

Utterly Despicable

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The death of both Voldemort and Harry Potter let the pureblood elite build the world they wanted. One that leaves Hermione in a vulnerable state, which Draco Malfoy is prepared to take full advantage of.

Status: complete

Published: 2010-08-11

Updated: 2010-11-27

Words: 46360

Chapters: 24

Rated: Fiction M - Language: English - Genre: Drama/Romance -
Characters: Hermione G., Draco M. - Reviews: 1,413 - Favs: 2,893 -
Follows: 1,064

Original source: <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/6226239/1/Utterly-Despicable>

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Utterly Despicable

[Introduction](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

Chapter 1

Chapter 1

Hermione worked in a bakery. She was lucky to have the job. It started really early in the morning and usually finished as it was turning dark, but she was lucky to have it. It wasn't that far from Knockturn Alley, where she lived, along with every other muggleborn. More commonly known as mudbloods these days.

The power vacuum after both Harry and Voldemort dies during the final battle left the space open for the most organised and self entitled, which was the old elite. They were used to ruling and felt justified in taking over. Voldemort was heralded as a mad man who had come about due to mudbloods running amok. They would not make the same mistake again. No one wanted to mention that uncomfortable period, everyone wanted to move on as quickly as possible. Harry was a part of that insane time and he was never mentioned either.

Somehow everything was blamed on the mudbloods. The council, which had replaced the position of minister, which had proved to be a vulnerability, had decreed that mudbloods must be controlled and managed. Now, all mudbloods had to live in the Muggleborn Quarters or MQ, a dark and dank corner of Knockturn Alley. They were not allowed to marry or have children. They were also not allowed to leave wizard locales which pretty much confined them to known wizard houses, Diagon Alley and Hogsmead. Hogwarts was also out of bounds in case they influence young minds.

The only jobs available to mudbloods were serving purebloods in some capacity or other. Some paid better than others, if you had the stomach for it. This is why Hermione was lucky to have her bakery job. It was retail, not something she had intended on, but it kept her and the two elderly muggleborn ladies she was supporting off the street.

The most unfortunate ended up begging, which the purebloods saw as complete justification for their inferiority.

The ladies were good company. They talked about the great war, which was the great muggle war of their youth. Apparently the men were a lot more handsome back then. The MQ wasn't actually that bad sometimes. Everyone was in the same boat and a certain black humour kept them going sometimes, but there were problems with alcohol and potions abuse, which sometimes led to violence even when the young purebloods weren't out looking for sport.

The biggest sport going was when one of the mudbloods ran away, usually into the muggle world. A gang of young purebloods would get together to go for a hunt. They even studied the muggle world to be more efficient at it. They were very effective, they would drag back the escapee beaten and broken, parade the poor soul through the streets before dispatching them to Azkaban if they were still alive. The female escapees fared no better, some would say worse.

There were the legends of the odd escape, but no one knew if it was true or not. The purebloods feared that mudbloods would be planning revolts if they were free and no one wanted to go back to the dark period that had killed so many.

Hermione still visited Neville and Luna, who were married and living in Luna's house. Luna's father was extremely nervous about having a mudblood in the house. Refusing to be in the same room as her. Neville and Luna were her only friends. Neville worked at Hogwarts and Luna managed the Quibbler.

Arthur Weasley was a broken man these days and Molly was driven mad by George's death and somehow also managed to buy in on the idea that it was the muggleborns' fault. Bill and Fleur left England and had settled in France. They had told Hermione that she was welcome in their home if she could ever safely make it. Going to France would mean risking the hunt. Portkeys were tightly controlled and not extended to the likes of her.

She could travel by floo, but her wand had been charmed to disallow apparating, along with a bunch of other spells that the council found too risky for mudbloods.

Ginny was in Bulgaria, or somewhere with Charlie. It turned out that she had been pregnant during the final battle and everyone felt it was better if she was gone from the UK. Carrying Harry Potter's child was just an invite for trouble. Everyone was sworn to secrecy with Bill as the keeper, meaning no one could ever mention it.

Ron had fallen in love with Pansy Parkinson of all people. His status as a blood traitor was a bit of an issue, so he learnt to embrace his pureblood status for the sake of love. Hermione could understand his decision, but she didn't particularly respect him for it. At first he had been reticent about it, but soon she became that friend of Harry Potter, then after a while, just the pathetic mudblood who kept following him around throughout school.

Obviously they didn't speak anymore. Percy was actually fairly civil to her when he saw her, but he was pretty convinced of her inherent inferiority. Ron just ignored her. Perhaps even fearing being approached by her.

Ron had actually done well in this new society. He had come from poverty and married into money and privilege. Money and privilege drove this society. Marriage was based on extending both commodities. Having married into one of the Slytherin families made one part of the aristocracy, who's most prominent members made up the council.

Lucius Malfoy, Canstal Nott, Ursoom Flint, Basil Parkinson, Termius Greengrass and Rudolpho Lestrange were the powerful council members. Draco Malfoy married one of the Greengrass girls, making them the most power family in the country, having an absolutely immense fortune and two seats on the council.

Hermione never saw any of them. Her bakery was frequented by more common people and she was never out and about apart from

dawn or dusk. Their kind only came to Knockturn Alley in the late evening, after an evening of drinking looking for someone to beat up or fuck.

But Hermione's luck was just about to run out.

About three in the afternoon on a cold November day, three of the most privileged young men in the wizard world sat down in the little cafe style seating outside of the bakery. Hermione closed her eyes as she saw them.

"Well, get out there stupid girl and serve the customers." The portly bakery owner ordered. "And do a good job of it. We cannot afford to upset these."

Hermione straightened her apron and stepped outside the door to the outdoor seating area.

Draco Malfoy looked fairly similar. He had filled out in his full transition to manhood. His clothes were expensive and impeccable, nothing different there. He was slowly pulling his gloves off when he saw her.

"Well, well, what have we got here." He said with a spreading smile that boded ill. "If it isn't the dumbest mudblood of them all."

Hermione gritted her teeth and did a little curtsey.

"Wearing a sack." He said and grabbed a hold of her brown woollen skirt and pulling it out slightly. "I would go as far as saying someone else's sack." He laughed.

The other two sniggered. She knew their faces were familiar, but didn't know them.

"Is there anything I can get for you this afternoon." She said and kept her gaze low. Purebloods generally insisted that mudbloods not look them in the eyes and Hermione had learnt that everything went a lot

easier for all parties if she didn't. Besides, she didn't want to see what was in their eyes.

"A little serving girl." He continued, still perusing her person. "How fitting."

"She was such an ambitious little thing." He explained to the others. "But the natural order prevailed as it always would. I told you didn't I?" He said to her.

Hermione cleared her throat. "Yes you did."

Actually she wanted to beat him bloody, but if she lost this job, she would be in a great deal of trouble. Serious trouble, like begging on the street trouble if she couldn't get another job. Being fired from a job made her practically unemployable in any capacity. The prospect of being a beggar or a whore kept her on her absolute best behaviour.

He continued staring at her for a while, seemingly trying to decide something.

"Three coffees and some raisin scones." He said with a sniff after a while to Hermione's utter relief. It was moving in the right direction. With the order, she could leave their presence and go back inside. Hermione let out the breath she was holding as she got inside.

She prepared the coffees and three plates with raisin scones, placing them on a serving plate. Her hands were shaking and she wasn't sure why. She felt pretty calm and she was certainly not going to be goaded into anything. Her life pretty much depended on it.

She actually managed to hide her shaking quite well, achieving to serve the coffees well with only one little stream of coffee flowing down the outside of the cup. Hermione cringed, but hoped for the best.

"Clumsy." One of them warned. He raised her hand and Hermione feared that he would hit her, but he didn't. Instead, he put his hand on her ass and gave it a good squeeze.

"Firm." He said with a laugh. The others joined and Hermione fought the bitter humiliation that was rising.

"If that will be all." She said and Draco waved her away without looking at her.

They sat there for quite a while, talking and laughing. She had to stay and watch them from the inside of the shop in case they wanted something else. She had become an expert at deciphering when someone wanted her. Sometimes they would glance at her, but they never called her over.

Hermione was beyond relieved when they got up and left. Draco dropped a galleon on the table, which was more than four times the bill. He didn't look at her as he walked away.

It was always humiliating serving people she'd known, but serving Draco Malfoy pretty much took the cake. His glee in her reduced circumstances was obvious. He made a point of dismissing and ignoring her, after continually insulting her that was.

They didn't often get purebloods in the bakery. Usually it was halfblood ladies who made a point of making it known they were better than her. Everyone was better than her, but this was her lot.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2

Hermione's little apartment had two rooms and a corner kitchen. It was thread bare and grey, but it was home. Edna and Delia were waiting for her each night when she got home. Hermione would cook dinner, then the ladies would inevitably fall asleep. The lamps she had charmed to glow after hours was the only light available.

Mostly Hermione would read in the evenings. Neville would borrow books from the Hogwarts library for her. Mudblood quarters was noisy in the evenings as those seeking more dubious entertainment consequentially ended up there. The thin walls also left most of the neighbours business privy to all and sundry.

The restrictions on her wand made a good fire hard to come by, but fire wood could be bought at a price and Hermione's job kept them warm enough during the most bitter winter nights.

She'd ended up taking care of the two ladies as they had no other alternative. They were too old and infirm to work and had no other means of supporting themselves. There was no else to take them in. Edna had been married to a half blood wizard who passed away seven years ago, but they had not children which could help her now. Delia was a spinster, who worked in the Department of Law Enforcement for close to fifty years. With the new world order, the pension that had been promised to her failed to materialise.

Work and two elderly women for company made for a pretty lonely existence. Hermione's parents were still in Australia, unaware of her existence. Sometimes she wondered what had happened to her house in the muggle world, maybe it had been rebuilt after it was burned down during the war. It had been a few years now since she had been in the muggle world last. She wondered how it had changed. Over time it had come to be seen as a paradise, where

you could do as you wanted. It wasn't a surprise that some would risk the hunt for it.

Seeing Draco had brought back a lot of memories. It really hadn't been that long since her school days, but she was so insulated in her life, it was starting to become quite small. She didn't read the Daily Prophet anymore, so the news outside of her small existence was usually only things she overheard from the customers.

It had been news when he married, but other than that, she had heard relatively little. Seeing him brought up a lot of old wounds. New ones as well. To her, he had been the poster boy for this type of society since she had entered this world at eleven. He had always been so sure that he had been right and she had lost in the end. Growing up, she never realised that people could actually treat other people this way. It was such a foreign concept and she had always thought that it was a bit of a put on, but now she knew better.

All these thoughts kept her up that night. She just couldn't fall asleep. She had stopped crying at the unfairness of it all a long time ago. She realised that there was just something her mind had to process before it will relent and let her sleep.

She was tired the next day, but it was uneventful. The next night she slept like a baby. The same the night after and the night after that.

A week later, however, she was greeted by the same blond head sitting outside in the cold sunlight.

"Ah Granger." He said teasingly when she went outside to take his order. Hermione's heart had dropped when she first laid eyes on him. She had considered ignoring him, but not seriously. He's not worth it, which had literally been the mantra of her life.

"How can I serve you today, sir?" She said with a curtsey.

"Oh, I don't know." He said with an evil little smile. "Maybe you could polish my booths."

"That is not what we do here, sir. We serve baked goods. Perhaps you can try down by Gambol and Japes, there is typically a shoe shine vendor there." After pointing out the direction, she returned inside.

Draco did not leave. He waited a while and then called her back out with a curl of his finger.

"I don't think I dismissed you." He said in arrogant crisp tones.

"Oh, I'm sorry, my understanding was that you were misguided." She said with the smile she reserved for difficult customers.

"Don't get lippy." He said.

"Sir!" She said with mocked shock. "I would not dream of getting lippy to a valued customer. We treasure each and every customer to our humble establishment."

"I'm pretty sure this isn't your establishment mudblood. You just serve here, like an elf serves. That is what vermin does." He said with hostile glee.

Hermione had to bite her tongue to stop herself from responding in a way she wanted. "And how can I serve you today?" She repeated.

He glared at her for what seemed like a whole minute. Hermione hadn't looking into his eyes throughout the whole encounter, but she would feel the glare and its attempt to burn her skin.

"But you are most welcome to just sit here if none of our products appeal to you." She said with a smile.

"Watch your back, Granger." He said and stood up. He walked away without looking back and Hermione sighed her relief. She knew she had been pushing it. Old habits died hard and her natural instinct was to stick a metaphorical thorn in his side and twist it for all its

worth. She hadn't said anything that could directly be labelled as irresponsible, but she had gotten close to the line.

She blew off the implied threat, hopefully she'd get lucky and never see him again. If the fates would give her one thing after all this awfulness, that would be it.

But she was not so lucky. He was back a few days later.

"How can I serve you today?" She said with a plastered on smile as she greeted him. She couldn't understand why he was back. This was not the kind of place his kind normally frequented.

"A coffee." He said without looking at her.

Hermione walked back inside and went to prepare the coffee. She brought it outside and placed it down in front of him.

"Will that be all?" She asked and was waved away.

After about 10 minutes, he waved her back.

"How long have you been working here?" He asked.

"About two years." She responded. She didn't want to answer but couldn't see any way around it.

"Come for a drink with me tonight." He said. It sounded like an order. Hermione was shocked that Draco Malfoy would ask her out for a drink. Pureblood only ask mudbloods out for one reason, and it wasn't for a nice catch up. She just hadn't expected that from him, the one who was always convinced he needed a shower if she so much as accidentally graced him.

"I'm sorry." She said with a blush. "I am not allowed to fraternise with the customers."

"Oh come off it." He said. "I'm make it worth your while. You should be honoured that I would consider spending time with you."

Hermione was mortified. She knew exactly what he had in mind. He certainly hadn't been the first to ask. Normally she would smile and say she was involved with someone, which wasn't true but most seemed to accept it. Some would push, but she would just keep smiling. With Malfoy, she wanted to laugh in his face and tell him where to stick it. It would be too much of a risk.

"I'm sorry, I am involved with someone." She said with a sweet smile. It didn't quite reach her eyes.

"Hmph." He said derisively. "Who would get involved with you?"

"You'd be surprised." She said, because many pureblooded wizard under 60 seemed to have tried. Most of them had arranged marriages established for financial or social benefit, but it seemed to leave the marriage a bit short in the more physical department, or so Hermione thoughts. Otherwise they were just all cheating bastards.

"If there is nothing else I can get for you today." She said with cheer and started to walk inside.

"I haven't dismissed you yet." He bit.

Hermione rolled her eyes while facing away from him, but she had the sweet smile plastered on her face when she turned around again.

"Look at me." He ordered. She complied, staring into the cold grey eyes she had squared up against so many times during school. "I always get what I want."

"And I would be honoured to provide you with anything this fine establishment produces."

She saw a tiny curl in his sneer telling that she might have amused him. Professionalism really could deal with anything. She was actually proud of herself for never losing the serving mask. If anyone could reduce her to street brawling, it would be Draco Malfoy, but

she had survived this scrape pretty well. What was he thinking, she was the debate queen, she could logically argue to convincingly establish that aliens were invading the earth and they were all going to be turned into drones in a couple of days. She indulged in a daydream of Malfoy being turned into a drone.

"We're not done yet." He said and stalked off. Hermione watched him leave. His robes billowed behind him as he took large purposeful strides away. His hair was a little longer than it had been at school.

It sounded like a threat. He had threatened her last time he left as well. He threatens, then hits on you, then threatens. Hermione could only shake her head and clean up the coffee cup he left behind.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3

She had a bad feeling that Malfoy was true to his word. He would probably harass her again. If only she could go on leave for a while. She would love to not be there the next time he turned up to taunt her. But leave was a foreign concept when it came to mudblood employment. She didn't even have a day off each week.

Hermione woke before dawn and got dressed in the icy cold room. She did her hair into a bun. Working with food, she had to have her hair confined, and it was typically a bun or a French twist. Her hair had mellowed a little with age, or maybe it was the poor quality shampoos she had to use. The bad shampoos actually made her hair better, by the sheer fact that they didn't work so well.

She made a fire for Delia and Edna who were still sleeping in their beds in the bigger room. With that done, she went for work. The frozen ground crunched under her feed as she walked. The sun was just starting to rise and this was Hermione's favourite part of the day. There was hardly anyone around, if there was they were either going to work or were too drunk to harass.

The day was going along nicely until the dreaded blond head appeared on the outside seating. Hermione could feel the shoulders slumping as she saw him. What insults or threats would there be today?

"Mudblood." He said when she got outside. "I seem to have developed a fondness for the atrocious coffee you peddle. It is so bad, you just can't stop trying it to confirm that it really is that bad."

"I will bring you a cup then." She said. "Anything to go with it?"

"Maybe one of those bricks you call a scone. I will risk my teeth."

"As you wish, sir." She said and went inside.

She prepared a cup and a plate with a scone and brought them outside. He made a grimace when she put them down in front of her.

"Enjoy." She said and walked back inside.

He called her outside almost immediately.

"You lied to me, mudblood." He said. "That is a pretty serious infraction."

Hermione was shocked, she didn't know what to say. It was a serious infraction and she tried to rattle her brains.

"You said you were involved with someone and it seems that's not true."

"You've been spying on me?" She blurted out before she could help herself. That's demented, she managed to keep to herself.

"I asked around and you don't keep anyone company." He said teasingly.

Hermione gritted her teeth. She could deny it, but that would be lying and being caught in a blatant lie was not good.

"Doesn't mean I will keep your." She said guardedly.

"Tsk, tsk." He said with a pleased smile. "Are you a virgin, Granger?"

"No." She said, she wasn't a virgin and it was best to admit that. Some guys had funny ideas about virgins and she did not want to get onto that track. She wasn't a virgin, far from it really. She had lost her virginity to George, which was a desperate mutual attempt for comfort which didn't last long. Then she had been together with Dean Thomas for a while and they had explored to their hearts content really. They had been together for a while, but they didn't have much in common outside of some pretty fabulous sex. They

broke up after a while and he eventually fell in love and ended up marrying.

"I bet you are." He said.

"I'm not." She repeated. "And I'm not interested."

"I bet you're frigid." He said with his horrible smirk.

"Yes, I'm frigid." She said in an attempt to make herself look unattractive. "Guys like you just don't do it for me."

"What does it for you?" He asked, tugging slightly on her skirt.

"Girl." She said. "I like girls. Me and Ginny Weasley, were a hot couple. I thought everyone knew." She knew Ginny wouldn't mind. Anything to throw people off the trail of Harry's kid didn't hurt.

"You're lying to me again." He said, and licked his lips. "In fact, I know for a fact that the Weaselette didn't run that way."

It was Hermione's turn to hrmph.

"Perhaps you've never been handled right." He said.

Hermione felt a wave of nausea rise.

"I'd rather die." She finally stated.

"Maybe we should see." He said. "Garcon." He yelled.

"What are you doing?" She demanded. "Stop."

"Garcon." He yelled again.

"Malfoy please." Hermione pleaded.

The shop owner practically ran out of the store.

"What is the matter, Mr. Malfoy. I hope nothing has displeased you." The man had a worried look on his face.

"This girl was rude." Malfoy stated.

Hermione's eyes widened in an attempt to plea with Draco.

"And then she spat in my face." Draco said and wiped some imaginary spittle off his face.

The shocked owner turned to Hermione.

"After all I have done for you." The owner said.

Hermione was shocked to her core. Malfoy was getting her fired. For what, for turning him down? Didn't he have any idea of what the consequences was for her. She would never get another job if she left this one without references.

Hermione whipped back her arm and slapped Draco across the face as hard as she could. It was already too late, so why not, she thought. It wiped the evil grin off his face and Hermione could see blood on his lips.

"Miss Granger." The shocked owner said, "we cannot condone..."

"Yeah I know." Hermione said and ripped her apron off before he could finish. She threw it on the ground and walked away.

She didn't know where she was walking, she was so angry her steps were just propelling her forwards in whatever direction was in front of her nose. Her hand was ringing with the impact of the slap. She pulled her fingers into a fist and released again and again to make the feeling go away. She wanted no reminders of him and his selfish, pathetic life.

It took a good fifteen minutes of walking before she started crying and once the tears started they didn't stop. She had to brace herself

against a wall as the sobs hit her. Her eyes were so full of tears she couldn't see.

Her life was over. She wouldn't be able to find another job now. She wouldn't be able to support herself and the ladies. How was she going to pay the rent? Her little nest egg wouldn't see them through the week. Neville and Luna might help her out of a tight squeeze, but they didn't have much to spare. She couldn't depend on them for any length of time.

If only she could make it to France, to Bill and Fleur. Her insides hurt so much she could barely walk, but she walked a little while further and made her way to the Leaky Cauldron. It was the entrance to the muggle world. The entrance wasn't open because people rarely moved between the two worlds these days, but she could imagine hearing the cars outside. If she ran, they would find her within a couple of hours. She had no money and nowhere to go.

The bartender stared at her. They didn't serve people like her as customers unless and pureblood or halfblood were buying.

"Got any work?" She asked Tom.

"No. Now get out of here before I throw you out." He said coldly. He had been so friendly when she was young. Served them butterbeers with a smile and a wink.

Maybe the hunt was the way to go. What else did she have left? It would mean pain and imprisonment, maybe even disfigurement and death.

No, she told herself, she wasn't a coward. There were good people in the world, someone would give her a job, she just had to keep trying.

She walked back to the apartment. The ladies were surprised to see her at that time of the day. They knew something was seriously

wrong, but didn't mention anything. Hermione went straight to bed and went to sleep.

She slept for a little while, but her worried mind wouldn't let her sleep all that long. Draco had ruined her life for a bit of entertainment, and just a cheap thrill at that. He wasn't stupid, he knew full well what the implications would be. Was there no low he wouldn't go to?

She tried to muffle her crying during the night, because even though the old ladies made out like their hearing was just about gone, in reality they heard everything.

Hermione had dreamt of being able to sleep-in one day, but now that the day were here, it was less than fun and relaxing. She didn't know what to do with herself. She paced back and forth in her room until the sun was high in the sky. She decided to go do what she always does when things get too tough, go to see Harry.

Harry's grave was in Godric's Hollow, next to his parents. He had a nice grave. The world was still grateful to him when he was buried, but the sentiment changed over time. Hermione didn't go often because there was no public floo in Godric's Hollow so she had to use Neville Grandmother's floo. Hermione would usually bring something from the bakery when she used Mrs. Longbottom's floo, but she would have to apologise for coming empty handed today.

Hermione had learnt that there were people tending Harry's grave. She wasn't sure who, but she suspected in might be Arthur Weasley. She always got really sad when she visited Harry, but she was also reminded of his never give up spirit and that is what she needed today. Even in the darkest hour, Harry never gave up.

She wondered how the world would be different if he had lived. It was funny how important Harry had been while he was alive. Reluctant as he was, but the world seemed to organise itself around him. He would never have stood for the injustices in the world today, but maybe in the end he wouldn't have been strong enough. Who knew. They would probably have labelled him as an attention hungry

loony like they did in fourth year. Although that showed how scared they were of him.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4

Hermione tried every shop in Diagon Alley and Hogsmead, but no one would give her any work. She even tried the Ministry, where one of the placement people would listen to her, but succinctly told her that while street sweeping jobs were available, they were only for men. Apparently, the wizarding world didn't like seeing women sweeping the streets. Just another one of the little hypocritical peculiarities of the wizard world. We don't mind women begging, but sweeping the streets is just unseemly.

Luna tried giving Hermione some work selling the Quibbler, but it didn't achieve much sales above the steady subscribers. Not enough to support her anyway.

Neville and Luna would give her their last cent if she needed it, but she didn't want to ask. How long could that go on anyway?

Hermione spent more time pacing in her bed room. She was running out of options. She would be down to begging soon. Or the only other alternative that was welcoming, the ladies who catered to the drunken purebloods looking for a bit of entertainment.

The whores were horribly treated by everyone. They were paid to take abuse and sometimes violence, and everyone blamed them for defective moral character. Hermione was pretty sure none of them would choose the profession if they had a choice. They earned enough to get by, but there was a heavy price for their livelihood.

It was an outcome that Hermione fear more than anything, stuck plying the trade on the street, getting abused and beat up by whoever felt like it.

Begging was the only alternative, but being dependent on the generosity of these people was something Hermione was completely distrustful of. The elderly usually had to resort to begging. Hermione had kept Edna and Delia from that fate, but she may not be able to provide for them anymore. The populace weren't kind to beggars either.

Hermione wished she could just close her eyes and it would all go away. The food was running out and the apartment was freezing cold. Edna and Delia were in the larger room wrapped up in every piece of blanket material they had.

Hermione hadn't eaten today and she concluded that she would have to start begging if they were going to eat tomorrow. She'd never been in a situation where she didn't know where her next meal would come from.

Hermione made three knuts begging. Two of them from Percy Weasley. The other one she got in conjunction with an awful fondling of her behind. Begging was mortifyingly embarrassing, but she had enough to buy some bread. Food in their bellies outweighed her embarrassment.

She didn't have anything to go with the bread, but it didn't matter, it tasted fantastic. Hermione knew it was just the hunger, but it was amazing what a little hunger did to the taste buds.

Hermione begged for another couple of days, and it got them something to eat in the evenings, but that would not pay the rent. Hermione felt like Oliver Twist's Fagin, but she was going to have to ask the ladies to join her if they even had a chance to make rent. She just didn't have the heart to ask and the ladies' medicinal potions were running out, making it much more difficult for the ladies to get out and about.

No way Hermione turned the situation would lead to an outcome where they had all they needed. The weight on her shoulders was starting to press down on her and she couldn't find a way out.

"If it isn't the mudblood." She heard behind her as she walked through the muddy streets back to MQ. Hermione knew the voice, but didn't want to acknowledge it. "I really need to pay you back to the injury you did me."

"You deserved it." She spat.

He didn't say anything but walked behind her as Hermione sped up her pace. Hermione felt the anger bubble in her.

"Do you have any idea what you've done to me?" She finally turned to look at the bane of her existence in the eyes.

"I have placed you in a bit of a bind, haven't I." He said with his customary smirk. "No work, no income. What are you going to do?"

Hermione knew he was mocking her. "Just fuck off Malfoy." She said and turned.

"Least I could do is buy you dinner." He said. If Hermione wasn't so hungry, she would keep on walking. It had been days since she'd or the ladies had anything other than bread.

"Just give me the money, and I'll buy my own dinner." She said.

"No, I don't think so." He said and held out his hand. "One time offer."

Hermione wanted to slap him in the face. Harder if she could manage it, but she was hungry and weak. She wanted to slap herself because she was just about to sell out her principles for a hot meal.

"Fine." She said and started walking ahead while shoving his hand away, she would rather burn in hell than take his hand. She would put up with whatever taunting he had planned long enough for her to eat and to stash away food for Edna and Delia.

Draco led her to a pub, where she ordered steak, eggs and chips. Along with a large side salad and a large butter beer.

She couldn't believe she was just about to eat dinner with Draco Malfoy. What had she been reduced to? Although it was just her eating. He ordered himself a whiskey and sat back in the booth and watched her.

To Hermione's surprise, he didn't taunt her. They were just sitting there in silence. What was there to say? Hermione didn't expect him to apologise, hell would likely freeze over first.

"So begging." He started. Here we go, thought Hermione. "You can do better than that."

"Better?" She shot back incredulously. "I can't get a job now thanks to you."

"You're a clever girl."

What was that supposed to mean, Hermione thought to herself. She didn't ponder it long, because the food came. It smelt glorious. The food was mouth watering. Hermione eat as fast as she could. It didn't actually take long because her stomach had shrunk so much over the last few days.

"You've got assets." He continued after he finished watching her eat.

"Are you saying I'm pretty?" Hermione chose to completely ignore the underlying direction and focused on the fact that he had given her a complement. Although she was naturally suspicious about anything he said, he was paying her a complement, which again fell into the when hell freezes over category. She knew he was after something, but to have him confirm that he had sunk so low as to pay her a complement was worth whatever vileness he was planning on unloading on her after.

He only smiled. A little more than a smirk, but still in the 'you're an idiot and don't know how the world works' kind of way.

"All I am saying is that you could be better off." He continued lazily.

"You're not expecting that I am going to take you out back and shag you are you?" She asked almost laughing. "In that case, you are actually dumber than I thought."

He was still smiling.

"Well, I'm done." She said having pack away all the leftovers in a couple of napkins. "See you."

Hermione strode towards the door.

"Wait." He commanded, but she kept walking.

He did catch up with her down the street.

"Now I don't think we were quite done."

"Yeah, we are." She said with as much authority as she could.

"A little food in you and you are all ire again."

Hermione was looking at him to say that he needed to state his business because she was losing her tolerance.

"You are just going to be hungry again tomorrow you know." He said. Hermione knew it was true but she didn't have to deal with that right now, in front of him. "I could make it easier for you."

Here we go, Hermione thought for the second time, here comes the reason for his supposed generosity.

"What do you want?" She said, growing tired.

"Just spend the night with me."

Hermione laughed. "You have got to be joking. I would rather die, I think."

"What about the old birds you've got cooped up in your apartment. What are their names, Elna and Delia?"

Hermione hated that he knew about her life.

"They're going to start suffering now without their potions, aren't they? Cooped up in a freezing damp apartment in the middle of winter. Do you think they will last through the winter at this rate?"

He was trying to manipulate her and she despised him for it.

"They will be fine." She said with more conviction than she truly felt. She felt awful and guilty as soon as she said it. She knew full well that she couldn't take care of them. Hermione had to turn away to hide the anguish that crept into her face.

Draco took the chance to set up close behind her. He traced the neckline of her dress with one of his fingers. Hermione cringed at the intimacy.

"Just one night and I will take care of it. You'll have food, firewood, potions for the old dears."

Hermione shrugged him off her.

"No."

"So heartless." He teased. "Send me an owl when you change your mind."

"Not going to happen." She said. "You're completely despicable, you know that."

"There is that annoying Gryffindor pride as well. Doesn't care who suffers for it." He said as she started to walk away.

"Fuck you Malfoy." She finally gave in a yelled.

"I will be waiting for your owl."

Hermione ran back to her apartment. She wanted to cry and beat something, probably at the same time. She had a sneaking suspicion that this had been his plan all along. She wasn't entirely sure why, but he probably wanted to ensure that her degradation was complete. To take whatever self respect she had left.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5

Hermione lasted four days without owling Draco. It was the ladies trying to convince her that they were managing just fine that ultimately did it, plus the fact that they would soon be kicked out only the street. It was obvious that they weren't fine and that Edna was in downright pain but did her best to cover it.

She got a note back from Draco telling her that he expected her at 8pm for dinner. Hermione felt like she wanted to throw up. It was better than being on the street.

A package came a couple of hours later. It contained a beautiful satin dress in garnet with gold detailing. Her house colours. She guessed he wanted her to wear it tonight. She didn't try it on. She would put it on tonight, but hated it. There was nothing wrong with the dress, just the circumstances.

Hermione had to go for a walk to distract her mind. She wanted to cry because she felt she had sunk so low. This was never a situation she wanted to be in, but women had done this since the beginning of time, traded favours for protection or survival. It was the oldest profession after all.

Maybe it was the fact that it was Draco Malfoy that made it so much worse. But then again, he had promised to take care of everything and he was capable of doing it. And it was better than random strangers on the street.

Hermione felt no joy today. She could usually find something to lighten her mood, even in these harsh circumstances, but today there was nothing. She didn't know what to expect tonight. He could spend the entire evening insulting her. If he behaved atrociously she

would just leave, she surmised. But there was no way she was going to get through the evening unscathed and she was prepared for that.

She got back to the apartment a couple of hours before. The ladies trying to convince her that they were bucking up nicely only confirmed what she had to do. She had booked the bathtub which was communal to the entire building. A part of her didn't want to bother, another part didn't want to give him ammunition.

The dress fit perfectly. She had no idea how he knew her size, but it was just right. It was the nicest dress that had been seen in this building for a long time. It got looks when Hermione walked down to the communal floor. Hermione didn't feel the least bit worried about getting soot on it, but hated the knowing looks she got from people.

She arrived at Black Manor exactly at 8 and was met at the door by an elf who showed her into the reception room.

Draco was sitting in one of the chairs with his feet on the table, tossing an unactivated switch in the air. He was dressed in black as per usual.

"You came." He said. "I know you would, although there was a chance you'd chicken out."

"You know I don't have any choices left."

"True." He said. "But being a Gryffindor, it is not always in your nature to recognise that."

Hermione felt the spite rise, but decided that it would be better for her to keep this from an all out brawl.

"Being a Slytherin, it is in your nature to take advantage."

He smiled. "Then we are in a perfect understanding."

Hermione felt the urge to hit him again, but restrained herself. What in the world was he thinking? They were never going to get on. It

would be a miracle if she didn't murder him before the night was through. He did deserve it. She actually put more credence in the thought than she intended to. She indulged in another little daydream.

"I have ordered dinner. By my accounts, you will be famished by about now."

Hermione gave him a dirty look. Unfortunately he was entirely accurate.

"I have also had two hot dinners delivered to you two little wards as well." He said and rose from the seat.

"Thank you." She managed, although he was just fulfilling his end of the bargain.

He took her hand and led her into the dining room. The smell coming from it was making her mouth water. The unmistakable smell of roast chicken, roast potatoes, green beans and a nice rich thick gravy.

"Champagne?"

Hermione nodded. He expertly popped the cork and poured two glasses. So far this was all a bit more civilised than she had expected, but the night was young.

"Let's toast." He said as he handed her a glass.

"Let's not." She said quietly.

"To a mutually satisfying arrangement."

Hermione wanted to retch, but took a sip of the drink. It bubbled on her tongue, dry enough to have the crisp feel without stripping her mouth. Good champagne, of course. It made her briefly think about her parents. The last time she had champagne was at her mom's birthday and that was several years ago now.

"This is the Black ancestral home, isn't it?" She asked.

"It is. No Blacks left now, so its mine. My mother's actually, but I live here."

"You don't live at Malfoy Manor anymore."

"Officially, as does my wife. She lives there officially, but she actually lives in Scotland with her sister."

"You don't live together?" Hermione asked.

"We don't co-exist in the same room if we can help it." He said, but the conversation was not pleasing him. "Enough about my dear wife. I actually have a choice of places to live. My family has property all over the country. The decline in the good wizarding families is leaving an abundance of fine houses for the remaining."

"Grimmald Place went to you as well didn't it?" Hermione asked, but she knew the answer.

"It did." He said after a second of considering her. "Potter died without an heir, so it returned to the Black family, which is pretty much me these days."

"I understand he had some muggle relations." Draco continued. "But muggles can't inherit wizard property."

"They don't deserve it." She said. "And since I don't believe in discrimination that is saying quite a bit." Hermione knew that Draco would lose Grimmald Place if it ever became known that Harry really had an heir. Although she suspected that Draco probably wouldn't care that much since he had so many choices anyway.

"Lets eat. I'm sure you've waited long enough to get your greedy little hands on the grub." He said and directed her to the table. It was set for intimacy. Draco sat at the end of the table and Hermione sat beside him. That or it was just making it obvious that the other end of

the table was for the mistress of the house and that she was not. No pun intended.

Hermione didn't like the way he spoke to her, but it still much more civilised than she had anticipated. Maybe he was on his best behaviour. Maybe he thought she might bolt. He was right, there was a great chance that she might.

They didn't talk much during dinner. Hermione felt awkward sitting in a gown. It wasn't distasteful, but it showed off her assets, as Draco had referred to them. She assumed that is what he was referring to.

It wasn't just that she was full with so little that was killing her appetite. The food was wonderful, but it was what was to come that was giving her the hebbie geebies. She wasn't sure she could do it. It was the same feeling she had when she sat in the dentist chair. The instinct to run was overruled by intellect, even with trusting parents. Grit your teeth and bare it, she told herself.

Her nervousness increased ten-fold when Draco got up and reached for her hand. He was leading her out of the dining room, towards the stairs. It was the most bizarre thing, touching Draco Malfoy, on purpose. And they were just about to do much more of it.

Hermione had reservations. Actually it was almost a panic attack. She didn't suffer from panic attacks, but she could imagine having one. Pull yourself together, she told herself. You are not walking to your doom. It was just... she felt like she needed to throw up. She looked up at the ceiling, trying to calm herself.

Draco kept on leading her down a hallway. The Black family home lived up to its namesake. It was very dark. The lights barely did anything to light it up, it was just soaked up.

"Malfoy, I'm not sure I..."

"You have to." He said. "You have no other choice. Bite the bullet."

"That's a muggle expression."

"I thought you'd like it."

"This isn't right."

"It is perfectly right." He said. "As it should be."

Hermione gritted her teeth.

"You don't believe that." She said.

"You know I do." He said. "I'll make it quick. You're not a virgin are you?"

"No!"

"Good. Why are you acting like one?"

"Because, this is wrong."

"Necessity is never wrong. It just is."

"There is no necessity for you." She accused.

"True, but as you know, I don't think this is wrong." He said and pulled her close. He snaked his arm around her.

"You're taking advantage."

"Absolutely." He and leaned in to kiss her.

"Uh.." Was all Hermione could managed before his lips were on hers. She knew it was coming, but she was still shocked. She tried to relax, but did a pretty poor job of it.

"Uh.." She started again as Draco undid the zipper of the dress. It fell to the floor and Hermione hands flew up to cover her breast.

"Nice underwear Granger." He said. Hermione gave it a 'go kill yourself' look. She hadn't seen nice underwear in years. "With knickers like that its amazing you're not a virgin."

Actually, the bickering was helping her. Bickering with Malfoy was familiar territory. The hand he was gently running up the side of her arm and neck was not. It moved up to her lips and his thumb forcefully stroked her lips.

"I gave you those teeth you know." He said.

"What?"

"If it wasn't for me giving you those massive beaver teeth, you would never have had the chance to size your chompers to a more suitable size."

"I didn't.."

"Liar." He said.

"Wha.." She started. "Well, nothing for you to take credit for."

"No appreciation."

He grabbed her head and pulled her in for a rougher kiss. He was exploring her mouth and walking her backwards. The reason became clear when she felt the bed hit the back of her legs.

He pushed her down and Hermione didn't struggle. He was on top of her, kissing her body. His hand were on her breast and the thumb was stroking her nipple.

It didn't feel bad, it didn't feel good either. It was like her nerves were not connected and the sensation didn't have anywhere to go. She wasn't turned on, but she wasn't revolted either. It was completely abstract, like watching a movie.

His shirt was off and he returned to exploring her body. He was completely absorbed exploring her. Hermione knew he was turned on. Every few seconds he would grind his hips into her. She could feel how hard he was. He was taking off her underwear and threw them away. He was sitting back looking at her, stroking her hips and her stomach as he did.

When he'd had his fill, he undid his zipper and lined himself up to enter her. He was behaving in a way she hadn't been truly aware he could. Intellectually she knew that everyone were sexual beings, but in reality she didn't see hardly any people as sexual. Least of all her childhood nemesis.

He hissed as he entered her. Hermione felt the intrusion, but again, the sensation had no where to go. It was the ghost of sex. A hint of the real thing, but her brain was not hooked up to receive it. She watched him as he thrust in and out. His face went from concentration to slackness, to the occasional flash of a smile. On one level, she felt like she was intruding on something very private. Which was a ridiculous notion, but it was the most bizarre experience.

He finished with a guttural cry and collapsed on top of her. His breath was ragged and he rolled off as it slowed down. Completely spent. He was asleep seconds later.

Hermione got out of the bed and pulled her dress on quietly. She wasn't sure how she felt. It hadn't been an awful experience. More bizarre than anything else.

Draco was lying of the bed, snoring slightly. His pants were still undone and sitting at the top of his thighs. His ... lying there. The back of his hand was covering his eyes. Skin very pale. Beautifully build. She had heard he was. In school, the rumour had gone around.

Hermione found her shoes and underwear and made her way downstairs. She tried to straighten her hair in the mirror she came

across. Her eyes were big as saucers giving her a dazed look. Maybe because she felt dazed.

Males are funny creatures, she thought to herself as she grabbed the floo powder and zipped back to MQ.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6

Hermione was tired the next morning. She hadn't slept well. She was ignoring the red gown that had been discarded in a corner of her small room as she sat on the end of her bed looking out the small window facing the street below.

She still wasn't sure how she felt about the previous evening. She wasn't directly distressed by the fact that she had given herself to Malfoy. He had been good on his word and everything was taken care of this morning. The ladies had their potions, there was wood to heat the flat and there was food in the cupboards.

She wasn't even outright ashamed about the night itself, she didn't really care what anyone thought. The only sticking point was what Harry would think. She was ashamed that she had coped out, given in, admitted defeat. Harry would never compromise, he never did. The thought completely gutted her. Would Harry hate her for being so weak? Then again, Harry was never hungry.

Hermione didn't know what the right thing was to do, should she have fought to the bitter end, starved and refused to compromise no matter what? She hoped Harry would forgive her for what she'd done. Starving to death might show these people how callous and hypocritical they were, on the other hand she didn't care enough about them at this point to be a martyr for their awfulness.

The thoughts just left her sad. She knew she was damned if she did and damned if she didn't, but this way she lived to fight another day. Although she wasn't entirely convinced there was anything left to fight for.

She didn't hear from Malfoy until the next day, when he demanded her company at 9 in the evening.

She considered not going, but that would put her back where she was. Begging on the street for bread. They hadn't really talked about anything beyond the first night. She was starting to understand that this was meant to be an ongoing thing. He would provide and she would...provide her company in return.

A package arrived soon after the missive. Another gown, a bright purple one this time. It wasn't ugly, but it wasn't her taste either. She also wasn't sure how she felt about having to do it again. She couldn't even understand why he'd want to. He'd gone out of his way to tell her how disgusting she was throughout the time they'd know each other, but he had schemed and manoeuvred to get her into bed. Paid to get her into bed. And by all appearances, he wasn't taking one for the team last night, he wasn't exactly holding back.

In terms of rubbing her situation in her face, it had been pretty lightweight as well. Hermione couldn't figure it out, but she was determined not to try that hard either.

She was dreading the evening, but she floo'd over to his house at the appointed time.

"You're here." He said when she arrived. "Come here."

She walked over to where he was sitting by the desk. She wasn't sure what he wanted. Was she supposed to kiss him? The thought made her stomach churn. It was much too cordial an action for how she felt. Although she wasn't entirely sure how she felt. She hated him, but couldn't deny that she needed him. He had made her dependant on him. Maybe this is how women who marry rich men feel. Although this was not a choice for her, it was absolute necessity. She did not understand why anyone would put up with this by choice.

"Turn around." He ordered.

Hermione did as she was told and felt something cold snake around her neck. He attached it at the back and adjusted it. It was obviously

a necklace.

When he was done she looked down and saw a gold necklace with an amethyst stone. It was a nice size, not too garish. It went with the dress.

"Are you giving me jewellery?" She asked.

"Don't you want it?" He asked surprised.

"I just wasn't expecting it." She said and touched the stone. "It's pretty."

"You are so naive." He said and grabbed her by the elbow. "Time to go."

"Go?" Was all she managed before he side along apparated them. The nausea rose in Hermione when they arrived. She didn't know where they were. It was a dark hallway, but obviously in a fine house.

Draco walked them towards a door and the light and laughing spilled out of the room as he opened it. He motioned for her to go inside and she did.

It was a dining room filled with Slytherins and ladies in bright dresses. They had obviously had dinner but had finished.

The room seemed to silence a little as they entered.

"As promised, my new girl." Draco said to the room.

"Is that...is that Granger!" Theo Nott said and stood up. He walked over and took Hermione by the hands and lifted them up to her sides. He started laughing. "Where in the world did you find her?"

"In some third rate bakery." Draco said in his lazy drawl.

"I thought she was gone." Theo said. "Marcus. Look, its Hermione Granger, the mudblood that Potter ran around with."

"I remember Nott, I was there." Marcus said. "Deserves a toast really."

"So she's been here all along?" Theo asked Draco.

"Yep." Draco said and walked over to the table.

I'm right here, Hermione thought to herself, annoyed at being talked about like she wasn't there.

"Sit down." Theo said in a low voice and indicated to the table. He returned to the table as well and sat down next to a blond woman.

Hermione found a spare seat and sat down as well. One of the other girls handed her a glass of wine and Hermione smiled her thank you. The boys were drinking wine as well as stronger stuff. They all seemed to stare at her at one point or another, but no one really talked to her.

Following the other's lead, she helped herself to some cheese and crackers on the table, and sipped her glass of wine. She noticed again that all the ladies were wearing bright dresses. It also became apparent that none of the ladies at the table were wives. It took Hermione a little while to understand that this was the girlfriend/mistress crowd. Obviously the girls they partied with while their wives were, wherever they were.

They sat around the table for a while and the men got increasingly drunk, and the crowd seemed to get increasingly flirtatious. Draco didn't pay that much attention to Hermione, which didn't bother her one bit. Instead, His Pastiness was talking and laughing with his friends as the drink was flowing.

While studying the crowd, Hermione noticed that there was some animosity between some of the girls as well. A couple of them were

particularly fighting for attention. As time went on, the group got louder and louder.

As much as she hated Draco, he was not an unattractive man. He had never had trouble attracting girls at school. It did not make sense to Hermione that he would have to pay someone to be with him, even worse, force someone into survival mode like he had done with her. But then they were all doing it weren't they. Every woman in this room was probably being paid in some form or another.

Theo Nott and Marcus Flint were talking about her. It wasn't difficult to tell and they were not making any effort to hide it. To Hermione's mortification, she got the feeling they were talking about her 'assets'. Talking horse flesh, she thought bitterly, maybe they will check out her teeth soon.

Some ice cream appeared at the side table and Hermione got up to serve herself some. It was the perfect opportunity to take a breather. The blond woman with Theo Nott joined her at the side table.

"My name is Constance." She said and held out her hand.

"Hermione." She said and shook the woman's hand. The blond woman was absolutely stunning. She literally looked like a living Barbie doll.

"Everyone calls me Connie." She said and smiled. "I'm with Theo. I think we were at school together at one time."

"I'm sorry." Hermione said, "I don't remember."

"You were very small at the time." Connie said and smiled the most brilliant smiles Hermione had ever seen.

"I haven't seen you around lately." Connie continued. "Did I hear that you have been working in a bakery?"

"That's right." Hermione confirmed.

"This must all be quite new to you then." Connie said and leaned in a little closer. "Are you living with Draco?"

"No, I have my own apartment." Hermione said, not sure where this conversation was going.

"In MQ?" Connie asked.

"Yes."

"I have an apartment there too, but I don't live there. Theo provides me with a little cottage out in the country."

"Oh." Was all Hermione could say. "How long have you been ...together?"

"About four months." Connie said. "Before that I was a part of a little bit more of a sedate crowd, mostly Ravenclaws. I was a Ravenclaw at school."

"Are all the girls muggleborn?" Hermione asked.

"Not all. For example that girl," Connie said while pointing to the dark haired girl who was currently sitting on Blaise Zabini's lap and having her breasts fondled. "Anthea, is a half-blood, but I am sure she won't be remiss in pointing that out when she gets the opportunity."

Hermione got the subtext and she shared a knowing look with Connie. Hermione realised that Connie might be a girl she'd have a lot in common with. Perhaps even a potential friend.

"Nice necklace." Connie said and started scooping ice cream into a second bowl.

"It was a gift."

Connie smiled. "Good start." She said and grabbed her two bowls and headed back to the table.

Odd comment, Hermione thought. She watches as Connie gave her second bowl to Nott before sitting down and flashing that brilliant smile at him.

Am I supposed to serve Malfoy, Hermione wondered. She didn't. She couldn't stomach the idea. He didn't look like he was all that interested in ice cream anyway. He was actually laughing. Laughing so hard he was turning slightly pink in the cheeks.

She'd never seen him laugh before. It changed his face completely. Perfect teeth, of course. Over the last few days, she had seen more than his scowling, snarly side. She was starting to realise that there actually was more to him. Pissed as he was. She'd never seen him inebriated before either.

Blaise and the half blood girl were fully making out now and Hermione, who was sitting across from them didn't know where to look. She studied the paintings of ancestors. By the look of them, she determined that this was Flint's house. The Flint family had not been blessed in the teeth department like the Malfoys.

Once Blaise and the girl started, it seemed to spread like a contagion. Soon Hermione's attention was drawn to a hand on her shoulder.

"Time for you to take me to bed, girl." Draco said. His was doing his best to pronounce each word, but he was clearly drunk.

Hermione got up and hesitated about what to do next. Draco swung his arm around her shoulder.

"I think flooing would be the safer option at the moment." He said and he seemed to know where the appropriate floo fireplace was.

Draco was a little unstable when they got back to Black Manor, but he pulled her close and kissed her. Hermione could taste the alcohol on his lips. It tasted like off fruit.

"Take me upstairs." He said. "I seem to have indulged a little tonight."

Hermione placed an arm around his waist and helped him keep stable as he walked up the stairs. She didn't really want to go upstairs. He was clearly drunk, which didn't bode well.

When they got to his chamber, he pulled her flush up against him and pushed one of her stay curls behind her ear.

"You smell divine." He said and nuzzled his face into her neck. "I love that perfume."

"Come on Malfoy, I'm so broke, we've eaten the condiments. Perfumed are not high on the list of priorities."

Hermione could tell that he wasn't listening. Instead he was watching her and occasionally pulling her hips in to press against him.

"I shouldn't have drunk so much." He said. "Now I am too drunk."

Hermione realised that he was saying it was too drunk to bed her. Oh what a shame, she thought sarcastically.

"I will get you some water." She said before he changed his mind. "Drinking a glass of water will help you feel better in the morning."

Hermione prised his fingers off her hips and pushed him back on the bed.

"Always so bossy." He said and laughed harder than the comment justified.

By the time she got back from the bathroom with a glass of water, he was asleep. Lying with his lower legs off the bed and his arms splayed across the bed. He was snoring. Hermione took his boots off and rolled him onto the bed before covering him with a blanket.

"Sleep tight Malfoy." She said. "I hope the bed bugs eat you alive."
She extinguished the lights before shaking her head and leaving.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7

Hermione got a note at about 2pm that told her that Draco required her presence immediately. It was a terse note and if it had been a note from someone she cared about, she would have been concerned, but she screwed the note up and tossed it into the fire. She would go, but she would finish her sandwich first. Surely he wasn't bleeding to death.

She floo'd over as soon as she had finished her sandwich, a bit curious to see what the emergency was. When she got there, the house was completely quiet.

"Malfoy." She yelled, when there wasn't anyone in sight.

"In the study." She got as a response.

"No, no, no." She got as she stepped into the study. "What are you wearing?"

"My clothes." She said, annoyed that he made a fuss when he was still in a dressing robe. Silk, of course, loosely tied so it showed a great deal of his chest.

"When have I ever given you the impression that wearing a sack was appropriate." He said. "Have you no dress sense at all?"

"You made it sound like an emergency. I came right away." She said.

"And this is what you wear?"

"I don't walk around MQ in a gown."

"Well, you will always dress appropriately when you come here."

"So which is more appropriate at 2 in the afternoon. This or a gown?"
She asked, annoyed at the ridiculous conversation.

"This is never appropriate." He repeated waving his hand at her clothes.

"What's the emergency?" Hermione asked wanting to change the subject.

"I'm fucking horny." He said, still looking at her brown wool dress.

"That doesn't constitute an emergency."

"I never said it was an emergency and yes it does." He said. "I was most upset when you weren't there this morning. I am a ball of twisted nerves and now I need you to spread those lovely legs of yours."

With a wave of his wand, her dress disintegrated.

"Hey." Hermione yelled and tried to cover herself with her hands.

"I think we already discussed that monstrosity. Now obviously we have to discuss the rags you call underwear."

"It's all I have." She said as they disintegrated as well. She tried much harder to cover herself up.

"Now sit on the desk."

Hermione didn't respond. A part of her brain was panicking again. She knew full well that she'd had sex with him before and she was expected to do it again, anytime it pleased him, but it was extremely hard to swallow the idea when it came down to it.

Draco raised an eyebrow at her lack of response. It took Hermione a few more seconds to come to terms with the fact that her choices were still really limited and the best overall outcome would include the route involving putting her tush on the damned desk.

She narrowed her eyes and slowly started to move towards the desk, getting on it while still trying to cover her modesty. It made no sense to still try, but she still did. She sat on the desk, naked, covering her breasts, feeling like a prize twit.

"Spread your legs." He ordered from where he was watching her.

Hermione's teeth were going to break if she clenched them any harder. She moved her legs apart about two centimetres.

"Now that is just not going to do." He said with his most evil of smirks. He started walking towards her. "Do you have any idea what it does to me when you act all virginal?"

He lifted her legs apart and placed himself between them. Hermione could feel what it did to him. He was obviously nude under the dressing robe. The silk of it was sliding against her legs and the pressure of his hands on her hips was demanding that she lay down on the desk.

He played with her legs for a bit, running his finger tip up and down the skin of her inner thighs. His attention was completely on her body now.

"Move your arm." He said when Hermione had kept her arm over her breasts as she lay down. His face seemed to relax as his eyes roamed her body.

Hermione felt disconnected from her body as she watched him. His hands roamed up to her breast and lightly kneaded them. She could feel how hard he was as he pressed against her.

She hadn't really realised how much taller he was than her, but up close, he looked much larger than her. His wrists were thicker, his hands were bigger and the long pale fingers were warmer than the pale skin suggested. The sunlight showed off the muscles of his chest and stomach. Male. She was less surprised this time with his sexuality. She had seen it once before.

He hissed out his breath as he entered her. It took a bit of pressure for him to get all the way in. He was making a humming sound like he had just tasted something that was mindblowingly yummy. He slowly pulled out and she body resisted the movement just like it had on the way in. His eyes had a serene and distant look to them as he started to move in and out of her.

"Sometimes Granger, like is beautiful." He said and started to move a little faster.

Hermione didn't know what to make of the statement. It didn't exactly fit with her sentiments at that particular moment. She wasn't exactly suffering, for which she was grateful, but this was more of an intellectual exercise for her. Like the previous time, she seemed to end up studying him, detached from the actions themselves.

He clearly enjoyed sex, she supposed that every male enjoyed sex, but everyone she had been with had been intensely concerned about how she enjoyed it. Malfoy didn't care and everything he was doing was for his own pleasure and he didn't seem to have any hang ups about it.

By now he had grabbed her by the hips and was pounding into her. His face seemed to swing between a smile and a pained expression and the lost focus completely as he come, crying out as he pounded into her through it.

He was leaning heavily against the desk when he'd finished. Life slowly returned to his face and he had a bit of a bewildered look for a couple of seconds.

She smacked her on the bottom as he pulled out and adjusted his robe.

"Lovely." He said. It was probably the biggest compliment he had ever paid her. It wasn't one she accepted, but she recognised it was one.

"I want you to stay the night when you are here." He said as Hermione sat up. "Instead of leaving me all frustrated and craving."

"I can't." She said. "I have people that depend on me."

"Surely the biddies don't need you in the middle of the night." He said.

"What if something happens? What if there is a fire?" She said. Staying the night with Draco was not something she wanted to do. What they were doing was bad enough. Her expression pretty much told him it was not an option she wanted to consider.

Draco didn't say anything. He ran his tongue over his teeth and seemed to concede.

"I have no clothes." Hermione said. "You destroyed my clothes."

Draco smirked again. "Just the way I like it."

"I am going to freeze my bits off sitting around naked." She snapped. "Surely you have some women's clothes left over. I am pretty certain I am not the only female who has ever been here. I am sure some of them shed some articles of clothing along the way."

"True, but I don't keep souvenirs."

"I can't floo home naked."

"I guess you will just have to stay put then." He teased, but Hermione's murderous expression told of her lack of amusement.
"You will just have to wear some of my clothes."

"I will ask one of the girls to take you shopping." He said as he led upstairs. "You seem to need everything and don't think I didn't notice your shoes. What were they made for, plowing fields?"

He was true to his word. Connie was at her door the next day.

"I love shopping." She said with a bright smile. "My favourite activity. Particularly on someone else's account."

"I wouldn't know." Hermione responded. Truthfully the whole shopping thing had never appealed, with the exception of books. But somehow, Hermione didn't believe that the bookstore was on the itinerary today.

Connie led her down Diagon Alley, she had forced Hermione into one of the gowns and they were walking down the street dressed up like Christmas trees.

"Now, gowns first, intimates after, then shoes and accessories." Connie said. "A whole wardrobe he said."

The next two hours were a whirl. Connie made the decisions, Hermione was just there for trying things on. Hermione didn't exactly see what made one different from another, but apparently some colours just made her pop, whatever that meant.

"Has he given you any more jewellery?" Connie asked.

"Do I need to buy jewellery too?" Hermione said exhausted.

"No silly." Connie laughed. "You really don't know how this works, do you?"

Hermione guessed not as she wasn't sure what Connie was referring to.

"They provide for you." Connie said and pulled Hermione down on one of the benches. "They pay for all your needs. The jewellery is the retirement plan."

"Obviously they don't want to give too much, because then you will run away, but there is also a status thing with giving their mistresses nice jewellery. Which of course should be discreetly encouraged at timely opportunities. It shows off their position and wealth. In that

respect, Draco Malfoy is a really good catch. He does like to show off his wealth. There is nothing worse than a stingy pureblood."

Hermione's mind quickly flashed to Ron, but she dismissed it.

"Is that what we are, mistresses?" Hermione asked, hating the label. She had avoided the label issue as much as she could. Being told one made her want to dry retch.

"If this was a court, we would be courtesans." Connie said with her long neck stretch high. "There are basically two ways to play the game." Connie said seriously. "You can either go the wealth route and accumulate enough wealth to retire, or you can find a patron."

"A patron?" Hermione asked. "Like a patron for artists?"

"At a stretch." Connie said with a laugh. "A patron is a man who wants a constant companion. They are usually a bit older, perhaps a widow. Maybe a less ambitious man. Basically they are looking for a substitute to a wife."

"Why wouldn't they just get a wife?" Hermione asked.

"They could, but their choices of potential wives are much more limited. They might not have the prospects to attract young and appealing wife, it is after all the families that accept proposals. Someone may be very attractive to one of us irrespective of what their prospects are. And someone with less than stellar prospects are unlikely to get someone who remotely likely to be fertile, so the choice for them would be a sour old pureblood cow or one of us. And lets face it, the pureblood girls are typically not well blessed in the looks department even at the best of times."

"It all sounds a bit Machiavellian." Hermione said.

"Amongst the Slytherin set is not the place to find a patron, especially not amongst the younger men." Connie continued. "Some prefer the patron route and find happiness there. I prefer wealth, you

don't need to depend on the whims of a man when you have cold hard cash. Men can't be depended on for constancy no matter how much they profess their undying devotion. So if you only take one thing from this conversation it is the only rule that counts. Don't fall in love."

"No chance there." Hermione said with a snort.

"Good." Connie said. "Draco Malfoy goes through girls like socks. He doesn't keep a girl for long, so take what you can get before its time to move on. Consider where you want to go next. If you are smart, you decide and make it happen."

I would rather go back to working in the bakery, Hermione thought to herself glumly. This was all a bit more predatory than she was comfortable with.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8

Hermione had no idea you could manage to buy so many clothes in one go. Her small closet wasn't going to fit all the gowns. There were bright colourful gowns, there were day dresses, there were more informal dresses, which were still more formal than anything she had worn growing up, even to weddings.

She had shoes, scarves, even gloves. Where the hell was she supposed to wear gloves? There was lingerie, which made Hermione very uncomfortable, ribbons for some reason and silk stockings. She now had the wardrobe of a historical romance novel heroine. All of it in either bright colours or pastels. The uniform of the less reputable. Wives wore more modest colours, black, gray, brown. Hermione wondered who decided these things. Did someone decide on this clear demarcation between the reputable women and the less so. Was this something the council had decided or did it just evolve?

Hermione presence had been demanded that evening. Her closet now had two green dresses, but it grated on her wearing Slytherin colours. She wasn't going to give the impression that she was supportive. She wasn't entirely sure what she meant, but she just knew she wasn't going to wear green.

She got prepared and floo'd over to Draco's house in the evening. He was dressed and waiting for her. He was sipping a whiskey. They were obviously going somewhere.

"Have you eaten?" She asked. It was an awfully familiar sentiment and Draco raised his eyebrow in surprise. Hermione wasn't sure why she asked, actually she'd guessed it would tell her how quickly he would get drunk.

Draco didn't answer, but instead looked her over.

"Better." He said as she stood up and come over to lightly grab her elbow, he was obviously talking about what she was wearing. "Did you enjoy spending my money?"

"Enjoy would not be the most accurate description." Hermione said.
"Exhausting would be more accurate."

"You are a strange girl, Granger."

"Why, because shopping isn't the highlight of my life?"

"Well, of course not, I am." He said with complete confidence.

Hermione couldn't help but to snort. Draco's grip tightened around her elbow as he apparated her to their destination. It was another Slytherin house. She could tell by the decor.

By the facial traits of the portraits, she would guess this was Zabini's house. The party was already in full swing. Connie smiled at her as she walked in behind Draco.

Zabini was chasing some pretty girl who was giggling like a ninny. The dark haired half blood girl wasn't there. Connie confirmed that she'd been replaced by the blond giggly thing.

Blaise acted like he was completely infatuated by the new short, curvy girl. Apparently, according to Connie, Blaise falls in love at a drop of a hat and he falls out of love just as quickly, but he is completely convinced that he is in love at the time. Connie was stressing the word love like it was a euphemism.

Hermione grudgingly accepted that they were in for another night of revelry for the young Slytherin crowd. Hermione hadn't had time to eat, so she busied herself with the various food plates around the room. Draco was already in conversation with Nott. They seemed to be laughing about something and Hermione wondered what kind of things they talked about.

The voices got progressively louder. Blaise and the new girl had disappeared somewhere and most of the others were playing some drinking game that involved levitating a glass while the others tried their best to distract them enough to drop the glass. They were starting to get drunk now and their attention span was shrinking.

It was Flint's turn to hover the glass and the intent on his face was complete until Draco mentioned some event when he had fucked Armenda Fudham in Divinations in sixth year. This sent both of them into fits of laughter and the glass broke as it plummeted to the ground.

Nott tried next and managed pretty well until the others got sick of his fortitude and tickled him until he dropped it. Now that she had seen the Slytherin boys tickling each other, she decided that she had seen everything. Her mind automatically concluded she should tell Harry and the thought made her sad. It was funny, her mind didn't accept Harry's death, but it had no problems letting go of Ron because he didn't feature in her subconscious decisions.

Malcolm Baddock joined the party. Hermione hadn't seen him previously and he made a double take when he saw her. A creepy smile spread on his lips and Hermione felt intensely uncomfortable. He had always been creepy and apparently nothing had changed. The others seemed to greet his arrival with enthusiasm.

Connie managed to corner Theo and after a quick conversation during which she was stroking the labels of his jacket. She was pouting and teasing as she was whispering to him. Theo was smiling sweetly at her and then leaned in and kissed her on the cheek. Whatever it was that Connie wanted, she got. Hermione had the impression that she had just watched a master at work.

Connie gave Hermione a little wave goodbye and walked out of the room. She was leaving the party for the night. Somehow she'd got Theo to agree to let her leave. Hermione hadn't even realised that leaving was a possibility. She looked over at Draco and wondered how she could achieve the same thing.

They had stopped playing the game now and were sitting down, laughing at some anecdote or joke. Flint was slightly spanking a girl who was lying over his lap, chiding him in a way that implied that she didn't mind at all.

Hermione considered how she should approach him. Maybe she could just ask. She decided to give it a shot and walked over, he was completely absorbed by the others anyway so maybe he wouldn't mind. As she got there, Draco pulled her into his lap and Hermione sat there stiff as a board.

"You really need to loosen up, Granger." He drawled. "This is a party and you are behaving like its a wake."

"Its just not my kind of thing." She said trying to formulate a way to ask to leave.

"Just not comfortable out of the library huh?" He asked and laughed.
"You only have two modes, harpy and swot."

Hermione was getting annoyed and she could feel anger rising in her.

"I would like to leave now." Hermione said. Maybe a direct approach would work. Maybe he was drunk enough to listen.

"I don't think so." He laughed even louder. "Seriously, you need to get go a bit Granger. Join the party. Not everything can be about showing people how anal you are."

"I'm not..." She started, but didn't finish as she decided to get off his lap instead. He held her down as she struggled.

"This must be rectified, you're going to do yourself an injury. I think you need a lesson." He said and pulled out his wand. "Imperio."

Hermione felt the curse wash over her, taking away her control while Malfoy filled her mind completely. Her body relaxed completely

against him, while her mind tried to reinstate some control. The pull to please was so strong, it echoes through her mind, wiping whatever intent she had over and over again.

"Dance." He ordered and Hermione felt herself get up of him, step up on the table and dance. Laughter was roaring through the room and Hermione only smiled sweetly as she danced for the audience.

Draco's ordered flooded her mind and she was losing track of her own identify as his will became the centre of the universe.

He ordered her to undo the buttons on her dress and she complied, then to slip the shoulder out and the arm. He was making her perform a strip tease. Hermione got a flash of realisation that her dress was on the floor, but the self awareness was wiped away within microseconds.

She was dancing in her underwear on the table. Her mind was fighting harder when he told her to take her bra off, but it was no use, she couldn't fight it.

He didn't ask her to go further, but she danced on the table for what must have been ages. He was watching her and he was making her smile at him. The others were watching her too, lust shining in their eyes as she was gyrating her hips, flicking her hair and teasing.

Deep inside Hermione consciousness, she was absolutely mortified. Eventually he ordered her to stop dancing and get dressed before Draco apparated her back. He didn't drop the curse until they were back at his house.

The first thing she did was slap his as hard as she could. The contact almost sounded like a gun shot.

He fell back onto the chair with the force of it.

"How dare you!" She shouted at him.

"It was just a bit of fun."

"You forced me against my will." She said. "An unforgivable."

"Come on. It not that bad." He said. His voice was slurring a bit. "You looked hot."

"Unforgivable Malfoy, because its unforgivable." Hermione was shaking with anger.

"Ok, I'm sorry." He said and came up behind her. "It was a stupid thing to do. I was drunk."

"That doesn't excuse it." She said and forced her hands off her.

"I said, I'm sorry." He said with a coy look. "I promise I'll never do it again."

"I don't care to hear your insincere apologies." Hermione said. "This little experiment is over."

"Come on, Granger." He said. He tried to grab her but he missed. His seeker reflexes had completely deserted him after a nights worth of drinking.

Hermione marched to the fireplace and floo'd back to MQ, she heard his protests, but didn't care. She didn't quite manage to get home before the tears started flowing. She had never been so misused in her life. What else had she expected, she chided herself.

She wasn't going to see him again. She didn't care what the outcome would be, but she would not let herself be abused in such a way. She needed a bath and she didn't care if it was two in the morning. It took a whole hour of soaking before she was finally cried out.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9

Hermione was still angry the next day. Actually she felt disgusted and hurt. Although she couldn't quite understand why she was hurt. Its not like she trusted him, far from it, but it hurt to be treated that way. Still, something in her felt that he should have taken care of her.

Maybe Connie was just right. This is strictly a financial transaction. Care did not extend beyond that. If she was going to survive in the world, she would have to become harder. No more ridiculous notions that arseholes like Draco Malfoy would watch out for her. This was not a world where anyone watches out for her.

Except for maybe Edna and Delia. They could tell that something was wrong and was trying their upmost to wring it out of her. She was not going to tell them, although she could imagine Delia stomping over to Draco with her rather debilitated walk and hitting him with her purse. At least she got one giggle out of the whole affair.

Hermione had to figure out what to do now. She would have to sell the necklace he gave her. It would probably keep them going for a few months, but after that she would have to do something. She considered selling the brand new wardrobe, which would extend their survival for a little longer.

She knew what Connie would say, keep the wardrobe, find another, someone rich and generous. She wondered what Connie would say about what Draco did. Was she supposed to put up with something like that? She didn't know Connie well enough to judge how she would react to something like that. Connie was probably savvy enough to never get herself in such a situation. Hermione hated feeling stupid.

At least it was a nice day. The sun was shining making a clear crisp winters day. The weather eventually turned over the coming days as did Hermione mood.

Hermione knew she needed to start planning. Begging was not something appealing and if she wasn't smart she would be on the street plying the trade which was an even worse fate.

Hermione didn't know what to do, so she wrote a note to Connie asking her to help advice her. Hermione quite liked the idea of a Patron. A kind man, who liked a quiet life with a gentle companionship. Hermione had no idea how to achieve that, but she bet that Connie did.

Connie came around a few days later, knocking on the door and taking Hermione out. Hermione was wearing one of the less formal gowns, which was a little less bright, but it was still clear to what class of society she belonged to.

They slowly walked arm in arm to one of the Patisseries in Diagon Alley. The French bakery had quaint little brass and marble tables and chairs. This was a store that served purebloods and the dowdy pureblood women would look upon them disapprovingly as they sipped their hot chocolates. Hermione got the idea that Connie liked goading them.

Hermione hated this world and she was pretty sure Connie did too, although Connie went out her way to highlight their hypocrisy.

"There is no power in being a wife." Connie said. "They exist to breed and their entire value as a person is based on being able to squeeze something out of their loins. They have no life outside that."

Hermione was listening, trying to understand Connie and why she would go out of her way to flaunt her status and beauty.

"They are so repressed, they are not allowed to do anything." She continued. "And they disapprove of us. Most of them fail. Their

fertility is atrocious. I feel sorry for them. The expectations on their lives were there even before the war. Not as bad as now, but they were always very controlled."

Hermione had never even considered their perspective before, or the limitations to their lives. She couldn't see Ron treating Pansy in that way, but he wasn't raised like the rest of them. Ron and Pansy already had two children, but the Weasley genes are known for being bountiful. She wasn't entirely sure whether Draco had children or not, but she guessed she would have heard if he did.

"Don't you want children?" Hermione asked.

"I don't know." Connie shrugged. "I have accepted that I won't have any and I am not wallowing in grief over it."

Hermione had been outraged that it had been forbidden for her kind to have children, but it was more of an issue being forbidden over any actual sense of loss. Maybe because she was still too young for children. Maybe over time the loss would become achingly real. Hermione dreaded that.

"Now about your situation." Connie said.

"I like the idea of a patron." Hermione said, acknowledging that she may not be strong enough to play the game that Connie did.

"Unfortunately, there is a little snag." Connie said and Hermione ears peaked. "It seems that Malfoy has put out a bit of a fatwa on you."

"What do you mean fatwa?" Hermione asked guardedly.

"It means, he will not approve of anyone taking up with you."

"He can't do that." Hermione said, feeling anger rise like bile.

"He can't control what you do." Connie said. "Although the Ministry tends to be lenient on purebloods abusing our kind. I've never seen it

before, but he has put a general threat out there that anyone who takes up with you will have to deal with him."

"So what? Not everyone cares what Malfoy wants." Hermione snorted.

"He is very powerful. Powerful enough to enforce his will." Connie said. "You must take this seriously."

"So what are you saying?" Hermione asked, hoping Connie will find a way forward to her.

"I think you are going to have to go back." She said, but continued when she saw Hermione's expression. "Only until he tires, which won't be long. This is just a matter of being defied. Once he is over that, he will lose interest."

"And I should just put up with being abused. Paraded in front of his friends like a puppet."

Connie sighed. "I realise this is not an ideal situation for you, but he is wealth and he likes to show it off. Use that. Play on his determination, use it to accumulate wealth."

Hermione was shaking her head and her eyes were water up.

"I know this is awful, but the faster you do this, the sooner you can stop. Retire for good." Connie said grabbing her hand. "You are not responsible for the way things are. They are. So take them for all they have."

Hermione felt even worse after seeing Connie, she had hoped that Connie would set her right for a decent future. Going back to Draco was not what she wanted, but she did believe Connie when she said that she had few other options at this point until Draco relented his claim.

Hermione had to shelve her fantasy about a nice quiet life of reading and gardening in the country with a gentle and potentially caring man.

Draco made his approach a few days later.

"Where are you going Granger?" He said as she walked past him in one of the MQ alleyways.

"I have to get some firewood." Hermione said, holding the empty firewood basket.

"The biddies getting cold?"

Hermione didn't answer. She had taken Connie's advice on board and as much as it grated her, she had accepted what the outcome of this little dealing would be.

"We are ok." She said.

"Sold the necklace then?"

Hermione nodded.

"That won't keep you going for long."

"I don't care, I won't be abused." She challenged. "I will make it stretch."

"Then what? No one else wants you." He said.

Hermione's eyes narrowed. Because you've promised to destroy anyone who tries, she wanted to yell at him.

"I'll be fine." She said and started to turn.

"Don't be so damned stubborn." He said. "I'm sorry. I won't do it again. I was drunk and it was an inconsiderate thing to do."

Hermione just stood. She let the hurt show in her eyes. So she was playing it up a bit. She was genuinely hurt, but it wasn't her instinct to show him.

He seemed to soften a bit. "You know I am not exactly known for my sensitivity. I promise, I won't do it again."

Hermione was still silent, astounded by hearing an apology from him. Was he drunk now?

"I will give you Grimmauld Place to live in." He said to Hermione's shock. "You and the biddies can stay there. Surely it would be a damned sight more comfortable. I know you're fond of it."

Hermione knew that he couldn't actually give it to her as she was not allowed property of any kind, but it was a generous gesture, letting her stay in Harry's house. Hermione almost cried for real. Maybe more from the irony of the whole thing.

"Fine." She said. "But not tonight. And not tomorrow. I will move tomorrow."

She walked away. He didn't argue so he must have accepted her terms. It had sounded like he actually was sorry, although she knew he wasn't capable of it. Why would he be sorry, he had been trying to humiliate her most of her life. Guess he finally succeeded, she thought as an afterthought, because he got her good. Now what? What does he want now? More humiliation? How much until he got tired and let her go?

Chapter 10

Chapter 10

Hermione moved into Grimmauld Place the next day. Edna and Delia were sighing with approval. Now they each had a bedroom with a proper bed and bathroom. A proper kitchen, stocked with food.

The house had been stripped of any objects that were not Black family heirlooms and furniture. Harry's things were long gone as were Sirius' things. The lack of life in the house was almost tangible, the fires were struggling to fight the chill of the long time vacant house.

Every corner held memories of better days. Especially the kitchen, which had been the central meeting place of the house when it had served as Head Quarters. Hermione chose Harry's room. She wondered if anyone had slept in the bed since Harry had. She couldn't imagine anyone had stayed in the house since. She tried to see if she could find Harry's scent in the sheets, but they were completely clean and devoid of any human scent.

Moving into Grimmauld Place was bitter sweet. It reminded her of a different time, a different life. A time when she still had faith in the world she lived in. She wasn't sure what she believed in anymore. It certainly wasn't her own innocence.

Draco was true to his word. He didn't bother her until the next day. He called her over early and they had sex on the living room sofa. Draco had a hangover and Hermione had learnt that a hangover seemed to make his horny. Maybe that was a faulty assumption, she accepted as he repeatedly thrust into her, he always had a hangover and he was always horny, doesn't necessary establish a foolproof link.

He so unapologetically revelled in her body and what he was doing. His concentration on what he was doing was absolute. Hermione watched as every muscle in his body strained with effort. He did have a rather beautiful body. There were no soft bits on him, which was amazing considering the lifestyle he led. He cried out as he came, arching back as he ground her hips to him.

He seemed to completely deflate after, his head sinking down and his eyes closed.

"Stay here until I come back from dinner." He said after a minute of catching his breath. "I don't think I can get through tonight without murdering someone if I don't have this to come back to."

Hermione nodded, happy that she didn't have to go with him.

"Fine, but after you come back, I am going home."

"Stay the night." He said, still inside her. Hermione tried to wiggle away, but he held her where she was.

"You know I need to take care of the ladies."

"I will send one of the elves over to look after them."

"No." She said. "They are my responsibility."

He stared at her. She wriggled harder making it obvious that she wanted him out. Still he held on. Slowly he started moving inside her again, growing harder with the friction. Hermione could tell that he was angry. As soon as he was hard again, he grabbed her off the sofa and placed her on the carpet where he forcefully thrust into her much harder than he ever had before.

Hermione didn't mind, she wasn't shocked. Somehow it seemed more authentic in some way she couldn't quite explain. And it was almost... sexy. Draco was shaking with exertion when he finally came, thrusting through it. Hermione had never taken herself for a

girl who liked it rough, but she had to admit there was something appealing in a bit of anger.

He rolled off her, sweat covering his body now. She wasn't sure who just won their little power struggle, but she was sure she didn't lose. She wasn't going to give up whatever power she had in this relationship. He had begged her to come back and providing her a place to live was not going to change that dynamic.

Staying the night meant something and Hermione felt that it threatened her independence. It was all she had left.

She waited downstairs while Draco went upstairs and showered. When he came down he was formally dressed. Deep black robes, impeccably cut. Silver and emerald cufflinks, collar links and pins. The belt buckle was also an austere silver variety that screamed understated elegance. He looked good, if you were into that kind of look. It showed his shoulders and chest well. The well tailored pants didn't do any disservice to his hips and thigh muscles either. The intervening years had served him well, because she never recognised that he looked this good in school. Perhaps it was the fact that he wasn't a gangly teenager anymore, as much as his personality and behaviour seemed to suggest it.

She didn't ask where he was going. She didn't care, but she guessed that he had to behave. He was planning on 'using' her after which suggested that he could not get too drunk. Hermione was pleased at the reprieve from having to spend the evening with him and his friends.

Hermione spent time in the library while he was gone. She had been served dinner in the dining room. The silence of the house seemed opposing as she ate alone in a room made for entertaining. There was an interesting collection in the library, mostly old texts. Hermione fell asleep by the fire with a blanket over her lap.

"Sometimes I wonder if you are twenty three going on eighty, Granger. No wonder you love the companies of the biddies so

much." Draco woke her. "Provide you with the kind of companionship you've always dreamed of?"

Hermione didn't respond, she knew he was still angry about their little disagreement before. He walked over to the serving table with glasses and decanters. Poured himself a large glass. Hermione could tell he was sober and probably resented it.

"Had to spend the evening with the parents and the she-bitch." He stated and flopped down in the other chair. Hermione could only assume that he was talking about his wife. "I swear the world cringes whenever she is near."

"Well, I am hurt Malfoy, I thought I was the biggest bitch you had ever met." She said.

He chuckled at the statement and stared down into his drink.

Hermione contemplated his actions. He obviously didn't like his wife and thought her a bitch, but then went out and sought out the bitchiest girl he'd known, and he had pointed out that fact on numerous occasions during their school years, to bed on a regular basis. She wondered if he was a bit of a closet masochist.

They had sex again that evening, slow and meticulous, which was different. Draco watched her dress from the bed, while sipping on his firewhiskey. His pale skin shone in the diffused light from the fire. Hermione knew he wasn't happy about her leaving, but she didn't care. Actually she was pretty glad she was defying him because maybe he would let her go sooner. Although walking around MQ at two in the morning had its hazards, crawling back in bed with a warm, naked Draco had a set of risks all of its own.

He didn't call for her the next day and Hermione had twinges of hope that he had grown tired. Her careful hopes were premature. He owled for her the next evening. He was already pretty intoxicated when she got there. Not drunk, but Hermione wouldn't want to apparate with him in this state. He was dressed to go out and they

floo'd somewhere. It was a club of some kind this time. It was full of wizards and ladies who weren't their wives, probably nobody else's either.

Funnily, the whole place was in Gryffindor colours, red velvet and gold. It gave a warm look to the room along with the million burning candles. Maybe the houses were finally unified as a consequence of their mistreatment of people with lesser status, Hermione thought bitterly. People were drinking, gambling and flirting. This was the pureblood male playground. Hermione had never seen anything like it. She thought their house parties were pretty bad, but this was much bigger in scale. There was music, pretty women serving drinks and scantily clad girls dancing. Hermione flashed back to what Draco had done to her before but pressed down the anger she still felt.

Draco was seemingly well familiar with the place, including some of the girls who flirted and pouted at him. They found the table with Draco's friends. The table was filled with all sorts of alcohol, and the odd bit of finger food. She got handed a glass of wine by someone and thanked them absently. Theo and Connie wasn't there, but the rest of the regulars were.

Hermione spent a bit of time looking around the room. There were a few people she recognised that she hadn't seen in a long time. She saw Cormac McLaggen with his arm around some girl while chatting to a Ravenclaw from his year. If she could have one thing going her way this evening it was to not run into him.

Hermione settled down for a long evening. She listened to their conversation for a while and it was interesting. Politics, Ministry inner workings and such, but after a while the drunkenness was setting in, leaving the conversation less diverting. There was gambling going on at the table and Draco was doing fairly well.

Occasionally he would get up and go to the bathroom, stroking her neck every time he walked past. She knew he was too drunk tonight to need anything from her beyond someone to get him to bed, and she was pleased.

Their gambling started to get more reckless, even to the point where Blaise and Draco were gambling with some of their lesser property. The excitement was clearly affecting them because they were caught up with each turn of the cards. The intensity even affected Hermione, who really had nothing better to do than to watch the game unfold. Draco won in the end and Blaise was furious.

"I am the undefeated champion." Draco exclaimed. A bit of his whiskey spilled out of his glass as he shot his arms in the air.
"Nobody can take me. The fates love me. I dare anyone to take me on."

"Really?" Marcus Flint said laughing. "I'll take you on."

Draco smiled, "Yeah? Get ready to have your balls handed to you."

"You think so?" Flint said with a smile. They stared at each other for a while. Not unfriendly, but not quite friendly either.

"I will play you for that little cottage you have in Switzerland." Draco said. "I dare you. I will put up the hunting lodge I have in Norway."

"No." Marcus said. "Granger."

Hermione head shot up at her name being said. What was going on? Marcus and Draco were staring intently at each other. The whole table was quiet.

"Fine." Draco said and then sneered, and Hermione mouth dropped open. "I will enjoy my summer in Switzerland this year."

Hermione couldn't believe her ears, surely he wasn't gambling with her as the stakes. Was that even legal? The game started and Hermione waited with baited breath at each turn of the cards. She didn't really know the game well so she wasn't sure what was happening. The intensity of the game was involving lots of people, who were standing around the table watching the game unfold.

Hermione frantically looked around as the crowd hissed. People were practically chewing on their fists and finally the crowd gasped and then cheered.

Hermione looked at Draco and his face was in a dark scowl. Marcus was laughing and pumped his fists in the air in a little victory dance. Hermione was feeling queasy with tension. What had just happened? Marcus had just won. Won her. What did that mean?

"Best two out of three." Draco said.

"No way." Marcus said, still laughing.

"Come on." Draco demanded, "You have to give me a chance to recover."

"Nope." Marcus said. "Come my lady." He said and held his hand out to Hermione.

Hermione was shocked, she didn't know what to do. Not being able to think of anything else to do, she hesitantly took his hand. Her eyes sought out Draco, who looked positively murderous. Marcus pulled her out of her seat and tucked her arm between his elbow and side.

"Time to go I think." He said smiling, then more quietly, "Before Draco loses it."

She heard a large commotion behind her as they walked down the stairs to the exit. She could hear Draco screaming some very colourful expletives. Language she had never heard him use before.

Hermione was positively shaking with adrenalin as Marcus Flint led her towards a fireplace. Her mind was whirling to grapple the implications of what just happened. There didn't seem to be enough oxygen in the air tonight. Hermione was too shocked and confused to think, unable to string together any coherent thought, she just let him led her into the fireplace.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11

Hermione arrived at Flint's house around midnight.

"I don't have to go along with this." She said. "You don't own me."

"Of course not." He said and sat down on a sofa in a large room, which must have been his bedroom, because there was a large bed further down. "You are under no obligation whatsoever."

"I can just leave." She stated more to clarify so they were both clear.

"Only Draco is under the obligations of the bet." He said leaning back and studying her. "Would you like a drink?"

"What? No." She said. "What does that mean?"

"It means he has to give up any stake he has on you if I have any interest in you." Marcus said, his eyes sparkling a little in the darkness. "But you are your own person, you can scurry on back to him if you want."

Hermione snorted and crossed her arms, which seemed to amuse Marcus. Hermione was trying to think through what would be best. She wanted to be rid of Draco and had just managed it, albeit unexpectedly. She wasn't entirely sure that Marcus would serve as a good patron, she couldn't imagine him settling down for a quiet life, but then again you never knew with men.

"I, however, would love for you to stay." He continued after a moment of silence.

If she walked away, she would be stuck back in MQ, but her access to potentially suitable patrons would be seriously diminished along with her prospects for taking care of herself. Patrons weren't exactly

walking around MQ looking for love matches. She would probably lose Grimmauld Place either way, and she had just spent the morning moving in.

"I live in one of Draco's properties." She stated.

"I will of course provide you with similar comforts." Marcus said.

Hermione wasn't sure what to do. She wished she didn't have to make this decision. What would Connie do? Actually she knew just what Connie would do. Capitalise on the opportunity presented, after all, she had just achieved Draco giving up his claim, which was just what she wanted.

"If you were to stay," Marcus said in a low tone with a smirk, "I couldn't imagine anything in the world that would piss off Draco Malfoy more."

Hermione smiled. Ok, that was a pretty appealing bonus, downright sexy actually. She would get what she wanted, plus she would seriously piss off Malfoy. There have been times in her life, in school, when she would have given anything to piss off Malfoy, and now the opportunity presented itself in the tidy package that was Marcus Flint. Orchestrated by Malfoy himself.

She had never really had much to do with him before. He was quite a few years ahead of her in school, obsessed with Quidditch and he had been a fearsome competitor according to the Gryffindor players. He wasn't handsome, but he wasn't revolting either. He had a nice body.

He stood up and came over to take her hand. He was tall. Hermione wanted to pull away. She didn't feel comfortable with the idea of sleeping with him. Sleeping with someone has never been a decision she had taken lightly. It had always included some serious reflection on what the person meant to her, until now, when it was more about survival. The whole thing was still intensely uncomfortable.

It was for the best, no matter how badly it went with her sentiments. This is what she did now. He wasn't some old disgusting slob. It was him or Draco, and Marcus had made it clear that it was her choice, as opposed to Draco who had ruined her life and forced her to sleep with him.

Marcus had said he would take care of her, and she could use this time to find the patron who would hopefully share his home for the rest of her life. How bad could it be? And it would really, really piss off Malfoy. The balance was seriously weighing towards Marcus.

Hermione's heart was beating violently as he led her to the bed. He indicated that she sit down, which she did. Her throat was dry at this point. Maybe she needed a bit of water.

He handed her a vial.

"What?" Hermione asked, she was under the most bomb-proof contraceptive spells thanks to the Ministry, so she had no idea what this potion was. "What is that?"

"You don't know what this is?" Marcus said with a raised eyebrow. "Malfoy doesn't use this on you. How very interesting."

"What is it?" Hermione said eyeing it suspiciously. She had a strong urge to bolt.

"It is called the Igneus potion." He said. "It makes things a lot better for you. You've seriously never used it?"

"I never heard of it." She said, still very uncertain.

"It's not a potion taught at Hogwarts." He said.

"Is it dark?"

"No." He laughed. "But it has been used by women in the wizard world since the beginning of time. You should try it, I think you will

find it improves things substantially. Here, I will try some." He said and took a sip from the vial.

Hermione's natural curiosity kicked in. A potion for women that wasn't taught in Hogwarts. What exactly were they hiding? Her recently enhanced scepticism for this society left her with no doubt that they would withhold things that were beneficial for women. He said it help her. Nothing in her instincts told her that Marcus was lying. Her curiosity was killing her.

She threw caution to the wind and downed the potion. The effect was immediate. Goosebumps travelled over her skin and her whole body tightened. It was a lust potion and it was very effective. Not a love potion, just lust, pure unadulterated, fuck me now lust. The height of lust. She hadn't felt this way since she'd been with Dean, which had frankly been a long time now.

She could barely sit still, she wanted a shag so badly she didn't know what to do with herself. She couldn't help but to grind her legs together. The hot, heavy feeling in her core was practically pulsing. And the answer to her little problem was standing in front of her, watching her as she was panting with desire. So his nice body was looking utterly fantastic. She wanted to rip his clothes off.

Fortunately he was open to oblige, but to Hermione's utter frustration, he wanted to play, to taste and to tease. None of while she had any interest in, she just wanted it hard and fast, right now. She was almost in tears of frustration by the time he finally entered her, which was probably in actuality close to two minutes later. The feel of him inside her was fantastic and sent waves of heated sensation throughout her entire body.

But it wasn't enough, she yanked him by the hair until he lay down on the bed and she could get on top. From where she could control everything. Seeing him at mercy to his own sensations was only fuelling the fire, which fully ignited as she watched him contort as he was trying to fight his rapidly developing orgasm. She felt merciless. She felt like she ruled the world. She came for the first time in a very

long time and it was glorious. All the stress and worry just evaporated.

She laid back on the bed trying to catch her breath. That was fantastic. Skip all the hassle, the worry about how you're looking or performing, or what your partner is thinking of you and just skip to the reward. This she could do again, and then probably again after that. Just glorious lust. Is this how it was for men?

She could see why this was not part of the Hogwarts curriculum. The school would probably have gone nuts if the student all knew how to brew this.

"And Malfoy doesn't know about this?" She said when she caught her breath.

"He does." Marcus said beside her.

"Then...?" She started without finishing. Did he want her to suffer? He could have given her this potion and, as Marcus said, things would have been a lot better for her. Maybe he just didn't care how she was faring. She cursed him for being a bastard.

There was no note asking her to move out the next day. There wasn't one the next day either. She didn't know what to do. Should she be trying to move to a property Marcus was providing, or did her 'earning' the right to live here extend for some time?

Trying to decipher ethics or etiquette in this whole thing was doing her head in. She decided not to do anything until she spoke to Connie. Apparently she would see her tonight, if Marcus' judgement was right.

She liked Marcus, he laid everything out. Where they would be going, who would be there, what they would be doing. She liked that she knew exactly what was coming. He also warned that Malfoy would not be happy. Not exactly used to not having his way. Not that

he had anyone else to blame but himself, Hermione thought. And he would be there tonight.

Hermione decided to wear one of her green dresses tonight. She refused to wear green for Draco, but she would tonight in a desire to twist the thorn. He probably would never even get the gesture, but she didn't care. In her mind it was a big 'Fuck You' and that was enough for her.

Marcus gave her a bracelet before they left for the evening. It was a silver bracelet with a line of small diamonds along its surface. Marcus giving her jewellery would send a stronger message to Draco, according to Marcus, one that said that her current amour valued her and intended on keeping her happy.

The evening's festivities were held the house of one of the younger Slytherins. One she had never paid any attention to in school but was now clearly part of the gang.

She made a beeline for Connie as soon as she arrived.

"Well that was an interesting turn of events." Connie said as Hermione sat down next to her. "Did you engineer that?"

"No." Hermione admitted. "But it means his claim on me is over doesn't it. The fatwa is over?"

"It does. It would have been brilliant if you had. Very effective."

"I wish I was that cunning, but it was pure circumstance."

"Well mission accomplished." Connie said. "We will accept the victory gracefully nonetheless. And yes, Draco has given up his claim according to the code of conduct they prescribe to."

"For good?"

"I don't know. I haven't really come across this particular situation before." Connie said. "Either way, Marcus is not a bad person to be

linked to. He is generous. Perhaps not patron material, if that is still what you are interested in."

"I am." Hermione said. "How do I go about achieving that?"

"It is better to look amongst the older men or the lesser families." Connie said. "By nature, the type of man you are interest in, are hard to access. They tend not to go to these kind of places, or gather in any places for that matter. The best way is let the girls know, particularly the more established ones, who will recommend unattached men they know of."

"I don't know any of the girls." Hermione said dishearted.

"I will ask around. Shopping is a good way to see them outside of these types of events. Now I must go entertain." She said with a sigh before getting up and seeking out Nott.

Should I be entertaining as well? Hermione wondered. Then kicking herself for forgetting to ask what she was going to do with her living situation.

Hermione decided that she probably needed to follow Connie's lead and went to where Marcus was sitting. Malfoy was sitting in the same circle of chairs. Hermione avoided looking at him as she walked up and went to stand behind Marcus' chair. She lightly put her hand on his shoulder and leant down to ask him if he wanted her to get anything for him.

There was a loud screeching noise as Draco suddenly got out of his chair and walked away. In fact, he left the party all together. She guessed he wasn't happy. What a shame.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12

Life with Marcus was bearable, even fruitful. He gave her quite a bit of jewellery. Mostly to show off for Draco. Draco did seem to notice these things. He gave her some new dresses as well, although she didn't think she needed anything. But she supposed it was the principle of the thing. Can't having her show up in some other man's gifts.

Draco was not happy about the situation. In fact he sulked. He wasn't running away anymore, but he looked murderous whenever she was around. He was still drinking, but he wasn't enjoying the evening. He would sit and watch the evening's festivities. Occasionally running his hands through his blond hair before returning to his feral looking scowl.

Marcus also slowed down his drinking, preferring to stay a little more sober than usual. There was some kind of silent conversation going on between Draco and Marcus. Obviously some kind of pissing contest.

This was an opportunity according to Connie. One to be capitalised on. Two interested men, trying to outdo each other. Not that Draco could participate, but it made Marcus more attentive.

Hermione could not believe that they were having some kind of contest for her. The girl they had both derided in school. Now they were competing. Although saying that, she would not trade the bit of payback she felt at Draco's anger and disappointment. Stupid boy. He was a man really, but how could you think of someone as a man considering what he'd done and how childish he was now acting.

She was still staying at Grimmauld place. She had not been asked to leave, so she stayed. If it had been some other place, she would

have felt uncomfortable staying after their 'arrangement' had now ended. But it was Harry's place, it didn't really belong to Draco anyway. So she felt alright with staying there.

With Marcus taking care not to drink too much, the likelihood of sex at the end of the evening was higher. She didn't mind. The potion made it easy. It was actually a nice escape from the stress and the tension, and it required nothing of her. No need to determine that she felt right about this person or what it would mean for the future or their relationship, it just was what it was. Pleasure. Induced, but pleasurable none the less.

Marcus was not a bad lover. Enthusiastic, wanting to try different things, which Hermione didn't mind while on the potion. It all felt good.

Connie sent her a note one morning asking her to meet in Diagon Alley that afternoon. Hermione found her sitting on one of the elegant little cafes meant for the wealthiest of this society. Dressed exquisitely in satin, looking like a tropical bird amongst the dowdy looking pureblood wives.

"I have found a patron for you." Connie said enthusiastically as Hermione sat down.

"Oh?" Hermione asked excitedly.

"His name is Augustus Merrimen. Mid to late thirties. Descendant of a muggleborn, hence the low position. Quiet man, a clerk at the Ministry with few social prospects. Probably few professional prospects as well. Not really an ambitious man. Are you sure you want to go this route?" Connie said uncertain.

"I'm sure." Hermione said. "I am not cut out for this kind of life."

"He has some money. An okay cottage that he inherited out in the Cotswold somewhere."

"I love the Cotswold." Hermione said.

"He eats lunch late in the afternoon." Connie said. "Right over there, she said pointing at a sandwich establishment across the road. He should be here any minute."

Hermione couldn't help but be curious. She ordered herself a tea of the disapproving waitress and waited while Connie kept an eye out.

"Here he comes." She said and discreetly pointed at a man in plain gray robes.

He had almost yellow wavy blond hair that reached down past his ears. All in all a plain man, who Hermione would not honestly have looked at twice. He was confronted by two women coming out of the shop and he stepped back and bowed slightly as they passed. They didn't acknowledge his presence.

"He has a good nature apparently." Connie said. "Has an interest in birds."

He wasn't ugly. He had intelligent looking eyes. Kind almost. Hermione felt like she was evaluating a puppy at the pound.

"Single obviously." Connie continued as they watched the man buy his sandwich and then walk out of the store. He smiled at someone he met then tucked his head down and walked back the way he came from.

"It would not be an exciting life." Connie said unenthusiastically. "But it would probably be quite stable. Particularly if you can bring yourself to care about birds."

Hermione felt compassion for the man. The poor, gentle man who didn't have the means to find a wife in this horrid world. He must be very lonely, she concluded.

"He might do." Hermione said quietly.

"Think it over." Connie said with a hint of distaste.

And she would, she decided. A puppy is for life, not just for Christmas, she told herself. She needed to think this over.

Marcus called for her that night. She spent the night looking pretty at the club where Draco had gambled her away. She made much more of an effort to look nice these days. The gambling didn't prove nearly as interesting tonight. Marcus refused to go near the gambling table. She and Marcus left early, followed by the angry eyes of Draco Malfoy as they left.

"You know the potion only amplifies." He said later that night as he lay on his back catching his breath after a particularly vigorous session.

Hermione lay next to him, feeling the sensations and heat starting to drain away after a very satisfying culmination. It wasn't much unlike what it had been like with Dean, although it skipped all the teasing and build up, the potion went straight into the heart of it. Hermione didn't mind, she didn't want some great meeting of heart and soul, she just wanted to get off and it did the job beautifully.

She found these regular releases affected her whole life. She was generally calmer and less worried, because she had a consistent and intense release of whatever pressure she felt. She hadn't even realised that she had missed it after Dean left. The sex that was. She had been so focus on the failure of the relationship, she had not given the sex itself that much thought.

"It does nothing for some girls." He continued. "With you, its wild. That means there already was a wild little thing inside you all along. The potion just brings it out. Who knew, the little prissy know-it-all. A heathen under all that primness."

He was smiling as he rolled over towards her. It wasn't meant as an insult. He wasn't telling her anything she didn't know. Or that Dean

didn't know. She smiled to herself at the memories of some of their evenings spent together.

"And he knew." He said.

"Who?" Hermione said, surely he couldn't be talking about Dean.

"Malfoy."

"What?" Hermione snorted. "Malfoy can't see beyond his own reflection."

"That's why he wouldn't use it on you." Marcus said and circled a finger around the heated skin of breast.

"Please." She said getting annoyed that he was touching her so intimately. "He wanted it to be as uncomfortable for me as he possibly could."

He didn't say anything, but Hermione got the feeling he didn't believe her. Hermione got out of bed and reached for her dress. Marcus stayed on the bed, sitting up slightly against the headboard, watching her.

"You're a fantastic fuck." He said and reached for the drink he had beside the bed. Still completely nude.

Hermione stopped and looked at him. She wasn't sure what to say. She knew he meant it as a compliment, but as a girl, it just didn't sit right. Particularly not with these circumstances. It kind of made it sound like this was what she was supposed to be doing and that hurt.

"Thanks." She said.

"I would love to keep you."

That got her attention and she stared at him. Was he getting rid of her?

"But he is not going to stop, you know." He continued.

"Who?"

"Draco."

Hermione didn't know what to say or think.

"But he lost." She finally said.

"For now." Marcus said. "I've known Draco all my life and he will not stop. He will get you back. And as much as I like having your company, there is only so much I can take before..." He drifted off.

Hermione was disconcerted by the statement. She had liked being Marcus' girl, but it's not like she expected him to go into battle for her, and he made it sound like that was required to keep her safe from Draco.

He was trying to warn her about how things would go. She always appreciated how he would inform her how things would play out.

"I would prefer to stay with you." She said and he smiled brightly. It was true, but it was also a bit of a reward. Maybe Connie was rubbing off on her.

"I will hang on as long as I can." He said. His eyes sparkling with mischief.

Hermione went home. She never stayed the night. It was a firm policy now. A bit of control in a world where she had very little.

A part of her was hurt that Marcus would sell her out, but she also knew that this was not a world with loyalty, particularly for girls like her.

She hoped beyond anything that Marcus was wrong about Draco. If it was true and Marcus would not want to go against Draco, what chance would a man like Augustus Merrimen have. It would probably

end badly. She was increasingly growing fond of this man who blended into the furniture even though she had never met him. He was her future after all. Her saviour in a sense, even if he had no idea.

This is what arranged marriages must feel like, she told herself. It had been done for thousands of years, still was in some parts. The world did not fall apart because of arranged marriages, she would make this work. It could work out really well. And if it didn't, it wasn't a marriage after all, she could just try again. But she decided that it was better to sit on the Merrimen plan for a while until things settle down, or at least until Draco starts turning up with another girl.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13

Life continued as it was for about two weeks. She went out with Marcus in the evenings. Marcus would take jabs at Draco. Draco would sulk. Which was at least amusing.

The sex was great. Marcus was generally more considerate than Draco, but he wasn't the perfect gentleman. Hermione tried very hard not to build the forgettable Augustus Merrimen into some kind of saint. That would do her no good. She had come to realise that no men were, well except for maybe Harry. The rest, you had to accept the warts as well.

This particular evening they were spending at Goyle's house. An old manor pretty similar to all the pureblood's old manors. Not a beautiful family from what their portraits reveal.

Hermione wondered if she'd ever see hers again, if they would ever remember her again. She tried to dismiss the thoughts as they were pressing down on her quite severely, but they would not quite shake.

Connie was holding court tonight. She had the boys enthralled by some story she was telling. Hermione wondered if she was punishing Nott for something. Punishment by charm offensive. Everything Connie did had a purpose. She was pretty sure she never wanted Connie as an enemy.

"They have to feel lucky to have you." She had told her once. It made Hermione wonder about the value of relationships, the value in relationships. Growing up she had never wondered about that, you fell in love and that was that. The purebloods didn't love, this was all about currency of some kind. Her relationship with Marcus was about revenge, and maybe sex.

At least Ron fell in love, he was a shit, but he fell in love and that was better than anything else she had seen from the pureblood's arranged business marriages, to the ill fitting needs of the pureblood women to the men with their mistresses.

She hoped so badly that this thing with Augustus Merrimen would work out. Driven by loneliness. A gentle evolving respect. Something sweet and supporting. A spark of warmth in this awful, cold world.

Hermione realised she was in the mood for punishment today, so she went out on the cold balcony area to shock herself out of where her mind was currently dwelling. The desperate hope of her plan pinned on a man she'd never met and the pressing sadness of what she'd lost.

The cold air was stinging, but it was nice to be away from the drunken mess inside.

She heard footsteps behind her.

"Hiding?" She heard the cool drawl that only had one master.

"Taking a minute to myself." She said annoyed at the intrusion.

"Do you like the house?" Draco asked.

"I hadn't really thought about it, they all seem pretty much the same."

It was quiet for a second.

"Where is Marcus?" She asked without turning around to face him.

"He has gone." Draco said.

So that was it. Whatever was to happen, had happened and Draco was here to inform her. She rubbed the bridge of her nose for a minute trying to hide the bitter smile.

She wanted to ask why. Why couldn't he just let her go. The fatwa was obviously back in force now. Why hadn't he tired of her? Although she knew the answer, because he hadn't had the chance, he lost her, which wasn't his plan, so now they were back on track according to his plan.

"Lets go." He said.

What choice did she have now? She was living in his house. She needed him to let her go, which he wouldn't do until he decided to. So she did the only thing she could, turned and walked after him.

He grabbed her elbow and apparated her back to the Black manor. He didn't let go as he walked her to the bed room. Where he pushed her away as they got inside the dark room lit only by a fire.

"Did you sleep with him?" He asked.

"Yes."

He sat down on the bed.

"Of course I did." She said.

"You could have said no." He said.

Hermione stared at him, not believing they were having this conversation.

"Well, I was trying to come to terms with that fact that this is what I do now." She said bitterly. "This is what you did to me. You lost me the only job I could get and turned me into a whore."

He tsked with annoyance.

"And then you gambled me away." She said pronouncing every word separately.

There was a pressing silence.

"Did he use the potion on you?"

"Yes."

Silence prevailed.

"Did you like it?"

More than I would ever admit, she thought to herself. "It made things easier."

"Do you want me to use it on you?"

"That is up to you as I understand the rules of the game." She said.

He tsked again.

Why was he interrogating her? Did he have some delude expectation that she would be loyal?

"You gambled me away." She said. "I don't understand what your expectations were? The act itself was pretty telling."

More silence.

"I had to pay a fortune to get you back." He finally said and got off the bed.

Hermione had to bite her tongue in annoyance. Part of her wanted to ask why, but the other part really didn't want to know what he'd say.

Talk time was over apparently. He was standing right in front of her now as he leaned down and kissed her. It started light, but deepened in a heartbeat. He pressed her to him and Hermione got reacquainted with how strong he was. He had never kissed her this deeply before.

She wondered if he'd actually missed her before dismissing the thought. She could feel how excited he was as it pressed against her

belly. A fissure invaded her senses. Her body was used to sex now, used to the pleasure and it responded to her shock.

This was not allowed she thought has he lifted her up onto the desk behind him. Her body was so used to giving into the desire, finding release, she didn't need the potion anymore.

She fought desperately to fight the desire as he caressed her thighs. He was unzipping and pushed insider her, sliding in easily. He groaned as he entered her. Hermione was mortified to think that he probably noticed how her body welcomed him. Her steely determination managed to shut down the sensations her body was begging for.

He didn't deserve her. He didn't deserve her accepting him. Marcus had been another story. She'd essentially been using him as much as she was using her. And he had asked. Draco hadn't, he manipulated and demanded. She wasn't sure if that was the whole story, but it made sense to her. She had issues with enjoying sex with Draco and that was the long and the short of it. She didn't want to go into the details.

She managed to suppress the sensations although her body was begging to submit, but something in her mind told her that submitting to Draco Malfoy would be a really bad thing.

He came with a cry that people on the street would probably have heard. He panted over her for a minute before pulling out. They were both still completely dressed. He tucked himself back in, but didn't bother zipping up. Instead he went a poured himself a generous drink.

The night wasn't over.

A few days later, life was back to the way it was before her little detour into Flint's service.

"So back again." Connie commented when Hermione saw her next, which happened to be at the club where she had been gambled away.

Hermione only shrugged. "I think losing annoyed him. I am not sure he is used to it." Although he got it dished out a lot at school, she completed in her mind. He should have been used to it.

"It is a bit strange." Connie said thoughtfully. "It does indicate something beyond the usual."

Maybe that was it, Hermione thought, maybe having lost to her and her friends so much at school, he refused to lose now.

"Do you think he has feelings for you?" Connie asked absurdly.

"Please, its Draco Malfoy." Hermione snorted.

"It is completely out of character. Whatever, it does somewhat ruin our plans for you though."

"I think it may have more to do with old school grudges." Hermione said.

"You either have to just wait out whatever this is that is going on with him, or you can do something about it."

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked tentatively.

"Well we might have to pull out the serious artillery." Connie said with new cheer.

Sounded good to Hermione, she hadn't realised there was serious artillery, but she was bolstered by the thought.

"What do men, well boys, fear the most?" Connie asked.

Hermione couldn't really think what she was referring to. Draco feared danger, but Hermione couldn't think of anything she could do.

She wasn't really willing to martyr herself in order to hurt him.

Hermione's uncertainty made Connie roll her eyes.

"They fear clingy women above all else. Clingy women who are in love with them. They will take a banshee, a troll and any number of men hating mythological creatures over a clingy woman any day."

Hermione stared at her for a while. She tried to think of examples. There was Lavender in sixth year. That had been pretty effective at getting Ron to run. Then there was Pansy following Draco around like a puppy. That seemed to have been embarrassing to him as well. He'd hated Pansy cooing over him, pouting and calling him sugary names.

"I think you might be onto something." Hermione said with a spreading smile.

"It literally is a deathblow to a relationship in these circles." Connie said.

"I don't have a great deal of experience with it myself." Hermione said with pride.

"Yes well, if you want to get rid of him." Connie said. "It can't be a quick thing. He would notice that you are playing a game with him. He does watch you intently you know."

"He is a predator." Hermione said dismissively.

"He needs to think you're in love with him." Connie said.

Hermione made an uncomfortable gulp.

"It needs to be a slow build up so its believable, then bring out the crazy." She said. "I swear he will dump you faster than you can say 'Snookums'."

"I'm not sure I could bring myself to ever call him Snookums."

"Well you might have to." Connie said sternly. "Whatever this is going on with him, it could drag on for years. If you are right and you are providing him with some kind of payback to some assault on his dignity or identity, this thing could go on forever. Do you want to play that game?"

"No." Hermione said, deep in thought.

"Unless you want to." Connie pressed. "You two obviously have some kind of history."

"No!" Hermione shot back offended. "I'm just not sure I could pretend to love him, I can't even pretend to like him. He makes me want to vomit."

"Really?" Connie said getting up. "A little bit of pain now or potentially years of pain later. You decide what you want. I should go find Theo."

Chapter 14

Chapter 14

Hermione was convoluted in her thinking. How the hell would she pull off pretending to be in love with Malfoy? She wasn't good at pretending to do anything. She was by no means an actor and had little experience deceiving someone, least of all a Slytherin who was used to watching for that kind of thing.

She didn't know what she was going to do? How do you pretend to love someone? First of all, she decided, you like being with them. That was going to be a stretch, because she didn't. At least she was supposed to bring it on slowly which gave her a bit of time to get used to the idea. Second, you have to like *being* with them, which Hermione was not sure she could pull off in a million years.

But what was the alternative, hang around doing this for two years. No, she had to pull herself together, get over her squeamishness and just do it. It was worth it. So she had to act like she liked it when he touched her. Maybe she could get some of the Igneus Potion. No she decided, he would be able to tell and having to use a potion to tolerate someone's touch was not a great indication of love.

She got her chance to practice the next day. It was Sunday afternoon and Malfoy called her over around three in the afternoon. He was dressed and had just returned from lunch with his family. He didn't specify which ones, but his mood was depressed. She still couldn't quite understand why he wanted to spend time with her. Obviously spending time with someone who loathes him makes him feel better or improves his disposition in some way.

"Are you hungry?" He asked and she shook her head.

"It feels like spring." He said and he was right. It was the first real sunny day that indicated that winter was coming to an end.

Hermione kind of liked winter, it suited her disposition and her predicament.

Hermione tried to smile, but it came out more like a grimace. Trying out her acting skills. Not too much, she chided herself, bring it on slowly. So she dropped her grimace to aim for a more neutral face. This was so frustrating, she thought with a sting of annoyance.

"What is the matter with you?" He asked. He had obviously been watching her face.

"Nothing." She said, "Just thinking of something."

"Always thinking." He said and pulled her close. "You really need to stop or you will do yourself an injury."

"That sounds so patronising." She said. She wanted to push him away, but restrained the urge.

"You think so?" He said teasingly. "How about, don't worry your pretty little head about it. Let me take care of the thinking, you do what you should and look pretty."

He was teasing her, but underneath it rang true. She was supposed to be pretty in her position, accommodating and welcoming. She was neither, so what was he doing with her when there were so many others prettier than her, nicer than her, more welcoming. Worse was that he made them sound like a team, like he would take care of her. And that was a lie.

"And if I don't?" She asked.

"You will worry yourself into an early grave. That constant scowl on your face will give you wrinkles." He continued still in a light manner.

Wrinkles on a girl like her was not a good thing, was the implication. Girls like her were only viable as long as they were desirable. She hated him for being so blasé about her position. But that isn't what

this was about, it was about distracting him from his position, not about hers. What fun would that be? Her position was awful. The jewellery, the money and the taking care of her current needs were all for the privilege of not caring for her position when he was done with her.

"Can't have that." She said and tried another smile. He noticed it, but didn't say anything. She decided that maybe she should try chatting as a first step to her supposed love.

"Would you like a drink?" She asked. "I can pour you one. I am assuming since its Sunday, you don't need to be anywhere particularly demanding this evening."

"Only what you demand." He said slyly.

Which was a bit of a joke as she did not demand anything of him. Not yet anyway, she said to herself with a little smile. Things were going to change for him.

Hermione went to pour him a drink. The sun was streaming into windows, seeming to shock the room's gloomy contents.

"I don't want a drink." He said in the low tone that told her he was thinking about her, about her anatomy more like. "Come here."

Ok, time for some acting. She gave him a tiny playfully chiding look, which got a small pleased look of surprise from him.

"What to do on a lazy afternoon like this?" He said in a quiet deep voice that seemed to play with each of the words. He was in the mood to play. "With all the time in the world."

He stepped towards her and Hermione's heart was beating quickly, not so much for the sickening resignation, but more from the fact that the game was on. The pretence was on and she didn't know if she could pull it off.

"I think I am going to have to fuck you slowly." He said with a look that wanted to pin her to the wall.

Last time, it hadn't been so much like sickening resignation, Hermione recalled. She had been fighting to not getting turned on after spending time with Marcus letting it all flow. Maybe that is what she needed, to let it flow. Her body ached for it. But its him, she hated him. Hated what he had done to her. Made her dependent, made her have to accept him, well accept his touch, she never accepted him.

Maybe she could just forget the fact that it was him, just some nameless, faceless male. Maybe pretend it was Dean. Let it flow. She closed her eyes and tried to breath out the tension.

I can't do this, her brain screamed. She felt him and the kiss at the same time. So easy with Marcus, but impossible with him. Her body reacted, but her brain still wouldn't give up its objection.

The kiss was slow and deep. He had never kissed her so before. Teasing, playful, soft. Even her brain had to admit that the kiss was rather spectacular. She had never considered that he was capable of being a good kisser. How could someone so selfish be a good kisser?

Focus on the kiss, she told herself, ignore the man behind it. A few more second of the treatment and she was completely lost in the kiss.

When it finally broke apart, she made a surprise, "Oh."

Her look pleased him. He pulled her in again, but the kiss was a little more urgent this time, but still ... Again it seemed to wipe her mind of all thought. When it broke again and she came to she realised that she had melted into it, into him, which would have been embarrassing if it wasn't for the fact that this was working towards her plan.

She couldn't believe he had done it, found a way in past her defences and her brain's disregard for him. Those kisses were the key, she realised. She supposed he had probably had more practice at kissing in school than anyone and now he was pulling out all the stops on her. And she was going to let it flow.

Her mind was screaming at her that this was an atrocious idea, but she had to. It was the light at the end of the tunnel. This was the way forward, the way to fulfil the plan. If his kisses melted her, he would believe. On top of the melting kisses, maybe her awful acting would have some chance.

He was tugging her hand. Hermione wasn't sure what it meant, but it didn't take her long to click that he was leading her upstairs.

No, her mind was yelling inside her brain. She had just done her bit for her plan, but his plan was still unfulfilled. Hermione didn't want to sleep with him. The sickening resignation was back, although her body seemed perfectly willing to take the leeway it had gotten with the kiss and push forwards.

Draco wasn't stupid, he knew exactly what he had achieved with the kisses, so once they reached their destination, he wasted no time in dealing with her brain and its objections.

He had her on her back with her dress buttons undone before a chiming noise broke through her trance.

Draco collapsed on top of her with a groan. The dead weight of his body was pressing down on her and restricting her breathing.

"Of all the times." He whined.

"What..?" Hermione started. "What is that?" Suddenly aware that she had kind of lost herself and was feeling very self conscious about it now.

"It's the hunt." He said. "There is a hunt on."

"The hunt?" Hermione said before realisation hit. A muggleborn was on the run and there was a call for the hunt. And Draco was one of the hunting party.

Nausea and humiliation washed over her. Not that she had ever expected that he wouldn't be, she hadn't even thought about it. And she had just been indulging in a bit of ... She was so disgusted with herself she didn't know what to do with herself.

"I have to go." He said and got off her. Hermione pushed herself back to the head board and pulled her knees up to her chin.

She sat there and watched him as he went to his wardrobe and started to change. His muscles were straining under the pale skin as he put on the clothes. The clothes reminded her a little of Quidditch robes. He was dressing for sport, she realised with another wave of nausea.

As he pulled on the leather boots that came up just below his knees, she wondered if he would go through the same meticulous routine of dressing if she ran. What would he do to her if she was the focus of the hunt?

"I have to go." He said coldly as he stopped in front of the bed. "I might be some time. Usually not too long, but you never know."

He looked like he wanted to say something else, but just ended up standing there for what must have been a minute, before he turned and walked out.

Hermione wanted to cry as the silence confronted her. She desperately tried to button up her dress with fingers that weren't really fit for such detailed movement at the moment. She got of the bed as if it was burning her. The enemy's bed.

Chapter 15

Chapter 15

Draco did not return for a couple of days. Hermione didn't know who the poor soul was, but whoever it was seemed to be eluding them for a while. She couldn't help but wonder if she could elude them too. She knew the muggle world well as she was pretty quick on her feet. Then again, they were pretty good at dragging people back and she was pretty sure the runner's life was hell after that.

She didn't like Draco very much at the moment. The fact that they were all out hunting one of her kind was a pretty big wedge. Pretending to like him was getting more difficult as a result. She wasn't good at pretending.

He did eventually return. They didn't speak about what had happened when he was gone. She didn't want to know. The first night back, he took her to Nott's mansion. An old gothic structure that didn't seem to get warm no matter how many fires were going.

Hermione tried really hard to smile and join in, but it felt disjointed. Draco joined his friends in whatever drinking game they were participating in. Hermione settled for sitting and looking pretty.

"You're not doing a great job seeming to get on well." Connie commented later in the evening when the boys were too involved with their own drunken behaviour.

"It is really difficult." Hermione whined. "He is just awful."

"He can't be that bad, surely." Connie said. "He doesn't beat you, does he?"

"No." Hermione replied sulking.

"Then suck it up and do it." Connie said with a brilliant smile that would automatically charm anyone within a 10 meter radius.

"I'm trying."

"No you're not." She said. "Try harder. You know he is intrigued by your resistance, so if you want to get rid of him, you have to be rid of his interest."

"I know, I know." Hermione conceded, knowing Connie was completely right, but still not happy about having to pretend she likes him. She hated this devious behaviour. Why can't the world say what they do and do what they say.

"Now." Connie said conspiratorially. "I hear from an interesting source that there is growing pressure on the Council to change how the muggleborns are treated."

"What?" Hermione asked surprised. "What do you mean?"

"Well apparently, the treatment of muggleborns is not sitting well with all members of society." Connie continued.

"That has never made a difference before."

"Well, times are changing. Things are settling down after the big change and now, I guess, people are more willing to view the situation more practically."

"How do you know this?"

"I was speaking to Maisy, who is the companion of the elder Nott, who is on the council. Apparently there is growing pressure to do something. It seems the good people of standing are offended by seeing mudbloods begging on the streets or offering their bodies to passing men."

"So now what?" Hermione asked, intensely focused on what Connie was saying.

"I don't know, but eventually they are going to have to do something." She said. "That is all I know."

This news put Hermione deep in thought. This could be really bad. Or it could mean that things may improve a little. Although she didn't have much faith left in this society. She felt more comfortable assuming it would make no change at all or even make things worse.

Draco didn't get too drunk that night, which wasn't the best possible outcome for Hermione. He had been without 'company' for a few days and didn't seem to want to miss the opportunity that evening to get some.

He was still drunk, so it was what she could only describe as a quick fumble. Up against the wall just as they got in the door. She still marvelled how strong he was even in his drunken state. He managed to hold her and keep upright, which wasn't a mean feat she supposed.

"I missed you." He said as he slowly let her down after finishing and capturing his breath.

"I missed you too." She replied through gritted teeth, but tried to finish with a smile.

"You are pretty when you smile." He said, his eyes and slight slur betraying his not so sober state. "I haven't seen it in a long time."

"Please. You've never seen me smile." She said, pretty sure she had never in all her time at Hogwarts, or since, smiled at him.

"What were you talking to Connie about, she seemed to upset you."

She was surprised that he had noticed. Not really thrilled that he had.

"Nothing." She said, but had to continue as she still had his complete and undivided attention. "We were discussing politics."

"You really don't understand the concept of a party, do you?" He said in a dismissive tone.

Hermione put him to bed and he was sleeping before she even got the covers on him. She didn't stay a second longer.

He called her the next night and they were going out again. He took her upstairs before they went out, which meant that he was planning of getting thoroughly drunk that evening.

Hermione tried to relax into it. Her body was more than willing, in fact it was hanging out for release, but her mind was still fighting. She tried to still it and let it flow and focused on the sensations. Draco was taking his time, teasing, stroking. Kissing. He was a good kisser and he knew it. He also knew that it got to her and he used it for all it was worth.

Under his ministrations, her body came alive. To the point where even her mind couldn't compete and she was wet and aching when he entered her. Her body wanted this dance and knew exactly what to do to nurture the sensations, knew how to angle and strain to get the most out of it. It felt so nice to let go of the worry and the deception. And the fighting.

The crescendo came on quickly and she grabbed his hips to drive the release. He came a few thrusts after, collapsing on her with his whole weight.

She could tell he was pleased as he started to dress. He knew she'd come and he was pleased. Hermione was too tired to care. It was good in terms of her plan, but emotionally it had drained her.

They went out to the club after and Hermione recovered somewhat. She managed to analyse her way through the situation, it was necessary for the plan and getting laid wasn't a bad thing. It had certainly done her good when she was with Marcus, it should be no different now. She just had to get over her little qualms about Draco. It was just that they had been enemies as school that was different.

Marcus was in reality no different from Draco at all, but she had no grudges against him beyond the norm of the general situation, so there was no reason she should be so 'involved' emotionally with Draco. This was necessary after all, so she needed to just get over it.

Her analysis of the situation made her feel better, as she usually did after she had the chance to think through things. She even managed to kind of enjoy the evening, although it was completely in the benefit of the plan. She was being seen enjoying the evening, but after a couple of hours she was getting tired. All the thinking and the emotions of the day had wiped her out.

She begged Draco to excuse her, even managed to pout and to her absolute astonishment it worked. With a kiss on the forehead and a squeeze of her backside, he let her go home. Hermione congratulated herself for learning. She had just gotten her way through wiles, probably for the first time ever and it worked beautifully. Awful as it was.

Hermione slept well that night. All alone in her bed in Harry's house, which unjustly was being controlled by Malfoy. She actually felt a bit positive the next morning. Maybe things would improve.

But her borderline contentment didn't last long. It dissipated completely when Delia didn't come down to breakfast. She sat with Edna and waited, both fearing the worst. After half an hour, Hermione went up to check and found Delia still tucked in her bed. She had obviously died sometime during the night.

Hermione was absolutely shocked and didn't know what to do. The room was eerily quiet and the lady in the bed looked very different from the woman she knew. She just looked different, much older, but peaceful.

Hermione closed the door quietly behind her as if she didn't want to disturb the room's occupant. Edna started crying but tried to hide it when she saw Hermione's shocked face.

"It was her time, dear." Edna tried to console her.

"I should..." Hermione started. She should do something but she didn't know what.

It was different when Harry died. There had been so many people mourning with her and someone else took care of all the arrangements. How does one arrange this, she wondered.

She settled on writing a note to the ministry. She couldn't think of anything else to do. After she sent the note, she just sat and waited.

After a couple of hours of waiting, an owl appeared at the window. It was Draco's owl and Hermione just couldn't be bothered dealing with it so she ignored the owl until it gave up. Persistent little thing it was too. But it finally gave up and flew away.

A few hours later she got a note from the Ministry which informed her that Delia's death had been noted and recorded, and that she was free to make arrangements with an undertaker at her leisure. The note also offered the Ministry's deepest condolences, which was nice. The Ministry usually did not offer any regards to persons of her blood status, so it was nice to note that they at least had some decency left.

Chapter 16

Chapter 16

The house was eerily quiet. Sometimes she would hear a car in the street outside. She didn't know where Edna was, and she really didn't want to go upstairs. Hermione had seen dead people before, people who had died horribly, but this quiet, empty death was terrifying. Poor Delia, died with this poor substitute for a family. Hermione couldn't image anything worse. She adored both of the ladies, but it isn't family.

She refused to think of her family. If she did, she would start crying and wouldn't stop. Stuck in this awful prison she was in. It was all so unfair. She wondered if Delia had any family in the outside world, people who loved her and didn't even know she was dead. She doubted the Ministry would inform muggles of the death of mudbloods.

And if she were to die, her family would never be told. Who would come to her funeral? Maybe Neville and Luna, she thought with a smile. Just like her and Edna would be the only people who will come to Delia's funeral, a poor substitute for a family.

Hermione couldn't keep her morose thoughts at bay. And she couldn't keep her resentment and bitterness out either. Her defences were completely down and the unfairness of everything just bombarded her. Maybe she was better off crying.

She sat in the sitting room for a few hours longer, knowing she should be sorting out an undertaker. Someone who would have to be paid, not to mention the actual funeral costs, which meant she had to sell her jewellery to get some money and it all seemed too hard at the moment. So she did nothing. Maybe she could just barter the jewellery directly with the undertaker she thought with a sigh.

The fire flared to Hermione's half hearted astonishment. Draco stepped out, which wasn't really astonishing as she had ignored his message earlier, but it was still a surprise to her.

"I don't like it when..." He started coldly, "What's wrong?"

Hermione could only stare at him for a while, "Um." She started, "Delia died."

"One of the biddies?"

She nodded and looked out the window. She didn't want to deal with him right now. Maybe he would go away like his owl did.

He shrugged and went to pour himself a drink. "She was old."

Hermione could only grit her teeth. Why did he have to be here? Couldn't he see that she wasn't up to it right now?

"Have you informed the Ministry?" He asked.

"Yes." She answered tersely.

"I didn't kill her." He said.

Might as well have, Hermione thought bitterly before cursing herself because the tears were now coming on strong.

Draco stood across the room looking awkward as Hermione started to break down in big blubbery sobs.

"Have you organised anything?" He said quietly after a while.

Hermione shook her head. "I just can't...", she started but couldn't finish as a new set of tears assaulted her.

He put his drink down and stepped over to her.

"Hush." He said and pulled her up. He pulled her into him and proceeded to hug her.

Hermione felt stiff as he put his arms around her. She wanted more than anything to melt into him. Seek the comfort on offer.

"I will sort everything, ok?" He said. "You just pull yourself together. Have you got anything black?"

Hermione shook her head. It was just another seemingly impossible thing to organise. His scent was completely enveloping her now. She just wanted to melt into him, let him take care of things like he said. Let him take her burdens for a while. It would be so easy. But he was a Malfoy, they gave nothing and there was always a price to pay. But she couldn't be strong right now.

She had never let someone take over, trusted someone to take care of her, but she needed it more than anything right now. He was the wrong person for the job on pretty much every level. She had never met the right person, even Harry couldn't be trusted to not do something stupid. That was never the issue with Draco, he just couldn't be trusted, period. But right now she needed to let go. Whatever the price was she would pay it. Later.

For now she melted into the warmth of his body and let him hold her.

"How soon do you want the funeral?" He asked and she could hear the deep rumble of his voice through his chest as she leant her head on his shoulder.

"As soon as possible."

"Have you eaten anything?"

"I'm not hungry."

"I will send one of the elves over to prepare some lunch. You need to eat something."

Hermione wasn't hungry, but she didn't argue. She let him tell her what to do, even though the small voice in the back of her mind reminded her that this is a completely selfish person who would throw her to the wolves if it benefited him.

"Is there anyone you need to invite?" He asked, catching Hermione off guard. It took her a few seconds to process what he was saying.

"No, its just us." She said. She doubted any of Delia's old colleagues would show up like they would have if it was ten years earlier. Even if they were prepared to come, they didn't deserve it. This brought a fresh wave of tears, which was soaking through Draco's white shirt.

"Alright. You go make a cup of tea." He said. "I will go arrange everything, then I will be back."

Hermione didn't make a move.

"I am sure the other biddy is parched." He said. "You should see to her."

She knew he was motivating her to move. She nodded and stepped away.

Draco left immediately and Hermione went to the kitchen to put the kettle on.

He was back an hour later.

"The funeral is on this afternoon." He said and Hermione was shocked at the speed.

"You said you wanted it as soon as possible." He said when he noticed her reaction. She nodded.

"There are men coming now to prepare her." He said and made himself a tea. Hermione would never have guessed that he knew how to prepare his own tea, but apparently he did. "Then we will

transfigure one of you dresses into something a bit more appropriate.

It would be the first time in a while since she'd wear an appropriate dress, she smiled bitterly to herself.

The funeral went without a hitch. It was raining, but somehow Draco was prepared with two umbrellas for her and Edna.

It really was sweet that he stayed, she thought. He could have just left her to it.

In fact he stayed after too. He had dinner with them. Dinner the elves had prepared. Hermione was famished because try as she might, she couldn't get much down at lunch.

It was nice to have him there, rather the idea of him was nice. The idea of someone you can lean on, depend on. Is this what it was like to have a husband? Her brain was well muddled by now, cried out completely.

Shortly after dark, he took her upstairs and to bed. It was really nice to feel cared for. She expected him to leave now but he stayed and laid on his back while Hermione cuddled into him.

She half slept but seemed to wake every hour or so. He was still there. So warm.

She was having horrible dreams. Not violent, just desolate, empty and dark. And his warmth was like a beacon.

She could feel dawn coming like a change in the air. Along with a strong desire to escape the horrible place her head was in. Her hands felt frozen and his skin was so warm. She burrowed it under his shirt against his skin. It was so smooth and warm. She wanted to kiss him. She leant in and felt his breath of her lips. She leant in further and kissed his chastely. She could feel it the instance he woke.

He took control of the kiss and deepened it, pulling her in closer to the warmth she craved. After a while, he rolled over on top of her, deepening the kiss even more.

Her body finally responded with some heat of its own and it felt glorious. His leg was between hers and the friction was igniting a fire as she felt his entire body along hers.

She needed more skin. All of it exactly. And proceeded to grapple with the tear stained shirt that was in her way. It didn't take long and he helped get rid of whatever it was she was wearing.

He explored her neck while her hands roamed his back and hips. She needed more. She wrapped her legs around his hips telling her intent. To her annoyance he held off for a while. She knew he was ready, she could feel it. She also knew that the small movements of her hips were making it hard for him to slow things down.

With a growl, he relented and slid inside her. The sensation was just as strong as if she had potion help. It vibrated throughout her body with every movement. He was still trying to slow things down and she groaned in frustration. He distracted her with a deep kiss that both distracted and added something.

When it broke, he was so completely focused on her, she almost felt mesmerised. She was locked into his eyes as he started to move inside her. And he wouldn't let her go as the sensations were overwhelming her. He was right there as her reality exploded and she dipped into the fabric of existence. That timeless place where everything made sense and where she knew everyone and everything was connected and as it should be.

She had been there many times, but she had never been there while locked into someone else's existence. Never known that uncertain connectedness extended to actual people. To know that this person belonged to the same fabric of existence that she did and to feel that sameness of them in no uncertain terms.

The connection broke as Hermione tried to get air back into her lungs. He was panting on top of her. Again a separate and discreet person.

That had been intimacy on a level she had not known existed and she would never have guessed he would be the person she would feel it with. It was all so wrong and it left her very, very disconcerted. She was pretty sure she had just paid the price.

Intimacy was the price. It was what he was after and he had used her vulnerable state to get it. Actually she had let him lead her the entire way. She felt used and more than a little confused.

Why would he even want that? This was dangerous ground. He was toying with her, she was sure. She felt sick to her stomach.

He got up and dressed as the sun was starting to encroach.

"You will be alright?" He asked and she nodded. "I better go."

Hermione nodded again. Wishing he was already gone.

Chapter 17

Chapter 17

Hermione didn't hear from Draco for a few days to her endless relief. Their last evening together had been a little too much, a little too close to the bone. Luckily she got over her neediness as the intensity of their coupling had scared her out of that state.

She hoped like anything the future didn't lie in that direction. She still couldn't understand how it had happened, or quite what happened, but it left her feeling very uncomfortable.

He was fairly distant the next time she saw him. More like he used to be, actually he hadn't changed that much, with the exception of being sensitive and, gulp, caring when Delia died and threw Hermione into such a state. Hermione was gobsmacked he was even capable, but he had played the part of a supportive partner fairly well for a day. Not that it was knowledge of him she particularly wanted. It just made her uncomfortable all round.

By the way he was now acting, maybe it made him uncomfortable too, because he was downright cold today. They went out briefly to some outside dinner on a lake. It was beautiful with lights and fires sparkling along the lake giving it a ethereal quality if you were in the mood for it, which apparently neither of them were.

Draco was grumpy. He wasn't even paying attention to the drinking with the usual gusto. He wasn't paying attention to her at all, thank heaven for small mercies.

Hermione wasn't particularly in the mood for participating in conversations either. Everything just felt awkward. She really needed to get rid of him, she decided. Getting rid of him meant going forwards. He was obviously not happy about something. Maybe he regretted being kind to her. Maybe the intimacy was uncomfortable

to him too. It did kind of suggest that more of it was in order to achieve her aim, but she wasn't sure she could deal with it.

Going back was not an option. It was where he was comfortable and where she was miserable. She wouldn't lie to herself and say she didn't find the sex intriguing. She admitted she was very confused about it. She found the thought of his body straining away over her very sexy. It really was the only not awful thing in her life right now and she wasn't sure she was willing to give it up, even if her current partner was him.

Previously it had been about the potion, been about release. But now, there was something else in the mix. He had been her nemesis growing up, looked down on and rejected her at every possible turn. She was pretty sure he well and truly believed she was beneath him, but it didn't change the fact that he wanted her. Filthy as she was, it was where he wanted to be at the end of the night. So what did that mean? What exactly did filth mean when it was where he wanted to bury himself until he was completely spent, night after night?

And why did she have to analyse everything? It was making her head hurt. But its not like he was some lone loony either. They were all doing it. There was no denying that Connie was hot property. Apparently so was she if Marcus' word counted for anything. She conceded that she just didn't get men. They were not logical creatures. She supposed that neither was she, because she despised Draco but to be completely honest, she didn't mind looking at him naked. And she couldn't think of anyone else she wanted to see naked.

Sex that night was rough and she didn't mind. It beat intimacy and she was avoiding his eyes like the plague. He wasn't particularly seeking hers out either. He certainly didn't mind taking direction from her when they were doing it. When she told him to go harder, he would.

She poured every bit of her confusion and anger into it and by the end she was practically screaming her release. It left both of them

completely drained. She noticed that she was lying on the actual mattress. Somehow the sheets had been bundled into a mess that was hanging off the edge of the bed.

She was panting for a while after he rolled off her, she was so incredibly hot, like she had sprinted a mile. She noticed the glistening sheen of sweat all over him as he fought to catch his breath. She would have to take a bath when she got home. She didn't want to lie in bed all night knowing she was covered in his sweat.

The awkward silence of the evening continued.

"You should go." He said.

"I'd like to stay." She said trying not to laugh because it is the last thing in the world she wanted. She wanted to rush out of there this very second, naked if she had to. But the plan required the sacrifice.

"No." He said sternly to her eternal relief.

She got up and dressed and tried very hard to look a little put out. Not too much in case he relented.

She walked out the bedroom door and waved a quick goodbye, then ran as she got out of sight. She wasn't sure why, but maybe in case he changed his mind.

She sat in the bath and reflected on how well the plan was going. Admittedly, most of it had been accidental, but still she had helped a little. He seemed freaked out, which was only good and he really was pulling back. She had to stay the course now.

Things got even better when he didn't call her for a few days. When he finally did, he was still a little reserved but more coolly detached like he used to be.

"Where have you been?" She asked and went over to hug him as she arrived at Black Manor.

"Miss me did you?" He said in that annoying superior way he did when he felt like he had the upper hand.

She pouted a bit. She really was getting better at this.

"I just don't like being alone for too long." She said.

Ok, he really enjoyed having the upper hand, she thought bitterly.

"Well that is a shame." He said a little more reserved after his moment of lording it over her. "Maybe you should make some friends with the girls."

He pried her fingers off his hips and stepped away.

"I hope you've eaten already, because we are going now." He said.

"Where are we going?" She asked, she wondered if she should whine and say she wanted to stay home, but didn't. She didn't want to overdo it.

She didn't even listen to his response, instead just dutifully followed.

The evening was typical. She really was getting so bored with these nights. They were all the same. Drinking, inane chatter about stupid stuff like Quidditch and the drunken stories of previous nights.

A couple of weeks followed with the same routine. He would call her over, they would go out, then rough, gymnastic like sex if he wasn't too drunk. Then he would tell her to leave, she would pout but leave.

But it wasn't enough to get the plan to the end result. They just seemed to have hit a new equilibrium. One where she begged and he lorded it over her by denying her. She needed to do more, but she wasn't sure what. How could she be more clingy, more annoying?

She decided that she would have to participate more in his evening activities. Laugh at his jokes, look like she's really into him. Yuck.

It seemed to back fire at first as he welcomed her attention. She suspected he liked showing off to his friends how adoring she had become.

Connie gave her a sneak thumbs up which steadied her resolve. She continued with her efforts squeeze up against him and gently rubbed his back when he was speaking to some Ravenclaw about some gaming rules. He didn't seem to mind. It did backfire a little, because it contact made her a little hot and bothered, egged on by the drinks she'd had. Sadly she realised, she actually wanted to go back to his place and ride him until he turned to putty.

She was definitely getting over her aversion of sex with him. Really over it. Well, she decided, she would use it to her advantage.

"Don't drink too much tonight." She pleaded and crept her hand a little lower down his hip as her thumb stroked his hip bone.

He looked a little surprise, but pleased.

"As the lady commands." He said a little hoarsely. He turned to the guy he was talking to and said suggestively. "It seems my companion requires my undivided attention."

The sex was vigorous and hurried, finishing in a sweaty heap on the floor. It had actually been amazing. She was starting to like it a little too much, she decided. One thing that was bothering her is that he wanted, demanded for her to scream his name as she was coming, and it seemed perfectly reasonable at the time.

Chapter 18

Chapter 18

It was someone's birthday the next evening, so it was an all out party, which frankly was just a little larger than their typical evening. The food was a little more elaborate.

"Great job, yesterday." Connie said.

"Its not enough, he is just enjoying it." Hermione said.

"But a believable build up, now you have to start cranking it up a few notches."

Hermione just nodded, not sure what to do, but she would think it over and come up with a plan. Planning was one of her specialties after all.

"Have you heard any more about what the Council are doing?" She asked after a few seconds of contemplating.

"Apparently they are drafting some amendment to the laws relating to muggleborns." Connie said.

"And you don't know what it is?"

"No, but I have heard that its not radical change, so don't get your expectations up to high." She said. "Now I must mingle."

Hermione couldn't help but feel a sting of disappointment.

Draco was back in party mode, clearly enjoying the company of his fellow Slytherin alumni, although there were representatives of every school. McCormack was giving her salacious looks whenever she walked past him. He would slowly check her out from head to toe, making her want to vomit. He clearly had designs on her when Draco

was done with her. It pleased her immensely that she had other plans and she would so sadly have to disappoint him. For the forgettable Mr. Merrimen too, that would hopefully burn.

She tried to convince Draco to excuse her and let her go home, but he said no. He really was enjoying this control over her, which he didn't have before because she wasn't engaging with him. It was really vexing her, but the way he was going he would be too drunk to notice after too long anyway.

So she waited and waited. She chatted with some of the girls on occasion. Chatting with the men was generally not a good idea because it would quickly devolve into flirting, or even worse groping. It seems they were all on the lookout to steal each others' girls and if you gave them an opening, they would eventually try it on.

The end was finally drawing close and Draco was pretty much unstable on his feet. He was clearly relaxed and happy. It was amazing the amount he could consume without making himself sick. But it also made him uninhibited. He was actually friendly with all and sundry, and seemed somewhat interested in their lives.

"Take me home girl." He finally said to her.

Hermione complied and led him to the fireplace.

"Did you have fun?" He asked when they stepped out into his sitting room.

"I always have fun." She responded and he started to laugh.

"I seriously don't think you understand the concept." He said and pulled her close. "You never have." He said a little more seriously.

Actually she was feeling a little bit affected by the few drinks she'd had during the evening. Everyone kept on giving her drinks and she had to be polite and sip away.

"Always running around saving the world." He said. "So serious. Always so serious."

"You were too in those days." She said. "Those were serious days."

He nodded.

"I am much too drunk tonight." He said, still holding her pretty tight.
"The mind is willing, but the body is not able. Such a cruel state."

"I should put you to bed."

"I'm not a baby." He said, and the implications were that he was not ready to go to bed yet. God forbid he was in the mood to talk.
Although this could be interesting. It was rare she heard anything of what was on his mind, other than partying and sex that was.

"Are you hungry?" She asked and he slowly shook his head.

"You really do have stunning eyes." He said. Hermione cringed, oh please not the drunken 'you're not completely ugly' speech. Maybe his mind really did travel away from those two topics.

"Don't think I haven't noticed the covetous looks you're given. You little vixen. Toying with the boys."

"I am not." Hermione said in dignified.

"I can see it in their eyes, what they want to do with you. And they can't because you're mine." He laughed. But he lost the pleased look and got very serious again.

"Let me show you something." He said.

"It's late. You should.." Hermione didn't want play, certainly didn't want to hear about his pride of possession. She just wanted to go home.

He hushed her and dragged her back to the fireplace. "12 Grimmauld Place." He said and they started spinning.

Hermione wasn't sure what he wanted to show her here and she was feeling a little anxious now. He apparently knew exactly where he wanted to go and dragged her along up the stairs if not in a somewhat unsteady way. He passed the bedroom and kept on going up another, then another set of stairs.

They were not up at the top of the house and he accessed another hidden set of stairs that obviously went up to the attic. Strange place to take her.

He walked into the darkness lit only by the moonlight of a small window and retrieved two boxes of stuff. Hermione was still standing on the stairs as he brought the boxes over to her.

The first thing she noticed was Harry's quill case.

"This is..." She said and slowly reached in.

"This is all his stuff that was here." He said. "You should have it."

Hermione sat down on the stair case with the box and slowly looked through the things. Actually a few of them were things she had given Harry on his birthdays.

"Thank you." She said, feeling very grateful that he would think of giving her this. Remembering it.

Draco sat down on the stairs just a step up from her.

"It should go to someone who appreciates it." He said. "It seems no one does."

Hermione didn't say anything.

"I hated the prick, but I know this world would be shit if it hadn't been for him." Draco said. "Most don't know what it was like when the

Dark Lord was alive. Have no clue what this world would have turned into."

"I suppose this is a better iteration." She said.

"For most." He said and she knew he was acknowledging her and her kind as the exception.

"It could be better." She said.

"It could be much worse." He said, seemingly much more sober than his clear drunken state.

His eyes were boring into her now and she could only return it. They were having an unspoken discussion of some kind. About what could have been, what was and what should be.

"This isn't right." She said.

"It could be worse." He repeated. She recognised that he didn't argue with the fact that it was wrong. It might have sounded like a small thing, but it was a bit admission on his part. More than she'd ever expected. Actually he had just acknowledged Harry's sacrifice and the fact that her treatment was wrong.

She didn't know what to say. She wanted to cry, actually. For so long, no one had even indicated that there was anything less than deserving in her treatment. The natural order. And coming from him of all people. The one who had pushed for her subjugation since the day she arrived.

It would never be an apology but the acknowledgement was as good as.

The silence was complete as Hermione leant in to kiss him. It was meant as a thank you, but once it got started, it just deepened. And not in an 'I'd like some of that' way, but in a much deeper appreciative way. All the way deep.

Hermione broke the kiss and pulled away. Shocked that she had done it. It wasn't because she had to, or because of the plan. She had done it because she wanted to kiss him. This was bad.

When she regained herself out of her shock, he was asleep on the stairs. And knowing what he was like, nothing would wake him up again. She had to drag him downstairs before he was completely gone, otherwise he would be spending the night on the stairs.

She got him into bed after some heavy coaxing and lifting. It was strange having him in the bed. Nicer than she would ever admit because she was still freaked out that she had full on, not excuses kissed him.

Hermione was still freaked out the next day. Draco had left without a word as soon as he remained consciousness. Hermione now knew without a doubt that she had to do something. Something drastic because things were really, really not going to plan.

She got a note the next day telling her to come at 9. When she arrived and they went to the club where they often go.

Draco didn't seem to remember anything from the latter part of the night before. Hermione realised he must have assumed that she had taken advantage of his drunken stated and gotten the sleep over she had been asking him for. It irked her, but it was in favour of the plan. So she tried to look pleased.

The club was crowded and Draco was a little distant again. Clearly not happy about being herded back to her place last night for a bit of snuggling time.

Tonight was the night, Hermione decided and she took a couple of drinks to build her courage. She felt the heat of the alcohol warm her and steadied her resolve.

She went to find Draco. Here is goes, she thought. She wasn't sure exactly what she was going to do, but she needed to make a scene.

Last night have given her an idea.

She started by clinging to Draco as he was standing with a group of Slytherins, laughing about some story.

"I'd like for us to go Draco." She said conclusively trying to hide her nervousness. Draco straightened and looked at her incredulously.

"Its not time to go." He said coldly.

"But I want to go now." She whined.

"I will go when I am ready, and you will go when you're told." He said through gritted teeth.

"Don't be like this Draco." She said loudly looking very hurt. People around were starting to notice.

"Be like what?"

"So cold." She said. She was starting to cry, well trying her best to anyway and to her surprise the tears were starting to flow. "I hate it what you're cold to me."

"I think you've had too much to drink." He spat.

"Don't dismiss me. I love you and I know you love me. And if you would just acknowledge it properly we can have a chance at making it." She said, loudly sobbing now. She noted that even the music seemed to have stopped. "We could make this world such a better place. Its worth trying because I love you so much."

Ok, it was done. Draco looked absolutely furious. There were shocked expressions all round and the quiet was all encompassing. Some of the Slytherins were completely amused and the odd one started laughing.

"You're drunk mudblood, you should leave." Draco ordered her.

The standing crowd seemed to clear a path towards the exit as she started walking. She was obviously radioactive. She floo'ed back to Grimmauld place and let out the breath she was holding. It was done.

Chapter 19

Chapter 19

Hermione felt drained when she got home. She was relieved that it was done, but also very nervous because she had just bit the hand that literally feeds her and that was uncomfortable because now she was on her own again. Cut loose into a hostile world.

There was a part of her that wanted to go over to his place and say she was sorry, she hadn't meant to do it. She wasn't sure where that was coming from, but chalked it up to plain fear.

She half expected the door to be barred when she got home, but there was nothing out of the ordinary. Nothing happened the rest of the evening either.

She had some very anxious dreams that night, waking early in the morning. At some point during the day, the repercussions of the night before were going to hit.

She recognised that a tiny part of her was hoping that he would have just gone, 'ok, but can I finish my drink first', but she knew fully well how utterly ridiculous that was. He had looked furious at her little scene.

A call through the fireplace made her jump, but it was only Connie informing her of her upcoming arrival.

"My dear," She said as she stepped out of the fireplace, "that was spectacular."

"You think it did the trick?" Hermione said, pretty sure it did.

"Not only did you burn the bridge, you burnt half the town as well." She said. "He was fuming for a good half hour after you left. Not only

did you rip it apart, you made it practically impossible for him to do anything other than end it."

"I have to say." She continued. "You have guts. You are aware that it has made you a persona non grata with the whole crowd?"

Hermione nodded.

"Not that Mr. Merrimen will mind. Not really his crowd. I'm not sure he has a crowd of any description actually. Well too late to ask if you are sure, your funeral happened last night."

"Do you think Draco is going to do anything to me?"

"No." She said. "That's the beauty, he can't really. If it gets out that he is still dealing with you, its going to look like he is on some level endorsing what you suggested. No, now he needs to distance himself completely. He left last night some raven haired girl imported from some Mediterranean country."

Hermione hadn't expected that last statement. Hadn't expected to be replaced practically immediately. No wonder she hadn't heard anything from him last night, he had been otherwise engaged.

Out of nowhere she felt a lump in the back of her throat and prickles in the back of her eyes, that eventually worked itself into a grimace she couldn't suppress.

"Oh God." Connie said. "You are the biggest idiot on the planet."

"Its not..."

"What was the one rule I told you?" Connie said sternly. "You're fucking in love with him!"

"I'm not." Hermione tried. "Really, I'm not, its just tension."

"You really are too soft for this." Connie said. "He would completely tear you apart. This is a game to them and as soon as he tires of

you, you're out. He isn't Mr. Merrimen, he isn't going to settle down with his mistress. Don't ever forget, we are just whores to them. Toys."

"I know." Hermione said knowing the brutal words were completely true, she knew it and always had. She swatted her eyes and tried to calm whatever stupid and unfounded emotion was unfortunately hijacking her at the moment.

"I'll make you some tea." Connie said like she was speaking to a naughty child.

While Connie was in the kitchen an owl arrived with a letter. She knew the handwriting well by now and the crisp, heavy parchment he used.

Your services will no longer be required. Stay in the house as long as you may need it. If there were some way of gifting it to you, I would, but I can't. Best of luck for your future.

D. Malfoy

It was business like and surprisingly cordial considering what she was expecting, but still cold considering what they had been doing almost every night. It was more a letter to someone who supplied office stationary. It just went to show that this had always been a business transaction.

The letter came with a pouch that contained five pieces of jewellery. The pouch was quite heavy and contained a necklace, two broaches, some kind of hair ornament and some earrings. None of them matched and were really too much for her taste.

Hermione put the jewellery down on the desk. Jewellery had not been what she had expected as the fall out of the night before, so she wasn't entirely sure what it meant.

She showed the letter and the jewellery to Connie when she returned.

"He's letting you use the house. That's great! And this jewellery is very generous. There is always parting jewellery, but not usually on this scale. These are precious stones. This will keep you for quite a while."

Connie looked at her suspiciously, "He isn't crying into his tea too is he?"

"I was not crying." Hermione defended herself. "It was just a little ... moment. It been nerve wrecking, you know. It was just tension."

"Because its looking like he is hoping you will stay unattached for a while, giving you a place to live and enough jewellery to live off for a number of years." Connie said fanning herself with the letter. "This is a very generous deal. You've actually managed to set yourself up here nicely."

"Please, this is Draco Malfoy. He gives nothing for free."

"Maybe not." Connie said. "He is the kind who would eventually take advantage of the fact that you're in love with him."

"I'm not!"

"That he thinks is in love with him, I meant to say." Connie finished but obviously still held onto her suspicions.

"No, I'm going to leave. Clean cut and all that."

"It will take time to organise things with Mr. Merrimen. Some incidental meetings, flirting, some dates. With a patron its better to take things slow. Get them truly hooked." Connie said. "Stay until its done."

"No, I don't want to." Hermione said. "I would rather go back to my apartment."

"In dingy MQ?" Connie said incredulously.

"But its all mine."

"I can't say that I understand your choices, but under the circumstances, I won't argue with you." Connie said. "I will have a think about Operation Merrimen and plan out our next step in the meantime. Much to do, I'd better go."

Edna didn't show any disappointment at having to desert her cozy room the lesser comforts of Hermione's apartment. They had enough means now to keep them warm and content for quite a while. So although it wasn't the faded glory of the run down Grimmauld Place, it wasn't that bad.

Hermione couldn't deny the tentative steps of excitement. She was her own woman again, no one to obey. No one else's will to bend to. For now. Relieved that the whole thing with Draco was over. No longer having to be imposed upon and all the emotional baggage that went with that. So while her means were limited, she had freedom and that counted for so much more.

She would have to get on with Mr. Merrimen, but if she didn't like it she could move onto the next candidate. She had a good feeling about him though. They would probably get on well. Men in his position would be glad to have someone to spend their days with.

Hermione was glad that she had Connie to help plan the thing because she didn't have a clue what to do really. Not well versed at picking up men.

She could probably even sell some of the more audacious gowns. She doubted she would need them now. She only brought with her stuff that Draco had given her. She didn't take a single thing that wasn't.

All in all she felt relief that it was behind her. She wouldn't have this feeling if she was still living in his house, even if she never saw him

again, she would still know that he was supporting her. She didn't have the same qualms about the stuff he gave her, that was part of the deal. And now the deal was done and dusted. Welcome the future, especially as things were starting to get complicated. In fact she felt like she had escaped a horrible fate.

She wouldn't lie to herself and say there wasn't something bone deep in her that wanted him to be the one she could depend upon, trust implicitly like she had the day Delia died, but he wasn't. He was the kind that would coax her up a cliff and then push her off.

There wasn't a peep from Draco again. She wasn't even sure he knew she had moved out, but she didn't care.

She met Connie in a cafe a few days later.

"So I've heard more about what the Council is planning. Strictly confidential. Pillow talk, you know. So it isn't public knowledge but the idea is to offer muggleborns a way to return to the muggle world." She said quietly so no one around them heard.

Hermione waited patiently for more information.

"The drawback is that they insist on a complete memory wipe. So not much of a concession really." Connie continued. "I am sure some are desperate enough to go for it."

Hermione had to turn over this new information in her mind. The possibility of going into the muggle world was very tempting, but wiping out her memory of the magical world was extreme. It was half her life.

"You wouldn't even consider it?" Hermione asked.

"Heavens no. I do have it fairly good here and what would I be if I was returned to the muggle world. Practically as an eleven year old. No education, no prospects."

"But you would be free."

"I don't really seek any freedom beyond what I have." Connie said.
"Even if things don't ever change here, I will have enough to retire in
a few years and I don't think I could live without my magic, it is a
fundamental part of me."

Connie moved onto other topics, but Hermione could not get her mind beyond the potential of going back to the muggle world. A world where she would be free, free to love whoever she wanted, free to marry. Free to have children. All for the price of her memory of magic and the magical world.

She thought about it for days after. Freedom, no more people looking down on her for her blood status, she wouldn't even remember the concept of blood status. She would just be another one of in the crowd just as equal as everyone else, with every opportunity. And she could have children, a husband, all the things that she suspected would become really important to her in the future.

She would forget everything about Draco, the war and the awful prejudice of this society. She would also forget about Harry. That probably caused her more concern than anything. Her one and only true friend. There was of course lovely Neville and Luna, but Harry was a true, lifelong friend. More like a brother. And he was dead.

She really had nothing here. Mr. Merrimen was a dream of a tolerable existence but nothing more. Even if it worked out great, she would still be dependent on him to support her. She would never have a career, probably never have a job even.

A part of her felt like it would be admitting defeat. She had as much right to magic and the magical world as anyone else, but was principle worth this life?

As she usually did, she wondered what Harry would do. Would he stay and fight? Fight with people who never wanted you in the first place. Sacrifice all your happiness for the chance to prove them

wrong. A chance that may never eventuate. Harry was always up for a fight, but he also wouldn't live his life to please or prove others.

But he wouldn't sacrifice others for his own good either. And neither could she. She couldn't leave Edna to fend for herself. As lovely as the dream of complete freedom in the muggle world was, she had commitments here and might do for some years to come.

Chapter 20

Chapter 20

The news about the amendments to the Muggleborn Act broke a couple of days later. Whispers spread like wildfire through MQ well before the next morning's edition of the Daily Prophet. Actually MQ hadn't been so lively as long as Hermione had been there.

Some were angry, others were more philosophical. Hermione still didn't know what to think. People were all saying the things she had been mulling over in her head for a few days.

She bought a copy of the Prophet and took it back to her apartment to read. Frustratingly, the article, although on the second page did give much details. It did, however, note an information session by interested individuals in the ministry lobby in two days time.

Even Edna had heard about it and she was pestering Hermione to go and find out more about it. After protestations that it wasn't something for her, Hermione relented and agreed to go to the information session.

Edna kept quiet for the next couple of days. Both of them tried to ignore it, but it hung in the room like an unacknowledged cloud.

Hermione had started wearing her more modest dresses again and felt more comfortable than she had in a while. The gowns were stashed away under her bed. She kept them for now, waiting to see what Mr. Merrimen's preferences were before getting rid of them.

She still had enough cash, so she hadn't had to sell anything yet. But saying that, there was nothing in her recent possessions that she treasured other than Harry's things.

She really had more things than she had room for now. She tried to organise it all so it didn't take up too much space in her small room.

Another chapter of her life packed away in boxes.

There was a sense of possibilities that she hadn't felt in a while. The feeling of freedom was wonderful, and pursuing Mr. Merrimen might counteract that, but on the other hand, it could work out really well. Niggling underneath was the possibility of returning to the muggle world, with its wide open possibilities of any kind of future she wanted. Provided she didn't want magic in it, that was.

The Ministry foyer was crowded ahead of the information session. It seemed every single muggleborn in the land was there. Beggars, whores, nicer whores and labourers of every kind. There were purebloods there as well, along with Ministry employees, obviously interested in finding out more about this change.

The information session was obviously delayed and people were getting restless. After a 45 minute wait, Percy Weasley took to the platform and went through the information the Ministry had available.

Apparently, the Ministry would perform a memory adjustment and any qualifying muggleborn would be turned loose in the muggle world along with a sum of £100. Once released, they will never have contact with the magical world again. Their wands would be confiscated and broken.

The procedure was simple, report to the Muggleborn Emigration Office, which would be set up the following day, where memories would be adjusted. From there, they would be taken to Piccadilly Square from where they are then expected to make their own way. If they run into strife from there, it is expected that the muggle authorities will step in. Anyone who went into the muggle world without a memory adjustment would be in breach of the Act and retrieved as before.

Percy stressed that there would be no more contact from the magical world. Every time he said it, a murmur would go through the audience. Some would gasp at the implications, while others didn't seem to mind.

Having heard most of it before, Hermione wasn't particularly disturbed. The idea of never having contact with the magical world again didn't really leave her with any particular sense of distress at this point. There wasn't much other than disappointment in it for her recently. All the good things had died with Harry.

That was a bit unfair, she recognised. There was Neville and Luna. But they were barely accepted by this society as it was.

Percy escaped the second after the information session concluded. People weren't exactly happy and there was tension building in the crowd. Slowly the crowd started to disperse and Hermione followed along the trek back to MQ.

Many felt like Connie, that they could not live without magic and forcing them to give it up was untenable.

Hermione loved magic, but not enough. The appeal of a free life was stronger than her love for magic. Knowledge had always been her passion, it just so happened that much of it related to magic, but in and of itself, it was convenient and efficient, but not much more.

As she walked along, deep in thought, she was yanked by the arm into a tight side alley. She knew the scent before she eyes actually saw him.

"What did you want, Malfoy?" She asked, annoyed at having her arm almost ripped out of its socket.

"You're not to go." He ordered.

"Go where?"

"Into the muggle world."

"What?" Hermione asked slightly confused. "You're not seriously telling me I can't go, are you?"

"Actually I am."

"Well that is not for you to say." Hermione pointed out matter of factly. "I can do as I please. I always could. Our little arrangement was just that. Payment, services rendered. Nothing more. You don't get to tell me what to do. About anything!"

"You're not going." He repeated coldly in expressionless way that almost reminded her of his father.

"And how exactly are you going to stop me?" She spat with a sharp look.

"Like this." He said and pulled out his wand. He muttered something before Hermione could react and a red light flew towards her and settled in her chest. It wasn't any spell she had heard off before. Hermione could only dumbly stare at him while he did another one. Her wand was practically useless for defence, so there wasn't much she could do.

She settled for a sharp slap.

"Undo it." She yelled, but he ignored her and turned to walk away.
"You don't own me. I can do what I want."

"If you go near the Ministry, I will know." He said sharply, "So don't."

"You can't do this." She said and grabbed his arm. He yanked his arm away.

"I guess I just did." And he apparated away.

Hermione could only scream at the wall in anger and frustration. At least her slap left an angry imprint on his cheek. How dare he come here and tell her what she could and couldn't do. As if he had any say in it.

Was his only purpose in life to make hers miserable? It really seemed that way. And then he dared to perform magic on her

against her will. That wasn't even legal. Not that anyone would take her seriously and he knew it.

There was nothing for her to do, but to return home and try to work out what he'd done to her. She very much doubted it was anything innocent done just to unsettle her. She was pretty sure he had done something to her. He had said something about him knowing if she went near the Ministry, which suggested some kind of tracking charm. She had no idea what the other one did. It was obviously dark magic. It wasn't anything she had heard before.

She screamed in frustration that he had performed dark magic on her. And forbid her freedom. How could he be so self absorbed and cruel? Actually that part wasn't really a surprise. Bastard.

When she got home, Edna wanted to know everything about what was said at the Ministry and Hermione recounted every detail she could remember.

Edna's gasps got worse and worse as she went along.

"You must do it, my dear." Edna said when Hermione was finished.

"What? No." She said. "Why, are you considering doing it?"

"Heavens no." Edna said. "I am eighty five. That would be most of my life."

"Most of mine too." Hermione said.

"But you are young enough to start over."

"No, I couldn't leave you." Hermione said.

"You must dear. This is no life. I've had a good life. A good husband and a long happy life. But you are young and you don't have the opportunities that I had."

"I don't want to leave." Hermione finally said, but she knew it was a half-truth at best.

"There is no reason to stay." Edna said. "Don't you think of staying for me. I can take care of myself."

Hermione wasn't so sure. But she didn't want to think about it anymore. Instead she told Edna that she had promised to go see Neville and Luna.

It would do her good to spend a night in their warm and welcoming kitchen. Both Neville and Luna were keen to hear what she thought about the new amendment. Hermione just wanted to shrug.

"I can't leave Edna." Hermione told them as they sat around the table eating some cheese and crackers.

"We can take care of her." Luna offered.

"I couldn't ask you to do that." Hermione said exasperated.

"It would be nothing." Luna said.

"Taking care of an elderly person is a lot of work." Hermione said.

"We know Mione. We've got my Grandmother and Luna's dad. One more is not going to be a great hassle."

"Besides, Dad might be open to a companion. He gets awfully lonely in that house." Luna said.

"I am not sure Edna would like to move in with a man. You know how ladies of her generation are."

"My grandmother is the same." Neville conceded. "But we can be there to help her if she were to need it."

"There isn't a future here for you anymore." Luna said.

"Things could change." Hermione said.

"True, they could. Maybe this is the first step." Neville said.

"Or they might not." Luna said quietly in what Hermione assumed would be the closest thing to arguing in the Longbottom house. "It is awful how you've been treated, forbidden to see your family, denied just about everything. Even if things got better, I am not sure such treatment can be forgiven."

It was true, Hermione hadn't even thought about it. Even if things went back to normal, she would never be able to forget how she'd been treated. She would be forever bitter. Maybe a memory wipe would be a kindness considering.

She didn't want to mention the fact that Draco had put some kind of hex on her and she was pretty sure she couldn't or shouldn't do anything until she at least knew what it was.

She would probably have to find some way to get Draco to remove it before returning to the muggle world was even a possibility for consideration.

Chapter 21

Chapter 21

Hermione lay in bed the next morning sure she could feel Draco's spell churning away in her chest. It was probably only in her imagination, driven by the unfairness of having this imposed on her.

She expressly avoided considering why he was stopping her from going. He must be pretty sure that she was considering it. Which made her wonder if she really was. Would she go if she could? All the reasons for why she couldn't go were stopping her from thinking about if she wanted to. And laying there contemplating it, the inescapable conclusion was yes. And somehow Draco had known this, even before she did.

Whatever his reasons, the end result of his actions showed that he wasn't done with her. Or he hadn't decided he was done with her. This could mean complications with Mr. Merrimen. Why couldn't he just leave her alone?

Hermione found out what one of Draco's spells did a couple of days later as she walked past the entrance to the Ministry on her way to meet Connie. It stopped her from going near the Ministry. It literally pushed her away. She was only passing by but it reacted and pushed her across the street, making her fall over into a puddle.

Her anger flared up again and she tried to clean the mud off with her wand. She couldn't understand why he had done this. She could see a muggleborn guy walking into the ministry with their suitcase packed. Obviously someone who didn't understand that you weren't allowed to take anything with you. She watched as the young man walked purposefully into the Ministry.

She felt a stab of jealousy and it took her by surprise. She had to inch past the Ministry entrance on the other side of the street,

cursing Draco the whole way. Then decided to put him out of her mind when she got to the other side. Obviously some new found way of torturing her, letting her stand by and watch while others went onto a shiny new life.

She met Connie in their usual cafe. Hermione felt definitively underdressed compared to Connie who was wearing a bright goldish orange dress which shimmered as the sun light struck it. Although her dowdy, ill fitting dress seemed to offend the purebloods even more than the bright dresses for some reason she couldn't fathom. She figured that they would be happier if she weren't screwing their husbands, but apparently not so. Hermione didn't care, actually she cared a lot less than she did a week ago.

She noted that she wasn't generally as angry as she was a week ago. Maybe knowing that there was a way out made her more tolerant, or dismissive. Maybe she was in the process of disengaging with this society, she wondered. A divorce process.

Connie, looking beautiful as ever, noted her drab dress.

"It might be hard to catch Mr. Merrimen's eye wearing dresses like that." Connie pointed out.

"Draco put a couple of spell on me to stop me leaving." Hermione blurted out, knowing it sounded abrupt, but it was related to their plans with Mr. Merrimen. It seemed to give Connie pause.

"Draco lost it when he found out about the new amendment." Connie said. "He was livid. His new girl was very flattered, but quite a few of us suspect his concerns lay elsewhere. He even went and argued with some of the Council members. Actually all of the purebloods are a little weary now. Don't want to lose their mistresses. Even Theo is being extra attentive at the moment."

"Are you considering going?" Hermione asked.

"Absolutely not." She snorted. "But Theo doesn't need to know that. Come to think of it, Draco did seem a little more blasé about it the last few days."

"Well he has effectively ensured that I can't, it seems." Hermione said bitterly. "He is not done with me and that is going to be a problem with any future plans."

"Is he in love with you?" Connie asked and it was Hermione's turn to snort.

"Please, this is Draco Malfoy we are talking about. He must have figured that my little scene in the club was to force his hand and he's not happy about it. The perfect revenge really."

"Still, pretty extreme." Connie said with uncertainty. Hermione knew that Connie was suspicious of both of their actions and intents, but there wasn't much she could do to convince her.

"He is not going to be happy until I am begging on my knees for him to take me back, so he can throw me a couple of knuts before telling me to fuck off. That is what he wants, total humiliation."

"Maybe." Connie said. "Maybe if that's what is needed then maybe that is what will have to happen."

"I would rather starve to death."

"Nothing has changed." Connie said exasperated. "You two are still playing the same game you were before this all started."

"Actually this goes way back." Hermione admitted. "We have a long history."

"That is constantly repeating itself." Connie said. "Would you leave if you could?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure?" Connie. "There seemed to be some unfinished business here."

"And it will likely never be finished." Hermione said, not really knowing what she was admitting to.

"Well we can't go ahead with Mr. Merrimen. Draco will tear him apart. So now what?" Connie asked.

"I don't know." Hermione said with a sigh.

Hermione pondered what she had to do for a couple of days. Draco had effectively ruined her plans, yet again. He had her stuck. She couldn't leave and she couldn't get on with her life. She tried everything she could think of to discover the spells he'd placed on her, but her limited wand wouldn't do anything useful.

She was alone in the flat for once with Edna out visiting someone or other. The mood not reflecting the sunlight that was streaming into the small windows. A knock on the door disrupted her pacing. She went to open, completely baffled who it might be.

"Ron!" She noted with stunned surprise as she opened the door.

"Mione." He said quietly. Hermione was annoyed that he used such familiarity. "Can I come in?"

Hermione hesitated for a while, then opened the door wider to let him in. "If you must."

She had no idea why he was here. They didn't really have anything to say to each other as far as she was concerned.

He looked uncomfortable. He was quite tall for these small rooms. Well dressed. Much better than at Hogwarts. Obviously Pansy's influence.

"You look well." He said.

"I am fine." Hermione said. It was silent for a moment. "Why are you here?"

"I am sorry how things turned out." He said after a while.

"That's great Ron." She said with a tense smile, hoping he had said what he intended to and she could shovel him out of her flat now. She wasn't interested in his apology. They were done a long time ago.

"This isn't my fault." He said. "How things turned out. This is not how I would have wanted it."

"Really, complete subjugation of some people for no reason at all. That is not how it would have turned out if you had a choice? Just a slight misfortunate turn of events, was it? It seems to have worked out well for you." Hermione said.

"I love Pansy." He said as if trying to explain. "It was you or her, and I had a chance to be with her. I love her. And being with her couldn't include you. Don't you see? You were always strong. There was nothing I could do for you."

"I understand." She said. She did. Maybe not respect it, but she could understand.

"She is my family now. I love her."

"I know." Hermione said, not really wanting to talk about it. She could understand his choices and his dilemmas, but she didn't want to talk about it.

"Are you going to go?" He asked.

"To the muggle world?"

"I knew you would." Ron said. "I wanted to see you before you went. Wanted to explain."

"Do you think I should?" She wondered, so maybe you wouldn't feel so guilty for shafting me, she finished in her head.

"I would if I were you." He said and she believed his honesty.

"But I won't remember anything." She said. "I won't remember Harry."

"Harry will remember you." He said after a while. "If he was here, he'd probably be first in line."

"He wouldn't be eligible being a half blood."

"Harry would have hated this world." Ron said.

"And you don't?"

"This is where Pansy is, so this is where I am." Ron said. "Her love does come with some conditions."

The silence prevailed for a while.

"So I assume you are planning on going then?" He said.

"I can't." She responded. "Malfoy have cursed me so I can't."

"Malfoy? Draco Malfoy?" Ron asked. "I had heard some absurd rumour, but... I guess there was some truth to it."

Hermione didn't respond. She was not going to regale him with her tales.

"And he doesn't want you to go?"

"No."

"And you want to?"

"Yes."

"Then get a curse breaker." Ron suggested.

"This is dark magic, Ron. Stuff I have never come across. Some random street peddler isn't going to cut it." Hermione stated. "A real curse breaker costs a fortune and my vault at Gringotts is running a bit low." She said knowing full well that they both knew she'd never had one and she wasn't allowed one either.

"Fortunately, I married well." Ron said with a overly cheery smile.
"Above my station, some say. I can give you the money."

"Its a lot of money, Ron."

"I don't mind." Ron said. "It's the least I could do. I hated knowing what's happened to you and if I had a way of changing things I would have. And now I can, so let me do this."

"Fine." She said. "Thanks."

"I'll find someone good and I will be back. Are you sure you want to go though?"

"Yes." Hermione said after a moment of hesitation.

Ron left Hermione with a lot of emotions. She suppressed most of them and focused on the hope. Hope for a better life away from this misery, sadness and unrelenting bitterness. A cruel world where people were awful and men gave you a glance of what they could be to yank it away again.

Chapter 22

Chapter 22

Hermione woke up feeling tense the next day. It was a bit scary knowing there might not be anything standing in the way between her and a new life. If Draco found out, he would probably be very angry. Good thing she didn't care what he thought. But she was paranoid. Paranoia he was having her watched. Which was ridiculous, but so was putting curses on her to stop her from leaving.

If all else fails, she could potentially go to the Wizengamot to have them release her, but she wasn't sure she would get heard to begin with. It would likely be too politically embarrassing to have mudbloods suing to be released from overzealous bonds.

No it might just be that she would get one chance at this. Heaven knows what he'd do if he found out. Maybe even put her under the Imperious curse. She wouldn't put it past him. He could even just take her. Who would stop him? She certainly didn't feel she could rely on Ron's friendship, to be her great defender. Not likely.

She would take what he offered, but she didn't forgive him. If it had been a few years ago, she would have nothing to do with him, but things had changed and if purebloods offered something, she felt no qualms about accepting. In the end, was he anything other than a pureblood.

Hermione acknowledged how jaded she was, felt. Maybe she wasn't capable of seeing past the blood status thing anymore either. And the hope of an end to it all had flickered to life in her and she couldn't extinguish it. And it was growing by the minute. As was her determination.

She broke the news to Edna that she was thinking about leaving. Edna refused to show anything other than full support. Like it was

the only natural path forward. Maybe it was, because Hermione could for some reason not see any other paths anymore.

If things worked out, she would ask Connie to sell all her things to support Edna. Connie would be able to get a good price for it. Edna would stay on in the apartment. With the jewellery Draco gave her and a bit of frugality, it might serve her for a good ten years.

The temptation to just walk away from everything itched under her skin. All the pain, the humiliation and the sadness. Just leave it all behind. Start new with no memories of this horrid place. In the bright and shiny muggle world.

She would also forget where her parents were. Lost in Australia not aware they have a daughter. It was the only kink in the plan. She might never find them. Then again, she might not ever be allowed to go looking if she stayed here, and her wand could certainly not handle something as complex as undoing the memory charm.

Her mind was buzzing with trying to think what to do. There had to be some way around this. If she could only get a message to herself. Maybe she could write something on her arm to tell her where they were. Or maybe a letter. Direct contact such as an owl would be out of the question.

A knock on the door broke her musings.

"Ron." She said as she opened to door.

"I brought a curse breaker." Ron said. "She can't stay long."

Which was Ron's way of saying this was costing him a fortune. She let Ron and the old woman in.

This was not a nice old lady like Edna. This was an old crone. Really a model for Disney villains. The woman's hook nose and stringy hair made her want to pull her hand away, but she offered it. The woman

did not take Hermione's extended hand. Obviously not a fan of the lower classes.

"This is the girl?" The woman spoke to Ron.

"Yes." Ron replied. "She said there were two placed on her."

"Sit down girl." The woman ordered. Hermione hesitated as the woman pulled out her crooked wand. Everything about this woman seemed crooked.

The woman mused over her, trying to read the traces of magic.

"They are powerful." The woman said. "Dark. The caster is not unaccustomed to dark magic."

Hermione could only grind her teeth at the thought of the caster and the types of magic he indulged in.

"One is simple, but powerful. A location aversion."

"The Ministry." Hermione offered.

"It will be simple enough to remove." The woman said and Hermione got a whiff of her breath. "The other is a tracking spell."

Hermione nodded. It made sense.

"The caster can tell where you are at all times."

"Can you remove it?" Ron asked.

"Of course I can, boy." The woman snapped, obviously annoyed at being doubted.

The woman went to start.

"Wait." Hermione said. "Will he know?"

"Will he know what?" The woman asked.

"That it has been lifted."

"He will be able to tell immediately."

"Then he will come here." Hermione said as she exchanged looks with Ron. "We must leave."

"I will apparate us as soon as its lifted."

"He will know where I'm going. He will head me off at the Ministry."

"Then we need to get past him."

"Are you ready?" The woman said.

"Wait." Hermione said. "I need a minute."

"Hermione." Ron winced.

Hermione rushed into her bedroom and rifled through the boxes with Harry's things. She remembered a stack of letters. Because she had a feeling she had seen a postcard in there. Once she had sent from Gibraltar one summer to his house in Privet Drive.

After some frantic rifling, she found it. It detailed her entire summer. She grabbed her wand and wiped the post mark off the stamp, then wrote a quick note down the bottom, 'But I my parents preferred Adelaide'.

"Here, Ron." She said. "You must mail this. There is a muggle post box in Godric's Hollow. Your father must know where to find it. Please mail this Ron, it is very important."

Ron nodded and put the post card in his pocket.

Hermione sat down in front of the old crone and the lady went to work.

"There are some boxes in the bedroom, Ron. Harry's stuff. You get it to Ginny, ok?"

Ron nodded again. "Where did you get it?"

"Quiet!" The crone ordered.

It took a good ten minutes, but Hermione felt the tracking spell leave like a little pop inside her.

"Now he knows." The crone said. "I expect payment by the end of the week." She said turning to Ron.

"Fine." Ron said and took Hermione's hand. They apparated away.

Appearing again in a fine pureblood house.

"This is my house." Ron said.

"Oh." It was nothing like him. She could never have known.

"He might come here." Ron said.

"Hopefully he is too busy trying to catch you at the Ministry." Hermione said. "But he might come here. We must move quickly."

"I can render him unconscious, I suppose." Ron said. Hermione could tell that Ron was not all that excited about taking Draco on. She could understand. She could well imagine that Draco would be bitter about such a thing. Draco would definitely keep a grudge.

"Maybe it would be better if its all a bit quiet. Slip by unnoticed." Hermione said.

"How?" Ron said. "Like a disguise."

"Have you got any polyjuice potion?"

"No, not the kind of thing I keep around the house." Ron said.

"We should have thought this through. This is too rushed."

"But I think I still have some of George and Fred's Ugly toffees." Ron said.

"Ugly toffees?"

"It was something they were working on. It makes one hideously ugly. They never released it, because they couldn't work out the side effects."

"Side effects?" Hermione asked suspiciously.

"It makes you really itchy." Ron said. "But you'd be so ugly, Draco wouldn't want anything to do with you even if he knew it was you. Its the best I've got."

"Ok, lets do it." Hermione said. She could handle a bit of itching.

Ron returned after a few minutes with a couple of toffees in his hand.

"Take one and keep the other in case it wears off too quickly. I had forgotten I had these." Ron said with a slight but sombre smile while he obviously remembering sometime in the past. "I am going to miss you."

Hermione was sure that Ron was talking about more than just her. She had forgotten that he had lost practically everything too. His family was decimated.

"Wait." Ron said, when Hermione was about to pop the toffee in her mouth. "Will he know your clothes?"

"He might." Hermione said.

"I'll be right back." Ron said and apparated away.

He came back with a dress over his arm. A servants dress.

"You have servants?" Hermione said disbelievingly.

"No, Pansy's mother does."

Hermione put the dress on and swallowed the toffee. The toffee was as uncomfortable working as polyjuice potion was.

She could tell by Ron's expression that it worked.

"Ready?" Ron asked.

Hermione nodded. "Wait. I need to write a note to Connie. Can you owl it?" Ron nodded while she wrote Connie a quick note asking her to please sell all her stuff for Edna and a goodbye to one of her dearest friends along with the best hopes for the future. It would have been more eloquent, but she didn't have time. It was time to go.

Ron apparated her into one of the side alleys down from the Ministry.

"Go before you are spotted." Hermione said.

"Mione..."

"Go Ron." Hermione said. She didn't want to start crying and as much as she was angry with Ron, it was still hard to say goodbye, because this was it. The end.

He wouldn't go without a hug and he held her tightly.

"Be happy Hermione." He said, his voice a bit shaky.

"I will be." She assured him. "Now go, or the toffee will run out. And oh my god am I itching."

Her skin was practically crawling, but she didn't mind because it let her mind be distracted from the fact that she was walking away from her life and a person who had been her closest friend through a large chunk of it. It distracted her from the good memories.

She heard Ron's apparition pop behind her as she turned to walk out into the main thoroughfare. It didn't take her long to see some of Draco's set. He had obviously brought re-enforcements. But no one noticed her. Her skin was itching so badly, she could barely walk straight. It took all her might to focus on putting one foot in front of the other.

She calmly walked past everyone. It was a busy day and there were people about which was good for her purposes. She made it into the Ministry. Draco was in the foyer, standing in the middle, watching the crowd. He was angry. She could tell.

Her heart caught in her chest as his eyes perused her. She thought for a second that the game was up, but he made a quick expression of disgust before moving his gaze on. She slowly moved across the foyer. Crabbe and Nott were in there as well. Neither of them recognised her.

She could feel Draco's presence like electricity in the middle of the space. He stood there, straight and tall, watching the crowd intently. She wondered what he would do if he caught her and a perverse part of her wanted to know. Wanted him to catch her. Wanted him to take her choices away.

But she knew in her bones that there would never be a future there. Choosing him would be a fool's option. He would hurt her again and again. The amount of grief and pain would far, far outweigh anything she could gain. There was no denying, now in the crux of it, that she burned for his touch. Thank Merlin, she was itching so badly she couldn't feel anything else but intense discomfort.

Without incident, she made it to the lift. She had to blink back tears as the lift door closed. This was it. She was doing this. If they had been meant to be, he would have caught her. Seen her. But he didn't.

Chapter 23

Chapter 23

The elevator ride seemed to take forever. There were some paper airplanes circling above. It really wasn't good security practice. Anyone could grab them and read. She mused over the abstract thought at a time like this.

She had to give into the itching and started scratching her arms, but had to stop as the lift stopped somewhere it wasn't supposed to. Her breath hitched as the door began to open, only to reveal some harried Ministry worker with their arms full of rolled up scrolls. Hermione suppressed the itching and stared intently on the floor.

To Hermione's horror the itching was beginning to recede which indicated that the effects of the Ugly Toffees were wearing off. That meant she was exposed if anyone she knew came across her. She hid her face in her hair as the elevator ride went on.

As the life doors opened for her, she had a quick look outside before stepping out. The corridor was dark, obviously the Office for Muggleborn Affairs was in some less desirable part of the Ministry.

Maybe it was time to take the other toffee, just to be safe. She reached into the pocket and panicked when she didn't find it. She searched all of her pockets and it was gone. Fuck!

It must have fallen out somewhere along the way. Hermione felt completely exposed without the relative security of her disguise. Now that her safe passage to her new life was in jeopardy, she felt it keenly. No, no, no, I will not lose. I will not lose this.

She took a mental hold of herself and told herself to use her brain. She knew she had a formative one, so now it was time to use it. No good will come of giving into panic.

Without a doubt, Draco had placed someone up here. She would have and she had learnt not to underestimate him. He was a complete prat, but he wasn't stupid.

Hermione walked as quietly as she could along the corridor and her heart literally skipped a beat when someone walked around the corner.

It was Percy Weasley, who looked surprised when he saw her.

"Her.." He started, but Hermione stopped him with a hard look and a finger to her lips.

Percy looked at her suspiciously, then around them.

"What are you doing?" He continued in a quieter voice in a manner that told her he taught she might be unhinged.

"I am going to register for release."

"Release, are you being held in capacity?"

"Into the muggle world." She said and got a surprised expression from Percy.

"Why?" He asked like she had just suggested the most outrageous thing ever. "You do know that it is a permanent change, don't you? You will not be able to come back." He said pronouncing each word like she was an imbecile.

"I know that Percy." She said.

"But you won't be able to do magic." He continued. "Surely you can't be considering giving that up."

"I really don't have a choice, Percy."

"Nonsense." He snorted. "That is a bit melodramatic. I am sure. I can imagine that being servant isn't the ideal, but its a decent living.

Much better than could be, I had heard you were earning your living in less respectable ways." He said if he was sharing something amusing.

"I am treated less than human, Percy."

"Nonsense." He repeated.

"I'm not allowed to marry, Percy."

"It's only a piece of paper, there are no restrictions on who you see in a personal capacity."

"I'm not allowed to have children, Percy."

"Well," he started, but seemed unable to find an easy justification, "it was better that... that there weren't a whole bunch of children running around that didn't have a stable home environment."

"That's a circular argument justifying your prejudice."

"I'm not prejudice." Percy stated, offended.

"If you say so, Percy." Hermione said. "Anyway, I was hoping to keep my intentions fairly quiet."

"That is understandable considering the silly decision you've made." He said. "So sneaking away like a thief with the family silver." He said with a chuckle and Hermione mused on how completely inappropriate he was.

"I would prefer that no one see me." Hermione said and she knew that Percy thought she was embarrassed about what she was doing. Part of her wanted to argue with him until he understood her position, but another just couldn't be bothered. Hopefully in half an hour, she wouldn't even know who he or his ludicrous prejudices were.

"Did you see anyone down that way?" She followed.

"Ah... Yes, I saw Blaise Zabini."

"Oh." Hermione said trying to sound surprised.

"And you don't want him to see you?"

"No." She said. "Well for someone in my position, it would be embarrassing to do something like this in front of a Slytherin from my year. Slytherins seeing Gryffindor piking out. Hurts the cause, you understand."

"Yes. I suppose. Old school rivalries die hard." He said tapping his chin. "He works at Gringotts you know."

"Really?" Hermione asked pretending to be interested in something she already knew.

"I suppose I could distract him a bit while you sneak past if you are sure about doing such a ridiculous thing."

"Would you, I would be ever so grateful." Hermione said holding her breath. "You know us mudbloods, never truly settle." She said through gritted teeth as he watched him accept her reasoning.

"Well if you insist." He said with a flourish. "Couldn't refuse an old housemate a favour, could I?"

"I'd owe you one."

"You won't remember." He said with a cheery laugh.

"True, true. But you know now that I would be grateful if I knew."

"Alright let me see what I can do." He said and winked conspiratorially before he walked around the corner.

Wanker, she thought as she watched him walk away. She gave it a minute then followed towards the corner. When she peaked around the corner, she could see Blaise and Percy deep in discussion.

Come on Percy, she said quietly to herself, for once in your life make yourself useful.

Percy started to walk away with a big wave telling Blaise to follow him. Blaise looked uncertain, trying to decide what to do, but finally decided to follow Percy.

Whatever wrongs you have done, Percy, I forgive you, she said as she started running as quietly as she could towards the wooden doors of the Muggleborn Affairs office. Her heart was pounding out of her chest with anxiety and adrenalin.

Only a few more steps and she would be there. To her complete surprise there was no tug on her arm, no commotion, just silence. Silence as she took the handle and opened the door. Silence as she slipped in and closed the door behind her.

The middle aged woman looked up from her desk as she entered the office.

"Yes?" She said as she took in Hermione's appearance.

"I am here to go into the muggle world." Hermione said.

The woman didn't look surprised. "Name?"

"Hermione Granger."

The woman wrote the name down and then opened a book to search for something.

"Hermione Jane Granger?"

"Yes."

"Have you got any ID?"

"No." Hermione said with a sinking feeling. "I don't have anything. I have a passport, but its at my parents place. It probably burnt when

the house burned a few years back."

The woman eyes her wearily, "You are supposed to carry ID at all times." She said and pinned Hermione with her eyes like only bureaucrats can. Finally she sighed, "Nevermind, just sign here, then you can go through. I'll take care of the rest of the paperwork."

The woman said and pointed her to a plain door off to the side of the department reception. It was a door like any other door at the Ministry. Hermione signed the paper held for her on the desk, not bothering to read it.

Hermione felt a pause as she looked at the door. This was really happening. Some part of her never believed that she would get here. A waves of emotions were flooding her now.

"That one?" Hermione said pointing at the only door there.

"Yes." The woman said and returned her attention to something on her desk.

Hermione took a step towards the door, waiting for something to happen, but it didn't. If this wasn't meant to happen, something would stop it, but there was nothing. Just dead silence broken by the receptionist turning the page of what sounded like a magazine. Somehow she had expected a bit more. This was a big deal after all, erasing her whole magical life.

The handle didn't burn her, it slipped easily open under her grip. There was a brightly lit corridor inside. Walking down Hermione felt detached from her body and from reality.

This was a big deal she told herself. It would leave all the badness behind and free her. It would also leave the good behind. Harry, Neville, Luna and all the good memories. She wouldn't remember any of them. She wouldn't remember their adventures, all the hours she spent learning, her amazement at magic's existence.

But she didn't belong in this world. That was clear to her now. That is not to say that things hadn't been different before Harry died and that the potential of this world to be so much more. But they had made it into a place she didn't belong and to a place she didn't want to belong.

She kept walking down the hall until she reached a space to the side.

"Hello." Said a middle-aged wizard holding an empty cup of tea. "Are you here to a memory augmentation?"

Hermione nodded.

"I was just going to have a cup of tea." He said and held his cup up.
"But it can wait I suppose."

With a friendly smile he waved her towards another door. "It doesn't due to make people wait." He said. "People are pretty nervous and its better if they don't have to wait."

Hermione nodded. They will likely start thinking, she thought, and no one wants to think about something like this.

"Are you sure you want to do this? Miss...?"

"Granger, Hermione Granger." She said. She liked this man. Obviously a medical man of some capacity. Kind face accented by a graying comb over.

"You don't have to, you know." He said.

"I'm sure." Hermione said lifting her chin in the air.

"Well, come through then." He said and held the door for her. "Have a seat."

Hermione sat down in the small chair he pointed to, which wasn't the larger procedure chair which reminded her of her parents' dental

chairs.

"Now, the process is that you will need to change to muggle clothes, then we will do the augmentation. It is a permanent procedure, it cannot be undone afterwards." He said with a serious look.

"Will it hurt?"

"No, you will be sedated. The procedure will take around forty minutes."

"What will I know after? Will I forget everything?"

"You will know who you are and all your life in the muggle world. It is a very sophisticated procedure. You just will not remember anything about your time in this world, any persons or knowledge of magical things."

"Will I think I am eleven?"

"No. Typically subjects are aware of their age and are emotionally at their appropriate ages. You will have some knowledge, but you will not remember how you got it if it was gained in the magical realm. We have done this a few times and it does go fairly smoothly." He said smiling reassuringly. "I haven't observed any subjects with really strong distress afterwards. The mind is an amazing thing and it seems to accept the augmentation fairly well."

"You don't have to go through with it if you don't want to. You can take some time to think about it."

"No." Hermione said immediately. "I want to do it. Now."

"Alright then, well go through in there and change into any clothes you feel comfortable in."

She walked into the door, which was a large closet full of clothes of all types. Muggle clothes. There were all sorts of sizes and it took a bit of digging before she found a pair of jeans that fit. She pulled off

the servant's dress Ron had given her and pulled the jeans on. Followed by a turquoise sweater she grabbed of a pile. Not her colour but it would do. The other wall had shelf full of shoes. They looked used. She wondered where they got these clothes from. She grabbed a pair of trainers that looked like they might fit and they were good enough. Not the time to worry about perfect fit. She was still at risk after all. Somehow she wouldn't put it past Draco to abduct her from here.

It was actually really nice to wear muggle clothes. It had been so long. Kind of like acknowledging a part of her she had been forced to suppress. Why can't they just accept that you can belong to both worlds, she wondered. What exactly was the harm?

It didn't matter, the magical world she loved was gone. Long gone and in its place was something dark and twisted. She wasn't having second thoughts. She knew in her bones this was the right decision. That didn't make this any less hard.

She tried to sooth her hair down and stepped outside of this closet. The kind medical man was there waiting for her. His wand was sitting on the table next to her. The implement of his procedure.

"Are you ready?" He said with professionally cheery regard.

She nodded, but it was a little stiff. This is it. The last moment in the magical world. She was kind of glad that her last conversation was with a stranger, who was for all intents and purposes reasonably normal. It kind of took the sting out of it. It would have been harder to swallow if her last conversation had been with Percy.

Right, time to move, Hermione told herself. The man indicated that she sit in the procedure chair and Hermione felt a wave of panic. It did feel like she was having an arm cut off and it wasn't a bad analogy. A bad arm that had gone septic. It had to go, but it was still hard. It was a huge thing and she was letting this perfect stranger cut into her, her brain in this instance. This man she didn't know, cut into

her memories, her life. She wondered if he would know all her secrets.

She forced herself to comply and went over to sit in the chair. She was shaking.

"Now I am going to sedate you." He said. "And then I will start the augmentation."

Hermione nodded again, but it came across as a small jerk. Try as she might, she couldn't stop the tremor in her body, but the man had obviously seen it before.

She was aware that he was turning to pick up his wand. Memories that wanted acknowledgement stole into her brain. Her, Harry and Ron sitting in the Great Hall, sitting on the Hogwarts Express. Dancing with Victor at the Yule Ball. Laughing in the common room. Training in the Room of Requirements. Draco holding her.

She dismissed that train outright. She watching in slow motion as the man brought his wand up to her head. She was utterly terrified.

Harry, she called in her mind for him to help her. She intently focused on her memory of his face. Maybe if she focused hard enough, it would stick. She loved him, surely love can't be erased. She focused everything she had on Harry's emerald eyes before a wave of nausea hit, then complete nothingness.

Chapter 24

Chapter 24

Hermione woke up in the middle of Piccadilly Square, which was most odd. She was fully dressed and standing next to the fountain, surrounded by people. She had no idea how she got there. She had no idea where she'd been, or where she was planning on going. Maybe she had been sleepwalking.

After a moment of uming and ahing, she decided that she couldn't stay there all day. Her memories hadn't returned so there was nothing for it but to go home. She got a little worried when she walked past a record shop and realised she didn't know any of the artists showcased in the window.

She took the tube home and was presented with the burnt out shell of her house. She felt like she'd woken up in a parallel universe. She had no idea what had happened. If it hadn't been for the fact that the house was boarded up, she would have assumed that it had just happened while she was out doing whatever it was she was up to.

She just couldn't remember what happened. After a good half hour of staring, she went around to her aunt's house. And her presence brought on a commotion as apparently they hadn't known where she was for several years. Years! They were bitterly disappointed when she didn't know where her parents were because they had been missing for years as well.

Having Hermione back gave her aunt hope that maybe her parents were alive too. The next few days went like a blur.

She was looked over by doctors, who proclaimed she had amnesia. Then questioned by Police where it was established that she was actually lacking long stretches of knowledge. The doctors established that she didn't have any brain damage, so everyone

assumed that she had experienced some severe psychological trauma. They said her memories may return, perhaps starting in dribs and drabs, but nothing came.

Eventually a really strange post card arrived through the mail at her parents' house apparently written by her for some person named Harry, talking about a vacation she had been on several years earlier. She remembered the vacation and the handwriting was hers, but she couldn't remember writing it or this Harry she had sent it to, at her parents' house.

The Police took the card and investigated it. It was mailed recently from inside England. Most odd. It also had a cryptic message at the end about her parents preferring Adelaide and as far as everyone could establish, her parents had never been to Adelaide.

It didn't take the Adelaide Police long to find two British dentists working in the city. Like Hermione they were also suffering from amnesia and had an adamant desire to stay in Australia. Hermione's aunt was very hurt that they hadn't been in touch in years and had left her to worry all this time, but they couldn't be reasoned with.

Hermione flew to see them, but they didn't remember her. At first they didn't believe that she was their daughter, but eventually, with the help of photographic evidence they grew to accept it. They still didn't want anything to do with England and their family there, so Hermione's relationship with them was superficial at best.

The doctors assumed it was a consequence of the trauma they had all experienced.

Before long Hermione returned to England. She had a much closer relationship with her aunt and she wanted to be home, which ended up being a little flat in Sheppard's Bush. After a few months of trying to remember her missing past, Hermione gave up and got on with life.

She got a job in one of the smaller local libraries. It didn't pay very well, but she didn't mind. Besides, they didn't seem to be able to find her academic records. The Ministry of Education officials were baffled, but they eventually suggested that maybe she had been educated overseas. As a result, they determined that she would have to sit an international education equivalency test to determine her competency level.

Hermione scored sufficiently well that she would gain University Entrance if she wanted it. The idea of going to University was appealing, she had always expected that she would, but the doctors suggested that she wait until the beginning of next year in case there was some distressing progress on the amnesia front. So she stayed at the library.

Eventually she got a boyfriend. She met him in the library one day. She gave him membership and he came back the next day and took her out for coffee. It just kind of progressed from there. She adored him. He was smart, sexy and he didn't seem too phased by the fact that she couldn't remember half her life. He worked as a financial analyst for some privately owned firm.

Right now she was sitting at the pizza takeaway waiting for her pizza. It was almost ready. They were having a night in tonight and she couldn't wait to get home. In to her cosy flat and out of the cold rain that was coating the entire city. Rainy cold days were hard at work as they brought in all the people with nowhere else to go. Some smelled less than fresh, others were belligerent and fighting, and it typically fell to her to kindly ask them to leave. But work was over and she had a nice evening ahead.

A ring of the bell told her that her pizza was ready. It smelled marvellous. Hermione ran through the rain down her street to her flat and let herself into the main door.

She balanced the pizza on one hand while she let herself into her flat.

"Draco?"

"In the kitchen. Did you get the pizza?"

"Yes, can't you smell it?" She said and shimmied her coat off. "What movie did you get?"

"Something where lots of shit blows up." He said and came out of the kitchen dressed in jeans and a t-shirt. Hermione smiled when she saw him. She always did.

"Really, Draco, can we ever get something French."

"Of course, we can." He said. "When we have run out of every other kind of film."

She nudged him and then pulled him close for a kiss. He was the absolute best kisser. She didn't know how she had gotten so lucky. He was perfect in every way.

He sat down and grabbed a slice of pizza and Hermione followed suit. She cuddled in and rubbed her feet on his as he put his arm around her. She wouldn't do that for long, because she had learnt from experience not to get too carried away with the touching or the pizza and movie would be wasted. There was plenty of time later and she would savour the wait, the slight touches, the anticipation.

They watched the movie as they ate. It wasn't a great one and Hermione had trouble keeping concentration. Before long, her hand snuck up his shirt and stroked the smooth, taunt stomach she loved so much. She could feel him tense under her fingers.

"You're trying to distract me you minx." He said.

"What, me? Like I would do something like that." She said and let her hand drift down to his waistband.

He moved in a flash to grab her knees and pull her down on the sofa beneath him. Hermione loved the weight of him on her as he

proceeded to kiss her. She sighed as she was welcomed the sensations and feelings that somehow had become her home.

She never worried about what she couldn't remember any longer, whatever it was she was pretty sure it couldn't compete with her present.

The End

A/N Thanks everyone for reading and reviewing. Much appreciated.