on her tea thoughtfully before she asked blankly, "How is *he*?"

"Back in St. Mungo's," was her soft reply as she stared into her own mug. Narcissa Malfoy looked as if her heart were breaking when she firmly said, "Permanently. I love my husband. His attack on Draco made me see that I cannot care for him any longer, but his attack on Hermione - I will not bring him home and give him another opportunity to hurt someone else." She reached across the table and regrettfully brushed her thumb across the fading mark on Hermione's face.

Without saying the words, Hermione understood that she was conveying her apologies. But she'd never placed the blame on Narcissa. With a small, "It's okay," she made sure that she knew.

Narcissa flashed another smile and within a moment, all signs of sadness were gone from her face and she was back down to business. "Do you know who did the forgeries?"

"Of course. It was her photographer." Rita answered

While the two friends discussed the matter in quiet tones, Hermione bit into her pastry and chewed thoughtfully as she read the article that was packed with ridiculous lies and strange quotes from people she'd never met in her life about them being a loving couple. The entire article's contents about the growth of their "relationship", Malfoy being the considerate boyfriend, and her being a swooning woman in love; it all bordered on ridiculous.

Had she been at a better point in her life, it might've provided her with a good laugh.

Alas, she wasn't.

And she damn for sure didn't need any extra attention.

"Is there something being done about the fake pictures?" Hermione asked finally.

Words were meaningless when it came to gossip articles, but pictures were damning.

"Draco is handling everything, as we speak."

There was something about those words that told Hermione that she was better off not knowing exactly how Malfoy was "handling everything".

She could guess that the article hadn't gone over well with Malfoy. After all, she knew him to be an extremely private man; only in the paper for social events that he attended, charity donations, official relationship announcements, and important Wizengamot cases that he had won. He would rather stay out the papers altogether, unless it was strictly positive. And while

the rumours were of little to no consequence to him, she had a feeling that he knew just how damning they were to her.

The fact that he was taking care of it, just for her sake, spoke volumes.

Hermione pushed the paper back to the centre of the table.

"To think *my* protégé is the cause of this hubbub," Rita Skeeter sneered, snatching the paper from the table. She glared at it one last time before handing it back to Narcissa, who folded it and put it back into her handbag. "Wait until I get my hands on that little chit. She will rue the day she *ever* decided to declare her independence from me by ignoring my direct orders." Her voice sounded almost deadly as she wrung her napkin menacingly.

"Exact your vengeance however you feel it to be necessary, Rita, but you need to advise Hermione on how to conduct herself for the next couple of days; at least until the rumours fade."

Hermione inhaled. "I don't think I need—"

"Shut up and listen," Rita, the cow, snapped.

An instant passed when she just knew that she was going to whip out her wand and curse the bitch into oblivion; she even went for her wand. But her beaten and battered conscience used all of its strength to stop her. Not even her war hero status would be able to save her from Azkaban if she was caught using magic in front of Muggles. And to avoid detection, not only would she have to Obliviate everyone in the café, she'd also have to Obliviate every person who walked past, just in case.

That was nearly a hundred people, more or less.

Needless to say, Rita Skeeter wasn't worth it.

The thought alone made her release her wand.

"Now, listen up Miss Granger," Rita started coldly, "This is what you do..."

She didn't need a damn tutorial on how to conduct herself. She'd been handling herself just fine, thank you very much. This article meant nothing to her. It was very low on the totem pole of worries in her life. Truth be told, all she wanted was to be left alone. Hermione stared into her cup of tea as she screamed silently in her head. For Merlin's sake! Was there anyone in the world that understood that she just wanted some *peace*?

"And then you..."

Hermione was close to tears and she rested her hand on her forehead in exhaustion.

For over five years life had beaten on her. She carried burdens, suffered in silence, heard the rumours that were spread about her...she'd overcome a lot of things, and now she'd taken two steps forward only to be hurled five steps backwards.

And it wasn't fair. It just wasn't.

She would give up all of her worldly possessions to ensure that no one ever bothered her again: not about her departure, not about her return, not about her past, not about her rumoured relationship with Draco Malfoy, not about anything.

"Are you listening to me, Miss Granger?"

The lie came easily and she almost cursed herself for it because she'd been so good about being honest, "Yes."

"Good, now, whenever someone asks you..."

As the witch droned on, her mind wandered back through time and space, back to a time she never wanted to remember again.

"Who says I'm keeping the baby?"

Those were the hardest six words she'd ever said in her life for one reason: they were a lie.

With all the death and destruction that had occurred in her life, Hermione had no intentions of killing the child that grew inside of her. It had taken her three days to get out of the bed after hearing of her parents' deaths and seeing the little positive sign on the pregnancy test Pansy had forced her to take in the midst of her grief.

But that day, Hermione forced herself from the bed simply because she knew there was much to do. Pansy had had everything, from her outfit to her breakfast, ready for her the moment she got out of bed. Honestly, Hermione didn't know what she would've done without her.

Pansy had not only found out the local laws on abortions, but found a clinic in Sydney that would examine her for the procedure. So, they drove down to Sydney for her appointment that afternoon where she got a rough due date, a bunch of pamphlets, a prescription for pre-natal vitamins, and a list of options. The doctor, after hearing that she was a new orphan, had offered to handle the situation surgically within the next week, despite the fact that she was just past the point for a legal abortion.

She had made the appointment knowing that she wouldn't show up.

Hermione clicked back into the conversation just as Pansy gasped.

"This is something I have to do on my own, no Ron, no Harry, nobody else—"

She took Hermione's hand in hers. "Fuck that, I won't let you do this on your own... you have me."

All between them was tense and silent, at least for a little while. They found a bench just outside the clinic, sat down together, and looked at the items she'd gotten from the doctor. While Pansy rattled on about what their procedure-day plans, Hermione sat in silence. She didn't have the heart to tell Pansy that she had no intentions of aborting the baby or accepting her help.

The fewer who knew about her pregnancy, the better; and as much as she wanted to, Hermione didn't know Pansy enough to trust her to keep her mouth shut. The tension inside her was building, but she got a huge relief when she found the prescription and dashed into the drug store to fill it for her.

Hermione stared at the pamphlets with tears in her eyes.

How had she gotten to that point? She went from having a mother to becoming a mother in the blink of an eye. She couldn't stay in Australia forever. She certainly couldn't return home to Ron or Harry...

Italy. It flashed in her head like neon lights. It was the answer to her prayers.

Her mind wrestled over the job offer she'd received the day before her flight; the job offer she'd mentally declined. But now it was looking better and better. She could go to Italy, live in anonymity, and raise the baby on her own and no one would-no. She couldn't run from her problems.

"Hermione?"

Her blood ran cold when she looked up.

"H-Harry? What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you," He flashed an uneasy look, "I took an emergency Portkey from London. Percy has a few contacts at the Ministry here and they let me know where you were staying. And I went to your hotel. I saw you leaving, but I couldn't catch you in time. So I followed you - and here I am."

Nervously, she chewed on her bottom lip for a moment. "Sounds like you went through a lot."

Harry merely shrugged, "I was worried about you. No one has heard from you since you left. I thought you were only going to be in Australia for a couple of weeks."

"I got a little tied up." Well, that wasn't a complete lie. "I'll be back in a couple of weeks."

"We need you back home. Everything is a mess and we need you..." he trailed off when he saw the look on her face.

But she already knew what he meant.

They needed her to come and fix everything.

When in Merlin's creation had she become everyone's handywoman?

Everything was such a mess in her own life, and here her best friend was, asking her to come home and fix all their issues. Who was going to help her?

He hadn't asked once about her parents. She nearly wept at the thought, but held herself together by a fine thread. "And I'll be home soon, Harry." Somehow she managed to hide the

crack in her voice.

If she was to be honest, their needs paled in comparison to hers at that moment. So, forgive her for staying away from London and everything else for a few extra weeks. Forgive her for staying away to think and plan. Forgive her for trying to figure out a way to establish paternity without either potential father finding out.

She couldn't be everyone's everything, now could she?

"Hermione, are you sick?" Harry's voice interrupted her bitter thoughts.

That threw her into the whirlpool of confusion. "No, why?"

The wizard anxiously shifted his weight from his left foot to his right, "It's just that I saw you coming out of a clinic and -" his voice turned suspicious, "What's going on? What were you doing in there? I thought your parents were in Brisbane."

Her voice was rank with defensiveness. "It's none of your business, Harry."

"You forget that I grew up as a Muggle, Hermione," He paused when she gasped, but continued on forcefully as he stood over her. "I know what kind of clinic that is so stop lying to me. I know why women go in there."

Panic overwhelmed her entire body. She locked eyes with Harry and all she saw was disappointment. He knew. He had to. Not once had he ever looked at her like that. Merlin, with every second that passed, everything seemed to get worse. So, she decided to be honest. "Harry, I'm—"

"This is a mistake. You're making a mistake."

Hermione rose to her feet in a protective anger, staring him down, "And it's my mistake to make! You're my best friend, you're supposed to support me in whatever I do; no matter if you think it's a mistake or not! Some friend you are."

For the first time, Harry regarded her with the same level of disgust that he regarded the Slytherins. And it hurt worse than she could ever imagine. "I can't condone what you're doing. Ron deserves to know what you're planning to do."

"He can't find out, not now. Please, Harry, he can't know. Not until I know—"

"I'm going to tell him and he'll make you see that what you're doing is wrong."

The tears started and they never seemed to stop. "Harry, please just listen! Listen to me!"

"Listen to you?" He snorted coldly, "I can't even look at you."

In that moment, all she felt was an incredible amount of pain; from his words, from the obvious disdain in his eyes, and from the overall heartache that weighed her down. And the betrayal.

Life as she knew it was over.

He couldn't look at her? After she stuck by him for seven years, after she fought and researched and saved his arse - after everything, all he had to say to her was that he couldn't look at her? She felt sick, but didn't know if it was the baby or the feeling of being betrayed by a friend. All she knew was that she suddenly found herself at a crossroad.

If she went left, she'd save her friendships and give up her baby. It was the easy thing to do. If she went right, she'd give up everything for her child. And she knew that was the right thing to do.

It was time for her to make a choice.

"Harry, we need to talk."

"I think you've said enough."

She gathered her nerve and wiped her tears away. "One day, you'll regret not listening to me. One day, we'll both regret this moment, and that's fine." She smiled ruefully. "You just made it a lot easier for me to walk away from you. You just made it easier for me to say goodbye."

And then she went right.

Hermione fell out of that memory and back into reality where Rita Skeeter was still gabbing on about decorum.

Hot tears bubbled deep within; they wanted desperately to be released from their prison, but she refused to cry in front of the talking witch. Never. "I-I have to go." She began, "My break is almost up."

And before either witch could protest, she dropped a note on the table and fled.

Part Two: The Beginning

For as long as she remembered, Hermione had always saved her tears for the moments of privacy where no one could coddle her with fake gestures and lies. She used to only feel that she could let go when she was alone, but as she suppressed her tears and walked the seventeen blocks back to the Ministry, the realisations that times were different had startled her into a blessed numbness.

She had cried in front of Narcissa once, Pansy a few times, and Malfoy more times than she could count, especially in the last couple of weeks.

For some reason, Hermione actually trusted him with her tears and her weaknesses.

But she had a good reason to trust him.

Malfoy never said a word during or afterward, even though he was obviously uneasy. For some reason, he always stayed when he saw she was upset. She didn't know if they were more than acquaintances, but they obviously were a lot closer than they had been since he'd rescued her from his father. Hermione didn't know why, and at that moment, she didn't really care.

All she knew at that moment was that she needed - a friend, for lack of a better word.

Since Pansy was out of town, Malfoy would have to do. But he wasn't such a bad alternative.

Sometimes he put his hand between the blades of her back, sometimes his hand found her shoulder, and sometimes he didn't touch her at all. He just stood there with their arms barely touching. She'd gotten so used to crying around him that she didn't want to cry alone.

And she thought of him as she fled the café.

Generations ago, a Zabini woman bore one Squib boy. When the pure-blooded supremacists of that time called for the family to outcast the boy, strip him of his name, and send him to live with Muggles, she refused. Determined to see to it that he had an excellent education, she sent him to a French Muggle school, much like Hogwarts, when he turned eleven. There, he met and later married a Muggle girl, and together, they had five children; thus beginning a separate line in the Zabini family.

From that side of the family, they only bore only Squibs, but they knew all about magic. They were not scorned by the magical side of the family, in fact, it was quite the opposite. The two families were very close. However, for hundreds of years, the magical side of the family made sure they kept the Muggle half out of everyone's knowledge for their own safety. Even after the second war, Blaise only brought those he trusted around them.

After Blaise explained everything, he invited Hermione to meet them and bring in the New Year with them. It was his way of saying that they were friends, for lack of a better word.

And she graciously accepted.

When they arrived at his cousin's house in the suburbs of Paris, they were greeted with hugs and cheers and kisses on the cheek. The Zabini family was an eclectic mix of people from different races and different parts of France. The environment was homey and loving.

Soon, no one could tell that once they had been strangers. Pansy was giving facials to all the little girls. Blaise was outside playing Muggle football with the boys. Draco had loosened up just enough to carry on a conversation with a few of Blaise's male cousins. Hermione helped the older ladies clean the kitchen after a wonderful dinner until they sent her out to mingle.

Instead, she found herself outside on the patio, watching the little boys running around, kicking the black and white football with just the porch lights to light their way. Her eyes

watered at the thought of Matthew. If he were alive, he would be nearly five, and out there with them.

They would probably tell him that he was too little to play, but he would've ignored them all. That's just the kind of boy that he was: headstrong and audacious, but humble too. Just like his parents.

In the last three hours of the year, the football game turned into a mini-fireworks show, of sorts. There was a giant clock outside that let everyone know just how close they were to celebrating a brand new year. Kids were enamoured with the fireworks and noise of the poppers, teenagers were setting off firecrackers, Pansy and her little clan of made-up princesses were holding sparklers and giggling, and Blaise and a few of his younger cousins were setting off minor aerial fireworks. Everyone was laughing and having a good time. It was a family celebration and Hermione found herself smiling from her vantage point.

No, it wasn't as fine as the Malfoy fireworks display, but it was wonderful in its own respects.

She didn't hear Malfoy until he sat down in the lawn chair next to her.

It was 11:56 P.M.

"Pansy's worried about you."

She regarded him curiously. "And she sent you to check on me?"

Malfoy snorted, "Do you think of me as the type that does the bidding of others?"

Blaise had set off another rocket into the sky and she watched as it exploded in a glitter of blue. With her eyes still fixated on the sky, she replied, "I'm not sure how to answer that question, in all honesty. You've not at all what I thought and you've proven me wrong at every turn."

Nothing was said between them for until the time read: 11:57 P.M.

"I came over here for some much-needed peace."

She wanted to ask him when he started feeling at peace around her, but the words never came.

Instead, they sat in a comfortable silence. Everyone outside started finding their spouses and the kids starts screaming in excitement. The sound of firecrackers and sparklers could be heard over everything. She looked over and found Pansy and Blaise smiling at one another.

"What's your New Year's resolution, Malfoy?" Hermione asked randomly.

His eyes narrowed in confusion, "My what?"

"Your New Year's resolution, Malfoy. It's a commitment that someone makes that goes into effect at the start of a new year. Generally, it's supposed to be your goal for the year, something lifestyle-changing; like refraining from smoking or drinking, losing weight, or—"

"What's yours?"

"I'm going to go in my attic, hire a landscaper, tell the truth, and make new allies."

"Allies? Why not call them friends?"

"When I think of the word 'friend', I think of someone who is replaceable, recyclable, and removable," Hermione told him honestly. "I prefer not to have friends."

"Maybe your resolution should be to change your mindset."

Shocked by his words, Hermione looked at him and found he wasn't looking at her, but at the sky where they let loose another firework at the start of the traditional countdown.

"Ten! Nine! Eight!"

Hermione looked around where everyone was coupled up. Her brows furrowed for a moment.

And then it dawned on her: the traditional (and dreaded) New Year's snog.

She hadn't spent her New Year's with anyone except Matthew and she found she was behind on traditions. She couldn't think of the last time she'd snogged anyone. Maybe six? Hell. How pathetic was that? Hermione was pretty sure she didn't know how to snog anyone anymore. Maybe snogging wasn't like riding a bike, maybe it was something that someone could forget. She licked her lips nervously and then it dawned on her. Malfoy.

"Seven! Six! Five!"

Fuck. She was sitting with Malfoy, of all people.

Hermione jumped out of her seat as if it had scalded her and quickly advanced to the railing of the patio. Surely, he didn't realize what he was doing when he sat next to her. No—

The world slowed on its axis when Malfoy joined her at the railing. Horrified, she looked at him with wide eyes, but found that his were on the sky. He looked at ease in the moonlight, pretty, in a masculine way. She couldn't remember ever seeing him so calm, so free, so—

When he looked at her, she looked away.

Hermione prayed that he didn't see the blush that crept across her cheeks.

"Four! Three! Two!"

Shit, oh shit.

"One!"

And all of a sudden she felt him move next to her, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. He was so close that their arms touched; so close that she felt his breath on the side of

her head when he turned towards her. Hermione trembled when he rested a hand on her back. His touch was different, not uncomfortable - just new.

"Happy New Year's!"

As the kids cheered and the adults snogged their respective partners, Hermione braced herself for a kiss - that never came. Instead, Malfoy whispered into her ear, "Happy New Year," and added after a slight hesitation, "Hermione."

She was glad that the cover of night and the celebration had prevented him from seeing her inflamed cheeks.

The feel of raindrops on her face drew her from the memory.

But it wasn't ordinary rain - it was as if someone had shoved her into a cold shower as a joke. The weather went from overcast to storming in about five seconds. She didn't have an umbrella, but the only positive aspect about being caught in that particular storm was the simple fact that she was only five blocks from the Ministry.

So she ran.

Lightning struck the sky above and thunder soon followed.

It was the perfect personification of her day.

Obviously, being five blocks from the Ministry didn't save her from the inclement weather. Rain soaked her clothes completely by the time she had dashed into the Ministry's visitor entrance. Sopping wet and sort of depressed, she performed a drying charm that left her clothes damp; she didn't even bother with her hair. Hermione quickly accepted that she was going to look like a drowned sewer animal for the rest of the day.

She sighed and quickly rushed through the packed Atrium, ignoring all the looks and stares that she received. Hermione had absolutely no idea what she was going to do or say when she arrived in his office, but she just hoped that he wouldn't turn her away. She was sure that she couldn't handle the rejection today. The looks Hermione received as she rushed through the cubicles in the front of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement were so meaningless that she barely noticed them. But she did notice that a few people sent off interdepartmental memos. It didn't matter what they said. Nothing mattered. They knew nothing.

And she wasn't about to be nervous around the plight of nosey pigs.

Instead, the witch ran swiftly and blindly through the empty halls and corridors that led to the Wizengamot Administration Services and Malfoy's office.

The secretary wasn't at her desk, in fact, there was no—

A familiar voice spat hatefully, "What are *you* doing here?"

Hermione cringed before turning slowly to face an angry Ronald Weasley.

All she knew was that this moment signified the beginning of the end.

the beginning of a truth

Chapter Summary

"Looks like I'm not the only liar among us."

Chapter Seventeen

The Beginning of a Truth

Part One: Panic attacks always were a bit of an oxymoron

Hindsight was definitely a bitch.

She should've left the café and gone home. She should've written Malfoy from the safety of her living room, pulled herself together, and met him for a late lunch or something, just to talk or sit there - it didn't matter. The fact of the matter was that she'd done something foolish. It was absolutely foolish of her to run through the entire Ministry blindly. She wasn't thinking; that much was obvious because she'd stumbled onto enemy grounds and immediately had come face-to-face with someone she didn't want to see.

And now she was required to face the consequences.

Alone.

"What are you doing here?"

In a millisecond, she covered her face with a mask of well-practiced indifference. "It's a free country, is it not?"

Ron's eyes narrowed in barely concealed fury. "Come to see your boyfriend, have you?"

Hermione's brows narrowed in a momentary confusion, but then she remembered the article. Of course, he would believe it to be true. "I can't see why my life is any of your business."

"You forget that I used to be part of your life, not just as your boyfriend, but as your best friend."

Hermione couldn't help but notice the bitterness in his voice and her response came out a bit softer than she intended. "I haven't forgotten, Ron."

"Then if you haven't forgotten, why is it so easy for you to move on?"

"Easy?" Hermione repeated, aghast, "Nothing about my life has been easy, Ron."

He didn't spare her one moment for an explanation. He just went on the offensive. "Don't stand there, Hermione, and act like the victim. You left us, remember?" And he added in a softer voice, "You left me."

The words burned in her chest. She found that she couldn't breathe properly. He was right. She had left him, but the reason. "There is so much I need to tell you, Ron, I hardly know where to start. I—"

It was as if her words had saved him from himself.

The moment of emotional weakness was done and Ron's eyes flashed with unrelenting anger. "I don't want to hear anything that you have to say."

Stubbornly, she pushed all feelings aside and argued. "You may not want to hear it, but I'm going to tell you anyway. I have paid my penance. I can't keep this inside anymore. I can't keep—"

"Was it worth it?" he asked coldly, "Was he worth it? Was he worth giving up your entire life? Was he worth giving up me?"

Hermione stared at him hard. She was not about to let him chastise her for abandoning them, when he'd done it twice himself. When she answered, her voice was laced with such intense emotion that it made it extremely hard for her to even speak. "He was worth everything and so much more. You can't even fathom how much he was worth it. If given another chance to turn back the hands of time, I would do it again; even if I knew that it would have the same end results. I would do it all again."

Pain filled his eyes and she had to look away. He reminded her of the eighteen-year-old boy that she had left standing in the Burrow's lounge area and her heart broke for him. He had no clue about what had really happened. He had no clue about anything. She'd given him no other option but to resent what she had done to him.

It seemed right at the time, but Hermione understood how wrong she had been.

"And - and what about me, Hermione? Did you ever love me? Or was it just a lie?"

Tears welled in her eyes from his stinging questions. "Ron, I - I fell in love with you when I was fifteen years old; that's the honest truth. I loved you then, believe me, I did." She wanted to touch him, but knew that it was an unwise move. "But the war, and things, and life, and *everything* happened and I just—" Hermione took a breath to stop herself from rambling uncontrollably.

She'd always dreaded this moment, but here it was.

There was so much that she wanted to say to him, but the words wouldn't come out right.

She stood there and stared at her hands, trying to remain strong, even though she felt her strength had been suddenly depleted. "I've made a lot of mistakes and bad decisions, and I truly do regret the way we ended—"

"No!" He bellowed so powerfully that it made her jump. Ron then flinched in such a manner that made her think that she'd wounded him physically. "No, you don't. You don't care, you don't—"

That time, she grabbed his shoulders as tightly as she could with her petite hands, "I know—I know it's easier to think of me as the monster, Ron, but I cared about you, and I—"

He pushed her hands off, recoiling as if her touch had burned him. Turning his back to her, he clamped his hands over his ears. "I don't want to hear this anymore!"

Angrily, she stepped around him and pulled his hands off his ears with a vicious jerk. Hermione stared into his blazing eyes as she shouted at him. "I cared! I still do! I regretted leaving you! I did! You can't even imagine how much I wanted to stay—"

For a second, he looked stunned from the outburst, but with a shake of his head, he seemed to clear his mind of all thoughts concerning her. Instead, Ron focused on his rage and pain. Lashing out in the only way he knew; he quickly backed her into the column with a thud. Hermione didn't flinch. "Then why didn't you, Hermione?"

Hermione figured that she was supposed to be intimidated by the way he towered over her, but she wasn't. Lashing out was his best defence mechanism. So, instead of reacting, she did something that shocked them both. She cupped his face into her hands and physically demanded that not only he look at her, but listen, as well, "You don't understand, Ron, I *couldn't* stay."

He fought, but she wouldn't let him look away.

Frustrated, he yelled, "I don't want to hear that!"

She squeezed his face tighter in her hands. "I know you don't want to, but that's the truth." Hermione didn't let him go, but Ron stop fighting her. "You're not a child anymore. You can't just throw temper tantrums and expect me to be persuaded to leave you alone." She lowered her voice. "I'm not scared of the truth anymore."

"W—"

The tables had turned and Hermione refused to let him speak. "You can yell as loud as you bloody well want, shout from the rooftops, tear down the foundations of the Ministry, but know this, Ronald: I know that it's late, maybe too late, but you need to know that I left to avoid hurting everyone."

Successfully, he grabbed her by the wrists and yanked her hands from his face, leaving red marks where her fingernails had clawed into his skin. "You didn't have to do anything."

"Yes, I did!" Hermione's thin shoulders sagged as tears ran freely down her flushed cheeks. She couldn't keep yelling at him. It hurt too badly. Pleadingly, she continued in a softer voice. "I couldn't stay—"

Ron's eyes narrowed further. "To avoid hurting everyone? You told me that you were leaving me for someone else. I—"

"I l-lied to you," she sobbed freely as her entire body shook uncontrollably. Everything hurt so badly. "None of that was true. I swear on my life there was no one but you when we were together. Lying to you was a big mistake and I'm so sorry. I'm *so* sorry."

He looked extremely confused by her admission. "But - but why?"

Hermione couldn't speak initially because her heart was in her throat, but managed to placate herself long enough to speak coherent words. "I—" She looked down at the floor then back at him. "Ron, I wanted to protect you, because I loved you, because I didn't k-know what else to do, b-because I was scared that you were going to hate me, because H-Harry said—"

Ron interrupted her harshly. "Harry? What the bloody hell does *Harry* have to do with anything?"

"There is so much that I want to tell you—"

"Then tell me, Hermione!" he pleaded.

She took a shaky breath. Hermione had no idea where to begin, so she started at the beginning. "It all started when you left us in the Forest of Dean. I was upset and—"

All of a sudden, the door that they were standing in front of flew open and out came an enraged Harry Potter. Hermione had a quick glance into the office, but saw no one else inside before the door savagely slammed shut. She already knew whose office it was; the golden-plated *D. Malfoy* on the side of the door told the witch exactly what she needed to know. They'd had a nasty row and Malfoy, more than likely, had gotten so deep under Harry's skin that it had made him lose every shred of control over himself.

Malfoy was pretty lucky that his office was still in existence.

Having such a perceptive man like Draco Malfoy under your skin wasn't the best feeling in the world, but it was one that she knew all too well.

After all, he'd been under her skin since almost the beginning.

He just knew exactly what buttons to push. It was a talent of his, and a curse for anyone on the wrong end of his biting words. And Harry, it seemed, was always on the wrong end. He looked positively murderous and Hermione wanted nothing more than for the Earth to open and swallow her whole because that option looked like it would cause her the least amount of pain. Harry took one look at Hermione and narrowed his eyes, but she saw a flash of pain and something else that she couldn't identify only seconds before he hid it all.

"What are you doing here?" he asked frigidly.

Hermione's heart raced out of control, beating violently in her chest. The world was a blurry vision of tan and blue. Her head throbbed tirelessly; it felt like someone had repeatedly struck her in the back of the head with the blunt end of an axe.

And just like that, her nerve was gone and Hermione Granger was lost to panic.

Well, she always thought that panic attacks were a bit of an oxymoron.

"What are you doing here?" Harry repeated, but his voice sounded as if he were speaking in slow motion. No matter how slow he spoke, his emotions were obvious. The bitter resentment in his voice and the frigid coldness in the air were too much for her to bear.

Wordlessly, she turned on her heels and fled back from which she came in a blind retreat.

She threw open the door and took off down the hall with the skill of a long-distance runner; a skill she didn't recall ever having before. It was stupid, she really knew it, but all the Gryffindor courage in her blood couldn't keep her there. She could handle one of them, but not both. Certainly not at the same time. However, she didn't make it more than a twenty metres before Hermione snatched back her wits and came to a screeching halt.

Merlin, she couldn't keep doing this.

She couldn't keep running from everything.

She'd never done it in the past; she always faced her problems head-on. But since her infamous flight from London, Hermione had done so much running that she'd made a habit out of it.

Well, not anymore.

She wasn't going to run any further or any longer; not from Ron, Harry, or the hell that would be on let loose the moment she told the truth. Lives would be damaged and friendships would be changed forever, but she couldn't carry it all on her shoulders any longer. Like she'd told Ron, she had done her penance for her sins.

Two sets of feet slowed to a stop behind her.

Hermione spun around and there Ron was - and to the left of Harry.

She told herself to breathe; it was all she could do at that moment. Breathe.

This was it. Hermione Granger's last stand - and she was ready.

Well, for the most part.

Ron was the first to inquire, "Why are you running from us?" His voice didn't have the same intensity as it had before and she wasn't sure why. "Why do you keep running from us?"

"I'm not running from either of you," She told him, and added after a short breath, "Not anymore."

"Come on, Ron," Harry implored. "There's nothing that she can say that could change—"

"Harry, you know more than anyone that I have plenty to say."

The subdued Ron asked, "What is she talking about?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Yes, nothing."

"You know what, I've had it." Hermione said hotly. "I'm done. I won't stand for it any longer. I'm sick to death of you treating me like garbage! Ron, I can understand, but you - Harry, I didn't do a *thing* to you!"

Harry recoiled as if she'd hit him in the face with a hex. "You didn't do a thing to me?" He repeated those words as his nostrils flared in rage. He reminded her of a bull just seconds before it charged. "What in the fu—are you fucking *serious*, Hermione? Don't you remember our last conversation?"

She had no intention of answering any of his questions, but she couldn't lie to herself. She remembered their very last conversation. And oh, had she been right.

They would both regret it.

Instead, Hermione remained as calm as she could without doing Voldemort a post-mortem favour and killing off the great Harry Potter with her bare hands. "You know for someone who's done everything short of spitting in my face since I've been back, you sure do have a lot of questions."

"You—"

"Maybe," Ron finally spoke up thoughtfully, "Maybe it's time for some answers. Maybe it's time for the truth."

"I already know the truth, Ron." Harry crossly spat, folding his arms against his chest.

Hermione blinked, but maintained control over her breathing.

Ron stared at his best mate with hurt blue eyes. She could tell that Ron was at a loss for words.

And so was Hermione.

"What?" He questioned in utmost confusion, "Y-you know—"

"No, he doesn't know the truth." Hermione sighed laboriously, "He doesn't know anything. And neither do you."

"I know enough!" Harry yelled.

Already short-tempered, Ron was losing himself further and further to pent-up frustration.
"Will someone tell me what the fuck is going on here?"

She breathed his name and leaned back on one of the many columns that lined the hallway,
"Ron, I—"

Harry's voice broke through, "I'm done here, let's go."

Her insides felt like they were in a pressure-cooker, rage and pain bubbled in the depths of her spirit. With each passing second, the pressure in her head and on her chest grew stronger, more intense. It had reached a boiling point. "We are *not* done here."

She could hardly breathe and she really didn't want to. Breathing hurt. It felt like all the walls were closing in on her, crushing her in a tortuous manner. But she had to do this and she had to do it now before she lost her nerve.

The pain in her voice was unmistakable. "Since when are you so rude and uncaring and angry, Harry, since when? We used to be best friends. We went through so much together. We—" Hermione took a shaky breath, not wanting to take herself there. "I didn't come back expecting forgiveness."

"And you shouldn't—you don't *deserve* our friendship." Harry broke in with the painful truth.

"No, I don't suppose I do." She said numbly. "And I don't suppose I want it either, but I at least thought we could be adults about this." Hermione folded her arms as her shoulder shook with hurt from his words.

The truth was always a painful thing.

"How can you ask me to be an adult now when you've acted like a child?" Harry questioned spitefully, stepping closer to her.

"I *was* a child, Harry!" Hermione finally exploded. "I was a child when I left! Don't you understand?"

"So were we, Hermione! Did you forget that?" Ron fired back.

She ran her fingers through her drying hair, "You don't understand, neither of you understand what it's been like for me. I—"

Frustrated fingers ran through red hair, "And you don't understand what it's been like for us!"

Tears filled her eyes as she shouted. "If you would just let me explain!"

"I, for one, don't need your explanations." Harry retorted coldly, but there was something about his words that were different. It was as if he were unsure of what came out of his mouth. "Life hasn't been easy for any of us after the war and it doesn't give you the right to

run off to Australia for weeks and then come back and abandon your friends when we needed you most."

Hermione wanted to pull her own hair out in aggravation and rage. "Is that all you care about? What I could've done to ease your suffering? What about *my* needs, Harry?" She made a haphazard attempt to dry her eyes, but it was useless; the tears wouldn't stop. "When you saw me in Australia, you never stopped for one second to ask me about what I needed. You never stopped for just one second to ask me what was wrong. You never asked me why I was there or what I was planning to do. You never asked because you didn't care enough to ask."

The colour bled from Harry Potter's face and his eyes softened considerably in something that looked like recognition. He looked as if he'd heard those words before.

Ron was utterly lost and he didn't like it one bit. "What is she talking about? You saw her in Australia?" He blinked in rapid succession as he tried to wrap his mind around what she'd said, "But you told me that you didn't see her—"

Hermione's voice was like stone. "Looks like I'm not the only liar among us."

Harry stammered, "I—"

"You saw me, sitting on that bench, and you never asked me anything. You just jumped to conclusions and believed the worst about me." She shook her head despondently, clearing her mind of the raging emotions so she could proceed. "After everything we've been through together. After the countless times I've stood by your side, forsaking everything for *you*...you turned your back on me without even letting me explain myself. You betrayed me without a moment's hesitation. You didn't even take the time to hear me out and let me tell you the truth."

Lowly, he pled his case. "I thought I knew the truth."

"Well, obviously, you thought wrong."

Ron's perturbed voice rang clear in the midst of the messy, emotional battle field. "What are you talking about? Someone *please* tell me what the fuck is going on here?"

"I saw her," Harry whispered in a voice only the three of them could hear, "I saw her in Australia."

He growled, "I gathered that much."

"But there's more..." He trailed off and drew in a deep breath as he confessed, "I-I knew she didn't leave you for someone else."

That took Hermione by surprise. It took every muscle in her face to stop her from releasing a gasp. How did he know that she had lied? What exactly did he know? For years she'd assumed that Harry knew nothing beyond what he thought he saw, but now - now she wondered what else he knew and what else he'd kept to himself.

Ron's anger was palpable. "Why did you let me believe that lie, Harry? Why did you lie to me about Australia?" However he felt at the beginning, by the time he spoke the last word, his voice was firm.

He wanted his questions answered.

And Harry awkwardly rubbed the back of his neck. "I-I don't know. I mean, I didn't want to tell you what she was really doing there—"

"Yeah, when you didn't even know yourself," Hermione argued. "I would've thought that you, more than anyone, would ask questions before they decided to launch an attack on someone's character."

"And what the hell was I supposed to think, Hermione?" Harry yelled in aggravation. He obviously didn't like being attacked on both fronts. "You were just there and then you got all defensive and—"

"I got *defensive* because you started reading off the verdict before I could state my case! You didn't make anything easier—"

"What makes *you* different from all of us?" The raven-haired wizard shouted, "What makes you think that you're so special? We all fought and we all had to heal!"

"Yeah," Ron input immediately, "What makes you think you were going through things that we wouldn't understand?"

She had a better understanding of David's feelings before he went up against the giant, Goliath. She had a better understanding of what it was like to be outnumbered and overpowered. She had a better understanding of what it felt like when all hope was lost. She understood 'courage under fire' in its most natural sense. She understood everything. But, mostly, she understood that she wasn't going to cower. Not today, and not to them.

For some reason, she just knew she could succeed.

"We were going through the same things, too!" Harry yelled over her thoughts.

"Yeah!" Ron agreed wholeheartedly.

It was her against the men she once stood beside.

Oh, how the tables had turned.

"What makes you think that you were going through things that were beyond our understanding?" Ron's bitterly angry voice made something fizz and pop in her head.

And she lost it.

"Because, that's just it. You wouldn't. Both of you couldn't *possibly* understand what I was going through at that time. And Harry - Harry didn't even stop and spare me the time of day

to find out." Hermione shouted so loud and so passionately that her voice cracked. She panted her next breaths and closed her eyes. Her throat burned miserably.

They spared her a moment of silence, but it ended far too soon.

"Life isn't pretty, Voldemort killed my—"

"I've heard all about your losses since I was eleven Harry, do you think you're the only one who's suffered at the hands of Voldemort? The war isn't over for everyone and its most certainly not over for me."

"What are you talking about? The war has been over for almost six years."

"The war with Voldemort, yes, but not—"

"You made it through, you lived and your parents—"

"My parents?" She mustered enough strength to tell the truth, "My parents are dead, Harry. They were murdered in a home invasion. There was nothing that I could do..." Hermione's voice faded into the silence of the hall. A low, choking sob escaped as she cried. "They never remembered me." And as if she'd just realised it once again, she whispered hopelessly, "They're gone."

A silence worthy of a fresh Maltese catacomb fell on the three war heroes. Sorrow and desolation were fresh in the air. Hermione was on her knees next to the column as her oldest friends stared down at her; their eyes laced with shame and concern. She felt as if they'd died all over again, the grief that she scarcely allowed herself to feel almost overwhelmed her.

Someone took a step forward and Hermione slammed her fist on the ground; her voice was as cold as the Arctic breeze, but she didn't hide her sorrow, "Don't come near me."

"Hermione, I didn't know." Harry said sadly.

"You didn't ask, Harry." Somehow, she gathered all of her inner-strength and pulled herself back to her feet, wiping any sign of weakness from her face, but on the inside, she was crippled. "You didn't ask."

"How was I supposed to know? You didn't say anything."

A pale-looking Ron spoke up in a weak voice. It was as if he were holding back his own tears. "You told me—"

"I know what I told you. I didn't want your pity."

He looked hurt. "Pity? I'd just lost my brother. Why would I pity you?"

For that question, she didn't have an answer. She'd been his rock after Fred died, no one could deny that. Ron had opened up to her, let her hold him, and let her ease his mind and pain. To be honest, she was so lost in her own pain that she didn't realise that Ron could've offered her a bit of comfort. Or at least he could've tried, had she given him a chance.

Hermione knew she was wrong, but in that moment she realised that maybe she'd been a little selfish and blind, too. But by that point, she'd internalized so much of her pain that it was lost deep within her.

"I don't know, I just don't." Her voice was strangled, "There was so much going on, so much. I should've told you the truth, but I couldn't. I didn't want to tell you anything. Telling you would've opened up the path for the onslaught of questions that I just couldn't answer."

She didn't know what else to tell him.

"Was that why you left?" Ron asked, stepping closer.

"No." She backed into the column.

"Then why, Hermione, why did you leave?" He kept advancing closer and closer until he was merely two metres in front of her.

In a voice that was barely above a whisper, Hermione told him, "I told you. I had to leave. I had to go away."

"Just be honest."

"You're going to hate me, more than you do now."

"I don't hate you, Hermione," Ron's words were poignant and soft. "I want to, I really do, but I can't."

Her shoulder shook as tears poured. She was so sure that she had cried all the tears her body could handle, but alas, she was wrong. It was easier to think that Ron hated her because he didn't know the truth, and to find out that he didn't hate her was just as relieving as it was painful. He didn't hate her then, well, he was definitely going to hate her now. "You're going to hate me." She cried miserably.

Ron backed up a few steps, "I won't."

"Yes, you will." She sobbed uncontrollably.

"Tell me!" He looked over at Harry who looked frighteningly pale and guilty. He was obviously still stunned by the news she'd dropped on them. "Tell us!"

"It wasn't supposed to be this way. It wasn't supposed to happen like this."

"Look, it's obvious she's not going to fess up." Harry unwisely spoke, but his voice was barely above a whisper.

Hermione's eyes narrowed, "You have no idea how hard this is for me."

"But Malfoy knows." Harry informed almost as if he'd just realised it himself.

Ron's eyes widened. "What?" and murderous eyes turned on Hermione, "You told Malfoy before you told us? I thought we were—"

"Don't say that you thought that we were best friends." She glared defiantly.

"And *he's* your friend? The bastard who taunted us all throughout school is your friend?" Harry shot back.

"Our relationship has nothing to do with anything. I told him the truth for reasons that are none of your business." And that was the truth. "Why should I let you two in?" She replied soberly, shaking her head. Hermione covered her throat with her hand because it hurt like hell.

"How dare you!" Harry seethed, "How dare you stand here after five years and say that to us!"

"*You left us!* We didn't leave you, Hermione!" Ron screamed.

Harry took over as they both advanced towards her, "You're the one who ran away!"

"You're the one who abandoned us!"

"You're the one who never wrote back!"

"You're the one who disappeared to Italy!"

They had her backed into a wall. Literally. They were too close.

Rage. Blind rage tore through her flesh and burned in her veins, scalding her tongue, even as she threw her words at him. "I did what I had to do!" She shoved Harry away from her. "I did what I thought was best!"

"Leaving your friends, is that what you thought was best?" The stumbling Harry screamed back.

"I didn't care—"

Hermione shoved Ron away with all her strength.

"You made that quite obvious! You did what was best for yourself!"

"No, I did what was best for my son!"

There was nothing; nothing at all, except a strangled silence that ricocheted off all the walls.

"He was the only thing that mattered." Her exhausted voice shook and lowered at the sight of their astonished faces. She was so drained, but she didn't care. "I made the choice and I chose my son - if given the chance, I would do it again. I wouldn't change anything." Silent tears ran down cheeks, but she didn't have it in her to sob the way she wanted.

She always thought that silence was golden; this one was horrible.

Harry looked shocked and Ron looked like all the blood in his body had evaporated.

"Your s-son?" Ron stammered, running his hand through his red hair as if he were trying to digest her words. "You had a son? *We* had a son?"

Her heart crumbled at the almost hopeful tone in his voice and for what she was about to tell him. "No," a miserable sob escaped from the back of her throat, "Ron, I'm sorry, but we didn't have a son—" She locked eyes with Harry and whispered in a voice that only the three of them could understand, "*We* had a son."

Nothing further was said.

Harry looked like he'd been hit by the Knight bus; emotion after emotion washed over his pallid face as every muscle in his body went rigid. But it was the look of shock and pain on Ron's face that had said more than enough. He looked as if life as he knew it was over - and it was. For them all. But she knew it and she understood it as well. Hermione wanted to say something, anything to ease their pain, but what could she say?

She could only take so much.

They both looked as if the truth of Hermione's son had physically wounded them both, but poor Ron looked as if he'd taken the news harder.

And she understood why.

There was love between them and it was just as real as the truth was painful. She simply couldn't imagine how he felt. Ron had leaned back on the opposite wall as if he'd been shot, clutching his stomach with one arm and gripping his red hair with the other. Harry, on the other hand, just stood there stock-still as her words still washed over him; a feather could've knocked him over.

Ron's voice was hoarse with distress, "How—" He shook his head as if the thought of '*how*' made him physically ill. "When did this h-happen?"

Hermione gazed at him with watery eyes. "Ron, don't—"

"No!" He roared and the broken look on his face ate at her. It was a face that she would never forget. "Tell me the truth! When did it happen?"

"It-it happened twice." Harry spoke up almost in a whisper.

"*Twice!*"

"Yes," Hermione nodded soberly, but the sadness and misery hung over them like a dense cloud. "The first time was a mistake, right after you left us in the Forest of Dean. The second was the night of the final battle," She told him morosely. "McGonagall had set Harry up in private quarters so he could rest and after you fell asleep, I went to check on him and he was so upset and..." Hermione trailed off, looking at her feet miserably as she remembered that night all over again. "We agreed that night that it would never happen again; we agreed that we would go back to our respective partners and forget about what had happened..."

She didn't have the heart to tell him the rest, but she remembered it clearly. Hermione had gone to Ron and Harry had gone to Ginny. The first few weeks were weird, but wonderful...until everything changed.

Ron looked horrified, then miserable, then contemplative, and finally wistful, "But we-after that," he stammered, "I mean, how do you know that *I'm* not the father?"

That thought had run through her mind as soon as she found out about her pregnancy. She didn't know and the estimated conception week the doctor in Sydney had told her didn't really rule either out. She hoped and prayed that Ron was the father, but prayer wasn't enough. Prayer couldn't change the fact that she and Ron had been more careful than she and Harry. Nothing was perfect, she knew that, and because of that knowledge, she decided that it was imperative that she find out the truth.

"I-I took a sample of your hair the night that we broke up." Hermione wrapped her arms around her body as she spoke, "I hadn't been with anyone else, except Harry. A week later, I went to see a Muggle specialist. I told him about the situation and he looked at the hairs. He told me that he could run the test with your hair, but only after the baby was born. So three months after Matthew was born, he performed the test-Ron," a hiccupping sigh escaped her lips, "I left because I didn't know who the father was, I left to protect my son, I left to protect you from the truth, I left because I didn't want you to find out from someone other than me, I left because I was scared - I left for so many reasons, but—"

"But what?" His eyes were so sad and brimming with unshed tears; it was like he already knew what she was about to say.

Tears continued to course down her miserable face, "But I didn't come back—" She took a hard, rasping breath as her lip trembled, "I didn't come back because he—he wasn't yours."

Ron sank further and further into himself and all she could do was watch.

Her heart bled for him; it bled for them all.

"You lied to me." Ron spoke darkly.

Hermione furrowed her brows, "Wh—" but he wasn't looking at her.

No, his gaze was fixed on the frozen Harry Potter.

"You told me that you only saw Hermione as a sister, that nothing had occurred between you two—you told me that the night I defeated the Horcrux!"

For the first time since she confessed about her son, Harry blinked and looked over at Ron, "I—"

"Save it," He snapped, "I don't want to hear it. I don't want to hear your voice. All you've done is lie."

"I lied to protect you." Harry explained.

Ron nearly lost his mind. "If someone else says—" He released an angry grunt. "*Everyone* has lied to protect me, but I don't need it! I don't need everyone's protection! I'm not a bloody child!"

Hermione was speechless.

"I—" Ron looked around wildly. Anyone could see that he was having an extremely difficult time stomaching the truth. She wanted to help ease his pain, but he was so far gone and she had to gear up for a second fight. "I have to leave."

"Wait! Just listen to me!" Harry yelled.

"I'm done listening to you! Fuck!" He covered his eyes and ran his hands over his face in exhaustion. "I can't even look at you. Neither of you. I don't even know what to do. I have to—" "

"Ron. I don't know what to do either, but let's just talk about this." Harry pleaded.

He shook his head as if the thought of talking about the truth made him sick to his stomach. His breathing was ragged and came out in spasms. "No!" Ron ground out, his eyes and cheeks were wet with tears, "I don't want to talk about it! I can't even begin to wrap my *brain* around it. It just makes me sick! I—I can't, I just can't." And he broke. He cried angry, hurt tears of a man who had just realised everything that he believed was a lie. His hands shook in rage as he searched his robes for his wand; his body shook with grief.

He cried—and Hermione cried for him.

He couldn't look at them. He couldn't speak to them. Ron physically and mentally couldn't stand to be anywhere near the people he once called his best friends. And he refused to be, any longer. Harry tried again, "Ron—"

He drew his wand on his friend for the first time and sneered as he backed away slowly. "Stay the fuck away from me."

Just like that, the original, great 'Golden Trio' became a broken duo.

For minutes after Ron's departure, the parents of Matthew Granger said nothing and made no eye contact.

She did not breathe. She did not move. She just watched Harry. She watched as he worked through everything in his mind. She watched as his face weaved through a multitude of emotions. Hermione knew she was just biding her time before the real fight began. This was the fight that haunted her dreams, but now, it was her reality. Any wrong movement would initiate round two, even though they both weren't ready.

Telling Harry and Ron were more horrible than she'd ever imagined; the pain in her chest was incredible and stifling - but at the same time, she felt-she felt odd. Lighter.

Like the load on her shoulders had lightened a bit.

She could breathe again.

It was a bittersweet relief; one that came with much heartache and despair.

The argument began with one word from the broken wizard. "Why—"

Hermione groaned. Not again.

But Harry shook his head. His voice was barely above a whisper when he asked, "Why didn't you tell me?"

She knew he was going to ask that, but the knowledge hadn't made answering it any easier. "I tried. I honestly tried." He just had to believe in her, even when he had no other reason, "I swear that I did, but you wouldn't listen to me."

"You should've *made* me listen!"

"I can't *make* you do anything! No one can! You get set in your own ways, Harry. You—" She took another cleansing breath. "I was trying to tell you that I was pregnant and keeping the baby that day on the bench, but you—"

"I thought you were getting an abortion!"

"And I thought you were telling me that I was making a mistake by keeping the baby!"

They stared at each other for a brief moment. So much drama, heartache, and misery were born from such a simple misunderstanding.

"Why didn't you write back? Why didn't you tell me in the letter or - something?"

She blinked in confusion. "What letter, Harry? I never got a letter from you."

"Yes, you did."

And there they were, back to square one.

"Listen to me! I didn't get a letter!"

"I sent it to you the day after you left! I was trying to apologise for everything I said in Australia, I was hoping that my apology would bring you back home. I-I didn't care-I just wanted you back." His eyes were hazy and she knew he was lost in his memory. "But you never wrote back and I just assumed that you'd—"

"That's your problem, Harry, you assume too much."

"And maybe that's true, but you kept me from my son."

She was back on the defence. "To protect him. To protect you and Ron!"

"No, you did it to protect yourself!"

"Protect myself?" Hermione balked, "I didn't protect myself! I *tortured* myself! I kept this beautiful burden inside my stomach for nine months and inside my heart for the last five years! I kept the pain from the truth just so you wouldn't have to feel any - so no one would have to feel any! What I did was selfless!"

"No, what you did was selfish!"

Her hands trembled as her body relaxed against the column, but she said nothing further.

Maybe, in some respects, he was right.

"And what good did it do, Hermione? What good did keeping this a secret do? You still hurt everyone in the end!"

"I couldn't lie anymore! It was killing me!" She lowered her voice. She had to tell him and she had to tell him right then, while she had his attention. "Besides, there's no longer a reason to hide anymore..."

Confused, Harry whispered, "W-what do you mean?"

She couldn't breathe, her hands trembled, and her lip quivered.

He started yelling at her. "Tell me, Hermione! Tell me what you mean!"

Her poor little body started trembling and she locked eyes with him. "Harry," Hermione whispered in the mist of her cries. "He's gone."

Harry's eyes watered. "W-what do you mean 'he's gone'?"

"I can't—" She shook as every muscle in her body went completely rigid. "He died."

Harry blinked. He blinked and stared at her as if he didn't understand. And when the understanding came, it came so swiftly that Harry staggered. It was as if he could no longer carry his own weight any longer. Hermione could hear his heart breaking more and more with each passing moment.

Better than before, she understood the kind of life that he had led. And she felt miserably for him.

He, too, had lost so many people in his short life - and he'd just lost another person that he'd never had a chance to get to know, to hold, to love...

Fate wasn't a friend to either of them.

All Hermione could do was watch as he broke down. His hands balled into a tight fist and he covered as much of his face as possible. "You-you tell me I have a son, and then you tell me he's dead. That's just cruel, Hermione. That's just—" his voice broke as tears just poured wildly down his ashen cheeks, "That's just-I *hate* you."

She closed her eyes and though she tried, she couldn't will herself to stop crying. Because in that moment she hated herself, too. "I'm so sorry," Hermione choked. "I'm *so* sorry."

She couldn't stand it.

"Why did you tell me?" He screamed at her as he advanced quickly, "Why couldn't you have just left it alone?" He backed her against the column, seizing her by the shoulders, hard.

"Stop!" His fingers digging into her skin hurt. "Harry! Stop! You're hurting me!"

He immediately released her and ran his fingers through his messy hair as he cried. She'd never seen him so upset. Not when Cedric died. Not when Sirius fell through the veil. Not when Dumbledore died. And not even after the final battle when the grief was so near for them all. Nothing compared to the anguish she witnessed today.

And suddenly, nothing mattered anymore.

Not their past, not their present, and not even their future.

Nothing mattered.

He knew the truth and he was as broken as she was.

And Hermione took him into her arms.

She expected nothing, but got everything in return, if only for a few moments. She didn't expect him to wrap his arms around her, but he did. She didn't expect him to bury his face in the crook of her neck, but he did. She didn't expect him to listen to her as she talked about their son, but he did.

"Matthew was born February sixth at exactly two o'clock in the morning. He was five pounds and two ounces, and he was twenty-three inches long; he had your chin, your eyelashes, your mannerisms, your hands, and your hair. Nothing in the world would get it to settle down and-I think he liked it that way. I—"

"Please, stop, Hermione. I—" his voice broke, "I can't do this. I can't listen—" And he pushed her away; his sorrow was replaced with rage and resentment.

"Harry," she whispered.

"Why, Hermione, why did you tell me this now?"

Meekly, she moulded her exhausted body into the column as best as she could, "I wanted to stop living a lie. I wanted to tell you, and everyone, the truth. You deserve to know your son."

"But he's dead!"

"He's still your son! You're still his father, just like I'm still his mother!"

He hit the column with his fist because he wouldn't dare hit her. "I wish you had never told me the truth. I wish I never knew."

There was a foreign sound and Hermione had her proof that they weren't alone.

"Ignorance *is* bliss," a familiarly deep, cool, aristocratic voice spoke up from the shadows, "It's high time that you learned that truth, even if you are reluctant to accept all others." Draco Malfoy stepped out of the shadows, advancing towards them like a leopard. The sounds of his dragon hide shoes echoed throughout the empty hallway. His features were cool and pointed, relaxed and even, right down to the leisurely strides he took.

Hermione, even in the depths of her own despair, found that she was only half as surprised to see him as Harry.

"Malfoy!" Harry stepped away from her, "What are you doing here?"

"I heard raised voices."

Emotionally exhausted, Harry ignored the new presence and buried his face into his hands, shocked to the core and brimming with grief for a son that he never knew.

The witch stared dubiously at the blond wizard. She was not so quick to accept Malfoy's words as the truth for only one reason: she knew him. She knew him well. And what she knew about him told her that he'd been there longer than he let on, probably since the beginning. He was probably the reason no one had walked through this particular hall.

Hermione knew that she should've been upset with him, but all she could think was that she was grateful that she'd had an ally, even though she didn't know she'd had one.

"You've checked it out; now go away, leave us alone!" Harry instructed darkly.

"I think I'd prefer to stay." Malfoy's eyes flickered over to Hermione, and for the first time she actually saw his concern. Of course, she only saw it for a moment. "Since a cloud of truth has fallen on us all, I think that Potter should disclose a truth that he wants, no, *needs* to share with you."

Harry went completely white. "No."

"There's no time like the present." He taunted coolly.

"You're a bastard!"

"I've been called much worse, believe me. And I can admit that I've been one for quite some time now."

"Malfoy," Hermione began hesitantly, "This is neither the time nor the place."

"This is the *perfect* time. You've told him the truth, and now you need to know the truth."

Harry Potter had reached his breaking point, "You think he's different? You think he's changed?" He asked irately. "He hasn't changed one bit. He's still a lousy-"

Malfoy gave a lazy shrug, "Perhaps I am, perhaps I'm not - who are you to judge me? You're no better than I am."

Slumping against the column, Hermione closed her eyes for a moment. She just couldn't take it anymore. She just couldn't take the yelling and screaming any longer. She felt like she'd screamed her entire day away and she was simply exhausted. She just wanted it all to be over, but it wasn't. She just wanted to leave, but she couldn't move. She just wanted to be taken away, but there she was, listening to two men as they argued. She leaned against the column, unable to stand on her own.

"I don't even know why I told you!" Harry screamed at Malfoy, "All you're going to do is throw it back in my face! That's just so bloody typical of you! Kicking someone when they're down! Does that make you feel like a man?"

Malfoy's eyes narrowed, "I've been a man much longer than you have, Potter."

The venom in his voice made Hermione cringe.

"I think I'm going to enjoy telling Hermione about the details of our tête-à-tête."

"Fuck you!" He shot back angrily. "My son is dead and I didn't even know him and I don't even know how to feel! My friendship with Ron is over! Nothing will be the same again and here you are, trying to fuck everything up more!" Harry threw up his arms, "Go ahead and tell her! Tell her everything you know!"

"Draco," Hermione's voice was barely above a whisper. But he had heard her and the sound of her single word had stopped him momentarily. "No more." She told him sternly. "No more fighting. Let's go." The exhaustion wouldn't allow her to go on any further.

For reasons even she didn't understand, Hermione reached for him with one hand.

She just wanted out. *Fast.*

He stared at her. "You need to know everything."

"Maybe I already know."

"Maybe you don't." Malfoy snapped.

She shook her head weakly. "Maybe I don't need this right now." She wiped her wet face, but it didn't do any good. "It's done. I've told them everything." And her heart was weary.

He stared at her extremely hard. She could hear Harry, but he sounded so far away. Malfoy flickered back and forth between her and Harry, but in the end, he took a breath, gritted his teeth, and drew her from the corner by taking her extended hand.

His hand and his next words were rough, but his touch was gentle and gentle was what she needed at that moment in time, "Fine," Malfoy snipped finally, "I'll stop. He's sorry enough without any further augmentation from me."

The other wizard glared hatefully, "You don't have a clue about what I'm going through, right now."

"No, I don't," Malfoy scoffed as he moved behind Hermione, resting his other hand on her shoulder. "As I've already told you, Potter, the world isn't black and white. And its high time that you learned that; and life, it seems, has been the best teacher."

And then, he led her away.

When she looked back at Harry as Malfoy led her back in the direction of his office, Hermione had expected that to be her breaking point. That she would break before she could walk away. Hermione had expected to be inundated with so many emotions that her heart would fail to beat any longer. That the walls that were around her would fall to the ground with a weakness they had never known. But for the first time, she was oddly at some sort of insane bittersweet peace. And her fortifications, although heavily damaged, were still intact, for the most part.

Her walls never did crumble, but Harry's did.

remember to feel real

Chapter Summary

"You're human, Hermione, and to be human is to know that you're imperfect and understand that you sometimes aren't the person you think you are"

Chapter Eighteen

Remember To Feel Real

Part One: Love

Hermione looked up from her suitcase and flashed a nervous smile at Harry who stood in her doorway of her childhood bedroom. He ran his hand through his freshly-cut hair, courtesy of Mrs. Weasley, and flashed a slightly sad grin.

She was leaving.

The war had been over for over two months and it was finally time to face her parents and remove the memory charm. The task was daunting, but it was time to face the music. Mrs. Weasley had extreme misgivings about Hermione's trip, but everyone else was busy.

Although she'd helped initially and fought in the Parkinson Manor skirmish, Hermione hadn't taken up a permanent post as an Auror in the new Ministry. Harry and Ron had, but she was focused on other matters, like her new relationship with Ron and private tutoring lessons so she could sit for her NEWTs early. Everything, however, was being put on pause for this trip.

If she was going to be honest, Harry actually had offered to travel with her, but she'd declined. For the first time in their nearly eight-year friendship, Hermione didn't feel very comfortable around him.

"What are you doing here, Harry? I thought Bill and Ron were taking me to the airport."

His new trainers captured his interest suddenly with no signs of setting him free. "I just dropped by to say goodbye."

"I told you goodbye last night."

"Yeah," He kicked the carpet lightly, "I'm really going to miss you, Hermione."

Hermione shut her suitcase.

After checking and double-checking seven times, she was finally absolutely sure that she had what she needed. Money (Muggle and wizarding), clothes, documentation for herself and her parents, her wand, toiletries, and the book that showed her how to reverse the specific memory charm that she had placed on her parents. Hermione had everything. Crossing the room silently, she approached her best friend and hugged him timidly. "I'm going to miss you too, Harry, but I'll be back in a few weeks. It depends."

As much as she wanted to ignore it, Harry's hug felt different. Before, it seemed that he only hugged her because she had hugged him. It was purely platonic, his hands were always around her upper back, and he was always the first to pull away. Now, after everything that had happened between them, things were sort of the same, but—different.

Harry's hands met at the small of her back as he moulded his body against hers. It was intimate the way he buried his face into the crook of her neck, and slowly breathed her in. It was as if he were trying to memorize her scent, her hug, her hair, her - essence.

Sadly, she closed her eyes.

He used to let go first, but not anymore.

And all she could think at that moment was that she just wanted her best friend back, without the complications. Gently, Harry ran his hand over her hair and murmured words she couldn't understand. The action was so intimate that Hermione backed up. Disappointment flashed across his face and he seemed to retreat back inside his now-usual shell where he couldn't be touched, or worse, hurt. His eyes were back on his trainers.

Absently, Hermione touched his shoulder, "What's wrong, Harry?" It was such a stupid question.

She wasn't blind.

"I'm just starting to realise something, that's all."

She probably shouldn't have asked her next question, but Hermione ignored the little voice that told her to walk away from him. "What?"

"I made a mistake, Hermione," Harry confessed gravely.

That certainly wasn't what she had expected him to say. "What do you mean?"

Her best friend took a hard breath and looked away, "I should've never let you go."

She tensed and turned her back to him, hoping for just enough time to recollect her emotions. After all, she'd suspected the intensity of his feelings just days after they had come to the agreement to go to their respective partners. Hermione, however, didn't expect him to come right out and admit it so bluntly. She thought that he would bottle his feelings, blame them on the emotional connection that they had, and leave well enough alone.

If she was going to be honest, she'd had a hard time in the days following their agreement, but she'd chalked it up to the truth that there would always be a soft spot for him, simply because, chaos aside, he was her first. Hermione knew the emotions that she had felt following their time together weren't real. She also knew that what he felt for her wasn't love, but infatuation and lust. She had just figured (no, hoped) that his feelings would go away and he'd be happy with Ginny, just like they had planned and talked about.

Obviously, nothing was happening according to plan.

"Harry—" Hermione began.

He cut her off gently, "Just hear me out—"

Firmly, she shook her head. "No, we agreed—"

"I changed my mind." Harry ground out, frustrated.

"You don't get to change your mind about this, Harry." She argued, suddenly irritated and fatigued from the conversation. "It's final." Her voice dropped, but it didn't lose its decisiveness, "I love Ron."

He looked like he'd been punched in the stomach. "You—you love him?"

Without hesitation, she responded, "Yes. I do."

There was a moment of silence where Harry pondered her words. His eyes were flashing with hope when he lifted his head to meet hers. "But things change...and people do, too. Maybe we were too quick to settle, maybe we're not supposed to be with them, maybe we're meant for someone else, maybe we're meant for each other, maybe—"

"That's—"

Harry's eyes were piercingly green and his voice was soft. "Maybe, in time, you'll come to love me like you love him."

"I'll never love you like I love him, Harry. I'm sorry. It was a mistake."

"That we made twice? Come on, Hermione, that doesn't make sense."

"We weren't thinking—"

"Maybe not the first time, but the second—"

"Stop it." She exasperated in a hiss, shaking her head. "It was inexcusable."

"How? You and Ron didn't officially start dating until the next day."

"But I knew where we stood and I—I feel bad enough as is. I know what I did, what we did, was wrong. I don't have any answers as to why I sought you out. Maybe it was for comfort."

We'd lost so many people. Ron was beside himself with grief. Maybe—" Hermione took a deep breath. "I don't want to argue about this anymore."

"Well, I want to."

"It's not all about you and what you want, Harry."

"What I want is y—"

She interrupted, knowing exactly what he was about to say, "And Ginny?"

There was such honesty in his eyes when he said, "I don't love her."

Hermione didn't understand. "Then why are you still with her?"

Another silence fell between them. Harry didn't answer her question, but she knew the answer. Harry didn't want to be alone, and Ginny was the perfect remedy. She was a stable backup; a good friend, someone that he could be with until Ms. Right came along. Both of them knew that she would never leave him or betray his trust; the younger witch still held a torch for him, smiting any other eligible witches who wanted his attention and affection.

Hermione groaned to herself at the thought.

After years of telling her that there was nothing going on and that they were just friends, she just had to go and give her a reason to worry. If she ever found out about what happened between them or of Harry's feelings and intentions – Ginny was going to kill her. She pinched the bridge of her nose at the thought and then pushed it away. Being murdered by the youngest Weasley wasn't the main problem.

Of course, while Hermione didn't particularly like Ginny Weasley, she didn't approve of Harry's reason for staying with her. It wasn't fair to either of them. Ginny deserved just as much happiness as anyone else. She didn't deserve to waste her years away with a man who didn't love her.

She didn't deserve to come in second place.

Hermione sighed.

Ginny was so wrapped up in Harry that the truth didn't matter so long as she still had him in the end; so long as she was sure that he wasn't going anywhere. Well, that didn't make the situation any less horrible. But who was she to tell Harry how to live his life? Especially when—Hermione sighed inwardly, chewing on her lower lip thoughtfully. Merlin, everything was a right, foul mess.

"You already know who I want."

When had they all go from friends to a fucked-up love square? She sighed and ran a hand over her thick hair. She already knew the answer. It was all her and Harry's fault. It started in the forest and it was supposed to end the night of the final battle, but nothing was over and

she felt helpless. Soon, Harry would crack and tell Ron everything and then-then it would be over.

Everything would be over.

Call her selfish, but she didn't want things to end because of something that had happened before they had started dating. But she knew Ron, she knew his temper and his jealous tendencies. No, he wouldn't dump her immediately, but their relationship would be over long before they split up; if that made any sense at all. He'd never look at her the same. No matter how much she told him that she only loved him, all Ron would see was her and Harry shagging.

His insecurities would be their downfall.

The scandal would destroy two friendships and two relationships; not to mention, further one person's jealousy and probably have the girl sending a hex or twenty in her direction. She didn't want to even entertain the thought of the scandal being made public. Merlin. Their lives would be destroyed and nothing would ever be the same again if Harry didn't get control over his emotions.

Hermione looked down at her feet. She had to end the madness, she had to drive him away from her and banish all thoughts of her from his mind. She had to do it, not for just his sake and not for hers, but the sakes of everyone else involved. "Harry-you can't ask me to love you back because I can't." She told him firmly. "I'm not going to lead you on, I'm not going to play games with your heart, and I'm not going to lie to you. I don't want you to have hope for something that will never happen. What I feel for you, Harry, is only platonic, nothing more. Yes, we messed up the boundaries of our friendship, but at the end of it all, you're my friend. I want you to be my friend—"

"I don't want to be your friend!"

So much for a calm conversation.

"But that's what you are!" Hermione ran a frustrated hand over her hair for the second time, "Look," She tried to explain, "What you feel for me is just an illusion—"

He seethed, "How dare you—"

"I don't love you." Her voice cracked and her eyes watered because she knew that this was the end of their friendship, at least for the time being, "I don't. We did something so stupid."

"I love you, Hermione." He eyes watered.

"Ginny loves you, but I don't. Love her as you love me and treat her as you would treat me." She took a breath. "I need you to leave, Harry. I need you to leave right now."

Part Two: For All These Things I've Done

January 17th

"Hermione?"

With a sharp gasp, she found herself back inside her therapist's office with no recollection of their previous topic of discussion prior to her painful stroll down Memory Lane.

Merlin.

She had tried to avoid thinking of Harry and Ron or of the nightmare of a row that they'd had, but she found that avoidance was rather impossible now that the truth was out. They both had immediately disappeared off the map, but that was to be expected.

Pansy had mentioned during lunch that very Friday that Blaise told her that Harry had taken an extended leave from the Department, and had confided in him before he left. He said that he was going to be at a house Andromeda Tonks owned in Athens, Greece for a while, vacationing - Ginny Weasley would not be accompanying him. And, as for Ron, the Prophet's gossipers were speculating about Ron's abrupt departure from Britain. He'd gone to Romania to stay with Charlie.

Everything had changed in the blink of an eye and she felt...

She was disgusted with herself.

"Hermione?"

Disoriented, she searched for the clock on the wall and found that there were only fifteen minutes left in the session. As she became more cognizant to her surroundings, Hermione spotted her therapist staring at her with curious blue eyes.

"I called your name twice and you didn't respond. Are you all right?" Katherine asked stiffly, but Hermione noted deep concern in her voice.

She blinked rapidly to clear the rest of her rampant thoughts from her head, "Yes, I was-I was just lost in a daydream."

The therapist crossed her legs daintily, quill in hand, as she scratched down a little note.

Hermione, no matter how many leaps and bounds they had made in the last couple of months, was still convinced that Ms Shepard was scribbling down her grocery list. The thought alone would've made her smirk had she not been in such an odd mood.

"Care to share?"

She patted down her hair and sighed wearily, "It was nothing serious."

"You looked seconds from passing out."

She knew that she was seconds from telling a lie and stopped herself. Instead, the truth slipped from her tongue. "It was just a difficult argument with..." She trailed off, staring at her feet as she muttered the next words with extreme discomfort, "Matthew's father."

Though she tried to hide her initial shock, both of Ms Shepard's brows rose sharply. Since the sessions had started almost, they'd talked extensively about her previous relationship with Ron, the night in Australia and the guilt she felt initially after killing Pansy's rapist, her parents and their deaths, and Matthew's life and death; she'd even opened up a little about her newfound balance with Draco Malfoy.

"I don't hate him, if that's what you're asking. We're...something like allies. I suppose."

"Allies? Why not call him your friend?"

"You know how I feel about the word."

"Yes, but maybe you need to change your mindset."

"Hmm, that was what he said."

"Maybe he has a point."

Harry, however, was a topic they hadn't touched yet, and for obvious reasons. And Harry had become a serious sore spot for her, as of late.

Flashes of memories from the painfully emotional confrontation ran through her mind like a movie preview, each flash more heartbreak than the last. She plagued herself with thoughts of what Harry had said. Because she agreed with him. Leaving had been the best option in a lose-lose situation, but in not returning to face the truth after Matthew's birth, Hermione had been selfish. She could tell herself different all she wanted; that was the truth. The real truth. The truth she'd buried in all her lies. In the end, her thinking had been too linear. She hadn't thought of every scenario that could happen; she had been so *stupid*. So blind. Selfish. In torturing herself, Hermione robbed Harry of something she'd clung to in her darkest moments.

Time.

Time with Matthew.

Time to watch him grow and change as she'd watched him grow and change.

Even though Harry's presence would not have changed Matthew's fate, she'd taken his opportunity to fight for him as she'd fought. To say goodbye as she'd said goodbye. To enjoy the last weeks with him without medicines and potions tiring him out and making him scream. To hold him as she held him. To mourn him as she'd mourned him.

In the end, Hermione was the villain in her own fucked up drama.

And she would have to atone for it as much as she could. If she ever could.

For all his faults, Harry had deserved better. And Hermione hated herself most of all because she knew—*she knew* that Matthew had deserved better, too.

It was a self-loathing she could not shake. It had followed her that afternoon into Malfoy's office where he sat her down and held her hand while she cried at the realisation that she'd been the monster all along. It followed her into her dreams and nightmares and the spaces in between. When she had come to, it was two days later and it was *still there* in Malfoy's bed with Narcissa at her side.

"I know," Hermione pressed on, "I know we haven't talked about him much. I know I've avoided the topic like the plague. I think that anyone would, if they were in my predicament."

"So why do you bring him up today?"

"I-I told him and my Ron the truth about everything, about my parents and Matthew's paternity." She shot up and paced in front of the couch she'd been sitting on. "I couldn't let my guilt fester any longer. I walked away feeling oddly relieved, but really, I am ashamed of myself for the part I played in this, for the things I've done, for the decisions I made that kept them apart. I'm not as good of a person as I thought."

Her therapist's quill stopped moving and she looked at Hermione before she bluntly said, "No, you aren't." While it hurt coming from someone else, she shut her eyes and let the words absorb and marinate. "And that's not always bad. You've been the brains for so long that you believe your own hype. What it boils down to is that you made a lot of bad choices during a hard time in your life; mistakes you never corrected and can never change."

She nodded solemnly.

"I can't judge you and I won't, but you may have kept your friends alive for seven years and been the brains, but you're not perfect. Going forward, you're going to make uncharacteristic, rash decisions that lead to mistakes that you can't take back. You're going to have even *more* weaknesses and moments of utter stupidity. You're going to keep having such incredible highs and the deepest lows you can imagine."

"But I'm so ashamed."

"Everyone has something in their past that they wished they could take back—and if they tell you otherwise, they're lying."

Hermione stared at her hands that were shaking.

"You're human, Hermione, and to be human is to know that you're imperfect and understand that you sometimes aren't the person you think you are. You have blind spots; no matter how many variables you plan for, there will always be some you can't account for. You will stumble and get back up. You will struggle and understand that struggling is part of being human. You will make mistakes, and your mistakes will hurt others, whether it's your closest

friends or people you've never met. To be human is to apologise and ask for forgiveness as you oscillate between remorse and compassion, destruction and repair."

Ms Shepard Vanished the tissue in her hand with a casual flick of her wand.

"Yes, you should be ashamed, but don't let your guilt drag you under. All you can do is try to fix what you've broken and find your own peace with everything."

"Perhaps I can't find it because I don't deserve it." Hermione said softly.

"Why are you so hard on yourself?"

"Because all I can think about are the moments in time when everything went wrong. There are so many I can hardly keep count. I should have known better and I hate myself and...its less pleasant when you know why."

Ms Shepard said nothing in response, jotting down a note in her book. "It's going to be a long journey back to rediscovering the happier person you once were. You may never get there, but as soon as you start down that path, you won't be here in the darkness. You're free to carry your shame and self-hatred as long as you choose to, but when you're ready, when you're *really* ready, it's okay to let it go."

Hermione sniffed and looked out the window. At that point, she didn't know if she ever would.

"I know," she whispered, "I know, but it's so hard."

"I understand," the therapist soothed as best as she could, "But it's time for you to *move*." Silence filled the room, but Katherine didn't let it linger. "How did telling the truth make you feel?"

"There was so much going on, I can hardly remember every word that was said." Hermione told her in a small voice that was barely above a whisper, "Ron just looked wretched, and Harry—" She choked. "I broke him. And, there I was, feeling *relieved* that the truth was finally out. There I was feeling like the weight on my shoulders had been lightened considerably. There I was, feeling like I could possibly breathe again."

She ruefully shook her head and sighed, rubbing her tears from her cheeks.

"I don't feel bad about being honest with them. The only way out of hell is to go through it. And that was my hell. I think in telling them, I realised a lot of things about myself. And nothing was good about any of my self-discoveries."

Katherine looked slightly taken aback from the raw emotion in her client's voice, but she cleared her throat and replied. "The burdens that you carried weren't truly yours to carry; not alone, at least. You didn't create Matthew alone—"

"Exactly. I didn't." Hermione closed her eyes, "I'm really trying to look forward, but all I can do is look back. All I can do is—" She breathed a sigh, "Harry. I told him he had a son, and with the next breath I told him that he was dead. It was cruel."

"Honesty can be a bitterly cruel thing."

Sadly, she closed her eyes and remembered Harry's face when she looked back.

"The truth has a way of breaking even the strongest person, Hermione. Matthew's death broke you. Did you not think that his death would also break his father?"

"I-I didn't know what to think."

"He may not have known Matthew, he may not have seen him with his own two eyes, but the bond between parent and child is there. You know that. Just like you know that he'll come around and want to know him."

Deep in her heart, she knew that her therapist was telling the truth.

She knew Harry. She knew him like she knew her own flesh and blood; like her skin and the bones it stretched across. They had been the best friends; they had fought together, slept together, and produced a child together. Hermione knew Harry well enough to know that once he got past his initial pain and came back to his senses, he'd want to know as much about Matthew as possible.

Matthew, after all, was his family; it didn't matter if he was now dead.

She knew what she had to do when he was ready.

Hermione absorbed all of her therapist's words and let them marinate in her mind. Harry may have hurt her at the Manor, but she'd hurt him far worse. Everything that had happened was due to one misunderstanding after the next; one mistake after another. She could have done some things differently, but Hermione remembered what she said.

She was human.

She could 'what if' herself to her dying day, but it wouldn't change what happened. Maybe Hermione would never fully atone, but she could try. She could open herself up to them if they wanted, when they were ready, if they ever would be ready. Hermione would hold herself accountable for her actions. She didn't know if she would ever love herself, but maybe one day she would like herself again.

"I love you, Hermione."

She swallowed painfully.

"What is on your mind, Hermione?" Katherine asked calmly.

"Everything, it seems. Life and love."

"Would you like to elaborate?" Katherine sat her quill and parchment down and took a polite sip from her warm teacup.

After copying her actions with her own teacup, the witch leaned rested her elbow on the arm of the couch, "My daydream, the one you first pulled me from, it was about love." Hermione confessed, though she didn't understand just what provoked that confession. Suddenly, she felt rather silly talking about her daydreams with her therapist. "I don't really like talking about that topic."

Katherine always respected her wishes, but that day she raised an inquisitive brow. "And why don't you like talking about love?"

"It's just—" A hard and tired sigh escaped her lips.

They'd discussed so much in that hour. There was so much that she had to think about, so much that she had to ponder. How could she explain something that she didn't even understand half the time? How could she explain something that she'd been too hurt and guilty to really consider? Hermione didn't quite know how to answer the therapist's question without opening a can of worms that she wasn't quite ready to open. She had just gotten comfortable talking about Harry; she wasn't sure if she could open up to her that much more.

Not yet, anyway.

The truth was that she was torn between her extreme disillusionment with matters of the heart and her extreme appeal with the idea of *truly* loving someone until she was old and grey. However, the words '*I love you*' were dangerous words to say to her.

"I—" She started, but couldn't finish because she was too lost in her thoughts.

While it appealed to her, love was also her biggest fear. It had completely turned her world upside down, but that wasn't her main issue with it. Hermione wasn't afraid of loving someone, but rather, she was afraid of not being able to love another person enough to let go. She'd let go of so many people that she loved that it made her hollow inside.

"I can't—" She started again, but found her thoughts changing in direction.

Love was one of the most powerful emotions in existence, and she knew better than to challenge its supremacy. Since even before the beginning of recorded history, songwriters had written songs about love, storytellers had told stories about its power; thousands of men had fought wars and died for just a taste of it. Love could build someone up and tear them apart at the same time. It was a powerful emotion. And who was she to deny its influence?

Vividly, Hermione remembered telling Harry that he didn't really love her; that his feelings for her were due to misplaced lust. She now knew better than to question the love that someone felt for another. The love that Harry had felt for her had turned him into a stranger and she understood now that she was a fool to have challenged the power of love. After all, love had certainly made a mess of her life. First with Harry, then Ron, her parents, and Matthew...love had hurt her badly.

True, her heart ached miserably and she often wondered if she'd ever be whole again, but there was more to her pain. It had made her cold to compliments and wary of everything. She was unaware of the fact that her broken heart had made it hard to open up to anyone, to trust,

to feel, to be honest, to—live. Hermione realised that her broken heart had made her keep to herself and present an appeal of mystery, but that really what she wore was a cloak of fear.

"Miss Granger?"

If she was to be honest, she was afraid of a lot of things, but mostly she was afraid of herself. She wondered if she would ever be able to truly be loved and not have to chase away the memories that threatened to drown her.

"Hermione?"

With a small jerk of her head, she brought herself out of her mental reverie. "I'm sorry. I just can't concentrate today. There's too much on my mind."

Katherine offered a comforting look, "That's understandable, but you never answered my previous question."

Truthfully, "I can't...I'm not quite sure that I can. It's - complicated."

"Matters of the heart tend to be complex in nature." She reminded.

Hermione nodded numbly, "I have a lot more to heal before I can even think about my heart."

"Quite the contrary, the heart is the first place that needs to be healed."

Sadly, she told her therapist, "But I'm not sure that I can heal it."

"And you may not be able to, not on your own. All kinds of healing, whether it be healing of the heart or of a broken arm; it all takes time and patience from you, strength and understanding from those you care about. When you had your accident at Marquette Manor, you didn't just pack up and leave for home after you were healed at St. Mungo's. No, you went to see a physical therapist to make sure that your physical abilities weren't compromised. And since your heart is broken—" She eyed Hermione meaningfully, "It's my job to see that your emotional capabilities aren't damaged. And while I can't heal you myself, even though I wish I could, it's my job to give you all the tools you need. It's your job to apply them. Do you understand all of that?"

Thoughtfully, she nodded. "Yes, I believe I do."

"I'm glad. It often takes *years* for people to understand that. It truly shows that you are further along than you were when you started seeing me."

At that, Hermione flashed a small smile.

Katherine pressed on after a brief silence. "However, there is something else that you don't understand and accept, yet."

Hermione drank the last of her tea and listened intently.

"Everything that you have been through is a loss, of sorts. Do you understand that?"

She nodded.

"Good. Now, you have to accept your past losses and allow yourself to grieve. Feel your emotions, Hermione, but don't believe them." Ms Shepard advised considerately. "That's the mistake you've been making since the beginning. Feeling bad is good, it's therapeutic, but allowing that hopelessness to overwhelm you, allowing yourself to believe that you'll never be happy again, and allowing yourself to fear your past; those things are not good for you."

Deep down, it made sense.

She gripped the arm of the couch, "B-but how do I stop?"

Katherine polished off the rest of her tea and replied, "You need to accept your past as unchangeable, learn from it, grow from it, face the rest of your demons, and start living for today."

The timer buzzed, indicating the end of their session.

Katherine handed Hermione her journal back, and Hermione left the office with a heavy heart and a clouded mind.

Part Three: Bleed like Me

She didn't expect to see Blaise sitting on a bench outside of the building.

Hermione could've walked in the other way and almost did; he hadn't seen her. And while her heart and mind implored her to go home until her dinner appointment with Pansy, instead, she found herself walking towards him, almost as if there was a slight force that was pulling her into his direction.

Whenever she saw Blaise in Muggle attire, he always reminded her of a combination between a 1940's Muggle actor and a GQ model. He was slightly roguish, sophisticated, and dreadfully handsome, in a classic but contemporary kind of way, if that made any sense. Blaise was a rather tall man, he stood nearly three heads over Malfoy, and he was built differently.

It was very cool on that London day, and he had dressed very appropriately. Blaise wore a very casual, two-button, navy suit. The jacket, that was open informally, revealed a crisp baby blue and white pinstriped shirt. The top button was strategically unbuttoned. All he needed to do to complete the image was to lose the opened navy parka that kept him warm and find a cigarette.

Blaise lounged on the bench, legs crossed at his ankles, and his dark eyes scoured the streets slowly.

He was about to rise and walk away when he spotted her. And flashed a charming and friendly smile.

"You just missed Pansy. She just went in for her session with Ms Shepard."

Hermione frowned. She must've had too much on her mind to notice her. "Oh, I didn't see her."

Blaise gave a little shrug, "She was in her own world when I walked her over here from the Apparition point. We just left St. Mungo's..." He trailed off, a bit distracted.

She raised her hand in understanding. She already knew what today was and she sighed for Pansy.

It was Family Day in the psychiatric ward of St. Mungo's. After blatantly refusing to go in previous years, Pansy had actually wrestled with the decision to attend this year. After all, the woman had no recollection of even *having* a daughter. However, that wasn't her only issue with visiting her mother. Pansy confessed the previous night that whenever she visited, her mother would talk to her about nonsensical topics, but about ten minutes into the visit, she started chastising Pansy in such a way that it reminded her of Hogwarts years when she wasn't good enough and her mother wanted her married off as soon as possible.

It was enough to make Hermione, who had originally supported Pansy's decision to visit her mother, question the witch's motives. Why would anyone subject themselves to such torture? The answer, which should've been obvious, dawned on her.

Pansy was healing.

And soon, she was going to have to complete some unpleasant tasks, as well.

"How did it go?" Hermione asked quietly.

"I had to stop her from Vanishing her mother's vocal chords," he said dully.

"That's not possible."

"Well, Pansy was willing to try."

"That bad?"

A little smirk appeared on Blaise's handsome face, "Yes, but it was better than last time. She's getting better with each trip. Soon, she'll be able to sit in the room with her mother and not be affected by her words. Soon."

Hermione could hear the conviction in his deep voice and feel the hope radiating off his skin.

Pansy was really lucky to have such a strong man like Blaise on her side and in her life. He was loyal and understanding, patient and kind. He rode through the storms in Pansy's life and he had never abandoned ship, not once, even when all hope seemed lost. The love and

affection he had for Pansy was unmistakable, even before she had come to her senses and opened her heart back up to him. He was everything that she needed and so much more.

And for the first time, Hermione was a little envious. Just a little.

"You look like you had a hard session."

She released a hard sigh, "There's so much that I have to do."

"There's a little café down the street that I like to go to whenever I'm waiting for Pansy to get out of her sessions; would you like to join me?"

Like the proper gentleman, he offered her his arm.

Her mind told her to go home, but her lips said, "Sure," and accepted his arm.

Blaise insisted that he pay for her hot chocolate and together they sat in a booth in the back of the well-lit café. It was quiet, but trickles of random conversation could be heard. Hermione observed the man across the table. Like his best friend, he took his coffee black and claimed that the caffeine will do the right job without clogging his arteries or his head with unnecessary nonsense.

"So, how have you been? No one, outside of Pansy, has really seen you in weeks."

Hermione fixed her lips to tell a lie, but stopped herself just in time.

She wasn't going to lie to him. She wasn't going to lie to anyone anymore.

"I just needed a break. Between the rumours of my supposed relationship with Malfoy and the entire confrontation with Harry and Ron—I had to do a lot of soul searching."

"Personal growth is hard and requires an uncomfortable amount of self-assessment."

Hermione nodded in agreement. "It's exhausting. I cycle between hating myself and wanting to forgive myself. It's a bit of a mess in my head. I didn't think I would be very good company."

"Understandable." Blaise sat his coffee down. "We don't have to talk about it."

She set down her hot chocolate and rested her elbows on the table.

It was now or never.

"Blaise, I've been meaning to ask—" She stopped and looked down, sighing.

"What is it?"

"Matthew's birthday is coming up and I-I don't want to be alone." She mumbled her admission with her head lowered and her eyes heavy.

"Do you honestly think that Pansy will allow you to be alone?"

Hermione shook her head, chuckling sadly. "No, I suppose not. I just—she'd probably throw a party."

Blaise chuckled. "She does love her parties." They both smiled at that and he cleared his throat. "I know you hate the word, but we're your friends, your *allies*, if that makes you feel better. The point is that you can come to us whenever you need anything and we'll be there for you, even Draco."

Hermione tilted her head in confusion. "What does he have to do with this?"

Blaise's face tightened. "Well..."

She knew he was about to say something important - something that had been on his mind.

"I know this may be impertinent of me, and if he knew we were talking about him like this he would hex me into the middle of last week, but I think you should know something about Draco."

"Okay..." Hermione said slowly.

"Don't let his behaviour fool you. He's not the most *open* individual in the world. He never has been."

"I don't understand." She frowned and sipped her tea, a bit uncomfortable.

"I know he barged into your life without so much as a by your leave and I know he's been horrible. He pushed too much and too hard when it was none of his damn business. I think his behaviour—I know it's something he quietly regrets. I also think that in his own way he's trying to atone for his mistakes."

"By being nice to me?" Or as nice as Malfoy could be. And for some reason her heart sunk a little.

All that progress.

Blaise had been right, though.

Malfoy had picked and prodded and burrowed into her life in what was an unwelcomed intrusion. He got on her everlasting nerves and sometimes she still wanted to smack him for the things he'd said and done. Nevertheless, had Malfoy left well enough alone, she doubted that she would have been at the point where she was; talking about her past, atoning for her sins, trying to swim instead of sink. She would have remained stagnant and closed up.

Sometimes, Hermione had realised, even people like Malfoy, were put into her life to test her, teach her, and make sure she could survive the hardest of times.

"Yes, and no." Blaise answered ambiguously. He seemed to notice the stiffness of her movements because he tried to explain himself better. "I think you've earned a great deal of his respect. Not just because everything that's happened, but he respects you as a person."

She snorted. "Respects me? You think so?"

His face never changed. "I know so."

Hermione picked up her teacup and took a sip. "So, you're Malfoy's spokesperson?"

"No, I'm saying things he would never say to you."

"Why?" She shifted under his gaze uncomfortably.

Blaise took a sip from his coffee cup. "He's a complete arse on a good day and a terror on his worst day, but he's cynical and will do anything to protect himself from any sort of harm."

"And why are you telling me this?"

"I'm saying this because *you* have the power to harm him."

And now, Hermione was confused. "Um?"

"Look, whether or not he'll ever admit it or he even recognises it, Draco carries a little torch for you."

She would've laughed had Blaise not looked so serious, "He can barely stand me sometimes."

"He cares more about you than you think."

"But wh—"

He wouldn't let her interject. "He requests tables for four, even though he knows you're not going to be there there. And sometimes I see him watching you from the corner of his eyes. He's tuned into you and—I'm not saying he's going to turn into some sappy version of himself, Merlin forbid, but he's far better than he was. He's got a long way to go, but he's at least giving a damn about someone other than—"

She could hardly speak. "Why-why are you telling me this?"

For the first time, Blaise looked more than uncomfortable, "Merlin, he's going to kill me, but as his best friend, I just wanted to make sure that it's mutual, that you're not going to use—he's a lot of things, but he's not made of stone."

Hermione sometimes had found herself wondering why Malfoy always seemed to be there when she needed a lifeline, why he sat in long silences with her, and why he often shortened his steps to walk with her. She hadn't given herself enough time to figure out him or whatever was going on in his head—and she *couldn't*. There was too much going on in her head. Hermione had been preoccupied in her own drama that she hadn't had a moment to process the way he held back when she *knew* he wanted to say something crass. Or the fact that when she'd finally had her meltdown after confessing to Harry and Ron, he'd brought her back to his home and stayed with her.

But what Blaise was saying seemed ridiculous.

They were more than stranger, almost allies, but far from that.

It was impossible.

But remembering what she'd said in therapy, Hermione decided to file the conversation away for a day when she was in a better head space.

Blaise sat his coffee cup down. "Draco isn't invincible, though he would have you thinking otherwise. He's a creature of habit and he holds his cards close to his chest." He told her, looking down at his empty cup. "But if you cut him, he will bleed like anyone else, he will bleed like—"

"Me."

temporary insanity

Chapter Summary

"My, my have you changed."

Chapter Notes

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

Chapter Nineteen

Temporary Insanity

Part One: Craving For Stability

January 21st

Draco had always been fascinated with numbers.

It wasn't just the actual numbers - he enjoyed calculating them, twisting them, and learning new ways to manipulate them. He used to count everything, mainly out of boredom, but numbers never failed to keep him entertained. He excelled in Arithmancy for those reasons alone, much to the confusion of his mother who had never attempted the subject.

Draco didn't bother explaining it, simply because he didn't know how to, or why.

He had always had the reputation of being rebellious, one who never cared for rules or the law and defied at every given opportunity. That was probably why people were so shocked when he became a Ministry employee. And while he had been insubordinate as a child, he didn't hate rules or laws.

When he was eighteen, he read somewhere that rules were made for the obedience of fools and the guidance of wise men, and he lived by that statement as best as he could. It made sense. Draco, at one point in his life, had been no better than any other fool - and that horrified him. After all, he had spent his entire life following what were deemed the "correct" rules. How had he been so blind?

It was then that he decided that he needed to make his own rules.

Rules, he found, were excellent to bend, wield, and control. But in order to successfully make rules, he had to understand their purpose. Not only did rules govern the lives of individuals, rules governed the entire universe. Rules created order, offered boundaries, granted stability, and provided comfort. Living without rules often led to chaos, violence, and anarchy. After spending two years without any concrete rules, other than stay alive and maintain face, Draco just knew that he couldn't live the rest of his life without rules. They afforded him the opportunity to acquire everything he had ever wanted in life, but wasn't really entitled to have.

And then it clicked.

Numbers were another stable thing he could enjoy. See, the beauty was that numbers had been around forever and they belonged to no one. Their meanings, orders, and interpretations had never changed. One plus one always equalled two. Not once had three ever decided that *it* was going to be the answer; it didn't work that way. Numbers were universal, but at the same time, like rules, numbers could be manipulated to fulfill the needs of men.

It was simple yet complex, and exactly the way he liked it.

Manicured fingers snapped in his face, bringing him back. "Draco? Draco? Are you listening to me?"

Well, he wasn't going to lie. "Not at all."

Pansy huffed and anxiously went back to watching the entrance of the restaurant, scouring for the tardy Blaise Zabini. When she didn't see him, she sulked. "Would it kill you to listen?"

He shrugged and muttered into his drink, "Probably," and took another sip.

Thankfully, she didn't hear him.

"I mean, your best friend is worried about her boy-oh, is that-" She sighed when she realised that the tall, black man who had just walked into the restaurant was *not* Blaise. Before he could snatch it off the table, the witch had her cellular contraption to her ear - for the fifth time.

Quite the little stalker, that one was.

Draco looked at the little Muggle contraption as if it were a foreign object - which it was.

She had returned from Australia with that bloody menace and it hadn't left since. Recently, Draco had learned that Granger was the only reason why she even knew the little nuisance existed. What was worse, since Pansy had started sporting the cellular contraption from hell, it had become a bloody trend for witches and wizards to use for times when they couldn't send an owl or a Patronus.

It had become the thing to have when out in Muggle London, period.

The downfall was that they didn't work inside magical establishment; and for that, he was extremely grateful. However, when they were in Muggle London, that thing buzzed, sang,

and she had a "texting plan" - whatever that meant.

Somehow, she had managed to convince Blaise, once they started dating to purchase one just so she could get in touch with him whenever she felt the need or the desire. It worked well for them, although Blaise admitted to him that outside of making and receiving phone calls, he didn't have a fucking clue as to how to use the thing. The fact of the matter, though, was that they both were always out of town on business and the menace that was currently attached to Pansy's ear allowed them to hear each other, even though they were kilometres away.

Pansy had begged him to purchase one, as well.

Well, Draco considered himself to be a pretty progressive wizard; he listened to all that rubbish about not shunning, but embracing Muggle technology and moving past the dark ages of old. Hell, he owned a television he barely watched, but that wasn't the point.

As he came to understand the Muggle culture a little more, he had a greater respect for them. Were they inferior? In some ways, but only because they didn't have magic and Quidditch. They had such a wide variety of interesting entertainments that he simply couldn't fathom how they managed to do everything in one lifetime. And their technology was incredible, even though it did promote sloth.

Muggles didn't live bad lives, but that didn't mean that he was going to jump on the bandwagon and convert. In some aspects, Draco would always be a bit of a traditionalist. He firmly believed that too little change was detrimental to the wizarding society, but too much change would make the wizarding world forget its ancestry and heritage.

He resolved for the happy medium. He still liked quills and parchment, but was open to using a pen and paper. He enjoyed Muggle action movies, but hated insipid television shows. He snubbed nasty Muggle hoodies and trainers, but all their clothes weren't bad. Needless to say, he was open to trying something at least once, but he was firmly *against* purchasing that little monster on Pansy's ear.

And he told her so.

"It's going to voicemail," the frustrated witch grunted and snapped her contraption shut, "I wish he would hurry up. He knew that our reservations were set for eight o'clock. It's not like him to be this late." Remembering her manners, she wiped her hands with the hot towel before laying it back on the table.

As much as he hated to admit, she was right.

Draco could show up wherever they were meeting ten minutes early and Blaise would already be there. Whatever that had kept him detained was something important, but he wasn't worried for Blaise's safety. He was capable of taking care of himself. He had good reason to worry about Pansy, though; after all, she was nearly chewing her manicured nails in nervous anticipation.

"I bet he's fine." He assured, but quickly realised that it was the wrong thing to say.

He nearly cringed when Pansy took a deep breath and addressed him. "You don't know that. What if something happened and the Ministry is in a hostage situation..."

Eleven Muggles wore blue ties: four were striped, three were plain, three were polka-dotted, and one had little squares.

"...and *maybe*..."

Ten Muggles wore black ties: five were polka-dotted, three were plain, two were striped, and one had little triangles.

"...I mean what if he was on his way and he was mauled by a magical beast..."

And one unfortunate gentleman wore a bright orange tie with little black stars running down the centre of the tie.

Draco shifted his eyes elsewhere, but there was nothing there to divert his attention. He heaved a sigh, "Don't worry, he'll be here soon. Tell me about your day. I promise to listen." He'd do *anything* to stop the rambling.

"Well," she began slowly, "Today I went to work and we attempted to finalize the colour scheme for the spring line. That idiotic bint, Carmen, suggested violet and a burnt yellow and I told them that those colours reminded me of..."

There were fifty-nine light fixtures in the entire restaurant.

There were thirty-one tables, all had lit candles and elegant table settings.

"...mauve is such a ridiculous colour, don't you think? It even *sounds* ridiculous. I forbade the models from wearing such a colour...I have an aunt named Mauve and she's quite ridiculous as well...you remember her? She's the one with the weird facial hair..."

He suppressed an internal groan.

Draco silently signalled to the waiter to bring him another drink - just as Blaise Zabini stepped out of the cold and into the restaurant. Thank Merlin!

Pansy was so lost in her tangent that she didn't see him, which was probably for the best. After all, he was due for a verbal tongue-lashing. Draco watched as he pulled off his parka before approaching the flustered hostess. He didn't hear the words that were exchanged, but he did watch as the hostess took his jacket to take to the coat room with the rest of the coats, gave him a little grateful smile, and led the way to their table.

"...might I add, while fuchsia is a fantastic spring colour, it's also terribly commonplace and completely trite. I—"

Pansy's voice died the instant that she heard: "Mr Zabini, is there anything I can get you to drink?"

She gasped as her eyes sought him out.

Without making a sound, he slid into the chair next to his speechless girlfriend, kissed her temple, and replied, "A glass of water, for now," and looked across the table at Draco once the flustered hostess walked off to deliver his coat to the room and drink order to the kitchen, "Sorry, I'm late. Have you ordered?"

Draco attempted to suppress his smirk, but failed. Silence, at last. "Not yet."

"We were waiting on *you*," Pansy snipped in affectionate anger as she took his hand that gripped the edge of the table. She didn't look a bit pleased, but her voice was filled to the brim with all kinds of emotion. "Where have you been? I was worried."

Blaise looked apologetic as he tucked his girlfriend's curled hair behind her ear gently, "Sorry, love, I didn't mean for you to worry. I lost track of the time..."

Feeling very much like the third wheel, Draco started counting the number of Muggle ladies that wore diamond earrings.

"...Hermione."

And just like that, he lost count.

A stream of internal epitaphs rang out in his head, but didn't make it past his lips. Draco blinked, fighting to get his bearings, but failed and quickly scrapped his counting plans altogether. Instead, he focused on the couple across the table who spoke in low voices about Granger.

Blaise had seen Granger?

Funny, he'd seen her, too.

Before she left for her physical therapy session that afternoon, they'd had a decent lunch together at some trendy Muggle restaurant that she liked. Although she cleaned her plate rather quickly, for the most part, she was pretty subdued and quiet throughout the meal. Draco found that he didn't care about the silence. It was no longer awkward. Granger didn't waste her words on frivolity, so when she spoke, he listened.

"Well, she said she'd be late." Pansy took a sip of her tea, "Why didn't she come with you?"

"She's still at her house, probably right where I left her. That's why I'm late." Blaise explained, turning his attention to Draco. "She's not going to be joining us tonight."

Pansy's voice had a bossy edge to it. "And why not?"

"She's started the purging process."

His brows furrowed in confusion, but only for a second. As understanding dawned on him, Pansy, who instantly knew what he meant, nearly leapt from her chair as if she'd sat on a tack. Blaise pulled the witch back into her seat. A few people glanced in their direction, but the focus didn't stay on them for very long. Pansy fired a look that could melt titanium as she tried to wrench herself away from him. "I have to help. I-"

"*You* have to stay here and *not* run off like a bloody Gryffindor," He told her firmly. "She said she'd call you if she needed you."

A frustrated groan was all he got in response.

"I helped her move the boxes from the attic into a storage room on the second floor, and I helped her arrange the boxes," Blaise interjected, "Everything was a mess. The movers put the boxes into the attic with no semblance of order and she never bothered to arrange it. After you went to the office for that meeting, she wrote me at home and asked me to come over and help her."

"I-"

"She said that she wants to do it alone. We have to respect that."

"But-"

"It's her decision, not mine, but she told me that she needed to do it alone. Besides, she said that she was only opening one box tonight."

Draco drank the rest of his drink and stared thoughtfully, albeit blankly, at a Japanese painting on the wall just behind their table. So, Granger was venturing into her attic. But he knew that it wasn't just about her foray. No, it was much deeper than that. She was finally facing her demons and tackling the absurd New Year's resolution list that she had showed him that afternoon.

Silently, he confessed that he was rather proud of her.

"Draco, what are you going to order? I'm going to get some sushi, and Blaise is leaning towards tempura."

He scanned the menu. He wasn't a big fan of Japanese food. It was Pansy's night to choose the restaurant and she always chose something exotic, while he stuck to restaurants in Diagon Alley, Blaise stuck with any place that had authentic Italian food, and Granger had a tendency to cook at Pansy's house.

The list of sushi dishes caught his eye and he scanned the list with a thoughtful frown on his face. He didn't mind sushi. After all, Pansy had had to practically force him to try it last year. After he got used to the strange texture, he realised that it wasn't half bad. It certainly wasn't something that he was going to eat every day, but having it every now and then was fine. So, he ordered a rather safe dish, and used the chattering voices of other patrons and the melodic Japanese music to tune Pansy's voice from his head, at least until the food arrived.

All conversation shifted halfway through the meal.

"What are you going to get Hermione?" Pansy asked as politely she lifted a sushi roll to her lips with her metal chopsticks, pausing. Though he'd never admit it aloud, Draco was envious at her dexterity with chopsticks. He had only enough skill to get the sushi roll from his plate into his mouth. He had no time to pause. It was rather unseemly.

"For what?" Draco took another sip of sake.

"Her son's birthday is in a couple of weeks and she's invited us to dinner - you too, Draco." She flashed an odd smile and proceeded, "I thought it would be a good idea if we all got her a gift. Remember when I suggested it weeks ago before we knew about the dinner plans?"

No, he didn't, but didn't dare confess that he hadn't been listening.

As he thought more and more about the idea of giving Granger a gift, Draco's eyebrow rose steadily. It could only go one of two ways: she either would be extremely grateful for their thoughtfulness, or she would be angry for their inappropriate presumption. In both scenarios, she was a mess. No matter how many times that she had cried around him, Draco still hated her tears.

Needless to say, the idea left him a bit hesitant.

"Blaise and I - well, *I* came up with the gift." She grinned, "We got her a weekend at this beautiful spa in Scotland. Of course, I'm going to go with her - purely as moral support." She added proudly.

Blaise snorted into his water glass. "You *still* keep telling yourself that."

Pansy glared, but then a coy smile broke across her face. "Naturally."

He rolled his eyes and continued eating.

"I think it's a rather thoughtful gift, what do you think, Draco?"

Well, if he was to be honest, he didn't know what to think. "It sounds fine."

"It's something that she needs. Merlin knows she needs to have a holiday after, well, '*the incident*'."

Ah, '*the incident*' – better known as the argument of the century between Weasley, Potter, and Granger. He had been leaving for a staff meeting when he'd heard their raised voices and blindly started casting every spell he could think of to ensure their privacy. In the weeks following, Draco spent a lot of time trying not to think about that day. He for damn sure didn't want to talk about it. And because Granger hadn't spoken of it, they bugged the shit out of *him* for details.

But he wouldn't tell.

He had known the entire story, but that didn't make it any easier to sit still behind a Disillusionment Charm and hear it all again from each of their points of view. It had been ugly. There had been no winners. By the time Draco made his presence known, he was running on instinct and knowledge that Potter was about to break and taunted him in part to distract him from Granger.

"Has she talked about it at all with you?" Blaise asked Pansy.

She shook her head, "Only that they knew the truth about everything." She ate the last of her sushi rolls with perfected elegance and delicacy. After, Pansy set her chopsticks down carefully. "I would've given my salary for the next fifteen years to see Potter's face when she told him that Matthew was his."

Blaise choked, and Draco *nearly* choked on his drink; their admonished words were said simultaneously.

"*Potter* is Matthew's—""

"All this time—"

"Father?"

"You knew—"

First, she addressed her shocked boyfriend with a simple: "Yes."

Blaise absorbed it all for a few moments. "I had no idea just how much of a bloody mess this all was. *Merlin*."

Draco knew what kind of relationship that Blaise and Granger had. They talked to each other in confidence, but he didn't ask questions. He didn't dig, and at one point, she felt less threatened in Blaise's presence than she felt in his. Draco frowned. Times had changed.

"You don't even know the half of it."

"I need a bloody drink."

Pansy flagged down their waitress and ordered Blaise a drink.

Draco kept quiet until after the waitress delivered his drink and walked away. He leaned forward a bit, catching her eyes and holding on to her gaze. "How the hell did you figure it out?" Draco asked and pointed out, "She never even told you."

Pansy shot him a look. "Y-you thought I didn't know?" She rolled her eyes. "My powers of deduction may not come close to yours, Draco, but I wasn't born yesterday. Honestly, she didn't have to say a word, although I wish she would've—" She ran a hand through her curled hair as she sighed at the memory.

Blaise polished off his drink quickly, still bemused.

"From the moment I laid eyes on him, I knew whose son he was. Minus the scar, the glasses, and the fact that he looks a lot like Hermione, I could tell that he was no Weasley. His eyes, although slightly different, were a dead giveaway."

Remembering the picture that he hadn't quite forgotten, Draco silently agreed.

Pansy's voice was void of all humour when she asked, "When did she tell you about Potter being the father?"

"The day I punched Weasley."

That apparently wasn't something that she had expected. "That long ago? And you kept it to yourself?" She smirked, "My, my have *you* changed."

He'd kept all of Granger's secrets.

"Quit while you're ahead." He growled.

She knew him too well to be intimidated. "You two *have* gotten a lot closer in the recent months."

"Did we have a choice?" He snipped, not at all liking where the conversation was going.

Pansy merely shrugged. "I think it was rather inevitable - I just didn't think it would happen so soon."

Well, that made two of them.

There were strict rules to follow in such a situation; rules that he hadn't hesitated to follow in the past. But, Merlin, those rules were blasted from the equation when it came to Granger. He'd broken so damn many of his personal rules since last August that he questioned his own sanity.

His plan had been simple: satisfy his curiosity and get out.

Well, he was one for two, but he was trapped in her world.

"What happened, Draco." It wasn't Pansy who had made that request, but a thoughtful Blaise.

He shook his head. "She'll tell you when she's ready. I, for one, don't ever want to discuss it. It was brutal, nasty, and it made every row that I'd ever had in my life seem trivial and inconsequential."

Everyone was broken and there were so many tears...

Blaise's brow rose slowly. "And there were no ulterior motives for your presence?"

Draco shot him a glare that firmly told him to back off, and didn't dignify his question with an answer. Making his presence known had been a rare moment of gallantry; he knew that for certain. Setting up the wards had been a moment of consideration; it was done in the service of someone he considered almost a friend. But staying - now, *that* had been a moment of temporary insanity.

Everything had been too *raw* for his liking—too real. It made his chest hurt horribly for reasons he didn't want to understand. Hell, it made him feel sorry for a bloody *Weasley* - sweet Merlin! What was the world coming to?

And later, much later, he even felt bad for Potter.

But he stayed.

He definitely could've lived without the consequences of pulling Granger from the rubble of the bomb she had dropped on them. For a total of twenty-seven hours and nineteen minutes, Granger didn't speak a word.

Immediately after, he had led her back into his office, told Shannon that he was leaving by Floo, and then had taken Granger to his house. It took him thirteen minutes to pry his hand from hers, two more to get her to the point where she had enough emotional awareness to shower herself, and one more to change out of his work robes. She dried her hair, he shrank a pair of lounge pants and a shirt for her to wear, she sat on the loveseat, he turned on the television, she took his hand again, and for the next twelve hours and forty-seven minutes, she didn't utter a syllable, and neither did he.

They just sat there and stared at the blaring television that was on a station that showed action movies back-to-back. He'd never seen so many car explosions in his life - and she didn't wince, not once.

She looked dead. Dead to the world. Dead tired. Dead.

"Draco," Blaise's voice snapped him out of his thoughts. A large amount of time had gone by because Pansy was trying to steal a glance at the bill that her boyfriend was paying. Their plates were gone.

"What?" He snapped, irritably.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm just tired." He went into his pocket for his wallet, glanced at his bill, and threw down a few notes to settle the payment and a generous tip. When they exited the restaurant, Draco quickly bade his best friends farewell and walked to find a point where he could Apparate without being seen, but he ended up wandering; his mind was clouded with thoughts of that horrible day.

Later, he'd asked her if she wanted something to eat, but she hadn't answered.

Sixteen minutes later he pried his hand from hers. He was at a loss and wrote to his mother.

When his mother stepped out of the Floo, Draco semi-explained the situation and she immediately sent for a few house elves. They brought over a few sandwiches that Granger ate - only after he threatened to shove it down her bloody throat if she didn't...

His mother volunteered to stay the night and Draco wrote to his boss and told him that he would be working from home the next day. At around one in the morning, Mother fell asleep in the spare bedroom. And after three, he fell asleep on the couch next to Granger

And Granger - never moved.

She was still staring blankly ahead when he woke up at eight o'clock.

It took another fourteen hours and twenty-nine minutes to break the silence.

His mother took care of her, talked to her, tried to get through to her, forced her to eat, and stayed at her side. He floated in and out from his office where he worked on case files and avoided her at all costs. But the first time he absently walked past the couch that she was still sitting on, Granger finally reached out and snatched his wrist. And then she finally spoke.

All she said was, "I was wrong," before she slumped forward.

Draco had caught her by the waist before she hit her head on the table, picked her up, and put her in his bed for what turned out to be a thirteen-hour slumber. He had spent part of the evening at her bedside, reading. After all, there was no way he'd be able to sleep, anyway.

He looked at his watch, shook his head, and Disapparated from a little alley just blocks from the restaurant with a small pop.

Part Two: Collision Course

He didn't Apparate home.

Instead, he found himself looking at a familiar, and still pathetic, front yard. It was nearly pitch-black outside, save for a few lights that were on upstairs which sparsely lit the front yard. She hadn't hired the landscaper yet. With a shake of his head, he went to open the front door.

It was locked.

With a whispered, "*Alohamora*," the door unlocked and he walked in. She either still hadn't put up wards or the wards that she had put up admitted him. The warm sensation that ran through his body the moment he stepped through the doorway told him that it was the latter.

Granger had trusted him enough to allow him into her home.

Such a strange twist of fate.

He shut the door as quietly as he could and whispered, "*Lumos*," to give him a bit of light as he slowly crept through the small, dark foyer and into the living room. The ground level of Granger's home was completely dark, save for a comfortable fire that emitted a soft, flickering light and warmth into the almost barren room. The room itself smelled of burning wood and furniture polish; odd, but not unpleasant. Draco was just about to call out for Granger when he heard a sound and froze.

It was a voice...well, a singing voice.

Soft, harmonious, but depressing music filtered from the upstairs and he wondered if the song that was playing was the theme song to Granger's life. Every shred of his good sense and wisdom told him to turn back, Apparate home, and go to bed - it had been a long day and he wasn't supposed to be there, anyway.

After removing his jacket, Draco took a reflective step towards the stairs.

Since when had he ever listened to *anything* when it came to Granger?

So, he headed up the stairs, taking them one at a time, not rushing. After all, he had a strong feeling about what he'd find upstairs. The makeshift storage room Blaise had helped her set up. And he knew who he'd find in said storage room. Granger. Now, what kind of state she was in, he didn't know. But he was ready for anything - or so he thought.

Following the music, he walked down the short hall, passing five shut doors and an open closet that was filled with neatly folded, organized, and color-coded towels, hand towels, and dish towels. He snorted silently. Typical Granger...it was good to know that some aspects of her personality hadn't changed.

Somehow, he found that oddly comforting.

The thought temporarily fled from his mind the moment he spotted the open door. It was the final door on the left before what looked like the door to the attic. The storage room.

Louder, yet still unrecognisable music filtered from the lit room. His next steps down the dimly-lit hall was taken warily because he didn't know what to expect. Draco peeked into the room - and there she was.

Boxes, bags, and storage bins were stacked neatly against the bare walls of her makeshift storage room, all with markings on the side of them; for organizational purposes, of course. Granger's spare room was, for the most part, cold and bleak; the lights were dim and the music sounded as if it came straight out of a sad movie. The woman sang about the painful and agonizing loss of a loved one, and he would've had to be completely devoid of emotion to not feel the sorrow in her raw voice.

Angels have no thought of returning you, would they be angry if I thought of joining you?

He wanted to leave, but he'd already come that far.

Soon there'll be candles and prayers that are said I know, but let them not weep. Let them know that I'm glad to go...

His eyes scoured the room. Not everything was in a box. A crib sat in the left corner of the room, a child-size bookshelf sat in the far right, a playpen was folded up and leaning against the wall, and in the centre of the back wall was a dusty jukebox. So *that* was the culprit; the reason why he was hearing the saddest lyrics that he'd ever heard in his life. He wanted to spell it to turn off and was about to, when his eyes fell on Granger again. She faced away from the open door and from the position of her arms, Draco could tell that she was holding onto something.

Death is no dream, for in death I'm caressin' you. With the last breath of my soul, I'll be blessin' you...

"My mum used to sing constantly." Granger began slowly; her voice was thick with such intense emotions that he found that he couldn't breathe comfortably.

She didn't turn around.

"In fact, some of my earliest memories of my mum are of her singing. She had such a beautiful voice..."

The song had ended and another one began.

"Mum used to take me to music stores every Saturday and she'd look around while I read a book in the corner. You see, more than anything, she wanted a jukebox. It was silly and impractical, but she wanted it..."

Draco stepped inside the room and shut the door behind him, softly, as if he didn't want to break the mood with any extra noise.

"I remember the day my dad bought this jukebox." Her voice was so soft it unnerved him. "It was Christmas and I was seven. My mum," she chuckled ruefully and he saw her shake her frizzy head with sad humour, "My mum screamed when she saw it and I didn't understand. True, it was so shiny and new, but it was nothing...or so I thought. When dad plugged it in, I immediately found myself fascinated by the orange, green, and red lights." Granger trailed off and gave off what sounded like a strangled, hiccupping sigh.

Draco looked at his feet, suddenly uncomfortable.

He felt like an intruder, even though she was speaking to him.

"And there was never a day that went by that she didn't play Billy Joel, Ella Fitzgerald, the Beatles..."

He had no idea who they were. Draco wanted to ask her just how the hell she knew that he was standing there.

"I never shared her appreciation for music. The only reason I kept the jukebox was because it reminded me of her."

The wards.

"But—but Matthew, he loved it. He used to stand in front of it for hours trying to figure out just how to make it work...and when I turned it on..." Granger choked up, unable to go on any longer.

Finally, she turned around and for the life of him, he couldn't look away, no matter how hard he tried. When it became too much, Draco used every shred of his willpower to force his eyes to travel south. And what he saw her holding made him instantly wish that he'd kept eye-contact with her.

A little red cape.

Merlin.

"You know," She began once she found her voice, but was already so close to weeping. "I thought I could do it alone. I was determined. It's harder than I thought."

He couldn't figure out why, but Draco took a couple of steps towards her. There was so much that he wanted to tell her, but the only word that formulated in his mind and rolled off his tongue was a very uncomfortable, "Hermione."

She looked positively wretched and it made him a little sick, "Will it ever stop? Will it ever go away?"

"What are you talking about?"

"The pain." Granger rasped as if the word physically hurt her. She dropped the cape back into the box and stared at it longingly.

Draco was standing a mere metre away from her when he bent over and picked up the cape. He folded it carefully and put it back into the box. "I don't know the answer to those questions."

She sniffled and mumbled. "You're so much better at hiding your pain than I am."

It was the first time that she had mentioned his pain and he wondered if he was as good at hiding it as she'd said he was. He snorted at the idea. Pain recognized pain. She'd probably seen his, even in the midst of her own. Or maybe she hadn't.

Draco's issues were born in a spoiled childhood, developed through his teenaged years, and presented themselves in his adult years. He found out at a young age what kind of people he had as relatives, and later, he had found out just what kind of man he had as a father. They only cared for themselves, superiority of blood, and the destruction of others. He always thought of his mother as weak, but after Dumbledore's death - and the trauma and guilt that he had felt in the aftermath - he quickly found that she was the strongest woman that he'd ever known. She was all that he had.

"How do you deal with it all?" Granger asked softly.

Draco couldn't find his voice to answer.

Father was insane, the governance - along with the responsibilities, duties, and expectations - of the Malfoy family was Draco's, and he constantly was under pressure to prove himself. With that kind of pressure on his shoulders and the guilt he carried on his back, came pain. Constantly being compared to his father made it much worse. He shuddered away from the thought.

Lucius hadn't even had the decency to leave him an instruction manual. No, he had played it all by ear and used that ruddy little thing called *feelings*. Contrary to popular belief, he had

them. He was not as ruthless as he would have others believe. However, keeping his feelings to himself was a must. It was a survival tactic.

Still, his father had done two very smart things before entering Azkaban. First, he retired. However, Father had made sure that he maintained ownership the family business. Second, he bequeathed leadership of to his favorite brother, Arcturus, in Germany. Arcturus was quite possibly the most terrifying man that Draco had ever known, but he was a loner who lived a simple life. He was a very rich man, he cared nothing for money. He only wanted to modernize the Malfoy family—make it more tolerable.

It was stupid. The lies they were forced to tell and the pretences they were forced to keep up. There were times that he resented his last name, there were times that it had filled him up with pride, and there were even times when he didn't want—shit.

Draco frowned.

So now, he was faced with a significant decision. He could lie to Granger; tell her that he didn't know what she was talking about. Or he could be honest with her and with himself.

The decision was made with surprising ease.

"I've had years of practice and a subset of family who would use it to destroy me."

Granger stared at him as if she'd never seen him before as a moment passed between them. He didn't know about her, but that moment had come with such an intense moment of personal clarity that he had nearly staggered. They were more alike than different. How was that even possible? Not even six months ago, Draco was positive that he didn't have a single thing in common with Granger. His life had been anything but simple, but everything wasn't as clear as it was at that moment.

Granger had been broken, but maybe - maybe he was broken, too.

She took a deep breath and asked, "Why did you come here?"

"I don't know."

And that was the truth.

"Are you here because you pity me?"

"I told you already that I don't."

She tilted her head curiously. "I don't understand your motives."

That made sense, because he didn't understand either.

He didn't understand a lot of things anymore.

The song changed to something he recognized; a Muggle song that Pansy used to hum all the time.

In every heart there is a room, a sanctuary safe and strong...

And Granger did something that he didn't expect.

Tentatively, she leaned in, resting just her forehead against his chest. She was incredibly tense and flinched with every breath he took; she probably had expected him to shove her away. And perhaps he should. If he had been thinking clearly, he would have. But how could he concentrate when the atmosphere was filled to the brim with tension and pain and that *damn music*?

When he didn't push her away, Granger took a slow, deep breath, and rolled her head to the side. Her ear was pressed right against his heart that he willed to stop thudding so hard. And he would have succeeded had she not wrapped her arms around him in what felt like a hug.

Dumbly, Draco looked down at the top of her frizzy head and made a face that was a mix of bewilderment and reticence, along with a pinch of nervousness. With a tight frown marring his features, he had half a mind to ask her what the fuck she thought she was doing, but then she squeezed.

Draco took a sharp breath as his discomfort rose to a new level.

It was a hug, all right.

Bloody hell.

He tensed and cringed in extreme anxiety, but didn't move a muscle.

And still I feel I said too much, my silence is my self defense...

Draco honestly couldn't think of the last time, outside of Pansy and Mother - on special occasions - that someone had hugged him. In fact, he could safely say that he had been hugged by a family member a grand total of five times, in his entire life. And none of them had been like this.

He was hugged once by his paternal grandfather three months before he died.

"You've got too much Narcissa in you, boy," He had told the ten-year-old boy in a stern voice the moment he had his arms wrapped firmly around him. "Bella was right about you; you're weak."

"Release him." His father's frighteningly chilly voice rang out in the drawing room. "That is no way to treat your grandson and my heir."

Grandfather released him and Draco fell to the floor in a heap. He did not dare to move a muscle as the war of words waged between the two Malfoy men. After all, it was well-known that his father and grandfather did not have the best relationship. He could only hope that his relationship with his father didn't sour.

He cringed at the memory. History had definitely repeated itself.

Draco had been hugged twice by his psychotic aunt.

The first was when he had failed to kill Dumbledore. He'd been locked in his bedroom for hours with his own guilt and despair when she came in, talking in that demented baby voice of hers. And then she took him into her arms for what was a bone-crushing embrace, told him that it was his fault that they were about to fall out of favour with the Dark Lord, and she slapped him so hard that he could taste the blood in his mouth. The second was after they'd all been punished for letting Potter escape from the Manor. She'd practically mauled him once his mother had left the room, digging her long fingernails into the back of his neck and daring him to vocalize his pain.

As for his last two hugs—his blood cooled considerably.

None of those hugs were as warm and timid as Granger's. None of them had hugged him simply because they wanted to or because they needed to. No, their hugs were a tactic to gain control over him; to hurt, subdue, and punish him. Their bodies were cold and their words were even colder. They had him right in their arms under a guise of love and protection; right where they wanted him.

So I will share this room with you, and you can have this heart to break.

Needless to say, he was at a loss of what to do.

Hugs were placed in the part of Draco's childhood that he wanted to forget. He'd never had good experiences that surrounded them. Besides, hugging just wasn't how he was brought up. No matter how much Mother had argued, Father wouldn't relent and hug him, not once. But the war - the war had changed everything, and when it was all said and done, his father had hugged him twice within the same year. Once, after they found that he was still alive, and second, just before Father went into Azkaban. Both of his hugs were stiff and almost reluctant.

And Draco had walked away, hating him even more.

The music filtered quietly from the speakers of the old jukebox; the music perfected the melancholy mood in the room that made his head ache and his chest feel rather tight.

He wanted to tear her arms off of him and run from the room. Just as the thought passed, Granger's shaking fist had grasped the back of his jumper tightly; it was almost as if she'd read his mind. Draco heaved an internal sigh, but it wasn't enough to relax his tense muscles.

His world had changed now that Granger had made her mark. And it was strange to think of it like that, especially since it was his fault because he hadn't minded his business from the start. Draco sighed at his own stupidity and curiosity. He sighed at the mistakes he'd made and the words he'd spoken to her in anger. But he couldn't take them back no more than he could go back in time to the first day at that restaurant and take Pansy's advice.

All he could do was move forward.

They were no longer childhood enemies, but—perhaps friends. He couldn't remember the moment his indifference crumbled, and that annoyed him to no end. All he knew was that each change brought them closer and closer together. Each change left him more and more confused about her.

Draco groaned inwardly - son of a bitch.

No matter what he thought before, no matter his reasons—which seem stupid in the grand scheme of things—Draco had a crazy thought that perhaps everything happened the way it was supposed to. He was supposed to ignore his own rules and invade her life. He was supposed to fuck up time and time again and feel bad for his actions. Because in learning about her, he learned a lot about himself.

He had changed some, but he still had growing up to do.

He could be better. He could try harder. He could let some things go.

And maybe, *maybe* he should listen to all the advice he'd given her.

And this is why my eyes are closed . It's just as well for all I've seen

If it were at all possible, Granger stepped even closer to him, invading his space as he'd invaded hers.

Words couldn't express how uncomfortable it felt.

Everything that had happened between them was unavoidable.

The collision between them was also inevitable.

And that alone had put a fear inside of him unlike anything he had ever felt in his life.

One of them had to turn away or it would be life-changing for the both of them.

Draco didn't know how many more life changes he could handle and maintain his identity. But he had time, time to decide what he was going to do and time to decide just how he was going to handle things between him and Granger - whatever they were. For now, he could let it be and focus on what the hell was going on now.

She hugged him tighter.

Well, they were friends, right? Granger was like Pansy, right? He would do this for Pansy without thought, right? Granger was just another Pansy...*right?* Rather than answer those questions with some concocted lie, Draco exhaled and gradually lifted his arms that remained at his sides.

He did *not* want to do this.

One above the other, his hands rested uneasily on the middle of her back and he pulled her closer.

And so it began.

He felt, rather than heard, the small noise Granger made and his uncomfortable scowl deepened. Bloody hell. He ignored how hard her body trembled, and forced himself not to become overwhelmed with his own bad memories or hers. He forced himself not to think about what this meant. He didn't count the seconds that she had stayed, he didn't count how many songs that had played - he didn't count at all. Draco just stared straight ahead; eyes hooded and his face blank. Even after her breathing evened out, neither made a move to release the other. She never stopped trembling and he never got comfortable, but they didn't move a muscle.

This was nothing, he told himself firmly before he rested his chin on her head and closed his eyes.

Only another moment of temporary insanity.

Chapter End Notes

A/N:

1. Lucius's theory about rules "Any fool could make a rule, and any fool could mind it." was said by Henry David Thoreau.
2. As for the two songs they were listening to: the first one was "Gloomy Sunday" by Billie Holiday and the second one was, "And So It Goes" by Billy Joel.

say anything else

Chapter Summary

"Everything is born, everything lives, and everything dies. Nothing exists forever. Everything dies, and someday, you will, too. No need in fearing the inevitable."

Chapter Twenty: Say Anything Else

Part One: The god of healing

February 6th

For the second time in a week, Draco quietly asked himself why he had actually consented to Pansy's gift-giving proposal. And after much deliberation, he still hadn't come up with a suitable answer that didn't make his scowl deepen.

Sighing deeply, he looked down at the closed brown box on his coffee table in his living room.

Granger's gift.

He couldn't claim total ownership over the idea because it was just as much of his mother's idea and she was unable to attend as she was visiting his father. Still, she had implanted the idea in his head two days before when she had told him to get her something that she needed; something that would draw some of her attention away from her losses. And after looking around all afternoon yesterday, this box, or rather, its contents, was what he had found. The box was no wider than two shoeboxes put together and no deeper than two shoeboxes stacked on top of each other; grip holes on either side and covered with a top that fitted snugly. He hadn't bothered with any decoration.

After all, it was just a useless box that didn't matter in the grand scheme of things.

Nevertheless, he picked up the plain brown box, grabbed some Floo powder, and Flooed to Granger's little lake house.

He was forty-five minutes late.

Draco stepped out of Granger's fireplace and was welcomed to the sounds of music as it poured from the jukebox that he'd brought downstairs, per her request the last time he'd been

there. He figured the sheer volume of the music was the only reason he'd been able to come into the room, unnoticed. Draco looked at the jukebox. It was cleaned, polished, and sat along the bare wall in her quaint and simple living room that was adjacent to the fireplace.

Pansy and Blaise, who were dressed in Muggle attire, were crowding around it; the former was listening to the latter as he explained how it worked. And then he guided her hand as she pushed a couple of numbers – and then the song changed. Thrilled at herself, Pansy gave off a little shriek of joy and wrapped her arms around him for a hug.

Pansy smiled and laughed more, and cried less. She was doing well in therapy and progressing at an incredible speed. True, she still slept with the lights on, but improvement was improvement, and Blaise was the king of patience. He was really good for her, but that was something he'd known for years. Draco wasn't sure if he wanted what they had, but the idea was slightly more appealing, and not quite as impossible as he'd thought previously.

Clearly there was someone for everyone.

He sat the box carefully on Granger's table and took a seat on her tan sofa, looking around with a frown on his face. Her living room was so bloody dull that it made him a little annoyed. There were no plants, no paintings, no decorations, no pictures, nothing...just a sofa and loveseat, two bookshelves that practically *bled* books, two end tables with more books, a coffee table with a few more books, bland walls, a pathetic blue rug that needed to be thrown out, and the bloody jukebox.

Her entire house was rather plain.

She lived like someone on the run, with the essentials of life and the bare necessities. It wasn't that she didn't own any decorative items. He'd seen them. He'd seen the paintings, pictures, nicer rugs, and everything else when he had gone to deliver one of the boxes to the attic. She had very nice things, but why didn't she want to put them up in her house?

It was another one of those things that he didn't understand about Granger.

Pansy's laugh rang out and Draco looked up to see Blaise smirking at his girlfriend.

Draco chuckled at his friends.

And that alerted them to his presence.

"You're late, Draco," Pansy shrilled. He was amazed that he could hear her over the music. "I thought I specifically told you to be here at—"

For a second, he waffled between pretending he hadn't heard her and snapping at her. Irritably, his mind worked up and executed a compromise. "Well, I'm here now, aren't I?" He settled back into the comfortable couch and drawled, "And it doesn't look or *smell* like I've missed anything."

"It's a charm that makes it so you can't smell what she's cooking," She informed in that snide, 'you idiot' tone that told him that they had been friends far too long. Huffing, Pansy frowned

and advanced towards him while Blaise stayed at the jukebox, chuckling under his breath and shaking his head. "Not that it matters. You *still* could've showed up on time."

Draco gestured to the brown box on the table. "I had to gather the gift."

Pansy eyed the box as her eyebrow rose, "Is that a—"

"Where's Granger?" He interrupted, rising from his seat and picking the box up off the table.

Blaise turned down the music slightly and pointed at the closed kitchen doors, "She just went back in to check on the food."

The first time he'd had some of Blaise's grandmother's cooking was when he was fifteen. At the insistence of his mother, he'd spent an entire summer at Zabini's grandmother's home in Naples. Draco quickly learned that they were not the typical pure-blooded family – not like his. Blaise's mother was an outlier, but the rest of Blaise's family was nothing like her.

There were always at least seven or eight of Blaise's teenaged cousins and friends there. They liked to show off all the spells that they'd learned during their school year, play Quidditch and other games, and explore the grounds; he was never bored like he would've been if he been at home. Each day, Blaise spent a couple of hours with his grandmother. It was obvious that he loved her and Draco grew to like her, as well. She was a rather funny witch with a low tolerance for bullshit.

Perfect.

After she had declared Draco as "too thin," she had launched a campaign to bulk him up by introducing him to foods from all over Italy. Merlin, even nine years later, he still remembered the smells and tastes of her cooking.

The second that he walked into Granger's kitchen, nostalgia hit him so hard in the chest that he had nearly dropped the box. If Italy had a scent, it would be this. It—Draco looked around, bemused.

How much food did she think they were going to eat?

Granger's modest kitchen table and her bar-counter were covered in finished dishes under warming charms. Draco just gawked. She'd cooked enough food to feed a small army. Six different types of fresh-baked breads, including panzarotti, ciabatta, pane casalingo, bruschetta, and two others that he didn't recognize; baked lamb, brodo di pesce, pizza napoletana, cape sante alla veneziana, pasta con acciughe, artichoke with potatoes, traditional lasagna, spaghetti alle vongole, salads, soups, and a few other dishes he didn't recognise. She had sauces, butters, Italian cheeses, dips, and other condiments. Bottles of wine and water littered a small portion of her bar-counter. And Draco just stared.

She had completely gone overboard.

And then he looked to his left and there she was, pulling a baking pan out of the oven. It looked like she was making a caprese cake for dessert. On the counter next to the stove were

platters of tiramisu and custard cups full of Zabaglione.

Merlin.

Granger was so wrapped up in making sure her cake was done that she hadn't seen him standing there.

Draco didn't know what to do at the sight of her. She looked rather funny; not at all what he'd gotten used to in the last six months, which was a good thing. She was taking better care of her mind, which made her take better care of her body. Her appearance reminded him of the Granger that he remembered from school: wild and untameable.

Granger wore dark blue Muggle jeans that had what looked like a flour handprint on the back pocket, a jumper that was carefully rolled up to her elbows because it was terribly warm in the kitchen, and an off-white apron that had seen better days. She wasn't wearing any shoes, just rainbow-coloured socks that looked utterly ridiculous. Her hair was piled on top of her head in a messy ponytail, but there was a piece that fell into her face.

And then he watched as she trekked downhill.

She took a deep breath as she tended to the fresh cake. Her focused eyes seemed to go hazy for a moment. Her bottom lip trembled; a sign of imminent tears, but she stopped herself by closing her eyes and pinching the bridge of her nose for a few moments. The witch took a couple of shaky breaths and murmured something under her breath that sounded like, "*Just get through the day, Hermione, just get through today...*"

Granger then opened her eyes and focused all her attention back on her task.

She was blowing the tendril from her face when spotted Draco from the corner of her eye. Her eyes widened slightly. Granger tensed, stepped back, and blinked. Her greeting was subdued, but he had heard it all the same, "Oh, I didn't see you there."

It was the first time that she had greeted him with something other than the slightly frigid: "*Malfoy.*"

But he really wasn't very shocked.

Things between them had been a bit interesting, in a weird yet oddly comfortable way, since his moment of temporary insanity. The supposed moment of temporary insanity had stretched on for hours, well into the night, as he helped her move the jukebox downstairs, and sat next to her while she opened and went through two more boxes before deciding to call it a night.

"Granger," Draco greeted with a nod.

Before he had left by Floo that night, Granger had told him that she would be opening another set of boxes next week and the underlying, '*will you be here?*' was painfully obvious in each word that she had spoken. Though he had tried, the almost hopeful look in her eyes had made it impossible to ignore.

Draco had nodded rigidly before he left.

Granger eyed the box almost curiously and met his eyes quickly thereafter. "You didn't have to bring anything. I've got the entire meal covered, right down to the wine." She told him.

His face was tight as he explained, "It's a gift."

She looked even more confused and apprehensive, "Oh."

He shot back with a sarcastic wave of his hand. "Do you think you cooked enough, Granger?"

The witch cast a few warming charms on the dessert plates and sat her wand on the counter, "I made it all from scratch – even the bread. Measuring ingredients keeps my brain active, rolling the dough keeps me diverted, baking keeps me busy, and preparing a meal keeps my mind off of – things."

Draco tried not to feel bad for her, he tried not to *feel*, but the underlying meaning of her angst-ridden words had made it quite difficult.

Wiping her hands on her apron, Granger took a deep breath. In an attempt to starve off the tears (thankfully), she sighed and leaned against the counter. She stared at the floor only moments before lifting her head to meet his gaze. She looked a bit embarrassed. "Once I started, I couldn't stop. At first, I made dishes that were more prominent in northern Italy, but then I realized that Blaise lived in southern Italy, so I made a few classics from—"

"I get the point. And if you're done," Draco lowered his eyes on the box, "It's yours to open."

Draco watched as she cleared a space on the kitchen table. The kitchen was an organized mess, if that made any sense. He knew how her mind worked, everything was separated and categorized – but to anyone else, it was a mess. Granger sat in one of the two empty chairs and asked him to put the box on the table in front of her. He complied silently and watched as her face twisted from confusion to joy to fear as she opened his gift.

The box contained a sleeping, four-month old kitten on a navy blanket.

"Oh my—Malfoy," Granger whispered in a shaky and choked voice as she lightly stroked the kitten's head with two trembling fingers. Her touch was reluctant and slow. She couldn't resist, but that was all that she wanted to do.

In one of their previous conversations, Granger had told him that her last cat had died in Australia and she had never found out why. She had found his grave in the backyard of her parent's home a week after their "funeral". Subsequently, she hadn't even entertained the thought of replacing him with another because she'd been too afraid to lose something else to death. Matthew's death had justified the reasoning even further.

It was why Granger didn't own plants or flowers.

Ghosting her fingers over the kitten's fur, she murmured. "He's wonderful, but I—I can't take him. I—"

"He's yours." Draco insisted.

Granger bit her lip and he could tell that she was close to tears that she didn't want to cry. "I want him, but I can't." After covering the box, Granger put her head in her hands, distraught. When he didn't move to take the box, she yelled at him, "Take him back! I don't want him!"

Backing down wasn't an option. "He's staying."

"No, he's not!"

"Yes, he is," Draco snapped back roughly, "He's staying and *you're* going to take care of him!"

"You can't make me take him, I can't—"

"Give me *one* good reason why you can't."

Her reply came after a minute of silence, and yes, there were tears, "What if I can't take care of him?"

"You can."

She shook her head. "I don't know what I'd do if—"

"He died?" He said in almost a whisper. "Everything is born, everything lives, and *everything* dies. Nothing exists forever. Everything dies, and someday, you will, too. No need in fearing the inevitable."

Draco had almost cringed at that final word.

Inevitable.

And so he uncovered the box once more. To his inward surprise, the kitten was still asleep. Draco ran a gentle hand down the back of the sleeping grey kitten and Granger, after moments of hesitation, did the same. The kitten purred in his sleep. Her touch was caring, albeit tentative. It was as if she were fighting an internal civil war. He hadn't anticipated that her fear would be so intense.

"Mother once told me," He spoke up once Granger took control of the petting, "That the fear of losing in the future is a waste of the present. You'll spend your life alone if you let that fear control you. Do you want that?"

She wiped her eyes with her free hand. "No."

He pointed at the kitten. "Then you know what to do."

There was a heavy pause before he heard her finally whisper, "Thank you."

Draco wasn't sure what she was thanking him for, but didn't ask for any clarification.

"W-what is he?"

"Half-kneazle and half-Himalayan," He told her.

She continued to stroke his soft fur lightly, careful not to wake him from his nap. Draco stared down at the little bugger. He had a slightly fluffy, dim-grey coat of fur, but his belly and paws were off-white.

"What's his name?"

"Apollo."

As if on cue, one of the kitten's little pointed ears perked up. A blue eye opened almost grudgingly, as he gave Draco a pretentious look that could be interpreted as '*oh, it's you*' and shut his little eye, purring softly as he covered his face with his paw. His message was clear: he didn't want to be disturbed.

"Apollo," Granger repeated, "The Greek god of the sun, prophecy, music, and h-healing..." She trailed off, a bit stunned by the meaning of her gift's name.

It wasn't a question, but Draco gave a stiff nod, "The witch who works at Magical Menagerie is completely fascinated with Muggle Greek mythology. The crazy bat said that she talks about mythology to the cats all the time, and every time she mentioned that particular god, he would perk up. The last owner was a girl who wanted to name him Orion, but was frustrated that the cat wouldn't respond to the name she'd given, so she brought him back. I thought that Apollo was a perfectly suitable name for the cat and bought him."

As if he wanted to prove the truthfulness of his words, Apollo opened his eye again, meowed, shot them both a look, but didn't return to his nap. Tentatively, Granger picked Apollo up and cradled him in her arm, his head resting where her arm bent. He took to his new mistress rather quickly, purring affectionately as she petted him gently. Everything between them was silent and still, save for the soft purrs from the grey kitten.

Truth be told, he was glad that Granger had accepted the gift.

After having had the damn cat in his house for one night, Draco found that he was glad to be rid of it. The witch at Magical Menagerie said that he should probably keep Apollo in his room for the first night if he didn't want the kitten wandering around his house during the night. Before he went to bed, Draco, figuring that the batty witch knew more about kittens than he, had allowed the kitten sleep at the foot of his bed under the blue blanket that was currently in the box.

What ensued was probably the worst night's sleep that he'd had in at least a month.

Not only was he afraid of kicking it in his sleep, the bloody thing purred and made other assorted noises all night. Oh, and waking up to a pair of little, curious, blue eyes located about two inches from his face had to of been the worst Four AM wake-up call of his life. He had thought that he was dreaming – until the bloody animal meowed.

Draco had nearly yelped and chucked Granger's gift across the room.

Too many times had he awoken in the dead of night to find strange eyes on him. Somehow, he had caught himself before he caused Apollo bodily harm. Exhausted from the lack of sleep he had gotten in the previous days, Draco found that he was too tired to make a case when Apollo climbed on his pillow, curled up, and quickly fell into a purring slumber.

Granger arose from her chair, still holding the kitten.

She looked like a new parent: worried yet determined.

"Is everything okay in here?" Blaise's deep voice rang out in the silence. His voice alone had told Draco everything that he needed to know.

They had heard them.

"Everything's fine." Draco observed his two best friends.

Pansy didn't bother to hide her alarm, but her boyfriend's face was an incomprehensible mask of poise. Blaise had always buried his emotions under calm words. In the near eleven years that he had known Blaise, he'd only seen him yell twice – at Pansy.

Granger turned and approached the couple standing in the doorway of the kitchen; her eyes were locked on the kitten in her arms, "Malfoy got me a kitten. Meet Apollo."

Both of the kitten's ears perked up with recognition and he purred, licking his paw.

"He's adorable!" Pansy swooned, petting his head lightly. Apollo gave off a low purr, clearly loving the attention from the two women.

"Thanks – if you all are ready to eat, you can go into the dining room." Hermione told them after transferring the kitten to Pansy, who was talking to it in a baby voice as she held it in her arms.

A few minutes later, the extravagant dinner Granger had dutifully planned was underway. Blaise had volunteered to help her carry out the appetizer dishes, leaving Draco and Pansy to quickly find their way into the plain dining room. The table was nice and the little chandelier was decent too, but like the living room, the dining room was dull and bare. Apollo was sleeping in his box by the dining room's entrance.

"I have to admit, the kitten idea was shockingly thoughtful." Pansy poured herself a glass of wine.

He knew what she was doing. It was wise to keep his mouth shut.

"You know," Pansy showed her impeccable etiquette skills that stemmed from years of lessons and parties. She swirled the wine in the glass, sniffed it, and made an approving face before she took a prim sip. Nodding, she set the glass on the table and eyed him. Her voice may have been light and dainty, but the underlying venom proved to him that she was no innocent princess. "After years of friendship, I'm really starting to realize that there's a lot more to you than meets the eye."

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

"I don't take back what I said before, Draco – you've changed. I can't put my finger on how, but you're not the same man who accosted me in your living room in August." Pansy shook her head meaningfully and her eyes shone with apology. "I was so wrong about you that day. You're nothing like your father. You're better."

"I'm trying. I've got a ways to go."

"Don't be hard on yourself."

He wasn't sure what he should say, so he said nothing at all.

"You know, she's really come a long way and," her voice caught slightly, "Thank you for being there. You might have been an entire arse about it, but I think you gave her the push she needed."

Draco fixed his lips to reply when the last two emerged from the kitchen.

Blaise was carrying two plates, while Granger carried a bowl.

And dinner began.

He could honestly appreciate just how strong Granger was, as a person. She was hurting, it was plainly written on her face, but not once did she crack. True, she'd come close, more than a few times, but she took a moment, sipped some of her wine and took a few deep breaths. Blaise was good about keeping Pansy from babying her. They never stopped talking and Granger always hopped right back in when she felt better.

Furthermore, Draco also found that he could appreciate just how bloody organized she was. Like in Hogwarts, when she set her mind to something, she did it to perfection; taking it above and beyond all expectations. So, when she said she was going to cook them dinner, she'd cooked them dinner, but made it infinitely better than a typical dinner.

Dinner came from two regions of Italy: Veneto, where she had lived, and Campania, where Blaise's grandmother had lived. Granger had smartly rationed their portions so none of them would be too full to continue, took short breaks, explained why she had fixed that particular dish, and showed the difference between wine from Venice and wine from Naples. Also, she included a storyline of Italian history with each dish that she served.

Draco found himself not noticing the blandness of the walls as he listened to her and Blaise work through centuries of Italian history over the course of dinner. They talked about wars, rulers, and revolutions; times of peace and times of turmoil. They had even talked about Wizarding history, as well. Draco honestly couldn't think of a time when Granger had looked more alive. She immersed herself into the diverting conversation and he saw glimpses of the know-it-all that had been lurking underneath the surface.

Each of the three appetizers, the four first courses, four main entrées, and three desserts were served with its own wine, breads, and a brief history lesson.

It was all bloody fantastic.

They talked and listened, Pansy laughed and Granger cracked a few sad smiles, Draco worked on his Italian and Blaise looked content. It wasn't until the conclusion final dessert, when everyone was full and sipping the last of their wine that Granger spoke humbly, "Thank you, for coming..." She sighed, letting some of her emotional exhaustion show, "It really means a lot to me."

Pansy guffawed as if to say, '*you don't need to thank us*,' and Blaise shrugged and told her, "We're your friends," as if it were the most obvious thing on the planet.

Draco gave her a quick nod, but only when she met eyes with him.

Granger just smiled weakly and rose from her chair. "I should probably start cleaning up before we watch the videos."

The videos...

Pansy Parkinson was going to get a killing curse to the chest and Draco Malfoy was determined to be the one to do the job. Fucking videos. The second box that they had opened on his night of temporary insanity contained dozens of home videos of Granger with her son. She had them all labelled and in order, starting from when he was born. When Pansy had dropped by the following morning, Granger showed her the tapes. She told the other witch that they'd watch them with her. If she wanted.

There was nothing in the world that Draco wanted less than to sit next to Granger as they watched home movies of her dead son. Blaise put up a hand, "Let us. Draco and I can handle it."

Draco scowled. First the videos – and now the – he didn't sign on to do the bloody dishes.

Granger looked at them both, "Are you sure?"

He fixed his lips to argue otherwise when his best friend kicked him in the leg. As he fired a surly glare at Blaise, he mumbled something nasty under his breath as the kicker replied with another casual shrug, "We're sure. Give us a few minutes. We'll spell everything clean and join you both in the living room in, say, ten minutes?"

"That's fine." She turned, padded across her dining room still wearing those ridiculous socks, picked up a purring Apollo out of the box, and left the dining room. Pansy quickly rose, kissed her boyfriend's cheek, and whispered a small 'thank you' before following Granger.

"Did you have to kick me?" Draco sneered once the two witches were out of earshot.

Blaise gave a half-hearted shrug, but Draco could see the humour in his eyes.

Wanker.

"What the bloody hell was that all about?" Draco asked minutes later as he and Blaise Vanished all the empty plates, glasses, platters, and silverware, into the kitchen.

"Pansy wanted to have a chat with her."

"Ah." And he finished clearing the table while Blaise used cleaning charms on the dishes. He grabbed a bottle of wine—he would need it—and wandered out into the living room. Granger was sitting on the floor in front of the fireplace, Apollo was exploring his new surroundings carefully, and Pansy was sitting on the couch with an apprehensive look on her face.

He'd come out too soon and would make more noise retreating back into the dining room.

"—haven't slept in two days and that I've been dreading this day for weeks. I don't know what I would've done if I'd been here alone. I really, truly appreciate everything that you've done for me."

Pansy shook her head. "I haven't—"

"You've made sure that I'm not alone on days like Christmas, New Year's, today...and you've stuck by me, even when I pushed you away, even when I lied..."

She shrugged. "You're my best friend, Hermione. At least, in the way that *I* define the word."

Granger looked confused, "I am?"

Pansy nodded. "Even though I just get the feeling that you want me to take the words back."

Granger just sighed and used her wand to conjure up a ball of yarn for Apollo to play with. The kitten pounced on it playfully. After a few moments of watching the sight before her, she replied, "I wish that I could be a true friend to you. I wish that I could follow Malfoy's suggestion and change my—"

"Your heart, Hermione," Pansy practically whispered, "What does it think?"

"It's still too weak and—"

"Broken?" She interjected.

"Yes, but mending..." She trailed off and looked over at Pansy.

"How can you heal when you still hide things?"

Granger looked thrown.

"You hide things from me."

There was no shame in her voice when she confessed, "I do."

"Why?" The song on the jukebox faded into silence and Apollo, though initially entertained with his conjured gift, started to move away from it and explore more of his new world.

Granger rose to her feet and scooped up the kitten that was treading towards the fireplace. "You're doing so well, Pansy. I just don't want to hold you back with any of my drama."

Pansy crossed her legs and leaned back against the couch, "It still doesn't explain why you kept things—"

"Because – I don't want to disappoint you," Granger confessed in a rush as her face flushed. Petting the kitten for comfort, she sighed harshly, "I just, sometimes, I can see it in your eyes. The hope. You want me to be happy and you want things to be normal; you're desperate for it. But, they're not, and I don't know when they'll be normal again. And, sometimes, when my façade starts to slip and I show just how sad I really am, I see it there; the disappointment." She ground out. "I just keep thinking that if I keep disappointing you, that you'll—"

"Never."

"So, I fake it. I keep my mouth shut and I lie. 'I'm fine' and 'Everything is just great'. I breathe, I talk, and I listen to your stories about your job. I do *everything* to keep up a façade around you when on the inside all I want to do is scream."

Draco felt uncomfortable and tried to creep backwards into the kitchen. Pansy wasn't much of a crier, but her eyes were wet. "I didn't know. I don't want you to think that—"

Granger stood in front of the fireplace, "You're so proud, Pansy. You're comfortable with sweeping everything under a rug. When you're having a bad day, I can't tell. When you're sad, you don't show it. I can't be like you. I can't ignore how I feel—"

"I *never* asked you to sweep your feelings under a rug, Hermione. That's just how I deal with things. Another curse of my upbringing," She gave a rueful chuckle, "You have to understand that I'm still working on me, just like you're still working on you. We're both a work in progress." A rare, honest smile broke across her face as she ran a hand through her hair, "And since we're works in progress, I'll be more open with you so you can be more open with me."

"Even if I have to admit that I'm—"

"You're *not* weak. I would've died if I had to go through the things that you went through, but you lived."

"I may have lived, but it wasn't a life worth living." Granger sighed and whispered the spell that started a low fire. "You might as well have buried me next to Matthew that day. He took me with him when he died." Pansy remained silent and the brunette continued. "I look back at myself from six months ago and I don't even recognize who I was. And I look at myself now and I still don't know who I am, but everything – everything is a little clearer."

"And things will keep getting clearer."

With another look over her shoulder, Draco saw the almost hopeful gleam in her eyes. "You think?"

"I *know*. You don't have to carry those burdens alone."

Granger's look turned from anxious as she face away from the fireplace, "I-I need to tell you—"

"That Harry is Matthew's father? No need."

It was obvious to Draco that Granger hadn't expected those words.

Pansy continued boldly, "Don't look like that. I've known for a long time. I knew the instant I saw him. His eyes and his apparent aversion to brushing his hair were the giveaways... although," She paused dramatically and put her finger to her chin, focusing on the table as if it were a hard Divination assignment, "He just as easily could've gotten that last one from you."

Draco witnessed an honest Granger laugh. It came out rough and very slow, but it was a laugh. Even though it didn't last very long, Pansy looked pleased.

Granger's laugh turned into a sad sigh, "He really *did* hate brushes and combs. I charmed them, I turned them into his favourite colours, I made them zoom around the room, I showed him how I brushed my hair, I did everything and the second I went to brush his hair, he started screaming like a bloody banshee and didn't stop until I finished. And then he'd pout for *ages*." She shook her head at the memory, smiling ever so slightly.

The smile slowly turned into watered eyes and sharp breaths. Granger covered her face with her hands, sobbing lowly. "I miss him," She cried softly, sniffling, "I miss him so much."

Pansy rose from her seat, abandoned her heels, and approached her friend, taking her into her arms. Like she had done to him three nights before, she clung to the other witch tightly and sobbed freely, but Pansy didn't seem to mind a bit that she got tears on her cashmere sweater. She just patted her back.

The knock on the door broke up the moment.

Granger lifted her head off her friend's shoulder, wiping her tears quickly.

"I think the was—" The persistent knocking cut her off.

Blaise emerged from the kitchen, looking at Draco curiously. Pansy released Granger and headed for the door, shooting him a strange look. Draco dumbly held up the bottle of wine as an offering. He was about to slink back into the kitchen when he heard Pansy's raised voice. "What the bloody *hell* are you doing here?"

He and Granger exchanged confused looks and he silently followed her out of the living room and into the foyer where Pansy was still yelling at the top of her lungs. "Today, of all days, you have the nerve to show your face! If Blaise hadn't taken my bloody wand, I'd curse that face—" Blaise covered her mouth.

The front door was wide open, but they couldn't see who was there because Blaise, who was physically holding Pansy back, was blocking the view. Granger went left around the couple, he went right, and Blaise pulled the enraged woman back. Draco only heard one sound: Granger's small gasp as she identified the man at her door. She stumbled back a few steps, her face a mask of shock. Unwittingly, he covered her fist with his hand before she could back away any further.

A flash of lightning lit up the darkening sky, followed quickly by the rumbling of thunder.

A storm was coming – how appropriate.

The man at the door looked as if he'd gone ten rounds with a Muggle boxer – and Draco wasn't sure who had won. A black eye, a swollen cheek, a bleeding lip, and what looked like a broken nose. Did he even feel it? His injuries didn't seem to bother him.

His eyes were focused on Granger and hers on his.

Speaking of Granger, her voice hitched as she half-whispered his name, "Harry?"

Part Two: And all hell broke loose

Pansy's solution to the 'Potter problem' was: "Let the git bleed on the welcome mat... *outside.*"

It earned her a silencing charm.

It was counterproductive, after all.

Hermione could hear her own heartbeat pounding in her ears. Her fist trembled inside Malfoy's bigger hand, and he still held on. Harry's hand reached out and touched the invisible wall of her strong wards – wards that kept him out of her house. She should've let Malfoy guide her back to the living room. He had her fist; all he had to do was lead the way. But Malfoy just stood there as if he knew what needed to be done.

"Malfoy, please take down the admittance wards." It came out in a whisper. She was too emotional to remove them.

His face was as a blank mask of diplomacy, but Hermione didn't relax until Malfoy extracted his wand from his pocket and carefully, following each of her directions, took down the wards of admittance. She turned her back on him when Harry stepped into her house, cautiously looking around. However, when she turned around again, he was walking away, through the foyer, and back into the living room. She knew why he had left.

There were other things that she had to deal with at that moment.

"How did you find my house, Harry?" Hermione asked.

"I asked Molly for the address. She told me that you gave it to her a few months ago. I thought that we—I should be here." It was so awkward. Harry hadn't walked further into her home and she hadn't stepped aside to welcome him.

Hermione pulled at the end of her shirt, keeping her eyes off his as long as she could until she pulled herself together enough to whisper, "It's his birthday." And she tried not to choke up, but her heart was in her throat.

Harry didn't look better off. "I—I remembered," he stammered, his eyes were soft and sad. "I—I didn't think about it. I just came." Harry ran a hand through his hair and then rubbed the back of his neck like he always did when he was anxious. "I messed up. I messed up so bad with you and Ron, and I'm—" he took a deep breath, "I want to fix it."

"You can't." she told him frankly. "Just like I can't."

He nodded with understanding; his face solemn. "Can't we try?"

"Things may *never* get back to the way they were." And Hermione didn't know if she was talking to him or herself. "But we can start." She stepped towards him. "I can start. I'm not going to make it hard for you." Harry went to adjust the glasses on his nose and flinched. "I can answer any question you want, but first, I have one: what happened to you?"

"Ron." And he sounded sore about it.

So, he was back from Romania. "Oh."

Words were no longer needed. She knew what had transpired. Ron must've come back around the same time that Harry went to ask Molly for her address. What had taken place must've turned the Burrow upside down. Poor Molly.

"Your nose is probably broken." Because she couldn't help herself.

Hermione patted her pockets for her wand to fix it, but Harry stopped her by reaching for her hand. "It's fine. I deserve it." When she just stared at his hand that covered hers, he released it with a soft apology and awkwardly shucked off his wet jacket before he hung it up on her coathanger.

Hermione led the way into the tense atmosphere of the living room. It was obvious that there was a temporary rift between Blaise and Pansy because Malfoy was sitting between them. The silenced (and scowling) Pansy was petting Apollo, a calm Blaise was pilfering through one of her books, and an expressionless Malfoy was staring at his hand. "Malfoy, can you do me a favour and heal Harry's nose?"

Every head had turned sharply at her request. Pansy clearly had something to say about that – and chances were high that her words weren't pleasant. A reluctant Malfoy rose from the couch and picked his wand up off the table after traitorously muttering something under his breath. Obviously, he was going to be the bigger man and heal a person that he clearly didn't like and she really respected him for that. He only took three steps towards the pair before Harry's unease was made known. "I-I'd prefer if Blaise did it."

Malfoy's brow lifted slowly.

Harry reasoned. "You *did* break it in Sixth Year."

Malfoy rolled his eyes and Hermione inwardly agreed. Harry was being ridiculous.

"Do you *ever* let anything go?" Malfoy frowned.

After Blaise fixed his nose and Pansy practically threw a conjured icepack at him, Hermione decided to cancel the rest of their plans. She started to apologise, but there was no need. Pansy and Blaise were the first to leave by Floo. They both gave her hugs and Pansy shot silent death rays at the Harry.

Malfoy was the last to leave.

"I don't have any food for Apollo," she began nervously, stealing a glance over her shoulder where Harry stood, watching them intensely. He was out of earshot, but looked determined to hear their conversation.

"I think I have a can of tuna." Malfoy looked over her head at Harry. "If you need it, you can come and get it."

And then he left.

Harry did nothing to hide the disapproval in his voice. "I'll never get over the shock of you and Malfoy being such good friends."

There was that word again. *Friends*. But she ignored his tone, calmed herself down with a few deep breaths, and invited him to sit on the sofa. Hermione went through the cabinet under her television, searching for the tape. There were more, but this was the one she'd made for Harry specifically. When she found it, Hermione put the tape in her modest VCR, "I thought that it would be better if I showed you, rather than told you, about Matthew." Apollo rubbed against her leg and she picked him up.

"When did you get a new cat?"

"Today." She didn't think it was wise to tell him that Malfoy bought it for her.

"What happened to Crookshanks?"

"He died sometime during the year that my parents were in Australia."

"Oh...I'm sorry."

Apollo started purring rather suddenly, snuggling in her arms and pawing her affectionately. She went and sat next to Harry on the sofa and Apollo stared at him warily until Harry scratched under his chin.

"He's cute."

And then Apollo bit him.

Harry winced and brought his hand to his mouth. "And feisty."

Hermione smiled affectionately as he escaped from her arms and stood on the edge of the sofa, trying to determine if he would jump. Before Hermione could put him down, he jumped and landed on his feet before disappearing around the corner. Without the distraction, the awkwardness returned. Hermione had so much to say that getting her thoughts in order was not a viable option.

Because she was human, after all. She didn't always know what to say so she spoke honestly. "I thought I was doing the right thing in leaving. I never thought—" Hermione blinked the tears away. "I took away your right to know him and I'm sorry. I didn't do it out of malice, but I understand just how selfish I was. I just—I have a lot of regrets."

"Me too," Harry murmured. "So many. Too many."

Their eyes met. Hermione was unsure how to verbalise all the emotions that seemed to swirl between them; that seemed to suffocate them under their heavy weights. She wanted to be able to anchor her emotions to something because they were running unchecked and wild. Harry seemed to be struggling just as hard, just as incapable of speech. He shifted closer to her and she turned, tucking her knee under her, careful not to touch him.

"I'm not proud of myself," Harry finally said. "For what happened at the Manor. I didn't know how badly you were hurt. I—"

"I forgive you." And it felt like a weight had lifted off her. "I forgive you so I can forgive myself. I *need* to forgive myself. And I hope that one day you'll be able to forgive me. I don't have any expectations."

Harry nodded. "I won't say I'm not still upset, because that would be a lie. But I said a lot of things that day that I didn't mean...or maybe I did, but now I don't. I think I understand the choice you had to make. I didn't make it easy." Harry's eyes were so open that she felt that she could plunge right into his soul. Yet, she didn't, afraid of what she would find and what she would see. "I sat down and thought about it. I thought about what you had said and what Malfoy—"

"Malfoy?" Hermione interjected. "When did you talk to Malfoy?"

"The same day you told us."

Well, that was news to *her*.

She wasn't quite sure what to think because her heart and pulse were racing out of control. She couldn't concentrate. What had Malfoy said? "What did he say?"

"He told me that I didn't know anything about you and I argued with him. I thought I knew you – looks like the prat was right." Harry shook his head at the irony of the situation. "He told me that if he had friends like me, he wouldn't need enemies. He told me that I had no idea about what you were going through at that time – he was right about that, too." And then something dawned on him and his words were half-whispered, "He was right."

She tried not to sound so anxious, but failed. "He—he didn't tell you about anything else, did he? About my parents or Matthew?"

"No."

Hermione released the internal breath that she had been holding. He could've told Harry, he could've told him everything, but he didn't. And it seemed strange that he wouldn't do that. Malfoy, after all, was an opportunist.

Harry was intensely staring at his hands. "I wasn't very fair to you."

"Neither was I." Hermione confessed. "I took away your chance to build a relationship with him, to—"

"Did he—did he ever ask about me?" Harry asked as he rubbed the exposed skin of his arm.

Hermione smiled sadly and nodded. "All the time. He whispered your name in his sleep..." She trailed off, voice suddenly thick. Hermione cleared her throat and continued hoarsely, "I showed him pictures and told him stories about you, about us and Ron, at Hogwarts." She watched as he winced painfully at the very mention of his best friend. She didn't linger. "I told him a little bit about the war and how you were a hero; that you saved us from Voldemort. I didn't keep you from him. I didn't hide you from him. I always thought that when the dust settled—" she choked up again, "Harry, he loved you, very much." She was glad to be sitting because she felt weak. Tears welled in her eyes at the very thought of all the conversations they had about "daddy".

Harry looked torn between sadness and happiness. His son knew of him, but it didn't change the fact that he didn't know of his son.

"I always had plans to come home and face my demons, but when he got sick..."

Staring directly at her with confused, narrowed eyes, he murmured, "Sick?"

And she told him about Matthew's first health scare. "I was about a moment from contacting you when we found a donor."

"You should've contacted me, anyway."

"I know, it's my biggest regret. Something that I'll have to live with for the rest of my life."

There was nothing but silence for a long time.

Then, Harry asked, "Hermione, how did he—"

"An undiagnosed tumour, of all things." A tear ran down her cheek and she was powerless to stop the rest. So much for a tearless story. "We tried to treat it, tried to stop it, and tried to control it, but it just kept growing and growing. It never stopped."

"And Magic—"

"Magic can only do so much, you know that. Magic kept his hair on his head and kept his symptoms at a minimum, but other than that, magic was powerless to heal him. They tried everything. Soon, they were telling me to make arrangements and that he had weeks. We relied purely on potions to make him comfortable. I didn't want to keep him at a hospital. I wanted him home. I wanted him to be normal, to play, to make cookies, to do everything he wanted to do. I *knew* that I should've contacted you, but I was out of my mind with grief. I-I didn't. I'm *so sorry*—"

She felt his arm snake around her as Harry pulled her against him. Hermione went with it, tucking her head into the crook of his neck. She closed her eyes tight. Harry whispered three words that, with the combination of her emotional level, made her release a choked sob: "I forgive you."

All day, she'd willed herself not to cry. She played the part of a strong mother and diverted herself with cooking and conversation. She'd smiled smiles that didn't reach her eyes and laughed empty laughs, but she couldn't help herself nor could she deny herself. The sheer pressure of the emotions weighing her down was almost unbearable. Hermione just couldn't take it. She was so tired of being strong.

When she felt a few of his tears fall on her, Hermione was shocked by them. He hadn't known Matthew – but neither had Pansy and she had initially cried more for him than Hermione had.

In his arms, she allowed herself to grieve—*really* grieve—for *their* son. Their son who had his father's eyes and his mother's smile. And Hermione held on as he grieved for their son who hadn't inherited his eyesight, but had his courage and strength. They grieved for their son who would have been starting school and celebrating his fifth birthday. And Hermione hoped that as they grieved together, they would heal together.

In grief, she knew there were no timelines, maps, or instructional books. They would not be able to fast-forward through the pain. But there was a small bubble of hope inside her that hoped that maybe, maybe one day, she would be able to tell Harry stories without crying; that she would remember something he did or said that would bring a smile to her face. But until then, they would honour his memory by being better people and by being better to each other.

Hermione pulled away slowly and for a moment, they just looked at each other and breathed.

Then, she took his glasses off and wiped his eyes.

And she didn't flinch when Harry wiped hers tears away.

"Can we watch it?" he asked.

"Do you want to?" Harry nodded and Hermione reached for the remote and turned the television on, "I made this tape for you, just in case you ever found out about Matthew or if something were to happen to me or him. Each month, we sat down, and added to the tape. Sometimes, a few seconds, sometimes longer. I spelled the tape to make it hold everything. I didn't want you to miss out – and I confess I almost mailed it to you so many times in his first year, but—but I'm glad I get to show it to you."

She pressed Play.

The screen was black for a few seconds as the date flashed on the bottom of the screen: May Fourth. Hermione remembered the day as if it were yesterday. After all, it was one of the best days of her life: the day she brought Matthew home from the hospital. The camera moved a little as it was set down on its holder and the lens cap was removed. The next thing they saw was Hermione's living room from her home in Venice. It was filled with plants, paintings, and life. And then the nineteen-year-old Hermione came and sat on the couch, right in front of the camera. She looked exhausted and thoughtful, but happy.

"If you're watching this, Harry, then you know why I left. I hope that I'm sitting with you as you watch this, but if I'm not, then I want to apologise. It wasn't my intention to hurt you or Ron, but I had to leave, for both your sakes and the sake of our son. I'd rather you both hate me than each other. You told me in Australia that I was making a mistake by having him and I just want to show you just how wrong you were."

The teenager rose from the seat and walked away, returning with beautiful, peacefully sleeping baby in her arms. He was wrapped comfortably in a maroon blanket. He fussed a little in his sleep, but she shushed him gently, rocking him in her arms. Hermione tore her eyes off her younger self and looked over at Harry – to find him completely enamoured. He was leaned forward, just staring.

"He's beautiful, isn't he?"

"Yes." She heard Harry whisper and it tore at her heart.

"His name is Matthew, after my dad, and he's just come home from spending the few months at the hospital. They say he won't be able to run or play without being winded. We'll show them, won't we, Matthew?" She looked down at her son with pure affection shining in her eyes, "We'll show the world that anything is possible." She kissed his forehead. "And even if you never run or play, I'll still love you."

The screen went black and the tapes continued on until Matthew's first birthday.

Hermione's hair was swept out of her face and she looked flushed, but she was holding a squirming one-year-old, who was banging two blue blocks together and repeating the word "vroom" over and over again. Dressed in a green long-sleeved shirt and pants, his hair was freshly cut and his greenish-hazel eyes were open and playful.

"Matthew, want to say hi to daddy?"

The baby on the screen shook his head no and continued banging the blocks together.

"He shakes his head at everything. Watch." She smirked and sang his name, "Matthew, want to take a nap?"

He shook his head no.

"Want some cake and ice-cream?"

He shook his head no. The Hermione on the screen laughed.

"*Say goodbye to daddy.*"

The block-banging stopped and he looked at the camera curiously.

"*Da-da?*"

Harry looked close to tears and Hermione was right behind him.

By the end of the second birthday where Hermione had to literally chase the laughing toddler around the living room before she could get him in front of the camera, they both were in tears – of laughter.

It started out as a chuckle from Harry and ended with Hermione bursting into a fit of laughter.

She remembered that day very clearly. It was later that year that he was diagnosed with leukaemia, but she couldn't tell. He showed off all his teeth with each of his grins. Merlin, it had taken an hour and a few prompts to get Matthew to speak, but as soon as he had started, Matthew hadn't stopped. For over an hour, he talked about everything, from the "boo-boo" on his elbow to the cake his mummy had made for him. He talked about liking "cahndy", "buks", and "Kittich" (candy, books, and Quidditch as video-Hermione corrected in the background). He cheered, laughed, told stories that were barely understandable, talked about his favourite television shows, and blushed. He then got really close to the camera, knocked on the lens with his little finger, and asked:

"*Is ne-one dere?"*

His father grinned.

On Matthew's third birthday, he had decided to sit "like a big boy" and talk. He "didn't need mummy" to help him. They had found the tumour two months after this video was done, but she still couldn't tell that he was sick. Matthew slowly counted his numbers in English and Italian and told his daddy that he loved him, in Italian. He was such a smart little boy. He talked about his toy broom, his best friend named Zak: the lion, how mummy took him to the park every Saturday to play with the other kids, story-time Fridays, and lasagna Wednesdays.

Hermione realised that was how she remembered Matthew: smiling and happy. She didn't remember his fainting episodes, post-radiation vomiting, or his extreme fatigue. She remembered him either before or after, but never during.

Matthew was in the middle of the birthday edition of 'Show and Tell' when there was a knock on the door.

Harry hadn't noticed. He was too busy smiling and chuckling at his son.

As she left him alone in the living room, Hermione cast a few lingering glances at the man on the couch and the boy on the screen. Father and son, united by a television.

It was strangely moving.

The persistent knocking tore her away.

She opened the door to a sight she didn't expect to see.

Ginny Weasley.

A deep, harsh sound of thunder bellowed in the heavens as the first raindrops fell to the Earth – how fitting. Hermione folded her arms across her chest. This wasn't a courtesy call or a friendly visit. There was a gleam of anger and distrust in her eyes. Nothing was out of the norm. "What are you doing here, Ginny?"

"*My* boyfriend is here."

"And how exactly do you know that?"

Ginny opened her mouth to respond, but snapped it shut suddenly. Hermione cocked a brow, calmly standing her ground. She knew why she'd shut her mouth so suddenly. Since there was no way in hell that Ginny knew for a fact that Harry was there, she'd have to admit that she had either followed him magically or physically. Harry wouldn't appreciate either. As far as Hermione knew, stalking was still illegal in all of Britain, Muggle and magical. Besides the fact that the youngest Weasley was stalking her own boyfriend, she'd also have to silently admit that their relationship wasn't as perfect as Ginny had made it out to be in her letters and during her previous threats.

And that wasn't something that she wanted to admit to Hermione, of all people.

"Well, since you can't answer the question—" And she shut the door in her face.

Hermione paused for a moment, looked at the shut door, and smirked.

That had felt good – no, *brilliant*.

She turned on the heels of her rainbow socks and decided to rejoin Harry in the living room. She was halfway down the hall narrow hall when she realised just how silent it was. Surely, he wasn't finished watching all of the tape. Cautiously, she peered around the corner and spotted Harry.

He was removing the videotape from the VCR.

"What are you doing?" She asked him warily.

Harry rose to his full height and turned, video in hand, "I should be getting back. Ginny's probably going crazy."

Too late for that.

"I kind of just walked out after Molly gave me the pain potion and your address."

Explained why he didn't seem to notice his injuries. "Oh."

"Do you mind if I kept this?" He held up the tape.

She shook her head, "No. I have more. When you're ready." Walking past him, she scooped up the kitten off the floor. He would probably be hungry soon, if he wasn't already. "I think I filmed and captured every major and minor event in his life," she chuckled ruefully at her obsessive picture-taking. Matthew could hardly sit still for most of them.

Harry flashed a small smile. "I think—I think I'd like that." There was a small noise that neither had noticed because Harry was preparing to say something hard, "Look, Hermione, about Australia—"

"I think its best that we leave that in the past, where it belongs."

She didn't want to dredge up old, painful memories. Not today. Not when they had made such a great progress. They had too far to go to trifle themselves with looking back. A nod of understand was what she got in return as a pregnant silence fell between them.

"I can't help but wonder what would've happened if you'd never left."

"I did, too – but I can't keep torturing myself or you. Just like I have to forgive myself, you'll have to do the same. It'll take some time, but in the end, you'll be a better person—"

"Like you?"

Hermione cuddled with her kitten as he pawed her affectionately. "I'm not a good person."

There was a shift in the atmosphere when he stepped closer to her. He was so close that she could smell his cologne. "You are, you know?"

She tried to ignore it. "There are those who would think otherwise if they knew the truth."

Harry paused, adjusted his glasses on his face, and sighed. "I just need to be honest with you, Hermione, but I don't know just how. I spent a lot of time angry at you and I know we're trying to fix what we broke, but I can't leave here tonight without telling you the truth."

She shot him a wary glance because she knew. She *knew* what he was about to say. "It's been a long day and—"

"I'm still—"

"Harry, don't say it." Hermione pleaded, "Don't say what I think you're going to say."

"Hermione."

"Say anything—"

"I'm still in love with you." He blurted out, clearly frustrated.

"Else." She whispered sadly.

There was no time to speak, no time to move, and no time to breathe. Hermione was even denied the chance to fully register his words. All she heard were the angry and hurt words of Ginny. "You're in love with her?"

A bolt of lightning lit up sky and on its heels was a ruthless, bellow of thunder that seemed to last forever. Hard rain started to fall. It was as if she could hear each droplet of rain as it pelted her roof. Perfect. The storm that had been brewing for hours had finally arrived; and with good timing, too.

It would've been a great time for something else; like a sudden and violent earthquake. Something to swallow her whole as all hell broke loose.

no roads left

Chapter Summary

“But dammit, Pansy, they're trying to fix their mistakes and we have to respect that and them.”

Chapter Notes

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

Chapter Twenty-One

No Roads Left

Part One: As your world becomes a rainstorm.

It started with a dry chuckle.

A thick and strangled, '*I can't believe this shit*' chuckle, which was accompanied by a slow shake of her damp head. Everything about Ginny seemed to be angry and red. It would've been a rather interesting sight to behold – had Ginny's anger not been partly, okay *mostly*, directed at her.

The tension following her question was palpable; so thick it was nauseating. Even Apollo was affected. His low, comforting purring had all but ceased; it seemed that he didn't want to draw any unwanted attention to the two of them.

Good kitty.

Hermione kept her mouth shut. Between Harry's confession and Matthew's birthday, she just wasn't in the right state of mind to engage in battle; nor was she prepared for such a fight. If Ginny could do her a favour and return tomorrow or maybe even the day after, she promised herself and the powers that be that she would engage her in what was sure to be an unforgettable confrontation.

Ginny folded her arms, making it clear as glass that she had no intentions of leaving without answers. Truth be told, it had been a long time coming. Virtually inescapable, it seemed. No matter, Hermione was more than willing to sit in silence. Just for a bit longer. Just to stave off the inevitable. The storm was worsening. The rumble of thunder was almost constant. The howling wind was gusting so hard that she could hear her patio furniture sliding around.

But Harry just *had* to end the silence with a question: "What are you doing here, Gin?"

"I think the better question is: what are *you* doing here?" she snapped back.

He seemed to be in ongoing state of shock. "How did you even know that I was here?"

"Easy," she replied flippantly. "I followed you."

As if she was well within her rights in doing such a thing.

It took a few seconds for Harry to fully grasp the full meaning of her reply. "You—" Harry's eyes darkened. "You *followed* me?" At Ginny's unrepentant look, snapped at her, "You had *no* right to—"

"I have every right, and you know it." Her voice was far too even for Hermione's liking.

"What?" He exclaimed, "You had *no* right to follow me here and you had no reason to come into Hermione's house without an invitation."

Ginny tried to explain rationale behind her decision to enter Hermione's house. "I saw you go in and then *she* told me that you weren't here. What was I supposed to think? She had no wards and the door was unlocked so I came in. You could've been cheating on me—"

Harry looked offended, but Hermione wondered if he had the right. If either of them had the right. After all, the lines between them had always been blurry. And there were lines they could cross. And lines they had already crossed. After years and a world of hurt between them, Hermione had fallen back into old habits just that quick. She'd let her guard down under the guise of opening up to him as Matthew's father and the old intimacy from their friendship them began to return. And maybe in their mutual grief, they'd crossed the line enough for Harry to say what he had said. Regardless, even if she *had* returned his affections, she knew that he wouldn't act until he had made a clean break from Ginny. Or maybe. She wasn't so sure anymore.

Harry exhaled like he was tired. "Now you know that I've *never*—"

"And saying that you're in love with another woman isn't cheating?"

"No, it's not."

"Yes, it is."

"Take a look around. Does it look like we're even—"

"Cheating isn't always physical, Harry. You know just as well as I do that you've been having an emotional affair with Hermione for *years*."

Hermione wasn't surprised that he didn't argue.

Ginny took an angry step towards him, "I'm only going to ask you this question one more time: *what* are you doing here?"

He wasn't as taken aback by her anger as Hermione was. "It's not really any of your business."

Wrong answer, Harry.

"*It is my business!*" were the first yelled words of the confrontation. The yelling didn't stop. Ginny was just getting started. "You're in Hermione's house, confessing your long-lasting love for her, and you have the *nerve* to think this isn't my business?"

Apollo, she realized quickly, wasn't a fan of raised voices.

Harry took a few steps away from Hermione and towards his Ginny. Each step he took away from her made her feel better, lighter. The room was still filled to capacity with anger and hostility, but she no longer felt stifled by his proximity. This wasn't what she had wanted to happen on Matthew's birthday. She wanted some peace. And just when she thought that she had found it, the storm had begun. And it hadn't stopped. So far, the fight was between Ginny and Harry, but Hermione knew that it was a matter of time.

She could only listen helplessly as she was pulled closer to being introduced into the argument.

"Look, Gin, let's go home. This isn't the time to talk about—"

"This is the perfect time! You left and disappeared from the country for weeks; you don't write and you ignore my messages—"

As calmly as he could, he told her. "I needed time to think."

Hermione realised just what kind of relationship Ginny and Harry had. It was nothing like she had portrayed in her letters. They were more like a pendulum gradually grinding to a halt; they were out of sync with no way to set them right. Ginny was on one end of the trying to assert her control and Harry was on the other trying to assert his dominance. She didn't trust Harry; it made for a miserable life for them both.

Ginny wasn't accepting his answer. "And *then* you come back, fight with Ron, and run off to see—"

"We needed to talk—"he cut her off.

Wrong again, Harry.

"What the hell am I supposed to think, Har—"

Harry shut his eyes and rubbed his temples before yelling back, "I don't know! I don't know! Merlin, if you would just shut up for *one* bloody second, and allow me a few words in—"

"Listen to you?" She looked as if listening to him was the most absurd thing that he had ever asked of her. "How can I, Harry? Huh? I can barely look at you!"

He was exasperated. "Ginny, I—"

"How long?" She ground out and Hermione cringed at the raw pain in her voice.

Dumbfounded, he blinked. "What?"

"How long!"

"How long, what?"

"How long have you loved *her*?" She spat the last word without addressing or even looking at Hermione.

There really wasn't anything else that Hermione desired. She stuck to her first wish; where the living room floor would turn into a portal to her personal hell. Leaving was better than staying no matter where she ended up. Ginny's question lingered in the air, but Harry's answer didn't matter.

Any timeframe that he gave would only make things worse. Ginny wore the look of a betrayed woman; one who had given everything, only to have it thrown back into her face. He'd already condemned himself. And in condemning himself, he'd condemned Hermione too. She never could control how Harry felt, but there was no way Ginny would ever accept that. She would blame Hermione for everything. Harry couldn't turn back, lie, or tell her that he didn't mean it. He was trapped by his own foolishness.

But he answered her, and the raw honesty of his answer made her heart clench. "*Years.*"

Years.

Ginny's cheeks reddened and looked seconds from bursting into tears, but kept them at bay thanks to her unabashed anger. Tears fell and Hermione wondered if she knew she was crying. "Did you—did you *ever* love me?"

It would've been too easy to placate her rage by telling her that he had always loved her, but Harry said something that Hermione didn't expect. "That's something I'm trying to figure out."

She looked as if he'd slapped her. "Something that you're trying to figure out?" Ginny stared at him incredulously, "We've been dating for over five years, Harry. Five years!" She shoved him away from her. "You should *know* how you feel about me after five years! You should know that you love me!"

Hermione actually took a step backwards.

"Well, maybe I don't know. Maybe I—"

Ginny closed the distance between them and cupped Harry's face in her hands, forcing him to look at her. It was as if she'd completely forgotten about Hermione's presence. "You know. You can't stand here and tell me that you don't, because I know you do. You've said it before. You've said it!"

He sounded sad and worried, gripping her arms lightly. "Ginny, calm down."

It was a sad sight to watch and it was hard to listen to her sobs so Hermione focused her eyes on Apollo, who stared back at her with blue eyes. He looked so subdued; not at all like the energetic bundle that had bitten Harry's hand. She hugged him close to her and he purred so softly that she couldn't hear it over the raging storms, both inside her house as well as outside. She felt it against her chest; she felt it against her heart. For a moment, Hermione shut her eyes. There was nothing more that she wanted than for them to be away from here, away from everything. She just wanted it to be her and Apollo.

"No!" Ginny cried. "You've said it! Plenty of times!"

"I know. I know," a sigh escaped from Harry's lips. "Look—"

Her shaking fingers were making an impression on his cheeks from where they dug into his skin, "You know! You've just been blinded by—"

"It's not that." He said softly, finally forcing her arms to her side and he held on. "It's not you. It's not Hermione. It's me, Ginny. *It's me.* I've always been the source of our problems."

Ginny's voice was almost a whisper when she asked, "You're trying to purposely push me away?"

Harry shook his head. "I'm just trying to be honest with you and with myself, for once. Ginny, we got together right after the war, and maybe we rushed into things. Maybe we—"

Every shred of softness left Ginny as she tried to squirm out of his grip. Another round of thunder rumbled. The wind had died down a bit, but the rain was relentless. "That's just weak, Harry, and you know it. That's something you figure out months later, not years."

He continued to hold on to her arms. "It's the truth."

"You could've told me the truth a long time ago."

"Would you have listened?"

Ginny resembled a fish for a few moments before she shut her mouth firmly. As Hermione clutched her little four-month-old lifeline, she internally answered his question. She was almost positive that no, she would not have listened. She would've made it her task to make sure that Harry loved her – or at least make him think that he did.

"I would've helped you—"

"I don't need your help!" At the look of hurt on her face, he groaned, released her hands, and ran his down his face in a weary manner. "Look, I'm sorry. I'm going through a lot and I—"

"You don't think *I've* been going through a lot, too? I've been going through this for *years*. You don't think I've *always* known." Angry tears coursed down her cheeks. "You were *miserable* when she left. Worse than Ron. You used to—" Ginny's voice broke. "You would say her name in your sleep."

And that explained everything. Why Ginny *hated* her so much. Why she felt so threatened by her return that she would show up at St. Mungo's under the guise of friendship. And also why she'd warned Pansy the way she had.

Harry dropped her arms, staring at her intensely, "Then why did you ask?"

"I hoped it wouldn't still be true after all this time. That maybe time had—"

"Why did you stay with me?"

And she was honest. "Because I love you."

"Listen—"

"No—"

In a flash, Harry seized her by the shoulders and shook her once. Hermione's eyes widened when he said with an intensity she had never seen, "Ginny, just—*listen* to me for one bloody second. Listen!" He closed his eyes and softened his grip on her, "Not listening is the reason why I'm in all this mess to begin with."

She looked confused. "In all of what mess?"

For the first time, Harry looked at Hermione. She understood the silent question that he had asked, and shook her head silently. Could he tell her about Matthew? No! There was no way in hell that she wanted a spiteful, angry, Ginny to discover his existence.

It wouldn't end very well for anyone involved.

"I can't tell you, not now, at least."

She pulled herself forcefully from his arms after he gave an answer that she wasn't accepting. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"Look, I can't tell you."

Ginny was seconds from screaming again before she sobered. She gave another chuckle; the same bitter one from before. "Well, this is just perfect, isn't it?" The misery in her voice made Hermione's blood thin. "You've finally gotten what you wanted all along, haven't you, Hermione?"

Well. This was it. No more delaying the inevitable.

She kept her tone even, almost diplomatic. "I didn't want any of this."

"I think it's your *guilt* that has kept you so quiet."

Hermione was annoyed and brittle. "No, and honestly, it's the absurdity of this entire situation that keeps me silent. You let yourself into *my* house, uninvited, mind you, and you have the gall—"

"The gall? That's rich." She snorted inelegantly. "Don't stand there and act innocent."

"I'm not." Hermione shot back as her anger rose. She was so damn tired of Ginny; she had been for years. "But you, *you* can't just walk into someone else's home and start firing accusations."

"I have every right to be—"

"This is *my* house!" Hermione's heart pounded hard in her chest; adrenaline pumped through her blood. "And that means that *I* say who has the right to be here!" Ginny had the nerve to open her mouth and Hermione ended all hopes of her speaking. "You have no business here."

Harry just gave an exhausted sigh.

She put her hands back on her hips. "And *Harry* does?"

Hermione answered her in a rather even tone. "Yes."

"Do you honestly think I'm going to leave without answers? Do you honestly think I'm not going to fight for my relationship?"

Disbelievingly, she stared at Ginny, "Ginny, I'm not your enemy. You don't have to fight me. He's yours."

"No, he isn't, and you know *damn* well why not!" She shouted.

Harry tried, "Ginny—" and failed.

"You stay out of this, Harry!" And she focused on Hermione. "And to think that I half-believed that bullshit that you spouted on the roof with Malfoy. I can't believe how much of an *idiot* I was. That was stupid of me. I'll never believe a word that comes out of your mouth again."

If she was looking to set Hermione off, she succeeded. "Everything that I said on that roof was the truth."

"Ha!" She sneered, "If your words were true, then why is my boyfriend declaring his love for you?"

"That's something that you need to take up with Harry, and not me. He came here on his own and I *definitely* didn't ask for him to profess his love for me, in fact, I tried to stop him before he could."

"You're lying! You're just saying that because I caught you—"

"No, I'm not!" She argued hotly, "If I loved Harry, I wouldn't be ashamed to say it, but I—"

"Be honest with yourself, you do! You always have! You've always been jealous of me—"

The feel of Apollo's purrs could no longer keep her calm.

"Jealous?" Hermione said in a harsh whisper. "You think I'm *jealous* of you?" A rough laugh escaped from Hermione's lip before she shook her head. "My life has been downright horrible at times, but never, *ever* wanted to trade places with you." Hermione narrowed her eyes. "You say you love him, but you don't trust him, and that's between you and Harry to discuss elsewhere. Not here. Not with me."

"How dare you—"

"No, how dare *you* stand there and insult me in my own home."

"You—"

She didn't want to hear anymore. Ginny had been talking almost nonstop for half an hour; it was her turn to listen. "Everything that's wrong with your relationship is not my fault. I know that it's easier to blame me, but you can't. You're jealous and spiteful and insecure and maybe Harry hasn't given you the attention and the confidence you need, but that's not my fault."

Ginny looked ready to punch her in the face and Hermione could only hope that she did lash out at her physically.

"Not only have you practically *stalked* him here—"

"I didn't stalk—"

Hermione almost laughed at her blatant lie. "Okay, you *followed* him here."

"I did it for—"

"You can say what you want to say, Ginny. You can chalk it up to whatever reason that fits you best. You can clean it, flip it, turn it, and let it marinate in bullshit, but the facts remain the same; you're mad at the wrong person. You're angry me when you should be angry at Harry, or maybe even yourself."

Ginny hand came out of nowhere to slap her in the face, but Hermione expected it and slapped her hand away. She shoved Ginny away forcefully with her free hand. Ginny stumbled back and tripped over the arm of the couch. She would've ended up face first on the carpet, but Harry hand grabbed her before he could and he steadied her. However, Harry could do nothing to dissipate the stifling air of anger and tension in the room.

Lightning shot across the sky as Ginny went for her wand, but Hermione was faster. In the coldest tone that she could muster, Hermione pushed the tip of her wand into her neck and spoke, "Don't you *ever* so much as allow the thought of putting your hands on me to cross your mind, again."

There was, finally, a stubborn fear in Ginny's eyes.

Her voice was as cold as the arctic. "It's not *jealousy* that I feel for you, Ginny. It's pity. Rather than combating your own issues, you'd rather blame them on me. I'm far from perfect, but—"

"Hermione," Harry interrupted firmly. His voice was a reminder that she needed to keep control over her emotions. "I think—I think that's enough. I think it's time for us to leave." He looked pointedly at Ginny.

"No, I'm not leaving here without answers."

"*We* need to talk. About us, about everything—"

Ginny shoved Harry away. He stumbled back a few steps as she yelled, "This is *your* fault, Hermione! Ever since you've been back, everything has changed—"

"I hardly think that you can blame that on me."

"Yes I can! Ever since you've been back, ever since you've refused to forgive him for whatever happened, he's been miserable. You've taken him away from his job, from the one thing he loves, for no particular reason other than your hatred of us! And your spite has driven a wedge between us. You've made him repeatedly seek you out and beg you for your forgiveness—"

"I've done nothing of the sort and you're *mad* if you think that! You don't know what the hell happened that night! I almost died!" At the semi-shocked look on Ginny's face, she spat, emotionally, "Tell me, when you confronted me on the roof, did you think I was at St. Mungo's for a bloody check-up?"

At least she had the decency to look partly ashamed, "I—"

"I had just awoken from a coma, my body was broken, and he was trying to bully me for my forgiveness – and *you* tried to do the same thing." Ginny opened her mouth, but Hermione refused to allow her a moment to talk herself out of this situation. "He was supposed to protect me and he didn't. He was supposed to stay, and he didn't. He was supposed to leave his personal issues at home, and he didn't. You can blame *him* for any of his work-related misery, but don't you dare blame me, Ginny, don't you *dare*."

A few moments passed before she addressed her boyfriend. "You didn't tell me that, Harry."

"I didn't even know until recently. They just told me that I had to ask for her forgiveness."

"They didn't *tell* you?" Hermione, in that moment, had quietly vowed to herself to refuse to break another curse for the Ministry, so long as she was a curse-breaker.

"No. Malfoy was the one who told me, can you believe it? He spared no detail. I felt like a foul git after he explained what had happened to you."

Her anger was tamed momentarily by just the mention of his name. "Malfoy?"

Each new discovery about the enigmatic man hadn't ceased to confuse her. He had defended her, not once, but twice, as far as she knew. He had bought her a kitten and given her all the right reasons to keep him. He had stood with her, by her side, and he had stayed. He *always* stayed. What else had he done for her that she didn't know about?

"Yes. And believe me, had I known, I wouldn't have even bothered to ask."

Insincerely, Ginny spoke up, "As much as I'm sorry for what happened to you, I don't see what this has to do with anything. I don't see how it explains what he's doing here with you."

Hermione almost lashed out, but Apollo's purring kept her temper in check. Barely. She remembered quickly that she didn't want to fight any more than she already had. "Harry's right, Ginny. This is none of your business. This is between me and—"

"I knew it! I knew you – oh," she let out a dry laugh, "You must be extremely proud of yourself, Hermione."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Daft isn't a good look on you. I *know* why you came back."

"Do you, now?"

"Yes, and you must be pretty proud that you've gotten what you've wanted all this time."

"For the last time, Ginny I don't want—"

"Then why are you back, huh? Why did you come back from Italy? You practically snuck back into the country; no one knew you were back until they saw you. Why did you keep your return such a secret if you *weren't* returning for Harry?"

"I think the *real* question that you want to ask is why I didn't tell *you* that I was coming back."

Ginny paled. "I-I don't—"

Harry shot her a confused look. "What is she talking about?"

"Oh, she didn't tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"Ever since I left, Ginny and I have written to each other. She wrote to me when I first left and—"

Her face was bright red, but still she fought on, "I fail to see how this—"

"I'm going to ignore the fact that you wrote letters to her, but you actually *received* letters back from her? Fu—Ginny, I can't believe that you kept that from us! You *knew* that we all were trying to—"

There were no excuses that she could use. "I—"

"Who *are* you?" Harry stared at her, fiercely, "Because you sure as hell *aren't* my girlfriend of five years. I feel like I don't even know you."

"It's because she's blinded you!" Ginny pointed at Hermione.

Leave it to Ginny Weasley to not accept responsibility for her own actions.

"Listen to yourself, Gin! Hermione hasn't blinded me. You're the one who's kept things from me!"

"I'm not the only one keeping secrets, Harry! I know!"

"You don't know anything!"

"I know that you had sex with her! Twice!"

Hermione's stomach promptly fell to her ankles.

Part Two: The Snake Wrangler

Pansy would not stop sighing.

Draco bit back the urge to hex her. His hand was wrapped so tightly around his wand that he feared that it would snap in two from the pressure of his grip. But he regained control and released his death grip. They were sitting on the second floor in the brand new, high-class wizarding bar in Diagon Alley. It was opening night and everyone who was someone was currently enjoying drinks and conversation. They didn't have reservations, but the moment the young girl at the front door saw them getting ready to wait in the long line, she had them ushered upstairs with all the other very important people.

They had seen eight of their old classmates in a twelve-minute span, but the most surprising sight of the night was the Nagini-slayer, Neville Longbottom. He was runner-up for the 'Most Changed since Hogwarts' superlative, but had lost because of a technicality.

He had already begun changing before they had left.

No longer was he the chubby, stammering boy who had nearly wet himself every time Snape walked past his desk in Potions. He was no longer the same round-faced, inept fool who made a mess of things and *constantly* lost his frog. He was stronger and leaner, he held his head up, conversed with them all confidently, and met Draco's eyes with ease. As Blaise talked casually with Longbottom (they had become friends after the war since they both worked for the Ministry), Draco found himself listening and reeling. He honestly couldn't believe that *he* was the same imbecile from Hogwarts.

There had been a running list in the Slytherin common room of jobs that Neville Longbottom couldn't do without losing a body part...or his life.

Draco thought that his addition to the list had been slightly ironic: #347—snake wrangler.

It was in Seventh Year that the Gryffindor had earned Draco's silent respect. He had been a fearless leader to those who were unable to protect themselves. Standing up to the Carrows, refusing to use Unforgivable curses on other students while everyone else cowered, stealing the sword of Gryffindor from Snape's office, leading Potter and crew into the castle, not to forget his utter defiance of Voldemort right before he slew Nagini. Draco still remembered the thought that passed the moment the snake's head hit the ground.

Guess I was wrong about the snake wrangler.

Longbottom had just gotten the position of Herbology professor and was out celebrating with his girlfriend, Loony—Luna Lovegood, who was just as strange as ever. Luckily, Pansy kept the woman engaged in conversation, because he was pretty certain that he wanted nothing to do with her after she told him that he had Wrackspurts flying around his head—and that was the reason why he couldn't focus.

He wished.

They both had asked Pansy about Granger. Apparently, they didn't really understand the rift between Potter, Weasley, and Granger. Lovegood found out about Pansy's friendship with Granger, and wanted her to schedule a reunion with their old friend. Granger had been hesitant to see her two old friends, but had finally agreed to have lunch with them the following week.

Longbottom just smiled while Lovegood tugged on her radish earrings in nervous anticipation. Pansy just smirked and drew Lovegood into conversation about their magazines.

As top editors of two different magazines who often worked together, they were associates and regularly had lunch together to brainstorm. Lovegood helped her father run *The Quibbler* – go figure – but she was also an important editor for another magazine, *Parenting for Witches & Wizards*. That was something he hadn't expected. Every parent (or couples who planned on becoming parents) in the wizarding world read that magazine.

And by world, he meant, the *entire* world. Yes. *Parenting for Witches & Wizards* was a worldwide magazine. It made *The Daily Prophet* look like nothing special. And it was just about parents, their stories, and how to be a parent to a magical child, among other things. In addition to her own work and travels for *Magical and Stylish*, Pansy had single-handedly designed every robe and clothing item for the maternity section of *Parenting for Witches & Wizards*, while her team of seamstresses had brought her designs to life and to clothing stores in stores all over the world. And Loony—*Luna Lovegood* ran the magazine. Bloody hell.

She was one of the most powerful women in media.

When they had left, Draco stared at Pansy and asked her if she and Lovegood were really friends.

Pansy had merely shrugged and said that the woman was strange, but she respected anyone who marched to their own beat. And then she went back to ignoring Blaise.

When she heaved her sixteenth sigh, Draco had just about had it.

"Your sighing is getting on my bloody nerves. Say something to him."

Pansy looked over at her boyfriend, who was calmly drinking his Elf-wine and pretending to be aloof. Draco knew better. As calm and patient as Blaise inherently was, Draco knew that he really hated when he was at odds with her. "I have *nothing* to say to him."

Blaise swirled the wine around in his glass. "Leave her alone, Draco." He drawled. "It's obvious that she doesn't want to be *mature* about this."

Rage flickered in her eyes. He always knew how to push her buttons. "I don't want to be—mature? You think *I'm* being immature? *You're* the one who hit me with a silencing charm, Blaise." She was obviously bitter.

"You were getting ready to *hex* him."

"I think that hexing him would've been the least of his worries." She shot back. "Besides, it's not like he didn't *deserve* to be hexed."

"And who are you to decide that? Huh, Pansy?"

"I—"

Draco sat back and watched the impending tennis match.

"You shouldn't be too quick to dish out penalties when you don't know all the facts."

"I know enough. He's a git. The end."

Blaise sighed for the first time. "He is a git, true. We all know that my dislike for him stems from the Marquette incident. Yes, he's been acting like an arse. Yes, he's done wrong. And yes, he had a hand in Hermione exiling herself. *But* Potter isn't the saint. He's human—"

"I can't believe you're defending him!"

He chuckled darkly, "Don't think I'm condoning his behaviour, Pansy. I'm not." Blaise sighed. "I'm just trying to make you see that yes, he may have saved the entire wizarding world at seventeen, but he's a *person*." At the look on her face, he drank the rest of his drink. "I'm not here to take sides."

"It sounds like you are."

He shook his head. "They both made mistakes. Large ones. Hermione more than him." Before Pansy could argue, he shut her down. "She should've been more open with them both and she shouldn't have tried to protect everyone's feelings—because really, *that's* why she left. To save Potter and Weasley's friendship from the truth. She should have given Potter a chance to know his son. But Potter should've listened and not jumped to a million conclusions. He shouldn't have pushed her into a corner and made her think that she had to fight her way out."

"That's—"

"But dammit, Pansy, they're trying to fix their mistakes and we have to respect that *and* them."

For a long time, Pansy was quiet and she sighed. "I understand that. I do. Honestly."

"Do you? Do you *really* understand that? Because attempting to hex the daylights out of Potter when he showed up shows me that you really *don't* understand. It wouldn't have made anything better. It would've made *you* feel better, true, but it wouldn't have done anything for the situation. It would've made everything worse for Hermione and—"

"I was *angry*, Blaise. He had *no* right to show, not today—"

"He had *every* right to show up today." Blaise argued back vehemently, "Don't let your anger with him blind you from seeing truth and reason, Pansy."

She looked affronted. "I—"

Funny, Blaise already knew what she was going to say and cut her off before she could utter anything else. "Yes, you were. You've experienced death, Pansy. We both have. *Potter* has. Hermione wasn't the only one to lose a child. Potter might not have known him in life, but Matthew was *his* son, too. He has every *right* to want to know his son."

Pansy's eyes glazed over. He had struck a chord. In a last ditch effort, she looked at Draco, "What do you think, Draco?"

He took a sip from his wine glass, and said nothing. He knew what she expected him to say. He'd been anti-Potter since he'd snubbed his attempt at friendship when they were eleven, so it made sense for him to argue against Potter. It made sense for him to argue against anything that made Potter seem less like a world-class git and more like a person.

She really shouldn't assume anything about him, however.

Blaise had been right about Potter's humanity, about their need to talk, about Granger not being the only one who had lost a son – about everything. It was something that he himself had only realised in the seconds following Potter's arrival.

Draco only fought battles that he could win and that ultimately were beneficial to him; arguing with Pansy until he was blue in the face wasn't conducive, not at all. "I'd rather enjoy my wine rather than talk about Potter." He spat his name the same way he did when he was sixteen.

There, detachment worked. It was a logical and diplomatic move.

Blaise smirked and Draco frowned.

Of course, he'd seen right through him. "Neutrality, eh? That's new."

Pansy agreed with Blaise with a simple nod of her head and a cocked brow.

"It's not our place and I'd prefer to stay out of it and let them sort it out between themselves." Draco shrugged blandly. He needed more wine if they were going to keep pushing.

The glass refilled automatically. He took a long sip.

"Since when have you ever cared about staying in your place?" Pansy asked curiously.

Draco refused to dignify that with an answer. He scarcely knew the answer himself.

When he said nothing, Pansy shook her head. "You're long past staying in your place, Draco. You're too involved."

"More than you think." Blaise backed her up.

They were right. He *was* too involved, and that annoyed him – but it was the truth. He'd finally accepted his place in her life, even though he was a bit hesitant to accept her place in his. When he realised that it was Potter at the door, Draco found that he was torn between his want to throw the bastard out and his want to make Granger talk to the poor sod. It was odd. He'd never had conflicting feelings about Potter in his life. It was always one-sided, and his mild hatred and major annoyance with the Potter was so constant it was almost comforting.

Now, he felt sorry for him. And that wasn't good.

"Fine," He huffed his confession, "I *am* involved in this, but—I don't want to discuss this any longer."

The two unified forced exchanged looks. "Would you have stayed?" Pansy asked.

"What?"

"Would you have stayed if Hermione had asked you?"

"Yes." There was no hesitation and Draco felt like bashing his head into the table. Repeatedly.

He'd be lying if he said that he hadn't wanted to stay behind – just to be sure that she would be fine. He'd also be lying again if he said that he hadn't allowed the thought of going back to cross his mind once – or twice. But she needed to handle her life and face her demons on her own. Furthermore, he wasn't about to interfere with her life – not unless she asked.

That was personal growth.

A far cry from the man who didn't care about anything except his family and friends. How long had she been the exception? Draco wracked his brain and couldn't find an answer. When had he created a new category for her? And when did she take up residence in that new and unnamed category? He was so fucking confused that it made him angry and nauseous. Or maybe it was wine.

And in the silence, Pansy leaned forward and half-whispered the most absurd question: "Do you like her?"

Draco tensed as the blood drained from his face. "Excuse me?"

She looked over at Blaise, who maintained neutral features. Pansy at least thought about it before she responded to him. "I—well, not as a person, but as a woman. There's a difference."

There was a difference? He almost shouted. He wasn't some snivelling Fourth Year with a—he didn't *like* anyone, let alone, Granger. She was *Granger*. She was so—fuck! Of all the senseless, preposterous, unreasonable, ridiculously absurd—

All three of their wine glasses suddenly shattered, spilling wine all over the tables, underscored by Pansy's shocked gasp. The closest waiter quickly Vanished the mess, politely asked if they were fine, and if they wanted another glass of wine.

It took every shred of his willpower and Blaise's, "*A new bottle of your best Elf-wine would be great,*" to control his sudden urge to hex everyone in the room.

The waiter walked away and his best friends gave him an incredulous look. "What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing." He might as well have turned into a real dragon and burnt them to a crisp.

"You're doing uncontrolled magic like a nine-year-old. I think it's safe to say that *something* is wrong with you."

"Blaise," Draco was sure that he was shooting steam from his ears. "If you know what's good for you—"

"You need to calm down, mate."

He knew he needed to, but that was easier said than done. Draco quickly doused his anger with two more glasses of wine and though he was slightly inebriated, he no longer felt the urge to go on a hexing spree. That was a plus. Finally, he focused on his friends, who were watching him with wary eyes. "I'm not going to kill you." He told them, calmly, though he was sure that his speech was slightly slurred.

"That's good to know, because for a minute there, I wasn't so sure."

Draco just snorted at Blaise. "I'm fine."

"You're getting drunk."

And so he was... "Point?"

Blaise said nothing, but he stared at him for a long minute. His gaze wasn't hard; in fact, it seemed as if he was searching through his own memories rather than Draco's. As a precaution, Draco blocked his thoughts and boldly met his best friend's eyes in what was a brief staring contest. From the corner of his eye, he saw Pansy watching them, slightly intrigued. Two minutes later, Blaise's eyes widened slowly as he slipped from his almost-trance. His voice was filled with shock, "Sweet Circe."

Draco didn't know what the hell he was going on about. "What?" He snipped.

"She's under your skin, mate."

He internally noted that it wasn't an accusation, just a statement of the fact.

It was his first instinct to deny, deny, deny. "That's completely and utterly ridiculous, Blaise."

The other man smirked, "You're in *serious* denial, mate. Pansy's right, you like her."

He wanted to lash out, but lashing out would've been the perfect confirmation, so he remained cool and almost chugged the rest of his wine. "I assure you. I have no romantic intentions—"

Blaise's smirk widened. "She didn't say *anything* about romance, and the fact that you did means that you've at *least*—"

"Don't you say another word, Blaise," Draco glowered, snarling ruthlessly.

Pansy had been shocked into silence. "Shit!"

He was pretty sure that he wanted to hex them both, preferably at the same time. Frowning deeply, he realized that he preferred it when they weren't talking to each other. Then they both wouldn't have a reason to jump on him. It was his fault that the conversation had even gotten to this point.

"You've changed." Pansy told him for the second time that day.

"Everyone changes." He argued with a lazy shrug. He was still so bloody mad at them, but the wine was doing its job.

"True," Blaise input, "You still treat everyone else with the same disinterest and contempt, but Hermione, you treat her—"

It was weak, but it was all that he had, "She's had a shitty life."

Pansy couldn't control her smile when Blaise retorted, "So what? That hasn't stopped you from treating everyone else like rubbish."

As much as he wanted to, he couldn't deny anything. Furthermore, he couldn't do or say anything, because Blaise was reading him right. He didn't need to give him a reason to continue. Draco wasn't the only one with amazing powers of deduction, and he knew that the moment he spoke the lie that was on the tip of his tongue, his friend would see right through him and call him out.

Fuck, he felt trapped.

He would've paid good money for them both to shut the hell up. His nagging internal thoughts and the horrible feeling that his confusion about his feelings towards Granger was slowly dissipating; it was frustrating enough, but his inability to flip the conversation back on

them had made it worse. They seemed to have gotten over their issues, and they wanted him to get over his.

Well, he didn't want to.

He preferred confusion over clarity, at least when it came to Granger.

Everything was changing too fast.

Draco could continue to tell himself that he didn't know how to feel about Granger, but the truth of the matter was that the more that he knew about her as a person, the more he felt like he could relate to her. It was odd because he, on some level, still didn't feel like he knew her very well. Outside of meals and drinks and small talks, they hadn't spent very much time alone.

But did that make a difference in the general scheme of things?

He knew so much about her without knowing much – if that made any sense at all.

Draco didn't know her favourite flavour of ice-cream or the name of her favourite book, but he knew that she dug her fingernails into her forearm when she got nervous and that her hands were always cold. Draco didn't know her favourite charm or her favourite drink, but he knew that she had panic attacks that put her in "flight" mode and that she mumbled the burial plot numbers of her parents in her sleep. Granger paced when she was restless, sat on her pier when she felt overwhelmed, liked action movies, cooked according to her moods, and—Draco stopped dead in his tracks.

Did he *really* know all of that?

After some consideration, he decided that it was best if he didn't answer that question.

Did he like her as a person? Yes. That was an easy question. She'd done what Potter and Weasley couldn't when it came to him; she'd left their past in the past. Sure, they'd gotten off to a horrible start, but that didn't seem to matter to her any longer. She had defended him, just as he defended her. He was her ally, and she was his friend.

For the both of them, every single day was a battle, not against the world, but against themselves. Draco didn't have to hide from her; she knew his family's secret and she knew about his pain. She knew and she had empathised, she knew and she hadn't told a soul. He could trust her. And part of him really liked that he could. Another part of him liked that he could see how much she had changed from month to month, week to week, day to day. She was going to heal, one day. She was going to fix and forgive herself. There were going to be a few bumps in the road for her, but she was moving instead of standing still. Part of him witnessed her changes with a sort of selfish and demented optimism...

He found that he was comfortable with her quirks, her stress-cooking and reading habits, the silences and even the talking. He was used to her horribly frizzy hair and her clothes. He still hated to see her cry, but he'd accepted her tears as a part of who she was.

She wasn't perfect, but neither was he.

How could he not like her as a person when everyone had been throwing her in his face for so long? How could he not when he shared at least four dinners, five coffees, and three lunches with her per week?

And how in the hell was he going to get her *out* of that new category?

That was going to take some more deep thought.

Draco tapped his foot under the table. He didn't mind Granger's presence in his life; she wasn't bad.

He just didn't like what she represented.

Change. She was a change that should've never occurred, but a change, nonetheless. Since he was powerless to stop the changes she had brought, he quickly narrowed down his alternatives. There were two: he could either adapt or fall behind. Well, really, he had one choice because falling behind meant failing and Malfoys were not failures.

So, adapting, huh?

But how could he adapt without losing himself in the process?

That was something he hadn't quite worked out.

"Any profound thoughts you want to share, Draco?" Pansy interrupted his internal diatribe with her banter.

Blaise looked as smug as ever.

Draco just put on his best scowl, but a denial never issued forth from his mouth. He stood up, almost swaying on his feet. "How's this for profound? I'm going home."

Part Three: Lose your voice

Hermione had hoped that this was part of some long and convoluted nightmare that she was having and that she would wake up in bed, with her kitten, and everything would be as it should. Blaming it on a nightmare, she found, was a lot better than blaming the real culprit – reality.

She was already so bloody disillusioned with reality.

"How did you find that out?" Hermione asked, refusing to let her voice and eyes betray her and inform Ginny of just how mortified she actually was.

Ginny folded her arms across her chest and looked at the both of them. "It's true?" Her voice was unnaturally calm.

"Yes," Harry answered slowly, but added immediately, "But it was before we started—"

Ginny anger matched the storm outside. Hermione was almost certain that soon her roof would be blown right off her house. "I don't care! You slept with her." She shot an unspeakably hurt and irate look at Hermione as her voice raised another octave, "You slept with him after all that bullshit you said about you being just his friend! "

"Look, Ginny," She tried to keep her cool and to stop her quivering lip, "It was before you started dating him after the final battle. He never cheated on you with me. You got him in the end. What happened between us shouldn't matter."

"It matters!"

And Hermione knew exactly what she meant. She could tell Ginny that it shouldn't matter until the end of time, but it really did. Ginny had been living in Hermione's shadow since she was eleven years old, and she'd done just about everything to step out of it: being the only Third Year to attend the Yule Ball, trying out and making the Quidditch team, being with Harry...

And there she was, still in Hermione's shadow.

"It was a mistake," she told Ginny truthfully. "A stupid mistake involving two upset and scared teenagers. It meant *nothing*."

Harry froze, and though he tried, he couldn't hide the wounded look that washed over his face.

Ginny didn't miss a beat. "Maybe for you it meant nothing, but it obviously meant something to him."

Her name on his lips was tight and his entire body had tensed, "Ginny." It was as if he were trying to regain control over his emotions using some new breathing exercises. Seven breaths later, he said, "This isn't the time to discuss something that happened so long ago."

"Were you ever going to tell me?"

"No." Harry answered flatly "I knew you'd overreact."

"Overreact?" She hissed as if he'd addressed her with a curse word. "You thought that I'd *overreact*? I'll show you an overreaction—"

This was getting to be too much for Hermione.

"I—"

"How could you do that to me? How could you keep something like that from me? Five years? Harry! You kept it from me for five years! You let everything go on as if nothing happened! Do you know how I feel right now? I had to find out about my boyfriend's sexual fling with his best friend by eavesdropping on Ron and Bill! Why couldn't you have been honest with me? Why—"

She pushed Harry off the edge and he started shouting, "Because you make it so damn hard! How can I be honest with someone who isn't honest with me? Huh? How can I be in a relationship with someone that I apparently don't even know? Explain that to me!"

Those words were met with silence. Hermione watched as Ginny slowly came undone. Tears that had built up behind her eyes started to fall as a choked sob escaped her lips.

Immediately, his eyes softened considerably and he sighed after realizing that he'd lost control over his anger yet again. "Ginny," he said, reaching for her.

"Don't!" The pain in her voice was evident as she shoved him away, hard – so hard that the tape fell off of the table he'd bumped into and onto the floor. Hermione's breath automatically hitched as she felt the first wave crash over her, signifying the first urge to run. She knew what was coming next.

"What's that?" She wiped her eyes and started to lean forward for the tape.

Hermione's heart stopped.

"It's nothing." Harry quickly snatched it off the ground and tucked it under his arm.

Brown eyes narrowed, "If it's nothing then why do you have it?"

He seemed to hate the next words that came from his mouth. "I can't tell you."

The room started to spin and her heart started to beat wildly. It was the start to another panic attack and she couldn't stave it off any longer. Everything was going to hell rather quickly and she was powerless to stop time, powerless to rewind or fast forward. Clenching her wand in her small hand, Hermione tried her best to calm down, breathe, and find peace in the middle of this storm, but she couldn't. She just *couldn't*. All she wanted to do was snatch the tape and run. That tape meant so much and if Ginny found out about the contents – she just didn't know what she'd do.

Her tongue wet her lower lip deliberately as she held on to Apollo.

Ginny was silent for a few blessed moments before she asked, "Why can't you tell me? Why —"

"Because," Harry sighed, "Hermione doesn't want you to know. There, that's the truth."

In that moment, Hermione could've cursed him into oblivion without feeling guilty.

Ginny looked at her. "What's on the tape, Hermione?"

"I don't have to answer you." And she sounded a bit faint.

"I think you owe me after sleeping with—"

"This has gone on long enough. Get out of my house." Breathlessly, she threw her hand in the general direction of the door. If they didn't leave, she sure as hell was. The muscles in her legs ached to run; she didn't know how long she'd be able to suppress the urge.

She started taunting Hermione instead, "Did you tape the event, huh? Did you? Is—"

"It's a tape of her son!" Harry shouted, furious that she would even suggest such a thing.

Time stood still. The dam of emotions inside Hermione had started to break.

Ginny blinked and shook her head. "Why would she give you a tape of her and Ron's son?"

"You knew—" Harry gaped, but the dizzy Hermione wasn't surprised. She'd always known that Ginny knew of her pregnancy.

"Mum suspected that she was pregnant the night she left Ron. She told me and I kept it to myself—"

"Ginny," Harry cautiously stepped closer to her, "Ron isn't—"

"Harry," she warned.

But it was already too late.

Hermione shut her eyes as an indescribable look washed over Ginny's face; it was a mix of confusion and annoyance. She picked up her meowing kitten and held on to him as she shook. Feeling wobbly, she swayed, but never fell. She couldn't see. She couldn't hear anything, just the rhythmic thudding in her head. Her feet were telling her to move, to run, and to get the hell out of there before Ginny could put the pieces together. But she stayed. She didn't know why.

She felt betrayed and stupid and humiliated. She felt like laughing and crying at the entire situation – at the same time. She felt so much, she felt so full of emotions that she felt nothing at all.

"Ron isn't—but mum said—I," And she gasped the moment Hermione looked up. Her body tensed tremendously as everything dawned on her. "It's you. *You're* the father."

Harry confirmed it by not denying it.

"Ginny, I—"

The sound of her hand connecting with his cheek was all Hermione heard next.

Harry just stood there. Hermione could tell that his face stung horribly, but he didn't stop the hysterical Ginny when she slapped him again. And again. Ginny couldn't speak; words

wouldn't come. She could only make hysterical, shrieking sounds that sounded like she was being skinned alive.

Harry's face was cherry red from her hand when he caught it and pulled his girlfriend in his arms, whispering his apologies as she sobbed freely. She jerked away from him, yelling something almost incoherent as she pounded her fists into his chest. He held on to her anyway as she took out her inconsolable rage on him.

The look on his face clearly showed that he believed that he should be punished.

Hermione could only watch with a heavy heart.

In that moment, she truly pitied Ginny.

"I'm sorry that you had to find out this way. I only just found out myself. I should've—"

Ginny wrenched herself out of his arms, found her wand, and Disapparated with a loud and almost disoriented crack.

There were no words. Hermione was moments from coughing up her heart and giving it to Harry so he could stomp on it again, and Harry—Harry rested a hand on her shoulder and she jumped away as if his touch had scalded her. She didn't want to be there with him. She didn't want to be near him.

He looked hurt by her actions, but what did he expect?

It wasn't supposed to be that way. It wasn't supposed to happen that way.

"Are you okay?"

Before she knew it, she was laughing. Hermione laughed so hard that she had to clutch her sides. "Am...I...okay?" She couldn't speak. It was then that Hermione realised that she was only laughing to hide the fact that she was more hurt by him now than she ever had been before. It was either laugh or cry, and her body was tired of doing the latter. Hermione realized that she would gladly go back to the night of the Marquette incident, because a broken body was still better than a broken heart.

Her laughter immediately stopped as she put on a deadly calm look, "Get out."

"What?"

"Go find her." She didn't particularly condone the dynamics of their relationship, but it was theirs. He didn't need to be there with Hermione. "You need to find her."

"And do what? Talk to her?" Harry scoffed, "I doubt she'll be in a talkative mood."

"Well, I'm not in one either." She couldn't keep the numbness out of her voice, "You shouldn't have told her."

Harry tried to reason with her. "I couldn't let her stand there and say that—"

"I don't care what she says about me. This is not about me. This has *never* been about me. Merlin only knows what she'll do now."

"You're not being fair. Ginny won't do anything."

All she could manage was a doubtful snort. "You don't know that." Shaking, Hermione tried to put Apollo down on the couch, but he wouldn't budge. Hermione closed her eyes and chanted. "This is a nightmare. This isn't real. I'm asleep."

If only that were the case.

He tried to comfort her. "It's going to be fine. We'll figure it out." He sounded so bloody calm for someone with a red cheek. "Just give her some time, she'll come around—"

As if it were a statement of the obvious, she reminded him, "She hates me and she has the perfect ammunition to keep hating me."

"Hermione—"

He obviously wasn't going to listen to her anytime soon. "Harry, go."

For a moment, he looked hurt...and then he looked determined, "Fine, but I want you to know that I mean what I—"

She growled in frustration. "I don't want to discuss that now!"

"Then when?"

Hermione picked up her wand off the ground. Her next words were as cold and numb as she felt. "There are a lot of things that you need to sort out within yourself, a lot of things that you need to figure out, and a lot of things that you need to talk to Ginny about. I don't know who you think you love, but you don't love *me*. The current me. You love the eighteen-year-old me and I'm not her anymore."

"That's not—"

"I'm different, Harry. I've changed. I've done *nothing* but *lose* and *regret*." She almost choked bitterly on the words. "I have good moments, but they don't last because everything turns to utter shit. And that's my cross to bear. That's my divine retribution." She looked down. "I'm not a happy person, and I'm not a very good person either. I'm *broken*, Harry." Hermione almost whispered, her words tasted like ash. "So please, don't tell me that you love me. Stop pressing. Stop pushing your feelings on me. Don't try to make me love you because I can't even love myself."

His eyes were soft, concerned, but she wouldn't let him interject.

"You need to stop, think, and be honest with yourself before you make another declaration of love. And if, at the end of your journey to self-discovery. If, at the end, you still think that you love me—*truly* love me." She looked him in the eyes and found her sight to be blurry.

"Then do us both a favour, Harry—do us both a favour and forget those words. Don't speak them..." she clenched her wand tightly. "And if all fails, lose your voice."

Part Four: Run

She was too disoriented to Apparate, but it was too late.

Hermione landed in a dishevelled heap in a patch of grass, deep inside of an empty park about a quarter of a mile from her intended destination. Pain from the impact shot up her back and she groaned. She felt hard rain pummelling on her back and the loud rumbling of thunder; she was outside in the middle of a violent storm. Not smart. She was soaked through and through by the time she shook off the dizziness and pulled herself to her feet.

She was just happy that she didn't Splinch herself.

Apollo, who had somehow ended up next to her, was shaken, but unscathed.

He didn't look happy that he was wet.

She had scooped her kitten off the ground and ran. She ran so hard and so fast that she could hardly see in front of her. She ran for reasons that she couldn't explain. Panic. Harry. Truth. Ginny. The hurt. Matthew. The pain. Hermione ran for all of those reasons, and so many more.

She ran forward because she couldn't run back.

She realised that she didn't have any shoes on when she stepped on her first rock. Pain shot up her leg and she slowed to a painful limp, hissing. Hermione quickly shook off the pain and started running again. After years of running, it had become second nature to her. Her lungs heaved for oxygen and she took in as much as she could, but there was no stopping to catch her breath. Sweat mixed with rain, and streamed down her face, burning her eyes even further. Hermione ran swiftly, blindly, and silently down the darkening streets; hitting everything that came in her way. Open gates, mailboxes, trashcans that had been blown over, and fallen tree branches; nothing was spared.

Thunder rumbled in the heavens above her head and she could hear the cracking of tree branches all around her.

Apollo was crying, and parts of her wanted to cry with him.

She ran as if Harry was hot on her heels. Stopping was even less of an option than turning back. It was so much easier to run forward. She would run until the voices and the words in her head were silenced; she would run until she reached her destination.

Her vulnerable, sock-covered feet stepped on a countless number of rocks and pebbles, glass and sticks. The pain was almost unbearable, but she couldn't stop. As she rounded the corner, the brief glow of a streetlamp framed her face. She was nowhere near her determined destination, which had been Pansy's house, but she knew where she was. Her feet and legs (and Apollo) had begged for salvation, but her mind cruelly paid no attention. As far as she was concerned, her body could give up and she'd still keep running. Her body could collapse and she wouldn't stop; she would run until there were no roads left.

She was being foolish, but that was of no more relevance to her, anymore.

Turning on the correct street, she finally stopped. The end of her rain-drenched shirt was caught on the fence that she had clipped. Wordlessly, she yanked the fabric with haste. It pulled free, but her shirt is torn at the seams. Ten houses—she was that close when she finally gave in and slowed to a walk. The rain had started to let up a bit. Her body was weak and hurt; her heart was starting to numb from the run.

Hermione checked the address before she rang the bell and waited.

Part Five: Free will

Draco drank his sobering potion before opening the door. And then he realised that being completely sober at that moment was the best idea; at least, when Granger stood on his front step.

Granger looked just as lost as she was wet and dirty.

For once, she wasn't crying, but she looked almost unrecognisable and he couldn't tear his eyes away.

Messy, sopping wet brown hair hung limply over her shoulders. There were bags under her eyes; she looked like she'd lost a week's worth of sleep. Droplets of water still dripped from her clothes, face, and hair. His eyes travelled down to her torn shirt that clung to her body like a second skin, down to her denims, and down to her—why the hell was she still wearing those ridiculous rainbow-coloured socks? Only, they weren't colourful or clean any longer, just worn almost to shreds and full of holes.

Granger shifted her weight from one leg to the other, and bit her lip hard.

She was hurt. "I tried to Apparate to Pansy's," her voice sounded hollow.

Seeing her right then was like watching one of those old, silent Muggle movies where a woman was tied to some train tracks and left to die. She'd scream, but it was in vain. The train was coming, and coming fast. No one was coming for her and all hope seemed lost. The conductor blew his horn and tried to slow down, but he was moving too fast. The viewer

couldn't tear their eyes from the screen, not to blink; nothing could get done until they saw the woman get rescued.

It was the same way he felt for Granger.

The first words he uttered were, "You're wet," that seemed to jolt her.

A wet Apollo jumped from her arms and trotted into his house like he just *knew* Draco wasn't going to turn them away. That bloody beast was probably going to the fireplace to dry off.

Her teeth started chattering uncontrollably, "I-it, uh, it w-was raining."

"How did you get here?" Pansy's house was out in the country. "Why did you Floo?"

Granger was shivering. "I'm not sure. I wasn't thinking, I missed my mark."

He felt more than heard Apollo clawing at his ankle, looking grumpy.

"I-I think he's hungry. You have tuna, right?"

He *had* said that, hadn't he?

Draco lips curved downward into a frown.

He found himself at yet another crossroad with two choices: close the door or let her in. Adapt or fall behind. Move forward or move backwards. Draco burned all the choices from his mind. He stopped categorising and planning and plotting; he was so damn tired of fighting it, at least for that day.

So, he summoned a thick blanket and wrapped it around her trembling shoulders.

And he let her in.

Chapter End Notes

A/N:

- (1) Listened to a lot of Linkin Park while I wrote this. Running became a theme.
- (2) the whole "job list" thing...so something that my friends created for me. Snake wrangler was #185 on my list.
- (3) the deeper meaning behind the last two parts was something I thought that all the romantics would enjoy. Lord we're getting there.

bend and brace for the unexpected

Chapter Notes

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

Chapter Twenty-Two

Bend and Brace for The Unexpected

Part One: Our memories lie

March 18th

The tradition of eating breakfast with Granger every morning had started when he woke up and found her in his kitchen cooking him a 'thank you' breakfast over a month ago.

Naturally, he'd been confused yet compliant because arguing with her about fixing him a fantastic breakfast was pointless. Okay, it was just plain stupid. He had stifled the questions that rose in his mind and enjoyed the French toast. On the second morning, he stared at her strangely, but ate the eggs, bacon, and toast. The fourth morning was a quick morning and she had made a breakfast that fit the occasion. He frowned, but drank the *caffè e latte* and ate the bread that she had baked before he hurried into the fireplace. On the fifth morning, he purposefully didn't come downstairs and was greeted with a warm plate of eggs and sausage. He felt a little guilty on the sixth morning and took her out for breakfast, along with Pansy, who had left early for her meeting with Loon—*Luna Lovegood*.

However, by the time the seventh morning rolled around, he'd had enough:

"Why do you keep coming into my house and fixing breakfast every morning, Granger?"

She merely shrugged and sighed, "I'm tired of eating alone."

Draco said nothing further on the subject.

So, when he awoke to the smell of food, he didn't give it a second thought. He just rolled out of bed and put on a shirt. Draco patted down his hair, washed his face and hands, and came downstairs. It was like clockwork. He wasn't sure exactly when the pyjamas aspect of their 'breakfast relationship' had started, but it had, and he didn't feel like arguing. He didn't blink twice upon seeing her standing over the stove plaid lounge pants that weren't as loose as they had been in the past, a long-sleeved grey shirt, and green slipper socks. Her freshly-cut hair was pulled back into a curly, messy bun.

Yes, Granger had succumbed to Pansy's incessant whining and had gotten her hair cut. He would rather have been hexed into a new dimension than to admit the truth that he was

secretly glad that they didn't completely tame the frizz or her riotous curls; not that Granger would have ever allowed them to even try. The look suited her better than he cared to admit. It was natural, suitable, and made her...well, Granger.

In that moment, however, he had the oddest urge to release her hair from the bun...

His voice was still hoarse from sleep when he greeted her, "Morning."

"Morning," she glanced at him over her shoulder before resuming her task. She was mixing eggs with a whisk while charmed knives chopped up various vegetables into small pieces. "How did you sleep?"

"Fine." Well, it wasn't a complete lie.

The nightmares had slowly waned as time went on, but the insomnia was ruthless.

Granger looked at him again. "How long?"

Her question wasn't clear, but Draco knew what she was asking.

Foolishly, he had confessed to Granger about his insomnia the night that she had shown up on his doorstep. He'd told her too much, but in his defence, *she* had started the conversation. It was as if he'd had Veritaserum poured down his throat.

Once he started, he couldn't stop.

And if Draco *hadn't* divulged everything about his resentment towards his father and the two times that he'd nearly lost his life, then he had come extremely close. It had started quite innocently, actually. While he picked a shard of glass from the sole of her foot and healed them, she told him about her argument with Potter and the girl-Weasley just to keep her mind off the pain. He was too busy concentrating on his task. While she drank a pain potion and he found milk and tuna for the hungry (and displeased) kitten, he told her about seeing Lovegood and Longbottom. When Granger came back downstairs after changing into dry clothes, she told him about her panic attack and how she had foolishly tried to Apparate.

Conversation seemed to move forward and the next thing he knew, it was three in the morning...

She was curled up under a blanket on one end of his sofa while he sat comfortably on the opposite end. There was space between them, almost like someone had constructed an invisible wall.

"Do you honestly know how lucky you are, Malfoy?" Granger asked faintly.

"I don't consider myself a lucky man. Contrary to popular beliefs, nothing that I have obtained has been given to me on a platinum platter." Draco surprised even himself with his raw honesty.

She merely gave an understanding nod that spoke volumes. "Still, you've got parents."

Draco shook his eyes, "I have an insane father that, on each Tuesday, I have to sit and observe as he deteriorates before my eyes."

"He's still your father, no matter what state he's in."

"Please," Draco scoffed, "He's not been my father for a long time. He was consumed with the family businesses, being a pillar of the community to keep his past hidden, and keeping his many mistresses happy. My mother puts him on a pedestal, but she spent most of my childhood miserable and angry at him for his indiscretions. Despite the fact that he thought of her as weak, she loved him—we both did. But he didn't love us enough to keep us out of danger." He couldn't extract the bitterness from his voice if he tried.

She fixed her lips to speak, "My therapist said that people forget that their memories are faulty—"

He didn't give her much of a chance to say anything else because he wasn't inclined to listen. Not that night. Not about him. "I remember everything with perfect clarity. I remember the arguments; I remember Mother begging him to think about us before he ran off to be the toady of the Dark Lord."

Granger just stared at him.

Draco pulled himself together and pressed on, "Anyway, besides a delusional father, I have a mother that blissfully ignores the reality that her husband is dying, and instead chooses to have hope."

She sat up from her reclined position. "Is it wrong for her to have hope? Most of the important things in the world have been accomplished by people who have kept on trying when there seemed to be no hope at all."

He frowned and quoted his father for the first time in years, "Hope is the denial of reality."

Granger stared at him for another moment, bemused, before she crossed her legs, Indian-style. "Well, it looks like I'm not the only one who needs to change their mindset."

"That very well may be true."

They were silent until Granger cleared her throat. "I should thank you."

He raised his brow, "For what?"

She took a deep breath and shrugged, "For, you know, being my..." Granger trailed off.

Draco stared at the fire. "It's not a bad word."

"Neither is hope, but you say the word as if it disgusts you. You're far from hopeless, Malfoy."

"And you're far from friendless, Granger." He shot back.

They sat at an impasse. Draco planted his feet firmly back on the ground and reached for a book on his table. Meanwhile, Granger arose from the sofa, padded across the room, and picked up the napping kitten, much to his initial irritation. All, apparently, was forgiven when she started petting him and rubbing his little pointed ears.

Apollo's contented purrs, the sound of his own train of thought, and the crackling of burning wood were the only things that he heard for a while. Granger curled back on the sofa with Apollo, but now she sat right next to him. Granger looked down at the open book on his lap, draped the blanket over her legs, and rubbed her kitten's head affectionately. He glanced over at the woman, raised his brow again, and continued reading.

If he had closed his ears any sooner, he would've missed her mumbled word: "Friend."

"Malfoy?"

Draco's head jerked up and he found himself looking at a concerned Hermione Granger. She held a bottle of canola oil in her hand. "Sorry, you were saying?"

"How long were you up?"

The answer was muttered before he could really reconsider. "Three hours, give or take. I finished reviewing the files for a case I'm working on." He looked around the floor for the grey kitten, but didn't see any sign of him. In fact, she hadn't brought the kitten around at all. "Where's Apollo?"

When her shoulders shook with mirth, he realised that he had successfully changed the topic.

Apollo had turned out to be exactly what she needed.

She returned to her task, pouring the eggs into a hot pan. "Probably right where I left him—in my bed. I told him that he could come with me, but he gave me a 'you've got to be kidding' look, closed his eyes, and went back to sleep." Granger shook her head and chuckled under her breath. "He's a little hesitant about travelling with me, but I suppose I can't blame him." She effortlessly caught the summoned spatula in her right hand before she gave him a glance. "Now, what *don't* you want on your omelette?"

Draco came up beside her and scanned the chopped vegetables and minced meats on the cutting board. "Onions and zucchini," he replied distastefully.

Granger chuckled and nodded, she set off to fix his omelette first. For a moment, he just watched her. She looked different when she was cooking. *Calm* and *tranquil* were two words that best described her during those times. He admitted internally that he'd rather see a peaceful Granger than a restive one. Some days she hummed songs that he had heard on her jukebox, some days she remained quiet, and some days she even talked to him while cooking. Draco watched as she methodically stuffed his omelette with chopped vegetables, cheese, and crumbled sausage. She never measured anything, he noticed, but everything was still done to perfection.

"Are you interested in learning how to cook?"

"Malfoys don't cook," he responded snootily.

"Don't or can't?" she challenged with a side glance.

Because he had no answer, Draco glared at her. She merely smirked in return. He had a sneaking suspicion that Granger was just jesting, which was odd. Their banter was usually in the scathing form, so it was different—but not all that strange or uncomfortable. He didn't know that she had a sense of humour, but figured that as she coped, she'd slowly return to the Granger that he had known from school. But changed, if that made any sense at all.

"I think you'd be a good cook."

"And why do you think that, Granger?" He replied evenly.

"You don't allow failed attempts to stop you, you're precise, and you're interested. You were good at Potions, if I remember correctly."

He nodded. "Yes, but how do you figure that I'm interested?"

"You always watch me cook." She said flippantly.

Draco felt like someone had tossed ice-cold water on him.

Blaise had assumed that he had considered her romantically, which was such a ridiculous idea that he found himself thinking about it often.

In comparison, Granger was far more intelligent than the lot of them, *but* Granger was no raving beauty. When they were in school, Blaise had said that she was pretty in a fresh way, and while Draco had completely disagreed, he had gradually changed his mind from a firm no to a maybe. She was pretty *enough* now that she had, for the most part, regained her physique. Not captivating, but—

With a small shake of his head, Draco immediately banished the thought from his mind.

If Granger was the best he could come up with when it came to a potential companion, then he would happily concede to live the rest of his life as a bachelor.

"I brought more filters for the coffee-maker."

Draco, a bit startled by her voice, snapped his head in her direction to find her looking at him.

"You said you wanted more filters."

Ah, the coffee-maker.

Naturally, when she brought that blasted machine into his kitchen twenty days ago, he'd vehemently resisted, to put it nicely. Truthfully, he'd gone on a mini-rampage. But how could he not? Not only was she infiltrating his life, she was invading his house with her Muggle appliances and trying to change the way he drank his bloody coffee. Did he tell her how to drink her sodding hot chocolate? No. But she had the *nerve* to tell him that Muggles had the

option of making coffee at home, and that he should try it. Coffee—made at home? That was the most foolish thing that he had ever heard in his life.

The one-sided argument had gone on for about fifteen minutes while Granger ignored him and ground up the beans in a noisy little machine, poured the ground beans into a piece of filter paper, she poured water into the coffee-maker, and turned on the sodding Muggle device. It was then that she told him that he was being *silly*.

Silly!

Draco, meanwhile, had raged on.

After all, he had standards. There was a lot of shit that he could take, but she was testing his patience with homemade coffee. Yes, he wasn't as bigoted against Muggle technology, but there were things that tasted better when they were made by professionals. Coffee was one of them and—well, that was until he had reluctantly tasted the coffee that she had practically shoved into his face.

If it *wasn't* the best coffee he had ever tasted...bloody hell, and if she *didn't* have a smug look on her face when he had refused to give the mug back to her.

Instead of speaking or even thanking her for the filters to the coffeemaker that he had refused to return to her, Draco just gave Granger a gruff nod and shuffled over to the cabinet that housed his previously ground coffee. It had taken six mornings, five cups of coffee that looked (and tasted) like tar, four burnt fingers, three combined hours of cursing, two broken coffee pots, and one humoured Granger for him to learn how to make the perfect cup of coffee. The only thing that had salvaged his pride was the fact that his coffee tasted even better than hers.

"What do you want to drink, Granger?" He figured that since she cooked, he could make her a drink.

"I brought over orange juice."

With a flick of his wand, he set the table and poured her juice. Then, he sat down with his coffee.

A few minutes later, they were eating in silence.

Oddly enough, he could gauge Granger's mood and how much she had slept the previous night by the amount of food that she cooked. When she was in a good mood and had had a restful night of sleep, she kept her meals simple and reasonable, but when she hadn't—she usually took plates to both Pansy and Blaise...and to her boss and her entire team of curse-breakers.

Today, evidently, was a good day.

She had made breakfast for two: omelettes and buttered toast. She chopped up fresh fruit, thrown in a few walnuts, and called it a fruit salad. Draco really didn't like walnuts, but he

didn't complain. He never did. He would eat everything else and when they cleared the dishes, she'd notice whatever was uneaten and keep it out of future meals. That was just how they worked. He hadn't really noticed the pattern until just then. Draco thought about fighting it, but didn't. It just worked too bloody well. He didn't have to lie to her or put up a front. He had a choice.

"You know, I've been thinking about your insomnia—why don't you take Dreamless Draught?"

"Why don't *you*?" He countered a bit brusquely.

Granger cocked a brow. "Why would I?"

"You have nightmares."

Her eyes went a little hazy. "I don't think of dreaming about Matthew as a nightmare, actually."

"And your parents?"

She merely shrugged, "It's nice to see them again."

He looked at her as if she'd gone mad. "That's not healthy."

"I know, but that's how I cope with the things that I can't change." She told him honestly and asked, "How do you? How do you cope with everything that's happened?"

Draco rolled his eyes. "I just do."

"I don't believe you."

Draco sighed.

She picked a piece of fruit with her fork and shot a cool look. "You don't accept criticism as well as you give it out."

He was aware.

Granger's eyes narrowed. "So, how do you cope with your father's illness?"

"After everything I've told you, do you honestly think that I care about my father?"

She took a few bites of her omelette before she wiped her lips with a napkin. "Beneath your anger and resentment, I think that you do, in a way."

"You're wrong."

"Maybe I am, but I don't think so," She ate a strawberry and chewed thoughtfully before she continued, "You don't strike me as the type that gives up on anything, Malfoy. Maybe there were times when you wanted to, but in the end, you didn't. I just don't see you completely

giving up on your father. If you didn't care about him, then you wouldn't visit him. If you didn't care you wouldn't protect him from the rest of your family."

Perhaps, she had a point about his persistent nature, but she was wrong about Lucius Malfoy. "I keep him hidden and protected from everyone for purely selfish reasons, I assure you. The fact that he breathes keeps me and my mother safe from my uncles and the rest of the Malfoy family. Believe me when I say that if things were different and I had control over his fate, I wouldn't even hesitate to—"

"To what?" Granger set down her fork and folded her arms. "Let him kill himself? Or would *you* kill him?" She questioned in a challenging voice and then snorted, "You're not at all capable of doing either of those, Draco."

He wasn't used to his given name slipping from her lips with such ease, and it threw him. "I don't want to discuss this anymore." The conversation was over.

Granger stubbornly accepted it and continued eating her breakfast.

It didn't last forever.

"Malfoy," Granger set down her glass and picked up her fork again. She sectioned off a piece of her half-eaten omelette and stabbed it with her fork. "Can you tell Pansy that I'm going to need to cancel dinner plans? I'm going to the Burrow."

Immediately, Draco paused. While he knew what that meant, he decided that it would be wise if he said nothing at all. Granger had recently decided that she was no longer going to alienate and hide herself from the people of her past. Starting with her lunch with Lovegood and Longbottom, she had been slowly reconnecting with her old friends. Pansy and Blaise had volunteered and taken turns being her moral support, while he only went when she asked him. It wasn't often, just once since she had started the campaign, but he quickly realised that Granger apparently wanted him around for the toughest reconnections.

He had no idea why.

Needless to say, the dinner with Bill and Fleur Weasley nine days prior had been impossibly awkward for a host of reasons. While an obviously nervous Fleur Weasley rattled on in broken English, Granger spent most of the dinner staring at her plate to avoid the oldest Weasley son's eyes and Draco spent most of the dinner staring at the other man's scars...

"Hermione," The eldest Weasley's voice permeated the thick air of silence.

It was the first time that he had addressed her since their initial hug. It wasn't that he hadn't tried; his wife nervously held the reins of the conversation and no one had taken them away. Weasley's wife had escaped the tension by excusing herself to the bathroom to "freshen up". Draco would've paid good money to escape, as well, but there he was...sitting at the sodding table.

After half of a vial of Calming Draught, Granger had still been so shaky and nervous when they had left for dinner that he thought that he'd have to slip the rest into her water.

Slowly, Granger looked up and Draco saw the unease and dread in her eyes—and then he felt it when she squeezed the life out of his hand. Draco winced, and then concealed the pain under a sneer when Bill Weasley looked at him oddly. It may have looked like they were holding hands, but in actuality, he was quite certain that he had no hand. The circulation was gone.

For the last ten minutes, he had been trying to get her to loosen the vice grip, she just squeezed harder every time he attempted to wrench his hand loose. The pain had made him briefly consider self-amputation.

The steak knife looked more and more appealing with each passing second...

"As you know, Ron and I talked once he returned from Romania—"

"Look," her voice sounded so defeated, "I understand that you—"

"Don't think for one second that I hate you. None of us do, not even Ron. He's upset, of course he is, but he's working on himself. If anything, we understand. I'm not saying that everyone would've been exactly thrilled about the circumstances, but we just wished that you would've told us, we wished that we could've helped, we wished that we could've supported you through it all—"

She stared at him dubiously. Her voice was softer than usual, "I hurt you all when I left. I hurt you all with the truth and with the lies. Why would you say all of that to me?"

"You've always been like a little sister to me, Hermione. You may not be our flesh and blood, but you're part of our family. You always have been, ever since you were the pushy, know-it-all, bookworm who drove us all mad." The eldest Weasley son chuckled at the memory before he smiled, "Families don't turn their back on someone, particularly when they make mistakes. Your family doesn't stop loving you, regardless of what you've done. And while I'm sure we all can think about 'what if', we can't change the past. All we can do is learn from it and focus on right now. All we can do is join in and help you pick up the pieces."

Granger's grip loosened.

Draco tumbled out of the memory only to find that he was sitting alone at the cleared table. Granger was magically cleaning his kitchen and for a second, he watched her.

So much had happened that night. They both left the restaurant feeling as if the weight of the world had been lifted from their shoulders. Hers was gone with Bill Weasley's reminder that she was still part of their family. And his was gone with a handshake at the conclusion of dinner and six words: *"I don't blame you for anything."*

The relief that had flooded his brain from those words was indescribable. He had told himself that he didn't care if they blamed him. He had told himself that he wouldn't ask for their forgiveness because he had done what anyone would do in that situation; he chose life, not just for himself, but for his family as well. But Bill Weasley's words had only made him realise just how much he *had* cared.

"When are you going to St. Mungo's?" Granger's question drew him from his thoughts.

Draco Malfoy gathered his wits before responding. "I'm meeting my mother there in about four hours."

Part Two: So much to do to set my heart right

By the time Hermione finished telling Molly Weasley about everything, Hermione found herself surprisingly dry-eyed as she hugged the woman who had been another mother to her through the years. It wasn't that she wasn't sad; talking about her parents and Matthew was still just as gut-wrenching as ever, but at that moment, the grief wasn't too overbearing. Yes, she still hated herself and she still regretted, but it wasn't overwhelming.

Hermione hugged Mrs. Weasley in the same lounge room where she had 'dumped' her youngest son. She understood that her self-loathing didn't mean that she had to put her life on hold, her guilt didn't mean that she couldn't progress at the same time, and her regrets didn't mean that she had to live her life inside a box. Her therapist had once said that she had to embrace the pain and burn it as fuel for her journey. She had no idea what Ms Shepard had meant at the time, but right there in The Burrow's lounge room, she understood.

Mrs. Weasley pulled away and wiped the tears from her red-rimmed eyes. "Oh, forgive me, I'm just crying all over you!"

Hermione just gave her a soft smile, "Only if you forgive me first."

"Oh, pish-posh, there's nothing to forgive." She shook her red head. "I told you that already."

"I—" She stopped herself from saying something negative and nodded.

Mrs. Weasley hugged her again. Hermione just closed her eyes and accepted the love and support the woman offered with her embrace. She didn't think that she could ever get enough. There was peace, and all of the troubling thoughts that resided in the back of her mind were muffled...and then silenced.

She needed this.

"You're family. No matter what, we'll still love you."

Hermione had heard those words twice in the last two weeks, but they hadn't failed to make the emotions swell in her chest. No, she didn't cry like she had the last time, instead, she just lifted her head off Molly's shoulder and gave a watery-eyed smile. "Thank you."

"No, don't thank me for something that you've always had."

Hermione just nodded, but said nothing further. Her heart was just too full.

Mrs. Weasley took her by the hands and led her to a sofa. They sat, ate treacle tarts, drank milk, and enjoyed the silence for a little while. "How have you been holding up since...?" Mrs. Weasley trailed off, looking into her cup nervously.

"Fine."

"Ron's doing much better."

For a moment, Hermione fixed her lips to remind her that she hadn't asked, but stopped herself. She knew what Mrs. Weasley was trying to say with that comment. "*Ron's doing better*," meant that when she was ready, Ron was ready to talk to her. Ron had never been the type to seek her out whenever he wanted to talk, and it looked like some things had never changed. That was probably a good thing because she didn't think that she could take any more surprises after the last one.

Hermione wasn't quite sure how to respond to Mrs. Weasley's statement, so she muttered, "Oh?"

"Yes."

Was she ready to talk to Ron?

There were so many conflicting emotions that waged war at the prospect. There was much they needed to discuss, much they needed to resolve, and much they needed to put behind them.

The task was daunting, but if Ron was ready, then so was she.

"I'm glad he's doing better." Hermione said genuinely.

Another comfortable silence passed. That was until Molly Weasley picked up the single picture of Matthew that Hermione had brought with her. It was of him sleeping in his bed, clutching his lion, and looking as if he hadn't a care in the world. Molly Weasley fingered the photograph lovingly, "He was such an adorable little boy."

"Yes," Hermione's voice was a bit hoarse, "Yes, he was."

"He looks like Harry a bit in this. Bless his hair."

She smiled.

"How have you been holding up?"

"About as well as anyone would." Hermione replied honestly, "I just take life one day at a time. Some days the pain is unbearable, and other days it's just a dull ache. I'm still trying to get myself back together."

Mrs. Weasley just nodded with understanding. "When Fred died, we were devastated, as you know. It just felt like something—"

"—was missing, and you didn't know how to find it." Hermione finished softly and willed the tears to stay down, "That's how I felt. At first, I was a mess. And then, I was numb. I didn't think it was real. I woke up the following morning and expected him to come crawling into my bed, and when he didn't..." she trailed off and stared into her cup of milk. Hermione's hands were shaking so hard that Mrs. Weasley had to pry the cup from her hands.

"It's okay," the older woman soothed as she put the cup down and rubbed Hermione's back.

Nodding slowly, she pressed on. Talking to Mrs. Weasley was easy. She had lost a son. She knew how Hermione was feeling because she had gone through the same experience. "I just thought that I had done something wrong and that taking Matthew was my way of being punished. But when we buried him..." Hermione trailed off again, shaking her head. The tears were rising, fast, but they wouldn't fall. Why wouldn't they fall? "When I came back to London, I crawled inside of this hole and refused to come out. I was so guilty, so trapped in the past, and so depressed. I felt like everything I touched, everything I cared about, always ended up dying. So, I refused to care about anything. Not even myself. I hate myself a lot of days, but I'm working on that."

Mrs. Weasley batted the tears out of her eyes and rubbed away the lone tear that ran down Hermione's cheek.

"It was so easy to climb into the hole, but it's been so hard to climb out."

"Climbing down a mountain is much easier than climbing up one."

"I'm ready to live again."

And not in the sense that she merely existed, as she had in the past. No, she wanted to be more than just a war hero, more than a daughter who had lost her parents, more than a mother who had lost her child, and more than a person who had lost her way.

Hermione wanted her life to *mean* something...she didn't know exactly what she wanted it to mean, but it *had* to mean something more than this. She wanted to be happy rather than sad. She wanted to smile more and cry less. She wanted to have friends and not allies. She wanted to breathe and not be stifled. She wanted to love like she had when she was younger. She wanted to be more trusting rather than cautious. She wanted to wake up each day and be okay with herself. Perhaps she would never find true peace, but she would take contentment.

Those desires weren't new; they were the same ones that she had had when she'd started therapy. Hermione doubted that she had *really* wanted those things back then. Those words sounded pretty, they were exactly what Ms Shepard wanted to hear, but Hermione realised in that moment that they hadn't been the truth.

Well, now they were.

Hermione had started therapy for all the wrong reasons, despite good intentions. It seemed that was the story of her life. She went to therapy for Matthew, her parents; she'd gone because her life was spiralling out of control, and she had even gone it so Pansy wouldn't worry.

But now—now she was going to do things for herself.

Molly gave Hermione a chaste kiss on the top of her forehead before she spoke. "If there is anything at all that I can do to—"

"Just talking to you about it has helped more than words can express." Hermione replied honestly. Merlin only knew how hard her heart raced only seconds before she had started talking. But, as soon as she had begun, she felt light-headed and dizzy with relief; all she could do was continue. "I can't tell you how relieved I am that you actually listened to me."

"Believe me when I say that I'll always listen, so long as you speak." Mrs. Weasley tucked Hermione's unruly hair behind her ears before a great smile broke across her splotchy face. There was no need to reminisce. Everything was out and in the open. It was a great feeling. "It feels so good to have you back here." She hugged Hermione again before she pulled her to her feet. Mrs. Weasley made her lift her arms so she could assess her figure. "You were always such a curvy thing. Now you're about as thin as Luna." She fussed. "Have you eaten lunch yet?"

"I'm not all that hungry—"

"Well, of course you are!" Molly fussed. "I was just so excited that you were coming today that I spent half the morning making all of your favourites. Mashed potatoes, steak and kidney pie, chicken, asparagus, pork chops, Yorkshire pudding..." Mrs. Weasley trailed off as she turned on her heels and started towards the kitchen. She apparently wasn't done calling out all the dishes she had made. "And, you know, I think I'll make some shepherd's pie, green beans, and curry chicken..." At that point, Hermione could no longer hear her.

She grinned.

Some things didn't change, but that was fine. It was actually quite a relief.

Hermione picked up the picture of Matthew off the coffee table and touched the photograph with her fingers. He definitely would've loved it here. He would have loved Molly. And Molly would have loved doting on him. She rose to her feet and turned to start her journey to the kitchen, but froze.

Ronald Weasley stood in the doorway.

Part Three: Stop and stare

The air that circulated inside of St. Mungo's was cleaned, purified, recycled, dry, and dead.

It never failed to make Draco's stomach churn uncontrollably or make him spontaneously dry heave every few minutes. His mouth was dry, his lips felt chapped, and it seemed that the air had sucked up all moisture from every living thing that walked down the hallway. Draco

would never get used to the air or the smell of stale cleanliness, and there was nothing more that he wanted than to turn around and leave not just the fourth floor, but the entire hospital.

He hated coming there with a burning passion.

But there Draco was, walking down a glossy white hall on the fourth floor, towards Ward 67.

The halls were empty and that, in and of itself, was odd. They never confined the patients to their wards without reason. Even though the doors to the other wards were shut, every now and then he saw a face pressed up against the little glass square. Draco would look at them, tilt his head to the left, and give them a curious expression. They always mimicked his actions before they pasted a silly grin on their faces.

It was a shame, what war had done to so many decent people.

Draco stopped and looked around.

It wasn't that he was afraid of his father, though he had had every reason to be in the past... but not anymore. He was no longer violent nor did he speak adamantly about veagles. They had controlled his outrageous mood-swings and his hallucinations with an obscene number of potions and a bit of Muggle medicine. Now, he was docile and often spent days staring at the wall, completely ignorant of every person that came into his room. He lacked emotion, passion, and will. Mother could be standing right in front of him and he wouldn't even blink. He didn't eat. He didn't sleep. They kept him nourished, but it wasn't as good as food and water.

Needless to say, there had been no signs of improvement as the weeks and months had droned on.

Lucius Malfoy was deteriorating, and his entire team of Healers knew it. Every day, every hour, every minute, and every second, they were losing him. And there wasn't a damn thing they could do, except watch and wait.

Strangely enough, it had turned into a demented mental game for Draco. Would he succumb this week? Tomorrow? Today? In an hour? Mother chose to have hope, while he had been more realistic and had started making plans, just in case.

He didn't want them to be ill-prepared so Draco had his solicitor check his father's will; just to be absolutely certain that he had left everything to him. He didn't want them to be blindsided by the rest of the family during what would be a rough time so he had created an iron-clad property-transfer scheme in case of Father's death: he had used the durable power of attorney that Lucius had signed prior to his incarceration at Azkaban to buy all outstanding company shares, assuring board control for himself. Additionally, he had transferred all monetary accounts into accounts in his name, only. Lucius had signed all relevant property deeds over to him, as well. Lastly, Draco had taken it upon himself to strengthen his relationship with his uncle, Arcturus. It was to the point where they were writing each other regularly, and on matters that didn't only involve business. No one messed with his uncle, and his uncle wouldn't let anyone bother him.

Or so he hoped.

After he had handled the business aspect of his preparation plans, he had enlisted his three friends to help in their own way. Blaise had helped him start to make overall funeral arrangements, discreetly, of course. Pansy's job was to write what would be printed in the obituary. And Granger, who had finally accepted that arguing with him about having hope was futile, had made him a list of everything that he would need to do between now and then. She gathered every document that he would need upon his father's death and gave him ideas from her personal experiences.

Draco felt like he was prepared for anything.

With a sigh, he started walking again, passing Ward 65 before a noise stopped him yet again.

It wasn't just a random noise; it was a voice. A raised voice.

Draco prided himself in not being some bloody Gryffindor who ran in with his wand blazing. Instead, he slowed his steps so he could listen before he intervened, but he heard nothing except a muffled, panicked scream.

Then, there was nothing.

Someone had put up a silencing charm, he deduced rather quickly. Though he preferred for it not to be true, Draco knew that the noises could only have come from one room.

Ward 67.

Just as he approached the door to his father's ward that was located at the end of the long hall, it flew open and his mother practically ran out. Immediately, she spotted her son and threw her arms around him, hugging him close and crying on his shoulder. She needed the comfort, but Draco was rather speechless. She hadn't hugged him in such a manner since the night Father had nearly strangled him to death. He was so startled that he held on to her without question.

"What's happened?" He asked once her tears had finally subsided.

It disturbed him greatly to see his mother so distressed.

Gradually, his mother pulled herself out of Draco's arms and elegantly batted the tears off her face with the handkerchief that she had been clutching in her fist. Her eyes were laced with dread. "I don't know. I was sitting with your father, trying to figure out just why his cheek had begun to droop when and all of a sudden something happened..." his mother trailed off as her breaths started coming faster.

Before she could start sobbing again, he asked again, "What, Mother?"

Narcissa shut her blue eyes. "He—he started having a fit. He grabbed his head as if something inside his head was causing him unspeakable pain." His mother's eyes flew open as she exclaimed, "I didn't know what to do!" Her hands were a trembling mess. "He tried to speak, but I didn't understand him; his voice was so slurred! I didn't know how to help him, I

called for a Healer. Lucius started vomiting not too long after." Narcissa fisted his shirt, obviously traumatized from what she had seen.

Draco remained disgustingly calm, but his heart raced for some odd reason.

He wasn't supposed to *care*.

"What have they told you?"

Her voice did little to hide her own frustration. "Nothing! I don't know what's happening! No one will talk to me. They just rushed into the room and started speaking in their Healer jargon. They told me to wait outside! I'm his wife!" she ground out, visibly shaking, "I'm supposed to be in there."

Draco wasn't sure how to process what she had just said. He felt as if his thoughts were being muzzled; all he heard was a low hum that originated in his own head.

"Calm down, Mother. I'll..." Draco trailed off, but shook his head, hardened his face, squared his shoulders, and looked at his mother with determination. "I will go see what I can find out." She nodded and said nothing further. She was still wiping the tears from her face when he side-stepped her and approached the door to Ward 67.

His mind was blank, save for the soft hum, and Draco had a crushing feeling that everything was about to change. He twisted the knob and slowly pulled opened the door.

Immediately, he wished he hadn't.

The room was in utter chaos. Healers were yelling spells and yelling at each other, two Medi-witches were cleaning the vomit off the floor with their wands, and Draco just stood in the doorway, frozen. He knew that something serious and irreversible was occurring at that moment.

There was a break in the semi-circle that had formed around his father's bed, allowing him to see the man who had sired him. Other than the line of dried vomit on the corner of his mouth, he looked as if he were just sleeping.

Just sleeping.

It didn't take long for Draco to be spotted.

"Mr Malfoy," one of the Healers called, "You should wait outside with your mother."

"I've come to find out what is going on with my father."

"Mr Malfoy, I have to ask you—"

"No," he cut the Healer off brusquely, "You have to tell me what's wrong with my father."

The man sighed, "We are still trying to determine exactly what is going on—"

"What do you mean you don't know what's wrong with him? He's unconscious!"

"Mr Malfoy, we're trying to help your father. Let us do our jobs. Someone will be out to talk to you as soon as possible."

It wasn't the answer that he wanted, but it was the answer that he accepted. With a stiff nod, he left the Healers to their work. As soon as he shut the door, his mother was right there, almost hysterically demanding to know what was going on. He told her everything that he knew, just to calm her down, and together they waited. Draco took to pacing to control his thoughts, while his mother stood directly in front of the door like a puppy that was waiting anxiously for her master to return from a long trip.

Fifteen minutes later when Narcissa's reserve was seconds from being broken, another Healer walked out. Draco stopped pacing and Narcissa immediately pushed herself off the wall. He stood beside her when she anxiously asked. "What news on my husband?"

The Healer gestured down the hall, "There is a waiting room a few doors down, if you would —"

"No," was her sharp reply. "I will *not* go to some waiting room," Narcissa snarled and then demanded. "I want you to tell me what is going on with my husband and I want you to tell me right this instant!"

After a pregnant silence, the man sighed, "His organs are shutting down rapidly—faster than before."

"What—" his mother grabbed his hand, hard. Draco tried to cover his wince with a frown. "Why now?"

"That I cannot determine, but we will see what we can do."

His mother looked as if life as she knew it was ending. "So—so," a flustered Narcissa finally spoke up, "What do we do now?"

"We have transferred him upstairs where a team of Healers are going to assess him and determine what triggered the sudden decline in his health."

His mother was shaking, but she remained strong, for both their sakes. "And—and his prognosis?"

"We don't know, Mrs. Malfoy," the calm Healer replied, but the slight waver in his voice told Draco all that he needed to know. "Right now, we're just trying to keep him alive."

That last sentence did his mother in.

Draco hadn't seen his mother cry so openly in years. In fact, it was the night of the final battle, when they were going home, that she had held him and sobbed her heart out while he had just sat there, numb. Father was staring out the window absently, pretending not to hear the sniffles and sobs of his wife. In the hallway of the fourth floor of St. Mungo's, she had broken down in such intense sobs that Draco and the man had to escort her to the private

waiting room. It seemed like a lifetime had passed before she had calmed down long enough to release him. Draco quickly slipped from her tight embrace and asked the Healer if he could speak to him in the hall.

He shut the door behind him and turned to the man, eyes fierce and narrowed. "I am not my mother, so don't try and feed me bullshit. Tell me the truth. Tell me everything that you know."

The Healer didn't hesitate for a moment, but he didn't show any signs of being affected by Draco's tone. "I think it has to do with his brain, maybe something in the part of his brain that controls organ functions. I have a few hypotheses, but nothing concrete."

"What are his chances?"

"The best that we can do is put him in a type of magical stasis, but it's really too early to tell."

"Is that all?"

"You want me to be frank, Mr Malfoy, so I will. You and your mother need to hope for the best, but if I were you, I would prepare for the worst. Now if you'll excuse me..."

Draco stared at the retreating form of the Healer.

His heart felt like it was about to race right out of his chest.

Prepare, eh?

Obviously, he wasn't as prepared as he had once thought.

Chapter End Notes

A/N

(1) I wanted to show how over six weeks had changed Draco and Hermione's relationship, and a bit of the changes in Draco. HE IN DENIAL.

(2) Hermione's response to Draco's bit about hope is a quote by Dale Carnegie: "Most of the important things in the world have been accomplished by people who have kept on trying when there seemed to be no hope at all."

(3) Draco's belief about hope comes a quote by Margaret Weis: "Hope is the denial of reality."

i will follow you into the dark

Chapter Summary

"I think that the knowing and waiting for a blow that you can't avoid hurts more than the actual blow."

Chapter Notes

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

Chapter Twenty-Three

I Will Follow You Into The Dark

Part One: No guarantees

According to Ms Shepard, challenges were presented in everything. If there was no challenge and no sacrifice, then there was no reaping the benefits of growth and learning. Hermione tried to remember that as she stared at Ron.

There was something different about him. The hard lines on his face had gone soft, the blue eyes that had once looked at her with such disgust were now gentle, and the tension that seemed to wrack his body was gone. Hermione's eyes met Ron's, but then she redirected her gaze to her feet.

There were no guarantees in life. Maybe it was time. Maybe she could apply that phrase to something a bit more positive.

Hermione sucked in a breath and took a step, then another. She had made so many mistakes in the past that she had stopped making decisions just so she wouldn't make mistakes. But there would be no more of that. She had a feeling that the odds were always going to be against her in whatever she chose to do because of who she was and what kind of life she had lived. It wasn't supposed to be easy, but she had survived this long. She could keep on going.

Every experience, every person, and every situation had a learning experience attached.

This situation wasn't any different. She was ready to learn, and that thought propelled her forward until she was standing in front of him.

Ron's first words to Hermione were a hesitant, "I'm not here to fight with you."

The relief that flooded her brain was inexpressible. "Honestly, that's really a relief because I'm sick of fighting everything and everybody."

He dug the toe of his shoe into the carpet almost nervously. "Mum told me you were coming, just—just in passing. She'll probably hex me into the next century when she finds out I'm here, but I thought... I thought that we should talk."

Ron was nervous, too? Well, that made her feel infinitely better.

Hermione slowly lifted her eyes to meet his. He towered over her, but not threateningly.

"You know, I never thought that we would be here." Ron's voice was soft.

"And where exactly are we?"

"Here, you know, standing in front of each other like strangers and not beside each other like..." he trailed off for an awkward moment. "Once we started dating, I never thought that we would stop."

Neither did she, but Hermione remained tight-lipped about the subject. After all, they were in the very room where they went their separate ways. It just didn't seem right to discuss their demise.

"Remember all the plans we made?"

Hermione shut her eyes and swallowed the bubble of emotion that threatened to rise from the pit of her stomach. They were going to date a while, get married, have two children (one boy, one girl), and grow old together. And the more she thought about their plans, the more she didn't want to discuss them. She didn't want to discuss anything. All it did was remind her of how differently everything had turned out. All it did was remind her why she didn't make plans anymore. More often than not, they fell to pieces.

"When you left, I wondered if you really meant what you said."

She broke her silence with a soft, "I did." Hermione did little to hide her bitterness, "But life has a funny way of wrecking one's plans."

Another silence fell between them.

"So, are you happy?"

"Are you, Ron?" She genuinely wanted to know.

He merely shrugged, "I have no complaints. There's always room for more important things, like marriage and a family..." He met her eyes again. "You never answered my question, though."

Hermione stared at him for a minute. "I don't even know what to say." She told him honestly. "How could I possibly be happy after losing so much?"

"I—I don't know." He shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

"I'm not happy." She confessed honestly, "I haven't been for a while. I—I don't know that I'll ever be blissfully happy, but I do think that one day I'll at least be content. I'm already getting to the point where I can accept the things that have happened. I'm getting to the point where I can live with myself. I'm getting to the point where I feel comfortable in my own skin. And, to be honest, I'm okay with that for right now."

"You've changed." He told her, and the tone of his voice told her that he wasn't sure if her change had been for the better.

"I had no choice but to change, Ron."

As she held his gaze, she realised just how much *he* had changed. Physically, he didn't seem as gawky as he had been. He had the same personality, but he seemed a bit subdued; at least, he did at that moment. Everything about him was strange and unfamiliar because he was essentially a stranger. Their lives had run along different paths, filled with different experiences and different life lessons. And now that their paths had crossed again, she wasn't sure what to think about the current Ron.

She had a few, secret romantic dreams about him over the years where she dreamt about what it would be like to be around him again, but reality was much different from dreams. She used to feel something whenever he so much as looked at her, but now...there was nothing.

"I'm sorry, you know, for everything I said. I had no idea, I didn't know the truth, I—"

"No one did."

"It doesn't matter. I was a foul git to you."

"I deserved it." She said plainly. "All things aside with Ha—" she abruptly stopped, finally breaking the gaze. Hermione wasn't sure about the state of Harry and Ron's friendship, and she didn't want to set him off.

"You can say his name, you know. I'm not," He released a hard sigh and ran his hand through his red hair, "I'm not saying that I can forget or that we'll go back to being best mates, but I *can* forgive him. Percy taught me how to do that."

At the mention of his once wayward brother, Hermione took a few steps back and turned her back to him. She couldn't look at him when she asked her next questions. "But can you forgive me, Ron? We don't have to forget or even return to what we used to be, I don't even want that...but you can forgive, can't you?"

Everything was silent, but only for a moment. "Yes, I think I can."

She nodded, relieved. It took a few moments, but he smiled. Hermione gestured for him to follow her, and crossed the lounge room. She took a seat on the sofa, Ron sat next to her, and she started talking. For the second time in the last two hours, she told him everything.

And like his mother, he listened.

To her surprise, it was even easier telling the story the second time around.

They talked for an hour. Molly had peeked in once, saw that the room was still intact, and left them. Ron had become flustered and uncomfortable, but he never told her to stop. Hermione talked to him about life once she had finally returned to Britain, and she didn't leave out anything. She told him about the Marquette Manor incident and about her arguments with Harry and Ginny.

"Ginny knows, you know." He broke in, "She knows about your son, Matthew."

"She was standing in my living room when she found out whose son he was."

Ron just nodded. "I know. She came here the night she found out and she was a mess. Mum had to give her a vial of Calming Draught to get her to stop crying. She stayed that night and George took her home. Harry was there, waiting for her. Ginny seemed happy to tell me that he camped outside of her flat for about four nights before she let him in. Mum thinks they're okay, now, because they just left on their week-long vacation to Aruba and Ginny's been looking at engagement rings."

She was surprised by that last bit, but didn't let it show. They could commit themselves to a life of misery for all Hermione cared; she wasn't going to waste another breath on them. "And what do you think about that, Ron?"

The wizard merely shrugged, "Whatever makes her happy, I guess. I mean, I've spent the last couple of years trying to convince her to break up with him."

Hermione was surprised. "Why?"

"I don't think he loves her. I mean, I think he likes her, but it's like there's something between them."

She wasn't sure what to say, but luckily, she didn't have to say anything.

A silvery-white Patronus entered the room. Ron looked puzzled at it, but Hermione stared at the approaching jaguar. A feeling of dread had washed over her and the colour in her face immediately fled. What had happened for him to send her a Patronus? She already knew the caster before his smooth voice transmitted the message.

Of course, Blaise Zabini's Patronus *would* be a jaguar.

St. Mungo's. Draco's father has taken a turn for the worst. I will meet you in the reception area.

Hermione jumped to her feet and snatched her wand off the table, surprising Ron.

He got up after her and asked, "Where are you going?"

"I have to go. Give your mother my apologies—"

"What's going on?"

There was no time to argue with Ron. He wouldn't understand no matter what language she used to explain herself. In that way, he hadn't matured. "Look, I can't explain. I *have* to go. I'll owl you, if that's okay? We can finish talking then."

"No, you don't have to. It's bloody *Malfoy*. We were talking. He can—"

She Disapparated before he could finish.

Part Two: The slap heard around the world

Hermione found herself inside of the crowded and almost chaotic reception area of St. Mungo's.

Blaise Zabini, who was dressed in standard Auror robes, was standing next to the flustered-looking Welcome Witch, waiting very patiently. He looked drained, but the only time she could tell was when he thought no one was paying attention. It was then that he lifted his eyes to the ceiling and gave off a sigh that spoke volumes for him. Briefly, Hermione looked around at all the other patients in the room: some were missing limbs, some had sprouted limbs from other parts of their bodies, some were green, some were covered in boils, and one scowling little boy had the misfortune of having steam pouring from his mouth and ears while his little brother watched in amazement.

It took a moment for her to clear her mind before she manoeuvred her way through the crowd. She found her way to him rather quickly. "I came as fast as I could."

"I just sent that message about a minute ago."

After looking around nervously, she asked. "How are you?"

That seemed to derail him, but only for a moment.

Blaise gave her the strangest look that she had ever seen before he replied, "Honestly? I need a bloody cigarette and a drink, but Pansy hates the smell of smoke and *someone* has to be there when Draco loses his cool, and he will. I can't do that very well if I'm drunk, now, can I?"

He had a very good point. "What's happened?"

After looking around, Blaise took her by the arm and led her to one of the old elevators without speaking another word. He pushed the button for the fourth floor and remained quiet they stepped onto the ancient elevator. Finally, just when Hermione was about to repeat her question, he asked a question, "What do you know about subarachnoid haemorrhages?"

The question left her momentarily speechless, "I-I know that they occur spontaneously, usually from a ruptured cerebral aneurysm. With the tumour being where it was in Matthew's

brain, he was always at risk for developing an aneurysm, so I did a lot of reading to be able to recognize the symptoms of a burst. They can be deadly, even when they are detected and treated early. However, it's not impossible to survive one. If the patient *does* survive, their chances of being severely impaired both cognitively and neurologically are extremely high."

Hermione duly noted the impressed look on his face. She may not have acted like the know-it-all that they all remembered from Hogwarts, but that didn't mean that she wasn't well-read or versed in a variety of topics.

"Why do you ask, Blaise?" And then, realization dawned. All she could whisper was a soft, "Shit."

"They just figured out not too long ago. I thought that was something that only happened to —"

"Muggles?" Hermione eyed him. "Wizards don't age as fast, but we are susceptible to most Muggle ailments. The difference between us is only one gene." She scratched her arm. "How's Narcissa?"

"Inconsolable, as expected. Pansy is in the private waiting room with her—"

She twiddled her thumbs in nervous anticipation. "And Draco?"

Blaise looked a bit surprised, though Hermione didn't understand why. She had learned a great deal about the situation and about Malfoy. Of course, she would be concerned about him as well as his mother. Blaise regained his constant composure and replied. "He hasn't said a word since we arrived."

That was to be expected from Malfoy. He wasn't very expressive, unless he was upset. He would rather throw himself off the tallest building in London than take off the mask he wore all the time. He was comfortable behind it, she could tell, but that mask didn't always work for him. There were rare moments when keeping up a façade became too much and he had to stop. Hermione had caught him sans mask on quite a few occasions; there were moments when he had unintentionally lowered his guard around her, as well as moments when life had forced him to take it off. It allowed her to see just how troubled he was; just how human he was. It had helped her to understand the man just a bit better.

"Has there been any new news?" Hermione asked.

"Right before I sent you the message, a Healer came in and told us he's actually slipped into an irreversible coma, and that it's only a matter of time. They said the ruptured aneurysm damaged the part of his brain that controls his organ functions and they can't repair it. His organs were already damaged before, but they're shutting down rapidly. His prognosis isn't good. He's in a lot of pain, but they've handled that with potions."

It was a familiar circumstance, yet completely different, and she had to remind herself of the differences to get her stomach to stop rolling. "How—what..." Hermione trailed off and stared at the floor to stop the world from spinning out of control.

All of a sudden, she felt a hand on her shoulder. Their eyes met and his were full of an understanding that she didn't know he'd possessed. They didn't talk very much about her past or even his; he must've found out the story from Pansy or Malfoy...or the both of them. "Are you all right?" The alarm in his voice was evident.

"Blaise," she looked at him hesitantly, "I – I don't know if I'm the right person to—"

"You are. Why do you think otherwise?"

"It's just—I have too much experience with losing."

"One faces the future with one's past, or at least that's what my grandmother tells me." He told her with a shrug.

It was a test. This was another step towards recovery. She had to conquer her fears. Failure wasn't an option. "You're right." Hermione's voice quivered. "You're completely right."

"I'll make sure to tell my grandmother that." Blaise smirked.

She smiled weakly, still a bit queasy.

A moment of silence passed and together they watched the arrow go from the one to the two, indicating that they were now on the second floor. It was the slowest elevator in wizarding London, for sure, but she used it to her advantage. Hermione gathered her nerve and began her previous question. "What can they do for him?"

Blaise leaned back against the elevator wall and took a breath before replying, "Therein lies the biggest problem, Hermione. Narcissa has the option of either letting him go naturally or putting in a sort of magical stasis to keep his body alive as the rest of his organs fail."

"How long will that take?"

"Naturally, he'll be dead before the sun rises tomorrow. With the help of the magic, it could be anywhere from two weeks to six months."

"And knowing that he's going to die either way, Narcissa is going to go with that plan, just to keep him alive longer?" Blaise nodded soberly. This really *was* hitting too close to home. Hermione chewed on her lower lip for a moment before asking the dreaded question. "And what does Draco have to say about his mother's decision?"

"Do you *really* need me to answer that question?"

Hermione shook her head, "No. I don't." Malfoy wasn't the kind of man that held on when he knew he was going to lose. Soon, the short fuse that he was already on would blow. She ran a hand over her hair. "Merlin."

"Exactly."

The day for which Draco Malfoy had been preparing with so much foresight had taken him by surprise.

How ironic.

"Why did you summon me?" She wondered.

"Narcissa asked for you to be here. And as for Draco," Blaise watched the arrow move from two to three. "We've had too many rows about his father over the years. He simply *refuses* to see that his father really cared for him. I can tell you that he's not going to want to be around when it's all said and done. He'll be too busy planning his next move, too busy figuring out how to defend himself and his mother from his uncles, and too busy being angry to see truth and reason. He's really a stubborn prat, but when he realises the mistake he's made, his father will be dead and he'll need someone."

"But why me?"

"Why *not* you, Hermione?"

"I'm not—"

"You care about him, don't you?"

She was suddenly very flustered. "He's not in the running for the 'Nicest Person' award, but—"

"But what?"

"Yes, Blaise, I do care about him—"

The rickety doors to the elevator flew opened and they were greeted with the empty halls of the fourth floor.

"Are you ready?" He asked her.

Hermione merely nodded.

With her small hand clasped inside Blaise's much larger one, he led the way towards the private waiting area. Hermione took in the sight and her nose took in the stale smell. She was suddenly so tense that she started to worry about having another panic attack.

Hermione absolutely *hated* hospitals.

The smell, the empty halls, the death, the—Hermione stopped herself, mid-thought.

This wasn't about her. So she stifled her own extreme discomfort and put on a brave face. Blaise pulled open the door for her, and immediately they found themselves on the battlefield of a civil war.

The room was small and bright with white walls and beige carpeted floors. The only furniture pieces in the waiting area were two hard-looking blue sofas that lined two of the four walls and two glass coffee tables located in front of the sofas, old magazines littering them to the point where Hermione had a hard time seeing the glass. Moving pictures (mainly of plants

and animals) hung on the wall; there was a bookshelf in the corner next to the door that was full of recreational reading books, and there was a Wizard's Wireless in the other corner.

In the centre of the room, the battle scene was set.

A severe-looking Draco Malfoy was on one side and a red-faced, Narcissa Malfoy was on the other.

She had never seen Narcissa less than pristine before, and it tugged at her heart. The reality that she had lost the war that she had waged on her husband's behalf was probably extremely difficult for her to accept. That was probably why she was willing to prolong Lucius Malfoy's imminent death for as long as she possibly could. Hermione knew from experience that that wasn't very good. Hermione spotted Pansy. She sat on the sofa furthest from the door, watching helplessly as the mother and son yelled at each other.

Malfoy had obviously broken his previous code of silence.

She was surprised that there was still a ceiling over their heads.

"You cannot be serious, Mother!"

Narcissa seemed beside herself with tears and frustration with her only son. "What do you expect me to do, Draco? I cannot give up on him! I will not! Don't ask that of me!"

"I'm not asking to you to do anything except be reasonable about this! You can try and try, but you can't save him! Whether it happens tomorrow or six months later, you can't change anything. He won't ever come back. It's time for you to be realistic! It's time for you to be—"

"*I am* being reasonable about this! What do you want me to do? Abandon him? I—"

"Seven percent, Mother!" He yelled at her. "He has a seven percent chance of surviving this! Seven!"

His mother kept her lips tight when she snarled. "Seven is *not* zero, and it would do you well to remember that. All hope isn't lost."

Malfoy scoffed. "It looks pretty lost to me."

"What if he defies the odds? What if—"

"It doesn't matter!" He argued, "Whether he miraculously survives or not doesn't matter because he's not there anymore. His body is still there, but he's gone. He's been gone for a long time."

"But he'll be alive, Draco! Alive!" Lucius' being alive was all that mattered to his wife, and Hermione understood how important that was to her, but....

"Alive?" Malfoy raged. His normally pale face was red with fury. "He'll be alive, but only in the strictest definition of the word. What kind of life is that? Is that the kind of life to which you're willing to damn him?"

Narcissa's skin paled. "He's your father, Draco." Her body was wracked with sobs as she continued, "He's my husband."

Draco stared at her for long time before he shook his head. "He hasn't been your husband for years, Mother."

Everyone witnessed his mother's anger level rise sharply. "I—"

"Years, mother." He cut her off and continued, "And what's worse is that you know it."

"How can you say something like that?"

"Just because Dementors sucked out all of his happy memories doesn't mean that you have to automatically wipe the slate clean. Just because he's had a aneurysm doesn't mean that you're obligated to forget about his whores—"

The sound of Narcissa backhanding her son across the face echoed through the room. Time seemed to hang, suspended in the air like a trapeze artist in the middle of a death-defying stunt. Hermione was too shocked to breathe. Narcissa was furious. "Don't you *dare* speak ill of your father. Not today. Not now."

Pansy's eyes widened in shock as she covered her mouth to stifle the gasp that desperately wanted to escape, while Blaise took a tentative step to the side and pulled Hermione with him. It cleared a nice path to the exit. Hermione didn't even notice that she had moved; her eyes were locked on Malfoy.

Like his mother, he was shaking, hard. Embarrassment and rage; the latter was unbridled and it seemed to change Malfoy into someone that Hermione didn't quite recognise. All the blood seemed to rush to his left cheek, making his mother's mark stand out greatly. Gone were the lines of frustration on his forehead, and gone were the aggravation creases on the corner of his lips.

Hermione was quite sure that she had never seen him so angry, ever.

For a second, Hermione held her breath. Malfoy brought his pale hand on his flaming cheek and shot Narcissa a withering glare that did little to cover just how hurt he was.

Remorse and regret filled her eyes. "Draco, love, I'm—" Narcissa took a step towards him, only to be halted the cold look on his face.

It was too late.

Malfoy held his hand up as if to say two things: "*Don't come near me because I'm not in control of myself,*" and "*I don't want to hear another word from you.*" Then, he promptly walked right out of the waiting room. Malfoy slammed the door so hard behind him that everything inside the waiting room shook.

Part Three: Love is watching someone die

A shocked silence followed Malfoy's exit while Blaise checked the hinges of the door for damage.

"I-I should go talk to him," Narcissa mumbled numbly a few minutes later.

"No!" the three of them chorused, startling Malfoy's mother.

"That—that's not a good idea," Pansy said with a wavering voice. "Give him some time to calm down—"

Her wise words of advice were cut off by the entrance of a chubby, worn out Healer by the name of Augustus.

Hermione recognized him from her last stay.

"What news on my husband?" Narcissa had a hopeful gleam in her eyes and all Hermione could think about was seven percent. Was seven percent good enough to keep one's hopes alive? Having hope was good, but having a realistic hope was even better.

"Mr Malfoy will be returned to his room in five minutes." Augustus paused and delivered what was a crushing blow. "I'm sorry, but there is still nothing we can do to stop, or even slow, his organ failure. Our prognosis remains the same." The tears started pouring down Narcissa's cheeks and Hermione felt so powerless. "Mrs. Malfoy, in about an hour, we can put him in stasis to prolong his life, but—" She knew that he was about to tell her that the best thing to do was to let nature take its course, but a hard glare from Blaise had stopped the Healer before he could continue. "We'll leave the decision to you. A Medi-witch will come and retrieve you when he is settled back into his room."

And, with that, Healer Augustus turned about-face and left them.

It was Pansy who embraced the older woman first and held her steady as the heart-wrenching sobs wracked her body. She whispered comforting words into her ear as she hugged Narcissa tightly. All Hermione could do was watch and keep the tears out of her own eyes. It was hard enough going through it herself, but to watch someone else lose someone that they loved in such a way was harder than she had anticipated.

Blaise stood beside Hermione and watched as the sad scene took place.

It took the entire five minutes for Pansy to calm Narcissa down to the point where her loud, gut-wrenching sobs had been diminished to miserable whimpers. And still, there was no Medi-witch around. Narcissa slowly pulled herself from Pansy's arms and gave Pansy a wet kiss on the forehead. Tears slipped from Pansy's blue eyes.

All was silent until the Narcissa asked, "What would you do, Hermione? What would you do if you were in my position? Would you put him in stasis or would you allow nature to take its course?"

Of all the hard questions that she had been asked in her life, those were by far the hardest.

Every eye in the room seemed to shift to her, and Hermione froze, suddenly unable to breathe. The blood flooded from her head to her legs, and all she stumbled back a few steps, but Blaise caught her around the waist.

"You—you can't ask me what I would've done because I'm not you."

When she came to the realization that Blaise wasn't going to let her go, Hermione thought about her question. It wasn't about what she would've done; it was about what she had already done. She had been in the same position. She had agonised over it, lost sleep over it, cried over it, and in the end—in the end...her mind drifted to Matthew.

After he died, there were days that she had thought that she was a bad mother because she had done nothing when he collapsed, because she had chosen to not let them poke and prod at his fragile little body, and because she had chosen not to prolong his immense suffering. There were days when she was so guilt-ridden that she couldn't get out of bed. There were days when she cried and wanted to hurt herself because she felt like she had killed him.

"Did you ever give up on your son?"

"Never." Hermione breathed. "Not for a single moment. Not even after he had taken his last breath."

Before Narcissa could reply, the Medi-witch appeared at the door. It was Helga. She shot a fearful look in Pansy's direction before she announced. "Mrs. Malfoy, your husband is in—"

She didn't let the young witch finish, Narcissa quickly bypassed Helga and headed towards Ward 67. The Medi-witch quickly followed after her, leaving then standing in the waiting room. Their emotions were at a fever pitch. Pansy rushed across the room and flung herself into her boyfriend's arms. It didn't take long before the sound of her throaty sobs echoed in the room. All Blaise could do was comfort her.

Hermione felt oddly alone.

But she remembered thought about Narcissa's question and found her answer. She exhaled and started for the door.

"Where are you going?" Blaise asked.

"To talk to Narcissa."

"You're going to convince her to listen to Draco?"

"No," Hermione shook her head, "I'm going to convince her to do what's right by her husband."

And, with that, she left Pansy and Blaise in the waiting area.

She took a deep breath before pushing open the door to Ward 67. As expected, Narcissa was sitting at her husband's bedside. Lucius Malfoy's scraggly blond locks were gone and his head was bandaged. To Hermione, he looked rather peaceful in his comatose state. Previously, he had always looked as if he were in extreme pain. Granted, the last (and only) time that she had seen him, the man had nearly tried to carve her face like a pumpkin. His wife was holding his hand and speaking softly to him.

Hermione thought about turning away, leaving them alone, but she didn't.

"I've loved you since I was sixteen years old. We weren't perfect: we didn't have the perfect life or the perfect marriage, but we were happy once, weren't we?" She tenderly stroked his cheek with her delicate hand, "I haven't been able to get this close to you in years," Narcissa's voice cracked, but she continued on, audibly choked up, "I've missed you so much. I've tried everything that I could think of to bring you back, but it hasn't been enough." Narcissa kissed the hand that she held and brought it to her cheek. "I've never given up on you, not for one minute...not for one second."

Hermione announced her presence with words. "I read somewhere that letting go didn't mean that you're giving up, rather that you have accepted that there are things that cannot be."

For a few minutes, Narcissa said nothing nor did she acknowledge her presence. Hermione stood her ground until she rose from her seat and placed her husband's hand back on his bed. "And what if I can't? What if I can't accept the things that cannot be?"

Hermione didn't know the answer to that question, but took another tentative step into the room.

"I don't know what to do. Tell me, what I should do."

"Narcissa, it's not my place to tell you what to do, but I can only tell you to stop thinking about what you will lose and think about what Lucius has already lost."

"Is that how you made your decision about Matthew?"

"I love my son, and I always will." Hermione told her truthfully.

"But you gave up."

She knew that Narcissa didn't mean to hurt her with those words, but they stung worse than she could ever imagine. "I would've fought for his life forever, and then kept on fighting. Still, in the end..." Hermione off, getting lost in her own thoughts. "He was on enough potions and medications to put down a large mammal, the radiation treatments were actually *hurting* him rather than helping, and he hated going to both the doctor *and* the Healer. His personality had begun to change. The only time that he reminded me of the sweet baby boy was when we were playing games together. Any other time, Matthew was a terror. I knew that he was so miserable." Hermione blinked away her tears.

She had always dreamed about the best parts of Matthew's life, not the worst. It left her unbelievably cold inside when she stopped glorifying it and remembered the truth.

Narcissa sniffled, but said nothing.

"Every night," Hermione continued, "I went into his room, just to check on him. He'd just be quietly laying there and my first thought was *always* that he had died." She took a tentative step towards Narcissa. "I think that the knowing and waiting for a blow that you can't avoid hurts more than the actual blow."

Narcissa wept softly at those last words.

"When I had to make my decision, I fought and struggled with myself for months. Put Matthew through hell so he could live a few more months *or* let him have some peace. And, in the end, the month before he died, I chose to quit being selfish. I stopped the treatments, threw away all the medication, and I let him be a kid. I let him live out the rest of his life the way that he wanted to live it. We had fun together, we created memories, and he smiled so much more. Yes, he was dying, but I was with him, every moment of every day, right until the end. I didn't give up on him; I loved him enough to know that it was time to let him go."

"You're asking me to give up hope, but I can't."

Hermione sighed. "I'm not asking you to give up all hope."

"Then what are you asking me to do then?"

"I'm asking you to think of your husband as I thought of my son—put him first in your mind before you make your decision. I'm asking for you to think of what he wants above your wants. I'm asking you to think about your son—don't prolong this; it'll only make it harder for you both. I'm asking you to do what I couldn't do and accept the loss and start the process of moving forward with your life. Don't keep your family in the same place that it has been for the last three years. It's not fair to Draco to carry the burdens of his father's illness, it's not fair for him to lie to the world, and it's not fair to him to have to constantly keep up a front because he's so afraid of the fallout. He's sacrificed so much, and so have you. It's not fair to you to keep your life on hold when you should be out there living it, it's not fair for you to be chasing something that's unattainable."

"I am—"

She tried not to make her words sound harsh. "You're not going to get him back, Narcissa, and you know it."

Narcissa's shoulders shook.

"Do you *honestly* think a man like Lucius Malfoy would want to live his life this way?"

"H-he's *far* too proud to allow himself to be seen as—" she froze for a long minute before she lowered her eyes to her husband's body. Finally, Narcissa muttered sadly, "You wouldn't want this..."

Hermione stood next to her and peered down at the comatose man. She rested her hand on Narcissa's shoulder. She hesitated only a moment before she hugged her close. Narcissa, who

was a head taller than her, clung to Hermione as if she held the secrets to the universe.

"When I married him," she said in a heartbreakin whisper, "I didn't expect for our marriage to end this way."

It was so hard not to cry at that moment. "We don't expect many of the things that happen to us, but they happen and you have to keep moving forward. That has been a hard lesson for me to learn, but I had no one there helping me along the way."

"I love him, and to love means that you have to fight."

"Yes, that's true, but to love is to suffer...to love is know that one of you will leave first."

Narcissa choked up and Hermione felt the wetness of her tears on her shoulder.

"I know you love him, and if you *truly* love him, use your love for him to continue to stand by his side. Stay with him. Show him how much you love him by being with him until the end."

Hermione heard the door to Ward 67 slowly open and a red-eyed Pansy peeked in. Blaise stuck his head in over hers. Hermione gently waved her hand, letting the couple know that it was okay for them to enter. Narcissa turned her head when she heard the clicking of Pansy's high-heeled shoes. She gave Pansy a faint smile and then a hug once Pansy had joined her at Lucius' side. Blaise lagged behind, leering near the doorway. With a nod of her head, she answered the question that he didn't have to audibly ask. He peeked out the doorway to give the Healer the message.

Narcissa took Lucius' hand again and asked, "Will you all stay with me, until the end?"

She didn't want to wait around for Lucius to die. That was just too hard for her. She had done it with Matthew; she didn't think that she could do it with him as well. But it wasn't about her, she reminded herself. Hermione pushed away every selfish thought that charged to the front of her mind.

Before she could reply, Blaise shut the door behind him and stole the words right out of her mouth.

"You won't be alone."

Part Four: A twist of fate.

In a strange twist of fate, Hermione found Draco Malfoy on the roof of St. Mungo's.

And for some reason, she just knew that he would be there.

A beautiful London dusk had started to settle upon them, and with dusk came the chill of night. And it was particularly chilly that March evening when she gently shut the door to the roof behind her. That was harder than it looked with two, lidded cups and a wand in her hands. When Blaise had gone to get food for everyone, he came back with an extra black coffee for Malfoy that he sent Hermione off to deliver.

No one had a clue as to where he had gone off to when he stormed out of the waiting room. Pansy had tried to find him, but was unsuccessful; she said that he had probably left the hospital. So, when Blaise had set the task on her shoulders, Hermione was sure that she wouldn't find the angry recluse. As soon as she had stepped out of the room, however, her feet had taken her to the stairs that led to the roof.

And there he was. He hadn't left.

Hermione was pretty unsure of why she was suddenly so bloody nervous.

The wind had begun to pick up and Malfoy, who sat on a patch of grass in the garden, didn't seem to notice. He was staring out at the London skyline, deep in thought, while his hair blew mercilessly in the breeze. His anger seemed to have been cooled. His knees were drawn to his chest and it was probably the most vulnerable that she had seen him, ever.

She wasn't quite sure how to process the sight before her.

Hermione was torn between standing there and approaching him. The latter won—but not by much. She took a tentative step towards him, but stopped cold when she heard his dry voice. "What do you want, Granger?"

Of course, her mouth went terribly dry.

The early-evening lights were starting to come on.

Malfoy stretched his legs out, but didn't turn to look at her.

She'd forgotten everything that she was going to say to him, but she took a few more steps. It was probably a good thing. Malfoy seemed to have the power to smell bullshit from miles away. "I-uh, I brought you some coffee. May I join you?"

He leaned back and used his hands to keep him propped upright. "If you must."

It was neither here nor there; the perfectly diplomatic answer from someone who didn't want anyone to think that he cared either way. As she had started to step outside of her cloud of misery, she had really begun to pick up on his little quirks. Malfoy wasn't very amiable, but she noticed that he treated her far better than he treated most everyone, save for Pansy and Blaise.

"How did you know it was me?" Hermione asked once she stood next to where he sat.

Finally, he looked up at her, but only to accept the Styrofoam cup that she held out to him. He went back to staring out at the skyline. "Out of the three of you, you're the only one both brave and stupid enough to follow me up here."

Unrepentantly, Hermione shrugged as she sat next to him. "Must be a Gryffindor thing. But you're wrong about one thing."

He sounded extremely bored. "And what's that?"

"I didn't follow you."

"Ah, so Blaise sent you." He sipped his coffee.

"Maybe I sent myself."

He snorted. "Bullshit, Granger."

She shrugged, "Maybe it is, and maybe it isn't."

"Taking the middle road doesn't suit you."

"And running from your problems doesn't suit you either."

"Yes, *that's* more down your alley."

Hermione winced. It was something that she had expected from him. Misery did, after all, love its company. "Score one for you, Malfoy."

Malfoy didn't reply, but he did wince at the tone she had taken. For some reason, he hated when she talked like that and Hermione didn't ask him why. Instead, she sat there with him, quietly. He sipped on his scorching hot coffee and she sipped on her hot chocolate. Next thing she knew, he sighed. "That was uncalled for."

And she accepted his apology because she knew how hard it was to say sorry...in so many words.

Together, they sat, drank their respective drinks, and watched as day turned into night. He seemed to be in a trance and his lips were moving. Finally, she asked, "What are you saying under your breath?"

"I'm not saying anything, Granger. I'm counting."

Her eyebrow rose, "Counting what?"

"In the building across the street, there are a hundred and thirty-seven windows, but the lights are only on in fifty-three of them."

She was fascinated. "Why do you count?"

Malfoy shrugged. "I like numbers. They clear my mind."

Well, that was interesting.

When she spoke again, Hermione wondered if she had spoken too soon, "How are you holding up?"

He cut his eyes at her. "Why does that matter to you, Granger?" Malfoy frowned. "Allies don't care about those—"

"First, I'm not here to argue with you, Malfoy." Hermione shot back and then sighed when he didn't respond with anything except an even deeper frown, if that at all was possible.
"Second, I'm not here as your ally. I'm here, *trying* to learn how to be your friend."

"Be my friend and go away."

She remained where she was, but Vanished her cup from sight. "That's contradictory," and then she Vanished his.

Malfoy stood up, dusting the grass off his trousers. "Bugger off, Granger."

Hermione got to her feet as well, "You need to be in there."

"Ah, so the purpose of this little visit comes out, finally. It's about time—"

"Your father is *dying*, Malfoy. He'll be dead before morning." She explained in a huff. It wasn't how she had planned to break the news to the man. "Your—your mother has decided to let him go naturally."

He stared at her for a moment and then shrugged. "Well, good riddance."

"How can you say that? He's your father."

"That's easy, Granger," and he repeated the last words from his previous statement as if she were mentally incapable of processing the English language. "*Good. Riddance.*" He stared at her with bored, yet heated eyes. "If you're trying to make me feel guilty because I refuse to be in there, holding his hand as he dies, then you're wasting your time."

"I'm not trying—"

"Then what the hell are you trying to do?!" Malfoy yelled in frustration.

Hermione kept her composure. "I'm trying to help."

"Then help me by shutting your bloody mouth!"

Placing her hands on her hips, she shot him a look that told him loud and clear that she wasn't going anywhere until he at least heard her out. "You're going to regret it."

"Life is full of them."

"But this will be one that you can avoid. Say goodbye to him, that's all. I'm not asking you to stay and hold his hand. I'm not asking you to do anything that wax sentimental. Just say goodbye."

Malfoy was acting every bit like the prat that she remembered from Hogwarts, spoiled and bitterly angry. "I can't think of one good reason why I should."

"He's your father." Hermione was starting to realise that trying to reason with him was, as Blaise said, next to impossible.

"Unsurprisingly, that's not a good enough reason." Malfoy deadpanned.

"Do it for your mother."

"I'm still angry with her."

Hermione had had about enough. "You're angry at the world, Draco! I understand! And that's fine! Be mad, be angry, but for your own sake, get *over* it! It's done. Your father paid for his sins." She didn't give him a moment to yell back before she continued on, however, she lowered her voice. "You told me once to stop fighting everyone and you need to do the same thing. Stop fighting and let go of your resentment." She stepped closer to him, "Lies destroyed my life, but your anger is going to destroy yours. Is that what you want?"

He didn't answer. For what seemed like forever, he just stared at her.

Finally, Malfoy cleared his throat. "I'm *still* waiting for that reason."

In that moment, she could've hauled off and slapped him herself. "Love. Isn't that reason enough? He loved you." Based on his accounts of their relationship, she was definitely reaching for the stars on that one.

But Hermione knew that there were always two sides to every story.

Maybe she had only heard one.

Malfoy took one good look at Hermione and started laughing. She wasn't sure why he was laughing, but it was sort of maniacal and disturbing. Well, maybe that was because she had never heard him laugh before—outside the realm of teasing everyone senselessly in school years ago when he had his two bodyguards around. And about as quickly as it had started, his laughter ended.

"My father didn't love me. He only loved himself."

She stared at him hard. "Maybe he actually *did*, but you were just too blinded by your anger to see it."

Malfoy didn't like that answer at all. He turned on his feet and started for the door.

And Hermione spoke to his retreating figure. "Don't let your decision tonight haunt you forever, Draco. I would give *anything* to have this kind of opportunity to say goodbye to my

parents."

He froze when she said his name, and listened to the rest of her words with his back still turned. And just when she thought that she had gotten to him, he turned his head and looked at her one last time.

"Fine," he muttered before he walked away.

When the door shut behind him, Hermione sank to her knees in the patch of grass, exhausted—yet there was power humming in her veins; a power that she hadn't felt in years. She felt strong; like she could do anything. True, it had been a long day, but she'd emerged from the wretched day a winner, in more ways than one. However, it was the latest victory that had meant the most to her.

Malfoy had done what she had asked of him. He may have not made peace, but it was far more than Hermione had expected. Malfoy had stood by his father's bed for a full minute.

But he wasn't present when his father took his last breath.

Part Five: Relentless

March 19th

Much like his coffee had done minutes before, the letter materialised in front of Draco at exactly 3:47 in the early morning hours. He had been perusing through files in his father's study, trying to absorb everything that he could before the news of Lucius' death broke in London—and the rest of the world.

It was only a matter of time before family would be knocking at his door.

The letter was inside of a crisp, white envelope that had his name written on the front—in his father's hand.

Draco froze.

He stared at the letter, debating on what he should do. He could open it, burn it, he could wait, or he could wait until he got home before he opened it and then burn it. Draco chose the final option.

After snatching it off the desk, Draco rose from his seat, walked across the room to the fireplace, and Flooed to the comfort of his own home. He sat on his sofa, ripped open the envelope, and with every intention of throwing it into his fire the moment he finished, Draco read from start to finish without even blinking.

Father, thinking that he was going to die, had written the letter before he had gone into Azkaban. And as he read, the world had slowed on its axis. By the time he finished, Draco felt so...so *hollow*.

He slid off the sofa onto his knees. The letter slipped from his fingers and fell to the floor. It didn't make a sound when it landed on the carpet, but the noise it made in his head was unbearable. His insides twisted into knots and he felt like he needed to throw up, even though all that was inside of him was the heavy weight of *nothing*.

If you are reading this, Draco, then I am dead. If you are reading this, then I am no longer a ghost in your life or a burden on your shoulders. It seems that the fates have another plan for the both of us, and all I can do is hope that their plans for you will be much better than my own. It seems that being honest is easier when you do not have to speak. Draco, there is something that I must ask you to do for me. Protect your mother; watch over her, and see to it that she does not mourn for me very long. I have not been the best husband to her through the years, but it does not mean that I do not love her. Make sure she is happy.

Those words chilled him to the core and he couldn't get warm. He couldn't think.

And you, son. There are things that I have always wanted to tell you, but I just have not found the time, the words, or even the courage. I fear that it is already too late for us to mend, but it is never too late to tell the truth. I know that I was not the best father. I know now that I could have instilled better values in you. I could have been a better man. I will not apologise for the things that I have done in my life because they all were for you. I did what I thought was right so that I could make a better world for you. I did what I thought was best for you, and your future. I will not apologise for wanting your life to be better than mine, but I will apologise for the methods I used.

Draco sat and gnawed on his knuckles and held back everything that he felt. His heart and brain were in combat: the latter attempted to make his father's voice shut up while the former merely laughed at the fucked up timing of his letter; it was a bitter laugh that lacked hilarity.

Do not think for one second that I was not proud to call you my son. You are the perfect embodiment of a Malfoy, yet there is a lot of Black in you...and better, there is a lot of your mother in you. There is much potential in you, Draco. Use it in what way you see best, but use it. Do not live the kind of life that I lived, though, that is something that I do not worry about. You will do everything possible to avoid my life. You will learn from the past and use it to safeguard your future. I could not have asked for a better son.

He instructed himself to breathe. He was so cold. He was so angry—at himself. He had taken part of Granger's advice and said goodbye. He had said all the right words at his father's bedside, but his words were hollow. Hollow. He felt nauseated because he hadn't done anything, really. He could tell himself otherwise. He could tell himself that he had said what he could, but that would be a lie.

Granger had asked him on the roof if he wanted to live his life being angry at the world, and he had finally realised the answer.

No.

He didn't.

I want what any father would want for their son. I want you to live with no regrets.

Bury your resentment when you bury me.

Draco grabbed the letter and clutched it in his fists. He ached from the cold and all he wanted to do was scream because everything was building and building and he couldn't make it stop. It was then that he *truly* learned the lesson that he had taught others.

The world wasn't all black and white.

And he felt hollow again.

In a burst of green flames, Granger stepped out of his fireplace. He had half a mind to ask her what the hell she was doing there, but he couldn't speak. He wouldn't speak. He was too afraid of what he would say. From the corner of his eye, he watched as she slowly approached him, almost as if he were a dangerous creature.

For a second, he felt like he was.

"Draco?"

Granger sank to her knees before him and gently pried the letter from his cold and shaking hands. The emotions on her face were indescribable as she read the words from a father to his son. He had expected her to tell him that she told him so, he had even expected for her to give him a pathetic look, but she did something that he didn't expect.

When she finished, her hands were shaking and she looked at him. Her eyes were full of the emotions that he couldn't express, but there was no pity.

Granger sounded about as hurt as he felt. "He's gone."

He already knew that.

"At 3:47."

The letter.

"Pansy is with your mother."

As if the letter were made from tissue paper, she folded it carefully and laid it beside her.

"I can't imagine what's going through your mind right now." Granger hesitantly rested her hand on his heart that thumped slowly under her fingers. He was numb to everything he did not want to feel.

She pushed herself up and leaned forward, lightly pressing her mouth against the spot right between his eyes. Draco closed his eyes. She was warm. Warm enough that subconsciously, he accepted the comfort that Granger tried to provide; comfort he didn't deserve. Her lips

lingered for what seemed like forever until slowly, she broke the contact and murmured something under her breath. Draco opened his eyes again only to realise that the cold had returned and settled into his bones.

“Do you want me to leave?”

His voice sounded strangled, even to himself. “Stay.”

So Granger embraced him and it was pure instinct, the way he hugged her back. That time, he was the one who was shaking, but she didn't let go. She was warm. Draco couldn't think about it. He didn't want to think about it. He just breathed and she breathed with him. For so long, Draco thought about how he would feel when his father took his last breath and he never thought he'd feel the way he did. He never thought that it would *hurt*. He'd been so bitter for so long that his body seemed to run on a steady stream of natural rage. But now that he was gone, he felt depleted. He was empty. He felt—Draco gripped the back of her shirt tightly in his fists.

And when grief finally hit him, it was relentless.

Chapter End Notes

A couple of things:

- (1) "One faces the future with one's past." - Pearl S. Buck.
- (2) "Letting go doesn't mean giving up, but rather accepting that there are things that cannot be." - Anon.
- (3) I am not a doctor, but I did a ton of research on cerebral aneurysms for my undergraduate thesis. It may not be perfect, but I did the best I could.
- (4) I know, I know, no Ron-bashing, but can't we all get along?
- (5) I listened to way too much Death Cab to get this part the way I liked it.

everyone's the same, our fingers to our toes

Chapter Summary

Everything was still various shades of grey...and Hermione Granger was in colour.

Chapter Notes

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

Chapter Twenty-Four

Everyone's The Same, Our Fingers To Our Toes

Part One: Brown

March 23rd

Rain fell on the eight attendees of Lucius Malfoy's burial, and, to Draco, time seemed to slow and then stop everything around him.

*When I am dead
Cry for me a little,
Think of me sometimes,
But not too much.*

As the officiator continued to read the poem, Draco stared at his father's closed casket.

An odd feeling strangled him as he retreated into himself, pushing everything—external and internal—away. It had always found him, circled him, engulfed him, and trapped him. He had always fought it at first, but then, he had given in to it.

It was change.

His life was changing and before he could prevent it, understand it, or even try to resist it; it was there. His thoughts circled and tumbled; they baffled and agitated him; they smothered and bound him to reality...to the external. Draco, at that moment, wanted nothing more than to escape. It didn't matter that his internal was in a state of disarray. Everything was muddled, anyway; too much for him to gather his bearings.

And just what in the hell was he supposed to do? What could he—Draco shut his eyes as he felt yet another twinge of discomfort in his chest as the rain fell. They were getting worse as his body became more familiar with them. The pangs of loss. Of guilt. Of anger. Of realisation. The awakening. It hurt. Everything just hurt. And it hurt to change. How the hell had Granger lived like that, he didn't know.

But then, it was over. His muscles settled, his fingers relaxed, and he could breathe again.

And so he did, but he knew that nothing lasted forever.

Draco opened his eyes and stared.

*Think of me now and again
As I was in life
At some moments it's pleasant to recall
But not for long.*

And then it came back and hit him, hard. He couldn't breathe, he couldn't speak.

He was good at disguising, pretending, and fooling the world. But all that he was doing was fooling himself. He was such a great actor, and that was why he was always so bloody tired and why he never slept. Always on. Never off. His mouth moved without his ears hearing. His eyes searched without his mind seeing. And Draco was dizzy and ready to get off the stage because it was making him ill.

That part of his life was done because he had changed.

Draco understood that life could be affected by the living, but what he was starting to understand was that life could be affected by the dead. He didn't know exactly how to cope. He hadn't had the time to handle it all, either.

When the news of his Lucius Malfoy's death broke at 6:14 AM on March nineteenth, Draco was wearily staring out of his window as the host of owls descended upon his house. Granger's hand was firmly clasped in his. She had muttered something, pulled him away from the window, and led him into the kitchen where a growing pile of letters awaited him. Granger numbly put out treats for the owls while Draco stared blankly at the letters that littered his kitchen table and floor.

In that moment, he had realised that, again, he hadn't been as prepared for the media, the camera, or the complete and utter psychotic fanfare, as he had once thought.

And his world had been shades of grey ever since.

News of his father's death had been received with mixed feelings. It seemed that a segment of the wizarding world had only seen him as an ex-Death Eater and, consequently, was glad that he had become "maggot food". They had sent the Malfoys Howlers and junk. Another part didn't care. They sent nothing. But the vast majority had seen him as a man who had paid his debt to society and had died. They had sent their condolences to the wife and son that he had left behind.

*Leave me in peace
And I shall leave you in peace
And while you live
Let your thoughts be with the living...*

Draco opened his eyes again.

The pain began again as soon as the last officiator spoke the last word. Living.

The officiator waved his wand and sent bolts of what looked like white lights into the grey sky to symbolize death. Draco was strangely aware of everything around him: his mother's soft sniffles from his left, Uncle Arcturus' sneezes from behind, his other two uncles' bored murmurs, Blaise's harsh but quiet words that silenced his uncles, Pansy's soothing whispers to his grieving mother, Granger's shifting feet to his right, and the hard rain that pounded on him thanks to a faulty protection charm.

Everyone had put up their own protection charms to keep themselves dry, but Draco hadn't bothered.

Neither had Granger.

"You go home this night to your home of Winter, To your home of Autumn, of Spring and of Summer; You go home this night to your lasting home, To your eternal bed, to your sound sleeping..."

The officiator had his wand pointed at the levitating casket and it was starting to slowly lower into the ground. His mother let out a low sob because she knew what those words meant. He had started the Blessings for the Soul's Release, and Draco stared. They were burying his father, and that would be the end. The change would be complete.

And where would he go from there?

As the words were spoken, for the first time in four days, his grey world had suddenly become a blur of colours. It didn't last. The colours, instead, had melted off their canvases like paint when it came into contact with turpentine; they just slid with ease; no friction, no resistance. His once-coloured world was various shades of grey, again, and nothing seemed to matter to Draco as he shoved his hands into the pockets of his long cloak.

From a distance, it was a scene cut from an old classic black and white movie. It was a stereotypical, burial scene featuring a weeping widow, a conflicted son, friends, and restless family members—some of which were glad to see the final demise. As the officiator blessed, the storm intensified. What had started as a soft rain had built up into a storm. Draco felt the magic in the air, felt it flowing through him, but it did little to soothe him.

Dark clouds loomed in the sky above them, rolling with so much ferocity that it made his uncles look up nervously. A sharp crack of lightning lit the sky, but Draco kept his eyes fixed on the grey scene before him.

"...The sleep of seven joys upon you, my dear. The sleep of seven slumbers upon you, my dear. Sleep, oh sleep in the quiet of quietness, Sleep, oh sleep in the way of guidance, Sleep, oh sleep in the love of all loving..."

The rain came down harder and harder, each drop sliding down Draco's blank face. It didn't matter. The casket was now out of sight and he felt another pang in his chest.

"...You have been called from the place of your dwelling; after times, after duties, after separations. May blessed soul-friends guide you, May helping spirits lead you, May the Gatherer of Souls call you, May the Homeward path rise up under your feet and lead you gladly home..."

He pulled the cloak tighter around his soaked neck, trying to keep the warmth from escaping his body. His hands, now removed from the deep pockets, rested at his side, cold and motionless. He almost looked left, but the sight of his mother was too much to bear. He locked eyes with Blaise first, then Pansy. The colours were still gone, he realised. She mouthed something, but he didn't comprehend. His eyes returned to the sight before him. Grey. Life was grey. And no matter how hard it rained; nothing could wash it away.

Fingers grazed his so lightly that he thought that it was his imagination, but it wasn't. They came back, just as hesitant, but they didn't leave. He didn't tear his eyes off the ground to identify the culprit. He already knew. He knew *her* hands. She didn't entwine their fingers, nor did she move them; she only provided the initial contact. Palm against palm, their wet fingers lined up. Her hands were much smaller than his, but he didn't wrench his hand away, no matter how many times he had considered the idea.

He was too tired to fight her fingers, her hands, or her arms. He was too tired to fight *her*.

When she laced their fingers together and squeezed, Draco cut them over to Granger.

To his initial confusion, he found her brown eyes staring back at him. Brown.

His world had been grey for four days, *she* had been grey, and now—

He hadn't intended to say as much as he had said. Just like every day since the news of his father's death had broken, it had been a grey and gruelling day. His uncles had been relentless in their mission to make his life hell since the reading of the will, Mother had been a wreck of mourning, Blaise had been too quiet, Pansy had all but moved into the Manor to take care of his mother, and Granger hadn't left his house since that night except to feed her cat.

He'd just dealt with the craziness of his father's funeral the previous day, which had turned into a public spectacle. For nearly an hour, he had watched as virtual strangers and family members that he had never before seen had lied and talked about how great of a man his father had been in life and how they would miss him. Draco knew for certain that his father wasn't a good man, nor would he be missed by anyone outside of his mother.

He was stuck in the middle of a bitter battle between his head and his chest.

Father had made quite a few mistakes and was terribly flawed, but weren't they all? He was human. He had realised his mistakes and tried to rectify them before he'd gone into Azkaban, but sometimes apologies via letters weren't enough. But they were a good start...and they were all that he had to tame his anger.

Large parts of him didn't want to attend the burial after the circus that had been the funeral. But, then, Granger had showed up just after two o'clock and asked him when he would be ready to leave. It had been hard enough to attend the funeral the previous day, and she wanted him to get dressed for the burial?

Needless to say, Draco snapped. Hard. It hadn't taken much to push him over the edge.

And down he'd gone.

The only thing that yelling at Granger had proven was that he couldn't go on the way he had been living. There were times when Draco didn't even know who he was or what he represented. He had been caught up in the façade for so long that he had forgotten what it was like to be honest with someone.

His bedroom door opened slowly and Granger stood in the doorway.

"I thought I told you to get out."

"Well, I'm back."

"How did you get past my bedroom's wards?" He shook his head and rolled his eyes once he realised the answer to his own question. "Oh, yes, you're Hermione Granger. You can do anything."

She pocketed her wand. "If you're trying to start a fight with me, do us both a favour, and don't. I know what you're going through."

He turned his head when she sat down next to him.

"It may be vital to wear your mask it until this mess with your uncles is over, but you don't have to wear it around me. I've seen you. Truly seen you...and you've seen me. We don't have anything to hide from each other."

Draco knew exactly what she had meant. That morning, when his walls had come tumbling down and he had been astonished to discover that he had actually been wrong about his father...she had been there with him. He didn't look at her when he arose from the bed, stood at the window, and stared out at the grey world. Draco was too busy wading through the pool of confusion to notice that she had joined him in front of the window.

That was, until she spoke, "It took Pansy four hours to get me out of my bathroom the morning of Matthew's funeral. It was absolutely horrible. She thought that I was losing my mind, and she was right, but it didn't matter. I had no grip on reality, I wasn't even seeing in colour."

Draco started at that last sentence, but said nothing.

"The world was black and white, and she was screaming at me to come out. And I refused. I mean, how could I?" She paused for a few minutes and he stared out at his grey life. He remained silent while she spoke. "Pansy ended up breaking in and dragging me out by my arms. We don't speak about that morning."

"Why didn't you want to go?" He heard himself ask, but he felt as if he were a million miles away.

"I didn't think that I could handle it. It meant that he was really gone, that he wouldn't be back, and I just couldn't accept that." She took a breath and continued, but her voice was thick, "Parents aren't supposed to lose their children. They're just not."

"Things that aren't supposed to happen seem to happen to us, don't they, Granger?"

"I suppose they do, but perhaps in the end, we'll be better people because of the challenges that we've faced and overcome. It sure as hell doesn't feel that way now, but—maybe."

The word lingered in the air. Maybe.

Granger had used it as a word of hope; he had used it as a word of uncertainty. His life was full of maybes. The woman next to him was a definite maybe, in a singular way that he didn't want to acknowledge.

"I know that it's so exhausting."

Finally, he looked at her. "What?"

"Wearing that mask..."

"Draco?"

And she had been right. It was exhausting. It was also hard for him to look in the mirror without being overwhelmed. On the morning that the news of his father's death broke, he had admitted to Hermione while standing in the bathroom that he didn't look in the mirror often. What he had neglected to admit was that he couldn't stand to look in a mirror and not see himself. He only saw a familiar stranger, someone he knew in passing, but didn't know all that well. And he hated the feelings of emptiness, uncertainty, and confusion that such a sight had evoked.

"Draco?"

"What?" He took a moment to look at her. Hermione was wet from the rain, and the message was clear as day, even in his haze.

"It's done." And with a glance in the direction of the casket, he realised that, sure enough, it was done. The change was complete, but he didn't feel any different...or maybe he did.

The rain had stopped, the storm had calmed, and the magic had disintegrated into the atmosphere. His world was still various shades of grey, but the brown had given him enough hope to know that the grey wouldn't last. The officiator pocketed his wand, a great pile of dirt

had appeared, and his two uncles quickly Disapparated to the Manor to prepare for dinner and the meeting that Draco had been dreading for days.

Only Arcturus stayed behind.

He gave his nephew a little nod.

He then watched as his uncle approached his mother, patted her shoulder—which was a huge display of affection in the Malfoy family. He whispered something that she nodded to, and Disapparated.

"We're getting ready to go back to the Manor. Dinner is in three hours and everyone wants to rest before." Blaise told them.

Granger beat him to the punch. "We'll be there soon, okay?"

Draco hugged his trembling mother for what seemed like forever before she finally pulled away. It didn't matter that she was dry and he was wet. She had been an absolute mess for the first day, but on day three, she had calmed down. She had made peace, and though it now hurt, Draco knew that she would be fine in the end.

Would he, though?

Four days had passed and he was still uncertain of that answer. There was still so much that he was battling. Narcissa kissed her son's cheek, told him that she loved him, and kissed his cheek again. He watched as she hugged Granger tightly. Blaise then took Narcissa by the arm and Apparated them both to the Manor.

Pansy heaved a great sigh and looked at her best friend. There was an unspoken conversation between them that had left him confused until Hermione looked around...and nodded. And even in his grey haze, he knew. This had been Granger's first funeral since her son's. He knew that she hadn't wanted to be there, in the Malfoy family cemetery, but she hadn't said a word.

Pansy waved her hand in front of his face. "Are you all right?"

He just nodded because that was all that he could do at that point in time.

Soon, he and Granger were all alone. Draco only realised that he and Hermione were still holding hands when she released his and turned her back to him. Confused, he watched as she approached the edge of the unfilled grave. She didn't get too close. Hesitantly, Draco followed her to the edge, curious about what she was going to do. He was about to speak when she opened her hand and showed him the handful of brown dirt. Brown.

Draco blinked twice, and the colour hadn't changed. Brown. He looked into her eyes. Brown. He looked at her wet hair. Brown. He looked up at the sky. Grey.

He sighed internally.

She dropped the handful of dirt into the unfilled grave, which confused him. "What are you doing?"

"It's a Muggle funeral tradition." Hermione replied softly as she dusted the rest of the dirt off her hands. "It's a symbol of closure. I have to admit that while it is painful, perhaps it ultimately provides the most healing."

Granger had told him that the first step to healing, according to her therapist, was to let go. But could he? Could he honestly let go of everything? Well, he apparently had to, because there was no one left to be angry at, besides himself. And Draco was tired of being angry at himself. He was tired of being a lot of things. And he was tired of being tired, so he was willing to do whatever it took to—Draco turned his head when he heard the dull cracks of Apparition.

The grave-filers had arrived to do their work.

"Sir, if you are—"

Bury your resentment when you bury me.

"Don't," it came out in a disoriented whisper.

"What?" Everyone, including Hermione, chorused.

Draco's voice was strong and firm by the time he told them, "You're all fired."

"But," Hermione tried to reason while the men stood there, jaws dropped, "They're here to do their jobs. They're here to bury—"

"I know what they're here to do." He was focused.

"Maybe if they would give us some time—"

"I need them to get off my property."

Bury your resentment when you bury me.

The confused men turned and all that was heard next were the small cracks of Apparition. Hermione looked rather startled by his outburst, but said nothing when Draco shrugged the wet cloak off his shoulders and rolled the sleeves of his shirt to his elbows. Granger had talked him into doing quite a few things. But there were no words that she could use to talk him out of his sudden plans.

It was the only thing he could do to start the process of letting go of everything that had bogged him down for so long. There was a look of set determination in his eyes as he turned and walked towards the mountain of dirt. He had to do this. And he couldn't use magic. That was too easy. There were no other options. But how could he—what would he need—

"You need a shovel."

Draco's neck jerked in her direction, and there she stood with her fingers wrapped around a shovel that was almost as tall as she. After appraising the Muggle tool, he took the strange

instrument from her. He then nodded more to himself than to her, slowly walked to the mound of dirt next to his father's grave, and instinct took over.

Hermione didn't offer to help; she just stepped aside and allowed him do what he needed to do in silence. Draco found himself rather conflicted; torn between asking her to stay and telling her to leave. But his mental war with Granger had to be put on the backburner for something more important.

And she stayed.

She sat on the grass, merely two metres away. She didn't speak, she didn't ask if he needed help, and she didn't even look at him. She just stayed. He would have rather walked across hot coals than admit that her staying had made all the difference in the world.

For over an hour, Draco put his everything into burying his resentment, his anger, his pain, his disgust; he put his everything into filling his father's grave. When he had first dug the shovel into the mound of dirt that had been charmed to stay dry during the rain, Draco had put so much force into the act that brown dirt had flown into the grey sky. He had paused, looked around his grey world, then at the brown dirt, and continued. His first scoops of dirt were disoriented as he got a feel for the instrument. Clouds of dirt had flown into the air as he haphazardly tossed the dirt into the grave.

But he kept going.

It was harder than it looked, and soon the sweat was pouring down his face.

Bury your resentment when you bury me.

He wanted to hate his father. He wanted to hate Father for everything that he had given him when he had left that letter, and for everything that he had taken away in that same moment. He wanted to curse and thank him for telling him the truth, even when it was too late for Draco to do anything to rectify his behaviour.

Draco gripped the shovel tightly and dug it into the now smaller pile of dirt. He took a moment to wipe his brow with the rolled-up sleeve of his shirt before he continued working. More than anything, he wanted to resent Lucius for being such a shoddy father, but knew that he wouldn't be the man he was today had it not been for him. He wanted to be angry at him for putting them through so much as a family, but it had made them stronger. Draco wanted to hate him for dumping the immense pressure on his shoulders at a time in his life when he just wanted to figure out his place in the world, but the responsibility had turned him into a man. A real man. He wanted to hate him for dying and making him experience the epitome of melancholy, but his sadness made him real.

Bury your resentment when you bury me.

He worked so hard, so diligently that his muscles ached and his mind screamed for him to stop, but he didn't. He had had his mind set. Even if it killed him, he was determined to fill the hole, not just the one in the ground, but the hole in his chest...the hole that he hadn't quite realised was there until that moment.

And, honestly, he didn't know if he'd ever get to the point where he was content with his father's role in his past. Draco didn't know if he would ever get to the point where he could accept that in teaching him all the wrong lessons, Father had taught him all the right ones, too.

Draco dumped more dirt into the half-full hole.

But—but he had a different view, some understanding, and a bit of insight, and that was a good start. With all of that had control. His world had changed so much in the last four days that any amount of control he could manage to gain over himself was welcomed. He couldn't change his past, he couldn't change his present, but maybe he could have some control over his future.

Draco pushed the shovel into the diminishing pile of dirt.

He could let go. He could accept. He could deal with the change. He could free himself from all the resentment and anger. He could listen to his father and bury it. *Truly* bury it all, because he could talk the talk, but walking the walk had always been difficult for him. He could do it now, though.

He paused with a shovel-full of dirt over the grave that was three-quarters filled. He turned the shovel over, wiped the sweat off of his forehead, and made his decision.

Another half hour passed before Draco found himself staring at his father's filled grave, feeling...not good, but not bad, either. He was filthy from sweat and dirt, his hands were blistered from the labour, his head throbbed, his chest thudded so hard in his chest that it hurt, but—but Draco felt okay.

"Are you all right?"

He looked over at Granger whose hands were fiercely gripping the hem of her knee-length dress robes. She looked completely undomesticated; her hair was everywhere and she was flushed and staring back at him with concern. Brown. He couldn't tear his eyes away because surely, he was going mad. They had been out there for hours; he could very well blame it on the heat.

Draco shut his eyes and opened them back. He looked around.

The shovel fell to the ground.

Everything was still various shades of grey...and Hermione Granger was in colour.

"Draco?" She narrowed her eyes.

"I'm fine." He allowed his annoyance to be made known, but shook his head. He had no reason to be annoyed with her. It wasn't her fault that she was in colour. He blamed his mind. "I need to go home and change before my meeting with my uncles."

With that, he grabbed his cloak off the ground and started to walk away from her.

He needed to clear his head. Maybe, if he got away from her, she'd soon fade into the background.

But Granger followed. He heard her hurried footsteps as he walked briskly through his family's private cemetery. He knew that he could've Apparated, but he didn't. Instead, he walked. His pace was strenuous, but walking was better than answering the questions that ran around in his already-confused mind.

Draco heard her small intake of air, halted mid-stride, and whirled around rather suddenly. Granger wasn't prepared for his sudden stop and collided right into his chest. She would've cracked her head on a headstone, but he caught her around the waist and pulled her into him. Clumsily, Hermione slammed into his chest, again. Immediately, Draco felt strange and released her before she fully got her bearings, causing her to fall back and land on her butt.

"Ow!" She shrieked. "That hurt! Why did you let go?"

Draco didn't have an answer, so he offered his hand and pulled her onto her feet.

"What's wrong with you? You're looking at me as if I've developed spattergroat."

"I'm *fine*." He ground out, looking up at the grey sky.

"Then look at me."

He felt like a petulant child. He didn't *want* to look at her. He didn't want to be reminded. This wasn't the time for that. Draco had just finished burying his father. Instead, he fished in his robes for his wand, muttered something that even he couldn't discern, and left her alone in the cemetery.

For a moment, Draco wanted to everything back to grey. It was easier that way.

Part Two: For your mother.

The first thing that Draco did when he landed in his house was start a hot shower.

As the steam rose from behind the glass shower door, he inhaled and removed his muddy shoes, wet socks, dirty trousers, and smelly shirt. He smelled terrible, but that was the last thing on his mind. His father was dead—buried—gone, everything was grey, his mother was grieving, Granger was in colour, his uncles were waiting, he smelled horrible, he—Draco turned on the faucet and splashed himself in the face with tepid sink water.

He really needed that.

Minutes later, he stood under the showerhead, letting the scalding hot water cascade over him.

The water relaxed his aching muscles and calmed his weary mind. He basked in the steady spray for a more than a few minutes before he grabbed the bar of soap and a towel. As he rinsed the soap off of his skin and hair, he relished in the feeling of being purified. And yet, no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't wash away everything.

He stayed in the shower until the water ran cold and he felt parched.

After wrapping a towel around his waist, Draco decided to quench his thirst before getting dressed. He came down the stairs and was halfway down when he discovered Granger—sitting in his ottoman. He almost swore aloud, but didn't want to her to discover him.

She was still in colour.

Draco thought about turning around and creeping back up the stairs, but no. This was his house, dammit. He was still Draco Malfoy, after all. So, he was going to do what he had planned, and if—he was momentarily distracted when she pinched the bridge of her nose, shut her eyes, and took a few calming breaths.

Well, distracted was—oh, hell, he was distracted.

There was still that aura surrounding her; the one that he had noticed when he had walked into the restaurant months ago. It was stronger and brighter, maybe because she was the only thing in colour, but there was something different about it—something different about *her* that went outside of her physical differences.

"What are you doing here?" He was composed for someone who was just in a damp towel.

She nearly jumped out of the chair when she saw him, and then her eyes widened. "Oh! I..."

Was she blushing? Yes, she was. Draco would've smirked, but he didn't, which was odd because he was mere seconds from rejoicing in her discomfort. It was almost tragically comical that Hermione Granger, who wasn't exactly innocent, was almost prudishly blushing at the sight of him in a towel.

"You what?"

"I—I was," Hermione had managed to move halfway across the room. "Why aren't you dressed?"

"It's my house." Draco was a bit annoyed from the conversation—and chilly, too.

"Y-you could at least put some clothes on."

"I wasn't expecting company."

She opened her mouth, then shut it and stared at him.

Draco had never, *ever* been as tense and awkward around a person as he was around Hermione. Never. It was almost out-of-character for him, and he hated it. He would've hated

her, too, because she was the source, but he couldn't hate her. Hate was a mental thing, after all.

"Why are you staring at me?" He folded his arms. His body was dry, for the most part, but he was still cold and he still refused to be the first to retreat.

"You should get dressed." Her voice sounded odd as she looked away. "I'll go fix some wine..."

And she was gone. She had practically run from the room as if Death Eaters were after her. Draco started to say something to the obviously frazzled Granger, but all he could do was shake his head. It was a widely-known fact that she didn't drink much, not anymore. He stood there for a minute and listened as she clattered dishes in his kitchen.

She had sworn twice and shattered a glass by the time he took to the stairs.

Women.

And with the word, thoughts of sex and relationships followed in succession.

Relationships and sex had been plentiful over the years, so much so that he had had enough of them both—okay, maybe not the sex; he was a man after all. But relationships were highly overrated. Well, that wasn't the exact truth. His father's mental illness had certainly played its part in not allowing him to know what a real relationship was all about...or was it the actual *women* that had left him rather ignorant.

It was probably the latter—or some weird hybrid between the two.

Draco buttoned his shirt and tucked the ends perfectly into his black trousers. He summoned a tie.

He had only ever dated one type of woman: beautiful and downright stupid. But, honestly, they were perfect for that part of his life, when the pressure was enormous and he didn't need anyone to ask him questions. Silly women never saw between the lines, never thought to ask questions, and never cared about anything except his Galleons. They were easy to please and easy to discard.

But now he had no use for them.

With the death of his father came not just pain, but liberation. Draco was free to find someone that he didn't have to lie to or hide things from. He could be honest...or not. Perhaps that wasn't such a good idea. If he had to be honest about his present, then he had to be honest about his past; and that was something that he would've preferred to leave right where it was...in the past.

However, Granger—Draco froze. Where the hell had her name come from? They weren't together, no matter what the rumours had said. He couldn't even entertain the thought of dating her because it was just too—he didn't know what it was, but it wasn't normal.

Draco sat down, put on his socks and shoes, and made sure that his black robes were impeccable. After fixing his hair, Draco, satisfied with his exterior, went back downstairs. Granger was in front of his fireplace, pacing. She wasn't drinking, but clearly, she hadn't gotten her wits back. There was a glass of Elf-wine waiting for him. He had sat down, picked up the glass, and polished its contents off before she finally noticed him. "Oh, you're dressed."

"Obviously," Draco drawled. "What did you want, Granger?" He snapped, but it lacked its usual edge.

She looked over at him; her cheeks were still slightly tinted. "I need you to come with me."

To his amazement, he didn't immediately deny her. "Where?"

"To retrieve something for your mother."

Part Three: Friend of the family.

Hermione clutched her wand tightly in her fist as she walked down a long corridor in the Malfoy Manor.

Sure, there were no threats lurking in the shadows and she was still on the ground level, but the memory of the last time that she had walked around the grand home alone had been enough to keep her on edge.

She wasn't enjoying the silence.

Where was everyone?

They had missed dinner, but Narcissa always sat in a parlour or the sitting room after meals; she hadn't expected everyone to just disappear, not with Draco's uncles around. Not only were certain rooms warded to keep them out, but Blaise and his trustworthy Auror friends had been conspicuously keeping an eye out on them ever since they had arrived in the country.

The parlour she had Flooed into was empty, and that had sent her on a search. After walking into empty room after empty room, her pace slowed and her mind, though vigilant, wandered carefully through the last few days.

Hermione had nearly been on auto-pilot since she had left Ron in the sitting room.

She hadn't had a moment to think. It probably wasn't the healthiest of responses, but she had thrown herself into helping Narcissa and Draco—so much that she would often return home late to a miffed Apollo that she would have to heavily dote on just to get back into his good graces. She had lived in a bubble of self-imposed solitude for so long. Now, though, she hated being alone. Hermione didn't like the self-hating thoughts that found her when she was alone – the same thoughts that her that she didn't deserve to have such good friends.

Friends.

That word was starting to get easier and easier to say. She had friends. People who cared about her well-being and wanted to be there for her; she'd always had them, but she had been too far gone to see or appreciate them before. Well, not anymore. She would value them, put her trust in them, and pick them up if they ever fell.

And Draco had done just that. He'd fallen. Hard. It was a sort of sorrow that she hadn't expected. She had expected him to argue and tell her to leave, but she had gotten something different.

Gone were the pretences, the masks, the indifference, and the distance between them.

When the tables had turned and his world had collapsed, everything had changed so abruptly that Hermione was still reeling. Blaise had been the one to first tell her to check on Malfoy, but she was already halfway to the Floo before he could even get the entire sentence out. She hadn't expected to find him so broken, but there he was, in the middle of the rubble of his old life, eyes vacant and lost. And when she had read the letter, her heart just opened and hurt for him. Draco—the real Draco—had clung to her so tightly and shook and cried and grieved.

Once he had fallen into a fitful slumber with his head in her lap hours after the owls had descended upon his house, Hermione rested her eyes with a new appreciation for Pansy. It was incredibly and painfully hard to watch as he lost his grip; it was even harder to be his walls when his had collapsed.

And Pansy had done it twice, for her.

Hermione opened another door and—found another empty room. She frowned, shut the heavy door, and continued down the hall. Malfoy Manor was a maze of rooms and corridors, and she reminded herself that this would be the final time she ventured through the mansion.

Truly, she believed that, like Narcissa, Malfoy would be fine, in the end. He just had some things to conquer, and the letter was the perfect start. Burying his father, and everything associated with him, today, had been another great leap that he had done on his own. She didn't know what he was thinking, but he was heavy in thought as he filled Lucius' grave, muttering under his breath.

When he finished, he looked as if he'd just finished climbing Mount Everest. Though he had looked at her with confusion and shock, for some unknown reason, there was something else in his eyes.

Relief.

He had jumped over a hurdle; the first of many, it seemed.

But didn't they all have things that they needed to overcome? She still struggled with her demons, still worried, and she still felt an incredible amount of self-loathing and pain—pain that seemed to have multiplied recently, despite her outward appearance. But it was fine. Pain had become part of who she was; it had become her foundation, something that she could

cling to when everything went to hell. It had become a symbol of the heartbreaks and disappointments that she had faced, the situations that she had risen above, the lessons that she had learned, and the losses that had made her heart clench.

But without realising, she had also pried the doors to her life – and her heart – open and allowed admittance to others. And while terrifying, Hermione knew that she couldn't live a meaningful life without something as deep and significant as love in it. She had loved so much; she had given her heart to so many people in the past at no cost. She had risked it all in its name. But Hermione had been naïve about love, and even intimacy. But with on the road to recovery, there was wisdom.

She would have boundaries.

She would take it slower.

She would make better decisions.

Hermione prepared to round another corner in the dimly-lit corridor of Malfoy Manor. The sounds of one angry voice and one calm voice, however, stopped her.

"There's no way that little sodding runt will ever run the family businesses. It—"

"Let him do as he pleases; there are always ways to control and force his hand. He has too much of his mother in him. He cares too much."

She took a few giant steps backwards, but it was a bit too late to duck into the closest room. It took a millisecond for Hermione to grasp her wits and composure, square her shoulders, and paste a blank look on her face before Draco's two uncles came around the corner.

Part of her thought that they wouldn't stop because she wasn't worth the scum between their toes, in their opinion. But her theory was proven wrong when the two men halted upon seeing the Muggle-born witch...*alone*. Just the way they liked, she figured. She watched with a perfectly calm and blank expression as the grins on Emil and Hesper Malfoys' faces morphed into something far more sinister.

Still, she never wavered. Instead, she boldly stared them in the eyes.

Emil Malfoy was the youngest of the Malfoy brothers and also the angriest. Hermione reckoned that he had every right to be angry. He probably had had to live in their shadows his entire life. He probably used his anger to assert himself and to remind his brothers that he existed. Of course, he was the first to speak, "Watch where you're going, *Mudblood*."

Hermione refused to be baited. "Excuse *you*."

"Excuse *us*? This little chit has lost her mind! Do you know who we are?"

"Yes."

"You're in the Malfoy Manor, you filthy Mudblood. Show your respect."

She just stood there, defiant, with her wand at her side.

The sneering Emil Malfoy was a rather short, pale, and rotund man with grey eyes and a receding hairline that was beginning to show his milky-white scalp. Emil had short limbs and large extremities that didn't fit his body type, and made him look so terribly awkward. It seemed that a defining feature of the male Malfoys was a lack of body hair. Emil was clearly the exception with his full blond beard.

"Don't you have anything to say, Mudblood?" He sneered.

That was the only Malfoy characteristic that he had down pat.

Draco had once said that Emil reminded him of Peter Pettigrew, minus the snivelling and the silver hand. And in that moment, Hermione agreed. He looked as if he had been permitted into the Malfoy family on a technicality.

"If you would point me in the direction of the parlour where everyone is, that would be—"

"I'm not some sodding house elf—oh, wait, you *do* know what a house elf is, right? Or are you too—"

"I advise you not to finish that statement, Emil." Hermione told him tightly.

"You dare speak my name!" When Hermione just stared at him as if he had mental problems, the plump wizard looked up at his brother. "Well, would you look at that, Hesper? Here's a little piece of filth that needs to be taught a lesson in manners." And even as he threatened her, she could see that he looked up to his older brother for his approval.

Hermione almost laughed at the pathetic display before her.

This was the man that had the nerve to rant about how *Draco Malfoy* hadn't belonged in the family every time they were in the same room. Funny, *he* was the actual oddball in both appearance and accomplishments. He was the only one of the brothers who hadn't made his own money outside of the family. Like he depended on his brother's approval to move in to do harm on her, Emil depended on the successful family businesses' stock for his income.

"Now, now, Emil, there's no need to be rude," finally came the cool voice of Hesper Malfoy, the eldest living brother. "She is, after all, a friend of the family."

Emil grumbled. "Filthy—"

Hesper cut him off scathingly. "*Enough.*"

And just like that, the plump man fell silent.

If there was anyone who reminded Hermione of Lucius at his peak, it was Hesper Malfoy. In fact, he looked so much like the deceased wizard in his prime that she had done a double take when she had first laid eyes on him. The only thing that distinguished the brothers was Hesper's eyes; they were a blue, instead of grey. Another thing was that Hesper Malfoy was a sociopath. He had absolutely no problem with killing someone and walking away as if

nothing out of the ordinary had occurred. Draco had confessed that Hesper had scared the living shite out of him when he was a child; it was before he realized that his uncle wouldn't kill him because he was family.

There wasn't much stopping him from killing Hermione—only the Unbreakable Vow that he had taken.

And the fact that he was wandless.

"Miss Granger, what is it that we can do for you?" He had asked in the most blatant example of superficial charm she had ever seen. But the look on his face had made her blood cool considerably. The charm in his voice was thick, but the covert hostility that was hidden behind the words was more disturbing than anything else in his actual statement.

"I'm looking for everyone else." She had to remain confident. He could smell fear.

He loved it, craved it, and he was relentless once he could sense it. According to Draco, that was why he and Emil were so close; the younger brother feared him and would do his bidding, if asked. Hesper was perfect at exploiting people, getting what he wanted, and discarding them when he was through. He'd sold his stocks when he was younger and made his fortune by seducing rich heiresses, marrying them, and killing them—though the killing part hadn't been proven because they had yet to find any of the bodies.

Thankfully, he was currently single.

"Well," Hesper drawled, "They're just around the corner at the end of the hall."

He was lying, and that was something that she found eerily amazing. When Hesper lied, he was calm and feigned sincerity. A liar could always recognise when a lie was being told, but it had taken her a few moments to realise the truth. He was *that* good. Everyone had a tell. Draco got frazzled, Pansy couldn't look her in the eye, and Blaise—well...he hadn't lied to her as much as his best mate had. Hermione figured that Malfoy had his reasons, but she was confident that he wasn't a sociopath.

All she knew, at that moment, was that she wasn't going to go into that room.

"Would you like for us to escort you?" Hesper smiled smoothly.

"No thank you."

"But we *insist*." He stressed the last word to hide the underlying threat.

"We do?" Emil looked dumbfounded.

"Of course, we wouldn't want anything to happen to the—" he picked his words wisely, "*Muggle-born*."

Hermione was far from convinced. "I'm perfectly capable of finding my own way."

"There is no need to be stubborn, Miss Granger."

"But there is a reason to be wary."

"Wary?" he looked slightly offended, but there was an evil glint in his steel-blue eyes. "I am wandless and bound by a Vow to not harm you."

"Then let me pass."

"We will take you to them."

"I'm not stupid."

"No, you aren't. I've heard all about you, Hermione Granger. Brightest witch of your age. First Order of Merlin recipient. War hero. With credentials like that, how could anyone think of you as stupid." It was a statement more than a question. "I see why my nephew is so *attached*. I don't think he knows that you will be his downfall."

Hermione narrowed her eyes. "Your arrogance will be yours."

Something fizzled behind Hesper Malfoy's eyes. The charming smile slipped into a scowl as his entire demeanour changed abruptly. The jig was up, he knew it, she knew it, and Emil was the only one who was confused. Hermione forced herself not to flinch when his right hand reached for her, but when he stopped short of grabbing her by the neck, she relaxed—slightly. He couldn't hurt her; he couldn't touch her, but that didn't mean that he wasn't dangerous. His fingers strained to seize her, hurt her, and drag her into his twisted game. And he could reach and reach, he could pull his arm out of its socket, and he could stretch his fingers as far as they would go, but the power of the Vow wouldn't yield to him. The wildly frustrated wizard, dropped his hand, scowling deeply.

"I can't touch you..." And then he smiled. And that was odd. He looked over at his younger brother. "But you can, Emil."

The portly wizard's grey eyes widened.

"You want to force his hand?" Hesper asked. "The best way to control him is with fear."

Her wand was at his neck. "Don't even think about it." Her voice was low and threatening. "I know twenty-seven spells that will sever your head from your body in one clean swipe. Do you want a demonstration?"

Hesper was still calm. "She's too good to follow through."

"They say that if you use the Killing Curse once, you can do it again..."

Emil gulped.

Hermione tapped his chin with the tip of her wand, daring him.

Emil was angry, sweating, and swearing. He didn't like his current position. Stuck between a Mudblood and his callous brother—an impossible situation. His lips twitched. "Filthy little Mud—"

"I wouldn't finish that word, if I were you," came the almost too-cheerful voice of Pansy Parkinson. "That isn't a word typically used in civilized conversation."

The fat wizard's flushed face suddenly paled.

"Are you okay, Hermione?" her friend asked carefully.

"Yes. Where's your wand?"

"In the middle of his back, ready to fuck his spine up if he so much as *breathes* wrongly."

Hesper whipped around to the woman. "You would protect this *filth*?" The veins in his forehead had made an appearance.

"With my life." Pansy replied ferociously and reached around Emil and in that moment, Hermione was sure that she had made the right decision by calling Pansy her friend. She was the very best one that she had; she'd proven herself time and time again. Hermione grabbed the hand of her *best* friend and slowly walked around the rotund wizard, who was sneering at them. Her wand was still pointed, just in case.

"You're nothing but a blood-traitor!"

"I suppose I am," Pansy sneered as they slowly started to back up, preparing for their hasty exit. "But I'm damn proud of it." Step after step, they made their way, backwards, in the opposition direction from which the brothers had come. "Oh, and for your information," Pansy lifted her wand higher the moment Hermione was safely behind the corner, "Your meeting with Draco will take place in Lucius' old office in approximately thirty minutes. *Do* see to it that you don't wander. I wouldn't want you to be late."

And they were gone.

Part Four: What she needed.

Before they entered the sitting room, which housed Narcissa, Pansy hugged Hermione, and it was then that Hermione allowed herself to reel and shake from the incident. "You're okay. They didn't—"

"No, thanks to the Unbreakable Vow and Emil's slow draw, they didn't put their hands on me. How did you know to—?"

"The wards had alerted Narcissa of your arrival, and when it took you too long to show up, she sent me out for you. Blaise left shortly after dinner—to prepare. Where's Draco? He has a meeting—"

"He'll be here shortly. He got a bit tied up."

Pansy didn't question about the wizard's whereabouts, she questioned Hermione's sanity. "Are you sure that you're okay?"

"I'm fine. Don't mention this to Narcissa, I don't want to worry her."

She resigned a sigh, "Fine, but—"

"I'm just a little shaken, that's all."

"You didn't sound shaken before."

"Hesper smells fear."

"Like a bloody dog. How did you—Draco told you?"

She nodded. "That night I told you about—"

"When Potter told Ginny Weasley about Matthew. Wait until I—" Hermione gave her a stern look. Pansy softened, slightly. "He deserves a good hex, Hermione."

"Pansy..."

"Or a curse."

"Not much better."

"I could kick him?"

Hermione shook her head. "It's been quiet on that front for a while. It seems they've talked it out. Perhaps it's all over. It's an open secret now and hopefully, we can move forward."

But she wouldn't lower her guard.

Pansy didn't look convinced, but said nothing when Hermione pushed open the door to the grand sitting room Narcissa was sitting on the sofa, occupying her time with her latest hobby—magical knitting. Lucius, it seemed, had been well-prepared for death—almost disturbingly so. He had left letters to his wife and son too far in advance for it to have been a mere coincidence.

And while she had read Draco's letter many times, his mother had been rather tight-lipped about hers. But Hermione had a good idea about his instructions. Lucius Malfoy had instructed Draco to shed his hard feelings towards him and free himself; it only made sense that he had told his wife something along the lines of, "Find happiness, try something new, don't mourn forever, move on, cultivate a skill, and mend broken bridges."

Narcissa had every intention of following her husband's final orders. There were many things that Hermione admired about Draco's mother, but mostly she admired her resilience. Hermione didn't know if it was innate or learned, but Narcissa possessed the ability to recover from just about anything. She was a grieving widow, but through her anguish, she

had managed to salvage her composure, her strength, and her dignified poise. But there had been moments when she could see sorrow lurking.

"I apologise for not making it to dinner. We were detained."

Startled, Narcissa turned, saw Hermione standing near the door with Pansy, and rose to hug her. "No apology needed." Something made her eyes light up just a bit. "Draco's here," her brows furrowed, "With two guests that the Manor's wards don't recognize—probably the solicitors, for the meeting." There was a moment of silence before Narcissa shrugged and led Hermione to the sofa where she sat in the middle of the two witches.

Pansy rested her head on Hermione's shoulder.

"How are you?"

Narcissa smiled weakly. "Doing the best I can."

"You're going to be fine, you know." Pansy told her, lifting her head momentarily to look at the woman who was the closest thing to a mother that she'd had for years. "And we're going to be here for you."

Narcissa rose from her spot on the sofa and stopped the charmed knitting. She had her back to them, and was looking up at a moving painting of an angel on the hearth when she said, "But you two have lives, and I can't keep them from you. I need time, that's all. I need time and a diversion. I've been taking care of Lucius for years, hoping that he would get better, and—" she took a deep breath. "And I need to fill the void that he's left behind."

Hermione heard the door to the sitting room creak open slowly, and she glanced behind her just once, nodded her head, and said, "Maybe that's not all you need."

Pansy, who had followed her eyes when she had looked back, stifled a small gasp.

"What do you mean?" Narcissa was still staring at the beautiful painting.

"Maybe you need someone, like family."

The older witch waved her off rather flippantly. At least she knew where Draco had got it from. "I have family. I have Draco. I have you two and—"

"But what about a sister?" a foreign voice asked.

Narcissa instantly froze.

Hermione couldn't see her face, but she had suddenly gone very still. The first thing she moved was her head; it shook slightly as if she wouldn't—no—*couldn't* believe whose voice she had heard.

This could both go very badly and open a lot of wounds, or it could be the best thing in the world for her. As she watched Narcissa's reaction from behind, Hermione sincerely hoped

that it would be the latter. For once, she prayed to every power that she believed in, and some she did not, to make something in *someone's* life work out for the better.

"It couldn't—*no*."

Narcissa was visibly shaking when she saw her sister, Andromeda, standing in the doorway with Draco and a blue-haired boy Teddy, who shyly buried his face in his grandmother's robes.

"It's me, Cissy." There were tears in her eyes as she made the first move. The little boy stayed behind and stared up at Draco with comically wide eyes. His hair turned the same shade as Draco's until the man himself looked down, almost did a double take, and bit back a smile. He squatted down to Teddy so they were almost face-to-face and whispered something in his ear that made his hair turn purple; something that made him look directly at Hermione.

Narcissa's legs seemed to be frozen.

From what Hermione had been told, they hadn't seen each other since Christmas break during Narcissa's Sixth Year. Andromeda was eighteen and running away to marry the love of her life, a Muggle-born. Narcissa was the only one to whom she had bothered to say goodbye. Bellatrix had become more and more dangerous as the months had progressed, but Narcissa was different.

Though she had been a believer in pureblood elitism, she was put off by Voldemort's bloodshed. She had been the one who had cried and refused to take the Black ring that Andromeda gave willingly. Narcissa begged her not to leave, and when Andromeda couldn't be convinced to stay, the youngest of the Black daughters had secretly stowed away a little bag of Galleons in her middle sister's luggage. If she had been caught, she would've been ostracised, but she didn't care.

Hermione didn't know why they hadn't reopened the lines of communication after the war, the reasons hadn't been explained, but she guessed there were assumptions made by both. Perhaps there was also fear.

"But how?"

Andromeda and Hermione locked eyes. "I contacted Hermione, this morning, actually. And she came over with Draco—" she cast an affectionate gaze over her shoulder at the nephew that she had just met for the first time.

Draco had been hesitant when Hermione had finally told him where they were really going, but he had stayed, even though he was uncomfortable. He had even answered some of her questions about his mother and the circumstances surrounding his father's death. It wasn't much, but it was more than Hermione had ever expected. They would probably never be close, but they were family, and Draco respected her role as a member.

Hermione gave Draco a small smile—and he looked at her blankly for a moment before he nodded in return. He then slipped out of the room for his meeting with his uncles.

Silently, Hermione wished him luck.

Andromeda took wary step after wary step towards her sister.

"But why?"

Andromeda stopped. "I got something from Lucius."

Hermione didn't know whose gasp was louder, Narcissa's or Pansy's.

"An owl delivered it four days ago, but I—" her voice cracked. "I didn't know what to make of it."

Narcissa anxiously closed the distance between her and her older sister. "What—what did it say?"

Andromeda looked more like Bellatrix than Hermione had ever cared to admit, but her face was softer. She reached into the pocket of her robes and retrieved the ring that she had shown Hermione merely hours ago. Her old Black family ring. The ring that Lucius had taken from his wife's jewellery box and returned to its rightful owner as a symbol of amity.

The simple action had not just taught Draco more about his father, but it had made Hermione think about the man, as well. Things weren't always what they seemed. He hadn't been a good man, but he wasn't the epitome of evil. He had made many mistakes that would eventually destroy his life and the lives of those he had cared about, but so had she.

She was amazed by the power that sins held over people. It was a word that could be said in a second and an action that could be done in a moment, but once said and done, it could take years to unwind the repercussions. Lucius Malfoy had committed sins in his life in the name of prejudice and because he thought that he was doing the right thing.

Hermione had assumed, like everyone else, that he had been a bad person.

Some people said that he deserved to die.

Deserved.

But she, too, had committed sins because she thought the ends justified the means. Did she deserve what had happened? The more she thought about it, the more she didn't know. A better question was: did Lucius deserve what had happened to him in Azkaban? That was easy, no. And perhaps that was the answer to her first question. Hermione was not so different from him, and he was not so different from any other human.

A sin was a sin. They both had committed them. Humans were inherently flawed and sometimes made poor choices; *no one* had the right to judge. And she wondered if anyone *really* could judge Lucius Malfoy; after all no one knew the man. Everyone had read him wrong, Draco most of all, but it wasn't like Lucius had given anyone the opportunity to read him correctly, either.

But Lucius seemed to have done one thing that Hermione hadn't.

He had forgiven himself.

And if he could forgive himself, perhaps one day she could, too.

Narcissa took the ring from her sister's hand and stared at it, fresh tears in her eyes.

"There was a letter, too." Andromeda told her softly after instructing little Teddy to sit next to Hermione.

Her voice was strangled, "What did it say? What did he—"

"Your sister needs you..."

Narcissa buried her face in the crook of her sister's neck, and cried.

Chapter End Notes

A/N:

(1). The poem at the beginning is an Indian prayer. The second prayer is called Blessings for the Soul's Release.

hide and seek

Chapter Summary

"You're twenty-four. Make time. You don't have forever. Malfoys marry young."

Chapter Twenty-Five

Hide and Seek

Part One: The chair.

Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock.

The great clock on the wall was mocking him. The sound was deafening.

Time was definitely not on his side.

From the centre of the room, Draco ignored the clock and focused his attention on the chair of doom. His father's chair was at the head of the long, gleaming mahogany table in the well-designed meeting room. There were eight other chairs at the table, four on each side of the table, all perfectly padded, polished, and emerald green, but he didn't care about those chairs; just that one. With a fresh cup of hot liquid in his hand that a house elf had delivered, his eyes narrowed in concentration as he prepared to take a long sip; his eyes never leaving the gold plated, green chair.

It had been one hour since the colours had finally returned to his world, and Draco felt kind of—well, he didn't know what he felt, only that he felt odd. Everything was much more vivid than it had been before.

It was almost blinding.

Tick. Tock.

He wanted to curse that sodding clock.

He didn't need any reminders of how little time he had left to think.

Draco sighed before finally taking a drink from his cup—he made a face. Nothing could ruin an introspective moment quite like a cup of tea. He *loathed* its taste and blanched when the

hot liquid hit his tongue, but his narrowed eyes never left his father's chair. He didn't know why; it was just a chair. Still, he couldn't look away. His gaze was so hard and intense that it was sure to burst into flames at any moment.

The corners of his lips creased in concentration.

Stupid, sodding chair.

He wanted to blast it and the clock from the room. Why? Because, the clock had reminded him that he was on borrowed time and the chair—fuck. He had looked at that chair—his father's chair—countless times before, but it was only at this moment in time that it had meant anything to him. And Draco had come to a frightening realization that he wasn't sure how to handle. That chair wasn't his father's anymore. It was *his*.

There were a lot of things that didn't belong to his father anymore. The chairs, the table, the room, the wing, the entire Manor; it was all his. Every picture on the wall, every suit of armour, every piece of furniture, every house elf; all of it belonged to him. Eighty percent of the shares from each of the three family businesses were his, and so were the millions of Galleons that they raked in.

Draco suddenly understood why Emil coveted the businesses; he understood why the man wanted Draco to give it all up. With money came power. Draco had inherited a considerable amount of power and it was his to use it as he saw fit.

Tick. Tock.

Draco ran his hand over his hair.

And now, he had to make a decision. The fucking clock wasn't helping things out, either.

It was tempting; so damn enticing that it made him sick. He could keep it all for himself. He could quit his job, use what he had learned, and live the life of a business owner. He had really good ideas; he'd pitched them to Arcturus all the time, and for no credit. But now... now he could take the credit and turn it into profit. He could do it. And he had the *power* to do it. He didn't need any of them. It was his. All of it was his.

Until midnight at least, but agreements could be broken...

Draco set the teacup on the table and stared at the chair.

Did he honestly want that for himself?

Tick. Tock.

Draco sighed.

It had never been his dream for any of this to be his. Father had always been the leader, not him. He had forced Draco to attend their meetings since the age of ten, and told him that one day, all of that was going to be his. He hadn't believed him, of course, because then he was positive that his father would live forever.

Obviously, that hadn't happened.

Once again, Lucius had been correct.

Draco had spent most of his childhood observing and learning everything about the businesses. He had sat in on meetings, listened patiently to all the ideas that came from the board members, and, since he had been so brilliant with numbers, he had even seen the facts, statistics, and figures from each company. At first, he had had a choice, but as soon as Father had seen his potential, his presence at the meetings had become a requirement whenever he was home from school.

He had seen the board during the best of times; days when they joked and laughed with one another. And he had seen them at the worst of times; when angry voices and threats to depose his father had rung out in the room. Those days, Father had escorted him from the room with instructions to go and study before shutting the double doors in his face. Not once had Draco listened to his father. No, he had sat outside of that very conference room and listened to the ear-splitting screams of the person who had dared to speak against his father—the person who had dared to try and seize his power.

Power.

He had seen what power and the lust for it could do to a person. It had destroyed his father, and had turned Emil from the uncle who used to give him treats as a child into the uncle who wanted to see his head on a chopping block. It was no secret that Emil wanted to unseat him during the vulnerable transition phase. Just like it was no secret that Hesper didn't give a damn about anything except for pushing people to their limits. Emil had sought to undermine his authority at every turn by disagreeing with everything that he had said since the reading of his father's will.

And that had got him thinking.

Did he want to be the reincarnation of his father? Did he want to play Hesper's games? Did he honestly want to sever the agreement that he had made with his uncle and allow the family's businesses to control his life?

Power was tempting, but it was also addictive and Draco didn't want to give up any more control over his life than he already had. So, no. He didn't want to be like his uncle or his father.

No, everything would be transferred on schedule.

Standing there, staring at his father's chair, had made everything look different. Draco suddenly realised that he didn't care about any of it.

And the ticking stopped.

He looked at Malfoy crest that had been engraved into the back of the door about a century ago.

When he was young and impressionable, there would be days when he'd stare at that emblem, wishing for the day when he could take his rightful place beside his father. But those dreams had changed. And it wasn't a change that had bothered Draco, not one bit. What did bother him was the odd feeling that had risen in his chest. If he didn't want this, if he didn't care, then what did he want?

He wasn't so sure about anything anymore.

But just as soon as Draco was adjusting to the silence, the door opened. Just as he was preparing himself to begin thinking about who he was, someone cleared their throat. He turned as Arcturus walked in. He still adorned the same robes that he had worn at the funeral, but his glasses were a little crooked and in his grasp was a neat stack of parchments. He had been a rather imposing and frightening man, to everyone else—well, that was a lie. His uncle used to scare the hell out of him as a child; they all had, well, except for the simpering Emil.

"Lost in thought, Draco?" His deep voice echoed in the large room and Draco, for an instant, felt like he had when he had first met his uncle at the age of six. Unsettled.

He turned his head away from his Uncle Arcturus. He actually preferred to talk to him only when they were seated; he didn't feel as intimidated, then. "Perhaps."

Uncle Arcturus was tall, just as tall as Father had been, but lacked the edge that his father had possessed. He was a different breed of Malfoy in the sense that he didn't resort to violence to get his way, nor did he use it to force others into submission. He was fair, wise, and calm. All in all, he was a rarity; a vegetarian wolf in a family of carnivores.

Many had mistaken his reluctance to duel and utter refusal to use Unforgivables as a sign of weakness, but he had set them straight rather quickly with a few curses of his own invention that should've been Unforgivable. Draco shuddered at the select few memories that he had had of his uncle's curses. Arcturus was bloody *ruthless* when crossed, upset, and/or mocked.

"Would you like me to leave so you can continue trying to stop the clock with your eyes?"

Draco scowled at his uncle. "No."

"I'm pretty sure that there's a spell that could destroy it, if you want."

He didn't respond because he had a feeling that his uncle was joking. Or maybe he wasn't. He was intelligent enough to invent such a spell. Malfoys were always sorted into Slytherin, but Arcturus was damn close to being a Ravenclaw. Why? He was probably the most brilliant Malfoy alive. Not only was he a genius with numbers, his Arcturus was a marketing mastermind, a staunch perfectionist, and a creative inventor. However, in the end, it had been his unforgiving maliciousness that had got him sorted into the Slytherin house.

Still, there was still something quite calm about him. There was something about his character that had made his father trust him above all others; trust him enough to relinquish some of the coveted power to him. And for good reason, too. Draco may have been the heir, but Arcturus had done wonders behind the scene and he had taken the incredible burden off

of Draco's shoulders. Not to mention, thanks to Arcturus, they had made back almost all the money that they had had to pay in reparations.

His eyes drifted back to the chair.

"Were you thinking about your father?"

"What makes you think that?"

"I've come into the room three times and you've been staring at your father's old chair."

Draco froze. Why hadn't he heard him? "Where have you been?" He changed the subject stiffly.

His uncle's voice was just as rigid. "Doing your bidding."

"Did you find everything that you needed?"

"Of course. Hesper's predictability is just as legendary as Emil's stupidity." There was no mistaking the disgust in his voice. "All we need now is a reason for the Aurors to search Hesper's home. Think of anything in particular that we can use against him?"

"Not at the moment. I'm going to wait for him to dig himself into a hole."

"Wonderful."

Draco glanced at the frowning man. The bad blood between Arcturus and the rest of Father's brothers was notorious, and to discuss it was taboo. Lucius had little time to entertain feuds. All that he had told her was that it was deep, personal, and he would've killed had he had been in Arcturus' situation.

"Did you complete your task?"

"Yes." Draco glanced over at the chair at the head of the table. "I changed the wards so that once they leave, they can never return to the Manor, again. The house elves have packed their belongings, I've warned my mother and my friends, and changed the wards over my house, just in case. Blaise pulled a few strings and there is a team of Aurors waiting patiently for their orders just outside of Hesper's home in Scotland. I've given them the blueprints and they know the location of each of his secret passages. Nothing about that aspect of our plan can go wrong."

"Perfect. And what about Emil?"

"Once we get Hesper out the equation, I know exactly how to deal with him."

"And the Granger girl?"

Draco stiffened. "She's been properly briefed on the subject, although I don't understand why I had to tell her everything about—"

"You two are close, am I wrong?"

"No, you're not wrong." He was oddly comfortable admitting that he and Granger were close. After all, he very well couldn't lie about that. It was quite obvious. The lines between them had been blurred over the last four days. Perhaps longer. And while he didn't have an exact title for Hermione, he knew that she'd become a permanent fixture. And dammit, she wasn't leaving. And *maybe* he didn't want her to. Maybe. And no, he wasn't going to shout it from the bloody rooftops, but she wasn't exactly meaningless to him...

"Well, then, your relationship with her will be used against you in every conceivable way possible, so keep your emotions under control."

"That's not a problem."

"I hope not. Hesper, on Emil's behalf, will try to make you react. That's just how he is. Emil's much too weak to try anything without Hesper to hold his hand and feed him instructions."

"You act as if they have a plan."

"I'm sure that they do. Together, they aren't complete imbeciles. I'm sure that they have some scheme up their sleeves, and we have to be ready for anything that they throw at us. Now, I know that they wouldn't dare touch Narcissa or any of your pure-blooded friends, but she's a Muggle-born. She may be strong enough to take on Emil alone, but Hesper? That was why I convinced your mother to make him take the Vow. He can't touch her, and she won't allow Emil to touch her."

"It doesn't mean that they won't try." Draco knew that Hesper had a knack for circumventing rules. He never played fair.

"True, but we have to hope that he won't."

Ah, there was that word again. Hope. He had reluctantly allowed himself to hope for a lot of things lately, but mostly, he hoped for normality in his life. Draco craved it. He hoped that after today he would have it in his grasp.

"Are you ready?" Uncle Arcturus asked, shutting the great door behind him with a wave of his hand.

Draco replied honestly. "If I'm not, I'll sure as hell make everyone think I am."

The older wizard snorted and took a seat in the first green chair to the right of father's – no – *his* seat.

"We don't have to do this today. There's time—"

Draco scowled at his uncle's final word. "Not for me, there isn't. I've made my decision. I don't want or need any of this shit, to be perfectly honest."

"Neither do I, but I need something to keep my days occupied."

"Well, I have more than enough problems to keep me busy." The painfully true words hung in the air for a long time before Draco snapped his finger. A house elf appeared. "Mazy, would you take that," He pointed to the cup of tea with a hint of disgust in his voice, "And bring me a cup of *coffee*. You know how I like it."

"Yes, Master, I's—"

"Mazy, I don't want you to kiss my arse. I just want coffee. Thank you."

The elf looked shaken and confused. "Y-yes, Master." He disappeared with a crack. Seconds later, a cup of steaming coffee appeared on the table in front of his chair.

It took Draco a full minute to walk over and retrieve the cup.

"They're supposed to worship you." Arcturus said stiffly.

"No, they're supposed to follow my commands."

"You're their master."

"It doesn't matter what I am to them, if I wanted my arse kissed all the time, I'd still be dating."

"You're not dating, at all?"

Draco tensed. "Not that it's any of your business, Uncle, but no, I'm not."

He looked confused. "I had just assumed—"

His eyes narrowed until they were nothing more than slits. "Assumed what?" He asked slowly.

"That you were dating the witch."

Draco stiffened. While he was used to the rumours that swirled around regarding his and Granger's relationship, he just hadn't expected his uncle to bring up the topic. There were so many thoughts flooding into his mind at that moment. His uncle's lack of anger, accusatory tone, and disgust had thoroughly confused him. Arcturus had never been one to care about blood purity, but Draco had always thought it was a show for tolerance. Apparently not.

"So, are you dating the witch?"

Annoyed with the direction of the conversation, he rolled his eyes. "She has a name, Uncle."

"Oh, and I know it, quite well. Miss Granger and I have exchanged quite a few words. She's a rather gifted and poised witch. Intelligent yet modest and unassuming; you don't find that very much anymore. And she's loyal—to you. And it seems that it's reciprocated."

"We're not having this conversation, not now, not ever."

Apparently, Arcturus refused to drop the subject. "I've always said that there's no better time than the present."

"Say what you want, but you can't convince me to discuss this topic with you."

"She means something to you, Draco. Above everything else, you defend her."

"I seem to have made a habit of doing that," he stated dryly.

There was a short pause.

"Well, do you have feelings for her?"

He looked at the man as if he had suddenly sprouted antlers. Arcturus was—he was waiting for an answer. Well, to hell with that. Draco cleared his throat. "I was thinking that we should discuss a few things before the—"

"Ahem." His uncle cleared his throat and gave him a look that said, '*I'm still waiting.*'

Draco stiffened almost to the point where he felt like he'd been hit with a Body Bind.

His grip tightened around the coffee mug. How the hell could he answer that question? It was loaded! Yes, she was his friend; yes he cared (even though sometimes it aggravated him to bits), and yes she pretty much was an important person in his books. But then Arcturus had to remind Draco about just how torn he was.

Perhaps Pansy and Blaise had a point. Draco blinked.

Obviously, the trauma from his father's death had made him certifiably insane. Okay, so maybe that wasn't the case. Maybe he'd begun to see the potential in her. Arcturus had been right about her. She was loyal, she wasn't stupid, she wasn't perfect, and she—damn. She was definitely not the smartest idea that he'd ever had, but perhaps. They would definitely have a lot to overcome, but maybe they could have something functional. It wouldn't be easy, but maybe it would work. Perhaps they could make each other happy in the long run. It was definitely not the best time to think about having a relationship with anyone, but maybe when the time was right he could entertain the thought that everyone had placed into his head...

His head started to spin.

But the question was if he had feelings. Romantic feelings. Sometimes, when she looked at him just right, he'd thought that she was pretty; like the day that he'd given her Apollo. Sometimes, he found her amusing; like when she fled from the room after seeing him in a towel. And sometimes, he could look at her and see that she honestly cared about him; like when his eyes found hers after he finished burying his father...

Son of a bitch. He didn't have time for this and Arcturus had no right to put that thought into his mind! He had expected something like this from Blaise, but not his uncle, not today, and not right then.

"I don't have time for this. We don't have time for this." He ground out.

"You're twenty-four. Make time. You don't have forever. Malfoys marry young."

Draco snorted. "So says the lifelong bachelor."

"Widower."

The pain in Arcturus' voice was evident, and it made him sound very vulnerable for the first time. The word itself lingered, encrusted in a bubble of finality. There was nothing that Draco could say, and that made him feel very uncomfortable.

"Don't presume to think that you know me, Draco. I am not what you think I am."

He talked for a living, yet words wouldn't come. *"I am not what you think I am."* It was clear that he needed to start paying more attention, because it seemed he had misjudged everyone. Uncle, Father, Granger...he had misjudged the latter two most of all. Father wasn't the man that he had thought that he was, and Hermione—shit. Draco pinched the bridge of his nose.

He suddenly had a pounding headache.

The door swung open and a frustrated Hesper walked in with a haggard and sneering Emil on his tail. The pressure intensified. He didn't think to ask them what was wrong. He would find out soon enough. Draco squared his shoulders, gestured to two of the seats opposite Arcturus, and reluctantly sat in his chair.

The clock started ticking again.

Part Two: Longing

"I'm bored!" The seven-year-old declared with a pout as his hair turned from electric blue to a dreary grey. He stood up and sighed for the third time. "Nana and that lady are taking forever..." He whined.

"She's not just a lady. She's your grandmother's sister." Hermione explained gently. "And they're talking. They haven't seen each other in so long."

He looked confused, "Is she my nana, too?"

"No, she's your great-aunt." Pansy replied, a bit awkwardly.

Teddy obviously didn't understand the way relations worked and after looking thoroughly perplexed, he shrugged and scrambled off the floor. "I want to go to the park. I like playing on the monkey bars. Nana doesn't like it when I go across them by myself. She says that I could get hurt, but I tell her all the time that I won't fall off. I'm strong. See?" He flexed his little arm muscles.

Hermione and Pansy stifled their chuckles.

"Oh, yes. You're so strong."

Teddy smiled knowingly. "That's what I keep telling her, Miss 'Minie. I can go across the monkey bars by myself." He looked over at an amused Pansy. "Can you go get my Nana, please Miss Pansy?" He grinned adorably, displaying his holey smile. His two front teeth were missing.

Hermione smiled. "They're talking right now, Teddy. She'll be back soon to take you to the park, okay?"

He pouted and sighed. "Okay." He leaned against the sofa next to her and groaned before burying his face into the cushions. And then, his turned bright orange as he bounced up and down with excitement. "I know! I know! Will you play 'Hide and Seek' with me, Miss 'Minie? Please!"

She smiled, "Of course I'll play with you, Teddy."

The boy threw his arms up, "Yay!" Then, he wrapped his arms around her neck—squeezing her tightly.

She felt her heart clench tightly. Teddy was the first child that she had touched since—Hermione shut her eyes, took a breath, and tentatively wrapped her arms around the boy. Fuck, it *hurt*. It hurt to even hug him, but she couldn't let go.

Earlier, while she and Draco were talking to Andromeda, Teddy had come bounding down the steps. He had been fresh from his nap and hungry for a snack. She had gulped. For a second there, she had sworn that Malfoy had tensed. But now, she understood that he had tensed because *she* had tensed. She'd been holding his hand, after all. It wasn't until right then that Hermione realised just why she had tensed earlier. It was because, for a second, her mind, body, and soul wanted it to be Matthew coming down the steps, not Teddy.

It was an impossible wish, at best.

Just the memory had made the tears well in her eyes. Her heart was pounding.

It was utterly ridiculous, she knew, but she couldn't help it. Teddy hadn't let her go. Oddly enough, he seemed to relax in her embrace. Hermione knew that she would hold on to him at least until he pulled away. She had seen bits of Matthew in Teddy—oh, hell, who was she kidding? She had seen bits of Matthew in every little boy between the ages of four and seven that she passed on the street. Was she wrong to want what those mothers had? Was she wrong to be so damn tired of feeling incomplete?

Sometimes, when the longing was especially painful, she would go to the park and sit and watch and wish. And if she closed her eyes tight enough, she could see Matthew running towards her. His eyes would be wide, imaginative, and playfully mischievous. And—her hands shook. Just thinking about that had caused her nothing but horrible longing. She

wanted to destroy the thought, stop thinking about the park, and stop wishing for something that could never happen, but...

Seeing kids smile and laugh and talk incessantly about senseless topics—it was almost unbearable. An array of emotions rushed through her veins, leached into her muscles, and weighted on her bones. She missed being a mother—no, that wasn't all. She missed being *his* mother.

Motherhood was more difficult than anything that she had ever experienced. Being the sole provider was hard, and Matthew's illnesses had made things harder—but Matthew had made every second of it worth everything and so much more. She missed the random things that he had found hilarious. She missed his sloppiness and his climbing habits. She missed his fascination with bugs and superheroes. She missed it all.

And her head throbbed, but her heart hurt worse.

Hermione was torturing herself, but she didn't know how to make it stop. She didn't know how to make *herself* stop. Would she always feel like this around a child? Would she always refer to herself as someone who had her son? Those questions were just too hard to answer, especially at that moment.

Hermione blinked back the tears and hugged Teddy a little tighter.

Yes, it was Teddy in her arms, but—but if she closed her eyes, she could fool herself into thinking that it was Matthew. Sweet Matthew who was so well-behaved that it was almost alarming. Innocent Matthew, who ate his vegetables and wore more of his dessert than he ate.

And tears ran down her cheeks. She tried to hold them in, but she couldn't. She hadn't cried like this in a while. She had put up such a good fight and she was trying to heal her heart, but today had taken her by surprise. As had Teddy.

"Hermione?" Pansy's voice sounded alarmed.

She didn't respond.

"Miss 'Minie,'" Teddy finally pulled back. "Why are you crying? Did I make you sad?"

Hermione wiped her eyes, catching Pansy's look of concern from the corner of her eye. "No, Teddy."

"It's okay." The little boy shrugged nonchalantly. "Nana gets sad. Sometimes she calls me Ted, I don't mind. Uncle Harry, too." Hermione sat up a little straighter at the little boy's rambling. "He was real sad, but he didn't call me Ted." Then his brows furrowed, "He called me Matthew. Then he got more sad..." he trailed off awkwardly. His hair turned red then purple then settled back on blue.

Hermione's hands shook. *Oh, Harry.* "Teddy, he didn't mean it."

"I know. Nana says he was hurting. Who hurt his feelings, Miss 'Minie? It's not nice to hurt people's feelings."

"You're right" She replied slowly. "Harry had a little boy, just like you."

"With blue hair?!" He pointed at his hair wildly.

Pansy snickered and Hermione shook her head softly, smiling. "No, Matthew had really dark brown hair."

"Oh. Like this?" And he turned his hair to a dark brown. Not like Matthew's but close enough.

"Something like that, yes."

"What happened to him?" Teddy scratched his nose and Hermione instinctively stopped him from wiping it on his shirt. Bless.

Pansy handed her a tissue and she wiped his hands while she talked to him, "He was really sick and—"

Teddy's hair turned almost black. "He died, didn't he?"

She gasped, a little shocked by his brazenness, but nodded, slowly, "Yes, he did."

"My mum and dad died, too."

Hermione found herself rather speechless.

"Do you miss them?" Pansy asked softly.

Teddy scratched his head, looked over at Pansy, thought about it for a moment, and shrugged, "Sometimes, when Victoire talks about her mum and dad. I don't know." He looked a little frustrated. "I don't 'member what they look like. Nana has to show me pictures." He perked up a bit. "My mum had pink hair and my dad was a—a—I don't 'member what he was, but he was cool! Uncle Harry says that he was the best!"

Hermione nodded. "He really was."

Teddy gaped at her. "You knew my dad?"

She nodded, smiling. "And your mum, too."

"I'm going to be a dark wizard catcher, just like her." Teddy announced proudly. His little shoulders were squared and he looked undeterred.

The witch ruffled his hair. "I have no doubt that you'll be amazing."

He grinned and patted down his now turquoise hair. Pausing thoughtfully, the little boy made a face before he said, "When I miss my mum and dad, Nana shows me pictures and tells me stories about them. It makes me feel better. She cries sometimes. I don't like it when she's sad. I don't want you to be sad, either. Or Uncle Harry. Nana always says that mum and dad want me to be happy, not sad. I don't think she 'members that when she's sad, but I do." He

puffed out his chest as if he were the most important person on Earth. "Will you 'member that, Miss 'Minie?"

She batted the falling tears from her cheeks. "I'll remember that. Thanks, Teddy."

The little boy smiled again and leaned closer, shyly asking. "Can we play now? I can hide first. You don't have to. I want to. Everyone says I'm such a good hider."

Hermione just closed her eyes and started counting...

Part Three: Better than I know myself.

And there was silence.

Tick. Tock.

Well, except for that bloody ticking clock behind him.

Draco took a casual sip of his coffee and waited for the room, or rather, his uncle Emil, to explode. He had just vocalized his plan about his future with the family's companies and, already, the weight on his shoulders had noticeably lightened. Now, all he had to do was wait for someone to react. Arcturus was poised, stoic, and his face reminded Draco of carved granite. Hesper leaned back in his chair and looked at his fingernails as if she were bored with the news. Emil's face was getting redder and redder with each passing moment.

It wouldn't be too long.

Tick.

That annoyance had to go. Draco didn't bloody care, but that clock had to go right then and there or he was going to turn and blast the antique into oblivion.

Tock.

When he thought about the clock in the moments following his decision, he realised that it was a rather ominous thing to have against the wall behind his head. He wondered just why his father had placed it there all those years ago. It was a symbol of his mortality, as well as a rather disturbing sign of hope to everyone sitting in lower positions of power. Time was always running out, each tick of the clock was proof of that.

Nothing lasted forever.

Perhaps *that* had been the lesson that his father had been trying to subtly teach when he had placed that clock on the wall behind his chair. It wasn't intended to be a beacon, but a self-reminder. Nothing, not even power was infinite. Perhaps Father hadn't just put that clock up for himself; he had put it up for Draco, as well.

Lucius was telling him that he had time.

He was giving him time to make the right decision—fuck, he had known.

You will do everything possible to avoid my life.

All along, his father had known what he would do with his power. That realisation had left him feeling rather odd and uncomfortable. It wasn't the place for such emotions, but inside, he reeled. Father seemed to have known him a lot better than Draco had ever anticipated.

Tick. Tock.

The ticking clock. It had done its job. It had given him time to think and reassure himself that he was doing the right thing. He wanted...he...well, Draco didn't know what he wanted, but he wanted more than success. He wanted more than what his father had.

He wanted.

He just wanted.

And that wasn't necessarily a bad thing, either.

In the end, perhaps his father had known Draco better than he had known himself. In the end, Father had done something right in the midst of a sea of wrongs. He had allowed Draco to make his own decision, without his influence.

Tick. Tock.

Maybe—Draco swallowed thickly.

Maybe Father *had* cared...in his own aloof and distant way, of course.

"That's your plan? Is it final?"

Emil's enraged voice startled Draco from his thoughts. "Well—"

"You cannot be serious!"

He focused his gaze on his uncle as he drawled his next words. "There's really no need for yelling."

"I can yell all that I want!"

"That may be so, but—"

Emil interrupted rudely, "There are no 'buts', Draco! You cannot do this!"

"If you don't like it my way, then cash in your stocks and try your own luck in your own business venture." And after a short pause, he added blandly, "I wish you all the luck in the world."

The youngest of the Malfoy brothers sputtered. "It's just—I can't—no, I *refuse* to let you do this!"

"Funny, I could care less if you did. It's done."

"Excuse me?"

They didn't know, but he and Arcturus had signed the paperwork that made his uncle the CEO; a job that came with a ridiculously large salary and power, not just in the family, but in the business world. It was the job that Emil wanted more than anything; a job that he thought that he could intimidate Draco into giving him. The wizard almost snorted at the thought. Emil was about as intimidating as a toddler's four-piece jigsaw puzzle.

As part of the agreement, Draco had already given twenty percent of his inherited shares from each company to his Uncle Arcturus, bringing his total ownership over each company down from eighty percent to sixty percent. It was a move that gave them a lot of insurance if anything should go wrong.

If the family tried to stage a coup on Arcturus, it would be rather useless because Draco still owned a majority of the companies. And if they tried to get rid of Draco, well, they would witness the end of everything they knew. As odd as it had been to write his own will at the age of twenty-four, he'd done so at his uncle's insistence. In his will, he'd ordered everything split up and given to charity. It would be chaos, at its best, but his mother would be fine in the fallout, he'd seen to it.

Emil looked ready to breathe fire. "This is outrageous!"

"No, your behaviour is outrageous. I thought we all were grown men."

Emil scowled at his nephew before turning furious eyes on Arcturus. "Arcturus will bring us all to ruin! You could have chosen me!"

"Really now?" Draco drawled coolly.

"Yes!"

He snorted. "What makes you think that I can trust you with anything?"

Admonished, he exclaimed, "I am *more* than trustworthy!"

Draco nearly laughed aloud, but he kept his face and voice serious. "I wouldn't trust you to tell me the correct time. You're lazy and spoiled and your anger management issues leave much to be desired—"

"What?! I'll have you know that I'm—"

"Frankly, I don't give a damn about anything that you have to say. You'll stab anyone in the back because you're too much of a coward to stab them in the front. And what's worse is that you won't do it yourself. You'll send Hesper to do your bidding."

"Coward?" Emil jumped up from his seat. "I'm not a coward—you are nothing but a child!"

"And if you're finished acting like one, I would like to proceed." He shot back. Emil's eyes narrowed in fury and his lips mumbled words that Draco couldn't hear—and then, he returned to his chair. Slowly. "Now, I think that we need to discuss—"

"I'm not discussing anything!" Emil shot off. "I can't believe that you're planning on giving everything to this—"

"This what, Emil?" Arcturus' voice was as cold as the air in the room, contemptuous and deadly.

The youngest brother's eyes narrowed and his moustache twitched. "You know what you are." He sneered once he realised that he was a comfortable distance from his older brother. Bloody coward.

"Since you seem to think you know me better than I know myself, maybe I need some *reminders*." The last word was lazy, but the tension in the room was so thick that Hesper had started to take notice.

The wizard's relaxed brow rose only ever so slightly. His gaze moved fluidly between his brothers before they finally rested on Arcturus. He yawned. "I'm not one for subtleties so I'll come right on out with it. This is about that little filthy half-breed that you were cavorting around with—"

"I wasn't cavorting around with her, Hesper. She was my wife."

The last sentence was accompanied by the chiming clock. They were halfway through the hour and Draco felt as if they had just begun. He almost gaped, but somehow managed to keep his face even. Barely. Arcturus had had a wife—but he was a widower. His deceased wife was a half—*what the hell?* Of course, Draco didn't care, but the rest of his family—bloody hell, they were absolute nutters about keeping everything pure.

He had just always assumed—fuck, there was that word again. *Assumed*.

More than anything, he needed to stop assuming.

He shouldn't have assumed anything about Arcturus. After all, the man had spent the last thirty-one years in near seclusion. He wanted nothing to do with them, and they didn't particularly hold him in high esteem, either. Only Father had seemed to have given his brother a chance, but likely for selfish and practical reasons.

Or maybe not.

Maybe he actually cared. Hell, Draco didn't know. He didn't know anything about the three men in the conference room. They were family, but strangers, too.

"Hmm, really..." Hesper strummed his fingers on the table calmly, "How could she be your wife when she didn't live long enough after the elopement to make it onto the tapestry?"

His rage flashed behind his eyes like a bolt of lightning, but it ended before it truly had started. However, it was enough to let Draco know that the current situation was spiralling out of control very rapidly. Tension fell over them all like a stuffy blanket. It was painfully obvious that something was going on right under his nose, and Draco honestly wanted nothing to do with it.

He'd done the meddling thing already and look at where it had gotten him.

He just wanted to tell them his stipulations, sign the final papers for Arcturus, and be done with the entire bloody thing. He just wanted to get on with his life. He was ready.

"I'm sure you played a part in that." The bitterness in his favourite uncle's voice was unmistakable.

Hesper's eyes flashed dangerously. "Is there something that you're accusing me of, Arcturus?"

"I think you know bloody well what—"

"Gentlemen, please. We have business to discuss. I haven't even finished talking." Draco interrupted calmly, letting just a hint of his irritation show in his words.

The two glaring men fixed their gazes upon the wizard sitting at the head of the table, while the last muttered angrily under his breath.

"Surely you don't think we're going to allow this blood-traitor to run the companies." Hesper said flippantly. It was as if he was just arguing to upset his brother. Terribly immature. Arcturus sneered.

Draco couldn't stop his eyes from rolling. "You've allowed him to run it for six years in my father's stead."

Emil sputtered. "That was different. Your father retired."

"True. And not only did the value of the stocks quadruple in the first year alone, they haven't stopped rising in value, which is all thanks to Arcturus. Blood traitor or not, he's qualified and he's had more experience than the three of us combined."

"As am I."

"The hell you are. I've had to close down three departments that you headed within the first year of you taking the job. Why? Because you 'mishandle funds' and sexually harass the female employees." Arcturus sneered.

"You—" Emil froze when his brother stared at him pointedly. Then, he lowered his head.

"Enough." Draco told them both sternly. "My decision is made, and it's final. If you don't like it, that's tough. I have no intentions of changing my mind. If you want to run the companies, Emil, fine. You can have that conversation with your brother because I'm not the one." Draco smirked derisively. "I can only imagine how well *that* conversation will go."

"You won't find out because that conversation will never happen. As if I'll beg this blood-traitor for a job. I think not!" The pudgy man haphazardly wrenched his wand from his robes and pointed it at his nephew. "What you're going to do is change everything! You're going to give it all to me!" His voice was about as shaky as his wand hand, and Draco knew that he wouldn't be able to get a spell off correctly even if he tried.

So he remained calm. "Am I now?"

"Yes you are!"

"And if I don't?" He took a sip from his coffee cup. "Before you threaten my person, might I remind you that the moment you use magic on me, you will lose your seat on the board and every shred of power that you possess."

Emil hotly muttered something under his breath as soon as he lowered his wand.

Draco's grey eyes narrowed into slits, "What was that?

"I don't know how, but one day I will teach you a lesson."

"You will now? That's nice," he replied flippantly.

Emil's eyes flashed with anger, "I don't think that you understand me, I will make your life a living hell. I have the means!"

"I understood you perfectly, and to be frank, I don't give a damn. Go ahead, threaten me. Why should I care?" He had to remain calm, but felt the agitation growing inside of him. That wasn't good. Not at all. Agitation led to anger, anger led to passion, and passion led to losing rational thoughts and acting on impulse. True, Draco wasn't innately impulsive, but he'd recently had moments where he'd lost his composure. He definitely didn't need that to happen again. Not on a day like today.

"Just because I can't touch you physically or magically, doesn't mean that I can't make your life a living hell. You don't step outside of yourself, Draco. Your father had that problem as well. He was a selfish bastard, wasn't he?" Draco visibly tensed and Emil smiled sadistically. "Oh, don't look like that. It's the truth. Your father was an egomaniac and he deserved everything that he got."

A week ago, he would've agreed wholeheartedly, but things had changed. He still might not have liked his father much, but he didn't deserve anything that had happened to him. Father had been a victim of circumstance and poor decision-making. Draco had no difficulty in admitting that. And for the simpering Emil, who had never made a wise decision in his life, to sit there and sling his father's name through the mud casually—anger shot though his veins.

His face felt hotter than usual and he knew that he'd crossed over into full-blown agitation that bordered on red hot anger. And he couldn't stop himself. "Don't you dare let another negative word about my father to spill from your pathetic lips." Draco seethed. "He was three times the man that you'll ever be, Emil." He surprised even himself with his defensiveness.

"I am more of a man than your father *ever* was!"

"A man?" Draco's voice rose steadily, "You think of yourself as a man?" And by then, he was shouting, "I've never seen more of a poorer excuse for one in my life!"

Emil's face had turned almost crimson. "Why you—"

" You're a leech and you have no problem with sucking the life out of everything so long as it fits your needs." Draco leaned back in his chair. " You're full of words and meaningless threats that you never follow through with."

"I—"

"I am *not* done talking!" Draco boomed.

"Well, I'm done listening!"

The only sounds that were heard next were Emil's enraged panting and Arcturus' soft chuckle. Well, that was before Hesper rested back in his chair casually. "My, my, this is getting entertaining."

"Shut up, Hesper." Emil lashed out.

Something flickered behind his uncle's eyes. Draco didn't know what it was, but it made Emil flinch and mutter an apology.

It took a few minutes, but Draco regained his composure. He picked up the quill to his left and started pilfering through some legal documents. "Now, there are a few stipulations that we need to discuss. First, I want to say that this isn't just a plan, it has been—"

"I'm not discussing anything."

Draco almost snapped the quill in his hand and glared at Emil. "You *must* be a glutton for punishment."

Hesper snickered.

Emil slammed his chubby fists on the table in frustration and anger, "And you must really be an idiot if you think that you can stop me. Nothing stops me from getting what I want, not you, not anyone! It would befit you to realise that I mean business."

"That's nice and all, but there's nothing that you can do to hurt me. It would—"

"Well, well, it's not all about you, now is it, little Draco?" Hesper finally spoke up evenly.

Oh hell. "You don't care about any of this, so—"

"Maybe I do, maybe I don't," he smiled menacingly. "All I know is that this looks promising."

"I suggest that you keep your mouth shut." Arcturus warned.

"Why should I?" He retorted. "Perhaps Emil has a point. Don't I have a say in things, too?"

Draco watched as Emil's face brightened after his brother's comment. He had his ally at his side. Fuck.

"You know, you're a lot more like your father than I had ever anticipated, Draco." Hesper smiled and popped his knuckles. "You walk like him, look like him, and you even grip your quill the same way he does when he's on the brink of rage." His words should've comforted Draco, but instead, they had left him a little unsettled. "I bet that there are facets of your personality that are a lot like his. Your father had breaking point. His was your mother. He did a lot to see to it that she wasn't harmed, even when I wouldn't have even bothered. Well, that was before you were born." Draco stiffened and set his quill on the table. Hesper leaned back in his seat. "I know you want me to stay out of this, so indulge me for a little bit."

"And how do I do that?" He was pretty sure that he'd gone almost rigid by that point.

"Everyone has a breaking point. Let's find yours, shall we?"

The wizard stiffened and almost cursed himself for having such a reaction. It wasn't as though he hadn't expected his uncles to go that route. "I won't sit here and play your psychotic games. We have business to tend to."

"Of course, of course. I know that business comes first. After all, I've been sitting on the board as long as you've been alive." He smoothly replied. However, it didn't stop him from continuing, "Before the meeting, Emil and I were discussing your little, ripe pure-blooded peach that you have in your corner. Pansy, is it? She's quite delectable, isn't she, Emil?"

The wizard being questioned smirked, "I'd love to sink my teeth into her."

Draco tensed, uncomfortably. They were baiting him, trying to push his buttons and force him to play Hesper's sick game. Well, he wouldn't. "Now, as much as I enjoy your petulant intimidation tactics—"

"Petulant intimidation tactics?" Hesper snorted. "This isn't intimidation, not in the least. I could always side with Emil and make your life not worth living, Draco, and believe me, I know how. However, I'm willing to give you a chance to, well, convince me that your plan is better than his. I don't want to hear facts or figures, show me your power. Show me that you can make good decisions under pressure. I really enjoy watching you squirm."

"You're bluffing." Arcturus told him. "You don't know anything."

"Am I? Hmm. Pansy lives alone, doesn't she? And she sleeps with all the lights on, yes? She works odd hours for a magazine, and she always travelling back and forth between Madeira. I wonder why she screams in the night..." He trailed off thoughtfully, but continued quickly. "Her house has impenetrable wards; wards that I've never come across before, but I'm sure that with time and with help, I can break right through them."

Bingo. Draco's face remained unaffected, but his heart was racing and his blood was warm. He wasn't supposed to be angry. He'd finally found something that he could use against Hesper. However, for some reason, he couldn't suppress his anger. Not at all.

It seemed that Hesper could sense his change in mood and smirked, "How am I doing?"

He wouldn't reward his detective work with an answer.

"Well, since you've decided to become taciturn, Draco, I'll keep on talking. Now, your mother on the other hand, is probably the most vulnerable of all—"

Rage fizzled in his head. "Leave my mother out of this." He seethed. "She has nothing to do with this."

Emil broke in with a rage-induced rant. "She has everything to do with this! And she has the nerve to call herself a Black. She's weak—"

Draco Malfoy was on his feet with his wand drawn in less than a second. Anger had bled into passion, and he was lost to it all. There was no stopping him. "You've got about three seconds to shut your fucking mouth or—"

"Let's all just calm down." Arcturus suggested.

Emil looked at Hesper, who nodded. Knowing that he had his brother on his side, he decided to be bold. "Or you'll what? You won't do anything to me. You're not capable of murder. We all know that."

Draco seethed. "You don't know *what* I'm capable of, Emil."

"You don't have the nerve, Draco. Face it. You're weak, just like your mother. You're not just a disgrace to the name of Malfoy, you're a disgrace to your dead father."

"Look, if you've got a problem, fine. I don't bloody care. There's the door," He threw his hand out, "You can see yourself out at any point, but threatening my mother and my friends won't do anything to make me change my mind in your favour, Emil. Trying to coerce me into playing your stupid little game won't do anything to further your cause, either, Hesper. If I want to give it Arcturus, then that's my decision to make."

"Emil. Enough." Hesper ordered with a snap of his finger.

As expected, the man backed down at his brother's command. Pathetic.

He turned to retrieve some parchment from a wide-eyed Arcturus. He was almost fully turned away from them when he heard, "It's funny. His little Mudblood girlfriend was far more composed under pressure."

Draco stiffened.

"Most definitely. We owe her a lesson in good manners, don't we?"

"Yes, we do." His eyes narrowed.

Draco's voice was low and demanding. "Get out."

"Excuse me?"

He turned to face them. "You heard me, get out."

"Draco, the plan—"

He furiously cut Arcturus off. "Fuck the plan! I don't even care! I want everyone gone!" He locked eyes with his seated uncles. "To sum it all up, everything goes to Arcturus and he gets to decide on every little facet of the companies, including who gets to sit on the board. Chances are probable that it won't be either of you, so consider yourselves barred. Now, the house elves have your bags packed and ready for you. Take your shit, and get the hell out."

Hesper rose to his feet casually, "Fine."

Emil sneered, "Yes. That's fine. We have better things to do anyway. We have an appointment with a little Mudblood who's somewhere inside these walls. I hope she's alone because I intend on fully teaching that little chit about superiority. I guarantee that she won't make it out as lucky as she did the last time."

Draco was thrown. "Last time?"

The air crackled with raw magic.

Emil glanced at Hesper who nodded before he boldly said, "Oh, the little witch didn't tell you? Ah, yes, we had a little encounter with her in a corridor. She—"

Red sparks shot out the end of Draco's wand and the clock chimed to symbol the top of the next hour.

somewhere else a clock is ticking

Chapter Summary

“I honestly don’t know what she’d capable of.” Hermione sighed. “Love brings out the worst in people.”

Chapter Notes

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

Chapter Twenty-Six

Somewhere Else a Clock Is Ticking

Part One: Then maybe...

The grandfather clock in the corner of the room tolled its tune to signal the start of a new hour.

Hermione had remembered just how hard it was to settle down an active little boy after playtime, and figured that calming Teddy down would be more like picking at a brand new scab; counterproductive and slightly painful. However, when they collapsed on the couch after over an hour of 'Hide and Seek', he had surprised her by falling asleep halfway into his requested story.

It was about the first time she had met his mum.

Teddy had his head rested against her shoulder at first, but soon he raised up his head, grabbed a throw pillow, put it in her lap, and rested his head on it. As he slept, Hermione rested her hand carefully on his head and played with his hair that seemed to switch back and forth between purple and blue with every breath he took.

Playing with Teddy had calmed her nerves, eased her mind, and dulled the ache in her heart. It seemed that he'd gone out of his way to make Hermione smile; popping out of random places with a bright smile and running in circles to avoid capture when she'd found him.

Teddy had been successful in his mission.

She couldn't think of the last time she had been so relaxed. It had been nice to just *be*. It didn't matter that 'being' essentially meant playing games with a child.

It was simple and exactly what she needed.

The relaxed atmosphere had affected Pansy as well. She'd spent the hour laughing heartily each time Teddy sprang out of a new (and creative) hiding spot. Hermione glanced over at her now reading friend and smiled affectionately. Hearing Pansy laugh had made her feel good. Hearing herself laugh had also felt good.

They needed to laugh.

She sighed and ran her finger through Teddy's colourful hair, again. When he wrinkled his nose, she was reminded of Remus. And when he tripped on the carpet and laughed at himself, he was spot-on for Tonks. His parents.

"Hermione?"

She glanced over at Pansy. "Yes?"

Pansy shut her book with an audible snap. "Are you all right?"

Hermione thought about for a moment before she wrinkled her nose. "Yes, I think I am."

Pansy smiled sadly. "It's been a long day, hasn't it?"

"Long, but overall, not too bad," she murmured, looking down at the sleeping boy. "Something good has come from all the misery." And she meant that in more than one way.

"I honestly didn't expect to see Andromeda walk through that door."

Hermione smiled sheepishly. "Surprise?"

"Most definitely. What do you think is going to happen now?"

She glanced down at Teddy's changing hair colour and touched his head softly. "Hopefully, she'll be like Draco and start the process of moving on."

"Like—what did Draco do?" she asked curiously.

"He filled in Lucius' grave."

Pansy was confused. "Why did he do that? Don't they have people to do that for them?"

She nodded. "Yes, but he sent them all away."

"Merlin, Draco's gone over the deep end."

"No he hasn't." Hermione paused for a moment. "It's really complicated, Pansy, but it was something that he knew he needed to do. All I could do was watch."

"Why didn't you help him?"

Hermione shrugged. "He had to do it on his own. He didn't need me to hold his hand."

Pansy was quiet for a few minutes. It looked as if she'd fallen into a pensive silence, but Hermione knew better. Her mind was on the move. She could almost hear her train of thought steamrolling down a track to somewhere it had no place going. Pansy placed the book on the table and crossed her legs politely. "I have a question."

"Uh-oh." Hermione replied cautiously.

She smirked casually. "Nothing to worry about, but Blaise and I were wondering...." Pansy trailed off.

"Wondering what?"

A bit uneasily, she played with her hair. "Well, about you and Draco."

There was a small pause.

"Okay...in what sense?"

Pansy flushed a bit. "Romantically."

Hermione would've laughed had she not been so surprised. "There's *nothing* going on there."

"You two hold hands." She reasoned.

"Loads of people hold hands with someone whom they're not romantically linked. It's not serious."

"You're right. Loads of people *do* hold hands, but not Draco. I can't think of the last woman he allowed to hold his hand." Pansy chuckled, "I can't even think of the last woman he even allowed to stand as close to him as you do." She paused and the corners of her lips creased. "Granted, I don't blame him. Have you seen the kind of women he dates? Morons, the lot of them, and he treats them as such. But you—"

What she was suggesting was laughable, at best. "This is absurd. You and Blaise have busy imaginations."

Pansy ignored her. "Minus his mother, he treats you better than anyone, even me."

Hermione scratched her head and made an incredulous face. "I think you're being a bit ridiculous."

"And I think you're being a little blind." She told her friend firmly, but rambled on after letting the words hang in the air for only a moment. "But so is he—well, not so much blind as in full-fledged denial."

"Full—what? Denial?"

"About you," Pansy replied as if it were the obvious as she rolled her eyes.

"There's nothing for him to be in denial about, Pansy, least of all *me*."

"What are you talking about?" She snorted. "Draco eats denial for breakfast!"

Hermione stared for a moment before restating, "We're *just* friends."

Pansy pinched herself between the eyes and exhaled several times. "I know that I may be coming on strong and maybe you're not ready to even think about that aspect of your life, but are you sure? I mean, really, are you a hundred percent certain that you and Draco aren't something more?"

There was no hesitation. "We're not."

Pansy's blue eyes locked on hers. "Are you sure that there's not any potential for something more?"

"We're friends and well..."

She respected their friendship. It was probably they'd fought and forgiven to get to the point where they were. But things between them were shifting. She wasn't sure *how* or *what* was changing, but she wasn't blind to it. And she didn't want it.

"I don't want anything to change." Hermione told Pansy truthfully.

"Some change is unavoidable. As much as you've preached to me about change, you should know that." Pansy replied. "Changing helps you learn more about yourself and the people around you."

She knew a lot about Draco, probably more than she knew about Pansy or Blaise. There were so many layers to him, some she had unfolded, and others she hadn't quite gotten to. She'd come a long way from thinking that he was some heartless prick. She'd gotten comfortable with him, and Hermione didn't want that comfort to turn into something awkward for any reason.

Draco Malfoy pissed her off more times than she could count, but he came to her aid. She trusted herself around him, but more than that, she trusted *him*. He cared; his actions, albeit subtle, had proven it. Hermione cared for him; that much was true. And now that she thought about it, perhaps she cared about him a bit more than normal, but it wasn't more than he deserved.

The thought alone scared the hell out of her.

"Hermione?"

Pansy stared at her with worry.

"Sorry," she mumbled shakily as she petted Teddy's hair. Her bloody fingers wouldn't stop shaking for some unknown reason. "I was just thinking."

"Oh, Merlin, you're shaking, Hermione. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to—"

"No, it's okay," was her distracted reply. She couldn't stop thinking. Not for anything in the world. And what was worse was that she couldn't stop thinking about Malfoy. Dammit, Pansy.

It wasn't like he was the best person. Sometimes he wasn't a very good person. He was a runner-up for 'The Most Screwed-Up Person Alive' award; an award that she had won by a landslide. It seemed that things between them were inverse. As she rose, he sank, and it wasn't as if he could blame his father's death, either. She replayed all of his words during all the times that he had confided in her. There weren't many, but he had painted a picture of the kind of pain that he was in, but in that he had also painted a picture of the kind of man he was, too. Perhaps, he wasn't as put together as he'd made the world believe. Perhaps he was vulnerable, now more than ever before. And perhaps—perhaps he was a bit lost, too.

And that was comforting.

She wasn't alone in her quest to return to some state of normality. She had Malfoy, who was probably looking for the same thing, too, and that made her feel oddly warm. The man was raw, broken, real, but true.

True.

"I'll drop it." Pansy said with conviction. "It's obviously not any of our places to try and determine what's happening between you and Draco."

"No, it's not." Hermione muttered absently as her mind swirled out of control.

They sat in silence until a flustered Pansy finally said, "I think you're scared."

She focused her eyes on her friend. "Scared? Of what?"

"Everything—well, everything that concerns the opposite sex."

Hermione frowned thoughtfully. "Maybe I am." She then she thought back to her embarrassing retreat after seeing Malfoy in a towel, and corrected herself, "No. Not maybe. I *know* I am."

"Why?"

"That's a rather silly question, don't you think? I've got every reason in the world to be scared."

"True, but so do I."

"You have Blaise."

"I've always had Blaise; I was just too blind to see him. Just like you have Draco, but maybe you're too afraid to see him."

Hermione flinched. "I-I don't want to discuss this—"

"True, you and I have every reason to be afraid of relationships, but we also have ever reason to try and conquer that fear. You can't pick and choose which aspects of your life you're going to work on, and continue to run from the rest. You just have to take each problem as they come to light, you know?"

Hermione stared at Pansy for a long time.

"Don't feel like you have to do what I say," Pansy said slowly. "I'm not forcing you. I'm just trying to make you think. I think it may do you some good to open your heart about as much as you've opened your mind."

And as she sat on the sofa and ran her fingers through Teddy's purple hair, she made a few decisions about her life. She had had every reason in the world to ignore Pansy's words, but maybe it was time to listen, maybe it was time to remove the blinders, maybe it was time to reintroduce another word into her vocabulary—oh hell.

First *friends*, and now—damn. Hermione took a deep breath. *Relationships*.

"I'll think about it."

"That's all I ask."

Hermione promised herself that the next time she gave her heart, she would be more careful about the recipient. But there was more to that. She wouldn't allow herself to get close to anyone if she thought that they were false. It may have been selfish, but if she was going to open herself up to someone, she would do it on her terms. No more lying to protect everyone else; she'd crippled her soul enough for the sake of others. And no liars, either. They might get her attention, but they wouldn't get her. They might be standing right in front of her, but they'd be invisible.

But...

If they didn't shy away from her coldness. If they somehow had managed to ease her out of her cloak of defensiveness and remove the shades that guarded her eyes. If they sat down and stayed awhile, then maybe. If they were tolerant and honest, understanding and trustworthy. If they were brutally honest—because Merlin only knew that she was going to need to hear the truth. If they could grow as she grew, learn as she learned, and change as she changed, then maybe. If they could understand and accept her tears, then maybe. If they could just hold on to her so tight without being disgusted by her fear, then maybe. If they could just hold her until the voices and screams silenced in her head, then maybe...

Maybe.

Maybe she would open herself without fear of rejection. Maybe she could relax, conquer her fears, and breathe a little easier—

The sound of the door opening startled Hermione. Looking over her shoulder, she smiled at the two sisters walking in, hand-in-hand. Narcissa's face was red and her cheeks were stained

with tears, but she looked better, almost relieved. Andromeda was smiling, and her grin widened even further when she caught the sight of Teddy sleeping. "How was he?"

Before Hermione could open her mouth, Pansy replied, "Perfect. They played 'Hide and Seek', isn't that what it's called?"

"Yes." Andromeda nodded with a smile. "Teddy's really good at hiding. One time it took me two hours to find him. I had to coax him out of his hiding spot with ice-cream." She released her sister's hand and knelt in front of Hermione and stroked her grandson's face gently, "Teddy, love." The little boy groaned and swatted at her as if she were an annoying fly. "Teddy, wake up." She coaxed softly.

"Nana?"

She smiled. "Would you like to go to the park with—?" Andromeda never finished her question.

Teddy shot up. He was a bit disoriented from sleep, but exclaimed excitedly, "Yes! Can we bring Miss 'Minie and Miss Pansy'?" He looked at Hermione and Pansy with wide eyes, "Will you come?"

She smiled. "Maybe we'll come next time, okay Teddy?"

He looked a little dubious. "Promise?"

Pansy was the one who replied with, "We promise."

He hugged her quickly, bounced off the couch, hugged Pansy, and skipped merrily to the door. Rising to her feet, she watched as he gave Narcissa a strange look before asking very abruptly, "Are you coming with us?" Narcissa nodded. He pondered for a moment. "Will you push me *really* high on the swings?" The question startled her, but she nodded again; a small smile had begun to spread across her face.

Teddy grinned and immediately started chattering about why he liked the park so much.

Hermione was so caught up in watching the exchange that she'd forgotten all about Andromeda. Well, that was until she said, "I know that today must've been tough for you."

She looked at her hands and asked, "What do you mean?"

Pausing for a moment, Andromeda sighed before confessing, "Harry told me...everything."

She figured as much after what Teddy had said.

"He came to me after he first found out, you know."

"No, I didn't know that." Hermione muttered.

"Well, he did. He was so angry, so hurt, and so utterly broken that he was almost irrational. For hours, he talked about how he felt, what he was going through, and what he had lost, but

I had to remind him that he wasn't the only person who had lost. Of course, he was as stubborn as ever, but after some time in Greece, at my insistence, I think he returned to Britain with more understanding."

She snorted.

"You should know that Harry isn't a bad person."

"I've never thought he was a bad person. I'm more to blame than him."

"Perhaps, but in the end, he betrayed your trust."

Hermione gasped. "How did you—"

Andromeda cut her off gently, "He told me about that, too. He's sorry."

"Well, he can tell me that himself."

"No, he can't. You won't talk to him."

"He's never tried." And that was honest.

" I understand that he told Ginny about your son, but why is it such an issue?"

Andromeda's words were a bit too abrupt for her liking, but she wasn't upset. "You don't know both sides of the story."

Andromeda paused thoughtfully. "You're right," she softened a bit. "Forgive me for being brusque."

She nodded a little stiffly. "I understand," and then she sighed. "I don't know what your relationship is with Ginny, but you didn't see the look on her face when she found out that Matthew was Harry's. I thought she was going to tear my house apart. That kind of anger doesn't go away with a vacation and the promise of a white wedding. It just doesn't."

"Maybe it's better that she knows."

Hermione frowned. "How could you say that?"

"Not everything can remain a secret forever."

"I don't keep Matthew a secret out of shame. I'm not proud of how it happened or how many people I hurt, but he was our son. Harry is—there are people who would love to bring both of us down. A lot of people who would tear our son's memory to shreds in the name of a story...and for the right number of Galleons."

"Do you think Ginny is capable of hurting Harry just to hurt you?"

"I honestly don't know what she'd capable of." Hermione sighed. "Love brings out the worst in people."

Part Two: Choices

All that was heard next was the sound of a body crumbling to the floor and a cool drawl.
"Well, well, this most certainly *is* a change in circumstance."

"Draco?" He vaguely heard Arcturus' voice.

His head ached and he felt nauseated. He knew he fucked up.

"Most interesting...that was most interesting indeed," Hesper drawled slowly.

The act was done. Did he even care? No. It was one thing to make threats again his mother and Pansy; it was something that he had expected. But they crossed the line and—Draco paled considerably.

"A Malfoy defending a Mudblood. Been around you too long, huh, Arcturus?" Hesper chuckled

"Shut up," Draco warned.

Dammit, dammit, dammit.

There wasn't anything wrong with defending Hermione Granger, but in defending her Draco had shown his hand.

In for a Knut...

Emil was just barely moving. His disoriented moans filled the room and that snapped an almost furious Draco to attention. He pointed his wand again.

"He's not worth it," Arcturus told him slowly.

"And how do you figure that?" Hesper didn't give anyone else a chance to answer before he posed another lazy question. "Besides, why should he stop? This is most entertaining."

"Aren't you going to do something?" Emil stammered, sitting up carefully.

His eyes were on Draco's wand.

"What do you suggest that I do?" His brother looked at his fingernails, disinterested. "*I'm* not the one with the wand." He looked at Draco. "You should do to him what your father would have done. After all, he said some very unflattering things about your witch earlier."

"But—but—you tried to—"

"I confess I was curious about whether she would stand or fall back, but she didn't flinch once. She knew about the Vow." Hesper looked at his nephew. "Because you told her. And why would you do something like that?"

Draco was about to hex *everyone* to shut them all up. He gripped his wand tighter.

"This isn't who you are, Draco." Arcturus told him out of the blue.

That statement reverberated in his head repeatedly. It wasn't the time for self-discovery. He had to keep his head together. He had to—Draco paused. Maybe Arcturus was wrong. Maybe he *was* the kind of person who cursed someone like Emil, or played games like Hesper, and maybe he *was* the kind of man who preyed on the weak. He'd done it before. He'd preyed on Granger—only, that turned into something unexpected. Him helping her didn't change how wrong he'd been.

Hesper broke into his thoughts. "She's interesting, that witch. Perhaps she's the one who's changed you so much in the last year. You were more like your father than ever and now—"

Draco squared his shoulders and set his jaw before answering carefully. "I'm nothing like my father. My father would have punished him."

"Exactly. And you?"

Tick. Tock.

He looked on the floor at the pale lump of a man who stared back at him with wide, fear-filled eyes. Yes, he'd hexed the man into unconsciousness in the heat of the moment in defense of a friend, but Draco was no killer. If there was anything, he knew about himself, it was that.

"Think about it, Draco. Remember your father." Hesper said silkily. "You have a choice here, just like Emil had a choice when he sent me to stalk Pansy, when he tried to threaten—"

"But I didn't—"

"Quiet," Hesper tsked.

Emil became flustered. "But—" He cowered when his brother shot him a furious look.

"You have a choice," Hesper reminded him coldly. "Show him that you will not take his insubordination. Show him your cruelty."

Cruelty.

Hesper was right. Father was right. Even that old coot, Dumbledore, was right.

Draco had a choice. He was free to become the kind of person that *he* wanted to be, and not the person that everyone expected him to be. Draco had choices, and he'd *made* choices when it came to other aspects of his life: like his mother, Pansy, Blaise, his job, the family's business, and even Granger—*especially* Granger. Damn, she'd been the target of his cruelty

numerous times, both in the past and in the present, but she didn't seem to harbour any ill will. In fact, they'd become friends in spite of his words and actions.

Maybe she knew. Maybe she didn't see him like he'd seen himself. Maybe...

Draco looked down at his wand thoughtfully. Sure, there had been moments when his cruelty had overtaken his rationality, moments when the darker aspects of human nature had intrigued him, and even moments when he had easily preyed on someone weaker than himself, but obviously there was something good in him. There would be days when he'd lose control and make bad decisions; days when he wouldn't be proud of his actions. However, there would be many more days when he would make the right choices. Draco decided that he wasn't going to tear himself apart over every little wrong thing that he'd ever done because he wasn't perfect, just flesh and bones...just like his father.

"I don't have to prove anything to you, of all people."

Hesper frowned. "What?"

He shook his head. "You're wrong about a lot of things, but firstly, you're wrong about me."

"You're heading down a dangerous path, Draco, and soon, you're going to be like Arcturus, here. You're going to be a blight on the family tapestry, too."

"If you think I care about that fucking tapestry, you're in dire need of a reality check." He would set that thing on fire if he knew where it was.

Hesper panted in rage. "You would disgrace your family—"

"You think you're my family? Ha! You may be my uncle, but in name only. You're no family of mine."

"And who is?" he hurled back in response. "Arcturus? Those blood-traitors you're friends with? Or maybe you consider that filthy *Mudblood* as your family."

"I don't think that's any of your concern." Draco put down his wand. "As I've been *trying* to state since we've started this meeting, I've signed all the necessary papers and as soon as the magical bind takes effect at midnight tonight, everything will belong to Arctutus. I'll retain my stocks, but that's it. I'm done."

Hesper and Emil were momentarily stunned.

"What?" Emil blinked in disbelief. "It's already done? I thought—"

"Clearly you thought wrong," he snidely replied.

"Your father worked—"

"None of this has anything to do with him," Draco told Hesper firmly.

"You're giving it to a blood-traitor who's good with numbers? It's disgusting! Your father amassed all this power for you, he hurt people for you to be where you are right now, and he even *killed* people for you to have this opportunity."

"Who have you killed, Hesper?" Draco asked with a tilt of his head.

Hesper's anger reached fever pitch rather quickly. "What?"

"Would you like to reconsider the next words that come out of your mouth?" Arcturus asked boldly, gesturing to the pile of parchment. "You've been married a lot of times with no divorces."

The sound of a mouth being snapped shut was all that they heard next.

Draco neatly summoned the pile of parchments from the table. He handed the agreement parchments to Arcturus before speaking. He'd read them a million times already. "You two should probably know that if *any* evidence comes out about you trying to stage a coup on Arcturus, you'll be stripped of everything. Next, you're not allowed back on the grounds of Malfoy Manor. If I get so much as a hint that you've been around Pansy's home or in Hermione Granger's presence, I'll—"

Hesper snarled. "What makes you think that we'll agree with something like that?"

"It doesn't matter if you do or don't. This matter has already been decided. You've wasted your time and mine. I don't think you know much about me, but I happen to work for the Ministry. And I will confess that the head of the Auror department was *very* interested to know that you were coming to town for my father's funeral, Hesper."

His uncle froze.

"It seems they're curious about your activities, but never had an opportunity until today."

"I—"

"In fact, they're already at your home in Scotland, just waiting for the command to start breaking through your wards." Draco watched as Hesper's smug look fell and a flush of horror spread across his cheeks. "And with the blueprints to your home that point out all of your secret chambers and rooms, Merlin only knows what they'll find hidden there." Draco sat the parchments down on the table, and Hesper desperately snatched them up, scanning the contents.

His eyes widened more and more with each sentence that he read.

"I have plenty of copies, and so do the Aurors. They'll know exactly where to look, thanks to Arcturus' detective work, but you can thank yourself for giving me the perfect opportunity to have the Aurors raid your home." Draco told him. "You shouldn't have come here. You shouldn't have threatened the people around me. I hope you *rot* in Azkaban."

The parchment fell from his hands, and Hesper glared at him. "Why you—"

"*Stupefy!*"

Draco turned to Arcturus, who was lowering his wand, before looking down at Hesper's unconscious body.

Well, that was interesting.

"I couldn't help myself." Arcturus shrugged. "I've been wanting to do that for *years*."

It was over.

Done.

Finished.

And thank Merlin because he was ready to get the hell out of there. The sounds of the ticking clock were practically ingrained into his memory. *Tick. Tock.* It was time; time to wash his hands clean of everything and time to walk away. He breathed a sigh of relief and undid the top button on his shirt in hopes that it would relax him, but it didn't.

"Arcturus, will you deliver Hesper to the Ministry and send the Aurors the command to start the search? I'd do it myself, but I'm liable to dump him in the Thames before we ever make it there."

"To be honest, I am too," Arcturus replied honestly. "But I'll do it. As for the message, I'll deliver it personally. I'm taking a Portkey there with Granger's boss to oversee the entire search."

Draco looked confused. "When did you decide to do that?"

"It was her idea, actually."

He blinked four times before asking, "How did she even know what was going—"

Arcturus cut him off. "I told her about it during our little talk. She told me to make sure that there was at least one Curse-breaker on the scene when they started breaking down the wards. And somehow, she got her boss to agree to take on the case, free of charge. They're going to transport all the evidence to her company's headquarters where a team of Curse-breakers will sort through it all before sending it to the Ministry. Perhaps we'll find answers. Perhaps I'll find out what happened to my wife."

Draco just stared at him for a few seconds, in complete disbelief.

"Like I said before, she's a singularly gifted witch, and she's loyal. It makes sense that you would have a soft spot for her." Draco said nothing in response to his uncle, and Arcturus took the hint to move on and locked on the third conscious person in the room. "Now, what should I do with Emil?"

That was a question that he could respond to. "Modify his memories, and then do with him as you see fit."

After nodding, Arcturus took a breath with his wand at the ready, but stopped when he caught sight of Draco walking to the door. "Where are you going?"

"I need to get out of this room."

"You handled yourself well today," Arcturus told him.

He froze. "I lost my temper."

"Yes, you did, but it was a natural reaction over someone you care about. Draco, you're only human."

He said nothing in response. He didn't want to even think about anything anymore. Abruptly, Draco turned and started to leave, but then he stopped. "Take everything. Take the table, the rugs, and the chairs—take my chair, too. Keep it, sell it, put it in your office, I don't care what you do with it, I want the room bare by the time I return tomorrow."

"Fine."

Draco pulled open the door, froze, and gave his final order. "Oh, and take that damn clock, too."

Part Three: The Pull of Gravity

Forecasters predicted rain that night.

A hundred percent chance, but there she was, standing on the edge of her pier. Her mind was plagued with thoughts, but her body was dry. As dusk turned into night, Hermione watched as storm clouds blanketed the sky and thunder rumbled in from the west. Still, there was no rain, only gusts of wind that made her hair blow around wildly.

She wrapped her shawl around her body, shielding herself from the spring chill.

Hermione had been out there for—she glanced at her watch and frowned, two hours. Just two hours? Merlin, it felt as if she'd been sitting on that pier for *days* with her thoughts. Pansy and Andromeda's words swirled around, mixing and mingling together.

Words like *forgiveness*, *regret*, and *relationships* floated inside of her head in individual bubbles.

The first bubble was tiny, the second bubble was a bit bigger, but the last one was massive, for some unknown reason. Fear aside, what did she want? Did she want to be alone? Forever?

Hermione almost shuddered at the thought.

No, she didn't want that. Not anymore. She was sure that she didn't want to be alone, or even lonely. But she wasn't alone or lonely, not literally. Hermione ate breakfast with Draco every morning to avoid it. She had friends, but a relationship? Was she willing to take the risks involved in sharing herself with someone else?

Looking to the sky again, Hermione frowned.

She really didn't have time for any of this.

But then, the wards announced that she had a visitor. And soon enough, she heard the noise, the sound of her guest stepping onto the pier and the creaking of wood as they slowly approached her. Hermione didn't move. She jammed her hands into the pockets of her denims and stared out over the dark waters. Seconds later, they were standing beside her.

The wind howled and thunder rumbled. Hermione's hair was in chaos.

And Draco Malfoy was silent.

"Did everything go smoothly with your uncles?"

Three minutes would pass before he replied with a short, "No."

"Oh." She finally looked over at him and her brow rose at the mere sight of him. Malfoy looked wrung out. He was sans cloak, his tie was completely undone, and the top two buttons of his shirt were unfastened. If it were anyone else, she would've assumed that they were trying to relax after a hard day. However, with Malfoy, she knew that something was amiss.

"Are you hungry?" She pulled her hands from her pockets and started to back away. "I'll make—" A hand grabbed her wrist and Hermione looked at him in confusion.

"Stay."

The unspoken second word hung in the air between them. *Please*.

Hermione didn't hesitate, not even for a moment. She stared at the moon that was almost completely obscured by the clouds and time slowly passed. Their arms were touching, he hadn't released his hold on her wrist, and Hermione found herself disoriented in the silence. She wasn't used to a silence that he had initiated and his face betrayed nothing. It put her on edge; not the upset sort like back during the days when they argued more than they listened. It was more as if she were on the brink of a precipice, ready to plunge into something. Would she jump or fall?

"I hexed my uncle today."

Her eyes widened, but she said nothing at first. She'd known that the meeting was supposed to be intense, but she hadn't known that it would reach that point. "Why?" Hermione waited three minutes, but it became obvious that he wasn't going to respond. "What happened?"

"Well, to put it plainly, before I could tell them, he struck a nerve."

Her brows furrowed. "What nerve?"

Draco just looked at her, but said nothing. Instead, he released her wrist and shifted, reaching and adjusting the blanket to make sure she was warm. He moved her hair out the way.

"You'll catch your death out here, Granger."

"I'm not that cold. Are you?"

He released her blanket abruptly. "No, I'm not."

Draco was acting strange and she couldn't put her finger on why.

"Did they try to intimidate you? It's a pointless endeavour. You and Arcturus already signed the agreement. The magical agreement—"

"Takes effect in a little over twenty minutes," Draco cut her off coolly as he turned his head away from her. "The question is, how did *you* know about that? I never told you anything about the agreement or—"

"Arcturus did, about two days ago. Before the funeral." And it was something that she hadn't thought about until that moment as there was too much going on. "He pulled me aside and we talked. He told me that your uncles, Hesper and Emil, wanted you to give your shares over to them. He said that they would probably come into the meeting not knowing that you both had signed the agreement, and that they would threaten your friends and mother to coerce you into signing over everything to Emil."

"They did."

Hermione paused.

"What else?"

"Umm...he told me that he did some investigating on his brother and found a mountain of evidence against him in the suspicious disappearances of his wives. And he knew the Ministry was investigating him because your uncle was dabbling in Dark Arts." In fact, she opened her mouth again to tell him that they talked considerably about him, but she stopped herself. "He told me to watch out for myself."

"Well, you did an excellent job of that." Draco retorted sarcastically.

Hermione did not like his tone. "What's wrong with you?"

"You didn't tell me about your encounter with my uncles." His voice was low and she detected a bit of anger in it, as well. Well, that was odd.

"I didn't know that I *had* to, Malfoy." She replied, staring at him with narrowed eyes. "I saw you all of six seconds after we returned to the Manor. It wasn't that serious, Pansy found me. She—"

Draco turned to her and hotly asked, "But what if she hadn't, what then?"

"Why are you so angry with me?"

He took a deep breath and folded his arms across his chest, but he didn't say a word.

She sat down on the edge of the pier and used the next few minutes to calm her simmering anger. "They didn't touch me. They were just trying to intimidate and scare me. And maybe they had something more sinister in mind, but it didn't happen, so calm down." She looked up at him and caught his stern face in the faint moonlight. "Funny, I never pegged you as the overprotective type."

"I'm not."

"Could've fooled me. You almost reminded me of Pansy." When he scowled, Hermione snickered and patted the spot next to her. "Why don't you sit down? I think you could use a break. It's been a long day." She paused and thought about all the conversations and realisations that she had had that day. She thought about Pansy, Teddy, Andromeda, Narcissa, and even Lucius. She thought about the little boy in her heart and the man next to her. She thought about everything. "Too long, huh?"

Draco didn't reply until he sat next to her. "You have no idea."

The words lingered in the air before a gust of wind blew them away. And then, there was nothing. Peace. Quiet. Stillness. Unknowingly, her hand found his and she gave it a good squeeze. Draco looked at Hermione for what seemed like forever. He looked like he had so much to say, but said nothing.

She thought a lot about what Pansy had said, about Draco not allowing anyone to be as close to him as she was. Hermione glanced down at their entwined hands. Perhaps her friend had had a point. She'd seen him treat others rather callously; in fact, she'd been at the receiving end of his brutality on a couple of occasions. But she had also been on the receiving end of his odd kindness, too. She wasn't sure if he'd even realised it, everything that was going on, *she* hadn't even noticed.

Maybe it was because they had become friends. Well, maybe not, because Pansy said that Draco treated her better than he treated them. And maybe that was true. He hadn't shoved her away or rejected her. In fact, now that she thought about it, Malfoy had never *really* rejected her. She wondered why.

Malfoy had been changing gradually in the last couple of months. Even she had picked up on it.

What made him change?

The calming winds startled her out of her thoughts and she looked up to the sky, again. The thunder had rolled right past them and the clouds—well, they were on the move, again.

"They said that it was supposed to rain tonight." Hermione had no idea why she had told him that.

"Oh really?" He sounded rather stiff.

"Yes."

She didn't say anything else on the topic, and neither did he.

Well, that was slightly awkward.

Before Hermione knew it, the clouds had moved just enough for her to see it. Hanging in the darkened sky, suspended by natural forces alone, was the most perfect full moon. She stared. A bluish white disc illuminated, contrasting with the cloudy night-time sky. It was stunning. Hermione thanked the cosmic forces for the company and the full moon, on a night that the forecasters said would be riddled with thunderstorms.

A pressure on her hand had made her look away. Draco.

She looked at him, again. He wore the look of a troubled, confused, and pensive man. His eyes were slightly narrowed and his breaths were coming in shallow rasps. Every now and then he would shake his head as if an unwanted thought popped into his mind. She squeezed his hand lightly to get his attention, but he didn't respond. Honestly, she didn't know what was on his mind, but obviously something was plaguing him.

He was warring with himself, and it wasn't going well.

"You're not alone, you know?" She told him softly.

His eyes met hers rather quickly. "What?"

Carefully, she squeezed his hand. "You're not alone. You're not the only one struggling and you're not the only one who's confused." When his face contorted, Hermione quickly interjected. "I don't assume to know what's going on in your mind, but I want you to know that I understand."

He did not look convinced. "You have *no* idea what's on my mind, so you should probably quit while you're ahead, Granger."

She frowned and looked out over the water.

It was so beautiful that she refused to allow his tone to upset her. Why didn't she sit out here more often? The truth came with a gentle breeze. Oh, right. The last time she was out here, she had nearly drowned. And—Hermione looked over at Draco. "Why did you jump in after me?"

His face contorted. "What?"

"When I fell in, why did you jump in after me?"

"I had my reasons," Draco slowly extracted his hand from hers and shrugged. "Perhaps my reason for jumping in after you has changed. Perhaps I jumped in for the same reason you showed up at my house the morning my father died."

Well, that certainly was a loaded statement.

Hermione was speechless.

"I'm not sure why I came here." He said in a tone so low. "I should be at home drowning in Firewhisky, but—"

"But here you are."

"Here I am." And he sounded truly defeated.

Hermione sat in silence, looking out at the dark water. She reached for his hand, but thought about what he had said. She wasn't quite sure how she could respond. Hermione had gone to him because it was her duty as his friend...a duty that easily could've been passed along to someone who knew him better.

Someone like Pansy, or even Blaise. But no, *she'd* gone to him.

"I came to you because I knew that you didn't need to be alone, but it's never been about why I came." At that, Draco looked at her, but she kept her eyes trained to the lake. "I *stayed* because I'm your friend. I stayed because I know what losing someone feels like. And I stayed—I stayed for you. Just like you've stayed for me."

"I've never known why I stay." Draco's voice sounded odd, choked. "Perhaps that, too, has changed."

Hermione's head hurt. Apparently, when it came to Draco, thinking was never a good thing. Evidently, it was pain-inducing. He'd unknowingly made her think too much today. And there he was, doing it again. Bloody hell. She was going to murder Pansy as soon as she saw her next.

"I—maybe you're right. Maybe we shouldn't discuss it." Hermione wasn't sure what was going on with her, but it needed to *stop*. Stupid Pansy with her stupid advice about that stupid word that she had made Hermione reintroduce into her stupid vocabulary. *Relationships*.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

She couldn't breathe. "I'll go and...go."

Draco looked at her in almost confusion as he cocked his brow. "You all right, Granger?"

Oh Merlin, she was panicking and she didn't know why. "Ah, yes, well, I need to go. Run."

"Having a panic attack?" It seemed that every muscle in her body had gone rigid all of a sudden. How did he—Hermione stared at him for a moment, cursing herself for ever telling

him about her panic attacks. Flippantly, he turned his head and looked out over the water.
"You should breathe."

The air between them was heavy, thick with tension and unspoken words.

"And then, you should figure out why you're panicking."

Hermione frowned. What a typical statement from a frustrating and stubborn man. He was a fountain of advice, but the moment someone tried to give him any in return, he'd shut down. But dammit if he didn't make sense. Never mind that. "Maybe you should listen to your own advice, Malfoy, and instead of telling me to figure out why I'm panicking, you should figure out what's wrong with you. Perhaps you should figure out why you're here."

"Maybe you should stay out of my business, Granger." He mocked.

She narrowed her eyes. "Maybe, if you don't want advice, don't try to give it to others."

Draco looked at her for a few moments before his eyes darkened. He leaned in closer and curtly advised in a low voice, "Maybe you should go run. You're good at that."

"Touché," she fired back, staring him straight in the eyes.

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

"I'm a sprinter, Draco, but you're a long-distance runner."

Malfoy glared. "Oh, and you're the perfect person to judge me."

"I'm *not* judging you."

"Doesn't sound like it." He started to get up.

Hermione grabbed him by the arm, forcing him to stay where he was. "*You're* the one who's attacking *me*."

"I'm *not* attacking you."

"Then why the attitude, Draco? You've had one since you arrived and I know it has nothing to do with your uncles or the day as a whole. It has something to do with me. You said you don't know why you're here—"

"You're *infuriating*," he cut her off hotly.

"Well, so are you, but here you are."

Time ticked by as they glared each other down, neither giving each other a metre. Hermione forced her head higher, tilting her chin at him. And then, something happened. Hermione felt, rather than heard, him exhale. It had sent all kinds of alarm bells off in her head. That wasn't right. He usually was determined to have the last word. He never gave up.

But he was and immediately, the irritation between them dissipated. What was left behind was odd and almost strangled; something she couldn't identify. Hermione's eyes travelled to his lips as she realised just how close their faces were—oh, now *that* was ridiculous...But their eyes met, again.

She couldn't recognise the look or figure out why they had flickered ever so slightly, but she was stuck. The silence between them was dangerous and she thought about breaking it with words, but she couldn't. It felt as if her tongue had swelled to three times its size within her mouth. Hermione couldn't move and Draco hadn't moved, except for the fact that his hand had once again crept into hers. Hermione felt it, felt his fingers as they slid up his palm and twined with hers. Felt the pressure and the warmth. His breathing was off, or maybe that was hers. She didn't know. She didn't know anything. He was too close.

Well—buzzing sound in her head made her abruptly jerk backwards.

The wards informed her that she had three new visitors. Two of which, she expected, but the last one was a visitor she hadn't anticipated. Malfoy looked thoroughly frazzled and out of sorts. Hermione swallowed thickly. "I, um, have guests." Awkwardly, she let go of his hand stood up. "Look, Draco, I don't feel like fighting with you—"

His voice still sounded odd. "As much as I would love to blame this on you, it wasn't your fault."

That was probably the closest to an apology that she would receive.

She nodded stiffly, squared her shoulders, and walked away from the edge of the pier. Each step seemed to reverberate in her head, which was pounding almost as hard as her heart. A headache potion was just what she needed. Yes, a headache potion and a good night's sleep would clear her mind of everything that Pansy had implanted.

Hermione heard footsteps behind her, but kept walking because soon enough he would catch up with her. And she was right. She glanced over at Draco, but said nothing. What could she say? It had been an odd night. Too odd, if you asked her. It started thundering again. A storm was brewing, or was it that another storm was brewing? Hermione stumbled on a step, and Draco's hand shot out to steady her.

Oh, yes, definitely a storm. Maybe it would bring rain.

After walking up the stairs to her back porch in silence, Hermione pulled open her door. She had no idea why he was there, and judging from the quick glimpse that she had taken, he looked like he had no idea why he was there, either. There was so much tension between them; far too much tension than there should've been, and far too much for her liking. Malfoy shut the door behind him.

"I'll make coffee."

Hermione nodded and slowly made her way into the living room.

Three people sat on her sofa, speaking to each other in low tones. Pansy spotted her first. Hermione noticed the worry in her eyes. Apollo was in her lap, purring softly. She then nudged Blaise, who stood immediately, still wearing his Auror robes. And then...

"Ron? What are you doing here?"

He rose from his seat, looking almost nervous. "I—" But then, he looked past her and narrowed in confusion. "What's *he* doing here?"

Hermione looked at Malfoy who had just appeared on her right.

"Well, hello, Draco. Fancy seeing you here so late." Pansy smirked and Blaise looked intrigued.

She was going to hurt the former, and judging from the scowl on Draco's face, he'd was thinking something similar. Or so she thought. "Because he is. Now, what are you all doing here?"

It took a moment, but Ron focused back on the task at hand. He ran a hand over his hair and picked up a large envelope off the coffee table. "I got it this afternoon and, well, I didn't know how to give it to you, so I sent a letter to Parkinson. And I—"

"Well, what is it Weasley?" Draco spat rather impatiently.

"Here." Ron ignored Malfoy and gave the envelope to Hermione.

She turned it over. The seal was broken. "You opened it?"

"I thought it was a letter from a fan."

Pansy petted Apollo. Blaise stood there, unmoving. Draco snorted and rolled his eyes. Ron scowled. Hermione frowned at them both and lifted the broken seal. She reached inside and pulled out the piece of paper. Not parchment, but Muggle paper. That was odd. She turned it over and it felt as if someone had sucked all the air from the room.

"What is it, Granger?" Draco asked.

"It—it's a—" She started breathlessly, feeling nauseous.

Blaise finished her sentence gravely, "It's a copy of Matthew's birth certificate."

And somewhere else a clock was ticking.

Chapter End Notes

If anyone notices my chapter numbers aren't right, let a girl know. They're all running together now. LOL.

spark in the dark

Chapter Summary

"Lie to me, if that'll make you feel better, but for the love of god, stop lying to yourself."

Chapter Notes

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

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Spark In The Dark

Part One: Questions of science.

April 5th

This was becoming a really nasty habit.

Draco had just wanted to point out that after today he would no longer accept this kind of behaviour from himself. It was beneath him and out of his character. He also wanted to point out that, no, he didn't want to be there, but there he was; standing outside of Granger's office, waiting.

Her secretary, who was still stealing looks at him over the top of her Witch Weekly magazine, had told him that she was currently in a meeting and that he could wait in the lounge area until it concluded, but Draco had refused. Well, that wasn't true. He just hadn't moved. His brain had commanded his legs to walk, not just to the waiting area, but out of the entire building before it was too late. And his legs, well, they weren't being very cooperative.

The secretary made the same throaty noise for the tenth time and Draco found himself grinding his teeth to stifle his annoyance. On four separate occasions, the witch, who reminded him too much of the She-Weasel, had tried to speak to him. Each time, her topic of choice had drifted further from 'making conversation' to the land of 'overt flirtation'. He forced himself not to roll his eyes. All of her comments about the weather, the quality of his robes, his plans for that evening, and the blatant dinner request had either been ignored or flat-out rejected. So, she had taken to making noises to get his attention.

Draco frowned, and lifted his head from the ground. His eyes focused on Granger for the third time since Cecilia—or Cynthia—had pointed her out to him. All the offices in the

building were rather odd. Instead of solid walls, they had impenetrable glass walls that acted as one-way glass. He could see her, but she couldn't see him.

Thank Merlin.

He hadn't seen her since that strange night on the pier that had turned into a nightmare-come-true for her. And while not seeing her would've never bothered Draco before, that time it had; a bit more than he had expected and a bit more than he had planned.

It had started out as a little twinge on day three when he had awoken to a silent house, question-asking on day six when he had had dinner with Pansy and Blaise, and had ended with him showing up at her office today, on day twelve. If Draco was going to be honest, he would say that not seeing Granger for the last twelve days had made him realise, almost to his horror, that he *liked* seeing her every day. He'd grown used to her intrusions, her omelettes, her simplicity, and her company. He's grown used to *her*.

Draco paused that thought.

He'd done some thinking. He had had nothing but time to think as he'd taken personal days from work since his father's death. He spent days calculating, thinking, and weighing his options before he'd finally *accepted* that there was something between Granger and himself. He didn't know exactly what, though. That had been a hard-enough pill to swallow, and Draco definitely didn't want to travel on that train of thought until he had nowhere else to go.

It was all rather sudden. Or maybe it wasn't. Draco didn't know, but what he did know was that everything had been moving along smoothly, and then—*bam!* Well, that wasn't true. Everything had been slowly building. He could see it now with so much clarity. Like flood waters behind an ineffective earthen dam. It was only a matter of time.

He groaned inwardly.

As of late, all thoughts pertaining to Hermione Granger induced headaches of epic proportions, and not being around her—bloody hell. In a month or so, he'd gone from blessed ignorance to raging realisations. He'd gone from comfortably living his life, to clinging to something just hold on. And whether or not Draco would admit it, he was more than frustrated. He was also a bit nervous. He hadn't been in a situation quite like this before.

But he had to maintain his wits. He needed them to get out of this situation. It would be easy to panic, and part of him wanted to. Draco might have lost control with his uncles, but he wouldn't lose it over this 'Granger situation'. It was just a phase. It would pass. He was sure of it.

So, why was he there?

He couldn't answer that question and it made him frown. Another thing that had made him frown: the sight of Granger.

When Draco walked into Curse-Breakers thirty minutes ago, he had expected to find a haggard train-wreck who hadn't eaten, but had gotten something else entirely. She looked

perfectly normal, like nothing had happened and today was going to be another ordinary day. Neither of which were true.

Granger stood at the head of the long table, moving her hands as she talked to the thirteen others in the room; all were scribbling notes on their parchments. Her stance was authoritative and confident, and that was most surprising to him. Every now and then, someone would say something or ask a question, and she would allow herself to slightly smile and refer to one of the diagrams floating on either side of her.

Draco found that he admired the way she held herself together even as things were falling apart.

Granger, he noticed, was dressed in plain Muggle clothing, but that was to be expected. Seeing her in robes was a rarity. It wasn't because her boss had encouraged them to wear less restrictive Muggle clothing when they were out in the field; it was because they typically met in Muggle restaurants for lunch. He always had to transfigure his robes to blend in. Draco had gotten so far as to reluctantly notice the length of her black skirt and the way her royal blue blouse fit snugly against her body, when the people in the room started to gather their things and rise from their seats.

If he was going to leave, it would have to be now.

The first person exited the room.

Right now. The second person exited, followed quickly by third. The fourth and fifth came out talking together. They both looked at him in awe before the sixth person, another female, dragged them away. Why weren't his feet moving? Draco inwardly sighed. Perhaps his feet weren't moving because he had no real intentions of leaving that spot.

Well, bugger that.

Draco forced himself to turn around, and was about to take the first blessed step out of that fucked-up situation when he heard: "Draco?"

Son of a bitch.

"What are you doing here?"

A slew of curse words almost flew from his mouth as his entire body went rigid, but he stopped the words from forming and slowly turned to Granger. She looked pleased yet confused to see him. From the corner of his eye, he could see the secretary watching them closely and curiously. A few of her 'students' lingered, too, looking highly interested in what was going to come out of his mouth.

Draco didn't particularly care for audiences, and quickly realised that coming to her office was a bad idea; probably the worst one that he'd ever had. Hell, he didn't even know *why* he was there to begin with.

This was *not* going well.

"Well, Granger, I—"

"Miss Granger, I have one last question about the protocol for emergency situations," a blond wizard with glasses interrupted. He had his notes about two inches from his face and a safety protocol book stuck under his arm. He looked up. "Oh, am I interrupting?" Before either could respond, he continued. "It will only take a few moments of your time, but I'm curious about this new system you've created. While it's brilliant," he let out an odd noise that sounded like a mix of nervous laughter and an involuntary snort, "I can't help but wonder what if a person had an emergency while in the Ministry."

One of the lingering witches slapped the palm of her hand against her forehead in exasperation, but Draco honestly wanted to thank the nerd for his intrusion. He didn't hear the Hermione's response as he was too busy plotting out his lie, but he did notice when the wizard walked away.

"I apologise for that. We just hired a batch of new Curse-breakers and I was giving them their safety orientation. You were saying?"

"I was—"

She checked her watch. "I have a last orientation meeting in about two hours, and then—" her eyes became vacant only for a moment before she snapped herself out of it. "I'm about to go to lunch, and well, if you want to join me, I could use the company..." Granger trailed off, looking at the ground then back up at him.

His mind screamed at him to say no, but instead, Draco replied with a noncommittal shrug. "Fine."

Granger stood there for another moment. "Well...good then."

"Okay."

Inside, he was trying to figure out if he was simply imagining the awkwardness or if it was actually there. Just when things had become awkward between them? Well, that was a rather stupid question. There had always been hint, but never this overt. He had his hypotheses of why, but he really didn't care to test them, now.

Granger smiled a little and for the first time, he could see the stress she had tried to keep hidden. She turned to the secretary, "I will be back in less than two hours, Callista. Hold all of my messages, please."

So *that* was her name...

"Yes, Miss Granger."

She looked back at him. "I have to get a few things from my office, is that all right?"

Once again, his mind demanded that he walk away, but he didn't. Instead, he nodded and followed her past the lingerers and into her office. Draco looked around. Her office was about as plain and dull as her house. From his spot in the entrance, he looked around at the bare

walls, the fireplace, the tidy desk directly in front of him, three cases of bookshelves that were located behind her desk, a file cabinet in the left corner, and the chair that was to his right.

And then, Draco noticed a picture frame on her desk.

There was nothing particularly striking about the frame, only that it was turned towards him. Odd. He walked towards the desk and looked at Granger. She was muttering under her breath as she searched in the large file cabinet for something.

Good. She wouldn't see what he was doing.

His attention shifted back to the picture and he didn't hesitate before picking it up. He wasn't surprised by the fact that it was a picture of a smiling and laughing Matthew blowing bubbles, but Draco was surprised that Granger had turned it so that she couldn't look at it while sitting at her desk.

Now, why would she do that?

He pondered. Maybe she was having another rough day; he honestly wouldn't blame her for having one. Maybe she was stressed; Granger had every reason to be. Maybe—he blinked. His concern for her as of late had been alarming yet justifiable.

The thought made him move to return the frame to its previous spot, but boy in the picture caught his eye. He'd seen pictures of Matthew before, but the wizard found himself staring at the boy. He looked so much like his mother.

It was most uncanny. It was—"That's probably one of my favourites of him."

Startled by Granger's interruption, Draco set the picture frame down on her desk rather hard and promptly did an about-face. And she was—bloody hell. She was right there. Not too close, but close enough. Closer than they had been in days and closer than he'd wanted them to be, in all honesty.

Because he didn't feel so comfortable while standing so close to her.

The last time they had been like this, he didn't know what the hell had happened. One minute, they were exchanging snide words. The strain between them had been tangible. Draco didn't know why, but he had been angry at himself and his reaction in front of his uncles, even though it wasn't her fault. He had wanted to hurt her with his words, but she wouldn't let him.

And Granger, well, she had been getting too close for comfort; too close to the root of his anger.

Maybes were flying all over the place, her anger was rising, the clock in his head was ticking, she had called him out about his attitude towards her, and then...something had happened.

He hadn't even *planned* on going to her home that night. He'd gone home and relished in the blessed silence for all of fifteen minutes. And then he'd realised that he was just staring at the

walls. And he impulsively grabbed his wand and Apparated to her, of all people. It was a move that he would give anything to go back and change.

It was the real reason why he was here in her office, today.

Draco had lashed out at her that night. He wanted to feel bad about it, but misery always had loved its company. And he'd been downright miserable. Arcturus's words, the realisations, Emil's threats, his breaking point, his loss of control, the day, burying Father with that bloody shovel, and seeing *her* in colour—he had been forced into a pretty unfair situation where he'd been unfairly compelled to see the world differently; to see *her* differently.

And at the very end of his failed attempt at hurting her, something had happened. Draco had later blamed it on everything, even things that weren't to blame.

He was just about to concede when *it* happened. Draco wasn't quite sure what *it* was, though. All he knew was that the tension had dispersed and left something behind; something he couldn't explain; something that had startled him into silence. Draco remembered breathing, but more than that, he remembered the look on Hermione's face. She went from looking irritated to alarmed to...*something*. He remembered seeing the change in her eyes and remembered thinking all kinds of absurd thoughts.

But there had been one flickering second when Draco had thought that she was going to do it; move the last couple of inches and...kiss him.

However, that hadn't been the problem, exactly. Oh, don't get him wrong, that *was* a problem; a major one, but not the biggest. No, the near-kiss hadn't been the problem battering his brain for the last few days. It was something else entirely...

"Are you ready?" she asked, looking at him curiously as she took a few steps away from him. "There's a nice restaurant down the street. Would you like to walk there?"

What had *really* troubled Draco was that just for that second, he had entertained the thought of letting her.

And since realising that, he hadn't been able to act the same around her.

"That's fine," he swallowed thickly.

The walk to the restaurant was a silent one. Draco was lost in his own thoughts and Granger had somehow managed to keep up with his longer strides without grabbing his hand. For that, he was grateful. The streets were semi-empty because it was raining, yet again; just a light sprinkle. The real rain was coming; he was sure of it. It seemed that the clouds were darkening more and more with each passing moment, and it had started to thunder, as well.

Another London day.

Granger's Muggle umbrella dangled at her side and when the navy thing had caught his eye, Draco abandoned every unnerving thought to roll his eyes. He would never understand that aspect of Hermione. She was the brightest witch of their generation, but sometimes he

wondered if she'd lived amongst the Muggles too long. Witches had no need for trifling things like umbrellas, but he didn't tell her that.

The outside of the Italian restaurant wasn't much, just brick wall and a sign; a real hole in the wall place and not very appealing, either. However, he didn't find himself wondering just what he had gotten himself into by accepting her lunch offer. That was odd. He always was wary of Pansy's restaurant choices, but he trusted Hermione's.

And for good reason.

The inside was different, and the mental reminder to not judge a book by its cover rang in his head. He scowled in annoyance. He hadn't judged it, just merely pointed out that the outside was uninviting. Draco took a moment to look around. It was a quaint and agreeable. That was to be expected.

As soon as Hermione gave her name, the hostess smiled brightly, greeted her warmly, and asked if they could wait just one moment while they prepared her favourite table. Draco looked over at her. Granger's hair was damp and was certain that when it dried, it would resemble a lion's mane. "Do you get preferential treatment at every restaurant in Muggle London?"

She merely shrugged. "I ate here a lot when I first moved back to London. I figured that this would be a good place to eat today. They have no idea who we are or why we shouldn't even be here. Well, together, at least."

He grudgingly admitted that she had a point.

If they had gone to Diagon Alley alone, the press would have had a field day. He didn't like it, but that was the truth. Speculations and rumours would have flown around wildly for a few days, but then they would have returned to their normal levels; the levels that they had gotten used to in the months since the trip to Paris and since they had become friends.

When the hostess seated them in the corner of the restaurant, she took their drink orders and left them in silence. When she returned with their drinks, the answers to the woman's questions spilled from his mouth almost automatically as he watched Granger. No, they weren't ready to order. Yes, they understood everything on the menu. No, they weren't interested in the Dish of the Day.

When she left, Granger fidgeted, drummed her fingers on the table, looked around. At one point, she was staring at the table so hard that he'd picked up his drink in fear that the table would be reduced to ashes under her intense gaze. It was obvious that something was bothering her more and more with each passing second, but she was driving him bonkers.

More than usual. "Look, Granger—"

"Can we talk?"

Taken a bit off guard, he blinked a few times before replying with an even-mannered, "Excuse me?"

It was her turn to frown and look frustrated. "I mean, can we *really* talk?"

"We're talking right now," he drawled. When her frown deepened, Draco sat straight in his chair. "Fine. If you must."

"I'm nervous," she blurted out.

Suddenly, Draco was uncomfortable. Well, more than usual. "Maybe you should talk to Pansy—" "

Granger frowned. "She's already concerned about me, and honestly, I just don't want to confirm her fears."

"I doubt that I'll be any help."

"You've been more helpful than you know," she mumbled.

Funny, a very minuscule part of him wanted to tell her the same thing.

"What are you nervous about?"

"Tonight."

Her reply made him think back to a night that he wanted to forget.

Bedlam had erupted. He couldn't remember all of the details; only that he was mad as hell for most of it. Weasley had blamed him out of habit, Blaise had his hands full keeping Pansy out of the argument, and he had been busy trying to *not* hex the spotted wanker into unconsciousness. Granger had just stood there, staring at the paper. He remembered that much.

Draco thought himself an expert at predicting her reactions. If her past reactions meant anything, that night he'd expected her to do two things after the initial shock had subsided: become unsteady on her feet and break down in tears. Tears were almost a guarantee. No, he still didn't like them, but he'd expected Hermione to lose herself to them.

But he had been wrong on both accounts.

Granger didn't lose her balance and she didn't break down in tears. No, she didn't even fall apart. She had, however, become unbelievably and ferociously angry.

"Don't you blame this on him, Weasley!" Pansy yelled hotly, while Blaise held her back.

Apollo was on the couch meowing loudly as if he were trying to get their attention. Draco started to follow the beast's line of vision, but didn't. "It's not—"

"This has 'Malfoy' written all over it!"

"Oh, really now?" Draco drawled, folding his arms.

"Yes! It has—"

Pansy snarled. "This isn't—"

"Conniving, manipulative bastard written all—"

"Shut up!" Granger yelled so loudly that they all instantly grabbed their ears. So that was what Apollo was trying to warn them about. Bloody hell. The shocking thing was that she hadn't used a Sonorous spell. "Enough—with the yelling; it doesn't change or solve anything. It just makes it harder to hear myself think."

"But—"

"Ron! We're adults, for Merlin's sake. Act like it!"

"He—"

"Look, I don't care what you think of Draco. Hate him for all I care, but do it on your own time. Right now, this feels like a threat and I intend to focus all of my attention on that, and not this blame war you've waged."

"I—"

She held up the birth certificate. "Right now, this paper is more important to me than your childhood grudge. This is more important than you. And if you can't accept that, then you can't possibly think that we're going to be friends again." At the hurt look on the Weasel's face, Granger softened slightly. "I know that you don't like Draco, I'm sure it's mutual." She shot Draco a stern look when he grunted. "But if you could see past your hatred for him long enough to help me, I would really appreciate it."

All they heard next was the sound of Apollo's purrs, but then something happened. Weasley's eyes softened. His next words looked as if they were the hardest words that he'd ever had to say: "I'm sorry."

Granger smiled thinly, glanced down at the birth certificate, and frowned deeply. "You're forgiven...only if you start being civilised and walk us through your day before you got the letter."

Weasley slowly agreed to her terms and the tension in the room simmered, but not the tension in Draco's brain. He found himself hung up on one word that repeated over and over in his mind. Us. Draco looked at her. Us. He frowned. Us. What the hell was wrong with him?

She glanced down at the paper in her hands before giving it to Pansy. "Can you go and make sure that my copy is in there. I don't like the idea that someone could've possibly gotten into my house."

"They didn't, at least I don't think. I tried to send you the package by Owl, but I couldn't. My owl couldn't find you and I couldn't Floo here because we're not connected, so I wrote someone you knew. Parkinson. Blaise met me at the Ministry a few hours ago"

Granger paused thoughtfully for a moment before she nodded. "I still want to check and see if it's there. It's in the box with the—"

Pansy interrupted her gently. "I know."

"Are you sure we should talk while—"

"Draco didn't do this." After a meaningful glance in his direction, Hermione added in a voice that only he could hear. "He wouldn't."

Pansy had been the one to notice the note written on the back of the birth certificate.

April 5th. Seven o'clock. The Leaky Cauldron.

Tonight.

He came back into the conversation when Granger said: "I honestly don't know how I'm going to react."

Well, thankfully, that was something that he wouldn't have to deal with. Blaise had been chosen to attend the meeting with her. It was the final decision that they had made that night after the Weasel had left and Pansy retired to Granger's guest room to sleep.

Blaise was the most level-headed of the group. Pansy was too emotional, Draco needed a reprieve from drama, and Weasley wasn't even an option. He could've been sent that envelope for a number of reasons and they'd spent hours speculating about them all until she gently told an exhausted Blaise to go to bed. He crawled up her stairs and joined Pansy in the guest room. Draco wasn't sure how long they'd sat on her patio that night, but they talked about any and everything that didn't involve that day's events. Thankfully.

Eventually, conversation lulled to sparse comments as Apollo purred contently on her lap. It was chilly, Draco was annoyed, and he didn't necessarily like the hot chocolate that she gave him, but he didn't complain. About anything. Draco wasn't sure why he didn't leave or why she didn't just tell him to leave. So he stayed. It wasn't like he had anything else to do.

The sun was peeking over the horizon when he had finally left for home.

"I hate to just sit here and talk about..." Granger trailed off.

Oh, she was talking? Well, he wasn't listening, but she didn't need to know that. And she didn't need to know what had distracted him, either. "It's fine." He picked up his menu and started narrowing down his choices.

A bit awkwardly, she asked, "How have you been?"

"Fine," Draco replied honestly.

"And the raid? I know that they found a lot of Dark artefacts, but did they—"

"No, they didn't find any of his missing wives or anything about Arcturus's wife. Still, with all the things that they found; he'll be in Azkaban for a long time. Arcturus is pleased...well, as pleased as he can be in his situation. The point is that everything's fine."

He could feel her eyes on him when she said: "That's a relief, I'm sure. When does his trial start?"

Draco didn't look at her. "I really don't know. It's not my case, for obvious reasons."

For that, he was glad.

"And Emil?"

"Arcturus modified his memory, set him up with a job where he could keep an eye on him, and sent him back home."

"And—"

"Just left this morning," He answered automatically then questioned, "Are you done with the inquisition?"

She apologised apprehensively, "I didn't mean for you to think that this was an inquisition. I was just making conversation...I was, well, curious. I haven't seen you in ten days."

A bit stunned, Draco looked over the top of the menu. "Were you counting?" He felt odd.

Granger lowered her head, shrugged at the question, and ran her finger along the rim of her glass. "I just got used to seeing you, is all. Tell me, is that a bad thing?"

Draco didn't answer.

Part Two: One step.

Panic attacks were still a bit of an oxymoron.

Hermione's tongue wet her lower lip deliberately as she tried to control her breathing. In the last hour, Blaise had asked twice if she needed a Calming Draught, but she had declined. They made her tired, and she wanted to be alert for what was to come. They stood at the entrance to The Leaky Cauldron. The downside was the insane restlessness, some fidgeting, heart palpitations, horrid anxiety, and the sheer hysteria occurring in her head.

She'd woken up that morning ready to combat anyone who would dare try to exploit her dead son, but that zeal quickly faded. It turned to uneasiness over breakfast, nervousness by lunchtime, and then to downright dread about twenty minutes ago as she and Blaise sat in silence at a Muggle café.

The dread had intensified during the walk there, and by the time they had arrived, her legs felt as if someone had injected lead into them. Like a true gentleman, Blaise held open the door to The Leaky Cauldron for her, but Hermione couldn't bring herself to walk through the door.

"Are you all right?" Blaise's deep voice made Hermione lift her head to meet his concerned gaze.

"I can't go in there."

"What ever happened to your Gryffindor courage?"

"Well, mine is still in repair, just like everything else."

Blaise allowed the door to swing shut and he rested his hands on her shoulders. He leaned in close, but not too close. Oddly enough, standing close to Blaise was different from standing close to Malfoy.

There was a fierce determination in his dark eyes when he said, "*No one* is going find out about Matthew, not unless you want them to. I will do everything in my power to see that that doesn't happen. Do you believe me?" And in that moment, she truly did. "I'm not the only one, either. You've got a prosecutor, an Auror, a magazine editor, and apparently a famous Quidditch player on your side. No matter what this person says or does, remember that there's nothing a Memory charm can't fix."

Hermione smiled despite the churning in her belly. "Spoken like a true Slytherin."

He grinned and moved to open the door for her. She stared at the open doorway and took a deep breath. Funny how walking six steps were harder than running a quarter of a mile in the rain. When she didn't immediately walk into The Leaky Cauldron, Blaise reminded her: "One step at a time."

Right. One step. And it was a hesitant one. The second was more confident. The third and fourth were taken together. And the fifth and six came easier than she expected. Soon enough, Blaise was speaking with Tom while Hermione looked around. It seemed that every eye was on her, but that wasn't completely out of the ordinary. Luckily, it was a weeknight and, therefore, not very crowded. Not that that even mattered; there were more than enough eyes watching her every move.

"Hermione," Blaise waved her over and she started walking towards him, trying to maintain her composure under the amount of pressure that she was under. He put his hand on her shoulder and informed, "They're waiting for us in the private area. Tom can't tell us who it is, but he ensures me that no one will disturb us while we're in there. Are you ready?"

Was she ready? Probably not, but it didn't matter. Her stomach was still churning when she squared her shoulders and told him, "I'm ready."

Blaise flashed an easy smile and led them away from the lingering eyes.

Without knocking first, he pulled open the heavy wooden door for her and she stepped into the room. Her eyes locked on the only person there and her mouth opened in shock and disbelief. No.

Lavender.

She looked up up, startled by the intrusion, and Hermione feet rooted themselves to the ground. Lavender had sent that envelope to Ron. Lavender knew about Matthew. Lavender had set up this entire meeting. *Lavender.*

It didn't make sense.

"Oh! You're here."

"You?" Hermione asked in disbelief.

Where were the signs? Hermione racked her mind, but found nothing meaningful. She didn't bother to keep in touch with her after they had run into each other months ago, but they had never been friends before and people made empty promises all the time. It didn't make sense. Blaise closed the door behind them and it seemed to jolt everyone from their trances.

Lavender opened her mouth to speak, but a playful giggle cut her off. A child's giggle. Hermione had been so focused on her old schoolmate that she hadn't even noticed the little boy seated in the highchair. She took a few steps closer to the table. Chubby Chase.

He'd grown a lot since Hermione had seen him last, but he was still pretty chubby with blond hair. At least he was smiling this time. He had what looked like black earmuffs covering his ears. Hermione instantly knew what they were. She'd bought a pair for Matthew. They were charmed to block out all the sound in the room, and they played music, too.

"Hermione, I—" she looked, squinted, and questioned curiously, "Zabini?"

When his mother rose to her feet, Chase looked around curiously before he turned his head and flashed a smile. Opening and closing his fists, he gleefully said, "Hi." Lavender put her finger to her lips, instructing him to stay silent. He mimicked her actions, adding a little, "Shh."

"He can't hear us, which is a good thing," Lavender finally said and clasped her hands together. "I think that we should talk."

"Talk?" Hermione balked, folding her arms across her chest defensively. "You seriously want us to talk? You're the one who sent me that envelope with my son's birth certificate?"

Lavender smoothed down her skirt. "Yes, well—"

Hermione shook her head, ruefully chuckling. "You know, when I saw you last August, I thought that maybe you had changed and grown up from the nosy, gossip-hound that you were at school. I thought that maybe getting married and having a child had changed you for the better, but now I see that you haven't changed one bit."

Lavender looked hurt by her words. "That isn't fair."

Blaise tried to keep everything calm. "Look, Hermione, let's just...."

Her voice was low and fierce, "No."

"*Not* listen to Blaise," he muttered under his breath, but Hermione was too angry to look at him.

Chase started making rhythmic yet inaudible noises. Instinctively, the two women tore their eyes off of one another for a moment to look at the boy, only to find that Blaise had taken a seat at the table and was holding a toy block that Chase had given him. The tension in the room scattered, but it didn't go far. Lavender smiled slightly at the sight before turning back to Hermione, whose eyes lingered a bit longer at the sight.

"Hermione, we need to talk."

"Just tell me what you want?"

"Nothing!" Lavender exclaimed vehemently. "I don't want anything from you, Hermione! I'm just a housewife, and my life was a whole lot better twelve days ago, believe me. I'm not in the gossip business. I don't even want to *be* here, and your attitude is making me want to be here less."

She stared at Lavender dubiously. "How did you even get your hands on it?"

"It was an accident, actually."

"What are you talking about?"

Lavender's face softened slightly. "I understand why you're so distrustful, I really do. If someone were threatening Chase, Seamus and I would do everything in our power to protect him." She paused thoughtfully. "It only makes sense for you to do the same for yours."

"What are you—"

"I'm not here to hurt you. I'm not here to exploit you. I don't care about your past, but I *am* here to help you." When Hermione's arms dropped to her sides, Lavender's did as well. "I wished that I had seen the signs when I saw you in August. I should've known that that was the reason why you knew that Chase was teething. It all makes so much sense now." She put her hand on Hermione's shoulder. "I had no idea that you have a son."

Hermione heart started pounding painfully. She looked all around the empty room before she met the eyes of her old classmate. If this had been six months ago, Hermione was sure that she would've had broken down. There were no tears, but the heartache was there. It always would be; she'd accepted that. Her voice was barely above a murmur when she said: "Not anymore."

Lavender's reaction was instant, just as she had expected. "I can't imagine what you must be going through; I won't even try."

"Best if you don't."

Lavender's face became very serious. "We need to talk, if you're willing to hear me out." When Hermione nodded, she continued, "I didn't send you that birth certificate to scare you, but I think that I might have. Sorry. I sent it to warn you. Someone *does* know about your son and wants to expose him, but it's not me. It's Parvati."

It was as she'd feared, but also something close to what she had anticipated.

That made sense. She had every reason to want to exploit Matthew. The article alone would make her a very famous and rich journalist. But Lavender—"You're her best friend. Why are you here telling me something that can potentially end her career?"

She sighed sadly. "I love Parvati, like a sister, but she's changed; even Padma has said that. They were inseparable in Hogwarts, but don't even speak anymore; did you know that?"

Hermione shook her head.

"Padma married Anthony Goldstein two years ago, and Parvati didn't even come to her wedding. Why? Because she was too busy working on an article and didn't want to be bothered. They haven't spoken since." Lavender looked distressed. "The job has consumed her, and I've tried to stand by her because that's what friends should do, but I can't do that anymore." She wiped a stray tear from her eye and took a few moments to breathe. "She was my best friend, but I don't know who she is anymore, and that scares me. *She* scares me, and I don't know what she's capable of. What kind of person could try to exploit an innocent child and then turn around and dote on mine without even blinking? I don't know the answer to that, but I do know that I don't want that person around my child."

"But Rita Skeeter does the same thing."

"I know, but that's different. With Rita Skeeter you know what you're going to get. You know that she's a nasty piece of work the moment that you meet her. She is what she is, and people can either take it or leave it. With Parvati, I don't know, and at one time I could say that I knew her best. I'm not here because I hate her. I still care about her, but I won't sit around and watch her hurt someone that doesn't deserve it. And she can hate me, I don't care, but I won't let her target innocent people. I just won't."

"Perhaps you two should sit down." Blaise said from the table. Chase was busy tugging on his electric blue tie almost curiously. Lavender quickly rushed over and pried his hands loose, gushing with apologies that he just brushed off. "No need for any of that. This room is private, correct?"

"Yes, I put up the privacy wards myself," Lavender replied as she sat down. Chase yawned. She looked across the table at Hermione, who had just taken a seat next to Blaise. "However, if you want to put a few up of your own, then by all means, please do."

And he did while Hermione spoke. "I apologise for jumping on you the way I did."

Lavender nodded.

"Now, how do we know that you're telling the truth?" Blaise asked.

"Other than the fact that I wouldn't lie about something like this, you don't. You're going to have to trust me, unless you have other alternatives."

"I do. Veritaserum."

"I had a feeling you would say that," she replied grimly as she picked up Chase out the high chair, Transfigured it into his stroller, and placed him inside of it. He yawned and quickly went from alert to bleary eyed. He fumbled with the headphones, but couldn't quite get them off. "I haven't been very fond of that potion since Fifth Year, but if that's what you feel you need to do, then so be it."

Hermione watched as Blaise retrieved the small vial from inside his jacket. She put her hand over his, "No potions."

"That's not smart, Hermione."

"I know it isn't, but," Hermione looked across the table at Lavender. "She doesn't gain anything by being here. If anything, she loses." Blaise consented with a nod and put the vial back in his pocket while Hermione Lavender to start from the beginning.

And she did.

" I was at Parvati's flat for dinner. Seamus was going to the pub with Dean, Terry, and a few others for their Blokes Night Out—or something like that. She hadn't seen Chase in a while because she'd been out of town for a while. Italy, I think."

Hermione's heart skipped a beat. "Did she say what part?"

"Venice, but she wasn't particularly forthcoming about her trip."

"How long was she there for?"

"Three months, I think. Skeeter suspended her after the whole fake photo business."

Blaise and Hermione exchanged looks. Her mind was swimming, but she asked, "How was the dinner?"

"Fine, at first. It seemed that Italy had done wonders for her mood because she seemed a lot happier than she had been when she left. She asked me if I had seen or talked to you since August, but I didn't think anything of it because it was so casual. I told her that I hadn't. And then, she got a Fire call from someone in the other room, she didn't say who it was, but told me that it was business and that she would be only fifteen minutes."

Hermione absorbed all of her words. She'd almost forgotten just how much Lavender rambled, and while it would have gotten on her nerves in the past, today's ramblings had been very informative, so far.

"What happened next?" Blaise asked.

"Chase disappeared. Silent isn't a word that I use to describe life with a fifteen-month-old." Hermione nodded in agreement and Lavender looked as if she didn't know to smile or look empathetic. "So I started looking for him, and found him in Parvati's office."

Lavender looked at her now-sleeping son affectionately.

"Don't get me wrong. *I am* still just as nosy as I was in school, but I think that it's more curiosity than anything. I was curious about *her*. We've been drifting apart ever since her suspension. She was so angry. Her credibility was shaky, no one wanted to publish anything by her, and The Daily Prophet had called her a liability. Nothing had changed, so I wanted to know why she had. So, I started snooping. I didn't find anything of interest until I glanced at her desk. There was a picture of you and Malfoy sitting in some restaurant together. You were looking out the window and he was looking at you rather intensely; that's about all that I remember about it."

"What—" And that was when she realised that the photograph had absolutely nothing to do with the problem at hand, but had everything to do with a certain Malfoy. "Nothing."

Blaise and Lavender gave her strange looks before the former instructed the latter to continue

"Yes, well, I picked up the picture to look at it closer and the birth certificate was underneath it, along with all of these documents, papers about you, articles about Malfoy from a few years ago, and notes for what looked like an article that she was working on. And another thing, there were copies of the birth certificate all over the room. The one I sent you was a copy, I think."

Hermione sat up straighter. "What?"

"Some of them didn't have the name of the father filled in, but some of them did. I just grabbed one that didn't have the name filled in." Lavender suddenly became uncomfortable again. She glanced over to make sure that her son was asleep before she asked. "Did you fill in the father's name?"

"No, I didn't."

Lavender looked down for a moment. "Then I don't understand."

"Understand what?" Blaise asked.

Lavender at the table for a while before she asked, "Is Draco Malfoy your son's father?"

Hermione scoffed, "Of course not. Not only is that absurd, but it's impossible."

The blonde looked as if she were trying to process everything that she had learned. "It really is, but I had to ask. You see, his name was forged onto some of the birth certificates." Hermione's mouth fell open in shock, but slowly the pieces were fitting together in her head. "I put one in my pocket, picked up Chase off the floor, and went to tell her that I was leaving. I just had to get out of there because in all honesty, I didn't know who my best friend was and

I didn't like the new person that had emerged. But when I went to tell her that I was leaving, she was still taking her call."

"Did you hear any part of the conversation?" Blaise questioned.

"Only a little. Parvati was telling someone that she didn't feel comfortable with bringing Malfoy into the situation."

"What does Draco have to do with this?" Blaise wondered aloud.

She didn't say it aloud, but it had Ginny written all over it. Hermione hated herself for immediately pointing the finger at Ginny, but until she had proof otherwise, she seemed the most likely suspect. There was no one who wanted to change the truth more than Ginny.

And she prepared herself for a very hard conversation with Harry.

"Now, we know that she hasn't yet written the article—"

"But we don't know when she will, either," Lavender pointed out.

"Hopefully, we'll have everything we need to stop her before that happens."

"What do we need?"

"We need to know who she's working with, and we need to find out how she got his birth certificate. Since I have mine and there's no way that she could've broken into my house without my knowledge, she must've taken it from the hospital where Matthew was born," Hermione concluded. "And in order to have done that, she would've had to do *something* illegal, because Muggles don't just let people come in and take records."

Blaise asked Lavender if that was everything and she nodded vehemently.

Hermione thanked her.

"We're supposed to have lunch the day after tomorrow. I could do some more snooping, and acquire more information for you. I could help out even more. That is, if you want."

A small smile crept across Hermione's face. "That would be great, Lavender. Thank you."

They all sat in silence for the next few minutes, trying to absorb everything that had happened in the hour that they had been sitting in that room. Blaise was the first to speak, "So, Weasley isn't in on all of this? Well, Pansy owes me a massage. She was so *sure* that this was his diabolical plan."

Lavender chuckled, "I bumped into him the day after I was at Parvati's. I was at the Apothecary, picking up some potions for my mother when I saw him come in. We're still friends, but I hadn't talked to him in a while. I casually mentioned you and his tone had changed from the last time I talked about seeing you. Ron told me that you two had worked it out. He told me that he hoped that you two would become friends again, in time."

Hermione was rather speechless.

"We went to Florean Fortescue's to talk over ice-cream, and he told me a lot more, but I'm sure that he wants to keep that private. The fact of the matter is that I didn't know how to get the warning to you; your Floo is private, my owls couldn't find you, your house is Unplottable, and your office was fielding any outside letters that you received. So, I sent it to Ron anonymously, hoping that he would go to you. And he did."

Hermione was blown away by the effort that she had made. "Lavender, I really don't know what to say."

"Then don't say anything. I know that we weren't the best of friends, but maybe we can try now."

Try. Well, that was a new word. Try. "Okay, we can try."

Lavender flashed a bright smile that faded when she looked at her watch. "Oh Merlin, it's almost nine o'clock! I really should get going." She stood and started gathering her things. "Will you write me?"

"I'll do one better; would you and Seamus like to come over for dinner Friday night?" Hermione stood up as well and continued her invitation. "Pansy and Draco will be there, as well, and maybe even Ron, but I'm not too sure about that—"

"That sounds wonderful. I'll talk it over with Seamus, but I'm sure he'll agree." Lavender paused and then chuckled. "You know what's really funny? I expected Malfoy to show up with you, instead of Blaise Zabini."

Hermione knew exactly why Lavender had had that thought. "You think we're dating, don't you?"

"Well, yes." She replied matter-of-fact.

"We're not, actually."

She seemed surprised. "But there are so many pictures of you two together. And the way he looks at you...are you sure?"

Hermione didn't answer.

Part Three: The A-Team

Pansy Parkinson was exactly twelve words away from being hexed. Not ten. Not fifteen. Twelve.

Draco's annoyance with her had begun shortly after he had arrived at her house, which had been designated as the meeting place. She'd commented on how early he was, and her words had acted like a shotgun at the beginning of a footrace. He was pretty certain that she enjoyed irritating him because each time she grated his nerves, the little smile on her face grew.

"I heard that you had lunch with Hermione today." Pansy was positively beaming.

He scowled. She was down nine words, already. "And what does that matter to you?"

"No need to be defensive, Draco, I was merely making a statement."

And now, she was over her quota. "Meddling seems more like it," he grumbled.

"Well, someone needs to meddle. You two are about as thick as they come, and that's putting it mildly."

"Stay out of it." Draco told her hotly, finally allowing his annoyance to show. "It's none of your business."

Pansy casually shrugged. "Perhaps it isn't, but it's kind of hard to ignore something that's constantly apparent to me, and something that you constantly ignore." He opened his mouth to argue, but she raised her hand and refused to allow him one word in edgewise. "You're in denial, Draco. I know it, you know it, Blaise knows it, your mother knows it, and even Granger knows it—well, she did after I told her."

He paled. "Excuse me?"

Pansy looked at him for a moment before she stood to her feet and said rather cheekily, "I told Hermione that you had feelings for her."

Draco wanted to strangle her. "You did *what*?" That was why everything had been so awkward between them. Through clenched teeth, he told her, "You better un-tell her, Pansy, and you better do it today."

She seemed unmoved by his anger. "You can deny it, but it's pretty bloody obvious how you feel about her. She's gotten to you, Draco. Everything has changed between you two, and it's about time. It's also about time that one of you admits it. Hermione is out because she nearly had a panic attack when I suggested that she add the word *relationship* to her vocabulary. So that leaves you."

Draco rose to his feet and folded his arms across his chest. He'd just about had it with all of these outside forces that seemed to enjoy wreaking havoc on his life. "You're not going to force me to do anything, so drop it, and drop it quick." He started to walk away, but turned back around. "And maybe Granger nearly had a panic attack because *you* were rushing her into something that she wasn't ready for."

"Well, if that was the case, why did she tell me yesterday that she wouldn't take my advice lightly?"

"I don't know what runs through her mind. I don't care to."

"So, you don't care?"

"No, I don't."

"You always ask about her when she's not around. If you don't care, then why did you show up at her job today? Why—bugger that, I know all the answers to those questions and it's not because you don't care; it's because you *do*, and it's a bit too much."

Draco frowned. "None of that matters. The fact of the matter is that you don't have the right to—"

"Lie to me, if that'll make you feel better, but for the love of god, stop lying to yourself."

He didn't say anything.

If—and that was a *very* strong if—this thing between them constituted feelings, Draco wanted the idiot that had given them to him to take them back for a refund. He wanted to be rid of them as soon as possible, because they weren't making his life any easier. He wasn't ready for them, and he wasn't ready for *her*. She made his skin crawl in the worst possible way because she never looked *at* him, but tried to look *through* him. Granger made him so bloody awkward; like a stranger in his own skin.

Blaise and Hermione Apparated into the room with two distinct pops that ended the conversation.

The former of the two who'd just arrived noticed their defencive stances and asked, "Everything okay?" The latter immediately walked to the Floo and called for the idiot, Ronald Weasley.

"Why are you calling him?" Pansy asked with a scowl.

"Because we need him. And you." She turned and gave Draco one of those looks that convinced him that she was trying to see through him, "And you, too."

Weasley stepped out of the fireplace a few moments later and looked around in confusion. His eyes met Hermione's first and Draco's frown deepened when he placed his hand on her shoulder and gave it a little squeeze. Weasley's greeting to Blaise was casual, his greeting to Pansy was stiff, and his greeting to Draco was non-existent; they just stared at each other for before they joined the others at the table.

He took the last seat next to Granger, while Draco pulled up an extra chair to the table, perturbed.

Draco listened as Granger and Blaise discuss everything that had happened earlier that evening, but he was very distracted. In a rather uncharacteristic move, he only snatched parts of the conversation while the Weasel seemed to eat each of Granger's words. Draco frowned.

He wasn't surprised about Patil. After all, Pansy had warned him that one day someone would go to Italy and snoop into her past. He didn't even have time to process the prospect of a

second person working with Parvati because everything had gotten very quiet all of a sudden. Draco lifted his head and found everyone looking at him.

Weasley glared at him. "Why Malfoy?"

Draco realised that he probably should've been paying more attention.

He leaned back in his chair and asked, "Why Malfoy, what?"

"Weren't you listening?" Pansy asked with a slightly hysterical edge on her voice. "Parvati is planning on forging your name on Matthew's birth certificate to say that you're his father, and not Harry."

He rubbed his temples in clockwise motion four times before he rubbed them twice in counter-clockwise motion. "Granger, you need to make a list of everyone you've pissed off."

Weasley was ready to argue. "If she needs to make a list, then so do—"

"This isn't about me, you dimwit, this is about *her*," Draco snarled as he pointed at Hermione, who lowered her head a little. "She's pissed someone off very recently. And judging from the look on her face, I think she knows who."

Weasley turned his attention to Granger. "Who?"

"Your sister," Draco answered before she could.

Weasley argued with a hard glare. "But Ginny wouldn't—"

"I think we've learned that your sister is no fairy princess. While I'm sure Patil probably went to Italy and found the birth certificate, your sister—I'm not sure how—is involved. She's a lot more capable of you or Potter seem to think," he retorted.

"That's it," Blaise interjected. "Potter. We need to recruit him."

Hermione sat up. "I'd already planned on having that conversation with him. They live together," she replied, simply. "He's the only person who can find out if she's up to anything."

The Weasel looked uncomfortable. "That's my sister. I don't know how I feel—"

"You know where the Floo is." Draco sneered and the redhead glared. "Don't let it burn you in the—"

"Draco!" Hermione exclaimed. He looked completely unapologetic and the Weasel looked furious. She shook her head at them before continuing, "We don't know if it's Ginny, exactly. We just know that she's a suspect. If we get Harry on-board, we can rule her out, that is, if she does nothing suspicious."

She was definitely quicker on her feet these days.

Weasley looked thoughtful for about a moment before he nodded his head. "I should talk to him."

Draco leaned back in his chair, touching his chin thoughtfully. There was a little too much between Potter and Granger, and some of what was between them Weasley didn't need to know. Draco had never had a problem dealing with him. Granted, the last time they talked, things had nearly gotten violent, but with Weasley there, he would serve as a perfect buffer. After all, those two idiots were on thin ice with each other and the chances of them uniting against him would be nil.

He frowned. Dammit.

"As much as it pains me to admit it, I might have a shot at convincing Potter to spy on his girlfriend."

"You?" Ron snorted.

"Yes, me...and *you*." He stared Weasley whose eyes nearly popped out of his skull.

Pansy snorted, "I would *love* to be a fly on the wall during that conversation."

Draco sneered at her.

"Are you sure?" Granger asked uncertainly.

"I'm working on a case on which Potter was lead Auror and we have our pre-trial meeting next Friday. It's the perfect place to corner him. If Weasley makes plans with Potter—"

"We're just getting back on speaking terms."

"Then, what's the problem?"

"I didn't even agree to it yet."

Draco snapped his fingers impatiently. "Then agree. I don't have all day. Look, Weasley, I don't like you. I never have and I never will. You're annoying and about as judgmental as Potter, but this isn't about me, and it isn't about you." He glanced at Hermione who looked positively gobsmacked. He'd said too much. Bloody hell, he had to talk faster. "And, well, I don't want this article to get out more than the next person, so if Potter is the key, then I'm on board."

Weasley grumbled for a minute longer before he agreed through clenched teeth.

Granger smiled at Weasley and he slowly smiled back.

Draco frowned. "So, while we're recruiting Potter, what are you lot going to be doing?"

"I'm going to Italy," Blaise announced.

Pansy gasped and slapped her boyfriend in the arm. "And you weren't going to tell me!"

He smirked at her. "I just did, actually." When she glared at him, he offered more information. "I'll be gone for a week, tops. I'm going to go do some investigating to see if Parvati used magic on the Muggles to obtain Matthew's birth certificate."

"And how exactly are you going to prove it?"

"It's illegal to use magic on Muggles, or even near them, as we all know. The Ministry is serious about investigating any kind of magic that's used around them, but it's harder to do so without The Trace. But it's really easy to tell if a Muggle has had their memory wiped or altered." Blaise explained calmly.

"And what if you can't find proof?" Pansy asked.

"We'll figure out a way over that bridge if and when we get to it."

She sighed and turned to Hermione. "What do you need me to do?"

"I need you to talk to Rita. Convince her to keep an eye on Parvati and make sure that she stays too busy to work on her side project." Pansy agreed without hesitation and a silence fell over them all. There was much to do and so little time. It was slightly overwhelming.

When Draco asked Hermione what she would be doing, she rose from her chair and said, "Preparing."

That was fair.

"If you all will excuse me, I need some air." And she walked out of Pansy's living room and onto her veranda; the door shut with an audible click. Weasley quickly rose to his feet and followed her. He didn't stay long and bid them all goodbye when he returned. He and Draco would be in touch, much to their mutual dismay.

It took another fourteen minutes before he left Blaise and Pansy to their soft conversation about the Italian trip. He stood, smoothed down his robes, and excused himself. He needed sleep. He needed time. He needed a break to mull things over. Pansy offered to walk him to the living room, but he figured that she was trying to get an answer to her earlier question.

He wasn't ready to answer.

Draco stood in front of her fireplace with a handful of Floo powder in his hand. He felt as if he were at a fork in the road. Two paths were before him. He could run and ignore everything for another day, or he could stay. Leaving would be easier. How many times was he willing to have this fight with himself?

As long as it took to rid himself of the problem, right?

Well, his mind was saying one thing and his body was doing another.

He abruptly turned and started in the direction of Pansy's veranda. It was stupid. *He* was stupid. He wasn't sure if he was going there to check on her, or if he was going there for

himself. But there he was, standing in front of the glass door with a handful of Floo powder tight in his fist, still uncertain about the path that he was going to take.

Granger seemed to be searching the sky for the answers to her questions, and all he could think about was if the answers to his questions were out there, too. Her arms were folded across her chest and her shoulders shivered a little to show that she was cold. With his other hand, Draco reached for the doorknob. Now he was *really* at an impasse.

Floo powder or doorknob.

Granger suddenly turned her head and gestured for him to join her with a warm look. She moved from her spot to come to him, and Draco felt odd when she opened the glass door between them with such ease.

"I can't believe you volunteered to team up with Ron."

"Perhaps with deep meditation beforehand, we won't kill each other."

He was only halfway serious.

Granger looked humoured. "Perhaps, but thank you all the same. I know you two have had your problems..."

Draco was looking at his problem, but he didn't tell her that.

She stepped aside. "Are you coming out?"

It was hard to remember a time when he hadn't been uneasy around her. "I was in front of the fireplace. I was leaving." He opened his hand to prove that, yes; he really was really leaving.

Granger's eyes were narrowed curiously. "So, why haven't you left?"

Draco opened his mouth to answer, but choked on the words.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: We're getting there. When I was writing this, every chapter felt like it was gonna be it, when Draco stopped choking on his words and says what WE ALL KNOW. But alas.

from little things big things grow

Chapter Summary

"My walls are white."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

From Little Things Big Things Grow

Part One: White walls

April 21st

The walls of her living room were white.

Her walls had always been white—too white, according to Draco—but it was only then that she'd paid attention. Perhaps that wasn't true. She'd been out of her fog long enough to finally take notice of something as arbitrary as her walls. Hermione looked around with notable disdain. The walls were plain. Very plain. *Too* plain. Her eyes dropped down to her furniture. It, too, was alarmingly plain.

Her living room was perfect for a retirement home, not for the home of someone in their twenties.

Hermione understood that the main problem with her living room was what it represented. There was nothing that proclaimed who she was today, only who she had been before. In fact, it looked like a blend of *all* the women that she had been in her life: bookshelves for the brain, a pathetic blue rug in front of the fireplace for the pacer, a juke box for the daughter, the crayon marks on the leg of the table for the mother, blanket that Apollo was sleeping under for the friend, the bare hearth for the loner, and the plain furniture for the recluse.

It was hardly a representation of her.

True, she was still some of those things, but there was nothing to show the new beginnings and the new steps that she had taken; nothing to show the new friends and the new bonds that she had formed. Well, she needed a room that would represent the changes that she had undergone.

After all, there were many.

In fairness, the last owner had asked for her input. They had offered to lay down new carpet and paint the walls another colour, but she hadn't been able to vocalise her opinion. Looking back, Hermione rationalised that maybe she hadn't changed anything because she didn't want to end up with another disaster that she would look back on with regret.

So, she'd ended up with white walls. She'd ended up with a room containing nothing—outside of the juke box—that made her feel comfortable; a room that left her cold. Hermione had heard that a room was supposed to depict a person's inner self; they feel calm and placid in their own living area, but she frowned and looked around thoughtfully.

Maybe it was time for a change.

And maybe her living room wasn't the only thing that needed a change.

Maybe *she* needed a change.

But she had made so many already; so many that the thought of them made her head swirl; so many that she could hardly remember life before them. Well, that wasn't true. She would always remember. Always. Those memories were locked away in a part of her brain to serve as a reminder of the place from which she had returned; the place to which she would never travel again.

Did that mean that Hermione was normal?

Not even close.

But one day, perhaps she would be normal, according to her take on the word.

It was all a matter of perception. Society had one way of defining the word, but Hermione had had another. Her perception—her perception of *everything*—had been skewed for so long that she'd had to redefine what the word 'normal' even meant. She'd had to redefine what a lot of words meant to her. And she wasn't done redefining everything; it seemed that she would never be done, but that was just fine with her. Redefinition was a process that she wouldn't take lightly. She wouldn't rush, be careless, or allow someone else to control it.

There were still issues that she needed to work through, things that she needed to be honest with herself about, and tasks that she still had to accomplish. Hermione needed more healing and more time to figure out all the things that she'd never really considered before.

But there were a lot of things about her that weren't 'normal', per se.

Hermione still felt uncomfortable in her own skin, and still picked and pulled at it as if it didn't fit right. She still had dreams and nightmares and everything in between. She was still troubled and still felt like running, but not all the time. There had been so many times in the last few weeks when she could've run, but she stayed. And yes, when the time came, she would fight, too.

Her rediscovered bravery had left her feeling stronger. Her rediscovered understandings left her feeling smarter. Because of everything that she'd been through—and still was going

through—she'd felt like she'd grown like a rose through concrete—she'd grown through the pain.

Pain. There had been *so* much of it. It was still there. So much that she'd felt as if she were drowning in it; so much that the thought of it still made her want to cry. Before she lost herself to the feeling, Hermione reminded herself that it wasn't just physical or emotional pains that had settled into the very core of her soul; there were growing pains there, too. They had always been there, lurking—or maybe they were a combination of the two. But in the end, growing pains had played a huge role in her journey.

She wasn't at the finish, not quite at the start, but somewhere in between.

"Hermione?"

She turned her attention to the fireplace whence the voice had originated. She checked her watch. Her eyes bulged. It was already noon. She'd spent the last forty minutes in a trance. Apollo lazily purred from underneath the covers, but didn't move until she started walking towards the fireplace.

"Yes?"

"It's Lavender, can I come through?"

"Sure." She looked around her plain living room and sighed before squatting down in front of Apollo, who purred and nipped her hand affectionately before allowing her to take him. Hermione looked around the room again before stepping away from the fireplace.

When Lavender stepped into her living room, she greeted Hermione with a bright smile and petted Apollo affectionately. Hermione offered a smile of her own while her kitten purred.

Lavender started talking immediately, "Well, since Chase is at my mother's for the day, I decided that I should get some things done around the house. I'd *just* finished reorganising the kitchen when I remembered you saying that you were off of work today. I thought that I should drop by and see how you were. I haven't seen you since we all had dinner."

Ah, the night when their usual dinner for four had turned into a dinner for seven and one baby. The Finnegans' had joined their little group for dinner. Hermione remembered being nervous about how the ex-Gryffindors would receive her ex-Slytherin friends, but Ron had come, and that had defused some of the tension in the room. Still, the first course of the meal had been a very quiet one; that was, until Pansy asked Lavender where she'd gotten her shoes.

That had been the ice-breaker of a lifetime.

"I'm doing fine." Hermione glanced at her sock-covered feet and ventured to the sofa.

"We should all have dinner again. That was fun." Lavender joined her on the couch before she added, "Well, it was pretty awkward at first, but I blame that on our history, you know." She reached over and petted Apollo once more before she continued talking, "Pansy Parkinson wasn't at *all* what I'd expected. Not at all."

What had ensued following the ice-breaker was a twenty-minute conversation on a variety of topics, ranging from the latest fashion in shoes to how cute Chase looked in his Quidditch shirt. It seemed that that ice-breaker had echoed throughout the room. Blaise and Seamus exchanged a few eye rolls at their women. They shared a few mutual, "*Women. Can't live with them, can't live without them*" moments that had bonded them, despite the fact that they wouldn't have spoken to each other had it not been for that night. Chase had practically inhaled the little finger food that Hermione had made him. Draco had been extremely quiet from his seat across the table, while Ron had been rather talkative from his spot on her left.

"Even *Malfoy* was different from what I'd expected."

Hermione tensed a little at the very mention of his name. "Oh?"

"Yes. He seems...older."

"We're *all* older."

Lavender shook her head, "No, not like that." She clarified, "Malfoy seems like he's experienced a lot more than anyone our ages should. He just seems subdued, a little restless, kind of stuffy, still a bit arrogant, but overall—well; he's done a lot of growing since the war."

After petting Apollo's head, Hermione replied, "I don't think he had a choice. I don't think either of us had a choice." She really wanted her to change the subject. Anything but Malfoy.

Lavender paused for a moment, "Well, it was interesting to see a slightly different side of him after dinner. I'm used to him being a huge prat, but he seemed almost human."

Hermione cringed.

Once dinner had concluded, they had retired to her sitting room for conversation. It had been almost second nature for Hermione to take the spot next to Draco on the loveseat, rather than the chair next to Ron. She wasn't sure why; hell, she hadn't even noticed it until five minutes later.

Initially, Chase had played with Apollo on the floor, but then the toddler had started petting him a little too roughly. Apollo had hidden under the couch for the rest of the night, and Chase ended up being put down in a spare bedroom upstairs. By then, the tension had cooled a bit more and everyone, even the taciturn Malfoy, had started making polite conversation.

Ron and Draco didn't speak a word to each other, but they both talked to everyone else; at different times, of course. Pansy and Lavender had bonded over their unashamed materialism. And Hermione had found herself quietly watching everyone, offering her input when asked.

Lavender crossed her legs. "It was kind of nice to just sit around and talk as adults without the memories of our childhoods looming over us."

"They're always looming over us, Lavender." Hermione pointed out. "I'm just glad that we were all mature enough not to bring anything up."

"Malfoy and Ron were glaring at each other for most of the night."

"Glaring, I can handle. I honestly thought that they were going to hex each other before the night was over. Thank Merlin for small favours!"

"And don't forget to thank him for the wine, too!"

Yes, thank Merlin for the wine. It had definitely done its job by further eliminating the tension.

Soon enough, the atmosphere was comfortable enough for Hermione to relax her shoulders. She hadn't had a sip of wine, but the fact that everyone else—save for Draco—had indulged themselves had made her feel a bit better. The fact that she didn't have to worry about Ron and Draco murdering each other had left her so comfortable that she'd nearly reached for Draco's hand, but thought better of it. He'd given her a funny look. The fact that she didn't have to worry about any House jibes had left Hermione so unflustered that she'd noticed that Draco had unconsciously brushed his arm or leg against hers more than once.

When Pansy had asked why her cheeks were flushed, Hermione had her excuse ready. Fatigue. And that was the moment they had all decided to call it a night. All in all, it hadn't been a very bad night.

So, were things between her and Draco so...wrong?

With a sigh, Hermione blotted that from her mind.

"We should definitely try it again."

Hermione smiled politely in response, but internally, she dismissed the request. She'd try again at least six months from now. *Try*. That was one of those words that had been in her vocabulary as if late. However, she wouldn't get carried away. Hermione still had her misgivings, insecurities, and her unease. There were things that she wasn't willing to try, like flying and Pansy's cooking.

But for what it was worth, her attempts with Lavender had been a success.

It had definitely been awkward at first, but they were trying. Lavender was genuinely nicer to her than she had been in school and it was pleasant to have a new face.

"Now, there was something else that I came here to tell you—*oh!*" Lavender snapped her fingers. "It's about Parvati, but wait—" She started digging in her purse. "I have something for you."

Hermione wasn't surprised. If Lavender had had any qualms with spying on her supposed best friend, she didn't reveal them. She'd been pivotal to the investigation, providing them with little smidgens of information that had got them closer and closer to figuring everything out. Hermione honestly didn't know what they would have done without Lavender. The road would have certainly been rougher.

The first week, she had handwritten Parvati's schedule for the month on a piece of scrap parchment. It had taken Hermione and Pansy an hour to figure out that—due to time constraints—Lavender had written the entries in a block calendar format, without the blocks, rather than in list format.

It was out of line with their original plan, but two days later, Pansy had just so 'happened' to bump into Parvati at the magical beauty salon. She'd chatted her up, and made a mental note of how many times Parvati had asked a question about Hermione. Pansy had carefully answered all twenty-three of her questions while managing to sound rather flippant and casual. For every question she'd answered about Hermione, Parvati had answered two questions about herself.

When asked about the last time she'd seen Ginny Weasley, she'd tensed before answering, "*Just yesterday, actually.*"

The second week, Lavender had said that ever since Pansy had talked to Rita, Parvati's work load had doubled and it was halting progress. *Perfect*. She had overheard the conversation between Parvati and her conspirator and had pointed out during the call that they had enough ammo to go for it without even mentioning Draco, but Lavender told them that the other person was almost insistent.

It had confirmed what she'd thought. This was definitely personal. And she didn't care what Ron had said, it *had* to be Ginny.

"Aha! I found it!" Lavender declared triumphantly. Hermione looked over and furrowed her brows when she saw what was in her hand. A Muggle tape recorder. "Seamus' cousin left it over at our house a few months ago. He's a student at University, and calls this his 'lucky charm'. He says that he has three of them, so I decided to keep this one. I don't know what it is or how to work it, but I've carried it in my purse when I'm snooping. If the luck has worked for me, then it can work for you when it comes time for you to confront Parvati."

"Thanks," Hermione graciously accepted the gift. "It's the Muggle version of Extendable Ears, only it records what people say."

Lavender was wide-eyed, "Oh!"

She said nothing else, but rewound it a little and pressed play. Sure enough, it worked. No wonder he had said that it was his lucky charm.

Maybe it could be hers, too.

Part Two: About time and decisions

What was that saying? Third time was a charm?

Yes, that was it.

Draco hoped that that statement held some merit because he wasn't sure what he would do if this meeting with Harry fell through again. On the original date of the meeting, there had been a large raid on some Welsh manor. Draco wasn't familiar with the family, but Aurors had recovered an obscene number of Dark artefacts. He'd heard that Granger had been called to the scene, but she'd come with plenty of backup. Hermione had stayed in Blaise's line of vision the entire day. On the second attempt, the Weasel had had some extended practice and wrote him fifteen minutes before the start to inform him of the change of plans. Draco had scowled and quickly changed the date, again, using the excuse of a large caseload.

Potter had begrudgingly agreed to change the date again. To today.

If that freckled wanker screwed anything up today, well—there wouldn't be a force on Earth strong enough to stop Draco from strangling him. The anticipation hung over his head like a rain cloud, following him around everywhere. He couldn't even *sleep* without thinking about it. As if he didn't have enough on his mind to worry and stress about; as if he didn't have enough things to keep him awake at night.

What the hell had he been thinking?

It was a horrid idea that put him in the room with his two least favourite people. And he couldn't even use *magic* on them.

He knew the answer, and the answer was the reason why he'd had such a horrible headache since that dinner party. It was also the reason why he was avoiding a certain witch. Draco swore under his breath and focused his attention on pretending to work for however long it took Potter to arrive. He was known for his tardiness all over the Ministry. Some things had never changed.

There was a knock on the door.

Draco checked his watch. "Enter."

He saw Potter's messy dark hair before he saw his face. Draco frowned.

Maybe some things *did* change.

The bottom of Potter's Auror robes and his boots were caked with so much mud that Draco snatched his wand from the top drawer and immediately muttered a few Cleansing charms before he could track any dirt into his office. He wasn't surprised when Potter didn't thank him, but he was surprised by the almost apprehensive look on his face.

Potter did not want to be there.

Now, what could—*oh*. Ah, their last chat in his office. Potter's life hadn't been the same since, and he wasn't looking for a repeat.

"Malfoy," he greeted indifferently.

"Potter," Draco placed his wand back and closed the drawer. He didn't need the temptation. "Take a seat." He didn't. No, Potter stood in front of his desk with his arms folded across his chest. Draco rolled his eyes and muttered under his breath, "Or not."

"What is it that we need to discuss about the trial?"

He picked up his quill and opened the file on his desk. Draco wasn't even looking at him when he asked, "Are you in some sort of rush that you can't sit down?"

"Ron's waiting for me," he replied stiffly.

Draco paused for a long time before he set his plan into action. "Well, he can wait in here."

Potter's brow rose dubiously. "You're joking."

"Does it look like I'm joking?" Draco asked sharply. "I assure you that seeing that freckled-faced idiot will not make my day any better, but I know that my secretary is a bit tactless and doesn't know how to compose herself around some of the more *famous* wizards." He rolled his eyes when Potter glared at him. "Besides, I would like for you to do your job instead of worrying about Weasley. So, if you will," he made a lazy gesture to the door, "Invite him in."

His day took a nosedive when Weasley walked through the door. He'd seen enough of that idiot in the last month to last him a lifetime. They regarded each other silently. Weasley offered a nod that Potter couldn't see, but it was hardly a nod of friendship. It was more of a nod that meant, '*Let's get this over with*'.

Draco couldn't have agreed more.

Weasley took the seat to Potter's left. However, instead of leaning back and relaxing while Draco started working, the idiot savant sat forward, defensively. Draco paled when Weasley opened his mouth. Was he *honestly* stupid enough to immediately launch that kind of discussion without a preamble? "Well—"

Apparently, he was.

"Unless you find yourself choking on your stupidity, I suggest that you remain quiet for the duration of this meeting." Draco snapped and added as an afterthought. "Better yet, don't say anything, *at all*." He shot Weasley a pointed look. He knew Potter and he knew that he had to wait for him to bring it up, not the other way around.

The Weasel's first reaction had been to scowl, but his second had been to argue, "But—"

"*Silence.*" Draco hissed.

"I—" Weasley tried to continue.

"Are you deaf or just dim-witted? I *told* you to be quiet."

"Don't talk to him like that!" Harry barked.

Well, this was going downhill rather quickly.

It was just his luck that Weasley was as upfront and predictable as anyone he had ever met. Not that he was surprised, but really, Draco just *knew* that he'd possessed more intelligence than that. He internally groaned. Sometimes perception wasn't always reality.

Apparently, his maturity was a condition dependent on Hermione's presence.

"It was your idea to bring him in here."

"You don't make the rules in this room, Potter. *I* do. And if you can't take that, get the fuck out." He told him darkly.

"Fine then, I will."

Potter had halfway turned his body when Draco spoke. "Good idea. Run along." He baited him, but added quickly, "Oh, and don't forget to inform your superior that you don't play well with others. Tell him that it's started to affect your work and how the Ministry prosecutes cases. I'm sure that'll make his day. And yours."

Less than a minute in the room and the situation had gone from manageable to teetering on the brink of chaos. Weasley was proving to be more of a liability than a buffer. Draco was about to abort the mission, and tell them both to get the hell out of his office when he took a deep breath and remembered why he was there.

Potter turned back around with a fierce glare.

"I'll let the news slip out...by accident, of course." Draco relaxed back in his chair and played with his quill. "You think your desk duty after the Marquette Manor incident was torture—"

"Fine." Potter caved. "But don't treat Ron like he's stupid."

Ron snarled.

Potter glared.

And Draco finally rolled his eyes. Well, they certainly were chummy again. He frowned. "Fine, but I'm not going to have you yelling at me in my office. Not this time, Potter."

If *anyone* other than Granger had gotten themselves into this kind of situation, he wouldn't have even bothered. Teaming up with someone that he despised? He *had* to have been bloody mad. He would've liked to rationalise his actions by saying that she would've done the same, but regrettably, it wasn't that simple. If the last couple of weeks proved anything, it was that things were more complicated than he had originally thought.

Well, on his part.

"Now that we've got past that, there are a few questions that I have—"

"Are these the questions that you're going to ask me at trial?"

"You know the drill, Potter."

"Well," the wizard muttered tightly, "Could you familiarise me with the case, again? It's been a while."

Draco said nothing, he just handed the case file over to Potter, who scanned it briefly before handing it back. "Do you remember it now?"

"The bloke who nearly blew up his home mixing illegal potions in his basement; yes, I remember him."

"Well, then, let's get on with it."

As he questioned Potter, a very small part of Draco's mind wandered.

Weeks ago, Hermione had opened the door between them and asked him why he had stayed. That Friday night, while they were sitting in Granger's sitting room after dinner, he'd been guided to some sort of internal understanding about the answer he'd choked on.

He was a bloody idiot.

He should've left when he had had the chance. If he hadn't been there, she would've never asked him that question. If he hadn't thought about the answer for so long, he would've been fine. Draco was anything but fine.

"Walk me through everything you did when you arrived on the scene." Draco instructed tightly.

"We were alerted about a magical fire at around eleven o'clock in the morning and I arrived on the scene shortly after we received the call. Mr. Schusses was outside of his home, and we apprehended him as soon as it became apparent that he had started the fire. The normal protocol was followed...do you need me to go over that protocol with you?" Potter asked.

Draco shook his head. "No. I know all about the Auror protocol in this particular situation." He pilfered through the stack of parchments in the file and selected one. "I just need you to look over your sworn statement." He handed Potter the piece of parchment and watched while his scanned it over. Weasley was looking at him as if he were trying to ask, *"What are you waiting for?"*

Bloody hell, did he not have a single iota of patience? Honestly?

Honesty.

That word had been on his mind for *days*. Everyone wanted him to be honest, even Mother. He'd had dinner with her last night because he thought that she wanted to see him before she set off for Fiji on her holiday. It turned out that she'd scheduled dinner to give him her blessing to pursue Hermione.

"I know that we haven't talked about it, but if you're holding back because of her blood...you don't have to."

"I could care less about her blood. Where did you get the idea that I was thinking—"

"You're not? Honestly?"

He scowled at the memory. Honesty. Pansy had told him he needed to be honest with himself. Well, during dinner with the Finnegans, he'd done that. And what transpired had been the worst dinner of his life. His thoughts had left him quieter than usual, but no one had noticed. Or so he hoped. Talking straight had been bloody hard with her brushing her arm and leg against him.

What the hell was *wrong* with him?

Honesty was definitely not his friend, because during those minutes, Draco accepted that he would've turned that doorknob. He would've gone to her because he cared about her, and he would've stayed because caring about her—he'd finally *accepted*—had grown into something else.

Something more.

Something deeper.

Feelings.

But that internal admission meant nothing. His feelings would disappear. They always had, so Draco agreed to keep them to himself. He just needed time, that was all. Time to get rid of them. Time to regain the control that he'd lost. Time to find his own way. And he just couldn't do that when she was near. So, he'd avoided her. Blatantly. He'd gotten her notes and messages, but didn't write back. He blocked her Floo. He did everything he could to give himself the distance he needed until his problem went away.

It had been over two weeks, so far, and no such luck.

There was a tiny, nagging voice in the back of his mind that told him that he was being stupid.

Draco certainly felt stupid.

"Yes, this is all correct." Potter's act of handing him the parchment pulled Draco from his thoughts. "Are we all done here?"

The Weasel looked incredibly nervous; so nervous that all Scarhead had to do was look over to see that something was definitely amiss. Draco *definitely* didn't need that. "I believe so."

Potter rose from his seat, but Weasley remained seated as he regarded Draco with wild eyes. He held up his hand calmly. *Three*. It had worked the last time. *Two*. The Weasel was halfway out of his chair when Potter finally turned. *One*. He looked as if he would rather chew on

glass than speak to Draco outside of work, but asked, "I know that it's none of my business, but how's Hermione?"

Right on time.

"Don't you know?"

Potter frowned. "If I knew, I wouldn't ask you." he retorted heatedly, but sighed. "Look, I know that I can't go to her home."

"Why not? I know for a fact she changed her wards to allow you access." Draco tilted his head curiously.

"It's complicated, but I just want to know if she's fine."

He was intrigued. Potter didn't know that Weasley had seen her, and Weasley looked awfully guilty. Perhaps things weren't as fine between them as he'd assumed. That was interesting, "She's fine, but I'm sure that Weasley could've told you that."

Potter turned to his best friend; a look of hurt in his eyes. "You've seen her?"

Watching the Weasel squirm was definitely a high point in Draco's day. "Well, a couple of times, but—"

"You didn't tell me?"

"You didn't ask, Harry."

"I'm—we need to talk. We both said some things that we didn't mean, well, I did. But we're best mates, you could've at least volunteered that kind of information—"

That sent the Weasel on the defence. "Our friendship is *not* the same as it was before." Weasley rose to his feet. "What did you think I was going to do, just forget about everything?"

Potter ran a frustrated hand through his hair. "Of course not, but I thought that we were trying
—"

"We are, but that doesn't mean that I completely trust you. You know, sometimes, I don't think you fully understand what you did to me. You lied to me, for *years*. You knew what had happened between you and Hermione, and you didn't even tell me. You let me believe something that you knew wasn't true. You—" Weasley stopped suddenly and looked uncomfortably at Draco.

"Don't stop on my account." He drawled.

"You know, you're a real prat, Malfoy." Weasley glared at him. "I don't know how she can stand you."

He shrugged only because he wasn't quite sure, either.

"She must be bloody mad to consider *you* a friend."

"What she sees in me is none of your concern, Weasley." He snapped and turned his eyes to the second standing wizard. "I'll send Granger your regards. Now, get the hell out. Both of you."

"But—" Weasley started, but never finished because Potter interrupted him.

"Tell her that I'm sorry. I just thought—no, I wasn't thinking. I just—" Potter looked frustrated, and Draco empathised with him only for that second. He knew what it felt like to be frustrated. Especially about her. He knew that feeling all too well. Draco halted that thought and stared at Potter, who showed a little more humanity than Draco was ready to witness. "I mucked everything up, didn't I?"

After an uncomfortable pause, Draco sounded oddly calm to himself. "I think you know the answer to that question, Potter."

"I guess I do, but do you think that you can convince her to write me?"

"No, I can't," he answered honestly. He can't make Granger do anything and he wasn't going to try.

"Why not?"

Life was full of rejection and as soon—he paused that thought. He couldn't say that, not when he would rather *not* take the chance to avoid being dealt the rejection card. Draco honestly hadn't thought about that, and it made him wonder about a lot of things.

"I asked you a question, Malfoy. Why not?" Harry repeated tersely.

Weasley was red in the face, as usual.

Draco stared at him long and hard. "Well, for starters, we're not friends. Granger and I are." It didn't matter that he was actively avoiding her, and that was something neither needed to know. He shook his head ruefully, "You know, this isn't even my place, but why would I help you when you need to help yourself." When Potter opened his mouth, Draco snapped his fingers. "You know what happened that night, Potter. You know I can't and I *won't* force her to do anything."

"And I said that I was sorry for that. For what happened with—"

"Go and tell Granger yourself." Draco curtly replied.

"I'm telling you—"

"Nothing that I particularly care to hear, again," he snapped impatiently.

"That night," Potter started angrily. "I didn't know Ginny would follow me. I—"

"You put a lot of pressure on her when she was trying to open up to you about your son. And you didn't stop even after she told you to say anything else." Potter's colour and anger seemed to bleed from him. Which was interesting because his was rising and his cheeks felt flushed. "Yes, she told me *everything*." Weasley looked completely confused, while Potter looked a little nauseated.

"What are you talking about, Malfoy?" Weasley asked slowly.

Once again, he took the high road and ignored the question. "You ruined your son's birthday for her."

Another tense silence fell between them, but it didn't last. Draco didn't allow it to last.

"I don't even think I could make her answer your letter, even if I tried. You're going to have to talk to her, face-to-face. She's not going to send you a letter because she doesn't trust your living arrangements."

"My living—I live with Ginny!"

"Exactly."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Draco was over it. And them. "You defeated the Dark Lord, you figure it out."

"But I don't understand. I live with Ginny—"

"Exactly," he looked at him more pointedly.

"That's crazy. Ginny would never do anything to—"

"There are an infinite number of reasons why we shouldn't ever say 'never', Potter."

"I think I know her well enough to say that that she wouldn't—"

Weasley jumped to his feet. "Enough with the back and forth, I've had it!" Draco and Potter looked at him, one with narrowed eyes and the other with curious ones. "I'll just come out and say it. Parvarti went to Italy and got your son's birth certificate. She's planning on writing an article."

The room fell silent.

Part Three: New Sun

The walls were mocking her again.

She wanted colour. Lots of it. Hermione wanted art. Life. Meaning. Something. *Anything*. Something that would quiet the mocking walls. She was more than plain walls and dull furniture. She was more than emptiness and sadness. She wanted to prove to them that she wasn't alone.

And more importantly, she wanted to prove it to herself.

Without even pausing to think it through any further, she ran upstairs to her attic, grabbed the first painting that she saw, and hung it above her fireplace. She turned to her Apollo who was sitting on the centre cushion, licking his paw. "What do you think?"

Apollo shot her one of his patented looks of disinterest and meowed.

Hermione stepped back, turned her head to the side, and realised that it was crooked. But as she moved to fix it, she looked at the painting more closely. Hermione couldn't figure out if it was one of her parents' paintings that she'd recovered after their deaths, or one she'd bought herself once her finances had improved. It didn't really matter, because the picture had left her mouth empty and her heart full. It was a stunning oil painting of a new sun as it rose over the water's horizon.

There was no way that she'd picked up this painting by accident. If her feelings at that moment could be painted, this picture would be it. She was that new sun. She wasn't quite at her full potential, she wasn't providing as much heat as she could, but she was getting there. Hermione left in pyjamas and wild hair. She got into her rarely-used car and drove to the nearest Muggle paint store. It was a little family-owned store, but she left with a sample of every colour available and the name of the clerk who would help her when she was ready.

They must've thought that she was mad.

She certainly looked it.

Hermione returned home, stood in front of a bare wall in her sitting room, and proceeded to cover it with samples of Strawberry Rhubarb, Cool Lava, Orange Zest, Empire Yellow, Green Acres, Blue Feather, Grape Parfait, and plenty of other colours.

It was a colour-overload for anyone, but to Hermione it was a fresh start.

Then, she started weeding down her choices.

She had plucked Mint Majesty off the wall and was aiming for Sensible Hue when she heard Pansy's wary question, "What in the hell are you doing?"

Hermione tossed Sensible Hue on the floor with the other nineteen colours that she'd already eliminated, turned, and shrugged sheepishly. "I'm going to paint my walls."

Pansy's eyebrow rose almost cautiously. "Well, that's...impulsive."

"I know." She made a face and removed Pale Cherry from the wall of colour.

Pansy sat on her sofa and smiled when Apollo made himself comfortable on her lap. "I honestly can't think of the last time that you did something impulsive—" then something caught her eye, "Is that a painting on your wall? Are you feeling all right?"

"I feel fine." Serene Sky quickly joined the rejects on the floor.

"Hey, I liked that one!"

"It was too plain."

Pansy said nothing for a moment. "You're serious about this, aren't you?"

"Completely."

Pansy picked up Apollo, stood to her feet, and kicked off her heels. "Then, you're definitely going to need a colour genius like me. Now, if you want, I can use my wand—"

"No wands. The colours are more vivid with Muggle paint." Hermione blanched at Velvet Evening and let it fall to the floor. All was silent for the next few minutes while Pansy picked Bright Citrus, Sable Brown, and Maple Leaf off the colour wall without so much as blinking. Hermione looked over at her with wide eyes. "I actually *liked* Bright Citrus."

"It would've clashed with your carpet." She pointed out.

"I plan on getting new carpet...and furniture. New everything. I'll keep the table, though."

Crayon marks aside, it was quite sturdy.

Pansy discarded Ash Violet and Plum Blossom before she finally asked. "What brought this on?"

"My walls are white."

Pansy didn't understand. "Your walls have always been white."

"Exactly." Hermione took down Mystical Purple. "This room says very little about who I am, and I thought that I could stand a change."

Her best friend stared at her for a moment before a small smile appeared on her face. "So, you decided to paint."

"*And* hang a picture on the wall."

"I saw."

"Baby steps, I know, but—"

"No, baby steps are good. Really good. I'm proud of you. Really." And she smiled.

Hermione smiled back just a little and removed Fresh Pink from the wall. "So, to what do I owe this visit?"

Pansy removed the rest of the pink coloured samples. "Nothing in particular. I just came to talk."

"Talk?" Hermione asked dubiously. "Aren't you supposed to be at work?"

"Of course, but I took a long lunch." She removed Rum Spice, considered it for a moment, and dropped it to the floor. There had to have been at least fifty more colours still on the wall.

Hermione folded her arms and deadpanned, "To come over here and talk?"

"Yes." Pansy replied.

"Well, what did you want to talk about?"

"Oh, just the usual," she replied flippantly, "Just how you've been, how your therapy is going, if you've talked to Draco, and how work is going for you. Has—"

Now, Hermione was even more suspicious. "But I just saw you yester—"

"Just indulge me."

Hermione removed the rest of the purple coloured samples. "I've been fine, therapy is going well, and work is going well."

"And Draco?" Pansy questioned in a tone that she couldn't recognise.

Her shoulders tensed just a little bit. "I haven't seen him since the dinner party. He stayed behind, watched me clean, and then left. I haven't seen him since. He's made himself unavailable, to me, at least." Hermione felt odd about the entire situation and cleared her throat in an attempt to clear the lump in it.

She didn't know what was wrong with him, or what she had done to upset him—if he was upset. She'd written him a week and a half ago, but his response was curt at best. He was avoiding her, and had made it obvious. He attended all the dinners that she couldn't, told his secretary to tell that he was busy when he obviously wasn't, and disconnected her from his Floo. And what had started out as a nagging sensation in her throat, had turned into a burning sensation in her hands and a feeling of dread in her heart.

"I'm sure it's—"

"He's ignoring me." Her voice was as cold as ice. "It's fine."

She had no control over him. He could make decisions, too, and it seemed that he'd made one. And it made her so angry because it was so random. But if he didn't want to be her friend, then—Hermione ripped Cheerful Hue off the wall and dropped it on the floor.

She didn't feel so cheerful anymore.

Pansy looked at her with concern. "Hermione—"

"I'm fine. Honest." She said flatly.

"You're lying."

"I'm practicing indifference."

"But you're not indifferent."

She looked at Pansy. "It would be easier if I were."

"You should talk to him. I'm sure there's an explanation."

"I tried." Hermione shrugged. "He doesn't want to see me."

Parts of her wanted to write him again, but her pride wouldn't allow it. She wasn't going to chase, she wasn't going to beg, and she wasn't going to try—especially because he didn't seem to want to. If he didn't care, then she would try her damnedest not to care, either. Hermione would pretend not to be disappointed and angry with him. She would pretend that she didn't feel rejected and hurt. Hermione took down Mellow Yellow with a prominent frown on her face.

"Draco is a stubborn creature. And while I have my suspicions about why he's avoiding you
—"

"I know what you're thinking and you're wrong." Hermione told her. "He doesn't have feelings for me, Pansy. I know you've said it before, but he doesn't." She opened her mouth to say something else, but shook her head and took down Burnt Sienna.

"It's in Draco's character to launch a defence against anything that he can't control." Apollo started squirming in her arms and she let him down to give Hermione her full attention. "It's in his character to launch a defence against *you*. He's fighting a losing battle, and you shouldn't give up at the first sign of defeat."

"They're called *signs* for a reason."

Pansy took down Minty Mist. "Yes, to caution you; to let you know that there's something going on that's outside of your control. It doesn't mean turn around at the first sign of trouble. If I gave up on you after the first sign of trouble, I wouldn't be standing here today. We wouldn't have made it past you lying to me about Matthew, but I fought for your trust. I tried my hardest to keep your friendship because I *knew* that it was worth it. And, here we are." Pansy pointed out firmly. "Don't stop fighting."

Hermione stared at her best friend soberly. "Things are complicated between us and have been since his father died; perhaps even longer. I don't know if we're moving forward or backwards. He—"

"Is struggling to maintain control of himself and how he feels."

She was doubtful at best about Pansy's statement. Outside of the few cracks, he'd always maintained control of his emotions. What she said didn't make sense. "Pansy—"

"He's not the easiest person, I know." She rolled her eyes and took down Winter Blue. And Hermione silently agreed. "Sometimes I want to push him down the grand staircase and hex him until he can't *see* straight, but he's terrified and he does *stupid* shit when he's scared."

Well, she wasn't necessarily immune from stupid behaviour.

"I—" Pansy reconsidered her words. "I can stand here and rant all day about that idiot, but it's meaningless if you don't know the answer to my question."

"What is it?"

Pansy looked at her and it was far more intense than any look she'd ever given her. "What do you want?"

And Hermione answered as best as she could without choking. "I don't know."

Part Four: Patron saint of liars and fakes

Draco's initial thought had been something akin to: "Well, this was most unexpected."

However, when Potter opened his mouth and said, "I don't believe you."

And then he remembered that Weasley had broken the news, not him. His response matched better to something Draco had said, and *not* his supposed best mate. It was further proof that things weren't as together with them as he'd initially assumed. Weasley looked as surprised as Draco felt. "You what?"

Potter opened his mouth and then snapped it shut. "I don't believe *this*," he took a step backwards, shaking his head. "This was planned. You two *planned* this." Potter pointed accusingly at them both. "I don't know what the bloody hell is going on that made you two join forces against me, but—"

"Oh, get over yourself, Potter. This isn't even about you." Draco cut him off brusquely.

"This is about Hermione." Weasley finished. "And your son."

"And what's your motive for being here, Malfoy?" Potter asked.

"Look—" Draco began, but was cut off by a ranting Harry Potter.

"And don't feed me any rubbish about you being here out of the kindness of your—"

"Fuck off, Potter." Draco lashed out hotly.

"You—"

Weasley grabbed his friend's arm when Potter stepped closer to him. "Harry, stop."

And when Draco leaned forwards in his chair, he took back one-sixteenth of the bad things that he'd said about Weasley in the last hour. He wasn't *completely* useless. "When you're ready to pull your head out your arse and listen, we can fill you in on what's going on. As I've stated before, this isn't about you, but Weasley's right. It's about Granger and Matthew, so swallow your pride, shut your mouth, sit your arse down, and listen to what we're about to explain to you."

Potter glared at him fiercely before he calmly pulled his arm out of Weasley's grip. "Fine," he mumbled before he sat back down in the chair. "But I'm doing this only for them."

It was good enough.

As Weasley started talking, Draco watched as Potter's face as he took in all the things that they had learned over the last few weeks. He was frowning when Weasley explained how he'd received the birth certificate from Lavender and looked confused when he found out that it was Patil behind it. He looked curious when Weasley talked about the accomplice, but frowned again when Draco cut Weasley off and started talking about the investigation they had launched.

"The good news is that Pansy has been able to get Parvati's work load increased with the help of Rita—"

"Skeeter? But she hates Hermione!" Potter exclaimed.

"And she still does, believe me. Pansy said that she sulked for a full day before she reluctantly agreed to help."

"So why did she?" He asked curiously.

Draco shut the open file on his desk. "Rita's rather fond of Pansy and my mother. Since my father's...*passing*, Rita's been rather instrumental at keeping my mother's name out of the gossip articles." The amount of gossip that had surfaced about his family following Father's funeral was almost obscene, but none of it was printed. "She doesn't want my mother distressed."

"But what makes you think that she can be trusted?"

"She just can," he replied irritably. "And if she doesn't, I'll get Granger to trap her in a jar for a few months." Both Weasley and Potter stared at him with wide eyes. Draco smirked and added almost flippantly, "Rita didn't seem too keen on that."

Weasley stammered. "How did you know—"

Draco made a face. "Not that it matters, but Granger told me about that the night Weasley's sister found out some rather disturbing things about Potter here." The wizard paled.

He frowned. "What's he talking about?"

Here it was. The moment when Weasley could've found out that his best friend had been in love with Hermione for *years*. And still loved her on some level. He could have found out that *that* had been what his sister had overheard. Draco watched as a pale Potter looked over at Weasley, uneasily. He adjusted his glasses and scratched his hair.

It would've been all too easy for Draco to do it; to open his mouth, tell the truth, and end Weasley's belief that what had transpired between them was just physical, at least on Potter's part.

It was there. In his hands.

The power to crush the most popular friendship in the Wizarding world.

The power to deal the last blow that would separate Potter and his Weasley.

It was there.

Potter was dreadfully silent. Weasley's frown deepened. "What...is he talking about, Harry?"

But Draco thought about the consequences, the arguments, and the senselessness of it all. In the end, it wasn't his place. In the end, he understood that it was more than just crushing their friendship and a third person would be affected by the fallout; a person who didn't need any more drama in her life. He didn't want to say that he was doing it *for Granger*, because then it would counteract any kind of progress that he'd made in his quest to kill his feelings for her, but that was the truth.

Dammit.

So, when Weasley looked at him, he looked back. "What were you talking about, Malfoy?"

Draco replied by rubbing the back of his neck. "I was referring to the night your sister found out about Matthew. Keep up, Weasley."

Potter's face, which had gone terribly pale, started to pinken as the life returned to them. Weasley's face flushed when he murmured, "Oh, I just thought that maybe there was something else going on that no one was telling me about."

Potter looked to the left, unable to look directly at his friend. Draco shook his head, but Merlin, did he *ever* want to speak up at that moment. He sighed. The things he did to protect Granger. "Well, you thought wrong. Wouldn't be the first time, now would it?"

Weasley glared at him before looking at his friend. "Anyway, there's more to all of this. Parvati is going to forge Matthew's birth certificate to say that Malfoy is the father."

Well, he certainly didn't hold back.

The room fell silent again as they each absorbed his words; one for the first time, and two for the second. Draco, for some strange reason, didn't react to it as badly as Weasel had. He

understood that it was bad news for Granger, but the thought of being linked to her in that manner wasn't exactly horrible. Draco paled. That thought was not helpful in his quest to rid himself of her.

Distress flashed in Potter's eyes. "But why you?" He asked Draco, who rolled his eyes in return to cover how he felt on the inside. "*I'm* Matthew's father. It should be—"

"Look, I don't want this to come out any more than you do, but—"

"We don't think this is about exposing Matthew, Harry." Weasley interrupted, but he looked pained that he was actually agreeing with something that Draco Malfoy had said weeks before. "Malfoy thinks someone's trying to rewrite history. For what reason, I have no idea."

Biting on his fingernail, Potter entertained Weasley's words with a thoughtful nod. Draco frowned in disgust. The last person in the room seemed a little quiet. But when Potter started talking again, his questions seemed to spew from his mouth. "So, what are you all doing about this? How is Hermione taking all of this? What do you need me to do? W—"

"Well, for starters, you could take a breath and let us answer a question." Draco replied snappishly.

Potter's frown deepened even more, if that was at all possible.

"We told you about Blaise's visit to Italy and Pansy's help at slowing down Parvati's quest." Draco reminded him. "Granger seems to be doing fine." And he wasn't going to confirm that...until he could look at her like he used to. "And if I tell you what you need to do, will you do it?"

"For them, I will." He looked fiercely determined. "What is it?"

"Keep an eye on your girlfriend."

Something flashed behind Potter's eyes.

It looked like a hybrid between disbelief, recognition, and anger. "What?"

"You're not deaf, Potter. We need you to watch your girlfriend."

He was on his feet quickly. His face had gone from normal to red at a rather impressive speed. "You think *Ginny* had something to do with this?" It was a statement, not a question. When Draco said nothing, he turned to Ron. Hot words of betrayal poured from his lips, "You think your *sister* had something to do with this?"

"No! I don't! But Hermione said that they need to rule her out, and I agree! Gin was furious when she found out, Harry. She—I understand why they would suspect her." When his friend scoffed, Weasley tried to reason with him; something that Draco found odd. Weasley? *Reasoning* with someone? Hmm. Perhaps he had matured. Just a bit, though. "We're asking you to do this to prove her innocence, not her guilt."

Draco scoffed under his breath and Weasley tried to eviscerate him with death glares.

He was pretty convinced of her guilt. He just hadn't put the pieces together.

"But she's gotten over it. We've talked and fought a lot about it. Ginny knowing about Matthew didn't change anything."

"Well, I'm going to cut the bullshit. It changed everything, Potter, whether or not you see it."

"Ginny—wait, she left before we could finish. And I never brought it up because she never brought him up. We fought exclusively about Hermione..." he trailed off for a moment. "I just assumed that she knew, but I don't think she really does."

"And don't tell her." Draco ordered. "It might change everything. We don't know."

"Ginny wouldn't do something like this! For all we know, it could've been *you*, Malfoy!"

Draco made a face. "Me?"

"I don't know, because you're—"

"Yes, I know, I'm *Malfoy*." He drawled in bored tones, "I'm an ass. I've been an ass my entire life. I've done shitty things. Is that it?" Draco glared at Potter hotly. "Come up with a better reason, Potter, because I've known about Matthew for *far* too many months if I was going to do something."

"And why didn't you?"

Potter, he realised, was getting a little too close for comfort.

"That's none of your concern." He told him tightly.

"No, I think it is. You *hated* Hermione—"

"Wrong again, Potter. I hated *you*. And Weasley, here." He shot him a curt glare that was quickly returned. "Granger was a pushy know-it-all who slapped me Third Year and beat me in every class. She just *happened* to have befriended you on the train. I didn't hate her. I almost forgot she even existed after the war, what with her hasty departure to Venice."

Potter's brow rose, but the tension in his voice was unmistakable. "And now?"

Now. Well, *now*, the blood was thudding in his ears like two-stone sledges. Now, Weasel and Potter were staring at him with a mix of curiosity and confusion, and Draco's mouth felt like ash. He was tired of thinking; the strain that he'd been under was affecting every aspect of his life.

"And now, Malfoy?" Weasley echoed Potter's question, but he looked infinitely more worried than Potter, who looked confused.

Draco fixed his lips to tell them that nothing had changed, but he couldn't lie. No, he *wouldn't* lie. But he sure as hell wasn't going to just sit there and let them interrogate him

about his feelings for Granger. He'd had enough of that shit already from Pansy, Blaise, his mother, and his fucking Uncle for crying out loud.

"I'm no longer indifferent." He finally answered crisply, "That's *all* you need to know."

"You didn't—"

"Weasley!" Draco snapped. "This is *not* the time!" He took a moment to regain control of his temper. "Get off me, and back onto the issue." Yes, the issue. What a perfect way to distract them from what the conversation was really turning into. A subtle investigation to see who had feelings for Granger, and a competition.

One that Draco didn't even want to participate in.

Draco cleared his head during the moment of silence. "So will you?"

"I *won't* stalk Ginny."

"Stalking sounds a little harsh. We need you to...keep an eye on her, that's all." Draco suggested. "Pay more attention to her, look around your house for anything to rule her out."

Potter shook his head. "Ginny and I have enough problems, we don't need—"

"Just *look*, Harry. That's all we're asking you to do. Look into it." Weasley told him.

He stood to his feet again. "You're both unbelievable, and I'm leaving."

It was time to go for the kill; hit him with everything he knew. His dreadfully calm voice rang out in the silence, "You'd be amazed at what you could find out if you dug a little deeper, Potter."

He froze and turned back around. "What's *that* supposed to mean?"

"Are you *seriously* this stupid? I honestly can't believe that you haven't figured it out, after this long." He was bluffing, but hope he struck true.

"What are you talking about, Malfoy?" he spat.

He was reaching for the stars when he said, "You told me about a letter that you sent to Granger—"

"What does that have to do with anything?"

Draco thought about it for a second. He looked over at Weasley who was making stupid little hand gestures. "I'm—I'm establishing a motive for you to stop being such an idiot."

"It sounds like you're bluffing, Malfoy." He folded his arms. "As much as I—" Potter chose his next words wisely, "Care for Hermione, I've messed things up abysmally between Ginny and I, and I don't want to lose her—"

Finally! Something to work with. "Cut the bullshit, Potter. You don't even love her."

He knew that much to be true.

"And who the hell are you to tell me who I love and don't?" Potter shot back hotly.

"Be *honest*." He cringed at his own words.

A little voice in his head said, '*Practice what you fucking preach.*'

And it sounded a little like Pansy.

"Is that true?" Harry didn't answer Weasley and he tried again, "Harry. Is it true?"

Potter's lips were pursed initially. He clenched his fists, stared at the ground, and stood rigid for a full minute. Finally, he lifted his eyes to his friend's and relaxed his body. "I think—I think that in time I could really—"

"In time?" Weasley shouted, face flushed hot. "You've had nothing but time. You've been with Ginny for *five fucking years!* You should bloody well know by now!"

Potter seemed angry that he was being chastised, but he seemed like he was trying to figure out just what to say. "Sometimes, it just doesn't work like that. Sometimes, you can be with someone for years and not even know—"

"You don't just stay and waste their time and yours. You—"

"What do you know about my relationship—or *any* relationship, for the matter?" Potter shot back rather brusquely. "You haven't even *been* in one since Hermione left you."

That certainly was a low blow.

Draco folded his arms across his chest. This was going to get good.

Weasley seemed to take his words like a sharp blow to the back of the head. "What do I know?" He said hotly. "I *know* well enough to *not* lead someone on."

"That wasn't my intention."

"It's what you did, Harry." Weasley ran his hand over his face. "I *told* her to leave you, but she wouldn't. She thinks that you really love her. She thinks that you're ready to settle down and get married—"

"Married?" Potter exclaimed, shocked. "I never said *anything* about us getting married. I told her that we were starting fresh. I told her that we were going to work through our issues and rebuild our trust in one another. I *never* said anything about us getting married."

"She says that you two have been ring shopping together."

"No, we haven't. She—" Potter's eyes softened and it seemed that he realised something else about Weasley's sister. "She's lying."

"We've established that she's lying, Potter." Draco drawled.

"Piss off, Malfoy." He shot back, but it was halfway muttered. "I don't understand it. *Why* is she lying?"

She-Weasel was doing a good job of planning her future with Harry...without his help. "There are *many* reasons why people lie." He took a step closer to where the two friends stood almost face-to-face. "Some lie to protect themselves, some to protect the ones they love, some because they can, and some lie because they feel threatened by something or *someone* else."

"Shut up, Malfoy." Potter spat.

"I'm not the one with a lying girlfriend, you are. You need to find out what else she's lying about," he suggested calmly, "We know that she's lied about exchanging letters with Granger for years. Think about it, Potter. I'm certain that there's more."

"And I'm certain that there isn't." He replied stubbornly.

Draco frowned. Did he have to explain *everything* to Potter? "Bloody hell, you're a moron. You've always been one, but this takes the cake," he told him rather bluntly. "Pay attention to her. Pay attention to the things you've told Granger."

"What the hell—"

"Why didn't you get to fix things with Granger after she left for Venice?"

"I sent her a letter, but—"

"Merlin, you're *blind*." Draco shook his head. "The truth about that has been staring me in the face for months, why can't you see it? Your problem, *Potter*, is that you don't listen to anyone. Your problem is that you don't see the things that you don't want to see—"

"Then enlighten me, dammit!"

"The letter, you idiot! The one from six years ago! Who sent it off?"

"I did!" He shouted back, face red. "I sent the letter! I wrote it, put it inside the envelope, and...I..." Potter shut his eyes as he mentally walked his way through that morning. His voice had lowered considerably when he continued, "I was living at Grimmauld Place. I was late for a meeting with Kingsley. Ginny had spent the night. I sat it on the table with the rest of the outgoing letters, and—"

"And what, Harry?" Weasley asked impatiently.

His eyes flew open and Draco recognised the look instantly.

He was *finally* having a moment of much-needed clarity.

"I told Ginny to send it off."

And Draco knew it wouldn't take much longer for Potter to realise that he was dating the patron saint of liars and fakes.

a moment suspended in time

Chapter Summary

"To be honest, I can't wait for that day. I know that we're all going to have to work hard, forgive each other, bury our resentment, and swallow our pride in order to get to that point. I know that it's going to take time to heal our wounds and clean the bad blood between us all, but I think that we can do it. We all just have to be willing."

Chapter Notes

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

Chapter Twenty-Nine

A Moment Suspended In Time

Part One: He had lost

April 29th

The first time that Hermione walked away from him, Draco didn't blink twice.

His stomach had been in knots during the short exchange, and he'd wanted her to leave as fast as her legs would carry her. And she had. Granger had produced the letter, reached for his hand, opened it with no resistance, deposited the letter into said hand, turned on her heels, and left him standing there.

And no, she hadn't looked back.

All he could do was stare after her. He wanted a second chance; one that didn't leave him feeling like a foreigner in his own skin. He wanted a chance to refuse the letter that was still in his hand more than an hour after she'd left.

Tomorrow.

Granger wanted to talk to him tomorrow.

She wanted them to meet at her house before sunset so they could talk.

Tomorrow.

The subject of tomorrow's discussion wasn't exactly a mystery to him, but he wasn't ready to answer any of the questions that she was sure to have. Draco re-read the short note, trying to

read between the cracks and crevices of her words, but he came up with nothing useful. Her cursive had told him a lot about who she truly was as a person: self-disciplined, meticulous, and intelligent. Nothing new there. He re-read the note, again. Her handwriting was impeccable; each loop was symmetrical, each line was straight, every 't' was crossed neatly, every 'i' was dotted perfectly...

His wondered if Granger's handwriting was *too* perfect, *too* practiced, and *too* careful.

Ah.

It was definitely not the first draft. It wasn't even the second. Or the third.

When he looked closer, Draco could see the minor imperfections. He could see the strain in the capital 'D' in his name, and the slight hesitation in the word 'tomorrow'. Granger had *wanted* this letter to be perfect, but more than that, she'd wanted him to *think* that *she* was perfectly fine. It seemed that Hermione had gone through great lengths to prove that she was unaffected by him ignoring her, but all it did was prove that she was.

And Draco didn't know how to feel about that. It was a mesh between guilty and justified, and it didn't sit well with his conscience that always seemed to appear whenever he was putting up a fight of some sort. Or when he'd done something wrong when it came to Granger. Draco returned to the belief that he needed to banish the damn thing for good.

But later.

Draco had accepted the gradual friendship that had blossomed under unusual circumstances, allowed her into his inner circle with Pansy and Blaise, and had even allowed himself to get as comfortable with her as he could allow; but he was starting to doubt their friendship of late. Oh, they were friends, but something was different with them. Their exchanges and their time alone weren't very friendly. In fact, they were always tense, quiet, and comfortably uncomfortable, if that made any sense at all.

The night on her pier wasn't an exchange between two friends, but quarrelling lovers.

That thought sent a foreign jolt through Draco's body, and his shoulders tensed as a result. He tore his eyes from the note, folded it twice, and slipped it into his pocket. His first steps were slow; the muscles in his legs were tight from lack of movement. He went to his sideboard, picked the first bottle that he saw, found a glass, and mechanically poured himself a drink. He needed something to calm his nerves and silence his thoughts, and Firewhisky was the best option.

He snorted. Silence his thoughts? Calm his nerves? Not bloody likely, but he was willing to try.

After the first glass of Firewhisky, Draco moved his head from side to side. The tension in his neck and shoulders were incredible, but it wasn't new. It had been there for *months*, but he hadn't really known why. He was always anticipating something—he didn't know what—to happen. When they were alone, it was hard to keep his composure, hard to stick to his personal script, and hard to keep his distance.

Draco wondered if it had always been that way, and realised that the answer to that question was a firm yes.

And look at where it had gotten him. Draco could've been doing anything at that moment, but he was thinking about a fucking note and a frizzy-haired Granger. Where had he gone wrong? But that was a hard question to answer because there wasn't a particular second, minute, hour, or day that it had happened.

Draco poured himself another glass.

It just seemed that he'd gradually gone wrong.

Last October, Draco had given her advice about Marquette Manor's house elves. In November, he'd gone to the roof of St. Mungo's just to check up on her, but he'd ended up staying there for hours in an awkward silence. In December, Draco had spent an agonising hour just watching her watch the clouds cry. In January, he'd crossed the line and brought her back to his home after her row with Potter and Weasley and made sure that she was well taken care of. In February, he'd done something completely against his nature and held her long after her sobs had tapered off. In March, Granger had kissed his forehead and held him while he reeled from the death of his father.

His third Firewhisky burned going down, but the burn was welcomed.

It was the end of April, and he was scratching his head at all the changes that she'd made and the ones she'd provoked in him. And Draco found himself wondering what tomorrow would do to him.

The journey thus far had been a slow, gradual, and an accidental one—one he hadn't been prepared to take, and hadn't realised he was taking until it was too late to turn around. Draco hadn't expected his feelings, but there they were, gnawing at him—more so in the last few days. They made him think, made him wonder, and made him see things clearer.

Draco was certainty's biggest fan. He wasn't a man who enjoyed playing the odds. He'd played when he was younger, but on the night that Voldemort fell, he'd vowed not to play with chance again. He only fought battles that he knew he could win. He didn't chase after the unattainable, and therefore, he didn't take many risks.

He coughed and poured himself another drink.

That life was over.

He'd unknowingly taken a risk when he'd approached Granger last August.

And his life hadn't been the same.

Draco grimaced at his ominous thoughts. See? This was why he was ignoring her. She made him think too much, worry too much, drink too much, and *feel* too much. He'd lost control as far as Hermione was concerned, and he wanted it back. It wasn't too late, was it? He just had to lose his feelings for her and—he looked down at the table.

The truth was still staring him in the face, mocking him. Not even the Firewhisky had helped to blur the fine line between fact and fiction. The fact was that he'd been trying for *weeks* to kill his feelings and *nothing* was working. It was only getting *worse*. But Draco wasn't ready to give up on the fiction and accept the fact that he had lost the war against himself.

He almost laughed at the ridiculousness of it, he almost laughed at how ridiculous *he* was being, but Draco wasn't that drunk yet. His tolerance hadn't allowed him the luxury of blissful ignorance. His problems were still his problems, and they were just as apparent as ever.

He had lost.

Part Two: The mending of their broken bones.

The sun was high in the blue sky when Hermione arrived at the sparsely crowded park in Little Whinging. There were a few clouds, but they no evidence to prove that the forecasted rain was on the way. Hermione coughed on her heartache as she passed parents who were out with their children. Her eyes rested on them as they enjoyed the warm temperatures, but they didn't linger for too long.

It had been a long time since she'd found herself in a park, and she wondered why Harry had wanted to meet her here, of all places.

Hermione pulled the letter from her pocket and scanned its contents once more.

Ron had slipped it into her hand after she'd joined the Weasleys for dinner yesterday afternoon. It had been a terribly awkward affair, with a lot of empty chairs as Bill and Fleur and their two children were visiting Fleur's family in France, George was having dinner with his in-laws, and Percy was working late, again. Charlie was there, however, visiting for the week. He and Ron had offered her the seat between them, while a pale Harry and a tense Ginny sat across from them.

When Mrs. Weasley had asked Harry if he was ill, he'd replied with a tight, "Excuse me," and left the table. It was odd. Ginny had followed him out, but returned rather quickly with a taut smile and angry eyes. When Harry returned, Hermione noted the tension between them and the confusion in Ginny's eyes.

She, too, was confused.

Weren't they supposed to be in love with each other now? Weren't they supposed to be getting married? She'd known that Harry had agreed to help them investigate her, but that day, Harry had seemed to be repulsed by her presence...and Ginny seemed to be lost.

Needless to say, the rest of dinner had been abysmal. Mrs. Weasley directed hopeful looks at her and Ron, Harry had remained sullen and distracted, and Ginny had remained silent and

angry. Hermione had been ready to leave before Mrs. Weasley could clear the dinner dishes, but thank goodness for Charlie. If he hadn't been there as some sort of buffer from Ron's lingering looks, Harry's moodiness, Ginny's anger, Mrs. Weasley's secret smiles, and Mr Weasley's questions, Hermione was sure that she wouldn't have made it through dessert. But she had.

Barely.

She still felt like a stranger to them. She still didn't feel like she belonged, but she was trying.

Trying.

And she would try today, too. With Harry. Or, at least, she would attempt to try.

Hermione wasn't sure where the note had come from initially, but she suspected that Harry had given it to Ron before his hasty departure after dessert, without Ginny. Ron had given it to her after she'd extracted herself from one of Mrs. Weasley's lingering hugs. Ginny had watched the exchange with extreme curiosity, but said nothing. After delivering a letter of her own to Draco, Hermione had gone home to read Harry's in private.

She had expected one thing, but had gotten something else. It was a pleasant surprise. Harry had said that they needed to talk, alone, and that he had something to show her; something that was very important. It had been her curiosity and her deep need to settle things with him that had brought her to Little Whinging at the designated hour.

Harry was waiting for her.

True, she was more than a hundred casual strides away, his back was to her, and the sun was nearly blinding, but Hermione knew that it was him sitting on the two-person swing set. There was a gentle breeze in the air as she took a deep breath, squared her shoulders, and started walking towards him.

With each slightly hesitant step that she took, she watched him.

Hermione would always know Harry. He'd been such a large part of her life, such an important part of who she was and who she had become—both good and bad. It didn't matter if days, weeks, months, or even years had passed since she'd seen him last, Hermione would *always* know him. And it didn't matter how far they'd drifted away from each other, there was one thing that would tie them together for life.

Matthew.

His name resonated in her head, ribs, and belly, before echoing in the depths of her soul.

So much of her wanted to be angry at Harry for that night at her house. So much of her wanted to be angry at herself for all the mistakes that she'd made, too. But she couldn't be angry. Not at him and not at herself. Not really. If they hadn't made poor decisions, if they hadn't been so inexperienced, and if they hadn't been so flawed as human beings on those two nights, then she wouldn't have had Matthew.

Part of her pointed out that if she hadn't had Matthew, then she wouldn't have known what it felt like to lose a piece of her soul. Another part of her pointed out that it was the losses that had humbled her, moulded her, changed her, and finally helped her appreciate the things—and people—that she did have.

Hermione had always been the one with the answers, but the last few years taught her that there was always room for growth and development, even for the brightest witch of her generation. She wasn't perfect and more than capable of not thinking things through. All of her life, people had praised her for her poise and brilliance, but Hermione had understood that even the brilliant were still human.

And she'd understood that the people who were *truly* brilliant were the ones who had never given up, even though they'd screwed up, let people down, and had their backs up against the wall. Those were the truly brilliant people. Not Hermione. She'd given up. She'd had to sink to the bottom of the lake before she'd found her will to live.

She'd had to hit rock bottom before she'd found herself.

But perhaps she was being too hard on herself, and perhaps she was a bit too judgmental. Giving up wasn't a sign of weakness or stupidity. Perhaps it was a sign of her humanity. Perhaps it was a way for Hermione to understand just how *real* she was; a way to help her understand that she wasn't special or different from anyone else, regardless of what people had said.

Some people quit and some persevered.

Some people passed and others failed.

That was life; the good always entwined with the bad and provided balance.

And for the first time, she felt balanced.

Perhaps it was a good thing that she'd fallen so hard. Perhaps it was her failures and the act of giving up that had created the conditions that propelled her to this stage of her life.

She was twenty casual steps away from Harry when he kicked at the dirt, sending a cloud of dust into the air that was immediately carried away by the breeze. She was fifteen away when he ran his fingers through his hair and sighed. She was ten away when he tensed and turned his head.

Harry had realised that she was there.

He didn't look at all like the person who had left her in the Manor, but rather like the person who had been her best friend for such a substantial amount of her life. Maybe it would end better than their last conversation, but she wasn't going to throw caution to the wind. She would remain cautiously optimistic to avoid disappointment. It was the only way that she knew how to protect herself.

After an experimental tug on the chain of the swing to Harry's left, Hermione sat down after confirming that the entire set wouldn't come crashing down on them. Her legs were facing north and Harry's were facing south, but both of their eyes were fixated on the ground beneath their feet.

They sat like that for ages, listening to the creaking sounds that the old swing set made and the faint noises of children playing. Every now and then, a gust of wind would blow that made Hermione smile inwardly, and Harry would dig his trainers into the dirt, but no words were exchanged.

That was, until Harry said, "I was starting to think that you wouldn't come."

"I always planned to," Hermione replied truthfully, looking at him.

His eyes bore into hers for a quiet moment. "I'm glad you came."

"I know we need to talk. I'm really tired of this war between us."

All was silent before Harry muttered, "So am I." Hermione watched in silence as he dug his shoe into the dirt more. Just when she was about to say something, Harry stopped and said. "I've been a complete wanker, haven't I?" He looked about as horrible as he had at the dinner yesterday. "Wait, don't answer that. I don't need you to, because I *know* that I've been a complete and utter wanker."

Her instinct had been to tell him that it wasn't his fault, but she ignored instinct.

Hermione sighed. "I forgive you."

"But I haven't even apologized for my behaviour that night. I shouldn't have pushed."

"You were about to apologise?"

"Yes, of course, but—"

"Okay then, I forgive you."

"But why?" Harry looked as if he were at a loss.

Hermione looked at the ground before she met his mystified gaze. "I'm forgiving you, Harry, because once I narrow down the thirty-six colour samples that are still magicked to my wall, I'm going to paint the walls in my living room. It's going to be a renaissance, and I don't want to start fresh without mending what's broken between us. Or without at least starting the process." Hermione played with the note in her hands.

Thoughtfully, Harry turned his eyes away from her and stared out into the distance and Hermione wondered what he would say to her in response.

She didn't have to wait long.

"Okay."

A small smile started to grow on her face.

Harry adjusted his glasses that were starting to slip.

They sat in silence for a little while before Harry said offhandedly, "You look good." Hermione, who wasn't comfortable with any praise about her physical appearance, shifted uncomfortably in her swing. Harry noticed her discomfort and flushed. "I-I mean, you look a lot better...than you did...when...bloody hell...." He trailed off again, as if he were suddenly struck by a bad memory.

Yes, there were quite a few of them as far as their interactions were concerned, but it was no time to dwell. "Let it go. I have, or at least I'm trying to."

"Right." When she didn't say anything else, he sighed, "This awkwardness, I hate it." Harry's voice was painfully honest. "And you want to know something else I hate? Not having you as my friend. I miss that. I think I want our friendship more than I want...well, you know."

And she did know, but she didn't say anything. In fact, she really wanted him to move on. His feelings for her had always made her uncomfortable.

"I do, you know, still," he told her softly, "But you don't, and I'm ready to stop pushing it. I don't want to, but I have to, so I won't bring it up again."

That was certainly most unexpected. She looked at him, a bit flabbergasted, before she said, "We never had boundaries. That's why we are where we are; why things happened between us that shouldn't have and feelings got misinterpreted. I'm sorry for that. Everything between us has always been blurred to the point where—" Hermione sighed, not knowing what else to say. "We should start fresh."

He flushed a little before he asked, "Do you think we can get back to that? Our friendship?"

"No, I don't," Hermione replied just as honest. When he frowned and looked down, she added, "But, in time, I think that you, me, and Ron will be able to sit in the same room and talk without the past lingering over our heads. I think that we all can be friends again, but maybe not the best of friends."

"You think so?" When she nodded, he smiled wistfully, "That would be nice."

"To be honest, I can't wait for that day. I know that we're all going to have to work hard, forgive each other, bury our resentment, and swallow our pride in order to get to that point. I know that it's going to take time to heal our wounds and clean the bad blood between us all, but I think that we can do it. We all just have to be willing."

And large parts of her were willing. These were her *first* friends. Making peace with the past was vital to moving on to the future. "I'm willing, and I know that Ron is willing...."

"And, I'm willing, too."

Harry's declaration hung in the breezy air, muffled only slightly by the childish noises and the creaking swing. She didn't want to break the silence, but her curiosity wouldn't remain silent.

"I have to ask, Harry...what brought on all this?" When he looked at her, she cleared her throat and clarified her words, "It just seems so sudden."

The reluctance in his eyes was apparent. "I've been thinking about this situation with you for weeks, and I've been trying to talk to you about it, but I was a bit of a coward and couldn't face you. But it seems that I was wrong, about a lot of things, and let's just say that I had an interesting conversation made me see for the first time."

"And what do you see?"

"I see that there are a lot of things that I don't know and a lot of things that I still need to learn. I see that there are a lot of things that I've assumed prematurely. I see that maybe I don't know the people around me as well as I'd thought. I see that maybe if I would've opened my eyes, I could've seen all the things that you were trying to tell me, all the things that you've been trying to tell me. I..." he trailed off for a moment and sighed before he gritted his teeth and said, "I see that Malfoy isn't as wrong as I once thought he was..."

Hermione's face contorted in confusion. "Draco?"

"Malfoy told me to look closer, and I listened. I don't know why, but I did. I didn't like what I found."

"Harry, you're not making much sense."

The wizard ran a frustrated hand through his hair and kicked the dirt again. "In January, he told me that the world wasn't just black and white. He told me that I needed to shut up and pay attention, but I didn't. Not really. Then he told me to pay more attention to Ginny. Watch her. Listen to her. Look for things inside of our house." He looked a little distressed for a moment. "And I did. I looked. I listened. I snooped. I—I found things."

She just sat there and listened.

"I never thought I would. I mean, it's *Ginny*. She would never—" he shook his head. "I *thought* that she wasn't capable. I mean, she's *Ginny*. She wouldn't intentionally hurt me or keep something from me. I know that I've done some things that weren't right when it came to her, but—it's *Ginny*. She forgives and...you agree with me, right?"

Hermione, who had gone very stiff, turned her eyes away from him. "Harry..." she trailed off. There were so many things she wanted to tell him, but she wouldn't stoop that low. However, she could answer his question. "No, I don't."

The wizard looked confused. "But you two—you were friends, at Hogwarts. The best of friends."

She looked at him strangely. "I don't know where you got that idea from, but she wasn't my best friend. Not even close. You and Ron were." *Were*. Harry flinched at that word. Hermione remained mentally unapologetic.

It was true, after all.

Still, she understood why Harry had been so affected by her words. *Were*. The word was probably a slap in the face for him.

"Harry, I'm not going to sugarcoat anything, and I'm not going to sit here and give you back your title as my best friend, either. Yes, we're going to work things out so that we can become friends again, but we're not the same people we were at eleven. We're not even the same as we were at eighteen. And, you know, things don't automatically fix themselves because just we've forgiven each other."

"I know that. Don't get me wrong, I don't expect things to go back to what they used to be, but it's hard to sit here and know that I'm responsible for chasing off my best friend."

"You're not responsible for me. Hold yourself accountable for your own actions, not mine. Don't put my burdens on your back, Harry. Believe me, it doesn't end well. The pain, the depression, the sleepless nights—"

Harry snorted ruefully. "I know all about those. I haven't slept much since my conversation with Malfoy and Ron, but I'm not saying that I slept well before that day, either."

She opened her mouth to tell him all the things that her therapist had said, but stopped herself. Merlin only knew how poor her sleeping habits had been as of late. Worrying about Parvati and Ginny had left her watching her clock for a few hours, but now, with Malfoy—she sighed sadly. Finding sleep hadn't been an easy task.

And neither was eating breakfast.

Hermione cringed at the thought.

It wasn't that she missed the company. Between Pansy and Lavender, she never spent much time alone, period. It was just that she wanted their silence, even if it was kind of tense. And the tension between her and Malfoy kept her on her toes, but at the same time, it allowed her to think without the threat of words. It was comforting. More than the silence, Hermione missed the sounds of tinkering dishes, the ruffling of the latest edition of *The Daily Prophet*, and the way he gruffly thanked her every morning while she cleaned his kitchen. She missed the scent of black coffee and hot chocolate as they entwined in the air. And she missed watchful eyes and offhanded compliments that came from a reluctant mouth....

She shifted on the swing and tucked those thoughts safely into the back of her mind. She would deal with that problem later today, but right now, there was Harry. And he didn't look so well. "I don't know what to tell you about the sleeping problem, I'm still going through it myself, but I can suggest that you talk to someone. *Anyone*. It helps. Believe me. It does."

He said nothing in response, only nodded.

Everything was silent. The tension between them had somewhat mellowed, but it wasn't gone. She'd had the feeling that he wasn't done, that there was more to reveal, but she remained silent. It was best not to rush him or force him into doing something that he didn't want to do.

"She's lying to me."

Hermione was confused. "What?"

"Ginny. She's not just lying to me, but she's lying to people *about* me. She says that we're getting married and that we've picked out rings and—" he scratched his scar. "I just don't understand. Why would she lie?"

Hermione cleared her throat. "People lie for loads of different reasons."

The words hurt because, at one time, she had been one of those liars.

"Malfoy said that," he remarked gruffly.

"Well, he's right, you know," Hermione gently tugged on the ends of her hair. "I know that you two have had your issues, but he's actually not that bad—" As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she looked at the ground.

"You would say that. You're—"

"His friend," she interjected. "But that's not why I'm saying it, Harry. I'm saying it because it's true." Hermione scratched at the skin of her left forearm and said, "He's...*different*."

"Maybe to you, he is," Harry snorted. "But he still treats everyone else like shit."

She smirked sadly. Well, he was currently treating her as if she were no different from anyone else. Hermione dug her fingernails into her skin, hoping that it would make an impression. She was dying for a subject change. "People lie for so many different reasons. Why do you think Ginny is lying?"

Harry took a moment to chew his lip before answering, "It's like she's trying to make everyone think that we're perfect, but we aren't. Not even close..." he trailed off, again, and ran a hand over his hair to pat it down. It was useless. A gust of wind blew it right back out of place. "After she found out about Matthew, I thought we could work it out. I thought that we could salvage things between us. We've been together for over five years, and no, things weren't perfect, but they were stable. *We* were stable."

"Is that all you want? Stability?"

"You remember how chaotic things were. It was a mess. And just when things were starting to calm down, you left without a trace, and—" he seemed to be struggling with words. "I-I just wanted to wake up each morning and know that I wasn't going to lose someone else. And, Ginny, she was there. She was always there, she had always been there, and she promised that she would always be there. I couldn't let that go. Is that selfish of me?"

"I'm in no place to judge you."

The swing set creaked when Harry moved in his seat to get comfortable. "Malfoy was right. I don't love her. Fuck, I don't even *know* her. I thought that maybe once I realised that in

February, I could start to get to know her. I thought that maybe now it would be different, could be different...but I'm not sure it will be, and I'm even less sure that I want it to be."

"Harry—" Hermione spoke softly.

"I can't—" He shook his head.

"What is going on?"

The wizard paused and took a breath before he answered, "I woke up this morning, turned over, and didn't recognise the woman that I was in bed with. I knew she was Ginny, but the last nine days have made it alarmingly clear that I know more about Divination than I do about my girlfriend. You know, I stayed with her because she was there. I stayed with her because she wasn't you. I stayed with her because I knew that she wouldn't do anything to hurt me. And now..." he trailed off.

"Harry, I don't understand. What brought all this on?"

"The more I find out about her, the more I realise that she's not the woman that I thought she was. The more I find out, the more I come to understand what Malfoy was saying. The more I find out, the less I like her. Merlin, I'm not even sure that I like her, at this moment. What she did was—"

"What happened? What did she do?" Maybe he was going to explain why he seemed so repulsed at dinner.

"You see, Malfoy and Ron asked me to start spying on Ginny, and I agreed. Malfoy had all these accusations, and part of me wanted to prove him wrong...and the other part of me wanted answers."

"What—"

"Just listen, Hermione."

She nodded.

"The first day, I didn't find anything out of the ordinary. The second day, she came home a bit morose. She said that she'd had a bad day at work..."

"Go on, Harry."

The wizard looked at her for a moment and sighed. "The third day, I came home a little early to do some looking around, and I found her and Parvati talking in the living room. When I asked her later on what they were talking about, she said that they were just having a girl's night in and she changed the subject. I didn't ask any more questions. On the fourth day, she caught me looking at her schedule for the month and completely blew up at me when I asked why she was having lunch with Parvati so much. She screamed at me about asking so many questions and about not trusting her. And that's when it hit me. She was lying about something. I'd only asked why she was having lunch, and she launched a full-scale defence. It just didn't add up."

Hermione's heart was beating wildly, but she maintained her composure. "No...it doesn't."

"After that, I started really looking, but I didn't find anything, again. But then," Abruptly, Harry stood to his feet. She watched with curious brown eyes as he started digging in the pockets of his trousers. He carefully pulled out a folded piece of old parchment and stared at it with a look that she couldn't read. "I found a box under her bed. I never even thought to look there before. I mean, I moved into *her* flat. I never thought—" he froze and took a breath. "I figured out how to break the spells around it. It was easy. There were a lot of photos and trinkets that she'd kept from school, but underneath all of that, I found this," he turned and handed Hermione the parchment. "Open it."

Parts of her didn't want to, but her overwhelming emotion was curiosity. So, with shaking fingers and a wildly beating heart, she unfolded the letter once, twice, and a third time before she focused on the words on the page. She recognised the handwriting instantly. *Harry*. It looked rushed, like the potions essays that he'd written the night before they were due. Her eyes first moved to the date.

It was day after she left. She would never forget it. It was the day she'd received a letter from Ginny.

She looked at Harry, who was watching her intensely. "This is the letter that you sent."

He nodded sadly.

Hermione folded the letter. She couldn't read it. Not then. Not when she couldn't breathe. Not when she was so...so...so *angry*. But as soon as it flared, it simmered. No. No more 'what if's'. Hermione had promised herself. No more.

"Are you going to read it?"

She honestly couldn't. Her heart was too full of so many different emotions that she wanted to gag. "I—I can't." Harry's brows furrowed, but she quickly added, "Just not now. I—it's a lot, you know. A lot to take in." She looked down at the letter. The tension in her head was incredible. "I think she's working with Parvati. I think she's helping her. I'm not sure why."

"Parvarti found Matthew's birth certificate on her own. Ginny didn't have anything to do with it." Harry told her. "I think this whole article about Malfoy being Matthew's father is Ginny's way of protecting the truth."

"How do you know that?" Hermione didn't trust it.

"Because she sent Ginny a letter and asked her if she knew you'd had a child."

And then he produced it.

Part Three: The truth.

Draco felt as if he were walking to his own execution.

He'd opened his connection and Flooed over to Granger's house. Draco had been expecting to find her on the sofa, waiting for him, but had been greeted with a different scene. Her house was empty, save for an annoyed kitten. Draco had frowned and looked around.

Apollo meowed. Draco glared. Apollo meowed, again.

When he'd asked where Granger was, the kitten responded by ignoring him completely and licking his paw. So, he'd asked again, in a firmer tone. Apollo looked at him blankly before he yawned. *Nice*. Draco finally sighed, lost the demanding tone, and asked him a third time. The kitten had taken his precious time before he hopped off the sofa and trotted pompously to the patio door. Draco had been in the middle of scowling when he'd caught sight of a weird-looking wall of colour swatches. He walked towards it, confusion etched in his brow, when an exasperated meow rang out in the silence. He'd turned and started for the patio door, and after squinting a bit, he'd spotted Granger sitting on the edge of her pier.

Sunset was already underway.

As he walked towards her, dread hung over his head like a rain cloud. It showered anxiety and fear down on him in torrents. There was no real reason to be afraid, but he had every reason in the world to be nervous. Last night, Draco had drank and contemplated, paced and deliberated, but he hadn't figured out what he was going to say to her.

Oh, he'd come prepared with a list of lies, but they all seemed flat, and his conscience was bugging him, telling him to just be honest.

Yeah, well, fuck that.

He could imagine the look on Granger's face if he'd broken down and told her the truth.

Draco cringed at the mere thought as he stepped onto the pier. Yes, better keep the truth to himself.

Nothing had always been better than rejection, he was almost certain of it.

So, he decided that was going to put on his gravest mask and wear it throughout the conversation. He would not waver. He would not cave. He would not do anything that he didn't want to do. Right. So, he squared his shoulders and continued walking towards her.

It amazed Draco that Granger hadn't turned her head once. He'd thought surely she would at some point. After all, he had been walking hard enough in hopes that it would get her attention before he was standing behind her. No such luck. It didn't matter that her wards had probably announced his arrival long before he'd walked out; she had always taken the time to look at him before. There was an irritating tightness in his stomach when he realised that she hadn't looked at him in—Draco physically swatted that thought away as if it were an annoying mosquito.

He couldn't see what she was looking at, but whatever it was had left her engrossed to the point that the second time he'd stepped particularly hard, she hadn't looked. She hadn't even flinched. Draco had watched her shoulders for a reaction, but there was none. He suppressed his annoyance with her and himself as he came to a full stop behind her.

Still, Granger didn't move.

Draco folded his arms. He hadn't even wanted to be there in the first place. Draco watched as her hand moved to scratch the back of her head. It was a wonder that her hand didn't get lost in the jungle that was her hair.

He rubbed the back of his neck.

Perhaps it wasn't that bad. Sure the curls were a bit windblown and messy, but that was to be expected given the length of time that Granger probably had been out there. He wagered that it had been at least three hours, but frowned when he realised that it wasn't likely that he'd find out the true length of time.

Draco remembered his task.

No meaningless chit-chat. Just answer her questions and leave as fast as he could.

That same hand moved to gather the rest of her hair and she swept it over her right shoulder. Not that it did much good. It seemed to recoil back into place, like a brand new spring. He was humoured, but he'd trapped it behind his stony mask.

It was unseasonably warm, and while he'd stuck to a slightly casual version of his typical attire, Granger had dressed according to the weather—short sleeves and Muggle denim shorts. She was leaned forward in such a way that the back of her pale pink shirt had ridden up a bit, showing just a hint of pale skin on her lower back. Draco was surprised by his reaction that left his cheeks a little warm. In an attempt to ward off that thought, he cleared his throat.

Hermione turned her head and looked genuinely surprised to see him there. "Oh, I didn't hear you come out. I thought that you were waiting inside. I'm sorry," she apologised, but never met his eyes.

There were four things that he noticed immediately: her splotchy cheeks, bloodshot eyes, hoarse voice, and the wetness on her face. She'd been crying. Quite recently. Draco started to ask her what was wrong, but stopped himself. That move didn't agree with his straightforward plan. Instead, he looked out over the water. His eyes didn't drift back to her until she stood to her feet. She was carefully folding a piece of old parchment. Draco couldn't help himself. He was curious. "What's that?"

Granger looked down at it momentarily before she wiped her eyes, again. "It's a letter that I never received."

"Potter found it?" It wasn't that Draco couldn't believe that Potter had actually found something that he'd only speculated about, it was that he'd listened to him enough to look.

Perhaps the naivety was finally gone, perhaps the blinders had finally come off, and perhaps Scarhead wasn't as much of a lost cause as he'd once thought.

She nodded somberly. "In a warded box under their bed. Would you like to see it?" Hermione held it out to him.

"No," Draco replied stiffly.

Hermione tucked the letter into her pocket and stared past him for a few minutes.

The silence had left him pathetically tense. Draco shifted his weight six times and tried not to think about how the paleness of her skin had made the freckles on her back more pronounced.

Son of a bitch.

The sun was sinking into the horizon. The cool down had begun.

"Why are we here, Draco?" Granger asked suddenly.

He was momentarily taken off guard. "We're standing here because you planned this," he answered gruffly.

She shook her head. "No, that's not what I meant. I meant, why are we *here*..." she stressed the final word, "As in, at this point in our relationship."

Again, he was taken by surprise. Relationship? He inwardly blanched. He thought about purchasing a dictionary for her because what they had was *not* defined as a relationship.

Or maybe it was.

Friendships were just a type of relationship, right?

Still, he didn't know what the hell she was going on about. Rather than stand there and stare at her blankly, Draco answered, "I'm not sure I follow."

Hermione's lips pursed before she clarified. "Why is it that we can stand a metre apart and not look at each other?"

"I'm looking at you now."

She shifted her weight from her left foot to her right. "That's not the point, Draco."

"Then, what *is* your point, Hermione?" he asked sharply.

"My point is that there's something wrong...between us. We were friends until that dinner party, and then—"

He didn't look at her when he said, "There's nothing wrong."

"There obviously is because you're not looking at me right now," she pointed out quickly.

When he met her eyes, Granger searched his as if the answer had been hidden behind his irises all along, but she had never been given the chance to look. Draco, who had been prepared for her penetrating gazes, attempted to look as indifferent as possible before *really* looking at her. He'd been surprised to see her so open to him. The sadness in them was clear to him, but he assumed that it was from Potter's letter.

A few moments into their staring contest, Hermione looked away. "Now I *know* that there's something wrong."

"Oh, and how's that?" he quipped with a roll of his eyes.

"You've put your mask back on."

Draco paled, but never lost his resolve. "There's nothing wrong," he maintained, because it was all he could do not to ask her the question that was on his mind.

Her voice rose a notch. "Quit *lying* to me. There's something wrong with you—with us." She shook her head and looked as if the word sounded odd coming from her lips. "With our friendship."

He'd had grown weary with repeating the same sentence over and over again. Why couldn't she just leave things alone? Why did she always have to meddle? Draco supposed that Granger wasn't much different from him. After all, his meddling was the reason he was even *in* this predicament.

"Fine, since you have nothing to say on that topic, speak on this one. Why are you avoiding me?"

He felt another one of those sharp pinches in his stomach as the cloud of dread over his head started to rumble. "I'm—" He couldn't even lie. Not about that. Draco had been avoiding her. He hadn't just underestimated her awareness; he'd underestimated her level of caring. Granger wouldn't have even bothered to bring it up had she not.

"You're what?" her voice sounded a bit angry. "Don't you say that you're not avoiding me, Draco. You blocked off your Floo. If that's not—"

Draco had had enough. He was guilty as charged. "You don't have to remind me of all the things that I've done."

Hermione took a step backwards as she recoiled from the truth of his words. "I didn't do anything."

"I know." And he really did know that.

"We're supposed to be friends."

And for the first time since he'd classified her as one, Draco found himself hating the word. *Friend*. He scowled but said nothing to her. The word had sparked something that he couldn't understand. It was an unfamiliar form of frustration, and he couldn't stop it from

mounting. It started in the soles of his feet and quickly rose to his ankles. "I understand that," he said a little dully.

"Then be honest with me."

"No," he cut her off brusquely. That was out of the question.

Granger seemed a bit confused by his curt answer. "No, what? No, you won't be honest with me?"

"Precisely."

She pinched the bridge of her nose hard. Draco could tell that her frustration with him had risen sharply. "You're *such* a bastard." Her voice was low and thick. "You think that you can do whatever the hell you want, and people are just going to roll over and take it. You think that you can treat people however the hell you want to treat them, and they're always going to be there." Her voice was rising steadily. "And, while I'm sure that may work for Pansy and Blaise, it sure as hell won't work for me!"

"Why, exactly, are you yelling at me?" he asked as he folded his arms.

Granger's voice had taken on an emotional edge when she replied, "Why am I yell—" she made a sound that was a mix between a grunt and a groan. "You can't treat me this way. You can't just be my friend one day and completely blot me from your life the next. Friendships just don't work like that."

By that point, the foreign feeling in his ankles had risen to his knees. "If you don't like my treatment, then you're free to walk away."

"That's the point that I'm trying to make. I don't want to walk away! I want to understand! I want to try and fix it, but I can't fix anything if you won't tell me what happened."

"I don't *have* to do anything!" he yelled once the foreign feeling climbed into the pit of his stomach.

Granger seemed startled by the tone of his voice, and worse than that, she looked absolutely wounded. She tightened her grip around her waist, almost as if she were hugging herself.

"You can't make me do anything that I don't want to do, Granger. It doesn't work like that."

"I think—I think I'm beginning to see that. I'm beginning to see a lot of things, actually," she told him softly. "I'm beginning to see that you don't care about our friendship. I'm beginning to see that you don't even care about me."

"Now you're putting words into my mouth."

"*Words?*" she shot back fiercely. "You haven't said anything worth mentioning, Draco! Just lies and excuses and senselessness that I don't even think *you* understand, but I do."

Hermione said angrily. "I don't have to put words in your mouth. Your actions over the last few weeks have spoken pretty loud and clear."

There wasn't much that he could say—actually, that wasn't true. He knew what he could say to her that would just end everything, but, again, that wasn't an option.

"Sorry I—I wasted your precious time," she said bitterly. "It won't happen again. I'll go."

Draco fixed a blank stare on his face and watched as she started down the pier. Relief was pumping through his veins, but that strange feeling was creeping up his body. He wanted to pinch and pull at his tingling skin, but he couldn't. He wanted to open his mouth, but, again, he couldn't. Draco's hands flexed as she turned her back to him. Part of him was screaming in victory; screaming because he had made it through the talk without fucking anything up... except their friendship. He frowned at the word and the truth. The second part of him was screaming as well, but for a different reason.

It was screaming that he was the biggest fool to ever walk the Earth.

She took a step away, then another, and just when he thought that she would get in the rhythm of walking away, Hermione stopped. His breathing seemed to slow as she turned around. That foreign feeling was moving swiftly into his chest. It felt as if he were exhaling cold air.

"Be sure to block your Floo when you leave, I'll make sure I block mine." Her eyes became vacant for a moment, and then she shook herself out of it. She met his blank gaze with open and honest eyes that were brimming with tears. "I was wrong for asking you to come here. I was wrong."

Draco was stunned even further into silence. He couldn't breathe. That tone. Her words. Her eyes. The *pain* in them. The emotion that he'd assumed was directed towards Potter's letter... it had been directed at him.

And that left him even colder inside.

It wasn't his intention. Of course, he was a bit heartless sometimes, but he wasn't that cruel. He'd kept away for himself and he hadn't thought about her. That was the truth. He wasn't the kind of person who purposefully hurt someone he cared about and constantly fought for. That just seemed counterproductive and senseless in this situation. And no matter what she'd assumed, he *did* care.

But he cared *more* about protecting himself.

And now, it seemed that in protecting himself, he'd made an egregious error.

She was open and honest, to him. She trusted him, but more than that, Granger trusted in him to not hurt her. He was nauseated, even as he spoke. "Granger, I—"

His weak attempt at an apology was cut off by her dull tone. "You don't have to say anything else, Malfoy." Hermione looked at the ground. "I get it. I'm not going to lie, it hurts because we've got through a lot of shit together, and you don't need to explain it any furth—"

"I haven't explained anything at all!"

Hermione's eyes narrowed, forcing a tear to roll down her cheeks. "Then do it."

Draco opened his mouth but snapped it shut as he choked yet again.

He wasn't sure where to start.

She chuckled ruefully after a few moments of silence, and nodded her head. "Just as I thought."

And that did it. Just as she thought? Those four fucking words—her *dismissal*—were enough to propel that foreign feeling right into his brain. It took up residence in his emotional control center, blotting out all rational thought. He was a volcano on the brink of exploding. Okay, he was exploding. "Just as you thought? Well, surprise, surprise, Granger, you thought wrong! I was trying to apologise! If you had waited, you would've heard me try to explain, but no! No, you didn't wait! You just—"

"I did wait!" she yelled at him. "We've been out here for over thirty minutes, and I've been waiting for you to say *something*, but you haven't! You just stood there and looked at me as if you were—"

"I didn't say anything because I *couldn't* say anything!"

"There's no one here holding a *wand* to your head! There's nothing here that you can use as an excuse, except for yourself! You had a choice! You *made* a choice! You didn't say anything because you didn't want to!"

"You're right! I didn't!"

"Why!"

"Why do you even care, Granger?" he shouted.

"Because—because I'm selfish, too! Because I don't want you to throw me away as if I don't matter! Because I do matter, dammit! I matter! And *you* matter to me! We've been through too much to just go back to being strangers! I'm your friend—"

"Stop *saying* that word!"

"Why?"

"No, it's because every time you say it, I feel like something is kicking me between the eyes! I'm *sick* of hearing it, and I'm sick of you saying it! I don't want to *be* your friend!"

The silence was deafening.

Their shouted words floated in the air between them, and he felt as sick as she looked. The emotions on that pier were so heavy that they threatened to crush them both. Hermione's reaction and Draco's realisation at what he had said happened simultaneously. She started backing away from him, looking as if she'd taken a stunner without warning. And all Draco could do was watch. He felt as if something were in his throat, choking him. Wet tears started down her cheeks, and Draco had never felt more lost than he felt at that moment.

It was the truth. Those words that he'd screamed at her. They were *true*.

And, in that moment, Draco realised that he was a lot worse off than he'd anticipated.

He didn't want to be her friend. He wanted—the thought was interrupted by Hermione turning her back to him, looking absolutely defeated. Why was *she* so upset? *He* had been the one to have that horrifying revelation. Not—oh shit.

Shit.

He rubbed the back of his neck. Bloody hell, he'd really made a mess of things. He sighed to himself. How could he have allowed things to spiral out of control? Draco had come in with a plan, albeit a bad one, but it was still a plan. Now, he had to say something...*anything*. The first words to come to his mind were absolutely wrong for the situation, so he went with his second, which was a bit more honest than he would've liked. "I didn't mean that. Not in the way that—"

Granger whirled around with an angry finger pointed at him, "*Don't*—don't say a *word* to me."

Her fierce tone and furious eyes left Draco momentarily speechless, but when he pulled himself together his tone wasn't so different from hers. "You wanted me to talk, and so I did. And now, you don't want me to talk. It sounds to me like I'm not the only one that doesn't know what they want."

"Oh, congratulations, you talked!"

"I told you the truth. That's what you wanted. But—"

"But nothing!" Hermione exclaimed. "Don't stand there and act like you did me some huge favour by telling me." She lowered her head and muttered more to herself than him. "I'd forgotten how much it hurts."

"If you'd just let me—"

"What? Twist the knife in deeper?"

"You misinterpreted my words," he blurted out. Draco almost slapped the palm of his hand against his forehead. Apparently, the connection between his brain and his mouth was faulty today, and it wasn't a good idea for him to speak. He was saying absolutely *everything* he didn't want to say.

Granger looked utterly bewildered. "What?"

Draco gritted his teeth because he felt as if he were backed against the wall. Any move would be his last. "I didn't mean it that way," he muttered reluctantly.

"Then what way did you mean it?"

He wanted to laugh—or do something that would relieve the tension in his shoulders and get him out of the corner that he was in. Hermione was looking at him with confused eyes, and all he wanted to do was jump in the lake. "I..." He needed a moment, but no, she was there, waiting and expecting an answer from him—an answer that he wasn't sure that he could give.

After a few moments of silence, Granger shook her head. "You know what? That's okay. I'm tired of fighting with you, and I'm tired—"

Draco cut her off rather brutally. "*Tired?*" As angry as he was, the word had come out almost in a harsh whisper. "You think *you're* tired? There is *no one* more tired than I am, let's get that straight, Granger." Before he knew it, he was standing right in front of her. "I have *never* thought about something as much as I've thought about this. I have spent *weeks* agonising, avoiding, weighing out my options, fighting, drinking, and not sleeping. I've done *everything* that I can think of to do, but it's not going anywhere."

"What are you talking about?"

"This!" he shouted. "*You!*"

Granger looked taken aback. "Me?"

"Yes, *you!* I don't know when it happened, where it happened, or how it happened, but it did, and—stop *looking* at me like that!" Hermione took a shocked step backwards. "You wanted the truth. You made me come here and tell you the truth, so, here it is. I'm sure you already know it because that big-mouthed asshole told you already. But, for the record, I do care about you, Granger. I care too fucking *much* about you."

She stared at him with such wide eyes, paler than he'd ever seen.

"I have *feelings* for you, Hermione," he told her harshly. "I look for you in every room I walk into and *every* action I've done has been with you in mind. I ignored you to make it go away, but I can't. I just fucking can't! I'm not proud of it, and I'm hate that practically screaming at you, but I can't take it anymore. I can't...I cant..." Draco was practically gasping for air.

He couldn't explain how he felt. It was a mix between relieved and horrified with a sprinkle of guilt that stemmed from him dumping all of his frustration onto her shoulders. She seemed to bear the extra weight quietly, but her head was lowered, so he couldn't read her face.

It was probably for the best.

And then he heard her sniffle.

"I bet you feel loads better, huh, Draco?" her voice sounded odd and strangled. She lifted her head and her eyes were cold and dark. It was his turn to look shocked. "You're a complete and *utter* ass, Malfoy. What did you expect me to do? Swoon? *Cheer?*"

No, he hadn't expected any of that.

He had expected her eyes to widen in horror, and maybe he had expected her to run away.

Oh, who was he kidding? Draco hadn't had a real expectation because he'd never planned on even telling her. And now, he was faced with an irate witch. "Since my reaction doesn't seem to be one that you had expected, how would you like me to respond? Would you like me to be happy over something that's made you *so* miserable? You care about me '*too*' fucking much'? Is that what you said? That's fucking—" she almost choked on a dry and bitter laugh as she backed away from him. "Bugger this."

She turned on her heels and walked away.

It was the second time Granger had walked away from him. Draco blinked, twice, and fixed his lips to tell her to stop. There was a moment suspended in time when all he wanted to do was fix what he'd said; a moment when all he wanted to do was apologise, not for what he'd said, but *how* he'd said it.

But the moment was just that.

A moment.

And the moment, like Hermione, was already gone.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Um. It took reading this nine years later for me to realize that there was no other way he was going to confess his feelings. Also shout out to Mr. Darcy/Elizabeth. Because while I didn't think about them when I wrote this, it really really throws me back into P&P.

at the mercy of history

Chapter Summary

After all, people loved a good story—even if it wasn’t true.

Chapter Notes

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

Chapter Thirty

At The Mercy of History

Part One: The art of letting go

May 7th

Hermione stopped reading.

There was more, but she was finished for the day. She massaged her temples and jotted down notes as she worked on the timeline of events at her dining table. Harry had found the first of Parvarti and Ginny’s exchanges by happenstance, but the rest were stuffed in the breadbox they never used. He’d found them and made copies and brought them to Hermione’s house while she pieced everything together.

It turned out they were both right, and both wrong.

And yet something felt missing.

Harry had been right when he said that Ginny wasn’t an accomplice; that she hadn’t given Parvarti what she needed to find Matthew’s birth record. She’d found it on her own—her method questionable, at best. But he had been wrong, too. In response to her first letter, Ginny had tried to lie, and she’d threatened to go to the press with a conception period that was far too close to the truth, and Ginny had caved.

She’d given her every letter Hermione had written to her over the years, the photos she’d sent, and the name and address of where she lived and worked. It likely was a diversion tactic, but truthfully, she’d given her just what she needed. Ginny probably thought it would end the story, but the letters never stopped and Ginny never stopped responding. When

Parvarti started pressing for the father, Ginny first said he was Ron's, which she didn't believe because Hermione had dropped off the face of the Earth.

And that was how Malfoy got brought into the fracas.

Ginny had played dumb and Parvarti needed a father. Simple as that.

And that was when she became complicit—when she suggested using Malfoy and started spinning a tale of a post-battle romance that was utter bullshit. She and Draco growing closer as Draco's post-war trial approached—a trial she and Harry had actually testified at—and ending when Matthew was born. Words like lust, lies, family secrets, bigotry, and safety were thrown about. They'd even tied that into her previously quashed story about them dating while in Paris as proof.

But as flimsy as the story was, Hermione knew the truth.

It was going to be *sensational*.

A bloody train wreck at its finest.

After all, people loved a good story—even if it wasn't true.

She folded the last of the letters rather haphazardly.

The key to the speculative journalism Parvarti specialised in was to get as close to the truth without going into detail. It was okay to have large holes because subsequent stories could be written at a later date for her ravenous readers. A bit of misinformation here, a bit of hearsay there, a few photos and *voila*. A story. Ginny was using Malfoy to lure Parvarti away from the truth, but what she hadn't realised was that her lies would force Hermione's hand.

Ginny couldn't rewrite history. She couldn't drag Hermione through the mud and protect Harry at the same time. Because the truth had a funny way of making itself known despite being locked away. Parvarti had been *too close* and it would only take someone else point out the obvious flaws before the truth would rear its ugly head.

One chink in the armour and everything would fall to pieces.

Hermione knew that better than anyone.

She put away her timeline and sat down her quill, looking around and frowning.

The room felt as stale as it was silent, and she didn't like it. Pansy and Lavender were in the sitting room having a quiet conversation. Blaise had left by Floo to Seamus and Lavender's home to help arrange everything that Hermione had given them. Harry was sitting at the table with her, chewing on his fingers as he read through the letters. Even Apollo was just sitting next to the table, licking his paw.

The silence was maddening.

She looked over at Harry. "What do you want to do?" It was a perfectly reasonable question, but she felt strange all the same for asking.

He looked up rather abruptly as he fixed his glasses with a practised finger. "About?"

"The article." Hermione said, "If it comes out and someone—" she made a gesture. "What's our plan?"

Because they had to have one and at the core of it all, it was her and Harry's cross to bear.

"We can tell the truth, but I don't think it would make anything better."

Hermione frowned thoughtfully.

He was right. It would be the scandal for the ages and something she'd factored in when she left. Had Harry not been who he was, and had they not been the heroes they were, it would not have mattered. They would have been ordinary people and perhaps, she would not have left in the first place. But she banished the 'what if' from her mind. At the end of it all, regardless of who they were, they still had a right to privacy and not to have the result of a teenaged indiscretion sensationalised for profit. Matthew deserved better. But if it did come out, could she do it? Could she pull the trigger, so to speak?

The house of cards would crumble on her, more than Harry, because women were judged more harshly. That was just fact, however antiquated. She knew the things they would say about her, the names they would call her, and the stigma that would be attached to her. After all, *The Scarlet Letter* was also a social commentary and Hermione knew what she would do if the circumstances arose.

Pansy came into the dining area where they sat. She stood at the doorway, eyeing all the letters on the table that Hermione had spent the better part of the evening combing through. "How is it coming along in here?" Pansy asked. She didn't spare a glance at Harry.

It was no secret that despite Harry and Hermione's attempt to mend bridges, there was no love lost. He and Blaise had a work relationship. As far as Draco and Harry went, they had reached some sort of silent understanding that left Harry no longer sneering at the very mention of Draco's name. The only person that he really had contempt for was Pansy and only because she was vocal of her contempt for him. They merely tolerated each other for Hermione's sake.

"It's going well. I'm almost finished going through Ginny's letters."

"Lavender just left with Chase." And that was Pansy's way of saying it was getting late.

Hermione nodded absently and pinched the bridge of her nose. She glanced at her watch. It was half past six. She'd been at it since three in the morning. No wonder her head hurt. She hadn't eaten since earlier when Pansy had come in with lunch. *Hours ago*.

She turned to Harry. "We can pick this up later."

He nodded. "I'll keep looking for more." He started folding all the letters and stacking them in the order Hermione had organised them. She wasn't used to it, Hermione thought as she watched him. She had been a single mother. If there was a problem, she dealt with it. And, now Harry was there. And it felt odd, but nice in a way that she wasn't on her own. Darkly, she thought about if it would have been that way all along. She closed her eyes as familiar feelings of self-loathing arose.

Her head throbbed harder.

"All is quiet on the Patil front." Pansy said, not knowing the mental strain Hermione was under. "Skeeter is working her to the bone."

Hermione nodded again; her mouth tasted like ash. "I need to finish packing." She looked over at Pansy. "Speaking of, Blaise told me that he would take the clothes to charity."

Pansy nodded. "He'll be back soon."

"That's fine." It was better that way.

There was a rather tense silence that fell between them and Pansy left the room during it with Apollo bouncing behind her. It stretched, but it didn't last. And it was fine because Hermione was struggling under the weight of her own guilt again. But rather than drown, she took several breaths and knew that it would sink back into the recesses of her mind. Ever-present, but muted until triggered again.

It was a cycle that wouldn't end.

"I have to go to the Burrow for dinner tonight. Are you coming?"

She pulled at the skin on her arm, pinching it tight until the skin was red. The pain was distracting.

"I have some things to do, so no."

Mrs. Weasley had begged her to come, but she couldn't bear another dinner with Ron's almost shy glances, Ginny's glares, and Harry's uncomfortable...everything. Once she finished packing, she was going to fold the clothes in the storage room and spend the evening curled up with her cat, a book, and a blanket. Oh, and dinner. If she could eat.

"Right. I understand." And with that, Harry waved and left by Floo.

Hermione sat on the sofa and recollected herself before she went upstairs and resumed packing.

She was doing this for a reason, Hermione thought as she packed the last of Matthew's old shirts into a bag and closed it with a tight knot. There just had to be a reason for why she was limiting herself to only an overstuffed box of keepsakes from his four years of life. And no, it wasn't madness, as she'd originally suspected. It was—it was something that didn't make much sense to her when she'd first started packing. It was something that she hadn't even planned or even considered. There was no spot for it in her to-do list that day; no rhyme or

reason or cause for any of this. Hermione had just sat up in bed that morning with the idea in her head and the urge to start giving things away.

She'd already given away so much. His bed, furniture, some of his untouched toys, and a few of his books that he'd never gotten around to reading were given to a very reluctant Seamus and Lavender for *their* son. Matthew's tricycle, changing table, crib, bassinet, lamps, brand new blankets, and the rest of his books and toys that weren't in her box of keepsakes had been taken to various donation centres in London earlier by a confused Blaise. And now. Now, there wasn't much of anything left—just three bags of his clothes and her parents' prized artwork that she hadn't had the courage to add to the lone painting above her fireplace.

Hermione stared at the bags of carefully packed clothes with an extremely heavy heart and tears in her eyes. Shirts in one, pants in another, and shoes in the last; all folded and cleaned because they had been cold and stale from months of sitting in boxes in a cold attic.

Months.

It hadn't been that long, had it?

Hermione hugged herself around her waist. *It had*. She stared at the bags. Over a year ago, these clothes were on his back. And now...now there was nothing. There was only emptiness, sadness, and silence. Now, they were in cold and impersonal black bags. Now, they were organised instead of strewn about. There were no signs of jelly or ketchup on his shirts, no grass stains on the knees, and mud caked on the bottoms of his shoes. The items in those bags didn't smell like him anymore. They didn't smell like anything. And that had left her feeling a little cold on the inside.

But maybe that had made it easier. Easier for her to touch them long enough to pack them. Easier for her to give them away. And maybe that had been the reason why she couldn't bring herself to give away anything that was now in her overstuffed box of keepsakes. They were irreplaceable.

Hermione turned her head at the light knock on the door.

It was Blaise, and standing next to him was Harry.

She thought that he had left.

"Are you absolutely certain about this?" Blaise asked.

Giving these things away was easier, but the act wasn't. But Hermione knew that it had to be done. It had been a long time coming; that much she had known. She had to let go sometime, but she didn't think that she'd be quite so calm about it. She had anticipated the mental breakdown, planned for the deep depression, and expected for the process to be long and excruciating.

But, in that moment, she felt—okay.

In the strictest definition of the word.

Yes, there was pain and a crushing feeling in her chest. And, yes, the longing that she'd felt when she was folding his clothes was almost debilitating. But Hermione hadn't fallen apart. It was time. Yes, it was time to learn the art of letting go.

"Yes, yes," her voice was watery, but she remained steadfast. Hermione turned her back, and didn't turn around again until she was sure that all three bags and the two men were gone. Gone. Hermione took a deep breath and hoped that it would keep the real tears at bay. Then another because the first breath hadn't worked well.

She was doing this for a reason, Hermione thought again, as she moved to the window.

Yes, for a reason.

"Are you okay?" Pansy's voice rang out in the silence.

Hermione numbly nodded. "I'm just drained." There was a lengthy pause where all she heard was the sound of Pansy's heels as she walked across the room. She then felt the other witch's chin rest on her left shoulder, and turned her head slightly to look at her.

Pansy was looking straight out the window when she said, "With everything that's going on with—" she cut herself off and muttered, "It's understandable."

She shut her eyes tightly. Hermione didn't want to think about everything that was going on. It was all too much for her brain to process, and it had left her quite numb. Between the emotionally draining process of clearing most of her son's belongings from her storage room, and the Parvarti and Ginny debacle, it was a miracle that she was as composed as she was. Hermione had been working so hard at piecing the puzzle together because, more than ever, she just wanted it to be over. She'd had enough drama to last her a lifetime, and she wanted to be free from the prison she'd locked herself in.

"What are you thinking about?" Pansy asked softly from behind her.

She sighed. "I'm tired of being tired."

Hermione turned her head when she felt Pansy move and watched as she leaned against the wall next to the window. She was pensive for a moment before she said, "Then don't." Pansy said. "I've been thinking about it, and I think that we should use your spa weekend—"

"But it's for the weekend only—"

Pansy waved her off. "I can write the resort. I've been going there for *years*. They'll let me change it to any three days that I choose, so that's not a problem." Pansy paused for a few moments before she said, "You need to get away, and I'm sure that you can get the three days off of work. I know I can." When Hermione nodded, Pansy continued, "I think the time away will do you some good."

She sighed. The spa *would* be very distracting.

"Just think about it. There will only be you, me and a team of magical masseuses. No drama, no worries, no Ginny and Parvarti, no Draco—" she abruptly paused. When Hermione

frowned and shifted the weight from one foot to the other, Pansy uttered a soft, "Shit," and cleared her throat. "I—"

Hermione's eyes lowered to her feet.

Draco. She hadn't heard his name since Blaise had tried to talk to her four days ago; she hadn't seen him since that disastrous shouting match on the pier a little over a week ago. Hermione stared out the window that gave her a clear view of where the fight had taken place.

She'd replayed the argument in her head at the oddest times: in the shower, at work, during lunch with Pansy, when she was petting Apollo...just to name a few. Eating lunch at her favourite restaurant was practically impossible because all she could think about was the things that he'd said, the things she'd said, and the things that they'd said to one another. Standing on her pier two days ago had made her stomach turn almost violently because all she could think about were the unspoken words and anger. Hearing his name only made Hermione think about her recent realisations...

Her emotions had been all over the place that evening, but anger was the only emotion present in her mind when she'd left Draco. But once the anger had passed, the torrent of unreleased emotions had shifted to disbelief. It hadn't taken much longer for the gravity of his words to sink into her skin. Malfoy liked her—*no*, that was too juvenile to describe what was really going on.

Draco Malfoy had real, honest-to-god *feelings* for her.

For her.

It was astonishing, but Hermione shouldn't have been too surprised. Pansy had told her about his feelings, in too many words, but to hear him yell them at her was something completely different. He wasn't proud of his feelings, and moreover, he wasn't ready for them. Hermione wasn't sure how to feel about that. In the heat of the moment, she'd been too furious even look at him. And hours after she'd left, Hermione still found herself upset. However, as the days passed and her anger cooled, she found that she was more understanding than anything.

They were two hurting people trying to find a new normal.

And emotions always complicated things.

"Are you okay?" Pansy asked.

"Yes," she replied softly, hoping that her voice didn't betray her.

Hermione wasn't an easy person to have feelings for, nor was she an easy person to have any kind of close relationship with. It wasn't that she came with more baggage than the average person because he was the proud owner to a set of baggage of his own. It wasn't that she was damaged, because he was damaged, too—even if he was reluctant to admit it. And it wasn't that she'd lost so much in her life, because he was no stranger to loss, either.

With her, there was no assurance that anything would work out and there was no guarantee of a future. There was no confidence that she would stay, or even feel the same way. Perhaps Draco had known that long before she'd even realised it. Maybe that had been the reason why he hated having feelings for her, among other reasons.

"What do you think about the spa idea?" Pansy asked. "I can arrange for us to leave tomorrow morning."

"Tomorrow, it is."

Part Two: The reason.

He had come back for a reason, Draco thought as he lifted his index finger to push the glowing doorbell.

There just had to be a reason. Eight days had passed since their raised voices had echoed strangely over the calm lake waters. Eight days since her voice had awoken something strange inside of him. Eight days had passed, but nothing had changed. In his head, somehow, being there had been justified.

Or maybe it just had been a long eight days.

He had stayed. Long after Hermione had walked away, he stayed rooted to his spot. Draco had stayed to calm down. When he had calmed down, he'd stayed and thought. When he had finished thinking, he had stayed to replay the argument over and over in his head. It was an act that had caused him to cringe just a bit more after each playback. He could have left, but that pier seemed to be the only place in the world that he could find some kind of clarity.

Staying, as of late, had become one of the few constants in his life. And that was as ironic as it was funny. Draco was a professional at leaving. He'd walked out of arguments with his mother, his friends, and even Granger on an occasion or two. And the number of women that Draco had walked out on in the last six years was—well, he hadn't thought to quantify the number because he had never really given a damn about any of them. They were just a number, a face, a person to be seen with, an empty vessel, and an empty brain.

And that was what made walking out on Granger so much different. She was more than that. Better than that, at least in his mind. And that was why he had cared. That was why he'd sought her out after their fight in the alley. That was why Draco had cared enough to jump in after her when she'd fallen into the lake—even before he'd known that it was accidental and not intentional.

Yes, he had rationalised his reasons, blamed it on so many other factors and people, but maybe it was more than that. Maybe Draco had jumped in *for* her. And perhaps he had

jumped in for himself, too. Maybe that was the start; the paradigm shift and the moment when he should have known things would never be the same again.

That was—*plausible*.

The proof had been in his future actions, not words.

Draco paled and stared at the doorbell. Bloody hell.

He had fucked up.

It hadn't taken eight days for him to realise it, but with the anniversary of the Final Battle—the gala that none of the heroes had attended—and a new case on his desk, there hadn't been much time.

Until today.

Did he honestly want to fix things between them? A very small, infinitesimal part of him wanted to avoid everything: the broken friendship, the declaration, and even the argument. It wanted him to leave it, because that way was easier. He could take his feelings for her and bury them deep enough so that they wouldn't affect him...

But overwhelming majority of him had thought otherwise.

And that was why he was there.

Draco hadn't been lying to Granger when he'd said that he was tired. He was tired—tired of burying something that didn't want to be buried, and denying something that was so disturbingly obvious to everyone else. He didn't know how the hell he was going to fix things and he sure as hell didn't know what he was going to do about his feelings for her, but he didn't want to leave them broken beyond repair.

He rested his finger on the doorbell, and pushed before he could talk himself out of it.

Mother had once said that it took a strong man to admit that he was wrong; it took a strong man to swallow his pride. Draco was practically choking on his as he forced it down.

Pansy opened the door, looking rather self-satisfied. "Well, well. Look at what the sheep dragged in."

"You mean cat?"

The smugness turned into a glare, but she ignored him. "And do I need to ask how long you've been out here?" she folded her arms across her chest.

He honestly didn't have the energy or the will to start with Pansy. Not at least at that moment. After all, he'd been saving up his resolve for Granger. "Don't start with me, Pans," Draco sneered. "What are you doing here?"

"I should ask you the same question."

"I think you know why I'm here," he snapped with a sarcastic edge in his tone

If she was surprised, she never showed it. "Don't fuck it up, Draco. It's been a long day for her."

"Long day?"

"Yes. We're finishing packing everything from her storage room. She's...well, letting go of some of Matthew's things; giving them to charity, as well as Seamus and Lavender...for their son." Pansy shrugged when Draco's brow rose. "I'm not sure where the idea came from, but I think it's a continuation of the colour samples day—"

"Colour samples?" Draco was really confused.

Pansy shot him a look, then shook her head, "She wants to paint her walls and she hung a painting on her wall. She says that she wants to start over. Like a renaissance or something."

A rebirth. Very apt, he thought with a slight nod. About bloody time, too, but he didn't say that.

Right now—well, at that moment, Pansy was chattering a mile a minute. "When Blaise and I came over this morning, she was upstairs in a packing frenzy. She was saying that they're things that she says that she doesn't need to keep anymore. She was saying that they're things that she can live without. Potter came back with Blaise and they took the last three bags of clothing to—"

Draco held up his hand. "Potter was here?"

"Yes, he's been here for hours."

"Why?" he asked a bit too quickly.

An interested brow rose on the witch's face, but she didn't probe. Thankfully. "They're sorting through Ginny Weasley and Patil's letters. He found them." Pansy paused and shook her head distastefully. "From what I can gather, it's just going to be a mess of speculation about you two. But I overheard her and Potter talking about telling the truth if they had to."

Draco's eyes narrowed. It wouldn't be pretty for Granger. And she'd just bear the brunt of it all in silence because she still blamed herself. "So how are we going to make sure that that article never gets out?"

"We?" she looked at him curiously.

"Don't start—"

"I just thought that since you two fought—"

"It doesn't change anything, Pansy." he snipped.

"Who are you talking to?" a voice spoke up behind Pansy.

Draco had known that voice instantly. *Hermione*. There was no surprised look on Pansy's face, which meant that she must've heard her coming long before she'd asked that question. He was more thankful for his resolve when Granger stepped into his line of vision and stood next to Pansy.

Above anything else, she looked surprised to see him, but he couldn't tell what else lurked beneath her surprise. She seemed a bit closed up and detached. It was to be expected, considering what had transpired between them. Draco couldn't blame her. He really couldn't do much of anything at that moment. Why? Because he was surprised by his internal reaction to seeing her, and confused by it. Hermione looked different; not different in appearance or even mannerisms, just different. To him. He was drawn to her: frizzy hair, black shirt, denims, orange socks, and all.

"What are you doing here?" Hermione asked as she shoved her hands deep into her pockets. Granger met his eyes for just a second before she lowered them back to the floor.

"I, well..." he looked at Pansy, who was looking more and more intrigued. "May I come in?"

"Why?" Hermione asked.

Draco flexed his hands. "To speak to you—in private."

"I'm sure that what you have to say to her can be said around me, as well." Pansy stated. They both looked at her, one was glaring and the other was wide-eyed. She looked between the two of them, made a face, and held up her hands as if she were surrendering. "Fine, fine. No need for the looks and the glares," she huffed snootily, "I have some things that I need to do to prepare for our trip tomorrow, so I'll leave my Floo open, yes?"

Hermione nodded, and soon, Draco found himself alone with her.

The silence between them was taut with tension and charged with restlessness, but it wasn't completely uncomfortable. Hermione took to rocking back and forth on the balls her feet, and Draco took to watching her. He didn't question it. He was more concerned with picking his words carefully.

"How have you been?" she asked.

"Fine." It was a lie, but that was the best that he could do at that particular moment. "You?"

"Me? Oh, right...yes, fine. I've been fine." she answered while scratching her arm, digging her nails into her skin. She did that when she was anxious or having dark thoughts. Not to mention, she was lying and not doing a good job at hiding it, either.

Draco was almost relieved. At least he wasn't alone in his feelings and lies.

"I heard about Potter finding—"

Hermione held her hand up, cutting him off abruptly. "Can we not talk about that?"

Draco shoved his hands into his pockets. "Fine."

They stood like that for a long time. Draco took to looking at the welcome mat beneath his feet, and Hermione took to shifting her weight from foot to foot. He was about to frown when her ugly socks moved into his peripheral when Hermione said, "Excuse me for being brusque, but why—"

"I apologise." Draco blurted out through gritted teeth. "I came here to apologise...if that was what you were about to ask. I—" he ran his hand over his hair and then rubbed the back of his neck. Bloody hell, this was hard. "I was wrong for dumping that on you last week." It had come out odd and gruff, but at least he hadn't yelled it at her.

That was an improvement.

His eyes travelled to the ground because he honestly couldn't remember the last time that he'd apologised to anyone. It was strange, and he didn't want to make a habit out of it.

Her voice sounded odd to him. "I don't—"

"Don't make me repeat it." Draco told her before he could stop himself. That had been a bit too harsh to follow an apology. Even after he'd spoken, the words still tasted bitter on his tongue.

Granger didn't say anything initially.

Draco figured that he had probably fucked it up, again.

But then, she spoke one word. "Okay."

His mind had started reeling. He had expected her to fight, to argue with him further, and to call him a prat for apologising in one breath and telling her not to ask him to do it again with the next. But, instead, she had said okay. Just okay. Okay? What the hell? Draco blinked at her in disbelief. Okay? What did that mean? Things were not okay. They had never been okay. They were staring across the mountain range at '*okay*', listening for echoes from the other side that would never come.

Draco wanted to say something, anything to kill the new silence, but he couldn't. He couldn't think of anything to say that would come out right. He had never been a master of words, especially when it came to her. "Is that *all* you have to say?" Again, he found himself cringing at his own words. He was losing control over his mouth, again, and that was the last thing that he needed. "Look, I—"

She chuckled. It was low and throaty, but it was a chuckle.

A nervous one.

Draco looked at her as if she'd gone completely loony. "What's funny?" he asked, a bit affronted.

Granger continued to chuckle. "You really aren't good at this, are you? Blaise told me you weren't, but I just thought that he was trying to cover your arse."

"Not good at what?"

"Words, or better yet, emotions."

Draco opened his mouth—he wasn't sure why; he didn't even know what he was going to say. Luckily, the faint sound of someone leaving by Floo had stopped the idiotic words from spilling from his lips. Granger opened the door wider to let him in, but he didn't make a move to accept her invitation. After all, he had done what he'd set out to do today. He had swallowed his pride, knocked on her door, and apologised to her. What more was there left to discuss? "I should probably go."

"Why?"

"I did what I came to do," Draco answered simply, shrugging his shoulders. There was an intense moment where he studied the look on her face, but in the end, he said, "So, I'll be seeing you, then."

"Yes."

"Right." Draco muttered almost under his breath as he looked at her one last time. Hermione's arms were folded across her chest and she was staring at the floor with such intensity that Draco thought that her floor was going to catch fire. He stood there for just a bit longer before he turned his back to her.

It was now or never, he thought as he started to walk away. But there was a sinking feeling in his chest and indecision that was weighing heavily on his mind. Draco, in that moment, realised that he wanted to stay. But that wasn't a good idea. Besides, what the hell would he stay and do? Probably make a fool of himself—well, more than he had already.

Draco squared his shoulders. He had to remind himself that he'd swallowed his pride. Bloody hell, he'd swallowed so much of his pride that he was practically bursting at the seams with humility.

It was better that he left. He needed to cough up some of that pride and force his mind to return back to normal. He felt a bit too vulnerable for his liking. Draco focused his attention straight ahead as he walked towards the Apparition point and away from her. But that feeling was still there; the feeling that told him to stop—to stay. Draco had assumed that it was due to the fact that he'd stayed so much that his mind couldn't grasp the fact that he was leaving.

"Did you mean it?"

Her question was like a soft shout and Draco initially wondered how he'd even heard it. But he had, and it had caused him to freeze mid-step. However, he didn't turn back around. Draco realised that talking to her was an easier task when he wasn't looking at her. "Mean what?"

Funny, he could look his uncles in the eyes, but he couldn't do the same to her.

He heard the slight tremor in her voice. "What you said...did you mean it?"

That was the stupidest question that she had ever asked him. He wouldn't have said it if he hadn't meant it. "Why are you asking me this?" he had tried to ask it calmly, but it had come out rather strained.

"I really don't know why. I don't have the room in my brain to process everything that's going, or the things that have transpired between us. There's far too much going on in my life, I know that, but I also know that I just...want you to stay, Draco." Granger sounded as if those words were the hardest words that she'd ever had to speak. Out of all the times she'd asked him to stay, asking him this time seemed to be the hardest for her. He wondered why.

He pulled his hands from his pockets. "Stay here for what?"

"I don't know," Hermione sounded incredibly frustrated by his questions and Draco had to keep himself from feeling vindicated. Now she knew how it felt to be asked questions that she wasn't ready to answer; questions in which she had no answers. "Talk, maybe," she finally muttered out. He could almost see her shrugging her shoulders in his head.

But Draco didn't turn his head.

"What do we have to talk about? Better yet, what do we have to discuss that we're both willing to talk about?"

Despite the noises that nature was making around them, he heard her pop her knuckles most unattractively. He cringed involuntarily. "I was just thinking—" she paused, "Wait, what?"

He rubbed the back of his neck with his left hand and shifted the weight from one foot to another. "Nevermind, I—"

"I know—I know that this is it," Hermione blurted out in a rush. "I know that if you walk away now, we're never going to talk about it. I know that if you leave now, I'll never get the courage to bring it back up again."

"Do you want to talk about it, again? Honestly? Because I would rather chew on glass than to discuss this with you, again." Draco sighed for what felt like the millionth time. "From what I remember, you walked away before we could have a further discussion."

"I was *angry*." Granger said in almost a harsh whisper as the tension between them rolled in. He found it ironic that there was so much of that and they weren't even looking at each other. "I had every reason to walk away, but it was my anger that made me leave. Not anything else, just anger. You were yelling at me. Remember that? You were yelling that you hated having feelings for me—"

"I was there, Hermione." Draco snapped with his eyes focused on the walkway that would lead him to the street and then to the Apparition point. "You don't need to quote me. I remember it all quite clearly, but what isn't clear is why you want to discuss this now."

"I—can you *please* turn around?" she asked hotly, "I am sick of talking to your back!"

He didn't move a muscle. "We don't have anything to discuss, Hermione. I asked you a question and you don't have an answer. I'm tired, I came and did what I intended to do, and now, I'm going home." And with that, he started walking, again.

"What do you want me to say, Draco?" Granger asked and he almost cringed.

"I don't want you to say anything."

"Wait. Okay? Just wait. I—"

"Look, I'd like to leave here with my pride intact." And more than that, he wanted to leave here with as much control over the situation as he could, but Granger didn't need to know that.

"Well, I would like it if you didn't leave at all."

"You want us to talk? Dammit, Hermione, I've done all the talking that I need to do. I've done enough talking to last me a lifetime. Talking isn't going to change anything, talking isn't going to make it go away, and talking isn't going to change how you feel about—" he stopped himself because, yet again, the connection between his brain and mouth was disintegrating.

"That's just it, Draco." Hermione's voice then rose sharply, "You know how you feel about me. And granted, you may not like it or want it or need it, but at least you know."

He was *not* going there, again. Draco's eyes narrowed. "I'm not going to do this with you."

"But I don't know how I feel about you!"

That was enough to make Draco turn around and stalk up her sad little walkway. "If you don't know, Hermione, then there's *nothing* that a conversation will do to change that. It'll just—" His head and heart were pounding for some inexplicable reason—anger, he surmised, because he really wanted to be angry at Granger for telling him that. He wanted to be angry because he hadn't just listened to the things she'd said, he'd listened to the thing she hadn't.

Hermione's inability to define her feelings meant only one thing: she felt *something*. And it was all fucked up in her head. Draco didn't know how to feel about that, but he absolutely hated that that deduction had filled his head up with something that he didn't want to feel, something that had left him a bit lightheaded—*hope*.

Draco blinked at that word, then at her, then at the look on her face that was a mix of fear and understanding, and then again when he realised how close they were standing.

He didn't even have a chance to step back, because she did it first. "Umm, Ron just got here, and—" Draco took a full step backwards. She took a sharp breath. "Can you just wait? Please. Just wait. For me."

There was a reason why he'd waited, and no, he didn't need to figure it out.

Part Three: Clarity

Hermione's mind was in a daze when she rushed into her house.

It was odd how the greatest moments of clarity occurred during moments of stress.

Hermione was well aware that she had more things to sort before she could even consider anything concerning him. A lot more, but if he left, that would be the end. And did she want that to be it? She didn't know. It was too hard and too much. It did nothing to alleviate the stabbing pain in her head; it did nothing to calm her frazzled nerves. She massaged her temples, unsure what to think about anything anymore.

When Hermione opened her eyes, she saw Ron. His back was to her, and his hands were jammed into the pockets of his trousers. And it was odd, because when she saw him, she had nearly forgotten about her mission to get him to leave as fast as possible. He was looking at the painting above her fireplace.

The painting of a new sun rising.

Hermione would've allowed her thoughts to travel down that particular road, but the sound of Apollo meowing interrupted her. And apparently, it had interrupted Ron from his thoughts because he seemed startled by the small noise.

He turned, looked down, and frowned, "You again?"

She thought that it was time to make an entrance, "Still not a fan of my cats, are you?"

If Ron was startled, he didn't show it. "Not really. Never been much of a cat person."

"I know." The silence between them was awkward. "So, why are you here, Ron?" It came out a bit brasher than she'd anticipated. She hoped that he hadn't noticed, but the slight cringe gave him away. "Sorry. That came out wrong, I was just—"

"No," he ran a hand over his head and shifted his weight, "I—well, Harry came to my flat and mentioned that you were upset. I—I just came to check on you." He didn't meet her eyes.

That was pretty thoughtful of him. It was one of Ron's traits that she hadn't gotten used to during the short span of their relationship. "I'm fine." She picked up Apollo, who had trotted across the room to her as soon as she had made her presence known. Her kitten gave off a low purr when she absently rubbed his ears just the way he liked it.

"Are you coming to the Burrow?"

"No."

"Do you have a moment?"

"Well, Ma—" she stopped herself. How he would react to her dismissing him for Draco was something she didn't want to find out. "I'm a bit busy. I have some things to do before I leave." That wasn't a lie. Getting the days off would be easy, she had enough vacation time built up. However, figuring out what she needed to bring, who was going to feed Apollo, and who watch her house were no easy tasks.

"When do you leave?"

"Tomorrow."

It was funny how some things never changed. And it was amazing how well she could read Ron, even after years apart. One could say that Ron wore his heart on his sleeve, but that wasn't exactly true. He was easy. She knew when he was restless, knew when he was afraid, and knew when he wanted to talk to her something important. Hermione realised quickly that he was there to talk.

"Pansy's taking me to a spa in Scotland for the next three days. She thinks I need to get away for a few days, to relax and take my mind off things."

"Yeah, that's probably a good idea."

Hermione looked at him a bit longer before she walked across the room to him. "Ron?"

The look that he gave her was one she had seen before...a long time ago. "What?"

She put Apollo down and watched as he trotted away. "Why are you here? Really?"

"I told you—"

"When you lie, you can never make eye-contact, and you always get jittery," she told him matter-of-factly. Ron's eyes widened and his lips parted in surprise at the fact that she still knew him. "You're here for something else. Tell me."

Ron looked at her for a long time before he started talking, "You see, there's this woman. Her name is Kate and she's a Quidditch reporter for the Prophet. She's covering our games for the season after the last bloke suddenly quit. I think there was a pay issue, but I'm not sure."

He was rambling and all Hermione could do was listen.

"Kate knows nothing about Quidditch. She took the position because it was either writing Quidditch articles or Obituaries." Ron shrugged and rambled on, "She almost chose the Obituaries, but her boss made her come by the pitch and watch us practice. I don't remember seeing her, but apparently, she had a blast." He chuckled under his breath and continued, "I've been teaching her the basics and helping her out in my spare time, and...."

"Yes?"

His cheeks started to redden. "She's nice, Hermione. She's pretty and down-to-earth and fun to be around. She doesn't care about who I am. She doesn't care about any of this, and you

know, I'm actually not sure what I like about her most: her quirkiness or her clumsiness, but...yeah. I do like her. Very much."

It wasn't what she had expected him to say. Hermione had never even thought about that aspect of Ron's life...she never even considered it because she'd assumed that he'd moved on long before she had come back to London. "She sounds lovely, Ron, *really*." And she meant it.

He looked uncomfortable. "Yeah, she is," he trailed off, scratching the back of his head. "But there's a problem."

She didn't like the sound of that. "What?" her voice wavered.

"You," Ron looked at his feet before looking back at her. "Or rather how I feel."

There were no words to accurately describe how she felt. She took a cautious step back; her eyes moving everywhere as she tried to process his last six words. The bright lights of the jukebox, the painting, and her colour swatch wall all called out to her, claiming her attention, but not for too long. The faint scent of Floo powder and Ron's cologne teased her olfactory bulbs.

She heard Apollo scratching at the door.

He had feelings? For her? After everything?

After the lies, the pain, the hurtful words, and truths, he—his timing was certainly shitty.

Hermione tried to ignore her racing pulse, her sweaty brow, and the tension that seemed to settle into her bones, but it was no use. All she knew was that she felt heavy and stretched beyond her means. She was already trying to make sure that she didn't unintentionally overstep her boundaries with Harry, trying to figure out how she felt about the man outside, and now this. Now Ron?

"Ron," she said his name in a rather frazzled sigh. "I—"

He kissed her.

It was a little rough and very impetuous, but his lips met hers and hands came to her shoulders to hold her steady. It was no more than lips touching, but it lingered and it left her feeling odd. It left her thinking that maybe some things really did change. Before, there had been something: a spark and heat. But now, there was nothing. No spark. No electricity. No heat. *Nothing*.

Hermione backed away from him. Something foreign bubbled to the surface of her skin. That had been a mistake. And that wasn't where she was supposed to be. She'd done something terribly wrong. "You shouldn't have done that."

Ron looked at her as if she'd gone mad. "What?"

"You shouldn't have done that, Ron. I—you can't just *do* something that. You can't just—"

"I came here to find out if there was any chance that we could—I don't want to start anything with Kate if there's something still going on between us. I don't want to start anything if there's hope..."

Hermione closed her eyes and tried to find the right words, but all she could say was, "Ron."

"I think a small part of me always has been waiting for you, beneath my anger," she heard him shuffle his feet. "I don't want to look back and wonder what might have happened if I had—"

"Don't," she opened her eyes. Her brain reminded her of a malignant memory from the last time that she had left him. Different setting, different clothes, different Hermione, different Ron, but everything else was the same. That night, before she left, Ron had told her that he would wait for her. He had said everything she wanted to hear. He had told the truth.

They were repeating history.

And she wouldn't do that to him.

"Don't what?"

"Don't wait for me."

Because the damage between them had been done, and everything had been severed and trashed.

"But I—"

She shook her head, sadly. She hadn't felt anything during that kiss because she no longer felt anything for him. That ship had sailed. And as sad as that was, it was probably for the best. She wasn't the same girl who loved him, plain and simple. And she would never be that girl again. "I understand everything that you're saying, but I won't let you do that. I don't deserve it. Not after I hurt you so badly. I messed up and I can't undo what I've done, but I can't keep living in the past." She took a step back. "Perhaps, in another life, we could've gotten everything we wanted. Maybe we could've been happy. Maybe we could've worked out, but—but not in this one."

He looked incredibly hurt. "Hermione..."

"You deserve happiness, Ron. I want it for you more than I want it for myself." She told him sincerely. "And Kate, she makes you happy. I can see it. Your face lit up when you talked about her. Don't let me stand in the way of that. Don't let me keep you from being happy."

"But you *do* make me happy—you did, at one time."

"You see me, Ron, but you don't know me. You see the Hermione from before, but I'm not her. I meant it when I said that you deserve better, Ron. You do, but I'm not it. Trust me. I'm working to become a better version of myself, but I'm not a good person. I'm working on healing myself, but I'm still broken. I'm working on forgiving myself, but—"

"I mean, you've changed, but so have I. Maybe, in time—"

"I can't give you what you want. I can't make you happy because what I did is etched in my soul. And you don't need that. You don't need my baggage. You need something honest and pure, and I am neither of those things. I—" Hermione cut herself off as a tidal wave of clarity hit her so hard that she could barely move.

Ron stepped closer to her. "You're trying to protect my feelings, but I'm telling you that I don't need protecting."

She felt the blood rush from her face as she stared at him. "I'm not protecting you. I'm telling you that I don't want this. I'm telling you that I want—"

"What do you want, Hermione? Really?"

Honesty was pulling at her everything.

The world was just a little tilted to the side and her heart had become unexpectedly unhinged. The question pounded at her, unleashing an unrelenting rainstorm onto her. The question beat down on her until she wanted to fall to her knees. Hermione had wallowed for far too long, and the answer was becoming alarmingly clear. She fought it, not wanting to admit the truth, but there it was, standing outside the door. There it was, waiting for her to come to her senses. There it was, where it had been for a while now.

And on the verge of breaking, the answer became clear.

"What do you want?" Ron asked again.

"I need to go."

Chapter End Notes

A/N of all the chapters, this one got the biggest overhaul. Um.

outside the absence of fear

Chapter Summary

"So much for no possibility."

Chapter Notes

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

Chapter Thirty-One

Outside the Absence of Fear

Part One: Impatience

Staying was one thing, but waiting was a completely different thing.

Draco had had to learn how to stay, but he'd never learned the art of waiting. Mother had always said that good things would happen to those who waited, but Father had said that Malfoys were bred not to wait for anything. Over the years, their conflicting beliefs had cancelled each other out and had left an impatient boy. That boy had grown into a man—a man who knew nothing about waiting for anything or anyone.

With a snort, he figured that he couldn't exclusively blame his parents for his impatience. As much as they were alike, they were still quite different. It had taken him a long time to get to the point where he could take their advice and make it work for him.

He could safely say that while he knew a lot about his mother, Father was still a mystery that he still found himself wanting to unfold, but not knowing how. Father seemed to have a way with words in that everything he said, good or bad, seemed to remain in his mind for years. Some of his earliest memories had been of his father speaking, telling him what he was not to do as a Malfoy.

Draco had spent the first minute standing, the second pacing, the third looking at his watch, and the fourth counting everything in his line of vision. But by the fifth minute, Draco was bored and curiously stared at her door. What was taking her so long? What could the Weasel possibly want? A long list of possible answers popped up in his head, and he stepped through the doorway of her home because he didn't like any of them. There was a nagging feeling in the back of his head that told him to wait, but he ignored it.

After all, he had never been blessed with patience. And he was still a novice at the art of waiting.

He moved through the foyer quietly, but paused when he heard Weasley's annoying voice.

"She doesn't care about any of this, and you know, I'm actually not sure what I like about her most: her quirkiness or her clumsiness, but...yeah. I do like her. Very much."

Draco rolled his eyes and took a few more quiet steps. He was waiting while Weasel was talking about some new crush? What an utter waste of time. Great. He had feelings for someone else. Did he want to make an announcement on the Wireless?

"Oh, she sounds lovely, Ron, really." Granger had said, but her voice sounded a bit strained.

"Yeah, she is," he trailed off for so long that Draco peeked around the corner to see if they were still there. They were. "But there's a problem."

He didn't like the sound of that.

"What?" Hermione's voice sounded odd.

"You." Weasel's head moved and Draco rested his back, hoping that he hadn't been seen. When there was no enraged shrill, Draco relaxed a bit. That was, until he said, "Or rather how I feel."

Draco wasn't surprised. Weasley was the type of person who held on to things and people. He'd held on to all that anger for years; it only made sense that he would hold on to his feelings, as well. And as much as it sickened Draco, he seemed sincere. And as much as it annoyed Draco, Weasley had said it better, too.

But he knew Granger. He knew what she was going to say. And for the second time that day, Draco found himself waiting. Waiting for her to say something; waiting for her to tell him what Draco had already known. He waited for her to tell him that Malfoy was waiting outside and she had to leave.

"Ron," her voice still sounded strange. Draco leaned forward and cocked his head so that he could see the look on his face when she denied him. "I—"

Draco's eyes didn't widen when Weasley kissed her, but they did as the number of seconds that passed without her shoving him away increased. The seconds felt like minutes, and with each passing one his grimace deepened and deepened until he could take no more...

Part Two: Decisions

His mother was seated pristinely on the sofa directly in front of the fireplace, holding a gold-rimmed saucer and teacup in one hand and a spoon in the other. If he had been paying attention to the look on her face or the way that she delicately stirred her tea, Draco would

have left as quickly as he had come. Not only did Mother never take tea in her private sitting room, she never cared about propriety when she was alone.

No, it was reserved for guests.

And he had never been fond of the company his mother kept. They were too catty for intelligent conversation and had too much to say about Draco's bachelor lifestyle. Narcissa knew of his dislike well enough to look alarmed when he arrived in a flash of green flames. "Draco?" she sat her saucer and cup on the table as she stood to her feet. "This is a surprise! I didn't know that you were coming!"

He hadn't planned on coming, either.

Draco had left from Granger with a full and restless mind. He'd gone home for a few minutes, paced, and then decided to come here. When he heard his mother's exclaimed words, Draco fully stepped out of the fireplace, picking at an imaginary piece of lint on the right sleeve of his robes. He didn't even bother to look up when he blandly stated. "There was a change of plans."

"While your change of plans is unfortunate for you, it's very fortunate for us," a mildly familiar voice spoke up, causing him to freeze in place. "Now you will have to join us for dinner."

There, sitting on the loveseat with her snotty mother and smiling brightly, was his last girlfriend.

Astoria.

What a twist in this wonderful day, Draco snorted sarcastically at the thought.

"Draco, you're already familiar with Astoria, I'm sure."

He nodded and tried not to smirk at the snide tone his mother had taken. She had never approved of Astoria. In fact, she had never approved of anyone.

Other than Granger, he frowned at that thought.

The time that it had taken him to walk back to the Apparition point had been the right amount of time that Draco had needed to give himself a firm reality check.

Over and over, the kiss between Weasley and Granger played in his mind. It played until his initial response of shock and anger had dulled to apathy. It played until he had practically memorised the words that were spoken. It played until the lone thought in his head was a scathing, *who are you kidding?*

The only person that he had been kidding was himself.

They had history, a bond, and if they tried hard enough, they could have a future, he supposed.

And Draco took a moment to think about his own future, and realised how uncertain it was. He wasn't even sure what kind of future he wanted because he hadn't given himself the time to really figure it out. He hadn't given himself the time to figure himself out, either. What did he want out of life? He couldn't think of the last time he'd done something that *he* wanted. It had been about duty, about necessity, and about the family; never about him. Draco might've hated life before Father's death, but he had been comfortable with it. He didn't have to think about himself; he didn't have to think at all.

It was easy.

But now—now, there was nothing to stand in the way, and it had forced him to see the truth.

The truth was that Draco had been too afraid to make a move, follow his father's advice, and live without regrets. He wanted to say that he'd done just that by telling Granger how he felt, but he couldn't. That hadn't been a leap of faith, just raised voices and raised tempers.

Merlin, he was so fucked up.

That was something that he had known for a long time, but had ignored because, again, it was easy. It was easy to find out the truth about everyone else, and easy to focus on the problems of others. But now, it was alarmingly clear; now his problems were bursting from the woodworks like termites.

But he was ready to try and deal with them, one by one because he sure as hell didn't want to live that way anymore.

To be honest, Draco was glad that Hermione hadn't figured out how she felt about him. If she had, they would've jumped too quick and been two fucked-up people in a fucked-up relationship. They would've have had to deal with their mutual issues, his worries, her uncertainties, his reluctance, and her fears. She would've had to deal with the real Draco: flawed and stubborn, lost and ready to be found. It would've been too much...for them both.

It was better this way.

He'd been a fool to give himself hope.

"You remember Abigail Greengrass, don't you?" Mother interrupted his thoughts.

It was time to turn on the charm. "Yes, I do. It's a pleasure to see you again, Mrs. Greengrass." He hoped that his words hadn't sounded as dry as his throat was at that moment.

The witch just nodded very stiffly and rested her hands in her lap. Draco always wondered why his mother was friends with such a woman, but she had assured him that she was nicer when they were alone together and she wasn't sober. He couldn't see reason in it...or why she treated everyone, outside of Mother, like garbage. It wasn't as if she were at the top of the wizarding world's pecking order.

"What about me? Aren't you glad to see me?" Astoria asked, placing her hands on her slim hips. She wore very loud yellow robes that screamed for someone – anyone – to look at her,

and Draco found himself unsurprised at how little she had changed in the last year.

"It certainly is surprising," he said dryly.

Astoria had never managed to distance herself from her family—or even her sister, Daphne. In fact, she had been such a negligible blip on his radar when she introduced himself to her last July that he had completely ignored her until Daphne had swept in and introduced them. Draco had only given her his time because rumours about his father's lack of presence were circulating and he needed to divert attention. She did the job until there was no need for her.

Draco turned disinterested eyes back to his mother.

"Abigail and Astoria decided to come and visit me now that I'm back at home."

He made a face. "You've been back since last—"

"We, too, were out of town this week," Mrs. Greengrass told him with a frown. She flipped her wrist when she airily said, "Shopping in Milan."

Draco made a face, unable to hide his boredom. Spending his evening listening to three witches chat about the latest style in witch's robes was not how he wanted to spend his evening. "I'm sure that that was exciting, I should leave you three to your discussion."

"No," Astoria said invitingly. "You should stay and have dinner with us."

"I can't imagine why you, of all people, would want me to join you all for dinner." When he'd abruptly severed their relationship, if it could even be called that, she hadn't taken it so well. He had never bothered himself to care or feel guilty.

"I got over that." Astoria said with her head held high.

"We Greengrasses are resilient," her mother commented proudly. "It's one of our better qualities, I think."

He didn't comment.

Draco gave his mother a look, telling her to intervene before he gave Astoria's mother a reason to look like she had something smelly under her nose. Astoria stood and smiled. Merlin, he had *actually* dated her? She was very pretty, that much was true, but there was something rather empty about her. She didn't make him think, care, notice, or *see*.

Or maybe all of that was new to him.

It was possible that this journey that he had taken with Granger hadn't been all for naught. Maybe it had been just as important for him as it had been for her. Perhaps she had been his subconscious ticket out of hell. Maybe he had unconsciously taken the path to finding out about her demons and helping her overcome them so that he could find out and learn to overcome his own. Perhaps she had been the key to everything. And maybe, just maybe, he needed her as much as she seemed to need him.

That thought had left him paler than usual.

Mother stood and placed her hand on his shoulder. "Are you feeling okay, Draco? You look ashen."

"I'm fine," he lied. "I'm just hungry."

"I'll see if dinner is ready to be served," and then she left his side to summon a house elf.

Five uncomfortable minutes later, she was asking them to proceed to the dining room. Narcissa gave him one last concerned look before she walked to the doorway of the sitting room. Mrs. Greengrass rose quickly followed after her, after giving Draco and Astoria a look that he couldn't read. He could hear Mrs. Greengrass start talking to his mother about Milan and rolled his eyes in response. When Astoria started towards the door, Draco took a moment to pinch the bridge of his nose before he followed.

It was going to be a long dinner.

"It's good to see you again, Draco," her voice was lowered, but not low enough. He slowed down further, hoping that she would catch the hint and keep walking. She didn't. "I haven't seen you since we broke up."

"That's precisely what happens when people part ways," he deadpanned.

She said nothing for a moment. "I'm getting married."

Draco looked at her. Why was she telling him this? He had far too much on his mind to even —his brow rose slowly as Astoria continued to watch his face for a reaction.

"Congratulations," was all she got in return.

"To Theo Nott," she supplied.

"Theo? The geek?"

Astoria lifted her hand to show off her diamond. "That "geek" is a very rich businessman, now."

"Good for him," Draco drawled. He really was in no mood for any of this.

"He asked me two months ago, on our four-month anniversary."

That was...quick,

"He takes me shopping, to dinners, and on trips. He thinks about what I like and what I want, and then he does them for me. He's so sweet and considerate and loyal and fun to be around. He really loves me and appreciates me, and he tells me that all the time."

As Astoria chattered on about what Theo did and said, Draco thought that Hermione careening into his life like a rogue bludger hadn't been such a bad thing. She had taken care

of the rumour mill, taken his focus off of the more troubling aspects of his life, and saved him from wasting his time on any more Astorias. She had saved him from himself.

"Theo was the one to send Mother and me to Milan. He gives me so much freedom and he lets me control almost everything. I get to pick where, when, and what place we eat. I get to choose what we do. I get to choose where we go. I think I've—"

"I think you've said enough," Draco brusquely interrupted. "Are you trying to tell me something?"

Astoria's eyes narrowed at him just slightly. "I'm just letting you know what you're missing."

He looked over at her, suddenly overwhelmed with the urge to let out his frustration with the entire day and really hurt her feelings. "Or what I'm *not* missing." Draco told her bluntly. "Astoria. He. Can. Have. You. I think I made my point clear last August." He told her curtly, "I hope that you're happy with a life of shopping trips and dinners and trips."

"Yes, I will be very happy. I never got that with you. I never got *anything* from you."

Ah, so there was the real issue and the reason why she was telling him all this. Perfect. He had been emotionally unavailable not just with her, but with every woman that he had ever been with. "What exactly do you want from me at this point in time?"

"I want you to realise that you lost a good thing when you gave me up. I—"

"I don't *care*, Astoria." That made her mouth snap shut suddenly. She stopped in her track, and so did he. Draco moved so that he was standing in front of her, looking down at her blankly. "And let me set the record straight, you can only be jealous of someone who has something that you want. You can only be envious of what you desire. Since I neither want nor desire you... I hope you understand the point I'm trying to make. Talk all you want, but it won't affect me at all. I hope you and Theo are very happy together."

With that, he walked into the dining room and took his seat next to Mother. She shot him a quick apologetic look before she turned and started talking to Mrs. Greengrass. Astoria came in and sat across from him, but thankfully, she didn't meet his gaze.

Dinner went by smoothly. There were a lot of words spoken, but few had been directed at him. For that, he was grateful. His thoughts had left him restless and unable to concentrate. His mind wanted him to think, process, and try to understand everything that had happened that day, but he wasn't ready.

"Are you all right, Draco?" The concern in his mother's voice was so genuine that he almost wanted to start talking. He almost wanted to tell her what had transpired at Granger's. He wanted to tell her everything that had been on his mind since he had arrived. Later, of course, but still, he considered giving her the opportunity to hear the story of how he had come to be where he was.

But he didn't.

He knew where to start, but didn't know what to say.

Instead, he said, "Yes. I'm fine."

Mother regarded him with suspicion. "Are you enjoying the meal?" she gestured to his barely touched plate.

"I am, Mother." The finality of his voice made it quite clear that he didn't want to discuss now or later.

Narcissa gave him a lingering look before she nodded and turned her attention back to her meal.

"So, Draco," Mrs. Greengrass spoke up finally, "What have you been up to since—" she cast an uncomfortable look at his mother. "Well, you know...."

Bloody hell.

He set down his fork and took a drink of Elf-wine that wasn't nearly strong enough for the conversation he was about to have. "Working and small details in switching the control of my father's businesses to my uncle.

"Anything else, Draco?" Mrs. Greengrass drawled.

"That's all." But maybe that wasn't it.

She daintily sipped on her wine, looked over at Astoria, then at him. "Ah, I see you haven't found a suitable witch to settle down with, have you?"

It took a lot for him not to say anything rude. "No, it's quite obvious that I haven't...what with the lack of the insane fanfare." He held his hand up and added dryly, "Or a wedding ring."

"You know, I think it's such a shame that you aren't settled down. You could have had any witch that you wanted, and here you are. Single. Your parents were married—"

"I'm not my parents," Draco reminded Mrs. Greengrass stiffly.

Astoria picked up her wine glass and took a sip.

"Besides, Draco is doing important work with the Ministry." Narcissa added.

"I can't imagine what is more important than keeping the Malfoy line alive. You could at least be dating."

"Haven't you heard the rumours, Mother," Astoria spoke up finally, "He's dating Hermione Granger."

Draco didn't even react to her words. He had heard it so many times from so many different people that he'd gotten used to it. He wasn't sure what his lack of confirmation or denial was

all about, but Granger had never denied it, either. There had been just too much going on, and no one would believe them anyway, so why try, right?

"Oh, I've heard, but he could never marry her, of course."

Astoria had had the decency to look at her mother in shock. "Mother!" It was clear that she, like her elder sister, hadn't inherit her mother's bigotry. "You shouldn't say that."

She looked at her daughter, "What? I'm being serious. She'll taint—"

"Abigail," Narcissa said sternly, "I won't have anyone talking negatively about Hermione Granger in my home. She's a lovely young woman and I approve of her, regardless of her blood. If she should ever join our family, she wouldn't taint it, she would only improve it drastically. I almost lost my son because of my bigotry, I lost my husband to it, and I won't have it in my home. So, if you can't adhere to that rule, then you are free to leave." Her tone was stern yet light.

He watched as Mrs. Greengrass sat back in her seat and looked across the table at Narcissa. When she nodded, mumbled an apology, and took a long sip of her wine, Draco found himself slightly amazed at how much power his mother had over others.

All was silent until Astoria asked, "Are the rumours true? Theo thinks they aren't, but I think they are."

"The rumours are... erroneous, not that it's any of your business." Draco choked out with much more difficulty than the situation called for. "We're not...together." However, as soon as the words were out of his mouth, he felt odd.

"You're not?" Mrs. Greengrass asked with a rare smile on her face.

"No." He felt sick.

Abigail Greengrass was oddly perky. "Well, now it doesn't matter what I think, it's not even a possibility."

Draco felt oddly morose.

With a small murmur, he excused himself from the table...and from the room.

It's not even a possibility.

His legs tried to outrun those words and the truth in them, but they kept up with his long strides. There *was* no possibility. She was right. That had ended today, the moment that he had seen that kiss, and the moment he had walked away.

It's not even a possibility.

And as he walked down the corridor, destination unknown, Draco realised that regardless of his issues, regardless of just how fucked up he was, regardless of how much work he needed to do on himself, he didn't want that to be the end.

He wanted the possibility.

He stopped and opened the first door on his left. It was a bathroom. Draco walked in, shut the door, and splashed water on his face in hopes that it would calm him. He then left the faucet running as he sat on the floor. For the second time, he found himself in a bathroom, thinking. And the bitterness of the whole situation sank into his very bones. There *had* to be some level of irony involved in realising that he didn't just have feelings for Granger, he actually wanted her. *Wanted*. After all this time of not knowing, he'd realised it with five words.

That was fucking ironic.

Or maybe irony wasn't involved, at all, he thought as rested his head back against the wall. Maybe he just had some terrible timing for that kind of clarity. It shouldn't have been too surprising, all things considered. Draco pondered and even considered it before he expelled that thought from his brain. Fuck that, it was fantastically ironic. And he meant that in the driest, most sarcastic manner possible.

He looked at the ceiling and then closed his eyes to calm himself down.

It's not even a possibility.

There was nothing quite like the feeling of realising that he wanted something that he couldn't have.

And it made Draco realise that he needed to make some decisions.

He decided that he would give himself a second to wonder if maybe he should've stayed. A second to wonder if he should've walked into the room, alerted them of his presence, and said something—*anything*. He'd give himself two seconds to toss that idea from his head.

Draco decided that he would give himself one minute to wonder if he had mistakenly taken the kiss between them as a sign that she had made her decision. It had happened so quickly. He would give himself two minutes to wonder why he even cared. After all, it was impossible.

He decided that he would give himself one hour to wonder if Granger would've ever figured out how she felt about him, in time. Two hours to wonder if - in time - he would've been mature enough to plunge into something more than friendship with her. Three hours to wonder if he could've been the man that she needed him to be. And four hours to banish the previous thoughts and ideas.

He would give himself one day to wonder if having feelings for a woman like Granger had been healthy. Two days to stop wondering the answer because there was still no possibility. Three days to realise that the lack of possibility was a good thing. Four days to completely close the book on Granger. And five days to realise that he really had done the right thing by walking away...by letting go.

Part Three: Left

Hermione took the house elf's directions and walked up the right staircase and down the halls, taking rights and lefts in the labyrinth that was the halls of Malfoy Manor until she reached the correct door.

She took a moment to catch her breath. After all, she had been going place after place looking for Draco. She wasn't fully aware of why, but him leaving sent dread down her spine. She'd gone to Blaise, to Pansy, to his job, and to his home—all with no luck. And now, the House-Elf had told her that he was here. So now what?

Well, she hadn't collected her thoughts or written notes, but there was time and it was too late for her to leave. Narcissa, after all, had been alerted to her arrival. It would be rude for her to leave without saying anything. So, she pushed open the double doors.

Narcissa had dinner guests.

Two of them.

They turned and gave her looks of surprise, disbelief, and appraisal. Hermione knew that she looked a complete and utter mess, and knew that she was being judged by the two strangers. But she didn't care because there were more important things circulating in her mind.

Unsurprisingly, Narcissa was the only one to greet her with a smile. She gave her air kisses. "Well, this is a pleasant surprise. Would you care to join us?"

"Oh, I—" she looked down at her clothes then back in embarrassment, "I'm not dressed for dinner."

Narcissa waved her off flippantly. "Oh, don't even worry about it. You *must* join us! Oh, I'm so happy that you came by. I have so much to tell you about my trip. I have to tell you how I put our Italian lessons to good use, and—" then she gave Hermione a look that she couldn't recognise. "Actually, why *are* you here?"

Hermione felt as if a giant spotlight shone on her. She suddenly had stage-fright. "Well, I came here to talk to Draco." That was the truth. Simple as that. Too bad, Hermione wasn't sure exactly what to say to him. The other two witches exchanged looks, and Hermione watched them with mild interest.

"He stepped out of the room about ten minutes ago." The younger of the two guests said.

"Did he say that he was coming back?" she kept her voice steady.

"I'm sure he'll return, soon." Narcissa clapped her hands once. "I have an idea. You should sit. I'll have Mimzy bring you a plate." And before Hermione could politely decline, Narcissa had called the house elf, asked for another plate for their new guest, and introduced her to the two witches: Astoria and Abigail Greengrass. Hermione noticed the way that Astoria cringed when she asked, "*Greengrass? Any relation to Daphne?*"

Truth be told, Hermione only knew of Daphne because every now and then, Pansy would mention that she needed to bury the hatchet and reconnect with her old housemate. There was a half-written letter to her on Pansy's desk that her pride hadn't allowed her to complete.

"Yes. Daphne is my eldest daughter. Astoria is my youngest."

"Oh." Hermione hadn't known that Daphne had had a sister, but the look on the witch's face told her that she had better not mention it. She had probably spent a long time being invisible. She gave Astoria a small nod, "It's a pleasure to meet you, Astoria." Hermione then turned to her mother and nodded, "And you, too, Mrs. Greengrass."

"The pleasure is all ours, Miss Granger," Abigail said, but Hermione didn't believe her. She made her dislike of her pretty obvious in the dryness in her words. She wouldn't trouble herself with figuring out why Mrs. Greengrass didn't care for her and Astoria looked so perplexed by her presence. Still, she swallowed bravely and took her seat at the table, glancing over quickly past Narcissa at Draco's nearly untouched plate.

Hermione realised that she wasn't very hungry.

In fact, she felt a bit nauseous.

"Miss Granger, you look a bit flushed," Mrs. Greengrass stated.

"Please call me Hermione." The witch gave her a funny look, but she ignored it, "And I'm quite well. Just a little tired." Narcissa's face told her pretty plainly that she didn't believe her. Damn. She was losing her touch. "How was your holiday?"

Narcissa blossomed. "Fiji was wonderful, really. It gave me just the kind of mental and physical break that I needed after Lucius." Her light dimmed a minute, but not long. "I loved it so much that I stayed extra time." The older witch seemed scattered for a moment before she nodded, "The weather was beautiful. The wizarding community was very lovely, and I brought back gifts for everyone. Yours is still in my room, but maybe after dinner I can retrieve it for—"

The doors opened and in walked Draco—or he would've, had he not frozen immediately upon seeing her. Hermione found herself struck by the sight of him. Black robes, pale features, neat hair, severe stance, slight scowl. Normal, in her opinion, but there was something off about him. He was paler than usual, and a bit haunted.

"What are you doing here, Granger?" he sounded gruff, surprised, and upset.

Was it even possible to feel all those things at once?

An average person could, but not a man like Draco Malfoy.

She had done nothing *but* feel, but Draco—his emotions were probably as new to him as they were perplexing. He had to have felt them at some point; she had seen and heard of them, but after the war it seemed that Draco had buried his profound feelings below the Earth's mantle.

And not just that, but he seemed to be careful with every word he said—well, not as of late and not with her.

"Well?" he snapped impatiently.

Hermione's head spun. Was the tension in the room her own imagination or a product of their own creation? Deep down, she knew the answer. It had been there for months, thick and almost vibrant; it could have been emanating as much from her as from him. Astoria looked as uncomfortable as her mother. He was still waiting. Hermione figured that she should probably start talking, despite the fact that she still had no plan. "I, well," Dammit, the words wouldn't come out right. "I," her shoulder sagged in defeat. "You left."

Draco's small chuckle was brittle. "Ten points to Granger."

"Draco!" Narcissa scolded.

He kept his eyes locked on Hermione when he said, "Stay out of it, Mother."

"It can at least wait until dinner is over."

"Actually, it can't."

"You can't be mad at me," she finally snapped. "You're the one who left."

"And watch me as I do it, again." With that, he turned and walked right out the dining room.

Hermione sat there in shock for just a moment before she stood and walked out after him without even excusing herself. The last thing she heard before she allowed the double doors to shut behind her was Astoria's *"What the bloody hell was that?"* It was followed by Mrs. Greengrass' gruff, *"So much for no possibility."* Hermione wasn't too sure what that had been about, but she was too busy storming down the corridor of Malfoy Manor after Draco, yelling his name.

He didn't respond.

She walked faster and faster until she caught him by the arm. "Would you just—"

Draco jerked himself free of her. "It would be a good idea for you to go away."

"And if would be an even better idea for you to tell me what's wrong with you."

He stared at her. There was something in his eyes that she couldn't place. "I am not doing this with you."

Hermione grabbed him by the sleeve of his robes when he tried to walk away, again. "We were fine earlier." And she realised, again, that she was talking to the back of his head. Her voice softened, but her grip on his robes didn't. "I think I deserve to know why you wouldn't wait for me."

He turned abruptly to her, his gaze so intense Hermione thought she would spontaneously combust. "And I want to know why you're even here."

"I—I think I made it obvious that I'm here to talk to you." Her impulsiveness to find him had made Hermione lose precious planning time, and she cursed herself for it. She preferred to think about what she was going to say, to turn her words over and over in her head until she was sure of every angle, every edge, and every imperfection. It was probably due to the many mistakes she had made, but she didn't care. She needed the time to sort everything and Draco wasn't going to let her backtrack.

It was frustrating.

He flexed his other hand. "I would have thought that you wanted some time alone...to get reacquainted." And his voice was hollow and empty.

"But I'm here."

He closed his eyes and took what sounded like a calming breath. "Stop."

The problem between them was that at some point, they had fallen and been shattered. There were too many fragments—so many unspoken words between them—that Hermione didn't know how to put them back together. Broken things had a way of doing that. There was much she could say to fill some of the holes, but she was choking on her words and nerves and something foreign was stuck in her throat and wouldn't clear. It only made things worse. Draco was speaking, but he wasn't giving her anything. They were having two different conversations. She was arguing and he was defending himself. He was fighting to save himself—from her.

And that baffled her.

If anyone could get hurt in all this, it was *her*.

If anyone had gotten hurt already, it had been her.

So why was he so keen on protecting himself?

Draco, for once, showed his frustration with her by running his hand over his hair. Hermione watched as he fixed his lips to say something, but stopped himself. "I don't want to drag it out." He sounded exhausted. "You made your decision, and I made mine, too."

"What in the hell are you talking about?"

"About *this*." Draco gestured between the two of them. "You made your decision and I give up."

"Give up what?" When his eyes narrowed, she didn't cower. In fact, she did the opposite. "Don't look at me like that, I'm not a Seer! I can't get into your head and read your thoughts. Be clear with me!"

"I am!"

"No, you're not!" Hermione sighed in exasperation.

"You want more than I can give, because right now, all I want to do is yell at you. I walked out of that dining room and made my decision that I was better off without *this*," he gestured between them for the second time, "getting in the way." He shook her hand off of his robes again. She hadn't realised that she was still holding on to him. Draco chuckled darkly and there was no humour in it, only ash and bitterness. "I can't win with you, can I?" He closed his eyes. "I let you go, and here you are. You're *always* here. I'm trying to respect what you want."

Hermione stared at him, unsure about how she should feel about that. "You don't know what I want."

He gave another humourless chuckle. "Well, neither do you."

She wanted to say more; there was a lot more that she needed to say to him; a lot more that was kept bottled up inside, ready to explode. But the words—they still escaped her. And she understood just why. Words added definition, and definition was frightening and final. Once she gave her words and feelings definition, then they were at risk to be twisted and she was at risk of being hurt. And it was rather unexpected because even though she knew all that, there she was, standing on the edge.

"Why are you here?" Draco asked abruptly.

"What?"

"Why. Are. You. Here?" he repeated slowly.

"I—" Hermione reflexively cleared her throat in an attempt to remove whatever was lodged in it.

And Draco promptly turned and walked away.

That did it. That was the push she needed to swallow whatever was stuck. And with that, strange things started to bubble: words, meaning, purpose—it became so clear. For a moment, Hermione tried to catch her breath, stop herself from vomiting the words she'd been choking on for what felt like *hours*.

She suddenly knew how Draco felt that night on the pier.

He turned the corner and she started after him, her determination building with each step she took. She rounded the corner realising that he was halfway down the grand staircase. "If you would just stay and listen."

She wasn't the type to toss all her pride to the side, because that was all she'd had for a long time. But there she was, laying everything out on the metaphorical table and hoping to god that she wouldn't get hurt again. She was willing, not just because she needed to, but because he mattered more to her than her pride. Draco mattered, and that was why she wanted him to stay—why she had always wanted him to stay.

The realisation made her feel as though she were taking a tumble down the stairs in the dark. Once she started, she couldn't grab hold of anything to stop her fall. It was sudden, unexpected, and not to mention, painful. Her centre of gravity was gone, and there she was, trying to reach for something – anything – to hold onto.

But Draco stopped at the bottom of the staircase, much to her surprise. He stopped, but didn't turn around. Hermione was instantly reminded of the conversation that they had had at her front door. Only now, she was at the top of the steps and he was at the bottom.

"You should go home." Draco told her, but his voice sounded odd.

"I probably should, but I'm not." She started down the steps. She sounded far more confident than she actually was, and that was fine. "Not until you start talking to me straight." Hermione didn't stop until she was three steps above him. "If this is about last week, on the pier—"

Draco turned around.

There were few things that she could explain about Draco, and even fewer things that she knew for certain. His confession last week had proven just that. He was like a book—a book left behind by a traveller in a country where no one could read. She felt like everything about him was right there in front of her, but she just couldn't understand him. Maybe it was her fault, but she refused to blame herself for reading him wrong because he wasn't hers. Perhaps she had been so caught up in trying to re-learn herself that she hadn't taken the time to study his language. And for the first time, Hermione wondered what it would be like if she had. She wondered how things would change if she'd had the power to unlock him, to see and feel and *be* everything that Draco was.

Fear accompanied that curiosity because it was too much to think about.

Hermione knew that she would no longer see what *she* wanted to see in Draco, and she would never feel the way that *she* wanted to feel about him. She would be able to look past all the reluctance and anger and stubbornness, and into the root of his issues—his issues with *her*. She would be able to feel everything that he felt but never showed. And judging from the look in his eyes in that split second, it would probably be too much for her to handle.

But it wasn't enough to change her mind or stop her from walking down the last two steps until she was one above him—and face-to-face.

And his face. Well, he was not happy, to say the least. "This has nothing to do with that and everything to do with today."

Now, she was confused again. "What happened today?"

Draco gritted his teeth. "Don't act like you don't know." He closed his eyes for a second and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Just go ahead and say it."

The defeated tone of his voice alarmed her. "Say what?"

"Just tell me what you came here to tell me." Draco told her with gritted teeth, "Just tell me that you and the Weasel rekindled whatever the fuck you two had in the past. Just say it, and be done with it."

"Is this what this has been about? About Ron?" Hermione asked in almost dry amazement.

"It's not what I know; it's what I *saw*—"

And his reaction made perfect sense. "You may have seen that, but you didn't see everything. You didn't see me push him away. You didn't see me tell him that we couldn't be what we once were."

If Draco was surprised, he didn't show it. His fingers flexed at his sides, that was all, and she didn't even know what that meant.

"I'm not..." Hermione trailed off to gather the words that were threatening to spill. "If I was even *considering* going back to Ron, why did I come here?"

Draco blinked only twice.

Hermione looked at the ground before and took a breath before she lifted her eyes back to his. "I'm not the same Hermione I was at eighteen. I'm not sure who I am, really." Hermione couldn't believe that she was telling Draco all of this, but at the same time, this talk seemed long overdue. "He wants something that I can't give him. He wants a family, he wants a wife, he wants children ... and I don't want any of that now."

Draco looked down at his feet.

He wasn't going to say a word, but that was okay, because it was her turn to talk.

"There's no progress in perfection, so I don't want it." She told him earnestly. "I don't want words, only actions. I'm on a journey to recovery and rediscovery and I want someone who is too. Someone who has seen me at my worse and still stays. I want the struggle ahead, because it'll only make us stronger and deeper-connected."

"Why are you telling me this?" he asked, looking at her for the first time.

Bloody hell, this was hard. No wonder Draco had been furious. Hermione just wanted to leave it there and walk away, but she didn't. She wanted to yell at him like he'd yelled at her and probably for the same reason: she was risking what little emotional control she had and it was fucking *terrifying*. Just because there were feelings didn't always mean there were guarantees. And he was just *standing there*, making her feel dangerous things that she didn't need or want. Now that it was identified, Hermione realised that they'd been around longer than she'd realised.

Dammit, if he could be honest – in his own way – then she could be too.

"You needed to know."

The meaning of her words seemed to dawn on him gradually and the hard lines on his face started to smooth. The hand at his side relaxed and in that moment he looked like the personification of clarity.

"You—"

"You aren't alone...in your feelings." Hermione tugged at the bottom of her shirt to avoid pulling out her hair. "You...you matter."

And the silence that followed was uncomfortable. She wanted to throw herself on top of an exploding cauldron. Hermione shifted her weight to her left foot, stuck her hands in her pockets, and waited for him to say something. Oddly enough, she could hardly maintain eye contact and spent the silent moments switching back and forth between him and the marble floors. It seemed like an entire eternity passed before Draco asked, "Is that all that you have to say?"

"Well, I don't know. I was hoping that you would say something in response—*anything*." Hermione bit her bottom lip, "Did you change your mind?"

Draco lifted his head to the ceiling and shut his eyes for a moment before he made eye-contact with her, again. "It would be easier if I had, but no. I haven't." She was genuinely surprised at the amount of open honesty in his voice. "I'm sure it's far too late for that."

"You're not the only one who's scared."

"I'm not scared," he told her.

"You're not?" Hermione continued fidgeting with her clothes. "I was really hoping that you were."

"No, I'm not."

"I'm bloody *terrified*." Hermione blurted out because when she truly opened up to someone, she opened all the way. "I didn't expect any of this. I—I didn't wake up this morning knowing about my feelings...for *you*—"

"Granger—"

Draco sounded very uncomfortable with her ranting, but she just couldn't stop. "It's hard to explain." Hermione shook her head, "I'm not ready for this."

He snorted and it lacked humour. "That makes two of us."

It was a rare moment of honesty between them and Hermione couldn't shake the fact that it had come so naturally. She also couldn't help but be relieved that he understood how she felt. "I haven't thought about my feelings in a long time. There's always been something else, someone else that needed me. I just haven't had time for me. And now that I do, it's strange to think about my wants and needs."

"So, what do we do?" Draco muttered a little awkwardly.

"What a dysfunctional pair we are. Imperfect and incomplete; we're not where we need to be. Neither of us wants to be here, neither of us really needs to be here, but here we are...and we can't move."

She heard the frustration in his sigh and understood exactly how he felt.

"Where exactly are we, Granger?"

She shrugged. "A fork in the road, I guess."

"A what?"

"There are two paths that we can take now. We could go right and ignore everything that's been said in the last week...or we could go left and try to figure it all out..." she trailed off, leaving the final word unspoken.

Together.

"Which way do you want to go?" Hermione asked.

Because she got the feeling that once the decision was made, there was no going back.

"Which do *you* want to go?" Draco shot back.

And she made her decision without a second thought, but she was choking on anxiety. "Left, maybe."

Part Four: The descent into madness

Left.

She wanted to go left.

Draco didn't know what to think.

She wasn't supposed to be the one to make decisions, at least, not that fast. Hermione had been the one too afraid to take a step forward because she didn't want to make a mistake. And there she stood on the step that put them face-to-face, telling him that she wanted to go left. But as he pondered, his gaze never moved from her. Her eyes were locked on her horrid shoes and her hair hung in a way that he couldn't even see her face. It was probably a good thing, too.

Draco couldn't seem to wipe the gobsmacked look from his own face.

Right was easier, but left was...more gratifying. But it put him at odds with his own character, but so did having feelings for Granger, but there they were. And there he was. It was insanity. He hadn't expected the sudden turn of events.

"And you?" She was looking at him, again. "What do *you* want, Draco?"

And he cursed himself because he always felt as though he were teetering on the edge of sanity whenever she looked at him the way she was now. "But—"

She popped her knuckles and muttered awkwardly, "It's a little easier when you don't think so much about it."

No thinking? He looked at her as if she'd gone mad. How could he not think when he was that far outside of his comfort zone? "One of us at least has to think about this. It's insane. It'll never work because we're all those things—"

"You're right, but I never said anything about us working. I just said that we should try and figure things out. Who's jumping ahead, now?" It was supposed to be sarcastic, but the nervousness in her voice was painfully obvious.

"I like stability."

"And I do, too."

"I like certainty."

"Nothing in life ever is, we both know this."

"But—"

"You're not a Seer, Draco. You can't predict the future." He opened his mouth to argue, but she shushed him. "Again, I said that we should *try* to figure things out."

"Look—" he tried to interrupt again, but she was so damn close he couldn't think.

"Maybe I'm not the only one that's afraid—"

"I'm *not* afraid."

"I know a lot of things and I'm...*feeling* a lot of things that I haven't felt in a long time, but hear me out. You matter to me, and I matter to you. That's all we have right now, but I don't think that we need anything else right now. I know that it's more complicated than that. I know that *we're* more complicated than that."

He snorted in agreement.

"I know that I'm not exactly the easiest person to have...erm feelings for, but neither are you, Draco. You have just as many issues and just as many things that you don't say. I know that neither of us is ready, but..." Hermione trailed off. "If I've learned anything in the last few months, it's that you have to take a chance on something. I took a chance on you when I told

you about what happened between me and Harry. You took a chance on me after your father died."

"And exactly what is your point?" Draco asked lowly.

"All I'm saying is that you shouldn't write people off too quickly. They might surprise you," she looked at him meaningfully and added, "I might surprise you."

It was too late. Hermione had surprised him into speechlessness.

Her feet were now halfway off the step; she was far too close. She was shaking, but her voice was strong. "Left or right, Draco? Because I'm not sure how long I can stand here, hoping for something that I shouldn't even be wanting. I'm not sure how long I have before I start over-analysing this...and you."

Draco wanted to analyse this to death. And he would have been able to if she weren't right there, asking him to take a chance on her. He could think, had he not been alarmed by the mere fact that Granger, the personification of fear, was taking this in far better stride. And he decided that if she could be honest and open without fear of judgment; if she could try without thinking...then maybe he could, too. Because he wanted it. And slowly, though nothing but his own persistence, he achieved some sort of fucked up equilibrium. Within that tenuous balance, he answered.

But he didn't do it with words.

He answered by reaching for her hand that gripped the bottom of her shirt so tight. He covered it with his and held it, feeling a bit stupid despite having done it before. But he wanted it. He wanted. He was stupid and this was stupid and—Granger's eyes closed almost involuntarily. And he found himself struck. Absently, his fingertips brushed against her cheek and she shuddered and he wasn't sure if it was a shudder of fear or something else. Her jaws were locked, lips pursed, and eyes narrowed. It was a look of sheer bravery, but Draco knew the truth. Her body language and her gathering tears screamed the truth.

She was scared.

When he tilted her chin, Hermione's eyes opened suddenly and there it was again. That feeling. That look. She was trying to do it again. Read him, know him, understand him, *see* him. She was trying to search him, probably for the same reasons that he was trying to search her; for doubt, for an excuse, for a reason to stop himself from taking the biggest plunge of his life. A plunge that he hadn't been prepared to take.

Draco didn't know what was worse, the fact that she hadn't seen anything to make her step away or the fact that he hadn't seen anything, either. Because there were a million reasons why he shouldn't, and only one reason why he should.

He murmured the few words that gave her the perfect escape, Hermione seemed to hesitate only for a brief moment before she leaned into him. When Draco nodded in return, she chewed on her bottom lip. It was obvious that she wasn't coming into this with an absence of fear. But at that moment as he watched her, he knew that he was going mad.

Draco wanted this—more than he ever thought. And he leaned forward just enough to graze his lips against hers. Draco could feel her shaking, but she didn't move or respond. Hermione just breathed and trembled like a mouse beneath some cat's capricious paw. His hand moved from hers and around her waist to pull her in closer. Draco couldn't shake the feeling that Hermione felt small and fragile to him. He felt like he was going to break her.

Maybe he would, one day.

Or maybe she would break him.

When she reached for him, Draco predicted, to his utter dismay, that it would be the latter.

He remembered the day that he had crushed her. It hadn't been his intention, but that was what had happened. He had crushed her, but at the same time, he had ended up lighting a flame that quietly grew and spread. By the time he'd noticed it, it was too large for him to contain. And now, he stood before her with seared skin and an ashy taste in his mouth and soot on his fingers.

Now, he stood before her, defeated.

When his upper lip brushed against her lower for the second time, Hermione looked as uncomfortable as he felt. She was nothing but pale skin and frozen features, but at least her eyes were shut. And again, she just stood there, not moving or responding. He thought about ending what had been an awkward few moments of almost-kisses, excuses on his end, unresponsiveness on hers, and apprehension on both their ends.

But he cast the thought aside and kissed her, taking his time as he built on it. He felt her small gasp and didn't let her stiffness dissuade him. The way his lips moved over hers was controlled, decisive, but still tentative. He was calculating, familiarising himself with a strange situation, and mentally taking any and all meaning away from his actions. This didn't matter. It didn't.

But it did.

And when he started kissing her honestly, kissing her deeply, he felt a tear roll down her cheek. And when she started to respond, she returned the sincerity and it felt like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders. She touched his shoulder and then gripped his hand, and Draco tried to ignore just how hard she was shaking, but he couldn't.

She was scared.

So scared.

But so was he.

:)

holding the hand of a hurricane

Chapter Summary

"He said that the whens don't matter, not when there are so many nows to distract ourselves with."

Chapter Notes

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

Chapter Thirty-Two

Holding The Hand of the Hurricane

Part One: Girl Talk

May 10th

Was it possible to be in paradise and hell at the same time?

Hermione still hadn't reached a verdict. She'd been at the Scottish Spa and Magical Paradise for two days—two very strange days. Two days since – Hermione grimaced at herself. She couldn't believe that she was still thinking about it. Didn't she have anything else to think about?

Well, the answer to that question was a firm no.

It was likely that the reason she'd formulated multiple philosophical theories about something as silly as the possibility of simultaneously being in paradise and hell was because she really didn't want to think, at all. But that wasn't it, and Hermione knew it. She wanted to think, she needed to think, but she *couldn't* think. Her thoughts had been nothing but a jumbled and twisted mess since she had arrived at the resort, and she was in hell for it.

"Oh my, another one," the witch massaging her back muttered to herself as she reached for her wand that was on the floating table. Soon, all Hermione felt was warmth and the pain was gone. She sighed softly to herself.

Paradise.

And hell.

Emotions were portable, after all; some people took their fears and distress everywhere with them. Hermione was no different. After all, she'd taken her emotions over seven hundred miles from Venice to London; the excursion to Scotland was no exception. She'd packed a bag with her nerves and fears and everything else that had clouded her mind and heart. It hadn't been her intention. She wanted to get away from it all, but it didn't seem right to leave it all at home. So, she had brought her emotional baggage with her: a satchel with Parvati and Ginny that was still unopened; a keepsake containing Matthew that was still close to her heart; and, a fifteen-pound trunk containing Draco Malfoy and a number of pretty dresses that she'd actually explored a bit.

Soon, she would have to put one on and face him.

Face him? That seemed a little harsher than what was actually going to take place.

A conversation – a real one. Probably. Hopefully.

Hermione's stomach started to churn.

She had talked a good talk, but Hermione didn't know the first thing on how to commence a relationship. She and Ron had come together naturally. Granted, there had been seven years of build-up and, hints and tension, but realising that the day of the final battle could've been their last was what had really brought everything to a head. The fact that they didn't die had just made things all the better.

Her masseuse dug into another knot and she winced.

"Oh, dear."

Draco was not Ron.

Their coming together hadn't been very easy or natural at all, but it had happened.

So, now what?

Her shoulders tensed, causing the masseuse to mutter, "Sweet Circe, I thought that after two days of pampering, you wouldn't be as tense. I suppose I was wrong." She used her wand to soothe the pain, "Granted, you're a lot better, but—"

"Don't give up, Carmine," Pansy instructed lazily from the next table. She seemed to be enjoying her massage. Hermione fought back a scowl. "She really needs this. Believe me. You wouldn't *believe* the last year...well, six years she's had." Pansy paused for a moment to sigh. "Carmine, you're the best. I would've had you massage me, but I want the best for my best friend. I want her as limp as a Flobberworm by the time we leave here tomorrow. I want her worry lines to be pampered away."

Hermione snorted. "Good luck with that."

"Weren't you supposed to leave your negativity in London?" Pansy asked sarcastically.

"I brought a couple of things that I shouldn't have," she mumbled a little louder than she intended.

"What are you talking about? You didn't bring half the items off the list that I gave you."

It wasn't like she hadn't had much time to pack, and she blushed at the thought. "It was a long list."

"The list was only fifty-seven items!" Pansy argued.

"Again, *long*."

She rolled her eyes, "Oh well, it's over now."

"I know that," Hermione closed her eyes, "You're the one that's huffy."

Pansy snorted, and then, there was silence.

It was a shame that she couldn't enjoy it quite like Pansy could. But she could appreciate that the room – no, the entire resort – was bursting with magic. It made her feel warm and fuzzy.

Carmine's fingers didn't, but that was minor.

Hermione could value the intense scent of burning thuya wood, potions, pastes, and vanilla incense. The miscellany of scents would've been utterly nauseating under different circumstances, but she found it a bit hypnotic – and even familiar, but she couldn't connect the odd scent with a particular memory. She even could welcome the tranquil music poured from a wireless that had been built into the walls. Hermione could appreciate it all, but she hadn't been able to relax.

It had taken a Calming draught, half an hour, and two pep talks from Pansy to get her to lie on the massage bed in nothing but a towel that only covered her bum. She still felt bloody uncomfortable though. The draught did very little for that, but she supposed it came with the territory.

A small groan escaped her when the Carmine's fingers dug into a sore area between her shoulder blades. She must've heard her because Hermione felt her pour even more liquefied muscle-relaxing paste on her back and start digging into her knotted skin with more fervour. She listened as Carmine told her – for the sixth time – that in the twenty years that she had been doing this, Hermione was the most wound-up witch that she had ever massaged.

She said nothing in response.

Instead, she closed her eyes and tried to remain relaxed.

Pansy's sarcastic snort from the next table over rang out in the near silence. Hermione frowned.

Not a few minutes passed before Carmine called for Stella, her assistant, "Can you bring me another container of muscle-relaxing paste? I've run out." Hermione only heard Pansy's

cackle.

A minute later, she felt her masseuse slather more paste on her back. And the fingers returned, digging into her back to loosen the tension. It didn't take her long to find another major knot. "Oh, Merlin. Try not to squirm. Goodness. You're going to feel like a new person when I finish with you."

Funny, she already felt like a new person. On the inside.

It wouldn't hurt to feel that way on the outside, too.

Hermione closed her eyes, inhaled in another attempt to relax, and found herself amazed at how the scent of the room reinforced many memories. How she could close her eyes and vividly picture the memory associated with the smell. It took her back to Snape's potions lab, back to the accident-prone Neville, back to Harry and Ron bumbling their way through assignments, back to Draco being – well – *Malfoy*. And if she ever doubted herself and the amount of progress that she'd made in the last few months, she would remember this as a true testament to how far she had come.

For the first time in a very long time, those memories didn't make her sad or depressed, didn't make her nostalgic or resentful, and didn't make her feel as though she'd been left behind.

She felt – not bad, but not good, either.

But it was enough for Hermione to feel like someone had poured a little hope into her near empty cup.

Hope that she would truly need on her journey to recovery – and her future.

The future.

She opened her eyes suddenly.

No, it wasn't the future, it was *her* future.

The corners of her lips turned in what was a near smile. She had a future. Hermione always knew she had one, but for some reason it was hitting her all over again. The decisions that she'd made, the new path that she was going to take – damn, she was really going to do this. Face her fears. Forgive herself. Start something new. Move forward. Put all those maybes into action.

Was she sure – *absolutely* sure about all this?

Wasn't there a manual? A 'How-To' book for the hapless?

Perhaps maybe there was one called 'Complicated Relationships for Dummies'.

She wished. Hermione was no expert, but she didn't think that relationships were meant to be easy; especially one like theirs, riddled with indecision and fear. They required work and dedication. They were supposed to teach, test, and force them to recognise and correct the

parts of themselves that they had yet to discover. Relationships were supposed to teach them the truth about themselves so that they could be true to each other. And maybe that was why they could work.

Hermione grimaced a little when Carmine's fingers found yet another tender spot.

Before she could swat the thought away, she wondered what would happen when things between Draco and herself were knotted – like her back. Would they implode? It wasn't any different from anything else in life. Hermione had hit enough rough spots to be something of an expert. If – no, *when* – she and Draco hit a rough patch, perhaps they would do things different. Or, at least she would. Hermione would be stronger. She wouldn't run away or avoid the issues. There would be boundaries. They would trust each other, and themselves. She would work through the hard times with him; kind of like how Carmine had worked through her knots.

Her mind began to race and her heart began to swell.

She felt – better than she had in a long time, content, and her thoughts weren't so dark. Sure, they came and went, but she could handle them. And she knew that she would only continue to get better now that she had poured her faith and trust into others—and herself.

And she had to figure out Draco's place in everything. They hadn't defined anything, set guidelines, or even discussed it since that – incident? That wasn't it. Hermione was struggling to assign emotional significance to what had transpired between them. It was more than an incident, more than one of the most vulnerable moment of her life, and more than the start of...*something*.

It was a – a *kiss*.

There, she'd said it – no, thought it.

She was still a mess, but Hermione also felt...exhilarated. Jittery, even.

If she could figure out what the hell she was going to say to him, life would be much better.

Carmine worked through another knot.

There was a high chance that they wouldn't make it past tomorrow or next week or even next month, but perhaps they would. Hermione closed her eyes for a moment as her smile started to spread. It was such a strange feeling; she found it ironic how she hadn't known what she wanted until it sat precariously on the metaphorical edge. And then suddenly, it had become crystal clear.

"What's got you smiling over there?" Pansy asked, sounding awfully smug.

Hermione winced when Carmine's fingers dug into her skin. "Nothing much."

Pansy snorted in response, then sighed when her masseuse whispered a spell on the stones and placed them on her back, "Oh that feels good." Then she got back on topic. "Nothing

much my arse, Hermione. You look almost *cheery*. I have an inkling that it has nothing to do with all the pampering that you've received."

She curiously looked at her friend. Pansy Parkinson did not have inklings. She knew everything she wanted to know, but always kept silent until the perfect moment. And she was patient, too. She had known about Matthew's paternity. She had known of Draco's feelings for her. She had known many other things that Hermione hadn't vocalised, which meant – *goodness*.

As she winced through the rest of Carmine's massage, Hermione wondered what she knew to make her look so damn smug, but didn't want the masseuse to overhear something that should be kept between them. The wait was long and hard, but when she whispered the last spell and placed the final stone on her back, Hermione was about as nervous as she was curious. When both their masseuses and their assistants left the room to prepare their mud bath, Hermione broke the temporary silence with a question, "What do you know?"

Pansy, of course, decided to play innocent. "What *ever* do you mean?"

She wasn't buying it for a second. "Just so you know, you don't do innocent very well."

"Of course, I do. I'm the queen of innocence."

"You're not only delusional, but you're changing the subject."

She lifted her head and glared. "I am not—"

"Spill it. Now," Hermione demanded.

"It's not like it's a big secret. I know, Narcissa knows, and I told Blaise before we left. I think that's about it, though." The stones on her back kept Hermione from folding her arms over her chest, but it didn't stop her frown. "And to be frank, I'm not happy that it's been *two damn days* and you said *nothing*. I'm your best friend. Aren't we supposed to have a ridiculously girly moment where we scream and jump together? Aren't we supposed to giggle about this over ice cream? Aren't you supposed to tell me every—"

"Pansy," Hermione finally stopped the rambling witch. "What the bloody hell are you going on about?"

"I know what happened between you and Draco," Pansy told her with a smirk. "And it's about damn time, too."

Hermione was torn between looking stunned and looking – well – not surprised. "Who told you—wait. I know the answer to that question."

Narcissa.

Instead of sending a house elf to find them for dessert, she had sought them out herself. Hermione wasn't sure what had happened. One second, they were kissing like nothing else existed or mattered and the next he was tensing. Then he told his mother to come from

around the corner. How he had known, she still didn't know. She figured that it was some Malfoy inner...*thing* at work. That was the best that she could do to justify it.

Once her presence had been made known, Narcissa calmly said that after ten minutes of silence, she had decided to make sure that they hadn't killed each other. However, Hermione could see a hint of a smirk on her face when an obviously annoyed Draco gruffly replied that they clearly hadn't before he took her hand and led her to the Floo.

She hadn't seen Narcissa since.

And Pansy, well she was grinning so hard that it was unnerving. "Tell me *all* about it."

Hermione rested her head on her hands and closed her eyes, "Nothing to tell."

"That's a load of bollocks. Narcissa said that they could hear you two shouting at each other before you all left earshot."

"How is it that you had time to find out all these details?" Hermione closed her eyes. "I barely had enough time to get a note to my boss."

Pansy smirked, "That's because you were too busy snogging—"

Snogging was too juvenile to describe what had happened. "It wasn't a snog," she argued, but felt awkward talking about it. It was easier to replay it in her mind. That way she didn't have to give it words. Maybe this was a good thing. "It was just a few kisses, that's all."

"Oh," she drawled, completely unconvinced. "So, your hands in his hair and his tongue down your throat are suddenly characteristics of a mere kiss? When did that happen?"

She ignored Pansy's disturbingly accurate details. "It wasn't just like that. It was...different. I don't know."

"You don't know? Or you don't want me to know?"

It was a little bit of both, but she only shrugged. Hermione couldn't quite put the answer into words that didn't make her sound or feel ridiculous. That first kiss – and everything that happened following was like free-falling blindly. That was the most accurate way to describe her entire relationship with Draco. Maybe it was different for him. He had to have known about his feelings before he'd yelled them at her. They'd had time to develop and build, whereas hers had struck her like a blow to the head.

Hermione was still trying to recover.

Yes, *still*.

"Fine, don't answer," Pansy pouted, "But you must tell me what happened between Narcissa catching you two and us leaving the next morning."

"Not—"

"And don't you dare say that nothing happened in those hours, because when I came to your house you looked thoroughly snogged, your hair was everywhere, you weren't finished packing, and Draco was sleeping on your sofa."

Hermione cleared her throat and muttered, "I wasn't going to say that."

"Then what were you going to say?"

"Not that it's any of your business, but after Narcissa found us, we went back to my house." When her best friend's eyebrow rose, Hermione quickly stomped on the idea forming in her head. "No, nothing like that. We only talked—"

"I bet you did," she chuckled cheekily. "Exactly how much 'talking' did you two accomplish?"

"Not much..." Hermione trailed off uncomfortably.

"I knew it!"

Pansy's exclaimed words startled her. Luckily, the stones were spelled to stay on her back or they all would have been on the floor. With each passing second, her dislike for where the conversation was going increased. "We didn't do whatever you think you know we did..." she scratched her head. "Wait. I—"

"I know you didn't do...*that*. Blaise and I—" she made a face and looked around awkwardly, "Not yet." Hermione didn't have nearly enough time to bask in Pansy's unease. "Back to you and Draco."

"We didn't make it to boiling water for tea before..." she blushed, "Well, you know."

Pansy was beaming. Bloody wench. "Before you two snogged like Sixth Years five minutes before curfew?"

Hermione's blush deepened. "It was...different."

"You've said that twice now. What does that even mean?"

"I'm not really sure. I – don't get me wrong, I enjoyed it. A lot. But it started off horrendous."

"Like 'Weasley-trying-to-snog-you' horrendous?"

She shook her head. "No, it was more like 'Fifth-Year-Cho-Chang-under-the-mistletoe' horrendous."

Because *everyone* knew about that.

Pansy gasped. "You didn't?"

Hermione groaned in response, "I did."

"But why?"

"I don't know! I was pretending to be brave and confident, but I was completely and utterly terrified. And before I knew it, he was kissing me and I was crying."

Pansy pathetically hid her amusement. "Like sobbing?"

"More like silent tears," she shook her head at the memory, "I didn't know how intense Draco could be, and well, I felt overwhelmed."

"Overwhelmed?"

"Yes, but not in a bad way, just—" she paused. "I don't know how to explain it, really, but I almost forgot how hesitant he was when he kissed me. Draco was...in control. I didn't mind, because I could understand his need for it, but it was just – a lot. I felt very raw and exposed and out of sorts. I still feel that way."

She nodded with understanding. "What happens now?"

That was a good question. "I wasn't in the right frame of mind to really talk, and I suspected that he wasn't either. We did agree to talk when I returned. We're having dinner tomorrow night."

"Like a date?" Pansy looked too excited for Hermione's liking.

"I don't know if it's a date. I left it to him to pick out the restaurant, and he told me that it would probably be in Muggle London and that I should probably look decent, and that was the last of the discussion."

"It *is* a date!"

"No, we're supposed to discuss what we're going to do and lay down some ground rules."

"Ground rules? This isn't a business merger, Hermione. This is—"

"I know what it is, but I'm really coming to terms with all of this."

"I understand that, Hermione, but just answer this question: how do you feel about him?"

"At the moment, light-headed."

She snickered, "I mean, in general?"

Hermione froze. This was the moment that she would verbalise – to someone other than Draco – what she had known for exactly two days. Maybe this time she wouldn't stammer it out so awkwardly. "I – I have feelings for him." It still felt awkward, but Hermione recovered. "We agreed to figure things out together, but I have no idea what to do."

Pansy's smile looked like it hurt. "That wasn't so hard, was it?" She begged to differ, but her friend never gave her the opportunity to say another word. "Oh, don't even fret about it.

That's the best thing. The not knowing."

"Well, I beg to differ." Hermione retorted. "I'm not sure if I like uncertainty—"

"*And* you both should prepare yourselves for more because relationships – especially complicated ones like yours and Draco's – are all about uncertainty," she told her truthfully. "When Blaise and I first started dating again, I tried to plan out every solution to every problem that we would have, and he stopped me. He said that the whens don't matter, not when there are so many nows to distract ourselves with. And, you know, he was right. Things were a lot easier when I just let go and went with the flow."

Part Two: You don't know

May 11th

Draco's fists clenched at his sides as he walked down the long corridor from the Ministry's library towards the elevator. The sound of his footsteps echoed loudly in the empty hall. Click, click, click. Stop. Cli—stop. He frowned. Draco hated a lot of things, but the general feeling of being watched topped the list.

There had been many times he'd felt like he'd been caged and examined. He hated it so much that he abruptly turned, wand drawn, and found himself looking at a person that he didn't want to see.

An armed and messy-haired Potter.

Draco raised a brow as he and Potter pocketed their wands simultaneously. "This is probably a stupid question, but why in the hell are you stalking me?"

Potter frowned. "I wasn't stalking you, Malfoy."

"Oh, right, so stealthily creeping behind me in an empty corridor – poorly, might I add – isn't considered stalking? Hmm, well, I'll make sure I commit that to memory for future references."

Scarhead made a face before he rolled his eyes, "I'm on duty tonight," he checked his old watch, "Well, I'm not on duty for another hour, but I'm supposed to be on post in half an hour to make sure that – I'm not supposed to be seen or heard."

"You failed miserably at that one, but that isn't surprising," he replied and was about to walk away when a question rose in his mind. "Since when have you ever taken a night shift?"

"Ginny works during the day, and I decided to work at night so that I could have the day to look around and," he looked around, "Everything else."

For a second, Draco found himself surprised. And then he broke a vow he made to himself at the age of fourteen. He complimented him. "That was actually a smart move, Potter. Didn't know you had it in you."

He seemed uncomfortable with Draco's scathing praise. "Right, erm, so, I need to talk to you."

Draco casually checked his own watch. He was meeting Granger in his office in an hour for dinner where they would have a conversation that he'd been partially dreading for the last three days. "I don't have time."

"It's about Parv—."

He abruptly cut Potter off. "Don't say a word. Meet me in my office in ten minutes."

And then he left Scarhead standing there, alone.

Draco used the time it took him to walk back to his office to clear his head, which had been clouded for quite some time. It was to the point where he'd become accustomed to the misty mental, physical, and emotional fog. He'd thought that clearing the air with Granger would've sharpened his brain, and maybe it would've had they *really* cleared the air. With words, and maybe definitions, but that hadn't happened. And maybe that was his fault. He didn't really allow her to get in much edgewise, but she hadn't really tried. Draco had, however, managed to curb at least *some* his own frustration with Granger by snogging her within an inch of her life.

Much to his annoyance, Potter was waiting outside his office door for him.

How in the hell had he managed that? Instead of asking, he unlocked the door, walked in, and shut it behind Scarhead. "You should take a seat," he said, trying to be a bit polite. He crossed the room and sat in his chair.

"I prefer to stand."

"Fine with me," Draco shrugged. When Potter said nothing, he snapped, "Start talking. I don't have all night."

In fact, he only had half an hour to go home, change clothes, come back, and wait for Granger to arrive. Their reservation was in an hour.

Potter reached into his Auror robes and retrieved a piece of parchment. "I think something is about to happen."

"Explain," he ordered impatiently.

"I've been looking through Ginny's scheduler, and there are weekly lunches with Parvati...up until two weeks from now. Then they all stop. Oh, and today, she asked me to ask for some time off starting from the twenty-sixth. She wants to go on vacation, again. This time, to Mexico. For three weeks, I think."

"You sound paranoid."

Potter rolled his eyes. "When does Hermione come back from Scotland?"

"She's already back," he answered automatically. Pansy had made sure that he knew when she'd burst into his office that afternoon and annoyed him for thirty minutes.

"I'll just go over there tomorrow and we'll keep going through the letters and discuss—"

Draco folded his arms across his chest. He didn't want to talk about Potter going to Granger's for research purposes. He just—well, *that* was an odd feeling. "Granger was going to bring me up to speed tomorrow so I'll be there to assist."

Potter didn't look that happy about it, but tough luck. "That's fine, perhaps you can help us figure out how to end this all with minimal impact. I know Ginny's done a lot, but I owe it to her to—"

"Excuse me?" Because Draco couldn't believe his ears. "You owe her what exactly? You don't love her and that's the only thing she's ever wanted from you."

Potter's face reddened slightly and his mouth opened and shut twice before he finally said, "Ginny may have done some things wrong, but I accept my role in that. Maybe, just maybe, we should've broken up a while ago, but we tried to work through our problems. I made a commitment to her, and I never strayed or faltered."

"Oh, and being in love with Granger isn't considered a falter?" He glanced at his watch and inwardly groaned. Fifteen minutes. Irritation was etched into his voice when he said, "Please, *Potter*, spare me the sanctimonious bullshit." After all, Ginny Weasley was Potter's creation, but he wouldn't say that. "You lied to her for years and made her think she had a chance."

"It wasn't all lies. I did feel that way about her at one time, and it changed. I can't help that."

"And when it changed, you should've just left rather than—"

"I'm not like you, Malfoy. I'm not a coward!"

"I'm not one, either! I—"

"I don't just stop when things get hard. I stay and I try and I *fight*. And that's what I did with Ginny—at least *I* don't bounce from woman to woman, looking for—"

"Don't even—" Draco threatened lowly.

"Don't even do what? Tell you the truth? When was the last time you ever did that, Malfoy? When was the last time you made a commitment to anyone other than yourself?"

He gritted his teeth, but said nothing in his own defence.

"You haven't, have you? I didn't think so. You have no *idea* what it's like, how hard it is, or how much it takes to make a relationship work—or even how to end it when it's not working. So, don't judge me or Ginny or our relationship, regardless of how messed up it is. It's not your place to judge. You don't know what we've been through and you don't know why even the process of leaving her is extremely hard on me. Hell, forget it, don't tell me anything, Malfoy. You. Don't. Know."

There was nothing quite like realising that Potter – a person who had made a *talent* of being wrong – was actually right. It was actually quite horrifying how closely his words had matched with Draco's frame of mind for the last couple of days. It made him really think about what he was getting himself into...as far as Granger was concerned.

Merlin, he *didn't* know.

That was a problem, considering how uncertainty was his enemy.

And speaking of uncertainty, its personification came into his office in a burst of green flames.

Draco frowned. Just what he needed...*another* awkward moment. He should familiarise himself with awkward since he was going to try with Granger.

She looked back and forth between them before she completely stepped out of his private Floo and into better light. Draco visibly tensed when she removed her cloak. She looked – not at *all* how he'd expected. He'd sent her the letter that afternoon with the time of their reservation and instructions on how to dress. After deliberations and suggestions from Blaise, he'd settled for a Muggle restaurant that they'd all been to before. It was casual and nice, nothing over-the-top or serious. And Granger – she looked striking.

And nervous.

"Hello," she greeted them both with a small wave, but her eyes lingered on Draco. "I didn't interrupt something important, did I?"

"No, you didn't." Potter assured her, but his voice was a bit tight. "We'll talk about it tomorrow."

She looked at them more dubiously, "Right. Okay." Hermione looked at him, "I can wait back —"

Potter looked between them for a moment with an arched brow. "It's okay," he began a bit awkwardly, "I'm about to leave. Duty calls."

"You're working tonight?" Hermione asked.

He nodded, paused, and asked, "And you're..."

Granger looked uncomfortable, "We have a dinner," Draco's eyes widened slightly. Potter seemed to have given up on her, but he didn't want to chance it by telling him that it was a –

wait, what the hell was it? Certainly not a date. It was just dinner. To his relief, she ended up saying, "To attend."

"Oh, well, you look nice. Have a good night." And with that, Harry Potter left the room.

Part Three: Waders

Harry's exit told Hermione everything that she already knew. She was utter crap at making excuses. Just crap.

We have a dinner...to attend? What was she thinking?

She couldn't make sense of it, really. She also couldn't shake the feeling that she was cutting some invisible cord between herself and Harry. But what? Outside of two incidents, they had never been anything more than best friends. But something had happened when she had stepped out of Draco's Floo; something had happened when he didn't meet her eyes and left. Even as the seconds ticked by, she couldn't shake the feeling that something was finished.

Maybe they could overcome the awkwardness surrounding them when they were in the same room.

Hermione looked forward to it.

It took all of three minutes for Draco to mutter. "That was awkward."

"Yes, it was. I didn't mean to interrupt whatever you two were discussing. I was ready a little early and I thought I would come."

"It doesn't matter," he shrugged and started cleaning off his desk. Without his wand. "Potter said he wanted to talk about something tomorrow when he came over. He sounded a little paranoid."

"Mmhmm." She tilted her head to the side as she watched him gather scattered papers, walk across the room to his file cabinet, organise said files in a fashion that she couldn't see or understand, and put them neatly into his file cabinet. It was an interesting sight to behold. Draco was in his element, and just seeing him so engrossed in something made Hermione realise that there was still so much more to him than she could even begin to grasp. There was more to him than his words, his job, his love for coffee, his silent struggles and insecurities, and his odd counting habit. She was both intrigued and perplexed.

Hermione approached him from behind.

Draco decided at that moment to shut the file cabinet and turn around. If he was at all surprised to see her standing there – *right there* – he didn't show it. And he didn't move away, either. Instead, he watched her with eyes that she couldn't read. Not that she could ever read him anyway, but being right there again only made her want to read him even more. Hermione tried for a few moments before her eyes fell to the floor, uncomfortable suddenly with her thoughts and her proximity to him.

Fear started to rise to the surface.

He still made her out of sorts. Judging from the way he ran his hand over his hair, it was mutual. That should've comforted her, but it didn't. Hermione took a step backwards.

"I'm ready," Draco said, his voice sounded funny to her. "That is, if you want to follow me back by Floo. I need to change, but it won't take long."

Hermione couldn't ignore the feeling that something was different. Their entire dynamic had changed, and she wasn't sure how to feel about that. The way he looked at her was different from before, and it was appallingly clear just how much three days could change things. And at the same time, three days away hadn't done much of anything. Things were still awkward, not bad, just unfamiliar. She had no idea what to do or even what to say to him.

However, she did know the real reason why she'd Flooed into his office.

"Okay," she mumbled, trying to sort her words out.

Draco cleared his throat, extracted his wand from his robes, and summoned his cloak that was hanging on the charmed coat hanger. "You know the reservation isn't for another hour. I wanted you to arrive here in about thirty minutes so we'd have time to Apparate into London and—"

"I lied," Hermione blurted out, "I've been dressed for hours. I thought that if I came here early, we could just go ahead and get this talk out of the way. It's kind of been weighing heavily on my mind for the last few days, and I honestly won't be able to eat until we just clear the air."

He paused in the middle of putting on his cloak. "Right now?" It was quite obvious that talking now wasn't high on his agenda for the evening, and Hermione wondered if he ever really planned on having the much-needed conversation. He tried to stall with a, "Maybe we should—" but he never finished.

"I know you would rather catch a horrible case of Spattergroit than to have this talk with me," she said almost ruefully. "Believe me, the feeling is mutual, but I know that I need this...and I think you do, too."

She just knew that he was about to say something else, and she was just waiting for it. Instead, Draco did something that she didn't anticipate. He took a breath and ground out probably the most difficult six words of his life, "What – did you want – to discuss?"

Truthfully, she would've choked had she been drinking anything. Her mouth opened, but words didn't come. He'd given in? There had to be a reason why.

Draco laid his cloak down and gave her an expectant look. A hint of a smirk was on his face when she stammered over her next words, "Well, I – I think we – I *honestly* didn't expect that." When he cocked a curious brow, she pulled at the ends of her mildly tamed hair. She could almost hear Pansy in her head cursing her for even *touching* it, but she ignored the nagging voice. "You *actually* agreed with me," she couldn't take the sound of amazement out of her voice. "That was almost...*easy*," Hermione said the last word as if it left a strange taste on her tongue.

And it did, but what felt stranger was the almost humoured look that he was giving her. Like this was just a game. Well, it wasn't a game, and she wanted – no, *needed* – to know why he had agreed with her.

"You were supposed to argue with me about all the reasons why we shouldn't, and I was supposed to retort with all the reasons why we should. Draco, I had this *entire* argument planned out, I figured out what you would say, and I – I even practiced it! And you just—"

"Agreed?" He sounded so smug that it annoyed her. When Hermione glared at him, Draco shrugged and checked his watch. "Look, since we're supposed to be – *honest*," he said the word with disgust, "I've been fighting with you and against you for a long time, Granger. I'm sick of it. It doesn't seem to be conducive to my mental health, and I happen to need all my faculties at the moment," Draco put on his cloak. "Not to mention I've had a long day, I'm tired, hungry, I have a case load like you wouldn't even *imagine*, and I have to be right back here at seven in the morning. So, excuse me if I ruined your plans, but right now, I might not know what to say, but I'm not going to fight." When her eyes widened, he pointed at her and warned with a scowl on his face, "And don't expect that I'll do the same in the future."

That final word stuck with her. *Future*. It had meaning. There was going to be more of this. More of these crazy awkward conversations, and more of them. Hopefully, they would be less awkward in the future. Ah, there it was again. That word. And what really struck her about this wasn't just the fact that it had been spoken; it was the fact that *Draco* had spoken it. Either he hadn't realised the magnitude of the word or he had a lot more faith than she had anticipated.

It was probably the former.

"Well, I—"

"Just say what you have to say so that we can leave," he told her abruptly.

This was happening a little faster than she had planned, but that seemed to be the story of her life at the moment. She sighed and balled her fists tightly. "Draco, we aren't Pansy and Blaise."

"Was there any doubt?"

A frustrated sigh escaped her. "No, I mean – Pansy told me that she just leapt into a relationship with Blaise this time, and I – I'm not her."

"Okay..."

"I can understand why she would suggest something like that. She and Blaise, they have a history, but you and I don't have any of that. We're not them."

"I think we've established that already."

She ignored him. "I'm just saying—"

"You're not really saying much of anything. In fact you're talking in circ—"

"I don't think we should start a relationship." Hermione blurted out, and then shut her mouth so hard that she was sure that he could hear the sound of her teeth clicking together. That had come out abrupt and all wrong.

The look on Draco's face never changed. Well, that wasn't true.

For a moment there, he looked as though he had smelled something rotten or heard a banshee howling in the distance.

"I mean – that came out wrong," Hermione sighed, but continued. "I meant that we shouldn't start something *serious*, now. I don't want a definition or a title." She popped her knuckles to release the nervous tension. It made him cringe. "Oh, sorry. Nervous habit."

"You should consider finding another one," Draco drawled.

"That's pretty much the only one I have that doesn't involve me yanking my hair out."

"Pity."

Hermione wasn't surprised when that awkward and tense and strange silence fell between them. It seemed to be the only thing that remained steady between them, and for that she started to relax a bit. But not much. "I'd like us to get to know each other, outside of all the drama and stress. I think we need to get over some of our individual issues. I think...you can come in at any point with input."

He looked confused. "You're saying that we should date, but wait to become serious, because we're not Pansy and Blaise?"

She was a little miffed that Draco had managed to sum her rambling into so few words. "Yes," she said, nodding a little uncomfortably, "Something like that." It felt a bit strange expressing the things that had been in her head. "We can't do things like Blaise and Pansy, because we're Draco and Hermione."

"I'm well aware of who we are," he rolled his eyes.

"I know that, but you don't seem to be grasping what I'm saying. Their relationship is something that they dived into. We're not divers. We're waders," Hermione paused, "We should just let things happen. There should be no expectations, no promises, and no time limits. I don't want to be pressured or pressure you into anything before we're ready. I've made a mess of things before by rushing into things, and I don't want to do it again, err, with you." Hermione looked at him for a moment before looking down again. It was better that way. Then, she didn't have to see the horrifically uncomfortable look that he was giving her. "I want us to be different. I want us to be natural. I just want us to just *be*."

Hermione lifted her head and found Draco looking at her dubiously. "So, you don't want anything?"

"That seems to be a hard concept for you to wrap your head around."

"It is." Draco rubbed the back of his neck. "No expectations, promises, or time limits?" he looked and sounded absolutely perplexed. "You *must* want something." He didn't say anything else, but she knew what he was trying to say. She must've wanted something because everyone wanted something.

"Nothing," she told him seriously, "I don't compare you to Ron, so don't compare me to—"

"I don't," he ground out.

"Then believe me when I say that I don't want anything that you can't give." Hermione looked at him.

He nodded.

"We should probably use this time as like a trial process for something more serious, I guess. We should probably treat each other like we're, err," she flushed a bit, "Treat me like you treat your other—" Hermione pause for a moment and cringed, "Or maybe not."

"I think I got it, Granger. No need to make this anymore awkward than it actually is. We're taking it slow. Got it," Draco gruffly said as he picked at a piece of imaginary lint on his robes. "So, what now?"

"Like right now?"

"What other 'now' is there?"

She rolled her eyes, "Maybe dinner first, and—I'm not sure. I hear that that's what wading is all about."

He nodded. "Are we ready?"

"Yes—" However, before Hermione could even finish her statement, Draco had his cloak on and was about to side-step her to walk towards his fireplace.

This was his attempt at running away, or regrouping after an awkward conversation. Either way, she didn't like that she'd said all of that and he hadn't said barely anything at all. But, at

the same time, Hermione understood. She cursed herself for it, too. She wanted to be miffed at him, but it wasn't in his character to be forthcoming with information. At least, not suddenly. He would talk in his own time. He would express himself in his own way. And he would deal with things in his own manner.

And that was something that she would have to get use to – because she wanted this.

She wasn't feeling particularly confident. Hermione hated that he was walking away with uncertainty in his eyes. She hated that she felt powerless to change his thoughts. So, instead of letting him just walk away, she turned and followed him to the fireplace where he'd just extracted a handful of Floo powder. Hermione put her hand on his shoulder and felt his muscles tense slightly. "Draco, I—"

He looked up at her, "What?"

"This is going to sound stupid, but it's going to be okay. All of it." And without thinking or considering the significance or consequence of her actions, Hermione pushed up on the tips of her toes and kissed him lightly on the cheek.

Just an innocent peck.

And it would've remained innocent had they been anyone else. But they weren't.

She started to move away, but couldn't. But she wanted to.

There it was, again. Tension. Fear. Steam. Tension had come first, and it had nearly overwhelmed her. Before she could backtrack, tension had quickly settled into her fingers and she found herself gripping the sleeves of his robes. It had settled into her calf muscles and she found herself internally screaming in pain.

But she didn't move. And neither did Draco.

Anyone else would've but, again, she – *they* weren't anyone else. They were caught in a weird stage where every word they said and every move they made would be analysed and replayed over and over in their heads. And when she kissed him, Hermione was sure that tonight, when she was on the brink of sleep, she would replay that one as well.

Part Four: Harry's eyes

Draco was pretty sure that she wanted him to hold her hand.

But he wasn't completely certain. Merlin, he felt like an idiot even thinking about it. Still, his eyes shifted to the left, and there it was resting on the seat. Her hand. Just waiting. He looked at Granger. Her face gave away nothing, but her fingers flexed and stretched.

Wait, was that code for something?

Bloody hell, this was utterly ridiculous. This entire evening had been like watching Longbottom fly for the first time. No, *worse*. Much worse. He was pretty certain that there was nothing worse than being completely clueless, but watching her drum her fingers on the seat between them was terrible. Tap, tap, tap, tap – oh, for Merlin's sake.

Draco reached over and covered her hand with his.

However, he paled when Granger jumped as if she'd been shocked. She hadn't been expecting it. He just knew that she was going to move her hand, but she never did. Instead, Hermione's look of shock transformed into a tentative smile as she laced their fingers together.

It was too late to turn—Draco paused at that thought.

Something was off, and it was nagging him to the point where he couldn't count without that stabbing sensation in his temple. Draco tapped his foot twice under the table, determined to find out what was going on. His eyes drifted to Hermione, who was regarding her menu as if it were a tricky Arithmancy question. He had intended on scanning the rest of the restaurant, but found himself watching Granger as she read the entrée description to herself, pondered for a moment, bit her lip, made a face, and shook her head slightly. It felt oddly intimate to be sitting next to her, rather than across. He wasn't sure how or why they were sitting so close at such a large table, but...

She hadn't been very talkative since they had left his office, but in her defence, he hadn't either.

Draco had never been one for words, and throughout that entire conversation, he had to stop himself from becoming frustrated and restless. All he wanted to do was not talk, and all she wanted to do was...make perfect sense. He'd forgotten how much pragmatic Granger annoyed him.

And then that kiss. It was...something.

Yes, he'd accepted everything concerning her, but there was still a tiny part of him that wanted that kiss to be less than satisfactory. Just so he could have a reason to walk away and say that there was nothing there. It was stupid, and he felt foolish for even thinking it, but part of him wanted to think of their first few kisses as a series of flukes. He'd enjoyed it, but in the days following, Draco found that he was looking for any and every excuse to depreciate it.

It was good because it needed to happen.

It was good because it had been a long time coming.

It was good because it was different.

Merlin was he stupid.

Today's kiss had killed that theory, and forced him to accept the truth.

It was good because, well, it was good.

And more than that, he really understood what she was saying. They weren't gorgeous, they weren't anything to write home about, but maybe they could be real – and that was better than a lot of things in his life right then. But even admitting that made his stomach turn. Draco drank from his water glass, He looked at Hermione, then at his menu. He'd been hungry before, but now, he didn't have much of an appetite. Great.

This just hadn't been his day. Potter had actually been right about something, Granger had ruined his stupid theory, and now he'd lost his appetite.

Everything had gone magnificently wrong in the span of two hours.

He had specifically requested a table for two in a quiet section of the restaurant, but after a thousand apologies and excuses from the hostess and the manager, they had been seated in the busiest section of the restaurant at a ridiculously large semi-circle booth that could've seated at least six more patrons. And it didn't end there. Their first waiter had ruined their order, delivered the wrong food to their table, and came dangerously close to spilling Granger's drink on her. The manager had said that he was the best waiter that they had, and that it was uncharacteristic for him to make so many errors in one night,

If Draco had known better he would've said that the Muggle was acting as if he'd been...

And there it was again.

That nagging feeling that was telling him that there were eyes on him.

Draco's eyes scanned the room, again, just waiting for a familiar face – or *something* – to register in his brain. But, so far, nothing and no one. Every person in there was a stranger. Still, he couldn't shake the feeling that they were being watched. It was probably his strange imagination or the fact that he really spent too much time around the vigilant Blaise, but – Draco looked around again.

Nothing.

He frowned, and supposed that this was a nice place to start imagining things. In a noisy restaurant with large booths, fake plants, mediocre artwork, and his hand entwined with Granger's.

Their new waiter approached their table. He took one good look at Draco's aggravated face and spoke to Hermione instead. "The manager would like you to know that your meal will be complimentary tonight. We are very sorry for the inconvenience and hope that you enjoy your meal."

Draco started to tell the Muggle where he could shove his courtesy, but Granger ended up politely thanking him.

"Are you both ready to order?"

Hermione released his hand when she ordered the chicken pasta. Draco ordered steak. Minutes later, the waiter returned with their correct drink and appetizer orders. Crab cakes. A tiny smirk formed on her face. It was the same thing that they'd shared during their first group dinner. That day brought back a lot of memories; punching Weasley, arguing with Granger, and finding the truth about Matthew's – Draco was brought back to reality thanks to the clinking sound the plate made when it was placed in front of him. He looked at Granger, then down at the crab cake on the plate before him, then back at her.

"You should eat something, Draco...you look a bit peaky." Stunned by her words, he just stared at her. Hermione fixed her lips to say something, but the nostalgia was powerful enough to affect her, too. "That felt familiar."

"It should. After all, you accused me of trying to poison you that day," he dryly stated with a roll of his eyes.

Granger was in the middle of chewing when he'd said that. Her eyes went wide and she swallowed and took a sip of her drink before she argued. "I did not! I just asked if it was going to kill me," Hermione chuckled. "And besides, can you really blame me for being a bit paranoid? You're not the type of man that does things out of the kindness of your heart."

He looked at her from the corner of his eyes as he sectioned off a piece of crab cake. He lifted the fork to his mouth and said, "I think it's safe to say that you don't know what type of man I am."

Draco had expected for her near-smile to crash, but it didn't. Instead, she got quite smug. "I suppose I don't, but I have time to learn. That is, if you're willing to teach me. I still enjoy learning."

It almost sounded flirtatious, but he didn't have a chance to confirm it. Draco bit down on the inside of his cheek as that stabbing feeling returned. No, he wasn't hallucinating or being paranoid. It was real. Someone was watching them. He was determined to figure out everything, but he had to maintain absolutely calm. They were in a Muggle restaurant deep in Muggle London. He'd picked a place like this because he just knew that no one would even think about looking for them there.

Granger eyed him oddly. "What are you doing?"

He shushed her as his eyes slowly started to scan the restaurant. And just when he was about to give up, he spotted her. *Patil*. And everything from the waiter's confusion to the reason why they hadn't gotten their table made perfect sense.

She sat at a table – the table in the area where *they* were supposed to be seated – alone. She must've thought that he was going to look away, but he held her gaze firmly until she finally looked away. Draco watched as Parvati finished the rest of her drink, rose from her chair, and started walking towards their table with a look of purpose in her eyes.

"Just so you know, Parvati is walking towards our table—" When she started to tense, Draco grabbed her hand and instructed through gritted teeth, "Don't look at her, Granger. Then, she'll know that we're talking about her."

"But—"

"Her being here tonight is no coincidence."

"I—"

"You've got about ten seconds to get it together, Granger."

She actually only had four.

Parvati stopped in front of their table, greeted them both with a rather distant nod. Both the smile on her face and the cheer in her voice were fake, but he wasn't surprised. "I'm so surprised to see you two rumoured lovebirds here on a date. I'm sure that my readers would love to read about this in tomorrow's Prophet. I can see the headline now, 'Rumoured lovers dine in romantic restaurant'. It's a little embellished, of course," she looked around the nice but ordinary restaurant. "But it's not like anyone would know."

"Like anyone would believe you," Draco said rather flippantly. "Your reputation is in the dumps."

"That may be so, but I daresay that with a few *real* pictures, which I've already captured, I could easily make the front page. That would do wonders in my quest to restore my reputation." Parvati looked at Hermione, "You two are very good for business and for my agenda, and you'll continue to be so."

"What exactly is that supposed to mean?" Granger asked very tensely.

Parvati sighed as if she were in distress and then smirked, "I'm crap at playing games, I'm sure you both know that. I don't like them, so I'm not going to play one tonight. I already know," the smirk disappeared and she regarded them both with very serious looks. "I know *everything*." Draco opened his mouth to speak, but she cut him off. "Don't play ignorant, either."

"If you know all that, then why are you here?" he asked in a very detached manner.

"Actually, this doesn't concern you, Malfoy. Only Hermione," Parvati saw Granger tense. "Oh, there's no need for that. You see, I only intend to help you."

"I can't see how you can possibly help me—"

"I was curious about what you'd been up to for the past six or so years so I took a trip and I stayed a while. Venice is beautiful. I understand why you went there, and more than ever; I understand why you stayed." Parvarti looked entirely too smug. "The entire wizarding world was, and still is, curious about your change in friendships and—" she glanced over at Draco. "Love interests." She looked back at Hermione. "You've almost been completely out of the public eye since your return and people are curious about why. But I understand that *children* have a habit of keeping one busy."

Hermione tensed.

"I've written an article telling the world that Malfoy here is the father of your son." She said rather casually. "While the controversy would be absolutely very profitable, I know for a fact that it's not true."

She squeezed Draco's hand so hard that he almost had to breathe through the pain.

She held up three fingers. "I know it's not his child." Dropped one. "I know it's not Ron's." Dropped the second.

Only one remained.

Patil reached into her pocket and produced something that she sat on the table, face up.

It was a picture. Of Matthew. One that he'd seen before.

It was a close up where he stared at the camera before scratched his head and grinned brightly.

Draco had always thought that he looked like the spitting image of his father in that photo.

Hermione released his hand and snatched up the picture, flipping it once. Twice. Three times. "This is the original." She clutched it to her chest. "*How did you get this?*"

"From a little birdie who got it from—"

Potter.

His mind was racing with everything that he'd learned, but first Draco had to *physically* stop Hermione from lashing out in anger. "You foul lit—" Thank Merlin she was sitting on the inside or he would not have been able to stop her from slapping Patil in the crowded restaurant. People were already starting to look over in mild curiosity. He held on to her for more than a few seconds, at least until she relaxed a little.

Patil looked positively gleeful. "You can have it. After all, I have a copy."

Granger looked murderous.

"He has his father's eyes, don't you think?"

Draco almost had to will Hermione to keep quiet. "And the article you're corresponding with Ginny Weasley—"

"Fake, all fake." Patil waved her hand. "I knew I was right about my hypothesis when she caved and gave me everything I needed. I knew what she was trying to hide. What you *all* were trying to hide."

"Why exactly are you here if you have everything you need?" Draco asked. "Why not publish what you know?"

"I'm here to give Hermione here the opportunity to tell the truth. Every detail of it," she put her hands on her hips. "The choice is yours and I'll give you a day to think about it, but I intend on breaking the news in two weeks, regardless of your decision," she took a step backwards before snapping her fingers as if she'd just remembered something important, "Oh, and I would advise you to prepare sweet little Matthew for his world premiere. Wherever he is."

She walked away.

Everything was quiet between them for exactly fifteen seconds before Hermione said, "She just made her second mistake."

"What?"

"She gave us a date."

"And what was her first?"

She looked at him fiercely, "She gave me an ultimatum. I *hate* ultimatums."

While Granger stabbed her crab cake to death and squeezed the feeling out of his hand, Draco began putting the pieces together in his head. And then he started working it out as if it were an intricate jigsaw puzzle that he'd been forced to put together without looking at the box. He had no idea where to put each piece, but with a little patience, a little thinking, and a little time, everything fell together.

And when it did, Draco turned to her. "I think you should take her deal."

"Have you gone *mad*?" her voice managed to be hushed and shrilled at the same time.

Draco snorted. He'd gone mad a while ago, but she didn't need to know that. "Hear me out. Write to Patil tomorrow and tell her that you'll take her deal. Set up an interview with her for two weeks from now, someplace private, and *don't* let her change the date. And we need to go to the Improper Use of Magic office tomorrow."

"But why?"

"I'll explain everything," he looked up to see the waiter approaching the table with their meals. "After we eat."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I made some changes to the next few chapters, cleaned some stuff up, fleshed some things out. I did all three chapters at the same time to make sure it all flowed smoothly. Here we go.

when there are no words

Chapter Summary

After all, there was something there for him to ruin.

Chapter Thirty-Three

When There Are No Words

Part One: Something to ruin

May 25th

Rain battered the flimsy umbrella that they were sharing.

And to Draco, it sounded as if there were hundreds of angry bees trying to tear through the nylon and sting them. But he held the large umbrella over them, steadfast – only watching. They both were in the business of watching, but they were watching completely different things. Draco was watching the back of Hermione's head as it frizzed even more from the humidity. And Granger was watching the doors of the Daily Prophet for Patil to come waltzing out.

Draco checked his watch. They had at least another five minutes before that would happen. He then shifted a bit, only to discover that the bottom of his trousers was wet.

Wonderful, he grimaced in annoyance.

It had been her idea to stand here. He would've preferred waiting in the restaurant just across the street. It was drier, for a start, but the view was terrible. This, to his utmost dismay, was the best spot. It would have been better had it not been raining, but the weather wasn't entirely surprising. Rain seemed to be, not just the story of the week so far, but the story of their entire journey. Draco would think it eerie if it weren't at least drizzling.

He would also think it strange if Hermione were calm and composed, but she wasn't.

Though she'd done a fantastic job of pretending, it had been the little things had given her away.

His suspicion had started over the massive breakfast that she'd fixed, but found himself distracted by the company of Blaise and Pansy to really give it much thought. It had grown when she showed up at his office, unannounced, and spent nearly an hour pacing while he

read over case files—or tried to, at least. He'd lost his patience, crowded her around his desk, and snogged her in an attempt to ease her anxieties—well, that was until Shannon knocked on his door to deliver the minutes from their staff meeting earlier. It wasn't exactly uncommon for Granger to be in his office, but her blush had almost gotten them caught. And then she'd started pacing again. He'd assumed it was for a lot of reasons, and took her to lunch where she'd punished her food by stabbing it with a fork until he moved the plate out of her reach.

And then the fork.

It was only five minutes ago, just when they'd first started "Parvati Watch", that he'd finally confirmed his suspicions. And all that she did was reach for his hand. But it wasn't hand-holding of the bone-crunching, blood flow-constricting variety, it was...odd, needy even.

Fearful.

Draco couldn't say that he shared her apprehension. He just wanted all of this to be over and would do his part to ensure that it happened. But it this wasn't about him. It was about her getting a chance to confront the Weasley girl. And today was about her doing something that he had only just began to fully understand.

Being the better person.

Granger had argued that she'd come too far and climbed too high to let something like revenge bring her down. He supposed that it made sense enough. He also supposed that, despite the fact that he'd been immersed in this mess for months, it still wasn't his place to question or balk. He wanted to, but if all Granger wanted to do was confront her, all Draco could do was ensure that she had her chance.

"This is taking forever."

"What?" He'd barely heard her speak over the rain and his roaring train of thought.

"I said that this is taking forever."

Right. Draco gripped the umbrella tighter. This was the point where he was supposed to utter some reassuring words in a convincing manner. Draco had never been one for words or comfort; he had no idea what to say that wouldn't further sour a bad situation. So, he did the only thing he could do. He stood there—then squeezed her hand and muttered, "Wait," under his breath.

Hermione looked over her shoulder. "What?

The timing was perfect.

Just as the word came from her mouth, a mobile blur of pink and purple caught his eye. "Wait." Draco repeated as he glanced at his watch and smirked. The rain was starting to lighten and there was Patil, right on schedule. His eyes never left the witch as she crossed the empty street and headed towards The Leaky Cauldron where she was supposed to meet

Hermione for their interview. Hermione was moving her lips to question him again when he interrupted her, "What's that quote? Good things happen to those who *wait*? Well, there she goes..."

If he thought that seeing Patil leaving on schedule would do anything for Granger's nerves, he was sorely mistaken. If anything, it heightened them. "There she goes."

Draco didn't say anything. He just started counting. *Five, four, three, two, one—*

"Gods," Hermione said suddenly, anxiously. "Are you absolutely *certain* that this is going to work?" He wasn't surprised that she was questioning everything. It was just pre-confrontation jitters. "Maybe we need more time to plan things out. Just to make sure that everything is perfect—"

Draco cut her off to deliver his prepared answer. "It *is* perfect, and there's no going back to the drawing board. Now or never. We've been through this about a hundred times. I'm going to meet Parvati to make this article disappear, and you're going to meet the Weasley girl, so that you can confront her."

"I know the plan inside and out. I'm just—"

"Worried?" he offered uneasily, but he already knew the answer. He could feel it. And not only that, Draco still had that crazy urge to do something that would soothe her worries, even though he was utter shit at it. When Hermione nodded stiffly, he somehow managed to keep his voice calm and firm when he said, "It's going to work."

Well, that was quite convincing.

It stopped raining suddenly and Hermione took the umbrella, let it down, and spelled it dry before putting it into her beaded bag. "Shouldn't you be following her now?"

"No." Draco had already decided that he was going to give her exactly ten minutes before he started walking towards the Leaky Cauldron. Ten minutes would be the perfect amount of time. "If I walk in right after her, she'll know that it's a trap, especially when she doesn't see you standing with me. And what do you think Parvati will do then? And since she's clearly not the tacky idiot that I'd originally thought her, she'll walk right back out and return to her office to figure out what happened. And the plan that I've worked so meticulously to perfect will be ruined. So, ten minutes is all I'm going to give her."

"Why ten minutes?"

Oh, there were two reasons for that. First, he needed the time to prepare, but he didn't tell her that. Instead, he started explaining the second—and more important—reason. "Well, it's psychological in nature, but ten minutes gives her the time to set up for the 'interview' and bask in the false euphoria of achievement. It's long enough to make Patil believe that she's successfully played her game and now has complete control over the situation...when, in fact, she doesn't." Draco explained.

"Doesn't seem like your style," Hermione replied, "You're observant, and you—well, from what I remember—you wait for that critical moment where you completely turn the tables on the other person."

She had been paying attention. Draco was impressed. He decided to ponder the meaning of that later. "You're right. I don't go for the element of surprise, it's too Gryffindor-esque for my tastes. But this is a special case...since I'm dealing with one, after all. Father always said, know thy enemy *and* know thyself..." he trailed off, trying his best to ignore the twinge in his chest.

"Draco." The worry etched in her voice made his stomach turn a little. "We—"

"Not today," he gruffly told her as he looked at his watch. "The worst feeling in the world is having the rug pulled from underneath you, so to speak." He knew that too well from experience, but pushed the thought away. "When I walk through that door, she won't know what hit her."

"You've put a lot of thought into this...perhaps *too* much."

"No such thing," Draco swatted the air. "Especially in this case."

She raised an eyebrow, but didn't argue.

Unsurprisingly, he was looking forward to squashing Patil like the bug that she was...once and for all, but he wasn't going to verbalise that. The last thing he needed was for Hermione to extend the noble act to her as well and suggest something absurd like *talking* to her. Although—wait. The chances of that happening were closing in on slim to none. She hadn't once questioned his methods or his plans for execution.

"I—" Hermione started, but never finished.

"Just do what you need to do, and I'll do the same. Don't worry."

Her trust in him had always been a mere footnote he kept in the back of his mind for safekeeping. Draco didn't *really* understand what it meant; not until right then. It became a thousand times more apparent—and more important—when she didn't argue with him. And, Merlin, it was still so—*strange*.

Her trust in him. Their new arrangement, definition, and status in each other's lives.

It was all still so new, and—Draco frowned when he paled slightly. *Distressing*.

She didn't seem to notice—too busy giving herself another quiet pep-talk. "Okay," she said with determination. "I'll do that."

And in that moment, right there in the outer edge of the alley between a restaurant and Quidditch shop, Draco realised that the reason he had been so bloody agitated about all the recent changes in their relationship wasn't because of her sensible attitude or his ever-present uncertainties. This had everything to do with her. Not him. Nothing new there, but it was different now. He was terrified of doing something—*anything*—that would hurt her.

Draco was no saint; he was impossible at best, and—he froze. This hadn't been easy for either of them. Getting to this point had come with a lot of anguish on her part, too, but there was a part of him that only thought of himself. His own worries and fears. It was a selfishness that he couldn't quite shed, but in that crazy moment, Draco realised that he wanted to because she'd done the same for him.

It was only fair, after all.

Hermione had given up the very thing that he'd clung to firmly. Trust. Yes, Draco trusted her, but still struggled to let go and *truly* accept her and this; and trust that they could work it out. But she'd done all that, and so much more. She'd patched them together and seemed cautiously determined with each small bit of progress they made. Their first uninterrupted outing to shop for rugs and their first double dinner with Blaise and Pansy. And—damn. All he had to do was step outside of himself, put forth some sort of effort, and perhaps they really could work through all their issues together without imploding or crumbling.

After all, there was something there for him to ruin.

"I should go on to Parvati's office and wait for Ginny." Hermione announced, reaching into her beaded bag and pulling out Potter's infamous invisibility cloak. Draco found himself—not jealous—but curious. He had no idea that they had seen each other. Granger must've read the look on his face because she started explaining, "I went furniture shopping with Pansy yesterday and when I got home, Harry Fire-called and asked if he could come through. I said yes, and—" she paused and frowned. "Don't look like that."

"Like what?" he drawled.

"Suspicious."

Draco started to tell her that he would always be slightly suspicious of Potter, but didn't. It was nothing that she had done, but feelings, Draco had learned, always lingered and for that he would always have Potter on his radar. He ran a hand through his hair before half-muttering, "I...trust you." He would have to work on that 'completely' part.

Whatever she was pilfering through her bag for was forgotten. Hermione stared at him with wide eyes, but didn't say a word. Thank Merlin for that. He'd said the words and he'd been honest, but he didn't want to answer any questions or hear any of her comments. "I—we just talked, had hot chocolate, and watched videos of Matthew." She looked uneasy for a second. "He told me that he was thinking about making a change in his life, but didn't say what, when, or even why."

Draco committed her words to memory. When he had the time, he would ponder over Potter's next move. Just not today. He had enough to ponder over without throwing him in the mix.
"Okay."

Hermione was antsy. "We'll talk about it later on—"

"Not today." Draco doubted that she would be in any mood to talk that evening. "Blaise is doing trivia and wanted you to play for his team. I'm only coming for moral support...and to

watch you destroy every living thing in there with the power of your mind."

She flashed a small smile. "Sounds like plan."

And so it was.

"I really should go on in. Their scheduled meeting begins in fifteen minutes and I need time to clear my head and rehearse what I'm going to say to her."

"Fine."

Hermione started to wrap the invisibility cloak around her, but stopped. "Oh, how long do I have before Parvati comes back?"

"All the time that you need," he replied somewhat cryptically.

She eyed him critically. He could tell that she wanted to ask him exactly what he meant by that statement, but was relieved when she didn't. The less she knew, the better. "Okay..." Hermione trailed off as she shifted her weight from her right to left foot. "Pansy told me that Blaise had private matters to tend to today, so she cancelled dinner. I was—"

"Stalling," he deadpanned.

Her cheeks started to pinken. "I know."

And then she started to pace. Two steps to the left, two to the right.

Draco had to grab her arm before she drove them both mad.

"I want this over with so badly, but I can't make myself go in there. It would be so easy just to let you bury her along with Parvati. I know you want to and you think she deserves it, but—" she chuckled dryly, "When have I ever taken the easy path?" Hermione didn't let him answer. "This is something that I have to do. Alone. I think—no, I know that I'm afraid of what may happen when I get in there. What if I walk out and nothing has changed? What if I can't change her mind and make her give this all up? What if—"

"Didn't you say you'd eradicated that phrase from your vocabulary?"

She looked at him. "I did. You're right."

"Just—" Draco looked around uncomfortably then ran a hand through his hair. He then rested both hands gently on her shoulders and looked at her. "If something goes wrong in there, we'll figure it out...together." And he hoped he hadn't sounded stupid just then.

But when Hermione relaxed a bit, he realised that maybe—for once—he'd said the correct thing.

"Together."

He pressed a kiss to her forehead in his first ever display of public affection. Her body went still. "I'm certain nothing will happen that a quick memory charm can't fix."

He heard her chuckle.

It was good enough for him.

Draco released her shoulders and glanced at his watch. Nearly eight minutes had passed since Patil had left for The Leaky Cauldron, and in six minutes Ginny would be coming around for her scheduled meeting with Parvarti. Hermione needed to go. "You should—"

"Go." She took a slow step back. "And get this over with." Hermione unfolded the cloak and wrapped it around her shoulders first, causing her entire lower body to disappear from sight. Draco blinked, first to get used to the sight of Hermione's floating head. He blinked again when she pecked his cheek rather suddenly and whispered, "Thank you," into his ear before she covered her head and completely disappeared from sight.

Draco watched for the door to the Daily Prophet to open and shut before he moved from his spot.

He spelled the bottoms of his trousers dry, and looked around to make sure that no one was around—because Draco Malfoy stepping out of an alley was, at the very least, gossip-worthy. After making sure that everything was clear, he stepped out and started walking in the direction of the Leaky Cauldron.

Diagon Alley was starting to refill with patrons and vendors alike, all who had abandoned the streets during the hard rain. The sun had started to peek from behind the storm clouds, and just for a second, he wondered if this was a sign of things to come. Draco deftly forced that thought into the recesses of his mind and forced himself to focus on the task at hand as he reached Diagon Alley's exit.

Oh, there was no doubt in his mind that he knew exactly how today would pan out; Draco had worked through the minute details and had a back-up plan for the back-up plan, should any situation arise.

He was ready, but his mind wasn't. He would get there.

Draco pushed everything irrelevant out of his head. No room existed in his mind for it. So, out went his thoughts on Hermione, the future, and selfishness; out went every thought and small revelation that he had made today, all the things that could potentially go wrong, and the worries that made his stomach twist and turn. He was preparing for battle—a battle he knew he would win—but a battle nonetheless. And as Draco walked the rest of the way to the Leaky Cauldron, he hardened his face and mind, filling his head with words and strategies and plans.

The chessboard was set, the opening moves planned and plotted, and the players all in their respective places.

Draco walked through the doors and made the first move.

Part Two: According to plan

Hermione made it a habit to never form a routine at work.

The beauty and curse of a routine was that, at some point, it was bound to become second nature. When that happened to someone, their job no longer was a profession that involved technique; it was just something that they mindlessly did to pass the time and collect money. Their work and productivity suffered, as well as their ability to notice when something was slightly off.

Like the mysterious opening and closing of an elevator door...when there was no one inside.

It was four hours before the printing deadline for the Prophet's evening edition, but chaos hadn't taken control of the entire floor—yet. It was only a matter of time, though. Maybe another hour. But right then, it was completely silent and everyone looked like they were working, but she could see the boredom in their eyes. Their mindlessness had made sneaking in so easy—*too easy*. And while Hermione wasn't used to anything coming easily, she took the opportunity given to her.

After side-stepping two employees who weren't paying attention to their surroundings and one close encounter with a memo, Hermione found her way to Parvati's office.

It wasn't exactly hard to find.

There was a neon green note on her door.

Back in one hour – P.P.

Moments from snatching the note off the door, Hermione paused and scoured the room. There was a witch staring in her general direction. And for one second, Hermione's pulse raced with fear that she'd been spotted somehow. But then she jerked, re-propelled her elbow on her desk, and started staring again. She'd been asleep...with her eyes open.

Hermione waited a minute before she quickly peeled the note off the door.

She definitely didn't need that note to be seen by anyone.

Next, she brought Parvarti's wards down quickly and without any noise. Hermione had expected to really test her skills, but it seemed as if Parvati wasn't particularly paranoid. She couldn't believe her luck—or the fact that Parvati had gravely underestimated her. But no matter. Hermione would use her ignorance for her own personal gain. And with a nearly silent *Alohamora*, she unlocked Parvati's office and opened the door just wide enough to slip through, unnoticed.

She took off the hood of the invisibility cloak, cast a silencing charm, set up a few privacy wards, and looked around. Parvati's office was small—well, smaller than she'd imagined. And more colourful, too.

The walls were bare, boring, and painted an odd apricot colour that made Hermione cringe.

Hermione ventured further into the office. It was a mishmash of rococo furnishings trying to blend themselves with the latest wizarding style and ugly walls. There weren't any pictures or personal effects, but there were a lot of parchment sheets. They littered her desk, along with a few cups, photographs, and empty boxes of take-away.

Parvati obviously spent too much time in this office; it was almost disturbing.

Something else that was chilling: the photographs.

They were scattered on her desk, separate from the cups, parchments, and boxes. Hermione wasn't disturbed because the photographs were of her and Draco; she'd expected it. Parvati had seemed to be photo happy with them, ever since the Malfoy Ball. Unlike some of those photographs, however, these were real. Hermione could tell. She could even identify the days on which each of these had been taken. Of course, there were some from the night Parvati had approached them, but there were also some of them in various stages of togetherness that seemed to chronicle the last few weeks of their lives.

But then she saw the copy of the photo of Matthew.

She'd given it to Harry as a keepsake weeks ago.

The two-knock sequence on the door brought everything back to focus, but it was too late.

Hermione didn't have time to hide or cover herself with the cloak; all she could do was watch as the door opened and Ginny Weasley stuck her head in. She knocked lightly, again, "Parvati?" She looked to the left. "I'm here for—" She looked to the right...and their eyes met. Surprise flashed across her features, but disappeared quickly as her face turned to stone.

Tension.

It was the kind that Hermione always felt around Ginny, and hadn't felt since that afternoon on the roof of St. Mungo's. It was the kind of tension that was familiar enough to feel routinely customary and habitual. It caused Hermione to square her own shoulders and stiffly fold her arms across her chest in defence. The staring contest didn't last long because she took a small step backwards, as if she were turning to leave, and Hermione stopped her with a very chilly, "I wouldn't do that if I were you."

The corner of Ginny's mouth twitched; a fleeting shadow of a grimace. Her voice was unnaturally low when she said, "You have no idea what I'm about to do."

"You were leaving, weren't you? Maybe to come back with security..."

Ginny shifted her weight from one foot to the other. "What's your point? You're breaking and entering. Not exactly a new habit, but no matter."

"By the time you return, I'll be long gone and there will be no trace that I was ever here," Hermione replied matter-of-factly. "No one saw me come in, and no one will see me leave. No one will believe you."

What happened next was something she'd anticipated and even planned for. Ginny went for her wand, probably to lock her in a body-bind, but Hermione was faster. One Disarming spell later, Ginny's wand was in her hand. Hermione put both wands on Parvati's messy desk.

"Give me my wand back!" she demanded hotly.

"You'll get it back when we finish here, and not a minute before." She gestured to the chair on the other side of the desk, "You should take a seat." And when Ginny stood there, defiant and angry, Hermione muttered to herself, "Or not." She looked around before addressing her, "Look—"

"Cut the shit, Hermione. Why are you here?"

"I'm here for you."

That clearly wasn't the answer that Ginny had expected. "Me?"

"Yes. I don't want any drama. I just want to talk—"

"Talk?" Ginny balked. "You want to talk to *me*?" A snort came next. "That's hilarious, seeing as to how you're the last person on Earth that I want to have a conversation with. Not that we have anything to discuss in the first place."

"Where the hell have you been for the last two months? I can think of a *million* things that we need to finally discuss, one-on-one."

Ginny's eyes first widened with clarity, then narrowed in defiance.

Stubbornness.

It was in Ginny's eyes and in her nature, as much as it was in her own. It wouldn't let her retreat, surrender, or accept defeat, but, often times, Ginny's stubbornness pushed her to do things that bordered on stupid.

"Parvati set me up, didn't she?" Ginny made a face.

"This is a set up, but Parvati isn't pulling the strings. She, obviously, has no clue that I'm here or else she would be in here with me, too. In fact, she's in the Leaky Cauldron right now, waiting for me. I imagine she's currently receiving the shock of her life—"

"Wait." She held her hand up before hurling question after question at a calm Hermione. "What do you mean she's waiting for you? Why would she? *We're* supposed to be having a meeting right now."

"Oh, I know that, but that doesn't change the fact that she scheduled an interview with me today." Hermione moved to look inside of her desk drawers. The first was full of quills, the

second was full of candy, and the third held gold...in the form of a little purple planner. Hermione removed it, opened it to that day's date, and handed it to Ginny, "Check her scheduler. See for yourself."

She snatched it and scanned the page for any proof that Hermione was lying, and her furrowed brows slowly relaxed as realisation dawned on her. Ginny looked up suddenly, "But—but why would she want to meet with you?"

"She wants an interview about my son."

Hermione had spent the weeks after Parvarti's interrupted their dinner angry at Ginny. There were a multitude of other emotions involved as well, but now it was different. Every bit of her wanted to be glass-breaking, earth-shattering angry. She wanted the storm and thunder. She wanted to yell at her like she'd done the night she found out about Matthew. She'd been waiting for this day for the last two weeks just so she could show her fury.

This was the perfect time.

This was the perfect moment.

But she couldn't.

"I didn't come here expecting anything from you, Ginny. I just want you to listen to me, for once. I came here to tell you the truth. All of it. And you can tune me out, ignore me, but I'm not walking out of that door until I'm finished talking. I'm not leaving until *I* decide to."

Ginny folded her arms and spat bitterly, "Well? Go on. What's this 'truth' that you want to tell
—"

It was a rare moment of—well, she couldn't think of the perfect word, for once. But the fact that Ginny was giving her the opportunity to speak had left her temporarily discombobulated and tongue-tied. Where to start? What to start with? *Who* to start with? She'd planned this conversation to the letter, and nothing so far was happening according to plan. But that that was to be expected.

Hermione picked up the cloak off the chair and held it in her hand. When Ginny gasped moments later, she realised that she'd made a mistake. Damn. And then she tried to say something, but never got the opportunity.

Her voice was low, and Hermione heard the barely concealed anger in it. "How—" she shook her head as if the potential answer physically pained her. "Why do you have that? It's Harry's." Hermione opened her mouth to answer, but never got the chance. "Tell me that you broke into our flat and nicked it."

Damned if she told the truth, damned if she lied. It was a very bad predicament, but she was at the point in her life where she could handle the fallout.

"Yes," Hermione answered as evenly as she could, "This is Harry's, but—"

"Tell me how you got it," she demanded hotly.

Hermione chewed on the inside of her cheek before she replied, "I didn't break into your flat, for starts. I got it from Harry. He—"

"Harry let you borrow it? He—he barely lets me look at it!" The angry shrill in Ginny's question made her inwardly wince and drop the cloak into the seat of the chair. "Harry knew you were coming here? He—" There was a painful and abrupt pause. "He hid this from me." The fury in her voice was replaced with a kind of cold resignation. "Harry was in on this." It was a statement. Not a question. And she looked to Hermione for confirmation.

She'd had enough experience with Ginny to know that she was merely seconds from detonation, but it didn't slow her down. "What did you expect? You wouldn't listen to him. You wouldn't—"

"I can't believe this! I can't believe—" she stopped suddenly, noticing the change of expression of Hermione's face. "You...it's *you*. Gods, it's *always* you, isn't it? I knew something was wrong—I've known for weeks. Harry's changed. He's been distant, moody, and angry. He's been treating me like I'm some strange girl whom he just happens to live with. And I thought it was the stress, I thought it was because I found out about—" she paused, not daring to speak about the elephant in the room. "Now I see that it's *you*. You did it. You changed him. You made him—"

Hermione recoiled. "I didn't *make* Harry do anything. He made his own decision, and—"

"Why won't you just stop *lying*? There's no point! I can see through your bullshit. You—"

"Open your eyes, Ginny!" she shot back fiercely. "Did it ever occur to you that maybe it's not me, maybe it's *you*? Maybe you're the reason why Harry's so distant, maybe you're the reason why he seems so angry, maybe—"

"You would say that, wouldn't you? Nothing is ever your fault. You're just so innocent in all this."

"I never said I was innocent, but I won't take the blame for whatever is going on between you and Harry. I'm not even a part of it!"

"Yes, you are!" Ginny yelled as she slammed her fist on the desk. The pain in her voice made Hermione's stomach churn with guilt. "You've *always* been a part of our relationship because I've always been his second choice!"

Hermione looked down, biting on the inside of her cheek, again. She felt—well, it was hard to put it into words. What could she say to that? It was the truth, after all, straight from Harry's mouth when he told her that how he felt two months before. And Hermione remembered the first time she'd seen them together after she returned from Italy. They'd looked happy, but things clearly weren't always what they appeared. Harry and Ginny were just a mirage, an illusion of their weary minds, caused by a ridiculous amount of hype, dishonesty on Harry's part, mutual insecurities, and Ginny's expectations.

"I have no problem accepting my own responsibility in all this. I can admit my mistakes and faults. I can admit everything. Perhaps I did have a part to play in your relationship, but it's

not only my fault. You need to stop blaming me." Hermione began strongly, "We made a mistake. *We*. Not just me."

"Harry does not see it as a mistake." And she sounded so bitter.

"But I do." Hermione told her earnestly. "I can't go back and change it, I have to live with the results of it, but it's still a mistake. I can apologise for that. And I do." Ginny quickly opened her mouth to retort, but Hermione cut her off. "I know that Harry and I have been through a lot together—I know we had a child together, but everything is not what you think. We're trying to get past all that for the sake of—"

"I knew it." Ginny interrupted. And Hermione, for the first time, wanted to hit her. "You said that you were here to tell me the truth? What's the truth, Hermione? That you've managed to steal my boyfriend—*again*. Are you here to tell me that now that you two have settled your differences that you're going to run off to Scotland, get married, and raise that—*child* that you two have together?"

Hermione was utterly confused. "What?"

Talking to Ginny had always been like throwing a ball against a wall. Hermione's words always came hurling back without making any impression whatsoever on her. It was pointless to even try, but she wasn't a quitter.

"You're *completely* off base here, Ginny. I—"

"Oh, don't stand there and try to deny it, Hermione. I know he's leaving me!" And she was back to yelling again. "I knew it before I saw the housing adverts in the bedside table. I may be a lot of things, but I'm not stupid." She blinked back angry tears. "The only way Harry would ever leave me is if you decided that you wanted him."

"I don't want him."

"You're lying to me!"

"This entire time I've convinced myself that you weren't stupid, just horribly misinformed and hurt, but now I'm starting to think—"

"Just tell me. Is that why you're here? To—"

"Whatever you're thinking, it's not—"

"—ask my permission to step aside so that you two can be together?"

Hermione fixed her lips to answer, but inwardly rolled her eyes in frustration.

"Is that what you want me to do?" Ginny asked angrily. Her hands were shaking.

She didn't answer, because she needed to choose her words wisely. "No."

"*Liar*," she spat hatefully. "You'll be in for the shock of your life if you think that I'm just going to play nice and let you take him from me."

Hermione shifted her weight from one foot to the other, but said nothing. It, clearly, was easy for Ginny to blame her for her failing relationship, rather than accept the fact that she'd had a hand in pushing Harry away. She considered saying that, but had the feeling that she just needed to stand there and let Ginny get everything out before she finally set her straight. This wasn't in her "I talk, you listen" plan, but since when had anything gone according to plan?

"Let me make myself perfectly clear. I've been with him for six years. I've loved him, taken care of him, picked him back up after you deserted him, and I am not going down without a fight." The sheer power behind her words almost made her step back. Hermione couldn't believe that she still didn't believe her. "I am not going to walk away. I am not going to give up. I am not going to back down. I don't care that you've had his child, I don't care that he still loves you, I don't care about any of that—"

"He's yours, Ginny!" Hermione finally exclaimed, just to shut her up. "Yours," she repeated quieter. "Whatever idea or notion you have about my relationship with Harry just isn't true. Yes, he let me borrow his invisibility cloak. Yes, he knew that I was coming here. And yes, he knew that I wanted to talk to you, but this whole conspiracy theory that you've drawn up about us running away together, it's utter and complete rubbish."

"I know you're lying. You've lied to me before."

"I've lied to everyone, Ginny! But that doesn't make me incapable of telling the truth!" Ginny opened her mouth to argue, but Hermione wouldn't let her. "You can stand there and point the finger at me, you can call me a liar, you can blame everything on me, but the truth is: we *all* have lied and our lies—your lies, too—are the reason why we're standing here today."

Defiance was written in every line of her faces. "My lies? What do *you* know of my lies?"

Ah, finally the place where they should be. She inwardly rejoiced.

"Everything," Hermione replied evenly. "Subtlety has never been your specialty. When you want something done, you just do it. You don't think about any of the consequences, and you don't even seek out the truth. The real truth. You just react." She told her truthfully. "The *second* I found out about the article Parvati is—or was—planning to publish about my son being Draco's, there was almost no doubt in my mind that you had something to do with it."

Ginny had the decency to allow her cheeks to colour slightly. "You weren't supposed to find out. Not until it came out." And then her face hardened. "Why is it that even when I use every resource available to me, you still managed to—"

"It's amazing, isn't it? How you plan and plan, and you think that you've worked out every little minute detail. But when it's time to carry out your plan, there's always a variable that you didn't think of. It's always a little one, too. One that's easily looked overlooked, but in the end, it ends up being important." Hermione unfolded her arms. "You should always be careful about who you work with, Ginny."

It was her turn to look perplexed. "What are you talking about?"

She ignored her question and continued, "I knew about your planned article because Lavender found Matthew's birth record at Parvarti's and sent it to Ron as a warning—" Ginny looked honestly surprised and Hermione realised that Ron had kept a secret from his sister. And she realised it, too. "But if I didn't know, I would've found out when Parvati approached Draco and I and told us that she knew Matthew wasn't his or Ron's."

Hermione took an unneeded breath, just to give the other witch some time to let it all start to sink in.

"She knows that Harry is Matthew's father."

For once, Ginny was finally speechless.

"But how?"

"Simple math and deduction. And you gave her everything else she needed to know when you gave her our letters. And his picture that you stole from Harry." She picked up the copy and showed her.

Ginny didn't look, physically turning her head away until Hermione put it back on her desk.
"I—"

"What did you hope to accomplish by doing all that?" She asked. "Matthew looks *just like* Harry in that photo. It's why I gave it to him."

"She said she needed a photo and Harry fell asleep on the sofa with that one clutched in his hand. I didn't look at it. I—"

She could see the realisation as it slowly dawned on her.

Hermione didn't stop now that she had Ginny's undivided attention. "I had an idea that you would do something after you found out about Matthew. I didn't think it would be something quite as cruel." It was hard for her to keep her voice even. "Even though you have a tendency to underestimate those around you and even though you only half-listen to the things that are said, this isn't you."

"You have no idea who I am, Hermione, so stop. You have no idea what years in your shadow in Harry's life have done to me." At the look of surprise on her face, Ginny scoffed.

"Everything still revolved around you after you left. Harry. Ron. Mum. Dad. The whole bloody wizarding world was fixated on you for a time. I couldn't go anywhere without someone asking me about you, where you went, why you left—" Ginny paused abruptly and scowled bitterly. "I was sick of hearing your name."

"That's not my fault."

"It is, though!"

"It doesn't give you any right to act the way that you have!" Hermione shot off, "I said this before, and I'll say this again: Grow. Up. Ginny. The world is wider than the narrow focus you place on it."

Ginny said nothing, but anger was practically radiating off her.

"And for that reason, I'm—not telling, but asking you to take your focus off of me. I may deserve a lot of things, but I don't deserve this."

"That's where you're wrong," she replied curtly. "Karma is a bitch, isn't it?"

"You don't know the first thing about karma. Everything you do, it comes right back around and around. And if you think you're absolved, you're wrong." Hermione told her tersely. "As for the ridiculous idea that I *deserve* everything that will happen to me...perhaps I do, but who made you the judge and jury over my life? Who gave you that right?" Hermione questioned harshly. "You say I don't know you, well, you don't know the first thing about me. I have seen and done things that you couldn't even imagine. I lost my parents and I've questioned my humanity at times, so don't, for *one* second, think that you can just—"

"This doesn't change what happened between you and Harry. This doesn't change the fact that —"

"It may not change anything, but I'm not the only one who should feel your wrath. Yes, I slept with Harry. Yes, we had a child. Yes, yes, yes. I've made my mistakes, I've lied to everyone, and I'm not a very good person. But I have done everything I can to atone for my shitty behaviour. I may be part of the problem, but I'm not *the* problem."

"What are you talking about?! You've always been the problem, and you'll always *be* the problem!"

"I didn't conceive Matthew all by myself, Ginny." Hermione took a quick breath to calm herself. "There was—there was another person with me." Something changed in Ginny's face and Hermione ran with it. "Harry was there, too, and you can't hide that with a fake story about Draco and I having a love child at the end of the war. You can't change history; you can't undo what's already been done. All you can do is learn from it. All *I* can do is atone for it. All *you* can do is move forward."

Ginny's eyes were nothing more than two slits.

"And making me pay isn't the solution to your problems. Making me pay isn't going to answer the questions that I know you have. It will only make things worse for—not me, but *you*." She paused and chose her next words wisely. "It already has."

She faltered for just a moment. "What—what are you talking about?"

Hermione looked at her and told her as bluntly as she could, "Harry knows...everything."

Ginny's transformation was a gradual one. In fact, if Hermione hadn't known her as well, she would've initially thought that she hadn't fully comprehended what she was saying. But that

just wasn't the case. First, her narrowed eyes softened. Then, her breathing and stance changed as she started looking back and forth between Hermione and the ugly peach wall behind her. She was thinking and panicking. Finally, she froze and her skin, which had been flushed with anger, had started to pale. Ginny sounded almost breathless when she whispered, "Everything?"

She let the question hang in the air before she repeated soberly, "Everything. The fake article about Draco being Matthew's father, the letters between you and Parvarti coordinating it, the letter you didn't send to me after I left. Everything."

Dread continued to roll across Ginny's features as she began to realise what she meant.

Hermione wanted to stop talking, but she couldn't help herself. There was so much she wanted to say and now that Ginny was quiet, now that she had some time to really work through her thoughts and feelings...now it was time for some answers. "What did you expect to gain?"

Ginny looked her in the eyes.

"I know you want to punish me, but in doing that you handed the truth to the last person who needed to know. Karma always has a way of coming back to you and now it has." She tried to control her own breathing, but found it wasn't an easy task. "I know that an article like the one you *planned* for Parvarti to publish would cause a lot of unnecessary drama in my life, and make people question my status as a war hero. But I'm *beyond* caring what people think of me." Hermione told her, with her head held high.

She dropped her arms to her side.

"Draco will deny it and I will too, and guess what people will do? They'll search for the real truth."

She watched Ginny's fists curl up at her sides.

"And if we have to, Harry and I will tell the truth together. I'm not scared of it. I never was. I've only been afraid of how much the truth would hurt everyone. And it does hurt. And it *will* hurt. Because if we have to, we'll tell the truth about how he was born—"

Ginny took a shaky breath.

"How he lived."

She stared at Hermione.

"And how he died."

And as the final bits of colour drained from Ginny's face, Hermione wanted to speak again, but found that there were no words.

here's me letting go

Chapter Summary

"I know Granger is willing to fall on her sword for this and tell the world, but I'm not going to let her be forced into it. She'll do it in her own time, in her own way, when she wants to do it...or if she wants to tell."

Chapter Thirty-Four

Here's Me Letting Go

Part One: The Scholar's Mate

Father had said that in order to guarantee success, the meeting between a blackmailer and the person they are blackmailing should go like a game between a chess grandwizard and a chess wizard.

The grandwizard's object was to enter the game with a sort of respect for their opponent, to play with confidence but not arrogance, and to end the game before the master could learn their strategy and use it against them. Each of the grandwizard's moves had to involve extensive thought and planning, all possible countermoves and outcomes had to be carefully considered, and there could be no surprises.

Grandwizards—like blackmailers—loathed surprises, or anything that would break their concentration and hinder their progress. However, someone had forgotten to explain all of this to Parvati Patil because she'd made several critical errors right from the start. But that was fine. Draco happily used it to his advantage.

The problem with Patil was that she was supposed to be the grandwizard in this game, but was playing like a novice. Her first move had been an arrogant disaster; a classic case of how *not* to behave when playing a worthy opponent. It was a pity, really. He'd expected more out of her following that surprise encounter at the restaurant a couple of weeks ago. But her blunders would only make things easier for him.

See, when Draco walked into the private sitting area in which they were meeting, not only had she not bothered to look up from the table, she'd continued to scribble in her notebook. Questions, no doubt. The scratching of her quill was the only sound that he'd heard after shutting the door. Eye-contact, he'd been told, was a must. It showed authority and confidence, two things that a blackmailer needed to establish immediately to show they were

serious and in control. It annoyed him greatly that she hadn't bothered to look at him, but he didn't vocalise it.

Why? It was simple. Because he was the chess wizard. The chess wizard's object was to do everything in his power to extend the game—whilst learning about his opponent. It was foreign territory for him, putting himself in a position where he didn't have control from the start, but it was part of that 'For the Greater Good' mess he'd heard the Ministry spout after the war.

Sure, the meaning—in this case—was different, but the overall message was the same.

Again, without looking up, Patil casually gestured to the seat across from her and suggested. "It would be best if you took a seat, Hermione."

To which, he replied with a cool and sarcastic, "Is that the way to greet an old friend?"

Draco was pleased at the 'just shit myself' expression on Patil's face, but managed to keep his face neutral. However, it was harder to keep his composure when she nearly knocked over her chair as she stood up, eyes wide and hands clenched at her sides. "Draco Malfoy?"

Oh, this was all just too perfect and priceless.

"In the flesh," Draco drawled, purposely adding a slight stiffness to his tone that, he hoped, would convince her of his apparent—yet false—unease. He only had thirty minutes to get what he needed, and if he wanted his plan to work, he would have to lead her into a false sense of security. Then she would be more willing to talk and less willing to realise that she was marching herself off a cliff. To do that it meant that he had to hang back, exercise patience and restraint and, to his utmost dismay, let her think that she was winning.

She observed him with dubious eyes before she asked, "How did you find out I was here? What are you doing here? Where's Hermione? Why—"

He silenced her with a wave of his hand. "As entertaining as this is, I'd prefer not to play twenty questions."

"That's fine, because I only have one question. Where is Hermione?"

"That's none of your concern," he replied while picking an invisible piece of lint from the sleeve of his robes. Of course, there was nothing there, but Draco had a feeling that in the months following their last encounter, Parvati had found a way to study his mannerisms. There was no empirical evidence to support that idea; just a hunch that he was testing out for the very first time. Merlin he hoped that he was right because his back-up plan wasn't nearly as flawless as his original.

Patil glared at him with squinty eyes. "Really now. And why not?"

He noticed the return of her arrogance almost immediately.

Well, that had gone easier than he'd anticipated.

Nevertheless, she'd given him all the evidence that he needed. She *had* been watching him, studying him, trying to learn his habits—probably in preparation for that surprise encounter at the restaurant. Draco snorted to himself. That was just fantastic for him, but bad for her. Shameful, really. No one had told her that the problem with making assumptions about others was that one either assumed too much or too little.

In this case, she'd assumed too little, but that was fine.

Draco forced himself to be just a bit flustered when he replied, "It just isn't. Now if we can just proceed."

She folded her arms across her chest, staring at him coldly. "Proceed with what?" she sniffed in a way that eerily reminded him of her mentor. "My meeting is with Hermione, not you."

"Actually—"

"Now, if you'll just send Hermione in—"

For just a second, Draco abandoned his plans and interrupted her with a very firm and curt, "Stop." He despised being interrupted, but—like most always—Draco exercised restraint. "She's not waiting in the hall; she's not even in the building. I'm afraid you'll have to contend with meeting me today."

Parvati obstinately stuck out her chin. "Not bloody likely. I don't care if I have to—"

"Take a seat, and accept that you'll be meeting with me today."

Again, she ignored him and folded her arms across her chest. A defensive stance while on offence. Another bad move, Patil. But all wasn't lost on her end. She had, at least, managed to self-correct her eye-contact problems. Her eyes never left his when she informed, "This isn't part of the agreement."

"Agreements, as you know, are meant to be broken."

"Hermione and I had a deal, simple as that. She would either tell me the truth or I'll print what I know. Either way, it's a win for me. I was just trying to give her the benefit of the doubt and the opportunity to come clean."

"Oh really?" he thought about going for it, but refrained. Barely. This wasn't the right moment. And besides, she hadn't said anything they could use against her.

And there were twenty-four minutes left.

"Yes, really," she huffed and frowned. "This meeting is over. You can see yourself out," the witch paused and tapped her chin as if she'd just remembered something important. "Oh, and make sure you tell Hermione that in four days she can read all about how your torrid one-night love affair the night of the final battle lead to the birth of her and Harry's son. He looks so much like Harry in that photo that no one will have any doubt. It's sure to be a sensational read."

His jaw clenched, but this time, it wasn't done on purpose. A million comebacks swirled around in his head, but Draco stopped himself from uttering one, simply because he suddenly didn't trust himself.

Or his words.

"You look a little tense, Malfoy. Did I strike a nerve?" Parvati asked hopefully. "It's a pity, really, that we couldn't chat longer. I bet there are *oodles* that you can tell me, but alas, I don't see the purpose of this meeting without Hermione here. Unless..." she looked at him with a tiny smirk on her face. "Unless *you* know the truth and she sent you here to tell me."

Well, that was an unexpected turn.

"You think you know me so well, but you've made it startling clear that you don't. I'm *not* her—or anyone's—lackey."

Parvati opened her mouth, but shook her head and finally sat down; that smug smirk still on her lips. At least that part was going according to plan. She then gestured to the chair across from hers. "Take a seat, Malfoy. I may have called the meeting off too soon. It seems like we have *much* to discuss."

That time, he was the one who didn't listen. "I prefer to stand."

She shrugged and set up a few privacy wards. Nothing too complicated. "Do what you want, but since I have to 'contend' with you, I may as well ask you a few questions." Patil didn't pause but for a moment before she started, "You see. I have a slight problem with all this."

Draco tilted his head slightly to the side, but said nothing.

The witch took his silence as weakness and smiled before continuing, "Doing something unselfish, like showing up here in Hermione's stead, is not really your style."

"How do you know that it's not selfishness that brings me here today?" he asked, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. It was only then that he realised just how tight his muscles were. When Parvati just looked at him sceptically, Draco told her, "I came here as her representation," in a slightly annoyed tone.

"You are?" Parvati asked, slightly leaning back in her chair. "I wasn't aware that we would need legal representation for the truth in an informal article—"

"Spare me the tripe, Patil. You seem to forget that I know your kind—far better than you do, it seems. And more importantly, I know your mentor. Nothing is *ever* informal." He spared her a casual glance before he added, "Or fair."

Her cold eyes flashed with anger, "I resent that." He watched as her hand balled into a fist on the table. "I'm nothing but fair."

Fair? Draco slowly cocked a brow. "And you're deluded, too, but that isn't news to me."

"What?"

"You heard me perfectly fine. Fair. You think you're being fair?" he snorted. "You blackmailed—"

"I didn't blackmail anyone. I simply gave Hermione the chance to—"

"You can stop telling yourself that any time. You didn't give her a chance; you gave her an ultimatum. Tell you the truth, or you'll tell the world what you know. I hardly see that as an opportunity, much less one that anyone would be stupid enough to actually take. So, don't think that you've done anyone any favours."

"And yet she did take it."

Draco relaxed his fists.

"What I still fail to understand is what *you* are doing here. You say you're not her lackey, but here you are, doing her dirty work. What are you to her? Because a selfish bastard like you would never—"

She just had to go and knock on the door of something that had been bothering him for weeks now. "Don't make assumptions about my character." Because, at times, he surprised himself. Like now. The point where he would've lost his patience and reacted had just passed, but there he stood with his anger in check.

Perhaps Granger's maturity—or whatever—had managed to rub off on him.

Better yet, maybe he had done a lot more maturing than he'd originally thought.

"I wouldn't dream of making an assumption about your character. It was merely an observation." Parvati sniffed as she picked up her quill. "There's no need to be so touchy, Malfoy." When his expression didn't change, she sighed. "There's no real reason why we can't talk this through like adults."

It was like the turning on of some internal switch; that was the only way to describe the abrupt change in her demeanour. It had nearly caught Draco off guard, but what had saved him from being completely thrown off his game was the fact that he'd seen it all before. It really paid to have Rita Skeeter as a family friend. It had given him the opportunity to watch her and get to know her style; a style that Parvati Patil emulated to a science...probably because she'd never bothered to find her own. Gone was the cold Parvati, and in her place was—well, Rita Skeeter's protégé in full on coaxing journalist mode.

"Malfoy, I'm only here to help."

He scowled, "Help, and get your story." Nineteen minutes left.

"Naturally," she smirked. "If I've learned something, it's that you don't get anything in life for free. You have to work and make sacrifices to get what you want."

Draco said nothing, but wondered just why she was talking to him as though he knew nothing about sacrifices. He'd done nothing *but* make sacrifices, and it had never been about what he

wanted. Was it possible to be selfish and unselfish at the same time? Or maybe unselfish by force?

That sounded more likely.

And from what he knew, Patil's sacrifices were purely motivated by selfishness. She'd given up just about everything—and everyone—just to get ahead. He found himself wondering just what the hell her point was.

But then he remembered that he didn't give a damn.

During the tense silence, Patil crossed her legs and clasped her hands together, trying to show him that he had her undivided attention. Draco decided this was the right time to give her another reason to let her think she was in control over the situation; he sat down in the designated chair and stared almost defiantly across the table at the smug-looking witch.

The silence lasted just long enough for him to adjust in his seat. And then she cleared her throat. "I hate silence. Nothing ever gets accomplished with silence. So, since you're feeling particularly taciturn, I think I should start with what I know. Just to get the ball rolling, or so the Muggles would say."

Another bad move.

He immediately heard his father's voice in his head, as clear as if his father was standing right next to him. *No matter how bad it gets, never show your hand, Draco.* It was the vivid memory of the serious look on Father's face when he'd said those words to him years ago that had almost made him pause. He'd been thinking about Lucius ever since that initial thought in the alley, and it was finally starting to get in the way of the task at hand. Draco quickly cleared his mind of his father.

He was going to get through this by himself.

"Where is her son?"

His face remained blank. "How exactly am I supposed to know that?"

Parvati's smirk remained. "Because you're with her all the time. And it seems as of late, the dynamic between you two has changed. I have so many photos of you two in my office—one would wonder if you two were *together*."

She was actually much closer to the truth than he'd anticipated and his stomach turned. "Perhaps we are, perhaps we aren't. I—"

"I just want to meet the tyke. He's five, right?" When Draco didn't answer, she continued. "I wonder if she sent him to school abroad to keep him a secret."

Granger would never.

"Now, it's time to tell me something that you know. I can't be the only one giving up information here."

Draco knew he had to choose his words wisely. Very wisely. He was so close to getting her where he wanted her, and he couldn't mess up or falter now. But what to tell her? It had to be something that would pique her interest, something that was the truth, and something that wouldn't betray Granger's confidence. "I can confirm that he's still in Italy."

And that was just grim.

For a moment, he wasn't sure what she would say—or do. Parvati looked completely sceptical. "How do I know that you aren't trying to trick me? How do I know that what you're saying is actually the truth?"

He shrugged, "You don't," and allowed himself to smirk for the first time since he walked into the room. "What does it matter anyway? You have your story."

"Not the entire story. How long did her and Harry's love affair went on before Harry started dating Ginny and she started dating Ron? The way Ginny tells it and the fact that she wants Hermione's head on a pike, leads me to believe there was some *overlap* there. And that in itself is an excellent story. I've got several quotes from Ginny that make everything all the more complicated."

Draco just sat there and let her talk.

"She was out for blood when I contacted her." Parvati shook her head. "I pushed just a little and she gave me Hermione's address and everything I needed. I went back to Venice for a few days, talked to a few of her Muggle neighbours but they barely saw her. She kept to herself, her job would not share any information with me. Pity. But Ginny is the more interesting story. She suggested I write about you two having a love child—I was reluctant, but curious. After all, it takes two to tango, or whatever the Muggles say. I asked her and she lied to me. It wasn't Ron, because Hermione would have never left. It wasn't you, because that was impossible. What other man had she been around, but *Harry*?"

And his mind started working overtime, trying to figure out just how he was going to find his way back to the road that he'd already established.

"Everyone knows the story of what happened when they were searching for Horcruxes. Ron left them for quite some time and it was just the two of them. I wonder what *really* happened. I have my thoughts about it. My theories. However, as I've learned since my suspension, nothing is more important than facts. And the fact is that there's a child out there that confirms all my theories. So where is he, Malfoy?"

"I told you he's in Italy."

"Where in Italy? My publishers are waiting."

"You're not going through The Prophet?"

"No, this has been picked up for publication by a new newspaper in Scotland. This will be their first major headline, and they are just itching for my final draft."

Well, that was interesting. "You talk too much, Patil. It's going to get you into trouble."

"I hardly doubt that."

He fake a sigh and asked, "What you want?"

"His exact location. What school is he in—"

"I know where he is," Draco bluffed.

It was her turn to look surprised. "Hermione's clearly lost her touch if she trusts you, of all people, with something like that."

Draco fought to keep his face impassive. "Do you want the location or not?"

She looked dubious. "How do I know you're going to tell me the truth?"

"I suppose you're just going to have to trust me."

"Your word may be good enough for Rita, but it's not good enough for me."

"Then why are you talking to me? All I have is my word."

Patil stared at him stubbornly for quite some time. For another second, Draco wasn't sure she would accept his answer, but then the corners of her lips twitched and she was smiling. So was he, on the inside, when she said, "I suppose you're right." Patil sat up straight, "Go on, tell me."

Draco checked his watch and tapped his finger on the table.

He stared directly into her eyes and answered her demand with a firm, "No."

The anger in her eyes was unmistakable. "That's not how this is supposed to—"

He snuffed her words out like a small flame. "I won't tell you. Not until you answer *my* question."

"Question," she snorted, "I don't think you're in the right place to start making demands, Malfoy."

"Oh, but you see, I'm in the perfect place to make demands. How did you get his birth record?"

"Surely, given your—" Parvati paused to choose her words carefully, "Friendship with Hermione, you had to know that the boy was born in the *only* hospital in Historic Venice."

Actually, he didn't.

Matthew was still a touchy topic; one he didn't bring up until it was necessary or pertinent. Meaning: never. She talked about him sometimes, more lately. He knew enough, but didn't know everything, and figured Granger would tell him in her own time and perhaps he would

watch her movies. He also figured she was waiting for him to do the same. He frowned at the thought before properly tucking it away.

She shifted around in her seat, suddenly nervous.

Draco would've grinned had he not been in such a predatory mood.

"I acquired it."

"Try that again without fidgeting. Or maybe with as much confidence as you had before."

"I—"

"Oh, don't be reserved now," Draco taunted. "Not when you were so bold just a few minutes ago." He paused and decided to play on her stubbornness. It wouldn't be too long now. "Don't be ashamed—"

"Muggle hospitals don't keep birth records. So, I went to the place that does and obtained a copy."

Bingo. Got her.

Draco leaned back against his seat and asked, "How did you manage to do that? Muggles have privacy laws. The paperwork, I hear, is tedious."

"I'm a good journalist," Parvati replied smugly, "And a good journalist seeks the truth, wherever it may lead. A good journalist also does whatever it takes to get what they need."

"And what does that mean?"

Patil waved her hand. "Harmless magic, that's all."

"On Muggles?"

Draco had to force himself to not make any facial expressions that would give him away.

"After what *you've* done, who are you to judge? At least I got what I needed without *someone dying*."

That was a low blow, but he took it because it was deserved. He never forgot.

"You look almost ashamed of your behaviour," her eyes narrowed fiercely. "But I'm not ashamed of anything I've done. It was done for the greater good."

"*Your* greater good," he shot back.

"Exactly."

"If you're not ashamed, if it was done for your greater good, then just tell me how you took
—"

"The Confundus Charm works perfectly on non-compliant Muggles."

That was all he needed, and it came just in the nick of time.

There was a firm knock on the door.

Parvati's head jerked, her eyes filling with confusion. "Who's there?"

Draco said nothing because he already knew the answer. He rose from his chair, went to the door, and pulled it open. Blaise stood in the doorway, clad in Auror robes and wearing a serious look on his face. Their only greeting was a slight nod that was actually a silent message. Draco then stepped aside, "Come in."

"Blaise Zabini?" Patil questioned, confusion etched in her brow. "What are *you* doing here?"

"I was invited."

Draco watched as cold realisation washed over her face. For the second time that afternoon, she jumped out of her chair so hard that she nearly knocked it over. Her cheeks were red and her finger was pointed at him accusingly, "You tricked me!"

"Didn't you ever wonder *why* Granger accepted your deal?" he asked, taking a step forward.

She took one back. "I just assumed that she was taking the most intelligent option."

"And you assumed incorrectly. She accepted your deal because I told her to. The purpose of this meeting wasn't for you to get your story, it was for you to condemn yourself...and you did a fine job of that." The gleam in his eyes, he knew, was nothing short of malicious, but this was the moment he had been waiting for. "You talk too much. It's going to get you into trouble. Repeated use of magic on Muggles; that's not good."

Blaise's face remained even.

Parvati actually had the gall to smile. "Is that your great plan, Malfoy? Get me thrown into Azkaban to stop me from putting out my article? That's actually pretty good. Let me guess, Zabini here," she gestured to the wizard, "listened in to our entire conversation using an Extendable Ear or some other magical eavesdropping device. Am I right?" She didn't let either of them answer. "If that's the case, then, you didn't hear a thing because, as you know, I set up privacy wards. Magical devices don't work in here." Her smirk was arrogant and Draco had the urge to just wipe it off right there, but he had a feeling she had a little bit more to say...and he allowed it. "It's my word against yours, Malfoy. You can't prove anything."

"But, you see, *that's* where you're wrong. I can still prove everything." He reached into the inside pocket of his robes and said, "You said it yourself. Magical devices won't work in here, but Muggle devices..."

Her smile quickly turned into a frown. "What are you talking about?"

"I didn't need Extendable Ears, not when I have..." Draco extracted the little tape recorder from his robes, "this little...thing."

Parvati's eyes widened with recognition. She opened and shut her mouth repeatedly, like a fish, and it was amusing. Evidently, she couldn't find the words to say.

"Granger spent the last couple of weeks testing it, making it resistant to magic and wards. It's a talent of hers. As you well know. Then, she taught me how to use it." After fiddling with it for a moment, Draco managed to turn it off and hand it to Blaise, who handled it like an expert.

Of course he knew how to work a Muggle tape recorder.

Seconds later, they all heard, "—assumed that she was taking the most intelligent option." Blaise pressed another button, and then they heard, "—Confundus Charm works perfectly on non-compliant Muggles."

And she crumbled.

"You tricked me!"

"Yes, but trickery is perfectly legal. On the other hand, using magic on Muggles is not so legal." he fired back. "You didn't just confess to breaking our laws here in England, you confessed to breaking laws in a foreign country. The Ministry will not tolerate—"

"The Ministry doesn't even have a reason to investigate me!"

"If they didn't, I wouldn't be standing here getting ready to take you in for questioning." Blaise told her.

"The boldness of your little stunt in the restaurant a couple of weeks ago with our waiter raised a lot of red flags within the Improper Use of Magic Office," Draco informed, "Hermione went and gave statements about it, which gave the department head every reason in the world to investigate you even further."

"They investigated me?"

"Of course, but the result of the Ministry's investigation was a lot like our own. They couldn't find enough evidence to arrest you. They needed verbal proof—a confession."

"But no one was hurt!"

"That doesn't matter." Blaise finally spoke up. "You broke the law multiple times, and we're to bring you down to the Ministry for questioning under Veritaserum and a wand test."

"We?"

Almost as if on cue, two Aurors entered the room. The first magically bound her hands and the second took her wand. The reality of the situation made Parvati almost hysterical. "Wait! Malfoy, I'll tell you everything you need to know. I'll tell you about the article—"

Draco looked at Blaise. He said nothing to her—his part in this whole thing had just ended. Blaise nodded at the two Aurors to take Patil, who was still trying to make a deal, out of the

establishment. All was silent between the two before Blaise said, "You know, if this goes to trial, you and Hermione will have to testify, right?"

"*If* this goes to trial. I have every intention of not letting it."

Blaise's eyes narrow first with confusion, then realisation. "You've planned further than I thought."

"I know Granger is willing to fall on her sword for this and tell the world, but I'm not going to let her be forced into it. She'll do it in her own time, in her own way, when she wants to do it...or *if* she wants to tell." He said with such fierce determination. "I know Patil's solicitor and I'll call him for a meet and chat tomorrow. He'll want to keep this far away from the Wizengamot."

"And if the prosecutor doesn't?"

"We try to make deals for smaller cases. It keeps our workload manageable and keeps the Wizengamot from hearing ridiculous cases."

"I would think you both would be more interested in seeing her thrown into Azk—"

"I speak for us both when I say that we're more interested in this ordeal being over." When Blaise smirked, Draco ignored him. He knew exactly how that sounded and it actually didn't feel that bad to say. *Us.* "Besides, anyone would be mad not to cut her a deal. It's not a solid case and what she warrants nothing except a slap on the wrist and to answer for her crimes in Italy. They aren't as lenient as we are about using magic on Muggles."

"But you have a confession."

"There aren't any laws about how you acquire evidence, true." Draco extracted his wand and used it to gather all the papers on the table. "But I don't want Hermione to go through a trial. And when I approach her solicitor tomorrow, I'll tell him we'll let it all go if she takes an Unbreakable Vow of silence."

"Whatever you say," Blaise held up his hands, "That's your area. I just investigate and make arrests. Though, I must say, that was the easiest one today, by far. I was expecting her to put up more of a fight." He gathered all her things and placed them into a bag he'd retrieved from the pocket of his robes. When he finished, he started towards the door, but paused and turned around. "You'll probably need to go find Hermione now."

"She'll find me when she's ready." Draco put his hands into his pockets. "If she's still up to it, we're coming to Trivia Night."

Blaise almost looked pleased.

"And then tomorrow I'm talking her to a Falmouth Falcons game." He'd decided it the moment he said it. He already had the tickets, after all. He'd been planning to go alone, because Blaise had to work. But now...

"Like a date?"

"Yes, a date."

"You've come a long way," Blaise chuckled to himself. "Don't bugger this up, Draco."

"I have no intention to."

"I'll make sure to tell Pansy not to expect you two for dinner tomorrow tonight." And then he left.

When the door clicked shut behind Blaise, Draco allowed the corners of his lips to curl into a slight smile.

The smell of victory was pungent in the air, and its taste was oh so sweet.

Part Two: In your hands

Silence.

There was so much of it in the moments following her words that it seemed to be a sound of its own.

But it wasn't the kind that preceded a great explosion or clap of thunder as a storm began. Instead, it was the kind that started out as imperceptible, went on to make its presence felt, and kept haunting her. It was the kind of silence that spoke to her, told her that just because the truth was out didn't mean that she could relax, didn't mean that she was finished being tested, and didn't mean that this situation had resolved itself.

Hermione had the feeling that their resolution was no longer in her hands.

As the silence between them lingered and thickened, it settled on Hermione, helped her digest what had already happened, and what was to come. The silence calmed her and helped her to remember why she was there. It was all too easy to lose her purpose in a situation like this.

It was all too easy to lose herself to anger when Ginny finally looked up and said, "You're lying."

Had she been in a different mindset, she wouldn't have heard the difference between this 'you're lying' and the last. While the last had been an outright accusation, this one was laced with a nuance of...*hope*.

"I can't express just how much I wish I were lying, but I'm not."

Ginny numbly pulled out the chair she'd refused to sit in only minutes before and sat down. She stared past her at the peach walls, and her eyes darted from side to side as if she were

trying to read something with her mind's eye. Then, she looked at Hermione suddenly, "But—"

"But what?" she cut her off, trying hard to keep her voice from rising.

"You *have* to be lying or—"

"No," Hermione shook her head. It was becoming more and more difficult to keep her voice steady. "I'm not going to let you do this, Ginny. I'm not going to let you twist this. You've done that to everything I've said for the last—I don't even remember how long. I'm not lying or leaving anything out. Our son *died* last year before I returned." Ginny cringed at her final word and she couldn't force the emotions from her voice when she asked, "Why would I lie about something like that?"

Ginny looked like she was still struggling to grasp on to Hermione's words, their meaning, everything. She put her elbows on the desk, and raked her hand through her hair with one frustrated sweep. Her next words lacked their previous venom. "Because you—you would say anything to clear your name and make me look like a fool."

"The fact that he died doesn't clear me from anything."

"Parvarti thought you'd sent him away to school to—"

"I would *never* send him away." Hermione shook her head. "Listen to your instincts, Ginny."

That wasn't the best thing to say.

Ginny glared at her with such stubbornness. "My instincts tell me not to believe you."

"Only because you've poisoned yourself against me."

"No, I didn't!"

"You've convinced yourself to not believe anything that comes out of my mouth. It's a shame that you're so consumed with hatred for me that you can't even recognise the truth. Because I *am* telling you the truth. Harry and I aren't running away to raise him or whatever delusion you've come up with. I don't know what Harry is doing, but I do know that it has nothing to do with me or our son because he died. *He died.*"

Hermione closed her eyes for a moment to control her breathing, but it didn't stop the tears because the words *hurt*.

"What do you want me to do to prove it to you? Would you like to see his death certificate? Would you like to take a Portkey to Venice to see his headstone? Because I'm not sure what else I can do make you believe me." Hermione stood up, tears still falling. "I just came here to tell you the truth."

"But why wait to tell me?" Ginny asked, staring up at her. "Why wait until after I—"

"Would you have listened to me? Would you have listened to us that night when you found out?"

Ginny said nothing for a very long time until she muttered, "No."

"Exactly."

"But you still should have forced me to listen the night I found out about him. We could've avoided all of this if you had just told me that he was dead."

"What difference does his death make?" she nearly shouted. "What does it change? It changes absolutely nothing!"

"It changes everything, Hermione! I'm not completely heartless. I would never disrespect a dead child like that."

"So it's okay to use a living child to achieve your means? Is that right?"

Her mouth fell open. "No! It's not like that!"

"But that's exactly what you said. It's okay to do what you did, to hand his picture over to Parvarti, to get Parvarti to write *lies*...as long as he was living."

"You're putting words into my mouth!"

"I'm just going by your actions!" Hermione shook her head, suddenly weary. "You didn't have an *ounce* of remorse until you found out that he was dead."

"But you lie all the time." Ginny's voice sounded mechanical, rehearsed, and over-practiced.

Hermione knew that she was only regurgitating what she'd convinced herself of all these years. And she wondered just why Ginny clung so firmly to her beliefs. Hermione had been inwardly hoping that her words—*the truth*—would have some sort of affect on her behaviour, but it hadn't and...and it was more disappointing than she could have ever expected.

It forced Hermione to ask herself a very hard question: what did she expect to come from today?

The answer: too much.

"I've done a lot of wrong things, and I've known this conversation would be the hardest because I used to think your resentment for me came from a place of jealousy and misunderstanding, but now I realise it came from a place of truth about Harry's feelings for me. And I'm sorry for it. If I could change what happened, I would. But since I can't..."

One moment of truth was *not* going to turn everything around and change Ginny. It wasn't going to erase her pain, anger, and deep mistrust; it wasn't even going to help her grow and move forward. That notion was idealistic—no, unrealistic. She couldn't change Ginny; she didn't even want to try. It wasn't her fight or place. And Hermione had a clear understanding of what she needed to do today.

Put it all in Ginny's hands.

"Ginny—"

She cut Hermione off abruptly, "Stop—stop *saying* my name like that. I *can't* believe you."

Hermione shook her head sadly. "I'm not about to sit here and talk in circles with you. Believe what you want to believe." She paused and opened the flap to her beaded bag and started digging around. "Keep on not believing me; keep on trying to exact your revenge. I'm tired of caring and I'm not going to try and save you, either. So, go ahead and find someone else to change history for you. You'll need to after today because I'm not sure Parvati will be able to write your story."

Not with the way that Draco was talking.

"Go ahead and find someone to write about my son—do whatever you think needs to be done to punish me. In fact, I'll even help you. I'll tell the truth. *We'll* tell the truth about everything."

And she started naming everything that she pulled out of her bag while Ginny shifted uncomfortably in her seat. "Here's a picture of the two of us," her hands started shaking. "His eulogy, some of his records..."

It was harder than she had imagined.

"Here is his p-plot number," Hermione choked on her emotions that threatened to overwhelm her as her tears continued to fall when she caught a glimpse of his picture. The last thing she wanted to do was turn it over to Ginny, but she knew that it had to be done. "His death record—" She put the last paper on the desk.

Ginny just stared at her with wide eyes. "Wh—what are you doing?"

She closed her eyes and slowly pushed the small pile of papers across the desk. "I'm putting this into your hands."

"What are you talking about?"

"I don't know how to make you see, so take it. Take it all. Use it as you see fit. I'm not going to run from this or *you* anymore. I'll fall on my sword whenever this comes out. I'll take the judgment from everyone. No one—*no one* can judge my actions more than I have. No one can hate me more than I hate myself."

Ginny looked shaken.

"But if you do it," Hermione said slowly. "You better make sure they tell the entire truth. All of it. Tell them about me *and* Harry; tell them about why I left. When you tell them about Matthew, you better tell them—" her breath caught in her throat and she choked on a sob.

She would not break down in front of Ginny. She refused. But at the same time, she was a grieving mother and sometimes the wave caught her by surprise. Time wouldn't heal her

wounds, but it had a way of training Hermione and making her able to live her new normal. So she buried it all until later; buried it until she was in the privacy of her own home—her safe haven.

Only then could she speak.

"Tell them that he was courageous and headstrong. Tell them that he was a little boy who didn't deserve the hand that had been dealt to him. Tell them that he deserved far better and far more than I *ever* gave him." Hermione's continuously quaking voice turned hard. "Tell them about everything you know, everything that Harry told you, but you *better* tell them your role in all this. You better tell them that you hid Harry's letter to me, tell them how you wrote to me for five years behind everyone's back, tell them how you gave Parvarti the—"

"Stop. Okay. Just *stop*." Ginny suddenly picked up Hermione's offering. "So, you have some documents and pi—" The picture—not the one of the two of them, but the one on Parvarti's desk—caught her eye. Ginny looked closer, seeming to search for something that would tell her otherwise. But then her shoulders slumped, her cheeks coloured considerably, and she looked almost nauseated when she half-whispered, "I never looked when I took it from Harry. *I couldn't*."

Hermione said nothing. What could she say?

She hadn't even looked at it when she'd shown it to her.

"He has Harry's eyes..." Ginny looked at Hermione, then back down at the picture. The silence returned, but not for long. There was disgust in her voice when she said, "He looks like you, too."

But then she dropped the papers and photographs as if they were burning.

"Take them back. I don't want them."

"No."

A look of horrified realisation crossed her face. "Harry *knows* and—he thinks—"

She calmly shook her head. "The photos and documents are yours until you really decide."

"Decide what?" her voice was almost shrilled.

Hermione gave Ginny back her wand. "Until you decide if you're going to go tell this story to someone else, until you decide if you're going to let this go, until you decide that you're finished being angry at me for something that I didn't do by myself."

Ginny pocketed her it almost numbly.

"The moment I walk out of that door, I'm done. You can waste your life on me, but I won't be doing the same." She picked up the invisibility cloak, carefully folded it over her arm, and started to leave.

"You know," Ginny sounded brittle. "Harry tried to tell me the truth. Numerous times. But I didn't listen to him."

Hermione stopped. She started to tell her that Harry wasn't the only one who tried, but she didn't because it was pointless. It would take some professional help, but she would learn that on her own.

"I was convinced that you..." she trailed off.

"Before I left for Australia," Hermione started, "Harry came to see me. He wanted to leave you, for us to be together, but do you know what I told him?" she looked at Ginny. "I told him that he and I were a two-time mistake. I told him that he couldn't ask me to love him because I didn't. I told him that I wanted to be his friend and nothing more. I told him that *you* loved him, and that he should love you as he loved me, treat you as he would me. I don't have anything but platonic feelings for Harry."

"But you, I—" her voice faltered.

"Wasted a lot of time trying to protect a relationship that wasn't being threatened," she paused, "No, that's not true. Your relationship *was* being threatened, but not by me. Harry stayed knowing how he felt and you let him, knowing the truth. That's it."

She looked down.

"You heard Harry tell me that he loved me still after all this time, and yet you stayed with him. You tried to punish me and use *our* son for something that happened when you and Harry weren't together. And you even tried to punish *me* for *Harry's* feelings by giving her everything she needed and trying to concoct that story to throw her away from the truth. The truth she already knew."

Hermione easily could've gone on, but that wasn't the real point that she was trying to make.

"But, forget all that. You could've walked away. You could've talked to him yourself without doing all this. You could have come to him or me when Parvarti approached you with Matthew's birth record. We could have dealt with her together. We could have worked something out. We could have turned a lot of negatives into something positive, for once and I would have welcomed it. Harry would have, too. But you lied to him and he found you out, you stole the only photo he has of his son, and you're surprised it's ended this way?"

She shook her head.

"Harry defended you when we approached him. He refused to think you were capable of the underhanded shit that we were accusing you of doing. He was trying to work for your trust, salvage things between you that probably were irreparably broken, but you did what you did and now—" Hermione stopped herself from saying anymore.

"Now what?"

"It's done."

For the second time, she showed true remorse. "I'm going to lose him, aren't I?"

She looked down at the cloak in her hands. "This is a conversation that you need to have with Harry when you give this," she extended the cloak out to her, "back to him."

Ginny took the cloak in both hands and stared at it, shaking her head. Hermione took a deep breath and walked across the room to the door. She had done everything she came to do, and now she was done. Hermione was twisting the doorknob when she heard Ginny sniffle.

"I bet you're judging me," Ginny said bitterly and then mocked. "'Ginny is a fool that—'"

"Who am *I* to judge you?"

Ginny was no different from Hermione. From Draco. From Lucius. From Harry. Sure, their sins were different, but no one was a saint in a world full of sinners. "We all make mistakes; some are worse than others, but they're all mistakes. There aren't levels to it. I'm just as guilty in this as you, hell, I'm even *more* guilty than you, but I've found peace in the midst of my own self-hatred. I live with the consequences of my actions *every day*, and you will, too."

Ginny met her gaze, and she found that she couldn't look away.

She knew that look. It was one of broken understanding. And Hermione finally understood why this had to happen now and not weeks before. Now, she was finally ready to handle this correctly. Two weeks ago, she would've had the urge to kick Ginny now that she was down. She would've wanted to yell and scream and curse her and teach her what pain truly felt like.

But she wasn't that person anymore.

Funny how one person could change so much in such a short amount of time.

There was no need for any revenge.

Revenge, as Ginny would hopefully learn, was always the weak pleasure of a little and narrow mind. Hermione would get no pleasure from her pain. So, she said the only thing that she could. "One day, I'm going to forgive myself for causing all this misery and pain with my lies. And maybe that'll also be the day that I forgive you. I know I will, I just don't know when."

And it was the truth.

She would, even though many thought that she shouldn't. Forgiveness, as Hermione had learned from Ron, didn't mean that she wasn't still hurt; nor did it mean that she would forget. It wasn't a prize or a gift or a free pass for her poor behaviour. It was simply that. Forgiveness. Hermione understood her role in her own story. She was not absolved and she would never be truly free.

And that was fine.

She knew that, like with Ron, they could start over, but the past would always be there—and that was why she didn't want what Ron had offered in her sitting room that night. She and

Ginny, on the other hand, would never be friends, but Hermione could let go and move on; she could find other ways to release any residual resentment.

She would do that.

A second sniffle from Ginny broke through her thoughts.

And after hesitating just a moment, Hermione grasped the doorknob again. She should've said more, she should've told Ginny that she was in dire need of professional help, but in that moment, Hermione thought that it was best if she said nothing at all.

So, when she closed the door behind her, it didn't slam shut.

Instead, it closed with a soft click.

When she found Draco waiting for her in their meeting location, the sun was high in the sky and she winced at its brightness.

When he asked her what had happened, the only thing she could tell him was, "I've let it all go."

in the ashes of the midnight sun

Chapter Summary

On threat of bodily injury, he'd specifically told Potter not to bring his name into this whatsoever.

Now he would have to kill him.

Chapter Notes

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

Chapter Thirty-Five

In the Ashes of the Midnight Sun

Part One: The ornate box

August 14th

The smell of Muggle paint was strong in the air, and he followed his nose until he found himself in the doorway of a very familiar conference room.

Or maybe not.

Mother had redecorated, again, and Draco had a hard time forcing his face not to twist into a scowl.

He looked around, then stepped back to make sure that this was the correct room.

Indeed, it was.

But—Draco took a full step into the room.

Everything was wrong. Instead of the sumptuous walls and marble floors, the walls were cream in colour. Not to mention the carpet on the floor—the *blue* carpet—which was a mural of a Quidditch player who happened to be in constant pursuit of a snitch that he never caught. In place of silently sneering portraits were posters of famous Quidditch players and one of a purple, ogre-looking creature jumping around.

And *toys*. Teddy's toys were everywhere.

Some were organized on one side of the large room—most were not. Draco frowned with distaste.

His puckered brow finally morphed into an outright scowl when, while wandering further into the room and noting the distinct changes, he nearly tripped on one of the evil little toys. The closest poster, which happened to be of that jumped-up Gryffindor wanker, Oliver Wood, did very little to stifle his cackle. Draco glared. Wood laughed. Draco brandished his wand. Wood flashed a cocky smirk. Draco pondered *aloud* about which fire spell was best.

And Wood fell silent.

Once he sent the offensive toy flying across the room, Draco brushed his shoulders, pocketed his wand, and turned to leave. And that was when he heard it.

Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock.

His head sharply turned, jutting inquisitively, with incredibly observant eyes. And there it was.

The clock.

He could've *sworn* that he'd told Arcturus take it away. And yet...

Draco seemed to gravitate to it like an old man to a park bench. With cautious fingers, he reached up and touched it. The wood was smooth beneath his fingers, crafted well and finished just as skillfully. It was a Malfoy heirloom, but at the same time, it looked very unlike the same clock that had taunted him the last time he'd been in this room. The wood was lighter in colour, and the appearance of the clock's face was changed to make it fit with the childish appearance of the room.

Childish.

Draco almost snorted at the irony of it all.

He hadn't had a single good memory that took place in this room, but with some time, carpet, toys, and Muggle paint, Mother had managed to redecorate the past. Or at least she'd tried. Such a thing wasn't really possible, even with the toys strewn about the carpeted floor. The past was lurking everywhere: under the layers of paint, in the shadows of the small bookcase, beneath his feet, and ticking right in front of him. It was unavoidable. Draco reached and touched the glass face.

Her handiwork was impressive, nearly flawless, but the ticking would always give it away.

His hands and eyes moved slowly. Draco had no idea why he was being so cautious—or even why he was appraising the bloody thing. It was a clock. Just a clock. An annoying clock, mind you, but it was a clock nonetheless. It made him wonder just why he'd given so much power to an insignificant clock. And now it seemed stupid to resent a clock... even this one. It hadn't done anything to him. True, the ticking rehashed bad memories and had taken him back to a place where he felt most vulnerable, but—it was over.

He wasn't there *now*.

In fact, he was eons past that day and those feelings.

And Draco understood why his mother had redecorated the room, but left the clock. To Draco, the clock and this room represented a time of his life where he'd felt off-balance and emotionally exposed. But to his mother, it all was a reminder of where they had come from... and her hope for the future.

"Draco?" Mother called from the doorway.

Amazed that he could hear her over the voices in his head, he turned and blinked. His mother wore a plain navy—not black—dress with the pearl necklace he'd sent her a couple of weeks ago. And it surprised him because she hadn't worn colour since Father's death. Needless to say, navy wasn't exactly bursting with life, but it was a start. Strangely, the fact that her dress was *Muggle* didn't occur to him until she frowned, dusted an invisible bit of lint off her sleeve, and complained, "I don't care what Pansy says or how many charms she casts on this dreadful garment, it'll never be better than Madam Sphoons. Never."

Draco offered his mother a small, but slightly strained, smile. "You look beautiful, Mother. As always."

And he wasn't just saying that, either. Her hair was curled and swept up into some intricate style and her face was made up and perfect, but those weren't the reason why he'd complimented her. For the first time in a very long time, his mother looked... less haunted and overall relaxed. The perpetual worry lines etched around her eyes had started to smooth, and Draco found that his own silent worries about his mother were slowly disappearing with them.

She smiled. "Thank you, Draco." Narcissa seemed to remember something and exclaimed, "Oh!" He was about to inquire, but she casually walked across the room and gave him a hug. It was a bit odd, and he suspected that Granger had something to do with it. However, he let her hug him and whisper "Welcome back, son" into his ear.

He glowered a bit when she absently straightened his tie, but said nothing.

"You look healthy. It looks like Venice was good to you. Perhaps that's why you didn't write but once."

"Not exactly. It was actually a very long trip. The Venetian Ministry didn't want to cooperate, at first, but all Potter had to do was flash his scar and everyone started kissing his arse—"

"Language, Draco."

The wizard rolled his eyes. "Sorry."

"It's fine. Are you just returning?"

Draco shook his head. "I've been back since yesterday evening."

"Oh?" Narcissa looked intrigued. "Hermione was here for dinner last night. She just so happened to mention that you weren't returning until this morning."

He knew exactly what she was saying, "I know," Draco replied smugly. As far as Hermione knew, he had spent the last three weeks at the Worldwide Wizarding Law Seminar in Vienna. After the first two days of his trip, he had a feeling that she didn't believe him. Just little things, he supposed. She never asked him about the seminar, or anything for the matter. Pity.

He'd gotten a copy of the entire itinerary for nothing.

Perhaps he was just being paranoid. Yes, that was it.

"That's what I told her before I left. It would've been extremely difficult to explain why I arrived home a day early and spent the entire evening missing in action."

She chuckled. "I think she has too much on her mind at the moment to really notice."

Draco was curious. "What do you mean by that?"

"She's... more restless than usual."

His eyebrow rose slowly. "Restless...how?"

"Well, she was the driving force behind the redecoration of this room. She's working extra, cooking an exorbitant amount of food, planning renovations on her home when she *is* at home, dragging me around Muggle London to—" Narcissa sighed. "Needless to say, she's running herself ragged and driving me positively mad."

Sounded like a stressed Granger to him.

"And she paces, a lot. I can't stand the pacing. How in the world do you deal with it? She goes back and forth and back and forth and she never stops! Just on and on and—" She cleared her throat. "I just convinced her to go home and take a nap. She's likely wearing a hole in her carpet instead."

It was hard not to chuckle.

It amused him greatly when his mother was flustered simply because it didn't happen often. He'd only been able to ruffle her feathers a few times in his life, and it had taken him years to do it. Somehow, Hermione had managed to do it in a few weeks. He didn't know if it was frightening or completely genius. And as he listened to his mother quietly fuss about his... about Granger, Draco considered the possibility that he'd gotten his lack of patience from his mother.

"Mother, the pacing is tame in comparison to her insufferable knuckle-popping."

Narcissa blanched. "Thanks Heavens she didn't subject me to that form of torture."

He just sniffed. "Do you know what was wrong with her? She seemed fine in her letters."

"I suspect it has something to do with the newspapers on her back porch."

Draco blinked. "The what?"

"Oh...she didn't tell you." She dusted an invisible piece of lint off his shoulder. "Well, I suppose you'll find out soon enough."

He didn't like the sound of that. Not at all.

Mother—with strangely perfect timing—asked, "Do you like the room? I only picked the paint colour. Hermione did the rest. I had no idea how to decorate a child's room. It's been a long time, you know, but when I mentioned the project to Hermione just after you left, she just sort of took control over everything. I would've protested, but I got the feeling that it was something she needed to do."

Draco fell silent. "You could've used my old room."

"That had initially been my intention, but we have more than enough space here. And really, out with the old and... perhaps in with the new."

"You didn't get rid of the clock."

Narcissa smiled rather softly. "You noticed, huh?"

"It was hard not to."

"Hermione said you would."

And it was funny because Draco only scarcely remembered mentioning the clock to her.

He wasn't sure when it had happened, only that it was late at night and Granger's hair had frizzed in the most atrocious way following a walk they'd taken. They were sitting on her patio, listening to the sounds from the lake perhaps a week before he'd left town. His remembered that his arm was around her and she was leaning comfortably into him, her arm lazily draped over him. What had started as an actual conversation had diminished to murmurs on her part and yawning on his. He wasn't sure how or why he had told her the story, but Draco had left comforted by the belief that she hadn't stayed awake long enough to hear it all.

Apparently, he had been wrong.

And she was right. He'd noticed.

"I figured as much."

She toyed with her necklace, and it prompted Draco, who was ready to change the topic, to ask, "Do you like the pearls?"

"Yes, they're beautiful. Where did you get them? And more importantly, who picked it out?"

"Australia and Pansy, naturally. She designed the string and sent them to me in Italy." When she softly chuckled, he added, "I, at least, played a major part in owling the gift to you."

He recognised the gracious yet coddling tone she used when accepting his little gifts when he was a child when she said, "The most important part, of course." Then, she smiled.

Rolling his eyes, Draco shoved his hands into his pockets. "I figured you wouldn't want anything from Venice, since we'll be there at the end of September." A question jumped to the front of his mind. "Speaking of, how *exactly* did you convince Granger to join us? She wrote me last week to tell me that she'd be joining us. I didn't bother to invite her because—"

"I think you underestimate the strength of a healing woman. She doesn't need you to protect her, Draco. One way or another she has to face these things. And they're going to be uncomfortable, for the both of you, but if you're truly serious about—"

He curtly interrupted her lengthening speech. "Mother."

"She needs a partner, not a protector."

Draco wanted to tell her that he was already privy to that, but decided it would take the conversation down a path he wasn't ready to travel. Talking to his mother about *any* aspect of his relationship with Hermione was second on the 'conversations-he-never-wanted-to-have' list. It was only trumped by the incredibly embarrassing 'how-many-grandchildren-will-I-get?' discussion. So, he stood and blinked while Narcissa explained to him the importance of treating Hermione like an equal partner, a queen even.

Bloody hell.

"I've seen the way you've treated your past girlfriends, and well, I never approved of them so I kept my distance. Hermione is different. You should always show your appreciation with gifts and trinkets and, for the love of Merlin, be *romantic*—"

At that, he decided it was the perfect time for a subject change. "I think I left a few robes in my room and I'm going to go...and get them..."

Narcissa smiled. "I understand why this conversation would be a bit awkward."

"A bit?" Draco snorted. "Try, dreadfully." He shifted his weight. "I know what my duties are to her and to the preservation of our...relationship." At that, she raised a perfect brow and he tried to assure her. "I do. Believe me, and we're not...like that. Granger wouldn't know what to do with a trinket, and if I ever decided to be *romantic*, she would think I was possessed. Thank you for the advice, but I'm—we're—going to do things our way."

Instead of looking affronted, Narcissa flashed a wide smile and went about straightening the room. They were meaningless tasks that she could've done with a spell, but Draco, who was a bit confused by her reaction, took to watching her with his back against the freshly dried walls.

He vaguely remembered doing something similar when he was a young boy, except he was likely sitting on the floor with his legs folded Indian-style and a scowl of boredom and disapproval on his face. Now, it felt oddly refreshing to do this, to stand and watch his mother do something pointless without worrying about...well, anything. And Draco found himself wondering if this was what it could be like for him. A simple, worry-free existence.

Could he do it?

And furthermore, could he be happy with it?

Truth be told, after the last eight years, a simpler life didn't seem so bad. At least, not in theory.

"You know, Draco," Narcissa said as she turned to him. "You can't get rid of everything just because it's unpleasant. Sometimes those painful things need to be in your face for you to truly appreciate what you've been through...and what you've overcome."

Draco paused. "I understand that now."

She tilted her head slightly to the side. "You do?"

"Yes."

"Then I have something for you." Narcissa smiled and left the room, returning mere seconds later with a very familiar-looking ornate gold box that was covered with a variety of gems and diamonds. It looked as old as the Malfoy family. Wonderful.

Draco had a really good idea who it belonged to, but asked about it anyway. "What is that?"

"I was going through your father's belongings, and—don't even start, Draco," Narcissa scolded after he made a face. "I found this in your father's office while you were away."

He blinked.

Narcissa sighed when she realised her son wasn't taking the bait. "It's full of letters...letters that were likely written by your father while you were away at Hogwarts. There are other things in here, too..."

Draco blinked again.

Her next words were spoken slowly, carefully. "I know that your relationship with your father was—"

"That has nothing to do with anything, Mother. I've buried my resentment. I'm at the point where I've accepted what he did and understand that he believed his choices to be correct. Have I completely forgiven him? I'm still working on that, but a box of letters written over fifteen years ago isn't going to change anything for better or worse. All it'll do is waste my time."

"Draco—"

"I don't want them, nor do I *need* them."

Narcissa always had been unyielding, so it didn't surprise him when she refused to give up on this. Annoying? Yes. Shocking? No. "They could really help you get to know him."

"To be honest, Mother, I know Father about as well as I should—as well as he would want me to. And I only needed one letter for that to happen. Anything else would diminish what I already know." Draco paused. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to go retrieve Granger before she wears a hole in her carpet. Meet us there in an hour and a half."

Narcissa extended the box out to him, again. "Just take it. Do whatever you want with it, at first. You never know. You may actually change your mind."

"I know that I won't."

Part Two: Welcome Home

The day was passing like molasses on speed—slow, yet a million things seemed to be happening.

In her head, at least.

The solitude was difficult and the waiting was interminable, but before Hermione knew it, the sun had begun its long and slow decline. Still, the evening was far away, and she was beyond restless. And her restlessness had led to a pacing session of epic proportions. It wasn't the kind of agitation that a sprinter felt when waiting on the blocks for a starter's gun to fire. No, it was the kind of restiveness one felt when being forced to fix something without the proper tools. She sighed.

There was a mess on her back porch.

And while Hermione's mind had been made up about what to do with the confiscated copies of Parvarti's article Blaise had delivered several weeks ago, she was *actually* struggling with was how she was going to fix her problem without reading the article.

Hermione cursed their Anti-Magic charms.

It was the reason why she couldn't take down the Stasis charm—the only charm that happened to *work* on the newspapers—and blow it all to bits.

Who in the hell would put Anti-magic charm on newspapers?

Someone in the business of teaching lessons.

Blaise.

Hermione couldn't help but pace.

She walked from the sink to the table and then back to the sink. Next, she went from the sink to the back door where she spent nearly a minute gazing out at the stacks of newspapers. She chewed her lip, groaned, and stared. Hermione shifted her weight from one foot to the other before sighing and stuffing her hands into her pockets. She relaxed before remembering just what was in her left pocket and pulled her hands out as if they were on fire. After walking back to the sink, she took a drink from her coffee cup and started over.

Apollo's eyes never stopped watching her from the doorway, but by the tenth time, he'd taken to licking his paw, and Hermione's feet were hurting. It was enough to convince her to stop. Well, that and the realisation that she'd wasted a full half an hour just pacing.

She looked over at her kitten. "This can't be healthy."

Yawning, Apollo trotted to the back door.

"Want to go out?"

He pawed at the door.

She folded her arms across her chest. "Have you learned your lesson?"

The kitten meowed.

"All right." Hermione smiled fondly before opening it and letting him out. "Stay away from the—"

Watching Apollo at that moment was something like watching a moth bump against glass.

As he'd done every time she'd let him out before, he went for the pile of newspapers. The moment his little paw touched into the protection charm, he bounced off. Not far, but far enough to stun him for a few moments. As she shook her head, Hermione watched him get up and try again. For such an intelligent kitten, Hermione had serious doubts about Apollo's common sense. Perhaps his stubbornness and determination to get to the newspapers always won the battle of wills.

Hermione picked him up and held him above her head. "You'll never learn, will you?"

Apollo looked at the papers, then back at her before meowing.

"I thought not." She cradled him in her arms and walked back to the door, opening it just a bit. "And this is why you get to go back inside." Hermione put him down on the kitchen floor and said, "I'll be back soon." Apollo made another noise, which made her eyebrow rise sharply for a moment. "Oh, don't start. I gave you another chance and you blew it. We'll try again tomorrow." The kitten growled again but turned and pranced off. Hermione tried not to look back when she turned and left him, but failed just when she started down the steps. She

figured he would be off sulking somewhere, but instead she found him at the back door with his paw against the glass.

It was bloody hard to keep walking, but a glance at the stack of newspapers helped her along. Quickly.

She considered sitting on the pier, but instead Hermione decided to shed her socks, roll up the legs of her trousers, and walk along the grassy banks of the lake. It was the first time she'd ever left the confines of her own property, but a walk seemed like the best thing to do and the lake looked more and more inviting with each step she took away from her pier.

It was perfect outside.

Warm. Overcast, but not actively raining...and it was not in their forecast for the evening. And she wasn't the only person taking advantage of the weather, either.

There was a Muggle on a little rowboat in the middle of the lake, fishing.

Hermione wasn't sure how far she'd walked before the temptation to just get her feet wet became too great. She walked to the water's edge, right to where the grass ended and the rocky mud began, and stood staring down at the water. Hermione took a step forward. She had no idea what she was stepping in, and mud oozed under her feet. It was shallow at this point, still, and yet very murky.

Lake water lapped gently at her feet. The first few were like a shock of cold to her system, but it didn't take long for the witch to acclimate to the water.

Hermione closed her eyes and slowly walked out into the lake as far as she could, getting the very bottom of her rolled up trousers wet. But it didn't matter. She was too busy absorbing all the sounds and smells around her. There was an unforced calm in the air, and it seemed that Nature was in one of its ebullient moods.

It didn't take long for her teeth to start chattering from the cold water.

Hermione could've placed a warming charm on herself, but ended up ignoring the chill.

In the time she stood there, Hermione didn't find a way to quell her anxiety or lasso her runaway thoughts, nor did she figure out what she wanted to do about the problem on her back porch.

She did, however, find a brief moment where nothing even mattered.

She wanted to go out further.

First, she rolled up the right trouser leg even further, then the left—

And that was when she heard the distinctive crumple of paper. Reaching into her pocket, Hermione retrieved the worn letter and held it tightly in her fist. It was last week when Ginny's Ural owl delivered everything Hermione had thrown at her in Parvati's office, and

more—like all of Parvarti's copies of Matthew's picture and even the pictures of her and Draco. There was no note, but the fact that she'd given everything back spoke more than a sudden apology ever could.

Ginny had finally made her decision.

She was finished, and more importantly, she was ready to let go.

Hermione wished her the best of luck.

The letter had spent the last three days moving from the pocket of one outfit to another. She had no idea why she was carrying it around. Ms Shepard had asked during her session that morning, but there was no real reason. Or so she thought. Regardless, it wasn't healthy. So, what was stopping her from just opening it, laying it on the surface of the water, and letting it drift away?

It wouldn't be—the snap of a twig on the bank ended that thought.

Her head snapped over her shoulder. She was ready to reach for her wand to hex first and ask questions later, but froze when she saw that it was only Draco.

The same Draco she hadn't seen in three weeks.

With a pleased-looking Apollo—who had likely served as his guide—trailing at his side, Draco at her peculiarly but didn't say a word. Hermione swore she saw a smile ghost his lips when she first saw him, but she wasn't sure. He could've been smiling at the cat—wait, no. That didn't seem right. They rarely got along.

Likes always repelled.

The moment of silence continued, but not for much longer. Hermione looked back out over the lake water one last time before fully turning around to face him.

But she didn't move.

It was strange, but she was so mixed up. Probably because so much time had passed. No matter; the awkwardness that had started to dissipate before he'd left was back with a vengeance. She wasn't sure what to say or do. Her first reaction had been to rush over and... throw her arms around him or hit him for scaring her, she couldn't decide which. Just seeing Draco had eased something inside of her chest that she hadn't known was tight.

She'd missed him, truly, but there was something that kept her safely in the lake away from him, backed off and in her place.

The first words between them came from him. "Apollo has a strange obsession with paper, especially the papers on your back porch. You should get rid of them."

"I've been trying to figure out a way to do that without looking at them. Magic isn't an option, sadly."

Draco frowned. "Why are they on your back porch to begin with?"

"The only theory I have is that it's Blaise's elaborate form of self-actualizing torture. Facing fears and whatnot."

"Ah, that actually sounds like him."

Hermione pocketed the letter and sighed.

"You're wet."

It was then that she realised that she'd taken a couple of steps backwards and was now nearly waist deep in the lake. Hermione blinked. "It's not cold." Anymore.

"But it's dirty."

Hermione blinked. "Not really. You should come in."

Draco snorted. "I'll pass. You should come out."

"Take a chance."

"I already am."

There was an awkward pause where they both started at each other. She used the silence to replay those three words in her mind. *I already am*. There was still a hint of uncomfortable disbelief in his voice—like he struggled to get over the fact that here he was, with her, of all people. Even after a couple of months of dating. And Hermione had a feeling that he would always have that tone—or maybe it would disappear once they made it through this stage.

Still, she understood. After all, Hermione couldn't quite believe it herself.

Apollo's purr broke the silence and Draco rubbed the back of his neck. "I mean," he cleared his throat and added weakly. "I've already been in the lake, to save your life. Not in the mood for a repeat. Why are you even *in* there?"

She put her hands on her hips. "I'm not quite sure, actually. Seemed like a good idea at the time. I needed to clear my head."

"You can't even swim."

"Are you going to teach me?"

He nodded. "I will before we go to Venice."

She looked forward to it. "I'm not very far in the water. I doubt that drowning here is an option." She squinted at him. "You really want me to come out, don't you?"

"As a matter of fact, I do, but not because I'm afraid you're going to drown."

"Then why?"

"I have something to show you."

The sound of sloshing water rang out in the silence as Hermione made her way back to the edge of the lake. The chill didn't settle into her legs and muddy feet until she stood in front of him, but it didn't last long. Draco dried her with a couple of quick and silent spells. She stepped on a rock in the grass and winced. And his hand was right there, on her shoulder.

His concern was silent, and Hermione wanted to comment on how good he was at that, but with a growl, Apollo pounced on a little rock. It distracted Hermione from the fact that while Draco's hand was still on her shoulder, his eyes were locked on her.

"He clearly needs to get out more," Draco drawled.

"I was just thinking that." Her eyes wandered down to their feet that were mere inches apart. Hers were pale and his shoes were covered in grass clippings and mud. Hermione looked back up at him, then covered his hand on her shoulder, not bothering to twine their fingers. And Draco did nothing except watch her closely...and let her. The sane part of her brain shut down and started to lift up on the tips of her toes, but he beat her to it.

He kissed her with slow deliberation. Every thought, both good and worrisome, fled from her mind when Draco slid his hand to her neck, moved his feet, and she casually wrapped her arms around him. His kisses were always careful and dominant, but the intense affection was there. And Hermione liked that about him.

Draco was who he was, intractable and reticent, especially with his feelings. He fought incredibly hard to keep his emotions private, but he always did something to show her that he cared. So far, he'd done it with a touch and a simple drying spell. Little, but all she needed... all she could really take at the moment.

She figured they could build on that.

Just when her shoulders started to sag, just when she had familiarised herself with him again, and just when she started to lean into him, Draco eased up. He didn't move though. With his forehead resting against hers and his free hand on her waist, Draco silently waited.

Hermione didn't know why, but she didn't question his closeness.

Perhaps he was happy to see her.

The idea made her smile.

"Welcome back," Hermione murmured, eyes still closed.

He released her a little too soon for her liking. "It's good to be back."

"How long have you been back?"

"Not long." Draco finally looked at her, and she wondered why he looked so intense, so serious when he asked, "How are you?"

"Better," she replied easily. "It's quiet for the first time in a long time. My head, that is."

"Is it still quiet now?"

"Yes, yes it is."

There was nothing after that, at least until she felt two of his fingers reach for hers, curling around them. The kiss and the quiet moments after were something she liked because it was still so intense. But him touching her? There wasn't an iota of 'touchy feely' in this man, and it made Hermione eye him questioningly. Draco quickly averted his eyes. And suddenly, his hand was in his hair and her stomach was tied in knots.

She hadn't decided if they were the good kind or not. Hermione mumbled, "How was Vienna?"

"Busy." For the second time, he cleared his throat.

Hermione shrugged, feeling a little discomfited. "So, what did you want to show me, again?"

Part Three: A Man's Courage

Hermione stumbled on the landing but didn't fall. She couldn't. Not with Draco's hand gripping hers. And it was odd because he'd nearly taken a misstep trying to keep *her* on her feet. Before Hermione's thoughts could take her in the direction where she contemplated what that meant, she opened her eyes slowly...then froze.

She shook his hand off, her heart hammering so hard in her chest that she thought it might crack her ribs. Hermione struggled to breathe, but worked harder to keep her hands from shaking.

"Why—why are we here?" she asked him quietly.

The wrought-iron gates to the cemetery were high and imposing and, not to mention, firmly locked with a large rusting padlock. She took an uncomfortable step backwards only to run into Draco's body. His hard hands immediately came down on her shoulders, causing her to tense.

"Why are we here?" Hermione asked him again, more firmly this time.

Draco didn't answer.

"I don't like cemeteries."

"You came to my father's."

"That was different! I did that for Narcissa! I—I did it for *you*."

Her words hung in the air.

"Draco, why...are we here?"

With his hands still on her shoulders, he guided the reluctant witch to the gates. He moved away from her to unlock the gate with his wand and looked over his shoulder at her. "I wanted to show you something," he said as he pushed open the gate with a loud creak.

Hermione just stood there, arms folded across her chest and her face a mask of disinclination. Draco didn't say a word. What could he say? He just looked at her. She looked at the gates, then at him, and shook her head. His eyes narrowed.

And she knew what he was saying, even with no words spoken. *Follow me. Trust me.*

She frowned. It wasn't that she didn't.

Goodness, for a while there, he was the one of the only people she *could* trust...even though she hadn't acknowledged it.

Follow me.

He was nothing if not persistent, and soon, she clasped her hand in his and they walked through the front gates. It was starting to get dark; the sun was starting to set in a blaze of colours that, along with the man with her, provided Hermione with a sort of comfort that she had never known. And she watched the sky to avoid watching the ground. She watched the clouds in the hope that she would forget where they were.

It didn't work.

As they walk past the graves littered across the once-alive grass, Draco hesitated, and it forced her to look down. Then around. Morbidly, Hermione inwardly mused over how nature didn't bother to exist amongst the forgotten souls in this place. It made her heart ache and her knees buckle.

Draco stopped.

"You okay?"

She inhaled. "Yes."

"We're almost there."

Hermione nodded and exhaled; her feet carried her forward, uncharacteristically slowly.

The graveyard they were walking through was old, almost disturbingly so, but it was full of neglected history. Mossy gravestones lined both sides of the path, with crosses covered in reddish rust, others of wood, blackened and drooping to the ground. The thick grass, yellow here and there with dandelions and weeds, had overgrown many of the graves.

It must've been the oldest part of the cemetery, but when Draco led the way into one of the narrow side-paths, Hermione spotted something that she did not expect.

Fresh graves.

The three headstones were close together, the centre one smaller than the others, in the cool shadow of a large tree that rustled in the breeze. Hermione half-expected him to continue on past them, but he didn't. Instead, Draco released her hand and gave her a little push forward.

Towards them.

She looked back at him only to discover that he had turned his back to her.

It was what he wanted to show her, and she was obviously meant to see it alone. With what felt like a perpetual frown on her face, Hermione looked back at the three graves. She almost turned to leave when she noticed something. It was plain, simple even, but the engraving of the angel was unmistakable...as were the words underneath:

Matthew Granger

February 6, 1999 – February 26, 2003

His was a man's courage.

Hermione couldn't speak.

Her heart was lodged in her throat.

Part Four: Liar

For a full twenty-seven minutes, Hermione didn't move.

Draco didn't know what was worse: the sight of her on her knees, head bent, and shoulders shaking or the quiet sniffles that sporadically escaped her lips. It had left him most uncomfortable.

When Pansy and Blaise arrived, hand-in-hand, Draco felt the unease ebb only slightly. Pansy went immediately to Hermione and crouched next to her, wrapping her arms around her. When his mother arrived, looking around warily as she stood with the couple several feet away, he finally pushed off the old oak tree he'd been leaning against. And when Potter quietly joined the small group, bearing an obscenely large bouquet of flowers and looking just as uncomfortable as Draco felt, he finally walked over to them.

He cursed inwardly.

Fuck. He'd forgotten about flowers...

His mother went to Granger and Pansy at a slower pace, but waited several feet away.

"Did anyone follow you here, Potter?"

The media had been in a frenzy since news of Potter and the She-Weasel's break-up had become public last month. It was a good thing that they'd spent more energy speculating about the reasons why instead of tracking the hero down. Still, Draco couldn't take any chances.

"No, of course not. I made sure."

Before Draco could reply, Blaise asked, "How long have you been here?"

They all spared a glance in the direction of the two women and his mother.

"Thirty minutes. How is Pansy?" Draco didn't think it would be wise to ask either about their trip to Australia, simply because then he would have to discuss his trip to Venice with Potter. It was another one of those conversations he would rather die than have.

He wasn't sure how, but they'd come back different people.

He had, too.

"Pretty good, all things considered." Blaise shared a look of understanding with Draco.

That piqued Potter's interest. "All things considered?"

"Don't worry about it." Draco slid his hands into the pockets of his black slacks.

Blaise nudged Draco. "How's Hermione?"

Potter's interest didn't wane on the subject of 'all things considered', much to Draco's dismay. Still, he answered his friend's question while keeping an eye on Scarhead. "She didn't want to come into the gates, and unbeknownst to me, she's been driving my mother mad, but all in all, she's fine. About squeezed my hand to death. She's going to break it one day."

Blaise smirked, but it died the moment Potter remarked with, "Yeah, she does that."

The silence following that comment was so prickly it was almost unbearable. Blaise started chewing gum, Potter stared at the flowers, and Draco tried to stifle the unease rising in him. He doubted that Potter had said those words on purpose. It was probably just another one of his foot-in-mouth moments, but it did a good job in reminding him that Potter would always be there, lurking. Fuck.

Draco was almost a hundred percent certain that Granger had told Potter about them... and that she'd done it before they left for Venice together. All the proof he had was a few sideways looks and murmurs, and he made a mental note to ask her about it later on.

"Has she said anything?" Potter broke the silence.

"No, not that I know of."

Potter looked around. "Oh, well...I brought these flowers for her—erm, them. Three bouquets..."

Three? Buggering hell. He hadn't even remembered to bring *one*.

"So I see," he frowned.

Blaise guffawed.

"Think she'll like them?" he asked hopefully.

A jaw muscle jumped, and Draco bit down on the inside of his cheek, hard. Blaise answered Potter's question with words Draco didn't hear while he looked over his shoulder at the three women. Pansy was kneeling next to Hermione, while his mother stood over them both. Pansy's hand was on Hermione's shoulder and she looked to be speaking to her. And—Draco sighed.

It brought everything back into perspective, again.

He was far above a silent pissing contest with Potter, of all people.

Not about some bloody flowers.

Draco found it was easier to not let his dislike show. It seemed that spending a few weeks in a foreign country with Potter had done wonders for Draco's Potter-patience. True, he still disliked him, no amount of time in any country could change that, but—he could at least tolerate him.

In short spells.

On a good day.

Oh well, it wasn't like his tolerance with Potter would last anyway, regardless of the fact that Draco felt bad for the poor bastard. Not *that* bad, of course.

After all, his empathy reserve was tapped out at the moment.

A week ago, Draco had been in another cemetery, in another country, doing the same damn thing with Potter. He'd even put a hand on the grieving man's shoulder. And he was fucking tired of death and the effects it had on people. Not only had he stood there and watched as Potter knelt before his son's grave, he had then been required to stand *next to him* while a set of Venetian Ministry workers exhumed the casket and prepared it for transport.

Potter had drunk himself silly that night, and Draco had felt human enough to have someone send a hangover potion to his room the next morning.

He hadn't talked to him about it though.

Blaise looked around. "Why here, Draco?"

"They're not spread all over the world anymore. And here, no one will find them and—" Whatever he was about to say next was silenced by Hermione.

She moved.

They all watched as she stood, then turned to hug Pansy. Granger's cheeks, from what he could see, were red and splotchy. Better than he expected. While Blaise and Potter exchanged words, Draco watched as they spoke to each other in quiet tones. Then Mother joined them. He couldn't hear what they were saying, but he figured it didn't matter because Hermione had a small, sad smile on her face.

And it was then that he understood that her reaction earlier hadn't been out of sadness.

It made him just a bit more comfortable with this strange situation.

"Look alive." Blaise froze.

He and Potter looked at his best friend incredulously.

The wizard cleared his throat. "No pun intended, of course, but here they come."

Draco didn't bother turning his head because seconds later, Hermione was right there. She smiled at Blaise, but blinked when she noticed Potter standing next to him. Clearly confused by his presence, she stammered before saying, "Harry?"

He almost rolled his eyes when Potter awkwardly replied with a rather quiet, "Hey."

"What are you—"

Potter shoved the flowers towards her. "These are for you...well, not you, them, but—I just came to pay my respects. Malfoy told me to come—"

She turned to Draco, finally, but he was too busy scowling at Potter to notice immediately.

On threat of bodily injury, he'd *specifically* told Potter not to bring his name into this whatsoever.

Now he would have to kill him.

But Hermione was blinking wildly, and Draco postponed Potter's murder and say something.

Too bad she beat him to it. "Did you—how did this—" She took a breath and tried again. "I don't even know what to say. You all have no idea just how much this means to me."

Draco didn't really know what to say, either.

Narcissa pointed out with a wave of her hand that seemed out of place for where they were. "We're having a celebration of life at the Manor tonight. The elves are preparing a splendid

Venetian feast; Andromeda and Teddy are already there. I even invited the Weasleys—well, some of them." There was an awkward pause. "I really should get going to make sure that everything is prepared." Before she Disapparated with a tiny 'pop,' Narcissa looked specifically at Potter and said, "Everyone is invited."

Mother definitely needs to work on her subtlety, Draco thought with a roll of his eyes.

Potter looked severely uncomfortable.

It probably had something to do with everyone awaiting his answer.

"I—I have some last-minute things I need to do before the move, but I'll be there after I finish up there."

"Tomorrow, right?" Hermione asked.

And her question convinced Draco of something that he'd had a tiny inkling about. Granger had spoken to Potter more in the past three weeks than she had talked to *him*, and he wasn't sure how to feel about that. Was there anything he could do about it? It wasn't like he could tell Granger to stop talking to her friend...and it wasn't like she would listen, anyway. The idea was laughable. The two of them would always be tied together in a way that he would never understand.

During their time in Venice, Draco had begun to begrudgingly understand Potter's need to mend the gap...and to stubbornly understand Granger's need to let him. He would never approve, of course, but in the end, it wasn't his place. It wasn't his decision. It wasn't his life. It was hers. Surprisingly, it was a hard concept for him to comprehend.

That particular line between him and Granger had been blurred for so long...it was nearly invisible.

Potter politely excused himself but didn't make it far before Hermione gave the flowers to Pansy and went after him. The two spoke very briefly before he tentatively hugged her...and she embraced him back.

When it lingered, Draco shifted uncomfortably.

"Don't worry, mate." Blaise's voice smoothly cut into his thoughts. "She's yours."

There were times when Draco *really* hated him. And this was one of them.

"I'm not worried."

Blaise snorted and chuckled when Draco glared at him. Pansy rolled her eyes. Almost simultaneously, Potter let her go, nodded as if replying to something she'd said, and walked away. She waited until he was out of sight before walking back to the group.

"Everything okay?" Pansy questioned.

She looked pleased when she replied, "Yes, I do believe everything is just fine." Hermione retrieved the flowers from Pansy and stood in front of him. Looking over her shoulder, she addressed the couple. "I—Draco and I—are going to put the flowers down. So..."

"We'll meet you both back at the Manor?"

And pretty soon, it was just the two of them again. Draco watched as Hermione took her time laying flowers in front of her parents' graves, then Matthew's. Then she stood at his side.

Silence fell between them, and it was a silence filled to the brim with memories and their histories combined; it was a silence that knew too much.

"You told Potter about us, didn't you?" His tone wasn't accusing, just matter-of-fact.

Hermione looked at him. "I didn't need to. He already knew."

Draco said nothing for what felt like forever. Then he muttered, "I forgot the flowers."

Hermione looked at him, amused. "After everything you've done, you want to discuss forgotten flowers?" He didn't reply. Anything he said would have been incriminating. Folding her arms across her chest, she waited several minutes before she told him, "I knew you weren't in Vienna."

He tensed.

"Your story was solid. Perfect, even, but I knew you were lying the moment I saw you."

He just looked over at her, jaw set.

"It was overcast in Vienna for the first two weeks that you were away, rained the last two days, and yet, you have a bit of a tan."

He wanted to scowl at her for being cheeky, but didn't. The overly observant Hermione Granger was back, and he found that he liked her. He would keep her on her toes, but she would keep him honest.

They would work. He would make sure of it.

"You did this, didn't you? You—" Her voice broke slightly, but she cleared her throat to cover it and whispered, "You brought my family back home."

"It was a group effort. Pansy and Blaise went to Australia, after all, she knew where your parents were. Potter and I went to Venice. Truth be told, all I did was handle the paperwork."

"Liar."

But she said it with a tiny smile playing on her lips.

Part Five: And torch the part of me that's you.

Hermione feigned fatigue and excused herself early from the celebratory dinner, but didn't return home. Instead, she walked down the outside steps of Malfoy manor to the gardens below and took off around the faux waterfalls, following a foot path that wound around the waterways and led to the rose garden.

It was dark there, and eerie with a combination of sounds: the falling water, crickets chirping, and the distant echoes of laughter. But the further she walked, the softer those noises became until it was just the sound of hooting owls and her footsteps crunching leaves on the concrete.

There were still a few things she needed to accomplish, problems she needed to face and overcome. There were others, but they always would be there, lurking. Seeing her parents and Matthew that afternoon had made it appallingly clear. It could wait, but for the first time, the fragments of her life were falling into place, mending and healing.

It didn't seem right to end the day without fixing everything else.

Still, it was too much for one person to have to deal with.

So, she continued walking, following the path, thinking and attempting to shake off her worries.

When Hermione reached the outermost edges of the gardens, she looked up at the night time sky, a very starry night with a full moon. Hermione remembered several points in the last six years when she had looked to the skies with a heavy heart. She recalled feeling so small while her problems felt as enormous and vast and complex as the universe.

Tonight, Hermione looked to the sky for a completely different reason.

When she'd returned to London, she remembered feeling utterly alone and riddled with guilt. When she finally told the truth to Harry and Ron, Hermione had felt perceptive. After convincing Narcissa to put her husband first, she had felt wiser. Later, while watching a mourning Draco fitfully sleep, she had felt vital—important. After talking to Harry, she had felt like she wasn't alone in her grief. When Hermione finally confronted Ginny, she had left with a feeling of letting go. After she and Draco left the cemetery that afternoon, she had felt like her strength had been renewed, restored.

And tonight, as she watched the stars settle and looked at the handle of Ursa Minor, Hermione remembered where she'd come from, and was glad to have survived. After everything she'd been through, these residual problems in front of her didn't seem so big anymore.

And Hermione felt...peace.

The moments that followed were epic, as vast and overwhelming as the sky above. Hermione pivoted and swiftly walked back for the Manor with the intention of going straight home and

setting the last couple of things in order. When her short, jerky steps weren't taking her where she needed to go fast enough, she broke out in a run. Everything was a blur as she ran up the outside steps, slipped into the Manor, and ran for the first fireplace that she could see. She vaguely remembered hearing her name as she dropped the Floo powder and called out her destination, but it was too late.

She was gone.

Draco Malfoy sprang to his feet in alarm when she came bursting out of the Floo, completely out of breath.

"What the—"

"The colour—sky—wall—papers—I know!" she told him breathlessly.

He looked at her as if she'd gone completely nutters. "What?"

Ignoring him, she went to the sparse colour wall and closed her eyes. Her hands blindly skimmed the wall, then they came together, and rested on one colour sample. Hermione picked it up. "This is it." She flipped it over. "Autumn Berry." Turning around, she presented the colour sample to the dumbfounded Draco. "What do you think? I rather like it."

He only blinked. "It's...fine?"

"I can see—" Hermione paused. Wait just a moment. She looked down at Apollo, who observed her with his head slightly cocked to the side. Then, Hermione looked at Draco who was giving her a similar look. She finally asked, "What are you doing here?" He fixed his lips to reply when Hermione noticed that something on her table didn't belong. It was a gold, jewel-encrusted ornate box. "What is *that*?"

"Something my mother thought would be nice to shrink and put into my pocket," he replied gruffly.

"What is it?"

"Old letters from my father."

She nodded with understanding and placed the colour sample on the end table closest to her. Folding her arms, Hermione walked the short distance to him. "I—why are you here, again?" She stood in front of him, just two paces away, mirroring his stance.

"You left early," Draco pointed out. "The Weasleys were worried."

"I was tired."

"You were restless."

Hermione stepped forward. "And you came to check up on me?"

Rubbing the back of his neck, he rested his hands on her shoulders and replied, "I figured it was the right thing to do."

"The right thing?"

"Well, because I'm your—" Draco let her go. There was a stiffness about him that Hermione was almost familiar with. His jaw and hands were clenched tightly. Draco was wound tighter than a cheap watch and kept looking between her and his feet. Wonderful. That meant only one thing: he was moments from snapping. But what about? And what was he talking about? As soon as the thought passed through her mind, he made a beeline for the table and picked up the box.

And it all clicked for her.

"Just so you know, Draco." He froze when she said his name. "I'm not one for titles," she assured softly. He just looked at her, shoulders as tense as wire. "You know that. They complicate things that are already complex to begin with." As she waited for his reaction, Hermione's stomach was in knots and her lips were tight as she took a shallow breath. "Why don't we hold off on titles for a bit, yeah?"

Shrugging, Draco set the box back down on the table. "If that's what you want, that's fine with me." He rubbed the back of his neck before he added, "It's not the title that I have a problem with."

"Then what is it?" She watched as he walked towards her.

"I don't have a problem. I was just trying to explain why I'm here."

"Oh."

"I'm...more or less trying to be...supportive. Like a partner."

Hermione looked up at him. "Supportive? Because I've had a long day?"

"Precisely."

She stared at him for a long time before she shook her head. "You're silly."

"Beg your pardon?"

"You've been supporting me, like a partner, for a long time. And..." There was much more she wanted to say, but couldn't find the words. But maybe one day she would. Then she would tell him what he meant to her.

"And what?" his voice was low.

"If you want, you can stay. I have something I need to do tonight. I considered doing it alone, but I think I think I need help."

Thirty minutes and countless trips back and forth from her back porch later, they dropped the last of the newspapers on the grass several feet from the steps of the pier. Hermione sat in the grass and drew her knees to her chest. She could hear Draco's slightly laboured breaths from next to her, but could hardly see the man in question in the darkness.

It was nearly midnight, and the moon was partially obscured by clouds. Hermione had purposely forgotten to turn on the outside lights, figuring that it would be better this way.

Draco hadn't questioned anything, and for that, Hermione silently thanked him.

"What now?" he asked after he caught his breath.

Hermione stood and felt around for the last thing she grabbed before they walked out.
"Matches."

"Excuse me?"

"Since I can't burn them magically, I'm going to burn them...the Muggle way."

That forced Draco to his feet. "Are you *trying* to burn your house down?"

"Of course not!" she replied, walking around the pile of newspapers to the steps of the pier. Hermione picked up her wand and after a silent *Lumos* spell, the tip lit up with a faint light. She then used that light to manoeuvre around her yard, looking for something... "Aha!" the witch proclaimed. "It's perfect."

Draco was at her side, wand tip lit. "It's a bush," he drawled.

"Not for long."

Seconds later, the bush was a metal barrel.

"What the hell is that?"

"A rain barrel."

"Okay...and what exactly are we going to do with it?"

Hermione didn't answer him. Instead, with another quiet spell, she Levitated the barrel and carefully walked to the pier. She felt Draco's hands on her sides as she walked up the three steps, but as soon as she cleared the top, they disappeared. Hermione concentrated on the levitating barrel and carefully placed it right on the edge of the pier. Draco seemed to know exactly where she was going with all this because he walked away and returned with an armful of newspapers.

Unceremoniously, he dumped them into the barrel.

It didn't take nearly as long she's anticipated and before either of them knew it, she was preparing to strike the match. "Wait." Draco turned and walked off the pier. A dumbfounded

Hermione stared after him in the darkness for several minutes before he returned with a bottle of Firewhisky...and the gold box.

"I don't think you can burn that."

"Of course not," he turned the box over and what seemed like a hundred letters fell into the barrel. She watched with wide eyes as he shook it—to make sure that it was completely empty—and set it down on the pier. He poured the rest of the bottle on everything in the barrel and then tossed the bottle inside as well. "Go on."

"Are you sure you want to burn the letters? They're from your father—"

"Which is exactly why I want to burn them."

Hermione looked at him.

"Just do it."

She struck the match, and for one moment the flame was the brightest thing in the dark night. With care, she picked up a few of the letters on the top of the pile and brought it to the match. The envelopes quickly caught fire, and Hermione carefully slid them as deep into the pile as she could while Draco watched quietly.

When the flames leapt through the pile, he mumbled something and left, returning with several sticks.

With unhurried care, Draco handed Hermione one stick at a time to place on the growing fire. In mere minutes, the sticks were crackling and the heat of the flames played across their faces. And Hermione figured it would be a good time to add the very last thing that she'd been carrying in her pockets for the last few weeks.

The letter. Harry's letter. The original. She'd already read the copy.

She had no reason to hold on to it any longer.

"I thought the Weasley girl had it."

"No," Hermione replied as she added it to pile of burning memories. "She sent it and everything else back last week."

"Oh."

"Yeah."

Hermione looked over at him.

There was a lot she wanted to say to him, but the words clogged in her chest.

Pensive.

It was the word that came to mind when describing the look on Draco's face as he stood there, solemn, intensely watching the flames spread and grow. Pensive, but not troubled or even melancholy. Truth be told, he looked...*relieved*.

"Think the fire is strong enough to burn everything?" he asked.

"It should."

Draco paused. "Good."

The smoke rose into the air and they breathed in the tang of burning paper and spruce and something that smelled like rotten eggs. The smell didn't matter, not when the meaning behind it was far more powerful. Fire represented destruction, but it also represented something they both seemed to need in that moment.

Purification.

Hermione slowly began to understand just why he'd burned those letters.

It was the same reason why she'd given up Harry's. It would always be there as a reminder of what had happened, her clawing guilt, what they had lost, and what could have been. They didn't need to keep that kind of memento in a box...or burning a hole in a pocket.

"I understand," she whispered.

A heavy silence fell between them after those two words were spoken. It lengthened into peace as the night seemed to contract around them. Darkness silenced everything, except for the lap of water on the banks of the lake, the crackling fire before them, his quiet breathing, and her own pounding heart.

Draco reached for her in the silent darkness, touching her hand hesitantly. Hermione looked to him in the usual startled fashion, so natural to her whenever he did something unexpected. But that time, Hermione didn't move. Draco's eyes remained focused on the flames, but then they shifted to her. She looked down only to watch his fingers slide through hers, holding it in his as a symbol of strength and unity.

Their eyes met.

And while her heart was thudding in her chest at his unspoken words, Draco seemed to be relaxed.

Silence persisted, but they stood in peace.

Hand-in-hand, they watched as their pasts burned until there was nothing left—only ashes.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: In which Draco makes a bold move. This is the original end of the story. I had plans for an epilogue but it never fit. A few years later, I went back and did it, but posted it separate but it's so much warmer than the rest of the story. But I got enough messages that I'll post them together here...and more fleshed out.

all the difference in the world

Chapter Summary

She was curious to the point of suspicion. "Are those for me?" She gestured to the bundle of Forget-me-nots with the ends in caps of water.

Chapter Notes

The epilogue. Different tone, which is why I've always kept it separate, but alas. Draco made his decision at the end of the last chapter to step forward with Hermione and their relationship to see where it goes. He made quite a few gestures. Here it is.

Epilogue

All the Difference in the World

There were still many things Hermione struggled with that sometimes, in the darkness, she couldn't come up with a logical reason of why anyone would even care about her, but Draco did—in his own way. He wasn't perfect by any meaning of the word, but he'd grown and changed exponentially since the night they'd burned everything away.

She smiled to herself.

He still hated mobiles, parties, and walnuts, but attended events with her and had a mobile because of her. He still couldn't be paid to eat a walnut and was sticking to his guns on that one. He was who he was, but he was also perceptive and generous. He still worked unnecessarily hard to keep his feelings private, but he'd shared so much of himself with her in the last three years—more than Hermione could have ever expected.

He refused to join her for Tuesday drinks with Harry and Ron, but when Ron invited her to dine with him and his girlfriend, Kate; Draco accompanied with little fuss, and spent *days* refusing to admit that he'd had a good time. And when Harry asked him if he could join them in celebrating what would have been Matthew's eighth birthday earlier that year, he hadn't rejected him. He still declined every invitation to Weasley's Sunday dinners, but he would turn up early to escort her home, and he was never rude and graciously accepted the plate Molly offered. Draco had pointed out that he made peace with everyone and didn't feel the need to form any kind of attachment with them.

And Hermione never argued because, well, that was his decision.

Draco wasn't as horrible as people thought – well, he wasn't horrible to her. He was still a prick to everyone else, but she understood that he was just being himself. It had taken them both a while to figure out that he wasn't much different without the mask than he was with it. Softer around the edges, vulnerable at times, and not so uncomfortable with the feelings he kept private.

But that was a side of him that she had only seen.

Hermione still struggled and tussled with the past, just like him, but they went through the dark days together. Sometimes the darkness was overwhelming that she wondered why he stayed. Septembers were hard and Februarys were harder; then it rolled into March when he'd get a bit morose around the middle of the month. There were times when Hermione believed that the only reason Draco had stayed was because he wanted to remind himself that there was someone in the world more fucked up than him. And it took time or Draco's form of brutal honesty for her to see the truth, but she always came to her senses.

He was there because he wanted to be.

And that was that.

Over four years ago, Hermione had wondered that if she screamed, would anyone actually hear?

Would they notice?

Would they even care?

She always thought the answer to all of those questions were no, which had been the reason she'd never tried. But now she knew that the answer was yes. She had screamed and a few people had heard...

Draco wasn't the only one in her life that knew just how much she struggled internally, how much she still hated herself, but he was the only person willing to not allow her to wallow. He wasn't the only one who knew that she was still in pain, but he refused to walk on eggshells around her. Draco wasn't the only person who told her that if she kept on going on her original path, she would never make it out alive, but he had been the person to drag her from the depths, both literally and metaphorically.

He told her the truth and made her see it, too.

The more that she talked and walked with him, the more that she sat and stayed with him, the more that she learned and understood him, the more that she held his hand and hugged him, the more she kissed and stayed awake with him when he had nightmares; Hermione realised that perhaps they had needed each other all along.

Sometimes, when the voices were too loud and the self-loathing was too much to stand, Hermione didn't think that she was worthy to have him or anyone in her life. But only God

knew how thankful she was for everyone. Because without them, she would still be trapped in a world where she carried around regrets.

A world that tried to see and hear her but couldn't.

A world that didn't truly know the battles she waged against self-hatred every day.

A world that couldn't understand.

"Lost in thought, again, Miss Granger?"

Hermione blinked back into the present, smiling sheepishly at Miss Shepard. "I just drifted right off there, didn't I?" She crossed her legs. "Sorry. I've got a lot on my mind."

"Would you like to talk about it? We have time."

She exhaled. "Honestly, I just can't believe this is my last session."

"I can," Katherine told her truthfully. "You've come so far, Hermione. It would take most people a lifetime to pull themselves out of a hole as deep as yours, but you're doing it. I know you aren't completely out, but I think you're ready. The real question is: do you think you're ready?"

Hermione never hesitated. "I am."

And she really believed it.

At the top of the next hour, after a heartfelt goodbye and a promise to make an appointment any time she needed, Hermione closed the door to Miss Shepard's office. She shut her eyes, and exhaled with a smile.

It felt like she was closing the door to another part of her life and starting anew.

And as she took the first steps away from the door, Hermione was reminded of how many new beginnings one could experience throughout their lives.

To new trainees on their first day or whenever they messed up, she always said that every moment was a new beginning. However, it was only right then – when she was experiencing such a radical shift from being the person who *needed* therapy to the person she was today – that she recognised it for its profound truth.

Endings and beginnings were central to the human journey.

Some were more welcomed than others, but Hermione was finally in a place where she could see that every ending needed to be acknowledged, grieved, and even celebrated before a new beginning could truly start. And she planned on celebrating this one as soon as she could.

The lobby of the office building where Miss Shepard's office was located was filled with people coming and leaving in rapid succession, but not crowded. She always paid attention to the people around her, waved if they recognised her and spoke when they spoke to her; so, it

was a wonder how she didn't hone in on the red hair the moment she spotted it. Maybe it had something to do with her racing thoughts or the feeling of anticipation, but it wasn't until the distracted redhead brushed shoulders with her and started to apologise with a, "I'm—" when she finally noticed *who* the redhead was.

Ginny Weasley.

"Sorry," the other woman finished, flushing like a cooked lobster.

Hermione hadn't seen her since she'd left her in Parvarti's office.

Ginny never came to the functions and Weasley dinners she attended, which was planned. It made sense and was the best way to minimize the awkwardness. Ginny looked the same; only slightly older and with shorter hair, but the hard edges of her face were smoother. "I didn't see you. Sorry. I was—" Ginny made an elaborate gesture with her hand. "On my own continent."

"I know the feeling." Hermione replied, and it wasn't as hard to speak to her again as she'd imagined.

And she had imagined it; late at night when she talked to Draco about it in whispers. She told him about what she'd say or what she'd do, and he'd listen until either she fell asleep or inserted his own opinion on the matter. Over the last three years, it had changed considerably. With the residual anger and resentment gone, there wasn't much left to say that she hadn't said already.

The only thing she could do was talk about something new.

And wasn't she just thinking about new beginnings and opened doors?

Ginny awkwardly looked around, tucking her hair behind her ears. "I'll just—sorry again."

Hermione was about to let her walk away and return to being just another familiar face in the crowd, but impulsively made a decision. The journal she held went from her right hand to the left before she asked. "How have you been?"

More than anything, she looked surprised by the question—so much that she blinked several times before carefully answering, "Fine."

And when Hermione said, "That's good," she was earnest.

It made Ginny open up just a bit more.

"I've been seeing a therapist. Miss Shepard—her office is just upstairs. Pansy Parkinson—or is it Zabini now? No matter, she referred me over two years ago."

Hermione hadn't known that. "It's Zabini now."

They married two months ago in a very small wedding at his grandmother's Italian estate with a handful of their friends and his Muggle cousins. Pansy looked stunning and Hermione

stood by her side in blue; Draco at Blaise's in grey. Hermione caught the bouquet his cousins convinced Pansy to throw as some sort of tradition many of the wizards didn't understand. Hermione understood perfectly what her catch meant, and when she explained it to Draco, he didn't look alarmed by the possibility. He'd asked her if it was something she'd wanted and she'd surprised herself when she nodded.

"Miss Shepard is my therapist, too," Hermione explained. "I—"

"She is?" Ginny looked alarmed for a flash, then uncomfortable. "Oh, I can start seeing someone else if that makes you uncomfortable. I didn't know. I don't want you to think that I'm—"

"No, no," Hermione assured. "I just had my last session with her today." Ginny seemed to exhale. "And if I still were seeing her, I wouldn't even dream of suggesting something like that. Not if she's helping you."

Ginny tugged on the end of her shirt, looking a bit more at ease. "She is. *Really*. It's been hard, but she's forcing me to take a hard look at myself." The corners of her lips quirked slightly. "So much fun."

That made her snort. "Oh definitely. I've taken so many hard looks at myself, my actions, and who I am as a person that it's been a frustrating journey, but it's necessary to know the truth."

With a silent nod, Ginny agreed. "I definitely understand that." She might have said more had her watch not beeped. She cut the alarm off and flashed a sort of faint smile. "I should go. I'm going to be late."

"Yes, I should go, too." Hermione paused. "Seeing you, it's been...good." And maybe she wasn't ready to see Ginny at the Weasley family dinners just yet, but seeing her today had made her hopeful that she would in the future.

"It really has." Ginny extended her hand in what looked like an impulsive move...

And Hermione shook it before they parted ways.

Hermione tucked the journal under her arm as she started down the steps, preparing to join her fellow Londoners on the busy sidewalk. She was just about to blend into the crowd when a familiar flash of blond caught her eye.

She stopped abruptly, causing the man behind her to nearly walk into her. After muttering apologies, Hermione weaved her way through the hoard of people and found herself standing in front of Draco, who was lounging on a bench with flowers next to him and a book in hand. It was one of hers that she'd left at his flat months ago.

He sat up a little straighter when he saw her, but said nothing.

She was curious to the point of suspicion. "Are those for me?" She gestured to the bundle of Forget-me-nots with the ends in caps of water.

"They're for your family, you know that."

And she did. They went to the cemetery on the first sunny day of each month and he always came with three bundles of flowers. Sometimes, he left her with her family. Sometimes, he stayed by her side when she talked to them. And a few times, Hermione saw him kneeled in the grass, speaking to them in words that she couldn't hear while she laid flowers on the other forgotten graves.

It was times like that when her heart would swell despite its heaviness.

"What are you doing here?"

Draco closed the book and shrugged. It was probably supposed to be whimsical, but he just looked like he'd been caught doing something wrong. "I happen to be in the area."

Hermione stared at him dubiously, folding her arms across her chest. "The Ministry is across town."

"I'm taking a lunch break." He shot a challenging look.

She tried not to smile. "At nearly three-thirty?"

Then he smirked. "Precisely."

Hermione finally let herself smile. It wasn't like Draco to volunteer information or to explain his actions or behaviour, but she always seemed to know what he was doing, even when he didn't do anything at all. Even when he was just *there*. Like today. "That's your story?"

"Exactly," he said, but there was a hint of humour in his voice. His eyes quickly caught the journal tucked under her arms. "I thought you were giving that back today."

She shrugged and joined him on the bench, sitting close enough for their legs to touch. Draco draped an arm around her without so much as an afterthought and she leaned into his side. It was nice, almost normal, and she liked it. "Decided to keep it. If I'm going to chronicle my feelings, I think this would be a good point to start."

"And how do you feel now?"

"It's complicated, but overall, not bad. And you?"

"About the same."

Hermione nodded and they sat in silence. It was a nice day; the first sunny one in about a week, so it felt good to just be outside in the moderate heat that was tempered by a decent breeze. Draco went back to reading and she read with him until she snorted at something the protagonist said. He gave her a withering look that lacked the malice necessary to make her feel like he meant it. "You like the book?"

"It's fine, but a little academic for my tastes."

"Book snob."

Draco flashed a smile that only presented itself when someone had *really* earned it.

Hermione quietly watched him, feeling warm and not from the summer heat.

Draco wasn't romantic in any sense or definition of the word; there were no roses, cards, trinkets, or anything that remotely *breathed* sappy—much to his mother's extreme annoyance. But in moments like this, when he truly looked happy to be in her presence, Hermione never minded. His actions had always spoken louder than his words and that was all she needed. Most times, when he looked at her, there was something that bubbled under the surface of him that looked a lot like love, felt like love, and sounded like love the one time he'd spoken the words when he thought she was asleep.

And he would repeat it again one day. She didn't need words to know how he felt.

Draco cast a side-long look in her direction. "What?"

"Nothing."

He didn't relent. In fact, he sighed and shut the book again. "What Hermione?"

"Really. Nothing. It's been a good day. I spoke to Ginny."

Draco tensed slightly. If she didn't know him as well as she did, she never would have been able to tell. Hermione knew that if he had his way, she would never have the opportunity to even be in the same room as Ginny. Draco was irrationally protective like that when left to his own devices, but he was getting better. The first time they'd gone to Venice, he spent half the trip torn between watching her every move and trying not to look like he'd been watching her. She had to finally pull him aside and let him know that he could breathe; that she wouldn't fall apart.

Not even a little bit.

And she reminded him again. "It was fine. I'm okay."

He nodded, but the relaxed look he'd been wearing was gone. "I saw her, but she didn't see me."

"I bumped into her." Hermione informed. "We talked. That's all."

"And?"

She made a thoughtful face. "And...that's it. It wasn't as hard as I thought it'd be. I know we aren't going to be friends, but I think we can be civil."

"Whatever works," which was his standard reply for anything he didn't fully agree with but didn't want to argue over. Hermione smiled up at him, which made him relax again. "Where do you want to go now?"

"I thought you were on lunch break."

He smirked. "I thought you knew I was lying."

"I did, but it's not like you to own up to anything."

Draco looked unapologetic.

Hermione remained pensive for a bit. "It's nice out. We could sit here for a little longer. I've literally been on the move all day. New trainees...pretty much the reason I was gone this morning before you woke up. Sorry about that, by the way, I had a meeting, then training employees who asked more questions about *us* than they did about protocol."

"That's fine," Draco moved the arm that was around her shoulder and took her hand. "I had some stuff to do, as well. Arcturus is in town for the day. He's invited us to have dinner tonight, but I expect that he'll chat more about how well the business is going than anything." He looked back at her before looking down at their now entwined hands. "I thought we should dine at a Muggle restaurant, for the sake of privacy."

"Sounds fine to me."

"But before that, we'll visit your family."

"I'd like that very much." Hermione smiled.

She had an inkling that he wanted to say more, and wasn't surprised when he changed the subject. "You know, you now have left a pair of socks at my flat; in addition to the pyjama pants, shirt, jumper—"

Her cheeks reddened a bit. "I'll just take it tonight after dinner."

"No need," Draco waved her off flippantly. "I, uhh, gave you a drawer."

She froze. A drawer? "Is this a—"

Draco gave her a pointed look. "I thought we agreed to let things progress quietly."

"But a drawer?" Hermione laughed. "Coming from you, that's almost like saying that you're giving up a bit of closet space, too. Next, you'll be asking me to move in."

He just looked at her and blinked.

She stared back at him until it dawned on her. "Seriously?"

Draco looked uncomfortable. "Well, you practically live with me already, Granger."

Hermione argued. "No, I don't."

He cocked a brow, "You stay over almost every night."

"Keyword: *Almost*. We spend the weekends at my house. I bought us a little rowboat to go fishing like the Muggles." Their first attempt at using it had been disastrous.

Much like many of their firsts.

Draco chuckled and shook his head. "I'll give you credit, but your toothbrush is in my bathroom."

"I think we both appreciate a clean mouth in the morning."

"Again, fair." He thought for a second. "Your stupid cat has spent so much time on my ottoman that he thinks that it's his personal space."

"Apollo is territorial. And you're the reason I have a cat in the first place."

"How's this? You fired my housekeeper."

"She wasn't needed."

"Are you even *listening* to yourself, Granger? You have your mail forwarded to my house."

"I just—" Hermione chewed on her lip. "Perhaps you might have a point."

"I know I do."

"So...you don't mind?"

"I wouldn't have cleared out drawer and closet space if I did. I wouldn't have asked if I did."

Hermione frowned. "But you didn't ask."

Draco sighed. "Do I have to?"

She preened, knowing it got on his nerves. "Yes."

He rolled his eyes and huffed a little more because if anything, he could still be a prat.
"Granger, will you move in with me?"

She smiled. "Yes, but I'm not selling my house. I've just finished replacing and staining the wood on the pier." She also couldn't bear to part with it because so much, both good and bad, had happened inside those walls.

That seemed reasonable to him because he nodded. "We'll turn it into a weekend getaway and perhaps, when we need the extra space, we'll move there permanently." And he opened his book again and kept reading like he hadn't said what he said.

Hermione opened and closed her mouth like a fish. She knew what he meant by extra space and that was such a life-altering statement to make on a random bench in the middle of London. Ultimately, she didn't say anything further on the subject except: "I'd be willing, if you are."

"I am."

And while her world tilted on its axis, Draco made a noise and flipped the page.

"You can stop pretending to read now." And he shut the book. Hermione chuckled. "You do realise that this is the first time you've ever said anything about our future, about us getting married and having c—"

He kissed her, probably to shut her up, but it worked well enough. At least until he was ready to say something. "Aren't you always telling me to not complicate things? Well, I'm telling you now. Don't complicate it. Everything else is complicated enough now that we're making plans, moving in together, and not to mention, we've finally gone public."

It wasn't a lie. "Do you wish we hadn't?"

It had been a miracle that they managed to stay out the gossip rags as long as they had. Hermione suspected it had something to do with everyone's fear that Draco would terrorise them for so much as hinting at their relationship. Or make them take an Unbreakable Vow of silence like Parvarti Patil. But on a random day three weeks ago, they'd issued a joint statement to The Quibbler, of all magazines, confirming the ever-present rumours.

The attention since had been relentless.

He shrugged in response. "Some things aren't supposed to be kept a secret forever."

She looked at him meaningfully. "Perhaps some things are."

"But that doesn't apply to us."

Whatever Hermione was about to say died on her lips when he kissed her again.

They were different with each other; considerate instead of critical, comfortable instead of tense, and balanced instead of insecure. They each were more inclined to listen, and less inclined to cast blame. They talked to each other and set guidelines that they stuck with. Dinner with Narcissa on Fridays, breakfast with Blaise and Pansy on Sundays, and one complete day that was set aside solely for them to be...well, them.

They weren't normal, but they tried.

They never had it easy, but knew nothing worthwhile was ever easy.

And they weren't even perfect; not even close, but they were a couple.

They fought and grew, pushed and pulled; they had jumped together and fallen. They didn't have a song or ridiculous pet names for each other, but they had an anniversary, plans for the future and to combine their two homes, and a story of how they came to be what they were now.

And still.

They were more than they had been, less than they could be, but they were actively working on changing that. Day by day, they worked to gain back all that they had lost, while piece-by-piece, their foundation grew stronger than it had ever been.

The end.

End Notes

Disclaimer: All publicly recognizable characters, settings, etc. are the property of JK Rowling. The original characters and plot are the property of the author. The author is in no way associated with the owners, creators, or producers of any media franchise. No copyright infringement is intended.

A/N: Moving this big one over to AO3 and tweaking. HARD TWEAKING Started in 2008, finished in 2009. I've always been hesitant about moving Broken over to Ao3, simply because I knew if I read it, I would wanna tinker with it. And it's FREAKING LONG. And there are a lot of redundant things phrases I felt like I had to clean up if I moved it. But alas. Moving has been a slower process than it was with the others.

Everyone in this story is flawed. Hermione is by far the most flawed. You might not like her much, but that's okay, because she makes shit choices. That's good ol' human nature at its finest and humans can't judge because we're all flawed. She sinks deep but she rises and combats her demons. And Draco is a whole ass, but that's what it is. Inadaze22's Theory of Change: I believe that when you change something, you alter the events that would have happened in the future...and the growth that they would've had as a person doesn't happen. Or it happens in different ways. Like the Butterfly Effect. The ripples affect everything and everyone...and have the potential to alter behaviors. Make sense?

I have to thank...everyone. My beta kazfeist, who went back through thirteen chapters when I first started with her...and beta'd everything. My friends and sometimes betas kate04, who really was my head cheerleader, floorcoaster, who did a lot of hand-holding, and somandalicious, who came in right at the end and really helped me power through. I also need to thank thebigdisaster, who is #2 on my cheerleading squad, softobsidian74 and seanemma4evr and wildflower4evr. I need to thank all my online friends who listened to me bitch and moan and cry about this story. Yes, real tears. I'm sure there are a ton of people I need to thank, but holy shit this is long and sounding much like an Oscar speech. So I'll leave this here.

Ways to connect:



Ina's [Tumblr](#) & [Twitter](#) & [Instagram](#) & [Dazed and Amused FB Group](#)

Works inspired by this one

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!