

## Stripped Bare

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# **Stripped Bare**

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## Summary

Dragged to Malfoy Manor, Hermione is tortured for information on Harry's whereabouts. When the Cruciatus curse proves useless, Bellatrix settles on a heinous course of action to loosen her tongue. Forced to come together under threat of death, Draco and Hermione are about to learn there is more to their relationship than hatred.

## Notes

ANNOUNCEMENT: Canimal, Freya Ishtar, and I cordially invite you aboard The Death Eater Express - a FB Group we created where all things Death Eater related are discussed, and Death Eater fictions are rec'd. Offering artworks, previews of upcoming chapters before they post, discussions of fics, and a chance to meet the authors of those fics in RL, The Death Eater Express is the place to be. Just search the name, hit join, and we'll add you. =)

# Chapter 1

Hermione Granger whimpered at the pain as she was jerked back onto her feet by her hair. The cruel, clutching hand that fisted her locks was unrelenting and demanded she retake her feet in spite of the pain of being Crucioed again and again. She gasped at the additional insult when she felt several precious strands tug free of her scalp with a painful sting.

She had no recollection anymore of how long she had been there in Malfoy Manor, dragged before the Death Eaters by that monstrous werewolf and kept at the mercy of a deranged Bellatrix LeStrange.

"Where is Harry Potter?" Bellatrix interrogated her for the thousandth time, seeming to truly believe that after all this time, after being relentlessly tortured for what felt like years, Hermione might change her answer.

"I don't know," Hermione whispered, unable to speak the words out loud because her throat was so raw and ragged from all the screaming.

Bellatrix backhanded her.

"LIAR!" she screamed, "You'll tell me or I'll have someone rape it out of you, bitch!"

Hermione felt dread curl in her stomach. She'd been waiting for it, though she had expected that rather than a threat, that would be the last resort. That she would be thrown to Fenrir Greyback so he could have his perverted way with her before he tore her throat out with his teeth.

"Please," Hermione whispered, her face wet with tears, one eye rapidly blackening thanks to the many times she'd fallen to the floor and been backhanded, her lip split open and dribbling her so called 'dirty' blood down her chin.

"Please... I don't know..." Hermione whispered.

"You're a filthy little liar, Mudblood, and if you don't tell me I'm going to let Greyback rape the truth out of you," Bellatrix hissed in her face. Her claw-like hand buried in Hermione's hair again, tugging her head back uncomfortably far, her wand to Hermione's throat threateningly.

"But I don't know where he is," Hermione sobbed. She was too far gone from the torture to care that she was crying in front of the Malfoys and the Snatchers and the other present Death Eaters.

"Your loyalty will see you fucked and murdered," Bellatrix snarled in her face, "GREYBACK!"

Hermione whimpered and sobbed as she was thrown on the floor again, face-down. She could hear the sound of that monster's gleeful chuckles, and could hear the click of his talon-

like toenails on the marble floor as he came closer.

"You can't...." A small voice protested just as Hermione felt someone seize the back of her jumper and begin to lift her from where she sobbed on the floor.

"What did you say, Draco?" Bellatrix demanded, though Hermione knew that in the cavernous room, silent but for Hermione's sobs and Greyback's glee, she had heard the words.

Hermione lifted her head slowly, her eyes meeting the grey, terrified pair of Draco Malfoy. She could tell at a glance that the protest had left his lips involuntarily. That his mouth had spoken before his mind had given permission for those words to blurt out.

"Did you just tell me I can't let Greyback fuck this pathetic little Mudblood?" Bellatrix demanded, and Hermione saw the way Narcissa Malfoy gripped her son's forearm in a white-knuckled hold, as though she was attempting to pull him away from Bellatrix's gaze.

"Is that what you said to me, Drakey?" Bellatrix purred at him in such a way that Hermione felt herself shudder involuntarily.

"I'm going to fuck you until you bleed, sweetling," Hermione suddenly heard a deep, gravelly voice growl in her ear and she recoiled violently, her body screaming obscenities at her as she skidded backwards across the marble floor that was now riddled with claw marks where she'd dragged her fingernails deep into the stone in the throes of agony beneath Bellatrix LeStrange's wand.

"Don't you fucking touch me!" Hermione spat at the werewolf, her voice raw and croaky.

"Greyback," Bellatrix suddenly barked, "Get out!"

"But you said I could have her!" the werewolf snarled. He was on all fours already, and his clawed hand groped at Hermione's ankle, trying to tug her closer, trying to pin her beneath him. Hermione kicked him in the face with all her might, eliciting a furious growl from the werewolf. She screamed in agony when he sank his claws into her calf-muscle right through the fabric of her jeans and slashed them down her skin even as he dragged her beneath him.

"I SAID GET OUT!" Bellatrix screamed, and Hermione didn't know if she should be grateful or terrified when the deranged witch latched onto the werewolf's fur and bodily threw him away from Hermione.

"The bitch is mine!" Greyback snarled ferociously, "I'm going to taste how fucking sweet she is!"

"Oh no," Bellatrix declared, wagging her finger at him like he was a bad dog, "No, it seems my Drakey likes this one. He'll rape the answers out of her!"

"Bella!" Narcissa Malfoy gasped "You can't be serious! This is my son and you want him to sully himself with a filthy mudblood?"

Hermione's eyes had swivelled to land on Draco Malfoy's face, and he was turning a disturbing shade of grey, since he was already so pale and washed out that simply turning white was no longer an option. He was staring back at her, looking utterly horror stricken and terrified.

"You heard the boy Cissy!" Bellatrix said sharply, even as she began to dance with glee, "He told me I couldn't let Greyback rape her. Don't worry Drakey, even the best of us are drawn in by their pretty looks, that's how they stole their magic from a real witch or wizard in the first place. Now take her upstairs and fuck her until she tells us where Potter and her other filthy friends are hiding."

Draco didn't move, and Hermione began to tremble. She knew that if he refused there would be trouble for all of them and more than anything, she wanted to avoid being anywhere near the clutches of Fenrir Greyback. Even if it meant having to allow Draco Malfoy to rape her. At least he wasn't likely to try and eat her flesh as he fucked her. Not like the mongrel would.

"What's the matter Drakey?" Bellatrix teased, her voice taking on a sing-song quality, "Don't you have the bollocks for this task either? Did the Dark Lord make a mistake when he honoured you with the mark you've yet to earn? Would you like to join her on the floor to be tortured? Maybe you're a mudblood sympathiser. Is that it Draco? You think this little whore is better than purebloods like us? You think she deserves the same rights when she stole someone's magic?"

"Bella. No!" Narcissa tried to intervene, but Hermione could see that Malfoy had no other option. She knew the crazy bitch would make him do it, and as much as the idea of being raped turned her stomach, Hermione had known the minute they'd caught her that it was inevitable.

"Do it, Draco!" Bellatrix said, ignoring her sister as she turned her wand on her nephew. Draco stilled beneath it, and Narcissa drew her own wand on her sister.

"Don't you dare Bella," she warned coldly, "Don't you draw your wand on my son."

"I'm disappointed in you Cissy," Bellatrix said, her voice mocking as she faked heartbreak, "Greyback, lock Narcissa and her husband in their chambers!" she commanded. The werewolf was only too happy to oblige.

"What are you doing?" Narcissa demanded, shocked and horrified now.

"Do it Draco, or the mudblood dies, and your mother will be next!" Bellatrix screamed, losing her temper again.

"Please Draco," Hermione whispered, seeing no other option. She did not want him to rape her, and she could see he didn't want to do it. But if he refused she would die, no doubt at the fangs of the werewolf.

"Listen to that!" Bellatrix screeched, "The little whore wants you Drakey. Now take her upstairs and fuck her until she gives us the answers I want."

"Draco..." Narcissa said, already in the grip of Greyback while Lucius seemed utterly despondent, too afraid to speak up for his wife or son.

Hermione held her breath as Malfoy finally moved. He walked stiffly, looking anywhere but at her eyes. When he reached her, he took hold of her wrists roughly and hauled her to her feet. She was surprised by the strength of his grip, and even more so to learn he was trembling as much as she was though she had no idea if his was from fear or rage.

"Greyback, escort them and make sure the mudblood cannot escape," Bellatrix commanded while Draco tugged her along by the hand, walking swiftly, his back stiff, his grip on her wrist unrelenting.

The werewolf followed them.

"What's the matter, sweetling?" he purred in her ear as they went, his foul breath hot against her clammy skin. "You too afraid of the big bad wolf? Is that it? Is that why you want a boy instead of me?"

Hermione didn't answer, though she did walk a little faster.

"Go ahead and try to run from me again, sweetling," Greyback sneered, his voice lustful and gravelly now. "I love to chase down my prey. Really brings out the animal in me. You're going to love the way I bite."

Hermione felt the way Malfoy gripped her wrist a little tighter and tugged her forwards a little harder away from the werewolf.

"Enough!" Malfoy snapped at the werewolf as they reached what Hermione assumed to be his bedroom.

"Got to make sure the little bitch can't get away," Greyback said, shouldering his way into the room and going to the windows, which he conjured metal shutters to seal closed.

"Don't touch me!" Hermione hissed when he came back on his way out of the room and stalked close to her, trailing a clawed hand across her stomach as though he were imagining ripping into it and feasting on her entrails.

"Got to make sure she's ready for you, Malfoy," he said, and Hermione trembled in terror when the werewolf circled behind her. She began to cry when she felt a sharp tug accompanied by the sound of tearing fabric as he used his claws to shred the back of her jumper and her shirt, both of which fell open, exposing her back to the chilly air of Malfoy's bedroom.

She sobbed harder when she felt those same claws trail longingly over the small of her back while he purred in approval.

"You better fuck her good and proper boy," the werewolf growled threateningly at Malfoy, "I'll know if you don't leave your mark on her."

With that he walked out of the room, slamming the door and warding it as it locked magically behind him. Hermione flinched when Malfoy gripped her wrist again, tugging her deeper into the room. She had begun to tremble like a leaf now, her breath coming in short, gasping pants as the fear fought to overtake her mind. It took every effort to even remain on her feet when her body was in so much pain from the Cruciatus curse she'd been afflicted with time and time again. Her eyes were puffy and red from crying, one of them almost swollen shut, and she squinted in confusion when she suddenly heard the sound of running water.

She turned to Malfoy, utterly bewildered as she suddenly found herself in a lavishly decorated bathroom where he was currently turning on the five shower-heads in the room, rapidly filling it with steam.

"You weren't supposed to get caught!" he hissed, suddenly jerking her close, his grey eyes serious and angry as he stood well within her personal space.

Hermione just stared at him, confused by his actions and his words.

"Listen, Granger," he commanded, still hissing, as though hoping that the werewolf – who was no doubt outside the room and waiting to hear the sounds of her sobbing and crying out – wouldn't be able to hear him hiss over the sound of the running water. "Where is Potter? You've got to tell me. I don't want to fucking rape you, but if you don't tell me now, neither of us is going to have a choice."

"But I don't know," Hermione replied, her voice croaky and cracking from all the screaming, thick from crying and pain, "I don't know where they are. We move constantly and only got caught when Harry lost his temper and accidentally said the name...."

"Give me something to work with, Granger!" Malfoy practically growled. "Something I can tell them so I don't have to do this!"

"I don't know where they are, Malfoy. I'm sorry..." Hermione whispered, feeling her legs beginning to give out beneath her, and noticing vaguely the pool of blood forming at her feet from the slash marks in her calf-muscle and ankle.

"Fuck!" he said through gritted teeth, his fists clenching in frustration. She squeaked in surprise when he suddenly seized hold of the destroyed jumper and shirt Hermione was clutching to her chest desperately, jerking it out of her grip and to the floor.

"Get undressed," he told her sternly,

"You're going to...." Hermione trailed off, her eyes wide and fearful now.

"Get in the shower, Granger," he told her, cutting her off before she could say it.

When she didn't move fast enough, her limbs sluggish and her mind recoiling from the idea of stripping in front of him, he stepped in even closer, his fingers making short work of the fastenings on her jeans. She whimpered when he dragged them down her legs, her arms clutching futilely at her emaciated body, trying to hide from him. Malfoy ignored her and Hermione began to cry again when he reached around behind her, easily unhooking her bra,

which he proceeded to wrestle off her. He did the same for her knickers, and Hermione's heart began to pound with fear when he stepped around behind her, his hands on her back.

She squeaked in surprise when he shoved her hard enough that she stumbled right into the waiting stream of warm water under the spray of the shower.

"Tiggy!" he commanded sharply, not even looking at her as she huddled beneath the water, trying to hide from his cold gaze.

A sharp crack announced the arrival of a scared looking house elf, his eyes huge.

"Yes Master?" the elf murmured fearfully, his eyes dancing around the room.

"Take these and get them washed. See if you can mend the damage done to them by that cretin," he commanded, nudging his toe against the pile of Hermione's clothes. The ones she'd been wearing for weeks while she, Harry and Ron had been on the run. "Then bring some food for Granger."

Hermione reeled from the shock of his words, trying to understand what he was playing at. She was still huddled under the hot water, though after spending the entire winter camping and on the run, it felt good to finally shower again. The heat soothed her aching body, and she eventually gave in to the feeling of the water, choosing for the moment to pretend Malfoy wasn't there and instead reaching for the shampoo and conditioner, figuring that she might as well make the most of it while she could.

Weakness overtook her quickly, and even as she was washing the soap off her body, Hermione leaned against the shower wall before sliding down it until she was huddled on the floor under the spray.

"Don't fall asleep there," Malfoy's voice warned, and Hermione lifted her head to peer at him dimly. She could feel her body trying to give in, trying to surrender her to the arms of sleep and so save her from the nightmare that was currently her life.

"What are you doing?" Hermione whispered to him, not even sure he could hear her as her eyes slid closed. She wondered if she imagined his irritated sigh.

Hermione's eyes flew open when she suddenly felt his hands sliding beneath her arms, disturbingly close to her bared breasts before he lifted her back to her feet with surprising ease. He was shirtless and Hermione had no choice but to eye his torso as he tugged her out of the shower, leaning her against himself when she couldn't stand on her own while he turned the taps off.

He was underweight like she was, as though he too had been doing without food and sleep and sustenance for far too long. Hermione realised idly that his situation had more to do with constant fear than with a lack of access to food. She tried to squirm away from him as he wrapped both arms around her too-thin, naked body, pressing her harder against himself and carrying her that way across the steamy room and over to the vanity table, where he lifted her until she was sitting on the cold marble bench.

Goose-pimples raced across her skin and Hermione hated herself for not knowing if it was from the chill of the stone after the hot water, or from the feel of his skin brushing against hers as he moved away again. Desperately she tried to cover herself, crossing her legs together and using her hands to hide her modest breasts, but she suspected Malfoy was doing his best to not actually see that she was naked. He moved away for a moment, before returning with a bathrobe that was much too big for her, draping the folds around her and ensconcing her in the warmth before he brought her a towel for her hair.

"What are you doing?" Hermione repeated weakly when he finished scrubbing at her hair roughly, no doubt leaving it in a complete bird's nest of tangles.

"Trying to keep you alive long enough for your idiot friends to show up here and rescue you," he replied gruffly. "Show me your leg."

"My.... What?" Hermione asked, completely bewildered now, though she already felt far better than she had, even after just a simple hot shower to soothe the deep-seated ache in her bones and muscles from the abuse of the cruciatus curse.

"Your leg, Granger, where Greyback slashed you and bit you. Won't do anyone any good if you bleed out in my bathroom," Malfoy said, his cold bony hands already taking hold of the abused limb and lifting it so that he could examine the damage.

Hermione stared at him, and at the ragged wound, blinking in confusion when he pulled out his wand and began muttering spells to stem the blood-flow and heal the wound. She knew he wouldn't be able to heal it completely, not without the aid of someone with proper medical training, but he might be able to help.

"Do you have any dittany?" Hermione asked him, surprised by the fact that he didn't seem to know what to say to her and so was pretending to be completely focused on healing her leg. He nodded mutely, reaching past her to pull open the mirror on the wall, revealing an arsenal of first aid equipment.

Hermione blinked when he handed her a Pepper-Up potion.

"I don't have the flu," Hermione said, staring at him in confusion.

"Drink it Granger. It will help with the effects of the cruciatus curse," he commanded her, not raising his voice to more than a hiss, as though very much aware that they were being eavesdropped upon.

Hermione decided not to question how he might know that, or why he was trying to help her. Instead she drank the potion while he dripped dittany on the slash marks on her leg, followed by covering the entire wound in gauze, sticky bandages and wrapping her leg from ankle to knee in a clean white cloth-bandage. When he finished, he reached for a pot of bruise-healing cream. Hermione flinched slightly at his light touch when he smeared some over her abused cheek and around her swollen eye.

"Why are you helping me?" Hermione breathed to him, holding his steely gaze as he looked directly into her face.

"They'll fail without you," he breathed back to her seriously, frowning a little.

"Not over a bruised eye, they won't," Hermione whispered, perplexed and mildly concerned by that fact that such a cruel person had the capacity to touch her wounded cheek so gently. She chose to not even think about the strange spark she felt as he brushed his thumb along her bottom lip where it had split open.

"I need you to tell me where they are, Granger," Malfoy murmured to her seriously, "Otherwise..."

"I don't know where they are, Malfoy," Hermione replied, "I haven't got even an inkling of where they will go.... I don't even know if they'll look for me."

"You didn't have some kind of plan on a place to meet if you got separated?" Malfoy demanded, raising his voice now so that if the werewolf was still listening outside the door, he would be able to report that Malfoy had interrogated her.

"We don't get separated," Hermione replied, "We've been on the run for months and months and we've never been separated before."

She chose not to mention the fact that Ron had a device that allowed him to find them when he'd taken off like a git. Or the fact that the most likely place they would've gone when they couldn't find her was the place she had once told Harry about. A little village by the East shore where she'd once been with her grandparents as a girl. She doubted Harry would even think of it. But if by some miracle he did, she didn't want to lead the Death Eaters right to him. Even if keeping the secret meant that she'd have to shag Malfoy.

"How can you not have agreed on some place to meet?" Malfoy demanded "You're the smartest witch in our year! How can you not have some kind of plan if things go wrong?"

She could tell from his waspish tone that he was getting cranky now, and that he believed she truly didn't know anything, that she was telling the truth. She could tell he was disgusted and appalled by the idea of having to shag her on his aunt's orders. She could see the frustration and desperation in his eyes.

"Our plan was don't get caught," Hermione replied, "And then Harry lost his temper and those bastards showed up. I have no idea where they could be. For all I know they've been captured or killed. All I know is that *if* they think that I'm here and even still alive, they'll try to get in to save me."

"They haven't been caught or killed," Malfoy muttered, "Trust me, we'd known if they had. They're all under orders to bring anyone they find here to be interrogated the way you have been."

"How many people has she fed to Greyback?" Hermione asked, feeling sick to her stomach and not really wanting to know the answer.

"Only one," Malfoy replied, looking away from her now, "And it was disgusting."

Hermione knew from his expression that he meant it and suspected based on the haunted look in his eyes that the werewolf had torn apart whoever that person had been and probably eaten them in front of him. There was no other explanation for his look of absolute horror. He moved to turn away from her and before he could Hermione grabbed hold of his arm.

He eyed her coldly as though he knew what was coming.

Hermione pulled him as close as she could, pressing her lips directly to his ear.

"Can you get me out of here?" she breathed to him so softly that she wasn't sure even Malfoy would know what she'd said, let alone anyone listening.

"No one can apparate through the wards except the Dark Lord," he shook his head, "And there's no way either of us are getting out of this room without doing what they want...."

Hermione deflated with defeat. If that was true, there was no way Harry and Ron would be able to get inside to save her, and even if they did, none of them would be able to get out. She wondered if Harry would remember the words she whispered to him one night about what they ought to do if either of them was captured. Harry had been concerned that they would try to follow him, and had all but ordered her to refrain should that ever happen. She wondered if he would honour her wishes and not try to find her when there was more at stake than just her life.

"There's absolutely nothing you can give me to get us out of this?" he asked her, and Hermione realised she still had her hand on the back of Malfoy's neck, pulling him close to her so she could speak directly into his ear.

"I made Harry promise not to search for me if I got caught," Hermione replied miserably.

"He's not going to leave you here. They know as well as I do that they'll fail without you," Malfoy replied.

After that, they both waited in silence and Hermione wondered why he didn't pull away from her.

"You know what this means.... Right?" he asked her softly.

"You're going to have to..." Hermione trailed off, her body beginning to tremble once more at the very idea. She gritted her teeth at her own fear, hating the idea of having someone as cruel as Malfoy touch her, but giving herself a stern talking to that it was better Malfoy than Greyback or one of the other Death Eaters. He'd even been kind to her and healed some of her hurts.

"Guess it's a good thing you already hate me," Hermione heard him mutter as he stepped back from where he'd been leaning against the bench between her spread legs and tugging her off the cabinet.

"Better you than them," Hermione muttered back.

With as much dignity as she could muster, Hermione squared her shoulders and limped out of his bathroom and into his bedroom. She trembled even more as she limped closer to the bed.

"Eat first," he told her, stopping her with a touch and nudging her towards a coffee table where the elf must have brought her some food. There was a plate of roast meat and vegetables with gravy waiting for her.

"Last meal, eh?" Hermione asked humourlessly.

"Maybe," she heard him mutter. He sounded angry again, as though he wanted to break something and Hermione wondered if his anger was aimed at her or at his Aunt for putting him in this positon, or perhaps at his father for joining the Death Eaters in the first place.

"You do realise that the longer you prolong this, the more awkward it's going to be, don't you?" Hermione asked him when she was almost finished her meal, scarfing it down in spite of the threatening nausea at the idea that any minute now she was going to have to have sex with Draco Malfoy.

He glanced at her sideways from where he was standing by the fire and she could tell he was already feeling awkward. Hermione could tell that he really didn't want to rape her and that though she wasn't going to put up a fight – knowing that their survival depended on them doing this – Hermione could tell that he didn't like the idea any more than she did. Were they under any other circumstances, where they weren't being pushed to have sex, they would never do so.

"Just eat your food, Granger," Malfoy growled at her and Hermione could hear the frustration in his tone.

"I can't eat any more," Hermione admitted, laying down her utensils.

"Then get up," he told her and Hermione felt her stomach clench with fear at the realisation that this was it. In spite of her fear, Hermione found her courage, climbing gingerly to her feet and moving away from the couch. She moved towards the middle of the room, unable to contemplate willingly going to the bed alone. She jumped when he strode across the room toward her and she squeaked in surprise when he collided with her. His hands delved into her messy hair and before she could do more than squawk in shock his lips covered hers, his tongue sweeping into her mouth and setting her whole body on fire.

Hermione hadn't expected that.

She hadn't expected the flush of heat that coursed through her body in response to him and she hadn't expected to find herself bringing her own hands up, curling around his bare hips. He'd yet to put a shirt back on after lifting her out of the shower and the feel of his smooth skin beneath her hands made Hermione feel funny inside. On some level Hermione felt very much like she was betraying Ron, standing there furiously snogging Draco Malfoy. She told herself that she didn't have a choice. That she would be killed if she didn't do this.

But that didn't mean she should be enjoying it. Draco Malfoy was simply something else in this wretched war to be endured. Definitely not to be enjoyed.

Not that he was going to make it easy, it seemed. Hermione heard the pathetic whimper that escaped her when he pulled away from her lips to trail a line of burning kisses, licks and nips down her throat, his hands leaving her hair to tug at the tie holding the bathrobe she wore closed, prying it open angrily. Hermione could tell from the rough actions that he was positively furious and she dug her nails into his hips when he brutally nipped her collarbone, his hands trailing over her body to cup her breasts.

She gritted her teeth, trying to bite back a moan of pleasure when he began rolling her nipples between his fingers, pinching just enough to smart but not enough to truly hurt her. She hated herself when the moan escaped anyway, and when she found her hands making short work of the fastenings on his trousers. She told herself to think of Ron. To imagine that it was his mouth and his hands tormenting her flesh.

She tried desperately to think of anyone other than Draco Malfoy and anything other than the fiery passion he'd stirred within her.

## Chapter 2

### Chapter Notes

WARNING: This chapter contains lemons and some triggers. Proceed with caution if you're sensitive to such things.

Draco Malfoy could tell from the way the little mudblood kept stiffening and relaxing in his hold that she was trying desperately to cling to reason and sanity. To tell herself that she didn't feel a thing. She was trying to hold still in his grip, as though she meant simply to endure his touch. That made him angry.

He was angry that she had to try not to enjoy the feel of his mouth on hers and his hands on her body. He was furious that she would dare to think she could just stoically endure this the same way she'd endured her torture downstairs. Most of all he was livid that the bitch was effecting him. He ought not to be feeling a single thing as he shoved her up against the door, being sure to be rough enough that she cried out a little in pain and annoyance. Being sure the beast beyond the door would hear that he wasn't just coddling the pathetic little swot.

Draco hated himself for the fact that the bitch was turning him on. He hated that she could draw such a reaction from him. Heat had rushed through him the minute he'd touched her, his senses roaring to life in a way he'd never experienced before and Draco couldn't stand the idea that this ridiculous mudblood could call forth such reactions from him. Her hands made short work of his belt and his fly, his already erect cock springing free of his trousers and Draco hated her for that.

Shoving the robe off her body roughly, Draco hiked her up his body until she had her legs wrapped around his waist. He was livid when she stiffened in his hold once more, clearly trying to remind herself that she was betraying her precious blood-traitor boyfriend by doing this with him. As though either of them had a fucking choice. Growling in fury, Draco wasn't about to let her get away with this. If he had to endure the shame of actually wanting to fuck her now that he'd laid his hands on her, then she had better do more than simply tolerate his touch.

Draco would make damned sure of it.

Holding her secure against his body, Draco spun them both away from the door and carried her across the room to his bed. When he reached it Draco took great delight in dropping down on top of her, hearing the air whoosh out of her lungs in her surprise. He felt an angry smirk curl across his face when she tried to cling to him as he pulled back again. The minute she realised the way she was clutching him, Draco felt her tense and then release him and he gritted his teeth in fury.

She wasn't going to get away with this.

As he pulled away from her mouth, pressing a line of kisses down her chest, he felt the way her hands ghosted over his shoulders and his back before she dropped them back to the bed, fisting them as though in an attempt to keep from showing how much she wanted him. Draco wasn't having that.

"What are you...?" she began when Draco nipped his way towards her left breast, "Oh God.. no, you can't...ah."

Draco chose not to speak as he took her nipple into his mouth, nipping the taught peak with his teeth just hard enough to punish her before suckling it. She writhed in his grip, a string of curses leaving her mouth and surprising Draco with her foul language. He'd never expected the mudblood could talk so dirty.

Using his hands he pinned her arms to the bed beside her head and he shot her a cruel smirk when she hissed at him for biting the opposite nipple, being sure not to neglect either one. Despite her best attempts Draco could feel the way she was arching into his touch and he took great satisfaction as he kissed his way lower, trailing a line of hot kisses across her ribs and taut stomach. Her knees were bent up and surrounded him.

"Don't you dare," she warned through gritted teeth, reaching for his chin in an attempt to stop him from licking her glistening slit. Draco smirked when she fell for the ploy, stopping his face from going any lower but completely neglecting his fingers.

"No," she groaned when he drove two of them deep inside her, plunging them and curling his fingers to apply pressure to the spongy tissue along her inner front wall. The filthy little mudblood moaned like a well-paid whore as he worked her over with his fingers. She was glaring at him in fury but didn't seem able to focus long enough to voice any further protests. The glint of panic in her brown eyes told Draco she was close and that she couldn't bare the idea of betraying Weaselbee by coming on Draco's fingers.

Draco delighted in the mental anguish he was causing her. It was only justified that she be tormented and punished for what she had stirred to life in him. The heat of her skin against his was divine and Draco loathed her for having stirred a similar heat in him. He felt his blood boiling with the need to dominate her. To claim her. To fuck her within an inch of her life as though she was all he'd ever need.

And he hated her for it.

How dare she cause such a response in him? How dare she make him want her this way? He'd never wanted to fuck anyone so much as he wanted to fuck Hermione Granger in that moment.

"No.... no, no, no, no, NO!" she chanted and Draco knew she was trying desperately to prevent herself from coming all over his fingers. That she was scrambling within her own mind for something, for anything to focus on other than the pleasure he was inflicting upon her. She tried to snap her legs closed to force him away. She tried tugging on his hand to make him stop.

When she managed to pry his hand free of her clutching passage Draco simply lowered his mouth and swipe against her clit with his tongue.

"Oh, fuck!" she cursed, her head flinging back against the pillows as he speared his tongue deep inside her, finding he rather enjoyed her taste. Salty and tangy with a healthy dose of sweetness, Draco had never enjoyed the flavour of a woman so much. How dare she taste better than the others?

As punishment, Draco drove her to the edge again and again, going to work with his fingers, his teeth, his lips and his tongue until she was sobbing with how badly she craved release.

"You bastard!" she snarled when he brought her to the highest peak before backing off enough to keep her from coming, "I'll never forgive you for this!"

Draco's dark chuckle was one of pure wickedness. He didn't want her forgiveness. He wanted to brand into her mind all the things he was doing to her. He wanted her to never forget that driving this pleasure into him was an unforgiveable act, one that would see her punished. His hatred for her had never been more profound than it was in that moment.

"No!" she growled, her voice breathy and weak yet husky with desire, "No! You can't do this! I can't.... oh god... fuck!"

Knowing just how badly she did and yet also did not want to come, Draco forced her too. He slowly added a third finger to her tight passage, scraping his nails roughly against her clamping walls while he worried at the tiny bud of pleasure at the top of her slit. When he took it between his teeth and twisted his head to one side and then the other, she came apart at the seams.

"NOOOOO!" she screamed, her voice cracking and her hands fisted so tightly in his hair that Draco was sure he would be missing several strands. She didn't seem to know if she wanted to push him away or pull him closer and Draco body's throbbed painfully with how badly he craved her. Merlin, he'd kill her for it. He'd never forgive the little bitch for making him so hard.

Before she could recover Draco crawled up her body, snatching up both her hands and dragging them up the bed. He planted his lips hungrily on her dirty little mouth even as he buried himself deep inside her. She was so wet that he met no resistance as he filled her, sheathing himself inside her tight, wet, clutching passage.

Fuck a troll, it felt like heaven.

He was going to have to kill her. That much was clear. Because if he didn't kill her, Draco wasn't sure he'd ever get over fucking her. Her hands tried to lift beneath his, her arms writhing in his grip and her back arching as he penetrated deep, filling her to capacity. She was snogging him wildly, so he suspected she meant to use her hands to tug him closer, but he wasn't having it. He wasn't through punishing this witch just yet.

He set a hard driving rhythm, jerking himself out before ramming himself back into her roughly. He didn't think either of them would be able to live with it should he take his time

and be gentle with her, and fuck it all Draco didn't want to. He fucked her brutally, so hard that her body scooted up the bed until her back was pressed against his headboard and he had his feet tucked up underneath himself, her legs sprawled either side of his hips. She'd managed to get her hands free and she was using her sharp nails with wicked effect, clawing his flesh. Draco could tell from the expression of pleasure and pain and hatred on her face that even she didn't know if she was doing it simply as a reaction to his own violence or out of pure hatred.

She met his gaze for a long moment.

"I can't," she groaned hoarsely, her eyes wide and panicked, her expression flickering between one of fear and pleasure over the idea of coming on his cock when she'd already come on his fingers and his tongue. He could tell she didn't trust herself not to and he could see it in her eyes that it was a point of no return for her. It was one thing, after all, to have sex with him because neither of them had a choice in the matter. It was entirely another to enjoy it so profoundly whilst simultaneously hating it so much and Draco knew she'd never forgive herself for betraying her boyfriend this way if she came on his cock.

Draco, on the other hand, would never forgive her for making him feel this way. He'd never enjoyed fucking any witch as much. He'd never felt so utterly free. His past bed partners had all been needy, annoying swots he'd talked into bed with him for the sake of being laid and scratching an itch. He'd never felt anything at all about any of them. He hadn't loved any of them. He hadn't hated any of them. They had all simply been shags of convenience when he felt the need for burying his cock in a warm wet hole.

Granger was different.

He'd never hated any witch so much as he hated this bushy-haired know-it-all who'd gotten him punished every holiday for consistently besting him in classes. He'd never despised anyone so much as this brainy, brilliant bitch who'd often outsmarted him and his friends. He'd never fucked anyone he felt anything for. To feel so much hatred for this one, and to hate her all the more for making him want to fuck her was something Draco could scarcely control.

He didn't have to be gentle with her. He didn't have to worry about seeing her again and knowing what they'd done. There was a very real chance she would never set foot outside this Manor again. He hated her for the freedom he felt when he fucked her. She cried out in his hold, cursing and muttering about how she simply couldn't come again.

Draco was going to make her.

"I. Fucking. Hate. You!" he snarled in her face, punctuating each word with a high, hard, brutal thrust deep inside her clamping, greedy passage. He had one hand wrapped none-too-gently around her throat ramming her against the headboard. He didn't squeeze her neck. He had no intention of killing her. Just of showing her how utterly he loathed her.

"Oh god," she whispered and Draco felt a truly cruel, utterly wicked smirk of pure ruthlessness spread across his face when her body went taut in his hold, her back arching and drawing him deeper, her passage clenching and squeezing his cock as she came hard. She dug

her fingernails into the flesh of his back, clutching him desperately like an anchor in the sea of pleasure he'd hurled her into.

Draco hated her all the more when she dragged him in with her, snogging him furiously, teeth nipping his lips, tonguing sparring with his, trying to find any semblance of dominance. He broke the kiss to curse when his body jerked deep within her, spurting his release inside her tight sheath.

Granger slumped against him in exhaustion after that, her taut body going lax in his hold, curling forwards and resting her chin on the top of his left shoulder. She was breathing hard, and Draco could tell from the little jerks and sounds she was making that she was crying. No doubt in horror at the betrayal she'd just committed. Mildly he considered saying something, sneering at her that maybe she preferred the darker side of things more than she thought if she was so willing to come on his cock.

He didn't.

Instead he burrowed one hand behind her, shifting her slightly on his lap to free his softening member from her swollen passage. His whole body ached with the power of each thrust he'd given her. He'd never fucked anyone so hard in his life and he wondered what kind of sick bastard he must be to have so profoundly enjoyed it. In fact, he was still trying gauge how twisted he might be when Granger went tense in his hold and suddenly screamed. Draco tightened his grip on her when she ducked her head down, tucking it against his chest and under his chin.

He almost didn't want to turn around, terrified of what he would find there that would have the courageous Gryffindor hiding against his chest. Turning his head slowly, Draco felt sick when he found that bastard werewolf leaning in the doorway to his bedroom, his cock in his hand. He'd clearly been stroking it, and had been watching them for a while.

"Get the fuck out of here!" Draco snarled, white hot rage boiling in his blood. His wand was in the pocket of his discarded trousers on the floor, but the fury coursing through him unleashed wandless, non-verbal magic, blasting the werewolf out of the doorway with a boom. The entire doorway exploded and set the disgusting creature's fur on fire where he'd been blown back into the opposite wall, knocked unconscious, much of his skin peeling off as a result of the blast and more burning and sloughing off as he burned. Draco didn't know if he was dead, and to be honest he didn't really care.

He detested that sick bastard and the world would be a better place without him.

"DRACO?!" a voice shouted from down the hall and Draco cursed foully when his mother, his father, his aunt, and a few other Death Eaters – Scabior and Turgroll – appeared in the doorway looking horror-stricken.

"Did she do this?" Aunt Bella demanded and Draco found himself wishing the bitch had been standing with the werewolf when he'd blasted the bastard.

"I did," Draco snapped furiously, "If he's not dead get the twisted fuck out of here before I finish the bloody job!"

"Touchy, touchy, Drakey," Aunt Bella purred and Draco felt sick when the bitch looked proud.

"He's dead," Lucius pronounced, feeling for a pulse and dousing the flaming body, "Need I ask why he died with his cock in his hand?"

"I don't think so," Draco snapped, "Bastard was jerking off in my doorway, watching."

"Disgusting!" Draco's mother said, looking like she might be sick. The scent of burning werewolf filled the doorway.

"Get him the fuck out of here and the rest of you piss off. I'm naked here," Draco drawled at them, feeling mildly better for having killed the werewolf. It had been a long journey since the night on the Astronomy Tower when he'd lowered his wand against Dumbledore, and Draco wasn't the same scared boy he'd been then. He had a knack for killing, in fact, as long as he was killing people he felt the world no longer needed. More than one of his fellow Death Eaters had met a sticky end when Draco had been sent after people, his wand turning easily on his brethren when he could get away with it.

"Really, Draco?" his father snapped, looking disapproving. Draco levelled the man a glare. He might still love his parents dearly, but Draco was through with simpering at the bidding of his father while he tried to get back in the Dark Lord's good graces. Besides, he had a naked mudblood on his lap and his junk dangling free and on display.

"OUT!" Draco shouted, regretting having destroyed the doorway. He smirked in surprise when the exploded doorway suddenly repaired itself, closing them all out of the room. For a moment he thought he'd also managed to mend it, but when he glanced suspiciously at the swot still hiding beneath his chin and straddling his lap, Draco began to think the mudblood might be responsible for the repair job.

"Did you do that?" he asked her curiously, surprised that she could do such powerful magic. Her wand had been confiscated when she'd been captured and she hadn't shifted at all on his lap, even to look at the doorway. In fact, Draco couldn't even see her face. She seemed too intent on keeping her bushy head of curls tucked firmly beneath his chin, hiding her face from him and from the others outside the door, whom Draco could hear arguing about how to deal with the mess and the dead body of the werewolf.

If he had to guess, Draco would say she was probably also still crying, since her shoulders shook silently. She didn't answer his question, though she did shuffle her weight a little on his lap, as though uncomfortable with being naked despite what they'd just done. Rolling his eyes Draco shuffled backwards, away from the headboard, sliding her off his lap as he went. She pulled her knees up to her chest as soon as she was free of his hold, hiding her face against her knees. Draco caught the crimson shade of it before she hid it and he smirked. He expected it would take quite a while for the embarrassment she felt to fade.

He cursed in annoyance when his aunt began pounding on the door, wanting to know what he'd learned as a result of fucking the mudblood. Somehow Draco doubted she would like to know that the little bitch was the best he'd ever had. Snatching up the bathrobe he'd stripped

off Granger earlier before storming over to the door, waving his wand to get it open before glaring down into the face of his deranged aunt.

"What?" he snapped at her. He was thoroughly through with her horseshit and the minute he could get away with it, Draco was going to see the bitch killed for what she'd done. It was all her fault he'd had to fuck the mudblood in the first place. Her fault that Draco would probably never forget fucking Mudblood Granger. Her fault that he wasn't even sure he bloody wanted to forget.

"Did she tell you where Potter is?" his Aunt Bellatrix asked, and Draco felt a cruel and furious smirk spread across his face when he caught the flicker of fear in her gaze as he levelled such a cold gaze at her. She wasn't easily daunted, he knew. And he could tell the blasting of his doorway and the murder of the werewolf had changed her perspective of her favourite nephew. She'd clearly had no idea he could do that without a wand.

"She doesn't have a fucking clue where he is, or how to find him now that they're separated. The best way to get your hands on him will be to spread it around that we've got her here, alive. That will bring him and all those Order bastards out of the woodwork," Draco told her, thinking quickly about the best way to get Granger free. He wasn't going to outright turn on the Dark cause, but Draco had seen enough to know that the Order and the light needed to win this war, else they were all doomed.

"She's broken?" Aunt Bella wanted to know, smiling wickedly when she looked past him, revealing her disgusting rotted teeth. When she frowned suddenly Draco glanced over his shoulder.

He was more than a little surprised to see that Granger had scooped up the Slytherin jersey he usually wore to bed. She'd pulled it on and climbed off his bed. He watched in a fascinated kind of horror when she scampered towards the now uncovered windows, shoving one open and releasing a patronus out of it. Moving quickly across the room Draco foresaw trouble ahead that he needed to head off. She was climbing the frame and about to throw herself out the third story window when he latched onto her, dragging her back inside the bedroom.

"Who did you send that patronus to?" Aunt Bellatrix screamed, having followed him into the room.

"What Patronus?" Granger tried to feign ignorance and Draco would've laughed at her acting ability if she weren't once again in grave danger. Spinning her in his hold, Draco did the only thing he could think of to make his Aunt think the witch was broken to him.

Pressing one forearm across her throat Draco pinned her to the wall by the window. His free hand immediately scooted under the hem of the jersey she wore and she cried out in pain and hatred and pleasure all at once as he drove three fingers back inside her.

"Who did you send it to?" Draco growled into her face, hating himself when he felt his body stir at the way she glared at him. She shook her head, refusing to tell him and Draco wanted to curse. He needed her to play along, merlin curse it all! He needed her to help him make Bellatrix think he could control her so that he could keep her out of the dungeons and out of the hands of the other Death Eaters. Otherwise he had no doubt the bitch would throw the

little mudblood to the more twisted and disgusting of his brethren and let them have their fun fucking her to death.

He eyeballed her hard, curling his fingers against the special spot inside her and feeling her squirm. His Aunt was giggling beside him and she gave a little cheer when Granger couldn't hold back a tiny moan.

"Tell me who you sent the message to!" Draco demanded, punctuating each word with a ram of his fingers deep inside her.

"Harry and Ron," she spat through gritted teeth.

"What did you tell them?" Draco asked her, hoping to hell she was playing along and not this easy to break.

She shook her head again and Draco caught the way she slit her eyes towards Bellatrix before glaring daggers at him again when he ground his thumb against her clit.

"Oh merlin," she whimpered, "I told them..." she tried, her voice growing ragged, "I told them where I am.... They'll come.... You'll all die for this!"

"So well trained, Draco," His aunt commented approvingly and Draco wanted to be sick, "You must have a special touch."

Draco threw up a little in his mouth when she brushed a hand over his shoulder and shot him a flirtatious smile.

"Want me to see what else I can get out of her?" Draco asked rather than acknowledging the neurotic woman's advances.

"Yes," Bellatrix cackled manically, "See if you can get her to tell us where they've been hiding, where the rest of the Order are hiding. Keep her alive. We need her alive to lure Potter here for the Dark Lord to kill."

With that said she leered unkindly at Granger and sauntered out of the room, cackling nastily the whole way. Draco didn't dare look over his shoulder, he didn't want to see the expression he expected he would see on his Mother's face at his actions. Instead he kept his gaze focused on the searing hot witch he was finger-fucking, unrelentingly pumping his fingers into her and eliciting moans of pleasure and horror from her with each curl of his fingers. Just as he heard the bedroom door close, Granger shrieked and came all over his hand again, sticky juices leaking from her.

Draco knew he was fucked when he found himself wanting desperately to lick his fingers clean.

# Chapter 3

## Chapter Summary

My darling cherubs, I'm so pleased by your response to this fic! It makes me so happy to know you're intrigued and want to read on. I have more than 100k words pre-written for this fic, so fear not, you're in for a long and healthy stint of frequent updates. I plan to have the story be complete by the time I get up to date with posting how many chapters are currently pre-written, so you shouldn't run out before this is finished. What do you think of Draco and Hermione so far? Are you enjoying them? Don't forget to pop a review down the bottom in that box for me to tell me what you think. Much love! xx-Kitten

Hermione Granger had never been so humiliated in all her life. She was going to kill Draco Malfoy the minute she got the chance. She'd understood that they'd had to have sex to keep them both from being murdered. She'd even understood that he'd had to be rough with her to keep the others from doubting his results when he couldn't get any more answers from her. When he'd so gleefully and brutally dragged her to orgasm, Hermione had wanted to claw his eyes out. She'd never simultaneously hated and loved something so much than she did when being properly fucked by Draco Malfoy.

How dare he do that to her? How dare he knowingly draw orgasm after orgasm from her? How dare he use his fingers and his mouth when all that had been required was his prick? Hermione had never been so mortified.

She'd never felt like such a harlot either. She'd betrayed Ronald. She'd submitted to sex with Malfoy to keep herself alive. That didn't mean she'd had any right to enjoy it. She felt like she'd cheated on him. It hadn't simply been a tragedy of war to be endured for the greater good. Malfoy had made sure she felt every thrust. He'd made sure she would never live down the shame of coming on his command. Hermione knew she had betrayed Ron. Sure, he didn't know about this. Sure, she'd had to have sex to keep herself alive. Those things could be forgiven.

But that didn't mean she could be forgiven for liking it. And blast it all, she'd loved it. She'd hated it. She hated him more than she hated anyone else on the planet and every thrust had only mounted her growing detestation of him, but merlin curse it all she'd loved it too. She'd never felt so out of control. So free. Malfoy hadn't given her any option but to feel every bruising thrust. He'd fucked her so hard she knew she'd have bruises and already her body ached with what he'd done.

When she'd come apart at the seams Hermione had never known a high like it and she knew she'd never forget it, even if she did want to burn the entire experience from her brain, she knew no amount of memory charms or potions would let her forget what he'd done to her.

She'd hated him all the more for jostling her on his lap afterwards. Shifting her a bit to make them both more comfortable without simply shoving her away like a disposable object.

She'd been trying to catch her breath and unable to restrain her tears as she leant against him, boneless and sated in a way she'd never been before. And she'd been disgusted and terrified when she'd laid eyes on that horrible beast, his hand stroking his todger as he watched them. She hadn't even thought about it as she tucked her flaming face under Malfoy's chin, hiding behind him in shame at being watched, at having anyone other than Malfoy witness her undoing. Her betrayal.

She certainly hadn't expected his reaction. She'd never seen anyone so explosively furious as Malfoy had been and she'd been beyond frightened when the door and the werewolf had exploded, blasted with such raw magical power that the git had died instantly. She'd never known anyone with that kind of ability. Sure all wizards had the potential, with enough practice, to use wandless and nonverbal magic. They also had the ability they had as children to make magic happen without a wand, but such a directed and deadly display was humbling.

Hermione knew she could do that kind of wandless and nonverbal magic, and she'd proved it when she repaired the door to keep anyone else from seeing her humiliation, but she'd never had the potential or the rage to kill someone with her ability. In fact, if she was totally honest, Hermione was a little afraid of Malfoy in that moment. She'd seen the hatred in his face and in his eyes when he'd fucked her, heard the truth to his words when he'd told her of his hatred for her. Had he wanted to, he could probably have killed her.

But he didn't. She'd meant to jump either to death or freedom after sending her patronus after Harry and Ron, and she hated him for stopping her. Hermione had even seen the moment of panic and desperation in Malfoy's face when his aunt had begun to scream and she'd realised as he shoved his arm against her throat and his fingers back inside her that he wanted to convince the crazy witch that he had control over her. That he could break her spirit and get answers from her. She'd known it wouldn't be realistic if she didn't put up a fight.

And she'd hated him more than ever when he'd proceeded to torment her aching flesh while the crazy bitch looked on gloatingly.

He dropped his arm the minute the door closed but Hermione barely noticed, too lost in the high he'd forced on her once more with his skilled hands on her flesh.

"I'm going to kill you," she promised him quietly, opening her eyes slowly when her legs began to wobble, her knees shaking and almost giving out beneath her as a result of the world-rocking orgasm he'd elicited from her.

"No you're not," he replied and Hermione could hear just as much promise in his voice, "I'm the only reason you're not being passed around the group, fucked to death by the rest of those bastards. Did you actually send that patronus to Potter?"

Hermione bit her lip, hating him for seeing through he lie.

"No," Hermione answered, "It would be too easy to follow. I sent it to some of the Order members, telling them where I am and to get word to Harry and Ron."

He caught her when her knees gave out underneath her as a result of pure exhaustion. The things he'd done to her, preceded by his Aunt's torture had left her drained and bone-tired. Hermione tried to protest when he scooped her up in his hold as though she weighed nothing, carrying her towards his bed. She tried idly to cover her bottom, feeling the way the soft fabric of his robe tickled her bared skin and recalling she only wore his old Quidditch jersey.

"Put me down," Hermione demanded feebly.

"Shut it, Granger," Malfoy told her, twisting and swaying a bit as he dragged open the covers on the bed before laying her inside it. Hermione felt strange when he pulled them over, tucking her in almost gently.

Hermione stared at the ceiling of the huge four-post bed, trying not to flinch in shock when Malfoy walked around the bed and climbed in on the other side after snagging up some pyjama bottoms and tugging them on. She had no idea what time it was, or even what day it was. She didn't speak when Malfoy laid on his back beside her in the bed.

Her mind wandered to her boyfriend and how crushed he would be when he found out she'd been shagged by Draco Malfoy. He'd never forgive her. He'd never be able to let it go. Not when he knew she'd come. And he would find out. She wouldn't tell him, but she knew any of the other Death Eaters who'd heard would blab it around, making sure it got back to her friends.

"Anything you want to tell me?" Malfoy asked sometime later when Hermione, despite her exhaustion, found that her guilt wouldn't let her sleep.

"Excuse me?" Hermione asked.

"Bellatrix thinks I'm raping more information out of you. You better give me something to work with or she'll hand you off to the others. If she thinks I'm not getting the job done she'll make someone else do it," Malfoy informed her, and Hermione knew he was right.

"I'm not telling you anything about the Order or about Harry and Ron," Hermione told him sternly. After all, it might've been better Malfoy than any of those other horribly Dark wizards, but at least her body wouldn't respond to them. They would be too interested in their own pleasures to be concerned over her endurance of their touch. Not like Malfoy had been. He'd not done so out of generosity or because he cared if she enjoyed sex with him. He'd done it because he knew she'd hate herself all the more for enjoying it. He'd known she would be tormented over what he'd done, over climaxing in the arms of the enemy.

"You want them to have at you?" he asked, sounding shocked and a little bit angry.

"They're not going to make me feel worse by...." Hermione began hotly, before snapping her mouth shut. Out of the corner of her eye she saw him smirk, realising what she meant despite her refusal to admit it.

"*I hate you,*" Hermione hissed at him when he chuckled softly.

"Not as much as I hate you, Mudblood," he assured her coldly and Hermione suspected she might get whiplash from his mercurial mood-swings.

They both fell silent once more. Hermione could feel herself slipping towards slumber, despite everything, and she feared the nightmares she knew would come. Just as she was almost asleep, Hermione felt his hand slide across the bed towards her under the covers. She tensed for a moment, fearful he wanted to torture her into orgasm once more, but instead he took her hand under the covers.

He didn't squeeze it, didn't use it to pull her to him. Just simply held it as though he meant to provide her some form of comfort. As she slipped off to sleep Hermione found her own fingers curling up to hold his hand just as firmly.

## Chapter 4

She woke to the feel of someone's arm looped around her waist. Hermione didn't dare to open her eyes, for just a moment hoping it was Ron spooned up behind her. It took her brain a little bit longer to catch up to the part where Ron tended to snore and thrash about in his sleep.

She knew too that it wasn't Harry. That one night not so long ago, at Christmas when they'd both been at their lowest and had turned to one another for comfort Hermione recalled that though he'd cuddled her before he'd fallen asleep, he'd rolled away and thrashed in his nightmares. When she slowly blinked open her eyes and caught sight of the lavish bedroom suite Hermione recalled where she was and everything that had happened with sudden clarity and she stiffened. She didn't dare jerk up and away. She didn't want to risk waking him.

When she turned her head a little, Hermione's eyes zeroed in on the ugly black mark burned into the forearm of the arm he'd slipped beneath her neck in his sleep. His skin was pale in contrast to the black ink of the Dark Mark on his flesh and Hermione did her best not to recoil at the sight. She'd been a little too preoccupied yesterday to notice the blemish but now she was faced with it and with the horror of what she'd done. Her whole body ached when she tried gingerly to scoot out of his hold, alarmed to find that in addition to the arm beneath her neck he also had one arm wrapped around her torso, the crook of his elbow resting intimately on her hip and his hand snuggled up between the curves of her breasts.

She listened intently, hoping to find out if she'd woken him, not yet willing to face waking up in bed with Draco Malfoy. His breathing was deep and even, indicating that he must still be asleep. Hermione didn't know if she should curse and try to find his wand or if she should just close her eyes and hope she might be able to wake up from this nightmare. As she deliberated, a startling idea crept into her mind. Maybe, with the right information she could get out of here.

And if anyone had that kind of information it would be Malfoy. This was his home, after all. Closing her eyes and laying her cheek down against the bare flesh of his arm, Hermione focused on drawing her magic up within herself and projecting it. Ordinarily to perform the spell she would need eye contact with him, but touch worked even better for such spells, she'd found.

"Legilimens," she whispered, focusing all her energy on the boy spooned around her.

In sleep his mind was unprotected and she was shocked by how easily she slipped inside it. She flinched slightly when she met with dreams. Dreams of a little boy with brilliant white-blonde hair running in the gardens while a laughing woman chased after him. Dreams of a slightly older Draco playing with a Crup puppy, its forked tail still intact as it jumped and licked at Malfoy's face.

A flurry of memories followed, many of them featuring Malfoy once he'd started attending school. In many of them Hermione caught flashes of Lucius berating him for once again failing to outdo a mudblood academically. She caught flashes of the times he'd spent with his

friends, of the duels and fights he'd had with Hermione, Harry and Ron. Of the feeling he got when he rode a broom, playing Quidditch for the Slytherin team. She even caught the feeling of suspicion and uncertainty he'd felt every time he played as her words about him buying his way onto the team tormented him.

She was shocked when she stumbled across a memory inside his mind of the night of the Yule Ball in fourth year and the way he'd seen her for the first time, all done up and barely recognisable. In fact she could feel the exact moment he'd realised she wasn't some pretty student from one of the other schools but instead none other than Mudblood Granger. Hermione didn't know what to make of it when, despite the way he thought of her by that title, in the memory Draco looked her over objectively and rather favourably.

Pushing deeper into his mind, Hermione tried to find any kind of hint that might be useful to getting her out of Malfoy Manor. In fact she was so focused on digging through memories of his life that she almost didn't notice the feel of warm lips pressed against her ear.

"Legilimens," she heard a sleep-husky voice purr, his lips teasing the sensitive shell of her ear. Too late, Hermione felt his intrusion and she tried desperately to think of nothing but calm lake waters. It didn't help. He was far better at the spell than she was and Hermione hated him when he nudged at the memories and thoughts of them shagging yesterday. She hated the way he made her relive it, refusing to budge from the memory no matter how she tried to think about anything else.

She hated him even more when she felt her body flush with heat all over again in response to the memories.

"Stay out of my head, Mudblood," he practically purred into her ear and Hermione was surprised when he didn't sound angry over her invasion. Instead he sounded smug, as though he rather liked toying inside her mind.

"Get off me, Malfoy," Hermione snapped, trying to jerk away from him hold.

"I don't think so," he replied, nipping her earlobe sharply and causing goose-pimples to prickle across her skin. She hissed in protest when the hand he'd had snuggled between her breasts twisted around to sensually cup one of them through the fabric of the jersey she wore.

"If you don't get your hands off me, I'm going to make you regret it," Hermione threatened him in a low voice, all too aware of the fact that all she wore was his old Quidditch jersey and nothing else. She hated feeling so exposed and she positively detested the way her body had heated at his touch.

"What are you going to do about it, Granger?" he wanted to know and Hermione shuddered at the way he murmured the words into her ear.

Narrowing her eyes though he couldn't see her expression, Hermione wiggled her hand between their bodies. She could feel the effects of waking up holding her on his body poking her behind and Hermione was only too willing to teach him not to go pointing that thing at her ever again. She grabbed hold of his package none too gently and began to squeeze nastily,

causing him to hiss in surprise before he pried her hand loose, his hand leaving her breast to seize her wrist so tightly that she felt the bones grind together.

"Now, now, Granger," he chided in a low voice. "Play nicely."

"Nicely?" Hermione demanded, snatching her wrist out of his grip. "I'm a prisoner in your house, being forced to shag you and tolerate you and waking up with you groping me. You can shove niceness up your arse!"

"Are you always this feisty in the mornings?" he asked mildly and Hermione hated him all the more for the amusement in his voice.

"Are you always this much of a git?" Hermione retorted in annoyance.

"If I was a git, I'd have shagged you downstairs in front of everyone. If I was a git, I'd have kept my mouth shut and let that beast have you," he informed her coldly, his amusement disappearing as quickly as it had come.

"You mean like how you shagged me with that disgusting thing watching us?" Hermione challenged, wriggling furiously in his hold since he seemed intent on keeping her in the bed with him. "You mean like you shoved me up against the wall, practically choking me, while your Aunt was in the room and the rest of your nutty relatives were in the doorway?"

"You were the one facing the door Granger, you can't blame me for not knowing Greyback was in the room," Malfoy informed her, his grip tightening when she began to thrash trying to get loose of his hold.

"I'm going to kill you," Hermione promised furiously.

"You don't have it in you," Malfoy retorted tauntingly.

"Try me Malfoy. The minute I get free I'm going to wring your neck and watch the light leave your eyes," Hermione snapped.

"No you won't," he replied, his grip tightening even more until Hermione had trouble drawing breath. "Now stop struggling and stop threatening me. You're not making it easy to keep you alive until your ridiculous friends get here to save you and if you keep it up I *will* punish you again."

Hermione went still in his hold.

"Are you actually trying to help me, or is this some twisted game you're playing?" Hermione demanded.

"I killed one of the Dark Lord's followers yesterday and you have to ask that question?" he drawled in response, sounding annoyed.

"You didn't do it to help me, you were just pissed off," Hermione pointed out.

"And I could've just let him have you, but instead I dragged you up here, cleaned you, fed you and healed you, and you're still unsure if I'm trying to help you? Aren't you supposed to be bright, Granger?" Malfoy demanded and Hermione wanted to kick him.

"You also stuck me on display and tried to make everyone think you'd broken my spirit whilst fingering me in front of witnesses," Hermione reminded him, blushing over the entire situation.

"Don't pretend you didn't enjoy it," he replied cockily and Hermione elbowed him in the ribs in fury.

"I hated it," she snarled. "And I despise you."

"That's okay, I hate you too," he said cheerfully and Hermione's eyes crossed in frustration.

"Are you mental?" Hermione asked him seriously.

"Not yet," he answered. "Are you going to try and get away from me again if I let go of you?"

"Of course I am," Hermione told him. "Why are you cuddling me anyway?"

"Because you need to stay in bed. You've been on the run for months, you look like hell, you've barely eaten and you were tortured to near insanity yesterday. If you get up you're just going to fall on your face on the floor and then I'll have to carry you back to bed again."

Hermione wondered what he was playing at that he actually seemed concerned for her wellbeing.

"That doesn't tell me why you're cuddling me," she pointed out,

Malfoy sighed as though suffering her presence was tiresome.

"You were screaming and thrashing in your sleep. You stopped when I cuddled you. Don't read too much into it, Mudblood. I just wanted to be able to sleep without you screaming in my ear," he grumbled as he released his hold on her slowly. "You should sleep some more."

"I can't sleep," Hermione replied. "I'm hungry."

"You're whiny, is what you are," he snapped, withdrawing both arms away from her and sitting up against the pillows. Idly, Hermione noticed as she copied his pose that his chest was still bare. She found her eyes drawn to a long thin scar than ran diagonally from his left shoulder across his torso to his right hip. She didn't have to ask to know it was the result of the Sectumsempra spell Harry had used on him in their duel the previous year.

"Tiggy!" he called, choosing to ignore the way she was eyeing him. Hermione jumped when the grubby house elf from the previous day popped into the room.

"Master?" Tiggy asked, looking nervous.

"Can you bring us some breakfast?" Malfoy asked the house-elf.

"Of course Master," Tiggy said. "What is you liking?"

"A bit of everything," Malfoy said, waving his hand nonchalantly. "Did you get Granger's clothes laundered?"

"Yes Master, Tiggy is putting them over here," the elf padded over to the dresser across the room. "Tiggy is regretting to say that he could not mend the damage done by the werewolf, Master. Tiggy tried, but the stitching kept unravelling again. Tiggy is thinking the werewolf used some corrosive substance on his claws."

"Don't worry about it, Tiggy," Malfoy nodded. "Just bring some breakfast."

Tiggy nodded, looking relieved that he wasn't in trouble for not being able to mend Hermione's shirt or her jumper. He popped out of the room to fetch them breakfast and the minute he did, Hermione slipped out of the bed, intent on regaining the security and familiarity of wearing knickers.

Her whole body throbbed painfully when she stood and she whimpered in agony as she fell to the floor, just as Malfoy had predicted she would.

"I told you that you'd fall if you got out of bed," Malfoy sneered, though he didn't get up to help her.

Hermione considered the idea of crawling across the room to retrieve her knickers but she didn't much fancy the idea of giving Malfoy that particular view.

"There's no point you putting pants on again yet anyway, Granger. I imagine my Aunt will be around later this morning to demand what other information I've tortured out of you, and since you're refusing to cooperate she'd going to insist on confirming that I'm doing my upmost to lure the information out of you."

"What makes you think that kind of threat would make me give up Order secrets?" Hermione demanded, glaring at him and gritting her teeth against the pain as she climbed back up on the bed and hid her body under the covers.

"Do you want me to fuck you again?" he asked, eyeing her lecherously and Hermione felt the colour drain from her face. "Yeah, I didn't think so. But I will, unless you tell me something I can pass onto them."

"Are they really thick enough to think that after last time didn't get any information out of me, another round would persuade me to loosen my tongue?"

"You better let it loosen your tongue or they'll hand you off to someone less considerate than me," he replied, crossing his arms as though annoyed at her.

"But why would that matter? I've already been violated by my arch nemesis. Why would being violated again by someone I don't even know make me give up secrets?" Hermione puzzled, honestly baffled by the idea.

"Do you want to be gang-raped by the scum of the earth that make up the Death Eater ranks?" Malfoy asked her, looking mildly alarmed.

"Of course not," Hermione snapped. "But even if I were, I wouldn't give up Order secrets. I knew when I joined that I might very well die or endure unspeakable things for the cause. I won't betray my friends."

"You Gryffindor idiots are too loyal and noble for your own good. Just tell me something I can use. Something inconsequential if you have to."

"Something inconsequential will have the same effect as not telling you anything at all. They'll just demand more answers and expect you to torture them out of me," Hermione replied, crossing her own arms and only just noticing the full implications of wearing his Quidditch jersey. She might as well just brand his name on her at this rate.

"Aunt Bella will torture you again if she thinks I'm not getting anywhere with you," he reminded her and Hermione felt a ball of dread curl up inside her. But she wouldn't let him see her fear.

Instead Hermione shrugged her shoulders, "So be it."

## Chapter 5

Draco was still shaking his head in total bafflement as he left his bedroom, locking Granger inside and walking swiftly towards the dining room. His forearm burned with the summons the Dark Lord had issued. He couldn't fathom the Mudblood's unrattable logic in the face of fear and threats of pain, humiliation and violation. It was as though she was able to look past her fear and simply objectively analyse a situation without bias.

How could she sit there and shrug over the idea of the terrifying, disgusting creatures he served alongside raping her? Did she have no self-respect? Had he broken that? He could tell that despite her use of the word violation; despite claiming that Draco himself had violated her; that she knew he'd had as much say in the matter as she had. He'd of course had more say in how he went about shagging her, but that was beside the point.

He'd been almost grateful when he'd felt the Dark Lord's call. He couldn't bear another second of sitting beside her in his bed, knowing she was naked but for the jersey that bore his name. He was unsettled by how much he enjoyed the sight of her in his house colours with his name scrawled across her chest and her back. Blast her for getting to him this way! He'd never before spared even a passing glance for Mudblood Granger, outside of the pursuit of her as belonging on the side of the enemy, and now he couldn't get the little bitch out of his head.

His blood bubbled with desire every time he thought of how her body had felt beneath his. His cock twitched every time he recalled the string of curses and moans she'd spat at him while he had tasted her sweetness and driven himself deep inside. He only hated her all the more for making him crave her, but there was no denying that he would willingly fuck her again.

"Ah, Draco," the Dark Lord's cold voice hissed in greeting when Draco stalked into the dining hall.

Draco's eyes scanned the small crowd of gathered witches and wizards. He hadn't summoned the entire inner circle it seemed, only those closest to him. There was his mother and Father, his Aunt Bellatrix and Uncle Rodolphus. There was Rabastan and Severus, Yaxley and Rowle. Crabbe and Goyle Senior were also present.

"My Lord," Draco greeted the snake-faced man with red eyes, moving hastily towards his seat.

"I am so pleased you've joined us, Draco," the Dark Lord said, rewarding him with a smile and Draco felt a shiver of dread crawled up his spine.

"Yes, My Lord," he said, unsure what else he should say.

"Tell us, how goes the interrogation of Undesirable number two. Has she divulged any of Potter's secrets?" The Dark Lord asked him and Draco felt his mouth go dry. They all knew then. They knew he'd been asked to fuck the answers out of her.

"She's too logical to be so easily swayed, my Lord," Draco answered truthfully, "But she did let slip that she, Potter and Weasley have been travelling around together. On the run from your forces. I suspect he fears you, my Lord."

"Indeed?" the Dark Lord asked, a creepy smile crawling across his face, "I must say Draco, I am pleasantly surprised."

"My Lord?" Draco asked nervously, glancing at his father.

"Yes, when Bella informed me of your interference in her plans to torture information from the Mudblood I feared you might be showing your true colours, your weakness...." The Dark Lord said in a whispery voice that did nothing to settle Draco's nerves, "However, when I learned of your aggressive actions to break her spirit I was most pleased with you Draco."

Draco gulped nervously.

"Thank you, My Lord," Draco croaked out, unsure if he was supposed to speak. He could feel Snape's eyes on him and he knew his Godfather was shocked by this turn of events. Shocked to hear Draco had willingly raped anyone.

"Then, there is the matter of your murder of Greyback..." The Dark Lord continued and Draco wondered if he would live through the meeting, "Tell me why you killed him?"

Thinking quickly Draco blurted the first thing he could think of.

"He interrupted me, my Lord. The Mudblood was in the middle of divulging some information, but she ceased the minute she spotted the bastard jerking himself off in the doorway, watching me interrogate her."

"Indeed?" the Dark Lord asked and Draco supposed that there was some truth to the answer. She might well have told him something if that idiot hadn't shown up.

"Fear of him stopped her tongue," Draco shrugged, "And I lost my temper when he refused to obey instructions."

Draco made sure to sneer as though Greyback had been no more than a disobedient dog who'd been put down.

"My, my, my," the Dark Lord practically purred and Draco could tell that he approved of Draco's actions and his lack of remorse over killing Greyback, "Perhaps the Malfoy family can yet find some redemption. Did she tell you anything else?"

Draco nodded his head, "She attempted to escape after sending off a patronus with a message when Greyback's imprisonment charms failed, tried to hurl herself out the window. She refused to talk to Aunt Bella, but I persuaded her to tell me that she'd sent the patronus to Potter and Weasley, informing them of her whereabouts. I expect they'll storm the Manor to rescue her as long as they know she's alive."

"Excellent," the Dark Lord purred.

"He was very persuasive, my Lord," Aunt Bellatrix threw in to the conversation, always looking for a reason to draw the Dark Lord's attention to herself.

"You shall be rewarded, Draco," the Dark Lord promised, "You shall give us a demonstration and I shall teach you a new skill in reward for breaking Potter's loyal little Mudblood whore."

The rest of the Death Eaters at the table sneered and laughed along with the Dark Lord and Draco felt sick to his stomach. A demonstration? The Dark Lord meant to put him on display and have him rape Granger again in front of the gathered crowd. Draco knew too that he did it not out of generosity but out of suspicion. He was far too cunning to simply believe that one shag behind closed doors had resulted in Granger spilling her guts to him. He wanted to see the little swot humiliated and broken. And he wanted to see Draco prove that it wasn't all just hype to get himself and his family out of trouble.

"Shall I fetch her then, my Lord?" Draco drawled, feigning indifference, as though he didn't care one way or the other where he fucked her or who witnessed it.

"Yes," the Dark Lord nodded and Draco got to his feet once more. The little witch was going to murder him. If there'd been any doubt, Draco no longer had any. She would kill him. And if she didn't then her precious friends would when they finally arrived to save her. Feeling like he was walking to the gallows, Draco took long, determined strides back through the Manor towards his bedroom where he'd left the Mudblood locked up and commanded to rest.

Draco began to panic when he unlocked the door and didn't immediately spot her, cursing foully. He tilted his head when a sound caught his ears and he followed it into bathroom suite where he found her sitting in the bottom of his shower, every shower-head turned on full-blast and beating down upon her.

"What?" she asked fearfully and Draco wondered what his expression must look like if she could so easily tell that he was about to sign their public humiliation over to the Dark Lord.

"Get up," Draco told her, not even bothering to turn the water off or strip this time before taking hold of both her hands to pull her to her feet. He almost laughed when she tried in vain to cover her naked body from his gaze.

"You're not going to like this," Draco informed her seriously, waving his wand at her to dry her.

"Oh merlin," she breathed and Draco could tell that for all her logic and bravado before he'd left, she was terrified of what she suspected was to come.

"The Dark Lord means to make a spectacle of your ultimate humiliation," Draco told her, picking up the jersey she'd discarded and pulling it onto her body, "He doesn't entirely believe that I've broken your spirit and presumes to have me prove it in front of a select group of his most loyal followers."

"What?" she demanded, her eyes wide and terrified.

"He's going to make me fuck you in front of everyone, Granger," Draco snapped at her, growing impatient with her. Merlin he hated her. He hated her for getting them into this situation. For making him want to fuck her again, even if he had to do it in front of an audience. For getting caught in the first place.

"You can't," she whispered, shaking her head wildly, "Not again."

"I don't have a bloody choice Granger," Draco snarled at her, "I don't like the idea any more than you do, but since it's this or both of us being tortured and killed, this is what's happening. If you hadn't gotten yourself bloody well caught in the first place, this wouldn't have happened."

"Don't you dare blame me, you bastard!" Granger snarled at him and Draco was mildly surprised by the fire and spirit that took over her features as she got angry.

"Well don't fucking blame me either! I don't want to fuck you in front of my parents and my aunt and uncle! In front of the Dark Lord and those other twisted fucks. In front of Snape. But I don't have a fucking choice. They're going to torment you, they're going to laugh at you and they're probably going to hurt you. There's nothing I can do about it. And you're going to hate me even more than you already do because I'm going to be even rougher and meaner than I was yesterday. I'm going to have to play up enjoying breaking you and you're going to have to give them the answers they want or they'll keep us there until we die."

"I won't give up any of our secrets," she vowed coldly, squaring her shoulders.

"If you don't the Dark Lord will probably torture you," he warned her and Granger glared at him coldly. Draco could see that she was steeling herself to what had to be done and he hated himself for admiring the strength of will it took her to let him degrade her and parade her in front of the others without giving up anything. He knew that he hadn't broken her. Far from it. He could tell from the look of cold fury on her face that he was in for what was going to be the worst night of his life and that if she ever had the chance she would watch him die slowly and in pain.

"None of them will break me," she vowed, "And you sure as hell won't break me."

"If you don't make it look like I have they'll make someone else try, or they'll just kill you."

"They won't kill me," she shook her head, "They'll keep me alive until Harry gets here. They might be able to make me wish I was dead, but they won't kill me just yet."

"Don't make this harder on both of us than it has to be Granger," Draco snarled at her, seizing her wrists and dragging her from the bathroom the minute she'd pulled on her knickers. She tried to stop to grab her discarded jeans, but Draco didn't let her. They would only be vanished or destroyed and she would need them later.

"You don't get it, do you Malfoy?" she demanded, glaring at him and he dragged her from the room, "I don't give two shits about making things hard for you. And my pain is worth it if it keeps Harry and the others out of the hands of people like you!"

Draco didn't say anything else, he just dragged her. When he reached the dining room he hauled her into the room with such force that she stumbled and fell to her knees. She was having enough trouble walking without him making it worse, but he had a show to put on and if the Dark Lord was going to believe his act he would need to make it believable.

Many of the gathered Death Eaters began to laugh the minute they realised he'd returned. His aunt could be heard cackling madly when Granger tried to scramble back to her feet and Draco didn't let her. He went after her, his hand finding the back of her neck and gripping as he threw her deeper into the room, causing her to fall heavily again and roll painfully. He caught the hiss of pain she emitted when he kicked her injured leg.

"Ah, Miss Granger," the Dark Lord chuckled gleefully, "So kind of you to come out of hiding and pay us all a visit."

"Fuck you," she snarled, and Draco watched the way the crazy bitch lifted her head to glare up at the Dark Lord as he moved across the room towards her. Before he could reach her and before Draco could grab her again, she was on her feet and she rushed the Dark Lord. Draco wasn't the only one shocked when she spat right in his face.

"Crucio!" the Dark Lord spat right back, turning his wand on the half-naked witch. Draco looked on helplessly as she writhed on the floor, screaming in agony.

"I thought you told me you had broken her spirit, Draco," he snapped, looking disgusted as he wiped the spittle from his face.

"No my Lord," Draco corrected despite his fear, shaking his head on the inaccurate assertion "Only that she could be persuaded to cooperate."

"Indeed?" the Dark Lord asked tersely and Draco nodded.

"Shall I persuade her to cooperate, my Lord?" Draco asked, making sure to keep an arrogant drawl in his voice, his eyes fixed on Granger where she was panting on the floor as she recovered from the utter agony of being tortured by the Dark Lord.

"Yes. Have her tell us where Potter's been hiding," the man nodded and Draco let a cruel smirk crawl across his face before he went after the Mudblood once more.

## Chapter 6

Hermione held her breath as Malfoy came after her once more. As soon as he was in reach she kicked out at him viciously but he was expecting the attack and dodged her feet. Hermione groaned when he buried his hand in her loose wet hair and jerked her head backwards so that she was forced to glare up at him.

"Tell us where Potter's been hiding," he commanded and Hermione would've been astonished at his tone of utter arrogant authority if her blood hadn't been boiling with rage.

"Never!" she snarled in return, fighting not to wince at the pain when several strands of her hair came free.

"You like making me force you, don't you Mudblood?" he sneered and the other Death Eaters shouted things at her, calling her a whore and a slut. Hermione ignored them. She hated herself for not entirely knowing the answer. She didn't like being forced to do anything, she didn't like not being the one in control, but she couldn't deny that she'd come harder than ever before in her life when he'd forced her to.

"You'll die for this," she snarled in reply as he hauled her to her feet by her hair. As soon as she could reach Hermione lashed out with both hands, her ragged nails slashing down the side of his face and his neck, drawing blood.

"You little bitch!" he snarled and Hermione regretted her actions when he backhanded her across the face. He didn't do it so hard as to break something, but she knew it would leave an even bigger bruise on the already bruised side of her face from yesterday's torture with Bellatrix.

"Punish her, Draco," the Dark Lord commanded and Hermione couldn't hold in her whimper of pain and humiliation when Malfoy twirled her in his grip to wrap one arm around her neck, squeezing just hard enough to threaten her air supply. Hermione tried stomping on his feet, but he was expecting that too. She wanted to die when she felt his free hand dive under the hem of the jersey she wore and tore her knickers down her legs.

"Tell us where Potter's hiding," he growled in her ear once more, his fingers tangling in her unkempt pubic hair. Hermione was grateful for it as it kept some of her flesh from view and she thanked her stars that she'd not had the time or the privacy whilst on the run to maintain her usual grooming ritual.

"No!" Hermione spat, trying again to stamp on his foot. He responded by nipping her earlobe harshly, hard enough to draw blood, before spearing his fingers through her hair and into her swollen passage. Hermione hated him for the sob that he drew from her. She hated the watching Death Eaters for the way they laughed and cheered. Most of all she hated herself for the fact that in spite of the horror of the situation she knew it was a sob of yearning, not of defeat.

Hermione had never hated anyone as much in all her life as she hated Draco Malfoy in that instant for turning her own body traitor against her. How dare he make her so wet and needy in this horrible place? How dare he control her body better than she did?

"Tell us where Potter's hiding," he growled in her ear again, making a show of the slow, torturous plunging of his fingers into her body.

"Stop it!" she hissed, trying desperately to claw his hands away from her, her hips bucking despite her best efforts to remain unaffected by the touch.

"Not until you tell us where Potter's been hiding," Malfoy told her coldly and Hermione felt more hatred pour forth as she felt his erection prodding at her bare bottom through his trousers. She didn't know if she ought to be disgusted most with him or with herself for the fact that they were both fucked up and turned on in that moment.

"I'll never tell you!" Hermione snarled, her nails scraping the skin off his arms and hands as she tried to claw his arm away from her neck and to drag his hand away from her aching slit.

"Then I'll never stop!" he purred in her ear, punishing her with an extra finger in her already abused channel and nearly driving her over the edge with the violence of each thrust. He made sure to scrape his nails over the special spot inside her, driving her towards a peak of pleasure she'd never known before him.

Hermione loathed the fact that his promise was supposed to scare her but instead just turned her on.

"Make her scream, Draco," Voldemort commanded and Hermione wanted to cry as she recalled they had an audience. She'd closed her eyes against them all, refusing to let any of them hold her gaze.

Hermione had never wanted to murder anyone so much as Malfoy when he did what he was told, grinding his thumb against the sensitive little bundle of nerves at the top of her slit, pressing it with each deep, bone-jolting thrust of his fingers inside her until she couldn't take it anymore. She bloodied her own lip trying to bite back the scream of pleasure that overtook her, but it still escaped.

Her whole body rushed with warmth and pleasure, endorphins flooding her system and leaving her feeling limp in his hold. She still struggled feebly, but she knew there would be no escaping him. He didn't stop tormenting her even as her walls clamped down on his fingers, gripping them furiously as her body spasmed with release.

"Still waiting for an answer, Mudblood," Malfoy told her and Hermione suspected from his tone that he'd practically forgotten the others where there and looking on as he tormented her.

"Won't tell..." she panted, trying to get her breath back as his fingers began shoving her towards a second peak of pleasure.

"You'll tell," he disagreed arrogantly, sounding entirely predatory as he tormented her. The others laughed and jeered as he continued torturing her.

"Make her talk, Draco," Voldemort hissed and Hermione flinched away from him instinctually despite Malfoy's hold, her body jerking away from where the evil creature hissed next to her ear.

When Malfoy withdrew his fingers from her, Hermione felt like she might cry, she was teetering on the precipice of another release and he was denying her. The audience laughed when she couldn't hold back her whimper. And they cheered when Malfoy fingers suddenly captured her clit and twisted it just enough to sting. Hermione's body bowed in his hold, her back arching, her nails digging into his skin and her mouth opening on a string of curse.

"No, no, no fuck, no! I'm going to fucking kill you," she snarled at him, unable to control her mouth or her body when he tormented her so. If it weren't for her clarity of mind and the boiling hatred she felt Hermione would almost think he'd put her under the Imperius curse her body obeyed his commands more than her own.

"You couldn't if you tried," Malfoy purred in her ear and Hermione could tell he was enjoying himself immensely as he twisted her clit this way and that, shockwaves of pleasure rippling through her, swamping her system with just enough to drive her mental but not enough to give her release.

"Tell me where he's been hiding," Malfoy commanded in a low, husky voice, "And I'll stop toying with you."

Hermione could hardly take it. Each twist twinged painfully and yet felt indescribably good like nothing she'd ever felt before. She tried gritting her teeth, tried to think of other things – horrible things that made her ill – she tried to think of anything else but the slow torture he was inflicting upon her. Malfoy wasn't going to have that. He nipped her earlobe again in punishment.

"I am not to be endured and ignored, Mudblood," he growled at her, "Answer the question."

He accompanied the demand with a press of his fingers against her nether region before he returned only to twisting her clit from side to side, causing Hermione to wriggle and struggle in his grip. Not that he was letting her budge an inch and get away from him.

"Everywhere," she gasped when she could take it no more, "We've been hiding everywhere."

"Explain!" Voldemort hissed and Hermione shivered when Malfoy's fingers twitched as though annoyed with the interruption. He pulled his hand away from its torment of her flesh and burrowed it between them, grasping for his belt and his trouser fastenings, Hermione suspected. Her knees felt like they'd turned to jelly and almost gave out on her as she tried to catch her breath.

"Answer him, Mudblood," Malfoy purred dangerously into her ear.

"We move around constantly. Never stop in one place more than a day or two," she elaborated, unable and entirely unwilling to tell them anything else. After all, there wasn't all that much that could be made of that. Voldemort didn't have enough followers to search the entire country all at once and even if he did, he wouldn't.

"Why hasn't he showed himself?" Voldemort demanded.

Hermione didn't answer him. She didn't even look at him. She kept her gaze fixed on the floor a foot or so in front of her.

"Make her squeal Draco," Voldemort demanded and Hermione felt her stomach roll uneasily, "Make her tell us everything. Pain is useless on this one. Draw the answers out of her."

In that moment Hermione realised that Voldemort was indeed very good at judging the character of a person. She suspected he knew that they could torture her with the Cruciatus curse into madness or death and she wouldn't give them anything else. She was too sound of mind and too skilled at compartmentalizing everything with reason, even pain.

"You won't get anything else but lies," Hermione warned, still refusing to lift her gaze. If she met Voldemort's gaze she knew he would use legilimency on her and Hermione wouldn't be able to protect her mind and her secrets then.

She cried out when sudden pain struck her, agony ripping through her limbs beyond any she could describe. The pain was so profound that she could not comparatively describe it to anything else. She writhed in Malfoy's grip, almost coming free of his hold on her throat when he nearly choked her as she was tortured.

He released her quickly and Hermione gasped in shock when just as suddenly as it started then pain stopped and across the room someone else screamed.

"Draco!" Voldemort growled and Hermione lifted her head to see that Malfoy's stormy grey eyes were narrowed dangerously on Bellatrix LeStrange where she writhed in agony, falling out of her chair. The warning from his master ceased his action and the dark haired woman slipped into her chair breathing raggedly.

"Don't interrupt me again Bella," Malfoy snarled, his words directed at his Aunt and so deadly that Hermione felt goose-pimples explode across her flesh. While everyone was distracted as Bellatrix began to fume heatedly, Hermione made a break for it. She was beyond caring that she wasn't wearing any knickers or that they would all see her bottom. They were going to see even worse than that if she stayed.

"Stop her!" Hermione heard Voldemort command and out the corner of her eyes Hermione saw the gathered group rise from the table. The explosion was unexpected and Hermione glanced towards the table in surprise as it cracked apart, debris from it knocking over everyone who'd stood to pursue her. She was too distracted to realise Malfoy had sprung after her and Hermione screamed when he tackled her across the hard stone floor, the pair of them rolling and tumbling together.

"Going somewhere, Mudblood?" he growled in her ear when he managed to pin her down on her back.

"Get off me!" Hermione shouted at him, her hands pinned down as he drove his knee between her legs, kicking them apart despite her efforts to keep them closed. Hermione renewed her efforts to fight him off, bucking and fighting beneath him, rage boiling in her

blood and exploding out of her in a furious burst of magic. When the rug beneath her and the drapes on the windows burst into flames, Hermione tried to throw him off her, but Malfoy wasn't having any of that.

"Is she doing that?" Voldemort asked as Malfoy drove both arms under her back, his hands curling up over her shoulders from beneath her and rolling them both wildly until they were free of the flames.

"She'll stop in a second, my Lord," Malfoy promised on her behalf and Hermione realised he meant to bury himself inside her again. Dread and anticipation filled her and Hermione tried desperately to buck him off her once more, but to no avail.

"Don't you fucking dare, Malfoy," she snarled in his face, torn between the horrible craving for the freedom fucking him had provided and the disgust and hatred for him that she felt coursing through her, "Don't you dare or I swear to Merlin I'll make you regret it."

He dared.

Despite the way she tried to close her legs and fight her hands free of the way he'd used magic to bind them to the floor either side of her head, he was too strong for her. Hermione's back arched and she cried out raggedly when he entered her again. Her abused sex both protested and welcomed the invasion and Hermione heard the sob of agony and yearning that left her throat. Amid the chaos created by the explosion he'd caused and the fire she'd started, the Death Eaters missed the sound but Voldemort didn't and he was sure to draw their attention back to her complete humiliation.

"You bastard," Hermione sobbed when he drove into her hard and pulled back out slowly as though savouring the way her body clutched greedily at his, entirely beyond her control.

"Shut up, bitch," Malfoy growled at her, his grey eyes boring into hers. They were dancing with hatred and Hermione knew he was as torn as she was between hatred and enjoyment of the total freedom in that moment. He'd ceased listening to the calls of the others, and even to Voldemort, who was barking questions at Hermione and demanding Draco make her give him the answers.

She could tell Malfoy didn't give two shits about the questions or the answers. She could feel it in the way he pounded back into her as hard as he could, causing Hermione to cry out in pain and fury. His face was bloodied with the scratches she'd clawed into his skin earlier and his eyes were wild. Utter loathing was written in every aspect of his expression as he glared at her, and Hermione could swear she heard his voice again telling her it was all her fault because she'd stupidly been caught.

"Just imagine what Potty and Weaselbee would think of you now, Mudblood," he sneered into her face, punctuating his words with bone-jolting thrusts that made her ache and burn for more and for an end all at once, "They'll never take you back now. Not when they hear how you moaned for me."

Dimly Hermione was aware of Bellatrix catcalling from the sidelines, of Narcissa Malfoy having turned her face into her husband's chest to avoid watching her son fuck a mudblood.

A couple of the other male Death Eaters looked eager to get a go at her themselves. Hermione was aware of it all, yet entirely detached from it all too. She heard the sobbed expletives that left her lips when her back arched of its own accord, trying to draw him deeper still.

"They'll never forgive you when they know what you've done," he promised her and Hermione hated him all the more for the emotional pain that truth delivered to her. She closed her eyes when the tears began and she refused to open them even when he forced his lips down on hers, nipping them angrily, causing as much pain as he could whilst still providing the most blinding pleasure Hermione had ever known.

"Tell us where they are, Mudblood," Voldemort was shouting, "Where is Potter?"

Hermione could feel something building inside her. Something wild and uncontrollable, coiling and springing, stretching at her psyche, threatening to consume her.

"HERE I AM!" a familiar voice penetrated the haze of pleasure and pain Hermione was suffering and her eyes sprang open when suddenly a dozen Order members including Harry and Ron were there duelling the Death Eaters. Her eyes met Malfoy's in an instant before everything blew apart, the building pressure inside her snapping free with violent and deadly force.

She felt his body shudder as hers dragged his over the edge into orgasm and she felt too the way power and magic was ripped free of her bound body, unleashing wave upon wave of raw power on the room at large. Hermione had no idea if it was entirely from her or from Malfoy too since his eyes never left hers. All she knew was that the dining room of Malfoy Manor blew apart, smashing through the walls, the roof and the floor to those surrounding it, the magic setting everything ablaze.

Dimly she was aware of the hex that hurled Malfoy out and away from her, of the way the raw magic she'd unleashed caused the whole room to explode, debris flinging about madly and killing more than one of the gathered Death Eaters. She could only pray that her friends didn't die in the crossfire.

The binds holding her to the floor melted away and Hermione saw Ron punch Malfoy across the face while Harry snatched a handful of wands away from the blonde, making Hermione wonder where he'd gotten them all from. She hoped hers was amongst them. Springing to her feet, Hermione rushed towards them, realising Ron was furious enough to kill Malfoy in that moment. Before he could unleash the curse Hermione collided with Malfoy again.

"Where's my bag?" she demanded of him, her eyes fixed on his bloodied face once more.  
"Give it to me!"

He didn't say a word, but his expression was one that would haunt her as he held his arm out to one side and the purple beaded bag came whizzing out of somewhere amid the destruction. He caught it and handed it to her quickly, never once taking his eyes off her.

"I'll kill you, ferret!" Ron was shouting, pulling at Hermione, trying to move her out of the way.

Before he could get the chance, Hermione felt a tiny hand clutch hers and she looked down to see a house elf gripping her and Ron tightly. Before she could so much as blink they were suddenly pulled into the warping tunnel of teleportation and transported far away from Draco Malfoy and Malfoy Manor.

## Chapter 7

Hermione's head lolled against the side of the bath-tub, the steaming water and many potions in it designed to help her relax and help her forget the horror of her time at Malfoy Manor. It had been almost a week since her escape and Hermione was no closer to forgetting what Malfoy had done to her. She'd refused to speak about it to anyone, even to Harry and Ron. They knew most of the facts anyway, since they'd apparated in with the help of several Hogwarts elves including Dobby during her interrogation.

They knew Draco Malfoy had raped her for the information as to Harry's whereabouts. They knew she'd been tortured and humiliated in front of everyone. She hadn't been able to bring herself to elaborate. She couldn't stand the idea of admitting to them that Malfoy had been almost nice to her when he'd saved her from Greyback's clutches. She hadn't been able to voice the fact that he'd healed her and fed her and tried to help her. She'd been unable to tell them that he wanted this war to be over just as much as they did. She couldn't tell them that she'd begged him to be the one to do it instead of Greyback. Couldn't tell them he'd killed Greyback for being a disgusting pervert.

She'd been unable to tell them anything. Every time she tried the words died on her tongue and no sound came out. She felt even worse over that. Harry continually looked guilty and tormented, always blaming himself for the hardships anyone else suffered in this war. She wished she could tell him it would be okay, that she wasn't gravely wounded. That she would survive and that it wasn't his fault. She just couldn't get any words out. For more than a week they'd been asking her what happened and all she'd managed thus far was 'you saw'.

Ron looked even more tormented than Harry did. He kept reaching for her hand as though to provide her comfort, before he would pull it back again as though he feared the simple touch might trigger some terrible memory. And so she sat in the bath, using her wand to reheat the water again and again though her fingers had turned wrinkly hours earlier. There was a Calming Draught in the water, though Hermione didn't think she really needed it.

At first she'd been taken to Shell Cottage, but when the others had realised what had happened to Hermione, she'd been taken straight to the Burrow and had been under Molly's strict care since then. The woman kept tearing up whenever she looked at Hermione and Hermione hated the way they were all looking at her like some violated, brutalised victim.

She hated it because she didn't feel like a victim.

Sure, she'd been forced to have sex with a boy she hated. Sure she'd been publicly humiliated. Sure, in a way, the sanctity and purity of her body had been taken from her. But Hermione didn't feel like some weak victim who needed to feel safe and in control. They hadn't taken her control away from her. Well, Malfoy had. He'd taken her ability to control her body's reaction to his touch. But they hadn't taken away the confidence she had in herself that she could survive. That she would be okay. That she was in charge of her own person and in charge of who got to touch it.

When it really came down to it, she'd let Malfoy. She had allowed him to have sex with her, knowing it was the only way to keep both of them alive. Knowing that if she didn't she would be tortured with the Cruciatus curse until she went mad or died from the pain. Instead, she'd simply had to have sex with someone she ordinarily wouldn't have chosen. Hermione didn't know how to explain all that to the others. All she knew was that it really all boiled down to the fact that she'd had a choice and she'd made it.

How was she supposed to explain that to Ron? How was she supposed to look him in the eye and tell him that she'd let Draco Malfoy have her body? That she'd involuntarily encouraged him and moaned for more? Hermione didn't blame herself, and she didn't blame Malfoy either. She just hated him. She hated him for making her feel every thrust, for making her feel pleasure when he could've been selfish and not allowed her any pleasure. She hated him for not allowing her to simply endure his touch. He'd made her enjoy it and Hermione didn't know what to make of that.

It was far more disconcerting, in her opinion, to have one's control over the pleasure they experienced taken out of one's hands, than for the same to be said over the pain one experienced. Had he simply forced her to feel pain, he'd have been a monster. But he hadn't. He'd made some things hurt, but never enough to lastingly make her recall the pain. Worse was the fact that he'd made her tingle. He'd made her quiver and shudder and come completely undone. He'd taken her ability to feel pleasure and he'd wielded it like a weapon.

And in doing so he'd handed her a particular type of freedom she'd never known before. A freedom Hermione hadn't been able to stop thinking about.

Sighing to herself, Hermione tried to push the unfathomable expression on his face before she'd escaped out of her mind. She climbed out of the bath and used magic to dry herself before donning a hooded jumper she nicked from Ron and some fleecy pyjama bottoms. She used her wand to gather up her hair, twirling it to make the tendrils curly rather than allowing them to frizz. When she was finished she stomped her feet into her slippers and made her way downstairs.

Everyone looked up when she walked into the living room and Hermione suspected they'd been talking about her. The immediate Order members were gathered there, all of them imposing on Molly and Arthur's generosity and providing the extra protection of them all being in one place. Hermione knew they were doing it for her, trying to help her feel safe.

She chose not to say anything over the way they all fell silent, indicating they'd definitely been talking about her. Instead she walked purposefully across the room and dropped down on the couch in between Harry and Ron, wedging herself in between them though they sat side by side. Almost immediately Harry looped his arm through hers and a moment later Ron put his arm around her shoulders, pulling her gently towards him and tucking her head against his shoulder.

She felt a small smile of contentment spread across her face as she sat there.

"Please stop treating me like I'm fragile," Hermione said quietly to the room of gathered people at large, her eyes dancing over Remus and Tonks, over baby Teddy and Andromeda.

Over Mr and Mrs Weasley. Bill and Fleur. Charlie was there, and Kingsley. Fred and George too.

"Hermione...." Ron began, sounding like he meant to chide her for saying such a thing.

"No Ron," Hermione insisted without taking her head from his shoulder, "I'm not breakable. I'm not fragile. I'm not broken. What happened was unpleasant, but it could've been much worse. I'd like to thank all of you, again, for rescuing me and for taking care of me since. But it's time to move past it and on with the mission."

"Hermione how can you say that?" Harry asked her while across the room Mrs Weasley's lip began to tremble and Fleur had covered her mouth, tears shining in her eyes. Hermione didn't feel like she deserved their tears over her supposed strength.

"Because we have a job to do. I know no one wants to hear it, but Draco Malfoy really was trying to help me back there and what happened was for nothing if we give up now," Hermione told him firmly, lifting her head from Ron's shoulder to meet Harry's confused gaze.

"Trying to help you?" Ron growled, "That bastard...."

He trailed off, too furious for words.

"Oh Hermione," Tonks murmured, her eyes filled with compassion and Hermione could tell that her words were only making them all even more worried for her.

"Tonks, please," Hermione help up her hand. She climbed back to her feet and paced towards the fire. She wrung her hands together as she tried to gather herself, trying to find the best way to word what she needed to convey.

"I am not a victim," she told them all as she stared into the flames, "I am not some broken spirit. Please do not look at me with pity and second guess your words or actions in my presence. What happened to me in Malfoy Manor was not some tragedy to be whispered about and tiptoed around as though I'll never recover. Physically I am healed, thanks in large part to Molly and Fleur."

She turned to nod her head at them, meaning to convey how grateful she was for their constant care since she'd been rescued.

"Please do not look at me like I am damaged goods," Hermione continued softly, her eyes dancing to each familiar and beloved face within the room, "I appreciate your concern and I am so thankful to all of you for all you've done for me, but I am stronger than this. None of you want to hear that this wasn't Malfoy's fault, but the truth is that he saved me in there. Bellatrix tortured me for hours for information and when I refused to give it up she threw me to the Fenrir Greyback with the command that he rape the information out of me."

Hermione saw the way the entire room flinched and the way they all looked horrified.

"Hermione... he didn't?" Harry asked in a strangled voice, guilt evident on his face.

"Before he had laid more than a claw on me, Malfoy spoke up. I think it was unintentional but he whispered that Bellatrix couldn't let him," Hermione continued, for the time being not answering Harry's questions, "She turned her wand on him and changed her mind, told him that if he wanted to stick his nose into things then he would do the job instead. She threatened to kill him and his mother when they protested."

Everyone looked disgusted and Hermione could see their fear and fascination for the tale despite the grisliness of it.

"He wasn't going to do it, he was too scared," Hermione continued quietly, proud when her voice didn't waver, "I knew if he refused Greyback would get me.... I ... I begged him to do it."

Hermione closed her eyes so she wouldn't have to see their reactions to that little piece of information, not wanting to see Ron's face when he learned she'd begged his enemy to rape her.

"Greyback escorted us to Malfoy's bedroom," Hermione said skimming over the details as best she could, "He was incredibly inappropriate and he made sure to ward the room so I wouldn't be able to escape even if I managed to overpower Malfoy. Once we were locked in, Malfoy dragged me into the bathroom."

Hermione opened her eyes again when she heard a rustling sound, her eyes drawn to the way all the men in the room were quivering with fury.

"He turned on the shower and told me to get clean and warm," Hermione told them, watching the way they all deflated, "With the sound of the water going to cover our voices he hissed at me about how I wasn't supposed to get caught. He had to carry me out of the shower when I couldn't stand on my own after hours of the Cruciatius curse. He had a house elf take my clothes, which Greyback had shredded with his claws, and try to mend them and clean them. He healed the slash Greyback had left on my leg, and some of the bruising on my face from where Bellatrix hit me. I asked him if there was any way he could get me out of there, but there were anti-apparation charms on the entire house so that only Voldemort could come and go. The rest had to use to main entrance. None of them thought about house elves."

Hermione stopped waiting for the information to sink in that Malfoy had helped her.

"He had the elves bring me something to eat. Greyback was still outside the door, listening. Pervert that he was he wanted to hear me suffering," Hermione told them quietly, "Malfoy tried to get me to tell them anything about where you were Harry, about where we'd been hiding and what we were doing. All I told them was that they'd know soon enough if you came to save me."

Hermione decided not to go into details about the way Malfoy had tormented her.

"When it was over I realized Greyback was watching from the doorway, and fondling himself..." Hermione said, feeling sick all over again at the knowledge that he'd seen what Malfoy had done to her.

"That cunt!" Ron snarled furiously and Hermione heard his knuckles crack, "If I ever lay eyes on him again..."

"He's dead, Ron," Hermione interrupted before he could describe what he would do to the werewolf, "Malfoy was furious. Like, unleashed wandless, nonverbal magic and caused an explosion in the entire doorway that killed Greyback levels of furious."

Hermione stopped then, allowing them all to really think about that. To consider that he'd either been angry over being watched – which seemed unlikely since he'd had no trouble performing for the crowd the following day – or he'd been furious over how afraid she was and how she'd been terrified that Greyback would try something.

"Everyone came running after that, and they were all a bit rattled by Malfoy's rage. When Greyback died the wards keeping me in broke and I raced to the window, sending my patronus to all of you. I tried to jump out the third story window too, but Malfoy caught me before I could...." Hermione admitted, "Bellatrix got involved and it got a little bit messy, but then they went away and Malfoy left me alone. Gave me his jersey to wear since I didn't have anything else. Bellatrix had confiscated my wand and my bag."

Hermione decided not to share the fact that he'd snuggled up behind her in sleep to stop her from having nightmares. She didn't mention the argument she'd had in bed with him or how they'd had breakfast together either.

"The morning you rescued me Malfoy was summoned by You-Know-Who and they must've been interrogating him about what he'd found out from me, which wasn't really all that much, other than that we moved constantly so they wouldn't find us. He came back about half an hour later while I was in the shower...." Hermione told them, "He looked horrified as he told me he'd been instructed that he had to demonstrate the idea that he could persuade me to talk and I was dragged into that room where you found me. I got away from him when he shoved me into the room and I spat in Vol.. You-Know-Who's face."

Gasps sounded around the room.

"He tortured me but he was more interested in watching Malfoy try to break me than in torturing me himself. Bellatrix tried to interfere halfway through his 'demonstration'," Hermione told them quietly, turning back to face the flickering flames in the fireplace, mesmerized by them, "I don't know how he did it or why, but Malfoy cut off her spell and turned it on her, snarling something at her about not interrupting him.... I tried to run when he was distracted, but You-Know-Who sent them all after me. Malfoy stopped them with some kind of explosion that made the table blast into them so they couldn't chase me before he tackled me."

Ron was vibrating with fury.

"He raped you more than once?" his voice growled out and Hermione closed her eyes. She chose to simply nod, not trusting herself to speak.

"Oh, Hermione," Molly burst into tears.

Hermione sighed.

"I'm fine, you know?" she told them, "I'm not going to fall apart or anything. I want to carry on with the mission. You-Know-Who needs to be destroyed. We need to end this war. The sooner the better."

"How can you be this strong?" Fleur asked her, also crying and Hermione turned to look at the gathered group. The men all looked furious and like they wanted to murder someone, most likely Malfoy.

"I made this choice," Hermione said firmly, squaring her shoulders, "I know you don't think it's true and I know it was a choice made under duress. Malfoy warned me that if I didn't give them anything else to work with they'd resort to torturing me into madness or death, or even to having the entire band of Death Eaters violate me. And I chose to keep my mouth shut anyway, knowing they would make him do that to me. Knowing what would happen. I couldn't sell you all out of something so trivial as pain or sex."

Even Tonks started crying then and Hermione looked at the gathered women exasperatedly. Andromeda was looking on shrewdly and Hermione tried not to notice the similarities between her appearance and that of Bellatrix. She didn't grow emotional the way her daughter and the others did, but she did look sympathetic and mildly baffled by Hermione's insistence that she was fine.

Hermione didn't hold her gaze for long. She was too busy being scooped into Harry's embrace as he pulled her into a crushing hug. She knew they'd begun to believe she was fine when she didn't immediately tense or freak out at being held by a male.

"I'm so sorry Hermione," Harry told her, holding her in a bone-breaking hug as though hoping that if he held on tight enough all the bad things she'd lived through could be undone.

"None of this is your fault, Harry," Hermione assured him.

"I said the name," Harry disagreed, pulling back to look at her, "It's my fault they found us. My fault they were able to find you to catch you. It's all my fault this happened to you."

Hermione sighed.

"Harry, it's not your fault. Did you say it on purpose with the intention of getting me captured?" Hermione asked him sternly.

"Of course not," he said, aghast.

"Then it's not your fault. It was an accident, and there's no harm done. I'm safe. We all got out of there virtually unscathed. Everything will be alright."

Hermione wondered if maybe she'd gone too far when Ron stomped off up the stairs without another word. She suspected he blamed Harry for this. Harry and Malfoy and after her story, maybe he blamed Hermione a bit too. He would never say so, Hermione knew, but she knew

there was no way the budding relationship between them would ever be the same as it had been before she'd had sex with Draco Malfoy.

## Chapter 8

"Get out!" Draco snarled in frustration, bodily hauling the pitiful witch from his bed and dumping her on her arse in the corridor. He couldn't stand the sight of her. Couldn't stand the smell. Couldn't stand the tangy tasty of her.

His whole body quivered with pent up frustration.

Nothing was helping. He'd fucked a grand total of thirty-seven different witches since that cursed Mudblood had escaped and Draco couldn't even remember all their names. There was no mistake that he had done everything he could. He'd tried everything. He'd fucked them facing forwards, facing backwards. He'd fucked them upside-down. He'd fucked their mouths; he'd even tried fucking a few of them up the bum.

And not a single one of them had gotten him off. He'd even resorted to bedding Pansy, knowing that if any witch would have the skills to get him off it would be her. And he'd thrown her from his bed last week, hexing her in outrage and utter fury when even she had failed.

He was going to murder that Mudblood.

He didn't know what the bitch had done to him, but since *that day* he'd not enjoyed another witch. Burying his hand against his throbbing cock, Draco stroked himself, his head full of that blasted mudblood until he felt the sticky release. It barely took the edge off the mounting sexual frustration that had been building inside him. He felt like he was going to explode with how badly he needed to fuck her again.

It had been almost five weeks since she'd blown apart his house and escaped along with the rest of her friends. Five weeks since his magic had melded with hers amid their shared orgasm, causing the fiery destruction of his family dining room and several surrounding rooms. And since then he'd been unable to sleep. He barely ate. He just kept fucking witch after witch and they all left groaning about how they'd never been so thoroughly fucked and whining about being thrown from his bed. More than one of them had been personally insulted that he'd not come for them. Pansy, in particular, had spent days trying to make him come and she'd been spitting hexes and curses at him in hatred by the end. Which, ironically, had just turned him on even more since it reminded him of the Mudblood's foul little mouth spewing venom and curses as she'd threatened him.

He needed to find her again. That much he knew. He couldn't live like this. When the witches didn't do the job Draco had been forced to do it himself, but none of it compared to fucking Granger and he couldn't keep living this way. He felt like a junkie in desperate need of his next fix. Only unlike a junkie who could score his wares from anyone as long as he had the money, Draco was beginning to think the only way he was getting his fix was by getting hold of Mudblood Granger again.

And he'd never hated anyone or anything more in his entire life. It had been bad enough that the little tramp had made him hot for her. Bad enough that when he did get his hands on her

he'd felt a pure, psychotic, possessive rage overcome him if anyone tried to interfere while he was having his way with her. Aunt Bellatrix still hadn't forgiven him for cursing her when she'd interrupted him during their sickening display. He'd managed to tolerate the Dark Lord's chatter because the man was only egging him on and encouraging him rather than interfering or wanting to get his hands on Granger.

Draco fell back against his bed, the heels of his hands pressing against his eyes as he tried to burn the sight of Granger out of his head.

His mother hadn't been able to look at him since that day. Draco knew she was disappointed in him, and horrified by what he had done. That she couldn't bear the idea of having her only son sullied by shagging a Mudblood. That she couldn't believe he'd sunk so low as to force himself on the girl. Draco had heard her arguing with his father about it. Blaming Lucius for raising Draco in an environment where bad people did bad things, warping his sense of right and wrong.

When he'd returned to school, Draco had been only too relieved. He'd gone mad locked up in the Manor and when the Mudblood and Potter had broken into Gringott's Draco had feared for his life. The Dark Lord had never been so out of control and Draco was pleased to be beyond his reach. He'd been rewarded too, for what he'd managed to get out of the Mudblood. The Dark Lord had taught him some incredibly effective and horribly dark spells.

But Draco knew that he was being punished for what he had done. Sure, he'd intended to help her escape and he'd even made sure she was kept from the evil clutches of Death Eaters worse than him. But Draco knew that his perverse enjoyment of fucking the girl had bought him this one-way ticket to a hell where there was no release and where she haunted him day and night. He craved her like he'd never craved anything else in his life and he hated her for putting him through this torture.

He hated her but Merlin he'd loved fucking her.

Draco was not fool enough to imagine there was something so special about her that she'd swayed him to the Light or to fancy her. He didn't. He despised her with every fibre of his being. But he wanted her too. Wanted her so badly he couldn't think straight.

Groaning, Draco considered trying to lure another witch into bed with him. Most knew he was somewhat in the favour of the Dark Lord at the present time and were more than willing to climb into bed with him. He didn't entertain the idea for long. It wouldn't help. They were all too willing, that was the problem. He wasn't twisted enough that he wanted to outright rape them like some monster, but he certainly wanted to be fought tooth and nail for every inch of satiation he could force upon them.

After all, Granger had known she had a choice when they'd fucked. She'd chosen to let him fuck her rather than spilling her secrets. She'd been under duress, to be sure, but so had Draco. It had been more than clear that if he hadn't done it, he and his family would be severely punished. The Mudblood had made her choice, just as he had made his. But she hadn't liked it. Even when he'd brought her totally undone she'd hissed and cursed her fury with him over making her feel anything. Even when he'd made her scream, Draco had known

that in addition to screaming with pleasure, she'd screamed with anger and hatred aimed at him for making her enjoy it.

Draco knew he was twisted for liking that. He'd liked that she had resisted so fiercely and that she'd fought so hard to feel nothing, only to succumb to him all the same. He'd rather liked the way she'd yanked hairs from his head trying to keep his mouth off her body, yet simultaneously holding his face close so that he wouldn't stop. He liked that she rebelled against the pleasure he inflicted upon her.

He like the challenge she presented.

The witches he'd bedded since had all been too easy. They came willingly to his bed and they didn't fight him at all. They'd wanted him to pleasure them. They'd willingly begged him for more when he tried tormenting them. They just laid there and took it and it drove Draco barmy with annoyance.

He needed this ridiculous war to be over.

He needed to find that blasted Mudblood!

## Chapter 9

Hermione glanced sideways across the bed at Ronald. He was staring at the ceiling and frowning slightly. She bit her lip, her legs twitching restlessly. They had returned to Grimmauld Place for the evening before they would tomorrow storm Hogwarts. Harry was downstairs on watch and she and Ron were supposed to be sleeping. Hermione knew Harry just wanted them to sort their issues out. They'd been bickering for weeks now.

Always over stupid things. She knew Ron still had his wand in a knot over what had happened to her at Malfoy Manor and she knew that he'd been avoiding her whenever he could. He never turned her away when she crawled into bed beside him, but he never laid a finger on her in any way other than a comforting hug or holding her hand either.

"Are you ever going to touch me again?" Hermione asked him quietly, watching his face for any sign of his answer.

"I touch you all the time," he commented, squeezing her hand indicatively where he held it under the covers.

"You know what I mean," Hermione told him seriously, "You haven't touched me like that since..."

"I didn't think you'd want me to," Ron answered, frowning though he kept his eyes on the ceiling.

"Why wouldn't I want you to?" Hermione asked him in confusion.

"Won't it trigger flashbacks?" Ron asked her, "I don't want to make you think about him."

Hermione closed her eyes. She suspected that his mother was probably behind that. Molly would've told Ron to be gentle with her. To take things slow and not to go snogging her or anything that might trigger some kind of emotional trauma.

"Ron," Hermione said softly, guiding the hand she held towards her bared midriff, "I've told you a thousand times that I'm fine."

"How can you be fine?" he demanded and Hermione knew her words had been bothering him, "You were raped Hermione. You were held done and violated by that bastard and you keep running around telling me and everyone else that you're fine. How can you possibly be fine?"

"It's just sex, Ron," Hermione sighed, "Maybe it's just not a huge deal to me or something. But I really am fine. Having your hands on me doesn't trigger flashbacks. Having you kiss me doesn't make me feel like I'm being violated. He didn't take away my control, Ronald. At least, not so much that I'm damaged by it."

"What the hell does that mean?" Ron demanded and Hermione knew she said the wrong thing. That he'd probably been agonizing for weeks about this.

"What does what mean?" she asked tiredly, "What do I mean by saying it's just sex? That's all it is Ron. Two bodies rubbing together in certain ways that are supposed to feel good. Sure the fact that it was Malfoy was awkward and horrible because I despise him, but it's still just sex."

"And if had been Greyback instead? If it was someone other than Malfoy?" Ron demanded and Hermione knew she'd struck on the heart of his problem.

"Well, based on the crude things he said I suspect it would've been more complicated than just sex with that twisted werewolf," Hermione told him, "Since he mentioned the urge to run me down and bite me. I suspect he'd have tried to eat me whilst fucking me. But had it been one of those other bastards instead, like Scabior or whoever, it still would've just been sex. They probably would've been more bearable, to be honest."

"What?" Ron asked, sitting up to stare at her in confusion.

"Well, I imagine that they'd have been more focused on making me afraid and causing me pain than on making a show of it," Hermione admitted, blushing in the darkened room.

"And you're just fine with that?" Ron asked through gritted teeth.

"What other option do I have, Ron? We're in the middle of the war. I don't have time for a breakdown. And besides, I don't need one. I know you don't like hearing it, but I truly am alright. Going into this war I knew there was every chance I would be killed, tortured or raped. I hoped it wouldn't happen, but I had planned for having it possibly occur."

Hermione chose not to mention the way her body had been aching to be touched again. She chose not to mention that most nights she found herself dreaming about the things Malfoy had done to her and the things he'd made her feel.

"And so that just makes it alright?" Ron asked, "If I shag you right now you're not going to freak-out and think of him."

"If you don't shag me right now I might cry," Hermione answered truthfully before biting her lip.

"Did you really just say that?" Ron asked, sounding shocked and a little bit amused.

"Yes," Hermione sighed, "Right now I feel like you're making it about him. You're turning this into a huge deal and I don't want that. I don't want to forever associate sex with Draco Malfoy. I want it to be about you and me being together because we want to."

Hermione blinked in surprise when rather than continuing to talk, Ron rolled towards her and pressed his lips to hers. Hermione sighed at the familiar feel of his mouth on hers and she brought her hands up to tangle them in his soft red hair. She hated herself when her fingers also recalled the silkiness of pale blonde hair gripped in her fists.

Ron undressed her slowly, taking his time with her and being quite gentle. Hermione tried to be patient, to let him go slow. She tried to enjoy the way his hands ghosted softly over her bare breasts and the way he pressed wet little kisses along her throat and clavicle. She tried to lose herself in the pleasant warmth that crept through her when he slowly entered her.

She arched her back, her eyes closed, trying to draw him in deeper, trying to roll her hips to make him go faster, to thrust harder. He didn't take the hint and Hermione didn't want to embarrass either of them by voicing her needs. Instead she let Ron make slow love to her, rather liking the slow, passionate snog he gave her as he took her.

But it wasn't enough. Hermione felt it when his body stiffened and he thrust a little faster, letting her know he was close to release. She wanted to cry when he groaned quietly before collapsing on top of her. A single tear trickled from the corner of her eye when she learned Draco Malfoy had taken something else from her.

He'd taken her ability to enjoy slow, passionate, loving sex. He'd taken her ability to enjoy pleasant warmth by replacing it with searing heat and hatred that made her whole body flame.

"Are you alright?" Ron whispered in her ear, rolling off her and tugging her into his arms, cuddling her close.

"I'm fine, Ron," Hermione lied, another tear trickling down her cheek to be soaked up by her hair.

"I've missed being with you," Ron told her quietly, "I love you, Hermione."

Hermione felt her heart constrict inside her chest.

"I love you too," she told him. And she did. She loved him dearly.

But it wasn't enough. She could tell it would never be enough. Ron was fun and safe and gentle. He was a safe-haven and he'd stolen her heart. But she could feel them falling apart as she laid there. She suspected from the way he laid there tense as he held her rather than dropping off to sleep like he usually did after they made love, that Ron could feel it too.

When he finally fell asleep and rolled away from her, Hermione slipped from the bed and left the room. Her whole body ached with how badly she needed release. Ducking into the bathroom and locking the door, Hermione slipped her hand down the front of her knickers. She whimpered when she touched herself, trying to emulate what *he* had done to her. She pinched the little bud of nerves there between her fingers, twisting it this way and that and she winced when instead of finding enjoyment she only managed to hurt herself.

Hermione didn't know how long she spent in the bathroom, curled up in the empty bathtub, her fingers inside herself as she tried to find release, any kind of release. When her wrists began to ache from the position she had them in Hermione gave up, her hands tangling in her own hair as she fisted it and pulled it in pure frustration. Climbing out of the bathroom, she padded down to the kitchen feeling terribly sorry for herself and so positively furious that she wanted to hex Draco Malfoy's face off.

"Hermione?" Harry asked, looking surprised to see her and Hermione glanced down at herself, realising she was only wearing knickers and a short silk robe.

"Hey Harry," she sighed, going about making herself a cup of tea without bothering to care about her appearance. She didn't doubt her hair was wild and that her eyes were angry.

"Did you and Ron have another fight?" he asked quietly, coming over to stand beside her as she poured them both a cup.

"No," Hermione told him, "We had sex."

"Blimey, Hermione," Harry laughed, clearly surprised by her pronouncement.

"Oh don't look at me like that Harry. We're all adults. We all know what sex is and know that we've all had it.... Or, at least everyone knows that I have," Hermione said, glancing at Harry sideways and catching the way his cheeks turned pink. She wondered if he was thinking of the fact that she'd been with Malfoy, or if he was recalling the one night they'd spent together.

She didn't think of it often, and they'd sworn each other to secrecy about it, choosing to keep it just between the two of them. Hermione knew Harry would take that secret to the grave. They'd both been at all-time low that night last Christmas. She'd only meant to hug him in comfort as he despaired over the loss of his parents and the destruction of his wand. She herself had been struggling with the pain of having Ron leave them and with the stress and depression that came from carrying the locket. She'd been missing Ron. Missing her parents. Missing her friends. He'd been missing his parents, missing Hogwarts, missing Hedwig, missing Ron and Ginny.

What had begun simply as a hug for the comfort of being there for each other had slowly morphed into something else. Hermione could still recall the surprise she'd felt when Harry's hand had slipped under the hem of her jumper to touch the smooth, warm skin of her lower back. She could recall the feeling of need that had swept through her, the need for human contact, the need simply to be touched. She wouldn't say she was attracted to Harry or that she fancied him. She certainly loved him. He was her closest friend and she knew she could tell him everything. But in that moment she'd seen the way he'd needed to be touched too.

In a flurry they'd both stripped out of their clothes and Hermione remembered that she hadn't felt guilty about it, hadn't felt uncertain or weird when she'd kissed his lips. Instead she'd just felt each touch. Felt the warmth of his skin. Felt the comfort he offered and the comfort he sought from her in return. She didn't think she would ever do it again, but she didn't regret it either.

"I take it things didn't go well, then?" Harry murmured softly, drawing Hermione out of the memory and back to the present. She turned towards him slowly. His eyes were sympathetic and Hermione suspected he was worried having sex had triggered bad memories.

"I'm really fine in that regard, Harry," Hermione told him, "Maybe it's a symptom of some deeper psychological problem I've yet to examine, but sex is just sex. I can separate it from love and look at it objectively as simply being something two people do. When in need of comfort. When in need of release."

Hermione shrugged and she saw Harry nod.

"I know," he murmured very quietly.

Hermione felt a tiny smile tug at the corners of her mouth. Of course Harry knew, because he'd done it too. He hadn't fallen desperately in love with her after they'd had sex. He knew just as well as she did that they'd both needed to feel close. To feel human. To turn their minds off for a little while. Their friendship hadn't suffered because of it. In fact, if Hermione was honest she thought they were closer now than they'd ever been. Not because of some romantic notion but simply because they had no secrets from each other anymore. Hermione told him everything. Shared everything with him.

She'd told him about the first time she and Ron had been together, about the fact that her first kiss had been Viktor Krum. Similarly, he'd told her every one of his secrets. About how he was madly in love with Ginny and that he was terrified that if he ever did manage to defeat Voldemort and end the war, she wouldn't take him back after he'd broken up with her to go on the run. He'd told her about the horrible treatment he'd received growing up with the Dursleys and how he'd begun to suspect it had something to do with the Horcuxes. He'd even told her that he'd begun suspecting he might be a horcrux, and that their terrible treatment of him was a result of the effect the horcruxes had on others.

In turn Hermione had told him that she had been wondering the same thing. Hermione had never been closer to anyone than she'd been to Harry, in every sense of the word.

"Having sex didn't trigger anything horrible, because there's nothing to trigger. I had sex with Malfoy. In front of other people. And that's that.... Only there's a small problem..."

"What is it?" Harry asked her seriously taking her hand and leading her over to the kitchen table.

"He wasn't a selfish git," Hermione admitted softly, glancing at Harry desperately, "I know you probably don't want to hear it, but Malfoy.... He didn't just, you know, hold me down. He didn't let me block it out and just endure it until it was over."

"He...." Harry began, frowning.

"He made me orgasm Harry," Hermione admitted in a whisper, her cheeks pink, "Repeatedly. Even when I didn't want to. Taking the control over who was touching my body wasn't that big of a deal to me. The minute I was caught, I knew I'd be raped. But he didn't just, you know, let me lay there and think of England.... He forced me to orgasm, again and again. And I couldn't stop him. Like, you know if you really don't want to orgasm thinking of other things, awful things, can hold it off.... He wouldn't let me. I tried. I tried so hard. I tried to think about horrible, unspeakable, unthinkable things to keep from feeling what he was doing to me. And it didn't work."

"So you... enjoyed it?" Harry asked, looking uncertain about wording it that way.

"It's complicated," Hermione told him, "I mean, physically, yes, my body enjoyed what he did to it and reacted accordingly. Psychologically I've never despised someone so violently. I

mean, I wanted to claw his eyes out and I wanted to get as far away from him as possible, but I also didn't want him to stop."

"Erm..." Harry said, looking uncertain of what to make of that.

"Don't get me wrong, Harry," Hermione told him, "I hate him more than anything. More than You-Know-Who, more than Bellatrix and the other Death Eaters. And I hate him for doing that to me, but I can't say I hated the sex. I mean, I did because it was him doing it to me, but he took away my ability to, you know, just grit my teeth and bear it."

"And that's effecting things with Ron?" Harry asked, clearly trying to wrap his head around the idea.

"Yes," Hermione admitted, "Before tonight he wouldn't even do more than cuddle me.... And then tonight we... I mean he was gentle and it was pleasant like it always was in the past, only I didn't... you know..."

Hermione felt her cheeks darken when Harry looked confused before he realised she meant Ron hadn't made her come.

"Any idea why?" he asked her diplomatically and Hermione was grateful that he was being mature rather than laughing at her.

"He was too nice...." Hermione admitted truthfully, "I think it was because he was too nice. Too gentle. I mean, he did all the usual things that used to get me there.... Only it didn't work because he was too gentle."

"Did you say so?" Harry asked curiously though his cheeks were pink to be discussing the sex-life of his two best friends.

"Of course not, I mean, I tried to encourage but I didn't want him to think me some... some... horny tavern wench moaning for it to be harder."

Harry burst out laughing at that and Hermione couldn't help but giggle along with him.

"Oh shut up," she swatted at him when he kept laughing at her good-naturedly.

"Sorry," he apologized though he continued to chuckle, "I just have this mental image of you in some hooker-outfit trying to look devious and flirtatious and it's... it's funny."

"Harry!" Hermione laughed, mortified though she could imagine how awkward she probably looked in his mind pictures.

"Sorry," he apologized again, "But if you didn't tell him that that's what you needed, he wasn't to know. Especially since it's a new development."

"Well obviously," Hermione sighed, "But it's not like I could come out and say, 'oh Ron, brutalize me, turns out I like it'. He'd spend the rest of time thinking I wanted to be shagging Malfoy and getting jealous over something so stupid."

Hermione paused when Harry spat tea all over the table in shock at her choice of words, staring at her wide-eyed even as he began to laugh again.

"You're not helping," she told him grumpily.

"I know we don't have boundaries anymore, Hermione, but please don't repeat that sentence ever again when I'm listening," Harry told her, chortling, "I can't tell if I should feel sorry for you and wrap you in cotton wool until you're a dried up old spinster where I can protect you forever, or if I should be renting a space somewhere for you to run your own sex-dungeon."

It was Hermione's turn to spit tea everywhere at that.

"Harry!" she choked, bursting out laughing despite everything. Harry had to grip the table when he almost fell out of his chair he was laughing so hard and Hermione didn't know if she ought to whack him again or just bury her face in her hands.

"Merlin, what have you done to me?" she laughed until her sides were sore and until Harry was gasping for breath.

"Sorry, 'Mione," Harry said again when they finally stopped laughing, "But I mean, maybe you were just over-thinking things. This is the first time you've had sex since Malfoy forced you. Maybe you were trying too hard not to think about what he did. You know, like thinking too much about needing to enjoy Ron's touch and you thought yourself out of it."

"I thought that too," Hermione admitted.

"You're going to tell me you couldn't get there alone either, aren't you?" Harry said looking concerned now. Hermione had admitted to him in the past that there had been a time or two when Ron didn't quite get her there and she'd had to finish off herself.

"Well Ron didn't make me look this dishevelled," Hermione told him, waving a hand towards her appearance.

"Bloody hell," Harry said, "You couldn't do it yourself, either?"

Hermione shook her head, biting her lip.

"Are you alright?" he asked Hermione seriously and Hermione lifted her gaze to his.

"I don't think so," Hermione admitted, "And I feel so stupid for worrying about this when we're most likely all going to get ourselves killed tomorrow, but I...."

"It's not stupid Hermione. And none of us are dying tomorrow. I think the best option is to talk to Ron about this. It's well and good to tell me, and I'm pleased you've told me what's bothering you, but I don't know how to help you. Short of..."

Hermione's eyes widened when she realized he meant that short of trying to bring her off himself, Harry couldn't think of any other way to help her with her sexual frustration. And she kind of hated herself and especially hated Malfoy when for just a moment she considered

asking Harry to try. This was all Malfoy's fault! She wasn't even attracted to Harry. She just craved release. And since Malfoy was the reason she couldn't get it, she hated him.

"Probably not a good idea," Hermione said, biting her lip and holding Harry's gaze. She wondered at the flicker of something she saw in his green eyes. She knew he wasn't sexually attracted to her, just the way she wasn't to him.

"Probably not, no," Harry agreed quietly, "Not with you and Ron back together now. I like having my head attached to my shoulders."

Hermione nodded, knowing that if Ron were to ever find out what they'd already done he'd never forgive either of them and knowing neither of them wanted to put him through it again. It was bad enough having him know she'd shagged Malfoy.

"Any suggestions on how to tell Ron to be rough without making him think I'm a Death Eater's whore?" Hermione asked bluntly.

"Definitely don't use that phrase," Harry advised, grinning a little bit, "You don't actually think of yourself that way now, do you?"

"Of course not," Hermione answered, "But I do think he took a piece of me and escaping didn't mean I got it back."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked her, frowning in concern at that.

"You remember that explosion that blew the whole room to bits?" Hermione asked him, referring to the day she'd been rescued.

"I was blown twenty feet across the room and through a wall, Hermione, of course I remember. Why?"

"It was me," Hermione admitted, "Me and Malfoy. Total chaos was everywhere and he didn't even stop fucking me.... You know that building sense of anticipation before you come?"

Harry nodded, looking confused by her quick change of topics.

"Well, it felt kind of like that, only so much more intense... I... I know I came and Malfoy did too, at the same time. But it was like when we did, our magic.... I don't know... melded together or interacted somehow and that's what caused the explosion. I'd already set the room on fire when I lost control of my magic fighting with him, and he was using wandless magic to torture his aunt and to kill Greyback."

"You think your magic melded with Malfoy's?" Harry asked, looking nervous and worried now.

"Not permanently or anything," Hermione told him, "But either it melded and was intensified as we both lost control; or it collided and reacted so violently that the whole room exploded and everything caught on fire."

"It was probably the second one Hermione. Some forms of magic don't mix well, you've told me that a hundred times. Maybe your core magic and Malfoy's are so different that they reacted the way some chemicals do. Like if you put hydrochloric acid and aluminium together in an air-tight container," Harry said.

Hermione chose not to mention her doubt about that. Chose not to mention that if they'd reacted that violently they'd have been blown away from each other and severely injured. She also chose not to mention that she suspected the meld was the reason she was so sexually frustrated. He'd been hexed away from her before their magic could un-meld.

## Chapter 10

Draco's whole body ached when he laid eyes on her again. He didn't know why he'd felt such a strong urge to come to the Room of Hidden Things in the height of the battle but he wasn't surprised to find Potter, Weasley and *her* there. He expected they were looking for whatever it was the Dark Lord kept muttering about being in here.

"Well look who it is," he drawled as he, Crabbe and Goyle came up behind them, interrupting Potter who looked to be furtively picking up a tiara.

"What the bloody hell are you doing here Malfoy?" Potter snarled, the tiara slipping onto his wrist as they all turned their attention towards him.

"You have something of mine," Draco replied, unsure whether he meant the wand Potter had wrestled out of his grip at the Manor, or if he meant Granger, "I'd like it back."

"I'm not giving you anything," Potter retorted.

"You fucking bastard!" Weaselbee suddenly shouted and Draco realised he'd been staring at *her*. Hungrily.

Whipping up a shield with the borrowed wand he was using, Draco blocked the curses and hexes Weasley began firing at him.

"Give me back my wand, Potter," Draco snarled, nodding at Crabbe and Goyle to block the three of them off before they could make a run for it, "Give it back and then stop fighting. We're here to escort you to the Dark Lord."

"Oi! Watch it, Weasley!" Crabbe grunted angrily when a stray hex from Weasley almost hit him.

"We're not going anywhere with you idiots," Potter retorted, also shooting hexes at them. Draco narrowed his eyes when Goyle almost hit Granger with a spell.

"Oi! That's my girlfriend, you numpty!" Weasley snarled, narrowing his eyes on Goyle before going after him. Draco felt his blood begin to boil again, just like it had when Greyback had interrupted him and again when Aunt Bella had cursed Granger. He knew enough by now to recognize it as possessive rage, and he hated Granger for making him feel possessive over her.

The Fiendfyre Crabbe had been trying to produce suddenly roared into existence, and Draco suspected his out of control core-magic was to blame. The whole place went up in flames and suddenly it wasn't so much about getting Potter, Granger and Weasley for the Dark Lord as it was about getting out of there alive. The fire engulfed everything quickly, despite Granger's efforts to extinguish it.

Draco ran for his life and when he found all the exits blocked, instinct drove him to climb. To do anything to escape the fire. He was sure they were done for when he Crabbe and Goyle couldn't climb any higher. Potter, Weasley and Granger had found brooms somewhere and he saw them all zooming for the exits.

In that moment, Draco thought he was going to die and he realised what a git he'd been.

"We can't leave them!" Potter's voice could be heard shouting to the others over the roar of the fire.

Draco opened his eyes with hope, shocked beyond belief to hear that. They had to hate him. Weasley certainly did. That much was clear.

"If we die for them Harry, I'm going to kill you!" he shouted and Draco felt like he could've keeled over in shock.

A shout from beside him drew his attention from the trio zooming towards him and he looked just in time to see Crabbe lose his balance on the unstable pile of stuff they'd climbed. He was so focused on watching his friend fall that he missed it when someone on a broom zoomed past him and he looked up again to see the Mudblood glaring at him in annoyance and she performed a tight turn and shot back towards him.

Potter was heading directly for Goyle and Draco noticed Weasley dive towards where Crabbe was falling. In the split second as time slowed down he recognised that despite what he'd done to her, the three of them must've rationalised that he was the easiest for her to haul onto the broom since he wasn't the size of a young elephant, unlike his two burly companions.

Reaching out his arm, Draco hissed in agony when she locked her elbow with his at such speed and with such force that he suspected he'd dislocated his shoulder. She flung him around onto the broom behind her without a word and Draco hated himself for the fact that amid the danger he felt his body heat up at her proximity. He grew concerned when the fire below leaped madly, as though fuelled by the same heat that had flared to life inside him.

Granger didn't say a word when he locked his arms around her stomach, she simply steered the broom towards the exit and he found himself admiring her ability to wield her wand whilst flying at break-neck speed around pillars and flames. The exit was partially blocked by flames and they were growing larger.

She shouted something to the others, her wand twirling madly to direct the flames away, waves of water appearing out of the end and lowering the flames enough that they could get by. The shot through the doors but not before the tail-twigs caught fire and Draco did the only thing he could think of. Before it could fall out of the air as it began to disintegrate he jerked her sideways off the broom, toppling them both towards the hard stone of the corridor beyond. He wasn't sure what came over him as they fell and he found himself closing his arms in a protective cage around her, tucking her bushy-haired head beneath his chin just before they hit the ground and began to roll on impact.

"Harry? Ron?" Granger was calling even before he'd released her, "Are you ok? Malfoy, get off me!"

Draco hissed when she bucked in his hold, making him crazy. The flames of the fire roared through the door of the Room of Requirement in response and before he could react beyond a flinch she was on her knees using her wand to fling the doors closed and trap the flames inside.

"Hermione?" Potter shouted and Draco watched in horror as the tiara on Potter's arm melted off, as did his sleeve which was flaming slightly.

"Harry, you're on fire!" Granger shouted at him and Draco would've laughed at the way she blasted him with water to douse it, expect he suddenly noticed she was on fire.

"So are you," Draco growled at her, shoving her hip and aiming his borrowed wand at the leg of her jeans, "Did you not feel that?"

She stared at her leg in surprise and Draco noticed that though almost the entire left pant-leg was gone, none of her flesh was singed.

"You're on fire too," she told him, pointing at his leg and Draco saw that like hers, his left-pant leg was burnt off. He also noticed that he wasn't burned, whereas Potter's flesh was riddled with burns.

"Hermione are you alright?" Weasley asked and Draco paled when he caught sight of the ginger idiot. His red hair was smouldering slowly and most of his clothing was singed as a result of diving towards the flames to get Crabbe.

"I'm fine, Ron. Are you alright? Where's Crabbe?"

"I missed him," Weasley admitted, sounding horrified, "I couldn't catch him before he fell too far into the flames. I tried, but he fell too fast."

"Crabbe's dead?" Goyle asked miserably.

"The idiot deserves it for starting that fire," Potter snapped.

"You owe us," Granger said, looking directly into his eyes fearlessly. Draco felt heat flare inside himself at her gumption and Weasley started to shout as the smouldering in his hair flared into a flame. Granger was quick to douse him, but Draco suspected she knew it was his fault the flames kept growing.

"Harry, the horcux?" she asked when Draco didn't speak. She was still kneeling in front of him, well within reach and Draco's hands shook with the urge to grab her.

"Shit!" Potter cursed.

"He made horcruxes?" Draco asked, cold dread filling him suddenly.

"You know what they are?" Granger asked spinning back to him.

"Of course I do," Draco snapped, "Do you know how many? Is that what you've been doing all year?"

"Might as well tell them," Harry shrugged, "He knows we've been destroying them. He's got Nagini close now. She's the last one."

"We've been destroying them all year. We were in there after Ravenclaw's lost Diadem."

"The tiara on Potter's wrist that melted," Draco nodded, "Fiendfyre destroys horcruxes. How are you going to kill the snake? She won't die without the same destructive methods the other horcruxes needed."

"Damn it," Granger groaned.

"You're helping them?" Goyle asked him in shock and Draco glanced at him.

"Do you want to spend the rest of eternity suffering the fear and torment of the Dark Lord? He's the reason Crabbe got killed. The idiot didn't know how to use that spell right because the Dark Lord didn't care enough to teach him how to control it, only how to create it," Draco snapped back.

"So we're turn-cloaks now?" Goyle asked thickly.

"Oh please," Granger rolled her eyes, surprising Draco when she continued, "Malfoy already was."

"If the diadem was destroyed in the fire then we need to find that snake and kill it. Come on," Potter said, always keen to push through everything and keep his eyes on the goal. Draco kind of hated him for his bravery in that instant. He was grateful they'd been saved, but he still hated the trio.

"What do we do?" Goyle asked Draco.

"Get out of here, Goyle," Draco told him, "Disapparate home and stay there. The battle ends today. Either Potter will win and you'll probably be arrested at some later date. Or the Dark Lord will win and you can suck up to him later. If you stay you'll just get yourself killed."

"Should've let them burn," Draco heard Weasley mutter as he limped towards Granger, clearly intent on pulling her away from him.

"I'll.... See you?" Goyle asked him uncertainly and Draco glanced at his friend. It felt strange to see him alone without Crabbe beside him and Draco could see the glaze in his eyes as he tried to process the death of his cousin and best friend.

"I'll find you," Draco nodded, "Go, you'll only get yourself killed in that state."

Goyle nodded slowly as he got to his feet, Draco watched him turn on the spot and disapparate away.

"I ought to kill you right now," Weasley snarled at him and Draco had the wind knocked out of him when Weasley kicked him in the guts furiously.

"Ron, now is not the time!" Granger snapped, getting to her feet and shoving the git away from Draco.

"Oh this is a bad time to kill the bloke who raped you?" Weasley snarled hotly.

A familiar sense of rage coursed through Draco as he got to his feet.

"Yeah, actually," Granger snapped at the red-head, "It is. Now stop being a complete arse! We have a snake to kill. Who has any ideas on how to kill it?"

"How many Basilisk Fangs did you get from the chamber?" Harry asked them. Draco noticed that he seemed far less put out by what Draco had done to Granger than Weasley did.

"A fair few," Granger answered and Draco marvelled over the fact that she stood there in front of her boyfriend, calmly discussing the situation even though she had her back to Draco. Shouldn't she be scared of him? Concerned that he might hit her from behind? Uncomfortable and uneasy in his presence?

Hadn't they all talked her into the fact that he was a monster who'd brutalised her?

"Think we can sneak up on it and stab it?" Potter asked, sounding doubtful.

"We don't have much of a choice," Granger shrugged, "Griphook made off with the sword."

Weasley was glaring at him over the top of Granger's head and Draco found it particularly difficult not to leer at the idiot. Almost as difficult as keeping his hands to himself when Granger was right there within reach. He was honestly surprised and a little disgusted with himself that in the height of the war and the minutes after the death of one of his closest friends he was still thinking about shagging the fucking Mudblood.

"There is another option," Draco threw into the conversation, realising that they seemed to be out of ideas about how to kill the snake.

"Why the fuck are you still here?" Weasley snarled aggressively, "I wasn't kidding when I said I'm going to kill you."

"You don't have the bollocks to look me cold in the eye and murder me, Weasley," Draco retorted.

"You have an idea?" Granger asked, spinning on her heels to stare up at him in astonishment and Draco noticed that she too seemed kind of surprised that he was still there.

"That surprises you?" Draco asked dryly, unable to resist letting his eyes stray to her plump lips and noting that one of them had been bloodied during the battle raging downstairs. She had a cut on her cheek too, and a rapidly blackening eye. Her hair was a tangled mess, some parts of it having come free of the restraining tie she'd used to tame it. He hated her for the way his mind presented images of the way he'd buried his hands in it when he'd fucked her.

"Yes," she replied coldly, "I thought you'd have run for the hills by now."

"I'm still waiting for Potter to return what's mine," Draco smirked, before growing serious, "And then I found out the Dark Lord had made Horcruxes and you idiots were hunting them down." He eyed her accusingly, "You should've told me."

"Excuse me?" she demanded, putting her hands on her hips and looking at him in disbelief.

"If you'd told me at the Manor that you and Potter were hunting down bloody Horcruxes, I'd have had the elves apparate us all out of there and have done whatever I can to help destroy them. I thought the bastard was just too terrifying to destroy and that was why no one had tried."

"Tell me he didn't Harry," Weasley snarled and Draco flinched when Potter suddenly gripped the red-head to hold him back. He hissed in fury and surprise when Granger slapped him across the face.

"Don't you fucking dare!" she growled at him, "Don't you dare stand there and say I should've just trusted you – my enemy – with the secret no one else but the three of us knew about until today. Don't you dare tell me that I should've trusted you! That if I had you wouldn't have...."

Draco supposed he kind of deserved it when she slapped him again. Yet before he could think better of it his hands encircled both her wrists tightly, his eyes flashing dangerously as he glared down at her.

"Stop hitting me and fucking pay attention!" he snapped at her.

"Get your hands off her Malfoy!" Potter and Weasley both shouted the minute he touched her and Draco felt rage boil through him. The feel of her flesh beneath his hands made his whole body ache with heat and need and he felt the way his core-magic wanted to strike out at the pair of idiots daring to interfere with him and the little witch glaring at him.

"Don't interrupt," he hissed, slanting a glare towards them as they advanced on him.

"Stop!" Granger snapped, "Don't even think about it."

Draco settled his gaze back on her face and he wondered how she knew he'd been about to strike out at them viciously with wandless magic.

"All of you quit it then, and listen. You need to destroy Nagini, correct?" he said, clenching his jaw to reel his fury back in.

"We do," Granger nodded and Draco noted that she was twisting her wrists wildly in his grip, trying to get free of him. He loosened his hold until he wasn't squeezing her completely, though he still held on firmly.

"And she's a Horcrux, right?" he clarified.

"Yes," Potter nodded and Draco wondered how the specky git knew with such certainty.

"Only three methods exist for destroying Horcruxes, Basilisk Venom, Fiendfyre, and the Killing curse in the case of living Horcruxes. Meaning that were the Dark Lord to be struck

with a Killing Curse during the battle, his body would once again be destroyed, as happened when Potter was a baby and the curse rebounded. But in a creature like Nagini there is no guarantee that the venom would be effective since she is also a serpent and is a biological cousin to the Basilisk, hence her size and her extremely toxic venom. Similarly, the Killing Curse won't work to destroy her because the Dark Lord imbues her with too much protective magic to keep her safe. He carves protective runes against Dark curses into her new skin every time she sheds the old one."

"Then how do we destroy her?" Grangers asked, "Decapitation works on all magical creatures, so that would kill her but not the Horcrux. And since the only other object we know of that we could use to decapitate her that is imbued with Basilisk venom was stolen from us, we have no way to kill her."

"Except Fiendfyre," Draco pointed out.

"None of us know how to cast it," Granger shook her head, "I thought about trying it myself, but the results would most likely be similar to what Crabbe did in there. If I did manage to cast it, I wouldn't be able to control it."

"But I can," Draco smirked at her, pleased to find there was a form of magic he could do that she couldn't.

"You can control it?" Potter asked.

"The Dark Lord taught the three of us, only Crabbe was too thick to pay attention to the part about controlling it. He got distracted by food, most likely," Draco admitted, knowing his friend had been thicker than a concussed troll.

"You want to help us?" Potter asked, looking sceptical.

"I want to survive," Draco shrugged honestly, "And I want to live in a world where I'm not kept prisoner and tortured inside my own home."

"Don't trust him Harry," Weasley said, "After what he did to Hermione, we can't trust a word he says."

Draco didn't bother with trying to convince Weasley, he was too lost to his own angst and rage to see reason. Instead Draco turned his gaze back to the fierce little mudblood in his grip. If any of them were going to trust him, it would have to be her. Potter morally couldn't without making light of what Draco had done to their golden girl.

"You owe us your life, Draco Malfoy," she told him quietly, ceasing her struggling to stare back at him, "If you betray us, if you go to You-Know-Who or try to run, I'll personally deliver on that promise I made to you at the Manor. I'll hunt you down like a dog and kill you. Do you understand me?"

Draco nodded his head seriously.

"Right then, we find the snake," Potter announced and Draco released Granger reluctantly. He couldn't believe he was going to help them and he hated himself for the fact that it seemed he was willing to risk far more than he'd thought to get his hands on the witch before him again.

"What's wrong with your arm?" she asked suddenly, eyeing him strangely and drawing Draco's attention back to the fact that during the flight and the fall his shoulder had been damaged.

"You dislocated it when you hit me a full-speed on the broom, and then you broke it when you landed on it," he told her, completely blaming her for the fact that his shoulder was broken. She pulled out her wand, but Draco didn't trust her not to hex him and chose to heal it himself with a wave of the wand he'd stolen from the pile in the Manor collected from prisoners.

"You're blaming me for this?" she demanded, already turning away to follow Potter in search of the snake.

Draco wondered if it was on purpose that they both ignored Weasley's cry of outrage and protest at the idea of him helping them.

"Of course I'm blaming you," he replied, unable to keep the smirk off his face, "It's all your fault."

## Chapter 11

Hermione was in a state of shock when the battle was finally over. It had been a long, hard fight and the fear and the loss she had suffered had drained her terribly. She'd felt her spirit begin to break when Hagrid had carried Harry's body back to the castle and she'd been furious when despite having helped them to kill Nagini, Malfoy had swapped sides at the insistence of his mother.

She'd been overjoyed when Harry had rolled out of Hagrid's grip and begun fighting again.

Now, everything seemed so distant. She sat in the Great Hall with the others, all quiet in their grief over the loss of Fred, Remus and Tonks. Hermione didn't know what to say. She knew Ron was upset with her and so was unable to offer him much comfort over the death of his brother. He'd been angry with her for allowing Malfoy to help them, and even more furious when, despite everything, Malfoy had snatched hold of her and twisted them both out of the way when Nagini had tried to bite them, his wand firing out the Fiendfyre and destroying the terrible creature.

Ron was furious because despite what Malfoy had done to her at the Manor, he'd also saved her life tonight.

"Miss Granger, are you alright?" a voice intruded on Hermione's thoughts and she blinked away the memory of how Malfoy had protected her as they both fell off the crashing broom and how he'd again protected her from Nagini's bite. When she focused her gaze, her eyes met the concerned pair of Professor McGonagall.

"I'm alright Professor," Hermione assured her, "Are you okay?"

"Just a few bumps and bruises," Professor McGonagall nodded, "You're bleeding there, Hermione."

Hermione looked to where the woman pointed and she noticed that her bared left leg was indeed bloodied where she'd scraped her knee in the fall from Malfoy's rescue. She still didn't understand how it was that she'd ended up with next to no fabric left of her jeans on that leg and yet not a burn on her body. She narrowed her eyes in confusion when she recalled that Malfoy had been in a similar state, and yet Harry, Ron and Goyle had all suffered terrible burns as they escaped the fire.

"It's just a scrape, Professor," Hermione assured her, "Is there anything I can do to help get things cleaned up here?"

"Actually, yes," McGonagall told her, "Madam Pomfrey has just informed me that she is running low on several of the potions she needs to get people healed up. With Severus dead and Horace badly injured... Well, I was hoping you might be up to the task of brewing some of those that she needs replenishing."

"Of course Professor," Hermione nodded, grateful to have been given something useful to do. She felt so useless in the face of such grief and she'd felt almost like she was imposing on the Weasleys as they mourned Fred's loss.

"I'll go and speak to Madame Pomfrey and find out what she needs," Hermione continued, getting stiffly to her feet and wincing slightly at the pain in her limbs from the rough night she'd spent duelling.

"Thank you, Hermione," McGonagall said, shooting her a grateful smile.

Hermione nodded as she made her way across the hall. She was shaken when across the expanse of people gathered in the hall, she spotted a shock of white-blonde hair. She'd been surprised when, as Harry had rolled free of Hagrid's grip and proved that he had once again survived the Killing Curse at the hands of Voldemort, Malfoy had shown that he truly was on their side. She'd seen the way he'd spun in the chaos and she could still recall the intense look of concentration on his face as he'd met her gaze.

She didn't know why he'd been looking at her that way, but she knew she hadn't been alone in her surprise and her fear when many among the Death Eater ranks had begun to scream and cry out in terror as they were all simultaneously tortured. She knew she wasn't the only one to realise how powerful he'd become when several more of the Death Eaters who were trying to flee at the sight of Harry still living had suddenly burst into flames, doing even more damage when they staggered and ran into others of their brethren.

The ground beneath their feet had begun to shake as Hermione had stared back at Malfoy across the courtyard, and she knew that just as it had at Malfoy Manor when the room exploded, their magic melded together intensely, causing a blast of raw magic to unleash. Hermione knew that between them they'd killed at least one hundred Death Eaters at that moment as the explosion rocked the whole castle. She had no explanation for how it had focused only on those Death Eaters that were trying to escape and yet missed Malfoy's parents and missed all those who'd fought for the light. She had no explanation that made any kind of sense anyway, and she didn't have the mental willpower right then to examine it.

She chose to look away when she saw Malfoy's head lift as though he could feel her gaze. She didn't have the strength to try and deal with him anymore today and she wasn't about to try. Not when she had a more important task to complete. Turning away from him, Hermione sought out the frazzled medi-witch. Madam Pomfrey glanced up at her as she was trying to heal a nasty looking wound across the chest of Terry Boot.

"Miss Granger?" Madam Pomfrey asked and Hermione could tell she was exhausted despite there still being so much left to do.

"Professor McGonagall said you needed some of your healing potions replenished," Hermione told the woman, "Which ones do you need? I'll get started on them right away."

"Oh thank goodness for Minerva," Madam Pomfrey sighed, "Hold this here for a moment will you? We need to get these potions into him one at a time while keeping pressure on the wound."

Hermione did as she was told, taking the wad of padded gauze from the matron and pressing it firmly against Terry's chest.

"Alright there Hermione?" Terry coughed weakly, trying to muster a smile but only managing a pained grimace.

"I'm just fine," Hermione smiled gently, "Try not to talk. You need to drink those potions from Madam Pomfrey."

"Glad you..." he began, "Glad you made it through..."

"I'm glad you did too, Terry. Now just relax and take your medicine so that Madam Pomfrey can make sure you make it through the night."

Madam Pomfrey prevented him from talking further when she began feeding him potions one at a time until all seven of them were gone.

"Thank you for your help, Miss Granger. Let me get you a list of the potions I need the most right now. Are you sure you'll be okay to brew them? You look exhausted," the matron said sympathetically.

"Just a little fraught," Hermione tried to smile, "Too many lives were lost today and it's getting to me. It will do me good to get out of the hall for a bit."

"Alright then, well I'd like you to take this anyway," Madam Pomfrey told her, pressing a phial labelled Calming Draught into Hermione's hand, "It won't do any of us any good if you're too fraught to correctly brew these potions we need."

Hermione nodded again slowly, unstoppering the potion and drinking it down when she realised the medi-witch wasn't going to tell her the names of the potions she needed until she'd made sure Hermione would be at a proper mental balance to be able to safely brew them. Hermione made a face at the less than pleasant taste, but she drank it just the same. Maybe it would help her forget about the fact that thanks to her many people were dead. Maybe it would help her forget the intense stare Malfoy had fixed on her before their magic exploded and killed so many people. Maybe it would help her forget the fear and pain she'd felt when she thought Harry had been killed. Maybe it would help with the despair she suffered over the deaths of Fred, Remus and Tonks.

"Wonderful, now most importantly I need more Pepper-Up potion, as it's very good for assisting victims of the Cruciatus curse at recovering. I also need Calming Draught desperately. Draught of Peace would be wonderful if you've got the time, and some Dreamless Sleep potion is a must. There is also a potion we use for pain relief called Opioid Draught. I also need antidotes but not as pressingly," Madam Pomfrey told her seriously, sounding as tired as she looked but soldiering on and healing the wounded.

Hermione noted down the ones she wanted dutifully, realising she would need to spend several long hours brewing all these potions and wondering if she would be able to cope.

"Anything else?" she asked softly.

"No, I think that will be all for now. Be careful in the dungeons dear, you never know who might be lurking down there. Thank you for offering to make these for me, Miss Granger. I know you've had a long hard year."

Hermione merely nodded her head, not trusting herself to speak. As she left the matron to her tasks Hermione spotted Harry over by the Weasleys and many of their friends and she walked slowly towards them all. The Weasleys were all lost to their grief over Fred and Hermione could see from Harry's expression that the loss of Remus and Tonks had hit him hard.

"Hermione?" he asked softly, looking up when she rested a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

"Are you alright Harry?" Hermione asked him quietly.

"I was worried when we couldn't find you," he nodded as he got to his feet and pulled her into his arms to hug her.

"Professor McGonagall has asked me to help Madam Pomfrey by brewing some of the healing potions she's running low on, so I'm going to be in the dungeons for a little while, alright?" Hermione told him, hugging him back and feeling the urge to cry.

"Do you need some help?" Harry asked her.

"No that's alright. If you're looking for something to do maybe see if you can get some people together to start tidying this place up. The whole castle is in desperate need of repair and we're all going to need places to sleep tonight. Not to mention there could still be some Death Eaters lurking in forgotten rooms, waiting for a chance to slip away unnoticed. Madam Pomfrey needs some sterile space to heal everyone as well and I think the Hospital Wing was destroyed in the blast."

Harry nodded as he slowly released her.

"Are you alright?" he asked her. Hermione bit her lip to keep it from trembling.

"I thought we'd lost you," Hermione whispered to him, tears filling her eyes, "I don't know what I'd have done...."

Harry gave her a little smile.

"You'll never lose me, Hermione. I promise."

Hermione nodded, blinking away the tears.

"Tell Ron where I'll be, would you? He doesn't need me interrupting them all right now."

"I will. Send your patronus to me if you need anything, alright? I'll see if we can get some of this mess cleaned up. Might stop in and ask the elves if they can put on a bit of food for everyone too. Food and rest are what we all need now."

Hermione smiled weakly at him before she slowly made her way out of the hall, stepping around the fallen bodies of friend and foe alike, and over the rubble left in the wake of the

fighting. The Calming Draught that Madam Pomfrey had given her was slowly taking effect, but Hermione knew she was overwrought and she desperately needed to get out of the hall. She made her way down into the dungeons, her wand clutched in her hand lest she run across anyone unfriendly, but as she made her way into the potions storeroom she found not a soul and for that she was grateful.

Hermione found one of the brewing books in Slughorn's office, knowing that it was part of his job at Hogwarts to ensure the Hospital Wing was kept stocked. He had a book filled with important and useful healing potions and despite the list that she had from Madam Pomfrey, Hermione decided to also brew some of the additional ones in the book too, suspecting they would also come in handy in the coming days.

She did her best to lose herself in the brewing. She focused her energy entirely on the slicing of arrowroot, the crushing of soporophous beans and the dicing of nettle leaves. She fixated on getting the temperature for each potion exactly right, being sure to scuttle between each one as she brewed two or three at a time to ensure there was no down-time at all where she might be distracted by other things.

Hermione had no idea how long she'd spent brewing and bottling potions, and the lack of light in the dungeon classroom gave her no indication of what was happening in the outside world. She enjoyed the distraction and the simplicity of brewing a potion in the wake of such a long and complicated year. It felt nice to have only one thing to focus on. It made her think that after all they had lived through, she wouldn't mind returning to Hogwarts when everything was settled so she could focus on completing her education and just on doing what she liked to do; learn.

She was so lost in her potion-making that Hermione didn't notice the faint click of the door as it opened and closed. She didn't notice the soft scuff of footsteps as someone approached her from behind. In fact, she didn't notice she wasn't alone until she felt a pair of arms looping around her torso and someone's body pressed intimately against her back.

Hermione gasped in shock and fear at being grabbed and she hissed in pain when she spilt scorching potion down her still bared leg, scalding the skin.

"Jumpy, aren't you?" a voice she was becoming entirely too familiar with drawled into her ear and Hermione immediately began to wriggle in his hold, lashing out with magic before she could think better of it.

Draco Malfoy hissed in surprise and dropped his hold on her to stumble back as she hit him with a non-verbal spell. Hermione spun to face him, drawing her wand quickly before she paused at the sight of him. His whole body was covered in a fine film of ice, his pale eyebrows glittering with ice crystals.

"Well that's a new take on giving someone the cold shoulder," he muttered and Hermione was annoyed that he looked mildly amused.

"What are you doing down here? Sneaking up on me?" Hermione demanded, her wand still aimed at him as she watched his lips turn blue with the cold of the spell she'd used before the ice began to melt.

"We need to talk," he told her, not looking all that concerned by her threatening stance.

"No, we don't. In fact, if we never see each other again, it will be too soon," Hermione retorted.

"That's how it's going to be then?" he asked and Hermione caught the expression of annoyance on his face and the glitter of malice in his grey eyes.

"Yeah Malfoy, that's how it's going to be. We hate each other, remember? Just because you switched sides at the end and helped us win doesn't mean we're suddenly friends. Not after everything you've done," Hermione told him, "So just leave me alone. If these potions get ruined because of you, I'm going to stab you with something."

With that said, Hermione turned her attention back to the potions before aiming her wand at the scald on her leg and healing it slowly.

"It's not that simple, Granger," Malfoy retorted and Hermione tensed when he came up behind her again. He didn't touch her, but Hermione could feel the heat coming off his body from directly behind her just the same.

"It is that simple. So either help me brew these potions and shut up, or get the hell away from me," Hermione spat through her teeth, feeling the all-too-familiar rage bubble up inside her at his presence.

"Our magic is melded together, Granger," he replied quietly, though Hermione noticed that he stepped to the side and began stirring one of the cauldrons of Calming Draught she'd been brewing.

"Don't be ridiculous Malfoy, that's practically impossible. The only way for that to even occur is...." Hermione began before he cut in.

"Is if we have the same core-magic type and it is unleashed at the same time whilst we're touching," he finished her sentence for her, "You know, kind of like the way we caused that explosion at the Manor whilst shagging."

"Don't," Hermione warned, closing her eyes against the memory.

"What? You think that explosion we caused during the battle was something normal people can do?" he scoffed, shooting her a sideways glare, "You think that we'd have been able to selectively kill that many people at once if our magic wasn't melded together?"

"Malfoy, leave it alone," Hermione snapped in annoyance, "I don't want to talk about it. I don't want to think about it. Just leave it alone!"

"I can't leave it alone," he snapped, "Because until it unmelds we're both completely out of control. For example, everywhere you go, you're leaving scorched footprints because you're emotionally unstable and your magic is reacting to it."

Hermione stopped and stared at him in confusion. He pointed towards the floor of the classroom where she'd walked in and Hermione noticed that there were indeed footprints

scorched into the stone floor in just her size. She frowned at the sight, and at the idea that she hadn't even noticed it was happening.

"And now you're making it snow," he pointed out quietly when she didn't say anything else and Hermione looked up to see a tiny flurry lingering above her, dropping tiny snowflakes down upon her head.

Hermione sighed in annoyance.

"It's going to keep happening until we untangle our magic," he pointed out seriously as he began siphoning the Calming Draught into phials and labelling them with his wand.

Hermione hadn't had a chance to research what it meant to have her magic melded with someone else's. She'd known it was possible under certain circumstances, but she couldn't recall what needed to be done to disentangle magic once it was tangled. She suspected she wasn't going to like it, and that it would most likely hurt.

"What do you want from me Malfoy?" Hermione demanded, turning to glare at him, "Why are you seeking me out like this? Given how powerful this meld has made you, I don't imagine you care all that much about untangling the magic. So what do you want?"

He didn't answer for a long time, but Hermione could tell from his expression that he wanted the same thing she was currently craving. Release. The type she hadn't found since she'd escaped capture at Malfoy Manor.

"Forget it," she hissed as he opened his mouth, clearly about to say something along the lines of them shagging, "Never again."

"It's the only way to untangle our magic," he pointed out, "You've not been able to get there since, have you?" he asked and Hermione felt a blush crawl up her cheeks, "Didn't think so. You won't be able to ever again unless our magic is un-melded. And the only way to unmeld it is to recommit the act that melded it in the first place."

"It's not happening, Malfoy. Maybe you missed the part where I was protesting, but I don't ever want you to lay a finger on me again," Hermione snapped at him furiously. She knew she was lying. She did want him to. Not specifically because it was him, but simply because she knew he would do all the things that he'd done before and that he would force the release on her whether she wanted it or not.

"I don't want to touch you any more than you want it either Granger, but until the magic untangles neither of us have a fucking choice. And trust me when I say I've tried everything else," he growled. Hermione knew there was a problem when a wave of possessiveness smacked into her at the idea of him fucking others the way he'd fucked her.

She knew too that it was the same possessiveness he must've been dealing with upstairs when he'd caused all those flares of the flames as Ron claimed her as his girlfriend. Hermione felt dread consume her at the feeling. She didn't want to feel possessive over Draco Malfoy. She didn't want to feel anything but hatred about Draco Malfoy.

"Stop it," he snapped at her and Hermione blinked before she realised that the rage that swept through her had caused a blizzard inside the classroom, most of it directed right at Malfoy, whose robes were once again crusted with ice and who now had snow in his hair.

"This is ridiculous," Hermione groaned in frustration as she tried to control the magic pouring out of her without her conscious intent.

"It's worse when we're close to one another," he informed her, "That's why it hasn't been such a problem until today. But it's not going to stop unless we..."

Hermione stared at him hatefully. Merlin, she hated him.

"So?" he asked when she didn't say anything for a long time.

"We're not having sex again, Malfoy," Hermione hissed at him, "I have a boyfriend. A grieving boyfriend who wants you dead even more than I do after what you did. I'm not going to make him feel even worse by..."

"What I did?" Malfoy growled, his eyes narrowing on her with just as much hatred as Hermione felt, "I didn't want to do that anymore than you did, Granger!"

"Liar," Hermione hissed at him, narrowing her own eyes right back at him.

"If I'm a liar then so are you," he snapped coldly, "Or have you forgotten which one of us was moaning and whimpering in pleasure?"

Hermione slapped him.

She regretted it immediately when Malfoy seized hold of her wrists in a bruising grip, his grey eyes flashing dangerously at her.

"If you keep hitting me," he threatened darkly, "I'm going to shove you against the nearest flat surface and fuck you until you pass out. Got it?"

"Let go of me, you bastard," Hermione hissed, twisting her wrist in his tight grip and trying to fight free of him. The touch of his skin on hers immediately made her blood boil and her whole body throbbed with impossible heat. This wasn't like the warmth that spread through her when she and Ron had made love the previous night. This was an all-encompassing, searing heat that made her feel like her whole body was on fire. Hermione hated him even more for the fact that he was the cause of it.

She'd never reacted to anyone else the way she did to him and it made her furious. How dare he be the one who could make her feel so hot and bothered with just a touch? When he dropped one wrist and instead caught hold of her hair, Hermione saw the intent in his eyes. His grip was tight enough to sting, but not to truly hurt and she knew he intended to use it to hold her still while he had his way with her.

"Don't you dare!" Hermione warned him moments before he closed the distance between them, his lips colliding with hers. Hermione hated the fact that her whole body throbbed with

need as his tongue swept into her mouth, sparring with hers for dominance. She hated the way he nipped her lips harshly when she tried to pull away from him.

Desire and hatred bubbled stickily in her blood and Hermione felt the way her whole body reacted as he forced her backwards until she collided with one of the benches, pressing her against it as he snogged her furiously. His actions were rough and harsh, making Hermione angry when, despite her hatred, she felt the throbbing need to be ravaged sweep through her. How could it be fair that she was desperately in love with Ron but could no longer enjoy his touch? How could it be fair that this boy she hated more than anyone else in the world could drive her so wild with pleasure and desire?

It had to be a sick twist of fate, Hermione decided, that there could be such explosive sparks between them.

When she felt his hands trailing over her waist and towards her breasts even as he snogged her skilfully, Hermione's eyes flew open. She shoved her hands hard against his chest, forcing him back and away from her. He hissed when she struck out with magic again, trying to freeze him in place before he could make a grab for her again.

"Granger," he growled warningly, his voice thick and husky with need and his eyes dancing wildly. Hermione's own breath was ragged as she aimed her wand at him to keep him at any.

"Don't touch me," she commanded.

"Do you want to be stuck like this forever?" he snarled, looking like he was having trouble moving, his teeth beginning to chatter slightly thanks to the magic she was using on him. Hermione suspected that if he really wanted to, he could break the hold very easily. With their magic melded together, hers wasn't overly effective on him and vice versa.

"No," Hermione snapped, "But I also don't want to betray my currently devastated boyfriend more than I already have because of you. So stay the hell away from me Malfoy."

Hermione whimpered as he broke the hold of her magic over him, lashing out with some ice of his own.

"Mention that git to me one more time, I dare you!" he growled and Hermione caught the possessive gleam in his eyes. She hated herself when she felt a sick thrill at seeing him so angry.

"Look Malfoy, this is obviously a problem and it needs to be dealt with, but not right now. I have no idea about the effects of magical melds, other than the increase in power, and there are more important things to deal with right now. Exercise a little self-control and this rubbish can be sorted out some other time."

"I hate you," he growled in a low voice and Hermione could see the conflicting emotions dancing across his face. She knew that much like she did, he was probably feeling the all-consuming hatred and desire that sparked between them. She knew too that she was furious that of all people, it was the two of them stuck in this tangled web of magic and hate and need.

"I know," Hermione sighed, "I hate you even more."

"I can't live like this," he admitted bluntly, and Hermione nodded slowly.

"Neither can I. But we're both going to have to until there's time to sort this crap out."

"I've already told you how it can be sorted out, and I've got time now," Malfoy retorted taking another step towards her and making Hermione's body tingle.

"You don't know that will work," Hermione replied, "For all we know, shagging right now will only meld it even more. So just.... Don't touch me. Don't even look at me. Just shut your mouth and help me bring all these to Madam Pomfrey."

## Chapter 12

Draco sighed in frustration as he fell into his bed in the Slytherin dormitories. Despite his growing need for release he'd left Granger be for the rest of the night, choosing to help her brew potions because for some reason he didn't like being too far from her when he didn't have to be. When all the brewing was done he'd helped Potter get some of the castle repaired.

Auror Shacklebolt had rounded up some Aurors and begun arresting people who were still on the grounds that had to be questioned, including Draco's parents. He'd tried to have Draco arrested too but Potter had intervened. The argument between Wonder Boy and the angry Auror had been hushed and long, but Draco had caught snippets of it. By the sounds of things, Shacklebolt was very aware of the fact that Draco had fucked Granger at the Manor, clearly under the impression that he'd brutally raped her.

Potter had snapped something about Granger wanting to keep that information quiet, clearly not wanting any more people than necessary to know all he'd done to her. Shacklebolt had still looked like he wanted to arrest Draco, but Potter had insisted that he'd helped them during the battle and pointed out that thanks to him, many of the Death Eaters were dead. Draco didn't know how much that would work in his favor since he'd killed more than a hundred people during the battle.

He felt no remorse over doing so.

Draco supposed that made him a horrible person, but he truly had not a skerrick of remorse over what he had done. When he'd met Granger's gaze it had been only too easy to wield death and pain on his brethren. He would never admit he'd done it to protect her. He would die before even acknowledging that the sight of her snuggled in Weasley's arms and heartbroken over the idea of Potter being dead had eaten at some part of him.

Within the room of Hidden Things when he'd been sure he'd been about to die, Draco had realized what a complete fool he'd been for most of his life and he'd immediately begun acting to change his ways. He wouldn't say he was suddenly a good guy. Far from it, in fact, but he was certainly a big enough person to realize that throughout most of his life he'd been a spoiled, sniveling git and that needed to change. He felt as though all remnants of the bratty child he'd been had been burned away in the fire, leaving behind something else entirely.

Something ruthless and dangerous and entirely too hooked on Hermione sodding Granger. He still hated her with a fiery passion, but he didn't delude himself into thinking he wanted her dead anymore. No, now he just wanted her. He craved her fiercely. He wanted to possess her. To ravage her. To bring her completely undone again and again until neither of them could stand it anymore.

When he'd snogged her in the dungeons, he'd felt like he'd been back there in the fire, only this time like he was burning in the flames. Merlin, he hated her, but blast it all he craved her. She had a hold over him and it haunted him. He'd been dreaming of her for weeks. He woke

aching with the need to bury himself inside her. To have finally had her in his reach once more had been almost more than he could take.

And when she'd shoved him away, hissing about loyalty to the boyfriend she'd already betrayed Draco had felt a murderous rage pour through him. He didn't know the full effects of having their core magic melded together but he knew it made him want to possess her. The idea of her having been alone with Weasley for weeks since she'd escaped tormented him. The idea that she might be elsewhere in the castle at that very moment comforting the ginger bastard had Draco clenching his fists.

He needed her.

He knew she wouldn't let him have her again unless she believed it would unlock their melded magic. Draco didn't honestly know or care if it even could be unlocked. What he did know was that the minute he'd laid his hands on her, his magic had been completely unleashed. It was a very rare and very dangerous thing to happen to any witch or wizard, and it was the reason his magic had been so powerful and wild since that day at the Manor.

It was why she'd been leaving scorched footprints when she walked and why she'd made it snow just by being confused. It was the reason his own magic kept setting things on fire and it was the reason he'd been able to simultaneously torture and burn so many Death Eaters at once. Every witch or wizard had the potential to be so powerful, Draco knew, but in order to unlock the amount of raw magical ability locked inside oneself, one had first to find the key.

And Granger was his key. Since hers had been unlocked as well he could only ascertain that he was the key to her magical unbinding as well.

It was incredibly old and incredibly rare magic that bound certain people together. For some it was found in the making of a friend, in others it was a bond of lovers. And for some, it was merely the meeting of one's magical equal and an outpour of powerful emotions. Draco suspected that the freedom he'd felt when he'd fucked her against his headboard came not only from the fact that he could completely unleash every hateful feeling upon her but also from the unlocking of their combined potential. When she'd caused the explosion in his house, Draco knew it had been the effect of irreversible magical release.

It wouldn't matter if he fucked her every hour of every day for the rest of time, there was no way to re-bind the unbound power they'd unlocked within one another. Nothing could tame what they'd unleashed. That much was set in stone. What was a problem, however, was that since then he'd also been unfulfilled. He would need to do some more research on the matter, but Draco feared that he would never again be able to enjoy another witch as he'd enjoyed Granger.

There was an undeniable spark of attraction and loathing between them that ignited every time he touched her. He had to have her. The trick would be convincing her. Especially since she was hiding behind her pathetic excuse for a boyfriend. Draco suspected from the look she'd given him in the dungeons that she'd tried to find release with Weasley and it hadn't worked. That was a good sign. As long as she was unable to find that release with anyone else, she would eventually come to him.

Draco didn't think he could wait the length of time it would take her to swallow her sodding pride and admit she needed him. In fact, he suspected she would exhaust all other avenues before she would concede defeat. And he couldn't abide the idea of her shagging her way through every wizard and perhaps witch, she knew as she hunted release. He would go insane if she tried.

Not that he wanted her as some permanent fixture in his life. He certainly didn't want to date her or anything so sickening. He didn't fancy her. He didn't even like her. He detested her with every fiber of his being. But he also wanted to fuck her into a stupor again and again and again until he couldn't move.

Closing his eyes in frustration, Draco tried to will himself to sleep. He was exhausted, and yet he couldn't get her out of his head. He couldn't get the taste of her lips out of his mouth. He couldn't get the feel of her hands clutching at him while he'd snogged her out of his mind and though he'd tried, he hadn't been able to scrub hard enough in the shower to remove the ghost of her touch against his skin. Draco had deluded himself into believing that if he only saw her again he would be able to put her out of his mind. That he would be able to look past the memory of her body fitted so snugly around his and recall all the reasons he despised and loathed her.

He'd even convinced himself that it was all in his head that he'd been so thoroughly affected by her at the Manor. He'd told himself that it was to be expected for him to react in such a way towards her. She'd been his rival academically for years. Similarly, she had a singular ability to make him doubt himself not only through the fact that until recently he'd believed his heritage ought to make him better than her but also when she used that ridiculously straight-laced logic to slice through all his bullshit and cut him right back down to size. He'd spent many years purposely ignoring her existence.

Whenever he'd tormented Potter and Weasley he'd made sure to exclude Granger. At first, he'd done in it an effort to make her feel like she was so pathetically insignificant that he wouldn't even deign to acknowledge her for the purpose of humiliating her. However, when he'd learned that she had a sharper tongue than all the pureblood witches he'd known and that she wasn't at all afraid to tear strips off him and make him look the fool Draco had begun actively avoiding drawing her ire.

To then be expected to turn around and not only acknowledge her existence as a human being and a powerful witch but also as a woman with whom he was expected to bump uglies was something that had thrown Draco for a loop. To find that his magic could be unlocked by her was even more unsettling and the fact that he'd never felt so free as when he ravaged her was something that he could never forgive because it was something he was entirely unable to forget.

## Chapter 13

Hermione tossed and turned for hours as she laid in bed high in Gryffindor Tower, she'd claimed Dean's bed for herself when it had come time for them all to go to sleep. She'd grown too used to sharing immediate quarters with Harry and Ron and the thought of sleeping apart from them after such a trying battle didn't at all sit right with her.

The trouble was that Hermione was far too used to waking up every few hours to trade off doing watch to make sure they weren't attacked at any given time. On top of all that Hermione had been unable to get the images of the dead out of her mind. She was also spending much of the night actively avoiding thinking about the fact that she'd snogged Malfoy in the dungeons.

She hadn't been able to forget the feel of his hands scorching her flesh and her whole body throbbed with the need to be ravaged. She'd never hated him for it more than she did at that moment as she laid there in bed staring at the ceiling and trying to focus on something other than the way his tongue had felt against hers. Hermione rolled to her front and sighed heavily. In the beds surrounding her, Ron was snoring softly, Harry could be heard thrashing and turning over in his sleep and Neville was making strange little noises that Hermione was choosing to block out in favor of her own problems.

She was trying particularly hard to keep from thinking about Malfoy and it wasn't working. As a result, her core magic was wreaking havoc all over the place. It had been snowing above her bed for almost an hour now, though it all dissolved before it could melt upon her head or the sheets. She felt like she was a bow with the string strung too tight, as though she would snap loose at any moment. Her body was sticky and uncomfortable, her legs restless beneath the sheets and her lady-garden throbbing with a desperate need to be tilled and tended.

She hadn't had the heart to even think about suggesting to Ron that they commemorate the victory with the most mind-blowing sex he'd ever have. She didn't want to seem insensitive to his loss, but for the love of Merlin, she'd never felt so needy in all her life. Grumbling to herself softly Hermione rolled out of bed. She didn't even bother to think about changing out of the clothes she'd thrown on after her shower, not really caring that the sweat pants she wore were hanging provocatively low on her too-thin hips. The heat in her body thanks to Malfoy's touch had meant she'd not needed a jumper. Instead, she wore only a pink tank top.

Hermione didn't even bother searching for real shoes, choosing instead to wear her slippers as she crept from the room and out of the Gryffindor common room. She didn't have any destination in mind that she could think of, she just knew she couldn't stand another minute trapped in a room with the boy she was supposed to be head-over-heels-in-love with when she kept thinking about the dastardly git who'd brutalized her.

She wandered the halls aimlessly, not bothering to light her wand despite the darkness of the corridors. When she found herself sneaking into the kitchens, Hermione decided a snack would be the best thing to take her mind off Malfoy. All of the elves were sleeping or out of the kitchens when she went inside and Hermione used her wand to light the candles enough

that she could see to make herself a pot of hot chocolate before she began fixing herself a sandwich.

She almost jumped out of her skin when she heard the sound of someone's shoes scuffing the stone floor behind her and she spun quickly with the butter knife clutched in her hand, ready to use it if need be.

"You going to make me one too?" Draco Malfoy asked her seriously.

He looked as disheveled and distracted as she felt and Hermione could tell at a glance that he was suffering the same sleeplessness she was. She'd bet it was for the same reason too. He was dressed in the most relaxed clothes she'd ever seen him wear, consisting of dark denim muggle jeans and a plain black shirt. Hermione hated herself for the fact that she even noticed the way his arms looked good in it and she hated the way her mind presented her with images of what he looked like without those clothes on.

"In what world do you imagine I would ever fix you a midnight snack, Malfoy?" Hermione wanted to know, eyeing him coldly.

"A simple no would've sufficed," he replied and Hermione regretted turning his suggestion down when he came up beside her and began fixing his own food, his elbow brushing hers and making her predicament infinitely worse.

"Must you?" Hermione demanded when his arm brushed hers for the third time in a row.

"Stop whining, Granger," he scolded her lightly, "If you'd made me a sandwich you wouldn't have to touch me."

"You have an entire kitchen to get your own food, why are you trying to do it in my pocket?" Hermione retorted in annoyance, unable to keep from complaining as it gave her a distraction from the feel of his skin against hers.

"You've finished making your food, why are you still standing here?" he countered and Hermione wanted to slap herself in the forehead when she noticed she was indeed finished fixing her own sandwich and that she could've moved away from him.

"I hate you," she hissed under her breath, snatching up her sandwich and moving away to eat it whilst trying to ignore the way his lips twitched into a smirk.

"Maybe, but you want me too," he pointed out and Hermione fought the urge to fling her mug at him. And herself, for that matter.

"You're delusional," Hermione informed him nastily, lying through her teeth.

"Mhmm," he hummed sarcastically, his eyes watching her even as he took a big bite out of his ham, cheese, and tomato sandwich.

"What are you even doing here?" Hermione asked "It's the middle of the night. Shouldn't you be asleep?"

"What are you doing here?" he countered with a shrug, "I was hungry and I knew you were in here."

"Excuse me?" Hermione asked, her eyes widening.

"If you weren't so busy trying to block out how badly you want me to fuck you again, you'd have worked out by now that whenever we're in close proximity to each other our magic gets more out of control. I can literally feel it when you come closer. Could feel it the whole time you were wandering down from Gryffindor Tower."

"How can you sound so calm about that?" Hermione demanded.

"Nothing I can do about it," Malfoy shrugged, taking another bite of his sandwich, "And since you won't let me shag you again to undo it, I guess I'll have to learn to live with it."

"Stop talking about shagging!" Hermione hissed at him in annoyance, almost spitting her hot chocolate everywhere over his blunt honesty.

"Why?" he asked, "It's all I can think about. Especially when you have that strip of skin showing."

He nodded his head indicatively towards the way her tank top had ridden up to expose her stomach since her sweat pants were hanging so provocatively low and Hermione blushed crimson, tugging on the hem of it and regretting not having put on something less revealing before leaving the dorms. She hadn't expected to run into anyone or she'd have dressed properly. Hermione hated herself a little when her mind pointed out how it didn't matter since Malfoy had seen her naked anyway.

"What? You're just going to accept wanting to shag me then?" Hermione asked, narrowing her eyes on him, "Seems out of character for you."

"I don't have a choice. The number of people I've shagged since you escaped would make you blush if you knew. Didn't help. So it'll have to be you," he answered as he poured himself some hot chocolate from the pot she'd made.

The possessive fury that swept through her took her breath away. Malfoy's too when the temperature in the kitchen dropped so much that ice crystals spread across the windows and everything in the room.

"You got a problem with that Granger?" Malfoy asked, smirking now and clearly finding humor in her inability to hide her reaction, "Don't much like the idea of me shagging all those other witches the way I shagged you?"

"Screw you!" Hermione hissed at him, losing control of her magic and causing a blizzard to spark up within the room.

She jumped when he laughed and looked like he approved of that idea. Doing the only thing she could think of at that moment, Hermione spun on her heels and stomped away from him with as much dignity as she could muster for a girl wearing slippers and unable to hide her

own jealousy over someone she loathed. Hermione wanted to rip his face off when he followed her.

"Thinking about trying to run away and hide in the dark Granger?" he asked, following her up the stairs and down the fourth-floor corridors, "I dare you to try. I can follow you anywhere, even without those scorched footprints you're leaving in your wake."

"Shove off Malfoy!" Hermione growled.

"No," he answered, "You can't ignore me forever. Eventually, you and I are going to have to deal with this mess."

"You expect me to just take your word for it that shagging again will unmeld our core magic?" Hermione challenged over her shoulder, "I'm not stupid, Malfoy. Just because you can't get off with anyone else doesn't make your sex life my problem."

"And the fact that you can't get off either without my help?" he retorted, "Does that make it your problem?"

"My sex life is none of your business!" Hermione snapped at him, glaring over her shoulder in annoyance.

"You want to just leave our magic melded this way all because you're afraid of what I can do to you?" he asked and Hermione could tell he was getting frustrated with her.

"Since the magic part isn't an issue unless we're in the same vicinity I figure I'll just stay as far from you as possible and that will be that. Problem solved," Hermione retorted, rounding a corner and discovering that her feet were instinctively carrying her towards the library.

"Look Granger, you might've gotten used to not being able to get your rocks off with that pathetic ginger sod you call a boyfriend, but I won't live like this!" Malfoy snarled from behind her and Hermione narrowed her eyes, glaring over her shoulder again.

"I'll have you know Ron is an extremely capable lover, thank you very much!" she spat and she hissed when the whole hallway heated rapidly, every torch along it leaping to life, the flames so high they scorched the stone ceiling. Hermione kind of hated the sense of satisfaction it gave her to know he was feeling possessive over her too. She really needed to look into the whole mess and figure out what in the hell was going on. It was out of control.

"What's the matter Malfoy?" Hermione taunted him as he had done to her earlier, "Don't like the idea of a little mudblood like me being with anyone but you?"

She squawked in surprised protest when he grabbed her wrist, spinning her in his hold and dragging her closer. Hermione tried to protest when he shoved her into the wall, his body pressing against the length of hers deliciously even as his lips crashed down on hers in the most possessive kiss Hermione had ever been given. She didn't know if she hated him or herself more for the way her body responded to being snogged so fiercely. He nipped her lips hungrily, his tongue sweeping in to tangle with hers. He tasted like hot chocolate and Hermione's whole body heated up so fast she wanted to melt all over him. She was a little

disgusted with herself when she brought her hands up to tangle in his blonde hair, yanking it sharply, though not sharply enough to dislodge him from her. He made a sound in his throat that was part protest, part approval and Hermione tried desperately to ignore the throbbing throughout her entire body with how badly she wanted him.

She couldn't do this to Ron. She couldn't! He was already devastated over Fred's death. The last thing he needed was to find out that the boy who'd raped her was currently snogging her stupid. Hermione hated herself all the more for not wanting to stop snogging Malfoy despite the pain it would bring her boyfriend. She loathed him with every part of her being, but the searing heat he awoke in her and the desire he sparked within her was addictive. Addictive and unhealthy and completely toxic.

"Stop!" Hermione growled, shoving him back as hard as she could and breathing hard as she tried to catch her breath.

"Granger!" Malfoy warned through gritted teeth, his hands still tangled in her messy long hair and a wild look in his eyes. His confliction over hating her so much and wanting her so badly was written across his pointed face and Hermione expected the expression was mirrored upon her own.

"Don't!" Hermione snarled at him. She wouldn't do this to Ron. He deserved better than the type of girl who would cheat on him with someone they both loathed. He deserved a girl who would be comfortable and satisfied with him in bed. He deserved the type of woman who would react to his touch the way Hermione reacted to Malfoy's. Minus the searing hatred, of course.

Hermione hated that she couldn't be that girl.

She was going to have to tell him. She knew he'd sensed it last night that there was a distance between them now. That he knew just like she did that their short-lived and rather turbulent relationship was coming to an end. But right then, at that moment, standing there in the corridor with Draco Malfoy pressed against her far too intimately, Ron was still her boyfriend and he deserved better than this. Hermione might not have been able to do much about having to shag Malfoy when she'd been captured, but she could refrain from snogging him or anything else until it would no longer make her unfaithful to the boy she loved.

"Just don't, Malfoy," Hermione repeated, tightening her grip to hold him at bay when he tried to lean into her again.

"If you mention that sod you call a boyfriend one more time...." Malfoy warned her, his eyes flashing dangerously.

"Malfoy!" Hermione snarled right back at him, "The sod is named Ron and for the time being he is still my boyfriend. He has enough bollocks to be dealing with and he doesn't need an unfaithful girlfriend on top of it. So get the hell off me. I don't care what kinds of stupid effects having our magic melded is going to have. Until it won't affect Ron, I will be ignoring those effects. And so will you. Let go of me! Now!"

He looked like he wanted to argue further, but Hermione glared at him fiercely. She was entirely serious. She wouldn't do this to Ron.

"Why does it matter that you're betraying him now but it didn't at the Manor?" he asked, letting go of her but still standing well within her personal space.

"It did matter, you git!" Hermione said, shoving him back so that she could continue on her trip to the library, "There was just nothing I could do about it then."

"Don't give me that," Malfoy snarled, "Don't delude yourself into thinking you didn't have a choice. You did. A bad one, but you still had a choice. You could've given Potter and the Order up if you'd wanted to avoid shagging me that badly."

"When you say things like that it's clear you have no sense of loyalty and that you're a complete imbecile," Hermione informed him coldly, "Giving up Harry and the Order was never an option. Choosing to cooperate as much as necessary given the circumstances to survive was a choice. One that would have been understandable to Ron. I had to shag you or I had to die. I don't have to snog you now."

"You do if you ever want to be able to orgasm again," Malfoy retorted and Hermione's eyes crossed in frustration.

"I'm not going to betray him, Malfoy. If the situation was reversed; if you and I were a couple and I was magically melded with and therefore snogging Ron how would you feel?"

The way the lamps flared a second time, even higher and more violently than the first flare was all the answer she needed.

"So you see the predicament. Don't touch me again, Malfoy. I mean it. I will do what I have to in order to sort this mess out with you by whatever means are necessary, once I have sorted things out with my boyfriend. Don't leer at me like that either, or I'll leave you hanging and horny like that forever," Hermione threatened him when he began to look annoyed again.

"You wouldn't. You'll crack eventually. I know you want me," Malfoy smirked and Hermione rolled her eyes, refusing to admit it as being the truth. The fact was that she did want him. Desperately. But she wasn't about to hurt or betray Ron any more than she already had just for her own selfish needs. No matter how good she knew it would be to let Malfoy fuck her three ways from Sunday again.

"Don't flatter yourself Malfoy," Hermione told him, "Your arrogance is a turn-off."

"So is your hair, but here we are," he retorted nastily and Hermione narrowed her eyes on him before shoving past him and stomping off down the corridor.

She traversed the castle in silence, heading for the only destination she'd ever known true peace. As she slipped inside the library, being sure to be quiet so as not to wake Madam Pince, Hermione breathed a small sigh of relief. The whispering and muttering of the books on their shelves and the musty smell of the library were like a balm to her soul and Hermione

found herself finally able to think of something other than Draco Malfoy for a few minutes. Even if he was still following her and seemed incapable of leaving her alone.

She made her way into the library slowly, not minding the dark of the familiar room as she searched by moonlight for the section on magical melds and their effects. She needed to find out if it was true that she and Malfoy could be melded together in this way and she needed to find out if there was any way to undo it. The moment she found the section, Hermione summoned a lamp to herself and she used magic to light it, smiling at the soft flickering of the flames in the dark library. She settled down on the floor in front of the shelves, leaning back against them as she picked up a book and began to read.

She lost herself in the confusing and conflicting information she found within each text. It seemed Malfoy had been correct about how their magic had melded in the first place, but there was no mention in any of the books she could locate about how to unmeld their magic. From what she could garner it was a highly dangerous venture to undertake such a magical unleashing and it seemed that once unbound the magic couldn't be reigned back in.

In fact, Hermione began to suspect that the very reason it was such a dangerous occurrence was that from the time the magic was unleashed inside both people, their core magic was prone to feeding off that of each other and to becoming entirely beyond control. It could still be wielded to terrible effect via a wand, but a wand was no longer required. As she read, Hermione came across the section that had been bothering her the most which was that once it had been unlocked, the witch or wizard in question no longer needed to even consciously form the mental intent to wield magic before it would occur.

How was she supposed to keep control of herself when she didn't even have to intend to react magically for it to occur? She felt very much like a child again at the idea of having fantastical feats of magic being performed without her intent to have them happen and she knew she needed to get a handle on the situation as quickly as possible.

She could find no mention anywhere of anyone who'd had their magic meld, wanting to unmeld it. She didn't know where Malfoy had found his theory that recommitting the act that melded the magic would, in turn, unmeld it, but she suspected it might be false. She paled when she came across the section that hinted at the idea that people who found the key to their magical unlocking were often bound to their key.

In her case, the key being Draco Malfoy.

"You lied to me about the idea of recommitting the act to unmeld our magic," Hermione accused Malfoy who had taken a seat next to her on the floor and was leaning up against the bookshelves. He was sitting as close as possible without being in her lap, his thigh was pressed against hers and he was making it so she had no elbow room to read.

"I know," he answered without looking away from the book he'd picked up, "I just hoped that if you thought it would work, it would be a viable way to get you to shag me again."

Hermione was surprised by his honesty.

"Are you really that desperate?" she asked him, baffled by his admittance.

Malfoy lifted his head and turned towards her slowly, his grey eyes locking onto hers in the dim light.

"Thirty-seven," he answered, baffling her, "I've fucked thirty-seven witches since you fled the Manor. In ways and places, you can't even begin to imagine. Unspeakable ways. They groan their depression when I throw them from my bed or leaving them catatonic on the floor somewhere. And I haven't been able to properly come with any of them. Do you know what that's like?"

"I've never shagged a witch, so no, I can't say I do," Hermione answered, annoyed when ice crystals formed in his eyebrows without her intending to cause them.

"How many times have you had sex since me?" he asked her rudely and Hermione blushed.

"Do you actually think I'm going to answer that?" she asked.

"Just tell me, Granger," he said through gritted teeth while the lamp next to her slowly began to glow brighter and brighter.

"Only once," Hermione sighed, looking away, "Thanks to you, everyone thinks I'm fragile and broken."

"Did you orgasm?" he asked, clearly having no respect for her personal boundaries.

"I think you already know the answer to that if everything I'm reading in these books is to be trusted," Hermione answered, refusing to meet his gaze and ignoring the way a sweet scent seemed to fill the air around them.

"Imagine dealing with the frustration you no doubt felt when you were left unsated. Only imagine feeling it hundreds of times overall because none of them was bloody you," Malfoy snarled, "So don't sit there and ask me if I'm desperate because obviously I fucking am. I loathe everything about you so much it makes me violent and yet I want to shove you down and fuck you until we both literally die from exhaustion. It's fucked up and it's your fucking fault!"

"My fault?" Hermione demanded, glaring at him and trying very hard to keep from squirming with how badly she wanted him at that moment, "You didn't have to fuck me like that! You could've just let me lay there and think of England until you were done, but you bloody well didn't! This is more your fault than mine!"

"You were the fool who got caught in the first place!" he argued, "If you hadn't been caught I'd have never laid a finger on you and none of this would've happened!"

"You're going to blame me for something outside of my control?" Hermione snarled at him, "It's not like I bloody wanted to be caught! Harry accidentally said the tabooed name and Snatchers appeared out of nowhere. I was caught before I could even begin thinking about defending myself. And then I was tortured by that crazy bitch, and by you! So don't you dare blame me for this, Malfoy!"

## Chapter 14

Draco lost it. He couldn't take it anymore. Watching the way that same fire danced in her eyes; listening to her hissing venom at him. He couldn't handle it. He had to have her. He had to feel her writhing and fighting against every morsel of pleasure he was going to inflict upon her.

She made a strangled noise of protest when he dragged her into his lap, his hands unforgiving in her terrible hair, his tongue delving into her mouth to shut up any further protests she had about not hurting her stupid boyfriend's fucking feelings. He pulled at her until she was straddling his lap as he leaned against the bookshelves on the floor. She bucked in his hold and Draco felt a jolt run through him straight to his dick, instantly making it even harder than it had already been.

He almost lost it when her nails dug viciously into the back of his neck, no doubt drawing blood and making him angry. She bit his tongue harshly when he refused to stop kissing her and Draco returned the favor with a vicious bite to her lower lip, his teeth sinking into the plump flesh and breaking the skin. She made another noise of protest, writhing as though she wanted to get away from him and Draco wasn't having any of it.

He smirked against her lips as he bucked his hips beneath her, grinding the hard hot lump in his jeans against the junction of her thighs and drawing a moan from her as though he'd just killed her. He could feel the hatred pouring off her like a toxic perfume, fermenting in his blood and making him crazy. When she ground herself down on him he knew he had her. She'd forgotten all about that pathetic sod of a ginger and she wanted him bad. She didn't want to want him. He knew that. If she could get away with it she'd run from him as fast as he could say Quidditch, but she needed him.

Draco bucked against her furiously again when her nails cut into more of his skin. The flavor of their mingling blood on his tongue was like a drug and before he knew it he'd shoved her out of his lap and back until she was stretched out on the floor beneath him. His hands left bruises on her creamy flesh as he held her down with one hand, the other making short work of her sweat pants, followed quickly by the fastenings on his jeans.

He shoved her shirt out of his way until he could get at her breasts and only then did he break his kiss.

"Don't you dare, you bastard," she threatened, her hands clawing at him, trying to pull him off of her. She groaned in outrage and pleasure when he drew her left nipple into his mouth, suckling the flesh hungrily. Merlin, he despised her! How dare she react to him this way? How dare she make him want her the way he wanted no one else?

He punished her relentlessly with his fingers and she clawed at his neck and shoulders as he drove two fingers into her wet heat without releasing her breast.

"Fuck you, Malfoy," she cursed, her back arching off the floor beneath him. Her body was like a well-strung violin and he played her like a master musician. She was dripping with

how badly she wanted him, and the way she fought and riled against her own need nearly brought Draco undone before he could even get himself inside of her.

"I warned you to keep your hands off me, you foul little git," she snarled when he began tormenting her clit with his thumb.

"Shut up and take it, bitch," Draco replied, leaving her nipple long enough to speak before laving the other one with his tongue, drawing the taut peak between his lips, and rubbing the little bud against the roof of his mouth. Her feral sound of hatred, protest, and bliss clawed at his psyche and tried to unravel him. But Draco didn't give in. He'd been waiting weeks to get his hands on this wild little witch and he was going to savor every hateful second of it.

Her hands delved beneath his shirt, clawing at the fabric until she managed to tear it off over his head and Draco groaned as she slashed the bare flesh of his back with her nails, breaking the skin and making him wild with fury. How dare she think she had any right to mark his flesh?

He punished her by pulling his hand away from her dripping passage before driving himself inside her as brutally as he knew how. She whimpered in pleasure and pain, her whole body taut and tense, arched into his touch. She clutched at his shoulders desperately, those claws leaving more marks on his flesh as she sought to hang onto something. To anchor herself to something. Draco knew the feeling. He was drowning in her. Drowning in how fucking good it felt to be inside her, to feel her hatred washing over his skin.

He lost all control then, every skerrick of self-control, every thought left him and he was nothing more than a beast. He rutted against her wildly, egged on by her threats, curses, and groans.

"I'll kill you for this, you bastard," she threatened him, her brown eyes locked on his own grey pair when he brought her to the pinnacle peak of pleasure. Draco could only smirk ferally as he shoved her into orgasm. Her body clamped down hard on his, spasming and fluttering, trying to milk him of everything he had.

Nothing had ever felt so good.

And he fucking hated her for it. Pinning her wrists to the floor, Draco reared back before plunging into her violently, stabbing at her, impaling her on his hard length again and again. He was blind with rage and need and pleasure. He couldn't stand it anymore and as he exploded inside her Draco felt their magic crash together violently. Fire and ice collided and a sweet scent filled the room. Draco didn't care about whatever other effects it was having. He was too lost to the sensation of being full sheathed inside the hateful little witch beneath him. He could feel her teeth embedded in his shoulder where she'd bitten him to muffle the screams he'd drawn from her.

Her nails had sliced his back to ribbons and his whole body ached with the sated sting of abused muscles.

He kissed her then. Before she could spit more venom at him. Before he could think about how much he wanted to wrap his hands around her throat and choke the life out of her.

Before he could even begin to fathom how terribly connected they really were, Draco pressed his lips hungrily upon hers and snogged her. Her sigh was a sweet, sugary treat in his mouth as she kissed him back almost lazily. She could barely move for satiation but she brushed her tongue against his deliciously.

Draco hated her all the more for how sweet her mouth tasted. He hated that her scent permeated his senses and made him think he'd never be able to live without her. He hated himself for thinking something so ridiculously clichéd and he hated that he didn't mean it in a good way. He hated that he needed her to find release. He despised craving her to simply feel human. For weeks he'd been wild with desire; burgeoning on insanity for another feel of her body clutching at his.

He couldn't bear the fact that he suspected he'd never be rid of her. He couldn't even kill her because he needed her too fucking badly. When her hands tangled into his hair and yanked his face away from hers, Draco curled his lip at her in distaste.

"Get the fuck off me," she hissed, her brown eyes flashing dangerously.

"Or you'll what?" Draco taunted, his face still close to hers despite the way she was pulling his hair.

She bucked beneath him furiously and if Draco weren't so spent he'd have fucked her all over again. She riled wildly for several long minutes, not even succeeding in dislodging his softening member from her tight passage and Draco found himself smirking cruelly.

"Get off me!" she snarled, "Damn it Malfoy, I told you to keep your hands to yourself until I could deal with Ron."

The nearby lamp exploded at the mention of Weasley and Draco snarled out a curse when he felt the glass from the lamp slicing into his skin. He jerked back from her with a curse.

"Now look what you fucking did," he accused, twisting painfully to see a nasty slash across his left arse cheek from the sliver of glass that had hit him.

"Your jealous reactions are your own problem Malfoy," she told him, looking away from him as she tugged the hem of her shirt back down to hide her torso before wriggling back into her sweatpants. Her hair was mussed and her cheeks flushed pink with embarrassment and exertion.

Draco opened his mouth to tell her no one in their right mind would be jealous over a pathetic little swot like her, but he bit his tongue on the lie. The fact was that the very thought of her with Weaselbee made him violently angry.

"Break up with him," he growled out warningly instead.

"Don't you dare tell me what to do, Malfoy," Granger replied, getting to her feet. Or trying to. Draco caught her in his lap before she could fall on her face when her knees wobbled and gave out beneath her.

He didn't know why he did it. It wasn't as though he cared if she hurt herself. And yet he caught her easily, tugging her into his lap and absorbing the brunt of her fall.

"Must you constantly touch me?" she demanded, sounding pissed off rather than grateful.

"Don't try to change the subject," Draco retorted coldly, his teeth nipping her earlobe sharply. "You better break up with that pathetic sod, Granger. I mean it."

"You can't tell me what I can and can't do," she replied and Draco growled low in his throat with fury.

"I can tell you that if you think I'm going to refrain from fucking you just because you don't want to hurt him, you're mistaken. I can tell you I don't give two shits about Weaselbee's hurt feelings and that if you have moral issues with cheating on him, yet you refuse to break up with him it's entirely on you. I'll fuck you either way," he warned her.

"You're despicable," she snapped, unfurling his arms from around herself and crawling out of his lap. Draco let her go, but only because he was too spent to even think about fucking her again right then.

"I'm not the one cheating on a hapless loser," Draco retorted, clucking his tongue at her in a most judgemental way, "What would he say if he could see you looking so ravaged right now?"

He smirked just a little when he caught the glimmer of shameful tears in her eyes before she looked away from him. He didn't feel bad about it. Let her stew over the fact that when Weaselbee found out Draco had been fucking the tempestuous witch he'd be beyond crushed. Let it be the driving force that caused her to do what Draco wanted. Saying he didn't care would be a lie. He did care. A lot. He didn't at all like the idea of Weasley shagging Granger when Draco could be doing it himself.

He didn't want her in any romantic capacity, but he'd accepted that he wanted to shag her senseless until he was a frail old man and couldn't get it up anymore. And he didn't want to fucking share her!

She didn't speak to him again even as she go to her feet and walked away. Draco kind of liked that she didn't even have the decency to acknowledge what they'd just done. She just begrudgingly took every morsel of pleasure he fed her and walked away without looking back. When he could feel the distance between them growing, Draco turned his attention to healing the wound on his arse. He used his wand to return the books they'd been reading to their shelves and repaired the lamp he'd accidentally destroyed.

Aside from the disturbances among the dust, there was no evidence of the fact that he'd just shagged a witch within an inch of her life right there on the library floor.

## Chapter 15

He was waiting for her when she returned to the common room and Hermione's heart stopped in her chest at the sight of him. The Marauder's map dangled limply in one of his hands, his eyes fixed on her as she came through the portrait hole.

"Harry?" Hermione began hesitantly, horribly aware that she probably looked as well ravaged as she felt. He blinked his green eyes at her in the dim light of the fireplace, an unfathomable expression on his face.

"When you didn't come back I got worried," he told her quietly, and Hermione felt a blush stain her cheeks. "I checked the map to try and find out where you were and to see if you needed my help."

Hermione felt her heart constrict inside her chest. He didn't sound judgemental, and he kept his features neutrally blank.

"I..." Hermione began.

"You were with him, Hermione. I saw you together," he rustled the map quietly. "Don't bother trying to deny it."

"I didn't go looking for him," Hermione offered quietly, having nothing else she could say. Harry didn't have to be a genius to be able to guess what she'd been doing.

"But you found him," he said, not looking away from her.

"He found me," Hermione corrected in a small voice.

"You have to tell Ron, Hermione," Harry told her firmly.

"I know," she sighed, moving towards Harry tiredly. She was surprised when he didn't lecture her or grow angry with her; when he put down the now blank map and tugged her into a gentle hug.

"Why?" he asked quietly and Hermione didn't have to look up from where she'd tucked her cheek against his shoulder to know what he meant. Why had she stayed there in the library with Malfoy? Why had she fucked him?

"Our magic is melded," Hermione told Harry's clavicle softly. "It's incredibly rare and incredibly dangerous. Every magical person has a type of leash on their magic. A lock on it that keeps it from reaching its true potential. The chances of finding the key to that lock are so rare, I only found two other documented cases in Britain's history."

"And Malfoy's your key?" Harry asked, sounding like he was kind of grossed out.

"And I'm his key," Hermione muttered. "Once the magic is unleashed, there's no way to lock it back up. And the more I'm around him, the more our magic reacts to one another's. It's melded together, so when we're in the same vicinity it becomes incredibly powerful. It's how we killed all those people downstairs today."

"Is that why you're making it snow right now?" Harry asked softly, his hand rubbing comforting circles in the middle of her back.

"You should see what happens when me and Malfoy are in the same room," Hermione muttered, recalling the blizzards she'd caused earlier. "It's like being an out-of-control child again. When I react emotionally to something, so does my magic, without any conscious intent from me to do so."

"You've been leaving footprints everywhere you go, too," Harry pointed out, directing her attention to the scorched footprint she kept leaving in her wake.

"I know," Hermione sighed. "The effects are horrible. You remember last night I mentioned that being with Ron I couldn't quite get there?"

She felt more than saw Harry nod.

"And that I couldn't get there alone either?" she clarified. "It's because of him. I can't do it without him. There's no way to lock it back up and no way to undo the meld."

"You slept with him?" Harry asked softly, though there was little doubt in his voice.

Hermione nodded, tears of shame prickling her eyes.

"And?" he asked and Hermione blushed when she realized he was asking if Malfoy'd gotten her there.

"Four times," Hermione whispered tiredly. "I tried to stop him. To tell him that I couldn't do this to Ron.... It didn't help."

"Did he force you?" Harry asked her, his grip tightening.

"Not exactly," Hermione admitted. "It's hard to explain Harry. I literally loathe him so much that it gives me energy. Every fiber of my being crackles with how much I hate him. But I want him like a crack addict wants another hit."

"Isn't that a lovely analogy?" Harry replied dryly. "He's about as good for you as crack too."

"Trust me, I know," Hermione promised him. "I have to break up with Ron."

"This is really rubbish timing," Harry grumbled and Hermione could tell from the tone in his voice that he was so terribly tired of everything in their lives always being a cluster of catastrophes at the most inopportune of moments.

"I tried to put it off, Harry. I tried to tell him I wasn't going to betray Ron again. That I'd have to sort it out with Ron when it wasn't a few hours after his brother had been killed,"

Hermione told him, trying to offer some excuse for her inexcusable actions.

"Bet that went over well."

"We had a fight," Hermione nodded. "And fighting with him is like an aphrodisiac."

"Ron's going to be destroyed about this Hermione," Harry warned her. "He really loves you."

Hermione began to cry at Harry's words.

"I love him too.... So much. More than almost anything in the world. But I can't do this to him, Harry. I can't put him through this. He was having a hard enough time with the fact that I shagged Malfoy to keep myself alive. I can't put him through the pain of knowing what I've done now. He knows it's over in his heart. He felt it last night as much as I did. Being in love isn't enough."

Tears trickled down her cheeks, dripping onto Harry's shirt as he held her tighter.

"You can't tell him the truth," Harry said finally. "You can't tell a soul. The only way he'll get through this is if he thinks it's his idea to break up with you. Let me plant the seeds of doubt in his mind. Let him come to you with the idea of breaking up. Don't ever tell anyone but me that this is because of your link to Malfoy."

Hermione could see the wisdom in his suggestions and it broke her heart all the more that Harry was willing to put himself in the middle of it and to do this for her. To protect her and Ron from the heartbreak that would come to them both if Ron ever found out about her link to Malfoy. She began to sob uncontrollably at that and Harry held her tighter.

She cried and cried until she could cry no more and she fell asleep in Harry's arms on the couch in front of the fire, her heart broken over the loss of the boy she loved, all because of a boy she couldn't stand.

## ~O~

"Can I talk to you, Hermione?" Ron asked her two days after her midnight chat with Harry. Hermione had gone out of her way to avoid Malfoy, ignoring the fact that he'd tried to catch her eyes several times. She knew Harry had been asking niggling, intrusive questions of Ron about the state of their relationship. She knew he'd been less than subtle when he pointed out that they didn't seem happy with each other.

At first, Ron had reacted angrily, confused over Harry's suggestions. Hermione had watched the way the doubt had begun to eat away at him though. Often during the past two days, she'd caught him watching her, a little frown wrinkling his brow.

"What is it, Ron?" she asked him softly, knowing already what he wanted to talk about but needing to feign ignorance to protect her secret.

"Are you happy with me?" he asked quietly, leading her a little away from the corridor where they'd been working to restore the castle.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I mean are you happy being with me? Are you content? Do you see yourself spending the rest of your life with me?" he asked and Hermione could tell from the tremor in his voice that he wanted her to say no.

"You're not?" she asked perceptively.

"I..." he began, his ears turning red as he looked away, "I just... it's something Harry said... I feel like you're not happy with me. Like you want more than I can ever offer you."

"Ron, are you breaking up with me?" Hermione asked directly. She didn't think her heart would be able to take it to have him go through a big long spiel about why they shouldn't be together. He held her gaze for a long time after that in silence and Hermione wondered at the silent debate he was having with himself.

"Yes," he answered finally, "I am. Don't get me wrong Hermione, I love you. More than anything.... But I know it's not enough. Not after everything we've been through. Not after..."

He didn't say Malfoy's name, but Hermione knew he was thinking it.

"You're not crying or even surprised," Ron noted when Hermione simply sat there staring at him. "You know as well as I do that we don't belong together."

"I love you, Ron," Hermione told him then. "I love you more than anyone I've ever loved before."

"But it's not enough," he nodded sadly. "I know. I think I knew the other night when we were in bed together. There's no going back from what you went through. You need something now that I can't give you. I should've known that when you kept insisting you were fine."

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked, startled by his admission.

His ears turned red again at her questions.

"I... It bothers me, Hermione. What happened to you; it eats away at me. Every time I look at you, I wonder if you're thinking about what he did to you. I keep reaching for you, thinking you might need me to hold you together. But you don't. You don't need someone like me, Hermione. You're stronger than me. Stronger than almost anyone. And I need a girl who needs me. I need a girl who needs me to hold her together when something bad happens. I'll love you for the rest of my life, but you know as well as I do that you're not the girl who needs me," he smiled sadly at her then. "When something bad happens you're already three steps ahead on dealing with it. I want to feel needed Hermione. I want to be the one my significant other looks to for what to do next. And you don't do that."

Hermione bit her lip, trying to hold back the tears that were prickling in her eyes now.

"I love you so much," she whispered brokenly.

"I love you too," he admitted. "I just wish it was enough."

He hugged her then. Gently. Awkwardly. Not at all like the hugs she'd received from him while they'd been dating. This was the weird ex-lovers-trying-to-be-friends kind of hug where the boundary lines of appropriateness were foggy and needed to be re-drawn.

"I'm so sorry, Ron," Hermione whispered against his shoulder. "I didn't mean for it to be this way."

He didn't say anything else, but when he kissed her forehead before walking away dejectedly, Hermione knew it was over.

# Chapter 16

## Chapter Summary

WARNING: \*pirate voice\* Here there be violence and smut.

## Chapter Notes

A/N: Look! Another new chapter for you to enjoy. I'm so pleased you liked the way I had things end with Ron. I've really started to deviate from fics where Ron is always the horrible villain. He can be insensitive and a bit thick at times, but I'm back on board the Ron's-a-good-guy train so I think most of my works will show him that way from here on out =) He's more fun to play with as a good guy. I hope you love this chapter. I'm pleased you're enjoying Harry in this fic too. Most times I'm not a huge fan of Harry tbh. But I want to be, so I'm trying to look past his angst from the series to the good guy buried there. Thanks so much for all your love and reviews.

Much love! xx-Kitten.

Draco reeled when out of nowhere a fist came flying at his face, connecting solidly with his jaw and rattling his teeth. He saw sparkles inside his eyes as he staggered back a step and when he searched for his attacker, Draco was flabbergasted by the sight of a glaring Harry Potter standing with his fists clenched and looking like he wanted to punch Draco again.

"What the fuck was that for?" Draco demanded, his temper flaring as he realized Potter had busted his lip.

"If I ever have to sit up through the night holding her while she cries on my shoulder because of you, you'll regret surviving the war," Potter threatened him darkly, one finger stabbing at him threateningly.

Draco stared at him in shock, narrowing his eyes on Potter in return when he realized the git meant Granger. The idea that she'd gone to Potter and sobbed on his shoulder about what they'd done in the library made him angry and Potter flinched when a nearby lamp flared dangerously, scorching the ceiling. The idea of Potter holding his volatile little witch at all made Draco want to pull Potter's face off in a rage. How dare he lay a finger on the which Draco had begun thinking of his?

He might not fucking want her, but he needed her and until he didn't Granger was his, curse it all!

"If you ever lay a hand on her again until this mess with Ron is sorted out, I'll see to it that you no longer have hands. Is that clear?" Potter snarled at him.

"Granger's a big girl, Potter," Draco sneered at Wonder Boy, "She can make that decision for herself."

Potter punched him again and Draco clenched his jaw.

"I swear to Merlin if you interfere or in some way do any more damage to her than you've already done regarding Ron I will kill you, Malfoy," Potter warned him in a low voice, "I don't care if your magic is linked to hers or if it makes you both unpredictable and dangerous. You're going to stay away from her until she says otherwise, got it? So if she decides she never wants to lay eyes on you again, you're going to fucking accept it. And so help me, if she decides she can't stay away from you, and you end up hurting her, I promise you now that they'll never find the scattered pieces of your corpse. You hear me? If she comes to me in tears that are in any way your fault I will raze heaven and hell to hunt you down and destroy you."

Draco eyed Potter with a mingle of fury, respect, and trepidation.

"You're not going to tell me to keep away from her if I'm what she wants?" he asked, baffled.

"Trust me, Malfoy," Potter shot him a knowing look, "I know Hermione's a big girl. She can make that decision for herself. But until the mess with her and Ron's relationship is done, you're going to stay away from her."

Draco narrowed his eyes at that knowing glint in Potter's eyes and the way his tone suggested he was only too aware that Granger was adult enough to decide who she wanted to shag. He felt a flare of suspicion and jealousy course through him. Had Granger shagged Wonder Boy?

"She told you everything, didn't she?" Draco asked the black-haired wizard before him, wondering how it could be that Potter would threaten him like this without trying to kill him. It was clear to Draco that she'd told Potter something, otherwise the git surely would've been trying to murder him if he believed Draco had raped her.

Potter smirked cruelly.

"Hermione shares *everything* with me, Malfoy," he replied, "So if you make her cry, even once, you're gone. Clear?"

Draco rolled his eyes, but nodded, his fists clenched against the second wave of suspicious jealousy that washed over him. With his threats delivered, Potter walked away, not bothering to look back. Draco thought seriously about hexing the bastard from behind but refrained. One misstep and Draco knew he'd land in Azkaban. He was no fool, Draco knew that the main reason Draco hadn't been arrested, despite everything he'd done was because Potter had intervened on his behalf. Draco watched as Potter crossed the hall and stopped at the sight of Weaselbee wandering dejectedly into the room. There was a resigned expression on his face and Draco's hopes soared that Granger had sorted her shit out with the red-head.

She'd been actively avoiding him for two days now, refusing to even look at him after what he'd done to her in the library. He could feel that she was somewhere nearby, so he assumed Weasley must've come from speaking with her. The sod didn't look particularly crushed or wrathful, so Draco assumed she'd not told him about her indiscretions. Draco didn't care either way if the ginger found out. As long as she and that sod weren't a couple anymore, she was fair game and Draco was going to shag her until the ache in his groin was spent.

He'd tried cornering her earlier that day just after breakfast, but she'd resisted. She'd walked the other way when she'd seen him heading towards her and when he'd cornered her in an upstairs corridor after lunch, she'd kicked him as hard as she could, slapped him across the face, and kneed him in the groin before leaving him clutching his abused bollocks in agony, coughing from the blow it hurt so much. Draco figured after that he'd just have to wait until she got her shit with Weaselbee sorted. If he was being honest, he didn't really want people to find out that he and Granger had been fucking. Enough people in his life - namely his parents - were aware of what he'd done to her at the Manor, having witnessed it, but no one needed to know their magic was melded and that he couldn't stay the hell away from her.

He'd been hanging around Hogwarts alongside many others, helping with the clean-up and the repairs despite both his parents having been carted off to Azkaban to await trial. He was only doing so because he knew there was no other way to be close to Granger.

Returning his attention to the idea of getting himself some dinner, Draco strolled over to the Slytherin house table and sat down. Most of the other Slytherin students had deserted the school, but there were a few underclassmen still loitering about. He didn't sit with them. Many of them knew him only by reputation and feared him as a result. He knew most people were baffled by his continued freedom, though he'd been granted permission to stay by McGonagall after she and Potter had had a discussion.

He ate in silence, noticing idly that Granger didn't attend dinner. He got the feeling from the way he noticed Potter clapping Weasley on the shoulder a few times that she'd broken up with Weasley and was probably sobbing about it somewhere. She probably didn't want to risk the magical outpour that would accompany her emotional turmoil being witnessed by people who wouldn't understand. There'd been a few reporters turning up on the grounds, documenting the battle, but Draco knew that among them was a few vicious snakes looking for gossip in the wake of the war. The end of Granger and Weasley's relationship would undoubtedly be a big deal. The trio had been hailed as heroes, and the press they got was only going to continue. Which was not something Draco wanted any part in. He could only imagine the horrible headlines that would spring from him being caught with Granger.

Uninterested in his meal when he could be devouring Granger instead, Draco pushed his plate away and got to his feet, ignoring the way the other students at his table fell silent as they watched him stalk away. Following the pull of her magic, Draco let his instinct lead her to wherever it was that she was hiding. He was surprised when he found himself exiting the castle and strolling across the grounds. He hadn't imagined Granger would be outside, but it wouldn't deter him.

The evening dark was stifling as he made his way through it, relying on the sparse moonlight to guide his way rather than lighting his wand. He found her sitting on the ground by a large

boulder by the Black Lake, far from the castle. He could hear her sniffling softly and see the way she wiped her eyes occasionally. She was crying over losing Weasley. Draco felt no sympathy over her pain. He was too selfish to feel bad about the fact that it was because of him that she'd broken up with the ginger. It was clear to him she was hiding behind the rock, though she didn't lean against it. She sat on the ground, her legs twisted up like a pretzel, staring out over the Black Lake as her tears fell. She didn't look up at the sound of his approach. It was snowing above her thickly, a little flurry floating above her head. Draco ignored the flurry as he sat down behind her, scooting up behind her until she was sitting between his bent up knees.

She jumped a little bit when he bumped her by accident but she didn't say a word. Draco was surprised by that. He'd been expecting her to rage at him and lose her temper. To blame him for ruining her life. To scream and shout at him about what a bastard he was for all he'd done to her and for his part in them landing in this mess.

But she didn't.

She just sat there as though she didn't know he existed. As though she couldn't feel their magic tangling and meshing together. She trembled where she sat, though whether it was from emotional distress, hatred, or the cold, Draco couldn't be sure. He sat in silence with her, peering out at the lake over her shoulder. His hands itched to touch her, but he fought the urge as best he could. Some part of him knew that she craved to be comforted over her break-up, but Draco wouldn't be the one to comfort her. Whatever this mess was between them, it wasn't one of hugs and cheerfulness and empathy.

"*I hate you,*" she whispered sometime later. She hadn't moved, despite being bracketed by his legs, and if she minded his proximity she didn't say so.

"I know," Draco replied quietly, his fingers pulling up little tufts of grass to keep from reaching for her.

"I'll never forgive you for this," she went on, her voice cold and hard.

"I know," he told her again.

She didn't say anything else. She just sat there, the flurry overhead dumping snow on the pair of them.

"You and Weaselbee are done then?" he asked eventually.

Draco realized it might've been a mistake when she made a sound like a screech of fury, spinning on him viciously. She lashed out at him violently, her nails raking over his cheek as she spun between his knees, swiping at him like a crazed house-cat. Draco cursed furiously when he felt warm wetness where she scratched him and blood began to flow, his hands trying to catch her wrists to fend her off. She went barmy in his hold, climbing to her knees, kneeling between his bent up legs, Draco grunted in surprise when she headbutted him in the face.

"Crazy bitch," he cursed, his eyes flashing dangerously as he shoved her away from him and scrambled to his feet. She did the same, snarling like some feral beast, clearly inconsolable with rage. Blizzard force cold buffeted him and Draco shuddered as she lashed out at him magically. Narrowing his eyes, he watched her charge towards him. The minute she collided with him, Draco latched onto her, twisting them both until he could pin her to the boulder she'd been hiding behind. He pressed himself against her firmly, crushing her against the rock to protect himself from her furious attempts to maim him.

When she ground her cunt against him through their combined clothing Draco smirked ferally. Even when she wanted to claw his eyes out, she wanted to fuck him too.

She beat at his chest with her little fists when he released her hands before she tore open his shirt and slashed his chest with her nails. Raging at him, she was completely feral, her eyes wild. Fuck he wanted her. He might've developed a terrible kink for forcing pleasure on her when she didn't want it, but there was something just as hot about having her want to claw his eyes out and still wanting to fuck him. Returning the favor, Draco ripped her shirt off over her head, his hands snarling the bra from her lithe frame and leaving her topless. She was too busy clawing at his belt to care. Draco leaned in, burying his face in her neck and breathing in the familiar scent of her skin. Fuck he was going to come if he didn't fuck her right that second. Snatching her hands away from his belt, Draco unfastened it, unbuttoning his pants and freeing his cock from them quickly.

"You little savage!" he accused when she tore into his shoulder with her teeth, intent on hurting him however she could. Draco shoved her harder against the rock before dragging her jeans and knickers down her legs. She kicked out at him violently when he caught the back of her knee, curling her legs up around his hip and driving into her as violently as he knew how. She writhed in his hold as he fucked her, biting him and scratching him, beating at him with her fists. He didn't stop pounding into her, drawing mewling cries from her lips. He didn't dare try to snog the little hell-cat. His lip was still split from Potter punching him and he didn't want his tongue bitten off by the furious chit in his hold.

She thrust her hips against his wildly.

"Is that the best you've fucking got?" she demanded of him when he slowed to adjust position and Draco nearly came.

"Fuck you," Draco snarled in return, and she groaned like he'd killed her when he wrapped one arm around the top of her shoulders, pressing her against his chest and pushing down on her body as he thrust up into her, high and hard, violently fucking her and refusing to give her any leeway to escape every brutal inch of his assault.

"Bastard," she accused, her voice ragged as she panted, her nails cutting into his upper arms viciously, her whole body beginning to tremble in his grip. Draco knew she was about to lose it when her head dropped back, cracking against the stone he fucked her into, exposing her throat. Grinding his teeth and reaching for his self-control, Draco buried his teeth in the soft flesh of her throat, biting down hard and causing the tremors rocking through her to jolt. She screamed as she came hard while Draco unrelentingly drove into her.

When her body unclenched slowly, she used the grip on his arms to shove him away from her, pushing off the rock and shoving him violently until he stumbled back from her.

"I'm not fucking finished with you, Granger," he warned her coldly. Draco took a menacing step towards her, but the crazy little mudblood pushed off from the rock and collided with him hard enough to make him stumble again. Draco cursed when he tripped over the pants bunched around his ankles. Before he could get back to his feet she used the bottom of her barefoot to shove him down further and Draco snarled at her warningly, her bare foot pressed to the middle of his bare chest, kicking him hard enough to hurt though he suspected she only meant to do it to keep him on the ground. At least, he assumed that was her intent when she dropped into his lap, straddling his hips and guiding him inside her again roughly.

Her hands clutched at his shoulders as she took what she wanted from him as wildly as she knew how. She ground herself onto his cock, again and again, her forehead buried against the top of his shoulder her hands circling his biceps, nails cutting into him. Draco gripped her hips tight enough to bruise, guiding her over him and slamming her down into every hard upwards truth he could force her onto.

"Fuck," he cursed, his own head tipping back as he reached for control.

He would never have believed, after fucking all those witches between her escape and now that he could possibly be aroused by anything but Granger fighting against what he inflicted on her. With the others, he'd loathed the feel of them so keen for what he could do to them. He'd hated them so willing. He'd never have thought after all that he'd be so out of control to have the vicious little mudblood riding him and taking what she needed from him. She gripped him tightly, clutching at him, bouncing herself on his cock and mewling at the effects coursing through her. Draco could barely stand it.

Snarling his arms around her, he flipped them, slamming her down in the grass and driving into her. He tangled his hands in her hair, dragging on it from beneath her until her head tipped back, forcing her to meet his gaze. Her eyes were wide and she had an expression of desperation on her face. Draco knew part of her wanted to forget it was him making her feel so good. That she wished he was the boy she'd broken up with. He could see it in the desperate way she tried to avoid his gaze, lifting her hips to meet his thrusts. Draco nipped her chin forcefully, his hand in her hair forcing her to hold his gaze, forcing her to accept that it was him, that it would always be him fucking her.

She needed to understand that no matter what she did or where she went, no matter how hard she'd tried, she'd never feel like she did then with anyone else but him. Their magic irrevocably meshed and nothing she could do would ever change that. She needed to know that no matter what she tried, no one else would ever fuck her like he could. No one else would ever force her to enjoy it the way he did. No amount of pretending he was someone else or hoping that the man she loved was the one she was tangled with rather than a man she despised would change the facts.

She clutched at him as she reluctantly held his gaze, her palms flat against his back, pulling at him. Her body rose beneath his, pushing towards release. Draco felt it slam through them simultaneously as she tensed beneath him, her eyes closing against the tears and a ragged sob leaving her as the coiled tension snapped free in a rush of endorphins. He buried himself deep

inside her and a groan left him as he filled her up, his release so powerful that his vision went dark for a moment.

Relaxing against her, the high of his orgasm dulled the pain he didn't doubt he'd feel after what she'd done to him. Draco laid there on top of her for a moment, trying to catch his breath. He knew she was crying beneath him, though not heavily. Tears slipped from the corners of her closed eyes when he pulled back to look at her and her bottom lip trembled despite the way she bit it to hold in her sobs. Draco didn't bother asking her about it. He knew the reason. She had a broken heart over Weasley and there was little Draco could offer her to take her mind off it. He'd done what he could by allowing her to use him as an outlet for the rage she felt over the turns her life had taken that meant she was magically melded to him and suddenly bereft of the love she'd probably planned to give to Weasley forever.

It was, in no small part, Draco's fault and he'd accepted her rage and her fury with him over it. There was little else he could do. He didn't actually care about her hurt feelings, though he imagined that being stuck with needing to shag her for the rest of his life would result in him developing some kind of feelings beyond blind hatred for the woman. After all, he didn't imagine it would be an easy thing to frequently shag her into a stupor without her cooperation. He supposed that when she wasn't feeling so emotionally distraught, they would need to come to some sort of arrangement regarding this entire mess. But for now, all he could do was get the hell off her and help her find her clothing in the dark.

The little hiccup type of sobs escaped her when he snagged the pile of her clothing from over by the rock and piled it on top of her naked form. Draco watched the way she clutched it to her chest for a moment, still sobbing, before she sat up slowly and wiped her eyes. Fixing his own clothes as best he could, Draco noticed she'd drawn his blood in several places and was glad for the fact that his shirt was black, else everyone would know about the marks she'd left on him. He watched from beside her as she slowly redressed herself, wiggling into her knickers and her jeans before fastening her bra and pulling her shirt over her head.

"You alright?" he asked eventually when she sat there next to him on the grass, pulling her knees to her chest and wrapping her arms around them. She looked more vulnerable than he ever remembered seeing her look.

"No," she answered bluntly, "My life is ruined because of what you did."

"Oh leave off Granger," Draco rolled his eyes, "You know as well as I do that the way I fucked you had nothing to do with our magic being melded."

"It did so," she argued, "You could have just been a selfish bastard and not made me feel a thing, but you didn't."

"And then what?" he asked, "Either way there's nothing to be done about it now but to bloody accept it."

She slanted a hateful glare in his direction for his words.

"Because of you, the boy I love broke up with me," she retorted, "If you think I'm ever going to accept that and forgive you for it, you've lost your mind."

"Wait, what do you mean *he* broke up with *you*?" Draco asked, frowning in confusion now.

"I mean that after that incident in the library, Harry was sitting up waiting for me," she sighed, "And it was pretty obvious what I'd been doing. Especially since he has a map of the castle that allows him to see where everyone is whilst anywhere on the grounds. He knew I'd been with you. Since I didn't want to rip Ron's heart out by admitting what we'd done, Harry suggested a better way. He poked at the fraying tendrils of my relationship with Ron until Ron decided that we weren't compatible as a couple because he wants someone who needs him, and thinks that I don't."

Draco raised his eyebrows at that. He supposed it made sense in a way. If she'd broken up with him, she'd have had to give some kind of explanation. And the only one that would be effective would cause psychological distress to Weasley. Draco wondered what he'd gotten himself into as he watched her taking a shuddering breath, trying to hold back more sobs.

"You don't need him," he murmured quietly, "He was right. You've never needed Weasley or Potter. That friendship works because they need you. They need your know-it-all ways and clever ideas. They'd have died years ago if it weren't for your quick thinking. And had you remained with Weasley, you'd have ended up married to the sod. He'd have spent the entire marriage feeling insignificant to you, not because you wouldn't care for him, but because he's the type of bloke who needs to be needed. And you're not the type of bird who needs anyone."

A little whimper of distress left her at his words. Draco didn't go on, though he wanted to point out that had she and Weasley stayed together they'd have grown to resent each other, Weaselbee would've eventually cheated on her and she'd have wound up a bitter old hag, divorced and unhappy. Not that she'd be much better off with him. Not that Draco had any intention of seeing her in any capacity besides the physical one. When she began to hyperventilate, trying to draw gasping breaths around the lump in her throat, Draco sighed. He wasn't much for being nice to anyone whenever he could avoid it, but he supposed that if he was going to be able to deal with her as his shagging partner for the rest of his life, he'd better try being at least a little bit nice to her.

Reaching over, Draco snagged his arms around her and tugged her closer until she was pressed against him. She cried harder at that, resisting feebly before giving in. Draco let her crawl into his lap, simply holding her when she buried her face against his chest and began to cry her heart out. Shuffling both of them, he moved until his back was leaned up against the rock she'd been hiding behind when he found her, his arms around the sobbing little witch in his hold, her head tucked beneath his chin. He didn't say a word as she cried her eyes out, simply stroking his hands down her back and over her awful hair. Above the two of them, the flurry she'd been subconsciously creating grew to an enormous size and he looked around in the darkness when the snowflakes began to fall over the castle heavily. They fell fast and thick, the weather surrounding the castle and the grounds being affected by the amount of sorrow and anguish she was experiencing.

Draco held her a little tighter as the cold set in. He could just imagine everyone up at the castle would be utterly baffled by the snowstorm occurring in May but he still didn't say a word. He just held the little witch who'd been the key to unlocking his magical potential,

wondering whether they'd ruined each other's lives or if they'd somehow righted what could've resulted in a lot of wrongs for the both of them.

## Chapter 17

She'd stopped eating. She barely slept. She'd been hiding out at her parent's house in the weeks following the funerals. There'd been a memorial at Hogwarts, and individual funerals for Fred, Tonks, and Remus. She'd sniffled her way through all three, the grief of the loss she'd suffered beginning to pile up. She'd attended all the other funerals for her classmates and peers who'd perished in the battle. And then she'd slunk back into her parent's home in London and she'd been hiding in the house ever since. The snowstorm of her grief had been following her wherever she went and Hermione knew that wizards and muggles alike were baffled by the appearance of snow in May.

She couldn't bring herself to care. She'd barely left her bed since she'd returned home. It had crossed her mind that she ought to travel to Australia and undo the memory modification she'd put on her parents to protect them during the war, but she was simply too tired and too distraught to do so just yet. On the days she managed to drag herself out of bed, she'd been sitting on her parents' couch watching the telly, though she barely seemed to see it.

She couldn't stop thinking about it all. Up until Ron had broken up with her, despite everything, Hermione had simply been dealing with every curveball life was throwing her way, but now she couldn't get it together.

Like a crack addict on a detox, she craved Malfoy's touch badly. She craved Ron and Harry's company, but she refused to seek it out. Every time she'd seen Ron since he'd broken up with her things had been strained and awkward. Harry had been trying to be supportive, but he didn't seem to know what to say to make her feel better about her broken heart. She could barely forgive herself for what she'd done with Malfoy.

It had helped, she supposed. Having an outlet for all the fury and rage she felt at the blonde wizard was useful, but the fact that he was the cause of her problems and simultaneously the outlet for her feelings over those problems meant she was terribly confused. She just wanted her life to go back to normal. She knew she needed to get over Ron, but she didn't really know how. Short of shagging someone else, but there was little point when she knew it would be a waste of time unless she sought out Malfoy. Which she was refusing to do.

Sitting in the bottom of her bathroom shower, Hermione simply allowed the warm water to flow over her. She needed to get it together, she knew that. There were things that needed to be sorted out. Like what she and Ron were to one another now and whether or not they could still be friends. Like returning her parents to their proper lives and memories. Like trying to find a way to rid herself of Malfoy.

Malfoy. There was her biggest problem. The boy she loathed and craved in equal measure. She knew she'd been terribly rough with him the last time she'd shagged him. She imagined he'd probably have scars from all the scratches and bites she'd left on his pale flesh. Not that he'd complained. She didn't like thinking about it. It made her horny. Horny and angry. Despite her increasing hatred, she felt like she needed a hit off the crack-pipe that was

Malfoy and she desperately didn't want to give in to her craving. She didn't want to be tied to him for all her sexual needs.

Narrowing her eyes at herself, Hermione dragged herself up in the shower and began scrubbing furiously at her skin. She wouldn't live like this. He was keeping her from getting a decent night's sleep because she tossed and turned thinking about all the things he'd done to her and all the things she wanted to have him do to her again. And Hermione refused to let herself pine for someone she despised any longer.

When she was washed and clean, Hermione climbed out of the shower, using her increased magical power to wandlessly and nonverbally dry her wild hair. Dragging her fingers through it, Hermione thought about the spell she'd learned to control the frizz and she was pleased when it dried in neat loose waves.

There would be no more sitting around feeling sorry for herself about Ron and pining after Malfoy's touch. Going to her cupboard, Hermione narrowed her eyes on the contents. She needed something that would deter just the average Joe. She intended to get laid and she wanted someone who wasn't going to be too soft and slow to handle what she knew she needed. She scrunched up her face when her mind presented the idea that what she needed was Malfoy. She wasn't having that. Transfiguring a pair of her jeans and a tank top into some leather thing she would never usually be caught dead in, Hermione eyed herself in the mirror. It was far from her usual outfit, but that was fine. She wasn't the same girl-next-door anymore. She'd discovered she had darker tastes and she was coming to terms with that.

The jeans she'd transfigured into some slash-leather figure-hugging pants, revealing little strips of her thighs. She combined it with a black tank top and transfigured one of her jumpers into a leather jacket. She dug out the make-up she'd purchased a few years back and began applying it to her face.

When she was finished, Hermione barely recognized herself and that was the way she wanted it.

When she was dressed and ready, Hermione went to her mother's computer and began searching online for somewhere in London she could go that she wouldn't stand out like a sore thumb. If it really came down to it she expected there would be places in the darker side of the wizarding world that she could go, but given her sudden fame following the war, she didn't want to risk being seen by anyone from the wizarding world.

When she found a place that sounded promising, Hermione gathered some money and her things, left the house, and apparated onto the street outside the joint. It was a sordid looking grunge bar that ordinarily she'd never have been caught entering, but Hermione strolled right in. She'd picked the place for the type of crowd it drew and for the fact that there was some band she'd never heard of playing live there, drawing more people in.

She ordered a drink at the bar and threw it back before requesting another.

It didn't take long, given the outfit she was wearing and the fact that she might as well have a big sign on her back saying "asking for it" before a guy shuffled over and began hitting on

her. He was dark-haired and rough around the edges. He had tattoo sleeves on both arms and probably other places too. Hermione didn't even get his name.

"So, you come here often?" he asked her.

"Nope," she replied, slurping up more of her drink. Her body felt hot and uncomfortable with need and she knew the bloke wasn't the one her body was telling her she wanted, but that wasn't going to stop her, "Don't imagine I'll stay long either."

"You want to get out of here then?" the guy asked and Hermione nodded her head emphatically, feeling a smile stretch across her face.

The minute they reached the alley the tattooed muggle snagged her hand, pulling her to him before pressing her into the wall and snogging her hotly. Hermione felt a flare of desire spike through her, and she closed her eyes. Maybe if she tried hard enough, she could forget about Ron and about Malfoy. The muggle groped her, grinding himself against her and Hermione gritted her teeth against the barrage of memories featuring Malfoy that assaulted her. Digging her nails into his skin, Hermione snogged him harder. His mouth tasted like cheap whiskey and he smelled of cigarettes but Hermione didn't mind. Both were things that didn't make her think of Malfoy.

She was having more luck with the muggle than she'd had that night with Ron as she tried to shove Malfoy out of her head, but she knew it was going to be hard going.

"Fuck," the muggle cussed when he came up for air, Hermione reluctantly allowing him to pull back from snogging her. His dark eyes flashed at her hungrily and Hermione felt a slow smirk spread across her face.

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Draco was going to kill her. The minute he found the little swot he was going to fuck her and then he was going to kill her. He hadn't seen her in weeks. Hadn't heard a word from her. It was as though she'd fallen off the face of the earth. He'd tried owling her, but all of his letters were returned unopened, still tied to the leg of his eagle owl. He'd tried contacting Potter too, but the git had returned the owl with a letter telling him to shove it and nothing else.

He was going insane.

He couldn't sleep for thinking about her. No one seemed to have heard a word about her. Even the papers had begun to speculate about her absence when Potter and Weasley were spotted out and about while Granger was nowhere in sight. He needed to find her, confound it all!

He had forgone the idea of even trying to bother with shagging any other witch, knowing it would be a waste of time and would simply leave him even less satisfied. He also knew that she must be living somewhere in London. He could tell because it had been snowing there for weeks now. Ever since it had begun snowing at Hogwarts after the battle it had been snowing everywhere she went. The muggles were all baffled by the summer snows, and even his father had commented just the other day about the weather conditions.

But short of wandering the city and banging on the door of every single person who lived there, Draco didn't have the foggiest idea of how to locate her when she clearly didn't want to be found. He didn't doubt she was avoiding him. He'd been expecting it in the aftermath of her breakdown. She'd been dumped and it was his fault. He understood that, but confound it all she hadn't even spoken to him. He'd attended the funerals of his peers, though he wasn't overly welcome at any of them, Granger had refused to even glance in his direction at each one.

It was like she'd become an Inferi. She simply stood there with dark sunglasses covering her eyes and hiding her grief at each one, unsmiling and cold as snow continued to fall overhead wherever she went. Not once had she snuck a glance at him, Draco knew because he'd been watching for it. He'd tried speaking to her, but she refused to acknowledge him when he said her name, and the one time he'd tried to get closer, Potter had warned him away long enough for her to escape.

"Sweetheart, would you please stop pacing?" his mother asked of him as he restlessly stalked the length of the dining table and back again. He was supposed to be eating dinner with them, but Draco wasn't hungry for food. He only craved *her*.

"Can't," he shook his head. His mother was barely on speaking terms with him after all he'd done. She didn't seem to know what to make of his behavior in the lead up to the Dark Lord's downfall, though she'd been blaming Lucius. She was trying to look past his actions, Draco knew, but she wasn't having much luck. He often heard her and his father shouting at each other about his condition and his behavior. He'd barely eaten or slept since he'd left Hogwarts.

"Draco! Sit down this instant," his father commanded, leveling him a stern glare.

"I can't," Draco repeated empathically.

"Why the devil not?" Lucius growled at him, looking perplexed.

"I'm not hungry," Draco offered lamely.

"Draco you've been like this for weeks, ever since the battle. What is wrong with you?" his mother demanded, laying down her silver-wear in frustration.

"What do you expect me to say, Mother?" Draco demanded turning towards her, "Nothing I tell you will be what you're hoping to hear."

"What are you talking about, son?" Lucius asked him and Draco turned his eyes on his father.

"My magic has been unlocked," he admitted quietly, glancing between his parents as their eyes widened slowly.

"When?" Lucius asked, perplexed, "Are you telling me it was you who killed all those people during the battle Draco?"

"Yes, it was me. My magic was unlocked when I shagged Granger," Draco told them, ceasing his pacing and gripping the back of the nearest chair tight enough to make the wood groan.

"Do not speak to me about that!" his mother hissed, her eyes flashing dangerously.

"Oh leave off, Mother," Draco snapped in return, "I did what I had to so that Bellatrix or the Dark Lord wouldn't kill me. She had about as much choice in what happened as I did and I'm tired of hearing about how you think my moral compass is broken."

"That mudblood was the key to unleashing your magical potential?" his father asked while his mother made a strangled noise of horror over the topic of conversation and his dismissal of her anger.

"Yes, and I was the key to hers," Draco admitted, "Our magic melded together. That's what caused that explosion here when Potter rescued her. It's why so many people died at the battle as well. When we're near one another the control each of us has over our magic goes awry."

"And that has what to do with the fact that you've barely eaten or slept in weeks?" his father wanted to know. Draco sighed heavily, tipping his head back to stare at the ceiling.

"Unless I'm shagging her, I can't get off," he told his old man truthfully, ignoring the strangled sound of disgust and horror that his mother emitted.

"You know that for a fact?" Lucius asked, looking concerned now.

"I fucked thirty-seven different birds after Granger escaped," Draco told him and his mother buried her face in her hands and began to sob. "Nothing worked until I shagged Granger again until after the battle."

"She let you?" Lucius wanted to know.

"The magical meld between us makes us crave and loathe each other in equal measure," Draco explained, "She resists only so long before giving in."

"Isn't she seeing one of those confounded Weasleys?" his mother asked, her voice muffled by her hands and her tears.

"Not anymore," Draco told her honestly, "She and Potter had a discussion about her shagging me whilst still dating Weasley, and the Potter poked at their sham of a relationship until Weasley realized he was too pathetic for someone like her."

"Did you just compliment a mudblood?" Lucius asked, looking even more concerned, a frown wrinkling his brow.

"Probably," Draco sighed, "Anyway, Weasley broke up with her a few days after the battle. That's why it's been snowing during May ever since."

"She's doing that?" Narcissa asked, lifting her head and her eyes widening in alarm.

"Yep. I'm probably not helping matters," Draco admitted.

"You're acting like this because you're craving her?" Lucius asked softly, looking alarmed now as though he didn't know what to make of the entire tale.

"Yes. It feels like being a crack addict on a forced detox. I've tried contacting her, but she's ignoring my owls. All the letters come back untouched," Draco told them.

"There's some kind of bond between the two of you that prevents you from simply finding some other witch to take to bed?" his mother demanded.

"Yes, Mother. Trying to shag anyone but Granger just makes it ten times worse. Trust me, I bloody tried that avenue already."

"How long is this meld supposed to last?" she asked, "Surely there must be some way to undo it. You can't actually be telling me that our only hope of you ever producing an heir lies in the hands of Hermione Granger? She's a mudblood, for Merlin's sake!"

"Well Mother, unless you lot can find some way to unmeld my magic from hers, I'm pretty sure the trend of the Malfoy's being purebloods will end with me," Draco told her scathingly, "But right now, I don't much care about finding a way to unmeld us, I just care about finding Granger and fucking her until I can't move."

"Draco!" she gasped, horrified with him.

"Narcissa, maybe you should go and begin scouring the library for information on magic melds. I'll be along shortly. I need to have a discussion with Draco," Lucius suggested quietly of his wife.

"What could you possibly need to discuss privately now? Draco's already shared the intimacies of his sex life with us!" Narcissa asked, sounding mildly hysterical.

"Narcissa," Lucius warned, "Do it, please."

She narrowed her eyes before she got to her feet and stalked out of the dining hall in the direction of the library. Draco turned his attention to his father expectantly, wondering what else he could possibly wish to discuss now.

"Was it really necessary to voice such things in front of your mother?" Lucius chided him.

Draco shrugged unrepentantly.

"What have you tried in regards to finding this girl?" Lucius asked after that, sensing he would get no further explanation or repentance.

"I tried to catch up to her at the memorials and funerals, but she ignored me and evaded me. I've owled her but she ignores my letters. I have no idea where she lives, other than that it's somewhere in London and when I tried owling Potter about it, he told me to shove off."

"Oh dear," Lucius murmured, "And this bond between you keeps you both from seeking out others to share your bed?"

"It doesn't prevent me from fucking anyone else," Draco shrugged, "But I can't come with anyone but her."

"And she has the same restrictions upon her?"

"I think so," Draco nodded, "She told me she couldn't get there with anyone else."

"She told you willingly?"

"She tends to snarl expletives," Draco smirked at his father, "You may recall?"

"Indeed," his father replied dryly, "I'm not pleased about this mess, Draco. If there is truly no way to undo the bond between the two of you, you do realize it will fall to a mudblood to carry on the Malfoy name?"

"You expect me to..." Draco trailed off, his eyes widening as he realized the implications of his father's words. "Father I despise the woman! She loathes me even more fiercely than I hate her. You can't mean...?"

"If she is the only one capable of bearing your son and continuing the Malfoy line, then yes Draco, you will marry her and she will birth your child. Is that clear?"

"She's a mudblood."

"That hasn't stopped you from shagging her; repeatedly, by the sounds of it."

"You want me to sully the Malfoy line by even considering marrying the girl?" Draco demanded, his heart hammering with fear inside his chest.

"How would you impregnate anyone else?" his father asked reasonably.

"The Malfoy line would no longer be able to call itself pure," Draco pointed out.

"The Malfoy family has always done whatever is necessary to slide beneath the persecution of its members and to ensure the line continues, Draco. We bury the histories of breeding with mudbloods and half-bloods deep in the texts and continue calling ourselves Pure. Currently, the economic climate of the world calls for purebloods to be persecuted and despised. As such, having you wed a mudblood would improve the way the Malfoy family is viewed in the public eye. Do you understand?"

"What are you saying, Father?" Draco breathed, his eyes widening.

"I'm saying that it would make the Malfoy's look particularly good to have as famous a witch as Hermione Granger look past our misdeeds and marry into this family, Draco. The most important thing is currently the notion of doing away with the old ways. We must be seen to do so. This bond between you and Granger will work in our favor and you're going to exploit it, is that clear?"

"You can't be serious?" Draco scoffed, "Did you miss the part where I mention the mutual hatred Granger and I share?"

"Draco, don't be thick, it's ill-becoming," his father chided him, "You'll be shagging the woman repeatedly until such time that the answer to this meld can be found, or indefinitely if there is no way to undo the bond. Women are simple creatures - beneath the confusion they induce in men - and it's physically impossible for any two people to share a bed and have wild sex repeatedly without some kind of feeling developing. Right now the two of you loathe each other, but it won't be so hard to amend that."

"You want me to fall for her?" Draco asked, "You expect me to have her fall for me?"

"I want you to do your duty to protect this family. In this instance that will be achieved by making sure that our reputation is protected by convincing the wizarding world that we have forsaken blood mania. It will also be achieved by having you marry and impregnate the only woman capable of making you ejaculate after this meld you've created with Granger," his father told him in a serious voice, all kidding tones leaving him, "You will do this Draco. Is that clear?"

"You can't mean it," Draco muttered, looking horrified, "Father do you know what you're asking of me?"

"Yes," Lucius told him, "I'm asking you to go against everything I've ever taught you and to set about wooing the brightest witch of the age into marrying you. Be grateful that she's pretty and that she's got a brain, son. Imagine how some of your ancestors must've felt when they had their marriages arranged. Besides, I saw the way you fucked her Draco. You and that mudblood have had something between you for years, maybe not anything romantic, but there's a spark there."

"You want me to marry her? You want me to knock her up?" Draco asked, staring at his father incredulously.

"Yes, that's what I want. The more you think about it, the more you're likely to want it too," Lucius told him.

"Why didn't you want to discuss this in front of Mother?" Draco asked suspiciously.

"Because your mother doesn't grasp the importance of what it is to be a Malfoy. To her, it's about posturing to the right people and making sure she doesn't put a toe out of line to make us look bad in the public eyes. I've done that enough for the three of us, I think. She needs some time to come around to the knowledge that you're magically bonded to a mudblood before she can begin to consider the idea of you shagging the girl again and she'll need a long while to come into the idea of you marrying and siring children with Hermione Granger."

Draco nodded his head in understanding. His mother had always been hot-headed about certain things, and the fate of her only son was one of them. She would fly into a rage over even his father's suggestion that Draco tie himself to Granger for the sake of the Malfoy line.

"Do you have any idea how hard it's going to be to pull this off?" Draco asked his father seriously, "Not only do I have to get past my own distaste but hers too."

"You got by distaste for her enough to shag the girl," his father pointed out.

"Yeah, but her body is one matter. At the end of the day, all women have the same basic structure and as far as the female form goes, Granger actually does alright for herself," Draco grumbled, "It's her personality that's going to be the tough part to come at in this situation. I take it I'm to assume your suggestion of marrying her is an order?"

"It is," Lucius nodded, "The pros far outweigh the cons in this instance. And don't bother arguing with me that you'll be sacrificing your own happiness for the sake of the family. I've seen the way you've been existing since the last time you shagged the woman. She might not make you all butterflies and rainbows, but she's important to your continued health."

"I wasn't arguing," Draco told him, glancing at him, "I don't want to do this, but as you say, the pros outweigh the cons. And at least this way I don't have to worry about Mother continuing to try fixing me up with Pansy."

"True," Lucius smirked, "How are you going to find her?"

Draco glanced at the ceiling again.

"The closer we get to one another, the more her magic reacts to mine. If she keeps ignoring my other attempts to reach her, I suspect I'll have to stalk the streets of London until our magic reacts enough to indicate where she is," Draco mused.

"Speak to Potter again first. If this bond is as entangled as I suspect it might be, she's probably suffering as badly as you. Worse probably, since the bond between you has cost her the relationship she was fostering with Weasley," Lucius instructed, "How did she take it when Weasley ditched her?"

"She went barmy," Draco admitted, "Screamed, cried. She beat the hell out of me too when I found her sobbing about it. I've got scars on my back from what she did to it when the only outlet she had for her fury about this mess was by shagging me again."

Lucius looked thoughtful for a moment, pondering that information.

"It will work in your favor to appear like her only option for many things to come, Draco. Yes, you are the cause of her need to break up with Weasley, but you were also able to offer her some form of reprieve for her conflicted feelings over the matter. That will make her second-guess everything between you. You need to find her," his father told him seriously, his long fingers drumming together as he considered the situation carefully.

Draco couldn't say he was entirely thrilled by his father's order that he marry the woman, but there was little use arguing about it. He'd known that his marriage would most likely be arranged to someone he might not necessarily have chosen for himself. He'd expected it would be one of the Greengrass girls, but Draco had never been overly fond of Daphne or her sister Astoria. Granger was a sight better than them. At least she could challenge him intellectually if he ever managed to get by shagging her or snarling oaths at her for the purpose of stimulating conversation.

Honestly, he was craving her body so badly that the idea of marrying her didn't sound half bad. If she was married to him, she'd never be able to put him through this kind of agony

again because she would live with him and he'd always know where she was at any given time.

"I'm going to have to return to Hogwarts and repeat my seventh year," Draco told his father seriously, noticing the way Lucius was still watching him scrutinizingly.

"You believe she will return and repeat the year rather than accepting a job offer? I don't doubt that after the actions she, Potter, and Weasley implemented during the war, they will have the world handed to them if they ask it. She'll be offered lucrative deals and jobs if she wants them, NEWTs or not."

"Of course, she will," Draco nodded, "But she won't take any of them. She's currently floating loose and free for the first time in her life. There's no more call for being Potter's brainy sidekick. She won't leap at any job offer without considering it carefully and she won't let herself enter the workforce without completing her education. She's much too much of a know-it-all with a study addiction to ever allow anyone to think about accusing her of having a lacking education – even if only in the sense of not properly graduating."

"Then you will return to Hogwarts as well. Locked up in the same castle will mean she has little opportunity to elude you," Lucius nodded, "I'll tell your mother. I don't want you sharing this discussion with her. She needs to believe the meld between you is the reason you marry the girl. If she thinks it's all a nefarious plot she might murder me."

Draco smirked at his father.

"Maybe not murder," he offered, "But she'd probably maim you."

"Yes, and I imagine she'd be particularly creative about it and make me wish she'd murdered me instead. Not a word to her about the idea of marrying Granger until she can be located and the two of you can be seen to be considering the idea of being together. If the pull between you is this strong after so few encounters and despite the distance between you, she'll come around to the realization that, hatred or not, she's better off close to you than far away."

Draco nodded his head in agreement, already thinking about how he was going to go about locating Granger so he could wring her scrawny little neck while he fucked her into submission.

## Chapter 18

She was going to slit his throat with something blunt so that it would be as painful as possible. Shagging anyone but Malfoy was a waste of her time. That much was becoming quite clear. Oh, they could make her feel things. They could build her right up to the edge of the peak preluding a topple into orgasm, but none could push her over the edge.

None but Draco fucking Malfoy.

Hermione despised him with every fiber of her being. Not only was he entirely to blame for the fact that she and Ron could never be together again, but he was keeping her awake, keeping her from eating or craving anything but him. She couldn't even find temporary release in the arms of another and she loathed him more than ever for that injustice. It was hardly fair that he could be such a horrible bastard and yet have her crave his touch so desperately.

And she was getting desperate. She hadn't seen him in weeks. She'd ignored all the owls that had come from him and from everyone else as she wallowed in the pain of losing Ron, so she had no clue if he'd been trying to find her. She suspected he must have. He was probably going as insane as she was. He also had no heartbreak to distract him even temporarily from the burning need for her.

Merlin, she was aching for it. For him.

Like a smack addict hooked on a dangerously addictive and destructive drug she trembled and shook for another hit. She'd begun scratching at her skin to fight the dreams and delusions of his touch against her sensitive flesh. The horrible truth was that she needed him but he was the last thing she wanted. Her hatred grew with every passing second, a noxious and dangerous thing living inside her soul and causing random explosions of magical energy around her wherever she went.

Not that she went many places. She'd tried sleeping with three different men before realizing she was only worsening the situation. Something would need to be done about her inability to come with them. She'd thought at first that it would be alright to still be able to feel pleasure, to build towards the pinnacle without ever needing to reach it.

She'd been wrong. Hermione had never known fury or heartbreak like it when she'd gotten so close, been right there, and yet couldn't find that release. It was worse than being tortured by Bellatrix. Even then, there had been a reprieve from the pain. Not with this. The inability to orgasm was one that made her tear at her hair and grind her fingers against her clit in the hopes of achieving something but it was pointless.

Everything she'd tried had only made things worse. She was going to have to find the bastard. Find him, fuck him and then slit his bloody throat. She wouldn't even mind doing it. Snarling under her breath about the entire mess, Hermione did something she'd not done since the war.

She dressed herself appropriately in regular muggle jeans – black, like her mood – and a soft sweater with her winter cloak around her shoulders. She didn't seem able to desist the ability to make it snow, despite it being more than a month since the snowing had begun. The world – wizarding and muggle – was entirely baffled by the prolonged and incessant snows that had been falling over most of Britain since Ron had broken up with her. Sometimes, on her good days, it only snowed in London. On the bad ones, the entire continent was buffeted by snow.

Hermione knew it was a problem. She was trying to get a handle on it. She'd seen reports on her parent's telly about how the migration routes of several bird species had been interrupted by the heavy snows. She felt terrible about the number of animal species effects by the weather. Of course, feeling terrible was only making it worse.

She needed to get happy so the bloody snows would melt or the world would go topsy-turvy forever. Which was why – appropriately garbed – Hermione left her parent's house and apparated across London, letting herself into number twelve Grimmauld Place.

It was still only early in the morning. Hermione had been out most of the night with a pathetic excuse for a muggle who'd done nothing but frustrate her further. When she'd returned home she had showered off his stench, dressed once more, and sought out Harry. She needed laughter and she needed friendship and Harry was perfect at both.

She didn't bother calling out as she entered the house. It was much too early for anyone living there to be even close to awake yet. Instead, Hermione let herself upstairs, searching the bedrooms until she found Harry fast asleep in the room Sirius had inhabited when he'd lived here. His black hair ruffled on the pillows, his arm slung out across the bed and his glasses on the nightstand, Harry Potter looked the picture of youthful adorability.

Smiling to herself, Hermione slipped the cloak from her shoulders and draped it over the chair by his desk. She stepped out of her jeans, not even remotely concerned that Harry would see her knickers. He'd seen her arse, so why bother about knickers? Keeping her jumper on, Hermione snuck beneath the covers beside her best friend, wiggling between the sheets until she was snuggled against him.

Looping one arm around his bare torso, Hermione burrowed her forehead against Harry's back, spooning up behind him and reveling in his warmth. He was always so warm when he slept.

"'Mione?" he murmured sleepily, not even tensing up at finding himself suddenly being spooned.

"Love you, Harry," Hermione whispered, her eyes already closing. She smiled when he moved his arm, his hand wrapping around hers.

"You too," Harry mumbled, still ninety-five percent sleeping.

Hermione let herself fall asleep next to him and for the first time all summer, it stopped snowing.

"And just what is going on here?" a sharp voice jolted Hermione from slumber several hours later.

"Huh?" Harry grunted, and Hermione felt him tense up, his hand diving under his pillow for his wand and aiming for the open bedroom door. Hermione opened her eyes to squint blearily at an annoyed-looking Ginny Weasley who stood with her hands on her hips, glaring at the pair of them.

"It's just Ginny, Harry," Hermione told him, reaching for his wand arm before he could hex the redhead by accident.

"Ginny?" Harry asked, his voice becoming slightly panicked, "Bloody hell, 'Mione?"

He rolled slightly to look at her.

"Morning," she mumbled, still cuddling him and in no mood to let go of him just yet, no matter how annoyed Ginny looked.

"Good morning," Harry grinned at her, "When did you get here? I haven't seen you in weeks."

"I crept in while you were sleeping. I didn't want to wake you. It was too early."

"Is someone going to explain what the bloody hell you two are doing in bed together?" Ginny asked testily from the doorway, her red hair beginning to crackle with fury.

"Why don't you take that off and join us?" Hermione pointed at her cloak, "And maybe we'll tell you."

Ginny's eyes bugged at her and Hermione knew the little redhead was thinking about hexing the pair of them.

"It's not what it looks like, Gin," Harry assured her, clearly not recognizing the danger he was in. Hermione knew he was too accustomed to sharing his bed with Hermione for the purpose of sleeping and cuddling to realize that Ginny would find it odd and not be alright with it.

"Really?" Ginny hissed, "Because it looks like you two are in bed together. And since I can see Hermione's jeans on the floor, I'd say it looks like you two are shagging."

"You're being unreasonable," Harry said, his morning brain not yet firing on all cylinders.

"UNREASONABLE?" Ginny screeched, her eyes bugging out and Hermione winced.

"Could you not make that sound again, Ginny?" Hermione asked, "And could you quit emulating Ronald and realize that Harry and I are simply too close as friends to care about sharing a bed or bothering with clothing at all times of the day – namely when sleeping? We're not bloody shagging, Harry's just warm and comfortable."

"The perfect snuggle-buddy?" Harry wanted to know, grinning at her.

"The best," Hermione assured him, watching Ginny's ear turn red with fury as she watched them interact.

"Are you going to come here and kiss me good morning or are you going to screech some more, Gin?" Harry wanted to know, "Because I want a kiss."

"You're in bed with my best friend and you're demanding I snog you?" Ginny snarled, beyond furious now. If she were a dragon there would be smoke pouring out her nose, ears, and mouth.

"Well, I mean, you can snog 'Mione too if you want," Harry told her and Hermione realized he was having fun provoking his girlfriend, "But I don't know how accommodating she'll be. Just get over here, would you?"

Ginny made an unintelligible sound like she might strangle them both.

"Is she always this cranky in the mornings?" Hermione wanted to know, laying her head in the hollow of Harry's shoulder and watching Ginny across the room.

"Only when she doesn't sleepover. Those days I shag her into submission when I wake up and she stays happy all day," Harry replied.

"HARRY POTTER!" Ginny shrieked at him, embarrassment coupling with her fury now.

"What?" he asked innocently, "Hermione knows we're shagging. You knew, right?"

He glanced at her with raised eyebrows.

"Yes, you told me while we were on the run," Hermione reminded him, "And again at the memorial up at the school."

"You..." Ginny sputtered, stomping closer, her wand in her hand and little red sparks coming out the end of it.

"Do you want me to go snuggle Ron so you can shag her?" Hermione asked her friend, enjoying getting a rise out of the redhead witch. It was entirely too easy to provoke her, and unlike Ron, she didn't immediately stomp off and sulk.

"I don't know," Harry said, grinning at Hermione before he looked over at Ginny, "Love, do you want Hermione to go and snuggle Ron so I can shag you?"

Hermione snorted at the flabbergasted expression that crossed Ginny's face.

"Only, I haven't seen her in nearly a month and she needs our love. She's got a broken heart, you know?"

Ginny looked like she couldn't take it anymore and just as she spun on her heels and made to stomp out of the room, Harry slipped out of bed, snagging his arms around Ginny's waist and dragging her back to bed to the sound of her growling and hissing. He somehow managed to

relieve Ginny of her cloak, tugging it off her before he dragged her into bed under the covers with him.

"I think Ginny needs some of our love, 'Mione," Harry told her, holding the thrashing girl with apparent ease. Hermione smirked as she snuggled closer to the pair of them, capturing Ginny's arms and pulling them around her body. Harry spooned Ginny from behind and Hermione cuddled into her from the front until the girl was trapped in their combined embrace. She was cursing a blue streak about it too.

"You let me go this instant! I'm going to hex both of you until your noses fall off! Get off me."

"Maybe I should shag her," Harry grinned at Hermione over Ginny's shoulder, "If she's already this feisty, I imagine it will be a wild ride."

"You're upsetting her now," Hermione warned him, peppering kisses over Ginny's forehead and cheeks while the girl snarled, "When do you think she'll remember we spent a year sharing a tiny cramped tent and are much too used to cuddling to care about her jealous rage over absolutely nothing more than two best friends being too comfortable with one another?"

"I'm sure it will sink it any minute," Harry replied, nuzzling his face into Ginny's neck and pressing kisses there too, "Are you going to tell me where you've been?"

"At Mum's," Hermione replied, still peppering kisses to Ginny's cheeks, "Sulking over breaking up with Ron."

"You haven't been eating," Harry replied, narrowing his eyes on her, "I don't even have to have my glasses on to know that."

"LET ME GO!" Ginny screamed.

"Oi! What's all the racket?" Ron grumbled, stumbling into the bedroom in only his pajamas, his dressing gown undone and his slippers on the wrong feet. He had his wand out, and his red hair was as messy as Harry's as though he'd been woken by Ginny's screeching.

"Ginny's overreacting about Hermione sneaking into bed with me this morning," Harry answered nonchalantly.

"Oh. Get over it, Gin," Ron rolled his eyes before yawning, "I bloody had to. You can't keep them out of bed with one another. They're like a pair of kittens."

"As if you don't want to join us?" Harry challenged, quirking one eyebrow at his friend.

"As if you're going to stop me?" Ron shot back, grinning as he crossed the room, shrugging out of his gown and leaving it with Hermione's cloak before he climbed into bed beside Hermione, shuffling up behind her. Hermione felt his warm body wrap around hers, his hands shoving Ginny's arms out of the way and back towards Harry as he spooned up behind Hermione.

"Miss me?" he asked her and Hermione felt her eyes fill with tears. She blinked them away.

"Of course I did," she replied, "Now quiet down and let me sleep some more."

"Ginny's the one being loud," Ron complained, nuzzling his face into her neck until his cold nose pressed against her skin, effectively trapping her wild hair beneath his cheek so it couldn't smother him.

"What the hell is wrong with the three of you?" Ginny snarled, "You can't just...."

"Ginny, love?" Harry asked, nipping her earlobe and grinning, "Shut it, would you? We're trying to sleep. Now quit wriggling before I tickle you and Hermione bites you on the nose."

"She'll do it Gin," Ron cautioned her, his eyes already closed like he meant to sleep, "Hurts like hell too."

"You've all lost your minds," Ginny declared.

"You're the one overreacting," Ron argued with his sister, "Did she accuse you two of shagging?"

"Yes," Harry and Hermione replied.

"Bloody idiot," Ron said, "Trust me Gin, if they were shagging, we'd know. Just spent too bloody long on the run with no one else. I know all about it. They'll climb into bed with each other to sleep until they die if we let them."

"You know you'll be there too," Harry told him.

"Are you saying you and Ron share a bed sometimes?" Ginny wanted to know, stilling suddenly.

"Loads of times, Gin," Ron answered around another yawn.

"They spoon sometimes," Hermione told Ginny, "It's really cute."

"Better when you're in the middle," Harry told her.

"You just like being my little spoon, Harry Potter," Hermione accused him, laughing.

"Maybe I do," Harry replied, "Being the big spoon all the time gets boring."

"Then why did I find you spooning me last week?" Ron asked without opening his eyes.

"I didn't want you feeling left out, mate," Harry answered.

"You three have lost it," Ginny said, her eyes wide.

"Possible," Harry agreed.

"Put a sock it in, would you Ginny?" Ron asked, "We've got our Hermione back and your voice is annoying me."

"You..." Ginny began, the snarl coming back into her voice but Harry flipped her until he could reach her mouth before he planted his lips on hers, snogging her into silence.

"Are they snogging?" Ron wanted to know, his eyes still shut.

"Yes, don't look," Hermione giggled, "There's drool."

"Gross," Ron wrinkled his nose, "Get your lips off my sister, Harry, you git."

"No this is good, now she can't screech at us," Hermione disagreed, wiggling back further into his warmth.

"Probably true. Don't want to know,"

Hermione chuckled at his response and she realized at that moment that she and Ron's friendship wasn't going to be ruined by their break-up.

"Where've you been, anyway?" Ron wanted to know, "We've been writing to you."

"I might've curled into a pathetic ball and sobbed for a month," Hermione admitted,

"My fault?" Ron wanted to know, opening his eyes finally and peering over her shoulder. Concern glittered in his familiar blue eyes.

"A bit," Hermione nodded, admitting the truth, "That and everything else that happened."

She didn't mention the death of his brother, or of Remus and Tonks and the others. She didn't mention Malfoy and all he'd done to her. She didn't mention the war and being on the run and feeling like she'd never put herself back together again. She could tell he could see it all in her haunted eyes.

"Sorry, love," he whispered, pressing a kiss to her forehead and sighing sadly.

Hermione nodded, her eyes closed as a few tears escaped her. She sighed heavily before opening them again.

"How have you been?" Hermione asked him instead.

"As good as can be expected," he replied just as honestly, still not voicing all they had survived, "Missed you.... Oi, knock it off you two!"

Hermione glanced at Harry and Ginny to see Ginny's hands tangled in Harry's hair as he snogged her enthusiastically. Harry pulled away. Reluctantly. Before smirking at Ron and Hermione over Ginny's shoulder.

"Don't you look at me like that after snogging my sister Potter, or I'll gut you," Ron threatened him though Hermione could tell he was happy for the pair of them that they'd finally sorted themselves out and were happy together?

"But she likes it," Harry replied cheekily, clearly happy to poke the bear.

"I'll like punching you," Ron retorted happily.

"Are they always like this?" Ginny whispered to Hermione.

"Yes. When they're happy."

"Have you really been at your Mum's sobbing this whole time?" Ginny asked her, looking sad, "You ignored our owls."

"I wasn't getting out of bed," Hermione shrugged, "And then I realized what a selfish idiot I was being by suffering in silence and making you all worry. So here I am."

"I missed you," Ginny told her, "Sorry about... you know, accusing you of being a home-wrecking hussy who was shagging my boyfriend."

Hermione grinned at her.

"I think I'm flattered that you think someone as dedicated as Harry is to you, would even think about messing that up for me," Hermione answered, "I'm sure that beneath the insults a compliment is hiding somewhere."

"I still think you three are weird," Ginny told them.

"Are you going to keep talking Ginny?" Ron wanted to know, sounding like he was half-asleep, "Only, you have a grating voice at this hour of the morning."

"It's after one in the afternoon, Ronald," Ginny retorted, "And on the first day without snow since May. You three are lazing about in bed when we could be making snow angels and having a snowball fight."

"Mione, make her stop talking so I can sleep," Ron whined.

"It's your own fault for interrupting her and Harry kissing," Hermione told him, grinning.

"Mum sent me round to fetch you lot for lunch, you know?" Ginny told them, "She's going to be angry if we make her wait."

"What's she making?" Ron asked, clearly weighing the possibility of delicious food against his desire to continue sleeping with Hermione spooned in his arms.

"She was cooking roast and a pie when I left. She made treacle tart too."

Ron groaned and Hermione knew he was annoyed about having to get up, knowing he wouldn't be able to resist his mother's cooking.

"Shall I tell her the three of you will be along then?" Ginny grinned, raising her eyebrows at Hermione.

"You could stay and make sure I'm clean and respectable for lunch with your parents," Harry whispered in her ear, grinning now.

"No hitting on my sister when I'm in ear-shot, remember, Potter?" Ron growled though Hermione could tell he wasn't actually angry.

"You know Mum will flip if she doesn't have a place set for Hermione," Ginny told him, patting his cheek, "And there's always later. You better go wash up Ron. You look terrible."

"Love you too, Ginny," Ron laughed at her. Hermione felt the little kiss Ron pressed to her neck before he released her, rolling out of bed and stumbling out of the room, clearly intent on taking his sister's advice just the same.

"Let me up, would you?" Ginny asked, elbowing Harry, "Before Mum comes searching for us all and walks in on this. She'll have a fit."

"Spoilsport," Harry accused her before lifting the covers enough to let her climb over him and out of bed.

"Aren't you getting up yet?" Ginny asked, glancing back at Harry and Hermione as Harry snuggled back under the covers.

"Five more minutes," Harry whined, winking at Hermione.

"Is this something I'm going to have to get used to?" Ginny asked them seriously, her eyes dancing between Harry and Hermione. Hermione could see a hint of worry in her eyes.

"Yes," Harry admitted, "Hermione's had my back when no one else in the world did. We're not shagging or an item and we don't bloody fancy each other, but if you can't handle having Hermione with me, things will get testy Ginny."

Hermione raised her eyebrows at the way Harry went all serious suddenly, bringing his glasses to his face and staring his girlfriend down.

"You're don't fancy one another?" Ginny asked, looking miffed by the implied ultimatum that if she wanted to push the issue of which witch Harry would pick of the two of them, it would be Hermione.

"We don't fancy each other Ginny," Hermione assured her, "That would be weird and you know that neither Harry nor I would ever do that to you."

"Well... alright then," Ginny said finally, still looking slightly miffed but clearly reading the seriousness of the situation and knowing they meant what they said, "Then I'll see you at the Burrow in no more than half an hour. Mum is serving lunch at two when Bill gets off work."

With that, she walked out of the room without another word and Hermione glanced across the pillows at Harry. Harry returned her gaze for a moment in silence, clearly listening for the sound of Ginny's footsteps on the stairs. Faintly Hermione heard her using the Floo back to the Burrow.

"I missed you," Harry told her, smiling at her slowly.

"I missed you too, Harry," Hermione whispered.

"You alright?" he asked seriously, brushing his thumb across her cheek and wiping away a stray tear.

"No," Hermione admitted, "I'm miserable and I feel completely selfish about it. What right do I have to mope about Ron after everything we've all been through and after what I did?"

"As much as anyone else who's got a broken heart," Harry shrugged, "What happened doesn't change that you love him. It just makes it more complicated."

Hermione sighed again, shuffling closer to him and burying her head against his chest, not at all caring that he was shirtless. He put his arms around her and Hermione felt the kiss he pressed to the top of her head.

"Malfoy's been looking for you," Harry told her quietly after Hermione heard his bedroom door creak closed and lock.

"He has?" Hermione asked, "I ignored all the owls that came to the house. If they didn't have a letter that could be dropped, I didn't receive it."

"He wrote to me, asking me to help him find you. I told him to shove it and didn't hear from him for a few weeks. He sent me another owl yesterday," Harry told her seriously.

"Have you replied to him?" Hermione wanted to know,

"Not yet. It came last night. I was going to ignore him, to be honest, since I hadn't heard from you either. I told him to leave you alone unless you wanted to have something to do with him."

"I don't want to," Hermione told him, "But I'm going to have to."

"This is why you look like hell?" Harry asked bluntly and Hermione nodded.

"I wasn't eating or sleeping much anyway, but being away from him is making it worse. It's been snowing because of me, you know?"

"I figured," Harry nodded, "What are we going to do about the two of you being melded? You obviously can't go on living this way."

"I think I'm going to have to get in touch with him, Harry," Hermione admitted, biting her lip and feeling guilty, "I despise him, but I can't stop thinking about him. I tried shagging some other blokes – muggles – but nothing worked. It was the same as when I shagged Ron for the last time. I get right to the edge and then nothing. It kind of hurts, actually."

"You've been shagging muggles?" Harry asked, looking amused.

"I had to try something. Shagging Ron didn't work and it's not like there's anyone else in the wizarding world I could ask. Not without it getting back to the Prophet or without it being terribly awkward."

Harry quirked an eyebrow at him and Hermione could tell he was thinking she could have asked him.

"Don't look at me like that. You fall into the terribly awkward category given that you and Ginny are back together," Hermione told him, rolling her eyes.

"So you're going to let him have you then?" Harry asked.

"I don't really have much choice. I was thinking I could just go celibate, but that didn't work either. It's like torture. I can't sleep, I barely eat. I don't crave anything except release at his hand," Hermione sighed, "But I don't at all like the idea of having to go to him to feel anything. When we were at the school after the battle and we.... Well, it felt like I was kind of normal again. I didn't really notice after the first meld because we were on the run and I wasn't sleeping or eating anyway and there was no time for sitting and thinking about sex."

"And now there's nothing but time," Harry nodded his head, "Based on his letter, I expect he's feeling the same way. I haven't seen anything about him in the Prophet, though his parents and the Malfoys, in general, have been disparaged a few times for escaping justice in the eye of the public. I suspect that other than attending the funerals, Draco's taken to hiding out in his house the same as you."

"What should I do?" Hermione asked him, needing his counsel. She'd been in her own head too long to trust her judgment.

"If you're suffering as much as you are, I think the only thing you can do is meet up with him. Preferably somewhere that you won't be caught by the press since they've been having a field day speculating about your absence from the public eye. I get the feeling the two of you will jump each other, so probably meet somewhere that you can shag without being caught. The last thing we need is to have Ron find out what you're up to. He'll kill himself."

Hermione nodded, knowing he would take something like her hooking up with Malfoy particularly hard so soon after their break-up and Malfoy's supposed rape of her. Fred's death was also a factor.

"So it would need to be secret. Godric, Harry, I'm going to have to set up some kind of... I don't know... fuck buddy scenario with him," Hermione groaned.

"That might be the best course of action," Harry agreed in a resigned tone, "Not that I cherish the thought, but you've got to do something. If the two of you can function as long as your magic is melding often, then you'll just have to meld it. And it's not like you had any plans of jumping into a relationship with anyone else while you're still in love with Ron. So I guess just shag Malfoy once a week or something and spend the rest of the time researching a way to unmeld your magic."

"Harry, there is no way to unmeld the magic," Hermione told him in a small voice, "I looked. Everything I read indicated that every other affected pairing was either non-sexual in nature, meaning it wasn't activated via sex and so sex wasn't on the cards, or they were in love and so didn't care about being melded. Nothing I found on the topic suggests that the magic can be rebound or undone once it's unlocked."

"So you're stuck with him for the rest of your life?" Harry asked, aghast.

"I think so," Hermione squeaked, feeling more tears well in her eyes.

"Well, then, I guess... I don't know. You're going to have to shag the idiot to keep your health and your sanity, by the looks of things. And needing to do that will make dating anyone else tough. Unless you find someone into an open relationship. I imagine there are pureblood traditions that could see you as his designated and recognized mistress should he marry someone else like a good little pureblood..."

"You're suggesting I be his mistress?"

"It sounds better than fuck-buddy," Harry told her seriously, "And what other option is there? Unless you marry the git?"

Hermione jerked her head up to stare at him in horror. The idea made her feel ill.

"Don't look at me like that, I'm not suggesting you do it. I can see how much you hate the foul little sod. But I think you'll have a hard time finding another bloke willing to just accept you having to shag Draco Malfoy to maintain your sanity. Especially if you can't get off with anyone but Malfoy. I'd feel pretty impotent if I had to put up with Ginny shagging another guy for her jollies..."

Hermione felt tears spill out of her eyes when she realized he was right.

"I mean, I don't need a partner," Hermione sniffled, "Professor McGonagall seems perfectly happy without a husband."

"Do you really want to be alone Hermione? I mean, I'm not saying that you'll be alone forever, but you've seen how lonely she is. She had no children other than her students. I know you want kids one day."

"I could still have them," Hermione sniffled, "I don't need to orgasm to conceive."

"Are you sure about that?" Harry asked, "This meld seems like Old Magic Hermione. The fated kind of Old Magic. If Malfoy was the key to your lock, and vice versa, then I expect that in addition to being denied orgasm with anyone but Malfoy, you'll be in the same boat concerning children. I'm not saying that's a certainty, but I expect it might work that way."

Hermione felt all the blood drain from her face, leaving her dizzy.

"I..." she began, "I need to ask Ron something."

"Hermione, you can't ask Ron to attempt getting you pregnant just to prove to yourself that you can have kids with someone other than Malfoy."

"Yes I can," Hermione whispered, "I have to know. And since the only other person I would even consider the idea of raising a child with is taken, there's little choice."

"Are you talking about me?" Harry wanted to know, a little smile on his face.

"I'm not saying I want to shag you again, you git," Hermione shoved him, "But if I'm going to be trying to fall pregnant, out of wedlock, with someone I'm not dating, you know there's no one I'd ask beyond you and Ron."

"What about Charlie?" Harry asked, grinning. Hermione had confessed to having a small crush on Charlie the first time she'd met him.

"Charlie doesn't like women, Harry," Hermione reminded him.

"You reckon?" Harry asked, his eyes widening.

"Ginny said he's never shown any interest in girls. Or in blokes either, for that matter. Maybe he's asexual."

"Maybe he's just private about his interests," Harry suggested, "Or he could be waiting for the right person. Who knows what he gets up to in Romania?"

"If I get really desperate I'll beg the man to knock me up," Hermione told him, "But doing so would mean having to admit to being melded to Malfoy and unable to, you know."

"That's true," Harry sighed, "And then it would get back to Ron.... I.... I can't betray Ginny again, 'Mione."

"Oh Harry, I'd never ask you to," Hermione rolled her eyes at him.

"Don't get me wrong, Hermione, if I wasn't with Ginny and you needed my help, even if that help meant knocking you up, I'd do it in a heartbeat. Anything you need, I'm here for you. But I can't hurt her," Harry told her, "If I have to choose, as I told her, I will pick you. Every time. Your friendship and loyalty and love mean more to me than anything. But I'm in love with Ginny."

"Would you stop fussing?" Hermione began to laugh at him, "I'm not going to ask you to knock me up and ruin your relationship. If I have to shag Malfoy, I'll just bloody shag him. And I'll be childless if it comes down to needing *him* to impregnate me when the time comes. I'll be the best Godmother to everyone's kids and spoil them rotten because I won't have any of my own."

Harry nodded, looking relieved and Hermione laughed a little bit more, touched by his honesty and his statements but never planning on asking him to choose her over anyone else.

"We should get up and get ready to go to the Burrow, or we'll be late," Harry said with a sigh, "I should warn you.... It's sad, going there. Without Fred there George just isn't the same. There's no laughter anymore. Molly cries all the time and Arthur looks terrible. He's barely holding it together for all of them. Bill and Charlie have been doing what they can, and Percy's been trying to prop George up alongside Ron and me."

Hermione nodded.

"I'm so sorry I haven't been around," Hermione whispered, "I just... I fell apart. After Ron broke up with me I just crawled into my shell and died there for a while. Everything that

happened while we were on the run, everything at Malfoy Manor, all the death. It all just crashed over me like tidal waves and paired with Ron breaking up with me, I just gave in to the pain."

"No one blames you, Hermione," Harry told her, getting out of bed and donning his dressing-gown before handing her jeans to her.

"I blame me," Hermione disagreed, "And I'm going to do better. I'll put us all back together. Maybe it will help distract me from thinking about bloody Malfoy."

"What are you going to do about him?" Harry asked, "You can't go on like this. Molly will have a fit when she sees you. Those jeans are sliding off you and that jumper looks like it was knitted three times too big."

"I... I guess, for now, I'll have to sort something out with him. Maybe address the problem like needing a prescription for a medical condition or something."

"Malfoy is a bloody medical condition," Harry grumbled, "Do you want me to return his letter?"

"No, I'll send him something," Hermione told him.

"His eagle owl is locked in Buckbeak's room upstairs," Harry told her, "Or he was last night. He can get out through the window. I had to lock him up. Malfoy must've told the bird to attack me until I replied to him. He's probably still in there."

"Alright. Do you mind if I use your desk?" Hermione asked him.

"No problem. I'm going to shower," Harry told her yawning widely.

Hermione nodded, going to the desk and sitting down. Harry already had some parchment and a quill sitting there ready to write to anyone should the need arise. Taking up the quill, Hermione unstopped an inkwell and loaded the quill with ink before she paused over the parchment.

***Malfoy,***

***Stop bugging Harry to get in touch with me. Meet me at this address at eight o'clock this evening, or sod off.***

***57 Worthington Drive, Walthamstow.***

***Granger.***

***P.S. Bring whiskey.***

Hermione tapped the parchment with her wand to roll it up before sealing it. She attached a black ribbon to it and carried the letter upstairs to Buckbeak's room. Harry had set the Hippogriff free before they went on the run, so the room was largely used as an owlery now.

When she opened the door, an enormous eagle owl perched across the room awoke with a screech and flapped towards her.

"No, don't even think about trying to attack Harry. Take this to Malfoy," Hermione commanded the bird, waving the scroll at the owl. It hooted at her indignantly before landing again and sticking its leg out to allow Hermione to attach the letter.

The bird took off out the window without another sound when she was done and Hermione watched it fly until it was out of sight. She didn't feel at all good about the idea of going to a motel in Walthamstow for the purpose of a quick shag with Malfoy, but she didn't see any other choice. She wasn't about to go back to Malfoy Manor and if she showed him to her parent's place, he would never leave her in peace. She couldn't go to the Leaky Cauldron or any other wizarding establishment either; not without drawing attention to herself and who she was meeting.

She returned to the kitchen to await Harry and Ron. Several minutes later they joined her and Hermione smiled at the pair of them as they made their way over to the fireplace.

"I'll go first," Ron suggested, "That way Mum won't pounce on either of you."

Harry and Hermine nodded and Ron disappeared in a flash of green flames.

"You better go next," Harry told her, "They'll all be excited to see you."

Hermione nodded again.

"Alright," Hermione whispered, "THE BURROW."

She dropped the handful of Floo powder into the flames and closed her eyes against the dizzying sensation as she twirled away. She landed in the fireplace at the Burrow, coughing at the ash that got into her nose and mouth. Ron took her hand, helping her out of the fireplace so Harry could come through.

"Hermione, dear," Molly gave a shout of happiness at the sight of her, and Hermione found herself being pulled into a crushing hug from the stout woman. Molly squeezed her tightly.

"Afternoon Mrs. Weasley," Hermione said, patting the woman on the back as she hugged her in return.

"Oh, look at you dear. Skin and bone. You've not been taking care of yourself. Oh, I feared as much. Come on now, into the kitchen, everyone's waiting."

Molly patted her cheek affectionately and Hermione could see the way tears threatened in her eyes. It was clear that she did indeed spend much of her time crying these days.

"Hermione, it's wonderful to see you," Mr. Weasley told her, hurrying over to hug her in greeting as well and Hermione felt her heart clench at the sight of the Weasley patriarch. He looked like he'd aged a decade in the month since she'd seen him. There were deep frown lines across his forehead and around his mouth; and his eyes – once so curious and full of happiness – were dulled and sad.

"It's lovely to see you too, Mr. Weasley," Hermione told him, hugging him fiercely in return.

She felt positively rotten about not being there to help them with their grief, even if she was trying to get a handle on her own.

"Hermione," Bill came forward next, wrapping her into a tight embrace. Hermione returned the hug with as much verve before hugging Fleur as well.

"We 'ave missed you, 'Ermione," Fleur told her, her accent as French as ever. She smiled sweetly but Fleur too seemed aged somehow, grief and the strain of trying to hold everyone together no doubt taking their toll.

"I've missed you all as well, Fleur," Hermione admitted, releasing the French witch to be tackled in a tight, brotherly hug from Charlie.

"Good to see you, kid," Charlie told her, clapping her on the back a few times before handing her on to Percy.

"Hermione," Percy said delicately, hugging her much more formally. He'd not spent as much time with her in recent years as the others and so he wasn't entirely comfortable embracing her, Hermione knew.

"Percy," she replied softly before turning her attention on the final Weasley in the room that she'd yet to embrace in greeting. George leaned against the kitchen wall and Hermione had never seen a more broken man.

His once red hair had been dyed an unbecoming shade of black and his eyes, once sparkling with joy and mischief were lifeless. He didn't react as though he even knew she was there.

"Oh, Georgie," Hermione whispered while the others were greeting Harry.

The use of the oft used endearment Fred had used for him snapped George's head up and his eyes found hers, a befuddled expression crossing his face.

"Hermione?" he asked in a voice, scratchy from lack of use.

Hermione didn't wait for him to say anything else before she stepped into him, slipping her arms around his waist and squeezing him tight, as though she might manage to squeeze his heart back together. Hermione heard the sob that caught in his throat just before his arms crushed around her bony frame. He buried his face in her hair and Hermione felt the silent sobs that wracked his frame. Her heart broke for him.

"There now, Georgie," she whispered, "It's all going to be better, I promise."

She didn't tell him it would be alright because she knew that without Fred, nothing could ever be alright. Behind her, she heard Molly beginning to cry again, and heard Mr. Weasley trying to quiet her soft sniffles. Tears leaked from Hermione's eyes as well and she just held George all the tighter. She rubbed circles on George's back, holding him so tight she worried his ribs would crack and he returned the favor.

"H'mione," he choked into her hair and Hermione knew he wasn't asking for release. It was a little-known fact that before the twins had left Hogwarts in their seventh year, they had enlisted Hermione's assistance testing their products. Hermione knew at the beginning they had rated their product quality on the amount of outrage she'd expressed when she saw their latest invention.

Shouting was a decent venture, a disdainful sniff was junk, and threatening to write to Molly meant they'd struck gold. As their business had grown, Hermione had been in correspondence with Fred and George on an almost weekly basis during the end of fifth year and all through sixth. Often they asked her opinion on certain products and while Hermione had been reluctant, to begin with, Fred had talked her into helping them when he insisted that the best way to ensure their joke-shop wares were customer-friendly and not barbaric was to make sure they got the magic right.

"I'm so sorry, Georgie," Hermione whispered to the bereft twin.

He cried harder at that, a small sound of anguish escaping him. Hermione fought back her own grief for Fred when it reared its head, pushing it down in favor of helping George through his. She could do this. She'd always functioned best when she had other things to occupy her mind and her time other than her own problems. And the last thing Hermione wanted to do was focus on her own problems.

Hermione felt Ron come up behind her and take her shoulder, silently asking if she needed help but Hermione waved him away. Molly was crying behind her and Hermione could feel the mood of the kitchen plummeting.

"Come on," Hermione murmured to the weeping man, "Come on now. No more of that, Forge."

George hiccupped at the little-used name his twin had called him.

"Fred would be up there with Remus, Sirius, and James joking about you being a ponce. Can't have that, can we? Come on."

Hermione didn't know if she should laugh or cry when George made a strange, strangled sort of sound something between a sob and a laugh before he slowly released her.

"A ponce you reckon?" he asked, pulling back slowly until he could rest his forehead against Hermione's. His voice was thick with emotion, but Hermione could see the beginnings of a smile.

"I can hear him now," Hermione nodded, "Still cussing Harry out for not mentioning that the Marauders map was invented by James, Sirius, and Remus. Asking his mentors not to look while you were embarrassing him in front of company. Listen to him, Georgie. '*You'll have to excuse, Forge*,' he's saying, '*Never was the same without that ear. Addled his brain. Don't look now gents, he thinks he's holy again.*'"

When George snorted, Hermione heard the gasps from behind her and she got the feeling that maybe it had been a while since a smile or a laugh escaped George Weasley. The snort came

again, this time turning into a snicker. Hermione felt her own smile grow wider when he hiccupped again before he started to laugh, his head tipping back as the sound escaped him.

Molly was crying harder now and when Hermione glanced over her shoulder at Ron – who was gripping her shoulder tightly – she saw tears leaking from his eyes.

"Holy again?" George asked when he got hold of himself, "Bloody hell, he never let me live that down. Should've known you wouldn't either."

He snickered some more and Hermione smiled at him when he met her gaze. His brown eyes were puffy from crying and bloodshot from lack of sleep.

"Never, your Holiness," Hermione replied, grinning at him.

He snorted again and Hermione couldn't help but feel touched when his hands cupped her face, tilting her head forwards until he could press a tender kiss to her forehead.

"Missed you, kid," George told her as he released her.

"I missed you too," Hermione told him honestly, "You ready for lunch?"

"I am," George nodded and Hermione let him take her hand as she turned back towards the table. Before they could reach the table, Molly swooped over to them, crushing both George and Hermione in a tight hug as she sobbed.

"Aw, Mum," George sighed, rubbing the woman's back, "Come on, let Hermione catch her breath, would you? Let's eat before this food you've slaved over goes cold."

Molly wailed, clearly overcome with emotion as George showed signs of life and Hermione suspected from the way the rest of the Weasley's looked haunted that George might as well have been a ghost for all the life he'd shown recently. She felt good to have been able to get a laugh out of him, throwing caution to the wind by mentioning Fred. She imagined everyone would've been tiptoeing around Fred's name since his death.

"Molly, dear," Arthur said, his voice tight with restrained emotion. Hermione could see Ginny crying on Harry's shoulder and caught Percy wiping his eyes on his sleeve in a decidedly un-Percy-like manner.

"Mum, come on, I'm hungry," George insisted, "You going to let us starve, woman?"

Molly pulled back from him, hope emblazoned across her face and Hermione could tell from how thin and tired George was that he hadn't been eating. Much like she hadn't.

"I bet you can't eat that entire pie, Georgie," Hermione challenged him immediately.

"You're on, Granger," George grinned at her and Hermione could tell by the flash in his eyes that he appreciated how she was trying to channel Fred, who'd have said exactly the same thing to hear him announcing his hunger.

"Three sickels?" Hermione asked.

"Done," George replied with a nod, not releasing the hand he was holding as he took a seat at the table. Hermione usually sat on the other side, next to Harry and Ron. But she got the feeling that no one was going to ask her to move, even if she had just slipped into Fred's seat. She could tell that it was Fred's too because the twins had carved their names into the back of the chairs in their youth. She realized no one had had the heart to take Fred's chair away now that he was dead and she suspected it hurt George all the more to have his twin's place beside him stand empty.

"Go on then, let's see it. You won't even get five bites down," she told him, still grinning.

Hermione smiled indulgently when he lifted the hand he'd intertwined his fingers with, bringing it to his lips and kissing the back of it in a silent display of gratitude.

"Hand it over then," he replied, releasing her and waiting for Hermione to hand him the pie-dish.

No one complained when Hermione plonked the entire thing in front of him and watched him dig into it with his fork, scooping out a big bite and shoveling it into his mouth. He coughed on the first bite as it slid down his throat, clearly out of practice eating more than what Molly could force into him to keep him alive. He glanced at her and Hermione held his gaze defiantly, daring him to say he couldn't do it.

The corners of his mouth twitched and he nodded knowingly before he shoveled another bite into his mouth and swallowed it down.

No one said a word about the pie when George devoured the whole thing.

"You owe me three sickles, Hermione."

## Chapter 19

Draco felt like he was going to explode as he apparated to a quiet street in Walthamstow at a few minutes to eight in the evening. He had tried to get to the address she'd given him by Floo and had been baffled when the fireplace hadn't budged him an inch. He supposed as he took in the sight of the decidedly muggle establishment, that he ought to be grateful he hadn't ended up in some boarded-up fireplace. He'd been beyond shocked when his owl had returned with a letter from *her* tied to its foot. Draco had sent the bird to Potter, demanding that the owl not return until Potter deigned to write back to him about locating Granger.

He was beyond furious when he learned the witch was obviously staying with Potter. The hints Potter had nudged at up at the castle had been driving Draco around the twist with jealousy and insecurity. Had Granger shagged the Boy Wonder? Was she still shagging the git?

Striding confidently into the building, Draco felt a terrible smirk grace his features when he realized it was a pub, with what seemed like hotel rooms upstairs. So she'd decided to shag him after all? That was interesting. Draco had been sure that he would have to meet her somewhere and somehow lure her to a secondary location so he could brutalize her. He'd expected her to tell him to stop making a nuisance of himself and leave her in peace.

He felt like someone had hit him with an erection causing charm when he laid eyes on the witch. She was dressed casually in what appeared to be fitted black muggle jeans that hugged her body close, coupled with a snug-fitting blouse and a leather jacket. He curled his lip to see her dressed like a muggle - though he'd grown used to it after the Battle - and grudgingly acknowledged that they would both look out of place in robes in a muggle pub anyway. Draco himself had settled for one of his black suits - nothing fancy.

She was leaning up against the bar and Draco felt something terrible inside him roar in protest when he noticed she was flirting shamelessly with the barkeep. The lights in the pub flickered, causing several muggles to exclaim in surprise but Granger didn't react. He got the feeling she knew he'd arrived, but she didn't turn to him as Draco crossed the pub in long strides. He didn't even think before clamping his hands down on her shoulders and spinning her to face him. She didn't look even a bit surprised when he tangled a hand into her loose hair and snogged her furiously.

A little hum of pleasure slipped from her mouth and Draco drank it down hungrily. Merlin curse it all, she tasted even better than he'd recalled. He smirked against her lips when she snagged hold of his silver tie, fisting it to hold him in place while she snogged him back. Her tongue was delectable inside his mouth, flicking, swishing, tantalizing him. It took more control than he'd believed he possessed to keep from fucking her right there on the bar. And he only refrained because getting arrested by muggle authorities would be inconvenient to his plans of seducing the witch.

"Miss me?" she purred when she shoved him backward to break their fervent kiss.

"Don't kid yourself, Granger," Draco replied, enjoying the sight of her lips already so swollen from his kisses. He smirked when he looked over her head to the barkeep, who looked like he couldn't decide if he was annoyed that he'd been flirting with her for nothing, or horrified by the idea of what Draco might do to him. Draco leaned towards the second one when he fixed the muggle an entirely predatory sneer.

"You're a horrible liar," Granger accused.

"Hush, woman," he told her, before ordering a drink, "Whiskey neat."

"For me too, Gerald," she purred, spinning in Draco's hold to smile at the barkeep again.

The muggle eyed the pair of them for a moment before fixing their drinks.

Draco handed him some muggle money that he kept on him for just such emergencies, clearly startling her with his preparedness. He sipped his drink as he leaned intimately against her back.

"Are you going to lean on me all night, or are you going to move so we can sit down?" Granger wanted to know when the muggle moved away from them.

"You want to sit down and speak with me?" Draco asked, mildly surprised.

"I think that would be wise," she replied evenly, slipping out from between him and the bar before she sauntered towards a table in the corner that was unoccupied. Draco followed behind her, noticing that the jeans she wore must be new. They fitted her snugly and he could see at a glance that, much like he had, she had lost condition in the past weeks. She looked almost painfully thin, as though she weren't eating enough.

"Do these people do food?" he asked her when he settled himself in the seat opposite her in the corner, still sipping his drink. The liquor wasn't as palatable as fire-whiskey, but it would do for now. He had a bottle of fire-whiskey in his pocket for later, as she'd requested.

"Now you want to eat dinner with me?" Granger asked raising her eyebrows challengingly and Draco decided he was going to wipe that smirk off her face when he fucked her into a headboard later.

"I'm not particularly hungry for food," he shrugged honestly, "But I assume by your insistence upon sitting that you're not going to let me have you. Yet."

"And here I'd been thinking you were thick," she smiled sweetly, her eyes cold. Draco leveled a glare at her, biting his tongue on the harsh and hateful retorts that filled his mind. His father had ordered that he woo the bitch into marrying him, and Draco knew he would need to work on his manners with the bloody mudblood if he wanted to even consider pulling it off.

Granger turned her attention to flagging down a waitress from the kitchens and securing some menus from her when he didn't respond beyond taking another drink.

"What did you want to discuss, Granger?" he asked in a bored voice as he read his menu. Nothing on it seemed overly appealing, but he supposed he would need his strength. He'd not

eaten more than necessary to keep himself alive in the month since he'd seen her, so it wouldn't do to be accosted by his appetite once he'd shagged her again.

"I assume - based on your condition - that you've not been eating or sleeping well since we last... interacted?" she asked him reading her own menu.

"A problem we seem to have shared," he agreed with her, settling on a pot pie and chips, which he requested from the waitress along with another drink. The foolish little muggle seemed to be trying to get his attention and Draco gave her his best blank stare when she smiled flirtatiously at him. If Granger noticed, she'd grown better at hiding her jealousy because there was no increase in magical power emitting from her. Either she wasn't jealous or the witch had learned how to hide it.

"Indeed," she agreed, ordering a burger and another drink before she met his gaze across the table, "This is a problem."

"This?" he raised one eyebrow at her.

"Yes, *this*," she replied, indicating the two of them with a wave of her fingers, "This ridiculous meld. It's a problem."

"Because you can't function without me?" Draco asked, smirking at her.

"Because neither of us is coping well apart," she corrected, narrowing her eyes at him in annoyance and Draco felt a flare of heat fill the pub. The muggles exclaimed at the warmth, calling to the barkeep about the heating. It had stopped snowing that morning, but just the same, it wasn't yet warm enough outside to turn off the heating. Excepting when Granger was messing with things.

"Why don't you just admit that you need me, Granger?" he drawled, still smirking.

"Unfortunately, I have no choice," she replied coldly, "And neither do you. It seems that this ridiculous meld has caused both of us significant problems, particularly towards the idea of shagging other people with any effect."

Draco's surge of fury over her knowing expression caused several of the muggle lights to flare brightly and then shatter. Granger smirked at him even as she wandlessly repaired them while muggles began to shout and complain in surprise.

"Know that for a fact, do you?" he snarled at her, gripping his glass tightly in his fist and trying to reign in his rage.

"I do, in fact," she replied, taking entirely too much pleasure from his fury.

"I'm going to kill you," he warned her in a low voice, "I'm going to fuck you until I can't move and then I'm going to kill you."

"Oh shut up," she rolled her eyes, "At least I only shagged three people. You shagged thirty-seven."

"You shagged more than three," he disagreed with her, "Forgetting about Potter and Weasley already?"

Draco narrowed his eyes on her, waiting for her to look guilty over his accusation about Potter. He was going to kill that git if she'd shagged him.

"Oh please," she rolled her eyes, "You already knew I tried shagging Ron, once, after the meld, and that it didn't work."

"And Potter?"

"Harry's dating Ginny," Granger replied, no guilty tone in her voice, "But were it the case that I had shagged someone else with any kind of... orgasmic... effect, I can assure you that I would not be here."

Draco's glass shattered in his hand and it was only the pain of broken glass sliding through his skin that kept him from throttling the bitch. She eyed him for a moment before repairing the glass quickly. She vanished the remaining liquid from the table and Draco was surprised when she reached for his hand, relieving him of the glass and healing the bloodied wound quickly before anyone could notice.

"Do you enjoy provoking me?" he asked through gritted teeth, gripping her hand in his and refusing to release it.

"Yes," she admitted with a smirk, "That's what you get for accusing me of shagging my best friend and of being a trollop."

Draco curled his lip at her in annoyance, noticing that she didn't bother trying to retrieve her hand from his grip. He felt mildly calmer the longer he touched her, and he hated her all the more for it.

"Did you have a point with this conversation?" he asked finally when he could speak without snarling.

"Yes," she answered, "The point was that as you had already discovered, I have recently learned that this horrible meld has robbed us both of the ability to achieve satiation with other people."

"And so you're here to beg me to fuck you?" he asked, smirking as he slid his fingers through hers, still holding onto her hand across the table.

"I'm here to suggest, since we are obviously incapable of functioning properly when we ignore the meld and refuse to interact with one another, that it would make sense to make some kind of arrangement," she corrected, looking mildly uncomfortable.

"Are you asking me to date you, Granger?" Draco smirked, thinking that this marriage order from his father might be easier achieved than he'd anticipated.

"No," she retorted, looking like she might be ill. Draco smirked. He knew the feeling. The idea of shagging her made him want to bend her over the table. The idea of dating her, on the

other hand, made him feel like he might vomit.

"Ah," his shit-eating grin entirely too smug, "And you got annoyed when I suggested you were a trollop."

"Fuck you, Draco Malfoy," she snapped, glaring at him, "This is obviously a problem and since we seemed to function just fine while we were at the school and shagging every few days, I would like to suggest we make some kind of similar arrangement."

"You want to be fuck buddies?" he asked.

Granger leveled him another glare, "That term suggests we could be friends. No. I'm suggesting we be... frosty sexual partners."

"Eloquent," he sneered at her and she huffed in annoyance, looking away from him. Their waitress brought them more drinks and Draco smirked when the muggle girl pouted over their joined hands.

"She's going to spit in your food," Draco warned her as the muggle walked away. Granger glanced after her and Draco knew it was no accident when the muggle stumbled and dropped everything she was carrying, shattering glass everywhere and cutting herself in the process.

"No, she won't," the witch replied evenly as though nothing had happened. Draco realized suddenly that the little witch before him had a vindictive streak.

"Did you just purposely injure a muggle out of jealousy, Hermione Granger?" he asked, taunting her now, "Aren't you supposed to be the champion of muggle rights and muggleborns? How could you?"

"I am no such thing, nor can you prove that she didn't simply trip on the uneven floor," Granger replied primly, "I don't know where everyone got this idea that I'm some goody-two-shoes, rule-abiding little thing. I've done more vindictive things to people than you can imagine."

"You mean other than shagging other men when you knew it would infuriate me after I expressly warned you that doing so would be a wasted effort?" he asked.

"I do indeed," she smirked at him.

"You were behind that Edgecombe girl being covered in that horrible mess of blotches and spots in fifth year, weren't you?" Draco asked, suddenly recalling her involvement.

"I might've been. She brought it on herself for being a blabber-mouth and for not recognizing that breaking the trust of the supposed Golden Trio would be foolish and not without consequence."

"I assume you were also behind the fact that Skeeter stopped writing trash about you?" Draco asked her.

"Rita Skeeter and I have an... understanding," Granger smirked wider this time, "I learned, after spying on you, that she was an unregistered beetle animagus. I might've inadvertently captured her in a jam jar and... you know, held her hostage for a few weeks."

"You kept her hostage?" Draco asked, his eyebrows rising in genuine amusement.

"She needed to be taught a lesson. She no longer publishes trash about me for fear of ending up in a jar again. She is under the impression that, should she draw my ire, she will be outed and prosecuted for being unregistered as an Animagus. She might also be under the illusion that I will return her to the jar and, submerge it in water until she is no longer a problem."

"And they call me a heartless murderer," Draco said quietly, eyeing her with newfound intrigue. He'd known after the battle that she was capable of murder, but never had he imagined that she would be quite so inventive about it. It was one thing for their magic to have clashed together, his intent wielding his own power and hers to destroy the lives of those Death Eaters and Voldemort supporters that needed killing, but he'd never have believed her capable of killing someone for any other reason than self-defense.

She narrowed her eyes at him.

"Perhaps you'd do well to remember it," she retorted rather than denying his accusation.

"Perhaps," he agreed, "Now, back to the topic at hand. You're suggesting we make a regular thing of shagging one another?"

"I am," she sighed, looking weary suddenly, "Discreetly. The last thing either of us needs, after a prolonged absence from the eyes of the wizarding world, is to be seen publicly meeting."

"Are you asking me to be your dirty little secret, Granger?" he asked her.

She huffed at him.

"Must be snarky all the time?" she wanted to know, "I'm trying to be reasonable about this, given how much I despise you. For obvious reasons, we have to come to some arrangement and since I fancy the idea of being anything more to you than a bed partner about as much as I fancy trying to snog an Acromantula, this is the solution. Do you want to agree to it or not?"

"What choice do I have? I don't imagine you'd agree to date me?"

"Are you saying you want to date me?" she asked, startled.

"It would make sense," he replied, "If we're going to be shagging, there's little point trying to date anyone else since it will undoubtedly end in bloodshed or murder. There's also the fact that were we to see other people whilst still participating in this arrangement, we would undoubtedly be caught as philanderers."

"I don't see why we can't just both be single," she argued, "I'm not going to date you. I despise you."

"And I loathe you," Draco replied evenly, "But you know as well as I do that this is as good as it gets."

He waved a finger between them.

"This meld can't be undone. Trust me, I've been researching it extensively, as has my mother. There is no way to undo it. Meaning that like it or not - hate each other, or not - your wagon is hitched to mine," he drawled.

"I'd rather die alone than be with you," she answered coldly and Draco felt a little like he'd been slapped, "I will consent to this horrible arrangement of shagging one another to keep us both healthy and able to function, but that's as far as this goes."

"So says the muggleborn," Draco replied quietly, catching the way her ears perked at his use of a word other than mudblood. He could tell she was surprised but she didn't mention it. They sat in silence as they waited for their meals to arrive and Draco eyed her. She looked like hell. There were dark circles under her eyes and her hair needed a trim. It needed a deep condition and some style as well, but he wasn't going to try and give her fashion advice. She was too spiteful. She'd do the opposite of what he suggested.

"So that's it then?" he asked midway through their meal, "We shag every other night and that's it. No dating. No anything else?"

"I don't get it Malfoy, are you saying you want to date me?" she asked, looking puzzled by his return to the topic.

"I'm saying we're stuck with one another," he shrugged, "What point is there in trying to pretend we wouldn't be, in effect, a couple since we'll be shagging most nights anyway? Do you imagine you can spend the rest of your life in my bed without developing some feeling for me beyond hatred?"

She narrowed her eyes at that notion and Draco suspected he'd said the wrong thing. He shouldn't have mentioned it. He should have let her simply be affected by him until she stopped despising him and fell for him. That's how he planned to deal with fulfilling his father's orders.

"Do you realize to whom you are speaking?" she asked frostily, lowering her burger to glare at him, "You ruined my life, Malfoy. You and your bloody need to make me feel something ruined everything. If you hadn't forced pleasure on me, the outpour of power would never have occurred and we wouldn't be in this mess."

Draco rolled his eyes, "And I thought I was dramatic. Honestly Granger, listen to yourself. If this meld hadn't happened, the war might've gone the other way. If you weren't effectively bound to me, you and Weasley would have dated a while, gotten hitched, and maybe popped out a few kids. And that niggling little problem of his need to feel needed would have eaten away at him until he cheated on you. Don't look at me like that, you know deep down that it's the truth. He told you himself that he needs to be needed and *you* don't need him."

"And you think I need you?"

"Like a drug," Draco smirked, "You may not like it but you do need me. Right now you need me to fuck you blind so we can both function, but eventually, you're going to realize you need me for other things too. Until then, we'll be fuck buddies and that will be that. Are you done eating?"

She looked scandalized but he could tell she was no longer hungry.

"Do you mean to fuck me in one of those upstairs rooms?"

"I'm not going to invite you to my parent's house," she replied, tight-lipped.

"Then we'll retire to the Manor, I think."

"I'm not going back to Malfoy Manor," she argued, resisting when he tugged her to her feet. Draco ignored her protests, tucking some money into the bill wallet the muggle had brought them and leaving it on the table.

"Yes you are," he disagreed with her, "I'm not shagging you in some seedy hotel. If this arrangement is going to function, it's going to have rules."

"Rules?" she hissed, giving up her resistance when he spoke in the same tone he would use were they not in public. Her cheeks went pink as muggles began to look at them.

"Rules," he agreed with a nod, "You've insisted that you don't want to be caught shagging me, therefore, we will have to be discreet. Since my parents are aware of the meld - given my inability to eat or sleep since I saw you last - it makes sense to go to the Manor. You are able to Floo directly there, thereby avoiding the prying eyes of the press. You refuse to show me to your family home, so there is no other option. Muggle hotels will not be adequate for our requirements."

"Requirements?" she hissed, as Draco tucked her hand into the crook of his elbow as he led her out into the snow.

"Indeed," he answered, "In the spirit of keeping this as a strictly business arrangement, I think it also prudent to have rules regarding shagging others. We might not be dating but from here on out, you're mine and you will conduct yourself accordingly. That means no more trying to shag other men, or I'll kill whoever you try it with."

"You can't blackmail me like that," she demanded, snarling at him in annoyance.

"Of course, I can. I am merely stating facts," Draco informed her, "If I find out that you're shagging anyone else, I will track them down and I will kill them. It's very simple. It's not as though either of us hasn't killed before, Granger. I won't even break a sweat over it."

"You're demanding we only see each other?" she snarled, "What's the point in being single if you're going to impose rules of exclusivity as though you were my boyfriend."

"Being single was your idea," he shrugged, "Not mine."

"You say that like you want to date me?" she hissed again.

"I am merely a realist, Granger. The sooner you realize that the only way for you to consider marriage, children and the white-picket-fence life is by being with me, the better. You will either be my faithful courtesan until you die, or you will eventually be my wife and the mother of my children. There are no other options."

She made a strangled noise of horror at the very idea and Draco smirked to himself.

"Now, stop dragging your feet, stop stuttering and prepare to Apparate," he commanded, stopping in a corner alley to take a calming breath. She closed her eyes, clearly realizing resistance was futile and Draco disappeared them both with a crack.

## Chapter 20

Hermione shuddered as she landed inside the gates of Malfoy Manor for the second time in her life, glaring up at the looming mansion in the evening light.

"I hate this place," she informed Malfoy coldly.

"Why?" he asked, "It's where you got yourself hitched to me."

Hermione spun on him so fast she got dizzy, but that didn't stop her from slapping him. She was furious with him for the way he'd been speaking to her, insisting she joined him here rather than allowing them each the chance to pretend it was a scheezy arrangement by remaining at the motel.

His eyes flashed at her in the late evening light. The summer sunshine that persisted well into the night had come out now that the snow clouds she'd been creating had abated, and there was more than enough light to see by. He snatched up both her hands like lightning, gripping them tightly and dragging her closer.

"Unless you want me to fuck you right here in the snow on the drive, you're not going to say another word or touch me again, is that clear?" he growled into her face, and Hermione could tell he meant it. She hated herself for the wave of desire that crashed over her at his seriousness. She knew that he wouldn't have any qualms about doing as he threatened.

"I..." she began anyway, and she regretted it when he dragged her into his arms and snogged her soundly again. Hermione hissed into his mouth, wriggling in his grip.

"Not here," she growled when she managed to drag him off her by yanking his hair hard enough that several strands came free.

"Then keep your mouth shut," he retorted coldly, his eyes undressing her. He dragged her by the hand all the way up the drive. Hermione went with mixed feelings. Part of her was reliving the terror of being dragged before Bellatrix and tortured. The other part of her was literally dripping her desire for Malfoy.

"Draco?" Hermione heard the voice of Lucius Malfoy ask when Draco dragged her in the front door and up a staircase off the main foyer. The elder Malfoy strolled out of what looked like an office on the right up ahead of them. Hermione felt her cheeks turn pink at the sight of Malfoy's father, suddenly recalling the last time she'd been in his presence outside the battle. The man had watched his son fuck her as Voldemort interrogated her. The fact that she was once again in his house for the purpose of having Draco shag her was utterly mortifying.

"Evening Father," Draco greeted his father in a tight voice, not stopping to speak to the man as he dragged Hermione by the hand towards what she assumed must be his bedroom.

"Good evening, Miss Granger," Lucius smirked in an uncanny replica of his son, and Hermione realized suddenly where Draco got his looks and his expressions from.

"Mr. Malfoy," Hermione greeted in an equally tight voice to the one Draco had used.

She could have sworn she heard the elder blonde wizard chuckle.

"I'll distract your mother, shall I?" he asked as Draco dragged her past the wizard.

"That would be wise," Draco replied, and Hermione felt her embarrassment grow.

Hermione shot a pleading look over her shoulder at the elder wizard, and she caught the way his grey eyes laughed at her. Despite his otherwise blank expression, she suspected he was pleased by the sight of her in his house - something she had never imagined could occur.

"You told them about this, didn't you?" Hermione asked Draco when he'd dragged her out of Lucius's sight and earshot.

"They are aware of the meld and that I will be shagging you on a regular basis. Father is not an idiot and has realized my continued health and sanity hinges on it. Mother has been scouring the library for ways to undo the meld."

"I'm surprised they haven't tried to murder me to free you of my filth," she sneered in response.

"Watch that tongue, witch," Malfoy cautioned her, silencing her with a look, "As it happens, her first thought was to have you executed to free me of this meld. We discovered, however, that killing you would have the worst possible effect. You see, we learned that melds like this tie the pair together irrevocably. If you were to die, I would remain in this half-state of existence, continuing to crave you until I killed myself. The same will go for you."

"What?" Hermione demanded, trying to pull her hand from his to stop and absorb that information.

"Death will not free us from this bond," he reiterated, "Now stop dragging your feet."

"You're telling me that either of us dying condemns the other?" she demanded, horrified.

"Not immediately. It's much slower and more torturous than that," Malfoy replied grimly, "The Old Magic responsible for the meld means we are stuck with each other for eternity. If I were to die, you would fall into a state of illness due to a lack of eating or sleeping. You would also succumb to madness. At least, that is according to the accounts Mother dragged out of the oldest tomes on melds like these. Eventually, the madness would drive you to suicide. When I tell you that your wagon is hitched to mine, Granger, I mean it. You and I are trapped together for eternity."

"But we hate each other," Hermione protested weakly, feeling faint at the news.

"I'm aware of that," he replied, "Let's discuss it later."

He hauled her through his bedroom door, and Hermione was overcome with memories as she entered the familiar room. He'd been kind to her the last time she'd been there. He'd allowed her to bathe; he'd healed her after being tortured; he'd made sure she was fed. And then he'd

fucked her into this mess. Hermione recalled with startling clarity the way it had felt to wake up to him spooning her after she'd fallen asleep in his bed.

Unlike the last time she'd been there, Hermione took notice of the room. It was more of a suite, really. There was a large lounging area, in addition to bookshelves lining the walls, his enormous four-post bed, and a writing desk and chair overlooking the gardens beyond.

Before she had a chance to consciously note the décor and color scheme, Hermione found herself being pressed back against the door, Malfoy's lips crashing against hers hungrily.

She didn't know if she hated him or herself more when a groan of approval escaped her lips. He swallowed the sound greedily, and Hermione felt his hands pulling at her clothes furiously. He stripped her jacket from her shoulders, dropping it to the floor. Hermione returned the favor, throwing everything else to the wind for the time being in favor of the all-consuming heat and desire he awoke in her. Hermione hated him for it, but there could be no denying that it felt fantastic.

She hadn't felt like this in weeks.

As she relieved him of his jacket and his shirt, Hermione realized that the child's play she'd had with those muggles had been nothing but wasted time compared to Malfoy. Some part of her knew the meld between them made everything better because everything was heightened. Another part of her, though, the part who'd been with him the very first time before they'd melded their magic, knew that he was just that bloody good.

Hermione hissed in pain when he jerked on her hair, tipping her head back and making it bang against the door. He followed the action by burying his face in her neck, nipping and kissing the flesh hungrily. Hermione heard the groan that slipped from her at the feel of his hot mouth on her over-sensitive flesh, and she wanted to cry with how good and simultaneously wrong it felt.

"Fuck you for making me wait," Malfoy growled at her, his hands dragging her blouse from her body, fingers snarling the clasp of her bra open. Each garment found its way to the floor.

"Fuck you for being such a bastard," Hermione retorted, her hands unbuckling his belt before going for the clasp of his trousers. She could feel his hands on the button and fly of her jeans, and she couldn't hold in her giggle when he tried to shove the tight-fitting denim from her body to little avail.

"Damn it, woman," he growled, jerking back from her to glare hatefully at the jeans.

"Don't you dare vanish them," Hermione warned him, sensing his intent. She wiggled as she pried the fabric from her skin, peeling the jeans off and kicking them from her feet. She'd slipped out of her boots already.

"Are those...." Malfoy began, and Hermione blushed when she recalled suddenly that beneath her jeans and boots, she'd donned a pair of multi-colored, knee-high socks.

"Shut up," Hermione rolled her eyes at him when he looked baffled. She bent, meaning to remove them, but he stopped her before she could. Hermione squeaked when he flicked her

knickers from her hips until they puddled around her ankles. Before she could go for the socks again, he hoisted her up his body, not at all struggling to lift her slight frame.

"Leave them on," he instructed, smirking at her before he snogged her again. Instinctively Hermione wrapped her legs around his waist, her hands tangling in his blonde hair as she clung to him. He stepped out of his own trousers and strode across the room towards his bed with Hermione clinging to him. She could feel his hard cock poking near her nether region insistently, but he'd yet to impale her.

She huffed at the feel of him dropping down on the bed on top of her, her head hitting his pillows. He snogged her even harder then until Hermione would swear she sore stars.

"Ungh," she groaned, biting her lip and pulling away from his mouth when she felt him drive two fingers inside her wet slit. Merlin, she loathed how good that felt. She returned the favor by palming his cock, and she felt the way he shuddered at the touch, driving his fingers into her harder.

"Fuck," Malfoy cursed quietly, pressing his face into her neck as they worked each other over.

"Hate you so fucking much," Hermione cursed breathlessly as she felt the tension inside her coil tight, poised to spring free. She'd been wet since he'd surprised her with a kiss at the pub. Her words seemed to turn him on even more, and Hermione knew he was just as fucked up as she was.

She knew that beneath the magic compelling them to crave each other, there was simply raw need and a dark connection of shared kinks drawing them to each other. She'd never have known she could be so interested in hard-core shagging if she'd never been captured and dragged to Malfoy Manor. When she had been with Ron, things had been sweet and gentle and lovely. She couldn't say she'd ever been dissatisfied with Ronald, excluding the final time after her meld with Draco.

But she knew now that she loved how it felt to have someone force pleasure on her. She enjoyed the way he took what he wanted from her body and gave as good as he got. She liked the foul language that poured from their mouths, curses, and expletives mingling with groans of pleasure. She liked that he wasn't gentle with her. That he wasn't afraid to hurt her. She liked the way every brutal thrust was that much better for the way it flirted with being painful.

Hermione knew she'd never have learned of such an interest if she'd never been with Malfoy. If she'd stayed with Ron, she'd have had the type of cute, adorable sex that people in love had. The type that people who cherished each other shared. She knew that they'd made love when she'd been with Ron.

What Malfoy did to her was the farthest thing from love. He fucked her. Like a well-used whore. And Hermione hated him for making her like it. When he kissed his way down her neck and towards her bared breasts, Hermione knew he was headed even further south.

"No you don't," she hissed, pulling on his hair as he kissed a line of burning kisses across her stomach. Hooking her legs under his arm and around his hips, Hermione used the grip to try and drag him back towards her lips.

"Witch," he warned, his voice husky and feral with need. He leveled her a glare, his fingers still playing in her swollen passage.

"Don't even think about it," Hermione shook her head at him, resisting, refusing to let his mouth any closer to her aching sex. She couldn't stand it. The last time he'd tongued her, he'd tormented her for what felt like forever. Pushing her right to the edge of the abyss and then backing off. She'd had enough of that with the muggles, and she didn't want it again so soon. She wanted him inside her, pounding her hard and fast to send her careening into the abyss of pleasure without a backward glance.

"I will get you," he warned.

"Later," Hermione huffed at him, almost delirious from the feel of his fingers working inside her. Using her legs, she dragged him back up her body until his cock nudged her thighs' apex. Hermione fished his hands away from there, canting her hips to the right angle to take him.

"Having fun?" he drawled, and Hermione caught the expression of intrigue on his face as she maneuvered him the way she wanted. He didn't resist, but he didn't help either.

"Not yet," Hermione retorted coldly before she dug both heels into his lower back and drove him deep inside her. She'd have been embarrassed at the strangled sound of pleasure he wrung from her if it weren't for the groan she heard spill from his lips at the feel of him spearing through her until he was fully sheathed in her wet heat.

Merlin, that might be her favorite part. There was nothing quite like the initial penetration during sex. She loved the way it stretched and stung just a little, bordering on being uncomfortable and painful and yet feeling so bloody good. The feel of him nudging so deep inside her she could almost taste it was like nothing she'd ever known, and Hermione adored that feeling.

"Bloody fuck, I'm going to kill you," he growled, "Fuck."

Hermione knew he was as furious as she was that it felt so damn good. She ignored his threat and bucked her hips. He hissed in a breath, lifting himself up on his elbows so he could glare at her. Hermione could see the fire dancing in his eyes, his hatred for her burning bright. She knew it was reflected in her own eyes. She held his gaze as she bucked her hips again, her ankles locked at the small of his back, his cock deep inside her. He narrowed his eyes before he began to move.

He glared every skerrick of his hatred at her as he began to slam into her, rearing back and driving deep again and again. The raw sound of their bodies slapping together filled her ears, and Hermione heard the expletives he drew from her lips. Hermione could see his hatred burning bright in his stormy grey eyes when his hands closed around her throat.

Clutching at his wrists, Hermione felt his hands slowly begin to tighten, gradually cutting off her air supply while his body drove into hers relentlessly. Hermione heard the little gasp of breath she drew, a moment of panic washing through her as he bucked into her harder, fucking her to death as he squeezed the life from her.

No sound fell from her lips as she momentarily blacked out while her body launched into orgasm. He released his hold on her throat with a dark chuckle as Hermione's body clamped down on his tighter than a vice, spasming and throbbing with the power of the orgasm that slammed into her. Hermione knew there were tears trickling from the corners of her eyes when she opened them to glare at him, the orgasm driving her wild. Before it could end, Hermione bucked wildly against him, bringing her arms around to claw her nails into the flesh of his back. She heard the hiss of his indrawn breath at the bite of pain.

"Fuck you," she snarled in his ear when he lowered it close enough, fighting for control. She was going to take it from him. The tail end of her orgasm caught him when she clenched her internal muscles voluntarily, surprising him with the additional, powerful spasm.

"Bitch," he groaned, thrusting harder for a few more seconds before burying himself deep, deep inside her as his come shot out to splash against her womb. Hermione had the wind knocked out of her when he collapsed on top of her, but she didn't mind. The high of her orgasm had left her too sated to care.

She was so tired, she realized. She hadn't slept well in days, not even when she'd snuggled with Harry that morning. She'd been too needy and frustrated to sleep well. Malfoy seemed to be suffering the same problem. He pulled out of her carefully, muttering cleaning spells and contraceptive charms as he climbed off her enough to draw back the covers on his bed. He didn't bother asking her to stay; he just looped one arm around her slim frame and dragged her across the quilt to where he'd opened the sheets.

Hermione sighed contentedly as he pulled the covers over the pair of them, and she didn't even mind when she dropped off to sleep with his arm still thrown across her ribs.

## Chapter 21

Draco woke with a sleeping mudblood in his arms. He was spooned around the little swot in his bed, and he had no idea of the time. The world outside was dark, making him think it must be the middle of the night. He'd not slept so well in weeks. Perhaps years. He didn't think he'd slept so well since before the war.

And he fucking hated her for that.

How dare she be able to make him come and to make him sleep well? How dare she be the one to have unlocked his magic? Draco despised their situation. Oh, he would admit he rather liked fucking her. It felt too fucking good not to enjoy that much, but he loathed having this entire mess involve the mudblood. Of all the people in the world, why did it have to be Hermione fucking Granger? It could've been anyone in the sodding world, and he'd wound up bound to Mudblood Granger.

More to the point, as a result of this mess his father had ordered him to woo the little swot into marrying him. The last thing Draco wanted to do was marry her. He wanted to throttle her. He wanted to shag her until they both died from how bloody good it felt. But he didn't want to spend his life putting up with her. Maybe he could just keep with this shagging arrangement. She'd agreed to that much back at the pub. Hell, she'd suggested that much.

It made sense, of course; she was no fool. She knew as well as he did that they were stuck in this together and that shagging anyone else was a waste of time. Draco had learned that the hard way, and he knew she'd done the same thing. He knew the little chit had been out shagging other blokes in the time she'd been away from him. He knew she wouldn't just come crawling back to him without first trying her other options. The only way she'd have crawled back into his bed was when she knew she didn't have any other choice.

Draco didn't know how he felt about that. He understood the urge to at least try to find a different solution. He'd done it himself, after all. The idea of her being with anyone else also made him insanely jealous, but at the end of the day, it was neither here nor there. She was back with him, inside his arms and in his bed, and Draco felt the most powerful urge to keep her there. He'd been craving her for weeks. For months. Since the last time he'd had her in this bed, snuggled next to him and trying to fight back the screams caused by her nightmares.

He didn't at all enjoy her company, nor was he overly a fan of anything to do with her personality. They clicked about as well as Fiendfyre and, well, anything. Draco eyed the girl in his arms carefully, at least as well as he could in the dim light of his bedroom. They'd fallen asleep with the hearth fire of his suite still burning, so he was able to make out some of her features by the flickering flames the elves had obviously been feeding during the night.

She looked almost peaceful in sleep, he noticed, lifting his head enough to look down on her. Her long curls were tangled in a nest about her head, partially concealing her face from view. Draco glanced at his outstretched arm beneath her neck, noticing that in her sleep, she'd strewn her arm across the bed beside his. He curled his lip at the sight of the scars they each

bore on their inner forearms. On his own was the fading remainder of the Dark Mark branded into his skin. The blackness of the brand was fading slowly, though it was still currently dark. The skull and snake design were still clear against his pale flesh.

Her arm bore another reminder of the war. Where he bore the brand of a Death Eater, she bore a memento of his Aunt's terrible cruelty. The word Mudblood was red and angry on her skin in almost the exact same spot as his Dark Mark. The sight of the two scars in such close proximity gave him pause. There was something about the two things, so entirely different, so opposed to the other, that brought into sharp focus the differences between the two of them.

He was a Death Eater. A pureblood. The sole heir of a long line of purebloods. He'd been on the losing side in the war, and he'd done and said terrible things both in the lead-up to the war and during the fighting. She was completely the opposite. She was a mudblood. The only witch in a long line of muggles. She was a member of the Order of the Phoenix. She'd fought for all that was good and right in the world. She stood up for others. She stood up for herself.

If she had to and had thought he deserved it, he'd bet the little swot would stand up for him if he needed it. He supposed, in some way, she already had. She'd refused to press charges for what he'd been forced to do to her in this very room the first time she'd been dragged into his home. She'd also clearly fought for him to some extent with Potter and the rest of the sodding Order; otherwise, Draco knew he'd be rotting in a cell in Azkaban.

He probably deserved to be.

Not that he wanted to be incarcerated, of course, but he knew he deserved to be punished for his crimes. He'd committed murder. He'd assaulted others. He'd brutalized the girl currently sleeping in his arms. He might not have had much choice in the matter at the time, but then, Draco knew there were things he could've done to prevent all this. He could've gone to Dumbledore when his family was first threatened by the Dark Lord. He could've sought their protection.

He could've turned to the Light sooner. Ironically, he knew he would never have at all if not for the little chit currently sleeping soundly against him. Had he not ended up shagging her, he knew he'd never have gone after her in the Room of Requirement. He'd never have sought her out and so would never have learned of the Dark Lord's Horcruxes.

Narrowing his eyes, Draco laid his cheek against hers. She was using his arm as a pillow, breathing deeply, sound asleep. Draco hated her for it. How dare she be so peaceful in his presence?

Tangling his fingers with hers where their arms rested together, Draco took stock of the rest of their entangled bodies. They were both still naked, having fallen asleep before redressing. She was much smaller than him, too thin from lack of sustenance both during the war and in her barely functioning state since then. Draco knew he was too thin as well. In fact, he was hungry.

His entire body was spooned around hers snugly, he noticed, their legs tangled, one of his thighs trapped between both of hers. He had one arm wrapped around her middle, his elbow

crooked over her hip, his hand splayed against her chest, his forearm snug between her breasts. His cock – which he suspected was what had woken him – was nestled intimately against her slit, snug against her folds.

Draco smirked.

Lifting his cheek from hers, he found himself entirely unable to resist the yearning for more of the fiery little witch. Nuzzling his nose against her neck, Draco peppered soft kisses along her jaw and down the side of her neck. Licking and nipping the flesh hungrily. His cock was already rearing to go, but it throbbed painfully when she moaned in her sleep, stretching her neck to expose more of her flesh to his tongue. Draco would admit that he kind of liked that.

Dragging his fingertips over her right nipple, Draco trailed his hand to her hip, canting it back against him more firmly until her arse pressed against him. Her body – clearly attuned to his touch and receptive even in sleep – was wet for him when he nudged the head of his cock towards her snug sheath. He took his time entering her, withdrawing his thigh from between hers and using his knee to curl her further to better angle her for his penetration.

She gasped, half-waking as he fed her inch by slow inch.

Draco smirked to himself as he did so. She was so tight and wet and warm, and it made his eyes cross with pleasure. Blast it all for feeling so fucking good! He knew she was awake when her hand tightened around his. He'd entangled their fingers where his arm lay stretched out under her neck. He didn't know why he'd done it, really. He just had. Clearly, she didn't know why he'd done it either; she simply reacted.

"This is how you wake me?" she asked, her voice husky with sleep.

Draco didn't answer her verbally. He simply began a slow pace, thrusting into her as deep as he could at this angle. He nipped her shoulder, refusing to let her turn her head to look at him. She arched her back as he took her slowly, drawing him deeper. Merlin, he hated how fucking good she felt.

Refusing to let her draw him into an argument or let her ruin what he'd begun, Draco took his time shagging her. He knew, after all, that he could make her scream his name and curse the day he'd been born when he fucked her with every hateful thing he had inside of him. Draco wanted to see what he could do without forcing his anger and hatred on her. He wanted to find out what kinds of sounds she might make when she wasn't spitting venom at him.

She began to mewl softly as he continued, rolling her hips against him in time with his thrusts. Her fingers were entangled tightly with his, and Draco found himself curling both their arms around her, pressing her back against him more snugly. Gods, he hated how good she felt in his arms. What right did she have to fit so well against him?

"Malfoy," she mewled softly, and Draco smirked at the sound of his name on her lips. He wondered what it would take to get her to whimper his first name. He didn't recall ever hearing her use it, but as he lay there in the dark, he found himself wanting to.

When she took up his free hand, which he's been using for leverage on her hip to pull her slowly onto each deep penetration, he thought she meant to stop him. Draco closed his eyes at the feeling that washed through him when she slipped his palm from her hip to her flat stomach. She pressed it, palm flat, low down on her abdomen, and for a moment, he thought she wanted him to play with her clit, but when he tried, she held him firm. She canted her arse further back against him, twisting slightly, and suddenly Draco felt it.

The nudge of his own cock against his palm from deep inside her.

He nearly lost it then.

"Fuck," he hissed, his eyes clenching tighter as he thrust a little harder. She whimpered at the feel of him holding his hand against her, feeling what he was doing to her. When she seemed sure he wasn't going to move his hand away, she curled her arm back around the back of his neck, her fingers tangling in his hair while she arched deeper into his touch.

Merlin, he loathed that feeling. He loathed it because he suspected he loved it. He loved being able to feel himself so deep inside her, nudging at secretive places within her, claiming her. Marking her with his body.

"Ungh!" she groaned when Draco found his face nuzzled against the back of her neck, his teeth biting down on her. He didn't break the skin, just nipped her hard enough to cause the slightest bite of pain.

She dissolved in his hold.

"Oh, God," she sobbed raggedly, her whole body tightening and shuddering against him. She clamped down hard on his cock, and Draco saw stars as he held himself back. He wasn't nearly done shagging her yet.

"What have you done to me?" she mewled as her orgasm seemed to go on and on in time with his slow thrusts.

Draco still didn't speak to her. He didn't feel like it. He didn't know what to say. He just wanted to have his way with her. Laving his tongue over the sting of his bite, Draco loosened his hold as she went lax, her body turning boneless with her release. She didn't protest at all when he rolled them both until she was face down, his cock still embedded deep inside her clutching sheath. When she arched her back, hiking her arse into the air a bit, Draco groaned as he slid impossibly deeper inside her.

He'd never fucked her from behind, though he knew from experience with other witches that it took him deeper.

"Ah," she moaned, turning her head to peer at him over her shoulder. Their hands were still intertwined, and Draco took great pleasure as he slipped his hand back under her, pressing it back to her abdomen. He thrust harder now, driving himself deeper. He met her gaze for a moment, and he could see she was practically delirious with pleasure, her eyes desperate, fixed on his face needily. Draco smirked at her, rearing back a bit before driving into her. She

braced for him, and Draco felt an unexpected jolt race up his spine as his pubic bone collided with her arse. The pressure was strange but good.

More. He wanted more.

Draco supposed he could admit he might've lost control then. The feeling of driving into her so deep, of feeling himself, both with his cock and his hand on her abs, so far inside her, combined with the nerve-crackling tingles from pounding into her might've driven him over the edge. He never let go of her hand as he fucked her then. She didn't curse. Not like she usually did. But she did moan his surname loudly.

She cried out in pleasurable agony when he slipped his hand on her stomach lower, his fingers finding her clit and pressing it like a big red Explode button. She detonated under him hard as he shagged her until he could barely breathe. His lungs were burning, his whole body straining, aching to get even deeper inside her.

The fire in the fireplace roared, leaping high up the chimney as their magic meshed together, threatening to consume them both.

"Fuck... Granger... Bloody, Fuck!" Draco growled, thrusting faster, harder, his grip on her tightening as his bollocks tightened painfully before emptying into her. Merlin, she had no right to feel so fucking good under him.

Their heavy pants intermingled as Draco collapsed on top of her. He was probably crushing her. He knew he should probably get off her.

"Don't move," she panted when he tensed, meaning to do just that.

"You sure?" he asked.

"Don't move yet," she tried again, clarifying, and Draco got the feeling she liked the comforting weight of him on top of her, pressing her into the mattress, both of them utterly spent. He wondered if maybe she just wanted to keep him inside her a few minutes longer. He would admit he rather liked being there.

He moved his arm from beneath her when it began to tingle with loss of feeling. She hummed a strange, contented sort of purr when he used the now-freed appendage to drag her nest of tangles to the side so he could nuzzle back into her neck. He breathed in the scent of her skin, slightly disgusted with himself when he realized it comforted him. He hated himself a little for the fact that he realized he'd been missing her scent as much as he'd missed the rest of her.

In fact, he loathed himself as he realized with a jolt that he'd bloody missed her.

He'd missed the scent of her skin. He'd missed that foul mouth of hers when he riled her up. He'd missed the feeling of her horrible hair tangling around his hands when he buried them in it. He'd missed the feel of her body shuddering and writhing against his as he inflicted pleasure upon her ruthlessly.

Draco lifted his head from her skin, glaring down at her in annoyance over his own flaws to learn he'd been missing a mudblood. She slanted sleepy eyes in his direction when she felt his gaze. He expected from the look on her face that she was suffering the same sudden realization.

Merlin, they were so completely bollocksed.

Draco didn't want to deal with it. So he didn't. Instead, he treated her like he would anyone else he'd just had mind-blowing sex with in the middle of the night. He lifted himself enough that he could graze his teeth over her earlobe, enjoying the way her pussy clenched around his cock at the sensation.

"You hungry?" he murmured to her.

She lifted her head at that, looking surprised by his question and then thoughtful.

"Starving," she admitted as he pulled out of her and rolled to the side. He let go of her hand carefully.

"Come on then," he smirked at her, getting to his feet and searching for some pajama bottoms, "Let's go get some food."

He handed her one of his jumpers, knowing she wouldn't be able to comfortably get back into those bloody jeans he'd had such trouble getting her out of. She was still wearing her knee-high socks, too, much to Draco's secret and perverted pleasure. She looked like a well-ravished mess when she pulled his jumper on over her head. It fell to mid-thigh, concealing her body from view. Draco didn't bother with a shirt or a jumper for himself.

He was too busy eyeing the well-shagged little mudblood as she climbed out of his bed and began searching for her knickers. He smirked, toeing them further under the edge of the bed so she wouldn't be able to locate them until he wanted her to. She narrowed her eyes and huffed at him but said nothing when she gave up a few moments later.

Draco didn't say anything else, though he did flick his wand at her, muttering cleaning charms on both of them. He looked away for a moment, tossing up the idea of 'accidentally' forgetting the contraceptive charms. He knew that if he really wanted to, he could knock her up and trick her into marrying him that way.

He dismissed the idea with a wave of his wand at her when he realized what a foolish one it was. His entire life thus far had been uprooted and hurled about like a weed in a hurricane, and he wasn't about to let anything make it worse. Especially not anything like knocking up Hermione bloody Granger before he was good and ready for kids. Something he didn't expect to be until he'd completed his NEWTs and done whatever the bloody hell else he felt like doing.

Draco glanced back at her again, unable to suppress a chuckle at the state of her hair. Having been out in the snow before he'd dragged her into bed with him, it had gone completely wild. It curled madly, kinking at odd angles and making her look very much like a thickly maned lion.

"Shut your mouth, Malfoy," she hissed at him, clearly realizing exactly what he was laughing at as he led her out of the room and away through the dark Manor, "And get used to it. You make me look like this; then you have to deal with it."

"I didn't say a word, Granger," he replied smoothly, still smirking.

"Your face did," she protested, "Don't you dare judge my messy hair when you're the one who made it messy."

"I can't be blamed for that atrocity," he argued, "You already had that nest going on."

"You made it worse," she insisted, "Merlin, I hate you. This isn't going to work. I want to kill you too much."

"Naw, you're such a sweet talker," Draco teased her, snagging hold of her elbow and tugging her down a step and into his arms.

"What are you doing?" she wanted to know, her arms going around his neck in surprise.

"Keeping you from hitting that trick step," he nodded his head at the second step she'd just barely brushed with her stocking foot. She glanced back at it and blanched at the sight of the wood splintering and giving way to what looked like a bed of nails.

"You could've warned me!" she hissed, and Draco smirked at the way her hands tangled in his hair at his nape. She wriggled a bit as though she couldn't decide if she wanted to thump him for nearly letting her impale her foot or if she wanted to climb him to make sure she didn't fall into any other traps.

"I did," Draco smirked, "By rescuing you. You should be thanking me."

He wasn't expecting it when she snogged him.

Her lips crashed against his hotly, and Draco nearly forgot about his grumbling stomach at the feel of her tongue sweeping into his mouth. Merlin, how was it that even after being asleep for hours, she tasted like heaven instead of like horrible morning breath? He clutched her tighter to his chest as he tangled his tongue around hers. Bloody hell, he was going to have to shag her again. There was nothing else for it.

How could she be this much an aphrodisiac?

She was just a sodding Mudblood. Nothing special. Only he supposed she kind of *was* special. She was the lock to his key and the key to his lock. She was the one witch in all the world that the Fates who controlled the Old Magic had decided would be the one capable to unleash his true potential.

Draco detested that.

"Is that your way of expressing gratitude?" he asked huskily when they broke apart. She wriggled out of his hold and didn't answer, though she did level him a sly look. Draco

smirked, knowing she wouldn't speak. Instead, he continued leading her through the dark towards the kitchen.

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She waved her wand to light up the kitchen when he led her into it, and Draco looked around the large space eagerly. All of the elves were sleeping, it seemed.

"Master?" a very sleepy Tiggy asked, appearing with a quiet pop rubbing his enormous eyes and blinking at the harsh light of the well-lit kitchen.

"Go back to sleep Tiggy," Draco told the elf, eyeing him pityingly when he noticed the poor thing was practically still asleep.

"You is needing something to eat, Master?" Tiggy asked, "Tiggy can make it for you, sir."

"That's alright, Tiggy," Granger interrupted before Draco could cave and ask the elf to cook them something, "You go back to sleep. We only wanted biscuits, and I've found them."

She rattled the biscuit tin indicatively.

"Miss?" Tiggy asked, clearly confused by her interruption and by the way she so casually treated the elf like he was hers. Draco smirked to himself. He knew all about what a crazy little chit she'd been when they were at Hogwarts before the war. She'd started a sodding society for House Elf rights, and he expected he would be getting a lecture from her about owning one the minute Tiggy was gone.

"She's right, Tiggy," Draco said, prying the tin from Granger's fingers and opening it to withdraw a biscuit to eat, "We're all set for a midnight snack. You go back to bed and get some sleep. I'll call for you when we want breakfast."

Tiggy nodded his head, looking relieved. His little shoulders sagged a bit, still rubbing one eye as he popped back out of the kitchen to wherever it was he slept. His mother had tried to offer the elves better living quarters when the war had finished, but most of them had refused to take actual quarters.

Draco turned back to Granger, expecting to find her fuming at him and ready to give him a tongue-lashing. He choked on his bite of biscuit he was eating when he found her sitting on the corner counter of the nearest bench, her multi-colored socks swinging with her legs as she nibbled one of the biscuits as well. She sat kitty-corner on the counter, and Draco nearly had a coronary when he recalled she wasn't wearing any knickers – something he could plainly see thanks to the way her jumper had ridden up.

"Don't splutter at me," she chided without even bothering to glance at him as he tried to dislodge the hunk of biscuit from his windpipe. She glanced over when he gave a particularly harsh cough, managing to unsettle the cookie dough from his throat.

"That's unsanitary," he informed her, pointing at the way she was sitting bare-arsed on the kitchen counter.

"You were the one who hid my knickers," she argued, taking another biscuit from the tin and nibbling on it like a chipmunk.

"You can't sit on the kitchen counters without knickers, Granger. The elves prepare my food here."

"As though you haven't had your tongue down there?" she asked, flicking her eyes toward her exposed pussy.

"That's different," Draco argued, shocked by her behavior. He'd never seen her seem so... forward. Or so blasé about anything.

"Is not," she argued, "Either way, you end up with the taste of me on your tongue. Now stop gaping at me and make me a sandwich."

"Excuse me?" Draco managed, suspecting she was trying to rattle him.

"Did you not hear me?" she asked. Draco noticed that as she spoke, she was also wandlessly and nonverbally controlling the kettle to make a pot of tea. He watched with mild fascination as two cups and saucers arranged themselves. The sugar jar scuttled over and began dumping sugar into one of the cups when the water was poured.

"Do you take milk and sugar?" she asked, smirking at him in an uncanny replica of his signature expression when she noticed his attention.

"Two sugars," he nodded, "Dash of milk."

He would admit to being slightly mesmerized by the entire collection of china, including a now steaming teapot, all hopped themselves onto a tea tray which was then levitated over to where she was still sitting.

"Are you going to make me that sandwich or not?" she asked as she sipped her tea. He kind of liked the way she stuck her pinky out like a posh Lady, even while sitting there bare-arsed and getting her juices all over his counter.

"Are you always this rude?" he wanted to know, recovering his equilibrium as best he could.

"Never," she replied, "But I can be worse. If you keep complaining."

Draco narrowed his eyes at her, realizing suddenly exactly what it was she was trying to do. She wanted to horrify him into forgetting all about the idea of them being a couple. He certainly didn't want to date her or bloody marry her. But he would. Draco knew he would. He didn't have a choice. Bothering with trying to find another witch who would have him would be a waste of time.

He was a disgraced Death Eater, for one. No one on the side of the Light wanted a bar of him thanks to his unsavory actions and allegiances during the war. And none of the other purebloods wanted a piece of him, thanks to the fact that his entire family had ratted out everyone who was a Death Eater and all those they'd known who'd been affiliated without taking the Mark. The Malfoy family was not currently a popular one, though Narcissa had

been working to improve their standing once again. Draco knew his Father was having to grease a lot of palms with hefty amounts of gold to buy back some social standing.

Not that they couldn't afford it.

As though any of that wasn't troublesome enough for him to consider finding another witch but the one before him, there was also the problem of *her*. What witch in their right mind would want to be with a disgraced Death Eater and a Blood Traitor to boot when he came with the added baggage of an in-built mistress for the rest of his days? He was stuck with Granger as surely as he was stuck with the brand on his forearm and the Puffeskin allergy he'd had since birth. He needed her like he needed sleep and sustenance.

She was practically a sodding medical condition and simultaneously, the treatment for that condition all in one. And while there were certain families and traditions among the pureblood elite who would tolerate the idea of him having a Mistress, none would be so forgiving as to accept that Mistress being Hermione Granger.

Mudblood. War-Heroine. Know-it-all. Swotty chit.

Nope, there wasn't a witch alive who would be willing to think about competing with that. Draco wasn't above admitting that the little witch was brilliant. She wasn't that bad to look at either when she tamed that wild mane of hers. Although Draco got the feeling as he eyed her that the hair would grow on him. He kind of liked the way she looked so well-shagged with it all in a mess like that. Any who might be willing to get past her smarts and her looks would surely object to her blood. Any who didn't object to the blood would undoubtedly know they could not match her. Even the prettiest witches in the world would not measure up for long.

Draco knew because he knew all about how a woman's beauty would fade, leaving only whatever substance she had as a person left behind. He'd seen a shining example of that in Aunt Bella. Her beauty had been irrefutable in her youth. He knew. He'd seen the pictures. But Azkaban and madness had destroyed that. Leaving only a psychotic bitch behind.

As such, he knew that even if he could find a witch with both unmatched beauty and brains, they would end up lacking. Granger would outshine them when beauty faded. None could be as clever as her. None would be as sharp as her either. Draco knew that. He despised her, but he wasn't above recognizing her more favorable traits when considering marrying the chit. Besides, even if he did find a witch not only willing to be with him but allowing him a mistress and all. Even if he found a bright beauty with the most pleasant personality in the world. Even if, by some miracle, those things were attainable, he would still wind up stuck with Granger.

She was the only witch he could get off with. Even being in her presence felt like a balm to long chapped skin. She got on his last damn nerve, but Draco couldn't deny that he craved her like a junkie craved a hit. And what witch would want to compete with that? No other would be able to bear him an heir to the Malfoy line. No other would be able to fall pregnant to him because no other could get him there. And he didn't imagine Granger would be willing to play at *menage e trois*.

He narrowed his eyes on the witch suddenly, a terrible dread filling his stomach. He couldn't knock anyone else up because he couldn't bloody come with anyone but her. But a witch didn't need to come herself to fall pregnant. Merlin's bollocks, if he didn't tie her to him in monogamy, he might very much have to suffer the indignity of raising some other bastard's brats. Or, at the very least, being with the mother of some other bastard's brats every other night.

Draco Malfoy did *not* want to be that bloke. He wouldn't. He refused. He couldn't stand the thought of the drama that would ensue, for one thing, if the little bitch got herself knocked up with some other bastard's kids. He would either end up their pseudo-step-father, irrevocably warping their sense of right and wrong and what was proper, or he would be that creepy bloke who turned up and shagged their mother every night only to be gone again by dawn.

"Something bothering you, Malfoy?" Granger practically purred as the torches and the fireplace grew higher and higher, the fire leaping greedily at the rest of the house as though intent on devouring it. Draco fixed his eyes back on the little bitch where she was still swinging her legs on the counter.

She looked smug. As though she could tell he was thinking things that made him insanely jealous and utterly furious. Unable to stand the thoughts plaguing his mind, Draco stalked her across the kitchen, watching the way she tensed as he came closer. Before she could stop him or protest, Draco dropped to his knees on the kitchen floor, jerking her forwards on the edge of the bench until he could bury his face between her spread legs and spear his tongue between her folds.

"Fuck!" she exclaimed, and Draco growled possessively when she dropped the tea cup she'd still been clutching, her head falling back at the feel of him tormenting her with his tongue.

Draco wasted no more time. He tasted her hungrily, forgetting his need for food with the taste of her on his tongue; the sweet flavor of her body bursting in his mouth and making him wild with lust.

"Bloody hell, Malfoy," she hissed between clenched teeth, one hand tangled in his hair, pressing his closer even as she writhed to escape his torment of her. She groaned like she was dying when Draco drove two fingers into her pussy, curling them against the spongy spot on the front wall of her passage and working it ruthlessly. He used his tongue and his teeth to twist and tease the bundle of nerves at the top of her slit. Her heels dug into his back, though whether she was trying to pull him closer or kick him away, Draco didn't even think she knew.

It didn't take long before Draco felt her burst around him, a low whine leaving her throat as her body spasmed with release. Before she could recover, Draco rose, capturing her lips with his and spearing his tongue into her mouth like he'd done to her dripping cunt. She tried to fight him off, clearly not approving of the taste of herself, but Draco refused to release her. He clamped one hand on the back of her neck, nipping her lips punishingly as he snogged her furiously. The other hand freed his cock from the pajama bottoms he wore and guided the throbbing member into her still-fluttering slit.

He wasn't going to stop. He didn't think he *could* stop. And he sure as fuck wasn't going to share!

## Chapter 22

Hermione escaped Malfoy Manor before he could wake. She was surprised she managed it, to be honest. She hadn't tried to be quiet or all that sneaky when she'd woken again at midday. She felt like she'd been hit by a truck by the time Malfoy had been through with her the previous evening. Her whole body throbbed with a sweet ache of being well and truly shagged.

She'd woken in his arms again, tangled in his hold as they slept. Hermione hated him for the way he clutched her so tightly, holding her to him so desperately. She hated him for it because she kind of liked it. She loved being spooned, and she loved being held as she slept. She never felt safer than when she slept in someone's arms. She also despised that he seemed to be the only one with whom she could get a decent night's sleep these days. Ever since this bloody meld. Ever since the Merlin cursed war.

She'd never slept as well as she had with him holding her, ravished into exhaustion and apparently safe in his otherwise violent presence. When she'd slunk from his arms, he'd made a noise of protest but not awoken. Hermione had thought about simply donning her clothes and fleeing as fast as she could, but there was little point in it. It wasn't as though she wouldn't be back again.

So, instead, she'd put his utterly delectable washroom to use. She'd not had the chance during her last visit to truly appreciate the glory that was his shower, but Hermione took full advantage of it. She didn't know how long she'd stayed there, the five showerheads beating down on her and easing the aching muscles he'd inspired in her. She'd have to bring her own products over, she supposed. She'd used his soap, shampoo, and conditioner that morning but suspected they would be hell on her hair.

And while she'd found she rather liked the citrus and spice scent of his soap on him, she didn't fancy it on her own skin. At least, not when it wasn't a result of shagging him. Hermione hated herself a little for that, too. His scent was intoxicating, but it felt like cheating to have it on her skin as a result of bathing. And since she had no doubt that she would be back, she would have to bring supplies with her next time.

She'd be sneaky, of course. He would be ruthless in his torment if she just turned up with a whole array of her things. He was smug enough as it was after that mess they'd made in the kitchen. Hermione was mortified over the destruction they'd caused in there. If not for their magic being unlocked, Hermione felt certain they'd never have managed to clean up and fix everything they'd broken.

As it was, Hermione found herself squirming into her tight jeans and wishing she had something less difficult to don that she could wear. Malfoy was still fast asleep in the bed, his naked body sprawled across the grey silk sheets. She paused for just a moment as she donned her leather jacket to peer at him. His blonde hair needed cutting. It hung over his face, disturbed by his breath and probably tickling his nose from the way he twitched his hand to brush it away in sleep.

She could see the Dark Mark still tattooed on his arm, though it was fading, where he'd flung it out across the bed. From the way his hand twitched a bit there, Hermione suspected that even in sleep, he'd begun to search for her. Possessive-sleeping git. Dragging her fingers through her hair and muttering a drying spell, Hermione smiled when her curls fell in sleek, shiny waves about her shoulders, dry, clean, and tangle-free once more.

She didn't bother leaving Malfoy a note. It was too much fun to think of him waking and flying into a rage when he found her gone. She adored not having told him where she lived, though she pitied Harry, who would undoubtedly receive an angry letter from Malfoy later today if she didn't contact him.

Slipping her boots back onto her feet, Hermione smirked as she left Malfoy's bedroom. She stalked back through the halls, desperately trying to recall the way to the front doors so she could escape this place.

"Good day, Miss Granger," a drawling voice startled her, and Hermione hissed in a breath of surprise, causing a nearby vase to shatter as Lucius Malfoy startled her.

"Mr Malfoy?" she asked, seeing his momentary shock over her reaction. She glared at the vase she'd destroyed, repairing it silently and levitating it back to its proper place.

"I see Draco wasn't kidding about the two of you being infinitely more powerful when in close proximity to one another," the man commented dryly. Hermione raised her eyebrows at him as he propped his shoulder in the doorway of what she assumed must be his office.

"Did you need something, Mr Malfoy?" Hermione asked. She didn't much fancy idle pleasantries. Especially not with a Death Eater and as horrible person as Lucius Malfoy.

"Does Draco know you're leaving?" he asked, smirking at her just like his son so often did. Hermione rolled her eyes, "Ah, sneaking out then. And leaving me to deal with his foul temper later when he wakes and finds you gone."

"The woes of parenthood," Hermione sneered in response. She was almost shocked by the words coming out of her mouth. She prided herself on her manners and ability to rise above being taunted.

"Indeed," Lucius replied, not looking rankled by her rudeness, "Something I'm sure you'll one day bemoan to my dear wife and me when raising my grandson."

Hermione nearly vomited at his feet.

"I'll not be bearing your grandchildren, Mr. Malfoy," Hermione replied curtly, "Now if you'll excuse me, I have things to do today."

"Suit yourself," he shrugged, "But we both know you're lying."

Hermione glared at him, suspecting he was accusing her of lying about bearing his grandchildren. She didn't bother saying goodbye as she huffed away from him.

"Mind the fanged geraniums, Miss Granger," he called as she went down the steps toward the foyer. Hermione rolled her eyes but heeded the warning when she opened the front door and found the plants snapping hungrily towards her ankles as she took the path to reach the front gates. She just barely avoided having her boots ruined by the plants, noticing with a jolt that the snowy weather had obviously cleared, leaving a fine summer day in its wake. She narrowed her eyes in annoyance to realize its timing coincided horribly with her reunion with Malfoy.

She could hear Harry tormenting her now.

As soon as she'd reached the gates of Malfoy Manor, Hermione hissed, accidentally pricking her finger on the gate as she tried to open it. She examined it carefully, horrified to discover that the infernal device was designed to be opened by magic and punished those who tried to leave any other way. Merlin cursed purebloods! How dare they demand magic to leave? Hermione was still snarling under her breath as she began to repeat the spells she knew for escaping such wards as theirs. Hermione knew it was just another pureblood tradition to demand such things should one manage to get close to the warded building.

She was in the middle of focusing on bringing the wards down enough that she could Apparate away when it happened. Out of nowhere, there was a click and a flash. Hermione instinctively realized that someone had just taken her photograph. Without conscious thought, she lashed out irrationally, somehow shattering each of the cameras she'd encountered when the flash went off.

"Excuse me? Are you Hermione Granger?" one of the reporters called, trying to gain her attention as Hermione looked around in surprise. It had been a long time since she'd paid the press any mind. Hermione wondered what terrible things they would print about her. At least she did for as long as it took to Apparate herself out of there.

"Bloody reporters," she muttered to herself as she Apparated into the backyard of her parent's home, "What do they possibly hope to achieve by loitering outside the gates to Malfoy Manor?"

As soon as she let herself in the back door of her Mum and Dad's place, Hermione took the stairs two at a time. Her bedroom was at the top of the steps, and Hermione couldn't wait to get into some fresh clothes. She'd still been unable to locate her knickers before she'd left Malfoy's, so she'd been forced to wriggle into her jeans without them. She hated the feeling of going without them, especially in such tight jeans.

Sighing to herself as she stripped out of the outfit and tossed it into her laundry hamper, Hermione took a moment when she was naked to go up on her toes, stretching her arms up over her head. Her whole body ached in a good way, and she felt better than she'd done in ages. Ferreting through her wardrobe, Hermione located some fresh knickers and a clean bra before speculatively eyeing the clothes she could wear for the day.

She supposed she ought to pop over to Diagon Alley. She needed to start getting things organized. She'd spent enough time wallowing, and now it was time to put her big-girl knickers back on and get her life back in order. Which would start by replying to McGonagall's offer to return to Hogwarts and complete her NEWTs. She also needed to go

about replying to the many other people who'd been writing to her. Some of them wrote with job offers, and others wrote to her because she was Hermione Granger – the brainy best friend of Harry Potter.

Hermione didn't recall exactly what Harry had been telling people, but she knew that many among the general public believed her to be somewhat important to the wizarding world. Sighing to herself, Hermione's eyes settled on a green and white jumper sticking out of the bottom drawer of her closet. Wrinkling her brow in confusion, she bent and tugged it free from its hiding place. She promptly dropped it in shock when she realized it was the spare Quidditch jumper Malfoy had given her when she'd been captured, and Greyback had shredded hers.

She hadn't realized she still had it.

Hermione eyed the name 'Malfoy' scrawled across for a long moment. She really shouldn't put it on. She ought to return it to Malfoy. Hermione bit her lip as she bent and picked it up again. Before she could talk herself out of it, Hermione pulled the jumper on over her head. She hated herself just a little bit for the way it felt so warm and comfortable. Anything Malfoy had given her had no right to do so, but it did.

"It's not like anyone will catch me wearing it," Hermione murmured, fingering the green and white fabric as she glanced at herself in the mirror. No one from the magical world knew where her parents lived, and no one from the muggle world remembered that she lived here. Shrugging to herself, Hermione decided to forgo self-loathing in favor of comfort. She stepped into some stretchy black tights beneath the jumper and went to her desk.

She needed to reply to all these letters she'd been getting before she went anywhere else. It was important to her that she thank the many people who'd been offering her positions since the war had ended. She wasn't ready to decide which – if any – would suit her. Hermione hadn't honestly believed that she would survive the war, so she'd long since stopped planning what she might like to do for a career after it was all said and done.

That was why she wanted to go to Hogwarts. She adored learning and was looking forward to having at least one year at Hogwarts not be interrupted by needing to help Harry defeat Voldemort. Harry and Ron, she knew, were not planning to return. They'd both been offered the chance to begin training to become Aurors, and neither boy was about to give that up. Hermione had been offered the same thing, but her life of fighting crime was over.

At least, the life of catching Dark Wizards. Hermione would leave that to Harry. She'd been thinking about how she might incorporate her interests in House Elf rights in a career, but she'd learned a thing or two since she'd been a fourth year. The most important thing about the topic being that most elves wanted to work and resented her for trying to stop them. She'd done enough damage trying to free them. She would still like to see some kind of implementation that allowed elves to leave their place of slavery should they choose to.

She wanted to give them the option. She'd only really ever known Dobby to be an elf interested in his freedom. The others seemed to prefer being employed and serving their family. Hermione couldn't say she blamed them in the larger scheme of things. If they weren't treated poorly, she had no problem with people having house elves.

She didn't know what kind of career she could make of it though. She imagined she would have to take Care of Magical Creatures if she wanted to go into any type of field involving the elves. And she'd dropped the subject after her OWLs because Hagrid's method had always been a bit unorthodox. Hermione supposed she could take it up again. She doubted McGonagall was going to object or try to stop her. She hadn't taken the subject in her sixth year, but Hermione didn't doubt she'd be able to pass any exam they wanted to make her sit.

Hermione scratched out replies to all the unanswered mail she'd been hanging onto since her retreat into herself. She was finishing up a final reply to a woman at Witch Weekly who had offered Hermione a position as a reporter if she was at all interested – which she most certainly was not – when the muggle telephone in her parent's kitchen began to ring.

Hermione frowned. She'd changed the number after her parents had moved to Australia, and the only person she could remember giving it to was Harry should he need to reach her in an emergency. Running downstairs quickly, Hermione snatched up the receiver.

"Hello?" she asked into the line.

"Hermione?" Harry's voice came through, sounding pleased that she'd picked up.

"Harry? Is everything alright?" Hermione asked, frowning.

"Everything's fine, why?" he asked nonchalantly.

"I gave you this number for emergencies," Hermione reminded him, "I assumed by your calling that something was wrong."

"Nope," Harry could be heard grinning through the phone line, "I just wanted to see if you were home."

Hermione could practically hear the judgment in his voice.

"Where are you calling from?" Hermione asked, "Grimmauld Place doesn't have a phone."

"I know. I'm calling from the pay phone down the street," Harry answered, "Anything you want to tell me about last night, Hermione?"

"Are you alone?" Hermione asked, smiling just a little bit at his nosiness and obvious concern for her.

"No, Hermione," Harry scoffed sarcastically, "I dragged Ron and Ginny down the street to stand next to me and shout into the phone while I asked you how you went with Malfoy last night."

"Ok, yes, it was a stupid question," Hermione agreed, laughing at his response.

"So?" he prompted. "How did it go? I assume by the fact that you're home now that you managed to escape him again."

"Yes, I imagine he'll probably owl you later looking for me. I got the impression that he wasn't thrilled about my avoiding him. Or about not being able to reach me. Or about the idea of me being gone by the time he wakes up today."

"You shagged him then?" Harry asked, and Hermione could hear the laughter in his voice.

"What do you think?" Hermione asked, rolling her eyes.

"That's a yes then. I'm surprised you managed to get away from him so soon, though."

"So am I. He was still asleep when I left Malfoy Manor two hours ago," Hermione admitted.

"Bloody hell, Hermione! You went back to Malfoy Manor last night?"

"Well, it's not like I had much choice. I met him at a pub and intended to utilize one of the rooms there. Malfoy got his wand in a knot about it and insisted that if I wanted to try and cheapen this arrangement, I was wasting my time and that going to his place would be the best way to keep the entire thing a secret. You know, since he told his parents all about this meld, there was less chance of us being spotted by anyone or overheard."

"Blimey," Harry said, and Hermione could all but hear him rubbing the back of his neck in thought, "He's probably right, though. If his parents know about it, it makes no sense to pay for hotel rooms and sneak around when you can just Floo over, shag him, and leave."

"Yes, well, try telling that to me two hours ago when I was leaving via the front gates so that I could apparate outside the wards and ended up smack-bang in the middle of the press," Hermione grumbled.

"You got caught leaving on camera?" Harry began to laugh.

"Well, technically. Although I might've been startled and reacted badly... and, you know, accidentally caused all of their cameras to shatter," Hermione sighed.

"Bloody hell, Hermione," Harry was laughing openly now, "You need to get a hold of that power. You're going to accidentally hurt someone with it if you're not careful... Do I need to bother asking how things went with Malfoy during the night, given that you've made it stop snowing finally?"

"What makes you think it was my doing that it was snowing?" Hermione protested.

"Oh, I don't know," Harry taunted, "How about the fact that it continued to snow the entire month – in the middle of summer – until you showed up here yesterday and then met up with Malfoy last night? Your moods are now controlling the weather."

"Oh shut up," Hermione complained when he laughed some more.

"You realize that even if you did break their cameras, the press is going to write something about you being seen for the first time since the memorials, leaving Malfoy Manor?" Harry asked.

"I know," Hermione sighed, "I'm not thrilled about it, but I'm not about to go around threatening people and making it worse. That will make everyone all the more suspicious, and the last thing I need is this getting back to Ron that there's something happening between me and Malfoy."

"What is happening between you and Malfoy?" Harry asked, and Hermione heard the sounds of him adding more coins to the pay phone. She was grateful he'd decided to call.

"We are basically enemies with benefits right now," Hermione admitted. "Although you'll never believe it, Harry, he basically demanded that as long as I'm shagging him – which may be forever – I wasn't to shag anyone else or he'll kill them. He pretty much suggested we date. He said he hated me as much as I hated him, but there was no way out of the meld – not even in death – so it was a matter of time. Can you believe that?"

"I'm still having a hard time wrapping my head around the idea of you and Malfoy being enemies with benefits," Harry replied.

"Well, I can't call him my fuck buddy," Hermione argued, "That implies that we're friends."

"True... I hate to say it, Hermione, but we did talk about this. If you're as stuck with him as has been suggested, then it would probably make sense for the two of you to be a couple. I don't know about you, but I can't repeatedly shag someone and not end up feeling something for them."

"Oh, I feel plenty of things regarding Malfoy," Hermione assured him, "Hatred. Disgust. Self-loathing, to name a few."

"Well, yeah, now. But what about this time next year? Based on what you've said thus far, I get the feeling that you and he are somewhat addicted to one another. Like crack addicts. How are you going to shag him every day and not end up falling for him?"

"I don't know," Hermione admitted, "But I'm not about to agree to dating someone I currently despise just because I have to shag him in order to function."

Harry was silent for a long moment.

"So... we have no boundaries anymore," he said finally, "And I was wondering..."

"What is it, Harry?" Hermione asked, curious by the way his voice had taken on a hesitant tone.

"What do we do about Ginny?" Harry asked finally.

"What do you mean?" Hermione raised her eyebrows.

"Well, I mean, you saw her yesterday. Sometimes she's worse than Ron when she gets jealous over the idea of something being between you and me..."

"You told her yesterday what you thought of her jealousy, Harry," Hermione reminded him, "And I don't think you should bring it up again. I mean, it's not like we can tell her about..."

you know. Then she and Ron really would flip. They'd never trust either of us to be alone together ever again. And it's not like there'll ever be a repeat performance."

"So we just file this under the 'Don't ever mention it again' sector and go from there?" Harry asked.

"Do you want to tell Ginny?" Hermione asked hesitantly.

"Not particularly," Harry admitted, "She'll probably hex our faces off. But I don't like the idea that I'm lying to her either. I mean, she thinks I've only ever shagged her."

"But it's not really lying to her, Harry," Hermione argued, "I mean, yes, in the most basic sense, you are providing incorrect information.... But she's better off not knowing. Telling her would only hurt her. You and Ginny weren't a couple when we..."

"Yeah, I guess," Harry sighed, "I just feel guilty about lying to her."

"Why?" Hermione wanted to know, "Wouldn't you feel even guiltier if you crushed her trust in both of us? You were single when it happened. It's never going to happen again, and extenuating circumstances caused it to happen in the first place."

"Extenuating circumstances?" Harry laughed, "Is that what we're calling it now? Being lonely and miserable and each of us craving other people's love in the middle of a bloody war whilst orphaned and on the run from the most powerful Dark wizard of all time is an extenuating circumstance to you?"

"Well, what would you call it then, smart-arse?" Hermione laughed with him.

Harry paused to think about it.

"No, I guess you're right. Those are extenuating circumstances," he snorted, "Just sounds like a news broadcast – Oh, don't worry folks, due to extenuating circumstances, Harry Potter has shagged his best friend."

Hermione laughed aloud at his amusement.

"Don't go shouting about it, fool," she chided, "You never know who might hear. Malfoy accused us of shagging last night, actually."

"He did?" Harry asked, shocked.

"Yes. I mentioned the fact that I was only meeting up with him to arrange this fuck buddy scenario because I had no other option. I mentioned having shagged three muggles since I saw him last. He got a bit cross with me... and then he grumbled something about you and Ron. I mean, I'd told him about Ron, obviously. But I don't know where he got the idea about you and me."

"That might've been my fault," Harry admitted, sounding guilty, "After you and him hooked up in the library after the battle, I erm... punched him. Twice. And threatened him to stay the hell away from you until you and Ron were through – and longer if you wanted nothing to do

with him. He said something about you being a big girl who could make her own choices, and I might've, you know, taunted him and said something about knowing just how capable you were of making your own choices. I mean, I didn't say we'd shagged it. But I kind of implied it."

"Oh, Harry," Hermione sighed, putting her head in her hands and pinning the phone between her shoulder and her ear.

"Sorry," Harry apologized guiltily, "I just wanted to put him off balance. He bugs me."

"He bugs everyone," Hermione replied, "Well, don't actually ever tell him we shagged, alright? He erm... he might kill you."

"What?" Harry asked, alarmed.

"Well, I don't know if it's the meld or what, but Malfoy and I are... rather possessive of one another."

"Is that why I kept seeing fireplaces and torches flaring every time he was near us at the castle, and you were laughing with me or Ron?" Harry asked.

"Yes. It's a little bit out of control. Jealousy is an emotional response and, as you've witnessed, having our magic unlocked means we both exude magic when emotional. It's a bit of a problem, really."

"You think?" Harry asked dryly.

"Did you really call me just to ask how last night went?" Hermione asked him, changing the subject.

"Yeah," Harry answered, "Well, that and to ask you if we should tell Ginny. And you know, to ask if you wanted to move into Grimmauld Place with me until you go back to Hogwarts?"

"You want me to move in?" Hermione asked, touched.

"Course I do," Harry replied, "I'm not used to living away from you after being on the run. It's been weird not having you around. And if you live here, I can keep an eye on those moods of yours. You know, so that I can prepare for the next summer blizzard."

Hermione laughed at him, twirling the phone cord around her fingers.

"But aren't Ron and Ginny living there too?" Hermione asked.

"Ron is," Harry admitted, "And I know that might be a bit tough for you two for a bit... Ginny's still living at the Burrow. Molly won't let her move in with me so soon. She's making her go back to Hogwarts too."

"Oh," Hermione said, "Erm... I'm really flattered you asked me, Harry.... I... well, living under the same roof with Ron might make it hard to, you know, meet up with Malfoy."

"That's true," Harry sighed, "But I mean, you're going to have to deal with it, Hermione. It's not like you'll be able to keep it from him forever. Even if you and Malfoy don't date, people will eventually start to wonder why you're not dating anyone else either."

"I know, but... I don't want to rub his face in it straight away. You know he'll get upset and say something horrible. He'll probably accuse me of being a tart if I'm keeping crazy hours because I'm out all night shagging Malfoy. And I don't know if I'm ready to accept the idea of him seeing someone else. Imagine how awkward it would be if he had a girl over while I lived across the hall."

"I just don't want you cooped up in your parent's house going batty," Harry told her, "You need to be with us. You belong here. Besides. It's only until September. What are the chances that Ron will move on enough to date some other witch during the next two months?"

"That's true..." Hermione mused, "But what about Malfoy?"

"Well, you already said you'll be going to the Manor every time you two have to shag... so it's not like Malfoy would be coming over and rubbing Ron's face in shagging you. Ron might not even know you've gone, depending on what time you leave in the evenings. If you left at night after he goes to bed, he'd have no idea you were staying at Malfoy's sometimes."

"I suppose.... I'll have to think about it, Harry. I want to go to Australia and undo the memory charm on my parents so I can bring them home... They might want me to live here with them for a while before I go back to school."

"Oh, yeah," Harry said, recalling her parents, "Do you want me to come with you?"

"Yes," Hermione answered honestly.

"I like that you don't sugar-coat it," Harry told her, and she could hear his grin.

"I don't want to go alone," Hermione shrugged, though he couldn't see it, "And I can't think of a better travelling companion than my best friend and long-time camping buddy."

"What about Ron? Do you want him to come too?"

"I think so," Hermione admitted, "And yesterday was less awkward than I thought it would be... I think we'll really be okay, Harry."

"I know you will. You two still love each other too much to let it go to bollocks. You've just realized that you need different things from what the other offers. Give it some time, and how you love him will change to how you love me."

"I suppose..." Hermione sighed, "Do you want to meet me in Diagon Alley in a bit?"

"You're going out in public?" he asked, shocked, "The press might die of shock. They've been having a field day speculating about you."

"Yeah, I know. That's why I want you to come with me. You can distract them. I need to go to the Owl Office. I've got a bundle of letters to send off to everyone I've been ignoring all

month. And being seen there with you might mean they'll forget that I was at Malfoy Manor."

"You just want to use my fame to cover your tracks," Harry accused, laughing.

"Well, yeah," Hermione admitted, smiling.

"You're lucky I love you, Hermione," Harry told her, "I'll meet you at the Leaky Cauldron in a bit if you like?"

"Ok. I need to get changed, and I'll head right over. You haven't heard from Malfoy, have you?" Hermione asked him.

"No," he told her, "But I can see an owl in the distance that looks like it's heading to Grimmauld Place. It's probably Malfoy's."

"He's such a git," Hermione sighed, "If it is from him, can you bring me the letter? I'll see you in a bit."

"Alright. I'll see you."

Hermione hung up the phone and smiled. She kind of loved that Harry knew how to use muggle technology and thought to do so to make sure their conversation about last night was private. She couldn't bear the idea of Ron finding out she was shagging the bloke he believed had raped her. He'd never forgive her for it.

Hurrying back upstairs, Hermione stripped out of Malfoy's jersey and her tights in favor of some smart-looking robes she'd bought. She stopped in front of the mirror to glare at her reflection. Her hair was smooth and sleekly curled, so she didn't bother styling it. She thought about putting on make-up, but wandering about Diagon Alley posting letters and picking up some things seemed silly.

Settling for some lip gloss, Hermione grabbed her beaded bag, concealing her letters inside it before she went outside. She would need to stop by the Ministry and have her parent's fireplace reconnected to the Floo network. She'd disconnected it at the beginning of the sixth year to protect her parents from being surprised by Death Eaters, and she'd yet to reconnect it.

It would be much more convenient if, from now on, she could Floo home from Malfoy's rather than needing to walk outside the wards to apparate. She highly doubted that Malfoy would be willing to apparate her through them, something she couldn't do herself unless she were added to their wards. She supposed she could also discuss with him the idea of being added to their wards to be allowed to cross them whenever the need arose.

Hurrying out the back door, Hermione apparated to the little used alley by the Leaky Cauldron before letting herself into the pub. She'd told Harry half an hour, but she might as well get started.

"You're Hermione Granger!" a witch at the bar exclaimed when she spotted her.

"I am," Hermione agreed with a smile, nodding her head to Tom, the barkeeper.

"I've read all about you," the witch went on, "Didn't you leave the country? No one's seen you in weeks."

"I've been busy," Hermione answered evasively, not liking how the woman didn't introduce herself. Things only got worse when Hermione spotted the lime-green robes of Rita Skeeter. Hermione stared at the woman across the pub, noticing that she was loitering in a booth as though waiting for someone.

Biting her lip for a minute as she ordered a drink from Tom, Hermione made a decision. She'd made a deal with Skeeter before the war to give her a story when it occurred to her since she was refusing to let the woman publish trash about her. Crooking her finger at the reporter, Hermione beckoned her over.

Rita raised her eyebrows above her horn-rimmed glasses in surprise before she got to her feet and crossed the room, swaying and sashaying in her way.

"Rita," Hermione greeted her with a nod.

"Granger," the woman replied crisply, "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"If I speak to you, will the rest of your rabid competitors leave off regarding my story since the war ended?" Hermione wanted to know.

"Probably not," Rita admitted honestly, sipping a smoking drink through a curly straw.

"You think they'll hound me regardless?"

"You were spotted leaving Malfoy Manor this morning," Rita replied with a smirk, "They're going to hound you no matter what. My photographer is furious with you, by the way."

"Was he the one who took my picture?" Hermione asked, bristling a little.

"No. Not that whoever did will be able to use it. You destroyed all the cameras. Quite a few reporters are put out with you about it," Rita purred at her, "Care to share what you were doing at Malfoy Manor this morning, Granger?"

"Not particularly," Hermione admitted, "But were I to share it with you, would the rest of them leave off about it?"

"Probably. Not about everything else, like where you've been hiding and why you've not been out and about like Weasley and Potter. But they won't ask about the Malfoys again unless there's a juicy story there. Is there?" Rita wanted to know.

"Don't look at me like that, Skeeter," Hermione warned, "If you even think about printing lies about me again, you know what will happen."

"Don't lie to me then," Rita shrugged.

"There is nothing juicy about why I was at Malfoy Manor this morning," Hermione lied immediately.

"Oh yes, a muggle-born witch in the home of notorious pureblood elitists. Couldn't possibly be anything juicy going on," Rita smirked sarcastically.

"I had a business meeting with the Malfoy family this morning, that's all," Hermione shrugged her shoulders, "As I'm sure you know, they've been doing their utmost since the war ended to atone for their crimes. I was merely invited to Malfoy Manor to... discuss reimbursement regarding my brief incarceration in Malfoy Manor during the war. Lucius, Narcissa, and Draco were interested in ensuring there was no bad feeling over my brief imprisonment and my torture there at the hands of Bellatrix Lestrange."

"How dull," Rita sighed, "I don't know why the rest of the gossip reporters have been so set on trying to learn of your whereabouts and report on your life since the war. You've always led a dull existence regarding gossipworthiness. Except when I was spicing your life up, of course."

"Oh yes," Hermione rolled her eyes, "I do believe you had me dating two celebrities as a fifteen-year-old."

"It was more exciting than the truth. And you were dating Krum," Rita accused.

"At the time, yes, but never Harry. I assume you'll be running a column featuring my meeting with you today?" Hermione sighed.

"Going to do something gossip-worthy?" Rita asked hopefully.

"I'm waiting for Harry, actually," Hermione told her, "And then we're going to the Owl Office."

"Boring," Rita sighed, "Tell me about Weasley. The two of you were a couple, weren't you?"

"We were, for a time. Not anymore," Hermione confirmed.

"Now this, I can work with," Rita smirked, jotting down a few notes on the pad of parchment she carried at all times. Hermione noticed that the woman had put away the Quick-Quotes Quill before speaking to her.

"You want to make something of my break-up with Ron?" Hermione asked, "It's old news."

"Maybe, but you've confirmed you're currently single."

"Who said anything about single?" Hermione asked, raising her eyebrows.

"You're dating someone?" Rita asked, looking excited, "Who is it? It's not Potter. I know he's seeing the girl of Weasley."

"I never said I was seeing anyone," Hermione smirked at her, "Just clear up with everyone about what I was doing at the Malfoys, would you? If you must confirm my being single, do so."

"And what should I write about where you've been hiding, your highness?" Rita wanted to know.

"I've been at home," Hermione shrugged, "Lounging about in my pajamas and just enjoying not being on the run anymore."

"You're so boring!" Rita threw her hands in the air, "How do you expect me to make a story out of this?"

"You're the reporter," Hermione told her, "If you can't come up with some way to make it interesting, then don't write about me; I don't care."

"You're not going to threaten me again?" the unregistered animagus wanted to know.

"Do I need to?" Hermione asked, raising her eyebrows challengingly. Rita looked away darkly.

"Hermione, what are you doing talking to Rita Skeeter?" Harry wanted to know, coming over and leaning on the bar. He ignored the way most of the pub fell silent as though in awe of him.

"Telling her what she's allowed to publish about me in the hopes of keeping the other reporters away," Hermione told him honestly, wrapping him into a one-armed hug in greeting. She caught several snaps of people taking their photos as the reporters inside the pub began to pay attention to having two-thirds of the Golden Trio in their vicinity.

"Harry Potter," Rita smiled wickedly and offered her hand to him to shake. Harry eyed it like it was a live snake before shaking it, "Anything exciting to report on the front of you and Miss Weasley?"

"Would I tell you if there were?" Harry asked the woman, raising his eyebrows at her.

"You two are boring," Rita declared, rolling her eyes at Harry's attitude, "I'm going back over there to wait for my source."

Hermione and Harry both just waved as she left.

"So, where to?" Harry wanted to know, and Hermione liked how he tucked her arm through the crook of his elbow and escorted her through to the backroom and into Diagon Alley.

"I need to go to the post office," Hermione admitted, "I've got a bundle of letters to send out. I told Rita that I was at the Malfoy's for a discussion about my temporary incarceration at the Manor during the war. She bought it. I'm hoping she'll publish it. I don't want to imagine what other people might publish about me being there. Ron will have a fit, I'm sure."

"Almost certainly," Harry grinned at, "Can I tell Ginny that you and Malfoy have a thing?"

"Not yet," Hermione shook her head, "You know she'll flip, and then Ron will find out. I don't want anyone to know if I can help it. We're not a thing either. It's just.... A business arrangement that is mutually beneficial to both parties."

"Try to distance yourself from it all you want, Hermione," Harry smirked at her, "But we both know, at the end of the day, you'll be climbing into bed with Malfoy."

"Does it bother you?" Hermione queried, glancing at him as they made their way into the owl office. Hermione began counting her letters so she could hire enough owls.

"Yes," Harry admitted, "I don't trust him, and I'm worried about what this will be doing to your mind. He did rape you."

"Not really," Hermione sighed, "I mean, he was as much a victim of circumstance as I was."

"And now you're shagging like bunnies," Harry rolled his eyes, "Just be careful. I don't trust him. Even if you do have to keep your... appointments with him for the health and sanity of the pair of you, it's still unpleasant to contemplate. He could take terrible advantage of you, Hermione."

"You worry too much," Hermione accused him as she hired seventeen owls to send out her letters.

"Not where he's concerned," Harry disagreed, "This came for you this morning after we spoke on the phone."

He handed her a folded-up letter stamped with the Malfoy seal. It was unbroken, indicating that Harry hadn't opened it and read it. Hermione liked that. Not that she would mind having Harry know whatever it was Malfoy felt the need to write to her about when she'd hit it and quit it. She didn't doubt that she would tell him all about it and even show him the letter. But it was still nice to know that Harry trusted her and allowed her privacy when he didn't have to. She knew that if it had been Ron instead of Harry who received the letter, she'd have already had him yelling at her about it.

Breaking the seal, Hermione opened the folded-up parchment and began to read. She immediately laughed out loud. It was a single line long.

### ***Really, Granger? Fucking really?***

That was all it said. Nothing else. She handed it to Harry as she threw her head back and laughed. Harry took it from her, reading it as well before he began to laugh along with her.

"I guess he's a little put out with you," Harry grinned, clearly enjoying the situation, "It's good to see you laughing again, you know?"

Hermione smiled at her best friend.

"You too," she told him, "How has everything been for you while I was moping and sulking by myself?"

"Good, actually," Harry admitted, "Some things are still sad, of course. Lunches at the Burrow were somber affairs until yesterday. Everyone's just trying to move along with life, putting the pieces back together. We've been attending a lot of trials, too, for the people they

arrested after the Final Battle. Of course, Malfoy's parents were some of the first to be tried, and I'm surprised Lucius didn't have to stay in Azkaban a bit longer."

"I did wonder when I saw him at the Manor why he wasn't still in Azkaban," Hermione nodded, "They were obviously both acquitted?"

"Narcissa was acquitted because she never took the Dark mark and didn't really have much say in the entire proceedings. Lucius was fined a lot of money for his crimes. He's currently making restitution payments to all the families of people who were directly impacted by his actions as a Death Eater. He was released because he gave up the names of just about every Death Eater and other scumbags who wasn't marked but was involved with Tom," Harry told her.

"Did you speak at his trial?" Hermione asked.

"No. I did at Narcissa's. Told them how she lied to the Dark Lord to keep me safe. There wasn't much I could say for Lucius," Harry shrugged, "What have you decided to do with yourself now that it's all over? I assume all those letters were things dropped off by owls while you were on sabbatical? People offering you jobs?"

"I'm going back to Hogwarts," Hermione told him honestly, "McGonagall has opened the school to everyone whose year was interrupted last year by the war. I'll be repeating seventh year."

"You don't want to enter the workforce like Ron and me?" Harry asked, "You could be an Auror, too."

"No, Harry," Hermione smiled at him, "My days of being a Dark Wizard hunter and fighter are through. I need to get a handle on my magic again now that it's unlocked. And I think Hogwarts is the best place to do that. I know that after everything we've been through, it seems silly to want to take exams and do homework and get my NEWTs, but I think I need to. I need the normalcy and the structure. And I need the chance to grow outside of being with you and Ron all the time."

"You mean you need space to find yourself as Hermione Granger and not as Ron's girlfriend?" Harry summarised knowingly.

"Well, that. And I don't really know much about who I am outside of being your know-it-all sidekick, too."

"You're more than a sidekick, Hermione," Harry told her, "I might've been the Chosen One, but I'd have never muddled my way through life past the age of eleven if it wasn't for you. You're the real hero."

Hermione laughed.

"We've had this discussion before," she chided him.

"I remember," Harry replied, "But these days, you've got as much bravery and friendship as I do. With all the books and cleverness to back it up as well."

"I just need to finish school and graduate properly. I could sit the NEWTs and pass them, but I don't want to. I want to spend one more year in Hogwarts. I think it won't ever be the same, but there's something about going to school that makes me feel like a kid instead of an adult with the weight of the world on my shoulders. I know my parents would want me to graduate," Hermione told him truthfully.

"It's going to be strange not having you around all the time," Harry told her.

"I know, but maybe that's the point. I do need time to get used to the idea of being just friends with Ron now. Yesterday, when he climbed into bed with us, it was nice, and it wasn't too awkward, but the lines between friendship and relationship are blurred. He kissed my neck before he got back out of bed. The Ron who was just my friend wouldn't have done that."

"No, but you'll never be the same as you were before you were together. There are some lines that can't be unblurred. I imagine when Ron gets around to dating someone else, things will change since I doubt any other girl will want him snuggling up to his ex-girlfriend."

"I think that's another reason I need to go back to Hogwarts and be away from him awhile," Hermione sighed sadly, stopping along the street to buy both herself and Harry an ice cream, "I still love him, and right now he still loves me, but we can't be together. The idea of him being with someone else – even with all I've been up to – hurts me. I don't want to be around and living in the same house as him when he starts seeing another girl."

Harry nodded in understanding, throwing his arm around her shoulders and tucking her into his side when he caught the way her bottom lip began to tremble at the very idea.

"But enough about me and my problems," Hermione insisted, looking for a subject change, "Tell me about you and Ginny. Is all well in paradise? Should I begin planning the wedding?"

"You haven't already planned it?" Harry laughed, grinning at her.

"Well, no, though I imagine Molly might've," Hermione grinned, "How did she take it when Ron told her we weren't together anymore?"

"She was upset," Harry admitted, "They all were, but I think they realized the same things you and Ron did. For all that you two love each other, you were never overly compatible. Ginny was heartbroken. I think she'd been planning some double wedding in secret."

"You're going to marry her then?" Hermione smiled.

"Well, not right away. She's still got school to finish and all that, though I wouldn't object if I could get away with it now," Harry grinned at her, "I love her."

"I know," Hermione nodded, "You have for a long time. She loves you too, you know? She has since she was young. When she was dating those other blokes – Terry and Michael and Dean – it was mostly my suggestion to make you realize she was alive. She used to get so

clammed up and strange around you because she was desperate for your attention. I had to get her to loosen up and act like herself so you'd notice her."

"Will you be one of my groomsmen?" Harry asked her seriously, and Hermione stopped to look at him.

"Don't you think it would make more sense for your groomsmen to be male?" she asked.

"I don't care. You've always looked out for me and been the best possible friend to me you could. Even when I didn't deserve it. You've had my back more than anyone else," Harry shrugged, "What is tradition over that?"

"Why don't we actually get you engaged to be married before we sort out wedding attendants?" Hermione suggested, "Not that I'm not flattered."

"Ginny already asked you to be maid of honor, didn't she?" Harry smirked.

"Yes, she did," Hermione admitted, "But I promise that if you marry anyone other than Ginny, we will boycott tradition, and I will be one of your groomsmen alongside Ron and Neville."

"How do you know I'd ask those two?" Harry raised his eyebrows, "Ron's a given, but why Neville?"

"Because he's had our backs since the Ministry," Hermione shrugged.

"Sometimes I think you know me too well," Harry smiled at her.

"I would be a lax friend if I didn't," Hermione grinned in return, "Oh look, there's a new Potions book out!"

Hermione was too busy picking up the book and studying it to see the way Harry grinned at her adoringly, shaking his head a little.

## Chapter 23

Draco was furious when he woke and found her gone. The little chit was going to be the death of him, he was sure. Not that he'd particularly liked the idea of spending the day in her company without shagging her every spare minute. That wasn't the point. The point was that he had a job to do – which was to convince the bitch to marry him despite how they hated each other.

That was going to be hard to achieve if she was skulking like a whipped dog from his bed and his presence after a night of shagging before he could wake. Being greeted by his father – who'd almost joyfully informed him that the little mudblood bitch had left some two hours earlier looking like a cat burglar and still blushing – was not how Draco had envisioned waking up. In fact, he'd woken envisioning the idea of fucking her stupid in his shower before eating his breakfast off of her.

He'd been more than a bit put out to learn she'd snuck off. He was all the more furious about the fact that she'd yet to tell him how to get in touch with her or where she lived so he could hunt her down when he needed to. He'd had to resort to sending his owl to Potter again, hoping she'd gone to Potter. Draco curled his lip as he viciously stabbed his breakfast. His father was entirely too smug about Draco's mood as he joined him, insisting he would have afternoon tea while Draco had breakfast.

He didn't know where his mother was. He'd thought she might be in the library again, looking for ways to un-meld him from Granger. Honestly, Draco wouldn't mind helping her. Everything he'd managed to find on the subject suggested it was a pointless venture, but it had to beat putting up with the bitch for the rest of his life. Which he was going to have to do either way. It was shag her forever and deal with those terrible scenarios he'd thought of in the kitchen before he'd licked her into an abyss of pleasure. Or it was marrying the swot and knocking her up with his kid.

Draco Malfoy was much too proud to raise some other cunt's kid. He might be a disgraced and defected ex-Death Eater, but he had some morals: blast it all. And they included the idea that a man should raise his own children. They also included not warping some poor kid's sense of self by being that bloke who snuck in and shagged the kid's mother every other night. He wouldn't do it. Merlin's grave, he'd rather carve his own eyeballs out of their sockets with a rusty blade than marry and impregnate a mudblood like Granger – but it beat the alternative.

"I assume by your mood and her disappearing act that you've yet to broach the idea of marriage with Granger?" his father asked, quirking an eyebrow over his tea.

"Did you imagine that the girl who despises me more than anyone else on the planet would be receptive to a marriage proposal this early in the game, Father?" Draco countered.

"Well, she was here and in your bed last night, wasn't she?" Lucius asked.

"Yes, but this isn't the 1800s, Father," Draco rolled his eyes, "Nor is she the type of woman who might be receptive to the idea of an arranged marriage. It's been snowing for the past month because she's been sobbing her heart out over breaking up with Weasley as a result of this meld with me. The last thing I'm about to do is propose to her the very next time I see her."

"Well then, what happened last night?" Lucius wanted to know.

"We had dinner," Draco shrugged, "Where she suggested we make an arrangement for casual sex to deal with the meld. When I pointed out some of the reasons it would be foolish of either of us to consider trying to see other people anymore – thereby hinting at a relationship - she lost her temper with me. She told me we could be enemies with benefits and nothing more – though I did force her to agree to exclusivity by threatening to kill any other bloke she shags who isn't me."

"How... crass," Lucius said, wrinkling his nose in distaste.

"She's a Gryffindor," Draco shrugged, "I had to be blunt. For now, I plan to mellow her into this current arrangement until she sees some reason and realizes that she's better off dating me. At dinner, she told me she'd rather die alone than be with me. She'll need a good long while to warm up to me. And I want you to stay out of it."

"Me?" Lucius asked innocently, "What could I possibly do?"

"Alert the press of the arrangement?" Draco suggested, knowing his father's mind well, "Sabotage her reputation until she realizes the rest of the world thinks she's with me anyway, and she has no choice but to be. The purpose of this venture is to improve our standing within society, not to tarnish hers. We want to use her fame as a rung on the social ladder, not drag her through the mud currently tarnishing the Malfoy name."

"Ironic that we need a mudblood to remove our mud," Lucius replied sardonically, "However, I have no intention of interfering beyond the occasional snarky comment. You are right. If the girl were to be seen associating with us so soon and people were to believe the two of you together so soon after the war, she would lose much of her standing. Entirely counterproductive."

"What are we to do about Mother?" Draco wanted to know.

"I believe she will see that it is in our best interests to accept Miss Granger, despite her blood status – because of her blood status, in fact. Were you not bonded with her, we would not do so, but as you are, there is little for it. For the time being, I suggest you practice subtlety with the girl. Don't go parading her in front of your mother. As Miss Granger suggested – enemies with benefits are all you can currently hope for. She will see reason eventually, I'm sure. Until then, simply do what you can. I will keep a tight leash on your mother."

"Where is she?" Draco wanted to know.

"She left over an hour ago, claiming she had a hair appointment in Diagon Alley with that woman she sees," Lucius waved a dismissive hand, "Do you have a better way to reach the

girl than before?"

"No," Draco spat, disgusted, "She snuck out without leaving instructions on how to reach her again. Based on past interaction, I suspect she'll have run either to her parent's place in London or to Potter. Not that I have even the foggiest idea of where either of those places might be."

"Do she and Potter have a relationship?" Lucius asked, clearly picking up on Draco's fury over the notion.

"I never thought so, beyond a close friendship, but Potter said something whilst threatening me about Granger after the battle. About how she was a big girl who shared everything with him. Something about the way he said it hinted at something sexual having passed between them. I don't imagine she would have cheated on Weasley with Potter, but..."

"Find out," Lucius nodded, "You don't want to go walking into any kind of trap. Knowledge is power."

"I might kill Potter if he's fucked her," Draco admitted to his father.

"You are possessive of her," Lucius nodded, eyeing him with intrigue, "Yet you claim you only hate her?"

"I do hate her. She's infuriating and a mess. But I like fucking her. Even before the meld – that first time when I killed Greyback – fucking her felt entirely too good."

"Because she's a mudblood?" Lucius wanted to know, "I've always believed they hold a certain forbidden appeal, though I've never laid so much as a finger on one like that."

"I thought so, to begin with," Draco mused, "But I'm not so sure anymore. I think it was because hating her so much could be expressed through fucking her. She makes me angry enough to want to kill her with my bare hands. And that first time when I fucked her, it was under the impression that one or both of us would be dead in the very near future, so there was no holding back or being concerned about – well, anything really."

"Yes, one of the reasons your mother has been so put out with me about it was your surprising lack of restraint regarding decorum," Lucius nodded.

"Decorum went out the window," Draco sighed, "I just... let go. Every furious moment, every slight, every wrong I'd been dealt came pouring forth, with her as the outlet, and to make matters worse, she had the nerve to bloody enjoy it."

"The nerve?" Lucius chuckled, "I saw what you did to that girl in the drawing room, Draco. You forced her to enjoy it, and it worked. But even before the Dark Lord, you were possessive of that mudblood. Bella's screams over it were clear when she interrupted. How did you turn the curse back on her?"

"I don't know," Draco admitted, "There just... I don't know.... When I have my hands on that fucking mudblood, she's all mine, and anyone trying to interfere is my enemy."

"Yet the Dark Lord didn't draw your ire the way Bella did?" Lucius asked.

"He was encouraging me," Draco shrugged, "And he didn't try to touch her. If he had, I imagine I'd have turned on him just as viciously as I turned on Bella."

"You'd have been killed," his father said, aghast.

"I know," Draco replied evenly, "I wasn't just toying with Granger when I told her I'd kill anyone else she shagged. I'm already having trouble with the urge to track down and murder the three blokes she shagged after me before believing it was a waste of time."

"At least it wasn't thirty-seven," Lucius said dryly, and Draco smirked, "How are you going to find her again?"

"I'll have to owl Potter and hope she's there or that he can get in touch with her," Draco shrugged.

"He is aware of this arrangement between you, then?" Lucius asked.

"I get the feeling she doesn't keep anything from the Boy Wonder," Draco nodded, "He'll know all about it. She's probably there now, complaining about what I said to her last night."

"I suggest working on gaining her trust and getting her to confide in you like that. When she can do that, she'll marry you."

Draco knew he was right.

"Until then, you'll need to keep Mother out of the way."

"I'm sure I can manage that," Lucius smirked and winked at him. Draco felt mildly ill. He wasn't fool enough to think his parents weren't intimate. He didn't want to have to think about it, period.

## ~O~

Three days later, Draco still hadn't heard another word from Granger, and he was about ready to hunt the swot down and drag her screaming by the hair back to his bed. She had broken her streak of avoiding the press. Draco had spotted her in the gossip column of the Prophet. Several witnesses indicated that she had been seen leaving the Manor when she'd left via the front gates.

There was also some drivel article from Rita Skeeter about Granger supposedly having been hiding away, nursing a heartbreak over Weasley, and having been seen at the Manor after some kind of reimbursement meeting following what had happened during her incarceration. Based on what she'd told him of Skeeter, he suspected that she must've spoken to the vile reporter personally with the story. The article had little to no hint of wild untruths, so Draco assumed she and Skeeter had reached an arrangement.

Skeeter kept her quill off Granger without her authority, or Granger would turn the unregistered animagus into the Ministry. Draco doubted she would mind being outed, but for

the effect it would have on her ability to eavesdrop and get exciting scoops. As it was, there'd been several pictures of Granger and Potter out and about – eating ice cream together, walking arm in arm. Draco wondered if Potter's girlfriend was alright with the arrangement. Some less intelligent reporters suggested that Draco's Mudblood and the Boy Wonder were dating.

There'd been more pictures of her doing ordinary things. She went to the post office, bought a book, and seemed to be acting like any normal witch. As normal as any witch could be after playing a prominent role in the war. It had been driving Draco spare. How dare she be out and about in public, her picture laughing and smiling, taunting him every bloody day in the papers? How dare she flit about like some regular person when she ought to be under him, fucking until she passed out every night?

"Draco, if you keep drumming your wand on the dining table like that, I'm going to confiscate it," his mother told him testily over lunch on the third day since Granger's walk of shame. Draco froze, realizing he was indeed drumming his wand on things, causing little red and blue sparks to pour from the end of it. That, and he'd been making it rain over the grounds since the previous evening.

"Sorry, Mother," he apologized. He'd stopped eating again. He was paranoid about Granger. It was driving him insane that she wasn't getting back to him and that he couldn't reach her. He needed to fuck her again. Somehow, three days away from her felt worse than the previous month without her. He was like a junkie – he was well and truly coming down after the high she induced, and he was twitching for another hit. He needed it badly. Merlin, at this bloody rate, he'd kill for another taste of the witch on his tongue and the feel of her warm, wet heat on his cock.

"For Merlin's sake, Draco!" Narcissa Malfoy snapped at him, "Just go to London and track her down, would you? I'm tired of this rain already, and if you set anything else on fire, I'm going to smack you."

Draco raised his eyebrows, shocked by her outburst.

"You're not warning me away from her? Hissing about her blood status?" Draco asked.

"I'm not saying invite her to tea, sweetheart," Narcissa replied huffily, "But obviously seeing her did you some good. I won't tolerate you not eating again. Find her and fix this. Obviously, this meld has turned you into an addicted drug user, and she is simply the vice of choice."

As he was opening his mouth to tell his mother that he didn't know how to find her, the whoosh of wings drew his attention. A particularly ruffled-looking Archimedes – his owl – swooped through the terrace doors and into the room. He was wet from the rain, as was the letter the eagle owl carried. Draco took it from the dripping bird and unfolded the sodden parchment quickly.

The lettering was smudged and distorted but still legible.

**17 Wimbledon Drive, Nottingham ~ 6pm.**

Draco crumpled the note in annoyance with the witch. He didn't need it to be signed to know it was from Granger. He was furious that she didn't acknowledge how he'd been trying to get in touch with her for days or that she'd disappeared three days ago without a word.

"I won't be at dinner tonight," Draco warned his parents.

"Charming," Narcissa sniffed, looking disgusted. Lucius hid his smile behind his goblet of pumpkin juice. Draco, on the other hand, decided a shower was in order and perhaps a nap. He'd be up late, he knew.

## ~O~

It was another pub, by the look of the building, though a little less seedy than the last one. He let himself inside at six o'clock, his eyes scanning the bar for his mudblood. He narrowed them in annoyance when he didn't encounter her. Ordering himself a whiskey, Draco leaned against the bar with his drink as he waited for her.

He loathed being kept waiting. He would have to punish her for it. It was just bad manners to keep someone waiting. She would learn. He would have his work cut out for her to turn her into the next Lady Malfoy of Malfoy Manor, but he was sure that, with enough time, he could convince her to keep certain proprieties. Draco eyed the serving waitress of the pub when he caught her ogling him. He curled his lip a little in distaste.

She was a redhead little thing and obviously interested in him. In the past, he might've jumped at the idea of shagging such a girl, were she not muggle, but he felt not even a trace of interest. In fact, her obvious lust made him feel rather ill. He was going to punish Granger for that, too. How dare she turn him off other women? It wasn't even that the waitress was unattractive – she was quite pretty if he was honest. But her obvious interest – eagerness, even – was like being doused with ice water. Not at all pleasant or something he sought out.

Similarly, Draco knew that even if he were able to overcome that little problem to shag the girl or any of the others like her, he would simply fuck himself into a fury and leave unsatisfied.

Where the fuck was Granger?

He was going to choke the life out of her for this. Fucked him, ignored him for days, and then had the nerve to be late for their appointment. He'd taken to calling his meetings with her appointments. Like he needed a Healer to keep his mind and body sound, she was his medicine.

Draco narrowed his eyes; it was an entire glass and a half of whiskey later when she finally arrived. She stalked into the pub like she was on some runway. Adorned in a summery cocktail dress in a becoming shade of periwinkle, her skirt swished around her knees invitingly. As she stepped down into the bar, the hem of the dress flirted with her thighs. Draco felt a twisted smirk cross his lips as his cock twitched with the reminder of the last time he'd seen her, and she'd had those thighs wrapped around his face.

He hated her a little more for the fact that she didn't even seem to be concerned about locating him. Her eyes didn't sweep the bar in search of him. She didn't look at all like she cared whether he was there or not. She also paid absolutely no mind to the way all the sods in the bar drinking away their Friday night and drowning their work week eyed her hungrily. Draco noticed, though, and he could swear he caught a little smirk playing on her lips when the entire bar heated by several degrees as his possessiveness of her flared.

She didn't even look at him as she stalked in low heels across the bar. She stopped almost directly next to him without saying a word or glancing at him.

"Whiskey neat, please," she asked the bartender. Draco didn't speak either as he eyed her. He waited, as she did, for her drink to arrive, and he watched as she tipped the glass to her lips. She drank it down in small sips until the glass was half gone before she finally glanced at him.

"Dressed fancy for me, Granger?" Draco smirked at her.

She rolled her eyes, choking the tiniest bit on the sip of whiskey.

"I've been at a garden party, actually," she informed him, "And the dress code was cocktail. You're the one in a suit."

Draco didn't bother pointing out that he almost always wore a suit unless he was in dress robes. He just snaked a hand to the back of her neck and pulled her close until he could snog her. He could almost feel the way many of the bar occupants recoiled in shock, tensing as though they believed he was some daring arsehole forcing himself on a girl.

He practically purred with satisfaction when Granger leaned into him, kissing him almost lazily. He smirked against her lips when he felt her hand rest intimately on his hip. She tasted of whiskey, and he could smell an unfamiliar perfume on her skin as he snogged her, licking at her tongue hungrily.

"You smell different," he informed her when he came up for air.

"It's called perfume," she replied huskily, and Draco wondered if she'd already been drinking at the garden party she'd attended. She hadn't swayed or slurred her words, but he could tell she was itching to get him out of there.

"I don't like it," Draco informed her, "Smells much too cheap. And like candy. You smell like a cheap hooker."

"Fuck you," she replied almost sweetly, and Draco hid his smirk.

"Whenever you're ready, Granger," he shrugged, shooting her a lecherous smile.

She gulped the rest of her whiskey in response, drinking it and shuddering the tiniest bit.

"I'm ready now," she answered when she was finished, setting the glass on the bench.

"Oh, you didn't invite me here for dinner?" he sneered, taking his time with his drink and enjoying how she began to fidget.

"Are you hungry for food?" she countered coldly.

"Clearly, you're not. Just for me," Draco taunted, having entirely too much fun, "What did you expect after ignoring me for days?"

"Oh, shove off, Malfoy," she sighed, "I happen to have a life – one I'd been avoiding until three days ago. I had responsibilities and appearances to make. Deal with it. We can't all be shut-ins like you."

"You think I'm a shut-in?" Draco raised his eyebrows in surprise.

"Have you left the Manor in the past three days?" she asked.

"Well... no," he admitted.

"Did your family have friends or company over during that time?" she tried again.

"Do you imagine lots of people want to come calling on disgraced Death Eaters?" Draco challenged.

"Of course not, hence my point. You're a shut-in. You stay at home, avoiding all company, excluding when I make you meet me somewhere. On the other hand, I have friends and family who require my attention and demand I see them often."

"Yes, I've been reading all about it in the Prophet," Draco smirked, "Seems you were attending the Manor for a business meeting the other day."

"Indeed," she replied tersely, "I believe I suggested it was a meeting to discuss reimbursement regarding my brief imprisonment there during the war. Which, technically, was not a lie. I am being reimbursed for what happened to me there in the form of both of us continuing to be of sound mind and in decent health."

"Couldn't go telling them you were attending the Manor for your next hit," Draco taunted, "Merlin forbid anyone learns that I'm your drug and you're a junkie."

"Are you pouting about being my dirty little secret, Draco Malfoy?" Granger smirked in return.

"Not at all," he shrugged, "Though I must admit, I find you terribly annoying."

"And I you," she replied, "I'm also going to suggest you no longer greet me by snogging me in public."

"Is that right?" he asked.

"Yes," she nodded, "I might've been choosing muggle-run establishments, but that does not guarantee that no one from the magical community frequents them. The last thing either of us

needs right now is to have it splashed all over the papers that we were seen snogging."

Draco sipped his drink thoughtfully. She had a point, he supposed. They could be caught by anyone with eyes who spotted them together. And they were both rather well-known in the magical community.

"Stop insisting on public meetings then," Draco shrugged, "Or run the risk of being caught."

"Why must you always be so contrary?" Granger wanted to know, looking annoyed with him.

"You kept me waiting in a muggle pub," he retorted.

"Not on purpose," she rolled her eyes, "It was Teddy's christening today. I couldn't get away any sooner after I got stuck arguing Ministry legislation with Percy Weasley. He still wasn't finished arguing with me when I told them all I had to leave."

"You've told them you're shagging me?" Draco asked, startled.

"Of course not," she rolled her eyes, "Harry is the only one who knows everything. Harry's the only one who won't flip and try to murder you - thus dooming me as well. I told them I needed to leave to begin preparation for next week."

"Preparations?"

"I'm leaving the country next week," she shrugged nonchalantly.

"Which you planned to mention to me, when?" Draco scowled at her, not at all liking the sound of that.

"I'm telling you now, aren't I?" she rolled her eyes at him, and Draco thought seriously about pinning her to the bar and ravaging her.

"Where are you going? How long will you be gone?"

"Australia," she answered, "Before the war, I modified my parent's memories to make them forget they'd had me and sent them off to Australia to live. I need to restore their memories and bring them home. I'm hoping it won't take too long. But it might."

"And how do you plan on having either of us remain sane while you're gallivanting around the world?" Draco snapped. He couldn't decide if he hated her or himself more for the fact that he sounded needy.

"We've survived longer apart," she answered, wrinkling her brow at him.

"Survived is the key word, as opposed to live comfortably. I'm coming with you."

"You are not!" she hissed, "Harry and Ron are coming with me. Besides, I don't want you anywhere near my parents, and you're not allowed to leave the country. Remember?"

Draco had forgotten about the disciplinary hearing he'd been summoned to some weeks earlier, where he was informed that he was restricted from leaving Britain for one year for his crimes during the war. He was also ordered to attend Hogwarts and complete his education. There was a long list of other requirements, including paying penance to those he'd harmed and performing community service-type tasks.

"And stop scowling like that. You can survive a week without your fix. Now, I suggest we remove ourselves from the public eye, lest we be spotted interacting."

"You don't want food?" Draco asked her, growing more annoyed by the minute.

"I do, actually. But not from here. That waitress will spit in our food if we order anything," she nodded her head in the direction of the redhead Draco had noticed earlier. She was glaring in their direction, clearly furious that Granger's arrival foiled whatever plans she'd had for hitting on him.

"Then where do you propose we dine this evening?" he asked.

"What's wrong with your place? The elves can feed us."

"You just like my cooking, don't you?" Draco smirked.

"Your cooking?" she scoffed, "Malfoy, you failed at making a simple sandwich."

"I was side-tracked, witch," he argued, unable to keep from smirking at the reminder when his stomach and hers had demanded food during the night days ago. He had tried to make them both a sandwich at her whining insistence and had been distracted entirely when she'd begun rubbing herself up against him mid-way through.

"That's no excuse," she retorted.

Draco was surprised by her good mood if he was honest. They might've spent several hours in each other's company shagging like bunnies, but it was rare for her to seem so talkative and to be taunting him. At least without being malicious. Not that Draco was complaining. The fact was that the two of them were going to have to get used to each other since they'd probably be spending the rest of their lives shagging. Joking with each other was certainly easier than spitting venom. He was surprised she wasn't more embarrassed, actually. Whenever they actually shagged, she had a tendency to blush afterward.

"Have you been drinking already, Granger?" he asked curiously.

"Yes," she admitted with a grin, "When Molly wasn't looking, Harry, the Weasleys, and I were spiking our butterbeer with whiskey. It was Charlie's idea."

"The one with the dragons?" Draco asked, finishing his drink and strolling out of the pub. He didn't bother offering her his arm or hand, knowing she would likely refuse.

"That's right," she nodded, walking next to him as they left the pub, "He usually works in the Dragon colonies in Romania, but he's taken some time off to be with his family. Everyone's trying to pull George back together without Fred."

"The twin that died?" Draco confirmed.

"That's right. The one who was held back by the girls from beating you up in fifth year," she smirked at him, "He died during the battle, and George just hasn't been the same since. I managed to get him to improve a little when I went to lunch with them before meeting up with you the other night, but he's barely coping."

Draco didn't know what to say to that. He could offer his condolences, but they would mean little to Granger.

"When those two weren't attacking me, I found them funny," he admitted finally. He caught the way she looked surprised by his admission.

"They were both very funny," she nodded, "George just isn't the same without Fred. It's like he's had half his body removed and is trying to learn who he is without that half. It's not easy. Today was sad... he was finally beginning to talk again, but he's so used to being interrupted mid-sentence with the same information by Fred that his conversation skills are a bit stilted. At one point, he cracked a joke - which was fantastic - but then he looked around, expecting Fred to add something, and he kind of plummeted when he remembered Fred was gone. We all try, of course. I've been picking up the slack wherever I can, but I fear I'm no Fred."

"Thank Merlin for that," Draco muttered, "Or this would be another level of awkwardness."

He waved his finger indicatively between the two of them. He was surprised when Granger threw her head back and laughed. He was so startled by the uncommon sound in his ears that he almost stumbled as they rounded a corner towards an alley where they could apparate. He'd heard her laugh in the past - but never because of something he'd said. At least, never because she was amused, rather than taunting him and laughing scornfully at him. He shook his head, trying to clear the shock before offering her his hand.

She took it after only a moment's hesitation. Draco eyed the way she stepped a little closer towards him until she was well within his personal space. If he took a deep enough breath, their chests would touch. She closed her eyes, clearly waiting for him to apparate them both to the Manor, and Draco smirked. He couldn't quite resist the urge to loop his free arm around her waist, pressing her forwards until she leaned against him before he apparated them both with a sharp crack.

He made sure to take them right to the front doors, having noticed the last time he'd brought them to the Manor that she had shuddered at the sight of the looming structure. He expected that after being tortured inside, she would not be much like being in his home. Then again, he was working towards replacing those memories with better ones that entirely involved him fucking her.

"Should we discuss the notion of you flitting off without notifying me of how to reach you?" he asked as he led her inside, bypassing the stairs towards his suite in favor of heading for the kitchen.

"What's to discuss?" she asked, "Though I recommend adding me to the wards to allow me to be able to come and go via apparation rather than another debacle with the reporters. I don't

imagine they'll buy the excuses for long if I'm caught leaving here again."

"That's what you get for sneaking out," he sneered at her.

"Just add me to the wards, Malfoy," she snapped, "It will make everything easier, including not having to owl you about meeting somewhere. I can just turn up."

"Why would I do that?" he wanted to know, "Do you imagine I want you showing up unannounced?"

"Fine, then don't," she shrugged her shoulders though her lips pinched into a pout, "And we'll go back to the idea of waiting days between appointments."

"Meaning?" he asked, stopping her with a hand on her elbow.

"I'd have come by two nights ago if I could get in," she shrugged.

"Why didn't you owl me?" he asked, frowning at the idea of being deprived of shagging her when he didn't have to be.

"I don't have an owl," she admitted, "It's not like I could swing by the post office after midnight."

"What were you doing awake after midnight?"

"Could you sleep?" she demanded, rolling her eyes and shaking his hand off her elbow before continuing towards the kitchen as though she knew the way.

"Get an owl then. Tomorrow."

"I'll be here tomorrow," she informed him, "I don't know what effect being several continents apart will have on the meld, so I thought it wise to... overdose. Most of the weekend."

Draco felt a feral smirk cross his face as she blushed. Clearly, she wasn't comfortable discussing her needs with him, even when what she needed was to be pinned beneath him, screaming his name.

"All of this could have been avoided if you'd tell me where to find you," Draco pointed out rather than commenting.

"I'm not going to do that. I'm either at my parents' place - where I'm living - or I'm at Harry's. And since Ron is living with Harry, the last thing I want is you turning up out of your mind and wanting to shag where Ron might see."

"So tell me where your parents live," Draco scowled at her.

"I'm not going to do that either. I don't trust you not to turn up all the time. Add me to the wards."

"Not unless you tell me where they live," Draco shook his head, "Your parents aren't even living there right now. There's far less chance of you having to encounter my parents there, and no one can catch us."

"Malfoy, I'm not going to tell you where they live. No one but me knows where they live. Not even Harry and Ron know. I'm not about to tell you, of all people. Add me to the wards to make this entire mess easier, or deal with only seeing me when I have time to make arrangements."

Draco began cursing under his breath. His Father wasn't going to object, of course, and it wasn't that he was worried she would abuse being allowed entrance to the Manor. It wasn't as though they had many visitors anymore or as though she would walk in on him with some other bird since they all disgusted him. It was the principle. He didn't want her showing up unannounced when he was enjoying his private time. He also didn't appreciate the idea that everything was on her terms. She reached out when she wanted to shag him. She left when she was done. She was the one in control, and he didn't like it.

"I'm not about to become victim to your whim, Granger."

"Fine," she rolled her eyes, "The next time I see your father, I'll be sure to point out all the reasons he won't want a Mudblood being seen coming and going at all hours. Merlin forbid the Malfoys are caught fraternizing with a mudblood like me. He'll add me to the wards before you can say Quidditch."

"Did you seriously just threaten to tell my Father?" Draco asked, "Blast it all, Granger, that's my bloody line!"

"Stop being an unreasonable git then, and I won't have to supersede your authority."

"You think you're so bloody smart," he growled, following her into the kitchen.

"Master?" the five Malfoy elves all stopped at the sight of him in the kitchen. Tiggy had clearly been quiet about him using the kitchen the other night.

"Dinner for me and her, Tiggy," Draco bit out.

"Please," Granger reminded him of his manners, and Draco glared at her.

"What is you be liking Miss?" Tiggy asked.

"Do you have anything meaty?" she asked, and Draco paused in his attempt to continue arguing with her, completely shocked when she wandered across the kitchen - unsettling the elves as she began opening canisters and jars of things and peeking inside them.

"Meaty, Miss?" Tiggy asked, glancing at Draco worriedly.

"Yeah," she nodded.

"I've got meat for you, Granger," Draco sneered, and she wrinkled her nose at him.

"Don't be crass," she chided, "And don't tempt me. I don't need to remind you that I actually bite. And I'm hungry."

It shouldn't turn him on to be threatened by her.

"Got any shanks, Tiggy?" Draco asked the elf instead, amused in spite of his hatred for the witch when she found what must be a jar of biscuits and began nibbling on one.

"Oh, I love shanks," Granger grinned, "Do you have mashed potatoes too? And hot chocolate?"

"Are you always this... impulsive with meal choices?" Draco wanted to know.

"Get used to it, Malfoy," she retorted, climbing up onto a stool by the breakfast bar he'd eaten at as a child when he'd snuck into the kitchen for treats.

"Are you drunk?" he asked, "You're here to shag, not upset my house elves."

The elves made a noise of protest at the thought of her upsetting them, but Draco waved away their manners.

"You want me to gnaw on you?" she threatened around a mouthful of biscuit, beaming when Zippy brought her a mug of hot chocolate, "Because I will. That, or I'll pass out without eating. Shagging you is supposed to be the remedy to ensure we both still eat and sleep. And we already discussed that I'm staying for the weekend. Would you rather feed me now or be interrupted by my rumbling stomach later?"

Draco rolled his eyes in pure frustration with her. She was bonkers. That must be it. Totally bonkers. Sighing, Draco crossed the kitchen to sit beside her at the breakfast bar, nodding to Tiggy and Zippy about the food. The elves all rushed to plate them both the requested meal.

"Is you be wanting anything else, Master?" Tiggy asked, and Draco could tell the elf was blushing over the idea of him and Granger shagging.

"Not right now, Tiggy," he shook his head before digging into his meal.

He hadn't realized until he'd sat beside her - noticing that she pressed her thigh intimately against his when he did so - that he was famished. He wanted to ravish her more than he wanted to eat, but he knew eating first would make more sense. That way, he could shag her for longer later. Especially if she was going to be around all weekend. She ate in silence beside him, and Draco could feel the rapidly thickening tension between them the closer they came to finishing their meals.

"Does this place have a pool?" she asked when she was licking her fingers clean. Draco was too busy ogling the fact that she was eating with her hands - having picked up the lamb shank bone and begun to gnaw the last of the meat from it. Watching her tongue wrap delicately around her slender digits was like porn for him.

"Of course, there's a bloody pool," he rolled his eyes, "You want to swim? Now?"

"I do," she nodded, grinning, "Where is it?"

Draco tipped his head back, begging for patience. She was clearly being flip as she tried to overcome the tension between the two of them. It was probably driving her spare refraining from insulting him, and he knew she was trying to improve the situation. It was one thing to loathe each other, but they were shagging for their own bloody sanity, and Draco supposed that he was going to have to get used to her moods. Merlin's grave, he was plotting to trick her into marrying him; he should be bloody grateful that she wanted to eat with him and swim with him rather than simply arriving, shagging, and then leaving again. At least by having dinner and trying at the fun of a swim, they could each pretend it was a date. Not that he wanted to date her.

Blimey, he was getting confused. He despised her. He didn't want to date her. But he did want to marry her - though not because he cared for her. His reasons for wanting to do so were entirely self-serving. He refused to raise another man's kids. And he refused to share the witch. He'd already begun thinking of her as belonging to him.

"You infuriate me," he informed her as he got to his feet and led her out of the room.

"You nauseate me," she replied in a sing-song type of tone, as though she found their mutual hatred cute, "That's not really the point, though, is it? Where did we land on the idea of you adding me to the wards? Because I bet that if I ran around the entire Manor, sticking my head into every room, I could locate your father eventually."

Draco growled before he caught her, shoving her into the wall of the corridor he was leading her down. She hissed at the sudden attack, his hands fisted in her hair and her head cracking against the wall with a thud before he captured her lips with his own. She bucked against him for release almost immediately - her tongue coming out to tangle with his, sweeping into his mouth and driving him spare. Heat engulfed him. That same blasted heat she always awoke inside him, and he felt like he was right back in his bedroom, snogging her for the very first time and finding that she tasted and felt too fucking good in his hands. She clawed the back of his neck hard enough to draw blood.

"I want to swim," she warned when she managed to tear his head back far enough to speak.

"I want to fuck," Draco retorted huskily, hating her all the more for the way she smirked at the admission. He hated himself for his weakness for her.

"We could do both," she suggested, and Draco nearly lost it right then.

Fuck a troll, he loved to hate this witch.

## Chapter 24

Hermione could honestly say she'd had a good day. It began with a gathering of friends and the people she considered her family in all but blood. It was a party for Teddy Lupin to celebrate his existence even without Tonks and Remus. It had been a little bit sad, in parts, but Hermione had discovered a love in her heart for that little boy that she didn't think she could ever feel.

She still had so much she wanted to achieve, but Hermione could honestly say she'd realized that she wanted kids. Maybe not today or tomorrow. But eventually. Before today, Hermione had always assumed that getting married, settling down, and having some kids was a notion for someday. It was something she'd set aside during the war – unsure of whether or not she even had a future.

Now, she knew without a doubt that it was something she wanted. She knew she wasn't alone in the notion. She'd seen the adoration in Harry's eyes when he played with his Godson. She'd seen the longing in Ginny's eyes as she watched her boyfriend tickling the tot's tummy to a symphony of child-like giggles. She'd even seen the intrigued expression on Ron's face when he watched that little boy wave his chubby fists and gurgle when Molly had deposited Teddy into Ron's arms. The boy might only be two months old, but he'd stolen the hearts of everyone who knew and loved Remus and Tonks.

She'd had a wonderful day holding the little boy, talking baby talk to him, and volunteering to babysit him in the months before returning to Hogwarts whenever Andromeda would allow it. And she'd had to fight Harry for the privilege since he also insisted on being allowed to see his godson whenever possible. She didn't recall having had such a good day in a long time if she was honest.

Even for the sad parts of the day, there had been comfort in the love that remained for those they had lost. They had all shared favorite memories of the dead and delighted in Teddy's existence and being together, alive and well, to enjoy the rare day of sunshine that summer. Even when she'd stopped in briefly at Harry's for something and discovered Malfoy's owl waiting, Hermione hadn't been bothered.

As she let him lead her through the many twisting halls of Malfoy Manor, trying to memorize them so she wouldn't get lost, Hermione could honestly say he had no chance of ruining her happy day. Even if he was being a snarky git. As usual. When he led her into a big, open room with a pool in it, Hermione felt a smile of pure happiness spread across her face. The ceiling had been bewitched – as it was at Hogwarts – to look like the night sky. A flare of his magic lit the torches along the walls, causing them to flicker and throw shadows and light around the room.

"Unzip me," she instructed Malfoy, tugging on his arm before spinning to present her back to him.

She expected a snide comment from him or something crass. She wasn't expecting the feel of his fingers ghosting across the back of her neck, gathering her hair together and laying it over her left shoulder. He trailed his fingers carefully down the length of the zipper, skimming his fingertips over the revealed skin in its wake, and Hermione shivered. Her whole body quivered with delight at the feel of feather-light caresses across her shoulder blades as he pried the dress apart enough that she could take it off. She knew he saw how it made her shiver and how goose pimples exploded across her whole body.

She could tell because he did it again, chuckling wickedly at her reaction.

"Stop it," she gasped, trying to control her reaction. She'd never known she was so sensitive there. Malfoy ignored her command, doing it again as Hermione reached to remove her dress. When he saw what she was doing, he helped a bit, and Hermione was too jittery to care.

"Mmmmm," she hummed in delight when his lips replaced his fingertips while her dress slithered the length of her frame to pool around her feet, leaving her in only her under-things.

Hermione loathed her body for a traitor when he lightly pressed one hand around her waist on her stomach, molding her back to his front. She cursed softly at the feel of him pressing against her so intimately, his lips still tormenting her as he kissed his way over her shoulders and the side of her neck. She hated the way her head fell to the side, entirely receptive to the caress.

"Like that, Granger?" he murmured huskily into her ear.

Merlin, she hated the effect he had on her. She hated it because he was so bloody addictive and so damnable good at winding her up. Heat poured through her like wildfire, awakening parts of her that only seemed to respond to him. Hermione felt her magic flare, and she whimpered softly when she could literally feel it wrapping around his magic the way he wrapped his body around hers.

There was no feeling like it, Hermione knew. The whole room seemed to fill with the floral scent of wildflowers in the spring, and Hermione realized she'd been closer to Malfoy than she'd ever been to anyone else. The magic inside of her was a part of her core. A part of her soul. And it was brushing flirtatiously against his own magic. The thought jolted her out of her enjoyment for a moment, leaving her feeling tingly and throbbing and yet somehow bereft as she stepped forward, pulling free of his hold.

She didn't dare look at him as she crossed the room towards the pool. She unclasped her bra with one hand, dropping it to the floor by the pool. When she was almost at the edge, Hermione slipped her thumbs under the hem of her knickers, flicking them off her hips and feeling them slide down her legs. She stepped out of them and up to the lip of the pool, her toes curling towards the water.

Unable to keep her curiosity under control, Hermione glanced over her shoulder at Malfoy. She found him watching her, his eyes half-lidded, his expression hungry. He'd unbuttoned his shirt, having already removed his jacket. He was in the process of toeing his shoes off his feet when Hermione turned away again, diving into the cool water and sighing at the kiss of cold on her searing flesh.

She hated the way he made her ache. She hated that look in his eyes when he intended to fuck her so hard she screamed. He had it now as he unbuckled his trousers. He'd dropped his shirt in the messy, strewn-out pile of their clothing, and Hermione found herself eyeing his lithe form hungrily. She despised the way the mere sight of him affected her.

It wasn't at all right or fair that he could be so bad and so good at the same time. His body's long, hard lines were stark beneath his pale flesh. His blonde hair gleamed a silvery white in the combined torchlight and starlight from the roof. The torches caused shadows to dance over him. She could see the hint of his ribs as he bent, removing his socks before he discarded his trousers and the boxer briefs he wore beneath them.

His stomach was flat, his abs tight and defined. He was underweight still, his hip bones jutting out sharply. A deep V of muscle defined his legs and torso, pointing like a giant arrow to what she was fast believing might be her favorite part of Draco Malfoy. He didn't even have the decency to look embarrassed by the raging hard-on he sported, his cock hard and swollen with how badly he wanted her.

Hermione had never really taken the time nor had the inclination to examine him before now. He was well-endowed. She'd known, of course, from the way he filled her up with it, but it was another matter to be looking the evidence in the face. Or the pants, as the case may be. Much like the rest of him, his flesh was paler than that of anyone else she'd seen trouser-less.

Instead of the turgid shade of purple or deep red, she'd seen on the likes of the other men she'd shagged, Malfoy's cock was flushed pink at most. The head of the steel length was a rosy shade of pink, and Hermione could see the faintest glisten of fluid that leaked from the tip with how badly he wanted her again. When she managed to drag her eyes away from his cock, Hermione blushed crimson.

He was standing there smirking at her on the edge of the pool. His eyes hooded with desire, his expression feral with lust, and yet a smirk tipped the corners of his mouth up smugly. She knew he was amused by how she'd scrutinized him and how she'd stared so long at her favorite part of him. He would likely torment her about it later.

"Having fun, Granger?" he asked in that lilting, sneering voice he had mastered so well.

"Yes," she replied boldly, doing what she always did when it came to him and feigning bravery she didn't often feel to disarm him. If he knew how flustered he made her with a look or a word, he would have a power over her that she didn't trust him with. So, instead, she threw embarrassment to the wind and tried to feign indifference.

Before she could think of something witty to say in return, Malfoy cannonballed off the edge of the pool towards her, splashing her. Hermione narrowed her eyes on him, swimming towards him quickly. Her whole body ached with how badly she wanted him, but first, she had some payback to dish out. When he came up for air, Hermione pounced from right behind him, her hand pushing on the top of his head and forcing him back under the water.

The pool was deep enough there that she couldn't touch the bottom, and she grinned when he went under again. At least, she did until he spun around under the water and latched onto her, pulling her under as well. Hermione was sputtering when she came up for air. She coughed

as she glared at Malfoy, who was similarly glaring at her in return. Frustrated with him, Hermione did the only thing she could think of.

She splashed him right in the face before swimming for the side or shallower water.

"Oi!" he protested with a growl, coming after her.

Hermione squealed when he caught hold of her right foot, tugging on it to draw her back through the water towards him.

"Get off!" she shouted, kicking with the other foot to spray water in his face again.

Malfoy dragged her under again for that, his hands crab-walking up her leg and around her waist, yanking her under the water. Despite herself, she began to laugh as she spun on his, trying to get him to release her. She didn't know exactly what made her think that tickling Draco Malfoy while wrestling in too-deep pool water would be a good idea, but she did it just the same.

And she nearly choked on pool water for her trouble when he let out a shout of surprise, immediately dropping her and trying to squirm away. Hermione delighted in the knowledge that he was clearly very ticklish.

"Damn it, Granger, knock it off!" he shouted, kicking and trying to tread water, laughing and squirming as she tickled him mercilessly.

"Leave off!" he tried again around a mouth full of water. Hermione laughed harder, nearly drowning herself and him in the process. She had to swim for the side again when it became too hard to stay afloat when she was laughing so much.

Malfoy was still trying to recover, and when Hermione reached the nearby edge, she kicked her legs out, looping them around his torso to hold him away from the edge and keep him above water enough that he wouldn't die. And then she tickled him all the more with her free hand. Hermione dropped him just as quickly when he returned the favor, tickling her ribs gleefully.

"Stop!" she shouted, laughing uncontrollably in response to the ticklish sensation.

"Never," he retorted, smirking as she forgot all about tickling him in favor of trying to capture his hands and prevent his torture.

"Ahahaha..... can't.....ahaha... I can't..... can't breathe.... Ahahahaha," Hermione laughed, choking out the words and barely keeping her head above water.

"You started it," he reminded her, still tickling. He'd looped one arm around the pool edge, clinging to the side while the other arm was belted across her torso, his hand tormenting her bare side. She squirmed in his grip, spinning madly and trying to escape his fingers.

She managed to spin until she had her back braced against the pool edge, and he pressed against her front. Unable to breathe properly, Hermione did the only thing she could. She

looped both arms around his neck, using him as leverage to keep her head above water, resting her chin on her own upper arm and fighting for breath.

"Do you surrender?" he asked, sounding smug.

"Never," Hermione huffed, "But I am calling time-out."

Bringing her legs up, Hermione looped them around his ribs, locking her ankles against his back and clinging to him like he was a life raft.

"I win this round," he celebrated, and Hermione felt his free hand tangle into the wet hair at the back of her head. He didn't use the grip for anything, and Hermione could only assume that the feel of her curls in his hands was growing on him. They were both breathing hard, trying to catch their breath. Hermione simply clung to him like a barnacle.

She wondered how she could feel so unconcerned by being naked with him in his family pool. She ought to be afraid of being caught by his parents or concerned that he was judging her. She ought to be self-conscious about her body or worried that he was seeing her less than pretty parts.

Hermione was shocked that while the thoughts did occur to her, she wasn't feeling any of those things. She simply didn't care if he thought she was too heavy whilst clinging to him or if he had a problem with the slight prickliness of her legs. And it wasn't out of being comfortable in his presence or anything so delightful. She just really didn't care about his opinion. Hermione wondered if that made her a bad person. She'd been repeatedly and rigorously shagging the bloke, and yet she couldn't care less about his feelings, his thoughts, or even his opinions.

Then again, she doubted he cared about any of those things when it came to her. Other than when she gave away, she thought he was fit and that he was skilled at getting her off.

She was still pondering the entire situation when Malfoy slowly turned his head and began nipping his way along her jaw towards her mouth. Hermione sighed at the feel of each little nip, just hard enough to be smart but not enough to sting or break the skin. Heat flushed through her again, and Hermione didn't even think as she turned her head and captured his lips. She caught his bottom lip between her teeth, biting just hard enough that he growled before she licked at the offended area and snogged him deeply.

Hermione let her eyes slide closed and let herself get lost in snogging him. She felt... good... as she kissed him. It always felt wrong in all the right ways to be touching him, snogging him, and shagging him, but she'd never really thought it felt good before. At least, not in the sense that it inspired a reaction from her and made her crave more of him.

This was the kind of good where she just enjoyed the feel of his lips and tongue against her own. And Hermione absolutely despised him for that. How dare he make her feel good about snogging him? How dare he make her think horrible, forbidden thoughts like that snogging him was actually rather nice. Pulling back with her arms enough that she could tangle her fingers into his hair, Hermione wondered if he felt the shift between them the same way she did.

She pulled at his hair hard enough to sting, and he bit her bottom lip hard enough to break the skin in response, his grip on her tightening as he pressed her harder into the pool wall. The taste of the blood on her tongue angered her, and Hermione felt the good feelings he'd inspired slipping back down into their forbidden box in favor of the heat, hatred, and heady rush of being brutalized by him.

Hermione took great delight in making sure he could taste her blood as much as she could. She bit him back just as hard, breaking the skin. On some level, her mind recoiled from the idea of blood-letting between the two of them, but most of her ignored the idea, seeking only to punish him. To rile him. To drive him as insane as he drove her. He ground her back into the pool wall, and Hermione felt the way his free hand – the one not clinging to the pool edge to keep them above water – slid between their bodies just over her thighs, shoving her downwards.

Her legs – still locked around his torso – slipped down from being locked about his ribs to squeezing against his hips. She felt the prod of his cock near her nethers, and Hermione knew what he wanted. She wanted it, too, but she wasn't about to let him have her that easily. Tightening her grip on his hair, Hermione forced his lips away from her, dragging his head back so she could attack his throat.

"Fuck," he hissed when she bit his jaw hard.

Hermione chuckled darkly, refusing to let him budge as she buried her lips below the new wound on his jaw, nipping and licking her way down his neck.

"Damn it, Granger," he growled huskily when she squirmed against him, wriggling out of his reach when he tried to align his cock with her aching center.

"Having some trouble there, Malfoy?" she breathed huskily into his ear before nipping his earlobe harshly.

"You're breaking the skin," he snarled, his grey eyes flashing at her when he jerked back from her.

Hermione laughed throatily at his reaction and nipped him again, "I know," she purred in his ear.

He made a noise of protest when she bit down hard on his throat, breaking the skin and drawing a few droplets of blood. Hermione hissed when he returned the favor, biting her hard on the top of her shoulder. She didn't know why she was biting him really, only that she wanted to rile him up even further.

"Would you stop squirming?" he snapped when she wriggled in his hold, refusing to let him impale her on his cock.

"Make me," Hermione retorted, and he shoved her hard into the wall of the pool. It was much too deep for him to gain any purchase against the floor or to hold her still very effectively when he had to hold onto the pool edge with one hand, trying to pin her with the other.

Hermione gasped when he seized her ankles, which were locked around him, prying her loose and pulling away from her.

She raised her eyebrows until he pulled himself right out of the pool, standing naked and wet on the edge. She glared up at him in annoyance for a moment, feeling a twisted sense of triumph over the way little rivulets of blood mingled with the water dripping from his body from all the places she'd bitten him. Hermione cried out in agony when he suddenly bent, snatching hold of a handful of her hair with one hand and dragging her from the pool by it. The other hand clamped painfully onto her arm, and she hissed in pain as her skin scraped against the pool edge.

"Ouch!" she cried out when he dragged her out of the water and onto the ground next to the lip of the pool mercilessly. He threw her down, shoving her when she tried to get to her feet, rapidly losing her temper with him and his treatment of her. He kicked her legs out from under, barely catching her before she could fall and crack her head on something. Hermione hissed when he pinned her to the floor, straddling her hips and pinning her hands by her head before he snogged her senselessly. She began to fight against him then, losing her temper entirely and shoving him.

She couldn't rightly say she understood the rollercoaster of emotion he could so easily inspire inside her. Nor could she explain how she could have, just minutes ago, thought of snogging him as feeling good and nice, only to now want to choke the life right out of him, but she did. He was the most infuriating person she'd ever had the misfortune of meeting, let alone shagging, but for the life of her, she couldn't make the burning heat inside herself from his touch stop.

Malfoy didn't budge as she bucked beneath him, trying to dislodge him from on top of her, wanting desperately to let him fuck her senseless but also wanting to drown him. The tiled floor beneath her back was cold and unforgiving as he kicked her legs apart, driving his knee between them when she tried to snap them closed. Hermione groaned at the familiar feel of him when he leaned into her, not yet impaling her but entirely at home, cradled between her legs.

His body was slick with pool water, sliding against hers easily, and Hermione hated him all the more when she found her ankles locking behind his back once more, securing him to her as she snogged him furiously. She could feel the smirk forming on his lips as he returned the furious snog before driving himself deep inside her. Her breath caught inside her throat at the familiar feel of him there after so many days away from him. She was convinced that three days had been harder than the month she'd spent away from him. Though that perhaps related to the fact that she'd spent the month pining after Ron and moping over the loss of their relationship, whereas the past three days she'd spent pulling herself back together and getting her life back in order. She had sorely neglected her friends and loved ones in their time of need, and Hermione had been doing her damnedest over the past three days to make it up to them.

Harry had been nagging her about moving into Grimmauld Place with him and Ron - at least until she retrieved her parents from Australia - and had insisted she come and stay for a short while. Which had resulted in Hermione, Ron, and Harry all snuggling in the same bed the

evening after her lunch at the Burrow, curled together like sleeping kittens in a box. Harry had insisted on being the little spoon again - much to Hermione's amusement - and Ron had crept in later in the evening when she was almost asleep, kissing her cheek tenderly as he spooned himself around her, effectively sandwiching her between him and Harry. Surprisingly, the position had made her feel much better emotionally than she had done before the war, and she knew that on a psychological level, at least, she was on the mend.

Which left this mess with Malfoy.

She had no idea what to do about it other than to see him regularly and shag him every other night. There could be no denying that shagging him was addictive. Indeed, being in his company was intoxicating. She hadn't expected that, but after spending the other day here, she realized she had no other option. It had to be him who shagged her. Everyone else was an utter waste of time. Their mutual hatred was something of a damper on the experience of being in his company, but for the time being, Hermione was content to simply shag him until their mutual fury was temporarily spent, and she could get on with things without the crippling need to get laid.

One of her hands tangled into the damp blonde hair at the nape of his neck, holding him in place, and she slipped her tongue into his mouth, swirling it against his hungrily while the nails of her other hand dug into his bare arse cheek, pulling him even deeper inside herself. Giving herself over to the many sensations he could inspire her as he forced pleasure on her and took what he wanted from her, Hermione cried out her pleasure and release with abandon.

## Chapter 25

This time, when she left his arms and his bed, Draco awoke to the cold left in her absence, and he reached for her instinctively, snagging her hand as she tried to slip from between the silk sheets adorning his bed. She glanced back at him, bleary-eyed, and Draco could tell at a glance how tired she was. He knew the feeling. He might've been lamenting her absence and cursing her existence since she'd left days ago without a word, but he'd spent most of the night showing her all the reasons she belonged wherever he was, under him and screaming his name. He was beyond tired, and his whole body ached with their combined exertions.

She made a grumbling sound when he tugged forcefully on her arm, toppling her back towards the bed. She caught herself before she could completely fall, one of her hands splaying over his bare chest, which was littered with scratches, bites, and bruises from what she'd done to him.

"I have to pee," she informed him, her voice husky with sleep.

"You better not just walk out again without a word, Granger," he replied, annoyed with himself over the relief that statement brought him when it ought to have grossed him out.

"I told you I'm staying all weekend," she reminded him, sounding grumpy, "And if you'd add me to the wards, I'd be able to come and go when I need to."

With that said, she snatched her hand from his grip, straightened, and strolled across his bedroom bare-arse naked as though she belonged there. If she felt self-conscious knowing his eyes were feasting on the sight she made, she didn't let on. Draco wondered about that as he lay there, scratching his chest idly while she closed the door to his bathroom and proceeded to run the shower. He heard the flush of the loo a few minutes later and then the sound of her under the spray of the shower. It was clear she was either putting on a front of being comfortable in his presence, or she didn't give a shit what he thought of her. Draco liked to think it was a little bit of both. If he was honest, he didn't give a toss at all about her thoughts, her feelings, or her opinions regarding him as long as she kept letting him fuck her. He was also getting used to her after so many hours spent in her presence fucking her until he couldn't move anymore.

She was a moody little thing. She could go from laughing and playing with him one minute - as she'd done in the pool - to being furious with him and provoking him into hurting her just a bit in her next breath. He didn't know what to make of it. During their shared time at school, Draco had never considered her to be overly moody. He'd spent enough time eavesdropping and spying on her and her doltish friends to know her better than she might think, and she'd never seemed so moody with them. Sure, they said things to put her nose out of joint, but with him, it was almost like she would begin to relax into his presence, as she'd done when she was snogging him in the pool after playing with him yesterday in a way that belied their hatred before she'd suddenly seemed to realize what she was doing and had acted to bring them back to oft-treaded ground by biting him so viciously and driving him to manhandle her into submission.

Draco was beginning to suspect, in fact, that she was doing her damnedest to ensure they stayed right in the realm of mutual hatred and that any misstep outside of it was quickly corrected. And that wasn't going to fly. Not if he was going to marry the little bitch.

Which he would do.

He didn't function unless he was fucking her on a daily basis, and he refused to let her even think about him being her dirty little secret while she considered the notions of her future. Not that he expected she would be doing that with the intention of children for a few years at least. If there was one thing he'd learned about his mudblood - and she was *his* mudblood - it was that she was determined to achieve everything in life. Which he suspected meant she would pursue a complete education and a career before she would even think about children or marriage. He wondered what she'd been pondering about such notions. Did she still pine after Weaselbee and the fact that she couldn't marry the bastard? Did she lament the notion of someday wanting children and not being able even to get off whilst creating them? Had she been thinking about the possibility that Draco might be the only one capable of knocking her up thanks to this bond between them?

Because it was certainly a possibility.

After all, what sort of curse meant that they were bound so that if one of them died, the other would pine and waste away until driven to suicide, but wouldn't mean they could only conceive children with one another? Sure, it was ensured on his part that he couldn't, given that he couldn't ejaculate without Granger, but did that mean she couldn't conceive without him? He didn't imagine that the curse was preventing her from ovulating or whatever the hell it was women did that made them bleed five days out of the month without dying unless they had a bun in the oven. Scrubbing his hand over his face in annoyance with his own wayward thoughts, Draco dragged himself from his bed, intent this time on fucking the little witch in his shower before eating his breakfast off of her. As he'd wanted to do the other day before she fled his presence.

Strolling into the washroom without care, Draco paused at the sight of the small beaded bag she'd carried during the war where it lay upon the bench. He narrowed his eyes at it. He'd suspected for some time since she'd first been captured with the bloody thing that it must have some kind of extension charm on it. It was all he'd seen her carry in a while, and he expected she must've charmed it to fit whatever she needed inside it. Something he further expected when he noticed a collection of girly products adorning his bathroom vanity. He frowned at the sight of them, noticing that there were only a few things - most notably a new purple toothbrush that stood in the holder next to his.

For a long moment, he frowned at the idea of her toothbrush being in the holder next to his own before he realized with a smirk that she was trying to be sneaky and subtly move some of the things in that she would need as his overnight guest - hence the newness of the toothbrush and the other products on the sink. They weren't just things she'd brought with her from home in preparation for staying a few nights. All of them were new - the bottles full, some even still sealed - suggesting she'd brought duplicates of things she simply couldn't function without and was sneakily moving them into his bathroom so she would have access to them whenever she came around to shag him.

Sneaky little witch probably thought he might not notice immediately. There were only a few, after all. A bottle of skin cream, a toothbrush, a roll of dental floss, a mouthwash bottle, and a lip balm tube. Based on the scent of jasmine filling the room, he expected that she must also have brought her own soap, shampoo, and conditioner with her and snuck those into the shower as well. The notion of her shit cluttering up his space bugged Draco for a long moment before he realized the practicality of such things and the fact that it was a step toward the direction he needed her to go anyway. If he intended to convince the little bitch to marry him, he'd have to get used to having her and all her crap cluttering up his space and his life. The notion annoyed him. Then again, if he woke up feeling as sore and sated as he did now every day for the rest of his life after fucking her into exhaustion every night, Draco might just be able to live with it.

Taking up his own toothbrush, Draco squeezed some paste on the brush and brought it to his mouth to rid himself of the morning breath he was suffering. As he scrubbed at his pearly whites with one hand, the other explored the minimal amount of belongings she'd brought into his space for a moment. He didn't want them cluttering up the sink. That would only annoy him. Digging into one of the drawers of the vanity, Draco moved the few items inside it - namely his shaving kit and after-shave - into the next drawer down, and he put his wandless magical ability to use to perform a cleaning charm to completely cleanse the drawer before he began piling her things inside it. The toothbrush could stay on the sink next to his, but the rest had a drawer, and she was damned well going to use it.

When he was done with his dental hygiene, Draco strolled back into his bedroom. He intended to fuck the little witch silly again this morning, but he'd give her a few more minutes to wake up and bathe completely. When he'd peaked around the edge of the shower, she'd been in the process of trying to deep-condition her wild mane of hair - which had gotten a little out of control after their dip in the pool last night and after he'd repeatedly dragged his hands through it, tangling it around his fingers, fistng the curly locks and ravaging her. He'd seen her working the conditioner through the ends - clearly having actually brought something useful to use on her hair and improve the nest it had been during the war. She'd been attempting to drag a comb through it to evenly distribute the product in the thick curls, and he knew it would take her ages.

While she worked on it, Draco went to the bedside table on the side she'd been sleeping and opened the drawers. He didn't have much in there - mostly some of his old stuff from his younger days at Hogwarts and a disturbing number of chocolate frog cards that he'd collected as a child. Bundling everything from the drawer that he no longer needed in there, Draco found one of the many boxes his Mother had been nagging him to put to use and placed everything he wanted to keep but needed out of the way inside it. When he was finished, there were three drawers beside the bed that she could fill with whatever she wanted that she might need while she was in the Manor. He smirked to himself as he went about ensuring there would be room for even more of her crap in his space. He didn't really need all the space in his bedroom, and if it meant she was likely to be around more often, he'd be able to fuck her more often. And Draco was thinking he could live with that.

Once the drawers were emptied and cleared, Draco called for Tiggy.

"Master?" the elf asked eagerly, looking excited about serving him.

"Morning, Tiggy," Draco greeted the elf, not at all concerned by the creature seeing him nude. Tiggy had been his elf since boyhood - the elf had seen him naked more times than he could count, "Could you prepare a breakfast buffet for me and Granger and bring it in here in about half an hour - I've got no clue what she likes in the mornings, so a bit of everything."

"Of course, Master," Tiggy smiled widely at him, "Is you needing Tiggy to do anything else, Master?"

"Not right now. I've just emptied these drawers so Granger can use them for her things whenever she's here, so there's a box of things over there in the corner that can go to the attic later - but I want to clean out some of my other crap and sort through what I want to keep but no longer need around, so don't take it yet."

"Tiggy understands, Master," the elf nodded, "Master?"

Draco raised his eyebrows at the elf, realizing he meant to question him.

"Will Miss be staying often, Master?" Tiggy asked, "Is Tiggy to prepare things for her as he does for the master?"

Draco nodded his head slowly as he pondered the elf's request.

"I'm going to marry the little snit, Tiggy," Draco admitted to the elf, "Though I've yet to convince her of the idea's merit. Treat her as though she is already your mistress. Unless she asks to be shown to the places in the Manor that you know no one is allowed to go. And don't let her near the Gallery. My ancestors will eat her alive."

"Yes, Master," Tiggy smiled, "She is being good for Master, Tiggy thinks. Master doesn't eat when the Miss is not here."

"It's a magic-meld side-effect, Tiggy. I'm stuck with the little bitch, despite how we both dislike one another," Draco told the elf, smirking a little at his perceptiveness. Draco had missed how the elf liked to chat with him, as he had done all of Draco's life. During the war, Tiggy and the other elves had all been too afraid for their lives to risk staying in the room when they weren't expressly needed or commanded.

Tiggy smiled toothily at him in response to Draco's words.

"Tiggy brings the breakfast, Master," the elf told him before disappearing to the kitchen.

Draco was still smirking when he glanced around the room for a long moment before deciding he'd given Granger enough time to deal with her personal hygiene. Strolling back into the bathroom, he found her rinsing the last of the conditioner out of her hair. Stealthily, he stepped into the shower behind her.

She flinched minutely when he smoothed his hands over her bare hips and around to rest on her taut stomach but made no protest to his touch. Draco nipped the top of her shoulder as he pressed himself against her back, molding her back into his chest. She must be tired, Draco decided, because rather than pulling away from him, Granger slid her hands along his

forearms before tangling her fingers with his. She didn't say anything, and Draco didn't either. There was simply no need.

He could feel the familiar heat that came from touching her begin to flame through him, but for the moment, he was content to stand there under the hot water as it poured over his aching body while he held her. She felt good in his arms. He didn't think either of them could deny that. The feel of her pressed to him felt right. Like she belonged there. Draco supposed that was because she did. He still wasn't fond of her, but he was getting used to her and to the idea that she was pretty much it for him.

There couldn't be anyone else. Well, there could be. But there wouldn't be. Draco wasn't that big on drama. And trying to have anything with any other witch who wasn't Granger would spell drama. No way was he going to sign up for fights between her and another woman. He knew who would win. It wouldn't at all be a fair fight when Granger's magic was unlocked.

Pressing a line of kisses across the top of her shoulder and up the side of her neck, Draco enjoyed the way she tipped her head back until it rested against his other shoulder, exposing more of her neck to his caresses. She didn't object to the affection. She simply sighed, and Draco noticed that she'd closed her eyes as though content. Or just tired.

He had kept her up most of the night. In all honesty, Draco was tired, too. Sighing against her skin, Draco stopped kissing her and simply held her to him for several long minutes.

"Are you alright?" she whispered eventually when he didn't move again. When he simply held her.

Draco was surprised by the slightest hint of concern flavoring her tone. She actually genuinely seemed worried for him.

"Yeah," he nodded against her, his chin hooked over her shoulder as the warm water poured over both of them, "When are you going to get your parents?"

"Tuesday," she told him quietly, "Harry's coming with me. I'm not sure about Ron yet."

"You share everything with Potter, don't you?" Draco asked her carefully, a flicker of jealousy rippling through him.

"Yes, I do," she answered quietly, "He's always on my side. Whatever I need. And I'm always on his."

"How did Weasley feel about you and Potter being so bloody close?" Draco asked her, narrowing his eyes as he glared at the floor.

"He was worried and jealous of our relationship some of the time. When we were carrying the locket Horcrux, it drove him mad. He was convinced Harry and I were secretly in love and that whenever he wasn't looking, we were wildly shagging," Granger told him honestly.

"Were you?"

"Shagging Harry every spare minute?" Hermione asked, "Don't be ridiculous. The only person I ever cheated on Ron with was you."

"So you've never shagged Potter? He told me you had," Draco needled, fishing for information about a topic that had been bugging him.

"He did not," she rolled her eyes, "He told me what he said to you, and it most certainly was not that he'd shagged me."

"But he has," Draco retorted knowingly, "No one can be as close as you two are without having shagged."

He was expecting her to deny it. To vehemently repudiate his accusation. Her silence, on the other hand, was not at all what he'd anticipated.

"You have?" he asked, stepping back from her and spinning her in his hold so he could glare down at her, "How does it count as not cheating on Weasley if you shagged his best friend?"

"Are you jealous, Malfoy?" she asked him, watching him with an unreadable expression, "Is that what this is about? You don't actually care about the notion of me cheating on Ron. I know you don't. If you had cared about that, you'd not have shagged me in the library after the Final Battle."

"Why do you ask questions you already know the answer to, Granger?" Draco demanded in return, "I don't give a shit about Weasley or about the notion of you sleeping around on him. I do care about the idea of you and Potter fucking. Isn't he dating Ginny?"

"I'm not shagging Harry, you idiot!" she rolled her eyes at him.

"No, but you have," Draco replied, reading her face, "You have before. I can see it in your eyes."

"Why would you think that I've shagged my best friend?" she asked evasively, and Draco knew then that it was true. She'd fucked the specky git. His fists clenched as he stepped back from her slightly, releasing his hold on her upper arms to keep from gripping them tight enough to break them.

"Because you haven't denied it. You fucked him."

She stared at him for a long time without saying a word.

"No one else knows, do they? You and Potter fucked, and neither of you had the decency to inform Weaselbee or his sister. And yet you claim not to have cheated."

"First of all, Harry and Ginny were broken up," Granger narrowed her eyes at him, "To protect her during the war, Harry broke up with Ginny. Secondly, Ron and I weren't dating because he walked out on us when he couldn't handle being on the run and hunting down Horcruxes anymore."

"So you did fuck Potter. What, he waits for his best friend to be out of the way and moves in on you?" Draco growled in annoyance.

"It wasn't like that," she protested, slapping his chest angrily, "We didn't plan for it to happen, and it only happened once. At Christmas. We'd been to Godric's Hollow looking for answers and stopped at the grave where Harry's parents were buried. We were lured by who we believed to be Bathilda Bagshot back to her home, but it was Nagini in some disguise as the old woman. Harry's wand was destroyed. He missed his parents. We were at a dead end. We were both lonely and missing people."

"A pity fuck then?" Draco sneered, and he narrowed his eyes dangerously on the witch when she slapped him across the face as hard as she could.

"Do *not* presume you understand what Harry and I went through," she warned him, her tone low and furious, "You have no idea how low we were. How alone and how hopeless we felt."

Draco glared at her, his cheek stinging painfully from her slap as she glared at him in return. It was clear to him that she made no apologies for having shagged Potter. That she didn't regret it.

"Until you understand what it's like to be completely heartbroken, orphaned, and without hope in the middle of a war zone on the tail end of a crushing and terrifying defeat, you have no right to judge what Harry and I did. We had no one else. We had nothing else but each other," she told him sternly, still glaring at him.

Draco realized suddenly that he'd crossed a line. That he truly didn't understand what had driven them to shag. What he did suddenly understand, however, was that they weren't in love, nor were they in danger of ever repeating what they'd done. Draco didn't believe he would ever have to be furious and try to kill Potter for shagging Granger again. Granger had no intention of repeating the experience, and Potter was madly in love with the Weasley girl.

Whatever had driven them to shag was clearly painful, hopeless, and utterly despairing. Draco could see that much from the amount of raw emotion on Granger's face and in her eyes.

"You needed to reaffirm your own humanity," he nodded quietly, "Both of you."

She seemed to deflate in surprise at his words. At his perception. She stared at him in confusion momentarily as though she didn't believe he could understand.

"No one else knows, do they?" Draco asked her then, searching her face, "Just you and Potter."

She nodded slowly.

"You have no intention of telling anyone or repeating the experience?" he asked next.

This time, she shook her head, still looking baffled by his sudden change of mood and his understanding.

Draco nodded his head, "Then I'll keep my mouth shut about it and won't ask you about it again."

"You..." she trailed off, not seeming sure of what she actually wanted to say to him.

Draco eyed her for a long moment in return, waiting for her to get it. Waiting for her to realize that he now held more of her secrets than anyone other than perhaps Potter. Waiting for her to realize she was stuck with him and that she better get used to it. When she just kept staring at him, Draco sighed before he reached out and cupped her cheeks carefully in his hands as he stepped toward her.

She made a soft sound that Draco didn't understand, and she didn't seem to realize she'd made it before he leaned into her and slowly kissed her soft lips.

## Chapter 26

Hermione was confused. Malfoy knew. He knew about her and Harry. He knew, and he had just promised he wouldn't tell anyone or ask her any more about it. He'd needled her before realizing it had been a pure instinctual affirmation of their friendship and a display of utter despair when she and Harry slept together. He'd realized what it had been about without her having to doggedly try to put into words something so painful that she didn't like to think about it.

Hermione didn't understand how he could realize so quickly and then accept the situation. In Malfoy's place, Ron would've spluttered incoherently for a while before yelling furiously and refusing to listen to reason. Maybe though, that was because Ron loved her and Draco Malfoy just wanted to fuck her. That being said, he certainly had a knack for making it seem like he cared. He might fuck her like the devil, but he cuddled her like he adored her.

He even teased her lightly, as he'd done in the pool before she'd picked a fight with him again. She didn't know what to make of it if she was being honest. Then again, maybe Malfoy could understand the need to reaffirm one's humanity and to turn to someone – anyone – when at his very lowest. After all, while she'd been on the run with Harry, Malfoy had been here. Trapped inside his own house. A prisoner with a megalomaniac for a jailer.

His own aunt had threatened his life and forced him to shag Hermione, knowing he didn't want to. He'd been given the Dark Mark, and until that very moment, Hermione had always believed he had taken the mark willingly. There was a chance, however, that he hadn't. Hermione didn't know that much about him or his life. She didn't know the types of horrors he'd been forced to witness, endure, or even participate in. She didn't know what he'd suffered just to keep himself and his parents alive.

She might've had to modify her parent's memories and send them off to another country. She might've been on the run, half-starved, hunting down Horcruxes and bearing the brunt of Harry's black moods alone. But what had he been doing? What had Draco Malfoy been forced to live through that meant he could understand and so easily deduce something she could barely think about, let alone vocalize?

His hands cupped her cheeks carefully beneath the hot spray of the shower, his naked body pressed against the length of hers. Hermione kissed him back softly, her whole world tilting dizzily on its axis. The ever-increasingly familiar heat of being close to him, touching him, danced in her blood, but the raging hatred she had felt for him from the very beginning laid dormant and uninflamed within her as he kissed her lips.

He did it tenderly, just his lips moving against hers softly, carefully, almost as though she were something precious that he treasured. His hands on her cheeks were gentle, his thumbs smoothing across her cheekbones beneath her eyes in a way that disarmed Hermione. Her own hands rested palms flat against his bare chest, and she could feel the unsteady beat of his heart hammering inside his ribcage. It matched the erratic beat of her own, and Hermione felt her control beginning to slip.

The resolve she'd kept that this thing between them could only be sexual and could only be filled with hatred and violence slipped just the tiniest bit. When his tongue teased the seam of her lips, lightly requesting entrance rather than demanding entrance and sweeping forward wildly, Hermione's knees almost buckled. This was what a kiss should be. A first kiss. This was the type of kiss she'd always imagined she might receive as her first and from a boy who loved her.

Malfoy didn't love her. In fact, he was probably one of the people farthest from loving her on the entire planet. But he kissed her like he did. When she parted her own lips carefully, he waited for her tongue to flick out and meet his rather than surging forward as he'd done in the past. She felt like she'd been electrified as she swept her tongue against his. He tasted minty and fresh like toothpaste and kissed her just as carefully as he'd done with his lips.

Hermione was sure she must be melting as her core magic brushed tentatively against his. Goddess, but it felt like being caressed in a way she'd never been touched before. His magic and hers swirled around each other, meshing, melding, sliding against one another, and making her dizzy. She'd never felt anything else like it in all her life. Dimly, she was aware of how Malfoy walked them out of the shower, using his magic to turn off the taps and dry them both, all without breaking their kiss.

She found herself being laid down carefully upon the grey silk sheets of his bed, and Hermione felt like she'd surrendered. His hands found hers as he continued kissing her, lighting a fire of something warm, sensual, and sweet inside her. She could only go along with it, unwillingly and incapable of changing the direction things had taken. Unwillingly to reach for that hatred, they so often threw at each other. She felt as fragile then as though she were made of glass.

Hermione wondered if Draco felt it, too. He intertwined his fingers with hers on both hands, sliding her arms up the bed above her head. His elbows bracketed her face as he stretched out on top of her, settling himself in the cradle of her hips. Of their own accord, her legs parted to accommodate him, recognizing him as the key to her lock and only too willing to have him right where he belonged. She found her hips arching towards him. Vaguely, she was aware of the soft, mewling sigh that left her lips when he sank deep inside her, her hips arching up to meet him, her body striving to accept him and welcome him again.

She ought to have been sore from the number of times they'd shagged since her arrival the previous evening, but all of that slipped away with her hatred as he took her slowly. This was nothing like any other time he'd taken her. He was gentle and careful. His lips on hers were feather-light and almost teasing. He stroked sure and deep within her, thrusting slow enough that she might've complained were it not for the way her whole body tingled and trembled with warmth and electricity.

She found herself arching into each deep, slow penetration; his hands intertwined with hers were sure and strong as he held her. His body was warm as it pressed hers into the mattress, his weight upon her reassuring and welcoming rather than crushing or painful. When she broke her lips from his, dizzy with the need for oxygen, Hermione gasped in each breath she could get. He wasn't fast or rough with her.

He wasn't fucking her. Hermione's eyes opened as a ragged sob caught in her throat when she realized he was making love to her.

"If things had been different," he murmured, his lips warm by her ear, "If there was no blood prejudice, war, house rivalries, and hatred... This is how I'd have taken you the first time, Hermione."

Goosebumps raced across her skin, and Hermione trembled as his words broke something inside of her. His magic seemed to envelop hers like a warm cuddle completely, and he thrust just a little bit faster. Hermione's breath grew ragged, and a sob escaped her as she arched into the orgasm that suddenly crested and washed through her, bringing a rush of endorphins she didn't know what to do with. Tears prickled in her eyes and spilled over, and when she looked, she found Draco peering into her face as she broke apart in his arms.

She'd have been horrified if she had any room left on her emotional spectrum. His words had pushed her over an edge she hadn't realized she'd been teetering on, so tender and so sure. She could tell that he genuinely believed that if not for all the wretchedness that stood between them, he'd have had her just the same. They would have come together like this, their bodies calling out to one another, their magic meshed and melded together as surely as the sun would rise.

As tears trickled down her cheeks, Hermione realized that drips of warmth against her cheeks came from him, too. Squeezing his hands tighter, searching for some way to comfort him and seeking comfort in return, Hermione pressed herself to him more fully. He thrust faster then, though no less deeply and no less passionately. He made love to her, his cheek pressing to hers when he seemed unable to bear the sight of her tears or perhaps unable to allow her to see more of his own tears as they poured free, too.

She didn't know what he'd endured, but she knew then that it had been no less horrid and no less wretched than those things she'd survived. His breath was ragged in her ear, his hands tight around hers, his magical energy completely enveloping hers as though he were laying claim to every part of her and washing away as much of the badness as he could. Stripping her bare of everything but him and that moment.

When she broke a second time, it was with a soft wail of emotional agony and physical ecstasy, and she knew she wasn't alone in the breaking. He uttered a sound that might've made the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end had they not already been doing so, his body trembling violently against her own quivering form as he poured all he had into her. Hermione sobbed softly against his shoulder, untangling her fingers from his when he lowered himself against her, spent.

Looping her arms around him, she could only hold him, crying harder when he delved his arms beneath her body too, crushing her to him so tight it might've been painful had she not felt like she was already utterly broken. Had it not felt like his tight hold was the only thing holding her together. His ragged breathing and sobs told Hermione she wasn't alone in her grief and agony.

As close as any two people could be, they held one another as the toxic poison they'd both ingested seemed to wash slowly away.



## Chapter 27

He hadn't let go of her even when all their tears seemed to have ceased. He wasn't sure he could. He'd clutched her to him, lifting her up and wrapping her legs around his hips as he'd carried her back into the shower while she clung to him. Draco had no explanation for what had just occurred. All he knew was that he couldn't let her go again. Not ever. Every thought he'd been entertaining about the idea of keeping this physical and of dodging his father's order to marry her was forgotten.

The witch had broken something inside of him, stripping away everything he was and everything he'd done and leaving him raw and emotionally naked. He'd never felt so exposed. So vulnerable. The feeling of her magic so interwoven with his made him feel like she was a part of his very soul. A part he couldn't live without.

She didn't speak as she clung to him beneath the spray of the shower. She didn't need to. Draco knew she felt as bare as he did. That his tenderly whispered words had unraveled the tight ropes she kept around her emotions and let them all come spilling out into the open. He could never let her go. Draco realized at that moment as he'd made love to her that he was stuck with her forever, that he wanted no one else, that she was it for him for the rest of his days.

She leaned against him, trying to catch her breath slowly and get herself back in order. Draco didn't think he'd ever get himself back in order. Not when he was so intertwined with the little curly-haired witch in his arms. He'd never much believed in the concept of soulmates despite knowing that melds like theirs were possible. Yet, despite being aware of how much he loathed certain things about her, Draco knew she was it for him.

His witch.

His *soulmate*.

His *destiny*.

"Hermione?" he asked quietly, pulling back from the witch and waiting for her to open her eyes and meet his gaze.

"Yes?" she whispered. Her eyes were red-rimmed with tears.

Draco bit his lip, feeling a strange swooping sensation in his stomach as he reached for the courage to ask her what he needed to ask her.

"Will you... I mean, would you like to... Ah, bloody hell," he sighed, stammering and tripping over the words in a show of nerves he'd not felt when conversing with females since he'd been fourteen.

She giggled just a bit when he tipped his face up into the shower spray for a minute, trying to sort out his jumbled thoughts, and Draco found himself enjoying the sound of her

amusement. The part of him that hated her for so long wanted to recoil, to retreat and protect himself from the scorn he feared she would dish out. His self-serving part wanted to run away and hide, to never speak to her again. To threaten her into silence over what she'd seen of his weaknesses and his vulnerabilities.

Another part of him knew it wouldn't be worth it. Not when the witch giggling at him was the one he would be spending the rest of his life with. There was nothing for it but to dig deep inside himself and find what little courage he could scrape together.

"Will you be my girlfriend, Granger?" Draco asked. He looked at her once more, blinking the water out of his eyes and shaking his hair back so he could see her reaction.

Her eyes widened slightly for a moment at the point-blank request. She looked startled, like a small child caught with her hand in the cookie jar. In fact, she looked a bit like she was going to have heart failure to have been asked such a question by the likes of him. Draco stared at her carefully, gauging her reaction, trying to prepare himself for the blow if she said 'no.'

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" she whispered. "Are you sure that's what you want?"

"Do you think I'd swallow my pride and ask if I weren't sure?" Draco asked her quietly in return, raising one eyebrow at the witch.

"I'd have said no two hours ago," she admitted, "But now... You do realize what being in a relationship with me would mean, don't you, Malfoy?"

"Putting up with you all the time?" he smirked, "As long as I can shag you whenever I feel like it, I'm thinking I could handle the rest of your annoying habits, Granger."

"You do realize that if you date me, you'll eventually have to put up with my family too, don't you? Meaning Harry. Meaning Ron and the rest of the Weasleys. Meaning my godson and your cousin, Teddy Lupin. Meaning my muggle parents, if I can fix the memory charm I did on them."

"I know," Draco nodded, "And you'll have to put up with my family. Meaning my obnoxious, pompous, snarky git of a father. And my condescending, calculating, and extremely judgemental mother."

"And you'd have to put up with my interest in House Elf rights. And my intent is to return to Hogwarts and complete my NEWTs. And my intention is to go into the DRCMC at the Ministry when I graduate. And my habit of being bossy, swotty, and fussy about just about everything."

Draco shrugged his shoulders slightly.

"You'd have to put up with my interest in Wandlore and my intention to start an apprenticeship with Mr Ollivander – if he'll take me – after I've graduated too. And you'd have to put up with my habit of being possessive, snarky, rude, condescending, smug, sarcastic arsehole all of the time. And my extremely low levels of tolerance for your dunderheaded friends. And my dislike for your ex-boyfriend. Not to mention my habit of

being a right prat whenever I feel like I'm being too forward, thus pushing people away by reverting to childish name-calling as a means of self-defense."

"You'd have to deal with this," she countered, pointing at her wild mane of curls, currently clinging to her scalp and plastered against her neck thanks to the spray of the shower.

Draco felt a slow smirk arrange itself across his face as he eyed the unruly next before lifting his hands and sliding them into the tangle.

"I kind of like this," he admitted quietly, gripping the curls tight enough to smart without hurting her.

"There's also the fact that everyone is aware of what happened between us while I was held captive here," Hermione said quietly, her brow furrowed. "Harry might be willing to get past it by throwing a punch at you because I've been able to tell him everything. Everyone else in my life will likely die of shock or be extremely concerned for my well-being and mental health if I announce we're a couple?"

"We wouldn't have to tell them right away," Draco rolled his eyes. "The last thing either of us needs right now is to have you dragged through the mud currently smeared on the Malfoy name."

"You're not just asking me because dating a muggle-born would look good for the idea of the Malfoys moving on from blood prejudice?" she asked suspiciously, her eyes narrowing.

Draco sighed. "I'm not going to lie and tell you that it wouldn't help a while from now if I were to be seen dating a muggleborn. But right now, it's not high on my list of priorities, Granger. Just answer the bloody question, would you? Do you want to be my girlfriend or not?"

"If I say no?" she asked, raising her eyebrows challengingly.

Draco shrugged his shoulders. "I'll have to keep asking until you say yes."

"You'd do that? Without getting your wand in a knot?"

"Oh, it'll knot plenty. And I'll take it out on you with even more hard-core sex until you literally can't sit or walk around comfortably," he warned quietly, pressing her back against the shower wall once more and grinding his hardening arousal against her fiery core. "But you're it for me, witch."

Draco heard her breath catch and watched her eyes widen at his admission. She searched his face for some sign that he was joking that he was being insincere and trying to trick her into agreeing for some ulterior reason.

"Say it again," she whispered, clinging to him a little tighter.

"You're it for me, Granger," Draco told her truthfully, "I don't want anyone else. I don't want to mess around anymore with bollocks about fuck buddies or friends with benefits or whatever else you want to call it. I want to shag you whenever I feel like it. I want to see you

whenever I feel like it. And I want to claim you as my witch whenever anyone mentions you."

She blinked rapidly at his low tone and serious statements, looking slightly stunned.

"But we hate each other," she whispered. "You hate me. You tell me all the time how much you loathe me."

"Do we hate each other?" Draco asked her seriously, raising one eyebrow challengingly as he held her gaze. "Do we *really*? I'm not in the habit of missing people I hate, Granger. Or of fucking them stupid every chance I get."

"Are you saying you don't hate me, Draco?" she asked, looking rather alarmed now.

Draco felt his lips twist uncomfortably at the turn the conversation had taken. The truth was that he didn't know what he felt for the little muggleborn. He knew she got on his last damn nerve. And that he loved fucking her to exhaustion.

"I'm saying you're all I want," he whispered, unable to hold her gaze any long as his cheeks warmed to pink. "I'm saying that when you were being tortured on my floor, and Aunt Bella wanted to hand you over to that monster, the very idea hurt me, and I couldn't keep quiet. I'm not saying I'm in love with you or that I much fancy you right now. But you're growing on me. I don't want anyone else. I don't want you to want anyone else, either. I want...."

Draco bit his lip, his brow furrowed as he tried to articulate what he wanted from her without sounding like a complete ponce. Or like a bloody sissy.

"What do you want?" she asked softly, gently combing her fingers through his hair.

"I want to see what we can be without all the mess of house rivalry and blood prejudice and war getting in the way," Draco admitted quietly, pressing his forehead to her and closing his eyes. "I want to see how deep this magic meld between us can get. One day, I even want to see what our kids would look like."

He heard her breath catch again.

"Don't get me wrong, Granger, it's not going to be easy. You're a pain in the arse ninety-five percent of the time, you get on every bloody nerve I've got, and you drive me spare. I'm no angel, either. I'm an arrogant arsehole, too proud and stubborn and fucking entitled not to argue with you at every turn and angry-fuck you against every surface in the bloody Manor. We wouldn't be one of those couples to which things just come easy. We'd have to work at this every day. But if you're willing to do it, so am I."

Draco watched her, his heart in his throat as he awaited her answer. She nibbled her bottom lip, looking thoughtful.

"What would we tell people?" she asked.

"The truth," Draco shrugged. "You're interested in books and ensuring every topic has information on hand, right? You could write a bloody Memoir about this entire thing for all I

care, as long as I get to crawl into bed beside you at the end of every day, and I don't have to second-guess if you want to be with me."

"And my friends?"

Draco shrugged.

"Potter already knows, yeah? Let him help smooth the way toward the others warming up to me. Or don't. I don't care. If the Weasleys want to hate me for the rest of their lives, that's fine by me. As long as they don't disown you or upset you while they do it, I don't give a shit what those tossers think."

"You realize that, as my boyfriend, it would be wrong of you to refer to my family as tossers, right?"

Draco smirked.

"Witch, if you agree, *I'll* be your bloody family."

Draco knew he had her when her eyes snapped up to meet his once more, widening with wonder and maybe just a spark of something more.

"You really want to do this?" she double-checked one more time before deigning to answer his bloody question.

Draco nodded. "I really want you. For the rest of my wretched life. So stop hesitating and bloody well tell me if that's what you want to do or if I need to fuck you into submission. Again."

He got the feeling she truly was right for him when a wicked little smirk pulled up the corners of her mouth.

"I might require the latter," she said.

"Thought you'd say that," he smirked in return.

When he drove into her once more, high and hard and brutal enough to make her whine, Draco felt like he'd been given a gift. A home. And when she came screaming in his arms a few minutes later, he thought he'd found himself a bloody girlfriend, too.

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~THE END~

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