

CHAPTER 2: DO YOU TRUST ME?

If the glares had been bad before, they were mutinous now. In the absence of her wand, Hermione had taken to twirling her combat knives in warning. It wouldn't be the first time someone had attacked her in retaliation for her actions, or for simply existing. She ate in the dining hall with everyone else who gave her a wide berth, and other than that, she stayed in her room. Even her morning training sessions had stopped. The obvious exception, of course, was when Kingsley tried to reprimand her for her actions and put her on scrubbing duties in addition to supporting Ron's declaration of house arrest. She had scoffed, stood, and told him that if he wanted that to happen, he would have

to imperio her to do it because she wouldn't be doing it of her own free will before promptly pulling the fingers at him and strolling from his office.

If it had been her and someone had told her that, she probably would have done it just to prove a point, but not Kingsley. No, because that would be breaking his precious moral compass. Realistically they couldn't make her do anything she didn't want to, and since she had lost all respect for the wizard, she had no inclination to indulge him either. In fact, over the last seven days, as her anger over Ron's actions grew, Hermione had become more and more defiant. Ginny supported her actions and loudly reminded everyone that they wouldn't be happy with someone stealing and breaking their wands either. She and Harry weren't speaking at all after she had punched Ron in the face for saying that Hermione was becoming a liability.

That morning a group had been sent on a supply run. Ginny had initially refused to go without Hermione, but eventually Hermione had convinced her on the grounds that she might be able to pick up some more cigarettes and a bottle of alcohol. England was operating on wartime protocol; the muggle government had issued a curfew, and businesses were only to run if they came under essential services. Supply was limited and usually expensive if you were a muggle, but they weren't muggles and the ministry was no longer monitoring acts of magic performed on muggles as the number of those incidents was overwhelming. There was also the fact that the government was being run by Death Eaters at this point, who couldn't care less about the Statute of Secrecy anymore, either.

Ginny had been swayed by Hermione's reasoning and gone reluctantly. That had been hours ago, and Hermione was getting worried. They should be back by now. Supply groups ran in groups of twelve, split into two teams for efficiency. It was because of her worry that Hermione had taken to pacing the foyer. "With any luck, someone will take out Ginevra and we will have one less psycho to deal with." The voice of Romilda Vane floated towards her, clearly unaware of her presence.

Hermione lurched forward and yanked her backward by the hair, slamming her against the foyer wall, a knife to her throat. Elise, who had been walking with Romilda, screamed in fright. Romilda squealed. "What did you just say?" Hermione hissed at her.

"Oh, Morgana! Get off me, you crazy bitch!" Romilda shouted, annoyed.

"You hope Ginny dies, do you? Well, I'll tell you what, Vane, you better hope she doesn't because if she does, I can't guarantee I won't burn this place to the ground with you all in it."

"Miss Granger!" Kingsley's voice boomed from the base of the stairs. "Unhand her at once."

Hermione hummed in response. "Just thinking how much I hate it here. I think I would go crazy without you. Actually, I think I would have left already, gone rogue maybe, and just taken my chances on my own."

Ginny nodded. "Think your chances would be pretty high," she said around an exhale. The thick white smoke bellowed out before her. "I feel the same, though. And for the record, if you go, I go." Hermione glanced sideways at her red-headed friend.

"You can't leave Gin. You have Ron—"

"Fuck Ron. He's an arrogant prick, and I want to punch him in his face anytime he opens that fucking mouth of his."

"And Harry—"

Ginny scoffed. "He is hardly a reason to stay these days. Always telling me that I shouldn't hang around you so much and I should speak to Ron nicely and blah blah blah, like he's my fucking dad. I don't need one of those. Had one. He died. I'm not looking for a replacement; I'm looking for an orgasm," Ginny ranted off, finishing with a cheeky smirk that morphed quickly into a sneer. "Not that I have been having any of those lately. Mr Boy-who-could-only-manage-two-pumps-and-he's-done."

Hermione roared with laughter. She wasn't worried about the noise; they had placed a permanent silencing charm up here for exactly this reason: the freedom to be themselves and joke around without the drama that followed when they were inside. "Yeah, the sex here is lacking, that's for sure."

Ginny snorted. "That's only because all the boys here are terrified of you. Think you're going to pull a praying mantis on them and rip their heads off afterwards."

Hermione grinned. "If the sex is lacklustre, I might." They laughed. "Seriously, this is how I know being gay isn't a choice because otherwise, you and I would be together."

Ginny grinned at her. "And probably having mind-blowing sex all day long. The Order could hate us for a different reason." They laughed again.

"Thanks for saving my ass today, Mi," Ginny said.

"Thanks for sticking up for me." Hermione volleyed back.

"Pfft, bitch, please. Always. I'm gonna go shower, maybe murder Ron and or Harry. See you at dinner?"

Hermione nodded and watched as her friend clambered back onto the roof. Ginny's words replayed in her mind: "If you go, I go."

someone. "Or what, Ronald? You going to snap my wand too?" She stomped into the stairwell, slamming the door so hard behind her that the whole wall shook.

Hermione chuckled. Having already plucked a cigarette from the packet and put it between her lips, she held the pack out to Ginny with an amused smirk. In retrospect, she could see why no one here liked to be around the two of them much anymore. They hardly fit in with the rest of the base.

"Thanks," Ginny said as she plucked a stick from the pack. They silently made their way to one of the dormers and climbed out onto the roof. It was their own little secret hideaway. From the dormer, they could creep across to the edge and swing around onto a tiny little alcove beneath the roof on the other side of Hermione's bedroom wall. It was a little less than a metre wide but was several metres long. Certainly large enough that they could sit comfortably, anyway. It overlooked the backyard, was covered in case it rained, and, best of all, no one knew they liked to hang out there, so they were never bothered.

The two witches sat and settled against the wall. Hermione instinctively reached for her wand to light the cigarettes in their hands but grew angry again at the realisation that it was gone. Ginny scowled and lit the end of her wand instead. "We will get you a new one. I don't give a fuck what Ron and Kingsley say. You saved our asses back there, and they should be thankful that Malfoy's team wasn't there, or else a lot more of our side would be dead. We can try to suss out a way to sneak off base and maybe try to get into Olivander's undetected. The old bastard might be gone, but his wands are still stacked to the rafters, just waiting to bury someone alive." Hermione smiled weakly in return.

The sigh of relief from the two of them was synchronised as they exhaled at the same time. They giggled. "God. I can't believe he snapped my wand. Fucking asshole." Hermione hit her head back against the wall lightly a few times in annoyance.

Ginny glared down at the garden below them. "If he thinks I'm going on missions without you, then he can think again."

Hermione snorted. "That sounds like a surefire way to turn the last of them against you."

Ginny shrugged. "Honestly, as long as I have you, I don't care."

Hermione bumped her shoulder to Ginny's. "You will always have me, Gin."

Ginny lifted her hand and held out her pinky finger. A silent promise that they often performed. Hermione's own pinky wrapped around Ginny's, and they let their hands fall between them. Silent once more, comfortable to just enjoy each other's company.

"Galleon for your thoughts?" Ginny whispered into the setting afternoon.

Hermione glared into the black-haired witch's wide, terrified eyes. "You all think I'm unhinged for killing a few Death Eaters, and yet you wanna creep around the house making comments like that, wishing for one of the people keeping you alive to die?!" Hermione's laugh sounded hollow to her own ears. "I'll remember that next time I'm covering your subpar hexes on the battlefield, Vane."

"Miss Granger, final warning, do not make me stun you!" Kingsley stood at the end of the hall. Romilda would no doubt go running off to anyone who would listen the second Hermione let her go, spouting about how she had tried to kill her. She was tempted to push it and see if Kingsley had the balls to do it, but there were several loud cracks, and suddenly, the foyer was full of people.

Hermione's grip dropped immediately as she focused instead on the carnage before her. Ginny was fuming, positively steaming with how angry she was. On the mat lay the corpses of three of their people. Everyone else had varying degrees of injury. Ginny herself had a thick, deep gash sliced into her upper right arm, which hung limply at her side, dripping blood everywhere. "Patils!! M.A.R!!" Hermione shouted before Kingsley could process what he was seeing. It was a shorthand that they had developed for the message galleons - M.A.R. was medical attention required.

Padma appeared at the top of the stairs in a hurry. "Holy shit. Lav! Going to need you too, sweetheart!" she yelled over her shoulder. The Patil twins had been trained fully by Madam Pomfrey before she had died but Lavender Brown was still in training under them.

From down the hall, Pavarti came running. "Non-emergency in the sitting room! Kings, help me get Morgan in the ER." Morgan had her stomach sliced open, her innards on full display. It was a miracle she hadn't been torn in half with a splinch apparating like that. The ER had no doubt once been an office, but as it was the closest room with a door to the apparition point in the house, it had been converted into the twins' miniature emergency room.

"You asshole!" Ginny rounded on her brother. "I hope you're happy! You're just too stubborn to admit that you were wrong, aren't you? None of this would have happened if you had pulled your head out of your ass for five minutes! It's bad enough that you kept my fighting partner home; you had to be so arrogant as to throw our procedures out the window! Now we have three, probably soon to be four, dead - all for the sake of your fucking ego!" She stepped toward the visibly shaken man, jabbing her still-good hand at him. "We work in two teams for a fucking reason. We have fighting partners for a reason. We separate for a fucking reason! We don't drag out teams on hour-long hikes to get to the damn drop zone for a fucking reason!!" Ginny

screamed, blood dripping continuously down her arm. "I tried to tell you all of this! Your issue with our ability to end a life does not give you the right to put everyone at risk to prove a point, a point you failed to prove, by the way!"

"Ginny!" Harry growled from somewhere behind Hermione.

"Stay out of it, Harry!"

"Shut up, Harry!" Ginny and Hermione snarled at the same time.

Ron was shaking, silent tears streaming down his face. "This is on you, Ron. Their deaths...This is all on you," she hissed at her older brother, shoving him in the chest before turning her back on him.

Ron hadn't been on the field as much as Ginny and her; that wasn't to say he hadn't been on the field often but definitely not as often as them. He liked to think himself a strategic planner, but the reality was that a lot of times, when shit hit the fan, all his plans crumbled to dust. Hermione and Ginny had learned what worked best through trial and error and developed strict rules for missions based on it. It was because of their experience and skills in fighting on all fronts and styles that they had been put in charge of the combat teams, much to everyone's dismay. It seemed that Ron had ignored that Ginny had been just as involved in their creation, and she was right. The Order had paid the price.

Kingsley had returned to try and sort the rest of the injured. "I will not be going on any more missions without Hermione. If you have an issue with it, then tell it to someone else because I don't give a hippogriff's right ass cheek," she snapped before storming upstairs. Hermione ran after her, catching up to her as Ginny entered one of the bathrooms. "Could you?" Ginny held out her wand and nodded towards her casting arm.

Hermione sighed and stepped forward, taking the wand in her hand. "The twins are probably better; I haven't really focused on healing, Gin, you know that."

"If I wait that long, then I might lose function - and we both know it - which is why you're going to do it anyway."

Hermione nodded and began the incredibly slow process of melding the flesh back together. "Who?"

"Think it was Nott Sr. He was aiming for my neck."

Hermione lifted her eyebrow in agreement. "I bet he was. What happened?"

Ginny growled. "We landed at what I thought would be the drop zone, but Ron said that we would be doing things differently today, that we would stick together rather than splitting up because 'twelve sets of eyes are better than six' and twelve people presented a better front than six that could be picked off. I tried to point out that it

hadn't even hesitated - she had killed him. The first killing curse cast by their side. It had been such a shock to both sides that the Death Eaters had apparated away in the blink of an eye. Where the Order had been incredibly critical of her choice to end a person's life, Ginny had been vocally grateful.

Ginny, too, had been feeling frustration and annoyance at the lack of change, especially after the death of Molly and more so after Arthur followed only a few weeks later. She began to resent the Order's stance on keeping Harry locked away in the base instead of letting them actively research the remaining horcruxes. It had led to the on-again, off-again dynamic between the two. They were on at the moment, but after this afternoon's situation with Ron, they might be off again by Friday. Hermione had a suspicion that the Order's protection of Harry was no longer necessary. Voldemort himself had killed the part of Harry that would continue to keep him from dying. Not that anyone listened to her.

Ginny and Hermione had become fiercely protective of each other over the years as criticism continued to mount against them. Ginny eventually used a killing curse of her own when a Death Eater snuck up on Hermione, who, at that point, had embraced the killing curse with a commonality that terrified the majority of the Order. The first night, she cried with Ginny, holding her after everyone yelled at the redhead. The next time was bad, but not in the same harsh, tear-your-soul-apart type of way. Eventually, everyone decided to just isolate themselves from Hermione and, later, Ginny - though Ginny still had some sway because of her relationship with Harry and being Ron's sister.

Hermione's room was usually quiet, but right now, she could hear the distant yelling of multiple people. No doubt Ron had just filled in the rest of the house of Dean's death at her hand. Once upon a time, she would have been distraught over one of her own dying because of her, but now she just felt inconvenienced. He hadn't followed orders, purposely ignored her because he was convinced that he knew better than her - like she didn't go on nearly every mission and hadn't saved every single person here from dying on several occasions. She had meant what she said to Ronald. If she hadn't lit the building up, then everyone would have died. That many Death Eaters against six of them? She was good, but she wasn't that good, and now she would be forced to endure lecture after lecture, threat after cold glare.

Hermione rolled her eyes at the yelling deep in the house below her. Rolling off the bed, she wandered to the drawers and pulled out her occasional guilty pleasure. The door at the base of the stairs leading up here opened, and she heard Ginny yelling at

years ago. While he sat inside comfy and cosy, Hermione was out there trying her best to help keep the Order members alive, trying to stop this war from ending the Order's existence entirely. Now, she didn't care if it ended or not. It was just life at this point, and she would continue to do what she needed to do in order to survive.

What she was tired of, though, was the constant criticism of her character. The constant dismissal of her ideas. She knew in her heart that the Order would have fallen long ago if not for her and Ginny's questionable morals. Everyone had questionable morals; it was just whether or not the reward was deemed high enough to bend. Hermione had long since become accustomed to blocking out the glares thrown her way, and tonight was no different.

Behind her, Ginny was getting into it with Harry now. Hermione's lips tugged into a half smile when she heard her punch someone, probably Ron.

Mercifully, her sleeping quarters were up in the attic, far away from everyone else, much to her own relief as well as the relief of everyone else. It wasn't much; it was just a small A-frame space with a bed shoved in the corner underneath two small dormer windows. They allowed a lot of light in during the afternoon, which gave it a kind of glowing atmosphere. She had some drawers shoved against one wall that would have once housed neatly stacked and folded piles of clothes, but now they were shoved in haphazardly, some items overhanging the edge of the drawers preventing them from closing properly.

She flopped onto her bed and glared at the roof, trying to process the loss of her wand. It had been the same wand she had brought in Olivander's fourteen years ago. Yes, over time, it had struggled with the changes the war had on her, but it was still hers. Hermione never thought Ron would be capable of being so cruel. War had changed them all; in a way, it had impacted Hermione and Ginny more than most. But that was her wand, her magic...

When the Battle of Hogwarts had taken place they had thought that was it. They would either win or lose that night, but what had happened was much more anticlimactic. Harry had gone to sacrifice himself and had been killed; as it turned out, this was Voldemort killing another horcrux he had never intended to make. Harry had risen, and Voldemort, realising his error, apparated away, leading to a further seven years of war. They learned much later that it wouldn't have mattered much anyway, as he had an additional four horcruxes they had no knowledge of. Eleven in total - the age he was when he attended Hogwarts for the first time.

Somewhere along the way, Hermione had changed, sick of fighting, she had grown frustrated and angry, so when a death eater had hit Ginny with a cruciatus curse, she

wasn't how we did things. I didn't even get to point out why because the bastard hexed me with a silencer. So then he's leading the group through town because he didn't even land near the shop because he thought the sounds of our apparitions would be louder than a whole ass group stumbling their way through town. Of course, the prick left me silenced."

Hermione frowned, she had a feeling where this was going. "So when I spotted movement, I couldn't even alert anyone because he had put me at the back where no one could see my signals. I tried to tap on his shoulder, and he snapped at me that he didn't wanna hear it right now! Well, of course, that told them exactly where we were, didn't it? A second later, they had apparated around us and threw down some kind of dome charm. Kept us trapped in that spot, couldn't apparate out. At least Ron had the common sense to lift the hex at that point."

Hermione took extra care to line a sliced nerve up properly, Ginny's eyes watered, and she gritted her teeth. Hissing her words through her pain, "Phillip was dead in a second. Wendy next, and then Yasmin last. I was throwing curses left, right, and centre, but everyone was disjointed; no one had stuck by their partners, and I was the only one killing anyone. Ron started yelling at me to stop killing people. I yelled that I'd kill him if he didn't shut the fuck up. That's when Nott hit me. Just managed to dodge it hitting anything vital. I don't know who it was, but I killed someone, and the dome went down. I yelled six and apparated us out of there before they could throw up another cage."

Six was the code for everyone to link up immediately. It didn't matter if the people next to you were injured or dead; if you were within reach, you grabbed on, preferably on two different fronts. "I could kill him, Mi. I think I could actually kill him. All because he would rather dig his heels in rather than admit he was wrong. Morgan is probably going to die. Yas, Phil, and Wendy are all dead, and we didn't even get supplies. A whole day wasted and probably four down, all for the sake of his ego."

Hermione stepped back, looking at the thick white scar now running horizontally across Ginny's upper arm. "I think that's as good as I'm going to get it. You will still need one of the twins to check it over. Can you wiggle your fingers?"

Ginny concentrated hard on her hand, and eventually, her fingers moved in the motion she wanted, but it caused a hiss of pain to escape the redhead. Hermione sighed in relief. She had function, at least. Whatever she had missed, the twins could fix.

While her wound had been open, Ginny had been gushing blood down her arm that had dripped from her fingers to pool on the ground. Hermione handed Ginny her wand back and assessed the amount of blood lost. "You will need a blood replenishment potion. I'll leave you to shower if you think you're okay, then go see the

twins. When you're done with the twins, come up to my room, think there might be a third of a bottle of Vodka left, and I still have a couple of cigarettes. I should avoid downstairs for a bit, lest I do something unforgivable." Hermione joked sarcastically.

Ginny laughed and nodded her head. "Yeah, I'm good. Thanks, Mi."

Hermione headed up to the attic to hunt down the vodka. It would be much easier with a wand and an accio, but oh well. Having eventually found it and retrieved the cigarettes, as well as pocketing a gift she had made for Ginny, she climbed out the window. She had planned on surprising the redhead with it for her birthday in a few weeks, but after today, she wanted to take no chances. There were still five smokes left, so it would be okay for her to have one now. She swung down onto the ledge and squeezed herself into the corner so that Ginny would have room when she eventually made her way out. There was a nice breeze displacing some of the heat of the mid-afternoon sun, and in the distance was a buzz of bees.

It was peaceful. It was moments like this, slow and golden, that Hermione felt the closest to the old version of herself, like if she had this for the rest of her life, she might be able to reverse some of the damage she had done. She didn't know how long she had sat there; if not for movement below, she might have drifted into a trance. She looked down to see Harry Potter hand in hand with Elise Morgan and jogging towards the garden shed. That slimy two-timing fucker, and now?! Really?

She didn't waste any time scampering back up onto the roof the second the shed door shut. She checked the bathroom first, empty. She peered into the sitting room down stairs, no Ginny. She strode to the ER and threw open the door. Padma was checking over the readings on her arm. "Garden shed," Hermione said before stalking out the back.

Hermione was there before Ginny had even appeared at the back door. The disgusting sounds of flesh slapping on flesh escaped under the door. Her face turned upward as Harry grunted, and Elise moaned what was clearly a fake moan. She wasted no more time and opened the door. Harry scrambled away from Elise, who, for the second time that day, screamed in fright at Hermione's sudden appearance. Harry tripped backwards over a bucket and landed on his ass, his softening member on full display. How utterly gross...and pathetic.

Hermione was staring down at Harry with a sneer of disgust when Ginny finally caught up to her. Ginny took in the scene before her, and a slow, disbelieving laugh echoed around the shed with her as the source. "Are you kidding me? Elise Morgan? If you're going to cheat on me, Harry, at least do it with someone better than me."

experiments, and I am not going to bow down and take your commands like the good little bitch you want me to be! And you might all disapprove of me and my methods, but I was still made captain despite it because I am a fucking good fighter, and I am damn good at keeping everyone alive. I made the right fucking call!"

Ron reached forward with lightning-quick reflexes and ripped her wand from her hand, bringing his knee up and snapping it in half before Ginny or herself could even react. Hermione watched in slow motion as the two halves of her wand dropped to the floor, where they clattered and jumped around for a second before falling still, lifeless of the magic within any more. Hermione looked up at Ron through her eyelashes as something else snapped inside her.

"You are fucking done. Consider this your official notice of being put under house arrest or fired or whatever you want to call it; I don't care. That was your last mission. Honestly, Hermione, you look a little too much like them." His finger pointed outside. Hermione said nothing, though. Keeping her cool, she glared at him.

Ginny wasn't keeping her composure so well; she flew at her brother, landing several punches to his jaw despite her short stature before Harry pulled her off him. Ginny managed to break free and shoved Harry off her. "Get the fuck off me! How can you just sit back and let him do that to her?! Conflict between you two aside, he just snapped her wand, and you have nothing to say?!" Ginny yelled at her on-again-off-again boyfriend.

Ron and Hermione were locked in some kind of glare-down. Both of them seemingly staring back at someone they were equally disgusted with. Her team - and half the household - had wandered in to observe the conflict. Not that she cared; there was no love lost here anymore. "You really think that will stop me, Weasley?" Hermione snarled as she took a step closer, Ron flinching at the use of his last name, her boots cracking glass that had fallen off of someone when they had landed. "I don't need a wand to kill you, remember? And I don't take my orders from you." She didn't actually take orders from anyone. Everyone tried, of course, and a lot of her ideas were voted against, but technically speaking, she was her own boss. "So," Her anger finally bubbled up, increasing the volume of her voice. "If you want to stop me, you'll have to fucking kill me!!" she spat at his feet. The second he had snapped her wand, he had snapped any leftover loyalty she had to the years they had spent in school trying to save the world - fat lot of good it had done them - the world had gone to hell anyway.

She turned to stomp up the stairs. Ginny glared at Harry, who looked at Hermione with an expression reserved for those he deemed untrustworthy. Hermione had to laugh. Harry hadn't stepped foot on the battlefield since the battle of Hogwarts seven

Behind him, Seamus was still trying to cough away the smoke inhalation while simultaneously sobbing over his dead friend.

"It is not my fault if Dean couldn't follow orders. I called to retreat three times, Ronald. If he had listened, I wouldn't have had to resort to such drastic measures," Hermione snapped back. Was it unfortunate that Dean had been killed by her fiendfyre? Sure, but she wasn't going to risk the lives of her whole team for the sake of one person.

Seamus lunged at her. "You fucking bitch! I'll fucking kill you!" His face contorted in an ugly display of rage and devastation. Ron pushed him back. He wasn't through with her yet.

"I gave the order three times, Ronald. If he had done as he was told, then we wouldn't be having this conversation," Hermione challenged, folding her arms across her chest.

"Everyone else managed to follow directions."

"Shut the fuck up, Ginny. The adults are talking." Ron spared her only a momentary glare of disgust. "And actually, we would. How many Death Eaters did you just kill Hermione, hmm? Twenty? Thirty? You don't even fucking care! You fucking disgust me!"

"First of all, I'm an adult too, dipshit, and second, don't you dare talk to me that way! Or her, for that matter!" Ginny snapped, a sneer taking over her face in her brother's direction.

"Oh yes, Mum would be so proud of the murderous cold-hearted bitch you've grown up to be," he spat. The soundtrack of Seamus crying continued in the background. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Harry slip into the room. Not that she expected any form of defence from him anymore. Their friendship had long since shattered.

"I don't know how many Death Eaters there were, and frankly, no, I don't care. There could have been twice as many, and I still would have burned every fucking one because this is war, Ronald. Sacrifices need to be made!" Hermione's eyes narrowed as she hissed at him. "I refuse to apologise for doing what was necessary to save the lives of everyone who did make it home."

Ron shook his head in disgust. "Who even are you anymore?"

Hermione huffed a laugh. "Apparently, one of the only ones around here willing to make the harder decisions. In case you haven't noticed, we're dying out there, Ron. It was either Dean died, or we all died. I refuse to have this same conversation over and fucking over. I am not going to stop using the killing curse, I am not going to stop my

"No one's better than you," Hermione mumbled under her breath. Ginny raised her fist, and Hermione bumped it with her own.

Harry finally scrambled back to his feet and put his gear away. "That, Ginny, that right there. You find out I'm having an affair, and you're fist-bumping Hermione. Elise is actually a lovely girl and—"

"No... no; actually, she isn't, but she is easy and stoked your ego," Hermione interrupted.

"I am not talking to you. You stopped being my Hermione a long time ago, and you've been dragging Ginny down with you for far too long as well. Just this once, would you please butt the fuck out," Harry sighed heavily.

"Look, Harry, it's fine. Hermione and I are going for a drink now. You and I are done, finally, so you are free to continue this little fling with Elise, and I can move on to someone who can actually make me cum." Ginny tugged at Hermione's arm, leading her back toward the house.

They had made it halfway down the hallway toward the apparition point when Ron looked between them and Harry, who was running to catch up to them. "Oh, she caught you, huh?"

Ginny and Hermione stopped, both slowly turning to look at the older redhead. "Wait a minute. You knew?!" Ginny growled.

Ron's cheeks reddening "Well yeah, Ginny, most people do. It's hardly a secret, and when you act the way you do, who can blame him?"

Both witches stared at him for a moment in disbelief. "Excuse me?" Ginny asked in a dangerously calm manner.

"I... Well, you have a tendency to act like a bit of a bitch, Gin."

Ginny nodded slowly at her brother with a look that could kill before dragging Hermione down the hallway and apparating them into what looked like... Cornwall.

It had been a long time since she and Ginny had visited here; it seemed to be doing as well as anywhere else, given the war zone environment. Ginny was already slinking down an alley and unlocking the back door of a store. "Keep a lookout," she whispered before disappearing inside.

Hermione wasn't sure exactly how good a lookout she would be, given she only had her knives on her, but she glanced around anyway. Ginny reappeared a few minutes later with two cartons of cigarettes and a bottle of gin. "Right, grab on."

Hermione did, and they were whisked away again, only to reappear on top of a hillside. Trees surrounded them and in front of them. Ginny sat atop an old stone retaining wall. "Where are we?" Hermione looked around.

APOSTASY

"Dartmoor," Ginny mumbled back.

Hermione sat next to her and took the bottle she was offering.

"It's pretty here," Hermione observed and took the cigarette she was being handed.

"Is it odd that I'm not even surprised by Harry's actions? I'm more surprised by Ron than anything," Ginny asked, exhaling into the afternoon air.

"No, I don't think so. You and Harry have been on separate paths for a long time." Hermione passed her the bottle. "I think it comes down to familiarity, and that's it. You haven't actually loved him in a few years now." Ginny hummed in agreement. "Whereas Ron, for all his faults, is still your big brother, and so he was always expected to fill that role."

"Don't get me wrong 'cause I certainly don't care what anyone else thinks, but to find out that everyone knows too... How humiliating."

Hermione huffed a small laugh. "I don't think we are exactly well-liked, Gin." She climbed down from the retaining wall and floated around, nudging stones with her boots.

"I don't see why not. How many times over have we saved everyone in that house?"

"Yeah, but we still don't exactly fit in there."

"I'm so sick of this war. It's stupid. And endless." Ginny sighed. "The so-called heroes are losing, the villains are losing. What's the fucking point?"

Hermione bit her lip. In her head, several little fragments of information flew together to form a larger picture. "Sometimes the villains win..." she said hesitantly.

Ginny frowned at her ever so slightly. "Like when?"

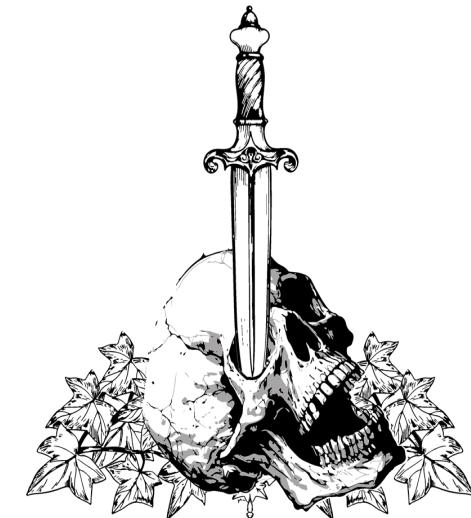
"Like, say... if they added two new super soldiers to their roster. Maybe changed up their game plan a little." Hermione stared at her.

"You want to join the Death Eaters?" Ginny said with a laugh.

Hermione offered a small smile of amusement back. "Well, no. But I mean... I don't think I can bring myself to go back to the Order and keep being told day in and day out what a shit person I am and having Romilda fucking Vane walking the corridors wishing you dead—"

"Wait, what?" Ginny spluttered with a confused smirk.

"Oh yeah. Right before you guys got back, she was saying that she hoped someone took you out so it would be one less psycho to deal with." Hermione rolled her eyes and stepped forward to take the bottle of gin; it hadn't burnt her throat in years, which probably wasn't a good sign. "So I told her that she better hope you do come back; otherwise, I would burn the house to the ground with everyone in it." Hermione glanced at her sideways. "A knife may have been involved..."



CHAPTER 1: IF YOU GO...

The heat was still licking at her skin as they landed with a thump back in the foyer of the headquarters. All around her, her teammates landed awkwardly and stumbling to catch themselves - all except Seamus, who let himself fall to his knees, the gasping for air slowed down by the sobs that were being wrenches from the man.

Ron landed steadily and immediately sought her out. Hermione rolled her eyes and sighed for the lecture she knew was to come. She was relieved when Ginny stepped up beside her. "You!" Ron roared. "What the fuck was that, Hermione? You just killed one of ours!"

Ginny sighed. "I love you," she chuckled, "and I am so glad you're my best friend. Kind of wish I had let Donovan kill her last month."

"Agreed." Hermione blew the smoke straight up above her.

"So. What are we doing then? Because honestly speaking, I think I'm done too. Today was... it was unnecessary. They have no respect for our experience, your experiments, or what we have done to protect them, and I have no desire to tolerate the humiliation either."

Hermione hummed. "Speaking of experiments..." Hermione pulled the folded-up tissue paper from her pocket. "Do you remember a few months back when I had that idea about the rings, but Kingsley said it was too dark to approve?"

Gin thought for a moment before her face lit up. "Oh, please tell me that you made some?!" Hermione unfolded the paper and held it out to her. There, in the centre, were two very thin bands. One silver with a tiny black diamond in the centre, and the other a black band with a tiny white diamond in the centre.

"Wait, but didn't you say it would need our blood?"

Hermione nodded. "Last month's mission to Hogsmeade, you cut yourself on the rocks, remember?"

Ginny smirked. "Sneaky. You know, all you had to do was ask."

Hermione nodded. "I know, but I wanted it to be a surprise."

Ginny picked up the silver one before pausing and looking at Hermione. "Does it matter?"

Hermione nodded. "Yeah, but you grabbed the right one anyway."

The idea had been that Hermione could potentially use the metal of the dead diadem horcrux to make protection rings. They would work in pairs and required the blood of each of the wearers. They would only work if the rings were in close range of each other, of course, and as long as both people wore them. The idea of blood magic, especially using old horcruxes tainted with dark magic, was too much for Kingsley. He had shut it down immediately and forbidden her from making them. But then again, that shouldn't have surprised her. She couldn't even remember the last time he had approved one of her experiments.

But Hermione answers to no one, and so, of course, she did it anyway...

Ginny slipped it on her finger and the ring moulded to size. Hermione slipped hers on, too, and felt the tingle shoot its way up her arm.

Ginny chuckled. "Well, now we definitely can't go back. Kings would throw us to the street now. Probably accuse us of harnessing Dean's soul or some bullshit."

APOSTASY

Hermione stared at her friend. "Gin... I am serious. I really...." She sighed and looked out at the sun casting shadows off the trees. "I can't stand it there. It's suffocating. And god, everyone is so dramatic. 'Hermione, you're so evil. Hermione, stop killing everyone. Hermione, you look just like them.' Ugh, it's never-ending. I can't go back. But I understand that it might not be that way for you—"

Ginny's loud and sudden laugh cut her off. "Mi, if you think I am going to miss that place, then you are delusional. Besides, I already told you, where you go, I go."

"Well, where shall we go?" Hermione asked.

"We could always see if our talents are better appreciated on the opposing team, as you said, and if not, then I say we go wherever the hell we feel like," Ginny said, far too casually for what they were discussing.

"You know that if we went rogue now and you wanted to go back to the Order, they would probably still take you, but if we do that - if we join the Death Eaters - then there's no going back to the Order. That would be it. They don't even trust me now as it is and barely trust you."

Ginny shrugged. "I've spent enough time with the Order to know we don't fit in there; why would we want to go back to cheating loser boyfriends, asshole exes who snap wands, and pretentious wannabe ministers who dismiss every brilliant idea you come up with?"

Hermione turned to look at her. "Gin, we would end up having to kill members of the Order; you might come face to face with Ron or Harry. When George returns, you might have to—"

"Mi, stop. I don't care. Do you feel bad about Dean?"

Hermione frowned at her. "No, he was the one not following orders."

Ginny smiled at her. "Right, because everyone in that house knows how we work and operate. If anyone is stupid enough to face off against us on the field, then that's on them. Do you think I am going to care if I have to kill Romilda fucking Vane? No. I am not. The only ones I might care about, and it's only a maybe, are Pads and Parv. As far as I'm concerned, everyone else knows better."

Hermione shrugged. "Well.. at least we know we have insurance if it doesn't go to plan."

Ginny stared at the ring on her hand. "We should keep this little secret quiet." She pulled out her wand and glamoured them with a notice-me-not charm. "This way, we can save it for the perfect moment."

Hermione nodded her agreement. "Gin, are you sure? Are you sure you want to do this?"

For Cort (aka Hypothetically)

There is this amazing person I know, she is strong and funny and resilient and sometimes I want to hit her with a frying pan but she deserves all good things in her life and so I wrote this for her for her birthday. Happy Birthday Cort 🎉🎈🎉 Love you always bitch. ❤️

Apostasy
ao3: Deydralinne

First published in 2024. Completed in 2024

Part 1 of Apostasy

Based on Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling
Relationship is Hermione Granger/Draco Malfoy

Rating: Explicit
Words: 146,747
Hits: 107,516
Kudos: 1,908

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Seven years into the war Hermione and Ginny are tired of being treated like crap after one to many betrayals from Harry and Ron, they decide to join the Death Eaters, changing the rules and the game in the process.



TYPESET BY SENNA SLYTHERIN 2024

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Ginny grabbed Hermione's hand and offered her a warm smile. "Do you trust me?" she asked.

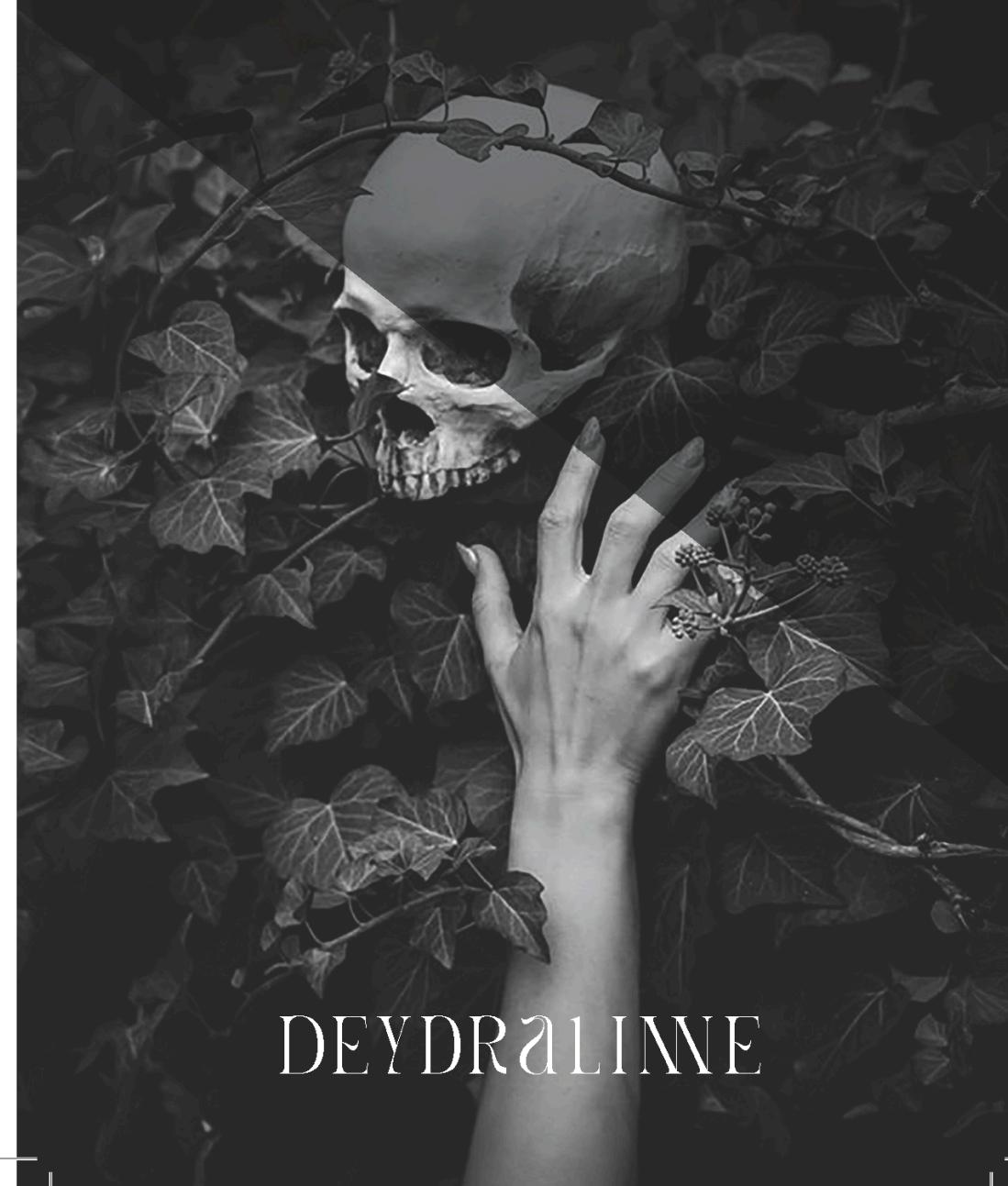
"Of course."
"Good."

Hermione's stomach pulled inward as she was whisked through Ginny's side along apparition. Wherever they landed, it went from being loud and boisterous to very quiet very quickly. Staring back in shock at them was an entire pub full of Death Eaters.

"Afternoon boys! Who wants to buy us a drink?" Ginny smiled, hands held out on either side of her.

Well, shit.

APOSTASY

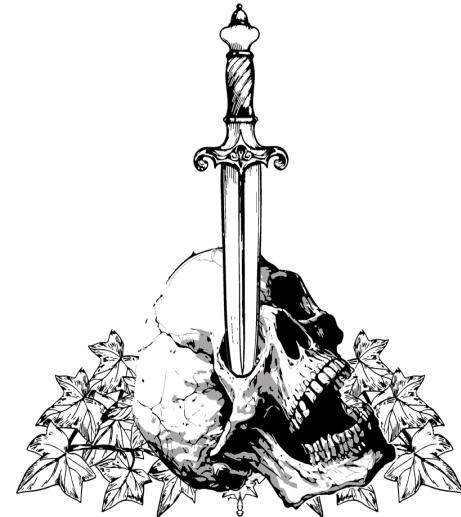


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IF YOU BOUGHT THIS, SHAME ON YOU.

IF YOU BOUND THIS YOURSELF. IM SO PROUD OF
YOU! XOXO -SENNA



CHAPTER 3: A MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL OPPORTUNITY

There was a thirty-second period when the Death Eaters surrounding them were so shocked by their appearance that no one moved. Just stared at them, or perhaps they were waiting to see if more members of the Order were going to be joining them. Then finally, people seemed to jolt to life; a dozen wands were pointed at them, but only one person actually fired a hex their way.

APOSTASY

Hermione was faster though; she saw the process on his face and quickly stabbed the blade of a combat knife into the shoulder of the closest Death Eater, using the shock of impact to yank the man in front of her and Ginny just in time to take the hit for them. Hermione raised an eyebrow and peaked her head out from around the man. “Well, that was rude. I don’t even have a wand, and my girl here doesn’t have hers drawn.”

Realistically she knew the rings would have protected them, but she was waiting for the reveal on that one. Confused faces looked back at her. Most notable were the faces of Theodore Nott, Blaise Zabini, and Draco Malfoy, who now stood rather than sat and were clearly assessing them for threats. Hermione let the incapacitated Death Eater fall to the floor. “Honestly, if we wanted to fight, half of you would be dead already,” Hermione mumbled as she wiped the blood off her knife on the denim covering her thighs.

“Why are you here?” Blaise eyed the unconscious man on the floor before looking between them. The majority of the Death Eaters in the place eying their three former schoolmates nervously.

It was no secret how high in the ranks the former Slytherin’s had risen. A few of the older, more bloodthirsty Death Eaters looked outraged that he was bothering to ask. “Who cares?! Kill the bitches!” Avada Keda—” an older man shouted in annoyance, but the man dropped dead before he had a chance to finish the curse. Draco Malfoy’s wand pointed at the corpse, his face pinched in disgust.

“We told you we’re here for a drink!” Ginny exclaimed, a little too bubbly.

Draco’s eyes flitted past them to the barkeep behind her and Ginny, a small singular nod of his head. Behind her, Hermione heard two glasses being slapped down on the bench and a bottle being uncapped.

“You have two minutes to start talking before I will gladly deliver you to the Dark Lord.”

Ginny started laughing and, in a bold mood, turned her back to collect the glasses. Hermione’s eyes darted around the bar, making sure that no one would shoot while she was vulnerable, but then she was back and pressing a glass of whiskey into Hermione’s hand, a sip for good measure before she spoke. “We thought you would be interested to know that we will no longer be providing our services to the Order,” Hermione spoke with cool indifference.

Another Death Eater she recognised as Marcus Flint barked a laugh. “You expect us to believe that rubbish?” He snarled, his teeth curling to expose the most disgusting set of rotting teeth that Hermione had the misfortune to see for some time.

APOSTASY

"We don't really give a damn if you believe it, Flint." Ginny smiled tightly his way.
"You're hardly high enough in the ranks to warrant us caring for your opinion."

Theodore Nott scoffed a laugh. "You're nearly out of time, ladies."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "I know that you lot need things spelt out for you, but honestly, do try to keep up." She smirked as Draco's eyes narrowed and his jaw clenched. She knew full well that those three, in particular, needed nothing spelt out for them. "We have left the Order and have decided instead to... freelance our skill set to more appreciative parties. We thought we would offer your Lord and Master first opportunity."

"Or we could just kill you." Blaise glowered.

"That would be ill-advised," Ginny sighed with boredom, choosing to lean against a bar stool, one elbow resting on the table, the other bending to bring her drink to her lips.

"So is walking into a bar full of people ready to murder you, sweetheart." Blaise's eyes glittered with amusement.

"So, a mudblood and a blood traitor have come to what, join the Death Eaters?"
Draco drawled disbelievingly.

"We have no interest in taking the mark, before you go getting the wrong idea." Hermione looked out the window into Diagon Alley, now vastly different than it had been ten years ago. "We grow tired of our skills being undervalued and rejected. If your King Snakeman," the several hisses of offence that sounded put a smile on both hers and Ginny's faces, "would appreciate them more, then we will gladly provide them. Otherwise, we will be on our way."

"You will be going nowhere, you filthy mudblood bitch." Tiberius Nott spat.

Hermione raised an eyebrow at him. "I think you will find that you have no way to stop us."

"A killing curse between those perky little tits of yours would do the job. McNair would probably enjoy having some time with your body afterwards; he tends to favour the less lively holes." It was clear the old bastard was trying to intimidate her, but it just made her smile bigger.

Hermione took a sip of her whiskey, stepping slowly toward the man, several surrounding Death Eaters pointing their wands with stronger intention. "Mi..." Ginny warned cautiously from the bar.

Hermione didn't stop her steps, though, until she was up close and personal. The elder Nott stared down at her with contempt.

Hermione smirked, looking him up and down. "Yeah, I can see it."

APOSTASY

“See what?” Tiberius rose to the bait.

“Why your son has surpassed you.” Several deep gasps sounded throughout the room. Tiberius looked as though Hermione had spat at him. His face grew redder and redder as each second passed, and he failed to find words. “You’re not very intimidating, are you? I mean, really, a generic death threat? You couldn’t even get a decent slicing hex off on Gin earlier, barely scratched her, and honestly, who cares what happens after I’m dead? It’s not like I’m gonna feel his tiny prick, dead or alive.” Hermione battered her lashes at him, offering him a tight, challenging smile.

“Fucking hell.” She heard Blaise exhale from a few feet away.

“Mi.” Ginny sighed.

Tiberius was still spluttering through his rage, unable to put words to feelings, shaking so badly that he looked as though he might start whizzing around the room like a shaken bottle of soda. Hermione took a few smug steps back before turning back toward the redhead at the bar. Ginny had a mildly amused smile, but she also shook her head and rolled her eyes at Hermione to let her know that she was treading dangerously.

“Fuck it, you wanna roll, let’s roll.” Draco downed his drink. Nodding to Blaise and Theo, who stepped toward them. Ginny groaned and swallowed down the rest of her own drink just in time for Blaise to reach the redhead.

“I’m going to need your wand, little dea del fuoco, for where we are going.” He held his hand out expectantly. His words might have been gentle, but his face was hard and pinched. Ginny smirked but handed it over.

Draco twirled his finger at Hermione, who complied and put her hands behind her back.

“Careful there, Malfoy, she likes to be restrained,” Ginny laughed, jumping off the bar stool and turning to offer her own wrists to Blaise behind her back.

Hermione knew they could be in a little bit of trouble here, but Ginny’s mood was infectious, and she knew that no matter what, the two would find a way out of whatever tricky situation they were getting themselves into.

The tricky situation was a large stone manor. It stood on a hill overlooking the village, some of its windows boarded, tiles missing from its roof, and ivy spreading unchecked over its face. Hermione was briefly overcome by the size of the building in front of them before she and Ginny were prodded forward. “Welcome to Riddle Manor,” Theo said, his voice portraying his excitement for the entertainment that was no doubt to come.

Riddle Manor, this must have been Voldemort's father's family home. The wind blowing over the hillside was the only welcome they would get there. Not even Ginny offered a smart-ass comment as they trudged up the stone stairs, the enormous wooden door folding inward.

For all the grandiose feel of the outside, the inside was practically bare of all furnishings. In the foyer, a large statue covered by a white drop cloth was the only item. In the hallway were the marks of where paintings once stood. In the ballroom that they were led into stood two antique dining chairs. The deep red curtains pushed open to allow the sunlight to flood the otherwise empty tan and cream-coloured hall.

Voldemort stood in the centre of the room, his back to them, his black robes falling loosely around him, talking to Bellatrix Lestrange and her husband, Rodolphus. Both of whom looked at the group in utter surprise.

This is not what she had anticipated Voldemort's home to look like. She supposed she expected black, damp décor with a few piles of bodies thrown in for good measure. "My Lord." Draco dipped his head to the snake-like man, who snapped his attention to them the moment Draco spoke.

A low hiss sounded from him as he took in the sight of Ginny and Hermione, whom the boys had let go of, their hands now free once more. Hermione ignored him, though, instead choosing to look around them in curiosity.

"Draco, my boy. Who have you brought me?" His voice quiet.

"Hermione Granger and Ginevra Weasley." Beside her, Ginny made a sound of disgust at her full first name, and even despite the situation, Hermione scoffed a laugh at her friend's reaction.

Their lack of trembling fear seemed to confuse the dark wizard in front of them who floated toward them, a scowl on his face. "Is there something amusing you wish to share, Mudblood?"

Hermione rolled her eyes at his jaded insult. "Only Ginny's aversion to her full name."

Voldemort didn't seem to know what to make of her. "Hmmm. Well done, Draco. Your capture of these two will be—"

"Respectfully, my Lord, we did not capture them."

Voldemort frowned. "Very well, I appreciate your honesty; name my loyal follower so I may reward them with my gratitude."

Draco seemed nervous to disclose the truth so Ginny helped him out. "Oh good Morgana man. No one captured us. We requested an audience." Ginny rolled her eyes and threw herself haphazardly into one of the dining chairs.

APOSTASY

Hermione, on the other hand, strolled slowly toward a large arched window nearby to look down at the gardens below. Their actions and casual demeanour simultaneously made the three Slytherin boys nervous and greatly offended Bellatrix Lestrange. Voldemort obviously had not had someone treat him with any level of disregard for a long time. "And what is the purpose of this audience?" he finally managed, his annoyance evident.

"Well, Voldie - can I call you Voldie?" Hermione started.

"No," the man snarled.

"Well, Voldie, we have come—"

"How dare you!" Voldemort hissed. "You should remember your place, Mudblood!" he raised his wand.

Ginny scoffed, Hermione smiled in amusement. "I wouldn't do that if I were you," She warned.

"Crucio!" Voldemort barked, but it wasn't Hermione who dropped in pain. Voldemort himself fell to the ground in the shock of it. A pained gasp escaped him. Hermione was now glad to have waited to give away their source of protection. While Ginny looked away to hide her proud smirk, Hermione feared it would fail. Ginny had been possibly a little overconfident in her invention.

The rings were a set because they encompassed a mirror enchantment; one without the other was useless, but together, they would bounce any hex or curse thrown their way back at the caster. They wouldn't work for anyone, obviously - it had required both hers and Ginny's blood to activate. They were linked to them specifically and drenched in deep, dark magic.

Voldemort's back arched off the floor as he writhed through the pain. Bellatrix woke from her horror with a start, raising her wand at Hermione and screeching at her. "Stop it, stop it at once, you insolent brat! How dare you!"

Hermione shrugged her shoulders. "I'm not doing anything, Bella."

Once upon a time, Bella had haunted her dreams, leaving her shaking and terrified of coming face to face with the eldest Black sister, but those fears had long since passed - probably around the same time Hermione had begun to lose her humanity. Everyone in the room was looking at her in various degrees of confusion, with the exception of Ginny, who was watching Voldemort with a twisted level of amusement.

"I said stop it!!" Bellatrix's eyes darted between her master and Hermione. When the crucio didn't ease up, she raised her wand at the witch. "Crucio!" she screamed at Hermione, but a moment later, Bellatrix was in the same position as Voldemort herself.

"You apparently negotiated a room to do your experiments in during your discussion with the Dark Lord. We will convert the old garden shed into that room for you. I won't take the risk of you blowing the house up and killing us all, so in short, no experiments in the house." Draco stated.

Hermione scoffed. "What kind of experiments do you imagine I'm doing?!"

"Agree to the rule, Granger."

"Fine." Hermione laughed. "No experiments in the house."

"You are guests here; if you want to go out, we will find a way to accommodate it, but you don't go out without at least two of us at all times." Blaise stated seriously.

"Fine."

"Are there any rules you have for us?" Theo asked, his facial expressions and voice still a little stiff.

"You don't get to take our wands without permission, ever," Ginny said with a surprising level of seriousness. Ginny herself had actually never had her wand confiscated, but Hermione had several times, and then, of course, Ron had snapped her old wand only a week ago.

No one said anything for a moment. Ginny folded her arms, gearing up to fight about it if need be.

"We wouldn't take your wands from you," Pansy said softly, "we might disarm you if you were attacking one of us, but we wouldn't take your wands in the capacity that you're stating."

"Then agree to the rule," Ginny pushed.

"Fine, I agree." Pansy was looking at them in a pitying manner that Hermione didn't like.

"Ditto," Daphne said into her drink.

The other four continued with a series of confirmations.

"Anything else?" Blaise asked patiently.

"Total honesty around missions. Don't try to do us favours by skimming details to save our feelings. We knew what we were signing up for. Don't bother with hiding details about who is killed, when, or what safe houses are taken down. If it's not clear by us giving up our own safe house, we don't care. We want in on it all, not being left out to spare our presumed heartache," Hermione challenged.

Another round of confirmations.

"Hermione and I are a team on the battlefield; do not get in the way of that," Ginny demanded.

"Fine, anything else?"

Hermione looked to her best friend, her eyes boring back into hers. A small tilt of Ginny's head to the side, Hermione scrunched her nose, and Ginny cocked an eyebrow. Hermione tilted her own head, and Ginny pursed her lips. Through those actions, they had an entire conversation.

"We want all those rules in a binding written agreement. We all sign it." Ginny turned back to the group, the group who were staring at them with various levels of amusement again at their communications.

"Well ahead of you, dea del fuoco." Blaise waved his hand, and a parchment materialised on the coffee table in front of them. "Touch the tip of your wand to the paper, and it will be all taken care of." The paper floated up and began to circle the group, starting with Daphne and Pansy, floating to her and Ginny next, Theo and Astoria afterwards, and finally to Blaise and Draco.

"What're the stakes against it?" Hermione frowned when everyone had completed it.

"Your magic." Blaise stated.

serious he was actually intimidating. Hermione could see the fear hidden deep down in the depths of his eyes.

Hermione looked at Astoria's face, trying to get a read on her. Whatever it was that Blaise was referring to, it pulled no emotion from her; however, her husband looked as though someone had stabbed a knife in his chest.

"Granger, Red," Draco growled in warning.

"Yeah, sure, whatever." Hermione waved in his direction dismissively. Theo looked up at him and caught her analysing him. His brow pulled together, and his eyes darkened.

"Granger," Draco warned again.

She blinked her attention to him. "I already said yes," she stated again, more definitely.

"Red?"

"What's wrong with her?"

Theo straightened a little. "Oh, stop it," Astoria snapped at him. "It's a valid question after the way you lot worded that."

"Tor." Daphne stated.

Astoria ignored her sister and looked Ginny in the eyes. "I'm dying. I inherited the Greengrass blood curse, unfortunately, and some days, it means I'm rather unwell. Some days, I'm fine. I still have a few good years left, but everyone tends to fuss over me, and if you want total transparency, I can be rather spoiled for it. I wanted a house in France that belonged to all of us, so we live here. I wanted to remodel the house and modernise it, so we did."

Hermione was watching Theo again. Halfway through Astoria's speech, he had become aware of it and glared back at her. Hermione saw it, though; it was too late - he still had hope to save her.

"Thank you for sharing that," Ginny said, sounding rarely empathetic. "I agree with your rule; carry on."

"Rule four. We eat dinner together every night that our presence is not required elsewhere. You may help yourself throughout the day, but dinner is a sit-down affair."

"And you want to extend that rule to include us?" Hermione asked in disbelief. The looks on the Slytherins around her didn't align with the rule being imposed.

"As I said, I tend to be indulged an awful lot," Astoria explained. "It's always been my rule for the house, and yes, I am extending it to you."

"Fine." Hermione and Ginny answered simultaneously.

APOSTASY

“You’re not.” Daphne sipped her martini. “But for the record, you wouldn’t make it to our bed to slit our throats, Granger.”

Hermione mirrored her smile. “Guess we’ll have to wait and see then, won’t we?”

Theo chuckled. “Fucking hell. You’re not here to make friends, are you, Granger?”

“Okay, let’s carry on, shall we, before we get ahead of ourselves,” Blaise sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Rule one, we do not fight in the house. If you have an issue with someone, there is a separate dwelling that has been converted into a training centre. You can get in the ring and knock each other around or duel each other until it’s out of your system - with the obvious exception of life-threatening spells - but you do it there. There’s even an outdoor sparring mat if you prefer, but it does not happen in the house. Are we clear and in agreement so far?”

Hermione tilted her head and examined his face. He was saying that Hermione and Ginny both had permission to go round for round with any of them. Except Astoria, that much had already been made clear; there would be a reason for that Hermione would figure out eventually.

“Granger, has anyone told you that you’re kind of terrifying? Especially when you’re thinking. Your eyes go all wide and unblinking - makes it look like you’re plotting a murder. There’s no double meaning or hidden agenda. The rules are as stated; they aren’t a code to break,” Pansy sighed.

“Many people have told her exactly how terrifying she is. Fine, we agree with your first rule. Any others?” Ginny responded.

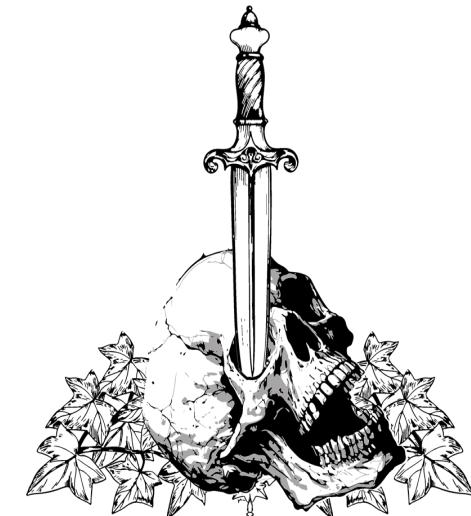
“Granger?” Draco asked pointedly.

Hermione frowned at him. “Yeah, fine.” It should go without saying that if Ginny agreed to the rules, then Hermione would abide by them too and vice versa, but she supposed that they hadn’t seen the duo for long enough to figure that out yet.

“Rule two, unless given permission in the circumstance, stay out of everyone’s rooms, and we will extend the same courtesy. Which means that any midnight throat slitting will need to be cleared with the room occupants first.” Ginny snorted into her drink at the notion.

“Fine.” Hermione sighed with all the false inconvenience she could muster, pulling smirks around the group all round.

“Rule three. You may see some things in this house regarding Astoria.” The entire group stiffened. “I don’t know what happened today, and right now, I don’t want to know, but what you see does not go beyond this house. You tell no one outside of this room, and you do not discuss any of it outside of this house.” Blaise had grown so



CHAPTER 6: TRANSITION PERIOD

Even with the security of the house rules, neither of them felt comfortable sleeping in their rooms alone. They had stuck with their original plan of sharing a bed, Hermione’s bed. Several times overnight, one would wake up, slip quietly out onto the deck for some fresh air, or, on one or two occasions, a cigarette. Dawn was cracking across the horizon when Hermione rolled over to see Ginny watching her. “This is ridiculous,” Hermione said after a period of silence, staring at each other.

"It is a little." Ginny giggled. "But it's a transition period, right? Either they will kill us, or we will adjust a little."

"I think the best thing for us is if we carry on how we normally would."

"Okay, well, it's nearly sunrise, so what we would be doing at the base is training."

"Right. Except I don't know where that stupid fancy centre that they were talking about is." Dinner last night had been a quiet and stilted affair. The food was nicer than she and Ginny had eaten in years: chicken Diane, boiled baby potatoes, and an assortment of steamed greens. After which, Ginny and Hermione automatically moved to do the dishes but Draco just waved everything away. Ginny and Hermione had retreated to Hermione's room for the rest of the night undisturbed.

"Well, we know how to get to the lawn. We could run laps to start with?" Ginny suggested.

"Yeah, that sounds good." Hermione nodded. "Hey, Gin? Do you regret this?"

Ginny just smiled at her. "Nope. Do you?"

Hermione shook her head. "I kind of feel like we should, but I don't."

Ginny nodded. "I know what you mean. But even if we did, we're kind of in it now." She chuckled.

"Right, get out and go get ready. I'll be over in a minute." Hermione said, jumping up and making her way to her wardrobe to change into a pair of grey leggings and a baggy shirt. The wardrobe had a ridiculous amount of heels on a display shelf, but everything about this wardrobe was ridiculous; why would she need five pairs of trainers?

She waved her wand and her hair pulled out of her face and into a high ponytail. Lastly, she put on her wrist holster that would house her wand and throwing knives. Ginny was waiting at the door for her by the time she finished.

"I wasn't sure if I would be stripped of my magic if I tried to come in without your express permission." Ginny giggled in hushed tones as they trotted down the stairs.

"You have my express permission to enter my room in every single situation and on every single day or night for the duration of our stay here," Hermione muttered, rolling her eyes because the rules probably would be that strict.

The house was silent. The grounds were silent. There was a light mist that clung to the base of the trees, which, in the early morning glow, seemed even more beautiful. They had only made it halfway down the first side when a dishevelled figure popped up barely two metres in front of them. Hermione and Ginny both skidded and scrambled backwards in surprise, drawing their wands on him before they could register who it was.

from where she stood at the bar, pouring herself and Ginny a drink, each after a quick wave of her wand to check for poisons. Daphne's smile grew wider, reaching her eyes this time. Hermione was ready to jump in if need be. She was confident that their rings would protect them against spells, but if someone pulled a knife, it might be game over if she couldn't react quickly enough.

Hermione returned, handing a glass of the amber liquid to Ginny. Pansy was smiling as she fiddled with her nails. "And risk a repeat of what happened at the Dark Lord's manor?" Daphne asked. "I'm not as daft as old Bella; thanks for the offer, though."

Ginny shrugged. "Well, if you change your mind, you know where we'll be."

"Oh, this is going to be fun," Pansy said, her voice filled with mirth. Daphne's spare hand snaked around Pansy's waist; it was intimate, loving. Oh, Hermione realised, they were a couple.

"Indeed," Theo mumbled.

"If you lot are finished, shall we discuss the rules?"

"Are you always such a stickler for rules, Zabini?" Hermione levelled him with a stare. "Is that your thing? You get your jolly off on rules? Like being told you're a good boy, too?"

"Rules keep us all safe, including you and Red here." Did they all communicate through smiles?

Hermione scoffed a laugh "Nice try, me and Gin keep each other safe, but carry on. What rules do you have for us?"

Everyone stared at the two of them standing in front of the fireplace for a minute. "You know this is only going to truly work if we trust each other, right?" Astoria asked more seriously than any of them had been so far.

"Tor..." Daphne warned.

Hermione cocked an eyebrow at Astoria. She liked the girl enough so far; she was infinitely better than the broads at the Order base they had been stationed at. "Trust is earned, not given. Can you honestly tell me that none of you aren't even a little suspicious of us and how we have managed to move into your home in a single afternoon? That the thought that we might creep into your rooms in the middle of the night and slit your throats hasn't crossed your mind? We have honest intentions and motives for being here, but it doesn't mean I would trust a single one of you to keep me and Ginny alive if it came down to us or one of you. Just like you should know without a shadow of a doubt that if it were a choice between saving Theodore or Ginny, I would choose Ginny every time." She could tell by the looks on their faces that they agreed with what she was saying. "Tell me I'm wrong."

Hermione nodded. "Yeah, I know what you mean. I doubt the group downstairs would do anything untoward and risk upsetting Voldy, but I don't think we should sleep separately tonight. Just to make sure."

Ginny sat up. "I was going to suggest the same thing. Keep our wands at our wrists at all times."

Hermione nodded again. "Most definitely."

They managed to make their way back down the staircases without getting lost. Ginny seemed confident in where she was going, so Hermione happily followed her, and as they were passing by the large modern sitting room, they stumbled across everyone else lounging about.

"Ahh! They have returned." Theo called loudly. Hermione and Ginny altered their course and stepped into the sitting room. There was a large stone fireplace surrounded by modern white couches, and in the corner was a minibar. Surrounding the room were even more arched windows; the view beyond was more secluded than the rest of the chateau had been. Instead, they looked out onto a small gathering of green trees. On the L-shaped chaise sofa sat Blaise, Draco, and the two women who had been missing earlier. Daphne Greengrass lounged in her blue pinstriped suit, her long blonde hair pulled back in a messy ponytail. In one hand, she had a martini, and between her legs, leaning against her, was Pansy Parkinson, looking even more striking than the last time Hermione had seen her.

She had really grown into her features now, looking every bit the supermodel she had always pretended to be. Her hair was still styled in a short black bob, and her flowing red floral dress fell around her tanned and slender legs.

"Granger, Weasley." Daphne smiled tightly. "What a surprise to see you two."

"I'm sure the shock of it will wear off soon, Greengrass," Ginny said sharply.

Pansy scoffed a laugh. "Play nice, you lot," Astoria warned. She was lying with her head in Theo's lap on the matching four-seater couch. Despite her warning, the younger Greengrass sister had an amused smile on her face. Draco wore a matching grin but remained silent, a glass of what looked to be whiskey in his hand.

"Would you ladies like a drink?" Blaise offered.

"Your generosity continues." Hermione drawled, giving a half curtsey before meandering over to the bar to investigate.

"What's generous is that you're both still alive," Daphne stated, her tight smile still on her face. Her eyes darted between Ginny and Hermione.

"You're welcome to try to rectify that if you take issue with it, Greengrass." Ginny matched the blonde's tone and smile. Hermione eyed the eldest of the sisters cautiously

"Fucking Merlin, Zabini!! Do you know how close you came to getting a killing curse to the chest?" Ginny shouted, stepping forward and shoving him. Blaise was dressed in pyjamas and looking at them in confusion. "We are soldiers in a war, you know!?"

"Where are you two running away to!?" he growled accusingly. Hermione stared at him in disbelief.

"What the hell are you on about?" Ginny snapped.

"You're running in a direction away from the house," Blaise stated again as if that answered their questions.

"Yeah? So?" Hermione snapped. "We're not leaving the property; therefore, we're not breaking any rules."

"Then why are you out here at the buttcrack of dawn!?"

Ginny and Hermione looked at each other in annoyance. "What does it fucking look like? We're jogging!"

Blaise's face softened. "You're... why?"

Ginny scowled. "It's what we do. Every morning, Mi and I go for a jog and then spar together, except we don't know where your stupid training thing is, so we were just going to go for the jog."

"You're not running away."

"No, dipshit. And don't jump out at us like that again! It really is a miracle one of us didn't attack you." Hermione growled before moving past him and continuing with her run, Ginny mirroring her movements. They were running along the far length when Hermione caught a flash of blonde, blonder than the two witches in the house. Draco also looked as though he had jumped out of bed in a hurry, and his hair tousled. Unlike Blaise, who, while still in pyjamas, was fully dressed, Draco wore only pyjama bottoms.

Hermione shook her head in annoyance as she watched Blaise walk back up the stairs to meet him, the dark-haired man explaining something to his pale counterpart.

"Assholes," Ginny grunted beside her.

"Illogical assholes. We bound ourselves to their stupid rules. If we were running away, we would be giving up our magic." Hermione argued.

Both men looked at them across the large lawn for a moment and then turned back into the house. They made it another two full laps around before Draco Malfoy reappeared in loose shorts, a plain navy blue shirt, and sneakers. Hermione and Ginny slowed to a stop and glared at him. "Do we really need a chaperone, Malfoy? Honestly?"

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Draco raised an eyebrow at Hermione in response. "No, Blaise and I are going to the training centre. If you would like to see where it is, then come with me. There is a proper running track that you two can use rather than running on the gravel."

"Fine. Lead the way, Malfoy," Ginny sighed. Hermione could see she was clearly trying to hide her growing annoyance towards the Slytherins in the house. She wasn't the only one. Draco folded his arms across his chest and put his shoulders back with a smug smirk on his face.

"Have we got a problem, Red?"

"I don't know, do we? You're the ones who can't even trust us to run laps in the morning. Where the fuck did you think we were going?"

"You might have been meeting your little Order buddies to pass along information." Draco volleyed back at her.

"As far as I know, you guys are planning a raid for them soon - a mission that we want in on, remember? We gave you their location to scout the area. So which is it, you botched the job, or you haven't bothered to check?" Ginny snarled, squaring up to him.

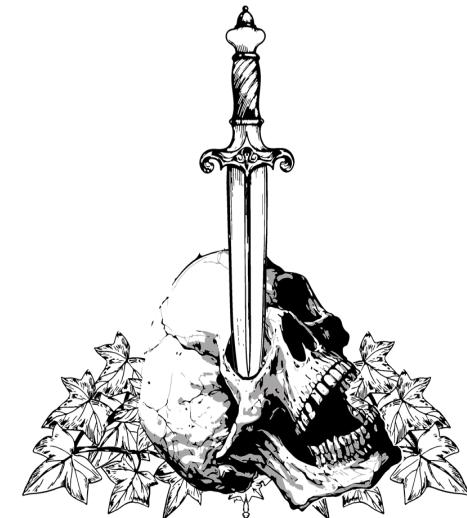
Hermione watched Draco's facial expressions as Ginny argued with him. "They checked. They're biding their time, which, if you ask me, is a stupid ass mistake." Hermione glared up at the blonde. "How long before the Order realises that we aren't just taking a day or two to cool off, that we have left and aren't coming back? They don't trust us, probably even less than you do. You're on borrowed time, Malfoy. Once they figure it out, they will be packing up and moving on, and you will have missed your opportunity."

Something in his dark grey eyes sparkled. "You're awfully eager for all your friends to die, Granger."

"My only friend is here with me. Frankly, I don't care if you do or don't kill the Order, but if they get in my way because you failed to do your job - if they stop me from achieving our goals, then yeah, we will have a fucking problem. Now stop wasting our time. Either show us to the training centre or get out of our way." She was significantly shorter than him and so she had to crane her neck to look at him as she snapped at him. It was something he seemed to find rather amusing, at least if his smirk was anything to go off. Neither seemed willing to break their stare-off first.

"If you two are going to fuck, can you just point me in the right direction first?" Ginny huffed sarcastically with an unamused look on her face.

Draco's grin grew. "Not even in your dreams, Malfoy," Hermione snarled. Ginny raised an eyebrow at her.



CHAPTER 5: HOUSE RULES

There was an alarming amount of clothes in her new wardrobe, a whole section dedicated to evening gowns alone. It took her far too long to find a simple shirt and some jeans. Ginny was sprawled out on her bed gazing out the French doors to the view beyond when she returned. "Comfortable?"

"More so, now that you're here." Ginny smiled.

Hermione nodded. "Yeah, it is a lot, isn't it?"

Ginny frowned. "More than I expected. It feels almost a little too easy?"

deck that wrapped around the two external walls of her room, tall white curtains framing them. A queen-sized bed faced one set of the doors. A wide white armchair sat in the corner between the two of them. Like Ginny's room, she had several potted plants placed around her room. "You will find your bathroom and wardrobe through that door there."

"Thank you," Hermione mumbled, stepping into the room, a little shocked that they were being provided with such nice rooms. The grandeur of it certainly flowed with the rest of the estate, but after having spent so many years in the attic with a single creaky bed, it was a little overwhelming. Blaise had made his retreat by the time she had wandered over to one set of doors. The view spanned for miles, overlooking another large lawn before it dropped off a cliff. Below the cliff was a bustling city - which city, she had no idea, but it was beautiful and untouched by the war in the way that England was. "Holy shit," she whispered to herself.

"Oh, it would definitely happen in my dreams, Granger, and you would be begging for it."

"Believe me, I wouldn't be the one begging, Malfoy," Hermione snapped sarcastically.

"It's cute that you think that" Draco cocked an eyebrow at her. She wanted to punch his smug smirk off his face, but he was already stalking away from her.

Ginny looked at her with wide, round eyes. "What is wrong with you?" She mouthed at her silently.

"I don't know?" Hermione mouthed back. Her cheeks were burning. Both girls followed after the retreating figure. It was a valid question: what the hell was wrong with her? It had been a while, and he was undeniably attractive for sure, but had it really come to that?

Draco led them back into the house and down a hidden hallway behind the staircase. There were several closed doors that they passed by before they arrived at a conservatory.

"Woah." Ginny whispered, voicing Hermione's amazement. The conservatory was a large rectangular room with a large domed glass ceiling and extensive decorative floral mouldings framing all of the glass walls. The floor glistened like water over the top of a multitude of flat stones. Plants filled the space in both the air and on the floor.

"This is..." Hermione stepped in and looked around her in wonder. The whole house was gorgeous, but from what she had seen so far, this was her favourite room.

Draco stood waiting for them on the other side of the room by yet another set of large French doors.

"Astoria designed this?" Hermione asked, still in awe of the beauty in the room.

"Actually, no. This room was my request. It's an exact replica of the conservatory at Malfoy Manor. It was the only part of the place I found I missed."

"I can see why," Ginny whispered.

Hermione nodded. "Likewise."

Ginny moved over to stand at the doors with Draco "Mi?"

Hermione snapped to attention. "Oh, sorry." From the French doors, they walked across a small grass field to another building with a dome roof. This time, there was no glass, however. Behind the building was a sea of trees. Outside the building was a training mat; it was something Hermione was looking forward to using. It would feel good to train in the fresh air with the sun slowly rising in the distance instead of in the dark, stale basement of the base.

Inside the building, they found Blaise already shirtless and waiting for Draco in a big square boxing ring. Beside her, Ginny stiffened; a quick glance her way told Hermione that she wasn't the only one who found one of their new housemates attractive.

Hermione gripped her arm and pulled her back outside without looking at the weights or dummies with targets painted on them. "Running track is downstairs," Draco called from his spot on the edge of the ring.

"Great, we'll get to it later," Hermione called back over her shoulder and all but dragged the redhead outside.

"God damn that man is fine. Don't you think he's fine?" Ginny gushed as soon as they were a safe distance from the door. Hermione gave her a look. Ginny and she had never had to worry about a man coming between them because they had very different tastes in partners. Objectively, sure, Blaise was an attractive person, but he wasn't someone that Hermione would be jumping up and down to get into bed with. "I actually don't care what you think, he is fucking fine," Ginny sighed.

Hermione scoffed and shook her head, a small smile on her lips.

"Like you can hardly talk anyway. Don't think I didn't catch you staring at Malfoy yesterday, and what the hell was that before?"

"I didn't even say anything!" Hermione chuckled.

"You don't have to. At this point in our friendship, I can practically hear your thoughts." Ginny scowled as she took her place at one end of the mat.

"Well, then maybe you need to get your receiver checked because my thoughts are, 'why not?' If you wanna take him for a ride, there's nothing stopping you." Hermione stepped into her own starting position at the opposite end of the mat.

"Is that advice you intend to follow too?" Ginny cocked an eyebrow her way.

"God, no!" Hermione laughed. "Ready?"

Ginny rolled her eyes but then nodded. "Falsum personam." Hermione flicked her wand. It was a spell she had created. A dozen faceless, human-shaped blobs rose up out of the ground and began firing mild stinging hexes at them. She hadn't managed to figure out a way to have them fire different hexes, but the stinging hexes were effective enough.

Hermione's brain kicked into combat mode. For every blob they defeated, another one rose in its place that advanced just a little bit faster. It was nice to be outside, and the sun had not yet risen high enough that it was uncomfortably hot. Hermione still felt a light sheen of sweat coating her skin from the excursion, but it was bearable.

Ginny sliced off a blob's head as it approached Hermione's back. Hermione took out the knees of two who were advancing on Ginny's right side. The faster they cut

"Where did you put them, D?" Blaise asked.

"The two end rooms up top. Grangers in the corner." Blaise nodded.

"Right ladies, follow me. You can shower, change, whatever you need to do, and then we should have a household discussion. Set some ground rules and boundaries," Blaise said, leading the way through the archway.

"Yes, Daddy," Ginny grumbled. Theo choked on his drink behind them. Blaise stopped in his tracks, slowly turning to look over his shoulder at her with a cheeky smirk and a cocked eyebrow. Hermione waited for him to turn around again and continue his guided tour through the chateau to give Ginny a look that clearly said, 'Oh really?'

Ginny smiled and half shrugged, silently mouthing 'Why not?' to Hermione before they followed him.

The entire house followed the same colour palette of creams and browns; big arched windows flooded every room with natural light. Their surprise must have shown on their faces because Blaise offered an explanation for the unasked question. "We all grew up in homes as dark as our souls; we all agreed that a change was needed. Everything is Astoria's design, so if you break anything, just know that you will have to deal with her wrath. And for all the jokes and threats, serious or not, let me make it clear right now: she is also the only one of us who is off limits. You don't fight, hex, jinx, threaten, or even yell at her. Am I clear?"

"You're saying we're allowed to hex the rest of you?" Ginny asked jokingly.

Blaise led them up three flights of stairs before he answered her. "Our group is used to a little bit of ribbing each other. Sarcasm is a fluent language in this house and we all have pretty tough skins."

"But not Astoria?" Hermione frowned at the man's back.

"Sometimes, yes. Sometimes no. That is all you need to know for now. Kind of like how we have been given need-to-know information only regarding whatever little deal you have made today." Blaise paused with a calculated grin outside a set of double doors, the frame decorated in ornate gold. The door led to Ginny's room. Two large arched windows filled the opposite wall, the ceiling decorated with classic mouldings. In the centre of the room was a large queen-sized bed adorned with throw pillows and blankets. Several potted palms sat in the corners of the room, adding pops of colour. Under one window was a long white Victorian-style chaise. "Through that door is an ensuite, and your wardrobe is off that."

Her room, while similar in colour scheme, was not the same as Ginny's; she lacked the large arched windows. Instead, she had two sets of large French doors leading to a

They entered into a large open-plan kitchen and dining area. "Wow." Ginny squeaked from beside her. It was nothing like what she had anticipated. It was light and airy; white marble floors filled the space, decorated by white wooden cabinets, and a large grey island sat in the centre with a matching white marble countertop. It was elegant with a hint of rustic throughout.

Draco strolled in, interrupting any train of thought though. He had gotten changed since Voldemort's manor. He had changed into a pair of tan trousers and a short-sleeved black button-up that he hadn't bothered to button bar the bottom two, where he had the shirt loosely tucked into his pants. Hermione allowed her eyes to roam over his defined chest, taking in his scars and the definition of his muscles before Ginny squeezed her arm and she tore her eyes away.

Objectively speaking, Hermione could admit he was nice to look at. Certainly nicer than any of the guys at the Order headquarters - a lot nicer, but she was also aware that Pansy - who was likely his girlfriend - probably wouldn't enjoy the mudblood invading their home ogling her boyfriend.

"I trust that your trip to Olivander's was successful?" Draco drawled in annoyance.

Hermione grinned and pulled her wand from her pocket, raising it to provide a demonstration, but Theo plucked it from her hand. "I think not, Princess."

"Hey?" Hermione exclaimed. Theo placed her wand down on the kitchen island.

"I think one destroyed wall is enough for today, don't you?"

Hermione glared at him.

"Relax, I'm not snapping it, and I'm not confiscating it. Just avoiding another tenuous six-month renovation project."

"Hey?" It was Astoria's turn to glare at the brown-haired wizard.

Theo sighed and placed a kiss on his wife's cheek. "You did amazing, baby, but let's face it, you would redo the whole house again if the replacements were even one shade off."

Astoria conceded her agreement with a tilt of her head and a raise of her brows.

"Do I even want to know?" Draco sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"Probably not," Blaise muttered, walking to the fridge, pulling two bottles of water from it, and tossing a bottle to Theo before uncapping his own and drinking half of it down in one gulp.

"Where are Parkinson and the other Greengrass?" Ginny asked, looking around. Astoria chuckled and popped herself up on the counter.

"They're checking your information." Draco scrutinised her face, trying to find any evidence of regret but neither Ginny nor Hermione would show any.

them down, the quicker the hexes flew at them, and the quicker they approached. It was a balance of dancing out of the way of the stinging hex and taking down the aggressors.

They had always worked on the grounds of being a joint unit, which meant that they were sharing the enemies, and these blobs would not stop coming until they had defeated 100 of them. Every so often one of them would hiss as a stinging hex caught them, but it happened rarely.

Both Ginny and herself were panting as they worked their way around the mat. Instinct had Hermione throwing a knife at a blob passed Ginny's shoulder. Ginny exploded a blob in between them and knifed one in the neck as it approached the redhead. Hermione kicked one next to herself in the stomach.

Slowly, the blobs thinned out and stopped respawning. Ginny turned to face Hermione, thinking they were done, but something appeared behind her. Hermione threw the knife before she could register what it was until the blade had already left her hand.

Draco grunted as it landed lodged in his thigh. He hissed a laugh. "Suppose I deserved that," he rasped.

Hermione smiled tightly at him as her way of agreeing. Draco's hand wrapped around the hilt. He sucked in a deep breath and yanked it from his flesh with another grunt. It was oddly sexy, and Hermione had to catch herself from staring at him again, instead summoning the blade back to her. Ginny pointed her wand at his thigh. "Vulnra sanentura." The deep but short wound pulled itself back together again.

"Thanks," Draco grumbled.

Hermione felt eyes watching her and looked around. On the small set of wooden stairs leading back into the conservatory stood Blaise, still shirtless and watching the scene with amusement. Daphne was beside him, leaning against the frame in another well-tailored pantsuit, this one a deep maroon colour with a grey blouse underneath. At her feet, sitting on the stairs, was Pansy in a pair of dark blue overalls. Even from here, Hermione could see the glint of her large gold hooped earrings. Pansy started to clap lazily. "Well, that was very impressive, you two."

"We have a meeting in a half hour, and you are expected," Draco explained before walking back to the others, the slightest of limps to his step.

Ginny looked over at Hermione for a second with a blank stare before breaking out in a grin. "Race you!" The witch took off before Hermione could process it.

"Hey!!" Hermione yelled, taking off after her, passing Draco, whose eyes were still following Ginny's running form in alarm. Pansy, Daphne, and Blaise leapt aside to

avoid being trampled by the redhead and stared at the two of them as if they had gone mad. Truth be told, they had gone mad a long time ago, but they were much happier for it. "That's cheating!" Hermione yelled, bounding up the wooden steps. Further in the house, Ginny cackled with laughter.

covered in cream-coloured pavers. Behind that was a huge home that combined both modern and classic aesthetics. The structure itself looked to be a classic old-style manor, but there had been clear renovations - all the windows had been replaced with large open frames.

"Welcome to our humble abode, ladies. Welcome to Chateau Latibule." Theo smiled back at them as he started off up the stairs. A shrill squeal of excitement filled the air, and a short blonde woman came running from the large, open sliding doors, throwing herself at Theo, her legs wrapping around him as he caught her. The woman showered kisses on him.

"I'm going to go out on a limb and say that is Astoria," Hermione said, walking over to Ginny, whose eyes were pinched shut. "Up you get." Hermione reached down and grabbed her friend's hand, who accepted the help.

"Remind me never to travel with you again," Ginny grumbled at Blaise.

Theo had returned to the top of the stairs with his wife in tow. Astoria wasn't someone that Hermione recognized from Hogwarts. She knew there had been a younger Greengrass sister but had never paid her much mind. She wasn't what Hermione expected though, either. In her head, she thought perhaps she would be like Narcissa Malfoy, prim and proper, the ideal pureblood housewife, or perhaps she was a Death Eater and would be cold and calculated.

The girl was bright and bubbly. Her blonde hair in light waves fell to an end at her shoulders. Her bare arms were mark-free. Her clothes were casual, a pair of denim shorts and a short-sleeved red flannel shirt that was tied at her front. She wore no shoes and a pair of sunglasses on her head.

"Hi!" she exclaimed excitedly. "Draco said you two were coming, but I thought he was pulling my leg until the clothes and furniture started turning up!"

"Stori, honey, your excitement is at a twelve, let's bring it down to a five. We don't want to overwhelm them." Theo whispered into his wife's neck.

"Oh," she chuckled. "Sorry, it's just so exciting for you to be here."

Hermione offered her a small smile before looking around. Beyond where the lawn they stood on was a garden framed in low, dark green hedges, but beyond that, Hermione could see no defining landmarks. "And here is?"

"France." Blaise motioned for them to move up the stairs, Ginny still clutched at Hermione's arm for support. In the centre of the large patio was a large, glistening blue pool. Hermione used to love swimming. It had been years since she had had the chance, however.

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Blaise shrugged. "He wasn't one of us anyway. And second, Millicent, who, again, wasn't one of us, fled the country in sixth year."

Hermione stepped around the counter, drifting habitually to Ginny. Ginny held out her hand to look at Hermione's new wand. The two of them huddled together and looked it over in glee.

Blaise cleared his throat.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Yeah, yeah." Theo held out his arm for her to grab onto. Blaise stepped forward and offered his hand to Ginny.

"We will be making three jumps, so hold on and don't let go," Blaise explained, and she and Ginny took the proffered limb.

Hermione groaned and steadied herself for the trip. She hated side apparitions. Well, actually, she didn't mind it, provided she was the one guiding the trips, but she hated to be the side-along. It left her feeling out of control, spinning a little and disoriented.

"I just want you to know, if Ginny doesn't arrive within three minutes of me and Theodore Nott here getting to wherever the hell it is we're going, I will be killing your buddy here in the most painful of ways." She offered a sweet smile at Blaise.

"Merlin, no fucking around with you, is there," Theo grumbled.

"Sorry, Theo, it's nothing personal, but the only one I trust is Gin. So if I have to make a threat on your life to ensure her safety, I will." Hermione was still staring Blaise down, who seemed to be entertained more than anything.

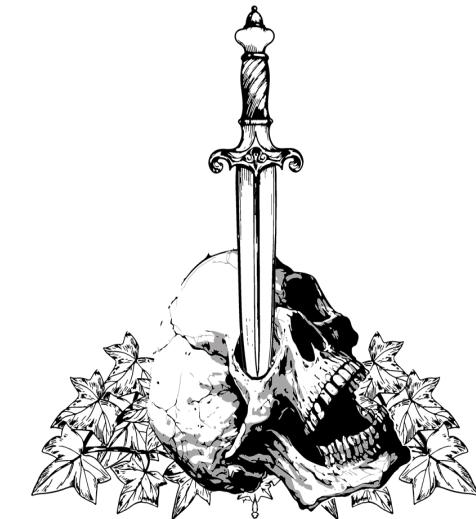
"Don't worry, Granger, your friend is in good hands. In fact, I'll race you there." Blaise disappeared with a pop, taking Ginny with him.

"Bastard!" Theo cried out before he was spinning them away. They had barely touched ground in the first location before they were spinning through the tight tube again. Hermione's head was spinning so badly that everything was just a blur. She was vaguely aware of another landing but again, they hadn't even touched the ground before they were on their way again.

They popped out the other side at the exact same time as Blaise and Ginny, the latter looking a little green as she sank onto her hands and knees with a grim expression. "That was a lot." She mumbled to the ground. Hermione waved her wand and the redhead's hair pulled away from her face and into a messy ponytail.

Ginny nodded her thanks and laid down on the grass beneath her. "Sorry, Red." Blaise chuckled at her reaction.

Hermione, whose own head slowly stopped spinning, looked around them. They had landed in a large rectangle grass yard bordered by off-white gravel and decorative Smaragd trees. In front of them were four long stone stairs leading to a massive patio



CHAPTER 7: DON'T THREATEN ME WITH A GOOD TIME

Walking into Riddle Manor this time around was a totally different experience. The estate was alive with people. Draco led their group up the stone stairs outside, this time dressed in his full Death Eater ensemble. The masks changed their appearance to suit their owner, and it seemed that this younger generation of Death Eaters wasn't as easily conformed as the older ones.

Draco's was a combination of a grey skull - cold, sharp lines and charcoal-coloured metal. His grey eyes appeared to burn into your soul from beneath.

Theo's mask was a deep, dark, shiny red with two little black horns jutting from the front. Blaise's was a smooth matte black with decorative silver swirls framing his eyes, nose, and mouth, all shaped into the most elegant and regal-looking skull she had ever seen. Daphne had an almost fully golden mask, as if someone had poured melted gold over her face and spread it around, a deep blue tinted titanium filling the void underneath where the melted gold dripped away. Pansy's was a black mask with golden-painted lips and gold decorating her eyes.

Daphne and Pansy walked on either side of her and Ginny. Blaise and Theo followed Draco, who marched ahead of them. Hermione knew that the appearance of hierarchy was big in the Death Eater ranks. Draco was the head of his team and now she and Ginny were - unofficially - part of that team. All five of the former Slytherins had the hoods of their robes pulled up. Ginny chuckled quietly to herself, and Hermione gave her a quick questioning look. Ginny shook her head and glanced at the others before biting her lip and giving the smallest of nods at Blaise's back.

Hermione laughed a lot louder than she meant to. She shook her head and rolled her eyes at her friend. She gave it a week and Ginny would be climbing him like a pole. Draco glanced over his shoulder at them; his grey eyes stood out beneath his mask in a way that lit Hermione's insides on fire. She waited for him to face back to the front before she nodded enthusiastically at Ginny.

It was Ginny's turn to burst into laughter, which only set Hermione off again. There was just something about the seriousness of the situation, the effect that the two men had on both of them and the feeling of freedom from the oppression that had been the Order that had the two of them on a high.

Theo chuckled in front of them. "I can not wait to see who you two fuck up today," He mumbled. Blaise gave him a sideways glance. Theo shrugged in return. "What? They are fucking unhinged! Honestly, they kind of belong here. Are you going to tell me I'm wrong?"

Blaise stared at him for a second before facing forward again. "No." he grumbled reluctantly.

"Everyone shut it," Draco snapped from the front.

"Oh, Daddy's mad," Hermione mumbled. Pansy snorted from the other side of Ginny. Draco flung around and stalked right up to Hermione.

"If you want to behave like a fucking brat, I'll treat you like one, Granger; I'll put you over my knee and belt your ass. Now shut the fuck up."

"Exactly." She looked at them pointedly.

Blaise grinned back at her. "You misunderstand, dea del fuoco, it's not a bad thing." He winked at her, causing the redhead's cheeks to tint.

Hermione let out a loud squeal from atop the ladder. "Oh yes! You are beautiful!" she gushed. In her hand, she held a pale blonde coloured wand with a black notched handle. "Yew wand, dragon heartstring, twelve inches, solid." Hermione called, reading the inside of the box.

Hermione jumped down from the ladder, staring at her wand in wonder. A massive smile broke out on her face. "Four!" she yelled.

Ginny hit the floor, face down. Blaise and Theo stared at her in shock for a second. She looked up at them in horror, "Get down, you idiots!!" They both dropped to the ground and a second later, a red streak hit the glass window frame behind them with such force that the surrounding brick flew out into the alleyway beyond.

Hermione started jumping up and down, squealing with enjoyment. "Oh, I love it! This is so much better than my old one!" She grinned at the wand again, clutching it to her chest in a hug.

"You could have killed us!" Theo cried out, sitting back on his heels.

Ginny scoffed. "Oh, please. If we wanted you dead, you would be."

Blaise's eyes glistened as he looked at the redhead. "That, dea del fuoco, I believe."

"If we're done here, then we should return home. We still have to get you two settled in."

"Who exactly is it that lives in the house? You make it sound like it's all three of you," Hermione asked, stepping forward. Blaise blinked at the mess behind her, his fingers twitching, she observed the movement in amusement.

"It is. We all bought the chateau together so that it would belong to all of us as a family unit rather than remaining in our ancestral homes. There's me and my wife Astoria, Blaise, Draco, of course, and then there's Daphne and Pansy, too." Theo offered Ginny a hand up.

"Aww. You just need good old Gregory and Millicent for your little Slytherin house to be complete." Hermione mocked.

"First of all, you killed Gregory like five years ago." Blaise raised an eyebrow at her, his restraint toward the mess finally breaking. He waved his wand, and all the discarded boxes and rejected wands returned to their places on the shelf. A sigh of relief escaped the man as he repocketed his wand.

"Did I? Condolences," she said, even though she actually couldn't care less.

Ginny caught sight of Theo looking at them with glee while Blaise frowned at the pile on the floor. "What?" Ginny raised an eyebrow.

"Where's her old wand?" Blaise asked hesitantly.

"Ronald fucking Weasley!" Hermione screamed from her spot on the ladder.

"He snapped her wand after that incident last week in Kent. Banned her from missions and told her she was starting to look like a Death Eater." Ginny explained.

"No wonder it's been quiet." Theo muttered.

"So he snapped her wand, and now you guys are prepared to kill them?"

Ginny stared back at him, her expression cold and shut off. "Among other things. More like the build-up of lots of things compounding. Plus, in case you haven't noticed, we don't exactly fit the criteria anymore. It's kind of a wonder we hadn't been booted out."

Another growl of frustration on Hermione's part.

Their meeting had been interesting, to say the least. To begin with, Voldemort had not trusted them, nor they him. It had been hours before they really got anywhere at all. Voldemort, suspicious of them being spies, had determined they were to live with Malfoy and his team to be monitored while they carried out their proposed plan - which, as Hermione and Ginny didn't have another residence to go to anyway, they had agreed.

The trio of Slytherin men had been standing guard outside the room when their meeting had ended. Voldemort had told them very little, and so had they. They had been informed the two witches would be moving into their chateau as guests, that Hermione was to be given a room for her experiments, and that they would have two guards with them anytime they left their residence. They were ordered to take the girls to Olivander's to find a new wand for Hermione and little to nothing else. Even despite their curiosity, they hadn't asked the girls for further information.

Voldemort had pulled Draco aside and relayed information Hermione and Ginny had provided regarding the Order safe house and requested someone check it out. Draco had gone wide-eyed and left the two of them with Blaise and Theo to head back to Diagon Alley.

"You two certainly have... changed over the years, yes?" Blaise frowned at the pile of wands. Hermione smirked at the twitch of his fingers, refraining from reaching for his own wand.

"You sound like my brother." Ginny's grin was unsettling, wide, and not at all filled with amusement.

"Your brother is a git." Theo dismissed.

Hermione smirked up at him through her lashes. "First of all, don't threaten me with a good time unless you're going to do it. Secondly, in case you haven't noticed Malfoy, I am not wearing a mask. You're not in charge of me, and even if you were, I probably wouldn't listen. So why don't you just lighten up?"

Draco's eyes darkened under his mask, his chest rising and falling more noticeably than before as he tried to keep himself under control. "You are incredibly fucking annoying," he growled.

Hermione felt her face light up. "Thank you."

"You're going to get us killed." He tried to reason.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Are you always so dramatic?"

"Yes," Pansy and Theo uttered in unison.

Draco stepped even closer and glared down at her. "Not all of us have secret little insurance policies like you and Red here, Granger. Some of us have more on the line and didn't just come here on a whim because we were bored."

Beside her, Ginny scowled. "Whim or not, back it up, buddy, because we're here to stay. Relax, would you? We're not going to get you lot killed. Trust us, remember? Merlin."

Draco didn't move; he continued to glare down at her. Hermione sighed and looked away. "I'm not going to make a promise I might break, Malfoy. I'm a lot of things, but a liar isn't one of them. The best you're going to get is an 'I'll try to behave.'"

"Try hard."

Hermione rolled her eyes again. Draco turned around and stalked back to his place at the front. He had effectively soured her mood. The rest of the walk through the manor to a room in the back was a silent one while Hermione glared holes in the back of his head. The room turned out to be an extravagant dining room with possibly the longest dining table she had ever seen. At least forty seats surrounded the table; all but five seats were full, and the edges of the room were lined with dozens more Death Eaters, all staring at them.

"Ahh, Draco. Welcome, come sit." Voldemort waved to the empty seats. Draco and the others moved forward toward the seats at the table, but Hermione and Ginny stayed where they were. "Oh, good. You brought our new friends with you."

Hermione offered the man a tight smile and swallowed the 'Hi, Voldy' greeting that she wanted to say. If anyone hadn't noticed them before, they were looking now, a few drawing their wands instinctively.

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"Hi boys, did yah miss us?" Ginny joked. Hermione bit down on the inside of her cheek to stop from laughing, her shoulders shaking silently. Draco's shoulders, however, went rigid.

Laughter burst out from an unexpected source. Voldemort himself was grinning in regalement. It tapered off, and he looked around the table. "Rookwood, Gibbon. Stand up."

Two Death Eaters a few seats up from their housemates stood instantly. Voldemort looked to Hermione and Ginny again. "Please, take a seat, ladies."

Rookwood spluttered from behind his seat. "M-my Lord?!"

Voldemort glared at the Death Eater. "Is there a problem, Rookwood? Surely you were raised with manners and taught about how to treat guests?"

"But my lord, she's a mudblood, and that one's a blood traitor?!" The man dropped in a screaming heap, boils breaking out across his skin.

"Thank you, Draco, that will be all." Hermione caught the tip of his wand poking through the gap between the chairs. The boils retreated, but the man remained in a gasping heap. Hermione moved toward his chair, stepping over him in the process, and sat down.

Sitting directly across from her was Bellatrix, who looked on the verge of a fit if her grip on the table was anything to go by. Hermione smiled sweetly. "Hello Bella, feeling better, I hope?"

Bella's eye twitched in response beneath her mask. Blaise snorted quietly, a few seats down.

"My Lord?" A mask she didn't recognise started from down the table. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

"What don't you understand, McNair?"

"Ah, the necrophiliac," Hermione muttered to herself.

It was after a moment of silence that Hermione realised that McNair hadn't responded. She looked up and saw everyone at the table staring at her.

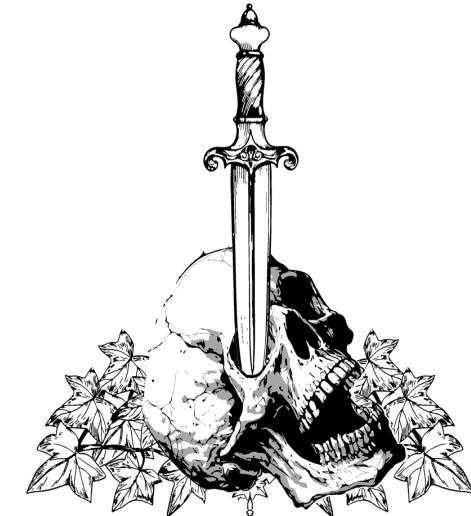
"Excuse me?" Voldemort asked from her left.

"I apologise. I was only trying to place faces, is all." Hermione suddenly felt more anxious about having miscalculated their worth than at any moment since she arrived.

"Necr-necrophiliac?" He repeated as if unsure that was what she had said.

Hermione's eyes widened a little "Uh, yes sir? If rumours are to be believed." She refrained from naming Theodore's father as the source of those rumours, just in case.

Voldemort's eyes sought out McNair. "Is that true, McNair?" a disappointed tone lacing his voice.



CHAPTER 4: A SAFE, COSY HIDING PLACE

It was quite the scene. Blaise and Theodore stood guard by the door of Olivander's wand shop. Ginny leaned back in a chair with her boots on the counter, throwing a knife up in the air and catching the blade between her palms. Hermione, no doubt looked positively unhinged. She stood atop a ladder pulling boxes of wands from the shelves, only to throw the wand over her shoulder into a discarded heap when the wand did not choose her. Growls of frustration became more frequent as the mountain beneath her grew.

McNair's eyes widened in horror. "N-no, my Lord." He stammered.

"Draco." Voldemort hissed

Draco's eyes locked on the man in a cold glare. McNair grabbed hold of the table in shock, his fingers scratched at the surface. A moment later, Draco scowled in disgust. "He lies, my Lord."

Voldemort's face contorted in a sneer. "You disgust me. Stand. Gibbon, sit."

"Thank you, my Lord." Gibbon bowed and strode around to where McNair had stood and was glaring in Hermione's direction with enough hatred that she was surprised he didn't perform an act of accidental magic. He stepped away from the table, joining those at the wall while Gibbon sat.

"Let's begin, shall we?" Voldemort looked down the table at everyone seated. "A warm welcome to our new friends. Does everyone know Miss Granger and Miss Weasley?"

Silence followed. Nearly everyone at the table stared back at Voldemort in disbelief.

"Good. They will be joining us for the next stage of our cause—"

"I'm sorry, fucking what?!" Someone stood from the table in outrage. A second later, he was dead on the ground, a deep red gash across his throat.

"Thank you, Theodore. Tiberius, you must be proud of your boy."

Tiberius said nothing. Hermione had a sneaking suspicion that he wasn't - nor ever would be - proud of Theodore because his jealousy and ego would forever get in the way.

"Now, as I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted, Miss Granger and Miss Weasley have recognised the worth in our community. They have left the traitorous Order and joined us. After speaking with our new friends, I have determined that their previous grievances against us be forgotten as what they can bring with them is far more valuable. Daphne?"

"Yes, my Lord." Daphne spoke from several seats down.

"Report on the base for me, please."

"Of course, my Lord. The information provided by Miss Weasley and Miss Granger was correct. Currently speaking, that particular safe house is disillusioned, and there are heavy wards in place, as we were told there would be. We would need a team of at least twenty, I believe, to break through the wards, which would alert them, and they would flee. Alternatively, we can apparate straight in with the company of Miss Granger and Miss Weasley. Likely, a few will still get away, but we could capture a large portion."

"Very well. Ladies?" Voldemort eyed them with scrutiny, searching for any sign of reluctance on their faces.

"Happy to help, Sir," Ginny answered for the both of them confidently.

A victorious glint shone in his eyes. "Excellent. In celebration and in the spirit of forging new pathways, I have a gift for the two of you." A wave of his wand brought a group of items flying towards him.

In front of Hermione landed a pile of neatly folded robes and a plain silver mask; the same items landed in front of Ginny. Surprise had her eyes widening. "Thank you, how generous of you," Hermione nodded. She knew who Voldemort was, and she recognised his need to have his ego stroked. He was deeply insecure, but if she wanted her goals to become reality, she needed to play the game he wanted her to.

"Indeed. Thank you very much, Sir, it is an honour." Ginny smiled beside her.

"Please." Voldemort indicated to the masks in front of them. "I'm sure we are all curious to see what form they take."

Hermione lifted her own to her face, and instantly, it suctioned to her. Hermione gasped but realised after a moment that it was fine. It wasn't attacking her; it was just doing what it was designed to do. Slowly it began to morph around her face, shaping itself, twisting into a new design, one that would supposedly reflect her in some way.

"Intriguing." Voldemort smiled at the two of them, a strange twinkle in his eye.

Hermione looked to the dark wizard. "May I?"

Voldemort gave her a nod of approval. Hermione pulled the mask from her face and, beside her, felt Ginny doing the same. She turned it over to examine it. Her mask had not complied with the old-school uniformity. It did not follow the typical oval shape either, instead taking a shield like shape. The mask was black with intricately layered black and red ornate swirls around her eyes, her mouth covered by a rough corrugated crisscross pattern. At the top of her mask was a larger, pointed, swirling design in the same rough metal as the cage over her mouth. She looked over at Ginny's and chuckled. The redhead mirrored her actions, a giggle falling from her lips, too.

"Nice." She said as they both instinctively fist-bumped each other and donned their masks again.

Ginny's mask was the same shape as Hermione's and with the same style of design. Ginny's had more silver swirls framing her mask, and instead of the crisscross pattern over her mouth it was smooth matte black. The rolling swirls around her eyes weren't as layered or pronounced but the pointed ornate decoration at the top of her mask was, it was smooth and shiny silver.

The masks looked like a set, just as Ginny and Hermione were. Ginny bumped into her shoulder in friendly affection. Around the table, Death Eaters were staring back at

"Well then, pretend it's not."

"You need to shift to a political approach rather than this barbaric warfare nonsense you have going on. Do you want England for a few years, or do you want the world - forever?" Hermione asked, turning back to the painting again as Ginny went back to inspecting her nails.

"So you would like me to believe you and Miss Weasley would like to join my ranks and advise me, is that it?" Voldemort asked breathlessly; the reminder that he was not invincible to torture himself seemed to have chilled his earlier anger.

"Yes and no. We are offering a mutually beneficial opportunity. We have things we can offer you in return for things you can offer us. We would be contracting ourselves to you as individuals, not as marked Death Eaters." Ginny stared the man down with a dismissive glare. Hermione loved that glare; it encompassed Ginny's fiery spirit and take-no-prisoners attitude.

Voldemort looked at her for a long time before his eyes roamed to Hermione. He looked at her as if she was a jigsaw he had yet to solve. His eyes flicked to the three men at the back, who, despite their obvious anxiety around the repercussions of bringing them here, stood tall. Finally, his eyes sought Bellatrix, and he growled in annoyance, the witch openly sobbing as she still clutched at her wand.

He stood and made his way to the window Hermione had looked out of earlier, staring into the gardens below, trying to find his answer. "Draco, take your aunt and uncle away. I would like to discuss these matters in private."

Draco glanced between the two witches briefly before bowing his head. "Of course, my Lord."

Voldemort waited until they had vacated the room before silencing it and turning to face them again. "Start at the beginning."

continue to be born. Witches or wizards like myself, like Lily Potter, who are smart and, if brought on side, could be a game changer for you. But instead, you're stuck. The war hasn't moved in seven years because you have no direction." Hermione ignored Bellatrix's flailing body, her mouth open in silent screams, tears leaking out the corner of her eyes. If anything, her self-imposed punishment was karma. "A much more realistic goal, and one certainly more attainable, would be to step out of the shadows around the world, magical folk no longer needing to hide for the sensitivity of muggles. Worldwide domination of a different kind."

"I mean, you yourself are a half-blood, Voldie. You can hide behind your notions of blood supremacy if you like, but at the end of the day, those of us with half a brain can all see it comes down to an insecurity of your place in this world, an insecurity that you will find a lot of muggleborns can relate to." Hermione continued absent-mindedly, pausing her steps to inspect a painting that had survived whatever culling had taken place of the furniture in this manor. It was a small painting depicting a battle between muggles.

"Long term, your current agenda holds no weight - it's temporary. If the Order manages to destroy you, they destroy your work, your Death Eaters will scatter to the wind like they did last time, and you will have wasted your life. Which is honestly kind of pathetic; you have a unique following that you could be harnessing for so much more, yet you're behaving like a child. An idiotic child who begged his mother for an ice cream only to receive it and watch it melt." Hermione continued her path. "Anyway, enough of that, Ginny and I didn't come here to critique you—"

"Though it has been amusing," Ginny added in.

Hermione grinned at her. "We came to inform you that we have decided to leave the Order. Our skills and experience have been greatly underappreciated for far too long, and we have grown bored of their constant rejections. We have decided to be gracious and offer our abilities to you first and foremost in exchange for certain benefits and privileges, of course. If you decline, that is fine; we will carry on our way."

"We are so fucking dead." Theo sighed in defeat beneath his breath but as Hermione had stopped talking, his words were clear. Draco was staring at Hermione in horror, clearly in agreement with Theo's words. Blaise, though, seemed to me mulling over Hermione's words.

"How do you propose we go about fulfilling your idea, Granger?"

"It's obvious, isn't it?" Ginny answered for her.

Voldemort finally seemed to have regained control of his muscles and pulled himself into the remaining dining chair.

them in shock. There was a distinct disapproving energy to the air but Hermione couldn't bring herself to care.

"Today is a good day, my friends." Voldemort smiled. "Today, we start to change the world. No longer will we hide in the shadows..."

Hermione zoned out as looked to her best friend, who looked back at her with kind, loving eyes. It had been a slow realisation to understand that Ginny had been her only tie to the Order, emotionally or in support of their cause. With Ginny here at her side, they could all burn for all she cared. She felt at home in a bizarre kind of way, and from the look in Ginny's eyes, she knew she felt the same.

"Our newest friends have kindly offered to help us sway the world leaders that our cause is the only way forward for all of humanity, by any means necessary."

"My Lord, forgive me, but is it really wise to trust them? They have killed so many of our people; what's to say that they are not here to spy for the Order."

"They are not." The firm voice of Draco responded.

"How can you be so sure?" Someone else argued.

"Are you questioning my abilities, Frieze?"

"Yes." The man barked.

"Crucio." Hermione heard the soft word fall from her lips. It was just another word to her now. She no longer needed to channel her rage - instead, it just melted out her fingertips like butter. Frieze fell forward onto the table, his hands gripping at nothing, his back and head rolling in an attempt to shift the unyielding pain. "You should know better than to question the Dark Lord and one of his high commanders." Hermione drawled. Beside him, another mask jumped to their feet.

"Avada Kedavra!" He shouted, pointing his wand at Hermione. The wizard was blown backwards, toppling his seat to the ground. His body landed at the feet of a Death Eater standing by the wall, his eyes wide and unblinking. Half the table jumped to their feet, drawing their wands. Ginny, who seemed to find the whole situation hilarious, began laughing.

Voldemort remained silent, sitting back in his seat, seemingly content to let this play out. Draco sighed in annoyance, and in a surprising move, he and his whole team stood, drawing their wands and pointing them at those who threatened Hermione and Ginny.

Hermione released Frieze from his cruciatus curse and sighed. "Enough!" Hermione shouted. "Before anyone else loses their lives to your inability to control your emotions, you should know that attempting to cast any hexes, jinxes, or curses at either of us is ill-advised and will backfire on you. We might have come to play, but we didn't come to fuck around. Isn't that right, Bella?" Hermione sat back smugly, smiling at the witch

whose eye hadn't stopped twitching since her previous comment. Theo failed to stifle a laugh from where he stood, which earned him an elbow to the ribs from Daphne. "Now sit the fuck down!"

Only their new housemates listened. "Now!" Hermione shouted with such force and ferocity that everyone seemed to drop to their seats from shock alone; even Ginny jumped next to her. All that is, except Tiberius Nott, who glared at her, his eyes filled with disgust.

"I do not take orders from you, mudblood."

Voldemort opened his mouth to say something, but Hermione beat him to it. "Just you wait, Tiberius. One day very soon, I will be in charge of a mission, and I will request you to be on that little excursion just so that I can make you eat those fucking words."

"I would rather die," he hissed with as much punctuation as he could muster on each word, leaning on the table in front of him with both palms flat.

"That can be arranged," Ginny offered with a satisfied smile.

Further down the table, Theo scoffed. "Would be my pleasure."

Tiberius turned on his son, pointing his wand in Theo's face. "You traitorous little shit. I should kill—"

Hermione stood and glared daggers at the man, slamming her own palms on the table and leaning towards him. "Touch a fucking hair on his head, Tiberius, and I'll peel the skin from your fucking body so slowly you will be begging for release, and when I'm done, I'll pass your dead lifeless corpse along to McNair to continue with. Please, I'm begging you, fucking try me. I haven't been on the field in over a week now; I'm just twitching to kill someone. I'll be feeding your body to Greyback for months to come."

Tiberius's eyes shifted slowly back to her, a dangerous glint shining in his eyes. "You talk a big game, little girl. I wonder if you will still be so lippy with a knife slicing up that little cunt of yours; got to get it wet for me to fuck that attitude out of you." He snarled.

"Tiberius! That is enough. If you speak to our new friends in such an abhorrent manner again, I will have to cut your tongue from your mouth!" Voldemort hissed. "Sit down right now."

Hermione smiled. "Yes, Tiberius. Sit," she said purposely, her eyes locked on his. He had a choice now, he could stay standing to spite her and disobey his master, or he could sit and in part be listening to her as well.

"What the hell?" Rodolphus shouted, his eyes narrowing on Ginny, deciding that she must be the source of his master and wife's suffering. "Bombarda!" The man flew backwards across the ballroom by an invisible force, his body colliding with a large marble pillar, his body falling to a heap on the ground.

"Oh, for goodness sake," Hermione huffed. "Just let go of your wands!" she snapped before turning to look out the window again.

Voldemort let go of his immediately, and the curse dispersed. He lay there panting as the residual pain no doubt lingered. Bellatrix, however, seemed unwilling to trust Hermione's word and continued to writhe in pain. Hermione rolled her eyes at the stupidity of the woman.

"Granger, what the hell?" Draco snarled, stepping toward her, his anger palpable.

Hermione cocked an eyebrow at him. "Ginny told him that it wasn't wise. Honestly, Malfoy, we might be here to offer services, but we're not stupid. We're not walking in here with one wand between us and a death wish."

"I don't know, that was pretty fucking stupid if you ask me," Blaise muttered.

"Well, we didn't ask you," Ginny retorted, now examining her nails.

Voldemort continued to lie on the ground, his limbs twitching occasionally as he stared at the domed ceiling above him. "Explain before I kill you myself." Draco hissed.

Ginny sighed loudly, throwing her head back in frustration. "As we have both stated on several occasions now, that would be ill-advised. Unless your goal is to end your own life, that is, in which case, be my guest."

"That's the problem with you lot," Hermione huffed and began to walk the perimeter of the ballroom, putting more and more space between herself and the Death Eaters. Her eyes roamed over the textured wallpaper. "You have no ambition, no drive. You don't see the big picture. Which frankly, considering each of you were Slytherins, is rather ironic."

"What picture?" Voldemort hissed from his place on the floor.

"I'm so glad you asked, Voldie. You have a vendetta against muggleborns, but it's misplaced. I mean, think about it, really. Harry Potter hasn't defeated you. It was Lily, a muggleborn witch, that caused you to fail last time." Hermione's voice rose as she strolled past the body of Bellatrix, still crying out in pain but gripping firm to her wand. Draco had clearly grown weary of the cries, too, as he waved his hand and silenced her wordlessly. Hmm, impressive.

"Just now, it was me who ensured our safety - which resulted in your self-inflicted pain. How many of your men have I killed, hmm? Your desire to eradicate muggles is pointless and frankly futile because muggleborn witches and wizards are going to

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Elizabeth swinging a crowbar into the side of her cheek out of nowhere as Hermione rounded a corner.

Ginny coming into the kitchen while Hermione was on scrubbing duties and immediately stepping in to help her before Yvonne Kennedy walked in and sent her packing because 'The bitch is here for punishment, Weasley, not a little gossip session.'

Draco's ghostly apparition walked passed. Draco's eyes darkened as his finger reached out and touched his head almost nervously.

Draco strolled in, interrupting any train of thought. He had gotten changed since the Voldemort's manor. He had changed into a pair of tan trousers and a short-sleeved black button-up that he hadn't bothered to button bar the bottom two where he had the shirt loosely tucked into his pants. Hermione allowed her eyes to roam over his defined chest, taking in his scars before Ginny squeezed her arm and tore her eyes away.

Objectively speaking, Hermione could admit he was nice to look at. Very nice to look at, indeed; how strong was he? Strong enough to hold her up and fuck her –

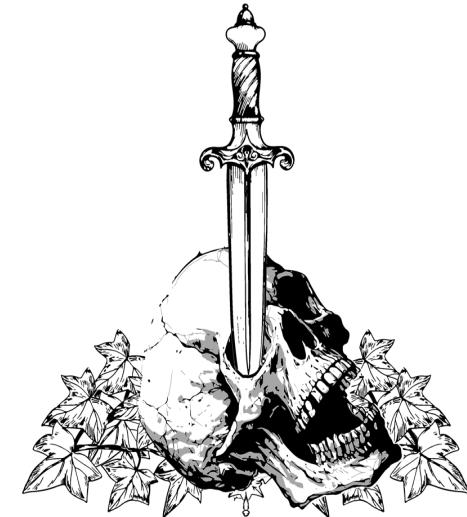
Hermione threw her defences up quickly, blocking the memory to him. Draco locked his jaw as he stared down at her. Hermione stared back, refusing to back down.

"What's the matter, Granger?" He smirked "I thought you said I could look at whatever I need to?"

Hermione glared up at him. "You have your own fantasies to jerk off to Malfoy; you're not stealing mine." She tried to say with as much disinterest as possible. Strolling away from the blonde spirit. "Besides. I think you will find this memory much more interesting." She spoke quietly as she came to a stop in front of a tall man, handsome with pale skin, dark hair, and even darker brown eyes.

"Who is he?"

Hermione smiled at the man. "Tom Riddle, before he became Voldemort."



CHAPTER 10: START AT THE BEGINNING

Voldemort stood and made his way to the window Hermione had looked out of earlier, staring into the gardens below, trying to find his answer. "Draco, take your aunt and uncle away. I would like to discuss these matters in private."

Draco glanced between the two witches briefly before bowing his head. "Of course, my Lord."

Voldemort waited until they had vacated the room before silencing it and turning to face them again. "Start at the beginning."

Ginny tutted at him. "Typical man, always in such a rush."

"You could do with some more furniture in here, Voldy; it's hardly suitable for entertaining," Hermione drawled.

"If I didn't think it would backfire, I would kill you for your disrespect."

Hermione smiled sweetly at him. "You would be correct, and as long as you wear that face, that is what I will call you."

Voldemort's eyes narrowed on her in fascination. "I do not have furniture because I do not like to entertain, and I don't know what you mean - this is my only face."

Ginny glared at him. "Liar." She snapped venomously.

Voldemort turned to her in surprise.

"What's the matter, Tom? Don't remember me? The fragments of your soul still speak to each other; search deep," Ginny growled.

Voldemort stared at her, his eyes rarely blinking in a vacant way. Part of him processing the shock of hearing his given name, and part of him was lost deep in the pits of his memories seeking answers he supposedly already had.

There was something about this painting that kept drawing Hermione back to it. It was just a simple painting, but there was something out of place. Part of her felt like she should be looking away from it, like she should ignore it, but whatever it was, it was right there...

She glanced over at Ginny, who was staring up at Voldemort from her place on the dining chair. There, that was it right there. In the corner of her eye, she saw the painting change. One of the men in battle, who looked as though he could have been a Riddle ancestor, no longer held the common sword he had held just a moment ago. In his hand was a painted version of the sword of Gryffindor. It was tainted, though; the Ruby at the hilt wasn't pure - deep within it was a small green glow.

Hermione smiled to herself. He found a way to corrupt it after all, even if only in painting form.

"Ginny Weasley. You're all grown up now." Voldemort finally stated with recognition.

"Miss me?" Ginny grinned.

"I recall mostly annoying childish whining about Harry Potter," Ginny made a disgusted sound that pulled what appeared to be a small smile from Voldemort. "but I suppose the few fleeting moments we shared of actual friendship could warrant what you call vague appreciation."

Ginny's hand came to rest on her chest. "Now, now, don't get too sentimental. You'll make me cry," Ginny smirked.

"I came to you last week and told you about the lunchtime incident. I told you about the things they were saying, and I pleaded with you to intervene before things got to this level."

"And I told you then that if you would stop giving people a reason to be afraid of you, then your life would significantly improve here. If you prefer, my offer to transfer you to the camp in Austria still stands."

"She hit me in the fucking face with a crowbar," Hermione hissed. "Are you telling me I am not allowed to defend myself!?"

"In the manner you did, no. A simple sticking charm and walking away would have been more than appropriate. In addition to your wand, you will be confined to your room without visitors of any kind until you can apologize to Miss Brampton."

"Go to hell, Kingsley." Hermione spat and stood up to leave the room, but he was already Stupefying her.

"What the fuck is wrong with you." Draco snapped.

"Excuse me?" Hermione folded her arms.

"Why the hell would you fight by their side for so long!?" Draco scowled.

Hermione smiled smugly. "So you see my point then."

Draco stared at her. "I suppose I do."

It didn't stop him from wandering her mind, though, playing memories of people Hermione doubted he recognised or even knew. She stood back and watched patiently alongside him.

Seamus approaching her, attempting to proposition her into a quickie and, when turned down, telling everyone the reverse to be true.

Candice Tarly and her sparring in the basement; nothing bad happened between the two - it was just the general dislike the girl had for her.

She and Ginny leading a mission into Kent the day Ron snapped her wand. The defiance of Dean Thomas that had led to his death.

Hermione listening as Romilda and her little posse gossiped about her.

Another rejected experiment proposal.

Another person telling her that they were disgusted with her, that they had looked up to her in school, but now...

George telling her to stay strong. That he was sorry he had to leave her and Ginny alone to deal with this but that he needed to go help the safe house in Scotland. He kissed her goodbye. They hadn't dated at all, but they had, on occasion, used each other to deal with the stress of the war.

She glared at the older wizard at the head of the table. He stared back at her, unimpressed by her outburst.

"Yes. That is correct." He stated finally.

"THEN GIVE IT TO SOMEONE ELSE!!" Hermione screamed in frustration.

"The answer is no, Miss Granger, that is final."

Hermione stood so fast her chair fell backwards with a loud clatter. She was so angry, so frustrated. This could save so many lives, the precious lives that were dwindling under the growing forces of the Death Eaters. She was halfway out the door before the tears of frustration that rarely made their appearance sprung free.

"Blimmin barmy, that one." Ron laughed.

Hermione's blood ran cold; she spun back and stormed into the room, barely giving those present time to get over their surprise before her fist collided with his face twice.

"Stupefy?" someone shouted.

"When was this?" Draco asked.

"Oh, uh... three? Four years ago?" Hermione shrugged.

"That could have tipped the war in your favour back then," Draco stated.

"Oh, I know," Hermione agreed.

Draco looked around at the faces surrounding them. "Kingsley?"

Hermione pushed through the crowd, Draco trailing along behind her. Eventually, they found the man standing far off in the corner.

Draco didn't even hesitate anymore; he walked straight up to him and jabbed his forehead as if the spirit would feel it.

Hermione held an ice pack to her face against a swollen bump on her cheekbone. Elizabeth Brampton sat in the chair, a neck brace around her throat. For what, she didn't know - Padma had healed her.

"I'll be keeping your wand, Miss Granger."

"Like hell you will!" Hermione exclaimed.

Kingsley stared into her eyes. Once upon a time, the wizard had liked her - respected her even - but the more of herself she gave up for this fucking Order, the less he liked her. "You should have thought about that before you acted the way you did."

Hermione's mouth fell open. "She attacked me!!" Hermione yelled, her outrage rising.

"And yet when I found you two, your hands were around her throat," Kingsley justified dismissively.

"For him, that's as close as you will get to a 'Welcome home, old friend' as you're going to get." Hermione smiled.

"You think you know me do you mud--"

"Uh ah." Hermione waved her finger at him. "There will be no more of that. Miss Granger will be the only thing you refer to me as until such a time as you no longer despise me, which is when you may call me Hermione. I would work on that one quickly, though, if I were you. I am going to change your life after all. But in answer to your question... I do, yes. In fact, I see you." She punctuated the last of her words, taking a step closer to the painting.

His eyes narrowed. "That's not possible."

Hermione hummed. "You know, Voldy, I have spent many years of my life afraid of you, hating you, running from you. But then I spent the last year or two thinking of all the ways in which you and I are so much alike." She turned back to look at the painting and saw once more that the sword of Gryffindor had disappeared. She smiled and moved to stand behind Ginny. "You obviously had magical blood from your mother, but you were raised in the muggle world. You came into this world knowing nothing of their ways. Distrusted from the start and scrambling to play catch up."

Voldemort stood there glaring at her. "It's a unique experience, isn't it? To have to fight for your place in a world that is rightfully yours. Because that's the thing, Voldy - this world is rightfully mine. I belong here and have exhausted my patience, pretending not to be as powerful as I am. The truth of the matter is that magical blood is superior, but it doesn't come down to purebloods; it comes down to all those able to pick up a wand and end a life with two little words. To bend people to your will, to change the very makeup of an object, to summon something from nothing. All of those who hold the power to do so are superior. It is the muggles without magic that we are above."

Voldemort waved his wand, and the dining chair he had been sitting on earlier transformed into a wing-backed armchair. He gave her a pointed look before the chair beneath Ginny began shifting into a loveseat. "I have no reason to trust you."

"Rude, considering I would argue that I am your oldest friend." Ginny retorted. "I have, after all, known you since you were sixteen."

"Be that as it may, Ginny Weasley, you have fought against me--"

"There's a connecting road off Stepping Stone Lane and Kings Mill Lane just outside of Painswick. If you follow it right to the end, you reach a dead end and the Order base that Ginny and I were living in these past few years." Hermione drawled, flopping down onto the loveseat in impatience.

Voldemort seemed at a loss for words. "I have no reason to trust you." He repeated again.

"Yes, so you said. We have no reason to trust you either, so let's just agree right now, between the three of us; never to lie to each other, yes? This is not your typical run-of-the-mill follower sign-up. We don't want what you're selling." Ginny retorted.

"Then what do you want?" Voldemort's patience was wearing thin but he gave a short nod all the same.

"To rule the world." Hermione stated.

"And how do you propose that, Miss Granger?"

"I plan to woo the world's magical ministries, naturally. To abolish the statute of secrecy bills around the world. Starting with England. Given you're controlling the Ministry of Magic, I can skip straight to the muggle government here; they are desperate to put an end to this wartime living and will sign whatever I put in front of them at this point. Ginny and I have the distinct advantage of having been poster children for the Order for so many years that we offer a different level of merit than your typical sign-this-or-die Death Eater types."

Voldemort thought for a moment. "Not everyone is going to agree with that."

"It's strategy, Tom." Ginny sighed. "You get enough people on your side, and the rest will either fold from intimidation or by force. Regardless, we're done fucking around."

"What about Harry Potter?" Voldemort asked.

"What about him?" Ginny asked, confused.

"He is an obstacle."

"Actually, he's not. Lily sacrificed herself to save his life, thus a protection was placed over him until he was of age. He couldn't be killed by you during that time. He came of age, the spell was broken, and then you killed the piece of your soul living within him - which was the only other aspect keeping him alive. Now, without Lily's magic and your soul to safeguard him, he's just a regular dipshit. He no longer holds sway over your life, thus the prophecy is complete." Hermione explained. Honestly, how no one else had figured out that Harry had lost all importance at that moment in the Battle of Hogwarts was beyond her. He had one chance to end it all, and he had failed because he hadn't destroyed all the horcruxes. "And in any case, the Order is not prepared or connected enough to stop this plan from moving forward."

"Am I to assume that the Order does not approve of your plan?"

"The Order does not approve of any of my plans. I believe the words they have used have been 'liability, mentally unstable, dangerous, egotistical'—"

"I'm not the only one that can help her but I am the only one that knows what she is going through. I know you don't get it. How can you? You haven't been outside in two years. You have no idea what it is truly like, but I did what I needed to in order to survive and save the lives of the people in this damn house. I will be the resident villain if I have to, but you listen here, Harry Potter, if I have Ginny in here later crying because you can't see that she is still a good person, then I promise there will be hell to pay."

Harry scoffed at her. "We should have left you in the manor that night. Seeing the person you have become is a much worse fate than if you had just died that night."

Hermione felt as though he had struck her. She slammed the drawer shut and glared at him. "You're right. You should have. Now get the fuck out of my room."

Draco scowled beside her. "Are they all like this?"

"In varying degrees of intensity, but yes. For the most part, he just ignored my presence after that. We had a few more disagreements about Ginny, he would remind me what a piece of shit I am, I caught him fucking Elise, blah blah blah."

"Who the fuck is Elise?" Draco startled.

Hermione shrugged. "Some Order chick. There's Ron." Hermione pointed at the wizard.

Draco strolled over and jabbed his finger into his forehead.

"No." Ron snapped.

"You didn't even hear me out!" Hermione exclaimed across the small oval table in the meeting room upstairs. All around the table, people avoided her eyes.

"You're right. I'm sorry. Continue." Ron offered her a tight, forced smile that didn't reach his eyes.

"I think I can create a homing device. It would be like a handheld wireless, but it would scan the area and reflect it back on a miniature hologram. If Death Eaters were nearby, they would show up as little red dots. It would be highly effective for neutralizing them quickly without us suffering so many casualties."

"Neutralize them!? Merlin, do you even hear yourself?" Ron scoffed in disgust.

Hermione sighed audibly. "I didn't mean it like that, Ron," Hermione exclaimed.

"But you would, wouldn't you? You would kill them if you came across them."

Hermione leant back, her mouth snapping shut. Her eyes narrowed on him, and he sneered at her, a tiny nod of his head as if she had just confirmed his claims.

"Kingsley, this could say—"

"I'm afraid I'm with Ron on this one. In the wrong hands, that could—"

"Oh, cut the bullshit and just say it. You think I'm the wrong hands. Say it."

Hermione flinched from the sharp barb. How much more could she do? She was doing everything there was to do...

Draco frowned and waved his hand; the memory shimmered and changed.

"Ginny's awake." Harry's voice was cold and hard in the doorway. Hermione looked up at him, relieved. Her head hurt from all the crying she had done. Her entire body ached, her chest was the worst. All she wanted to do was curl up in her bed and sleep.

"Thank Merlin." Hermione stood and took a step towards the doorway.

"Where do you think you're going?" Hermione faulted at Harry's question.

"I um..." Hermione trailed off.

"Ron and I talked, Hermione; we don't want you around Ginny right now."

"Harry?!" Hermione exclaimed.

"You killed someone, Hermione."

Hermione flinched. "And that somehow makes me a pariah now, does it? I'm still me! I was protecting her, for Merlin's sake!"

He stared back at her with the same face she had seen on Kingsley earlier, on the faces of Padma and Pavarti, Ron and Molly, and every single person she had interacted with since.

"The Hermione I know would never have done something so heinous. She would have found another way. She wouldn't have given up like that. I have no idea who you are. Stay away from her." Harry turned his back and walked away from her while Hermione's knees gave out underneath her.

Another wave of his hand, another memory.

"You poisonous wretch." Harry stormed into the attic without knocking. Hermione was in the middle of retrieving the cigarettes she kept in her drawers. Blood matted her hair; it wasn't hers, some Death Eater on the receiving end of a slicing hex in their earlier run-in. Normally she would have headed to the shower, but currently, Ginny was sitting on the roof and needed her more.

"Hello to you too, Harry." Hermione drawled.

"It's bad enough that you have damned yourself, but now you're dragging Ginny down with you."

Hermione's eyes hardened. "Don't you dare, Harry James Potter. You have no idea what Ginny is going through right now. I will not allow you to treat her the way you all treated me. Ginny saved my life, and she doesn't deserve your holier-than-thou bullshit right now." She hissed quietly.

"Oh, but you do, right Hermione? You're the only one that can help her now?! You got what you wanted, didn't you? Someone to sink in the misery with you."

"Don't forget that time Kingsley said you were 'worse than the devil himself' and that I was no more than your little henchman" Ginny interjected.

Hermione pondered that for a minute. "Oh yeah, that's right. I had forgotten about that." Hermione smiled. "In any case, the Order and I do not share the same belief system. The Order believes that knowledge is power; they believe that they can defeat you with the power of friendship. Ginny has some top-tier torture skills that she isn't allowed to use. I have experiments that could revolutionise war that I'm not allowed to create. We are both chastised any time we kill someone - it was getting very annoying, actually."

"And what is it that you believe, Miss Granger?"

"That power is power. The muggle population has guns, armies, and tanks. Their population outnumbers us fivefold. And yet we are still stronger. We are still capable of ruling dominance over them. I have a brilliant mind, Voldy. Given the resources and freedom to do it, I believe I can come up with some truly spectacular things. While I don't believe in the 'knowledge is power' crap - I do understand that knowledge is key, but I need connections to start this and muscle behind me to back us up."

"Which is where I come in."

"Clever boy."

"I don't like to share, Miss Granger."

"You misunderstand us. We don't want the responsibility of world domination. We are happy to help you achieve it. Then we are free to reap the rewards as some of your top-ranked generals while you are the one in charge. We like fighting, something you can not do if you're the one in charge. We get to have control over armies and create whatever insane experiments she comes up with next, freedom to do as we please - while you're king of the entire world, changing magical history forever. I believe it's what they call a win-win." Ginny explained.

"We will need to fix that face of yours, obviously." Hermione rolled her eyes. "Pettigrew royally fucked it up. No matter, I have an idea for how to—"

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, come now, Voldy, we all know how charming you can be, even more so when your appearance is that of a human, not some grey skeletal man creature. If you're going to rule the world, you will want to do it with your proper face."

Voldemort leant back in his chair. His fist covered his mouth. His eyes darted between them. "You two aren't afraid of me, are you?"

Ginny snorted. "No. We're not. Which you should consider a good thing in our roles. You have enough yes-men. You need someone in your corner who isn't on a

leash to tell you what's a good idea and what isn't. This way, you know that when we say yes, it's because we mean it - not because we're stroking your ego."

"Miss Granger has an unfair advantage over this situation. For the sake of building a relationship based on good faith, I would like to know how you did it."

"With a piece of you and a mirror," Hermione answered honestly but vaguely. Voldemort seemed to understand that's all she was willing to give up and hummed in his chair.

"If I am to provide my services to you, I am going to need to take some security measures."

"Naturally."

"Fine." Ginny waved dismissively. "We are going to need some assurances of our own. An unbreakable vow that you won't make any attempts on our life or have anyone else make an attempt on our lives. That you won't strip us of power upon achieving our goal, and that you will do everything within your power to aid our plans."

Voldemort hissed in disapproval. "If that is the game you want to play, girlie, let's make it double, shall we? You will swear not to make any attempts on my life or my remaining horcruxes. You will not return to the Order to pass along any information, and if you are successful, you will not make any attempts to overthrow me and steal power for yourselves."

"Deal." Hermione and Ginny said simultaneously.

"Well then, let's begin negotiations." Voldemort drawled.

Draco stood there staring at Tom's spirit.

"Any questions?" Hermione asked sarcastically.

"What was the fuzzy bit?"

Hermione frowned. "Fuzzy bit?"

Draco frowned at her. "Something happened after Ginny said, 'Remember me?' Blah blah blah, and then he remembered her."

Hermione smiled. "Oh good, I was worried I would have to obliviate that part. I'm afraid that is confidential to your master."

"You and Ginny are really all in?"

"Yes. And as per our agreement, you no longer get to say shit about it."

"Where did my spirit thing go? I really am very interested in these fantasies you mentioned."

"Malfoy?"

"Yes, Granger?"

"Get the fuck out."

Draco stared at her with distrusting eyes. Silence stretched between them. Just when she thought that the conversation was over and she turned to continue the search, did he respond. "Yes. I think that's what's most unnerving."

Hermione hummed in response. She wasn't interested in yet another conversation about her morality.

"It was Goyle."

"What was?" Hermione passed by Molly Weasley, her spirit earning a double take from Draco.

"The second person you killed," Draco said quietly.

"Oh..." was all Hermione had to say. George Weasley caught her eye. "Finally." She sighed with relief, brushing past one-half of the Weasley twins. Fred would be floating somewhere behind her. She began to search the crowd in front of her for the face of either boy he had requested to see.

"This must have taken an impossible amount of work to create," Draco commented, looking around them again.

"Uh..." Hermione said distractedly. "Think it was about five months? Maybe four? Sometime after we went on the run, but it was done before the manor... oh, there's Harry, come on quickly before I lose him again." Harry stopped and turned to face her as she ran up to him. Even his spirit self stared at her in disapproval. Hermione scoffed at the boy she had once been willing to die for. How young and naive she had been. Draco appeared beside her.

"How do I...?" he trailed off.

"Just touch his forehead," Hermione explained.

Hermione rubbed her eyes; she had been reading for so long that the words were blurring together. She was trying to find something, anything that could give them a new direction to go in. They had been at this for months and reached a dead end. Ron lay in the tent. She had tried to heal him the best she could, but the splinch had been bad, and in all her preparation, she had only managed minimal training with healing spells. Which meant that they were stuck here until he was well enough to risk apparating again. Her stomach rumbled. She was so tired.

Harry stood quickly, sighing in frustration at her lack of progress. "How long until he can travel again?"

Hermione inhaled sharply; his words sounded full of frustration. She frowned up at him. "I'm doing everything I can..." Hermione reasoned softly.

"You're not doing enough!"

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"You don't just wake up one day and flip allegiances, Granger. That's not how that works," Draco sighed.

"Who said that's what happened?"

"Wasn't it?" she could feel his eyes on her, but she wouldn't look at him.

"No. It was more gradual than that. It was like... it was like getting thousands of little paper cuts. One by itself stings for a second, but then you move on. Thousands are harder to ignore; they bleed everywhere, and everything that touches you hurts. On top of that, the people giving you the paper cuts keep pouring salt on the wounds. You beg and hope that they will stop because the very first paper cut you ever got, they helped put a band-aid on. But the more you beg, the more you realise that you're the problem because you stay even though they keep giving you paper cuts. The only way out is to burn the library to the ground, so that's what you do. And you find that, actually, the fire sealed all the little cuts, and you feel better than you have in years."

Draco says nothing for a while. She passes by Luna's spirit; the girl died before Hermione's first killing curse, though something told her that Luna wouldn't have turned on her the way everyone else had. Hermione gave the witch a sad smile. Draco's eyes were still on her, cataloguing every one of her facial expressions.

"How many people have you killed?"

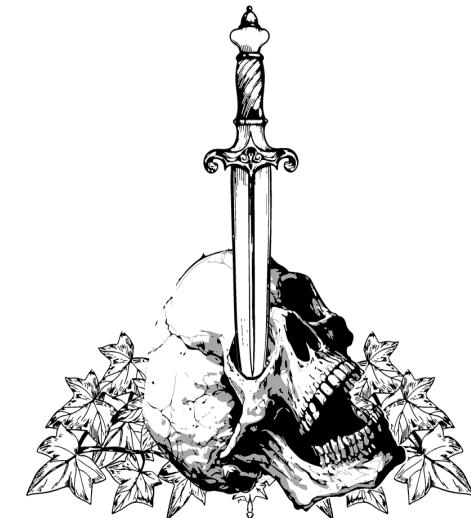
Hermione shook her head. "How would I possibly know that."

Draco stopped so suddenly that it took her by surprise. "What?"

Hermione frowned at him in confusion.

"How long did it take you to stop counting, Granger? How long did it take before you stopped replaying their faces in your mind when you went to bed?" Draco demanded.

"I never did that." Hermione gave him a pointed stare. "It was him or Ginny. I chose Ginny. I will always choose Ginny. She is my best friend. Yes, that first death was hard for me once upon a time, in the beginning. I went back to the Order and cried for nearly a week. I listened silently as every person expressed their disgust and disappointment in my choice to end a life," Hermione squared her shoulders, her gaze narrowing on him, "but I got over it, and Ginny was by my side for every moment of that. Her face was a constant reminder that I did the right thing. When I killed the next Death Eater a few weeks later, it was hardly even a surprise, and I certainly didn't lose sleep over them. I couldn't even tell you what they looked like or why I did it again. I'm sure if I interacted with everyone here, then I would figure it out, but why would I bother? What would it matter? You're a killer, Draco. When you look at me, isn't it like looking in the mirror?"



CHAPTER 11: FAMILY BREAKFAST

Hermione stared down at the pool, watching the way the lights buried within twinkled. It was still dark; Ginny wasn't awake yet, still curled up asleep in Hermione's bed, but from the moment Hermione had seen the pool on their first day, she had been looking forward to a swim. Her parents had had a pool, and during summer holidays she loved nothing more than to creep down while everyone was still sleeping and swim laps.

She had found the swimsuits yesterday afternoon, but her extensive stroll through memory lane with Draco had left her nauseous, and she had crawled into bed as soon

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as dinner was over. Like the trainers, they were in excess of the number she would need. This morning she had picked a one-piece, white, sporty-looking suit. The material was a mesh-like lightweight fabric; it wasn't for show like the flashier numbers that had been in there with it because this wasn't a leisurely swim.

She only waited long enough to throw a towel on the edge of the pool and cast a waterproof charm over her wrist holster before diving into the water. The water wasn't cold from the night air, but it wasn't heated either. It encased her as she glided through the water in a way that woke every nerve ending alive with a buzz.

There was just something about the feeling of pushing herself through the liquid that soothed her. The power of her legs propelling her through the water left her feeling strong. It had been years since she had last had this opportunity.

She swam the lap of the pool, rolled under, and kicked off the pool wall to swim the lap back, only to repeat the action. Hermione swam back and forward seven times before she unexpectedly crashed into a solid surface. She pulled upwards out of the water to see a smug-looking Draco Malfoy.

"Do you mind?" She snapped.

"Not at all," he responded, stepping closer to her, his hand darting through the water to her wrist. He held up one of her metal blades to her face. "Anticipating many enemies in the pool?"

Hermione crossed her arms and sneered at him. "Well, you're here, aren't you?"

Draco chuckled in a low way that had his chest shaking. His bare chest glistened with the tiny mounds of water coating him. "Am I your enemy, Granger? I thought we were on the same team now."

"Everyone's my enemy until they give me a reason not to be, no matter what team they are on. Had plenty of enemies in the Order, too, you saw that," Hermione stated defiantly.

His eyes travelled down the swimsuit that clung to her, across her shoulders and arms, leaving a trail of goosebumps behind before looking into her eyes again. "That I did. Wasn't the only thing I saw."

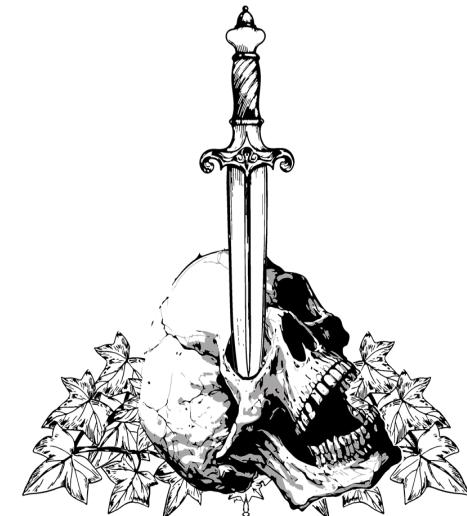
"Oh fuck off, Malfoy. Yes, you're attractive; that's not news to you." She ignored the glint in his eyes at her admission. "But you're also a gigantic pain in the ass. I am trying to swim, and you are in my way, so kindly fuck off."

"Such a filthy mouth, spewing profanities like that," he drawled.

"Is there something you want, Malfoy?"

"Nope," he drew out, popping the p sound. "Just enjoying the view."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Well, enjoy it somewhere else."



CHAPTER 9: LEARN WHAT YOU NEED TO LEARN

Seeing that doesn't bother you anymore?" Draco asked when he caught up to her.

Hermione scoffed. "Why would it?"

"It was the first time you killed someone."

"Does the first person you killed still haunt you?" Hermione retorted.

"I have never claimed to be a good person," Draco mumbled.

Hermione hummed. "Which is what I am claiming to no longer be, and yet you're struggling with that notion." Her eyes roamed over the spirits around her.

expressions, leaving her alone, one by one. Hermione stayed on her knees in the dirt for a long time, shaking tears welling in her eyes. Finally, she looked over at him; his blank black eyes stared back at her, and suddenly something tore inside her. Her chest ached more than it ever had before. She crawled over to the man and broke down on top of his body. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. Merlin, forgive me." She sobbed over his lifeless body. "I had to choose her; I'm so sorry."

Draco pulled back. "That was the first person you killed." He eyed her, expecting a reaction similar to the Hermione of that memory.

Hermione chuckled. "Yeah. They came pretty easy after that, though. Come along, lots to see."

As she made to move past him, Draco's hand shot out to grab her arm, causing her instincts to kick in. Hermione's free hand came up, and she jabbed her palm under his jaw, connecting with force.

Draco growled and whacked her arm away with the hand that had been on her arm, pulling that knife from earlier back up to point at her a mere centimeter from her face.

Hermione stuck her tongue out slowly, the tip pressing into the tip of her own combat knife. A sharp pinch as the point pierced the skin. Draco's eyes darkened as his gaze flitted down to the connection, her eyes narrowed at him. Her lower abdomen clenched tightly as she watched his pupils dilate at her action, his face only lit by the dim glow of the pool lights.

He was looking far too good right now. The shadows sought out all the sharp lines of his face and chiseled body. The water clinging to his shoulders and chest glistening in the lights. His blonde hair was damp and swept back out of his face. She was definitely in trouble here.

Retracting her tongue and snapping her mouth shut, Hermione tasted the faint metallic taste that accompanied blood. It wasn't much - she had barely pierced her tongue - but against the bright silver of the blade was a singular drop of her blood slowly tracking downward toward the handle.

Hermione reached up and snatched her knife back off him. Draco remained frozen in his spot, staring at where her knife had been. "First chance to swim laps in eight years, and as usual, you have to come along and ruin it," she grumbled.

"Right... sorry I'll just..." Draco trailed off, turning and jumping from the pool, quickly scooping up his discarded towel and wrapping it around his front.

Hermione frowned, that had been easier to get rid of him than she had thought as she watched him retreat back into the chateau. The tightness in her abdomen hadn't eased up. In fact, if anything, it had spread through her like a fire. No, that wouldn't do at all. She returned to her laps and pushed herself to kick harder than before. By the time she was finished, the sun was cracking over the horizon, and her arms and legs felt like lead, but the thoughts of Draco Malfoy's sex appeal had been pushed into the depths of her mind.

She clutched at the edge of the pool and tried to slow her breathing. "Good swim?"

Hermione nearly jumped out of her skin. "Jesus, Gin, you scared the crap out of me. How long have you been there?"

Ginny shrugged. "Maybe ten minutes. Panicked slightly when I woke up and you weren't there, but refrained from burning the house down long enough to pass by Malfoy muttering some nonsense about it being his fucking pool and looking like a

deer in the headlights. What did you do to the poor bloke? He looked proper out of sorts." Ginny moved to sit at the edge of the pool, her feet dangling into the water.

Hermione shrugged and shook her head. "I don't know. Told him he was ruining my swim. Nothing out of the usual." Hermione leant back, extending her arms as far as she could allow while still gripping the edge, tucking her knees up to her stomach, and pushing her feet against the wall.

"I think we should sit down with that lot today." Ginny nodded her head towards the door. "We need to get the raid done before they take off, as a security measure."

Hermione nodded. "I know the Order doesn't trust us, but do you really think their first instinct will be that we turned?"

Ginny shrugged. "Probably not, but the longer we're gone, the more likely it will be that they pack up, just in case. You called it yesterday when you told Malfoy that we only have a small window of opportunity."

Hermione assessed her friend's face. "And you're really okay with leading them straight in there?"

Ginny raised an eyebrow. "Why wouldn't I be?"

Hermione shrugged at her, lowering herself into the water until it reached her chin. "Your brother might get killed."

Ginny's face softened as she started chuckling. "Good thing I have four spare then right? Honestly, Mi, you don't need to worry. I'm in this, okay? One hundred percent. I can't stand Ron, and frankly, after the way he's treated you and me over the years, I really don't give a mandrake's behind about him. I might hesitate if it were Georgie or Bill, but Ron is big enough and ugly enough to look after himself, and if not.... Well, then that's on him. He should have paid more attention to our training sessions when he had the chance. Are you...?"

Hermione scoffed. "Merlin, no. The only ounce of concern I have is tied up in you - but if you say you're fine, then I'm fine. You're right, though; we do need to move. I left some things behind under the floorboard I would like to get back too, so I would prefer not to risk losing that."

"Okay. Well, I don't mean to be all guns abrasion or whatever the saying is—"

"Guns a blazing."

"- but it's the waiting that's worrying me, and I'm concerned that if we push it too hard, then that lot is going to get suspicious, but we need to get on to this quickly."

Hermione smirked at her red-haired friend. "I don't know about that. I think all you would have to do is bat your lashes at Zabini and he would give you the keys to the kingdom."

She moved through the crowd, searching for the first sign of someone living to differentiate. "Granger," Draco whispered.

"Yes?" Hermione continued to walk through the sea of the dead.

"Some of these people are Death Eaters."

"Yes?"

"Why are they here?"

Hermione stopped and looked back at him. He was looking uneasy. Hermione stepped closer and touched the forehead of the Death Eater he was looking at. She remembered this one well. A fuzzy square appeared where his head had been.

Ginny's scream pierced her eardrums. "Ginny!" Hermione screamed in response. Panic ripped her open from the gut up through her chest. She stupefied the Death Eater in front of her and looked around her. Her eyes roamed the field they were in. It was supposed to be a simple reconnaissance mission of the hospital nearby, but they had crossed paths with a camp of Death Eaters entirely by accident. They had seemed just as surprised to see them, too. Ginny's scream hadn't stopped; it was a pure and gut-wrenching sound. "Ginny!?" Hermione screamed, tears falling down her face as she scanned the crowd. A few of the trees nearby were on fire. Bodies of a small handful of Order members lay on the ground, covering the dirt and grass in a sickening red colour. Her eyes landed on the sight of her friend writhing on the floor. Her body contorted in ways that weren't natural.

Above her stood a figure with his back to her. "No!" Hermione screamed. "Avada Kedavra!" The words left her instinctively. The robed figure flew several feet before landing at the feet of Ron, duelling against Gregory Goyle. Time seemed to stop; everyone ceased the fight and looked at the body, tracking it back to Hermione. Suddenly, everyone in a robe popped away.

"Ginny!?" Hermione skidded to Ginny's side. Her red-headed friend had fallen unconscious. Pulling her body up to rest against her knees. "Ginny?? Can you hear me?"

"Hermione... what did you do?" Ron stared at the body in horror.

"Would you worry about that later?! Ginny needs help!!" Hermione screamed. The mention of his sister's name seemed to pull him back to the present, but instead of coming to help Hermione, he stepped over to them, scooping Ginny up in his arms and backing away from her as if she were the threat. Hermione looked at him, hurt. "Ron!?"

He scowled at her before turning his back on her and apparating away with Ginny cradled in his arms. Everyone else was staring at her with the same horrified, disgusted

Draco frowned but slipped into her mind. Hermione forced herself to let him in, to lower her defences. She had begun practising occlumency during her year in the tent with Harry and Ron, figuring that if they were captured, it would be handy. Her mind was a fortress that no one had successfully invaded. Not at least in the ways they would need to; it was set up like an exact replica of the Department of Mysteries. Endless rows of shelves that reached impossibly high, filled to the brim with hundreds of thousands of tiny orbs to mimic the prophecies. Instead, they were the home of her childhood, useless memories of Hogwarts, or even more useless memories of life since the battle. Only a handful, like her gardening or eating, but enough to throw someone off. It would exhaust someone trying to search all of them in an attempt to find anything of use.

"Don't bother with those; you will find nothing worthwhile. Over there are several doors. Stand in front of the one on the far left and turn anticlockwise three times," Hermione told him. He did as he was told. "Take that door." He did; where it led him was to the veil of death. Playing on repeat was the moment of Sirius Black's death. It looked just like a regular memory, which is why it was perfect. "The veil. You may step through it. You'll find what you need on the other side."

Draco peered back at her hesitantly. "Really, Malfoy, it would be quite the feat to recreate a functional veil of death in my brain."

She stepped through it first to show him there was nothing to fear; he followed a moment later. Beside her, his presence gasped. Floating in front of him were the wisps of everyone she had ever known that had passed. "Dead people are at the front, living people are at the back. You can stop any one of them, and they will show you whatever you want."

"I want Ronald Weasley and Harry Potter."

Hermione wasn't surprised but sighed all the same. Of course he would choose people right at the back. "Very well, come along then." She began to walk through the wisps, leading him deeper through the dark plane; there was nothing but spirits here. Like the Department of Mysteries, it stretched on forever, the only light coming from the faint, deathly glow provided by each spirit. Draco looked around her with a shudder. She had purposely made it as dark as possible. The cold had been a side effect of her continued use of the killing curse and other unforgivables, but it worked in her favour. No one had ever even come close to discovering this part of her brain; they had never even made it past the prophecies in the first room, but she imagined that the atmosphere would be enough to deter anyone who tried.

"Oh, shut up!" Ginny giggled, kicking water at her.

Hermione laughed and splashed her back. "You never told me how you're little 'tour' went yesterday either." Hermione put her fingers up to make air quotes around Ginny's excuse.

Ginny blushed furiously. "He actually did just take me on a tour of the house. He was trying to be such a gentleman that I didn't have the heart to interrupt him and jump his bones."

Hermione pretended to gag around her finger.

"It's not like I have high standards to compare him to! It's been so long putting up with 'Come on baby, ugh, ugh, I'm done. Was I good?' that—"

Hermione snorted in laughter. "Jesus, Gin. How did you put up with that?"

Ginny grinned at her. "I know, that's what I'm saying. I deserve a sainthood, honestly, for the level of ick I tolerated there. What about you and Malfoy anyway? And don't even deny the sexual tension because I will gladly have literally everyone in that house back me up if you even have the audacity to try."

Hermione laughed awkwardly. "There's a difference between teaming up with a mudblood to win the war and bedding one. He might be down with the verbal foreplay, but actually following through is probably a different story, Gin. We can't ignore the fact that there is a very large elephant in the room here, being that three days ago they were prepared to kill me just for my blood status. The only reason I'm allowed to be here is because I have something Voldy wants. I'm a means to an end."

"What an absolute crock of shit." Ginny stared at her. Hermione gave her a disbelieving look. "They aren't stupid, Mi; they saw what we didn't want to years ago - that Voldy was on the rise, and the only way to make it through comfortably was under his leadership. Tiberius Nott, now he's a muggle-hating son of a bitch, but there is no way in hell you can look at Theodore and tell me that the apple didn't fall far, far from the bird bush."

"From the tree. You've mixed two sayings..." Hermione mumbled.

"Whatever, I don't care. The point is that if I suspected even a fraction that Blaise was harboring muggleborn hating tendencies then I would lose all attraction to him. Daphne and Pansy both made you lunch yesterday after drinking your drink." Hermione rolled her eyes; that hardly meant they didn't hate her. "And every damn time you and Malfoy are in the same room, the rest of us are left feeling uncomfortable because neither of you will stop making those 'fuck me' eyes at one another."

Hermione ducked her head under the surface of the pool, counting to thirty before breaking for air again. "The only reason you're doing that is because you know I'm

right. I suspect they are like us, Mi, and just think witches and wizards, in general, are the superior beings. I think that's why they had no objection to the proposed change of course. Now get out and help me make everyone breakfast."

"Are we poisoning them?" Hermione asked, hopefully launching herself up on the side of the pool.

"No, regular breakfast. I'm thinking pancakes."

"Crepes. We're in France; it would be a crime not to make crepes," Hermione argued as she wrapped her towel around her.

"Yes, fine, but I don't know how to make crepes, so you're going to have to help me," Ginny sighed as they stepped into the kitchen.

"I'll help you, sweetheart."

Ginny and Hermione both had their wands out instinctively in a second.

Theo raised his hands in innocence.

"Would you lot stop sneaking around!" Hermione cried out. "I'm going to put bells on you all, I swear."

"Bells? Why... doesn't matter. It's not sneaking; it's our house. Besides, if you don't want everyone to hear your conversations, then you probably shouldn't be speaking at such a regular volume when the kitchen doors are open and when Draco's, Blaise, and mine and Astoria's rooms all have decks that either overlook or neighbour the pool."

Hermione gave him a withering look. "I'm going to get changed. Are you okay here, or are you coming up with me?" Hermione ignored Theo's show of offence at her question to Ginny.

Ginny smiled. "I'll be fine. House rules, remember? If he tries anything, I'll just stab a fork in his eye."

Hermione chuckled, throwing a look Theo's way. He was frowning at Ginny in horror. "Alright. Theo, play nicely."

"Me?! You two seem to be far more violent than I am in an everyday capacity. Tell her to play nice."

Hermione trotted back up the stairs to rinse off quickly in the shower before throwing on some jeans and a tank top. A small, mint green portable radio caught her eye as she passed the sitting room. "Oh, hell yes." She said to no one as she scooped it up and ran back to the kitchen.

"Ginny! Look what I found!" Theo and Ginny were already in the process of mixing the batter in a large metal bowl.

Hermione didn't even wait, she turned the radio on and quickly began to tune through the stations. An upbeat song caught the attention of Ginny, who grinned over

will be the only one to fall for that poor little gentle lamb routine? We will eat you alive. Wake up and realise that we aren't the same pathetic girls you remember from school. War changes people. It's certainly changed us." Ginny scowled.

Blaise was looking at the redhead as if she hung the moon. Hermione shook her head as she topped the mixture with ginger ale; that man was in so much trouble, she could see it already. The glass floated to Pansy, who cocked an eyebrow at it but sipped it all the same.

"Mmm. This is really good. Thanks, Granger!"

Finally, she poured herself another whiskey and went to sit next to Ginny. Draco clearly still felt they weren't taking this seriously and stormed out of the room.

"So, where's your mask, Granger?" Astoria asked. Hermione waved her hand, and it appeared.

"Oh, you are twinning. That's so cute!" Astoria exclaimed.

Draco stormed back in. "No, you know what?! I want to know what your plan is. You told the Dark Lord that you would be okay with apparating us into the safe house. Do you really expect me to believe that?!"

Ginny groaned beside her, her head falling back to land on the arm Blaise had slung over the back of the couch.

Hermione sighed and leant forward. "Okay, do it. You're a legilimens, right? Do it. See for yourself. I'll take my defences down, you can have free reign, see what you have to see, learn what you need to learn, but when it's over, I don't want to hear another goddamn word about it."

Draco looked taken aback by her offer. Pansy rolled her eyes and stood up. "Help me make everyone some lunch?" she held her hand out to Daphne, who accepted her hand and stood as well.

"Draco, you know I was probably the most sceptical of us, but even I can see that they are all in," Daphne stated before letting her girlfriend lead her toward the kitchen.

Ginny rolled her head to look at Blaise. "Would you mind giving me a tour?" Hermione snorted, only to get Ginny's elbow to her ribs. Blaise took in Ginny's cheeky smile and stood immediately, leading her from the room. Significantly less than a week, it seemed.

"Oh, what's that?!" Astoria called over her shoulder even though there very clearly had been no one calling for her. "You need mine and Theo's help?? Okay, coming!" Astoria dragged a reluctant to leave Theo from the room.

"Well?" Hermione snapped. "Get on with it."

body being handed back to you. When your family is all dead.” Ginny looked up at the man spewing venomous words at her. Her smile faded, and tears welled in her eyes.

“Draco!” Astoria snapped.

Draco ignored her, stepping closer again. “When it’s just you, and you’re all alone, and both sides have rejected you. When you’re trying to run for your fucking life... Begging won’t save you, Red. They will tear you limb from limb. When you truly understand that this isn’t a joke. This isn’t a holiday.” The tears fell from Ginny’s eyes, and she began to sob openly.

Theo and Blaise both scowled, and Astoria leapt off the couch, stomping towards Draco and shoving him. There is no way that she was strong enough to move him but he allowed her to push him backwards. “What the hell is wrong with you?!” Astoria yelled.

Hermione chuckled quietly to herself and began shaking Daphne’s drink. Daphne eyed her in suspicion.

“I’m trying to get her to understand, Tor!” Draco’s voice was firm, but he did not yell.

Astoria pointed at the sobbing witch on the couch. “And you were unnecessarily cruel about it! You should be ashamed of yourself, honestly!”

Ginny turned away from Draco, her hair shielding her face from him. Blaise, who had been frowning at Draco, chanced a glance at Ginny now that she was facing him.

Hermione smiled tightly to avoid laughing as his eyes registered what he was seeing. Hermione knew that Ginny had stopped crying the second she had turned away. She probably had a huge smile on her face at this point. Blaise’s frown disappeared, and his eyes went wide. “Fuck me. You are terrifying, you know that? Like truly fucking scary.” He breathed out. Theo glanced over at the two of them and burst out laughing.

Astoria stopped yelling at Draco and turned around, confused and unable to see what they were seeing. Ginny looked back at her, and suddenly, Pansy’s laugh filled the room because Ginny was indeed smiling. Ginny had not cried properly in years, neither had Hermione. Not since the early days of them using the killing curse. The look in Ginny’s eyes, despite her smile, was one of a killer calculating the situation.

Draco actually took a step backwards.

Astoria chuckled and shook her head. Hermione poured the martini into a glass and floated it over to Daphne, who toasted it into the air in thanks. Hermione looked Pansy over before deciding on a drink, and she set about making her a Moscow Mule.

“You should really stop underestimating us, Malfoy. You need to learn that we will win at this game every fucking time. This is just a classic example. Do you think you

at her from the kitchen island. “They say I’m crazy, I really don’t care, that’s my prerogative.”

Hermione grinned back and turned it up magically with her wand to blast through the kitchen. Theo stood there eying the two witches with an amused smile as they danced around the kitchen and sang loudly. It was one of the only recently released songs that they knew. Hermione had had a radio in the attic briefly, but it was destroyed by Harry one night when he got angry at how late Ginny stayed up with her drinking and dancing around in her room. Hermione and Ginny both started dancing in Theo’s direction as he flipped a crepe out of the pan and onto a plate. He laughed, catching the contagiously good mood they were in, and began singing into the spatula despite clearly not knowing the words.

“I don’t need permission, make my own decisions. That’s my prerogative.”

“Who the hell?!” A ruffled-looking Daphne sprinted into the kitchen, her long blonde hair a mess. Pansy followed closely behind her in a short slip and silk robe.

Ginny and Hermione looked at each other before dancing their way towards them, trying to pull them into it the way they had pulled in Theo. Astoria’s small frame stepped into the doorway next as she took in the scene in alarm. “Oh, family breakfast! I love it!” And instantly started skipping over to Theo to press a kiss to his cheek at the stovetop.

Daphne looked around in bewilderment. “It’s six in the fucking morning!!” She exclaimed. Pansy sighed and made her way to the coffee pot, pouring both her and Daphne a large mug each. Hermione, who was still dancing around the kitchen, passed by the fridge, pulled out the creamer and tossed it to Pansy, who nodded her thanks.

The song ended, and Daphne opened her mouth to argue but couldn’t seem to find the words. Pansy passed her one of the mugs before slumping into one of the bar stools, still adjusting to the sudden and loud wake-up call.

“Buy me diamonds and rubies, I’m crazy about Bentleys. Gucci dresses and drop-top compressors.”

Another upbeat song came over the radio, and it made her happy to see Astoria start dancing beside Ginny as she piled a stack of plates on the island. Daphne sulked into the bar stool next to Pansy and glared silently into her coffee cup.

“What I need is a gentleman, who does the best he can. There to hold my hand, I want him to understand, of course, I want diamonds and expensive things.”

Blaise’s figure stepped into the archway; one eye squinted shut as the other blinked in an attempt to adjust to being awake. “Good morning!” Ginny chirped loudly his

way. Blaise frowned and stepped into the room, helping himself to Pansy's coffee, who didn't even have the energy to fight him off and just let him take it.

"You lot are far too cheery for this time of day," Blaise mumbled, lost to the song blasting over the radio.

"Would we call it daytime?" Daphne scowled.

"Cheer up, Daph. These two have big plans for us today, apparently," Theo chuckled, pushing a large stack of crepes towards her to put on the dining table.

Daphne whimpered in a fake cry for a few seconds before grabbing the plate.

Hermione danced to the archway, cupping her hands around her mouth. "Malfoy!! Family breakfast!! Get your pasty ass down here!!" she yelled up the stairs.

"Yes, she seems totally serious," Draco grumbled, throwing Ginny a pointed look.

"I'm always serious about killing people, Malfoy. We both are. What did you expect? Tears of guilt? Sombre, heart-sinking reluctance?" Hermione said as she finally located the door and slid it open with a victorious grin. Inside on the top shelf was a neat row of tomato juice. In the middle were several cans of various sodas. On the bottom shelf was a bottle of Vodka, a bottle of gin, and a bottle of dry vermouth.

Hermione started piling the bottles onto the counter. Pouring first Draco and Theo's whiskeys, making them both triples. Draco reluctantly accepted his but, in the end, grumbled his thanks.

"Thank you, princess," Theo said, accepting his floating glass. "Oh, Stori, wait till you see their masks! They are totally matching. It's pretty cool." Theo threw a grin at Ginny, who smiled back.

Theo, it seemed, was warming quickly to the pair, perhaps at the encouragement of his wife, or maybe it was just his nature. Hermione set to make Astoria's drink. She looked around, trying to find the missing ingredients. Draco glanced at her before pushing on the front of the counter, a drawer popping out.

"Yes, actually I was. You two are supposed to be the good guys," Draco continued, determined to have this conversation.

"What raids have you been at?!" Ginny scoffed. "We stopped being the good guys years ago. It just took us a while to catch up to that fact. Look around you; we're sitting in your stupidly expensive sitting room drinking your booze, and look," Ginny summoned her mask with a flick of her hand with the aid of her wand strapped to her wrist, putting it on and staring at him as if it proved her point.

"Oh, that's so pretty!" Astoria claimed.

"Thank you!" Ginny smiled as she vanished it again.

Hermione smiled at the room while mixing the vodka, tomato juice, Tabasco, and Worcestershire sauce in a tall tumbler before floating it Astoria's way. She pushed along the front of the counter and, at the other end, found what she was looking for - another hidden drawer filled with ice popped out. Scooping some into a shaker, she started measuring out the gin and vermouth for a martini, the drink she suspected was Daphne's drink of choice.

"Oh, I'm so glad this is all a fucking game to you, Weasley," Draco growled coldly, stepping across the room toward her. "I cannot wait for that undeserving glee to fade from your eyes. When Tiberius gets a hold of your friend and tortures her - when he makes good on his promise and rapes her. When all that's left is her broken and defiled

“What happened?” Astoria asked, eyeing everyone’s faces. Draco looked pissed off. Blaise looked impressed. Ginny looked smug. Daphne and Pansy looked amused, and Theo looked downright gleeful.

“Granger crucioed Frieze.” Daphne gave her an approving nod.

“Ousted McNair which had him kicked from the table.” Blaise continued stealing Draco’s whiskey from over the counter of the bar and moving to flop down on the couch.

“Somehow worked her backfire magic thing, which killed Brinkley.” Pansy grinned.

“And then, in the most glorious display I’ve seen in some time, threatened to flay my father and then hand his body over for McNair’s pleasure and feed him to Greyback… what was it? Oh yes, ‘for months to come,’ before effectively humiliating him by calling him a ‘good boy’ for sitting down when told.” Theo bounced onto the couch, grabbed Astoria’s face between both hands and pressed a kiss to her lips before sitting back on the back of the couch. “Truly spectacular. I’ll have to show you in the pensive, baby. You’re going to love it.”

“It was truly idiotic, is what it is.” Draco snapped. “She’s gone and painted a huge fucking target on her back. Probably on ours, too.”

Hermione sighed. “Yes, that is true, I have. Theo, I’m afraid I’m going to have to kill your dad, mate,” Hermione said, stepping forward and taking Draco’s drink from his hand, downing it before handing it back.

“Would everyone stop stealing my drink!” Draco exclaimed.

“Hey, you do what you need to do, Darlin. I’ve never seen anyone speak to Tiberius like that. He was one of the first followers back when Voldemort rose to power the first time, so everyone else kind of fell in line.” Theo continued.

“Would someone please take this fucking seriously!?” Draco growled.

“She is serious, Malfoy.” Ginny rolled her eyes, picking up the, once again, freshly poured whiskey and going to take the seat next to Blaise. Draco slammed down the bottle on the bench and glared at the witch.

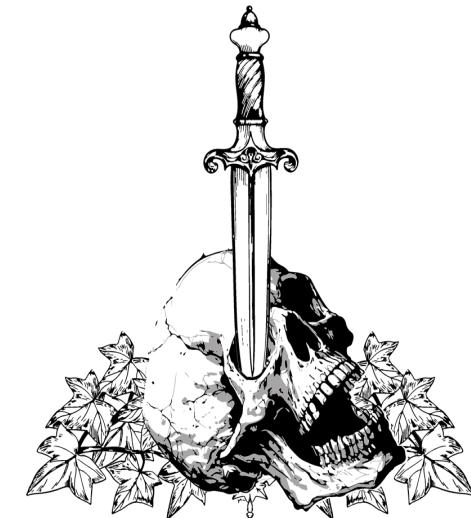
Hermione chuckled as she stepped around the bar and pushed him out of the way. “Drinks? Parkinson? Greengrasses? Theo?”

“Yes, please, Granger.” Pansy smiled as she leant against Daphne. Daphne gave her a small nod.

“Make it a triple, please, lovely.” Theo beamed at her.

“It’s actually Nott, not Greengrass anymore, but I’ll take a Bloody Mary if you’re offering to make it!”

“Right.” Hermione nodded and stepped back, looking for the hidden mini fridge.



CHAPTER 12: TRIPLE NINE

There are doors here, here, and here.” Ginny pointed to the exterior walls on the map they had created of the house. Blaise waved his wand, and doors appeared on the building, each numbered with a small gold digit.

“There are two apparition points. One there in the foyer and one in the corridor upstairs right here. If we each take an apparition point, then we can effectively block both of them. However, that won’t stop people exiting through doors 2 and 3. If that happens and they make it beyond the wards, then they are able to apparate away freely.” Hermione continued pointing to various points on the map. They were all crowded

around the large square table in a room down the hall from the conservatory. The map on the table was made of a series of glowing lines, red where the wards ended and little red crosses for the apparition points. The walls of the house in green, with windows and doors marked in blue.

“We can have people stationed around the perimeter of the wards - they can apparate in thirty seconds after us; that way, it won’t matter if they trip the alarm.” Daphne leaned against the bookshelf that ran down one side of the room, her hands shoved into the pockets of her pants. Today was another three-piece suit, this one a white pinstripe. Suits seemed to be her preferred clothing of choice, and for a moment, Hermione was jealous of how well she could pull them off.

“Yeah. I mean, catch who you can and do with them what you will, but I think what is more important is what’s in Kingsley’s office.” Hermione started cautiously.

“What do you mean?” Draco frowned.

“Mi and I have shared the view for a while now that something doesn’t add up with Kingsley. Harry will go to his grave, claiming the extreme opposite of Voldemort’s methods to be the only way. Ron was always the third best out of the ‘golden trio’ throughout school. When we settled into our safe houses, the power he was given boosted his ego beyond his capabilities - which is why they have behaved the way they have over the last few years...” Ginny frowned, her fingers dancing through her hair.

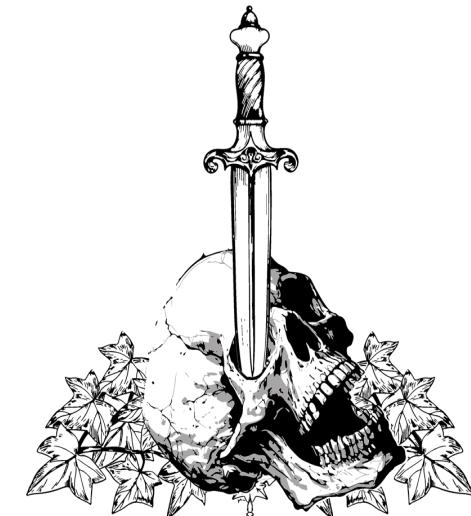
“But with Kingsley...” Hermione continued. “There were ideas I came up with that could have changed the war. In the earlier days, that weren’t dark in nature—”

“Like that honing device.” Draco said.

“Yeah,” Hermione nodded, “among others. But he would shoot them down without any consideration. At first, I thought it was just an issue with me, but before George left, I had him pitch one of my ideas as his own, and it was shot down too.” Hermione sighed.

“We think that Kingsley has an interest in keeping this war going, but we just don’t know why.” Ginny finished for her.

“Look, at the end of the day, yes, the Order members are annoying, but they are small fish compared to what we want to focus on now. The direction is shifting and so our focus needs to shift with it. Give the orders to capture who we can, but either Ginny or I need to get to this room here,” Hermione pointed to a small corner room on the ground floor, on the opposite side of the safe house to the apparition point. “before Kingsley can grab whatever he’s hiding and flee out door number 2. That needs to be a priority.”



CHAPTER 8: SEE WHAT YOU HAVE TO SEE

That was fucking brilliant.” Theo grinned the second they stepped through the floo into the sitting room in the French chateau, waving his hand at the wireless in the corner. A catchy but unfamiliar beat filled the background noise of the room.

“That was fucking reckless. What happened to best behaviour, Granger?” Draco snapped, heading straight for the bar.

Hermione shrugged. “I said I made no promises.”

"There are also items of importance in the attic that we will need to acquire before burning the place to the ground." Ginny stated.

"The other thing is, this needs to happen today. In the past, Gin and I have disappeared for a night or two after heated arguments, but then we have returned, and we don't want to allow any extra time for them to become suspicious and have safety plans in place."

Theo exhaled. "That's a shorter window than we typically like to prepare."

"We can make it work," Draco sighed, stepping closer to the table. "Blaise, Theo, and Pansy, you go with Granger with the goal of Kingsley's office—"

"Oh, is it like that now, D, is it?" Blaise chuckled.

Draco ignored him and continued on. "Daphne and I will go with Ginny using the second-floor apparition point to retrieve the stuff from the attic. We can meet at the downstairs apparition point after securing Kingsley's office. Theo will stand guard to make sure it stays secure; that way, these two loons can do their battle buddy bullshit as we do a sweep of the house. I don't want Tiberius or McNair anywhere near this. In fact, non-table soldiers only. I don't want to give them any opportunities to shaft us on their first mission." Draco finished looking around at the other Slytherins.

"We should go over the codes." Hermione gave Ginny a nervous look.

"Codes?" Pansy frowned.

"Hermione and I were in charge of the combat training. The codes were our system, and we drilled it into their heads."

"Four is drop." Blaise said, obviously recounting the visit to Olivander's.

"Right." Hermione nodded. "Five is movement ahead, but you won't need to listen out for that one because we want them to be aware of the movement."

"Six is grab hold because we are apparating ASAP." Ginny continued.

"Three is clear the room. If you hear that, then get out - they are blowing it or blocking it or something." Hermione followed on seamlessly to her explanation.

"I expect that the first thing that will be called when we drop in is triple nine. That's the breach code." Ginny gave a tilt of her head.

"The others aren't really things you will need to listen for. They will fight in pairs, but they will be in teams of three. Assuming they get their shit together and aren't so stubborn, they want to ignore their training to spite us. No one else in the Order will do anything remotely dark, so no worries on the killing curse front."

The room fell silent for a minute, everyone's eyes locked on the floor plans of the small manor that was the Order base.

"We will need to inform Voldemort of our plans before we go." Blaise stated, his eyes flicking up to Draco's.

Draco flicked his fist over and looked down at the watch around his wrist. It had many different hands doing many different things, from what Hermione could see. Obviously, it was a wizard's watch, and from here, she couldn't understand what all the functions were, but time seemed to be one of them. "Daphne, Blaise, you're with me. We will go assemble the extras. Pansy, Theo, make sure these two are ready by 11:45. I want us there no later than noon exactly."

Hermione looked down at the map of the safe house as three of the group of Death Eaters strolled from the room. There was a feeling blooming in her stomach, a combination of anticipation, relief, and excitement.

Ginny bumped her shoulder, and Hermione looked over at her. A smile was resting on her friend's face and she could see the fire in her eyes - she clearly felt the same way as Hermione. "Ready?" the redhead asked.

"Ready." Hermione nodded.

Hermione examined herself in the mirror as she strapped the wrist holster to the outside of the hooded black robe. In a way, she felt more comfortable like this than she had in the Order. She blended in with the rest of the Death Eaters, black pants, black shirt with a zip-up leather vest over top, the boots, the robe... it all felt comforting, like she didn't stand out with a huge target on her back the way she had with the Order. A wave of her hand and her mask appeared in place. Hermione started laughing at the absurdity of it all, and yet at the same time, it just made sense. She waved the mask away again for now.

"Ready, Princess?" Theo said from her doorway.

Hermione waved her arm, and her hair pulled itself back into a high ponytail. She gave herself one final once over in the full-length mirror. "It suits me, don't you think?" She asked, turning to check the back. Before pulling up her hood.

"Yes, I think it does." Hermione's eyes clashed with his across the room.

"Is that pride on your face, Theodore Nott?" She smiled at him. "You hardly know me well enough to be proud of me."

Theo huffed a laugh. "I know more than you think, and I will always be proud of the people who find their way into our little family. You might not be there yet, but I reckon you will be."

Hermione hummed as she fought her growing smile. "We will see. You, maybe, but I could still kill Malfoy."

He snarled at her in rage but sat reluctantly. Hermione was still leaning forward, her palms against the table. "What a good boy you are, following orders like that. Such a good, good boy," Hermione spoke with all the false sweetness she could muster.

Tiberius shook with rage. His face was positively purple, but Hermione refused to look away. One of these days, she would be glad to watch the life drain from his eyes, hopefully at Theodore's hands. She had a feeling he had been a father in only the most literal sense of the word.

"Holy shit." Theo breathed shakily, an impressed tone to his voice.

Voldemort chuckled with amusement. "Please sit, Miss Granger. While I admire your enthusiasm, let's try to keep any more deaths from occurring until at least after the meeting, shall we?"

"Of course, Sir."

Hermione lowered herself into her seat, but her eyes were locked on Tiberius'. Yes. She would definitely have to have him killed; to allow him to live would be to derail her entire plan.

Hermione that perhaps Astoria was more scared of what was happening to her than she was letting on. Her eyes lacked the sparkle that had been there the day prior, and it was easy to see why everyone jumped to accommodate her requests.

Draco cleared his throat. "I'm not much in the mood for fighting, Tor." Hermione watched as Astoria deflated in whatever excitement she had managed to muster before, and it broke her heart. She had said she still had a good few years left, but that seemed optimistic looking at her now.

Hermione frowned and stood suddenly. "Well, suck it up because it's happening." She felt several pairs of eyes on her, but she was only looking at Astoria, who sighed with relief and peered back at her with silent thanks. It was clear to Hermione that Astoria just needed some normality right now.

"Well, alright then." Draco finally settled after looking between the two witches for a moment, pushing off the counter and stalking from the room like a predator.

Theo frowned at Hermione in deep contemplation before giving her a small, subtle nod of appreciation. Ginny was already waiting at the edge of the outdoor training mat by the time everyone else had made their way out. Her red-haired friend took one look at Astoria and summoned a pillow which she transfigured into a small sofa.

Draco rounded on her the second her foot stepped onto the mat, swinging with a punch aimed at her head, but Hermione was quicker. Dodging out of the way, she used the opening to her advantage by landing a punch to his ribs hard enough to push him back a step.

Draco's foot swooped out and knocked her off her feet onto the ground. Over the years, Hermione's instincts had developed to a point where certain solutions had become second nature to her, as was the way with the knife she threw up at him, barely missing his cheek.

Her foot came up between them and prepared to kick him in the stomach. This time, it was Draco who was faster, diving over her in a roll, landing on his back in the dirt above her, his head next to hers; he reached back with both arms wrapping underneath her chin and pulled, closing off her air supply in an attempt to make her pass out.

Hermione decided to take a play out of Draco's book, kicking her legs up over her body and pushing her shoulders further into the ground to roll over the top of him, coming down to land with a knee on either side of his stomach, straddling him. The force of her actions broke his hold around her throat. She pulled a secondary knife from her holster and pressed it against his throat before he could dislodge her.

The blade kissed snugly against the skin, pulling a slight hiss from him and freezing him in place. It only dug in further when he licked his lips, moving his throat and jaw

beneath the blade. He stared up at her in impressed pride, his eyes twinkling, his lips fighting against a grin. Hermione gave him a satisfied smirk and raised an eyebrow at him.

"Granger, you need you to get off me." His voice was cool and clear.

"Are you giving up already, Malfoy? We're only just getting started." She pushed the blade a little further against his throat as an incentive to admit defeat or fight back.

Draco was fast, his hands snapping out toward her like a snake lunging at its prey and gripping at her hips. He didn't roll them sideways as she had anticipated; he just pushed her down so that her hips were aligned with his, her eyes widening at the feel of him hard below her. His hips rolled upward, just to really make his point. "No, but if you don't get off me or at the least remove the knife, I'm going to want to fuck your brains out right here, so get off."

Hermione struggled to swallow as fire erupted in her abdomen. "Get up or get off, get off?" She teased breathlessly while his eyes darkened. Somewhere closer to the house she heard Ginny proclaim that she called it and would accept cash payment.

sexual attraction to the man on the other side of the room, but Blaise wasn't as quiet as Theo. "You're on. Five hundred says he has her tapping out in less than three minutes."

"You're both wrong." Ginny smirked before departing the kitchen and disappearing into the house. "Put me down for three hundred."

"I want in on Ginny's action." Pansy eyed her with amusement, the corners of her lips tugging upward.

"She didn't even say what her action was." Blaise debated.

Daphne poured herself a glass of wine, the first, notably, that Hermione had seen her drink since their arrival. "She didn't have to. Men are stupid and blind to the obvious." Daphne teased light-heartedly, pausing on her way passed them to whisper something to them. Understanding slowly dawned on their faces before turning to her with piqued interest.

Hermione rolled her eyes. Fantastic, just what she needed, everyone in this house to know about her attraction to the man. It didn't matter, she supposed. At the end of the day, Draco wasn't stupid, and she was almost certain that he had picked up at least a little of the sexual tension rolling off of her every time he walked into the room.

"You can fight me. You can fight me right now if you want, Granger." She wanted to punch the smug look off his face.

"No fighting in the house," Astoria croaked from the doorway. Everyone in the room immediately turned to her. Hermione was right; Astoria was not having a good day.

Her skin was nearly translucent; she was so pale. Hermione's heart lurched at the sight of Astoria weakly leaning against the door frame, her bony fingers wrapped around her elbows. Theo, who had been carefree and goofy so far, straightened and rushed toward her. "Baby, you're supposed to be in bed; what are you doing?!"

Hermione listened to the fear that had etched into his voice. There was a small splatter of dried blood on Astoria's neck that drew her attention. Theo wasted no time in swooping Astoria up into his arms despite the protest from the witch. "I want to be around people. Please, I don't want to sleep anymore." Her pleas gave Theo pause to search her face.

"Everyone relocate to the lounge—" Theo started.

"No, I want to watch their fight." Astoria frowned.

"Astori—" Daphne started.

"No. I want to watch them. Theo can carry me there, and I'll sit the whole time, I promise." Her voice cracked at the end, dropping in volume, which indicated to

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stream of entertainment watching the overly cautious Draco try to adjust to the energy they brought.

"He's hosting a dinner tonight for his closest and highest-ranked commanding officers. The guys will be expected to go, but we women are not obligated to attend," Pansy answered casually, clearly finding as much amusement in the situation as Hermione did. Daphne rolled her eyes. Of all of them, Daphne and Pansy seem the least bothered by anything, treating their positions as a regular job. They weren't steadfast in their servitude to the Dark Lord like Draco or Blaise seemed to be, but they weren't just along for the ride like Ginny and herself.

She suspected that the dark marks on their arms came more from loyalty to their friends than from the cause itself. In a way, she supposed it was no different from her staying with the Order despite her growing grievances, at first out of loyalty to what used to be between her, Harry, and Ron - and then out of devotion to Ginny.

At least here, Daphne and Pansy were clearly equally as adored. Had their little group been this way in school? It was hard to recall; she had been so caught up in the whirlwind that had been the golden trio and their attempts to defeat the man she was now determined to work with, a better world in mind. The trajectory of her apostasy within the wizarding world made her giggle. Perhaps it was her lack of humanity, or maybe it just came down to maturity and naivety.

"Fantastic. I have a question for you," Hermione said quickly, sitting up and looking between them with one pursuit in mind: "When do I get my workshop, and as a follow-up to that, when can I play with Elizabeth?"

Draco raised an eyebrow at her, his eyes locked on her. It was only here in this house that she saw him lower his guard a little, and she couldn't help but be drawn in. The way his tongue slid along the inside of his teeth was mesmerising. She was going to go crazy if he kept looking at her like that.

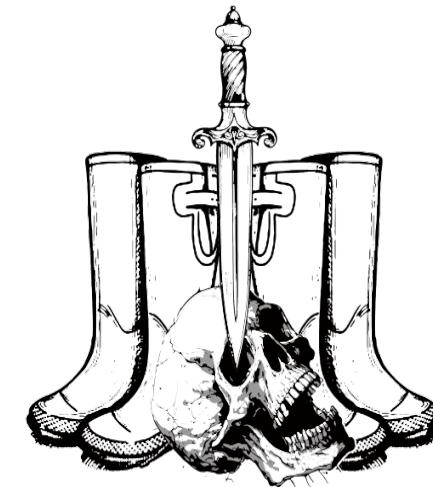
"Or better yet, when can I fight you." She directed Draco's way.

Ginny snorted. "Yeah, fight." She shook her head and rolled her eyes.

Draco smirked back at her with glee. "You want to fight me, Granger?" The tone in his voice suggested that he knew she would get her ass handed to her, and if she was being honest with herself, the probability of such was high. What she really wanted was to fuck him, but she wasn't going to tell him that.

Hermione shrugged; her skin heating under his roaming gaze that was assessing her as a threat. "Yeah, why the hell not?"

Theo muttered something under his breath to Blaise, who snickered and nodded in agreement. For a moment, she thought they were mocking what was clearly her obvious



CHAPTER 15: PINK WELLIES AND PRICKLY PEARS

It felt so surreal to be walking down the street, passing muggles who carried on about their days as normal. The fresh floral scent of a nearby florist filled the air and mingled with the smell of freshly baked bread. Daphne took the lead, strolling down the street in another of her navy blue pinstripe suits, her long blonde hair hanging loosely down her back. Pansy flounced along, tugging on her arm to direct her to a nearby shop window to gush over how the shoes on display would be perfect to go with the white romper she had donned for their trip into the village.

Astoria had indeed worsened, and after an hour or two, Theo had carried her back to their room and shut everyone else out. Blaise and Draco agreed to make excuses for

his absence at their dinner, and Pansy pointedly offered to show Hermione and Ginny the town below the cliffs. War had not reached them here, and it felt peculiar. She had killed what she would estimate to be several hundred people at this point- maybe more, and she could take down a fully grown man in no time at all. She had blown up buildings and set them on fire, taken what she needed without remorse, and on a few secret occasions, helped Ginny to torture people for information - not that the Order knew that.

But here, there was a muggle man sitting outside of a cafe, dipping his croissant into his coffee and reading a book, one leg crossed over the other without a care in the world. Is this what her life would have been if she had fled at the start of the war? That feeling annoyed her as it bounced around in her head. She didn't want to be that person, living in ignorant bliss to the horrors of the world. She liked who she had become, even if it meant that her hands were stained with the blood of those she had killed to become who she was now.

She thinks that was the main issue Harry and Ron had with her. She didn't regret taking a life, but it made her morally grey in their minds. Pansy stopped and twirled around to face her outside of an old bookstore with a teasing smirk. "Will this be the rest of our afternoon?"

Hermione scoffed. "No, I no longer devour books like I used to, only when the information within is necessary."

Ginny reached out and latched onto her arms with an iron grip, her eyes wide and a smile tugging at her face. "There's an ice cream store?" She screeched, pulling a few odd looks from passers-by.

"Yes?" Daphne answered, turning her head and looking at her as if she had indeed lost the plot.

Hermione chuckled. "We haven't had ice cream since before Fortescue was killed."

"That was like...eight years ago." Pansy frowned.

"Hence her desire to amputate my arm with her razor-sharp claws." Hermione smiled through gritted teeth.

"What - oh, sorry. Can we please get ice cream?" Ginny asked, not waiting for an answer as she crossed the road and made her way towards the small blue and white shop leaving the three of them standing there staring after her.

"Should we... go help her?"

Hermione shook her head. "No need, she will be out soon, probably with a hundred tubs of ice cream, will probably need to cast a stasis charm on it, though, because I can't imagine it won't melt before we get home, and if that happens, you do not want

"She's right, he can't kill her, but he could kill us." Blaise nodded in agreement.

Hermione tipped her head sideways slightly, catching Ginny eyeing her cautiously. Hermione and Ginny had already discussed her plan to create more rings, and they knew that they were playing a dangerous game right now. As it was, they had targets on their backs from some of the death eaters and likely now would be targeted by the Order as well. Though only one of those posed any real threat. The Order had been staunch in its views on the killing curse, and ultimately, it would be their downfall. She knew that by being here in their house, they were taking on the most risk. So far, her and Ginny's rings had held off all attempts made on them, but their new housemates didn't have the same luxury.

The way Tiberius looked at Theo at their meeting confirmed that they would be the ones to deal with any fallout. Neither Hermione nor Ginny felt that was fair, and given that Theo had already formed a soft spot within her in the short time that she had been here, she wanted to do what she could to protect him and the others.

That didn't mean that she was ready to let them in on the plan just yet, but it would be at the top of her priority list as soon as they had set up the space for her experiments, that and finding a way to fulfil her promise to Voldemort to restore his face to what it should be. She wasn't sure just how badly Peter had fucked it up yet, and the solution might be harder to find because of it.

Her fellow teammates weren't the only house members that she was concerned about; even though it seemed cocky, potentially arrogant even, she believed that she was smart enough to find a solution to Astoria's blood curse. She had spent much of her time at Hogwarts dumbing down the extent of her intelligence, something that she was no longer prepared to do. Was it bold of her to assume that she could undo a generational curse that had plagued the Greengrass family for centuries? Yes, probably, but she still believed that she should be able to do it anyway. Another thing she wasn't quite prepared to let the others in on just yet, she didn't want to get Theo's hopes up while there were still too many variables involved.

The youngest of the blondes was noticeably absent today and Hermione could only suspect that it was because her health was not the best. Blaise had mentioned that some days were better than others, and a part of her had not expected to see a bad day quite so soon. At the risk of making it seem like she was prying, Hermione kept her mouth shut and did not ask while secretly hoping to catch a glimpse of the witch to get a better understanding of what exactly it was that she was dealing with.

"What time will we be expected to report back to Voldster?" Ginny asked. Hermione scoffed at the nickname, and Draco choked on his drink. It had proven to be a reliable

Hermione shook her head. "I don't want to be in charge anyway. I just want to steer the way and let him be the poster boy." She leaned back against the back of the dining chair, her fingertips peeling at the label on her water bottle. It was true; she didn't want total power, but she did have a vision for their world, and she had for quite some time.

"He's going to take it that way," Pansy added warily, looking almost concerned for their safety.

"What I want to know is why wouldn't Kingsley want you to take power? Why purposely ensure the good guys lose?" Daphne turned to face them. Since they had all returned to the French estate, she had spent most of the time listening and staring out the window. Hermione could see the cogs turning in her brain, trying to make connections with missing pieces.

"Good is relative. He wanted power for himself." Draco eyed Hermione with fascination. He usually eyed her with fascination but this was different, more intense. "Isn't that right?" His grey eyes pierced into her soul setting her skin alight and the hair on the back of her neck standing at attention.

"Right." Hermione agreed softly. Sometimes, when he looked at her, she could imagine that perhaps it wasn't all just her, that perhaps the invisible pull affected him too. "Kingsley has been making small plays to put himself at the head of the Order, and everyone knows he wants Minister."

Ginny shook her head. "Not even that he wants it; he acts as though he has the job - like he's earned it already."

Hermione picked the last of the label from the bottle and began folding it. "We will need to report this to Voldie."

Everyone straightened a little and gave her looks of varying confusion or shock. Hermione needed to gain Voldemort's favour, and the way to do that was through getting him to trust her. If he found out she lied to him about this or purposely kept it hidden, then trust would be broken and would never be regained. They had agreed never to lie to one another. She didn't want to be Minister for Magic. Not since she had begun utilising the unforgivables. She rather enjoyed the freedom to do as she pleased without the negative black lash that used to come with being on a pedestal.

"Are you insane?" Blaise exclaimed incredulously.

Hermione shrugged. "Maybe. But imagine how he will react if he finds out I kept this from him... imagine how he will react if he finds out you kept this from him. I have a level of protection that you do not, and despite what you may think of me, I do not actually wish to see any of you dead. You're rather growing on me."

"How touching," Theo smirked, earning him a withering look in response.

to be around her because she will flip out ." Hermione turned to look at the display in the window of a small plant nursery. The interior of the shop was meagre; from what she could tell, there wasn't much of a store at all, but light flooding in from towards the back of the shop indicated that there would be an outdoor garden centre out back.

Normally, she wouldn't think twice about passing a nursery by, but something in the display had snagged at her subconscious. What was it... Her eyes narrowed, and she did another sweep of the window, finally falling on a promotional poster with one tiny little picture on the edge—a photo of the back of their shop. Again, nothing special if not for a particular plant captured among them: Prickly Pear.

It wasn't a rare plant, but it was not a common one that she was used to seeing. They preferred to grow in warmer climates than the United Kingdom, where she was used to living. It seemed that here, it was suitable enough for it to survive. Hermione entered the shop and immediately sought out the shop clerk, a little old lady who reminded her of her nana Ruth. "Prickly pear, do you still have one?" Hermione demanded a little too harshly.

The woman startled at her sudden appearance. "Oh, dearie me. I'm sorry, sweetheart. What was that?"

Pansy rushed into the shop behind her. "Granger, you can't just take off like that; if you wanted to come in here, all you had to do was say—"

"Prickly pear," Hermione snapped, causing the woman to look a little taken aback. I saw in the window a photo that had a prickly pear. Do you still sell it?"

"Oh." The woman dusted her hands off on a rag. "Well, yes, I do have one... afraid no one wanted to buy it, so it's beginning to look a little sad. It wasn't supposed to be out the back for this long." The clerk began a slow bustle out back to show Hermione the plant. "Here we are, dear." Her long, bony fingers pointed at the cactus in the corner of the courtyard. It was indeed looking a little sad, but that's fine; she would bring it back. The second Hermione had seen it in the window, the cogs had begun turning in her brain, with Astoria being at the centre of it all.

She spun around on Pansy, who took a step back at the abruptness of it. "Do you have a greenhouse?"

The black-haired witch shrugged. "Of course. We don't use it, though, so it probably needs a clean-up."

Hermione looked around and began to gather the items that she would need in a flurry of determination. She acquired a large black potting tub and threw gardening tools and gloves inside, bags of compost and potting mix, some sand, and fertiliser. Hermione grabbed several garden spades and made her way back into the store. She

dumped it all on the counter, looking at Pansy, and pointed at the pile. Pansy raised her eyebrows at Hermione and bit her tongue in the side of her mouth.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Please," she grumbled before going to retrieve the cactus from out back. Her eyes roamed over a shelf just next to the door. "Pans, what size shoe does Theo wear?"

Pansy shrugged, a scowl still on her face as she fumbled through her wallet. "Uh... I don't know. 12? 12 and a half? Why assume I know just because I like fashion?"

Hermione rolled her eyes and grabbed two pairs of gumboots off the shelves. She had a small pair of blue ones for herself with pictures of leaves covering them, and rather unfortunately for Theo, the only colour they had in his size was a plain hot pink. Hopefully, he wouldn't mind; she couldn't imagine that he would be too bothered by the colour and, more likely, would be bothered by the concept of the rubber boots as a whole.

Dumping them on the counter as well before bumping shoulders with Pansy. "Thank you. It's for Astoria - I'll explain later."

The mention of the blonde witch currently at home riddled with pain, bloody noses, vomiting, and migraines had Pansy's face softening and whatever bad mood Hermione had put her in falling away. Ginny had indeed brought two bags full of tubs of ice cream but had returned by the time Pansy and Hermione emerged from the nursery, juggling and nearly failing to carry everything. There was a downside, it seemed, to be in a country so untouched by a magical war. She couldn't simply wave her wand and levitate everything out the front door.

"What in th-"

"Later." Pansy cut Daphne off.

Daphne waved her hand in an indication of everything. "Well, I guess it's hometime then?"

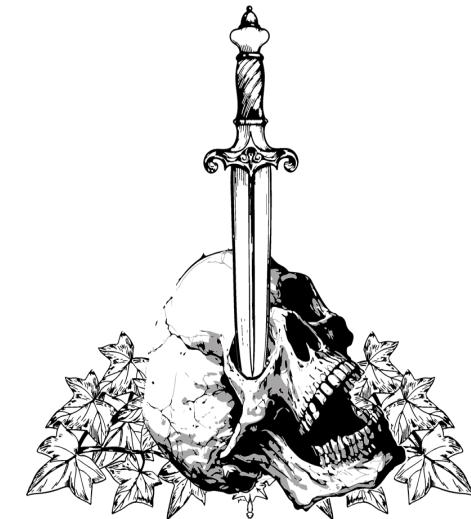
"Yeah, sorry, I should get started on this as soon as possible," Hermione mumbled, not really paying the woman any attention, peering instead into one of Ginny's bags to see what flavours lay inside.

Ginny nodded in response to her unasked question when Hermione looked up at her. "Mhmm, and choc fudge brownie."

"What just happened there?" Pansy chuckled. "How do you guys do that? Communicate without speaking?"

"We've been good friends for a decade and a half? We know each other. The only flavour Hermione will eat is lemon sorbet, preferably with chocolate fudge."

"That's disgusting." Daphne frowned, taking the items from Pansy's hands.



CHAPTER 14: THE FIGHT

So, what does that mean?" Theo frowned, his arms crossed as he leant against the kitchen counter. Now that they had all returned home, she had just finished reiterating what had been said in the prophecy. "Are you going to overthrow the Dark Lord and become the next supreme ruler of our world?" he attempted to joke.

"She can't," Ginny answered firmly. "We both took oaths with Voldie that we weren't going to try to replace him or aid in his downfall."

"I thought so too at first, but it actually works." Ginny shook her head.

"Hey, did you get mint choc chip?" It was Pansy's turn to peer into the bag.

"You mean toothpaste?" Ginny smirked, teasing the black-haired witch.

Daphne and Hermione shared a look with each other, ending in a pair of small smiles in comradery before their companions launched into a full debate.

Daphne knocked on the door softly for her, but Hermione wasn't fucking around. She waved her wand, and the door flew open with a bang. "What the hell, Granger?!" Daphne exclaimed while Theo and Astoria, both lying on the bed, jumped.

"The fuck are you doing?!" Theo hissed in clear annoyance.

"Come on, you and I have a job to do. Daphne will stay with Astoria." Hermione threw the hot pink gumboots into the room from the doorway.

The action seemed to stun Theo, who stared down at the wellies in intrigue. "What are those?"

"Like them?" Hermione beamed with a smirk.

"I..." Theo crawled to the end of the bed to look at them better. "...Love them."

Hermione chuckled. "Fantastic. Put them on."

The sun was dipping lower in the sky as they made their way out to the back patio where they had left all their new purchases. "I need you to get me a cauldron and help me set up the shed for my experiments."

"Alright?" Theo was still too busy looking down at the bright pink gumboots with a grin on his face. "This was urgent, why?"

Hermione thought for a moment about how to explain it. She didn't want to give him false hope. This wasn't a cure. Whatever the cure was, was buried deep in old forgotten dark magic, but there was a possibility - a small one but a possibility all the same - that this could help make the bad days less horrible. Hermione levitated everything and motioned for Theo to lead the way. "I have a potion in mind that might help give Astoria a boost, like an energy drink. It won't fix everything, but it might just take some of the edge off." She finally offered as they made their way around the side of the house and down a small hill.

Theo stopped in his tracks. "What?" The only instances in which Hermione had seen Theo bothered all involved Astoria.

She held her breath. "I can't promise anything, Theo. It won't make it better completely, just might help a little."

Theo nodded and swallowed, a frown forming. "What's an energy drink?"

Hermione giggled, another idea forming in her head. "Oh, just wait. Your whole life is going to change."

The shed itself was small, but it was cleaner than what she expected, and she would still have enough room to do what she needed to do in here; she actually felt better that it was away from the house and prying eyes. At the Order base, she had been forced to do all her experiments in her room, hidden away. On two separate occasions, Kingsley had had her room turned over while she had been out, and her experiments had been gone when she returned. It had left her with an unease about experimenting, and while she didn't distrust the other occupants of Chateau Latibule, she didn't exactly trust them either.

"Well, princess, here we are. What do you need me to do?" Theo sent several balls of light flying to the sconces on the walls, illuminating the shed, which was more like another room with a soft, warm white glow.

Hermione pulled a piece of parchment from the tub and a quill and began scribbling a list. "I'll need these ingredients; the fresher, the better. Do you have elves?" Hermione asked absently.

"Zimmy cleans and cooks if no one else has, Gimlee does the gardens," Theo answered. She could see him shifting from foot to foot in the corner of her eye nervously.

"Relax, Theo, I'm not going to yell at you again." She drawled.

"You remember that?" It was hard to forget; looking back, it was probably one of the most ridiculous reactions she had had during the height of her S.P.E.W campaign. Unfortunately, Theodore Nott had ended up on the receiving end of a rather impassioned attack on his character when he merely mentioned that most old wizarding families had grown up with them and, thus, were reliant on them—so if she wanted to free the elves, then she would need to provide an alternative.

"Hard to forget. Sorry, by the way. Will Zimmy come if I call him? Zimmy?" Hermione summoned without waiting for Theo's answer. A rather elderly-looking elf appeared with a grunt in acknowledgement. "Hello Zimmy, pleasure to meet you. Would you be able to give this room a sterilisation clean, please?"

The elf grunted again and got to work slowly casting small circles of magic that would sterilise the room. Hermione handed the parchment to Theo, who took it with trepidation.

"Hermione, I..." His voice trailed off.

"I know." She turned away then and exited the shed to begin the repotting process for the cactus. There would be enough of the fruit to get maybe a dozen potions out of; after that, it would be a matter of waiting for the cactus to heal and pick up its

"You won't find anything hidden in there. It will be his desk drawer; it's always locked." Ginny announced, waving her mask away.

The rest of the group followed suit, and Draco frowned before moving to the aforementioned desk. A tug at the handle confirmed it was locked, but it apparently wasn't locked very well because when his Alohamora didn't work, he simply sliced the top of the desk clean off and sent it crashing into the wall. Hermione craned her neck to peer inside. There were several loose papers crammed inside, but that's not what drew her immediate attention.

In the corner sat a small blue sphere, a swirl of liquid mist floating within. "Well, that will be it." Hermione sighed, knowing they might not receive the answers they were looking for after all given that prophecies only worked when the person they were about touched them.

Draco picked up the papers and started shifting through them with a shake of his head. "It's just strategy notes. Some of these look like plans for some kind of invention—"

"Not those, though they are probably my inventions, but I meant that." She pointed at the prophecy sitting in the corner.

Everyone looked in the drawer before looking at her with a series of confused looks. "What exactly are you seeing?" Blaise queried.

"The prophecy?" Hermione said slowly, looking at each of them for any signs of recognition. "No? Just me?"

"You can't glamour prophecies to hide from the people they are about," Pansy said, looking between the three men in the room. Hermione's mouth fell open, surely not?

"Oh god." Ginny groaned. "Please don't let this be another 'destined to save the world, he can't be killed while she lives and vice versa' cause honestly, we did that one already."

Hermione snorted and reached for the orb, and the second her fingers touched it, a shimmer fell away from it.

A conflict resolved quickly will change the world as we know it. The brightest star leading a nation out of the dark and into the light will be our saving grace. She, most intelligent, will guide us on the path to greatness.

Well, shit, isn't that interesting, she mused to herself, meeting Ginny's eyes with a smirk.

Hermione shook her head. "I obliterated him; he won't even remember it happening. He will just think that he got cut off and escaped before a faceless death eater could attack. Kingsley knows the most about the other locations; that's why he never leaves the house. He always claimed it was too risky, that too much would be compromised."

Theo snorted. "Hardly did him any good when you two were in here."

Ginny smirked back at him in pride. "Most definitely. He's been trying to get Hermione out of here and into the middle of nowhere for years now."

"Well, let's find out why," Draco growled as he came back into the living room. "Daph, Pucey, and Rowle are managing the transportation of the prisoners."

Hermione sighed. "It feels almost anticlimactic. It would have been nice to catch someone myself."

"You just killed that black-haired chick, put a trace on Kingsley, and captured the crowbar chick. How is that anticlimactic?" Pansy snickered.

"Crowbar chi—" Draco's eyes fell to the unconscious body of Elizabeth. "Oh. I see." A wave of his wand had ropes shooting towards her and securing her hands and feet.

It brought Hermione a certain level of satisfaction watching Elizabeth be levitated out of the room, knowing that she would end up trapped in a prison cell. At what point had she really stopped caring if the Order lived or died out? She wasn't entirely sure, but she did know that she probably should have left years ago before the resentment and bitterness had eaten away at the last of her sympathy towards them. Now, it almost felt justified.

"Are you ready?" Draco asked her with a softness that she wasn't expecting as if he was expecting this to be hard for her. In reality, she was eager. There had to be a reason for all the madness that went beyond simply her use of the killing curse.

"Absolutely." She straightened, her heart pounding in her chest as she led the group back down the hall toward Kingsley's office. It was neat in here. A wall of books sat behind his desk, and a soft white light gave the impression that the room was a much more friendly environment than had been her experience. His desk was neat, with a few pieces of parchment sitting on top beside a bright orange quill and an ink pot, and a small plant was in the opposite corner.

This room seemed so normal that it was hard to believe that there was a war going on at all. Draco and Pansy both moved to the shelves and shelves of books, starting at opposite ends, but Hermione knew better; the books were encouraged to be used by those in the house. Skilled fighters were a commodity, and if anyone could improve, they should.

production or acquire more prickly pears. Either way, Hermione really desperately wanted this to work.

She could have used magic, sure, but she didn't want to risk any damage being done to the root system and she definitely didn't want the plant to be shocked by her magic at all. The result being that by the time she was done, she was covered in dirt and compost. The cactus looked happier in his new home already, which gave her hope, but there was still so much riding on this.

She was just in the process of washing her hands and boots off with a quick *aguamenti* when Theo repaired. "Woah! They came out so clean." His eyes locked onto the boots on her feet.

Hermione chuckled. "Yeah? They are designed to be easy to clean, keep your feet dry, all the good stuff." She raised an eyebrow at him. "Did you find everything already?"

Theo nodded. "D enjoys making potions, he had a lot of the ingredients already. I'll let him know it was me who pinched his ingredients when he gets back."

Hermione nodded and returned to see that Zimmy had disappeared, obviously having completed the task. "Alright then, let's get started shall we?"

Theo unloaded everything onto the counter. "We? You're okay with me being in here?"

Hermione shrugged, "Normally, no, I would tell you to fuck off. But this is for Astoria, and if anything happens to me, then you need to know how to make it - assuming it even helps."

Theo froze in his movements, his stare burning into her. "Are you expecting something to happen to you?" His tone had shifted to calculating.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "We are in a war, Theo. I'm hated by ninety-five percent of your organisation and a hundred percent of mine. The chances something doesn't happen to me are a lot slimmer than the chances they do. I'm not stupid. I know how this goes."

"She blindsided me with a crowbar once. Not much to it." Hermione shrugged just as Ginny and the others trotted down the stairs. "Did you get it?" She asked as soon as her eyes landed on Ginny.

Ginny responded with a nod as she glared down at Elizabeth's body. "Yeah, please tell me we're taking that one back with us."

Hermione snorted. "Obviously."

"Did you secure the office?" Draco frowned, all serious in his commanding officer tone; something about it just made Hermione want to fuck with him.

"Nope, we were too late. Whatever it was, he took it and ran." It was a good thing her mask covered her mouth because there was no hiding her smirk at the outraged look on his face.

"Are you serious right now?!" His voice bellowed. "Fuck, guys!"

Pansy and Theo stared back, tight-lipped and wide-eyed. It might have only been a short few days, but these two were already growing on her, and she could tell that if they continued on their trajectory, she and Gin would have a lot of fun causing trouble with them.

"She's fucking with you, D," Blaise stated seriously. "I can sense Theo's wards from here."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Buzzkill," she muttered.

"Are you... fucking pain in my ass." Draco swung around and stormed out of the room furiously.

"You know you might actually kill him yet, Princess - raise his blood pressure too high or burst an aneurism or something." Theo exhaled heavily.

"Or he will throw her up against a wall and fuck her," Ginny added, sounding a little too hopeful.

"Ginny," Hermione growled her way.

Even beneath her mask, Hermione knew Ginny was grinning at her. "What?" She tried to shrug innocently while Pansy snorted a laugh beside them. Hermione felt the blush rising in her cheeks.

"You know damn well what. Who have we managed to capture?" Hermione asked, suddenly turning on her serious persona; Ginny's eyes twinkled back at her knowingly.

Blaise shrugged. "Unfortunately, the major players got away. Kingsley apparated before I could get a stun on him."

Pansy waved her hand dismissively. "Hermione let him go intentionally, we have a trace on him. We're hoping he will lead us to some of the other safe houses."

Blaise frowned. "That's risky."

since left her, and even if it hadn't, why should she care about those who had never cared for her? "I was curious."

The witch who had grown desperate suddenly stilled. Her eyes were wide and bleeding but lifeless. "Are you able to slow it down a fraction?" Hermione asked.

Theo huffed a laugh. "You definitely belong with us."

"If we're done here, we should meet in the foyer to do our sweeps." Pansy drawled.

Hermione waved her on for her to lead the way. Chaos still seemed to be running loudly through the house as its participants desperately tried to find their way out. Shattering glass was merely a backing track as people attempted any way they could to get out of the house and beyond the wards.

Hermione leant against the fireplace, her eyes roaming around the room. "I have to admit, there was definitely something suspicious about the way—"

Hermione watched as Elizabeth ran down the stairs in the mirror at the edge of the room. From where Hermione stood she could see up the stairs in the foyer, and Elizabeth was so preoccupied with checking over her shoulder that none of the death eaters were following her that she wasn't looking around for the danger.

She shouldn't be surprised. Elizabeth was a gardener, not a fighter, after all. "Two seconds, please," Hermione muttered to Pansy. Grabbing the metal poker from its spot against the fireplace, she stalked forward.

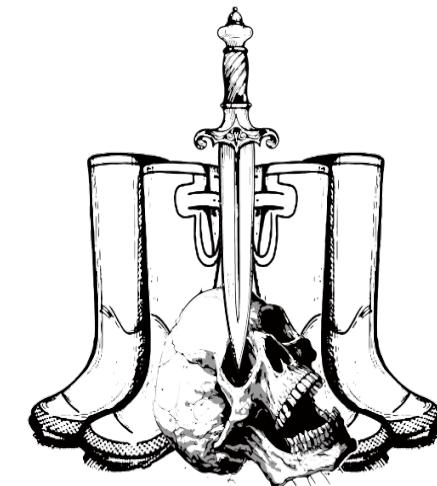
Elizabeth ran around the corner, and Hermione swung it straight into her cheekbone with such force that the girl flew sideways into the frame of the archway into the sitting room; the hit to her head knocked her out, and she fell backward onto the ground. "Not nice, is it, you fucking cunt." Hermione hissed at her before throwing the poker down onto the girl's stomach.

She straightened her shoulders and turned back to face Pansy, whose eyebrows were raised, an amused grin pulling at her face. "Sorry, you were saying?" Hermione waved her hand for her to carry on.

"I was saying that there was definitely something suspicious about the way that Kingsley went straight for his office. He would have had to have passed by the third downstairs exit coming from that direction, so he wasn't looking for door number two, was he?" Pansy theorised.

Hermione shook her head. "No, we will know more when everyone has either been rounded up or escaped."

"So, are we just not going to talk about the personal vendetta against that one?" Theo indicated to Elizabeth's unconscious body.



CHAPTER 16: A REASONABLE PLAN

Morning, Voldie." Hermione chirped as she strolled into the large empty hall in Riddle Manor. Draco had not told Voldemort about the contents of the prophecy at their dinner, telling him instead they were still shifting through evidence, as per her request.

"Voldster!" Ginny bounced in behind her. "How are you today?"

The Dark Lord grimaced. "Must you two call me that?" The man sighed in disdain; there was nothing he could do about it, and he knew it. Draco and Theo, who had accompanied them this morning, flinched as well, but Hermione always delighted in seeing the way it made Ginny shine with amusement. They were putting perhaps a little

too much faith in their rings and maybe getting a little cocky, but for now, Hermione was choosing to enjoy it.

"Yes. I told you, as long as you insist on that ridiculous name and wear that face, you will be called stupid things." Hermione transfigured a chair into a loveseat and flopped down. "Besides, that really isn't our most pressing issue right now."

They had debated a lot over how to break the news to them. The thing they had all agreed on over coffee that morning was that it should come from Hermione and Ginny, as casually as they could, preferably. The fewer of them present, the better. That way, it wouldn't seem like so much of a threat.

"We want to start by saying that we came to you Tom, and are telling you because we don't want this to get twisted into something it isn't. Yesterday, we recovered some things from the Order base, as you know, and we have been working through them. One of the things we came across was this prophecy. Kingsley had it locked away in a drawer, hidden under glamourous." Ginny's hand appeared from her pocket and in her fingertips was the small orb.

Voldemort straightened, his eyes narrowing at the sight of it, his bony hand reaching out to take it, which Ginny allowed. His expression turned to one of confusion when he heard nothing. "We will need to find a Seer to try and determine who it belongs to."

"No need. We already know. It's mine." Hermione tried to keep her voice as level and carefree as possible. Ego was a fragile thing, and she knew that when it came to the Dark Lord before her, that statement was especially true. His eyes shifted to her, looking at her with suspicion. She didn't wait for him to ask, figuring that her best bet was to offer the information freely. "A conflict resolved quickly will change the world as we know it. The brightest star leading a nation out of the dark and into the light will be our saving grace. She, most intelligent, will guide us on the path to greatness. That's what it says."

Voldemort swept away to walk the perimeter of the room, his cloak billowing out behind him, the room had become taut with tension as everyone waited to see his reaction in thick silence. Hermione watched as he took several deep breaths. "And what would you determine that to mean, Miss Granger?" She had to admire that he had not called her mudblood once since she had demanded it, even in the face of her continuing to call him Voldie despite his request not to. The hypocrisy wasn't lost on her, but she needed to see how far things would go, what the boundaries were and what kind of relationship would be formed between the two of them.

Kingsley's frame crashed into one of the benches. Stunning him momentarily before his figure loomed over her again. Preparing for hand-to-hand combat. Hermione snorted she had no interest in wasting her time sparring; she had no intention to kill the man either, at least not yet. She wanted to know what he was keeping hidden first so that she could make his death suited to his crimes.

"Who else is in on your dirty little secret?" Hermione asked, stepping forward slowly.

Kingsley snarled. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Hermione chuckled, "Are you sure about that?"

Kingsley stood firm. His eyes hardened on her.

Hermione cocked an eyebrow. Her wand finding its way to her fingertips, she relished in the fear that flooded the gentleman's eyes.

"What are you doing?" He whispered. "You don't want to do this, Hermione, I know you don't."

She clicked her tongue at him. She was done entertaining this conversation. "Obliviate."

It clearly wasn't the spell he had anticipated because her brow furrowed in shock before his mind went blank. "Pansy, put a tracker on him." Hermione muttered, "I want to know exactly where he heads next." He wouldn't forget everything, of course; she didn't want him to be useless but she did remove their little interaction, the memory that she had turned on them. It wouldn't take them long to figure it out, but whatever time she could get, she would take.

She turned and headed back to the office, Theo finishing up the last of the new wards that were spreading like a virus, eroding the existing ones created by the Order. "No one but our team, you, and Red can enter," Theo explained, a thrilled grin spreading across his cheeks. "Though I do hope someone tries, I haven't had a chance to test my new ward out yet - it's supposed to make their blood boil from the inside."

Hermione's eyes went wide with impressed shock from her place in the doorframe until the groan of Tania regaining consciousness from down the hall drew her attention. It was a short march to grab the witch by her hair. She didn't particularly care either way for the girl, and her curiosity was peaked. Hermione all but threw her through the doorway, and instantly, the girl began crying out in pain.

Pansy made her way back to the doorway, where Hermione looked on in fascination. "Jesus Granger. That's brutal even for you," she uttered.

Hermione shrugged with her arms folding across her chest, Tania's screams growing louder and louder as she writhed on the floor uncontrollably. Interestingly Hermione felt nothing as she looked on at the witch, no remorse, no guilt. Humanity had long

The screams around the house were overwhelming. Directly opposite the dining hall was Kingsley's office. Between them on the wall was door number two, the exit into the backyard. They weren't the only ones to arrive at the corridor in the junction. Kingsley skidded to a halt in the archway into the dining hall. His dark brown eyes locked with hers.

Hermione tutted and waved her index finger at him. She carefully stepped forward, placing her back to the office. Kingsley's eyes narrowed on her. "Expelliarmus!"

Hermione giggled when, instead of disarming her, his own wand flew out of his hand. She watched as the horror, followed by realisation, passed over his face.

Kingsley stood a little straighter in defiance. "So, you have been a bad boy, after all, Kings."

He glared down at her. "And you've been a traitorous bitch."

Hermione shrugged, a smirk forming beneath her mask. "Yeah, well. I have a very specific skill set, and it's about time someone appreciates it. I don't really care who I use it for, or on. As long as I achieve my goals that is."

"Do you really think that he is going to appreciate you, Hermione?"

Hermione chuckled at the use of her first name. He hadn't called her that in years. He must be feeling desperate to protect whatever was in the office behind her. She smiled knowingly, not that he could see it. "Secure the office," she said, her eyes not leaving the man who had been her 'superior' all these years.

Behind her, Theo moved to follow her direction, and Kingsley began to look panicked. Pansy flanked her, waiting to see how their continued interaction would play out. "Hermione, please, you don't want to do this. You don't want to join them. They want you dead, remember?"

Hermione hummed in amusement. On more than one occasion, she had thought the Order felt the same way. Their obvious disdain for her and Ginny had never been hidden. His attempts to persuade her were pathetic at best. He wasn't even trying - not really. She could see his brain turning, trying to figure out a plan of escape.

"How much of yourself did you give up in order to defeat them? You know this isn't right. You know that it's not where you belong."

Hermione sighed, tilting her head and looking straight into his near-black eyes. "I'm bored now," she said, stepping toward him, Kingsley stepping back with each of her steps forward. His legs were longer than hers; he was putting more distance between them than she was making. Hermione jumped and gripped her fingertips into the edge of the wooden doorframe, swinging with enough momentum to close that space and knock him in the chest with her boots, sending him flying backwards.

Hermione looked into his eyes. She probably should have felt nervous, but she didn't - if anything, she felt at peace, like she was exactly where she was supposed to be. "I take it to mean that Kingsley made a grave mistake by pushing me to the point that he has, and he has sealed his fate. He has given you victory on a platter. I am not destined to, nor do I want to rule. You know the vision that I have for the world - for our world - and when I help to make that vision a reality, it will be you who sits on the throne of it all."

She was met with more silence as the Dark Lord turned over her words in his mind. "I think it would be foolish of me to put complete trust in you, Miss Granger. Who's to say that you won't change your mind? That you won't try and seize power in the end, after all?"

Hermione tutted at him; a tight smile tugged at her lips. "Oh, Voldie, I thought we agreed never to lie to one another? I swore an unbreakable vow that I would do no such thing, did I not? Besides, my spirit is too wild to be contained to that of a political position."

One could argue that the role she intended to play in the coming months for his regime would be considered a political one, but she had zero interest in remaining in that role. When all of this was said and done, she planned to take an extended vacation. Perhaps she and Ginny could sip cocktails on the beaches of Hawaii, summoning pitcher after pitcher without fear of retribution. It was a simple thing, stupid even in the grand scheme of things, but why should she have to hide any part of herself? She was a witch; being born to muggle parents did not change that, and she refused to hide anymore.

Voldemort looked at her with trepidation. "Look, at the end of the day we could have lied, buried this, and hidden the fact that it responded to Mi, but we didn't because we are trying to build trust here; don't let paranoia get in the way of that." Ginny sighed and gave him a pointed expression.

Ginny had decided to approach her relationship with Voldemort as one of an old trustee's and to an extent, it seemed to have put Voldemort at ease. Ginny had always been viewed as a hothead, act-first-think-later type, but Ginny could be strategic in the way she managed people. Hermione had often questioned over the last few years if Ginny should have been in Slytherin back in school. She just seemed to know how to read people and was able to slip into the role they needed.

Voldemort looked upwards, contemplating things before nodding to himself. "I suppose this is true. Very well. I will withhold judgment for the time being." Hermione rolled her eyes. She knew that trust was earned, not given; she knew that better than

anyone, but it didn't stop the feeling of annoyance rearing its ugly head whenever someone questioned her motives.

"Brilliant. Now, should we move on to business?" She drawled, twirling her wand through her fingers. "I have been theorising on what went wrong with your resurrection and Peter Pettigrew. I was wondering if I might have Draco retrieve his memories of the night."

Voldemort laughed, a sound that, without a nose, sounded inverted. "That would be fine - if I hadn't killed the spineless rat years ago."

Ah. Well, that made things difficult then, didn't it? The truth was that she could have listed a hundred people who could have done a better job of Voldemort's resurrection than Peter Pettigrew. He knew how to hide, how to survive - but it didn't mean the man was capable of skilled magic, the evidence of that in the form of the man in front of her. It was more good luck than good management that he had survived as long as he did. He should have run and fled the country after what happened in Godric's Hollow, but the idiot had stayed here in England.

"I can offer my own memory of the night instead." He offered reluctantly. Hermione understood. He was still learning to trust her and to part with a piece of himself like that was him showing her a great deal of good faith.

Hermione shook her head. "I'm afraid it won't help. I was hoping to examine his thoughts around it, see if there was a distraction somewhere during his spellwork."

Voldemort frowned. "Would it affect the outcome?"

Hermione nodded. "Yes, I would say so. That magic required a great level of skill and concentration, and it would have been easy to mess it up." Voldemort stared at her with narrowing eyes and tightly closed lips. He looked embarrassed. "What's up, Voldie?" Hermione asked casually.

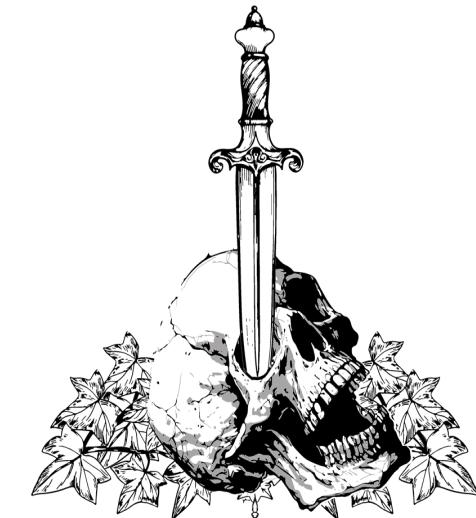
Voldemort exhaled a long breath. "What I am about to say is not to leave this room, swear it."

Ginny bit her lip to hide her smirk. "We swear." Hermione reassured him.

"Pettigrew was a weak, spineless little thing. He was an animagus with the animal form of a rat. As you know, my wife Nagini."

"Wait, hold on, I'm sorry, what!?" Ginny exclaimed.

Voldemort smiled sadly. "Nagini was a maledictus. I met her not long before her snake form took hold of her completely. She appreciated my ability to communicate with her no matter what form she was in; it was one of the things that led to the bond we had. She terrified Pettigrew. She was there in the graveyard that night; it had been years since she had seen my human form, and was anxious to show her support."



CHAPTER 13: A CONFLICT RESOLVED QUICKLY

Her feet pounded down the hallway toward the office in the back corner of the building. She could hear the others behind her. A witch named Tania scrambled into the hall in front of her. Her blue eyes blew wide under her black wavy hair. She made no effort to draw her wand, no effort to move. She just stayed frozen in her spot. "Bitch, move!" Hermione waved her arm with the wand in its holster and Tania went flying through the air, crashing with a thump into a painting on the wall.

"Definitely a possibility that it may have been enough of a distraction to lead to these results." Hermione offered delicately. She could feel Ginny beside her, fighting extra hard not to snicker at the man in front of them, who bore a striking resemblance to a snake.

Voldemort also seemed to be aware of it because he glared at the witch for a long time before eventually he also started to chuckle. "Yes, I suppose that it is rather humorous." He turned to Hermione with a serious look once more. "Will you be able to fix it?"

Hermione chuckled. "Shouldn't be a problem." Well, actually, it could be. She wasn't sure that was even the cause of the defection. It seemed likely but the other issue was that she had a strand of thought that had been tugging in the back of her mind that told her she would require Harry Potter in the same manner that Peter had.

"Excellent. I will be having Draco reach out to the muggle Prime Minister in the coming days. Are you familiar with him? Tony, I believe his name is." Voldemort looked to Draco, who had remained silent against the back wall. Hermione assumed he had received a nod of confirmation but didn't bother to look for herself.

It was all good and well to begin to make progress with the muggle Prime Minister, but it would do little good if there was not a constant and consistent figurehead on their side to lead the operation. It was one thing to theorise about all the changes that would be made and another entirely to implement them. Hermione was not ignorant of the scale of the project they were to undertake.

"I think what we should discuss is you stepping into the official role of Minister for Magic. If we want other countries to take us seriously, then we need to show we can run one country, let alone all of them. What we need is a Minister that can be charming and charismatic, but cool and calm under pressure. We need to rebuild England, both muggle and magical because without that, this will all be for nothing. The people need someone that they can look to. Which means, Voldie, you need to keep your nose clean."

Beside her, Ginny slapped her hand over her mouth and swallowed the squeal of laughter that wanted to escape her. Hermione gave her a look that she hoped portrayed the need for the redhead to shut up before she pushed it too far, and they ended up truly fucked. Thankfully, be it the rings or the fact that the redhead seemed to be growing on the Dark Lord, the wizard rolled his eyes.

"You have our team to handle the dirty work for a reason. From now on, do not kill anyone. We want to focus on flipping the image the public has of you. Which means community work, rebuilding destroyed but essential buildings, like Hogwarts. You

know... fund a project at St Mungo's, don't threaten to kill everyone if they don't comply... that type of shit."

"And obviously we still need to come up with a game plan but we are thinking France makes the most sense as the next country following England," Ginny added, seemingly finally having regained her composure. "Pending your approval, obviously."

Voldemort nodded and waved his hand dismissively. "Yes, yes that's fine."

"It's not just your public image that needs to be cleaned up. You have a few... problem Death Eaters that will need to either be brought into line... or disposed of." Hermione reverted back to her previous line of conversation.

At that, Voldemort turned and gave her a look of disapproval. "My followers?"

Hermione sighed and rubbed her face. "Yes, Voldie, the Death Eaters. I think a lot of them can be converted to the new plans, but some of them..."

Voldemort's shoulders stiffened, and Draco moved further into the room. It was seldom that he spoke first in Voldemort's presence, choosing more often than not to speak when spoken to. "I happen to agree, my Lord. I know you won't like this but... Tiberius-

"Is one of my oldest and most loyal supporters." Voldemort snapped, instantly going on the defensive.

"He's bad business, Voldster," Ginny stated firmly. "He's really bad business. He was loyal to your old regime, but there is no way that he gets on board with this. You need to think seriously about what it is you want, because if it's the likes of him, then Mi and I are wasting our time here."

Ginny, as always, was right - not that Voldemort seemed too impressed with their observations. Hermione could see the paranoia whispering in his ear, telling him this was some kind of trick, that she was trying to reduce his numbers so he would be easier to attack. "May I suggest a test of your own creation? Those who pass and swear loyalty to you, no matter where you are headed, can continue breathing; those that do not can be put down like the dogs they are."

Voldemort contemplated that for a moment. "Very well, I suppose that is a reasonable plan."

"Take us away, Princess," Theo said, stepping up beside her and gripping her arm, Blaise on his other side. Pansy looped her hand into Hermione's elbow.

There was a moment - a split second where everything slowed down - she could feel her blood whooshing through her ears. She felt her lungs expanding, heard the breath she sucked in before she was squished and spinning away. She didn't need to muck around; she knew exactly which stop to take, so there was no need to wait for the world to focus around them before they were off again.

Part of her expected resistance, part of her expected that the wards might reject her, either because of her absence or because she now wore the mask of a Death Eater, but there was no change. The four of them landed in the foyer with a crack and came face to face with Elise fucking Morgan, who, of course, did not yell triple nine; instead opened her mouth to scream.

Pansy moved immediately, stunning the witch before she could alert anyone. "Office. Go, go, go."

Upstairs, there was a scuffle, and someone who sounded like Seamus Finnigan shouted, "BREECH!!! TRIPLE NINE!"

"Shit." Hermione hissed and took off towards the office at a run.

APOSTASY

A series of cracks outside had Theo and Pansy throwing their drinks back and swallowing with a grimace. Hermione offered them a helping hand by vanishing their glasses as footsteps made their way through the kitchen. Ginny snickered into her drink. A second later, Draco appeared in the doorway, taking note of everyone. With Ginny having her back to him, he could only see the drink in Hermione's hand.

"No. Absolutely not. We go in there with clear heads, Granger." He snapped.

Hermione raised an eyebrow at him and downed her drink as well swallowing and opening her mouth with her tongue out. "Whoops. All gone."

Pansy hid a laugh behind the back of her hand. Draco's grey eyes flew to look at her. "Why didn't you tell her the rule about drinking before a raid?"

Ginny tilted her head and poured her glass into her mouth too. "Oh, she did. But we decided to ignore it because it's a stupid rule." Ginny turned to smile sweetly at him.

"It's not a stupid rule." Draco grit out through clenched teeth. "It keeps us alive."

"Yes, you're right. Thank Merlin Gin and I found ourselves here. Without your wise guidance, we surely would have perished - really, it's a wonder we survived this long without you at all." Hermione drawled sarcastically.

Draco glared at her. "I'm beginning to think the same thing."

"Oh, relax, D. They have single-handedly been holding their own and wiping Death Eaters out for years. I'm sure they can handle one safe house." Theo smiled at Hermione. Draco glared at Theo's back.

"Everyone on the lawn. Now." He snapped.

Ginny and Hermione brought up the rear. "Really, and that's what you want to take for a spin?" Ginny whispered.

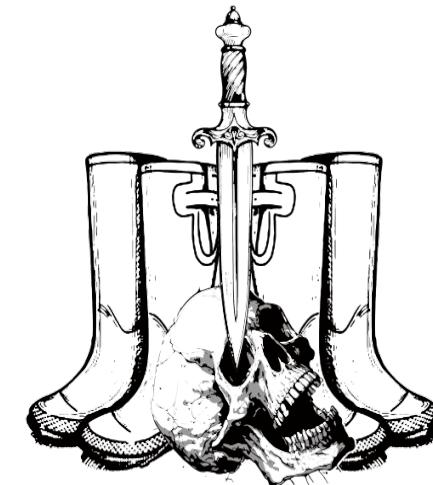
Hermione shrugged and looked at his back. "I don't need him to talk," Hermione whispered back.

Ginny giggled, earning herself a glare from Draco, whom she gave a withering look in response to.

"Red, you're with us," Daphne said as she adjusted the holster under her ribs. Pansy stepped forward and gave Daphne a deep and gentle kiss.

"Stay safe, baby." Pansy spoke quietly. Hermione turned away to give them the privacy that she felt their moment deserved.

"I love you, see you soon, okay? Stay out of trouble. Granger, Theo: look after my girl, yeah?" Hermione nodded her head and gave Ginny one last look; her friend's playful manner had diminished. Hermione gave her one singular nod that Ginny mirrored before they both waved their masks into place, their new housemates doing the same.



CHAPTER 17: SOUL BOUND

Potion fumes assaulted her nostrils. So far, it was looking how she had imagined it would, and at this stage, Hermione was hopeful that she had assigned the correct properties to make this successful. Hermione dropped a sprig of skullcap into the cauldron and began turning counterclockwise. The potion had already been brewing for over a week, and the timing had to be perfect. She couldn't afford to delay it longer by messing this up.

Hermione ignored the light breeze that filtered through the room as the door opened. Ginny's familiar perfume reached her, and she couldn't fight the amused smirk from tugging at her lips. "Hello, Ginevra. Did you sleep well?"

Hermione had gone to see the redhead late the night before, only to find her room empty. She needed zero guesses to figure out where she had gone. For all the grief everyone gave her about her growing attraction to a certain blonde wizard, Ginny's magnetisation toward Blaise had been worse, and honestly, Hermione was surprised that she hadn't pounced on him sooner.

Hermione counted out the seconds before she dropped the ground prickly pear needles into the liquid. As a ripple of purple spread out to the edges of the cauldron, she ignored the way that her friend slunk into the room without objection to her first name, which told Hermione everything she needed to know.

Hermione waited anxiously for it to transition from purple to deep blue. If it didn't happen, she had miscalculated something and would be forced to start over—and that was not something that she was willing to admit to herself or anyone else. Theo was supposed to be here to learn this, but he had been sent to Surrey on a mission with Draco. It was disappointing because she had hoped he would be here throughout the entire process, but neither job could wait.

"Not a wink, actually." Ginny's grin was clear in the tone of her voice.

Hermione snorted. "I'm happy for you." She raised an eyebrow. A sigh of relief fell out of her as ever so slowly turned blue. Hermione tipped in the aloe vera slime and dried stag beetles. Three clockwise followed by precisely three-fifths of a turn counterclockwise. Steam curled up out of the potion as it began bubbling. Hermione placed the lid back on top and waved her wand to set a timer of forty-five minutes.

Ginny jumped onto the counter in the middle of the room and looked at Hermione with a smile she was trying to fight. Hermione's eyes narrowed at her in suspicion. "Oh God, you two are going to be insufferable now if the sex was that good," she teased jokingly.

Ginny's elation didn't waver; if anything, she looked nervous about telling her something, which wasn't like Ginny. Hermione had known every detail of her pathetic sex life with Harry. She had known details that had forever changed the way she had looked at the man, and in all honesty, she was expecting Ginny to have started spilling the beans the second she had walked in here.

"Ginevra." Hermione drawled sarcastically. "What's going on? Please tell me the sex wasn't so bad that you want us to cut and run."

Ginny huffed a laugh. "No, the sex was mind-blowing, but that is not the most shocking revelation."

Hermione tried to rack her brain; perhaps Ginny had seen something? "Well, spit it out then." Hermione rolled her eyes.

Theo snorted. "Maybe accidentally while fucking, but I don't think even you believe that." He said as they made their way to the staircase.

"Why does everyone keep saying that?" Hermione exclaimed, exasperated. "Malfoy and I are not fucking." Not that she would mind, perhaps.

"Yet." Theo mumbled, giving her a challenging look when she glared at him. Pansy and Ginny were on the couch in the sitting room, facing each other and examining Pansy's nails when they entered the room.

"...doesn't chip if you have the right charms. I change the color maybe twice a week, but that's only cause I get bored of it. Maybe more if we have an event on or Daph and I are going on a date night."

Ginny sighed. "Date night? Jeez, what's that like?"

"You didn't have dates with anyone in the Order?" Pansy frowned.

"We essentially lived in a prison, Parkinson. Besides, the only guy I was allowed to date in the Order was Harry," Ginny scowled, her face turning up in disgust.

Pansy shook her head. "I'm sorry, did you say 'allowed'? As in you had restrictions on who you dated?"

"Yeah. More like everyone else was ordered to stay away from me." Ginny rolled her eyes.

"Ew. That's so..."

"Yeah, I know. That's why I kept going back, don't even know why; the result was still the same, me getting myself off and feeling just as frustrated."

Pansy giggled.

"Boy-wonder not so wonderful in bed?" Theo asked as he sat on the arm of the couch.

"No. No, he most definitely is not," Ginny sighed, her eyes roaming to Hermione. "That's a good look on you, Mi."

"It's a good look on you too." Hermione smiled. "Anyone want a pre-raid drink?"

"Yes, but you want to make it quick because Draco will be back shortly, and he's a prick about keeping your head straight," Pansy answered.

Ginny snorted a laugh next to her. "Well, then he's going to struggle with us."

"Pick your poison." Hermione pulled out the whiskey and poured herself a triple.

"Whiskey." Ginny and Theo both said at the same time. Hermione poured two more triples and sent it their way.

"Tequila, thanks Granger."

Hermione nodded her appreciation at Pansy's choice. A triple into the fourth glass floated over to Pansy.

Theo was clearly joking, but Draco's head whipped up to them with narrowing eyes. His reaction pulled a smug grin from Hermione, who shrugged. "Who knows? Never say never, right?" She answered, her eyes locked on Draco and practically growled.

"If you two are done fucking around, we need to leave." He snarled and stormed from the house. Theo let out a long, low whistle, but Hermione felt quite proud of herself. Ginny slid up beside her and bumped their shoulders together. Everyone else tried to hide their amusement. Tensions had been continuously and steadily growing between her and Draco, but she wasn't about to let him win. She liked riling him up, possibly a little too much; the only comfort she found in it was that he was the only other person currently not having sex in this house.

"Oh, sweetheart, you are going to chew him up and spit him out on a leash," Daphne commented.

"That's the plan." Hermione winked her way before following Draco out. "Hey, I have a question," She directed at him as she approached the apparition point, feigning innocence. "If I did marry Tom, would that make me your boss?" She could barely contain the glee at the way he clenched his jaw. Adrian Pucey looked between them with confusion. He had been the year above them at school, but Hermione couldn't recall ever having interacted with him. He didn't appear disgusted by her presence, but then again, she hardly knew the man.

"It's not relevant." Draco bit out.

"Then hypothetically?" Hermione asked, overly sweet, batting her eyelashes up at him.

"Hypothetically speaking, if you married the Dark Lord, then yes, you would be his boss," Adrian answered reluctantly. To his credit, he did not cower under the furious look Draco threw his way, instead meeting his ire with a roll of his eyes. "Of for fuck sake, Draco, she asked hypothetically."

Draco grabbed onto Ginny and Daphne's arms and disapparated without another word. Adrian snorted. "Think you pissed off your boyfriend, sugar."

Hermione grinned at him. "I usually do." She didn't bother to deny Adrian's assumption - never say never, right?

Pansy, Theo, Blaise, and Adrian all linked up, Hermione grabbing on at the last second before she was yanked through her navel through space, bouncing to a stop briefly in a forest clearing and then again in an alleyway. It was unusual to emerge fully in stopovers; she had become too accustomed to travelling with Blaise and Theo, who only landed in the briefest sense of the word.

They finally landed outside a Marks and Spencer inside the shopping centre, approximately a hundred metres from a group of Death Eaters fighting with several Order members that she didn't recognise. Hermione didn't hesitate, grabbing Ginny's hand and yanking her along, firing a killing curse off as soon as she was close enough for it to land. "One!" Her eyes meet the steel grey ones across the courtyard. She smirked and dodged as a black-haired witch with wild curls threw a hex her way. She knew that she was protected from the rings anyway, but she also didn't want to advertise that fact. One of her knives came out of her holster and slid across the witch's throat, spraying blood everywhere as she nicked an artery. "Two!"

This was more than the usual number of Order members. A quick scan of the crowd confirmed that. She suspected this was a safehouse group that was being forced to relocate, which, again, didn't make a lot of sense. Safehouses all had safety protocols, as far as she was aware, that prevented entire bases from shifting through town - backup locations, apparition plans if things went wrong...

She was barely paying attention, distracted by the feeling that something didn't add up. She knew that the trace on Kingsley had been broken only days ago. In that time, Death Eaters had raided two different safe houses, both after he had left their safety. Hexes were flying everywhere, and members of the Order were dropping like flies. The blood that was soaking her outer robes and neck was sticky; it felt heavier than it normally did, and it was not just because she was barely pausing between kills. "Nine!" She cried out as the wizard's head rolled away from her.

A witch fighting with Pansy a few feet from her caught her attention because Hermione knew those wild black curls. She had already killed that witch shortly after they had landed. The shock of it had her pulling up short. Hermione scanned the crowd again. This time, she could see it. The double-ups, the carbon copy fighters. Rage flowed through her veins because that had been her spell, her creation, and everyone in her Order base had argued it was too risky a move to use in battle, and it had been approved - conditionally: for training use only.

Hermione grabbed Ginny's wrist and tried to apparate to the other side of the battlefield but found that they remained stationary. Ginny frowned at her, not understanding what Hermione was trying to do. Panic gripped at her and dug its claws into her flesh. "It's a trap," Hermione whispered in realisation.

"What?" Ginny asked, not having heard her and still not understanding what was wrong as she fired off an Avada at a nearby target.

Hermione turned to her; the mix of rage and panic was not going to bode well. "It's a trap." She said again loudly, firmly.

Ginny looked around, trying to see what Hermione could see; it took her a second, but when it finally registered, horror flooded the redhead's face. "Those bastards." Ginny hissed.

"Gin, there's anti-apparition wards up," Hermione stated, searching the crowd for their team. Theo was a few feet away, so Ginny grabbed him and pulled him towards them, Pansy naturally following as they tended to stick together on the field. Blaise, Daphne and Draco were all too far away to grab at subtly. Ginny whispered the issue into Pansy's ear, who looked startled for a second and screamed 'Marco' without warning.

Hermione was too busy scanning the perimeter of the second floor of the shopping centre; he had to be here somewhere. "What's wrong?" Blaise's voice pulled at her attention again.

"It's a trap. Look around; there are copies of the people we are fighting, there are wards up against apparition, we are stuck here." Several loud pops nearby signalled the arrival of a multitude of new Order members to the fight.

Hermione tuned out as Ginny once again began explaining the invention of the spell. "If it's her spell, just cast the counter spell." Daphne shook her head.

"I can't." Hermione tried to ignore the approaching members, her eyes once again roaming the upper story. "I made it so that only the caster would be able to end it; that's why it was denied. It left someone alone and vulnerable." She explained absently as her eyes locked on Kingsley's. He stood, hidden in the shadows of an alcove, staring down at her and into her soul. She felt him attempt to drive into her mind, but Kingsley had never figured out the fortress that her mind had become over the years. Next to him stood, sneering at their group in disgust, was Ronald Weasley, Kingsley's keeper.

The latest arrivals of the Order were quick, throwing stunning curses at Death Eaters who were only now just realising that they couldn't apparate; a switch had flipped wherein Death Eaters had begun dropping left, right, and centre, and the Order had gained the upper hand.

"What!?" Daphne exclaimed as she tried to fight off a nearby wizard.

"Shit." Hermione breathed as she looked around, racking her brain for a solution.

"Mi..." Ginny said in warning. They were running out of time, and she knew it; they were now significantly outnumbered, and everyone in their group had returned to fighting around her to try to hold off the Order for as long as possible. "A solution soon would be appreciated."

"I know, just... gimme a second." She shushed. Her eyes flew back to the alcove Ron and Kingsley had been in only a moment ago, just to find it empty.

The brunette wizard nodded, a defeated "I know" barely loud enough for her to hear. "But she isn't suffering the way she normally does."

A light rap against the wood made her jump, and Pansy offered her a sympathetic smile. "Sorry to interrupt. Pucey is here. The scouts spotted an Order faction slipping into an abandoned mall on the far side of London. We've been summoned to go sort it out."

"Theo needs to stay here with Tor," Hermione argued.

Pansy swallowed and shook her head. "Actually, Tiberius is there already. He asked for Theo specifically." A sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach formed as she turned to look at the man.

Did Tiberius ask for Theo by name often? Or was it a new thing that had occurred since her run-in with him several weeks prior? "Would one of the elves stay with her?" Hermione asked.

"Gimlee," Pansy said. "She adores Astoria. When we first moved here, she and Astoria spent a long time together working on the design of the gardens. Astoria let her take the lead on it more than most wizarding families would. She and Astoria still walk the grounds together and discuss the changes Gimlee has made." Hermione nodded, and Pansy repeated "Gimlee" in a different tone.

A small house elf sprung out of the ground, much younger than Zimmy. The elf appeared to be barely a young adult in elf years. "Gimlee, we need to go out, but we can not leave Miss Tori alone. Would you please stay with her? I know it isn't—"

"Of course, Gimlee will stay. Gimlee loves Miss Tori. Gimlee will make sure she is well cared for and nothing bad happens." The small elf delighted at Theo's words, clambering up onto the bed beside Astoria and staring down at her with big, wide eyes.

Theo hesitated before pressing a kiss to the sleeping witch's forehead and slipping off the bed. He turned to Hermione and forced a smirk in place. "Time to kick your ass, Princess."

Hermione snorted. "Dream on Theodore. Even half depleted, I'll wipe the floor with you."

"Oh yeah, how did it go?" Theo brightened, remembering why she had been absent for the morning.

"Voldie now has a face, and he called me Hermione, so he no longer hates me." Hermione chirped brightly. "I've decided to call him Tom." She explained as they made their way back into the kitchen.

Theo raised an eyebrow at her, sticking his tongue into his cheek for a moment. "Am I looking at the soon-to-be Mrs Dark Lord?"

Daphne shook her head and closed her eyes. "Maybe nothing, we don't know. She fell asleep and won't wake up." Her voice cracked as she whispered, filling Hermione with dread, she took off running towards Theo and Astoria's room, skidding to a halt in their doorway.

Theo's eyes found hers; the fear was evident. "She stopped throwing up about twenty minutes after you left. She took the potion and then fell asleep; I haven't been able to wake her." He whispered.

"Can I come in?" She eyed the doorframe, feeling a bit like a vampire from a muggle storybook. She still wasn't certain if Blaise meant it when he said that their magic would disappear, but she wasn't going to take any chances.

"Yeah, of course." Theo turned back to his sleeping wife.

Hermione slipped into the room and towards their bed, despite the depletion of her magical energy, she pushed through the strain and waved several diagnostic charms over Astoria's resting frame. She took in every number and colour before allowing herself to relax and breathe a sigh of relief, a small smile tugging at her mouth.

"That looks positive; it's positive, right?" Theo frowned at the diagnostics hovering in the air, trying to read them back to front.

Hermione nodded. "Very positive. See this one here?" She pointed to a small pulsing pale green light. "This one was red this morning. I cast it when she started throwing up. It's her heart rate. Red's far too high; her body is struggling to cope with the strain that the bouts of illness put on her, but this is within normal range. Her body is metabolising the effects faster. This number here," she pointed at a number on a different diagnostic panel, "shows that her iron is still low, but it's increasing again, which, again, is good because it was non-existent this morning."

Theo swallowed nervously. "So she is okay? Why isn't she waking up?" He frowned.

Hermione shrugged and shook her head. "My thought would be the skullcap leaves. It was supposed to help with insomnia. I know she struggles with it when it's bad. It would just be a guess, but I think, combined with the intent behind the potion and the other ingredients, she has fallen into a medically induced sleep in order for the rest of the potion to work its magic, cleaning the toxins from her blood and metabolising it faster."

Theo nodded and pressed his eyes closed to hide the tears that welled there. "She will be okay."

Hermione nodded slowly "She will be okay, but Theo... this isn't a cure. It might help her live a little longer because it is less strain on her body, but... the curse is still there," she explained delicately.

"We don't have a second. This is your spell, Granger, think." Draco snapped.

"Don't you think I don't know that I—" A hex landed on Blaise's shoulder, and the man fell in slow motion to the ground unconscious.

"Blaise!!" Ginny screamed in terror, becoming briefly distracted from her fight, allowing the witch to punch her across the face. Shit, that was not good; the rings did not protect against physical attacks then. She had suspected as much, but it was different to have it confirmed.

"Ginny, focus. I have him okay." Hermione shouted, moving to stand over her friend's lover.

"How about you have a—" Pansy started, but like a bolt of lightning, the solution hit her; it was so obvious.

"Pestis Incendium!!" Hermione screamed, pointing her wand straight up at the ceiling above, waiting for it to catch fire before moving on to the shops nearby.

"What are you doing!?" Draco grabbed her arm and glared down at her in horror.

"There are anti-apparition wards. Everyone is able to apparate in, but they can't apparate out." The loud crackle of the flames spreading through the centre had become the backing track for their fight. People had begun screaming as the heat began to rise and the flames multiplied.

"Yes, including us." Draco hissed as if he was having to explain it to a child.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "The Order is stuck here too, they will need to take it down in order to get out of here." Nearby a shop window shattered in the heat, spraying glass everywhere. Fiendfyre was not normal fire, it sought out members of the Order and chased them as though it were alive, sentient, intent upon killing them. Mutating as it took the shape of several large basilisks, twisting and turning, engulfing several of them, their screams dying as they did.

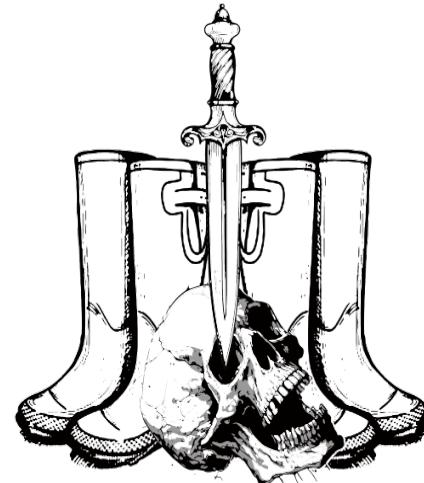
The centre was getting unbearably hot. A flash of movement on the second story caught her eye as Kingsley and Ronald began running along the walkway in an attempt to get away from the large, fanged serpent. "Six!" Kingsley's voice boomed overhead.

Two things happened in that moment: one, the Order began to group up in preparation of the wards falling, and two, Hermione caught sight of Tiberius as he aimed his wand at Theo's back across the wall of fire separating them from him.

It was a choice that she only had a split second to make: stun and capture Kingsley or save Theo. She had a split second to make her choice, but there was really no choice at all. She stepped between Theo and his father, shielding him from whatever spell was now hurtling their way, deflecting it effortlessly while her eyes sought out Kingsley, who was looking at her smugly. It was too late to act now because, at that precise

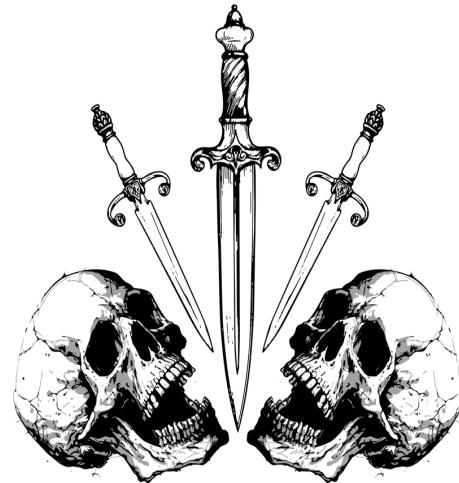
APOSTASY

moment, the wards fell, and Kingsley and Ron were gone, leaving behind the bodies of their dead.



CHAPTER 19: DOUBLE-UPS

She felt far too good, coasting along on the high that had been fixing Tom Riddle's face and singing 'Dancing in the Moonlight' loudly, much to the annoyance of Draco, so she should have anticipated the crash that would come from walking back into the chateau several hours later to find silence. Daphne and Pansy were both sitting at the island counter with cups of coffee in front of them that lacked the steam of a fresh cup. Both witches stared at nothing in front of them, lost in a daze. Hermione's heart started pounding instantly. "What is it? What's wrong?" She threw her bag on the dining table, ignoring the way that Blaise instinctively flexed his fist at the mess.



CHAPTER 20: MUSICAL BEDS

Her eyes shifted back to Tiberius, narrowing on the man. She should have let the spell hit her. He could have taken himself out, but it was instinct to deflect still, especially when it came to curses like an Avada Kedavra. His face contorted in annoyance before he also disappeared.

Her eyes were left to roam over the debris that was scattered around, the cackle of flames slowly eating its way through the empty shops. The heat in here was stifling, and sweat dripped down the back of her neck. “For fuck sake.” Draco groaned.

"What?" Ginny crouched and revived Blaise, Hermione really had to get to work on those bloody rings. Too many things today had been close calls, proving just how necessary they would be, she glanced back at the empty spot where Tiberius had been. If she had been more focused on Kingsley just then, Theo would be dead. There was no one else to blame either, they had all been doing the best they could, fighting multiple people on multiple fronts.

And to be fair, to date, the Order had never pulled a stunt like that, so she had not anticipated seeing her own spell being used against her like that. "We're being summoned," Blaise mumbled as he tried to sit up, rubbing his head where he had knocked it against the hard floor.

"Granger, what are we doing about this?" Pansy waved towards the fiery monsters.

Hermione felt the anger of it all and let it run through her veins like the beasts running through the complex. "Leave it." She muttered before apparating back to Riddle Manor. She had warned him; she had told him that if he touched a hair on his head, there would be hell to pay. A few cracks behind her sounded, but she wanted only one thing. Technically, she didn't need to be here, but she had something to do before she went back to the chateau to check on Astoria.

She stormed through the manor, knowing exactly where they would be. She could feel the congregation of magical energy in the usually empty ballroom. "Granger!" Draco called out behind her. Hermione threw the doors open with enough force that half the room turned to look at her, including Tom, who broke out in a grin at her appearance but faltered when she pointed her wand straight at Tiberius, who had not turned at her arrival but did turn at the confusion on his master's face.

"Crucio!" She hissed under her breath with immense effort, and the man dropped suddenly, not having time to react to the assault. Her wand did not waver as she stomped over to him. She could feel that her energy was nearly entirely gone; between the potion that morning and the raid on the shopping centre, she knew she was headed for a pretty awful comedown, but there would be no way she waited to deal with this.

"Granger!" Draco shouted, and he finally caught up and took in the situation.

Hermione ignored him and kicked Tiberius straight in the jaw. Blood flew from his mouth as his head recoiled from the blow. She went to kick him again, but Draco's arms wrapped around her waist from behind her, trapping her arms and lifting her up and away from the oldest Nott. It, rather unfortunately, caused the curse on him to drop, too. "Stop!" She shrieked at Draco, her nails digging into any part of him that she could find purchase on, attempting to kick at him as he turned her away and toward Daphne. "He tried to kill Theo, let me fucking go!"

Hermione shook her head and flipped him off, not sparing him another glance. Instead, she slinked around the table and toward the man, crouching next to him with a proud grin. "I am a genius."

Tom peered up at her through half-open eyes with a grim expression. "Modest, too." He muttered. "You nearly killed me."

Hermione waved her hand dismissively. "Rubbish. Never doubted myself for a minute." She grinned at him, his eyes twitched, and a slow chuckle rose out of him. Eventually, he found the strength to turn and rise up on shaky hands and knees, using the chaise beside him for support as he pulled himself up onto it. "Would you like to see?" Hermione beamed as she knelt in front of him, pulling a handheld mirror from her bag and offering it to him. Quiet fell between them as he took the handle and turned it on himself, his face void of any reaction for a moment as he turned in different directions.

His now deep brown coloured eyes shifted to her and narrowed in bewilderment, looking at her once more as if she were a riddle to be solved. "Hermione Granger, you astound me."

like an idiot, but then a sigh exhaled from the Dark Lord, and all four of them collectively sighed in relief.

Muscle began to reshape itself over the wizard's exposed flesh, building on itself and filling out to a more defined structure. The red made way for a sickly white colour that continued to grow and change toward a soft tan, skin forming where there had been none. The structure of his face morphing, the cartilage of a nose began to protrude from his face, and small dark brown sprouts of hair pushed through his skull. Human nails grew where there had only been rancid, brittle-looking claws before.

No one made a sound as the face of Tom Riddle took shape, everyone staring at the unconscious figure with bated breath. Hermione silently pleaded to any entity that would listen that she hadn't just killed the man by sending him into cardiac arrest. Collectively, they let out a relieved gasp as his chest began to rise and fall with minuscule breaths.

"Holy shit..." Ginny whispered. "That was scary for a minute."

Draco glowered Hermione's way. "Some warning would have been nice." He snarled.

Hermione sneered at him. "If I had known that was going to happen, don't you think I would have said so?" She snapped back at him.

"Guys," Ginny stated, but Hermione was too busy glaring at the blonde.

"I don't know, do I? You swoop in here barely two weeks ago and start throwing your weight around!"

Hermione smirked and raised an eyebrow. "If I remember correctly, you liked it when I threw my weight around last time."

"Guys," Blaise said more firmly, but again, Draco and Hermione's eyes never deviated from each other, locked in a battle of the wills that had become their life as of late.

"You think so? Just wait, witch. You and I, round two when this is over. I'll show you exactly how much I enjoy throwing your weight around." He snarled.

Hermione's mouth opened with the intention of a retort on the tip of her tongue, but the gurgling sound of someone being sick finally pulled her attention back to Voldemort, who had rolled onto his side and spewed the thin black potion over his carpet. His body, obviously still weak from the ordeal, was shaking, and he had broken out into a sweat - but he was definitely a human. A laugh of amazement bubbled up out of her. "Oh my god... I did it." She began laughing loudly in surprise. "I actually did it!"

Draco sneered at her. "Your surprise at that fact should be concerning."

At those words, he froze, still holding her up in the air. "What did you just say?" Daphne breathed. The entire room had fallen silent as they watched the commotion unfold. Tom had begun making his way down the makeshift podium he had set up and toward where they were.

"He tried to Avada Theo, and I lost Kingsley because I chose to save Theo instead." Hermione screeched. Draco dropped her, causing her to stumble into Daphne, who caught her. She turned just in time to see Draco's fist colliding with Tiberius' face.

"Draco!" Tom barked as he finally approached. "That is enough! We will deal with this tomorrow, but this is not the time!"

Draco sneered down at the man, grabbing him by the cuff of the shirt, "You better watch yourself, Tibby; I'm fucking coming for you." His tone was icy cold as he hissed in the man's face before shoving him away again and standing to bow to Tom. "My lord, I apologise for the intrusion."

Tom's brown eyes passed to her, and after a moment, they softened, and he sighed. "Yes, yes, we will discuss this tomorrow. Hermione, Draco." He nodded his head and swept away from them. Hermione glared down at Tiberius and lunged to kick him again, but Draco once again scooped her up and turned her away, shoving her gently toward the door.

"Go home." He whispered at her with a look that told her he wasn't fucking around. She thought for a moment about ignoring him, of standing her ground in defiance simply because he told her to go, but she could feel the crash coming on quickly, and perhaps she imagined it, but she could have sworn that she saw concern in his eyes, as if he somehow knew that she was fading fast too.

She huffed and stormed from the room, his single word of "Daph..." following her out.

"I got her." Daphne jogged to catch up to her, and Hermione fought to roll her eyes.

"I don't need a fucking babysitter." Hermione snapped with more bite than she intended.

Daphne appeared unbothered by the attitude and nodded. "I know, but it will make D feel better if he thinks that you're taken care of, repayment for Theo or whatever." Hermione doubted that even Daphne believed her own words; it sounded like the kind of placating bullshit you told toddlers to prevent a temper tantrum.

Oddly enough, she couldn't bring herself to care or argue the point any further. She didn't complain when Daphne took her elbow and apparated her several times across the country. She could barely remember walking back across the yard and the patio or

into the house, but she must have done so because, at some point, she collapsed onto the lounge suite, after that, everything else just faded away...

Sunshine shone on her face softly as she managed to blink her eyes open. She was met with a sight that shocked her speechless for a moment. Draco Malfoy stood there with his hands in his pockets, staring out the window. His hair had grown in the weeks she had been here, not by much, but enough that it was noticeable. She looked around her and realised that she was not in her bed or on the chaise lounge but in what appeared to be Draco's room.

She peered down and saw that she was wearing a pair of black satin pyjamas and frowned in confusion. "Pansy lent them to Ginny, who changed you." Draco explained nonchalantly.

"Oh... and I'm in your room because?" Her voice came out softly, but in the space, it sounded loud to her ears.

"We couldn't get permission to enter yours." He turned to face her and rested against the windowsill.

"Okay... then why not Ginny's room?"

Draco raised an eyebrow at her, a playful glint appearing in his eyes. "Do you take issue with being in my bed, Granger?"

Hermione fought a smirk. "No, I'm simply curious."

Draco hummed with a smile that sent butterflies flipping in her stomach. Oh no... those would need to be squashed. Sexual attraction was one thing, but butterflies were another thing entirely. Butterflies meant feelings, and feelings were not something that she wanted, especially not with a man who clearly couldn't even decide if he wanted her or not.

"Ginny specifically said her room was out of action as she intended to be having a lot of sex last night. Blaise told Theo that he could crash out in his room as Astoria was still asleep and in the middle of their bed, so Theo did not want to disturb her. Daphne and Pansy informed me that Astoria had recently started renovating the guest rooms, which, to my surprise, all look as though they have suddenly been blasted with a bombarda maxima, which brings us to this current situation."

Eventually, enough magic had been taken, and the contents of the cauldron turned a thin, liquidy black. Hermione sighed and slumped into an armchair behind her, breathing deeper with the exhaustion that had hit her. It was only temporary, and she could deal with temporary. She waved her hand towards the cauldron. "It is ready."

The silence was tense; no one moved, and no one spoke. Voldemort stared at her for what was an uncomfortable length of time. Hermione raised her eyebrow at him and stared back. She refused to cower, he could go to hell if he ever thought she would. "What will happen?" He asked finally.

Hermione exhaled slowly and shook her head. "I'll be honest, Voldie, I don't know. I have never taken the potion myself. I do know that at the end of it, you will look human again, though, so there's that." Hermione answered casually and contemplated if it would be rude to close her eyes and have a quick five-minute power nap.

Voldemort peered into the cauldron with a disgusted sneer. Hermione snorted in amusement. "Sorry that it doesn't look more appealing," she muttered sarcastically, letting her head fall back against the back of the armchair and let her eyes fall closed. Around her, nobody moved, and the silence started to pull her under into the depths of sleep until, suddenly, everything happened at once. A loud thud sounded, followed by an almighty roar.

Hermione's eyes flew open to see the horrified faces of Blaise, Draco and Ginny staring at the ground on the other side of the coffee table. Hermione leapt to her feet and peered down at Voldemort, writhing on the ground in agony, which was nothing in comparison to the flesh that was peeling from his face, as if it was being burnt from his body.

"What did you do?" Blaise yelled over the sound of his Lord's agony.

Hermione shook her head. What did she do?! She intended to fix his face, not remove it. A large chunk of flesh slid off his bony cheek, another from his finger, all of it melting away to nothing, while Voldemort screamed louder. Bile rose in the back of her throat at the smell of the rotting meat. "I..."

"Hermione, do something!" Ginny screamed at her in a panic, but she didn't know what to do. What was there to do other than watch the horrifying scene unfold?! She didn't even know what she had done wrong - it should have worked.

Silence fell.

Voldemort stopped writhing and screaming.

"Is he...?" Draco's panicked eyes flew to her, the little colour he had drained from his face. She had no answer for him. She knew she was opening and closing her mouth

Hermione stepped into a large private sitting room that overlooked the manor's gardens below. There was more furniture in here than she had seen in the entire rest of the property combined, all of it a dark coffee colour with light wooden tones and all of it of an antique style. Hermione suspected that this all had belonged to Voldemort's father's family at one point in time.

Voldemort emerged from a room off of the main sitting area, and for a moment, Hermione questioned if he owned anything but tattered black robes. Though she supposed it was hard to imagine him doing anything even remotely human these days, like shopping or sleeping. Evidently, he must, given that he had just come out of what was obviously his bedroom, but imagining it was still hard to do.

"Miss Granger, Miss Weasley, Draco, Blaise, how delightful." His face was tight and pinched, his eyes suspicious as they narrowed on her. "Are we ready to proceed?"

"Shall we get straight to it then? No small talk?" Hermione smirked jokingly and reached into her bag, pulling items from it, nodding in question to the coffee table in front of the chaise lounge. Voldemort didn't seem amused but nodded in acceptance. Hermione placed down a medium black cauldron, placed the skull at the bottom of it, and began tipping the components onto it before heating the metal with a wave of her wand. "I will need you to donate a few drops of your blood," she told him.

She could feel the way he was staring at her, but she carried on stirring in the ingredients. Eventually, when she gave him no reaction, he seemed to have decided that it was a legitimate request. The mistrust of her was obviously still high, or perhaps it was just his general paranoia. His hand moved into her line of sight, and as Draco had done earlier, he sliced the flesh on his palm - much deeper than necessary. The blood pooling in his hand was darker than blood usually was, likely corrupted after years of living a half-life or from having split his soul so many times. The thick blood began to drip, splattering against the exposed top of his father's skull. Hermione threw in the final ingredient, several long unicorn hairs and began stirring runes into it with the tip of her wand.

Keeping her mind clear and focused on restoring Tom's actual face, she began reciting the incantation "Restituet fons et ut in animo, restituet fons et ut in animo, restituet fons et ut in animo." She chanted over and over as the magic began to tug in her fingertips, making her hand and wand shake ever so slightly as the forces of magic tested her willpower. Hermione fought through it and continued. Dark magic always required a little sacrifice; in this case, it would drain a little of her energy for a day or two, but that was fine - a cost willingly paid if it meant aiding their plans.

Hermione chuckled. "Hmmm, seems like it was a rather unfortunate coincidence then."

"I slept on the couch, just so you don't think I did anything untoward." His tone had shifted to a darker, more husky element, and the butterflies jumped again.

"I didn't think that," Hermione reassured him. "I could have stayed there, you know... On the couch, I mean."

"I meant my couch, and in any case, no, you couldn't have. You were taking up half the couch and we wanted to be in there. Plus, you were snoring."

Hermione gasped and grabbed the pillow beside her and threw it as hard as she could at the man, it was pointless because he caught it without any effort whatsoever. "I was not!" She exclaimed.

Draco grinned at her in amusement. "You realise that there are five other people who live in this house who will back me up on that, right?"

Hermione stiffened. "Four," she said as if it were fact.

"Five," Draco argued, holding up his hand, the veins in his arm and hand flexing. It was an odd thing to affect her in the way that it did, causing her to rub her legs together, but if he noticed the shifting of the blankets, he didn't say anything. "Daphne," His index finger pointed to the other hand's thumb. "Pansy," He moved along one, his grin becoming more smug as he continued "Theo, Blaise and Ginny."

"Ah, wrong. Ginny will side with me and defend my honour even when I am wrong."

Draco rolled his tongue of his teeth slowly, the playful smirk made her abdomen burn. "Ahh, yes of course. I forgot that you two have been slumming it with the Order and no longer possess a decent moral compass."

Hermione snorted. "The irony of that statement." She shook her head and threw the covers off her. "Thanks for the sleepover, Malfoy." She jested as she made for the door.

"Anytime, Granger," Draco answered softly.

Hermione wasted no time, turning up the stairs and toward Ginny's room, banging her fist against the wood until the door was yanked open by a dishevelled-looking Ginny wearing nothing but a robe and who grinned at her with pride. "Oh, look who it is, sleeping beauty. You're looking disappointingly well rested."

"You have permission to enter my room," Hermione stated, her eyes narrowed on the witch.

Ginny chuckled. "Yes? I know?"

"So then, why did you not levitate me into my own bed? Why have everyone play the game of musical beds? Who blew up the guest rooms?"

Further in Ginny's room, Blaise roared with laughter. "Theo."

Hermione nodded. "Of course it was. You all need to stop making bets on my damn sex life."

Ginny snorted and gave her a pointed look. "Or lack thereof, you mean?"

"I...Ginny." Hermione warned and pointed her finger at her before turning and strolling back downstairs. Pansy could wait to get her bloody pyjamas back. Hermione wanted coffee, strong coffee, because despite the decent sleep, she still felt drained, and she had things that she needed to sort out. Kingsley was turning out to be a real problem. She should have just killed him at the raid.

Tiberius needed to be put down as soon as possible, like the rabid dog he was. Hermione needed to prepare for their dinner with Tony and she really, really needed to get the rings made for her housemates. Music from the wireless floated out from the kitchen, along with a witch singing a little off-key. Hermione rounded the corner, and Astoria immediately stopped and turned with a huge grin on her face. "Hey baby, how are you!" The blonde exclaimed loudly and bounced across the kitchen, dropping the spatula on the stove beside the pan to pull Hermione in for a suffocating hug instead. Theo, who had been leaning on the counter watching her with awe, smiled and silently picked up the spatula to take over where Astoria had left off.

"Tor, let the poor girl breathe." Pansy joked from the dining table, not that it stopped Astoria from rocking Hermione and herself from side to side.

"I am glad to see you feeling better." Hermione sighed. The blonde was even peppier than usual.

"I am, and it's all thanks to youuuu." Astoria grinned, finally stepping back and poking Hermione lightly in the shoulder. "Best I have felt in years. " Astoria dragged the emphasis out on the word and bounced back over to the frying pan where Theo was flipping an omelette. "Woke up, was sick once, really badly and then all better!" She chirped.

Hermione didn't know what to say, she was not used to this level of cheerfulness, even from Astoria who was by nature a peppy person, Hermione looked to Pansy with wide eyes, silently pleading for help while Daphne scoffed and sipped her coffee.

Hermione shrugged. "No, but let's get it over with anyway."

Draco hummed in agreement, and the four of them made their way to the apparition point. Riddle Manor had lost its daunting feeling; now, instead of looming over her, it seemed smaller, more familiar, and nearly friendly. The sun made the estate warm, and the scent of jasmine hung in the air, making it almost cosy and welcoming, adding a storybook feel to the old place.

Harry had cried once upon a time when he had relived his experiences, telling her how the dark, cold graveyard had haunted his dreams for months afterwards, but when Hermione had visited the place, she had found that it was just another graveyard, not unlike other ones she had visited over the years. Sure, his perception of it was under a harrowing experience where he had witnessed the death of one of their peers, but extracting the skull of Tom Riddle Sr. had been just another day for her; it was no less peculiar now carrying it in her bag through the front doors towards the Dark Lord.

His manor, which normally had the odd Death Eater roaming the halls, was empty. He had specifically cleared the place in case this little 'correction' failed. As far as Hermione knew, only she and her housemates even knew this would be taking place. Her only concern was that she would be untouchable if this failed, but Draco and Blaise would not be. While the three people accompanying her had the utmost confidence in her abilities, Voldemort did not, and Hermione knew it. She needed this to work; needed to prove that her presence in their ranks was needed.

They had a dinner with Tony this coming weekend to discuss the proposed end of the war, and she wanted Tom to be there, given her plan for him to step into the role of Minister for Magic. In order for that to happen, she needed Tom, not Voldemort or the Dark Lord. She had confidence in her capabilities as well, but there was always part of her that listened to the niggling voice of doubt, that perhaps everyone who had doubted her over the years saw something she didn't.

Draco led them through the manor to a part of the estate that Hermione had not yet been to. She had seen the empty ballroom several times now and the dining room once but the direction in which they were heading seemed to be leading towards Voldemort's private quarters. Draco paused outside a large set of double doors covered in decorative gothic wrought iron curls.

His wand sliced across his hand, causing a cut in his palm just deep enough to start bleeding. He held his hand up to a shimmering ward on the door, and the doors opened inward. He motioned for the others to enter while he passed a quick healing charm over the wound, sealing it once more.

APOSTASY

Astoria needed to stop vomiting long enough to get it down and for the twenty minutes it would take to absorb into her system.

The vomiting issue was something that couldn't be avoided, but Hermione was already churning over ideas in her head about things she could do to counteract that unfortunate issue. Footsteps sounded down the hallway behind her. Daphne appeared at her shoulder; a deep inhale of air at the sight of her little sister hunched over the bowl of a downstairs toilet. "Draco says the Dark Lord will see you this morning, sooner rather than later. He's waiting with Blaise and Ginny in the sitting room when you're ready."

Hermione turned and looked at the witch beside her with annoyance. "Seriously? This morning? I was hoping to be here for Astoria, monitor how the potion goes—"

Daphne offered her a pitying smile. "That's the price of being in high demand, I'm afraid. You create potions for everyone at once, and you are bound to be pulled in multiple directions."

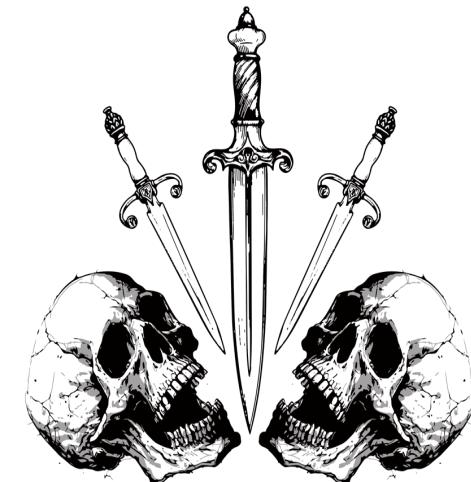
Hermione sighed and turned back to the blond, now gasping for air. The thought of asking them to hold off on giving her the concoction until she had returned from Riddle Manor crossed her mind for just a fraction of a second, but that would be unfair to Astoria. She had created the mixture to ease her ailment, not to study her like a scientific experiment, so she squashed the thought as quickly as it had arrived.

"Alright then." Hermione sighed. "Theo, you need to make sure that someone is with her at all times. Write down anything you think might be relevant... actually, write down anything you think might not be relevant as well." Hermione spoke quietly into the bathroom. Theo looked at her with wide, uncertain eyes but nodded all the same, Astoria capturing his attention again as another wave of vomiting took hold.

Hermione could hear the sobs in the woman's breaths, and her heart broke for the witch. She had already been in this exact situation for two hours this morning, and there were no signs of letting up. It was clear to Hermione that Astoria was on borrowed time. She could see the panic in Theo's eyes, and he tried his best to be supportive. She saw it in the way that Pansy stayed extra close to Daphne, who had an influx of public affection towards her girlfriend.

She saw it in Draco's reluctance to leave. If Hermione was going to pull off a cure, she needed to do it sooner rather than later. The only issue was that the Slytherins were all too emotionally involved in this, and she had things she needed to do without getting anyone's hopes up or clueing them in on what she was doing.

"Ready?" Draco asked, uncharacteristically quiet as she stepped into the sitting room.



CHAPTER 21: THE NEW MINISTER FOR MAGIC

For fuck sake, Granger. Stop moving!" Pansy snapped, tugging Hermione's head back by the strand of hair that she was currently trying to curl.

"Ow!" Hermione glared at the witch's reflection in the mirror only to receive a withering look back. For some reason, she had trusted Pansy when she had told her that she would help Hermione to get ready, that it would be a fun bonding experience. So far, it just seemed to have stressed them both out, and Hermione no longer felt bad that she had missed out on this 'experience' with her dorm mates at school.

APOSTASY

"Well, if you would stop moving—" Pansy muttered angrily beneath her breath.

"I'm moving because you keep pulling on my fucking hair, Pans." Hermione glowered at her in the mirror, hissing the words out through gritted teeth.

"I'm curling it. It's going to pull a little." Pansy shot her another withering look in return.

Ginny giggled from Hermione's bed. "I'm so glad I didn't have sisters." Both Hermione and Pansy whipped around on her with angry glares, which only seemed to amuse Ginny even more.

"Ginevra—" Pansy sneered with a forced smile.

"Oil?" Ginny sat up straighter, feigning offence.

"Don't you have someone to go fuck? Like, oh, I don't know... yourself?" Pansy sang sweetly.

"Jealous, Parkinson?" Ginny smirked.

"Of you? No. Of Blaise, a little." Pansy grinned, looking Ginny up and down appreciatively.

"Jesus..." Hermione mumbled and shook her head. Pansy chuckled and pinned the last curl in place.

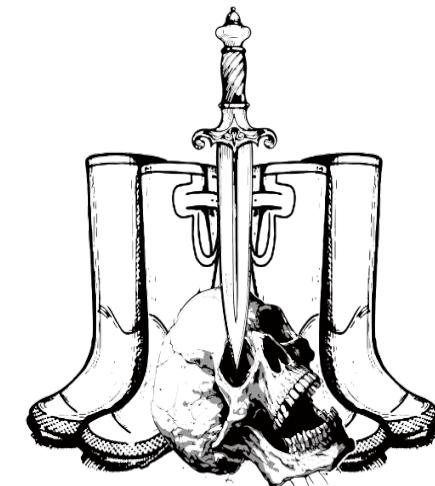
"There, all done." Pansy stepped back with a proud grin on her face. "And all with minimal bloodshed. Next time, we should start a little earlier, though." Hermione didn't see the point in having gotten so dressed up; it was only dinner with Tony Blair, the muggle Prime Minister, who was pretty much guaranteed to sign whatever they put in front of him. 'Consider it a practice run,' Pansy had said when Hermione had told her as much.

"Next time?" Hermione whipped around to face her. "Next time, I will do it myself."

Any warmth on the black-haired witch's face vanished entirely. "Let me make this very clear, Granger, if you fuck with my creation at all, ruin it in any way, I will be cutting it off."

Ginny snorted again. "Merlin, you sound like she did in the Order base when it came to her inventions."

Hermione raised an eyebrow at Pansy. She contemplated holding off on giving Pansy her ring just so she could land a stinging hex on the witch's buttcheek before she was shielded, but ultimately she found that Pansy's threat warmed the cockles of her heart a little. "Aww." Her hand came up to cover her heart. "You care about me. That is just so..." She took a second to enjoy the witch's horrified look "Cute." Hermione shrugged with a smirk.



CHAPTER 18: THE TRANSFORMATION

It was only six days between Astoria's potion being done and her next bout of bad days. Hermione stood nervously in the doorway as Theo gathered the blonde's hair while she vomited nothing but blood into the toilet. Not all of her beautiful blonde hair had been spared; a few strands at the front had been caught in the expulsion before Theo managed to clear them from her face.

Theo rubbed at the witch's back and offered her soothing words that Hermione couldn't hear. She stood by and watched silently as the blonde shook, the colour draining from Astoria's face more and more with every violent emptying of her stomach. Today would be the first trial of Hermione's potion, the only issue was that

Pansy started spluttering, "As if Granger! It's only because it's our asses on the line that I'm even bothering."

Hermione nodded. "Oh, I see. So if you were safe from all that, you wouldn't still be doing my hair and making sure I look nice for the ministers of the world?" Hermione grinned, sharing a look with Ginny, who rolled her eyes and chuckled. Pansy was the last one whose blood she needed. She had very subtly collected everyone else's earlier that day. Well, not really subtly at all, actually. Ginny had come outright and asked Blaise for his; Hermione had 'accidentally' cut Theo while working in the shed that morning. She had stung Draco with a very minor slicing hex disguised as a stinging hex, and Daphne had just outright pricked with a needle.

She had really pissed the blonde off with that one, she hadn't wanted to speak to Hermione at all during lunch, but when it came time to start getting ready, she had dropped her bad mood. Pansy's eyes narrowed. "Does this have anything to do with why you're going around collecting everyone's blood?"

Hermione didn't answer; she just continued to smile at her. Pansy sighed. "Fine, keep your secrets." Pansy waved her wand, and a vial appeared. Hermione watched as the witch pointed her wand to the tip of her finger, and a thin cut appeared; it took a second, but the blood eventually began to pool and collect. Pansy stuck her finger in the top of the vial and squeezed her finger until several drops fell and collected in the bottom. "Is that enough?" Pansy asked her when the blood had flooded the bottom centimetre.

Hermione nodded. "It's perfect, actually, thank you." She snatched the vial from Pansy before she could change her mind about asking questions. "Now tell me again, if you were safe, would you still be doing all of this?" Hermione asked pointedly

Pansy's eyes narrowed on her, and she clicked her tongue in reluctance. "Yes, Granger, I would, and you know it. Don't mess up your hair." She bit out before storming from Hermione's room. Ginny chuckled and rolled over on her bed.

"That's everyone now, yeah?" Ginny indicated to the vial in Hermione's hands.

Everyone aside Astoria, but she never leaves the house anyway, so I'm not sure that she really needs one." Hermione held the vial up to inspect it. "Perhaps I'll ask her anyway," Hermione mumbled, not so much for the sake of a ring but because she had some theories that she wanted to test out about the youngest of their group's blood curse. She hadn't even told Ginny yet that she wanted to start looking into it because, at this stage, it was purely hypothetical.

"How long will it take?" Ginny frowned, her eyes locked on the red liquid within.

Technically speaking, the rings didn't require much time to make. They, just like Tom Riddle's face restoration, required a little sacrifice... and obviously some dark magic. Hermione shrugged. "Shouldn't take long, especially now that I know what I'm doing."

She nodded towards the door, and the redhead followed her out. Ginny had already gotten ready and had purely been lounging around for the sake of entertainment. Her dark red cocktail dress was eerily close to the colour of the blood in Hermione's hand, as was Ginny's lipstick. It made Ginny's skin appear a little more pale than usual, but Hermione thought she looked amazing, and so did Blaise, evident by the way that he had pulled her into his room half an hour earlier.

Hermione had been ordered into a modest black number that clung to her waist and then flared out delicately. It reminded Hermione more of something that she would have worn to a funeral once upon a time than something she would wear to dinner with the Prime Minister. However, to be fair, that in and of itself was not something that she ever thought she would be doing.

The plan was to get his signature on these documents, consenting to the abolishment of the Statute of Secrecy in the United Kingdom and in return, when this all passed, Tom and his Death Eaters would be helping the muggle population by utilising magic to help speed up the process of restoration. For instance, places like the shopping centre she burned down the other day.

Then, Tom would make his public debut with the face that she had created for him, one that she was rather proud of at that. Hermione would invite the few journalists that were still floating around to the ministry to cover the breaking news: Tom would issue a public declaration of his decision to step into the Minister's role and demand a ceasefire from the Order by announcing that he was tired of the misinformation; that his intention was for witches and wizards alike to step out of the dark and that the Order needed to surrender or be tried for treason.

Draco and Blaise both stood at the bottom of the stairs waiting for them, a glass each in their hands, their heads turning their way as their footprints echoed off the marble beneath their shoes. There was a slight dip in Draco's brow of disapproval as his eyes roamed over her, and the level at which her heart dropped in disappointment surprised her, instantly souring her mood and making her self-conscious.

She didn't think she looked bad, maybe not what she would have picked, but surely her appearance wasn't offensive? She swallowed down a snarky comment as they approached the wizards, Blaise held out his arm to Ginny, who lit up as if he hung the

Ginny chuckled beside them in amusement. "Oh great. I'm going to end up somehow refereeing this, aren't I?"

Hermione turned to her with a teasing glower. "I doubt it, Gin. You will be too busy screwing Blaise's brains out."

Ginny fought a grin. "At least one of us is getting laid. Unlike someone who won't admit that she wants-"

Hermione frowned and shook her head. "I have admitted it. But I also refuse to be the one to crack first, if he wants me, then he can be the one to beg, not the other way around." She finished smugly.

Theo chuckled beside her. "You two definitely fit in here."

"Not all of it. I'll catch you up on what you missed with the next batch if this works." Hermione placated, "How did you guys get on in Surrey?" Hermione didn't mean to sound as concerned as she did; truly, she was just interested, but the way that Ginny and Theo looked at each other and smirked irked her. "Forget it. I don't even know why I bother."

"Don't you?" Ginny teased with clear enjoyment. Hermione knew that the household had made numerous bets on her and Draco's non-existent sex life, she hadn't bothered to question Draco's willingness to fuck her since the very short-lived fight outside last week, but he had yet to make any indication that it went deeper than a surface level attraction. It could be as simple as her being a single woman in close proximity to him.

"Surrey was fine, Princess. Draco survived without injury." Theo teased.

Hermione rolled her eyes in response. "Oh, for fuck sake. I wasn't asking about Malfoy; I was asking about Surrey. You know, where the mission was?"

Theo chuckled. "Yeah, we know what you asked versus what you meant. Surrey was fine. I killed thirteen people, couldn't tell you their names."

Hermione scoffed. "Is that all? Thirteen is nothing." She mocked pointedly.

Theo licked his lips and stared at her long and hard. She had yet to see him look quite so passive-aggressive before, as if calculating a sum that didn't exist. "Actually, Princess, I believe I have twelve up on you since you arrived."

Hermione scoffed and crossed her arms, giving him a challenging look. "That's only because I haven't been on any raids!" She could feel the tightening in her chest, the one that always drove her to win at everything because it was too uncomfortable not to be. She might have lost the need to consume books at a ghastly rate, but she hadn't lost that need to be the best of the best. She blamed her competitive nature on her mother.

"Even if you had been at fifty raids, I would still be ahead." Theo straightened and stated with a confidence that had her seething. It seemed that the wizard before her was just as competitive as she was, and now she felt like she had something to prove.

"Care to put money on that?" Her eyes narrowed on Theo. She liked Theo, he was fun to be around and had a similar style of humour to her and Ginny, he seemed as ready to annoy Draco as she was, and he had put up with her excessive use of the wireless at loud volumes without complaint, especially when she did it to annoy Draco, but right now she was gearing up to do whatever it took to take him down.

"Oh, you are so on sweetheart." Theo licked his teeth. "Fifty galleons to the winner of each raid, and the first to a hundred gets five hundred?"

Hermione held out her hand to shake on it. "Deal."

moon and painted the stars, leading her away toward the apparition point in the yard outside.

Hermione watched them leave, and for the first time in a long time, the tiniest shards of loneliness pricked at her cold heart. Draco tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear, startling her. His eyes were looking at her hair with a scowl. "You look nice."

Hermione scowled up at him. "You sure? Because your expression says otherwise." She snarled.

Draco looked at her in confusion for a second, his bottom lip becoming trapped between his teeth as he tried to hide an entertained smirk. "Let me clarify: you look divine, Granger; however, I am not a fan of the pureblood, trophy wife persona Pansy has put you in."

"Oi." Pansy snapped, coming back into the passageway with a drink in hand.

Draco raised an eyebrow at her and waved his wand. The pins holding Hermione's hair in place vanished, letting her hair fall freely around her shoulders. Pansy let out a disgruntled shriek of horror. "Draco Lucius Malfoy!" She screeched. Draco grabbed Hermione's hand and tugged her through the kitchen and to the apparition point. She tried to ignore the flipping butterflies in her abdomen that took flight at his touch.

It would do her no good to allow this gooey schoolgirl crush to continue. "Oh, Mi, Pansy is going to kill you if she sees you." Ginny's eyes blew wide at the sight of her free-flowing hair.

"She saw, trust me." Hermione accentuated with round eyes.

Draco scowled. "She will get over it."

Ginny quirked her eyebrows. "Well, then, you better hope she comes and cuts your hair in the middle of the night instead."

Blaise and Draco gave each other an odd look. "She won't," Draco mumbled confidently. "Can we go now, or are we going to stand around yapping all evening?" He snapped, suddenly tense. Hermione's navel yanked as Draco apparated them away from the chateau to Riddle Manor. His apparition, like Daphne's, was much gentler than Theo and Blaise's. The four of them materialised fully between each jump before he moved on to the next spot.

When they landed on the gravel driveway, she was surprised to see the edges of the paths lit up with perfectly spaced lights; lanterns placed around the base of the manor before them highlighted the ivy climbing up the face of the wall and cast shadows in pretty patterns. "Oh." was all Hermione managed before Draco's hand fell to the space between her shoulder blades and pressed her to move forward.

This time felt different than any other time she had been to the manor before. Funnily enough, if she thought about it, pretty much every time she had been to the manor, it had presented her with a different atmosphere. She had never felt the estate feel so human as what she did now. He led her toward yet another new room, this time another dining room - but one far more appropriate for seating only a small number of people. The smell of roasting meat wafted through the room, making her mouth water.

Tom stood next to the fireplace in a slender black suit, staring down into the flames. Seeing him look so normal after years of wearing tatty black robes had her stumbling over a step. She looked at Draco in surprise, who mouthed the singular word 'Pansy' back at her.

Of course, was Pansy behind the sudden furniture and decor that decorated every wall and corner of the property? "Tom, something smells good." She smiled at the wizard, who looked up, his eyes still far away in thought.

"Hermione, why must you insist on awful nicknames?" He rubbed his temple, deflated.

Hermione blinked at him. "First of all, Tom is your actual name, not a nickname. Voldemort sounds like a comic book bad guy who gets dunked in a vat of chemicals; we are not calling you that." She stepped closer to him and looked at the spot he had been rubbing at. "Is everything okay?" She asked quietly, the others having the decency to pretend not to hear.

Tom looked at her with a tired smile. "Yes, everything is fine. Simply been a long day; I'm afraid that I'm not used to Miss Parkinson and Mrs Nott's company or with the task of shopping." He grimaced.

"Ahh," Hermione smiled, patting his arm sympathetically. "Now that I understand."

Tom smiled softly at her and led her back toward the others, his hand sitting lower than Draco's had at her mid-back. Hermione found immense joy in the way that Draco's eyes darkened and narrowed at the action, his jaw clenching. Hermione turned her face towards Tom, leaning innocently closer to him in the process. "I do like what you've done with the place, though. It is much more fitting for a Minister for Magic." She praised, and Draco clenched his fist tightly in the corner of her eye.

"Thank you." He paused as they approached the other three, taking in her appearance. "You look ravishing tonight," Hermione smirked at no one in particular as Tom's eyes slid over to Ginny. Draco ground his teeth, not that Tom noticed, but she and Blaise certainly did. "As do you, Ginevra; absolutely stunning."

Ginevra gave him a tight smile. "I suppose I deserve that," she admitted reluctantly. Tom's eyes sparkled in triumph. The doors to the dining room opened once more, and

Everyone just seemed to have this confidence in her that she would be able to pull everything she created off. Ginny had never, for a second, appeared to doubt that the rings would work and keep them safe when they started this madness. Theo now seemed to trust that his wife would be well looked after and that whatever concoction Hermione came up with would be safe for her to drink. That, of course, was the intention, but she couldn't know for sure.

"Are you nervous about it?" Ginny eyed her warily. The redhead often knew her better than she knew herself.

Hermione shrugged again, "It's not often I have other people's well-being on the line with my experiments, but no, I am certain that I calculated everything correctly. The potion will be fine, the only question comes down to whether it helps or not."

Ginny smiled at her. "I have no doubt that it will. Even if it's only a little bit, she will still be better off."

Hermione swallowed and nodded her head. "I have some ideas about Voldie's potion, too, but I think I'm going to need to visit the graveyard."

"Oh god, you're not going to make him drink his father's remains, are you?" Ginny pulled a disgusted face.

Hermione chuckled but avoided answering her friend all the same. Hearing that Tom Riddle Sr. would need to donate a bone to her potion was probably not the appropriate conversation to be having directly after 'Hey Mione, guess what - I found my soulmate,' so she settled for a smile.

"So." She pointedly changed the subject. "You and Blaise. Does that mean I'll be losing my neighbour?"

Ginny genuinely thought about it for a moment. "Eventually, probably. But in the near future, I would like not to rush anything. At the end of the day, we will still need to learn who each other is in this life. Our bond... streamlines that process, but it's not like I'm getting married tomorrow or anything."

Hermione raised an eyebrow, "Yeah, we will see about that." She teased. Ginny opened her mouth to argue when the shed door opened again, and Theo burst in, breathless and hurried.

"Theodore," Hermione smirked, her eyes dropping to his shoes. 'Shoes' was putting it generously; it seemed that the brunette wizard had taken an extreme liking to the pink gumboots, as she seldomly saw him without them these days.

"Hi, I'm here, sorry. Did I miss it?" He panted, leaning on his knees to catch his breath.

popular once upon a time. The fact that they were in a war didn't change history; if anything, it just confirmed that this was where they belonged. Ginny belonged with Blaise, and Hermione belonged anywhere that Ginny was.

It would mean that she would have to streamline the process of recreating the protection rings for their housemates because there was no way in which she was going to let Blaise die just when Ginny reconnected with him. It would require telling them about their own rings, though, and despite feeling positive that they were supposed to be here, a part of her felt uneasy about it.

She and Ginny had spent so long being able to rely on only each other, it was still hard to wrap her head around the fact that wasn't the case anymore, especially now. She was getting there slowly. "So what does that mean now?" Hermione asked, coming to stand next to her and bumping her shoulder into Ginny's lightly.

"I don't even know." Ginny sighed and offered her a shrug. "I guess it means that I am off the market?"

Hermione tilted her head. "That's a shame; the French men will be heartbroken."

Ginny chuckled. "Oh, shut up."

Hermione's smile softened. "Are we happy about this?"

Ginny nodded. "Yeah, I think so. I mean, I wouldn't have chosen it if I had known beforehand, but now that it's there again, I can't imagine wishing for anything different. Does that make sense?"

Hermione nodded her understanding. "Yeah, I get it." Though could she really? She didn't know what the bond entailed that made it so special, so really, she could only be happy for her friend and do what she could to help and support her. "Well then, congratulations!"

The knowledge that she was truly staying here long-term was actually somewhat soothing. She had never been one for moving constantly. It made her feel uneasy. It did mean that whatever was going on in terms of her feelings towards Draco would likely get worse before it got better, but there was something stubborn in her that dug its heels in. She refused to make a fool of herself and act on it first; if he felt the same way, then he could come to her.

Hermione pushed off the counter and pulled some parchment with notes scrawled all over it. "How's the potion for Tor coming?"

Hermione shrugged. "I guess we will find out in..." She trailed off, turning to look at the small sombre blue numbers. "Thirty-seven minutes. I'm hopeful..." Hermione frowned; she had anticipated more backlash and pushback for what was essentially an experimental potion from, at the very least, Theo.

in edged a very timid-looking muggle man with his wife clinging to his side, eyes wide and terrified.

"Minister Blair," Hermione beamed, moving to greet the couple. "Welcome! It seems you found the place, alright? May I introduce you to Tom Riddle, the new Minister for Magic." Hermione waved her hand in Tom's direction, and he stepped forward, swallowing his discomfort in the situation and extending his hand to the muggle Prime Minister.

Tom smiled in greeting as Hermione casually attached herself to one of his arms. It was meant as a friendly gesture, but Blaise's fake cough told her everything she needed to know about Draco's reaction. "Pleasure to meet you."

Ginny took a deep breath and sat up straight. "Okay... What do you know about soul bonds?"

Hermione blinked at her several times slowly. When Ginny didn't elaborate further, Hermione sighed. "It was a ritual that some witches and wizards used to use to tie their souls together during marriage bonding ceremonies. It started to become frowned upon back at the turn of last century because it was said to be the work of dark magic to force a soulmate bond. Ginevra, tell me that you..."

"Right, so, obviously, there were no guarantees that two souls would be able to find each other in the next life or that they would find each other too late. So the way the magic worked was that you would be drawn towards the person you had a soul bond with, but you wouldn't actually know anything for sure until you... reconnected. I always thought it was a myth, you know, one of those..."

"Oh..."

"Things that grandparents used to warn you against to scare you out of getting married too young..."

"My..."

"I never actually believed it; I mean, who would? I mean, I've always thought Blaise was attractive in school..."

"God!"

"But I wouldn't say I was ever drawn to him before coming here, but then... last night..."

"You two are soul-bound?!" Hermione shrieked, her eyes round and her mouth falling open.

"Yes, it seems that that is the case." Ginny started chuckling in disbelief, her cheeks flooding with a tinge of red.

Hermione was seldom speechless, though she supposed that if there were a time to be speechless, now would be it. What did one even say to that? "I... well, what the fuck!" Hermione exclaimed, followed by a nervous laugh. "Are you serious?"

Ginny nodded. "Crazy, right?"

Hermione shook her head in disbelief. "Okay, so, rewind, you and Blaise started doing the deed..."

"Doing the deed?" Ginny giggled and raised an eyebrow at her.

"And while you were doing that, a soul bond from a past life activated?" Hermione asked incredulously.

"I know." Ginny bit her lip and nodded in agreement. She supposed that it wasn't that crazy, this was bound to happen from time to time, the ceremony had been very

Ministry. A wave of her wand had her iced tea levitating over to her, sipping it before setting it on the edge of the pool.

Astoria had relaxed again and returned to her sunbathing, her eyes closed and tilted up toward the sky. It was just a little too tempting. Hermione took a breath and sank beneath the water, gliding through it slowly like a predator on the hunt. Her fingertips pulled her along the bottom, assisting her. She didn't dare to breathe out and risk the bubbles, alerting the witch of the incoming danger.

The shadow of the pool floaty above her was her reward, she found she missed the thrill of the hunt and this, while not the same, scratched the itch a little. Her legs tucked under her and she kicked off the tiled floor, launching her upward quickly. Hermione collided with the inflated plastic, throwing the petite witch over the side with a scream, and laughter erupted around them.

Astoria, resurfaced, drenched from head to toe, coughing and gasping from shock. She glared at Hermione who only smirked back. Theo was too busy clutching his ribs and trying not to fall in with how hard he was laughing. "Your face..." He gasped between peals of laughter.

Draco was the only one who moved to help the witch, offering her a hand up and out of the pool, though he, too, was smirking. Astoria smiled thankfully and took the offered helping hand before kicking off the wall, catching Draco unaware and pulling him into the water, clothes and all. She then turned and yanked on Theo, pulling him in as well.

Hermione was laughing too hard to notice Draco swimming for her in the way that she had for Astoria. His hand gripped her ankle and tugged her down under the water while he propelled himself upward, but she grabbed at his shoulders and hair and clung on, forcing him to take her back to the surface with him. His fingertips dug into the backs of her thighs as he tried to push her away from him, but her ankles locked around his waist, her hands moving to his shoulders as she tried to shove him back under.

He allowed it, but only because his hands slid up over her ass, which sent sparks through her and to her waist, where he tightened his grip around her and pulled her down with him. His white blonde hair floated around his head like strands of silver.

His thumb brushing over the underside of her breast sent shivers down her spine and caused her nipples to harden within her swimsuit. His eyes, like steel, cut to them, his fingers digging in deeper and subconsciously pulling her closer.

A burning ache in her core tugged at her abdomen, driving her to ever so slightly roll her hips that she tried to play off as an attempt to break to the surface. Elsewhere in the pool, more splashes disrupted the water around them, but Draco remained firm

in his decision of holding them underwater. The hammering of her heart was also increasing her need to breathe deeper, but the restriction to do so made her lungs burn.

Blurriness of having her eyes open underwater or not, his smug smirk melted her insides. He wanted to play; fine, she would play. Her hands left his shoulders, trailing down his arms to cover his hands, where she pressed her fingers between his and pushed his hands upward and toward her breasts. Draco released a breath, the bubbles rising up between them, each hand squeezing at the flesh, his rubbing over her pebbled nipples softly. She wanted to moan at the touch; it really had been too long, but she wasn't going to let him win, so she carried to push his hands upward, slowly, over her chest, disappointment and confusion flashing across Draco's face.

Her hands guided his to the base of her throat, where again his hands gave a small squeeze, his control was slipping, she could see it in the way his eyes were locked on their intertwined hands. She held them tighter against her neck and his mouth parted, releasing another bubble of air. Surely, he would be running out of air soon; he would have to concede defeat, but he didn't even seem aware of it himself.

She snaked their hands to the underside of her jaw, pushing his thumb outward to stroke her flesh. His eyes clashed with hers, and she could see it even through the haze; the white-hot desire was there, so then why was he holding back? She kept going, pushing their hands up and into her hair, his finger clenching around the loose strands and pulling her closer to him, their hips aligning. Her eyes fluttering closed at the feel of his solid cock pressing against her was involuntary.

Her lungs were burning now, and her head was starting to spin. She needed to get to the surface, but she refused to give him the victory. Her heels dug into his asscheeks, her hands making their way back to the nape of his neck, where her fingers weaved through his hair, softly massaging her nails against his scalp. If they had been above water, she would have thought he would have purred because of the way his eyes fluttered. Her lips turned upward, pleased that she could have that effect on him, savouring it before her grip tightened instantly, tugging hard.

His instinct was to hiss, which, again, let more air escape him. He finally seemed to realise the true nature of the game with widening eyes and a smirk to match her own. He just needed to make the first move; if he did, then she would give him everything, probably more than she should want to give him. This little crush of hers was getting rather out of hand, he entered a room, and she knew about it because the fucking butterflies would start flipping. She had taken to training specifically when he didn't because she would be distracted and more focused on the way his muscles rippled than on Daphne's incoming blow.

She needed him to make the first move because she couldn't be that girl. The girl who made all the moves and trailed around after a guy who didn't want her as much as she wanted him. His hold on her hair loosened, and his hands slid down to her shoulders, his fingers splayed out and gripped at her back, pulling her closer. Her face and chest were so close to his that it made her skin burn even against the coolness of the pool water. It was her turn to release a breath, bubbles rising up between them.

Surely, he would kiss her. They were so close already; could he feel her heart beating? Could he tell what he was doing to her? Hermione ground herself against him, eliciting the release of bubbles from both of them. Her lungs were constricting, burning with the need to release what breath she had left and renew it with fresh air, but surely this would be it, right?

Another splash and someone collided into them, grabbing at Draco's shoulders and tugging on him. Draco released her immediately, and Hermione wasn't sure whether it was embarrassment or the need to prevent her from being pulled under further when he would not be in control. She hoped it was the latter.

Air couldn't come quickly enough as she heaved for a few seconds before looking at the disruption in annoyance, only to see Draco and Blaise caught up in a wrestling tussle. Her eyes found Ginny sitting on the side of the pool, drinking her iced tea. "Oi! That's mine!" Hermione swam to the edge. "You emerge from your sex-filled isolation and come and steal what doesn't belong to you?" She joked, took the glass out of the redhead's hand and sipped on it.

Ginny smirked at her and raised an eyebrow. "Are you referring to the tea or your man?"

"My tea." Hermione glared at her. "Your husband is closer to Malfoy being his man than I am."

Ginny shrugged. "You haven't made a move-"

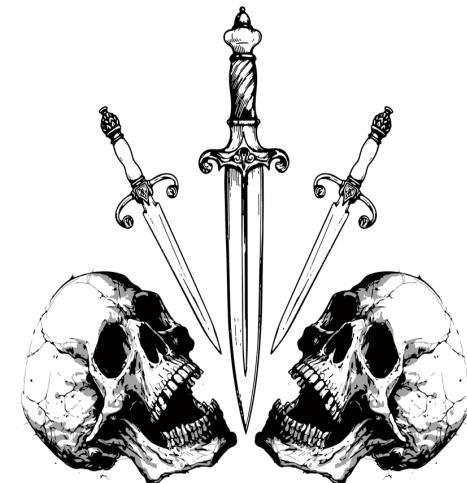
Hermione scowled. "I wasn't far off."

Ginny feigned innocence. "Oh really? Apologies, we didn't know."

Hermione knew for a fact that Ginny was lying through her teeth. "Oh my god, Ginevra, please tell me you didn't just send Blaise in to pull him away based on a bet."

Ginny smirked at her and took a sip of Hermione's iced tea. "I don't know what you're talking about." Hermione scowled and pulled the redhead into the pool, shoving her playfully under the water.

The foyer was not as clean as she would have liked, but at least it was better than it had been when they had inspected it two days prior when they had begun the planning of this announcement. There were a few very timid-looking journalists huddled



CHAPTER 24: A CALL FOR CEASEFIRE

A storia squealed as Hermione splashed cold water at her on her pool lounger. "Hermione!!" Theo laughed loudly from the edge of the pool, his legs kicking lightly in the water. Music floated all around them from the wireless placed on the ground just outside the kitchen door. Sitting a few feet away underneath the shade of the table's umbrella, Draco, Daphne, and Pansy conversed casually.

Today seemed to be one of the rare mornings that no one had anything to do, and so they were allowed to simply enjoy it as they saw fit. Since summer would soon be on its way out, that meant enjoying the nice weather before they had to go to the

man out of sorts," Pansy mumbled, still frowning down at the crowd below. Hermione clicked her tongue and raised her eyebrows in defiance. Perhaps if he was so out of sorts, then he should act on it and give her some sort of sign to go ahead.

"We have bets going if you would like in, Minister," Ginny joked, ignoring the filthy look that Hermione gave her.

"Put me down for the Malfoy lad caving first, before the end of the month."

Hermione's eyes narrowed on the French man who beamed back at her. "Why is it always about me and Malfoy?" She scowled.

"Because everyone is taken and boring?" Blaise offered her sympathetically.

Hermione shook her head. "You two activate an old soul bond, and that's 'boring'?"

"Now that is interesting." Louis sat forward glancing between the two of them "When did you two remarry?"

Blush flooded Ginny's cheeks. "Oh, we haven't... we aren't... We only just got together, so..."

Renauld waved his hand nonchalantly. "What does that matter, you have your whole lives to learn and relearn each other, soulmates need the stability of matrimony. It helps your magic grow! You will be able to borrow from one another, you know? I could do it right now if you wanted?" Perhaps it was the whiskey talking, perhaps that's just how things were done around here either way the room had fallen silent and all eyes had moved to Ginny and Blaise.

Blaise was looking at Ginny like he would be okay with whatever she wanted, ever. Ginny looked like a deer in the headlights, Hermione could see her mulling it over in her head, fear of what that would mean for her clouding her thoughts.

"Gin," Hermione said, pulling Ginny's attention to herself. "Whatever you decide, things will be okay. Trust yourself." Hermione nodded at her, love and appreciation shining back at her through her friends' shining eyes.

together as if it would bring them any level of safety. It would not. If they wanted them dead, they would already be so.

Hermione rolled her head in an attempt to loosen up her muscles. Today needed to go well, they needed this announcement to go as planned. She had spent several days coaching Tom through what he would say, helping him to write his speech and reminding him that once upon a time he had been one of the most charming bastards around.

She had needed something to fill her days while Ginny had been busy locked in Blaise's room fucking her brains out and only reemerging for food and hydration. The Order had gone radio silent, which put her a little on edge. They had always been careful, but this felt bigger.

So, in the short of it, Tom needed to start wooing back the public. "Good afternoon." Hermione cooed sweetly as she approached them. Her presence here seemed to come as somewhat of a surprise. In the years following the war, the majority of media outlets had shut their doors; their clientele had largely gone underground, and so didn't risk ordering the Daily Prophet lest an owl be seen delivering it.

But that didn't mean that she wasn't still one of the more recognisable faces of the Order, an unfortunate stain on her record from her days at Hogwarts with Harry. "Thank you so much for coming. Can I get you anything? Tea? Coffee? Perhaps a sandwich?" All five of them shook their heads anxiously. Hermione sighed. "Please try to relax. This is a good day. No one will harm you here."

A door opened, and the sound of footsteps echoed off the tiles. Tom and Ginny, engaged in discussion, entered the foyer and headed their way. Ginny laughed loudly at something Tom said, which seemed to relax the wizard, a grin of his own breaking out across his face. Tom had spent so long being Voldemort that she wasn't surprised that he had forgotten certain elements of how to be human.

His solution had easily become torture and murder during his reign as Dark Lord, but during that time, his insecurity had been allowed to fester - his paranoia convincing him that everyone and everything was out to destroy him and take what he had. To be fair to Tom, in a way, they had. "Hello, I am so sorry to have kept you waiting. Tom Riddle, pleased to meet you all." Tom's suave voice rippled like velvet. It was a line that they had practised a few times together in an attempt to get him past his disgust of the word sorry.

That first afternoon had been the most frustrating of her time with him to date; his stubborn refusal to utter such nonsense had wasted their entire day. But here, you would never have guessed. Hermione puffed up with pride as he offered his hand to

the reporters in a friendly gesture. The reporters slowly took his offered hand one at a time and shook it lightly.

They had not been told the nature of their visit today, only that they would be receiving an announcement and that they would need to meet here at the ministry. “Can we get you anything? Food? Drink? No? Then perhaps you would like to get started then, I’m sure you’re curious why I have requested you here today. I would like to announce my decision to step into the role of Minister for Magic.” Tom indicated to the chaise lounge that they had brought in specifically for the interviews; the five reporters sat awkwardly, and all pulled out variations of quick notes while Tom sat in the armchair opposite them.

“I think that our citizens have been suffering long enough - caught up in the Order’s crossfire for too long. It’s time we put an end to this madness and stop allowing these terrorists to destroy our community.”

Hermione watched as the confusion passed over the reporter’s faces; one of the braver wizards raised his hand. “I’m sorry to interrupt, but I am afraid I am very confused... Is it not your desire to exterminate the muggle population?”

Hermione felt for the poor lad; he looked near wetting himself under Tom’s sharp gaze. It was almost comical. Hermione chuckled, and Tom seemed to remember himself, chuckling lightly himself. “Oh dear, the misinformation being passed around really is rather damaging,” Ginny mumbled, earning them more looks of confusion.

“Not at all!” Tom shook his head in disbelief. “No, I’m afraid that stems from vicious rumours spread by the Order terrorists. I don’t want to exterminate them. I want to bring them into our world.” Hermione beamed proudly at him. He didn’t even hesitate; it had been entirely believable, and it was not at all as though it had been rehearsed for several hours. “I think that our worlds should be open to both sides and that we should be stepping out of the darkness, allowing the technological advances of the muggle world to propel us into the modern day. In return, there are many things that the wizarding world can do to increase the quality of muggle daily life as well.”

The reporters all stared at him wide-eyed. “I’m sorry, sir?”

Tom waved his hand dismissively. “Someday perhaps, but for now, I want to focus on rebuilding our community, getting us back on our feet, which is why I have asked you all here today. I would like to issue a public statement ordering that my first official act as Minister for Magic, as decreed in the state of emergency under article 119, section 194b by the Wizengamot, be the immediate surrender and ceasefire of these Order... radicals. Too much bloodshed has taken place, and too much damage has been done. These violent attacks are unnecessary, and our country’s witches and wizards have been

to step closer to Renaud. “It’s not a matter of just getting Ren’s signature. He would need to take it to the national assembly, and in order to make it sound with the confederation, it would need to be unanimous. You won’t be able to walk into every leader’s office around the world and say, ‘Hey, sign this because a prophecy said you should.’ You will be laughed out.” Louis signed and leant against Raynaud’s desk.

“There’s also the issue of your little Dark Lord proble-”

Hermione waved her hand dismissively. “Already solved. Face fixed, energy redirected, muggle converted, currently training him to be a suitable political face.”

Renaud and Louis both blinked at her as they tried to process her words. “Are you claiming that you have ended a twenty-plus year-long war overnight? That seems a little far-fetched.”

Hermione scoffed. “No, of course not. Don’t be ridiculous.” They appeared to grow confused by her retraction. “It was more like an afternoon?” She turned to Ginny and Blaise “Right? Few hours?” She turned back, feeling smug to see their mouths parted and both of the wizards speechless. “I mean, he tried to torture me initially, as one does, but... you know. Protection. So after he finished torturing himself, I just used logic, appealing to his paranoid nature and need for acceptance as well as his vanity and desire for wider respect and acknowledgement... It was like taking candy from a baby.” Hermione shrugged.

“Sounds about right.” Ginny nodded in agreement. Pansy knocked loudly on the window, shaking her head at someone below. Hermione strained to see in the crowds below and saw Draco getting a little too close and personal to another one of Renaud’s security guards. Daphne weaved through the people to get to him, pointing Pansy out to him, who gave him a look of ‘don’t you fucking dare’.

“Look, why don’t I send over some of my plans tomorrow - inventions I think could really make a difference in the world that harness both muggle technology and magic? I’ll send my proposed outline for what a world without the secrecy limitations might look like and the benefits for both parties. You can think it over. If you decide not to pursue this, then that’s okay, but I really hope you do because I would really like to have a close working relationship with you and your Government.”

Renaud gave her a proud smile. “Alright then, send it and I’ll look it over, but I won’t make any promises, Hermione. This is bigger than what I would have thought you wanted.”

“Oh, for fuck sake- I would like to apologise on behalf of our colleague. Theo likes to think that practical jokes are funnier than they are. I would steer clear of the fondue if I were you, Minister.” Pansy shook her head. “Merlin Granger, you really have that

"Just your signature." Hermione smiled sweetly.

Renauld choked on the whiskey he was sipping. "Just straight into it, I see." He laughed. "What am I signing?"

"I want to abolish the Statute of Secrecy worldwide. In order to do that, I need to take at least 60% of the world's support to the international confederation of wizards. Now, I have England's muggle minister's support, but that means little because he is desperate to restore the United Kingdom to peacetime, and as it is, the government is in shambles. But what might interest you is a prophecy that the Order hid. I was supposed to resolve the war years ago, but the Order has been blocking my path every chance they could get because Kingsley wants Minister for himself."

Renauld sat back in his chair and looked at her. "The prophecy said that she would lead us out of the dark, saving our world in the process." Blaise chimed in from his spot on the couch.

"The world is hardly progressive enough to handle the truth of magic; it can't even handle basic social issues as it is," Louis spoke up. His English was drowning under a French accent, but he spoke kindly, like his eyes.

Hermione nodded. "I know what you mean, but I believe it can. If anything, I think this might be the kick it needs to stop viewing everything else as life and death." Hermione debated. "Minis—"

"Please, just Renauld." The man grimaced.

"Alright, Renauld was right earlier. The mirror charm you figured out - rather quickly, might I add, too - was my design. It's not the only thing I have in the works. I think an argument could be made for accelerating the development of both worlds, which, after all, isn't that what tonight's gala is about? Advancing the wizarding race?"

"She isn't wrong, mon amour." Renauld sighed.

Louis's eyes darted to her and her friends suspiciously, instantly on edge. "Your secret is safe with those in this room, Louis. Pansy's life partner is down there in the crowd somewhere, which is probably one reason she is anxiously watching." Hermione snorted as Pansy smirked and pulled the finger at Hermione. "Ginny would never tell a soul if I asked her not to, and Blaise is her soulmate, quite literally, so he would rather die than betray her trust. I have no reason to keep your secret, but regardless of how this meeting plays out, I will because it is not my story to share, and I would rather build a good rapport between us. I might be starting out in England, but I am hoping that France will play an equally large part in this little revolution."

"The logistics of it alone are a nightmare to think about." Louis returned to their original conversation; his shoulders had relaxed, though, and he had allowed himself

without the safety and security of a functioning government, a functioning economy for too long now."

"And how do you plan to fix that?" A young woman who had fallen immediately into journalist mode asked.

"Our first two major projects will be the restoration and rejuvenation of St Mungo's medical hospital and Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry."

"Am I wrong to say that your Death Eaters were in charge during its final year of operation? Students were tortured and taught dark magic that was practised on other students, correct?" The witch narrowed her eyes at Tom, who, despite some tension in his shoulders, kept his composure.

"Ah, that was a rather unfortunate judgement call in the early days. I support Severus Snape stepping into the role, not knowing that he was, in fact, a spy for the Order. I can assure you that no such atrocities will take place when the school reopens. In fact, I have put effort into copying the proposed curriculum for your notes." Ginny pulled out a file with a slip of parchment inside that duplicated and floated to each of them.

The five reporters sat there, scanning over the page for a moment, no doubt confused by the total integration of muggle sports and literary studies. The witch, obviously still not quite believing what they were selling, turned to Hermione and Ginny. "You two are Hermione Granger and Ginevra Weasley, are you not? I was under the impression that you two were members of the Order. What do you have to say to those who will no doubt be confused by your sudden switch in allegiance?"

Hermione took a deep breath and tried to slow her racing thoughts. This witch still had a lot more fire left in her than she would have thought. "Yes, that is true. Unfortunately, in our youth, we put our trust in those in positions of authority. We believed what they told us to be true because they were supposed to be the adults we could rely on. As we have grown up, we have become aware of things that our adolescent selves were not. The Order is rather unfortunately corrupt, and Kingsley Shacklebolt personally has an interest in keeping this war going."

"In what sense?" The witch challenged.

"In the sense that he purposely withheld course-altering information in an effort to maintain the position he does, including but not limited to advancing technology, condoning the assault of Order members, and hiding prophecies that would change the course of the war," Ginny stated in a matter of fact tone.

Renauld stopped dancing and looked at her with intrigue. "Come, let's relocate to my office."

Hermione laughed. "Oh! I did not mean this instant; you have thrown this fabulous gala."

He gave her a pointed look. "You hate it and find it pointless. You and I both know it, and I feel the same. It is an unfortunate aspect of the job, but I would much rather hear about this. Grab your friends, and let's go."

Hermione felt her face light up in a quick fondness for the French Minister. "Are you sure?" She didn't actually wait for a response as she worked her way back through the crowd quickly, searching for Ginny or any of the others. Blaise and Ginny were engaged in a hushed conversation with the head of security she had seen whispering in Renauld's ear. Pansy was in the middle of a discussion with some guy who appeared to be debating something or other with her.

Hermione gripped her arm to grab her attention. "Pansy, where's Malfoy?" The elderly wizard scowled at her, muttering something in French, presumably about her rudeness.

Pansy shrugged, "Theo, Daph, and Tor all took him outside on the terrace to calm down." The short-haired witch's eyes sparkled with delight. It seemed that everyone liked the way in which Draco would become when it came to her. She certainly did, as evident by the low fire burning in her stomach at the thought.

"Okay, you need to come with me." Hermione dragged her over to Blaise and Ginny. "You two, we have a meeting, like right now." Her other hand grabbed Ginny's and pulled her along, too. Louis chuckled and fell in behind them.

Renauld was talking to a couple nearby where she had left him, but on seeing her return, he smiled and excused himself, directing them toward a doorway at the edge of the room and immediately to the right up a set of stairs. Renauld's office had a wall of glass overlooking the gala below, which carried on unaffected. "Can I get anyone anything?" Renauld shrugged off his jacket and tossed it in the corner onto a cream armchair.

Blaise clenched his jaw, and Hermione hid a smirk. Hermione suspected that the sole purpose of the chair was as a dumping ground for Renauld's briefcases or jackets, as it was clearly positioned out of the way of any guests that might be visiting the minister's office in its place behind his desk. Louis rolled his eyes and waved his hand, sending the jacket to the closet instead. Ginny and Blaise collapsed onto the black leather sofa pressed against the glass while Pansy moved to observe the party through the glass, her arms folded across her chest.

Renauld made an ‘ahh’ sound before twirling her and spinning her back to him. His hand rested against her lower back, pulling her in closer. “Well, then, he has already lost.”

Hermione leaned back and peered at him. “What do you mean?”

Renauld’s eyes flickered from Draco across the room to her, a small smirk on his lips; he tilted his head toward her cheek and leant in closer. Hermione stiffened, but no kiss came, just the hot breath of his words. “You, Hermione Granger, are the brightest witch of our age. Did you think I would not recognise you? My head of security, Louis, tells me something very interesting. I think anyone who can find a way to reverse magic back on its caster has already won a battle of wills, don’t you think? Fascinating stuff. I hope one day you will indulge me and tell me how, but for now, I assume your presence tonight is not purely for the company.”

Hermione gave him a sly smirk. “And what makes you think I have anything to do with it?”

Renauld threw his head back and laughed far too loudly for what she had said. She raised an eyebrow in confusion at him, but he spun them around again and whispered, “He is easily jealous, your man, is he not?”

Hermione sighed in understanding. “Yes, he can be.”

“Mine is not. He understands that in certain roles, one must portray a certain type of lifestyle. Unfortunately, despite it being 2005, the world has not quite caught up yet; I hope it will soon. I must confess that while I take great enjoyment in winding your boyfriend up, this is as much for my benefit as it is for yours.” The realisation hit her, and suddenly, any discomfort she felt melted away.

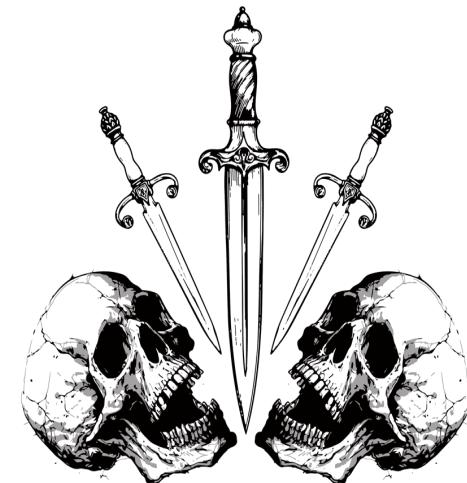
Her hand rubbed against his arm. “Hmmm. Well, then, I shall try to make it worth your while.”

He continued to hold onto her as one song ended and another began. “You could tell me the purpose for blessing us with your presence. Correct me, but I thought that you were on the side opposing the Death Eaters?”

Hermione huffed a half laugh. “That, Minister, is a long story, one that I am afraid is a little too sensitive for nosy ears and a little too long for a stolen second dance. However, I was hoping that I would be able to acquire a meeting with you to discuss it.”

Renauld looked pleasantly shocked. “Discuss it with me?”

Hermione nodded, “I have recently moved to France. As you know, the English government is in shambles, but I have a solution... a worldwide solution that I would love France to support me on. It could mean big changes...”



CHAPTER 25: ...I WANT YOU IN MINE

A loud knock echoed through the house, causing everyone to freeze and look at each other in confusion. “What the hell was that?” Theo exclaimed.

A moment later, Zimmy popped into the kitchen with an air of bewilderment as well. “Mistress Granger, French Minister for Magic, Renauld Thibault is here to see you.”

“He - wait, what ??” Hermione jumped up quickly in shock before looking to the elf to show the way. In the weeks that she had been here, they had not only never used

the front door, but she didn't even know where it was. The elf, seeing her uncertainty, led the way.

Sure enough, the immense front door was open, and there stood Renauld, his hands casually shoved in the pockets of his suit pants, looking at something out of her line of view. "Minister!" Hermione rushed forward with a smile slipping into place. "I'm so sorry, I wasn't expecting you!"

He turned and brightened at the sight of her. "No, no, of course not. You'll have to forgive me for just stopping by, but I hope the gifts I bring will make up for that."

"Gifts? Renauld, you didn't need to get me anythin - Oh, sorry, please come in, you didn't need to get me anything." Hermione motioned for him to come inside. Two men in black suits eyed her with distrust but remained where they were at the bottom of the stairs while their boss stepped into the foyer.

Renauld waited to say anything else as he trailed her back to the kitchen where the others were all still congregated. He reached into his jacket and pulled out a file, handing it to her with an approving smile. "The vote was unanimous. Congratulations Hermione, you have the support of France behind you."

"Wait," Hermione took the folder and flipped through the document within, all five hundred and seventy-seven signatures were present. "Oh my gosh. Renauld, this is..." She trailed off.

"Would you like a tea minister? Coffee?" Pansy smiled with all the grace of her pureblooded upbringing.

"Oh no, thank you, Miss Parkinson. I won't be staying, but I couldn't miss the opportunity to see Hermione's face when she learned that she had been successful in her endeavours." He offered Pansy a tight smile.

"Of course." Pansy gave her a knowing look, a look that was not shared by Draco who was barely containing his disapproving look at the man.

"What's this? L'institut de recherche et d'innovation supérieur de H.G?" She frowned at the accompanying paperwork in the file. She really had to find time to learn French since she would continue to reside here for the foreseeable future.

Theo spluttered into his drink before delving into a coughing fit. Daphne clapped him on the back and offered her the sweetest of smiles. "H.G - That would be you. - Innovative Research and Enhanced Development Institution. The minister is giving you a laboratory for your experiments."

"Oh." Hermione's eyes grew wide in surprise. Oh? The Minister for Magic of fucking France, who just handed her a document with every single member of the national assembly's signatures on it and a research lab and all she could say was, oh ?!

again. The suit flicked his wand to separate Draco, but he only ended up throwing himself backwards a few feet. "What the hell?" Repeating the spell produced the same results, as Draco landed a third punch to the same place on the man's jaw, which had howls of pain being yanked from the suit on the ground.

"Malfoy, stop." Hermione sighed, moving forward to tug at his arm lightly. Somewhere on the edge of the room, she saw the remainder of her housemates slip in, and rush in alarm, toward them.

Draco immediately listened, standing and kicking the man swiftly in the balls before straightening his robes again. "Qui est la pute maintenant?" He snarled as the wizard rolled on the ground, groaning.

A man appeared nearby and cleared his throat, a tight smile on his face as he took in the scene with displeasure. "What seems to be the problem?"

Draco looked at the man with annoyance. "Your employee has a foul mouth, and I do not tolerate disrespect of my companions."

The man on the floor grunted something broken and mumbled around his gasps for air, and Draco lunged for him again. Hermione, thinking quickly, stepped between them, "Woah there, let's everyone... just... calm down." She held her hands up in peace. Draco's eyes bore into hers, and she could see the same restlessness that flowed through her. She had meant what she said that day. She had shown him her memories; they were a mirror of each other, and she could see that - the question was if he would.

"Couldn't agree more." The newest man, whom Hermione assumed was Minister Renauld Thibault based on Draco's previous statement, smiled, holding his arms out in agreement. "Miss Granger, I wonder if I might be so bold as to steal you from your boyfriend for a quick dance?"

"I'm not her boyfriend," Draco snapped venomously before storming away toward the others in their group. Hermione rolled her eyes while Renauld looked at her in what was certainly bemused disbelief.

"Certainly, Minister." Hermione dipped ever so slightly. Her dress, this time chosen by Ginny, didn't allow for much more than the smallest of courtesies.

Renauld waved his hand to stop her. "Renauld, please." The suit that had tried to magically move Draco away eyed her with fascination and whispered something into the minister's ear, who hummed in curiosity but extended his hand toward her anyway and whisked her away onto the dance floor.

"Your not boyfriend is watching, or should I say glaring." Renauld breathed close to her ear.

Hermione chuckled. "We are engaged in a battle of wills," Hermione answered.

Hermione straightened and forced a smile onto her face. She didn't see the point of being here talking to this woman about things that, frankly, Hermione had no interest in. She was here purely with the intention of speaking to the minister, someone she hoped Draco would spot on his return from the bar.

Half of these people didn't speak English, and as she had yet to learn French, this limited her ability to communicate. Draco and Blaise, the two French speakers of their little group, had both disappeared to the bar to obtain glasses of whiskey, which left her and Ginny to fend for themselves as the rest of their group had not yet arrived.

She felt the ghost of someone's hand against the exposed flesh of her back. Hermione turned as a man in a black suit and a sour-looking expression leant in to whisper to the woman opposite her, offering what Hermione assumed were apologies before attempting to lead her away, but Hermione did not move, only raised an eyebrow at him and his audacity.

The man looked frustrated and said something to her in an urgent, hushed demand, but it was entirely in French and went right over Hermione's head. Ginny had moved to step between them with a glare, but the man rolled his eyes and repeated his earlier statement. "I don't know what you're saying," Hermione exclaimed.

A tall, solid, and looming presence appeared at her back. "Enlevez votre main d'elle ou Je vous l'arrache." Draco's voice was cold and low in warning.

The man in the black suit sneered. "Votre petite putain ne m'intéresse pas; sa présence a été demandée par le ministre Renaud"

Draco's hand slid around her waist, this thumb brushing lightly over her skin where the low cut of her cleavage ended, and her dress resumed. He tugged her back behind him and stepped closer to the man, his face turning to stone. "Comment l'avez vous appellée?"

Draco's size and presence intimidated most; unfortunately, this man was not one of them. "Voil à ce qu'elle est n'est-ce pas, une sale petite pute?" Draco's fist collided with the jaw of the man so hard and fast that she swore she could hear a bone break, though she couldn't be sure whose, knocking the stranger to the ground. Around them came several startled shrieks of surprise.

"Wait," Hermione exclaimed, "Minister Renaud? I caught that, right?" She turned to confirm with Ginny, who was watching the two wizards exchange with far too much enjoyment. The suit scrambled back to his feet and was gearing up to spear Draco around his waist with a tackle.

"Gentleman!" The loud, booming voice of another suit halted the wizard that Draco had punched, but it did not stop Draco from stepping forward and punching the man

"Your ideas are inspired Hermione, I would be honoured to help you make them a reality in any way possible."

"Renaud, I don't know what to say! Thank you!" Hermione finally exclaimed.

"It's completely private and entirely yours to do with what you please, no regulations or limitations." He smiled, his bright green eyes gazing softly at her.

She nodded her appreciation and smiled back genuinely. "Thank you. This is very kind."

"Well, I'd best be off. I'm no doubt running late for my meeting with the games minister."

Hermione fell into step beside him as she walked him back through the house. "I wondered if I might ask for your assistance?" Renaud spoke quietly once they were out of earshot. "Do you trust your team?

Hermione paused to look over at him. "Yes, of course?" He seemed to hesitate over her words, but ultimately he obviously decided to trust her enough that her trust of the others would be acceptable enough validation.

"Louis has travelled to Italy, as you know." Renaud started slowly, Hermione nodded. "He was due back two days ago, but I have not heard from him. He left the hotel with his guards and never made it to the airport. Italy is claiming ignorance, they say they will look into it but..."

"But you think they have something to do with it." Hermione frowned at him in concern.

"Oui." Renaud lowered his gaze to the marble floor.

"So then why are you asking... Oh. I see." Louis was doing something that may have been frowned upon by the national assembly, a national assembly that Renaud convinced unanimously to sign her document, and if Louis had been caught, then this might become an ugly extraction and he would need someone that could be trusted not to hesitate to play dirty.

"Get me the information on where he was staying, and I'll see what we can do." Hermione agreed, not missing the way his eyes flashed in a tangled mix of hope and despair.

"Even if it's just his body... I would appreciate it."

Hermione paused and offered him a one armed hug "He will be okay Ren, I just know it." She didn't know it of course. She had no idea but she hoped for the minister's sake that he was, she had met Louis and she had liked him. He didn't deserve to meet an ill fate.

Renauld didn't say anything. He offered no sign of agreement, just ducked his head and left through the front door. His guards, visibly relaxed at the sight of their boss, returned, seemingly unharmed.

Italy had not been the next on their list to approach; they knew that Alessia Cascioli was not likely to hear out their proposal, let alone take it before her parliamentary house for voting. They had planned to leave her until she was among the last for that very reason; however, perhaps they could alter that plan. Attempt to find Louis while there.

Draco was positively sour when she reentered the kitchen, much to the apparent enjoyment and amusement of her other housemates. "Nice visit?" He scowled.

"It was actually," Hermione responded cheerfully. "I think I will be seeing a lot more of him in the near future."

Draco glared at her, sending butterflies fluttering in her stomach. They were both fighting this thing between them, waiting for the other one to crack first, but she would be damned if it was going to be her. No. She would, however, use his obvious jealousy to her advantage. Draco made a choking noise and slammed the bottle down on the counter. "Excuse me. I have training to do before I take this to the Dar- Tom." He bit out and stormed from the room. Hermione waited until she heard the slam of a door down the hallway before she allowed the snicker of laughter to leave her.

"You two are like watching a train wreck. Horrifying, but I can't look away." Daphne shook her head and sipped her coffee.

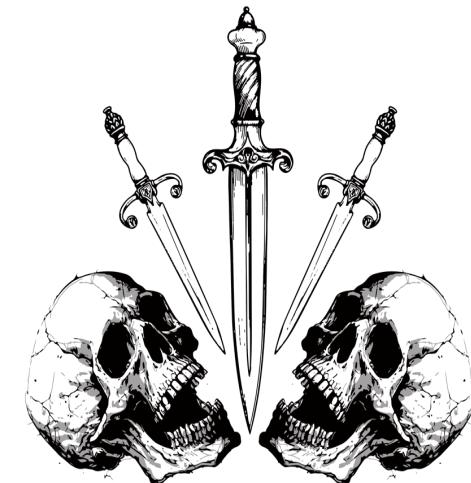
Hermione poked her tongue out at the blonde and began looking over the signatures again with pride. This was really happening. She could really make this a reality; she could make her vision for a free world actually happen. She would make it happen. A scoff rippled through her at a thought she had. Harry had once been the chosen one, but she was the chosen one now, and she would make them all rue the day that they had chosen to doubt her.

"Feel good?" Ginny slid up beside her and bumped her shoulder. Hermione could feel the genuine pride her friend had for her.

Hermione nodded. "It really does, Gin. We can actually do this."

Ginny shook her head. "No, Mi, you can. You are the one that is making this possible."

Hermione thought of Louis. Italy was going to be a tough nut to crack, and she wasn't sure they could get them on board without taking out Alessia Cascioli, something Hermione wasn't opposed to but something she would like to avoid if it could be helped too. "Blaise." She commanded the wizard's attention suddenly. "Who do we have on the inside in Italy right now?"



CHAPTER 23: RENAULD

The Annual French Gala for the Development of Advanced Technologies was pretty much exactly what Hermione had thought it would be. A lot of fancy-dressed witches and wizards with far too much money and a desire to brag about such. Hermione sipped on a glass of champagne to hide the grimace as one witch in particular gushed in broken English about the holiday home she just purchased in Tuscany, her third in the area. Ginny smiled and nodded along enthusiastically, the witch elbowing Hermione in the ribs slightly.

Blaise appeared confused by her question. "I'm not sure. I'll have to check. I thought we agreed to wait on Italy?"

Hermione nodded. "We did, but Renauld's head of security went on a trip and hasn't made it home."

Several pairs of eyes stared back at her. "I have said we will look into it." She gave Blaise a look that she hoped portrayed the urgency and significance of it.

Blaise nodded slowly. "Alright. I'll look into it then." He mimicked back at her.

Hermione mouthed a quiet thank you his way despite the fact that everyone else was looking at them and observing their interactions anyway. As far as she was aware, the only other people who knew about the minister's paramour were Blaise, Ginny and Pansy, though Pansy may have told Daphne. She had no issues with bringing the entire house in on the mission, but she wasn't about to go around spilling secrets that weren't hers to share.

"Well, I, for one thing, think we should celebrate." Astoria stood with a grin. "This is a big moment, right? Like we all knew England would fold, but to have the unanimous support of another country is pretty fantastic, especially being the one where we live."

Hermione chuckled. "Sure. Sounds good... I might go calm down the resident caveman."

Pansy was the one to choke this time. Hermione narrowed her eyes at the group as they eyed each other with a nervous excitement. She wanted to argue that she wasn't going to have sex with him, but there was always a possibility when they were alone together, and the reality was that she was more than ready for him to break his resolve. She wasn't going to break hers, of course, but she did hope she was going to break his because Merlin, was she in need of being railed.

The training centre was dark and quiet, with the exception of the pounding of Draco's fists into the punching bag in the back corner. Hermione had to stifle a moan at the sight of his shirtless chest, his skin glistening with a light layer of sweat. His muscles rippled as he unleashed his aggression on the bag, his knuckles only protected by a thin layer of white strapping tape. His hair was pulled back out and tied out of the way, with a strand hanging loose around his face - only just too short to pull back with the rest of it. The pendant, which had become a permanent fixture around his neck recently, jolted with every movement.

Maybe she would cave first.

The power of each strike to the bag twisted her insides in anticipation of something that hadn't even happened yet. She took her time crossing the training centre, admiring

the view of the man who had yet to notice her. It wasn't the first time she had seen the scars covering his body, but it didn't stop them from being any less startling, the ones on his back in particular.

She had never asked about them despite her curiosity. Much like Renauld's relationship status, it wasn't her secret to share or feel entitled to. She had to bite her lip as she approached and heard him muttering about political pariahs. Truth be told, Draco supported the French Minister for Magic and expressed his approval of him prior to Hermione being introduced to the man.

It had only been when Renauld, finding amusement in Draco's obvious jealousy, had begun to tease the situation with his flirting. It had clearly worked. "Oh come now Draco, you're letting your jealousy show."

Draco clenched his jaw and punched the bag even harder. "I'm not jealous," he snarled through gritted teeth.

"Oh? So you won't mind then if I was to start dating?" Hermione sang in a soft voice. The punching bag shook precariously, threatening to fall from the clip that suspended it from the ceiling.

A growl vibrated in his throat. "Why would I care who you date?" Draco snarled so venomously it made her giggle. His head whipped around and he stalked towards her. "Something funny, Granger?"

"So you're okay with me bringing him home?" Hermione teased, raising an eyebrow at him in challenge. She took in the way that his nostrils flared.

"You're a free agent, Granger. Provided it does not compromise Astoria, it's not my business."

Damn it all. She was going to have to push hard for this. Hermione feigned contemplation. "Well, that's good to know. I just wanted to check because it's been so long..." Hermione whined with a cheeky grin. "Since I've had a man touch me. There's only so much you can do for yourself, you know? Eventually, you just need a man to lift you up and slam into you over and over again." His pupils dilated, and he clenched his jaw. "And since I can get quite loud, and since it's been so long..."

Draco let out a shaky breath as he looked down his nose at her. The front of his shorts was tight, and out of her peripheral vision, she could tell that his cock was already hard.

"It just felt polite to give a heads up to my housemates if I am going to let a man fuck me into oblivion. What do you think?" She smirked, loving the way his eyes flashed dangerously at her. "I think Renauld looks like he would know his way around a woman's body, don't you?"

rumble in anticipation. "My mother has extended us her invitation to the minister's annual ball in a week's time. My ailing father is more of a priority to her at present and so she had no intentions to go anyway." Draco stated in a clipped tone. His parents were obviously a subject he didn't like to talk about.

Those around the table shifted awkwardly and sipped their drinks with wide, avoidant eyes. Hermione thought about using this as an opportunity to push his buttons, but his stiff shoulders suggested he already anticipated that, and she wanted to keep him on his toes, so she offered him a friendly and polite smile across the table. "Well, that is very generous of her, please extend my thanks and well wishes." With her overly sweet tone seeming to throw him off, she turned victorious to Theo to discuss the need to acquire another prickly pear.

"Oi, no shop talk at the table tonight, please." Astoria snapped playfully. "I would like to make a toast." The blonde announced as she raised her glass of wine. "To new friends, better futures, and... to finding the missing pieces of our family. I know it's early days still but you both have come to mean a lot to me, and all of us, I know." She sent a glare Draco's way through misty eyes, silencing any argument that might have been on the tip of his tongue. "We are so glad to have you here in our lives, and I guess... Welcome...Cheers."

Everyone raised their glasses in acknowledgement. Ginny shot Hermione a look from beside her, and Hermione knew she felt it, too. They were home. "Cheers."

Ginny laughed. "I suppose not, but there is no reason now that you can't recover. You're no good to me dead."

Hermione sighed in relief as the floor finally stopped sinking, and she could sink into the hot water. The muscle relaxant had mingled and had her limbs tingling. "Come here, I'll help you wash your hair," Ginny ordered, clearly seeing that Hermione was stiffer than she had let on. "Cruciatus doesn't normally impact you so much?" she mumbled as Hermione turned her back to the redhead and floated closer to her.

"There has been a lot of energy transference lately. I'm running at what I estimate to be approximately 10-20% of my normal capacity." Hermione explained "You're right. I probably do need a few days." she placated.

She heard Ginny scowling, but thankfully, she offered no opinion on the matter. Not that she needed to; Hermione knew Ginny as well as she knew herself. Ginny would be thinking something along the lines of being thankful that Blaise was now protected but annoyed because it didn't mean Hermione was any less important to her.

She wasn't planning on anything happening to her but Hermione was glad to know that if it did, Ginny would be taken care of, Blaise would see to it and make sure that she recovered from the loss her death would bring. "You're only telling me I'm right so that I'll stop nagging," Ginny stated.

"Is it working?" Hermione asked cheerfully, causing Ginny to snort a laugh. A gloop of liquid landed on Hermione's head before Ginny started massaging it, a mound of thick bubbles growing around the strands. Without warning, Ginny shoved Hermione down under the water and held her there for a few seconds before letting go.

Hermione resurfaced spluttering and drenched, water dripping from her eyelashes, and she gasped. "Bitch!" Hermione splashed Ginny, whose roars of laughter turned into shrieks as she tried to hold her hand out to shield her from the water being flung her way.

It felt nice to spend time with just the two of them, it had become a bit of a luxury these days. Hours must have passed as they joked about past missions and things they wanted to do once the world opened up. "It sounds stupid, but I really want to go to Disneyland." Ginny would say. Hermione would explain that she wanted to swim in the dead sea. "Could you imagine Malfoy sunbathing on the beach?!" Hermione giggled, which started an onslaught of teasing from Ginny that Hermione no doubt had imagined that.

At some stage, a knock on her bedroom door and a shout from Astoria had her reluctantly climbing from the tub to dry and dress herself for dinner, though her stomach seemed happy as the smells of spaghetti bolognese wafted to her, making it

The heat in her belly was growing, she tried to maintain her innocent bravado, but she couldn't contain the desire to fuck him in her own eyes, and she knew it.

Draco slammed his hands down on the box of the fighting ring behind her, caging her in. "I think he looks like he couldn't find your hot little cunt with someone pointing it out to him."

Well, he wasn't wrong. She carefully schooled her features into disappointment and tried to keep her breathing under control. "Oh, you think so? Well, that's a shame because he promised me a decent orgasm."

"Is that all?" Draco hissed, his breath hot and heavy and so close to her face.

"What do you mean?" Her words were a little gaspy as her eyes dropped to his lips, taking in the soft parting of them, watching as his teeth worried his bottom lip.

"A woman like you wouldn't be satisfied with one. He may as well tell you he couldn't handle you, that he would do a half-assed job. You want someone that will make your eyes roll back in your head, someone who would make you cum before he even fucks you." He was impossibly close now, his chest practically pressed against hers, the feel of his hard cock against her thigh. He would be able to feel the way her chest rose and fell with each laboured breath. He had to know she wanted this as much as he did. "You should want someone who gets off on getting you off, not just out of obligation."

"Do you have any recommendations?" Hermione looked up at him with lusty eyes, pleading with him to give in, to just let her have the win, because Merlin if he did, she would give him every win from here on out in return.

His top lip pulled back in a sneer. "I am not going to steer you into someone else's bed." He growled. His hands came down and grabbed the bottom of her asscheeks and lifted her up, her core gliding against his erection.

She gave a surprised moan. He pressed her back onto the edge of the box, stepping with her. His breath was hot against her neck as he leaned into it. He was so fucking close to giving in; hell, if he asked her to, she would give in right now herself. "Not when you and I both know I want you in mine." She could swear that she felt the very tip of his tongue connect with her skin, but if he did, he didn't proceed any further into it. In fact, he had turned to stone beneath her. She was about to start begging even without his asking her to. She had fought this game with him so long that she didn't care how they got there - just as long as they did, she would take his words as her victory.

Draco stepped backwards three whole steps, and the warmth of his body was replaced by the cool air of the training centre. Hermione sighed loudly in

disappointment, a glare morphing on her face. She opened her mouth to argue, but he looked equally displeased. “I’m being summoned. Immediately.” He huffed in frustration, and just like that, he was gone, leaving her as unsatisfied as he claimed Renauld would leave her.

Hermione blinked back at him. “We’ve been here for how long now, and you have never mentioned your parents; I kind of assumed they were dead,” Hermione grumbled.

He turned to face her. “Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t realise we had that sort of thing going. What would you like, Granger? Dinner? A formal introduction? We’re not engaged.”

Beside her, Theo scoffed, and Daphne leaned in to whisper a smart comment to Pansy. Draco rounded on the witch and gave her a withering look.

“Merlin Malfoy, I’m not asking to suck your dick; I was just saying I was surprised is all.” Hermione rolled her eyes, stood on shaky legs, and stretched them out. “You haven’t mentioned them, and I assumed they were dead. Colour me surprised and skippy for you that they aren’t.” She snapped, strolling from the room. “If anyone needs me, I’ll be soaking in my tub,” she called over her shoulder.

She made it to the second landing before she slowed down, struggling with the excursion. What she really needed was a good two or three days to just lay in bed and recover, but she didn’t have time for that. They had too much to do. Though it did feel good to at least be able to check rings and Tom’s face off her list. Ginny caught up to her and helped her up the next two flights of stairs without comment.

“Thank you,” she mumbled, panting quietly as they finally reached the top. Come in if you want.” Hermione had only recently figured out that by turning one of the dials in her enormous shower, the ground would lower. If she lowered it far enough, it converted into a bathtub. It was easily one of the coolest things she had ever seen, and she had squealed so loudly that Ginny had run in, thinking she was being attacked.

Hermione dumped a whole bottle of muscle relaxer on the floor of her shower and turned the dial, stripping off to her underwear and stepping down onto the slowly lowering platform. A wave of her wand meant the music floated in from her bedroom, and water poured down, filling the room with steam and sending goosebumps rippling over her skin.

“I would prefer you didn’t take yourself out and leave me without a partner by doing reckless shit, you know,” Ginny mumbled, dropping a towel to the edge of the shower and sitting on it to dangle her feet over the edge. Hermione hummed in noncommittal agreement. “Hermione. I mean it. This isn’t the Order. You can slow down.” Ginny nagged.

“Blaise was hit, and Theo nearly died.” Hermione gave her a pointed look. “I wasn’t going to let you bury Blaise before you even get a life with him. And we couldn’t exactly move forward with our plan for world domination when Voldie was still Voldie.” Hermione chuckled.

Blaise glowered at him. "Oh ha ha, very funny. You should do stand-up comedy."

Theo jerked his head at him. "Yeah, you wanna be my agent?"

Blaise sighed and rubbed at his face. "We have the signatures of the British prime minister, now what? We need a game plan—"

"I was thinking France next, one because we live here," She didn't miss the way everyone puffed up a little at her claim. "And two, because from the little I have seen of the Minister for Magic here, I think we have a good shot of convincing him."

"Okay, so who else do we know about? Italy is out, their minister is a total bitch, strict as hell on the laws there." Blaise summoned a world map from somewhere further in the house and stuck it to the wall, marking the United Kingdom green, Italy red and France blue. He hesitated before marking Germany in yellow. "I can see if Mum has an in there."

"I'd say the Scandis will all be pretty progressive and open to signing it..." Draco crossed his arms and nodded at the map. Sweden, Norway, and Denmark all turned blue, a brief pause before Switzerland, Finland, Iceland, and the Netherlands followed suit. "I think Ireland will probably agree."

"I could reach out to Viktor" Hermione chuckled at Draco's sudden scowl. "See what Bulgaria is likely to think." Blaise smirked and nodded, marking Ireland in blue and Bulgaria in yellow

"I visited New Zealand on holiday during Christmas break, fourth year, I got the impression that they would be relaxed enough to go for something like this, Australia too probably," Blaise mumbled and marked them blue.

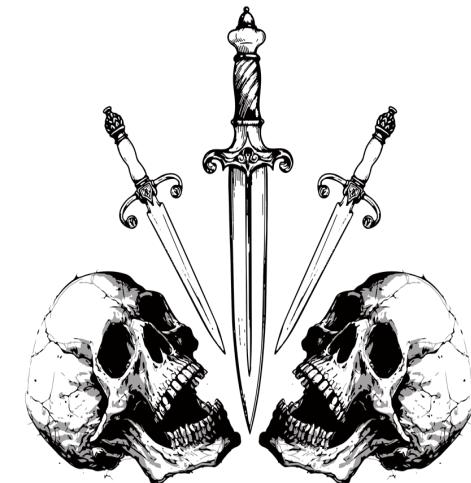
Ginny's eyes flickered over to Hermione, who was trying to keep her facial expressions neutral. At the end of the day, it wouldn't change anything, not really. She would still never be able to bring them back into her life, and at this stage, she wouldn't want to. She had seen and done too much for them to be able to ever look at her the same way, killed too many to be their Hermione. It would be a kindness to just let them go.

"Malfoy, your family is old French and all that posh nonsense; you don't have Minister Thibault on call, do you?" Ginny teased.

Draco arched an eyebrow at her. "I know you're joking, but it's possible. I'll have to go to the manor and ask."

"Ask who?" Hermione asked, not following.

He gave her an odd look "My mother?"



CHAPTER 26: CHAOS

The wireless being on had easily become one of her favourite things about living at the chateau. Theo had just found a way to charm it to play throughout the entire ground floor at the same volume, which, given that he had allowed Hermione to set it, was loud. Not that anyone had had any complaints so far. Draco was the only one likely to complain, and since he was the cause of her pent-up energy and he wasn't here, she was free to lead everyone else astray. Theo and Blaise were splayed out on the lounge, engaged in a conversation; Ginny perched on Blaise's lap.

Every so often, a laugh would tumble from her, or she would grace them with one of her contagious grins.

Tor, Pansy, and Daphne all were dancing to the music while Hermione had snuck behind the bar to mix up a special little treat for them all - something she had been saving specifically for a time when Draco was away from home so there would be no risk of him killing the buzz before it had even begun, which was seemingly a habit of his. She retrieved the cans of chaos, vodka, peach schnapps, and cranberry juice and proceeded to make them all large glasses of 'excitabull', a cocktail with the main ingredient being Red Bull.

Her eyes fell on Theo and those bloody pink gumboots; his reaction to the energy drink was probably the one she was most looking forward to. There was a certain chaos to Theo that she just loved to encourage, partially because his energy often matched hers and Ginny's, but also because it seemed to annoy the absolute shit out of Draco - which happened to be one of her favourite pastimes. She had been so close to breaking him, and she knew it. He knew she knew it.

The drinks floated out to their recipients, who at this point had become so used to her 'bartending' that they didn't even hesitate to sip on it. Ginny took one sip and whipped around to look at her. "Oh, this is going to be good." She stated with glee.

Theo frowned at the drink in his hand in contemplation. "What is?"

"Remember how I was telling you about energy drinks a few weeks back?" Hermione smiled before pointing to her glass. "Enjoy." Theo looked back at the drink and gulped down the entire thing. "Jesus- Theo, it still has alcohol in it!" Hermione chuckled.

"That's really yummy." Theo looked at his now-empty glass with a pleased smile. "Can I have another one?"

Astoria laughed. "Perhaps maybe one without alcohol? I want my husband to still be able to walk in an hour."

Hermione bit her lip. Realistically, there was no reason to say no, right? She shrugged and sent another can his way. Two things that she realised immediately were: one, she had unknowingly kickstarted a new addiction in the wizard, and two, he lacked the ability to pace himself on anything other than hard liquor because he began to drink it as quickly as he had the previous one. Ginny and she shared a look and started a nervous laugh that continued to build on itself. "Oh shit." Ginny giggled in unison with Hermione.

Draco sauntered into the sitting room unexpectedly, his serious tone immediately thickening the light mood of the room to charged tension. Everyone froze and looked

he placed her gently on the lounge suite. His jaw clenched in disapproval while hers chattered.

"I needed to make sure that it would hold against stronger spells as well, not just sticking charms." She whispered, suddenly cold. She hadn't realised to what extent she was still recovering. "Safe to say it does."

Draco looked down at her, his breathing a little heavy, and his eyes closed off in pain. "What, Malfoy? Just say it," she whispered. Everyone else who had flooded into the room behind Draco edged away to provide some space, their eyes flicking between the two of them.

"You have to mean it..." He sighed dismissively.

"I always mean it, but never at anyone in particular," Hermione explained softly. "I'm angry that this war is still going on. I'm angry that any of us are having to hide who we are. I'm angry that the Order is full of hypocritical assholes."

Draco nodded his acceptance of her explanation, his face returning to its usual cool, uninterested demeanour. Hermione scoffed and shook her head. "You are a funny man, Draco Malfoy." She shooed his hand away as he fussed over her sitting up. Her muscles still tingled with aftershocks, and her skin ached, but she was starting to feel like herself again.

Ginny moved to her, extending a cold can of soda in her hand. "That was... stupid." She said, her voice clipped, but Hermione could see the concern on her face.

"I'm fine, it was only a second, I've had worse. Besides, it will make me feel better the next time Tiberius tries to kill Theo-

Theo shook his head, his curls bouncing as he did. "He won't. He will be on his best behaviour now. Try to spin mistrust, say that Hermione is lying and that she is trying to get him killed."

Hermione frowned at her new friend. "You're awfully chill for someone whose dad tried to off them."

Theo sank onto the arm of the sofa next to her with a shrug. "Eh, not the first time, won't be the last. I choose to look at it as his way of saying he loves me." Theo smirked.

Hermione chuckled and shook her head. Blaise crossed his arms and looked to the ceiling in thought. "Babe?" Ginny hit the back of her hand against his arm. "Care to share what's going on in the gorgeous head of yours?"

"I was just thinking..." Blaise mumbled absently, trailing off mid-sentence.

Pansy, Ginny, Daphne, and Draco all looked at each other and shared a chuckle. "Shit mate, don't do it too much, I think it's melting your brain," Theo jested, pulling laughs from all of them.

So, instead, Hermione pointed her wand at Pansy and sent a rictumsempra her way. Pansy stiffened in anticipation, but nothing happened as she was wearing her own ring. “Malfoy, you try.”

Draco didn’t hesitate, sending the spell wordlessly, only to be attacked by an invisible force tickling him instead. A particularly ticklish spot on his ribs had him gasping and glaring at her through teary eyes. Hermione bent down close to his face and spoke slowly and clearly like the idiot he insisted on acting like.

“Drop your wand.”

He did what she said, and the spell broke instantly. He crouched there, gasping for a few minutes. “That’s what you two have?”

Hermione waved away the glamour on her hand to reveal the ring that had remained there, hidden since that day in Dartmoor.

She looked between Draco, Daphne, and Blaise. “You three were a bit trickier. It took some reconfiguring to make a triad of rings work, so if we could test yours out, that would be great.” She frowned as she handed the three of them their rings and slipped off her own and into her pocket. Draco straightened up and followed the moment. “Don’t deflect it, okay? I need to make sure that it works for each of you.” She explained.

She started with Blaise, who gave her a nod of confidence. “Cantis!” Blaise remained silent while an urge to sing moved slowly up through her windpipe like a bubble ready to burst. Her mouth opened. “I don’t wanna close my eyes, I don’t wanna fall asleep —” Hermione waved her hand and moved along to Daphne.

The witch, whose suit was champagne-coloured today with a silky peach-coloured blouse underneath, smirked at her. “That was just beautiful, Granger, truly.”

Hermione rolled her eyes and pointed her wand. “Colloshoo!” Sure enough, Hermione’s feet stuck to the ground instead of Daphne’s, and when she took a deep breath and sent a cruciatus curse Draco’s way, it struck her like a thousand tiny razor blades, dissecting her nerves and cutting every cell in her body into two. Her fingers spasmed, and she dropped her wand, falling to her knees and trying not to be sick.

It seemed that the effects of the past week still had her drained and vulnerable. “Fucking hell, Princess! What did you do that for?” Theo was the first of the group to reach her, gripping her elbow and helping her back to her feet, refusing to let go and leave her unsteady.

Draco had closed the distance between them and swooped her up into his arms, one arm under her knees and one behind her back, marching her back into the house where

at him, taking in the sight of blood over his clothes. “We need to go, everyone. The Order are trying to claim Diagon Alley.”

“What?! That’s a public domain?!” Ginny frowned.

Draco shrugged. “It doesn’t matter if it is or it isn’t; they are attacking it right now, so do you want to waste time discussing this, or can we go fix the situation?” His tone was gruff and impatient. Hermione wasn’t sure if it had been their early interaction in the training centre that had left him in a bad mood or the Order’s cockblocking.

Everyone jumped to attention, those with drinks in their hands quickly downing them and summoning their robes. Theo, who was ready twice as fast as everyone else, sat waiting on the arm of the lounge, his knee bouncing in anticipation, his wand tapping against the palm of his hand. Draco frowned at him with concern. “What’s up with you?” He questioned.

“Nothing,” Ginny answered a little too quickly, her smirk a little too cheeky for Draco to buy that.

“I had a couple of Red Bulls. Have you ever had a Red Bull? I’ve never had a Red Bull before, but I just had a few Red Bulls, and I really like Red Bull.” The brunette rushed out almost too fast to be intelligible.

Pansy slapped her hand over her mouth and tried to squash the laugh that was trying to escape her. Hermione had to bite down on her lip hard enough to sting in order to swallow her own laugh. Draco slowly looked at her in confused horror. “This has you written all over it. Explain. What the fuck is a Red Bull?”

Hermione really did try to fight the urge to laugh, but Theo stood and started jumping from one foot to the other, which looked ridiculous in his Death Eater robes with his bright pink gumboots, she lost that battle. “Um... It’s an energy drink.”

“Ene-” Draco shook his head. “Energy drink? Like a pepper-up potion?”

“Ha!” Theo exclaimed with a wide grin. “Yeah but better. Come on, are we going or what?” He began jumping up and down on the spot.

Draco looked from him to her in horror. Hermione tried and failed to keep a straight face. “In my defence, I didn’t mean for him to drink them so quickly, and I didn’t anticipate us leaving the house.”

Draco scowled in disapproval before storming back out the way he came. Daphne was grinning ear to ear as she followed him out. “Hey, at least he should kick your ass on your little kill count comp.” Pansy winked and strolled from the room, too. Trying to avoid getting into even more trouble, Hermione took off to try to catch up. There was winding Draco up, which was one of the things that she lived for at this point, but

then there was getting everyone else in trouble, which was something she honestly made an attempt to avoid.

"I just want to start by saying that Theo didn't know what they would do, so really, if you want to fight anyone later, it should be me." Hermione huffed breathlessly as she arrived at the apparition point. If he did fight her, then she was certain that this push and pull between them would finally shatter, and everyone would be better off for it.

Draco glared at her and opened his mouth to respond, but his eyes drifted behind her to the house, his eyes turning cold just as the unmistakable crack of a can carried across the patio. Hermione's head whipped around to see Theo sculling back yet another can of Red Bull with Blaise in absolute hysterics behind him. "Oh my god," she whispered and hid her face in her hands. She heard the crack of apparition and looked up to see that Draco had gone. Daphne and Pansy chuckled quietly before disappearing themselves.

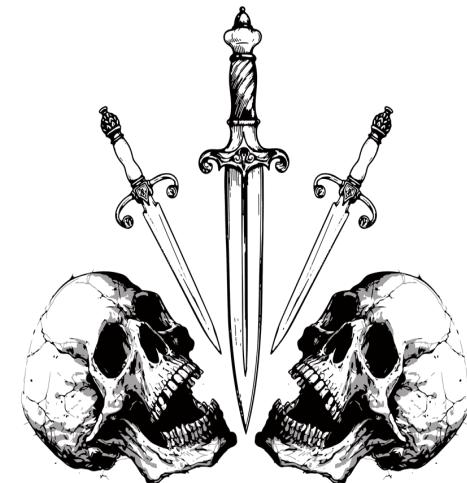
Hermione shook her head and sighed deeply. "Come on, chaos puppy. You're going to get us in trouble with Dad." Blaise and Ginny herded him successfully to her, but they were far too gleeful to be faultless in this situation.

Ginny waved away Hermione's accusatory look with twinkling eyes. "It will be fine, Mi, honestly."

Hermione scoffed and rolled her eyes, grabbing Theo's arm and began the series of jumps it would take to get to their destination, Blaise and Ginny popping out of the ground beside her a second later. The chaos that was Diagon Alley immediately assaulted their senses. There was smoke and streaks of spells in various colours shooting everywhere. Theo whipped around and immediately hurled a killing curse at a random Order member, shouting out "One!" and disappearing into the thick of it, she heard "Two, Three!" before his counting died amongst the sound of yelling in the mess.

"Merlin," Hermione whispered. The Order had never been so forward as to blatantly seek out conflict, especially not on this scale. Ginny slipped her hand into Hermione's and squeezed. There was no use in standing there staring; whatever their game was, it wouldn't be solved by doing nothing. Mentally, she began a checklist of the shops that she knew had been operating as normal in the street - and if there might be a reason for any of them to be a target. Her list came up empty. Was this retaliation for London?

At this stage, fighting had become second nature to her, especially against the Order, who still clearly refused to use lethal curses. Her blade slid across the throat of a man who was aiming a body-binding hex at a masked Death Eater. "One!" she shouted over



CHAPTER 22: PORTCULLIS

Explain that again, please." Theo shook his head in confusion. Hermione reached forward and plucked two rings from the pile and handed them to Theo and Pansy, both of whom looked at each other nervously before slipping them on. "Please step outside." Hermione directed patiently. Again, the two looked at each other nervously but did as requested all the same. Theo looked so ridiculous with his gumboots that she couldn't muster the urge to do anything other than wrap him in candy floss and cotton wool.

Daphne slipped into the room and fought to hide her visible response. Not that it mattered; Ginny was too lost in her own mind to notice the blonde's presence anyway. The way Daphne reacted, the way Astoria knew what to do just as well as what Pansy did, told Hermione everything she needed to know. The sisters had been the ones to help Pansy after whatever it was that she went through. How triggering was this event for all three of them? And yet none of them shied away. Hermione had trusted only Ginny to have her back for years, and she knew Ginny felt the same way, but they didn't only have each other anymore. Perhaps she wasn't quite ready to put them in the same category as Ginny; she wasn't sure that time would ever come, she and Ginny had been through too much together, but the others were pretty damn close. She cared about each of them, would protect them just as fiercely as she would Ginny... and she trusted them with the single most important person in the world to her.

Daphne slipped over to Hermione and pulled her back into the bathroom but froze at the scent lingering in the air. Her breath escaped her in one short exhale. "Oh Pansy..." She whispered, shaking her head to refocus and pressed the door closed softly behind them. "Ron escaped. Draco said he must have fled seconds after you because Draco didn't even make it up the stairs, but by the time he turned around, the bastard was gone, and the house was burning down so fast we couldn't stick around. Harry is in the cells downstairs. Theo is currently reluctantly healing him-

"What?! Why?" Hermione exclaimed a little too loudly for either of their liking.

A glance at the door reminded Hermione of the silencing charm Astoria had cast earlier that she hoped was still in effect. "Because Blaise nearly killed him, and you wanted him alive," Daphne whispered back. "I had to knock Blaise out with a vase to the head. Love these rings, Granger, really do, but they are not helpful when I need to stop Blaise from killing someone - which, for the record, is not something I ever thought I would have to do."

Hermione hissed in secondhand pain. "Sorry." She grimaced. "Where is Blaise now?"

"Pacing the hallway. Draco had to set up wards on the cells to keep him out, after Theo healed the gash on his head and revived him he just wanted to see Ginny but Pansy was pretty adamant that it wasn't the time yet." Daphne sighed, clearly not saying just how hard she had also been working to keep Ginny's husband from the room.

Hermione nodded. She wanted to see Harry for herself, but she was fairly certain that she would kill him if she laid eyes on him, and that would be for Ginny to decide. If she wanted to kill him herself, she would get the chance to do so; otherwise, he could go to Tom, who without a doubt would kill him, if just for the closure of it.

Daphne opened the door again, and the two of them slipped back into Astoria's room. Ginny had finally gotten dressed and was sitting cross-legged in the middle of Astoria's bed, pulling at her fingernails. "The rings didn't work because we were separated."

Hermione's heart jumped to her throat. She knew that would be the case because she had been cut in Diagon Alley, but the way that Ginny said it felt like she had failed her, like she should have been able to find a way to make them work over a distance. Hermione knew it wasn't what Ginny was thinking, but it was what she felt.

"So when Ron put me in a body binder and silenced me, I couldn't fight it. I had my wand taken in Diagon... I..." Ginny took several deep, slow breaths. "I couldn't scream or fight back, and Harry just kept saying that I had to know that we were meant to be, that he was so glad I had come home, he..." A sob turned growl ripped through her chest. "He thanked me for giving him this, for giving him another chance. As if I wanted any of it." Ginny snarled, her gaze focused on the bedspread in front of her. "As if me crying wasn't enough of a sign, or my lack of movement, or my silence..." her voice trailed off in defeat, but then her eyes found Hermione's and everything else fell away. "I was trapped. I couldn't do anything about it, but my mind was still all there... Then you apparated in, and the rings activated, and the force of it... he flew across the room into the wall, and I just started screaming... hoping you would hear me. Praying that the room wasn't silenced because I already was..." a fresh wave of tears broke free. "Thank you for coming to get me." Ginny croaked through sobs, "thank you for saving me..." The weight of it all had her leaning forward and sobbing again into her hands.

Tears and a gasp both fell from Hermione. "Oh Gin..." She didn't know what else to say, because she would always come for her, always, but this time she had been too late. If she had been even ten minutes earlier, would it have saved her friend from this fate? Would it have made a difference?

Hermione crawled onto the bed next to her and wrapped her arms around her. There was nothing else that she could do right now but to not let Ginny face this alone. The other girls all piled on the bed around her, too, Astoria stroking Ginny's hair while Daphne and Pansy both just sat there in solidarity while Ginny cried.

alone and joined them at the bottom of the shower, passing glances over Ginny's body, obviously taking note of Ginny's visible injuries.

It could have been hours by the time Ginny stopped crying and sat up, wiping her face despite the shower water running over them all continuously, and took a few shaky breaths. "Soap, please?" Her voice croaked, hoarse from the sobbing. Pansy summoned a clean cloth, pressed it into Ginny's hands gently, and covered Ginny's body in suds with a wave of her hand. The scent of pear and honey filled the air. It took Hermione a second to realise that the reason it smelt so unfamiliar was for the same reason they were in Astoria's shower instead of Ginny's; Pansy knew that this scent would forever be associated with this moment.

She looked slowly between Pansy and Astoria with a sinking realisation. They were too aware of what to do and what to avoid; at least one of them had first-hand experience with this tragedy, and the way the Pansy had stiffened with the scent filling the shower led Hermione to believe that it was her. A deadened look her way, and the smallest of nods confirmed her suspicions. It was hard to describe the way that her love for Pansy grew exponentially at this moment; she was giving Ginny a gift at her own expense. A scent that Ginny would never have to smell again here in this house because it was a scent that Pansy, and likely everyone else, would avoid at all costs.

Ginny starred as the white bubbles washed down the drain, taking with it only the physical layer of grime from her body. The mental layer would be harder to get rid of, and one Hermione wasn't sure would ever truly go away. Astoria turned the water off and helped Ginny to her feet, taking Ginny with her to help her dry and dress. Hermione paused, wanting a second with Pansy alone, who hung around awkwardly, knowing what Hermione was doing.

She pulled Pansy in for a tight hug the second Ginny had left the bathroom with Astoria. "Thank you... and I'm sorry." She pulled back and looked into Pansy's eyes, wanting to make sure that the witch understood the weight of her gratitude.

She left it at that, not wanting to dredge up what might be an unwelcome topic for Pansy and made her way into Astoria's bedroom. Ginny was standing there in front of the full-length mirror in the corner, her eyes tracking every bruise on her skin. Her hair had been dried, but she remained in only undergarments. "I can heal them if you—"

Ginny shook her head. "No," she whispered. "No, I want to remember these so that when I kill him, there's no doubt in my mind that he deserves it."

There was another knock at the door, Astoria creeping across the room to answer it. She peered back into the room and bit her lip. "Gin? Daphne is here, is she okay to come in?" Ginny nodded absently, her eyes still glued to the reflection of her body.

them delicately helped her down the hallway, another thing became apparent: there was no way they would have gotten her up those stairs. Ginny's gaze was unfocused and it was taking all three of them to keep her moving on level ground as it was.

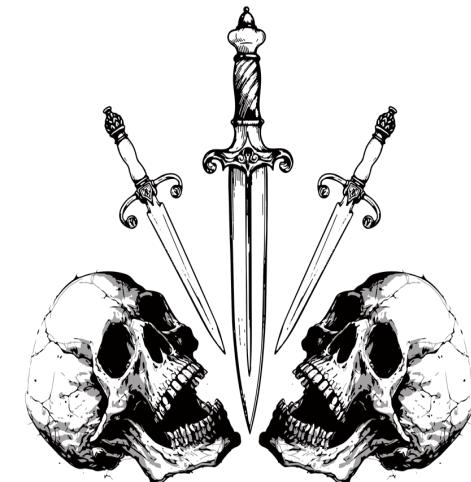
Astoria's shower truly was the best choice; it was huge, no doubt, to make it easy to access during her bad days, and it meant that Pansy, Astoria, and herself could all help Ginny get into the shower. "Ginny, we're going to get you clean now, okay?" Astoria stepped up in front of her, her voice gentle as she guided Ginny under the spray with her hands. Not a single one of them cared that their clothes were being drenched. They all delicately worked together to wash Ginny's face with a soft cloth, all the while Ginny stood there, trapped in her mind, frowning at the wall but not really seeing anything - her eyes welling with tears and her chest heaving with shallow breaths.

At one point, Pansy whispered that she was going to get other clothes for her. Ginny waved her hand, and the sheet dress that clung to her skin, soaked from the shower's spray, burned away to ash, leaving Ginny bare. The act alone seemed to be enough to break her because she collapsed to her knees again and started crying in a mix of rage and heartache. Hermione and Astoria said nothing, dropping to their knees themselves and just stroking her hair away from her face, whispering affirmations to let it out, they had her, they were sorry, and they wouldn't let anyone else near her ever again if she didn't want them to. Pansy slipped back into the bathroom with the baggiest clothes she could find folded in her hands, which she left on the counter, along with Ginny's wand, which they had apparently found on the streets of Diagon Alley. Wordlessly, she opened Astoria's medicine cabinet and began rifling through the potions, plucking several out and putting them next to the clothes.

"Ginny..." Hermione whispered, only for the girl to fall sideways into her arms. Hermione's own tears, the first she had cried in years, were lost in the overhead stream of water. Her arms wrapped around her friend as sob after chest-aching sob fell from Ginny. Hermione didn't shush her, and she didn't tell her it would be okay because it wouldn't. She didn't know exactly what had gone on in that room, but she could guess enough to know that it was something that would stick with Ginny for the rest of her life, in worse ways than Ginny's screams would stick with Hermione.

She did promise the girl revenge; she promised to help her burn the world to the ground if that's what she wanted, promised to stay hidden away and never see the light of day if Ginny preferred, and most of all she promised that she loved her.

At another point, Pansy disappeared to answer a knock at the bedroom door, where Hermione distantly heard her arguing in hushed whispers with someone until Astoria silenced the bathroom, blocking the sounds out. A few moments later, Pansy returned



CHAPTER 29: CONFESSIONS

Hermione slipped off the bed at the light knocking at the door. Ginny wasn't quite asleep but she wasn't far from it, and even though she knew Ginny was awake she crept lightly, not wanting to stir her from the state she was in.

She opened the door a crack and saw Blaise on the other side, he looked like hell. "Mi, please," he whispered. Hermione's heart lurched for the man, she couldn't begin to understand what he was going through right now. If it had been her being kept away, she might have already blasted her way in. She glanced over at the redhead, only to find

her looking at her with sullen eyes. She gave a small nod and Hermione opened the door.

Blaise sighed in relief and slipped into the room. "Guys, let's give them some space," Hermione said. Daphne and Astoria slipped from the room without a word, but Pansy paused and squeezed Blaise's arm before following Hermione out.

"Care for a drink?" Pansy mumbled. Exhaustion was clearly catching up to her housemate, but Hermione nodded all the same, following her down to the bar in the sitting room. The house was so quiet it was eerie. Astoria and Daphne slipped up the stairs and, a few minutes later, closed a door. Theo and Draco were nowhere to be seen, which left just Hermione and Pansy. Hermione had become somewhat the unofficial drinks maker of the house since their arrival, but today, Pansy made her way over, pouring herself three fingers of rum and drinking it down quickly. She proceeded to pour another glass for herself and one for Hermione, swallowing that one down as well before she finally began to speak.

Tipping a third glass worth of rum, she avoided Hermione's eyes as if ashamed. "Did you know I have...had an older brother? Phineas. He was the pride and joy of my father's life." Pansy smiled sadly. "He died. My final year of school, he um... he got caught in a storm on his broom, fell, and smashed open his skull." Hermione said nothing when Pansy drained that glass, too. The glisten of unshed tears had begun to shine in the witches' eyes, leaning against the counter of the bar.

Pansy inhaled deeply, staring at one spot behind the bar top and seemed to deflate in on herself. "Nothing I ever did for my father was good enough - not to say that he was vocally disappointed in me, just that I did not matter. I listened and did everything I was told, Hermione. I saved myself for the husband he would have picked out for me one day. I would have married them and been a dutiful and doting wife, even though I knew I was gay."

Hermione slid her untouched drink closer to the witch who took it gratefully. "I would have produced heirs for him and played the part of the perfect pureblood wife because that's what was expected of me. I got good grades, I never answered back. I did everything that was expected of me. When Phineas died, my dad began drinking real bad. He started gambling, and nearly lost our entire estate."

Hermione felt sick, she could sense where this was going and tried to prepare herself mentally for it, but was there ever any real preparation for conversations like this? Hermione had been lucky, she knew that. She knew that the statistics were horrifyingly high and she had been, at least so far, one of the fortunate ones.

Hermione would have taken all the time in the world and killed anyone and everyone in this damn house who failed to intervene, but Ginny's broken whispered words reached her. "Please just take me home." Hermione nodded and gently guided her from the room. She could hear Daphne threatening to stun Blaise if she had to, but she couldn't bring herself to focus on anything other than getting Ginny away from this place.

Ginny gripped Hermione's arm with her nails, biting into the skin as she halted in the foyer where Draco was currently engaged in a fistfight with Ron. The witch snatched Hermione's wand from her and pointed it at the red-haired male. "Draco!" Hermione cried out with only seconds to spare for Draco to jump out of harm's way before Ginny had set the house aflame, part of it catching on her brother's pant leg.

"Blaise! Daphne, time to leave, now!" Draco shouted while taking off up the stairs. Hermione didn't stick around to find out what was happening with the Harry situation, not wanting to force Ginny to see his face again, instead, she apparated them out of there and had the unfortunate responsibility of managing the multiple jumps.

Hermione purposely stopped in a forest she knew along the way, pausing to look at her friend, who had begun to shut down. Her expression lacked all of the warmth that she associated with Ginny, and it made her want to burn the world to the ground. "Do you want a minute?" Her voice was purposely quiet. When Ginny shook her head, she continued on their way and silently thanked Pansy for having the foresight to shift the apparition point to the kitchen instead of the lawn outside.

Ginny was already collapsing into a catatonic heap on the floor the instant their feet touched down on the marble floors. "Pansy!" Hermione screamed, but Pansy was already rounding the corner and into the room halfway through her name being called.

Pansy took one look at Ginny and her eyes widened and flew to Hermione's, heartbreak evident in them. "Tell me this isn't what I think it is."

Hermione didn't have the heart to confirm the claim, choosing instead to bend down and lift Ginny up under her arms. "Help me get her upstairs."

"Oh my god." Was Astoria's muffled gasp as she came rushing in, stopping behind Pansy before pushing both herself and Pansy forward to help. No one said a word as they got Ginny up on her feet. Hermione automatically made to turn towards the stairs, but Astoria halted her. "No, use my room. The shower is bigger, and it won't matter if she never wants to step foot in it again."

Hermione nodded. The memories of this weren't even something that had crossed her mind, but of course, that would be an issue. Of course, Ginny would never want to step foot in whatever shower she had to wash this moment away in. As the three of

she belongs." His grubby hand reached out to grab her arm, but Draco was there in a flash, grabbing the man by his throat and throwing him up against the wall.

"Touch her, and I will cut your hands off before I kill you." Draco hissed. Ginny screamed again, and Hermione took off up the stairs and towards the sound, two at a time. She was certain that Blaise was somewhere behind her based on the loud thumping footsteps, but everything else in the world had ceased to exist. Ginny had never really been scared of anything, not since her first year and her experience in the chamber of secrets. She had said that having Tom Riddle inside her head as a child had been scarier than anything else she had faced.

But the scream coming from her now was pure. There was no mistaking her fear and pain this time. "Ginny!" Hermione screamed again; she paid no attention to the people that Daphne and Blaise were killing or flinging out of the way.

"Hermione!" Ginny screeched so loud that the hair on the back of Hermione's neck stood up. Her feet pounded against the hallway as she raced toward her friend's cries. The wooden door didn't stand a chance as it was blasted inwards.

Hermione took exactly one step into the room before her heart broke. Ginny had pressed herself as far into the corner as she could, tears streamed down her face, her red hair messy and her pale skin on display. The only thing covering her bare body was the sheet she had yanked from the bed to shield herself and the gold chain necklace that always hung around her neck. Ginny had killed before, she had tortured before, but the hatred in her eyes now was unlike anything Hermione had ever seen. Black and blue bruises in the form of fingerprints stained her upper arms and collarbone, and mascara streaked down her face, leaving behind muddy black tracks.

Hermione was so focused on the heart-wrenching sight of her friend that she didn't even notice Harry on the other side of the room until Blaise was roaring and lunging toward his naked frame. Bile rose in the back of Hermione's throat as the realisation of what had happened sunk in. "Daphne, I want him alive. Make sure Blaise doesn't kill him," was all she snarled before she rushed to Ginny's side.

"Come on, I've got you." Hermione purposely stepped between Ginny and the chaos that was occurring on the other side of the room, shielding Ginny, who broke into a small yet gut-wrenching sob at the sight of Hermione's face. Hermione waved her wand over the sheet, transfiguring it into a shirt dress and slowly held out her hand for the redhead to take if she wanted. Ginny's shoulders began shaking as she fought back sobs. "I got you, Gin. I'm so sorry I wasn't here sooner. I'm so sorry." Hermione stepped forward cautiously and waited; Ginny collapsed forward and broke down against her chest.

"So he is in big - like owed this guy Frankie a lot of money, like more than even our estate was worth. We were about to lose everything, and my mum, well, she was so far checked out of her head on pills that she had no idea what was going on. So my dad cut this guy a deal: he could take the holiday homes, half of what was in the vaults... and me. My virginity." Pansy stares at the bottle, maybe contemplating if she should chance another, but she had already had a significant amount in a short time, so maybe not.

"I go home for Easter, right, like right before the final battle, not knowing what he had done. It's weird because no one picks me up from the station, but I make my way home and I walk in the house, and this guy Frankie jumps out from behind the door and shoves me down on the marble, hits me a few times, so I'm disorientated. I don't even know what the hell is going on, but I roll over to try to defend myself, and I see my dad..."

Evidently, Pansy decides that she can, in fact, handle at least one more drink, and tears begin to fall down her cheeks. "This Frankie guy binds my hands and sticks them to the ground above my head, starts shoving up my skirt and unbuckles his pants. I'm screaming and trying to kick him away. He's fat, old, hairy, and smells like pigs, you know? And I am pleading with my dad, 'Daddy, please, please help me, what are you doing, why are you letting him do this?' right, and do you know what he said to me?"

Hermione remains silent but doesn't dare look away from the witch in front of her. Pansy scoffs and slams the now-empty glass down on the bar top. "He looks me in my eyes, and he says to me 'Just do as you're told for once, shut up and give him what he's here for; our family needs this.' Then he stood there and watched while I was raped, while I cried, while that scumbag came in me and then got up and left with a fucking grin. My dad looked at me and the... mess... it had created over the foyer floor, and he told me to clean it up. He went upstairs to his room, and I left for Daphne's."

Hermione was certain that she had begun crying again, but she felt frozen and unsure of what to do or say. Pansy didn't let the silence linger for long; she sniffed and straightened, looking at Hermione with tired, worn-out eyes. "Draco came by a few days later, distraught because you three had been brought in and he had had to watch you get tortured and all that, and when he found out what had happened, he just got up and left. I didn't think much of it, I was too deep in my own shit, but he came back the next day and told me that my dad was dead, in my foyer, in the mess I hadn't cleaned up and that Frankie was next to him. With a fire poker shoved up his ass." Pansy scoffed and shook her head.

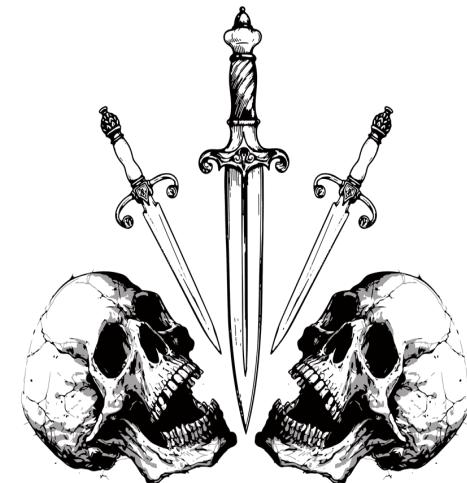
"My dad was the first person Draco ever killed. It was something he had really struggled with up until then; he had said he felt like he still could have been swayed either way up until that point, but after what happened to me, something in him snapped and suddenly, killing wasn't so scary. He did that for me so I would never have to live looking over my shoulder for the shadows of the big, bad man, Hermione. He is a good person, and what happened to you, to Ginny... it really scared him. In a way I haven't seen in a long time. I know you have this game of push and pull going on, but... it ain't a game to him. Just thought you should know that. Now, if you'll excuse me, I am going to bed." Pansy sauntered off with far too much poise for a woman who had consumed so much rum.

Then Hermione was alone with her thoughts, and that was a scary place to be right now. She wanted Harry dead, Ron, Kingsley, every fucking person who was in that house, every fucking person in the Order. Every last one of them could burn in hell for all she cared. How had she and Ginny stood by for so long while the Order had eroded themselves from the inside out with their lies about morality? While they had condemned her and Ginny when they offered up their souls in the name of their cause? The Order's crimes had been just as heinous, just as grotesque, but buried under a different mask: hypocrisy.

Hermione walked around the bar and poured herself a glass of gin and tonic. If she had died and Seamus had lived, would they have treated him the same way that they had treated her? Honestly, she didn't think so, if anything they might consider him a hero for having ended someone as vile and evil as her, or what they claimed her to be.

Funny how she was the 'bad guy,' but this entire war could have been over already - countless lives saved if the person they followed so blindly and without question had just been a little less greedy. It didn't matter; she was going to end this war one way or another, and she would make sure of it. In the coming days, she would need to sit down and make a plan. They still had to find Louis, tragedy in their own lives or not. Renauld was counting on them for that. Too much time had already passed, and Hermione could only hope that Blaise had sent off a message to one of their teams to start the search prior to the events of Diagon Alley.

If not, then they needed to double down and find him quickly. The faster they could conduct political business, the faster this war would be over, and the less likely things like Ginny being raped or herself nearly dying in the street would happen. And then there were the words Pansy had left her with. She didn't know how to stop - it was who she was; she pushed everything to the limits, including this thing with Draco. 'It



CHAPTER 28: PEAR & HONEY

The second her feet touched the ground, Hermione was shoving Romilda away from her, an Avada Kedavra shooting from the tip of her wand effortlessly.

Somewhere upstairs, there was a loud thump followed by a scream that would haunt Hermione for the rest of her life. She had never heard Ginny scream like that, and it instantly turned her blood to ice. "Ginny..." She breathed, taking off towards the stairs in front of her. "Ginny!!" She screamed at the top of her lungs.

She was so focused on getting to Ginny that she failed to notice Ron stepping in her way. "You're not taking her anywhere, she's my sister and she is staying here, where

ain't a game to him, ' replayed in her mind like a broken record. Well, if it wasn't a game, then what was it? Because he had yet to make a move.

He had been waiting for her to fold just as much as she had. Theo slunk past the door frame and up the stairs, the list of things she had to somehow accomplish kept growing and she felt like she should be cracking under the weight of it all. In a sense, for some things she felt like she was, but for others, like her goal to find a way to save Astoria's life, she felt strong, airy.

Theo never spoke much about his fears with Astoria. Hermione wasn't sure if that came down to denial or that she simply hadn't earned that trust yet. He hadn't seen her since she had pulled that little disappearing act from his basement. Realistically, she had told him she would stay put and then roped his dying wife into distracting him, so she wouldn't be surprised if she never earned that trust.

And instead of helping him she had gone and added more work to his pile in the way of Harry Potter, someone she was sure no one actually wanted to be helping right now in any way, shape, or form. Hermione bent down and slipped off her slippers, discarding them out of sight lest Blaise saw them, taking her drink and trekking slowly across the sitting room and through the kitchen to the yard outside, letting her hair fall from the ponytail it had been pulled back into. There were very few times that Hermione got to feel the ground beneath her feet. Hermione's mum had told her that if she ever found herself spinning out of control one day, then all she had to do was stand barefoot on the grass. At the time, being a small child who had idolised her mother, she had believed her. As an adult who had been fighting in a war the majority of her life, she saw that advice for what it was.

A crock of shit.

It, of course, didn't stop her from doing it anyway, crossing the gravel pathway to the centre of the lawn and squishing the green blades between her toes. She watched them squirm and sipped her drink. It had been a long time since she had thought of her mother. She tried not to, if she was honest, tried to block them from her mind in the way that she had blocked herself from theirs, it was less painful that way in the beginning.

But in the moments she did allow herself to think of them, she wondered what they were doing. She didn't think of them as anything other than alive, though she supposed they could have died. She could have died, and at least in the afterlife, if there was one, she would have gotten a chance to explain. She wasn't sorry - she could never be sorry for what she had done, just like she was not sorry for her choice to kill.

Would there come a time when those deaths would come back to haunt her? Maybe, but for now at least she had no regrets, not unless you counted the people she regretted having let live that is. The glass was cool against her lips, the light bubbles dancing around her mouth and giving her just enough warmth and clarity to think.

It had been close the other day - she was fine, and that was great - but it had been close. She needed to find a way to build on their rings, to make them even better. It wasn't good enough yet. She couldn't handle the regrets of another close call.

Hermione swallowed down the last of her glass and began the trek back inside. She was tired; she needed sleep, but she needed to make sure first, above all else, that Ginny was okay before Hermione left her to do that. The Order wanted a fucking war, and they would get one. She was not afraid of an army of sheep in lion's clothing, she was a fucking dragon, and she was tired of being hunted. Not when she was an apex predator, something they would likely only realise as she burnt them all down.

told her all she needed to know about what to expect. Draco had told her Blaise was torturing people for information and that he had already killed three of them. Hermione could only pray that he had left someone that she would be able to recognise as useful.

"Blaise." Daphne hissed through the darkness as they rounded a corner. "I brought you help--"

"I don't need help. I—" Blaise snarled, turning toward Daphne, but his eyes snagged on Hermione instead, the curse dropping from his victim, leaving them in silence instead. "Mi. Thank fuck. If Draco see--"

"What the fuck ?!" Draco roared from the end of the hallway.

"Think he already knows," Hermione whispered. Her eyes flew around to the prisoners in the cells surrounding them. Desperate to spot someone... anyone worth interrogating as Draco stalked ever closer to them, his face angrier than she had ever seen him. "Her!" Hermione exclaimed, jabbing her finger at none other than Romilda Vane.

Romilda shrunk back, hiding in the shadows of her cell with wide scared eyes. "Question her." Hermione stated again with confidence, meeting Draco's gaze with defiance.

Draco glared at her but turned and slipped into the witch's mind with ease. Romilda had never been able to grasp the concepts of occlumency, and it seemed that Draco was not being gentle with her the way he had been with Hermione because Romilda clutched at her head, whimpers falling freely from her like a melody.

Blaise, Hermione, and Daphne all waited with bated breath. Silence stretched between them, Hermione's heart pounding in her chest. She needed Romilda to know something. If she didn't, Draco would send her away, and she doubted that even Blaise would be able to help her - and then she wouldn't be able to find her friend.

Draco stood up straighter as he came back to himself, turning to Hermione with a look that made her ill to her stomach because his earlier anger was gone and replaced with determination. "Got it."

counted to sixty-three in her head before she was being led out of the cupboard and towards the kitchen.

Pansy was whistling a sad tune to herself in the kitchen, the sounds of cups being shifted on the counter ringing around them in the air, but Daphne didn't pause this time; she carried on into the kitchen. Pansy took one look at Hermione and sighed. "That's the stupidest fucking idea I've heard today, and believe me, I have heard a lot of them. Draco is going to go spare."

"Babe..." Daphne groaned. "Please..."

"We need you to be ready, Pansy. If I get information, I'm not waiting and risking losing her forever. I need to know that you will be waiting to help if she needs medical attention," Hermione said defiantly. After getting a nod from the dark-haired beauty, she continued to pull Daphne from the house, her muscles finally starting to function within the normal range of stiffness.

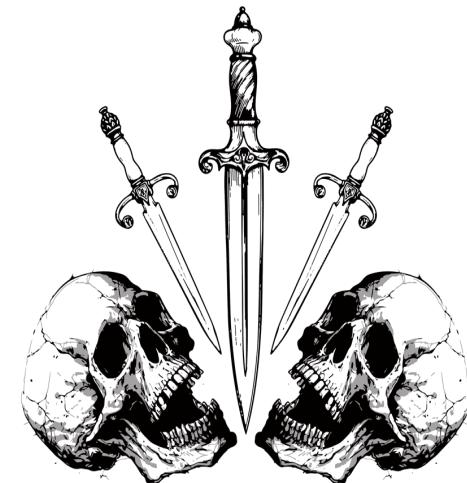
"Granger, perhaps I better be the one to—" The blonde's words dying as Hermione yanked them through the atmosphere, not bothering to fully materialise between jumps until they landed in the alleyway behind the ministry.

"Merlin, some fucking warning." Daphne snapped, steadying herself on the wall beside her. "Who the fuck taught you to jump like that? You've been travelling with Theo and Blaise too much. Bloody hell." Daphne breathed in deeply through her nose, and Hermione had to giggle a little at the parallels to the muggle equivalent of 'Who taught you to drive?' After a long exhale, the witch stood tall and straightened her jacket. "Alright, let's get this over with."

Both witches tried to look as though they belonged there, and for Daphne, that was easy. She had already spent a great deal of time there this morning, but Hermione garnered a few looks, and upon catching her reflection in a window, she understood why. Her hair was an untamed mess, and her clothes, the fact that they had obviously been cleaned up with a scourgify, were still torn in places.

Hermione thought that perhaps the only reason that they managed to make it down to the holding cells uninterrupted was because of the glare of determination on Daphne's face. It was only when the elevator had stopped its whirlwind journey on the deepest basement floor that her expression changed at all and switched to that of a predator seeking out its prey. Hermione wasn't sure if that prey was Draco or Blaise, but either way, she didn't want to risk getting her head bitten off by asking. Instinct told her that she was already on thin ice after the apparition incident.

The ministry cells were a labyrinth of twists and turns drowning in black tile; screams of "I don't know" pulled them to the right, but the stiffness of Daphne's shoulders



CHAPTER 30: KILL FOR YOU

She was on her way back to Ginny when Draco appeared in the hallway, pulling her into the bathroom next to them. The smell of smoke clung stubbornly to his clothes, his hair dishevelled, and there were still bags under his eyes. Hermione realised the last time she had seen him had been in the Order's house as he had gone to warn the others of Ginny's fire, and she doubted he had slept since the night before Diagon Alley. The corner of his lip was busted, likely from the fight he had gotten into with Ron; part of her wished he had just killed him instead. She knew it had come down to instinct - the moment Ron tried to grab her, he had just stepped

in, but it would make her feel better knowing that Ron wasn't running around free out there.

His hands grabbed at her waist firmly and pulled her to him, his body shaking slightly against her as he pressed her back into the counter. His head dropped to the crook of her neck, and his arms wound around her, holding her as close to himself as he could. "Hey..." she whispered. "What's wrong?" Well, that was a stupid question because, obviously, the last two to three days had been hell.

There had been a lot of moments where they had toed the line fairly closely to sexual tension or flirtation, times where their bodies had ended up in close contact in this strange teasing game where they tried to see who would break first, but this was different. This felt like panic, like a need for reassurance, emotional - this had never been something that they had done before.

Draco shook his head against her. "Just... let me have this, please." He grumbled. "I just..." Whatever he just, she didn't know because the words died in his mouth and his grip on her hardened. "I have spent the last twenty-one hours trying to keep Blaise from doing something rash, and I don't even know why. Why shouldn't he do something rash? Why shouldn't he beat Potter within an inch of his life, over and over again? Why shouldn't he burn England to the ground to make sure that every last Order cunt is wiped off the face of the planet?"

Hermione reached up and began to stroke his hair, choosing to remain silent and let him get it out. "If it had been you... I'm not sure I could be stopped; I still want to now." His voice had turned angry again as he pulled back to look at her, the back of his finger brushing a strand of her hair out of the way. "So how can I expect Blaise to sit back and do nothing when I know if I had been in his shoes, nothing would hold me back."

"Draco..." His name slipped off her tongue and it seemed to break his resolve. His fingers came up and laced through her hair, gripping it in his grasp and pulling ever so slightly to force her to look at him in his eyes, eyes that were blown wide with his pupils consuming his iris, leaving only a small ring of silver as frame.

He glared down at her, his nostrils flaring in rhythm with his chest. "It could have been you," he growled.

"No, it couldn't have. Ginny meant something to them. I do not. I'm okay, Draco."

He leant his head forward. He was so close that she could feel the warmth of his breath skating across her lips. "Stop saying it like that," he whispered.

"Like what?" She whispered back. The tension in the air had changed again; it was still thick with desperation but now of a different kind.

missing and everyone asked you to stay put, would you?" Daphne frowned at her. "Ginny might not be blood, but she is my sister, Daphne. You know she is, and you know that if it was you, you wouldn't stay sitting around here either."

Daphne sighed heavily, looking seriously in contemplation between Astoria and Hermione for a moment. "They are going to be so pissed with me."

Astoria gave Daphne a tight-lipped smile. "I'll distract Theo. Maybe I can trick him into getting some sleep. That will only buy you two long enough to get to the ministry, though; you're on your own with Draco."

Hermione shook her head, "Blaise can help bypass him. He will be desperate to get Gin back."

"You have no idea," Daphne mumbled.

"If I can get to him before I run into Draco, then maybe, just maybe, I won't end up stunned and in a cell of my own."

Astoria and Daphne stared at each other for a long minute before Daphne rolled her eyes. "You owe me for this, Granger."

"If I can help find Ginny, Daphne, I'll owe you twenty," Hermione mumbled and threw her legs over the side of the bed. She ended up needing Daphne's help to stand up, to which the blonde rolled her eyes and muttered about this being a terrible idea.

Astoria ruffled through the bedside table and recovered Hermione's wand. "Good luck," she whispered before slipping from the room.

Daphne waited barely a minute before she helped Hermione down the hall. It turned out the room Hermione had been in was still in the Chateau - possibly another requirement for Astoria, or maybe it was the general medical treatment room for them in case they were injured on the field. The sound of Theo talking to Astoria and walking their way had Daphne pulling her into the closest room, which turned out to be not a room but a closet.

The way that Daphne moved with such silence should have terrified Hermione, but honestly, she was just constantly blown away by the abilities of everyone in the house. "I'm just so tired," Astoria's voice put on an air of helplessness. "I just think that if I lay there then I'll start thinking about Gin and Hermione... Could you please just come lay with me for a little while? Just till I fall asleep?"

Astoria's pleading and pouting voice flitted past them. Surely Theo would be able to sense what was clearly manipulation in his wife's voice? Surely he would be able to sense that he was being played? "Anything for you my love." Theo's voice carried back down the hall to where Hermione and Daphne remained in the cupboard. Hermione

Hermione didn't like that; it left her too much time to think about the fact that they had gotten Ginny. Who had her, and what did they want with her? The Order was a lot of things, but the only reason she was listening and staying in bed for now was the fact that they didn't believe in killing anyone and they did not approve of torture. Yes, Seamus had nearly killed her, but she suspected that was more personal than Order approved.

There was a soft knock at the door, and Astoria's head poked around the frame. "Hi, how are you feeling?" Her soft, sweet voice wrapped around Hermione like a blanket. "I brought you some soup if you want it?" The petite little witch slipped into the room, a tray in hand. Hermione was more relieved to see a large glass of orange juice accompanying the bowl and smiled her appreciation before drinking the entire thing down, only to wince. It was already an effort to get her throat muscles to work around the words, but swallowing was harder.

What the hell had happened to her throat? Maybe it was the smoke from the fire? "Thank you." Hermione smiled and spooned a few mouthfuls. "Tor? How long was I out?" Astoria was wearing different clothes than what she had last seen her in, and though she hated to admit it, the witch looked about as well as the two other housemates who had blessed her with their company so far.

"Not quite thirty hours."

The spoon dropped from Hermione's hand. Thirty hours. Thirty hours was far too long to have not found Ginny yet. Did anyone sleep at all in that time? It didn't seem so. What good was it doing anyone for her to be sitting here in bed, especially if everyone was running on fumes?

"Nope. This is ridiculous." She muttered more to herself than to Astoria. "I should be helping."

"Hermione, you nearly died," Astoria exclaimed.

"My best friend is missing. The keyword in your sentence is 'nearly'. It's not like I need to do anything strenuous, but I can help Tor. I can't just sit here doing nothing. I can tell them who to question out of the prisons, and Draco can use his legilimens skills and speed the whole process up. If we wait too long, then they will move her, and it will take too long to find her again. Do you really want to see what Blaise will become if we let it get to that stage?"

"It's not up to her, Granger; there's no need to sell your arguments to her," Daphne drawled from the doorway.

"I'm not trying to sell anything to her, but this is pointless, and you know it. I'm not dead, and there's work to be done." Hermione gave her a pointed look. "If it was Tor

"Like you didn't nearly fucking die in my arms - like you think I wouldn't kill for you. Because I would, I would do so much worse than just kill someone, Granger, don't you get that? Don't you get what would have happened if me sucking the poison out hadn't saved your life?" His glare was so intense, but so were his lips crashing down against hers, his hands pulling her flush against his body. A feral growl ripped through him.

"Draco." She whispered against his mouth, her hips rolling against his. Fire erupted through her at the feel of him hard between her thighs. His mouth moved to her neck, where his tongue licked a circle around her pulse before he sunk his teeth into the flesh, and a hiss of pain bounced off the walls.

"Are you still okay, Hermione?" he growled, frustrated with her reassurances. Her neck throbbed where he had bitten her, his tone cutting, daring her to say she was.

"Yes." She answered defiantly. His mouth dove down on hers once more, his mouth parting in an all-consuming kiss. "I am. I'm right here. I am alive." The words were lost against his lips. She pulled at his shirt, tugging it over his head. Draco didn't fight it, and she relished the burn of his bare skin against her hands. The weeks of teasing and the almost joking nature of their flirting were gone. Instead, the weight of unspoken words fueled the needy gasps and firm hands gripping at each other's flesh.

Hermione slipped back and up onto the counter, her thighs framing Draco's hips as he followed, allowing no distance to form between them. He ground himself against her, her head tilting backwards and her mouth falling open. He pulled at her hair, demanding her to look at him again, all of his emotions bleeding through in the way he glared at her. He had only seen Ginny for a second on their way out. He had likely heard from Blaise about the scene they had arrived at, but he had been so much more involved with her own incident that Ginny's situation probably added fuel to that already burning fire.

She could feel the defined ridges of his scars beneath her fingertips digging into his back. The accumulation of everything that had built up over the span of years, let alone months, poured from her and into him, all her aggression and rage. It all rolled off of her and clashed with his, causing a fight for the upper hand. If this was going to happen, and she was fairly certain it was, there would be no fun, teasing foreplay, and frankly, she didn't want or need that right now; she just needed release.

She broke their kiss to pull her shirt up over her head and threw it on the ground. Draco's hands dropped to her waist, his fingers dragging across her skin, leaving behind a trail of heat. Hermione rolled her hips, pulling another groan from him. His fingers shifted to the drawstring on her track pants, yanking it aggressively before grabbing the

band and tugging at it until she locked her feet together behind him, using him as leverage to lift her hips for him to move them down.

A gasp sounded at the chill of the counter against her exposed skin, but his mouth was covering hers again in an instant. Her pants were being discarded somewhere over his shoulder. His fingers dipped into her core without hesitation. Hermione's eyes fluttered at the feel of him; she hadn't cared about foreplay, but the tension in her abdomen was already so taut that she had to focus on not riding his fingers right there.

"Draco." She moaned just as his teeth captured her bottom lip. His eyes didn't shy away; he looked straight into her soul and curled his fingers inside her, sending goosebumps across her skin like fireworks. His fingers stroked at her again, and she fell backwards against the cold mirror behind her. His other hand found its way to the base of her throat, squeezing just enough to make the blood rush to her head, making it spin.

His eyes burnt into her, his eyes so dark that she couldn't even see the grey any more. His chest heaved as he quaked with a quiet rage. Each pump of his fingers into her felt like a delicious punishment. It was her fault that he had these feelings after all; she could feel all the unspoken words. How dare she make him feel this way about her. How dare she come to mean this much to him that the mere thought of her injury or pain could send him into a spiral.

His fingers moved with increasing speed; she wanted more, wanted to feel him inside her more fully. Hermione moved to unbutton his jeans, but the hand that had been buried in her cunt ripped free from her to grab her wrist. "Don't," he snarled, shoving it back toward herself, his hand tightening ever so slightly around her throat as his fingers dove back into her with renewed irritation. Driving her towards that peak faster.

She gulped at the air, and she struggled to maintain her control. She couldn't think straight; the sight of him was devastatingly beautiful, even with his face seething in his anger at the situation. Each motion of his hands filled the bathroom with loud sounds of her arousal. She was losing her battle to hold on, her head spinning from the constriction of air and the fire that had been brewing in her from the moment she had seen him in that bar.

"What about now?" He growled at her. "You still okay now, Granger?" His pace was punishing. She knew what he wanted but she wouldn't give it to him.

"I'm not made of glass. I won't break. I'm okay, and I'm here, and that can piss you off, but you won't be the reason I hurt. You got to me in time, Draco - you saved me. I'm okay." Hermione glared back at him.

"She's not here." Draco snapped. His eyes locked on her like he might take her down himself if need be. "We're working on it, but if you don't lie the fuck down, Granger, let us do our jobs and do as you are told, then I'll curse you myself and just let you fucking die this time." A shiver ran down her spine at his words.

"How bad was it?" Her voice betrayed her fears.

"It was fine, I sucked it out in time." His tone clipped. "But you're body is still recovering, so lie the fuck down."

Hermione shook her head in dismissal. "Not me you idiot, I'm clearly fine, thank you by the way, but I meant Diagon Alley. What damage was there, how many did we lose? Prisoners? Come on Malfoy, I'm asking for a debrief here. I need all I can get here."

Theo huffed a sour laugh. "Always working, right, Princess? I need to go let the others know you're awake; they've been waiting." His eyes darkened a little despite the smile on his face. "Stay in the bed, Mione, or I'll have to stick you to it." Theo stumbled out of the room, leaving her with Draco, who was gawking at her as if she had told him that she was secretly Harry Potter in disguise.

"Four shops were damaged in the fire, and three more were blown up. Seventeen civilian casualties. Tom has already issued a statement that marks the Order members as enemies of the state. He did a brilliant job of calming the uproar - you should be proud. Ginny was taken, but we're working on rectifying that. I couldn't tell you the names of anyone, I can't say I ever gave a fuck about any of your little Order buddies, and frankly, I was a little distracted. Theo wanted me to make sure you knew he took down eleven before your...accident."

Hermione looked at him, really looked at him; he looked as sickly as Theo had, and if it had been just him then she might have been more concerned, but for now, she put it down to the stress of it all. "Thank you Draco, it was a risky thing to do what you did. It could have killed you."

His eyes lacked the warmth that she had come to associate with them. He looked at her with such contempt that it made her uncomfortable. Was she missing something? He sighed deeply, rubbed his face with his hands, and when he looked at her again, his tone wasn't so much annoyed as exhausted. "Blaise is interrogating some of the prisoners. I should get to him, or else we might end up with no one to interrogate. Daphne is with him at the moment and she sent word before that he's already killed three of them. I assume you won't take issue with my absence." He didn't bother waiting for a response, simply standing and slipping from the room, leaving her alone.

It took her a few attempts to try and open her eyes; they, like the rest of her body, were slow and sluggish, but eventually, when she finally managed to pry them apart she was greeted by Theo's soft face hovering above her.

His hair - which, granted, was normally a bit scruffy anyway - was a complete mess. He had dark bluish-purple bags under his eyes, which were bloodshot and watery. He was pale and looked ready to drop on his feet. "You look like shit, Theo." She didn't mean to grumble, but the way her throat struggled around the words.

A bitter scoff sounded from the other side of the room. "You should see yourself," Draco growled angrily.

Hermione tried to move to see him clearly, but she had never felt so weak. Theo, seeing her struggle, helped her up. Draco was slumped into a loveseat on the other side of the room. It was clinical as if it might have belonged at St Mungo's, but that wouldn't make any sense given the couch Draco was slumped in and the artwork on the walls that screamed Astoria. Draco looked as bad as Theo; his eyes were closed tight, his hair was a mess, and his clothes were more tattered than Hermione had ever seen.

The whole thing put her on edge. A nagging feeling that something wasn't right coiled in her stomach. She tried again to search her mind for information that would clue her in on what had happened, but the fog was persistent. "Okay, what's going on?" Hermione asked, her concern mounting.

"Do you remember going to Diagon Alley?" Theo asked gently.

Hermione thought hard; it made her brain ache, but eventually, parts of it came back to her, trickling in like a dripping tap. "The Order attacked. We went to defend it, there was a fire and..." Seamus's face flashed in her mind. "I killed Seamus." After that, things became harder to visualise. She remembered the feelings of panic and confusion, a brief image of Draco over her with his lips locked around her arm and pain, lots and lots of pain like he was biting her - No. He was sucking something from her arm... poison.

Poison from the hex that had landed because- "Ginny!" She screeched, earning her a scowl from Draco at the sudden volume that echoed around the room. "Where is she?" She tried to climb off the bed, but Theo stopped her, pushing her back down as his eyes darkened a little.

"I think not, Princess. You will stay there for now, thank you very much." His tone matched the expression on his face. He wasn't fucking around, but neither was she.

"Theo, get out of my fucking way. I need to see Ginny. Where is she?" She glared up at him. He looked tired, really fucking tired. How long had she been out?

Her words seemed to rattle him for a second, his motions faltering, his shields falling just enough for the fear to flash for just a second. Hermione took the opportunity and reached for the button on his jeans again, this time he let her even though he had resumed his ministrations, flooding her brain with fog again.

His hand on her throat slid to the back of her neck and pulled her back toward him, his kiss less angry and more appreciative. The band in her stomach that had been painfully tight from the moment this had begun, threatened to snap into oblivion. "Draco..." she whispered in warning.

"Don't you see what you're doing to me, Granger?" He exhaled against her, "I'm a man of planning. I am logical." His thumb reached up and brushed over her clit and began rubbing steady circles, stealing an all-too-loud moan from her. "I follow reason. I assess each situation and don't take unnecessary risks..." His breathing was laboured as he struggled to maintain his own control. "So tell me why, when it comes to you, I lose all sensibility? Tell me why I can't control my thoughts or my feelings... constantly fighting the urge to bend you over the table and fuck you until your cumming all over me, to kill anyone who so much as looks at you the wrong way. Why, every time the minister calls you Hermione, I want to punch him in the face. Why I wanted to slaughter every last prisoner we captured that day" His pretty words stroked a part of her brain that she liked to deny having. "You would like that, wouldn't you? Me soaking in the blood of those who threaten you... tell me." He growled, his voice demanding again.

Hermione tried to think clearly enough to answer, perhaps offer a rebuttal, but she was free-falling over the edge, the walls of her pussy clamping down around his fingers and stars exploding behind her eyes, so instead, she ended up screaming out a resounding "Yes!"

His fingers slipped from within her, leaving her empty again. She barely got a whimper out before his cock was pushing into her. A second whimper fell out of her as she waited for her body to adjust to his size, stretching her to her limits. It wasn't until he bottomed out that he paused and hissed a series of unintelligible words against her shoulder. His hands dropped to her thighs and grabbed her with a bruising grip. "Fucking perfection," he breathed, pulling back to the tip and slamming back into her.

Her nails dug into his shoulders in an attempt to find purchase. Her thighs spread open further of their own accord, allowing him in deeper. "Oh God... Draco?" She gasped as his cock began pistonning in and out of her with all the aggression he had demonstrated earlier returning, driving her hard and fast back toward another climax. Her breasts bounced from the motion, and all she could hope was that no one would

pass by the bathroom anytime soon because the sounds of their hips colliding, their pants, grunts, and half-mumbled words of worship...all seemed to echo off the walls.

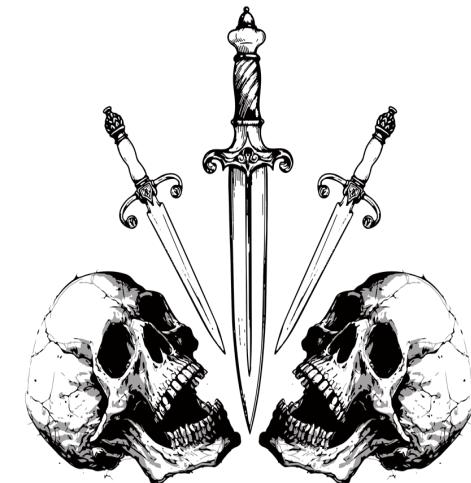
Draco's praises of 'Oh fuck - Taking me so well, your cunt was made for me, it's mine, do you understand?' mingled with her own exclamations of 'Feel so fucking good, fucking me like that, all yours, yes I'm all yours.'

Hermione's hand moved above her head and she steadied them both by clawing at the wall. It had been so long since she had slept with anyone, but she was almost certain that it had never felt this good. If it had, she couldn't imagine why she would have stopped. Surely the heightened ecstasy was contributed to by whose dick was pounding into her, stroking at every hard-to-reach itch within her. One of his hands released her thigh to grab her other hand from his shoulder and pin it with the other above her head. Her freed thigh moved to wrap around his waist instead, her heel digging into his ass with every rutting of his hips.

"Oh fuck." He groaned. "Do you have any idea how fucking glorious it was to watch you cum before? So fucking pretty, just like the noises you make." His words stuttered as he fought to hold himself together. "The only one who has this effect on me, who has ever had this effect on me." Draco leant his forehead forward to rest against hers, "I want to feel it; I want to feel the way you come undone around my cock. Won't you show me, Granger? Won't you show me what a good girl you can be?"

His words sent shooting sensations through her abdomen, twisting her insides and pushing her closer to that edge, but then suddenly, he was gone, pulling out of her and leaving her needy. He yanked her forward off the counter and turned her around, only to push her forward on it again. His feet kicked hers apart, his hand sliding up her back and around to the front of her throat, yanking her head upwards and bringing her face to face with their reflections. "Look at you. Tell me you don't see what I see; tell me you aren't the most beautiful fucking goddess... Watch yourself. I want us to both see how gorgeous you are when you cum. Do you have any idea how many times I have wanked over you these last few weeks? Every fucking day."

He lined himself up and thrust into her with force. Hermione watched as her lips parted and formed an 'o'; the accompanying moan seemed louder as it bounced off the glass. She watched as her eyes fluttered, resisted the urge to roll back and looked to him instead, the way his eyes trailed her body in awe and the way he bit the inside of his cheek, the light sheen of sweat over his skin, the way his hair fell from the hair tie it was only just long enough for. He kept going on about how gorgeous she was, but had he looked at himself? He was glorious, like a Greek god carved out of marble.



CHAPTER 27: THIRTY HOURS

Her entire body tingled and ached as though it had been thrown into a pool of electric eels. She groaned and tried to displace some of the pain in her body.

"Holy fuck, Granger? Are you with me?!" Theo gasped and stumbled over to whatever hard surface she was currently lying on. She tried to remember what had happened, but her brain was still trying to reboot.

Her hand came up to her face and rubbed at it. "Yeah? I think so. What happened?" Her voice was hoarse and her throat hurt like it had been bruised from the inside out.

His eyes locked with hers in the reflection, a smirk tugging at his lips as he picked up his pace, fucking into her so hard that she had to reach out and steady herself. It was all too much; she felt too much. The fire coursing through her was consuming her, and she couldn't stop it. The world had stopped existing outside of them. She had read books in her teenage years where the character had described it as such, like everything else faded from existence, and at the time, she had rolled her eyes and brushed it off as over-romanticised fantasy because sex had never been that in reality but here in this bathroom, she understood.

His other hand gripped her hip, keeping her steady. Each drag against her walls pushed her closer to oblivion. The noises he was making made her feel powerful. She did that to him; she made him feel this way, the same man whom she had seen kill dozens without batting an eye.

Her orgasm had escalated quickly. Draco's hand left her throat, and barely had time to clamp over her mouth to silence her scream before it ripped through her. His chest pressed against her back, and his free arm wound around her front to pull her as close to him as possible. His hips stuttered, a feral growl vibrating through his chest as he attempted to drown his own sounds by locking his lips around the spot where her shoulder met her neck. "Fuck... Hermione!" His cry sent tingles over her skin and shivers down her back, and he pressed as deeply up into her as he could before his hot release filled her quaking cunt.

The reality of how loud they had been made evident to her by the absence of noise other than their heavy breaths, both of them frozen in their position, still trying to ground themselves again. Draco's forehead moved to rest against her shoulder and his hold on her tightened, reminding her of what had started this in the first place. "I'm okay, Draco," Hermione whispered.

"I know," he said through still-laboured breaths. "Doesn't stop me worrying, though... I thought I was going to lose you." He reluctantly pulled out and hinted at her to turn around, capturing her chin between his thumb and index finger, tilting her face up to look at him as his cum dripped down her thighs. When his lips touched hers, it was softer this time, affectionate, his other hand brushing strands of her hair back behind her ear. Then he was pulling away, seeking out his wand to wave a cleaning charm over her and handing her back her discarded clothing.

They redressed quietly, but she slipped her hand into his just before he opened the door. Theo stood there, leaning against the wall in those stupid pink gumboots with a shit-eating grin on his face. "Haven't you two heard of a silencing charm."

"You're the one standing here listening like a fucking pervert." Hermione countered with a roll of her eyes.

"Yeah, well, Blaise sent me to find you... Ginny wants to go to the cells." Theo's voice lacked the usual cheerful tone she had come to associate with him, which, after several days of seriousness, was getting concerning. "She wants to see Potter."

mind, the only word that mattered. "G-" The word was cut off by the scream that ripped out of her as Draco began to suck the poison from her arm again, the fire in her fighting back so violently that everything around her began to fade to black. "Ginny..." she mumbled before she was lost to the inky depths.

It was the sharp burning sting to her arm that at first hadn't registered in her mind, she was no stranger to hexes, seven years in a war did that to a person, made them numb to the minor injuries, eventually you just learned to categorise them without thought. She was so used to them before that it took her brain too long to realise that she hadn't felt one in a few months. She hadn't felt one because of the ring on her finger, a pair to the one on Ginny's protecting them both from any spell that had been flung their way since they had started wearing them. The rings that only worked when they were in close proximity to one another.

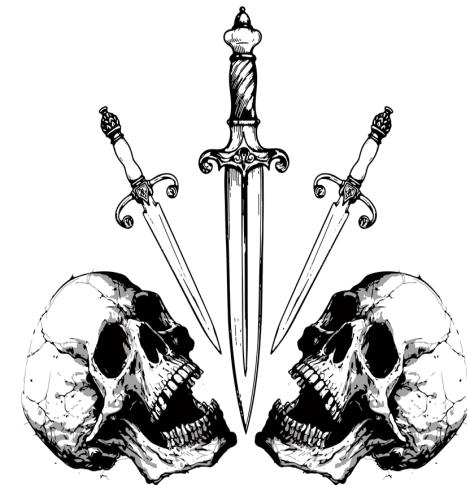
Hermione looked down at the gash in her upper arm. It was only small, tiny, really, but the thick black tentacles spreading ever so slowly out around it under her skin burned. It was poison. She could feel it already clouding her mind, attempting to distract her from something else... something really important...

Draco appeared in front of her, grabbing her by her shoulders and speaking to her. Hermione knew he was speaking to her because his lips were moving, but her ears didn't pick up on any of the words. In fact, she could hear no noise at all, not even the fire. She felt her face pull in a frown as concern began to register on his. She recognised the movement of the word 'Granger?' in question on his lips, her eyes started to make their way back to the gash on her arm as the realisation hit her, the sinking feeling of despair dug its claws in, throwing her off balance and making her stumble but Draco's arms dropped to her waist to catch her.

She tried to speak, but her legs gave out under her. Draco guided her down to the ground, panic having completely morphed his face. She watched helplessly as his eyes began searching her, going immediately to the side she had been hit. His hand grabbed at her arm and turned it, exposing the cut to him. Her mouth felt full, and it took all of her focus, all of her concentration, to push the obstruction from her mouth. Draco bent his head to the wound on her arm without hesitation, his lips wrapping around it, swallowing it completely. The numbness that had spread through her body suddenly burned like fire in her veins as it retreated, like it was slowly being pulled from her bloodstream again.

She thought she might scream with the way it seared her insides like acid, even opened her mouth to do so, but then it stopped. Draco had turned to spit onto the pavement behind him. Blood rushed in her ears, making a whooshing sound on loop. The burning was back, as was the iron grip Draco had on her arm holding it still.

She thought she might be gasping; she could vaguely hear a noise that sounded like her. Theo and Pansy's faces appeared above her, both looking horror-stricken down at her. The moment Draco turned to spit again, she tried again to say the word in her



CHAPTER 31: NOT A BIG DEAL

No one said a word as they made their way to Blaise's room, and besides one statement about how Daphne owed him three hundred galleons, Theo didn't mention the bathroom incident again. Not that he needed to, because the moment they all reached the door, Ginny's eyes blew wide in surprise. "You two had sex!?" she screeched.

Hermione's mouth dropped open, she attempted to find the words but just ended up staring at her in disbelief.

"Oh please, I'm somewhat traumatised, not dead." Ginny whipped around to face Blaise, missing the way Draco stiffened beside her. Hermione squeezed his hand, both a silent reassurance and a plea not to say anything. "You owe me six hundred galleons."

Hermione gawked. "Why is everyone betting on our sex life?"

Draco cleared his throat and frowned at the redhead and her husband. "You two share a bank account."

Ginny shrugged nonchalantly. "We didn't when we made the bet." She smirked at him, but Hermione didn't miss the way it failed to reach her eyes.

"Gin, are you sure that you're ready to do this? He can rot in his cell if you're not." Hermione moved into the room and sat at the end of the bed. Ginny sighed and bit her lip for a moment.

"I don't want to wait, Mi. I hate that he's in this house at all, even if it is the dungeon, and I'm not scared of him - I'm just disgusted by him and what he did. Without Ron putting me in that body bind, I would have already killed him. It was a cheap shot. Tomorrow, when Tom returns, Blaise and I are taking him to Riddle Manor and handing him over. Tom can kill him however he likes; I don't care. I just want to be the one to tell him that."

Hermione nodded. "Okay." looking back at her friend with understanding. Harry's death was not a question but a matter of when, and it seemed that the when would be tomorrow.

She didn't offer to go with her. She figured that it would already be assumed that she would because there was no reality in which Hermione ever left her to fight anything alone. Blaise might be Ginny's soulmate, but Ginny was and always would be the person, in every situation, that she could rely on to always be there and who knew that the reverse would always be true. Harry fucking Potter was no exception.

Hermione's immediate reaction upon seeing him hanging in his chains was to want to punch him across the face, but this moment wasn't about her. Theo had clearly healed the most lethal of the injuries that had been inflicted on him. As far as she was aware, everyone else in the house had taken a turn maiming him in some way or another, Blaise especially, before Ginny would see him.

If she was being honest with herself, which she tried to do as often as possible, the fear that flooded Harry's eyes as they entered the corridor outside his cell felt like being given a treat. She couldn't stop the memory of Ginny sobbing against her in the bottom of Astoria's shower from playing in her head, and the knowledge that Harry, of all people, was the cause of it pissed her off to no end. He deserved every bit of pain that he got and then some.

the noise, moving instantly into hand-to-hand combat with his buddy. The smell of a fire started spreading through the air in an overpowering way, disguising the other scents around her. There was something about it that put her on edge, not only because the smoke thickened, making it hard to see and warmed the air to an uncomfortable degree, but because something about it felt like a tactical move. How many buildings had she set on fire over the years? The shopping centre just the other week? The building in Kent before her and Ginny's departure? Dozens more over the years before that.

Her eyes scanned the crowd, hexes fired from the tip of her wand in rapid succession, dodging and weaving out of the way of danger herself - not that it mattered much, it more came out of habit than anything else, and frankly it was one she didn't want to get lazy with. A flash of hair that she recognised as Ginny's didn't comfort her as much as she would have liked. The witch had wandered a little too far from Hermione and it wasn't how they operated. "Gin!" She called and tried to move closer, only to be caught in a confrontation with Seamus who threw hex after curse after punch in her general direction.

"Mi?!" Gin's voice carried over the heads of those between them.

"Gin!" Hermione screamed back. Her ability to multitask seemed to anger Seamus who threw useless spells that failed to even come close to hitting her. That in itself should have raised the alarm bells, but Hermione was too focused on trying to get closer to Ginny. The fact that she couldn't see her anymore already put her on edge. "Oh, for fuck sake!" She snapped, flinging a killing curse Seamus's way at the same time that he flung something at her, closer to her than he had done so far. It was a shame he was dead before it met its mark, she would have liked to have seen what he had in store for her bounce back at him. His lifeless eyes stared at the pavement beneath him where his body fell.

Hermione didn't even pass him a thought as she stepped over his body, her toe knocking the side of his face. The smoke had continued to build on itself, making it hard to see anything, and she couldn't see the store Ginny had been outside of only seconds ago, "Gin!?" She called out, hoping to hear her friend's responding call, but all she could hear was the crackling of the fire that was causing a sweat to break out over her skin. "Gin?!" She tried again; her panic was growing at an alarming rate now. This wasn't how they fought, but aside from the thick fog obscuring anything more than two metres in front of her, there was something else... something very, very wrong. It was the way it was suddenly too quiet. It was the way that bodies littered the street, but no one was moving.

rounded on Draco and looked at him expectantly. He only shrugged until Hermione yanked her hand from his; if he wasn't going to tell her, then she would play that same game. Draco sighed while Harry screamed silently. "He was just warning me."

"Warning you of what?" Hermione raised an eyebrow.

"Not to hurt you. He w- is under the impression that I am only seeking your casual affections." Draco shifted awkwardly.

That didn't make sense to Hermione. "And he's what? Worried that I will run back to the Order if it doesn't work out?"

Draco frowned in surprise at her. "No...? He has taken it upon himself to step into somewhat of a surrogate father role. He is more concerned about your mental and emotional well-being in the event that would happen. He has become... attached... as much as it's possible for Tom Riddle to become attached, that is. He feels that since you corrected his appearance and your plan is entirely on track for success... Well, you have become his new favourite being."

"Then what was with your iciness?" Hermione scowled. She didn't appreciate the obviously private conversation they had had, in her presence no less.

"I am of the opinion that you are not an object to be treasured. You also are not one of his Death Eaters, so while I appreciate his respectful behaviour, his protectiveness is not warranted nor is it unmatched by my own." Draco clenched his jaw and looked over her head towards his boss.

Hermione smirked up at him. "Is that so? Are you saying I shouldn't be treasured? Am I not worthy of being coveted, Malfoy?"

Draco clicked his tongue at her and fought the shake of his head. "I have fucked you, Hermione; I made you cum as little as an hour ago, do not call me Malfoy again!"

"Or what?" She teased. "Are you going to bend me over your knee and belt my ass, Malfoy?"

Draco growled and lunged at her. Hermione squealed and tried to dodge out of the way, a huge grin spreading across her face as she squirmed in his hold, trying to lean away from his playful attempt to bite her face.

"What's my name?" He warned, his eyes alight with happiness. Hermione giggled and tried to break free, ducking her head under his and wriggling to the other side.

"Malfoy!" She squeaked, peals of laughter filtering through as he lifted her off the ground so she couldn't get away; those damned butterflies had grown and transfigured into birds that were desperately trying to take flight. She squeezed her head to one shoulder as he came close to biting that side of her neck. Her cheeks hurt with the

extent of grinning, Draco's mouth mirroring her own, beaming just as widely, just as genuinely.

"What was that?" His fingers started to tickle at her ribs. The shrieks coming from her drowned out the gushing, wet sounds of Blaise stabbing into Harry or the pants of exertion caused by the effort, at least for her anyway. "Hmmm? What was that?" His whole face lit up when he smiled at her like that. His arms were wrapped around her back, holding her so tightly to him that she had nowhere to go and no way to escape the tickling.

"Draco!" She finally yelped between gasps for breath that her laughter had stolen. "Draco! I give!" She giggled. Draco held her just as close as he placed her back on her feet, and the sounds of blood dripping returned. Harry had fallen quiet, likely dead, but Blaise obviously still had some pent-up aggression towards the wizard. Draco leant down and kissed her deeply, melting the ice within her once again.

"Ugh." Ginny pulled a face of disgust as she slid back over to them. "You two are actually sickening."

Blaise had finally stopped stabbing Harry Potter, who was, in fact, very much dead; it would be hard for him to remain alive with the number of wounds covering his body and the amount of blood being vanished underneath him. Though it seemed just as much had found its way onto Blaise, mingling with the sweat and seeping into his clothes. Ginny's husband stood panting and trying to catch his breath as he listened to a Death Eater Hermione hadn't noticed arrive, Tom listening carefully to whatever the soldier was saying.

The logical part of her knew that not every report would mean another battle or another raid, but she was just so damn tired, and the amount of shit they had been through lately put her on edge. Blaise nodded along seriously, occasionally saying something to Tom, likely in explanation. Draco must have felt her tense and followed her gaze to their friend. "Rowle. He was in Italy last I heard. It might be about your other minister's boyfriend," he whispered reassuringly in her ear.

Hermione turned to him in surprise. "You know about that?!" Hermione gaped, shoving him lightly in the chest.

Draco quirked an eyebrow at her. "My family has been in contact with the French ministry for years; it wasn't hard to work out."

Hermione scoffed in disbelief. "Then what was with all the 'grr, caveman rage, me jealous arrgh' bullshit?"

Draco shrugged and smirked smugly at her. "Foreplay?"

Hermione laughed and shoved him away with a shake of her head. "Unbelievable."

Blaise and Tom made their way over while Rowle levitated Harry's body from the room. "So it turns out Minister Renauld was correct to assume that Italy's government was involved. Rowle tracked him to a small village, Craco. Cascioli has him guarded. Rowle couldn't get a great look, but he said about twenty and said they looked like an elite team."

Hermione nodded. "Alright, well, let's make sure Renauld knows; he's probably going out of his mind by now."

"I'll fill him in." Ginny declared. "I won't go into detail but I will fill him in on the Louis situation."

Hermione nodded. "Tom, is it okay if I assemble a team to go in and retrieve him? It would be highly beneficial for the relationship between England and France."

"But not good for the relationship between England and Italy?" He queried.

Blaise hummed. "With all due respect, sir, I think that may already be a case of flogging a dead horse. It's highly probable we will have to infiltrate their government as it is."

Tom paced for a moment, deep in thought. Hermione watched him silently, letting him tick it over in his head. "Alright, who can we plant in there to start that process?"

Draco tipped his head in consideration. "Vivaldo, perhaps?" Tom nodded again in agreement.

"Fine, make that happen then. Hermione, you may gather a team of your choice; keep me informed." Tom nodded, dismissing them for now.

Hermione offered him a bow of her head respectfully. Though he wasn't her boss, the idea that she had him in close support did wonders for her confidence. "Thank you, Tom." She responded quietly.

The second they landed back at the Chateau, she turned to Draco seriously. "I want Tiberius on that mission, and I do not want him leaving Italy alive."

Draco chuckled. "Great minds, Love. Consider it done." His face was simply beautiful in the glowing orange of the fading daylight. Both Blaise and Ginny nodded their approval of that decision.

Hermione found Daphne, Pansy, Astoria, and Theo all dancing about the sitting room, the wireless playing in the background, and all with a drink in hand. "Ah, they have returned!" Theo chirped with far too much enthusiasm and pep. Hermione's eyes scanned the room and landed on the tops of the silver cans, only just visible over the top of the bar.

"Oh... dear..." Hermione mumbled, her eyes locked with Ginny, who peered back at her in glee and shrugged. Hermione chuckled and made her way to the bar; there laid

"Minister, please, Draco, if you insist on such formalities. After all," Tom's eyes flicked back to her in assessment, as if she was an old familiar painting of which he was quite fond, "Hermione here is leading us in new directions, is she not?"

Hermione put on her best smile and nodded. "That is correct. How are things going with the ministry?" She asked, purposely shifting the conversation away from herself while Ginny hit Harry with a cruciatus curse.

Tom chuckled politely. "St Mungo's was rather surprised to learn that funding had been reinstated. It's fine - different, but fine." She could sense the words he wasn't saying. That it had been a difficult adjustment period for him; Tom was still unlearning some of his more barbaric ways. Honestly, he was doing so much better than she expected of him, and it was possible that having the face he did had impacted his confidence more than he had let on.

Hermione nodded; unfortunately, the ministry was still in shambles and trying to find legitimate workers was hard. The public seemed to be slowly coming around to the idea, more out of desperation to end the war possibly, but also in large part due to the Order's stupid decision to attack Diagon Alley. "I think it's important that we get Hogwarts back up and running as soon as possible, but I think that, more importantly, and not to the same extent, we need to get Diagon operational again. It would be a good opportunity for a PR stunt to see you out there, helping the community and all that bullshit. Feed them the idea that you give a crap."

Harry screamed silently, pulling her attention momentarily to see that Blaise had stabbed a knife into Harry's genitals before turning back to the conversation between her and Tom, Ginny still holding the cruciatus steady. "Especially if we are going to expect students to shop there. Parents of halfbloods and muggleborns might feel better about it if we at least look like we're coming out the other side of the war."

Tom nodded. "In that case, Draco, which team do you think would be most appropriate for the task?" Tom's tone was stiff; there had definitely been some shift in dynamic between the two men, and it made her skin itch.

"Pucey's team would probably be the most pliable to the new regime, Minister." Draco's tone was equally as clipped, and Hermione started to panic internally. Her eyes sought out Ginny, who was now just watching on as Blaise stabbed Harry in the stomach repeatedly, but turned as she felt Hermione's eyes on her. Hermione sent her a look that she hoped read 'help me' and tried to indicate toward Draco and Tom without making any movement.

Mercifully, Ginny picked up on her cues and came to pull Tom away under the guise of relaxing the supervision agreement now that she and Blaise were married. Hermione

"I don't mean physically. I mean, being the minister and following Hermione's directions, I can't kill him. I could take him before the Wizengamot, but he would need to get jail time, or it would look like our—"

"No." Ginny dismissed with a shake of her head. Hermione couldn't stop the laugh bubbling up out of her as she looked at Harry's round confused eyes as he glanced between his mortal enemy and the girl he had raped. Neither of them finding him important enough to kill themselves. Hermione was impressed by Tom's commitment to her orders, however; it was a good indication that he was, in fact, taking on board what she had said.

"Oh, man. Nobody wants you." She giggled. "Does this mean that we can just kill him then because I think Blaise—"

Blaise halted the end of her sentence with the Sectumsempra that he cast at Harry who remained stationary and upright. His skin erupted into dozens of small cuts and a muffled and long groan of pain escaped the wizard. Blaise, who Hermione was certain had a thing about mess, waved his wand again and any blood that had begun to drip, fell instead into a large tub like object that had materialised beneath Harry.

"Is that... a kiddie pool?" Ginny asked in surprise. Tom moved to stand next to Hermione, unbothered by the happenings in his foyer. Draco innocently stepped back to stand beside her, slipping his hand into hers and rubbing the back of her hand affectionately while pretending to be focused on the scene unfolding with Harry. Hermione rolled her eyes and chuckled.

Tom didn't seem to notice, however, and cast her one of his charming smiles. "Hermione, I wanted to offer my personal congratulations on securing the French ministry. With everything that has happened of late I haven't had a chance to discuss much with you. Why don't you and your household join me for dinner this week? We can have a debrief and a celebratory drink in honour of your success." His tone was all suave, but his eyes told her that the invitation was more mandatory than an offer.

"Of course," she smiled back at him, "That would be lovely." Tom's eyes fell to hers and Draco's joined hands. Draco shifted beside her, tension arising as Tom and Draco began to stare at each other for an uncomfortable length of time. Harry's muffled moans of pain being the backing track for whatever moment this was almost seemed fitting. Was it the notion that one of his top commanders had fallen into bed with a muggle? Or was Draco's subtle little claims over her warranted to something more? "Wouldn't it?" She added belatedly, intentionally, turning to Draco and squeezing his hand in warning when the tension became too thick.

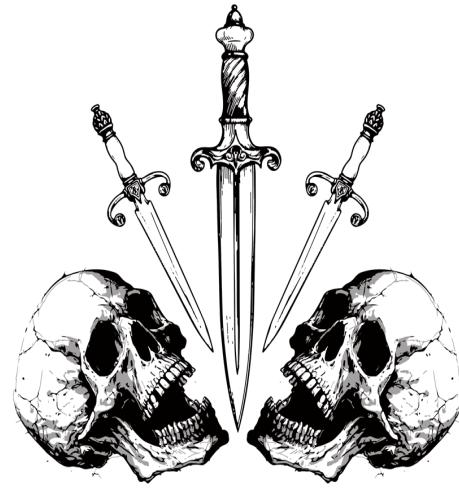
Draco smiled tightly. "Yes, you honour us, my Lor—"

enough empty cans for each of the housemates that had remained home to have drunk two or three each.

Astoria pulled Ginny in to dance with them. The petite blonde had clearly consumed a fair amount of the energy drinks by the way she was bouncing around, her hair flying everywhere, tugging one of Ginny's arms toward her while pushing the other away only to switch with the next bounce.

"The phone rings in the middle of the night. My father yells what you gonna do with your life—" Pansy and Daphne yelled, singing along with the song playing on the radio.

"Are you lot drunk?" Draco frowned at them in horror. Hermione held up one of the empty cans to him in explanation. Draco threw his head back and sighed loudly. Hermione giggled in amusement; based on the level of drinks consumed, they were in for a long night. She started singing along and mixing them all drinks. Really, at this stage, she may as well join them, right?



CHAPTER 33: A (KIDDIE) POOL OF CRIMSON

Tom, though initially overcome with glee, quickly became confused upon learning they hadn't just brought Harry to him for him to watch the execution.

"I am afraid I do not follow; what would you like me to do with him? I can't kill him."

"Sure you can, the prophecy thing is done—" Ginny started explaining, but Tom held up his hand and shook his head.

APOSTASY

"I never said I had a problem with it. I'm saying that you weren't as joyless as you claimed to be; you were more cheery than they are." Daphne straightened, crossing her arms. "If you want everyone to hear your sexcapades, that's on you."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "As much as I am enjoying this new development of Daphne defending me—"

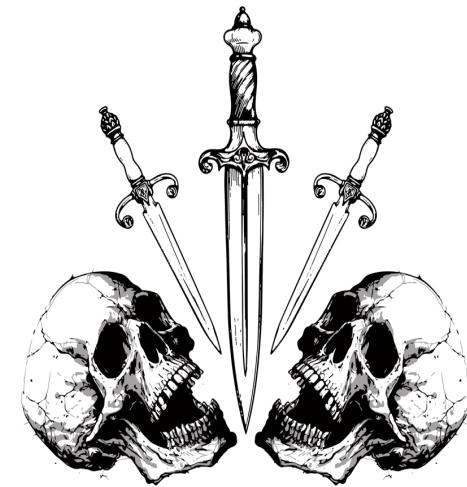
"I wasn't defending you." Daphne sneered, though the bite wasn't there.

Draco chuckled behind her. "Yes, you were." His hand slid around her front softly, sending tingles across her body.

"-I would like to get on with this, shall we?" Hermione waved toward the open doors to the patio and back lawns.

"I'll go retrieve him." Blaise sighed and slipped from the room, taking with him any of the 'joy' that had existed in the room before. Ginny began tugging at the hem of her shirt, and everyone passed each other cautionary looks.

That is until Theo bounded into the room, singing loudly and obnoxiously. "We're off to kill the wizard, the awful wizard named Pots. Yes, we're off to kill the wizard; I hope he screams a lot." Everyone stared at him for a second before simultaneously bursting into fits of laughter. Blaise followed a few seconds later, levitating a stiff-looking Harry Potter. The laughter died immediately, only to resume shortly after and louder than before. Just like that, Theo had restored balance. Theo caught her eye and he gave her a quick wink.



CHAPTER 34: ITALY

Hermione had never been to Italy before; it was a shame that her first visit here was under such unpleasant circumstances. Alessia was not a pleasant woman, and perhaps it was the way that Hermione, Blaise, Ginny and Theo had barged in here, but something told Hermione that perhaps she was just a bitch all the time.

Alessia was in her late thirties - early forties, had mousey brown hair and cold, hard brown eyes. The witch was thin and had a stern face, a face that was looking up at

Hermione, pinched in great annoyance. "I am certain that I did not have an appointment with you today, Miss Granger."

Hermione had noticed that she almost exclusively called Miss Granger by people who did not like her or people who were trying to impress authority over her. In the case of the Italian Magical Minister, Hermione suspected it was both. "No, you did not," Hermione mumbled absently, browsing the woman's bookshelf instead.

"And yet, here you are." Alessia sighed in frustration. She was likely used to people getting to the point quickly. Most politicians did; their time was precious... Usually...

"And yet here I am." Hermione parroted, pulling a book from the shelf, flicking through it and discarding it on her desk, much to the minister's annoyance.

"So then perhaps you would like to tell me why you're here?" Alessia bit out as she waved the book back to its place on the shelf.

Hermione shrugged and dropped into the chair opposite Alessia. "Not really. I knew the second I saw your face what your response would have been. I've probably just saved you half an hour of time."

"One would argue that you are still wasting it." Alessia glared with a false smile. Her agitation was growing with every passing second. Hermione leant her head back and looked at the ceiling in boredom. Alessia exhaled heavily and sat back in her chair. "Well, get on with it then, issue your threats so you can be on your way."

Hermione snorted a laugh. "Do you know what most people's number one fear is, Alessia? Most people's number one fear is public humiliation. What need do I have to threaten you? What an odd thing to say. You look tired. Are you sleeping alright?" Hermione rolled her head to look at Theo. "Don't you think she looks tired?"

In the corner, her bodyguard's brow gave a slight dip, and Hermione caught the way his beady little eyes flickered to his boss in assessment. Theo leaned against the wall, one pink gumboot crossed over the other, the legs of his suit buried within the rubber shoes. "Yeah, maybe. I can see that." Theo made a show of leaning forward to examine her. "Yeah, she does. Bags under her eyes even."

"Perhaps you're not thinking clearly, hmm? I came here with a proposal that I wanted to present to you, but you have been nothing but rude and hostile. Behind them, the minister's bodyguard shifted again. "From the moment we arrived—"

"You waltz in unannounced and unininvited with no schedu—"

"You instantly assume that I am here to threaten you. Honestly, is this how you treat all ministry relations?" Hermione smirked lightly at the woman.

The Italian Minister rose to her feet and pressed her hands to the surface on her desk. "You are not members of any parliament that I will ever choose to recognise."

to shift his hand and push his thumb, ring and all back into her spasming core. The sensation his ring brought drew out her orgasm to the brink.

"That's it, so fucking beautiful Hermione, such a good girl for me," he whispered as he let her ride his hand through the climactic waves of pleasure. Her mind was lost in the haze; she had been reduced to a breathless, shaking, mindless puddle, nodding absently at his words as he continued to coat his family ring in his accomplishment. "And look at that, two minutes." He announced with an air of arrogant victory. He caught her bottom lip between his teeth and tugged at it gently. "Time to get up," he stated, his hand withdrawing from her pants to slap her playfully on the thigh.

It was longer than the ten minutes she had been allotted before she stumbled downstairs. Draco, of course had only taken up two minutes in theory but her legs had felt like jelly for at least five minutes afterward and while Ginny had not left without her, the entire household was smirking rather knowingly. Hermione rolled her eyes and began the process of making herself an iced coffee that she could take with her.

"Uh, Hermione?" Ginny tilted her head and looked at her questioningly.

Hermione threw her a half-filthy look. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but some of you, yourself included Ginevra, made a lot of money off my sex life recently; I think you can wait a few minutes for me to get a caffeine fix."

Draco strolled in, whistling a light tune absently and started working alongside her to make his own coffee. "Oh Merlin, you two are disgusting. Ginny and I weren't even so cheery during our honeymoon days." Blaise snickered

Daphne snorted. "That's easy for you to say. You didn't have to listen to squeals of laughter and all the other noises that were being made."

Ginny levelled her with a smirk. "Neither did you, Greengrass, silencing charms work both ways you know."

Hermione sighed and leant against Draco's frame, who was now resting against the counter. She sipped on her icy drink, and his hand came out to rub against her upper arm affectionately as he, too, drank from his mug.

"And it's my responsibility why?" Daphne droned, rising to the challenge.

"I'm just saying, if you had a prob—"

clit at the same time that his fingers curled in against her walls, stroking at that sensitive spot within her.

Draco made a pleased humming sound as he moved his thumb, and what she assumed was one of his rings rolled over her again with the perfect amount of pressure. “Do you know what that is, Hermione?” He whispered in a husky tone next to her ear, his hand still stroking her hair affectionately, moving to peer down into her eyes softly again as if he wasn’t knuckle-deep in her cunt, fucking her with increasing intensity. “That,” He flexed his thumb, and the ring stimulated her again, “Is my family ring.”

His nose brushed against hers lovingly; all the while, her cunt was making obscene sounds while fluttering around his fingers, still buried deep, still stroking at her walls with enthusiasm. “This particular ring belonged to my great-grandfather. It’s been in my family for over a thousand years; goblin made you see... and right now, you are getting off on it, rubbing your perfect pussy all over it. Do you know that goblin steel takes in that which makes it stronger? Do you think if you cum all over it, the ring will absorb it? Strengthen it?”

Her abdomen was tightening, and Hermione had to fight off the waves of pleasure threatening to take her under, if nothing other than to prove Draco wrong, but the way the ring kept hitting exactly the right spot made it very difficult to remember why she should care.

“I’ll let you in on a little secret, shall I? I have dreamt about using this ring to get you off for so fucking long.” His hips ground into her thigh, pressing his hard cock against her. “ Fucked myself raw over the thought of you cumming on it, making it yours , making me yours.”

Her responding moan was far too loud, but it seemed to spur him on, pushing him to fuck her with his fingers even faster. The wave was building, and shortly there would be no stopping it, his words filling some depraved part of her that got off on the thought of Draco Malfoy going back to his room after a battle and wanking over her. “Oh god...” She pleaded; she wasn’t sure what she needed more anymore: the feeling of release that he gave her or the collateral to make him try again. She was right fucking there, and any second now, the decision would be made for her.

His lips brushed against hers, his breathing strained and heavy, those stormy grey eyes boring down into her soul. “Come on, Love, why don’t you show me just how good you can be for me? Claim it... make it yours.”

“Draco!” She cried out, her vision turning white behind her closed eyes. Her back arching off the bed as she clamped around his fingers, fingers he pulled out of her only

She hissed. Her brown eyes narrowed into thin slithers of rage directed entirely at Hermione.

Hermione raised an eyebrow her way. “Are you telling me that you don’t believe that the United Kingdom has a government or that you don’t want to deal business with the UK? Because those are two very different things. If it’s a matter of not understanding the position of Minister for Magic has been filled recently, then I am happy to discuss with you-”

“Get out.” The witch snapped. “I do not want, nor does my country want, anything to do with you and your crooked, murdering Prime Minister. I have no interest in whatever scheme you intended to sell me, and it will be a cold day in hell before I resign, so just get out.”

Hermione smiled slowly, rising from her chair just as slowly. A person could lie about a lot of things, but Hermione always found that the one thing people often struggled to hide was the truth in their eyes, and right now, Alessia Cascioli’s eyes said panic. “Alright, sorry to have bothered you and wasted your time.”

The others followed her from the office and passed the receptionist whom Hermione had ignored entirely on her way in. The round short woman glowered at her venomously. No one said a single word as they rode the old elevator down to the ground floor. Hermione smirked smugly, but it wasn’t until they exited the building and apparated to an abandoned house in Craco that she turned to Ginny and Blaise with questioning looks.

Ginny nodded, and Hermione hummed, pleased. It was a tiny little bug, muggle originally in design that she had built upon. She had made it minuscule, brought it to life in mere hours. A tiny little bug that had burrowed its way into the ear canal and then the brain of Alessia’s bodyguard, another in her receptionist, and several more in everyone they had passed by. A listening device that would pick up on the small insignificant phrases, ‘Don’t you think she looks tired?’ and future criticisms that would be potentially harsh, it gathered it all and repeated it back to the host’s subconscious.

It would be undetectable. When people started turning on her, the first thing Alessia would do would be to check if their memories had been tampered with. They had not. But small little things that would normally slip by suddenly didn’t seem so unimportant anymore. Alessia would soon become a desperate mess in her attempts to prove to her own government that she wasn’t unravelling at the seams. She would begin to look crazy in accusations that Hermione had done something. Granted, it was on the slower side of Hermione’s usual plans of attack, more manipulative and fuelled by gaslighting, but it would get the job done.

Alessia's dismissal of any effort to engage in a discussion with Hermione and the UK would reflect less on Italy and more on the slow insanity that it would appear Alessia had undergone. It would mean that when they got their guy elected as minister, the parliament and all its deputies and senators would be less opposed to completely dismissing them again, especially after the headlines that would be making their way across English and French papers, singing the praises of the end of the war, of the good that Tom was doing.

"Good. Well done, you lot." Hermione crept over to the window, letting the light catch and reflect off the blade of her knife. She directed it into a house on the next lane over. A few seconds later, a small circular beam of light bounced back at her, the face of Draco's watch being its source. On the other side of the room, Blaise was doing the same thing, alerting Pucey and Rowle's teams that they were ready to move in.

Initially, Hermione had wanted Tiberius - she wanted to make sure that it was the last mission the old bastard ever went on, but in the end, after examining the logistics, it hadn't been worth the risk of him fucking it up on purpose. Louis was precious cargo, and so far from what she had seen of Pucey and the things she had heard, he would be a better fit for the job. Rowle had been Daphne's suggestion, apparently a bit of a jerk, but direct and got the job done. Besides, she had another plan for Tiberius, something much more fitting.

"Alright people. It's game time. Everyone remembers their positions?" Blaise would need to go and meet up with Draco and Daphne, while Pansy and Theo would need to slip into the next house over. Hermione had agreed with Draco when he had lectured their entire house on the sloppiness that had surrounded them lately. Ginny had been kidnapped, she herself had nearly died, Theo could have died, and Blaise had been stunned. They needed their heads on straight today.

"Mi," Blaise said quietly, catching her arm as she moved back toward the cupboard where they had stashed their gear earlier during their scope of the place. "Please, wat-"

"If you think I am letting her out of grabbing distance, then you are crazy, Blaise Zabini. She is safe this time. I promise," she whispered back sincerely to her best friend's husband. He nodded his appreciation, but her own anxiety about Ginny being in the field was mirrored back at her on his face. Hermione would never, not in a million years, turn around and tell Ginny to stay home. This is what they did. This was their lives and this was their skill sets, but it didn't mean that she had to like it, not so soon after how spectacularly it had gone wrong last time.

There was a jolt of movement as he whacked something away from her and shifted to look at something at the end of the bed. "Rise and shine bitch, it's time to kill Harry." Ginny chirped with far too much enthusiasm, considering Hermione had been asleep only moments ago.

Hermione squinted and blinked at the foot of the bed. The thing Draco had whacked away was obviously the pillow that was now discarded there. Ginny stood there grinning from ear to ear, her finger pointed at Hermione and moving between her and Draco. "As cute as this is, it's nearly five o'clock, and we have people to unalive, so get your ass up. You have ten minutes, or I'll leave you behind." Ginny bounded from the room with a smirk, pulling the door closed behind her.

Draco turned his eyes back to her as the door clicked, his hand that had been at her lower back sliding across her belly as she rolled reluctantly to lay flat and stretched. "Good morning." He murmured with a dip of his head to kiss the exposed skin of her neck, a sensation that sent tingles spreading out around the surrounding area.

"Afternoon, apparently." Hermione mumbled and rubbed her eyes. Draco's hand slipped under her shirt and made comforting sweeps over her skin. His fingertips gripped at her flesh and pulled her closer again. His mouth was hot against her neck, eliciting feelings that had no business stirring within her given that she had to leave momentarily to go watch the execution of her childhood friend.

"You were so tired," Draco's mouth moved to the underside of her jaw, his lips placing another kiss. "You were so soundly asleep, I bet I could have driven my cock into you and fucked that tight little cunt of yours, and you wouldn't have woken up." His hand dipped toward the waistband of her track pants.

Heat flooded her body as she let out a long sigh, his words causing the butterflies in her stomach to flip and flutter uncontrollably. "You should have because - oh - Draco... We don't have time for this." Her back arched off the bed as his hand continued its journey.

Draco scoffed, brushing her hair away from her face gently, leaning back to look down at her with a raised eyebrow, his pupils blown out in lust. "Challenge accepted." His fingers dipped lower, brushing over her clit and pulling a shuddering breath from her. "What do you think, Love? I think I can make it happen in less than two minutes." His smug smirk as he glanced at the small clock on her bedside table made her heart lurch.

Hermione's eyes fluttered, and she tried to refrain from writhing as his middle and ring fingers sunk into her core. "I doubt even you are that impressive, Drac- co -" Her argument turned into a coo of pleasure as something cold and hard rubbed against her

that she had been scared because even she knew that it had been a close call. Perhaps it really came down to not being ready to deal with that fact, and if everyone was working as hard as Pansy says they were, maybe they weren't ready either.

"I should let him in, shouldn't I?" Hermione rubbed at her face in an attempt to keep herself awake.

Ginny tilted her head in contemplation. "Yeah, but letting him stew is kind of fun too." Hermione giggled and pushed her friend lightly.

"Are you okay?" Hermione asked her softly.

Ginny took a swig from the bottle and thought about it for a moment. "I was scared that you guys wouldn't find me. That they would move me before you got to me. I'm not used to feeling scared or helpless. A lot of the time, I feel kind of... invincible? But when I couldn't move, when I couldn't do anything to fight it... I felt scared. For the first time in a really long time... I forgot what that was like. I don't know if I'm okay, but I will be. I will get through it with you and Blaise and the rest of this crazy household." Ginny smiled at her genuinely. "It will help when Harry is dead, too, I think." Ginny stood and made to retreat, pausing to look back at her. "You should talk to Astoria. Do you want me to send lover boy in?"

Hermione groaned. "Please stop calling him that... and yes. Please." Hermione's bed was so comfortable, like a snug cloud, it made it very difficult to keep her eyes open, so when her bed dipped beside her, she startled and looked up to find Draco pausing, watching to see her response. "I'm still mad at you, but I'm also too tired to talk about it, and I think I kind of get it, so just... shut up and come here." She snapped at him, pulling him down and curling herself into him. Sleep followed her the moment his body relaxed in relief, and his arms cocooned her around her.

A light breeze flowed through the room, blowing the white curtains into the room. Somewhere outside, a bird was singing, and warmth engulfed her. Someone was stroking her hair and pushing it away from her face. A thumb rubbed back and forth against her lower back when a hand held her tightly. She felt so content, curled into the solid body of warmth against her. "Mione..." His husky voice whispered. "Mione, love... Can you wake up for a moment?" Hermione groaned and squeezed her eyes tighter. The body she had wedged herself against shook with a quiet chuckle. "Mi-

Blaise let her arm fall back to her side, shed his coat and scooped up his bag before kissing Ginny on the forehead and slipping out the door like a ninja into the abandoned town of Craco. Even Theo slipped off the gumboots that she never saw him without anymore, the ones Draco had spent two hours arguing with him about that morning, and donned a pair of black combat boots instead.

It was yet another thing that Hermione liked about being on this side now; the quality of their fighting gear was far superior to that of the Order's. "I mean it, you know Gin. Within my reach at all times." Hermione glanced a look at Ginny to make sure she understood. It was far too soon for any of them to be back in the field after such a horrible week - it had only really been days - especially against an enemy they had no experience with. But they had a job to do. She had given Renaud her word they would do everything they could, and she wasn't about to go back on it now.

Ginny nodded, her anxiety had been buried deep obviously. Theo stopped between them with out of his classic cheerful, cheeky grins that lightened any mood. "Just so you know. I'm in the lead and after today, I doubt you will catch up."

Hermione soured. "How do you figure that?"

Theo smirked smugly. "I killed thirteen in the last raid."

Hermione's mouth opened and closed several times. "You mean the raid where I nearly died?! You're going to count that?!"

Theo nodded confidently. His mischievous demeanour shone brightly. "And the shopping centr-"

"Nope, that was a redo." Ginny interjected seriously with a shake of her head. "We don't know how many of those were copies, so my official ruling is that London was a miscount."

"And what about Diagon?" Hermione crossed her arms in defiance, smugly staring back up at Theo in glee, confidence rising quickly.

"It's valid," Ginny announced. "His kill count stands."

Hermione whipped her head around to gape at the redhead, remembering only at the last second that they were to be quiet. "What?! You traitorous bitch." Hermione whispered at her aggressively. "I nearly died!"

Ginny shrugged. "Yeah, and he only counted those he killed before you went down, so it stands."

Theo snickered beside her. "I fucking love you, Red. Don't get yourselves hurt out there." With that, he slipped from the room and down into the street below.

Ginny, smartly, avoided any attempts to speak to Hermione, who now felt betrayed. Hermione silently attached her holsters around her thighs, waist and arms. They didn't

know who they would be up against today, so she needed to be prepared for all scenarios. She needed to be able to walk out of there with both Louis and the kill count lead.

When she was finished, she slipped back to the window and shone the reflection again, twice into the same house she had the first time. She waited until she got three flashes back before she grabbed Ginny's hand and slipped downstairs to the doorway into the street, pulling her balaclava down with one hand as she did. When Ginny did the same, she slipped out the door and crept along the edge of the building. In the distance, the sun was setting, which meant that shortly, the shadows that were forming around the building would be one of their best assets.

Either the Italians were hoping for someone to come and save Louis, likely someone from France, or they were so overconfident in their abilities that they did not believe that wards were necessary. Or perhaps, and one option Hermione found a little unlikely, was that they did not want to tamper with the decaying muggle village. Ginny's hand remained gripped in hers as they slinked down alleyways and around houses toward the heart of it all. Ducking and diving through buildings were possible. She knew that all around them, the others were doing the same.

The first guard they came across was lazy and careless, half dazed as he took a leak against the side of one of the buildings. He didn't hear her as Hermione let go of Ginny's hand, slipped up behind him, sunk one of her knives straight into his carotid artery like butter, and yanked it out immediately, her other hand covering his mouth and nose to muffle any noise. The man fell to his knees as the gurgling sound of blood rushed out from his neck. It was a messy death, but it was quick - so quick that almost instantly, he had lost strength, and within fifteen seconds, the man was dead in a pool of his own blood. Ginny crept back up behind her and slipped her hand back into Hermione's, who started tugging them toward the building on the corner.

The building was dark and it allowed Hermione and Ginny to camouflage into the walls and catch their breath. They would need to slip across the road, but unfortunately the road was rather open and wide. The building they wanted to get to would be patrolled and so they needed Pansy and Theo, who had been assigned this location, to take out the worst of the dangers before they could make a break for it.

Or at least that was the plan until they heard shouts and curses being flung. Hermione chanced a look out the window and saw Theo legging it down the street, laughing. The lunatic had blown their cover, and he was laughing. A few guards were chasing after him, but one of them was trying to button up his pants. Pansy appeared

"I didn't know that." Hermione crossed the room and flopped down onto the mattress beside Ginny. "I had sex with Draco."

Ginny gave her an amused look. "I know. I made a decent amount of money off it." She chuckled.

Hermione rubbed her hands over her face. "Way to make it sound like you're my pimp."

"Your what? "

Hermione shook her head and swallowed a yawn. "It doesn't matter. The point is that I had sex with Draco and it was mind blowing and he still didn't tell me."

Ginny laid down and turned to face her. "Blaise wasn't there for much; he only saw a few minutes in Diagon Alley before he realised I was missing, but he said he had never seen Draco look like that. Astoria told me a bit about it after you left the room. He was in a really bad way. He was really sick, Mi, like real sick, and he still wouldn't leave you. I think he might be a bit more invested in it than you think. Astoria certainly seems to think so."

"What do you mean by that?" Hermione frowned, searching her friend's face.

Ginny avoided her eyes and hid a smile. "She may have mentioned that he stopped cutting his hair the day after we arrived."

Hermione shrugged. "I don't see what that has to do with anything." Because honestly, who in the hell would?

Ginny's face lit up with the joy that she got when she knew something Hermione didn't, which made Hermione suspicious. "Well, you wouldn't because I doubt you have taken much time to look into the Malfoy family history."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Are you going to make me pull it out of you, or are you going to get to the point."

"Oh, I am absolutely not telling you. That is a you-and-Astoria conversation... or you and Draco, which means getting over your little mood and leaving this room."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Fine. Don't tell me then." Was she a little bit moody? Yes. Was she also probably snappy because of exhaustion? Also yes. Was she going to do anything to change that? Absolutely fucking not.

Ginny handed her the bottle, and Hermione took a large sip. "I'm turning into an alcoholic," she mumbled.

Ginny shrugged. "We all probably deserve a few drinks after the week we've had."

Hermione stared at her ceiling for a minute and sighed. Arguably, she should cut them some slack. She hadn't yet told Ginny either, and she could hide behind her justifications of trying to focus on the trauma she had been through, but the reality was

feelings. Isn't that what they had done? Or were they using the justification of 'getting around to it' like she was?

Another knock at the door, this one followed by Ginny's soft voice. "It's me... I have booze and cigarettes."

Hermione sighed but slowly turned and pulled herself up, using her bed for support. Her body protested at the movement of her stiff joints. She could do nothing about the unimpressed look she knew was on her face; she was too tired. She just wanted to sleep for a month. The adrenaline of the past few days had well and truly gone and the weight of the last several weeks burdened her.

She pulled her door open and was unimpressed to find that it was not only Ginny there but Draco as well, sitting in the hall with an annoyed glower on his face. Ginny quickly gave her an apologetic smile. "He isn't with me; he's been there since last night. Can I please come in?"

Hermione sighed and stepped aside for the redhead to enter, her eyes clashing with Draco's. He looked exhausted. She wanted to tell him to go to bed, but he was a grown man; he was clearly capable of making decisions. He had certainly made the decision to keep the extent of her injuries from her, so she shut the door. Ginny had already taken up residence on Hermione's bed.

"Did you sleep at all? You look like shit." Ginny tossed her the cigarettes.

"No," Hermione whispered, catching them, extracting one, and putting it between her lips. "No, I didn't." She said, lighting it and inhaling deeply.

"Maybe you should."

Hermione sighed. "Yes, mother."

"Oi. Don't take that tone with me, young lady." Ginny grinned. It was so stupid that it actually made her chuckle. Hermione moved to stand in the doorway of her patio, exhaling as she looked out over the town below. "I can't imagine lover boy out there slept much either," Ginny added, a hint of curiosity in her voice.

"Well that's his problem." Hermione bit out. "I never asked him to stay there."

Ginny groaned in frustration. "You two are honestly exhausting." Hermione said nothing, but she couldn't help but agree. "I am sorry for getting angry." Ginny eventually continued when it was clear that Hermione had no interest in responding. "That wasn't fair, and I should have trusted that you would have told me. I was concerned because the thought of losing you--"

Hermione sighed. "You aren't going to lose me, Gin."

"You don't know that. I nearly did, apparently." Ginny scowled.

in the doorway, panting with a grin of her own. "Theo caught two of them being a bit naughty in one of the buildings. Come on, now's your chance while they're distracted."

"Pans--" Hermione shook her head in amusement.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm going" She giggled before jogging off to help Theo.

Ginny gripped Hermione's hand tightly before letting go entirely. "Ready?" She whispered. Hermione nodded in response and followed Ginny's frame as she slipped out the door and bolted across the street, pressing herself flat against the building to catch her breath when they got to the other side. By now, the alarm had been raised, and there were shouts in Italian coming from all over the outside of the building above them.

Inside, Hermione could hear the thundering of approaching feet as at least two people were running down the stairs towards the door currently situated between them. Ginny gave her another nod and mouthed out a countdown from three. Hermione whipped her wand to the inside of the building and fired an Avada curse effortlessly at a man whose body fell, tripping another man up behind him. Ginny's curse landed on a woman behind him. A knife was already leaving Hermione's hand and embedding itself into the throat of the guard who tripped.

A third man came out of nowhere and swung at Hermione, successfully landing a punch across Hermione's cheek bone with a sickening crack. She stumbled back and tried to shove down the throbbing in her cheekbone but her eyes were watering and it had taken her by surprise. So far, these guys had seemed rather incompetent but this guy might actually pose a threat. Ginny slipped flat against the wall as the towering giant of a man stepped out, an ugly scar running down half his face.

"Merlin mate, has anyone told you that you punch like a girl?" Hermione spat at his feet, gearing up for the fight. The wizard lowered the wand he had pointed at her and growled; each step forward easily cleared the distance of three of hers. His skin was darker than the shadows falling around them, his eyes black and angry. "Come on then, big guy. What you got?" Hermione asked, more as a rhetorical question for herself, but he answered it by backhanding her across the face so hard she crashed into the road face below.

"Has anyone told you that you fight like a girl?" the man she decided to call Ginormica snarled down at her in broken English.

Hermione huffed and took a deep breath - shit that hurt. "Yeah, well, I am a girl, so I'm not sure what your excuse is."

Ginormica stepped toward her, close enough for Hermione's hand to launch out and slice through both of his Achilles tendons, one after the other. He let out a hiss of

pain as he fell forward onto the pavement, her instinct to roll coming seconds before his body collapsed where she had been. Ginny fired a killing curse his way while Hermione lay there panting for a second. Her face really fucking hurt, but she would have to deal with it later.

She forced herself to sit upright and climb back to her feet, driving a knife down into the back of his skull just to make sure. "Seems like the kind of beast that would somehow come back to life again if we turn our backs," Hermione explained, trying to shake off the ringing in her ears and the ache in her cheekbone that hurt anytime she looked around.

A few feet away, another guard went flying backwards off the roof above them, crying out and trying to grasp at nothing with his flailing arms before colliding with a nearby building. Blonde hair caught her attention as Daphne peered over the edge to check the body of the guard, who had landed on an oddly angled heap on the ground. "Jesus Mione, what did you do to your face?"

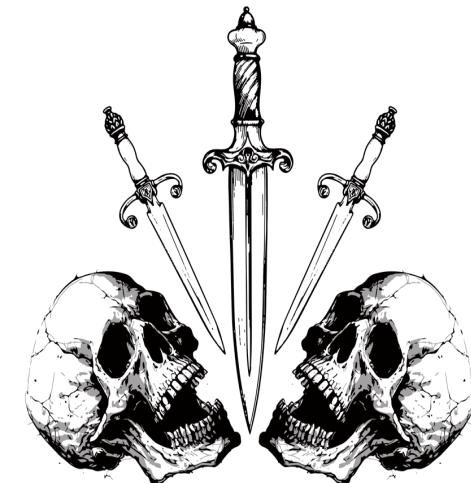
Well it must be bad if Daphne could see it from up there. "Face?" She heard Draco exclaim. Hermione grabbed Ginny's hand and yanked her into the building before Draco could peer down and make a scene about her injury. This was exactly the reason her housemates had a rule: couples were not put on the same teams. Draco had separated Ginny and Blaise immediately, obviously seeing where it was heading, but only that morning had she realised that Draco had separated himself from her, too. At least, that was how it was supposed to go most of the time.

Injury caused to your romantic partners was a distraction and one that Draco didn't need, given that he, Daphne and Blaise were the ones tasked with getting to Louis first. Hermione bypassed the stairs and headed down the corridor, checking each room they passed. One guard thought he would get the jump on her and send an Avada Kedavra her way, only to drop dead himself. Hermione snorted in amusement, which was instantly followed by a wince.

The corridor veered off to the left and down another corridor, and at the end was an old open doorway leading to the outside. The door frame darkened, and Theo, who was still laughing maniacally, burst through it with a singular guard chasing him now. Ginny shot a stream of green light their way that hit the pursuer straight between the eyes, causing him to fall flat on the ground.

"Ugh, Red!" Theo whined. "I was right in the middle of the best game of tag I have ever played."

Hermione rolled her eyes and strolled down the corridor towards Theo. "Come along, chaos puppy. We need to find Pansy."



CHAPTER 32: GOBLIN STEEL

Her panic attack had come and gone; she had sat on the floor, hugging her knees and watching the sunset and the sky turn a deep indigo colour. She watched the stars come out and twinkle in the sky, and watched the sun rise again before there was a knock at her door.

Hermione ignored it, too angry with everyone out there to be bothered by it. She just wanted to sleep, but she couldn't bring herself to move. She felt frozen in place. When she and Ginny had moved in, they had agreed not to hide anything to spare their

"Here." Pansy stumbled into the corridor where Hermione had just come from, clearly exhausted judging by her panting. Pansy had to lean against the wall and suck in air deeply to try and catch her breath. "Fucking hell, Theo. What part of 'the rings only work if we stay together' do you not understand? You're killing me!" She gasped.

"Is that everyone?" Hermione asked, looking between Theo and Pansy. Outside a crumbling and busted window, she heard a cry before someone fell head-first from the roof; the sound of their skull hitting the stone was audible. "Uh... well...now that should be everyone, right?"

Theo shrugged helpfully. "I killed six that I ran into chasing after this lunatic," Pansy grumbled, waving her hand in Theo's direction.

"Just think, I have made your life better, Pans." Theo smirked "Now when we get home you will add long distance running to your work out regime." Theo lit up in a grin that quickly died when he saw Pansy's mutinous glare his way.

"Hey guys?" Daphne's voice called from the stairwell behind them. All four of them quickly trotted back toward the stairwell that had been in the foyer. The town was old and crumbling around them. The floor was practically just dirt and broken tile and a lot of crumbled stone, the stairs, though looked a little dodgy, had been sturdy enough for the men who had bounded down it earlier.

"Yeah?" Hermione called back, trying to look up and see if she could see Daphne on the landing above.

"We found Louis, he's up here." Daphne's voice called back down.

The landing above was dusty, bloody, and littered with bodies. Draco took one look at her face and audibly snarled. Hermione brushed past him, ignoring his theatrics and came up short at the sight of Louis. Blaise had just lowered him down from a hook that had held him up upright, chained and hanging from the ceiling. His body was bruised black and blue, and his bare chest was littered with dirt and wounds, some of which looked infected.

Pucey stepped into the room, followed by several of his men, all of whom seemed to be as shocked by Louis' appearance as she had been. "All clear," Adrian mumbled with a nod.

Louis didn't seem entirely conscious, but conscious enough that the one eye that wasn't swollen nearly entirely shut blinked, shuddering as he tried to focus on her. "Hey, Louis." She smiled at him. "I don't know how to tell you this, mate, but you look like shit." He got half a laugh out before he fell forward into Blaise's arms, coughing profusely and clutching at his ribs. Hermione turned and whispered to Pansy as quietly as she could. "We need to get him to the hospital quickly."

Pansy pulled out a handkerchief from the pouch on her hip and unfolded it to reveal a little gold key, shimmering in what little daylight remained, which wasn't much. "Is he in good enough condition for that?" Theo hissed, eyeing the portkey with uncertainty.

Hermione shrugged. "I don't think that we have another choice."

turned to greet her at the sound of her approaching footsteps. "Oh hey, I think it's best to give him."

"What did you do?!" Hermione snapped through her mounting panic, her jaw clenching as she breathed heavily through her nose.

Theo shook his head in confusion, "What are you-" but his face turned cold in realisation. "Pansy." It was a statement, not a question, but his lack of denial made her want to be sick.

"You should have told me." Hermione seethed, her eyes finding the blonde wizard staring back at her from inside his doorway, a kind of panic on his face. "You should have told me." She snapped. "Stay out of my room. Just leave me alone," she whispered before continuing to race up the stairs, slamming her bedroom door shut behind her.

She almost managed to make it to her patio before her panic attack took over completely, and she dropped to the ground, gasping for air while spots danced across her eyesight.

"Wait! Wait, wait, wait—" Hermione couldn't breathe.

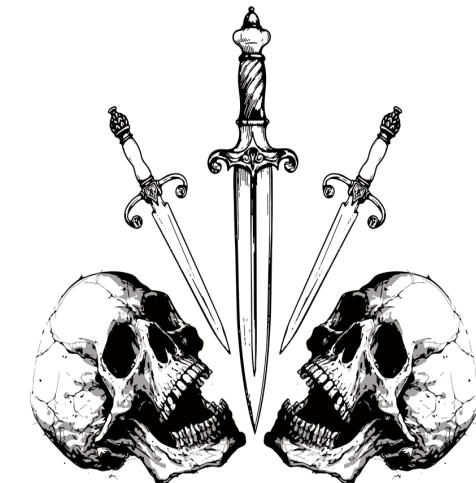
"-day, it's going to be bad. Theo was covered in her fucking blood, the room was covered in her blood, but you weren't here!" Pansy shoved the man in the chest. He made no effort to stop her. Apparently, no one had told him how bad it was either if his face was anything to go by. "You were off killing half the prisoners for information! You didn't get to see the state of her, or Draco, or Theo when it was all said and done! YOU weren't here, so don't you dare tell me that's enough." She hissed with so much venom that Astoria actually cowered behind Daphne. Pansy spun to look at her, and if Hermione didn't know better, she would have put the look down to pure, unbridled hatred. "And you -"

"Wait! What are you talking about?" Hermione snapped.

Her genuine surprise had Pansy straightening and scoffing with a shake of her head. "Unbelievable. No wonder you're walking around acting like you are; here I was thinking you were just in denial, but they didn't even tell you , did they?" Tears of frustration began welling up in Pansy's eyes. "Wow. That's just... That's just great. Well, let me do the honours then since I seem to be the only one willing to share information around here. You nearly died, Hermione, not just like a little bit, like traumatically, in a big way - you wouldn't stop fucking bleeding. It was pouring out of you as quickly as it was being replenished. It took me twenty-two hours to find the fucking curse they used in the poison, which meant that for twenty-two hours, you were barely alive, and we were all working our asses off to try to save you and waiting around for another eight to see if it had worked, but you know. It's no big deal ." Pansy spat through gritted teeth before she turned and strode from the room.

The other four sets of eyes looked to Hermione and she began to feel like she was suffocating under the weight of it all. Her eyes locked with Astoria's, and her heart sank because the guilt was etched plain as day. A look at Daphne confirmed what Hermione already suspected, which was that Pansy was telling the truth. Her defiant stare back at Hermione challenged her to argue with her, but Hermione had nothing left in her to argue with; it felt like she had just had the feet kicked out from under her, and she still couldn't fucking breathe because, of course it was true, but no one had told her. "Stay out of my room," she whispered, dropping her gaze to the floor. "Everybody... just stay out of my room."

Hermione allowed her feet to carry her out of the room at a run and to flee up the stairs. Draco hadn't told her. Theo hadn't told her. No one told her. She wouldn't have stopped until she reached her room if Theo hadn't stepped out of Draco's room and onto the landing at that precise moment. His usual friendly smile, only slightly cautious,



CHAPTER 35: AN ESTIMATED GUESS

The Sequana Magical Medical Hospital was quieter and cleaner than she could ever remember St Mungo's being. It had a soft, peaceful glow of sunlight permanently filtering in. It was pitch black outside, but inside, it felt like a warm summer afternoon. It was relaxing, which she supposed was the reason for the enchantment.

Renauld rushed in seconds after they had arrived, nearly crushed Hermione in a bear hug, and then disappeared into the private treatment room. Hermione had wanted to hang around just in case and make sure he was okay, but they had to be at Riddle Manor

that night for dinner. One of Renauld's guards had seen them getting ready to depart and had stopped her. Draco had translated for her; apparently, he was Louis' little brother. Their mother had been beside herself, convinced that Louis was dead and that if there was anything that they could do for her, not to hesitate to reach out.

Hermione had returned to the chateau to find that Astoria was already dressed in a shining silver beaded gown with her hair pulled back into a tight bun. Daphne, Pansy and Theo had left a few minutes before her and the others, and it seemed they had also gotten ready. Theo in a dress shirt and pants with a silvery grey vest to match Astoria's dress. Daphne in a black one-piece suit with a plunging neckline, and Pansy in a plain black floor-length gown with a queen anne collar. The latter appeared the most bored by the notion of dinner with her boss as she lounged around, flicking through a newspaper.

"So it's like a formal affair then?" Hermione eyed them all with a level of amazement. They had all gotten ready so quickly, but she didn't know how to do that, as she had not grown up with fancy formal dinners and galas every other week.

"I've already hung a dress on your door for you, Hermione." Astoria smiled at her sweetly. "Draco, all black, please." She added before disappearing down the hallway.

Hermione's dress was long, black, covered entirely in lace, and sheer in places. The slit that ran up one side was so high that she was sure if she moved the wrong way, people would get an eyeful, but she put it on anyway. She brushed out her hair, letting it fall loose around her shoulders and smeared on a thin layer of lipstick. Ginny was just stepping out of her room at the same time as Hermione. Though she had spent every night sleeping in Blaise's room since the night she and Blaise had married, it seemed she had yet to move her clothes. Ginny looked Hermione up and down and let out a long, slow whistle. "Damn, girl." She grinned.

Hermione rolled her eyes and eyed Ginny's knee-length, long-sleeved, glittering gold dinner dress. "Damn yourself! Have you seen those legs!?"

"Ladies! Let's go! We're going to be late!" Blaise shouted up the stairs at them.

"We're the guests of honour; we can't be late. Everyone else is just early." Ginny shouted back.

As it turns out, they could be late. While the dinner was in celebration of them, the host was Tom Riddle, and the other guests were Death Eaters, so when they were shown into the formal dining room, everyone was already seated. Not that Tom was present yet anyway, but some of the other guests didn't seem too thrilled to be here or to be waiting. Adrian Pucey gave her a reassuring nod as Draco's hand, warm against

"Not a big deal?!" He hissed quietly, his anger palpable. She could feel it radiating off of him, not in waves but like a tsunami. "No—" He took several deep breaths, but she was too scared to look at him, afraid of what she would find there. Too many people in this room were glaring at her, and it was setting off her fight or flight response in ways that made her skin crawl. "Not a big deal?!" Draco's voice thundered, causing her to jump. A bitter laugh filtered out of him, twisting at the guilt in her stomach.

"That's not what I—" Draco didn't stick around to hear what she had to say; he stormed from the sitting room without a look back. Theo threw her a sympathetic look and followed after him. Hermione sighed. "That's not what I meant. I meant that this is war - we are in a war. It's hardly the first time I've nearly died." She tried to explain, but Ginny was still staring at her in betrayal, and Pansy's glare had turned vicious.

"Oh, I see. So you have been poi—"

"Pansy!" Blaise snapped in warning. Pansy ignored him, though, crossing her arms as she stepped forward toward her. Daphne and Astoria slid into the doorway, peering into the room in confusion, and all the while, Ginny's eyes had not left her face.

"No, she was getting there, remember, Blaise? Besides, apparently being poisoned and nearly dying in the street is a regular occurrence for her—"

"Poisoned?" Ginny whispered in horror.

Hermione begged the redhead silently, "I was get—"

"Tell me, Mione, do your lovers also usually have to suck the venom from your body as well, making them violently ill by the way for hours afterwards, while blood pours from your mouth, nose, eyes and ears and you scream in pain, too? Or was that special to Draco and the rest of us? Is it just Theo who has had to work overtime to try and repair your veins and arteries because you wouldn't stop fucking bleedin'—"

"Pansy! That's enough!" Blaise yelled.

She felt like the ground was shaking beneath her, the whooshing of blood filled her ears again, and it didn't seem to matter how deeply she tried to breathe in air, not enough of it made it to her lungs. No one had told her this - why had no one told her this!?

"Fuck you, Blaise!" Pansy whirled on him, screaming at him. "You weren't even here! You didn't see what it was like! You have no idea! Theo had to use every single one of Astoria's special potions on her—" Pansy's finger jabbed in Hermione's direction. She may as well have slapped Hermione.

"Wait, what?!" Hermione demanded

"—as well as half the blood replenishers! The fucking plant that they were using for Tor's potions has no more fruit on it, which means that when Tor has another bad—"

A pleased smile appeared on her face. "Oh, you didn't know? Blaise and Ginny are soulmates. They got married at the end of last month, and the only reason her husband hasn't ended your fucking life is because we all thought that Ginny deserved that right, but you are so insignificant now that she would rather give you to Tom. Personally." Hermione leaned in closer. "I was hoping she would feed you to the hounds."

Hermione looked at the man through her lashes and felt nothing. His death would mean nothing but justice for Ginny, so when Hermione turned and followed Blaise and Draco out, it was with a smile for a brighter tomorrow.

Ginny was in the process of pouring several drinks at the bar when Hermione found her again. "We are celebrating because, honestly, it's about fucking time you two sorted your shit out and boned."

Hermione quirked an eyebrow. "Who even says boned?"

"I do." Ginny declared with a false happiness to her voice. "But as I was saying, You two finally getting over whatever barrier has stopped you boning these past few months is cause to celebrate."

Pansy, who had entered the room rather unfortunately at that precise moment, looking worse than when she had retreated to her room several hours prior, scowled. "I would hardly say Hermione nearly dying is cause for celebration." The dark haired witch took in the looks that were shared across all of their faces, issuing an annoyed scoff in understanding.

"What?!" Ginny snarled, an accusing look on her face as she spun on Hermione, hurt written all over her face.

"You didn't tell her." Pansy snapped.

"Pans, we've been a little busy." Blaise started.

"No. We were busy. Yesterday, but there is no reason why no one has told her since then. You aren't helping her by keeping it from her!" Pansy's voice rising in volume, the events of the past few days, finally catching up to her it seemed.

"I was getting ther—" Hermione started.

"Were you?! When was that going to happen, Mi?" Ginny's tone made her recoil a little, stepping back into Draco's chest. His arm came to sit on her arm, and she wondered if it was intentional that it was in the same spot as where the injury in question had been. It was supportive, but she could feel that he still had unresolved feelings about it, too.

"For fuck sake, it's not even that big a deal—" That was the wrong thing to say, and she knew it immediately the moment the words left her mouth. Draco froze behind her, his hand disappearing.

her back, guided her to the chair next to his, pulling it out for her and tucking it in gently behind her.

Hermione let her eyes wander and came face to face with Lucius Malfoy, sitting directly opposite her. The man did indeed look ill; he had never carried much muscle on him anyway, but he seemed near skeletal. His eyes were glossy, his breathing laboured, his hair thin and stringy, and his cheeks sunken in. Despite his obvious ailment, his eyes narrowed on her and flew to his son in bewilderment. He was wise enough to keep his opinions to himself, though, and Hermione shifted anxiously as Draco sat next to her. Narcissa tilted her head in observation next to her husband, her mouth pulled into a thin line.

"Draco, aren't you going to introduce us to your new... friend?" Narcissa asked stiffly.

Hermione's stomach clenched in anticipation. Thankful for the presence of Ginny and Blaise on Draco's other side, Astoria and Theo next to her, and Daphne and Pansy on the other side of them. Draco didn't even hesitate. "Mother, don't play coy. You know who Hermione Granger is, but if you insist on these games. Mother, father, Hermione Granger. Hermione, My mother Narcissa and my father Lucius. Though I doubt you will hear much out of my father..." He trailed off with a mumble.

"Pleasure." Hermione smiled politely toward them. Narcissa offered a tight, forced smile in return, and Lucius just glared silently. Hermione hadn't known that Draco's parents would be here; if she had, she probably would have argued for a different dress - not that it would have mattered. Hermione imagined that they would still dislike her no matter what she wore.

She could feel the blush flooding her cheeks as Lucius continued to stare at her. "Father," Draco growled in warning. Lucius dropped his eyes away from her to the plate in front of him. Narcissa shifted her gaze to Ginny, eying her with the same distaste with which she had eyed Hermione. "Blaise, I hear you have... married. Congratulations."

Silence fell thick and tense over the dining room while everyone awkwardly sipped at their drinks. It became more and more uncomfortable as each second ticked by on the grandfather clock in the corner. Eventually, Hermione couldn't take it anymore. She could, in a way, see why Narcissa and Lucius were less than thrilled to see her in supposedly intimate company with their son, but really, she had no reason to shy away from being here, so she smiled at Adrian across the table. "Pucey, how did your men get on today?"

Adrian opened his mouth to answer her with a sympathetic smile when Tiberius snorted into his glass of whiskey in disgust. "Something amusing, Nott?" A Death Eater Hermione recognised as the other Lestrange brother sneered in his direction. No love was lost between those two, it seemed.

"Not at all." Tiberius, clearly already intoxicated, chuckled. "Actually, just counting my blessings Rabastan. My son might have chosen a defected cunt to take to wife, but at least she is a pureblood - even if she will be dead soon - and knows how to be civilised at a formal dinner, not like Malfoy's mutt mudblood bitch." The elder Nott seemed unbothered by everyone's open mouths and wide eyes staring his way in shock, swallowing down the rest of his drink bitterly.

Everyone moved at once; Theo was up, stepping on his chair with one foot on the table, ready to pounce for his father's jugular. "The fuck did you just say about my wife?!" His face twisted into a quiet storm.

Astoria squealed and leapt back up and away from the table, Pansy following and shielding her from the chaos now ensuing. Daphne, Draco, and Ginny were all on their feet with their wands pointed at the man's throat, the tips of their wands all glowing green and Blaise was gearing up to punch the man in the jaw.

"Enough!" Tom roared as he entered the room from the shadows. Everyone halted but did not retreat at all. "Tiberius." Tom tutted. "That is not how we treat our guests."

Tiberius scoffed and snapped his fingers for the elf to pour him another glass of whiskey. "Apologies to you, my Lord." Though his tone lacked any remorse.

"Not to me." Tom eyed the man with calculation. "Apologise... to Hermione."

Tiberius paused, swallowed down his drink and snatched the decanter from the trembling creature. "You cannot be serious," he mumbled, pouring himself a glass he did not need.

"Did I stutter?" Tom growled, his anger at Tiberius' disobedience rising.

"Shall I assume that you are also fucking her? It is the only justification I can think of for how she has waltzed in here and put everyone on such short fucking leashes. Perhaps the 'Golden Girl' has a golden cunt."

Tom's wand pointed at the man at the other end of the table. "Tom," Hermione commanded quietly from her position, still seated, and gave him a shake of her head. "Everyone. Sit down, now."

Nobody moved for a second. Reluctantly, Ginny was the first to sit down, tugging Blaise down with her.

Theo still had one foot up on the table, leaning toward his father and ready to pounce. "You are a dead man," Theo hissed. "A fucking dead man, you hear?"

"Please..." he begged. "No more..."

His words invoked a disgusted sneer from Blaise, but Hermione turned to look at Ginny. Hermione watched the way Ginny stared at him. The cold and distanced look in her eyes. He hadn't been the Harry Potter that either of them grew up with for years. He had complained so often about the changes that they had gone through, but did he realise that he had changed too? "You're going to die tomorrow, Harry Potter. Know that no one is coming to save you this time." Her words fell, and silence filled the space, her eyes never leaving his. Hermione turned and watched as the realisation that Ginny was right finally registered in his eyes. "Sleep well," Ginny stated, her voice void of any emotion.

Harry's green eyes sought Hermione out only to find her already watching him, a final pleading that she would see reason and save him hidden in the green orbs. Hermione had seen reason; she saw reason long ago, before she even left the Order base. Back before she was condemned for her actions, before he aided Kingsley in his crusade against her, before he stood by and watched Ron with his... back before he committed his own crimes by raping her friend. She had seen reason before she had even taken that first life. Harry was no longer the chosen one; he was just a man, a sad, pathetic excuse for one at that. Ginny turned and strolled from the cells, not waiting for Hermione or Blaise.

"Did you know? About Kingsley and the prophecy?" Hermione asked as calmly as she could. Harry immediately looked like a deer in the headlights. Hermione chuckled and shook her head. "Of course you did." She made to turn away but his voice stopped her.

"I found out about a year ago, but by then, you had become this." His words were shaky and filled with guilt right up until the last word that he spat with disgust - as if she was the horrible person. Well, if she was, she didn't want to be 'good' when 'good' looked like him.

She turned around with an incredulous smile. "You raped someone?"

"I didn't know!" His cries sounded pathetic and unbelieving of even his own bullshit.

Her feet carried her forward, and her fist collided with his nose, a satisfying crunch being the result. "You fucking liar. Don't you dare, don't you dare tell me you didn't know. She couldn't move. She couldn't speak, and she was fucking crying. Those are all good signs that she didn't want it, you fucking disgusting sack of shit. The only reason her husband?"

"Husband?!" Harry exclaimed in shock.

building, huge and modern in its design, she felt the wards shimmer in recognition of her. Pansy was a different story; being unable to pass through initially, the security measure, while normally reassuring, slowed them down while they attempted to figure it out.

"Is it a blood ward?" Pansy asked her from the other side. Hermione reached out, and the wards shimmered in her hands.

"No... Maybe try declaring your intent?" Hermione suggested. Pansy gave her a look like it was the stupidest idea she had ever heard.

"I intend to assist Hermione Granger and mean her or her research no harm," Pansy said, her palm flat on the other side of the ward. Sure enough, a light green glow rippled through it, and Pansy fell forward, obviously having been leaning against the ward outside.

Hermione let out a victorious cry of laughter. "And you didn't think that would work." Pansy glowered at her and waved at her to lead the way. Hermione had never had the doors of a building open upon her arrival before. She had seen it previously in some older wizarding families, but it was a pretty spectacular feeling to have it happen to her now as they approached the front of the lab.

As she walked in, the room began shifting and shaping to her needs. "Oh, shut the fuck up!" Hermione beamed, looking around as the walls shifted and separated into three different rooms. In one, the walls turned to bookshelves, desks in varying shades of grey popped up out of the floor, lamps in the centre of each one. In another room, steel counters with beakers and medical equipment appeared, glass tubes lining cabinets, needles in a neat row on a sterile tray. The last room looked to be a small kitchen, which appeared to be fully stocked. A reminder to eat and not get lost in her research.

Pansy started dumping the books onto the tables from the extended purse she had shoved them all into at the Greengrass estate, causing the reality of their situation to come crashing back down on her. Hermione took a deep breath and started separating the books into piles: journals at one table, old family grimoires at another, and pureblood records at yet another table.

Hermione sunk into one of the chairs and pulled the first book towards her, the book was a history of the family. It was Hermione's hope that she would be able to go back through and figure out when the curse actually started. "Hey Mi?" Pansy asked softly. "Are you okay here if I head back to the hospital? I was going to stay but no one knows you're here and the wards will keep anyone out that doesn't belong."

Pansy's concern over Astoria's condition was understandable. Hermione nodded and smiled at the witch. "Of course, go on. I'll be there later." And so, for the first time in months, maybe even years, Hermione was left on her own, truly alone. There was no one else downstairs, no one in the next room over making a cup of tea, and the emptiness around her was heavy. The lamps were lit across all the tables, and they provided a soft yellow glow to the room.

It would have been easy to fall back into an old habit of researching and studying if not for the fact that Astoria's life hung in the balance. There was something about Astoria's sudden bout happening directly after Tiberius dying that seemed odd to her. Her eyes scanned over the page of the family tree, a pattern standing out to her as if written in gold while useless information faded to black. Ophelia Greengrass, born in 1791, ten generations of Greengrass women prior. All dying between the ages of eighteen and twenty-seven.

Astoria's mother had been only twenty-six when she had left behind two small children. And at twenty-four, Astoria was already doing better than some of her ancestors. Hermione shook her head and scribbled down the pattern, but just as she finished the direct line, she noted something else. Some of the Greengrass ancestors, like Astoria, had not had children; their deaths had come later in their lives, some in their thirties, one witch living until forty-nine.

Those names and dates joined the list alongside the others in their own column. The curse also didn't seem to affect everyone - some members of the family saw no effects of the curse at all, which again seemed odd. She hadn't noticed any effects from Daphne, and no one had mentioned any information to the contrary. She started pouring over journals, one tradition that she was especially thankful for that seemed to be prominent in pureblood culture as a way to pass information down to the next generation.

For their part it seemed that the Greengrass family had tried to undo the curse, but no one seemed to either be willing to write about it or know what was going on. A noise at the front door had her jumping to attention, wand drawn, but as the figures of Theo, Pansy and Draco emerged she relaxed. Theo smiled at her weakly, once again exhausted and sleep-deprived. "She's stable, Daphne is with her."

Hermione shook her head at the sight of all the books being unloaded onto the tables. Draco stepped around and grabbed her chin between his thumb and forefinger. "Have you taken a break at all?"

Hermione glowered at him. "I've barely started, I don't"

"Hermione, I left last night; that was nearly sixteen hours ago." Pansy groaned as she ran her fingers through her black hair. She had changed since Hermione had seen her last. When she looked around, the lamps had extinguished themselves while the sun had begun to stream in through the windows at either end of the room.

"Oh..." Hermione whispered. Apparently, she had gotten more lost in the research than she had thought.

"I'll make coffee." Draco sighed. His disapproving tone caused a flush in her cheeks.

Theo eyed the piles she had created, taking a moment to figure out her system before sending the books he had brought from Nott Manor to the correct tables. Picking up her notes and eying them with a frown, his mind clearly ticking over in thought.

"Alright, where do you want each of us?" Pansy rolled up the sleeves of her soft pink jumper.

"I... okay. Pansy, I want you looking through the Greengrass grimoires, anything they might have tried to end the curse—" Hermione cut herself off as Theo and Pansy turned to her in confusion. "What?"

"I thought you said we couldn't cure it?" Theo frowned.

Hermione let her eyes fall awkwardly to the floor. "Well, it didn't mean I wasn't going to at least try." She answered. "Theo, are you going back to the hospital?"

"I will soon, but I can help for a little bit." He nodded with a newfound determination.

"Alright. Can you cross-check those dates and see if any line up with any deaths in the Nott line?" Hermione said, returning to her seat and pulling the journal back toward her.

Draco didn't say a word as he slipped into the seat next to her, placing a cup of coffee from the tray in front of her before his hand moved her thigh over the top of his own, his thumb rubbing soothing circles into her muscles. One hand reaching out and grabbing a journal to go over himself.

She looked at him for a moment, one strand of his hair falling in his face, and a surge of appreciation for the man briefly overcame her. He had not tried to stop her from doing her research, nor had he pushed her to solve this faster. He just accepted that this was how she did things and got on board, making an effort to care for her and help her in whatever way he could. A small smile tugged at her lips as she turned back to her journal and started reading again.

"Hey Mi..." Theo started with uncertainty. "I think I found something..."

Pansy's laughter bounced off the walls of the library. "Are you suggesting I proposition the fucking minister to see if he wants to what... go halves in a child?" Her black hair bounced as she shook her head.

Hermione snorted. "No, I am saying you have options. It doesn't have to be a case of 'Oh, well, I'm gay, so it's never in the cards for me,' there are plenty of clinics in the muggle world that help same-sex couples have babies; why should it be any different here? I imagine that once the secret is out, having a half-blood baby will be something that is widely sought out." Hermione grumbled with some bitterness despite it being an aspect of her plan. She hated the idea that having a magical child would be something that would become a trend, but she could also see how it would benefit the wizarding population. If it was a highly popular trend, the number of the magical population would skyrocket within a year, maybe doubling or even tripling the number of magical beings. As it was, the magical population was dwindling.

Every year, they came closer and closer to extinction as one family merged with another, especially in cases where their parents had only one child, like the Malfoys. Or even in cases they hadn't: Sirius had no children, nor did Regulus. Their line had died. Their cousins had been girls, Narcissa having had only Draco, Bellatrix having had no children at all, and Andromeda having only Tonks. The entire Black line had shrunk to rest entirely on Teddy's shoulders as Draco had taken over the Malfoy line, and even then, Teddy wasn't a proper Black; he was a Lupin. His inheritance, should he receive one one day, would be in the most technical of terms. If he grew up to have children they would be Lupins too. So then, the Black family truly will have died out.

How many generations did they have to go before the options for purebloods were limited to two or three people? The wizarding race would be extinct in practically no time at all if they didn't look at the larger picture, which is where the notion that people would jump at the chance of having a half-blood was definitely more practical.

Hermione followed Pansy back to the floo. Hermione wasn't sure why she expected light and airy decor when stepping into the Greengrass residence. She had been told that they all had been raised in dark, bleak households, but in her mind, she had separated the Greengrass sisters from that. Alas, the walls here were just as dark, drenched in blacks and shades of brown with the occasional red accent, though it did feel decidedly less sinister than the Nott family estate.

This time, Hermione was able to at least touch the old journals, the ancestral grimoires, and the books on the Sacred Twenty-Eight, which made the whole process go a lot faster. She anticipated that the hard part would be entering the research facility, which was something she had yet to do, but as they apparated to the front of the

"Well what do you want me to do then Hermione?" Pansy asked patiently. Hermione had been snapping more as her agitations had grown but the witch had remained level headed and calm.

Hermione shrugged and scrubbed at her face with her hands. She wanted to sit; her legs were tired from standing, but she had been warned that if she sat, then she would likely be bound to the chair and killed slowly. "I don't know... I... I can't think and work under these conditions! I..." Hermione looked around her; the pile of books that she had requested Pansy to get her sat in piles spanning across two full-sized tables. Even under better circumstances, this would take forever to comb through. "The lab - the fancy lab that Renauld gave me - could we take these books there? Where can I sit and see without something trying to kill me?"

Pansy tilted her head. "I will need Theo for that... The Nott family have always been... particular about their belongings. I can help here, but I don't think I can remove a book from the premises, anti-theft wards and whatnot."

Hermione sighed heavily and looked to the ceiling. "Okay... well. Leave these books here on the table for now, then. Theo can come get them once we know Tor has stabilised. Greengrass estate? Will they try to kill me too?" Hermione groaned.

Pansy chuckled. "No, the Greengrass family have never been quite the openly raging cunts the Notts or Malfoys were. We could probably move those books to the lab without issue. Daphne added me to the family wards after her dad died, so it should recognise me alright."

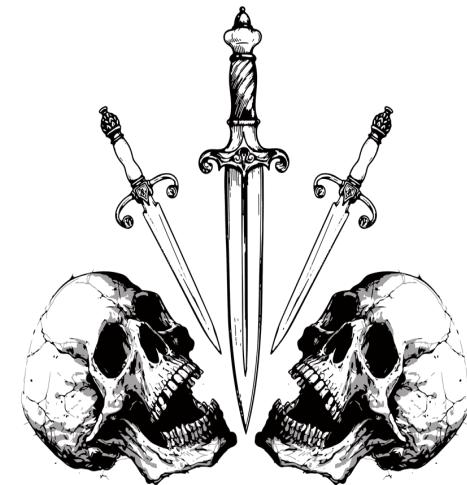
"After her dad...?" Hermione trailed off, realising it was not her business.

"Even in the wizarding world, it's not commonly accepted to take a same-sex partner. Families have daughters to raise to be someone's wife, to be an incubator for their husbands' heir. Can hardly do that if my 'husband' lacks the equipment to put a baby in me. Daphne's father would never have disinherited Daphne for it, especially when he still had Astoria to do her duty, but he never approved of me or my relationship with his daughter romantically speaking."

Hermione hummed in disapproval. It seemed abhorrent, but then again, many things in the pureblood circles seemed that way, all of it justified in the name of keeping their bloodlines 'pure'. "You never wanted children?" Hermione pried.

Pansy shrugged. "As I said before, I would have done my duty and had them and played the part, but it hardly matters now that I am openly lesbian. Neither Daphne nor I."

"But you could use a donor. Perhaps a certain wizard couple feels the same way, that they have also dismissed it as being a non-option."



CHAPTER 38: SLEEP

Draco! Put me down!" Hermione screeched, hitting her fists ineffectually against his back. It seemed that her grace period had run out because after three days of pouring over the books, she was no closer to an answer, and Draco had decided on her behalf that it was time to sleep - at home, in his bed, for longer than twenty minutes.

She had tried to argue that she didn't have time to sleep; Tor was unconscious in the hospital. She was relatively stable for now, but they needed an answer all the same, as her organs were still in slow decline despite the healer's attempts to keep them level.

Draco had argued that she was no good to Tor or anyone else at this stage because she needed sleep to think clearly. "Hermione, love, if you don't shut the fuck up, I will knock your ass out," he explained coolly and calmly before he apparated them back to the chateau, not risking putting her down in case she made a run for it.

Ginny was in the kitchen with a bowl of cereal in hand when he stormed them inside. "Gin, a little help here?" Hermione pleaded.

Ginny just raised an eyebrow at her and continued chewing her breakfast. "Nope. He's right. You need sleep."

Draco scoffed in amusement and continued through the kitchen. "Traitorous bitch!" Hermione shrieked, only to be ignored by both of them. Hermione started to sob in frustration. "Draco, let me fucking go. I don't have time for this bullshit."

A sharp, stinging slap came collided with her ass cheek, which while on his shoulder, was rather unfortunately at a good height for him to hit, it seemed. "I said enough." He growled around her cry of shock.

"The fuck! Did you just—" Another slap on her ass answered that question. "Ow! What the hell, Malfoy—"

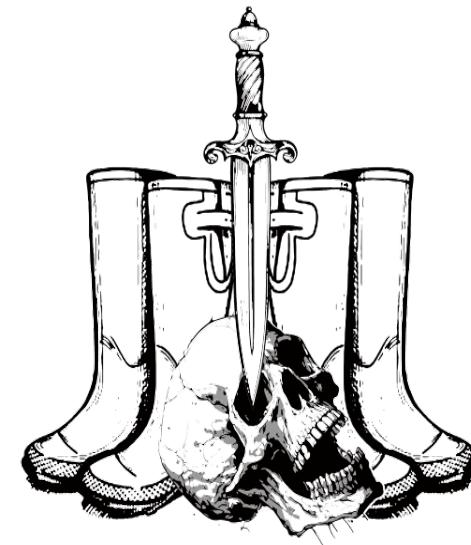
Draco stopped mid-climb and put her on her feet in front of him, still in his hold and also in line with his pissed-off glare. "Do not. I have already told you, love, you don't get to call me Malfoy anymore. You are going to sleep, Hermione. It's not up for debate, so - would you like me to stun you and force a sleeping potion down your throat, or would you like to do this the easy way?"

Even in the state she was in, he had an effect on her. The bossiness, the way he took charge in certain situations but allowed her to take the lead in others, the way he glared at her like she was a huge pain in the ass, it all had tingles spreading through her. "Or, you can stop being a prick and let me get back to work—" Draco moved to extract his wand, and Hermione grinned and raised her hands in defeat because she knew that he wasn't bluffing. He wouldn't hesitate to stun her and do exactly as he said he would. "Okay, okay. Fucking hell." She conceded, turning to trudge upstairs reluctantly.

Draco hummed in approval and followed her to the landing outside his room, where she paused. He tipped his head. "Don't even think of fighting me on this again."

Hermione pointed at his door. "House rules—"

"Were abolished, remember?" He explained, his tone shifting to one of patience, leaning forward and pushing the door open for her and guiding her into the room "And even if it wasn't, you have never been unwelcome in my room." His words filling her with a fuzzy warm feeling.



CHAPTER 37: A PATTERN IN GOLD

What are we even looking for?" Pansy sighed, pulling more books from the shelves and opening them for her. Apparently, Cantankerus Nott really went hard on the purist beliefs. Hermione couldn't touch anything in the manor without running the risk of having her face blasted off for being a muggleborn.

Hermione skimmed the page and shook her head. "Anything that mentions a Greengrass ancestor." The pages turned, and again Hermione scanned for the keywords, letting out a frustrated cry. "This is useless. I need to compare them to the Greengrass records to even know what I'm doing or looking for."

His room was bright with the morning light, and her sleeping patterns were well and truly fucked now; there was no denying that. Draco waved his hand and the curtains slowly drew themselves back across the windows. The sight of his bed, plush and ready for her, the reminder of how soundly she slept the last time she had been in it, all had the heaviness of exactly how worn out she was settling into her bones. Her eyes were heavy, and her muscles protested their use. She yanked her shirt off over her head, shoved the track pants she was wearing down, and left them both discarded on the floor. She collapsed on the soft, velvety covers and let her head hit the pillow.

Draco chuckled and leant over her, his arms resting on the mattress on either side of her head and dipped his head to press a kiss to her lips that made her heart leap. Fucking birds . A moan vibrated from his lips. “Never going to stop doing that.” He mumbled against her.

She giggled and let her eyes fall closed. She was so tired... physically she was exhausted but her brain was still whirring away over information that she had been reading not ten minutes ago. That was one thing about Draco that she didn’t quite understand; he just knew. He always just knew, with everything, but especially with her. The bed shifted around his retreat down toward the foot of the bed; her panties vanished before she could register where this was going. “Draco... I don’t have the energy for-”

His hands pushed her thighs apart and held her open to him. His tongue wasted no time in licking her from her centre up to her clit, eliciting a moan from her and pulling a low, hungry groan from him. “Good thing I don’t need you to do anything other than relax and stop thinking then, hmm?” His breath was hot against her as his husky words floated quietly up toward her. Again his tongue made a pass over her before his mouth latched around her clit and sucked while his tongue continued to roll over it inside his mouth.

“Oh fuck.” Hermione gasped, a fire spreading through her body at a rapid pace and setting every nerve in her body alight. The suction released, and his tongue dipped into her folds and lapped at her arousal gathering quickly. One of his arms snaked under one thigh, lifting it to his shoulder and changing the angle, which allowed him to dive deeper into her, and wrapped around to the front of her hips, pinning her to the mattress firmly. Another growl of pleasure vibrated against her as his other hand rubbed against the inner side of her other thigh, massaging the muscles gently.

His touch only increased the fire within the pit of her abdomen. The soft, soothing touch a stark contrast to the greedy need in which he licked and sucked at her cunt, unable to get enough of her to satisfy his hunger - slowly pushed the thoughts away

from the forefront of her mind. Her hips were pinned to the mattress, but her back was not, and she had no desire to stop the way it arched effortlessly off the bed. A loud moan filled the air around her, which only seemed to spur him on with vigour. "Fuck baby, you have the sweetest-tasting pussy." The coil in her core twisted and tightened. It wasn't enough for the man between her legs to just look like a fucking god; he had to be exceptionally talented, too?

Each moan rolled off her tongue and flowed loosely from her body. His hand on her thigh fell between them, and just as his tongue latched around her again, he slipped two fingers into her and curled them expertly upwards, stroking at her inner wall. At this stage, he could have stopped because her mind had turned to mush, thoughtless and numb and ready for sleep to pull her under, but Hermione also knew that Draco was not going to stop until she came all over his fucking tongue, fingers, and face - and she was so damn close.

Each of his growls had unlocked some primal part of her that was drunk on the power it injected into her. Draco's tongue never faltered, working hard and fast against her clit in time with each curl in and out of her. "Oh god... Draco..." she warned, the band within her so taut and ready to snap. His eager nod against her while he continued his actions sent her over the edge, black fog blurring the edge of her consciousness, her climax rippling through her aggressively.

Every single one of her muscles in her arms and legs turning to jelly, she gasped as she rode out the waves of pleasure pulsating through her, right through to her magical core. His fingers within her slowed, waiting for the pulsating of her climax to slow before he slipped them from her, leaving her empty but satisfied and struggling to remain conscious. "Sleep, love." He whispered, pressing soft kisses to her inner thighs. She managed to nod absently before doing exactly that, rolling to her side and letting the fatigue pull her under while something soft and warm covered her.

There was a feeling of being too full and hot, a growing pressure in her abdomen that felt exactly right that woke her. Draco was pressed against her back, his lips placing soft, gasping kisses on her shoulder, his hand spread out over her thigh, holding it over top of his own while his cock slid in and out of her. A moan was already falling from her lips as her eyes fluttered open.

"I won't pry, but I hope that whatever Louis was doing was successful for you, and I hope he is okay. Can I come by and say hi later?"

Renauld chuckled. "Of course you can. He would like that. He's been wanting to thank you personally."

"Okay, I'll come by later then." Hermione glanced over her shoulder and saw Ginny reappear out of the floo with a bundle of what looked like clothing in her arms. "Thank you again for your help with Astoria. I should get going... I have a lot of research to do."

Renauld's hand came to rest on her upper arm, pulling her attention back to him. "I trust that if anyone can figure it out, it will be you."

She smiled softly. "I think you think too highly of me, Ren," she said before giving him a one-armed hug and slipping off toward the group once more. Ginny pressed a baggy shirt and some leggings into her hands when she reapproached. Pansy had already changed and looked more casual than Hermione was used to seeing her. She tried to think of an instance in which she had seen Pansy wearing track pants but came up short. "Ready?"

Draco grabbed Hermione's hand and pulled her into him, his arms folding around her, a blanket of his comforting scents calming her nerves that felt fried. His lips coming down and pressing against hers. "Don't be reckless." He said in a way that sounded like a warning, the way that his eyes locked with Pansy's behind her confirmed it was.

"Me? Never." She joked before following Pansy to the floo. It was clear as soon as they stepped through the other why: Nott manor was dark and ominous and drenched in dark energy that protested her very presence.

a cold which caused an infection in his lungs. He was dehydrated and showing early signs of sepsis, but he will be okay. He's sleeping at the moment. He told me I needed to make a national holiday in your honour, he... he thought he was dead. I would be lying if I said I hadn't thought the same." Renauld swallowed thickly, eying the healers again before subtly indicating to the exit.

Theo was pacing the room, one corner of his silver vest stained in his wife's blood, his hands anxiously running through his hair. They all jumped when they saw her, but she had nothing to tell them. "I don't know, sorry. Renauld gave the order to do as I said, but I don't know if that changes anything..." She explained delicately. "It isn't looking good. I don't even have medical training and I can see that. I need to go... to both your estate and yours," she indicated to Daphne and Theo. "I get you can't leave her..."

"I'll take you." Pansy offered. Hermione nodded her thanks and stepped away from the group, taking Renauld with her.

She could feel Draco's eyes burning into the back of her, but it felt more protective than jealousy-fueled now. They didn't go far, just far enough to talk in private. "I am sorry that it took us so long. We had... some issues of our own arise."

Ren hummed and eyed the group behind her. "Yes, your friend Ginny explained in very brief detail that a hit had been taken out on you two by your old order team."

Hermione exhaled deeply and rubbed at her face. "I nearly died, Gin was kidnapped, and things were a mess, but that's not the point. I wanted to apologise that it took us so long to get to him."

Renauld held up his hand in silence. "Absolutely not, Hermione. You saved him." Hermione nodded; she wouldn't ask why he had been taken or what he had been working on that had led to it in the first place. He had respected her privacy enough to have allowed her the same courtesy when they had first met, and oddly enough, she found it easy to trust him. His soul felt like an old, familiar friend.

"I know you have already done me a favour by pulling rank tonight" Hermione sighed.

"Whatever you need, mon ange, just say the word." He shook his head in reassurance.

"I was just hoping that if it comes to your attention, the whereabouts of an order safe house in France, or more importantly if you hear anything about Kingsley Shacklebolt or Ronald Weasley..."

"I will see what I can do."

The ease with which he thrust in and out highlighted how wet she was. Her arm came up behind her and grabbed at the back of his neck, pulling him closer. She was so close to the peak already.

His hand on her thigh tightened; Draco was gasping and was clearly warring with himself to deny his release.

"Oh fuck, Draco, harder, please." She begged with her voice hoarse. Draco groaned in relief and rolled his hips faster and deeper into her.

"Even when you sleep, you make the prettiest fucking sounds. Grinding your ass on my cock, whimpering for it. Hearing your sleepy little 'please Draco...' - fuck love, I could never deny you anything, and you were just so fucking wet... tell me, what were you dreaming about, hmm? Or was it all from before you fell asleep? Did I not do enough to satisfy you?" His voice was low and husky in her ear. His hips snapped into her harder each time; each one was absolutely delicious, and yet she needed more.

"Harder, please.." She mewled, pushing her hips back to meet his with each thrust. Draco's hand on her thighs shifted to her hip, his fingers digging into her flesh, and he pushed himself as deep as he could within her before rolling them so she was above him with her back pressed against his chest. His grip stilled on her hips as he held her down against his and, despite the shorter roll of his motions, hit exactly where she needed him to. "Oh god, yes - Draco!" She cried out.

His grunts against her shoulder, strained and guttural, adding to the ever-mounting fire in her abdomen. One arm moved to wrap around her front, holding her tight against him as he surged up into her. "Fuck." He gasped, his teeth sinking into her shoulder as he fought to hold on. His other hand came up to rest against the underside of her jaw, pulling her head back toward his. "You didn't even stir, I entered you, and you just made this relieved, needy little noise, and your cunt gripped at me - fuck Hermione." He broke off in a loud groan of pleasure. The effect that she had on him, Merlin, it was addicting. His hips started to stutter, but she was already free-falling.

Her orgasm ripped through her so strongly that by the time she came back to earth, Draco was stroking her hair from underneath her, panting and whispering sweet little reassurances in her ear, telling her how fucking amazing she felt, how beautiful she sounded. She moved to roll off him, but once again, her body felt boneless, so Draco rolled them both back to their starting position, slipping from her in the process. He had immediately fallen into a soft and subdued role again, quietly calculating everything around them, scenarios that Hermione wasn't privy to, stroking his fingers affectionately up and down her arm and staying close against her side.

"What time is it?" she mumbled through a yawn.

"A little after four." He said, pressing a kiss to her neck and nuzzling into her hair. Hermione gasped. "I slept all day!"

Draco chuckled behind her. "Four in the morning."

Hermione turned so suddenly that she accidentally caught him in the stomach with her elbow. "Are you serious?! You guys let me sleep for nearly twenty hours?!" She screeched, throwing the covers off and preparing to spring from the bed, but Draco moved faster, grabbing her around her waist and pulling her back to him.

"I will get up and help you research, and I will make us coffee and spend the whole day making sure you're fed and helping in any way I can. Merlin, don't you think I want to save Astoria too? But for the love of god, give me five minutes to just hold my fucking girlfriend and appreciate how lucky I am that we are both alive, would you?" He snapped.

"Girlfriend?" Hermione squeaked. The birds, attempting to break free from her chest in celebration

Draco hummed. "You're right; significant other or partner is more accurate. Girlfriend feels a bit teenage-like, doesn't it?"

A smile pulled at Hermione's cheeks as she snuggled down a little. "Is that who I am, is it?"

Draco froze behind her. "I told you that you were mine, that I was yours, did I not?"

Hermione rolled over and squished herself in against him, pressing her cheek to his chest. "That is true. It's different to hear it out loud in that capacity, though." The thought that she was already way too involved with this man was screaming at her aggressively. She hadn't allowed herself to become overly attached to anyone in a romantic capacity ever, so of course, she would go and fuck that up now by doing exactly that. "You better not fucking die." She snapped sourly.

Draco chuckled and pulled her closer, "I'll try my best, love."

"Good, you better not because I'll be really pissed if I have to go back to fucking myself after having experienced this." Hermione grinned, slipping her hand between them to rub at the front of his cock pointedly. "Ruined me, you have."

Draco twitched his hips, "Is that so?" His arms around her pulled her closer to him.

Hermione nodded and leant back to look at him; it absolutely was. The man was fucking gorgeous with those storm grey eyes and white blonde hair that seemed to find a knack for falling in his face these days. Hermione hummed, Ginny's words playing over in her mind. "You need a haircut."

helped to levitate her. "Ginny, go get the floo ready," Hermione whispered, and the redhead ran off immediately.

No one had changed. They were all still in the clothes they had attended dinner in. Even in his fully black ensemble, Draco's shirt was soaked in glistening blood. The bottom of Pansy's dress had swept through some of the mess at some stage because she left streaks of it across the floor.

Was this Hermione's fault? Had Astoria reacted so badly because of the potion? Guilt weighed down on her, suffocating her. Was this the cost of Hermione's potion making it easier last time? The knowledge that the reason Astoria had no potions currently was because of her felt like an extra kick in the gut; if Tiberius hadn't sent... "Tiberius." She whispered to herself. Something about the fact that Tiberius' death coincided with the same evening that this was happening scratched a part of her brain.

"Blaise." She caught his arms as he walked down the hall toward the floo. "I need you to release the contract. It's impractical in the current situation to have two bodyguards at all times." She explained in a hurry.

Beside her, Blaise nodded. "Consider it done."

The healers at Sequana's took one look at Astoria and rushed forward to take her. One healer tried to stop Hermione from entering the room, but Hermione just rolled her eyes and shoved past her anyway. "She has a blood curse. You need to put her into a medically induced coma, put in an IV with a continuous feed of blood-replenishing potions. You will need a team, someone to focus on each of her organs. If you let her die, I will personally see to it that you are all dead by sunrise. Do I make myself clear?" Hermione commanded the room.

"You can't just come in here and make threats on our lives" the healer she had ignored earlier argued.

"Perhaps not, but this woman has top-level priority. Do as Miss Granger says, on my orders." A voice from the doorway brought her instant relief. The healers in the room all jumped in surprise and scrambled to do what she had told them, sending out summons to more healers in the hospital.

Hermione spun and stepped forward to wrap her arms around the man. "Ren, thank you." Hermione smiled softly. "How did you—"

"Mrs. Zabini came and fetched me. I was still in with Louis." Of course, she would have; Ginny knew the wizard's fondness for her.

"How is he?" she asked hopefully.

Renauld's eyes softened on her. "Alive. Thanks to you." The French minister eyed the healers in the room cautiously. "He had a few infected wounds, several broken ribs,

The shed door flew open with a bang, startling her awake. She must have dozed off at some point during Theo and Ginny's insane drunken ramblings. "Theo, Mione, get in here right now." The panic in Pansy's voice was enough to sink her stomach like lead. Ginny, wide-eyed, scrambled up with the two of them despite her presence not being demanded.

The sprint back to the house was long enough for the anxiety and fear to take over - what had happened?! They all froze as they reached the French doors leading into the kitchen. There was so much blood. "What the..." Hermione frowned, unable to absorb it all.

"Astoria, she said she felt ill. Apparently, she stood to go to her room, but it was too late; it's not normally this bad." Pansy rushed through her explanation as everyone came too again and trotted to keep up as they headed toward the 'hospital' room. Smears of blood were everywhere: streaks along the walls, a slash here and there on the floor, but all of it was shiny under the lights overhead. Hermione's chest tightened as she observed each angry red spot. This was too much blood. Even with the aid of blood-replenishing potions, this was extreme; it hadn't been this bad last time.

She entered the room and saw Tor unconscious on the bed on her side. Daphne crouched beside her, sobbing and stroking her hair, whispering unheard pleas into her little sister's ear. Draco was pouring blood-replenishing potions into her, only for her to throw up violently seconds later. His hands were shaking, and he was as pale as she was.

"Tor!" Theo roared and skidded to her side, it was the purest form of agony that passed over his face. Hermione shook her head and tried to slow her heart that was now hammering in her chest, at least long enough to cast the diagnostic charms. Everyone in the room froze and looked at the colours and numbers on the screen.

Half of them were black or approaching zero. This was beyond what any of them were capable of. This was too far gone. Astoria was dying. Not in six months, not in three years, now. "No!" Theo sobbed.

"We need to get her to Sequana's - now," Hermione ordered. All eyes turned her way, but no one seemed to move. "What are you doing?! MOVE!" Hermione snapped.

"Tor hates hospitals," Daphne whispered.

Hermione glared at her and gave her a disbelieving look. "Well, it won't fucking matter much if she's dead, will it?" Was this normal? Was this how bad it usually was? Had Astoria just had a few good weeks in a row with the odd hiccup in amongst it? No, Pansy had said it wasn't... Blaise was the first to follow her orders, and Theo

Draco huffed a little, his eyes roaming over her face. "Thought I'd let it grow out, actually." He rolled away from her and out from under the covers. "Come along then, love. We should probably check that your lab hasn't imploded in your absence."

Hermione nodded. "Are you crying because you're pissed off or because you're upset that I killed your dad?"

"Because I'm pissed off.... And upset. I don't know, okay, I don't fucking know! The guy was an asshole and deserved to die. He tried to kill you, tried to kill me, probably knew for years that our family is the reason Astoria's dying... all the times I could have killed him myself but he was my dad and... Tonight was a lot! Like what the fuck, Mi, some warning would have been nice." Theo snapped through sobs.

"You're right. I'm sorry; I should have given you all a heads-up." Hermione said. She should have; she wasn't entirely sure why she hadn't. She had tried to justify it by saying to herself that if Ginny or Draco knew, they would have let their emotions get the best of them. Tried to tell herself she didn't want to have to make Theo choose, but really, it came down to her just wanting a little piece of justice for herself. It was selfish, and she blindsided everyone with it.

Theo smacked his head against the wall lightly a few times while tears continued to fall. "Do you think we can fix it? With Stori, I mean?"

Hermione sighed heavily. "I just told her that I don't know. Maybe not." Guilt twisted in her stomach. She knew she was doing him a kindness by telling him that, but it didn't make her feel any better watching the wave of grief pass over her friend's face.

"Is she okay?" Theo whispered with a sad nod.

Hermione shrugged. "She and Daphne were having a private conversation. I left them to it... I'm sorry I killed your dad." Hermione shrugged with a half-hearted smile.

Theo scoffed a laugh and shook his head. "I'm sorry he tried to kill you ." Theo looked at her, and some of the glints of happiness started to return. Hermione giggled, and soon, they both laughed loudly at how ridiculous the situation was. Because it was, wasn't it? What the hell had this life become really? Harry Potter was dead, she was helping Tom, and plotting to kill family members left, right and center.

The door opened and Ginny slipped in with a bottle of tequila. "Thought you could use this," she said, extending the bottle to him.

Theo nodded and accepted it with a grin. "Thanks, Red... so where to from here, Mi? Any more hidden tricks up your sleeve?"

Hermione tapped the tip of her nose with her finger and giggled. Ginny snickered. "Well, can I make a request since we seem to be killing family members at the moment? I would like Ron taken out, too, please." Hermione knew that despite Ginny's joking demeanour, she was serious.

Hermione nodded. "Kingsley, too," she added.

Hermione wanted to reassure the blonde that she could; she felt confident that she could, but she was also painfully aware that things like this take time, and what Hermione did not need was the added pressure of everyone's watchful eyes. No hope was better than false hope, and if, for some reason, Hermione couldn't figure out an answer in time, then she didn't want to face everyone's disappointment. Maybe that made her a coward, but it didn't stop her from shaking her head. "I don't think so, Tor. I can maybe prolong it, but I don't even know how far back this goes."

Astoria nodded in sombre acceptance. "Okay. That's okay..." Tears welled in the witch's eyes again. "Perhaps this is something that you can work on with Daphne... For the next generation."

"What next generation, Stori? You're dying, and I'm gay. It's just us!" Daphne exclaimed suddenly.

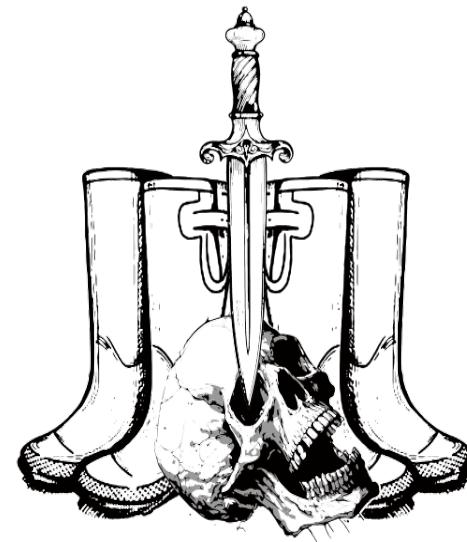
Astoria tilted her head in thought. "I've been thinking about that... I always said that I didn't want children because I didn't want to pass this down to them... but with Hermione's potions, they could lead relatively normal lives, maybe even long lives, because they would be able to start the potions before the damage is done. I don't see a reason not to now. I would like Theo to have someone, and I mean someone connecting him and me in a different way than you guys do... he will need it. He needs someone who will need him to be able to keep his shit together." Astoria let one sob fall free before she sniffed and straightened her shoulders.

Hermione took in the look of disapproval on Daphne's face and slipped quietly from the seat. Nodding at the others to head to the sitting room and give the sisters some space to discuss it privately, she slipped outside and made her way toward the shed. She had seen Theo slip off this way earlier and knew it was simply a matter of him needing a moment.

Theo was on the floor leaning against the far wall, tears running down his cheeks that he was trying to angrily swipe away when she entered the shed. Most of the ingredients needed for Astoria's special potion had been re-brought and sat waiting on the counter, the only absent thing was the prickly pear.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Hermione asked softly, crouching down and sitting opposite him, her back to the island bench in the middle of the room.

"No! He was a huge piece of shit." Theo managed to get out around little gasps, resting his arm on the knee of his leg that sat upright. He seemed annoyed to be crying and upset in the first place, but Hermione knew and understood that a lot had happened tonight.



CHAPTER 39: POTATO, TOMATO

Doesn't she look tired? Speculation spreads regarding the job performance of the Italian Minister for Magic, Alessia Cascioli.

Criticism has begun to circulate recently regarding the Italian leader's ability to perform her job. Employees of the Minister have started opening up about the way in which Alessia Cascioli treats not only her staff but members of parliament abroad, and it may come as a shock to learn, dear reader, that it is not positive. Those close to the forty-two-year-old witch say that in recent times, they have noticed a physical decline in her energy and focus, claiming that they believe the job is getting to

be too much for the Minister. One employee, who has requested to remain nameless, has gone so far as to say that she thinks that it has impacted potential alliances with other countries. Is this just a blip in the road for the previously popular elected official, or is this the end for Alessia Cascioli?

Hermione had been pouring over the journals for far longer than she would have liked. Time was running out. Astoria, who had been considered stable for the most part, was still declining, slowly but surely. If she didn't find an answer in the next day or two, the damage would be irreversible, and the last nine days would be for nothing.

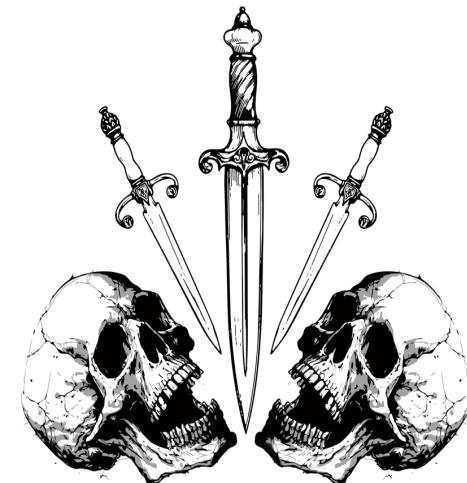
Theo and Daphne never left Astoria's bedside anymore, convinced that this was it. She would be lying if she didn't think that perhaps that was the case, too. But Hermione couldn't stop, not knowing that she, in part, was responsible for the blonde's shortened time frame. Not that anyone seemed to blame her, but it was true all the same.

Theo had stumbled across it the day he had brought the books - the deaths of the Greengrass ancestors who had refrained from having children, all coincided with the death of a member of the Nott family. Those who did have children all seemed to die within a short period of time following the birth of their children as if the pregnancy had accelerated the process rapidly.

Astoria had no children, which is why, at twenty-four, she had been managing fairly well for the most part, whereas several before her had been dead already, but when Tiberius Nott died, it activated the failsafe plan: imminent death. Clearly, one of the Greengrass' in history had pissed off someone in the Nott family. She had hoped that Ophelia's diary would provide insight, but it seemed that she had been genuinely confused and surprised when the symptoms had started, right up until the final page, where she had written a farewell entry for her daughter.

In her annoyance, she had sent it flying across the room, narrowly avoiding hitting Ginny in the head, who had taken to organising shifts for those not at Sequana to help.
“Ah, sweetie? Maybe we put the journals away for a bit?”

“I have just wasted over a fucking week trying to find a clue, even just a trace of one, for nothing!!” She screamed in frustration. Tears burned in the back of her eyes, not out of sadness but out of overwhelming anger. It bubbled inside her, threatening to burst out of her and set the whole place on fire with all these stupid books inside it.



CHAPTER 36: UNEXPECTED CONSEQUENCES

So the Nott family is the reason our family has a curse?” Astoria asked teary-eyed, tugging at the tissue between her hands as they all crowded around the dining table at the chateau. Well, almost all of them.

“Yes.” Hermione nodded hesitantly. “I don’t have much more information than that.”

Astoria nodded, her glossy eyes seeking out Hermione’s nervously. “But you still can’t cure it, can you?”

Hermione's hands came out and swept everything off the table, including the lamp, sending it crashing to the floor and shattering among the books. The tears that had only threatened her before spilt down her cheeks as the side of her hand caught one of the Nott family journals, causing the skin to burn and blister instantly. "God dammit!" She hissed, grabbing at the wound in an attempt to lessen the pain and turned away from the worried eyes of her friend.

She tried to pace out the worst of the pain. She had learnt over the last week and a half that the infliction stopped that moment she removed contact with the item but it didn't make it throb any less. Draco entered from the direction of the kitchen and after a silent stare off with Ginny, slinked toward her while the redhead disappeared into the kitchen he had just vacated.

"Come here." He commanded softly, but she wasn't in the mood for being placated, so she just glared at him and continued her pacing as he sat on the edge of the now-cleared table. He gave her a few more minutes for the worst of the overwhelming feelings of failure and guilt to subside before his fingers reached out and lightly grabbed at her skirt, pulling her toward him, his fingers gripping at the back of her thighs as he placed her between his own thighs with his fingers interlocking behind her. "Show me." He demanded, his eyes letting her see the disapproval his voice was hiding.

She sighed and held her hand to her chest, showcasing the already tearing skin that ran from her wrist to the tip of her pinky finger. His eyes darkened at the sight, releasing his hold on her to begin the practised healing charms he had already needed to use three times in the last week. "Talk to me, Love," his tone clipped.

"I'm just—" Hermione huffed and looked to the ceiling. "I don't know how to fix it. I don't know how to save her. I was so sure that the journals would have something." Hermione shook her head and let the cooling sensation against her finger soothe some of the anger coursing through her veins as well. "And instead, I've wasted a week we didn't have, and I need to save her because it can't be my fault that she dies." Hermione had become desensitised over the years to the number of people she had killed.

Even standing by as Blaise had plunged a dagger into Harry over and over again, she had felt nothing. She had been so caught up in her bliss with Draco that she hadn't even really noticed the moment he had died, but it was different with Astoria. With everyone else, it was a choice that Hermione had made, a casualty of war or decisions made in war, but Astoria was the one part of her life that was untouched by the war. She was still pure-hearted, loving, and loyal to their household, and from the very first day, she welcomed Ginny and Hermione with open arms.

It was hardly the first time she had killed someone that had once been her friend, but Astoria was not someone she ever set out to hurt, and if she had known this would happen, she would probably have found a cosy little cell to shove that old fucker into instead. Draco tilted his head. "This is not your fault, baby, no one blames you for this."

Hermione pulled away from him as the tears restarted. "I do. I do, Draco, because intentional or not, if she dies - if I can't fix this, then I am responsible. I killed Tiberius and, therefore, killed her by extension."

"Okay, so then let's figure this out." Draco stood and turned toward the empty table, summoning a permanent marker. "It started with Ophelia, right? When did her symptoms start?"

Hermione sighed. "Fourteen is when it physically appeared, but she had been sick with bouts of fatigue her whole life." She rubbed at her temples while Draco started scribbling on the surface, adding relevant facts.

"Okay, then we're looking for something that happened in her mother's time then..."

Hermione shook her head. "No, her mother was a Rosier. It was her Father who was the Greengrass before her. He had no journal."

Draco paused, staring at the information marking the tabletop. "And what Notts were alive at that point?"

"It was two brothers named Titus and Thaddeus in their age group as well as their mother, Phyllis, and grandmother, Ethel." Hermione rattled off absently.

"Any connections?" Draco asked, adding the four names to the table too, throwing in lines to join the Notts in a miniature family tree. Hermione hummed and levitated one of the books she had swiped off the workspace earlier to the table and began turning the pages to find the potential information.

"Thaddeus Nott and Nathaniel Greengrass were in the same year at school but in separate houses. Delphina Rosier was in the same year as Titus, the year below Thaddeus and Nathaniel. I don't know what house she was in, though."

Draco slashed in a few more lines and stood up to look at it. "Is there any information on betrothals for Titus or Thaddeus?"

Hermione frowned and stepped closer, "You think that it's a revenge - jealousy thing?"

"I think that it's a possibility. Some of us get very protective over people we care about romantically." Draco raised an eyebrow at her. His hand reached out and tucked a strand of her hair gently behind her ear.

dawned on Theo and Daphne first, the brunette wizard whipping around to look at her in horror and shock, his mouth wide open and a frown on his face. One by one, her housemates came to the same conclusion.

"I mean, really, I should thank you, Tibby. Without you sending that poison to Seamus, things might have been a lot different. You've really streamlined the process for me." Hermione chuckled into her wine glass with a slight shake of her head, pausing with the glass millimetres from her lips. "Even in death, you are a failure. Funny that."

Tiberius was drenched in his blood - it was everywhere. The pool of it leaked outward along the floor under his body. Thick and red and staining Tom's floor, but for once, Blaise seemed unbothered by it; he was just staring at Tiberius' slowly dying body, as everyone was. Every person here had been shocked speechless at Hermione's discoveries tonight. Hermione had, of course, sped up the poison's attack on the wizard's body when recreating the potion herself. She didn't have all night for it to drag out, so she sighed happily when the bastard finally exhaled his last gurgly breath. "Right, shall we eat?" Hermione asked, turning to Tom expectedly.

Once more, everyone turned to her with open mouths and wide eyes and not a word between them. Food appeared on the plates before them, filling the air with delicious smells of roast vegetables and beef wellington. Hermione snorted in amusement that food had appeared on Tiberius' 'dirty' plate after all. It seemed a shame that it would go to waste as his body remained where it was, limp and empty now, unable to enjoy the meal before him. "Hmmm, this looks delicious, Tom, thank you." Hermione praised before cutting a potato and popping it in her mouth; a pleased hum vibrating through her at the taste was the loudest thing in the silence.

The sound of dripping and several horrified gasps pulled her attention toward the man at the end of the table. Thick black veins spread up his skin from under his shirt's collar, foamy blood had begun to spill from the wizard's mouth, and tracks of it ran from his eyes. Tiberius gasped for breath only to choke on the blood spilling from him. On either side of her, her teammates went rigid. "Is that...?" Pansy's voice trailed off in horror.

Hermione hummed her agreement. "Yes, I tried my best to recreate it, but of course without your recipe Tiberius, it was just an estimated guess. How did I do?" She asked the wizard at the end of the table rhetorically. His mouth was open in silent screams, blood spilling all over his front, his ears and nose both had streams of crimson flowing from them now too.

"What are you talking about?" Draco whispered, his eyes glued to Theo's father's body, his face pale. No doubt the poor man was reliving her own experience with the poison, the poison that had very nearly killed her right in front of him.

"See, I thought it was a bit odd...that the Order would use a poison like that. It was hardly their MO. I went over all the notes from Pansy's attempts to find the curse, and I realised that it was dark magic. Old magic. Magic that the precious Order would never have come up with on their own because, first of all, they are too stupid, and second of all, it would go against all the hypocritical bullshit they have been spouting for years - even in the name of removing me as a threat."

Tiberius' skin was turning a translucent shade of white, and she had to admit, the way his eyes were bugling and soaked in the blood from his veins was rather gruesome. She could see why Draco and the others hadn't wanted to talk about it. "So then I started looking into it a little bit further, and I realised there were traces of things I recognised. Elements that are the same as something I've seen before. In a different variation, of course, as yours was a much milder, much more basic strain because you are also stupid, aren't you, Tiberius?"

Hermione glared over at the man and felt the weight of all her rage building. The funny thing was that he had unknowingly helped her. It was possible that she would never have made those connections if not for his idiocy. "Your ancestors were smarter than you; they knew how to make it stick, to pass it down throughout generations. You, on the other hand, couldn't even make it stick enough for one person—"

"Oh my god." Astoria jumped to her feet, knocking the table causing the cutlery to clatter against the glassware. Her eyes widened in disbelief as the implications of what Hermione was saying had clicked in her brain. Her eyes, unfocused on the wall on the other side of the room, lost in her thoughts. Hermione watched as the realisation

Hermione fought a smile. "I think you meant possessive."

Draco shrugged, "Potato, tomato." Hermione shook her head at the error but Draco was turning back to the table before she could correct him. "I think that it is worth looking into at least. I mean, they were all there at the same time, right? Or maybe Thaddeus and Nathaniel were friends—"

"They were in separate houses." Hermione reminded him but sought out one of the other books. Two jumped out at her, so she directed Draco to one while she flicked through the other. Draco, admittedly, was faster than her, but that was because she kept getting distracted. Draco, leaning over a table with black trousers and a black dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up, was just too nice to look at. She couldn't help it; she felt giddy around him, even in the most awful of circumstances. It really was disgusting. Ginny was right.

"Here." Draco jabbed at the page in his book. "Titus and Delphina had an official courtship, but it was broken before any marriage contract could be presented. The reason is listed as infidelity."

Hermione sighed and sunk into a chair. "Okay, so we have the reason and, but now we need the how." Ginny sauntered back into the room with several cups of coffee floating in front of her as well as a plate with a grilled cheese sandwich that landed in front of Hermione.

Hermione's stomach rumbled in appreciation. She was certain that if not for the people who had been on rotations with her, she would have fainted from failure to eat multiple times over. It was their constant presenting her with food that kept her going, just like it was Draco's demands that at least every second night, they return to the chateau to sleep properly. "Thanks, Gin." The melted cheese spilt out onto her tongue, and she hummed again in delight.

"I think that actually probably helps because it narrows down the spells that could have been used." Draco began collecting the ancestral grimoires and moving them to the brainstorming table, stacking them in a neat pile and pulling one at a time to him, scribbling down pages and books of potential curses. Ginny pulled two off the pile and gave one to Hermione, who, between bites, flicked through the secrets of the darkest arts, but even with the safety of her wand levitating the pages, there was a residual sting each time.

The book was reluctant to even allow her remote access to its inky depths, but that only made Hermione more determined. Some of these spells or curses were truly horrific, all of them rare, unheard or lost to the darkness of history. One particular page caught her attention and it took her far too long to realise that she had spent a

good ten minutes reading up about flaying techniques in magical beings, but her curiosity had been peaked and so she stored the information away for later.

The occasional scratching of a quill against parchment or squeak of the marker against the table would sound from the other two, but Hermione had yet to come across anything that warranted noting; she had been able to dismiss all of it with confidence. She was about to give up hope on the little black book that liked to sting her in punishment for her audacity, turning one last page in resignation.

A scoff of disbelief rose up out of her. "Hey guys?" Hermione peered down at the black pages in front of her that were tattooed with white ink, handwritten but as clear as a summer's day what it was. Hermione took another bite of her grilled cheese sandwich and tipped her head to the side, reading the information before her. "You can stop looking now. I found it."

Draco peered up at her with a frown, "Are you sure? We can keep looking in case—"

Hermione finished her bite and shrugged. "I mean if you want to keep looking, by all means, but I'm pretty sure this 'one thousand bloody deaths' is it."

Ginny scrambled to peer over Hermione's shoulder, reading rapidly before letting out a disbelieving, annoyed laugh. "Oh fuck off." Ginny turned around and walked out, slamming the door behind her.

Draco frowned at Ginny's reaction. "I'm not going to like what's written there, am I?"

Hermione shook her head. No, he wasn't because she couldn't imagine that any of them would like the solution. "No." Hermione took another bite of her toastie and stared down at the words, wishing they would rearrange themselves and give her a simpler answer.

On the other side of the room, Draco leant on his table with both hands, hung his head and sighed audibly. "Okay, what's the stupid book say?" he mumbled.

"That the curse is permanent," Hermione answered quietly. "It can only be undone by every member of the Greengrass family dying, which means that as long as there is a living Greengrass... the curse will continue."

Draco looked up at her with bitter disgust. "So when Theo dies—"

"Daphne will die, too."

question." She looked around at them, not understanding what she had said to make them all react in such a way.

"I believe it has more to do with the way that you have announced that you are, as we speak, killing one of our oldest friends with as much casualty as discussing the weather, only to disregard it and return to small talk, dear." Narcissa sighed, pointing out the obvious before taking a sip of her wine.

"We are all seasoned killers here, are we not? One pitiful man's imminent death should hardly warrant an in-depth conversation. Not when there is something more worthy of talking about. It is apparently rude for me to discuss work at the table. Is it also considered rude to seek marital advice from the couple who has been married the longest here?"

Narcissa looked at her in amused disbelief. "No, Miss Granger, it is not. Never go to bed angry at one another, and if you do, make sure it is resolved before getting up in the morning. It will do no one any good to take it into the new day with you."

Narcissa offered, finishing by falling back into her chair with her lips pursed, like so many before her, examining Hermione with intrigue.

"What is your deal, Miss Granger?" Rabastan asked over the top of his wine glass. The majority of those in attendance tonight had yet to say a word to her or anyone else, but it seemed that Rabastan had been elected as an unofficial jury of those silent.

"What do you mean?" Hermione glanced his way.

"I mean, you came from the Order. You have no problems, it seems, with killing, even those on the same supposed side as you. You sit pretending to be just another innocent little girl, but I don't buy it..."

Hermione sighed. "If you get rodents in your house, you don't allow them to continue existing there. You get an exterminator and wipe the fuckers out, and I don't think I have claimed, even once, since coming here to be innocent. I am just a girl." She responded, her lips tugging upward slightly in the corners as her eyes clashed with the Lestrange brother.

"I don't believe you," Rabastan whispered back purposely and slowly across the table.

"You can believe what you like, Rabastan. At the end of the day, times are changing, plans are changing - either get on board or get out." Adrian drawled, his fingers picking at his napkin on his dinner plate.

"There is no getting out." Hermione corrected. "If you're not on board, then you're dead, and if you think for a second I won't know, think again."

"Did you just threaten me?" Tiberius smirked her way.

Hermione rolled her eyes. Why did everyone think she was threatening them? She had issued Tiberius with one warning, he had fucked around and not listened, and now he would be facing the consequences of his actions because Hermione did not like repeating herself. What a waste of her time that was. "I did not. I was merely stating facts."

Beside her Draco was staring at the whiskey glass making its way to Tiberius' lips. The only thing to have survived his earlier tantrum. She ignored the burn of Tiberius glaring at her until he had finished the last drop of his drink, it was only then she looked at him and smiled sweetly. "Did you not notice that you were the only one to get whiskey this evening, Tibs?"

Tiberius frowned, his eyes searching the table to confirm that everyone else had indeed been drinking wine. His rage turned his face an ugly blotchy purple. "You bitch," he spluttered. "Give me the antidote right now! Your horrid little—"

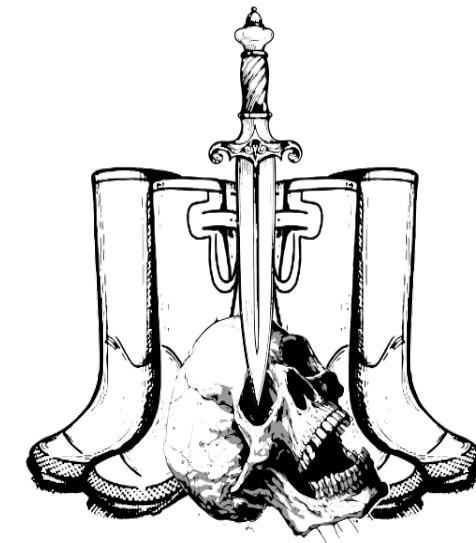
Hermione was quicker than him; the moment the old bastard's hand flexed, she shouted 'expelliarmus' and wagged her finger at him while Draco instinctively caught the man's wand. "I don't think so. I crafted that especially for you. I won't have you ruin my surprise by offing yourself on a rebounded curse. You will see soon enough anyway. In the meantime, I think we have had enough of your outdated judgements. Silencio. Inhaterio."

Tiberius slammed backwards in his chair, stiff and unable to move despite his attempts. His lips moved aggressively, no doubt shouting slurs her way, but not a sound was made from his lips. "Right, apologies, everyone, that was quite the disruption." She was met with more silence as everyone tried to recover from the surprise of Hermione's actions.

"The whiskey?" Tom finally asked in fascination.

Hermione smiled in response. "Poisoned. I am rather interested to see how it goes. Should be soon, I hope; I would hate to delay your dinner further, Tom." When no one said a word and continued to look at her in horror and/or admiration, she decided to shift the focus back to the purpose of the evening. "So, you two have been married for a long time now. What would you say is the secret to a long, happy marriage? Any advice for the happy couple?" She smiled at Draco's mother and father politely and nodded her head in the direction of Ginny and Blaise.

Draco laughed beside her, slow and quiet at first, building in volume and intensity until the sound was echoing around the room. Their housemates added to the chorus of noise and Hermione's confusion. "I don't see what's so funny; it was a genuine



CHAPTER 40: THE WAY OF THE FUTURE

Hermione glared at the curly, black-haired witch opposite her. She had been the one to demand this stupid and pointless table meeting after all, time that Hermione didn't have, time that Astoria was now forced to be alone in the hospital. "Are we really going to stand by and let this m—" Bellatrix cowered as Tom snapped his eyes to her in a warning glare. "P-person come in and take over like this, but more than that, she killed Tiberius! Tiberius, who has been loyal to our cause from the start!"

Hermione scoffed and shook her head. "Something funny, witch?" Prowers, a Death Eater about ten years her senior, scowled. Draco, who was sitting on one side of her, stiffened. His head turned ever so slightly to watch the man out of the corner of his eyes.

"Hardly my fault that he didn't listen." Hermione drawled, giving Prowers a satisfied smirk. "I warned him, he didn't believe me, and now he's dead. Should I warn you next? I do hope you'll call my bluff, just like fucking Tiberius."

"My Lord, this is what I mean!" Bellatrix screeched as she folded herself over the table, lowering herself and pleading up at him; it was pathetic. "She is trying to ruin you, my Lor-"

"Ruin him?!" Hermione snapped, her eyes narrowing on the witch. "No, I saved him. Tom has been pulled down by the likes of you and Tiberius and all the other mangey mongrels in your ranks for years." Her rage grew with every word. "He should be made for greatness. I simply redirected him toward a better path, a path that you, Bella, are too far gone to understand." Hermione sighed heavily and looked to the ceiling, trying to find the patience to refrain from killing everyone here and being done with it. "I have things to do. I do not have time to be wasting, trying to convince someone I don't even want around that I will be the best fucking thing to have ever happened to Tom Riddle." Hermione punctuated.

"His name is Voldemort!" The witch shrieked, her voice echoing and shrill in the large dining room and Hermione saw this meeting for what it was. The eyes never lie; one can try, they can hide behind excuses or reasons, but the eyes always tell the truth.

Hermione started laughing, in shock at first but then loudly and full of disgust as it tumbled out of her. "Oh my god, woman. I..." Hermione trailed off as her laughter continued, all eyes burning her skin while Hermione did an inventory of those at the table. "You are truly pathetic, you know that?" Her laughter evaporated, and her face pulled into a sneer toward the witch. "Are you serious? You're jealous of me? Are you that desperate for his affections that you honestly view me as a threat? Have you lost your fucking mind? Actually, don't answer that; I know you have." Hermione shook her head and stood.

"I could never be jealous of you. You are nothing, you are—" Bellatrix tried to argue, but her eyes looked panicked, like a deer in the headlights, laying it all bare for the whole table, including her husband, to see.

"Bellatrix." Tom hissed in warning.

"Listen, I don't have time to soothe the insecurities of a crazy woman, but I will say this, Bella: if he hasn't wanted to fuck you by now, there's probably a fairly high chance

"Theodore, sit down right now," Hermione demanded again, firmer.

"Yes, son, you wouldn't want to upset your new leader." Tiberius glared. "Leading us into a new world, alright, by wiping out our existing one, having us mingle with fucking trash!" Tiberius ended his rant in a roar, his hands coming out and swiping the plates, the glasses - with the exception of his own, anything within his reach to a deafening crash to the ground. No one said a word as Hermione's eyes narrowed. "Sixty years, Tom! For sixty years, you and I have been friends, and for what?"

Her fingers wrapped around her wine glass in hand, sipping it delicately. The elf in the corner moved forward to clean up the shattered serveware, but Hermione held up her hand to stop it. She stared at Draco until he sighed and sunk back into his chair. Her eyes moved to Theodore, who glowered back at her. "He has no right—"

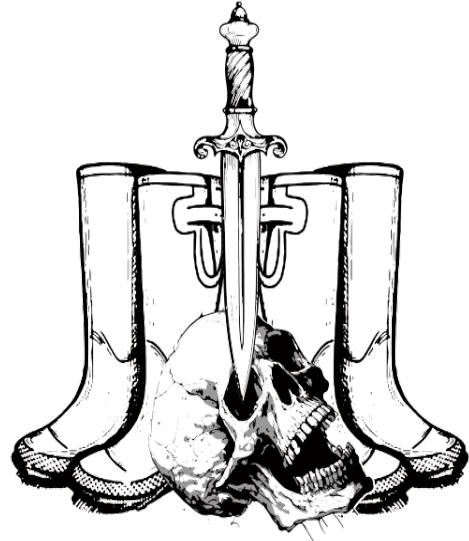
Hermione shushed her friend. "He is shit-talking for the hell of it, and karma will come his way soon enough." Hermione soothed. Slowly but reluctantly, he removed his foot from the table and stepped down off the chair, his hand extending out to Astoria who stepped up to him and let him help her back into her chair. Pansy following suit without needing prompting.

Daphne was pissed off at having to stand down; that much was clear, but she sat all the same, refusing to look at Hermione, or anyone else for that matter, just glaring down at her place setting. Hermione sighed and raised her eyebrows at Tom, who lowered his wand but did not move, his eyes more furious than Hermione had seen them in some time. "Tom, please, sit," Hermione asked sweetly.

Tom fiddled with the button on his suit jacket and stomped to his chair, huffing in annoyance as he sat. Hermione waited until he had taken his place at the head of the table before casting the reparo on the shattered plates and glasses on the floor, levitating them back into position in front of Tiberius, who snarled with disgust. "If you think I will be eating off plates that have been on the dirty fucking floor, girlie, you are out of your damn mind."

Hermione shook her head and placed her glass back on the table casually. "You'll be dead by then so really it won't matter." She answered nonchalantly, waving him off without so much as a glance his way.

Silence fell over the table again, and all eyes shifted to her. Every single person in this room was staring at her. She hadn't mentioned the plan to anyone. The only being in this room who knew the truth was the elf in the corner; not that one person had noticed yet that it was their Gimlee, not one of Tom's elves. "Thank you, Gimlee, you may leave now." Hermione sighed, finally looking up at the table surrounding her. Her housemates looked at the elf in a mixture of confusion and recognition.



CHAPTER 43: NEARLY DIED

Hermione's eyes fluttered open as someone shifted something near her head. "Shh, it is okay. Go back to sleep, ma chérie." Though the voice was familiar, it startled her. She scampered sideways in her bed to look up at Louis' face, placing flowers on her bedside table.

It took a second to place him in her foggy brain, she felt slow, weighed down under a groggy haze. "Louis! How are you?"

Louis chuckled. "Better than you it seems, we need to stop meeting like this." Hermione looked around her and realised for the first time that she was in a hospital

bed, in the chair beside her was Draco, groggily rubbing the sleep from his eyes and looking dishevelled with his clothes crumpled. In the corner, still asleep on a couch was Ginny, her hair a mess and bags under her eyes.

“Apparently so. Are you okay? All healed? Glad to be back home?” She tried to push herself up the bed, but her arms protested the movement. Draco sleepily moved forward to help her. She eyed his hair, hanging in his face and the short fuzz now covering his chin and jaw. His steel grey eyes met hers, and she could see the weight of his own weariness. Hermione shook her head. How long had he been here? How long had she?

“You end up in the hospital due to exhaustion, and you are asking me how I am?” Louis shook his head in disbelief. “Merlin... I am fine. I am all healed and pleased to be home, oui. I cannot stay. I just wanted to stop by and leave you these, check to see how you were.” Louis smiled down at her fondly.

Hermione nodded. “That’s okay, I’m fine, I think?” Beside her, Draco growled, much to the head of security’s amusement. “Ah. It seems that is up for debate.” Hermione added with a soft smile as a tingle ran down her spine under Draco’s gaze.

“I will let you rest,” Louis said with understanding. “We will catch up once you are home, no?”

Hermione nodded and accepted a one-armed hug from the man. “How long have I been asleep?” Hermione asked in a hushed voice once Louis had shut the door behind him.

Draco shooed her over to the side of the bed and climbed in beside her, pulling her against his chest with a yawn. “Two days.” He mumbled.

“Two days?! Astoria? Daphne?” Hermione tried to sit up again, but Draco’s arms tightened around her in warning.

“Both alive. Daphne will be discharged tomorrow on the order of bedrest; Astoria will have to spend a few weeks here before she can go home.” Draco said, already half asleep again.

Guilt churned in her stomach. “Have you gone home at all?” She asked, her hand reaching out and stroking the stubble on his face. Another yawn and a squeeze was her only answer, his breathing slowly levelling out into a relaxed and even pace. She couldn’t even take the luxury of having a few days off to rest and recover because she still had a job to do, and the deadline for that job was far too short.

She would have to settle for this moment right now, the time she could let Draco rest and just lay in his arms. The steady rise and fall of his chest had become such a comfort to her that it was hard to remember what things had been like before. There

“I’m listening.” Death encouraged.

Hermione couldn’t get enough air into her lungs as she slid back into the realm of the living. Her gasps were loud as she collapsed on the floor. The circle dulled and turned dormant once more. Ginny skidded to her side, eying the circle before deciding it was safe to cross. “Holy fucking shitballs Hermione!” She muttered, pulling Hermione into a tight embrace. “Never do that again.”

“I’ll do my best.” Hermione panted, tears streaming down her face from the involuntary watering of her eyes. Her lungs burnt, and though she was back, she couldn’t shake the chill on her skin. There was nothing left in her; even the task of sitting upright was too much effort. She let herself fall sideways into Ginny, sliding onto the floor to rest her head on Ginny’s lap.

Her heavy eyes slid over to the beds of Astoria and Daphne, the final two Greengrass’ in their family line. The numbers from the timer showed that she had used up her three minutes. Livia was already administering shocks to Astoria’s chest while another healer had moved to work on bringing back Daphne. A breeze filtered through the room as the door caved to the pressures of those trying to get in. Another shock and nothing happened. “Again.” Livia ordered in urgent demands. Hermione’s eyes drifted closed; sleep would claim her soon. There was a scuffle of people, but amidst the yelling, a sound came that made stillness fall over the room again.

It was the sound of two heartbeats.

and hazy. "I know you, witch." His deep tone filled the emptiness and sent shivers down her spine.

"I know you too," she whispered back, taking in the room around her. "Death."

Death laughed, hearty and full. "You are smart, but I see what you intend to do. You do not plan for me to collect their souls." He said slowly, seriously, and giving no indication of his standing on the matter.

"The pact the Nott family made with you is complete. There is no living Greengrass as we speak. I have read over it a hundred times; there is nothing written about you getting to keep them."

The figure moved in the corner of her eye again, circling around to stand in front of her. Her skin turned cold as his breath touched her face. "Not everything can be found in books, child." His tone bordering condescension irked her.

"No. But if you expect a contract to hold up, you need to get it in writing. All Greengrass family members are dead. Therefore, the pact has been completed." Hermione argued. She knew it was risky to be debating an issue with Death himself; history showed he did not like to be cheated, and there was nothing to stop him from keeping her here as punishment.

"I am aware of the pact. I was there when it was made." No one spoke for a moment and she was starting to worry that she would run out of time. "You have sent many people to me, do you know how many?"

Hermione didn't. She had never counted, never felt the need to. She had started killing people, and there had been no reason to dwell on the lives she had taken. "No."

She could hear the smile in his voice even if she couldn't see it. "Would you like to?"

Hermione shook her head. "They do not matter. They were just people, and now they aren't."

Another laugh bounced off the walls around her. "These sisters are just people."

Hermione nodded, looking to the door so that she could watch him in the corner of her eye. His presence wasn't as unnerving as she would have expected. "As am I." She felt him circling her again.

"Then why should I let them slip by?"

"I need them. I have a plan for the world, and they need to be there to help me achieve it. They have paid the debt. I have not broken any rules."

"I do not care for the affairs of men." He drawled in disapproval. "This is trickery, and you know it."

"What if I offered you further payment?" Hermione suggested, hopefully. This had to work. It had to.

was no denying that, at some stage, she had stumbled into love for him. She didn't want to describe it as falling because it hadn't been; it had just been a slow realisation that they fit together, the perfect mirror images of each other.

His touch soothed the restlessness in her soul, his embrace brought her comfort, his smile melted the ice around her heart, and his complete acceptance of her, as she was, was like coming up for a breath after drowning. Ginny had accepted her completely as well, but Ginny had always been an extension of herself, and they had just been drowning together.

Her eyes tracked over his features as he slept, and she should have known that he would be trouble from the moment they had landed in the bar. He just looked far too good, and now he had the power to break her irrevocably.

She wondered if Ginny had also stayed the entire time. It seemed like it, at least. If Draco's level of fatigue was anything to go on, he didn't seem to have slept properly in the two days she had apparently been unconscious, which indicated to her that the couch had been occupied during that time - or that she had not been as well as she thought? Though she felt fine, a little drained perhaps but nothing like she had after Diagon Alley.

But then again, he did have a tendency to be overprotective. He was also, no doubt, still affected by her last close call. She wondered just how many problems she had caused him over the last few months. How he still considered her worth it, she would likely never know because she sure as shit brought this man no peace, least of all the same kind he brought her.

Letting him sleep now was the best she could give him. She knew they all lived in a constant state of chaos - the side effect of war, unfortunately - but it often felt like hers was somehow more turbulent than most. He let out a deep sigh in his sleep and she didn't bother to hide the smile it brought her, she let him pull her closer when one of his hands landed on the back of her head and guided her toward him.

Ginny yawned from her spot on the couch, sitting up slowly and rubbing her face. Hermione watched as Ginny turned and eyed Draco with confusion and then slowly realisation dawned on her face as she finally noticed Hermione in his arms, peering back at her. The redhead looked on the edge of combusting so Hermione put a soft finger up to her lips and mimed for her to be quiet.

Ginny's eyebrows shot up as she mouthed a quiet 'oh really' followed by her pretending to gag on her finger. Hermione chuckled lightly and melted into a gooey gush of emotions as Draco's hand on the back of her head tightened in his sleep. Ginny shook her head with a warm smirk. 'You are so fucked,' she mouthed again.

Hermione sighed in defeat. ‘I know,’ she responded in the same manner.

“Now that I’m not terrified you’re going to die, I am going to go home, shower, change and all that, then I’ll come back. Do you want anything?” Ginny whispered as she stood, collecting the belongings Hermione hadn’t noticed strewn around.

“Coffee?” Hermione said as quietly as she could, but Draco still let out a long breath in response. Ginny nodded, giving Hermione one last look of genuine happiness for her. With Ginny gone, Hermione snuggled in closer against his solid frame. The way his fingertips pressed into her hair and against the back of her skull, protecting her and keeping her close even in sleep, allowed her to let her guard down a little because she knew, if anything happened, he would be awake in an instant.

Though she wasn’t tired, she closed her eyes and listened to the sound of his heart beating beneath her ear, a steady drum. She wanted to memorise the rhythm, to take it on and make it her own. Perhaps one day, when this was all over, they could all go sip cocktails on the beach somewhere. She would have to invent some kind of salve for Draco to protect his porcelain skin.

She didn’t know how long she lay there before Ginny slipped back into the room, causing his breathing to change and for him to stir. “Morning sunshine!” Ginny sang after a pause to check if he would drift off again.

Draco frowned and shoved his face into the pillow and the top of her head, his arms stiffening as his whole body stretched reluctantly. Hermione chuckled as he mumbled something about Ginny’s obnoxiously positive mood.

“Hey now, don’t be like that. I brought you coffee.” Ginny grinned, holding up the carry tray of the cafe-bought coffees for them to see. Draco stretched again and yawned, finally letting her go.

“Gimme,” Hermione said, extending her hand to take one appreciatively. “Okay.” she hummed as she took a sip. “Let’s go.”

“Go where?!” Draco growled. Hermione turned to look at him as though it was obvious with a tilt of her head.

“To see Daphne and Astoria, where else?”

Draco stared back at her in annoyance. “You aren’t going any-”

Ginny snorted a laugh. “As if we could stop her. Honestly, Malfoy,” she said at the same time as Hermione scoffed and snapped, “I fucking dare you to try and keep me here.”

Draco audibly sighed in frustration and rubbed at his face. “Fucking pain in my ass,” he grumbled before taking the coffee Ginny was holding out to him in sympathy.

because Pansy is ready to kill you, and the only thing stopping Theo from busting in this door is a handful of guards and Blaise.”

“Well then, I suppose we better get a wriggle on then before that happens.” Hermione rolled out her shoulders and tried to calm her nerves. Could everyone else hear her heartbeat, or was it just her? It seemed so loud as it pounded against her chest. Was she really going to do this? With next to zero preparation... Merlin help her.

Daphne made her way to the new bed and hesitated, slipping off her ring and pocketing it. Hermione could see her hands were shaking, and her breathing was heavy. Her head turned ever so slightly to look in Hermione’s direction. “I would say good luck, but that doesn’t seem like enough...”

“I know,” Hermione responded, and with that, Daphne climbed onto the bed and laid down with a nervous exhale. Ginny held out her hand out to give Hermione the vial of Theo’s blood. There was a surprising amount within, and all Hermione could do was hope that Ginny hadn’t literally stabbed him and that Theo wasn’t out there bleeding out and dying as well because, really, two of her friends dying momentarily already seemed in excess of what was preferable. “Gin, do the timer?”

She took a moment to occlude the fear and anxiety about what she was going to do away to the far reaches of her mind; such humane feelings would do her no good right now. The calm that washed over her restored her confidence as well because she was brilliant, and if anyone could do this, she knew it would be her. A short nod in Livia’s direction, and the healer turned to Daphne with a sympathetic look. “I’m really sorry, but this is going to hurt... stabilis impulsa maxima.” Daphne’s eyes blew wide open for a second as her whole body rose up off the bed before she fell back, lifeless.

Livia, though clearly panicking internally, held her composure and turned to Astoria. “Everyone clear. Stabilis impulsa.” Hermione watched as the shock registered on the diagnostics floating overhead. A second later, Astoria’s heart had stopped. Angry red numbers appeared on the wall, counting down her three minutes.

Hermione began activating each ruin, which glowed neon green in response, the colour of death it seemed. “Morte confecta. Sanguinis mei sanguis hic non est.” She chanted, uncorking the vial and tipping it on the floor in the middle of the circle. Though she was not a Nott, she knew his blood would suffice. “Reatus, retributio. Familia non est amplius.” The entire circle shone, and Hermione’s world went black.

She didn’t fall so much as stepped into a different dimension. She was still in the same hospital room, but she was alone, at least physically. In the corner of her eye, she could see a tall black man, dressed in layers of fine black fabric, but if she turned her head toward him, he disappeared. The whole room was washed in a greyscale, dusty

Hermione looked at Livia, studying her kind features. She had remained untouched by the war, but she spoke English without the underlying French accent, which suggested that she was from the United Kingdom. "Thank you," Hermione said.

The healer nodded and swallowed nervously. "Hufflepuff..." She shrugged, "It's in my nature."

Hermione smiled. "Yeah, well... I was a Gryffindor, so... we can just blame it on our dispositions then."

The door opened and another bed was rolled in and pushed into the space beside Astoria's. A pair of sceptical looking healers entered and though they tried to hide their lack of confidence, Hermione felt it. The entire room had a distinct feel of nervous energy.

Outside the room, there was a lot of yelling going on; some of it sounded like Pansy, some of it sounded like Draco, and a lot of it sounded like guards, but she blocked it all out and stood on shaky legs to cross the room to Astoria. Hermione's hand stroked back a strand of her hair. The witch was so pale and cold that Hermione had to double-check that she was still alive. "I really need you to fight Astoria, okay... because if this doesn't work, I don't think Theo will ever forgive me for not letting him say goodbye," Hermione mumbled. Her stomach was in knots. There was so little time to get this right. "Three minutes?" Hermione confirmed with Livia.

"Yeah, I can bring her back first and then move on to Mis-Daphne. I'll stop Daphne's heart first and then Astoria's to give you as much time as possible, but if it gets too close to the time being up, I can't hold off; I need to start bringing them back." Livia explained. Hermione hummed her agreement. There wasn't a lot of space in the room, but there would be enough room for the circle of ruin she would need to make in order to perform the completion spell.

No one said a word while Hermione worked, getting as much prepared as she could. Levitating the secrets of the darkest arts out of her handbag and onto the floor in the middle of the circle she had made with her wand. All of the healers shifted uncomfortably. She understood it; once upon a time, she would have been the witch arguing to stop this from happening. "I'm not bringing in dark magic, just so everyone knows. I'm just closing it off..." Hermione explained sympathetically. "I'm not going to lie and say this is going to be smooth sailing, but it's really important that no matter what, you do not stop what you're doing. They are your priorities."

The door opened again, and Ginny slipped back inside, closely followed by Daphne, who closed the door and locked it. "I hope you know what you're doing, Hermione,

It turned out to be a bit harder than Hermione initially thought, her muscles protested their use upon first getting out of bed and she had to rely on Ginny to steady her as she tried to hide the fact from Draco, who raised an eyebrow at her knowingly but said nothing. Daphne was their first stop, despite her desire to see Astoria awake and smiling after so long thinking she might never get the chance again, but Daphne's room was closer to hers.

The nurse on duty, as she made her way past, was glaring daggers in Hermione's direction. That was fine, let her be angry, Hermione didn't care. Everyone employed here was bound by an oath to keep their mouths shut, so it made no difference to Hermione.

Daphne had been moved into her own room following the events. Apparently, the healers all thought it best for rest purposes. Ginny had told Hermione that Astoria hadn't woken up right away, and even when she had, she hadn't been fully with it. It seemed that she had come right after a few hours, but it had been a concern that their group of murderers might start making threats.

Pansy took one look at her before crossing the room to close the distance, her hand coming out quickly and slapping Hermione hard across the face, causing a stinging burn to spread across the afflicted skin. Behind her, Ginny snarled and Draco moved to step between them, but Pansy had already moved on to throwing her arms around Hermione's neck in a tight, oxygen-limiting hug. "Pansy-" She croaked out. "Can't - breathe."

"Pansy!" Daphne warned tiredly from her place in her bed. The blonde looked worse for wear, but she supposed that dying would do that to you.

Pansy was shaking as she stepped away from her. "I could kill you, Granger, I really could, but I could also kiss you. It's very confusing."

Hermione rubbed her cheek. "Merlin Pansy, did you have to hit me so hard?" She grumbled as she flexed her jaw. Draco and Ginny had both stepped beside her protectively, Draco's hand falling against Hermione's waist, pulling her ever so slightly against him.

"Yes, I did, because you killed my fucking girlfriend."

"Only temporarily, and technically I didn't do anything," Hermione grumbled, ignoring the way Pansy glared at her.

"But you also saved Astoria... so..." Pansy trailed off awkwardly.

Hermione rolled her eyes and pointed past Pansy toward Daphne. "May I?" Hermione didn't actually wait for Pansy to step aside; she just continued around her and stepped up to Daphne's bedside. "Hi, you okay? You didn't come back all screwy?"

Daphne laughed lightly, and Hermione let herself relax a little. She knew it had been a risky move. Just because the two sisters had avoided death didn't mean she was entitled to get them back without problems. However, Hermione's heart sank as she watched Daphne try to lift her left hand, which immediately started trembling. "The healers are all confident that it's temporary. I will have to do some physical therapy with it, but it will go away... and it's not my dominant hand anyway, so, in the grand scheme of things, I'll take it."

Hermione exhaled slowly and nodded her head. "Okay... I'll see what I can—"

"Merlin, Hermione, just stop." Daphne laughed again, only to wince suddenly and rub her chest. "You don't need to fix everything. My sister is alive because of you. It isn't a problem that you need to fix. It is a temporary situation that I am perfectly capable of dealing with."

Hermione tracked the movement. "Does it hurt?"

Daphne sighed and looked at Hermione softly. "It's manageable. Again, its temporary, getting shocked at a high volume will do that to you. The pain meds help, laughing too hard is a bitch, and talking above a certain volume hurts." Her eyes flicked over to Pansy intentionally. Hermione could imagine that their first conversation had gone rather similarly to Pansy's reaction to Hermione, perhaps without the slap.

"Oh sure, blame me. I was upset Daphne, and scared and—" Pansy rolled her eyes and threw out her hands in exasperation.

"Wouldn't let me get a word in edgewise to tell you that I was fine." Daphne groaned, throwing her head back against her pillow in annoyance at what was obviously a repeated conversation. Hermione looked at Ginny with an amused look. She stepped away slowly as the couple began bickering.

"Have they been like this for the full two days?" Hermione whispered to her red-haired friend quietly.

"The first day was the worst; Pansy wouldn't stop yelling at her, Daphne ended up yelling back at her, or tried to anyway... She cracked a rib doing it. Livia was not impressed." Ginny whispered back.

"Right... well, this has been fun... glad you're alive... enjoy your argument!" Hermione chirped and waved as she backed out of the room before she could get pulled into it and went in search of Astoria's room.

Astoria did not look as good as Daphne had, which Hermione supposed was to be expected. She was sleeping with her bed in an inclined position, her skin still nearly translucent, and the skin that wasn't covered by her singlet exposed the hideous black and blue bruising everywhere. Theo was sitting in the chair next to her bed, much the

everything available to me. It all comes back to this curse ending when every Greengrass is dead. It's just you two. If you both die, I can perform the ritual. It is risky, I know, and it still might not be enough to save her, but without it, she is definitely going to die but... and it is a huge but, there is a chance if this works, she will be alive and if that's the case then she will be free from the curse."

Daphne began pacing the small amount of space in the room, one hand leaving her pocket to cover her mouth. Livia cleared her throat "If we are also looking at doing this to Mrs Nott... I would say you have three minutes and you should be aware that the risks are higher with Astoria. As you've said, she is not exactly stable."

Daphne looked at her pale, unconscious sister and sighed sadly. "Okay. Let's do it. What do you need?"

Hermione nodded and turned to Ginny. "I need Theo. More specifically, I need a vial of his blood—"

"Well that shouldn't be hard, he caused a huge scene last night, he isn't very happy with you right now for keeping him out of the room." Ginny mumbled.

Hermione shook her head. "I don't care." She turned to healer Livia, "I'll need healers who are willing to help you and get onboard; everyone else can fuck off—"

"We will need a second bed in here for Miss Greengrass—" Livia added, one healer standing near Astoria's head nodded in agreement, while the man who had objected shook his head in disapproval. The witch Hermione had silenced was screaming something at them but Hermione had no interest in listening to it.

"Daphne, please. Given that you're about to kill me and all." Daphne tried for a smile, but it came out a little shaky. "I need to see Pansy," Daphne mumbled, removing her suit jacket and placing it delicately over the back of a discarded chair.

Everyone seemed to move at once. Several healers stormed from the room, but some stayed. Livia sent a message off on her medicard, Daphne slipped from the room, probably to find Pansy, while Ginny crouched in front of Hermione. "Are you sure about this?" Ginny whispered when the chaos had settled a little.

"No, but I have to try. Otherwise, she's dead anyway." Hermione answered in a hushed tone. The truth was that this was going to be a huge risk - for Astoria, Daphne, and for herself. Death didn't look favourably upon being tricked, and it could backfire and attack her instead.

Ginny sighed. "I'll go stab Theo," she mumbled and withdrew from the room leaving her with just Astoria, Livia and two other healers.

"You can't resurrect the dead." One healer snapped, her face pulled into a serious scowl.

"Wrong. Muggles do it all the time." Hermione argued with a raised eyebrow; again, everyone stopped and looked at her as if she had gone crazy. "It's true, they can lower your temperature to a point of..."

"Sorry, but no, her blood would—" The same witch, who clearly had a problem with Hermione interrupted. Hermione didn't even look her way as she cast a silencing charm on the woman. Ginny scoffed, but Daphne was looking a little pale.

"Point of death, but then we would have to warm you back up again. I was thinking - if you're willing, that is—"

Daphne laughed, bordering hysterically. "Willing to die?"

Hermione held up her hand to wait until she was finished. "That we would just go hard and fast. Stop your heart, I can do the ritual real quick, and one of these fine people could bring you back again."

Daphne looked to the healers, and one of the healers chewed her lip for a second but nodded. The man opposite her stared at her in shock. "Livia?!"

The healer, Livia, gave him a pointed look. "Oh, what? We could do it. We have spent the last two weeks keeping this girl alive to give Miss Granger time to find a solution. Technically..." Livia looked from Astoria to Daphne. "We—I...I could do it. If I used a strong static jinx to stop your heart... and then I could do it again to restart your heart... But the window would be small." Livia looked at Hermione, seemingly deciding that she was settled on doing this. "You would have five minutes at the absolute maximum before I would have to shock her again to bring her back...and it would hurt... a lot. It obviously comes with risks...and even with magic, assuming it all goes perfectly, she's still looking at four to six weeks recovery time..." Livia trailed off, trying not to cower under the mutinous glares being sent her way.

Daphne stared at the healer with an open mouth and wide eyes that flickered to her little sister. "But... you could do it, you could bring me back." Livia nodded. Daphne turned to Hermione with a new sense of determination. "Explain. How is me dying going to save Astoria?"

"Well, that alone wouldn't..." Hermione shifted nervously. "We would... need to do the same for Astoria..."

"What?" Daphne exclaimed, any confidence she had in Hermione's plan fading. "She is nowhere near stable enough for that."

Hermione rubbed her temples, still feeling a little dizzy from her internal trip. "I don't know what else to tell you, Daph. This is our only option. I have combed through

same as Draco had been in her room, dishevelled and scruffy. His hands were shoved in his pockets while he stared absently at the floor. His head looked up slowly as she opened the door, his eyes unfocused and glossy, and he took a moment to register that it was her.

Hermione wasn't sure if she should expect him to kick her out, or for him to be angry, or if he would be thankful, but he was none of those things. As soon as the recognition had dawned on his face, Theo began to cry, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees and hiding his face in his hands while his shoulder shook.

Hermione turned and whispered to Ginny and Draco to give them a minute before she made her way over to her friend. She placed her hand on his shoulder in an attempt to comfort him. Neither of them spoke; he continued to sob into his hands while she continued to stand there with her hand on his shoulder, waiting.

Eventually, the shaking of his shoulders subsided. Theo let out a shaky breath and sat back, giving Hermione a chance to see that his complexion was just as pale and unhealthy-looking as Astoria's. "Theo?" She whispered, crouching next to him and taking one of his shaking hands in hers. "Have you gone home to sleep at all? Have you eaten?"

Theo wouldn't look at her, choosing instead to stare down at the floor like he had been when she entered the room. Hermione realised that he wasn't looking at Astoria either, not once since she had arrived, and while he had spent the majority of it crying, he hadn't even glanced her way. "I would have let her die." He croaked, his voice hoarse and barely audible. "I could have lost her..." His fingers swiped over his mouth in remorse. "I was so sure that it was over, that she was gone..." a whimper escaped him as he fought off another wave of tears. "What kind of fucking husband am I?"

"A good one. One who tried to respect his wife's wishes even when he didn't want to, even when he had to face off against everyone else because he wanted her to have her dignity. One that didn't want her to suffer because her wellbeing mattered above his own." Hermione said firmly, her eyes burning into the side of his face as the dam broke again.

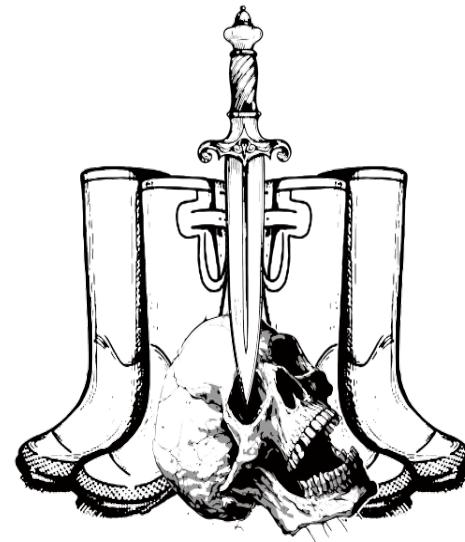
"Couldn't have... said it better myself." Astoria wheezed. Theo didn't look up at her voice, still adamant about staring at the floor. Hermione's eyes, however, flew to the blonde in relief.

"Astoria, hi! How are you?" Hermione moved to sit at the foot of her bed, the strain on her muscles finally getting to be too much.

It felt a stupid thing to feel when Astoria was clearly fighting to even keep her fluttering eyes open and breathe properly. "I'd feel better if..." She paused to catch her

breath; even the act of talking was a struggle, it seemed. "I didn't have to look at this..." Hermione's heart pounded as she watched Astoria helplessly. "One's moping face... every time I... opened my eyes... making me feel like I'm on my... deathbed or something...honestly, he's so dramatic." She managed a weak smile. "Anyone would think I nearly died."

Hermione huffed a laugh and shook her head in disbelief while Theo finally looked at Astoria in horror. "That's so not even funny." Hermione argued but a small giggle rose up out of her anyway.



CHAPTER 42: A DEAL WITH DEATH

I'm sorry, what?!" Daphne exclaimed. The healers in the room all froze and looked at her in horror at what they were hearing.

"Focus people!" Hermione snapped their way, and they all started and returned to the job of constantly keeping Astoria dosed on blood-replenishing potions, healing her internal organs as much as possible, and generally keeping her alive. "I'm not saying you have to die and stay dead. Just long enough that I can do a completion ritual, and then we can bring you back."

nothing to hear; she had lost that access the moment she had stepped into this room. She relied entirely on Ginny to have her back and protect her from external dangers. There was nothing to taste, no smells to identify, and nothing but an endless sea of eternal black.

Eventually, the black gave way to soft glowing words floating towards her, swirling and encasing her like being in the eye of a tornado. Words that her conscious mind had missed the deeper meaning of. Words that made her heart ache and want to be sick all at once because they were words that carried a lot of risk for a possibility of reward.

Hermione stared at the words swimming around her, waiting, hoping that they would turn into something else. She stared at them until they burned her eyes and she was forced to face what she could no longer ignore. This was the only option.

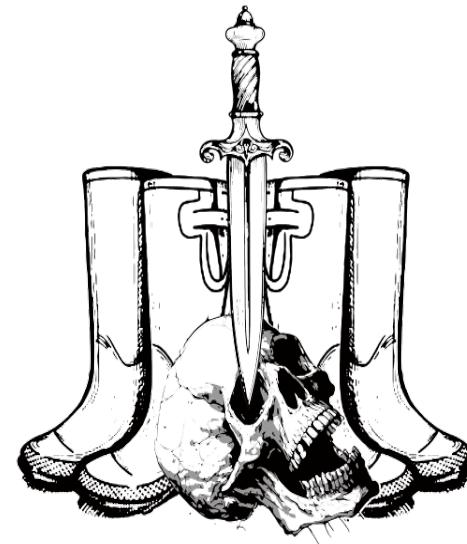
When she resurfaced, Hermione was forced to put her head in her hands. "Oh, thank Merlin," Ginny mumbled. "I was starting to worry it was going to be like the incident of '99' all over again." Hermione sighed and stared at the floor.

"Hermione?" Daphne asked softly, "Please tell me you figured out something?"

Ginny must have explained what was happening to her while she had been under. Hermione was reluctant to meet her eyes. "I did," Hermione whispered, so quietly that she was sure no one had heard her. Hermione finally found the courage to look at Daphne head-on, and the relieved smile that had spread across the Greengrass witch's face fell because clearly, whatever was written on Hermione's face told her that it wasn't going to be a clean or easy fix.

Daphne straightened, shoving her hands into the pockets of her white suit pants. "What is it?" Daphne swallowed and locked her jaw tightly. Her hair was messy, and the healers in the room had changed. Ginny looked as though she hadn't slept in two days, but both she and Daphne wore the same clothes, not that Hermione had given them any option, she supposed. How long had she been out? Her eyes flicked to Astoria's diagnostics and saw that she truly was on the verge. It was now or never.

Hermione's sombre words, though spoken quietly, hung in the air heavily, now thick with tension. "You need to die too."



CHAPTER 44: MEDDLESOME FOOLS

Hermione held the pillow up behind Daphne as Pansy helped her into their bed. "Hey, baby?" Daphne looked innocently up at Pansy, "Do we have any cinnamon ripple ice cream?"

Pansy stroked Daphne's cheek. "I'll go check."

Daphne's eyes followed her as she left the room, pulling the door closed quietly behind her, waiting a few seconds to be sure before turning to Hermione and sighing in relief. "My gods. She is driving me fucking crazy, hovering like I'm going to fall apart at the seams."

Hermione snorted and tilted her head. "Yeah, well, enjoy your brief reprieve because I'm pretty sure we have some in the freezer, so she will no doubt be back in a minute."

Daphne shook her head confidently. "No, we don't. I made Blaise throw it out for me." Hermione chuckled again and pulled the covers up over Daphne's legs. Sure enough, a few moments later, a perplexed-looking Pansy returned and said she would just nip out and grab some. "Oh no, don't worry about it then. I just thought if we had some it would be nice." Daphne waved her off, a cool mask of barely suppressed disappointment in place.

"Don't be ridiculous; it won't take me too long. Hermione? Could you stay with her?" Pansy asked with wide doe eyes.

"Oh, um... sure?" Hermione shrugged awkwardly. Pansy smiled her appreciation and left them alone once more. "Nicely done... I do actually have a question for you..." Hermione trailed off hesitantly. "I was supposed to ask Astoria about it... but well... she isn't really up for talking much." That was putting it mildly. She had been exhausted after the small conversation she had had with Hermione the day before, but on the bright side, Blaise had convinced Theo to come home with Daphne and Hermione to get some sleep and that he would stay with her. "Um... it's about Draco's hair?"

Daphne's face remained blank as she peered back at Hermione. "What about it?" The witch said, clearing her throat and running her fingers through her own hair.

"Well, it was mentioned by Ginny that Astoria had said there might be some significance to him growing it and that I should ask Astoria, but, well... there's been a lot going on, and I was wondering if you happened to know why it's apparently important..." Hermione's anxiety around asking the question rose as Daphne remained silent, just staring at Hermione.

Daphne sighed and leaned back into the pillow. "I do." Hermione edged around to sit on the other side of the bed, her back leaning against the footboard. "Why don't you just ask him?"

"He changed the subject pretty fast last time I mentioned that he needed a haircut," Hermione explained.

Daphne snorted. "Yeah, well, he would. He probably thinks it would have you running for the hills."

"What do you mean?" Hermione frowned.

"Malfoy men stop cutting their hair when they, for all intents and purposes, are permanently off the market."

Hermione blinked at the blonde witch. "What?"

"Theodore Nott..." Hermione paused at the healer's station near Astoria's room, out of breath and feeling like the walls were closing in on her. "No one else is allowed in that room other than the Healers, myself," Hermione pointed to the witches on either side of her "Ginevra Zabini and Daphne Greengrass, do you understand? Especially not Theodore Nott, and he makes no decisions about Astoria's care until I say otherwise."

The witch started and began shuffling the files to try and find Astoria's notes. "Theodore Nott is her husband? He automatically has legal rights?"

"No. I have the command of power here, as ordered by the Minister, as you will see in the notes when you catch up. In the meantime, no one else gets in, and he does not have the power to make decisions. Have I made myself clear ?"

The young healer squeaked and nodded her head. "Uh, yes, ma'am."

Hermione scowled at the title but nodded and swept into Astoria's room. The healers were used to their little group at this stage, but when Hermione started pulling out books from within her bag about the dark arts and handing them to each of the witches, who gave each other odd looks, they all began to shift uncomfortably. Even more so after Hermione locked the door, preventing intruders from the outside.

Hermione transfigured a small hospital chair in the corner into a small chaise and perched with her legs folded. "Excuse me. I need to concentrate. Ginny, cover me."

"What the-?" Daphne began, but Hermione was already diving into the depths of her mind. Her mind was greater than what people knew. Draco knew of the Department of Mysteries and her veil of death; objectively, he had seen the other doors but not what was behind them. Hermione opened one and took a deep breath, steadying her nerves before hesitantly stepping into a black void of space. She avoided using this when possible because the darkness tended to pull her in - she would lose days in here if she wasn't careful. On one occasion, back in the early days of its conception, she had, and when she emerged, she had found a very distressed Ginny.

The use of this room pulled on some strand of power that left her feeling ill and not herself, and everything that she had read on it, which amounted to approximately one page, warned users very clearly that it was not something to be messing with. People had gone mad from trying to unlock that part of their brain.

The problem was that the room that accessed the deepest parts of her subconscious was brilliant because she was brilliant. Being in complete darkness was always a little unsettling; everyone always thought that it heightened your other senses, but Hermione didn't find this to be the case. At least not here, where her other senses didn't matter. There was nothing to touch except the innermost threads of thought, and there was

Hermione stood so quickly that her chair fell over to the floor behind her as she leant on the table, glaring at him, “I will knock your ass out, Theodore, you know I fucking will. Do not test me.” She hissed.

“She is my wife!!” He roared back in her face, the dam on his emotions finally breaking over; he stood, flipping the table as tears started free-falling down his cheeks. “My wife!” Draco moved Hermione out of the way in an instant and slammed Theo against the wall. Everyone had jumped at the normally calm and placid man’s outburst. Theo sneered at Draco and tried to shove him off unsuccessfully. “Get the fuck off me!” He shouted and shoved Draco again, pushing him back one step before Draco slammed him back into the wall.

Hermione tried to slow her breathing, her options ticking over in her head. She couldn’t let him do something so fucking permanent. She knew where he was coming from; he only wanted to preserve what dignity his wife still had left. But she had not yet reached the same finality that he had. “I’m really sorry, Theo… but I can’t let you do something you will regret.” Hermione looked around. Spying her bag on the counter, she grabbed it before taking off to the apparition point.

Daphne and Ginny both ran after her while chaos had erupted in the house behind them. “What are you doing?” Daphne asked breathlessly as she caught up to her.

“Stopping Theo from making a huge fucking mistake…” Hermione eyed her warily. “Are you guys coming or what?”

Ginny instantly grabbed onto Hermione’s arm, and Daphne looked over her shoulder before nodding frantically and grabbing on. Hermione pulled them away just as she saw Draco arrive in the doorway. When they landed at the lab, Daphne appeared around in confusion. “I need that book.” Hermione hurried as she started toward the door.

“Which book?” The blonde asked quietly, no doubt reeling over what had just happened.

“The secrets of the darkest arts.” Ginny mumbled in explanation, “Mi, you have combed over it a hundred times. You don’t seriously think that looking at it again is going to help?”

Hermione ignored her and started sending books flying into her handbag. “Daphne, can you do the Nott books? They won’t listen to me.” She muttered, grabbing all the research and shoving that in her bag, too. Within a minute, they had cleaned her lab out, and Hermione led the way back out the door, barely giving the two witches time to catch up and latch on before they were spinning through the atmosphere towards Sequana.

“When they meet the single person for which they want to spend their life with, are accounted for, betrothed, intended, whatever you want to call it. That lets the witches know he’s off-limits. It’s an old tradition, as far back as the Malfoys have records. A physical representation of their lasting commitment toward a witch, each Malfoy gets one… well except in Draco’s case. In fourth year, he was made to start growing it out because of the contract negotiations with my father for Astoria’s hand, but neither of them wanted that. Eventually, old Lucy finally listened when Draco told him he would never sleep with her, not even once, so he was allowed to cut it again. You are the person he chose. It’s why his parent’s didn’t say anything at that dinner. It’s too late.”

“But…” Hermione tried to process the information being provided to her, she also understood now why Draco probably thought she would run for the hills. “He stopped cutting his hair when we arrived? That doesn’t even make sense, he’s been growing it for months, we only just started dating?”

“Yeah, but it was probably a pretty easy decision for him as soon as you were within the realm of possibility… he’s been in love with you since, like, the first year.” Daphne rolled her eyes. “Not that he figured it out until you insinuated that he bought his way on the quidditch team. He had been so excited that you might notice him if he was playing quidditch too; of course, he handled it like a little dweeb, but it’s not news to any of us.” Daphne smirked as Hermione’s mouth hung open in shock. “Honestly, have you never wondered why none of us have ever made an attempt to kill you or Ginny? All your other Order buddies, sure, but never you two. You would have been dead already if Draco had ever wanted you dead. You two were always our biggest threats; it would have made sense to take you out. If it helps, he’s not likely to propose until his hair is past his shoulders anyway.”

Pansy’s words from weeks earlier echoed back in her head. ‘It ain’t a game to him ‘I...’’ Hermione’s eyes dropped to her lap as her hands started fidgeting with each other. “I’m in love with him… and that scares the shit out of me because it means giving up a piece of control that he could use to ruin me if he wanted to...” Hermione confessed quietly.

Daphne hummed in understanding. “I’m afraid that is a pretty universal feeling. We all feel that way. But the flip side of that is worth the risk. Besides, I can guarantee that you would be more likely to hurt that man than he would you. I don’t think there is a line that he wouldn’t cross for you.”

Hermione snorted. “I wasn’t aware any of us had any lines left.”

Daphne shrugged. “Maybe not, but if we did, he wouldn’t hesitate, not even for a second. You are a much bigger threat to him than he is to you.”

Hermione frowned at her with an uncomfortable twisting in her stomach of dread.
“What do you mean?”

“He is well aware that he is going into this having deeper feelings for you than you have for him. He never imagined a life in which he could exist within the same spheres as you. He had accepted that it would never be, and now you’re giving him the possibility of that? If you were to take that away from him? I don’t think you understand how much you could hurt him. Don’t get me wrong, he’s committed to you, but he won’t be expecting a wedding and kids anytime soon. He understands you need to catch up first.”

And there it was. The kick in the guts that made her feel ill. The horror washed over her like ice water. Mercifully, Pansy chose that moment to reappear with the ice cream. Hermione knew Daphne didn’t really want but ate gratefully anyway, which allowed Hermione to slip away.

There was no other option. She would have to talk to him about it; it was the only fair thing to do. Draco wasn’t in the sitting room or kitchen, so she headed upstairs to his room, hesitating before ultimately letting herself in, but he wasn’t in there either. He would come back eventually, she decided before wearing a hole in his floor with her pacing.

Maybe she was overthinking it? Hermione caught sight of her reflection in the mirror and had to mentally slap herself. She would just lie down and wait for him, rest, maybe do some meditation. Except that the dread from earlier still sat like a sinking stone in her stomach making it impossible for her to still her mind.

Her thoughts wouldn’t stop racing. She was not ready to get married, they had barely started dating and despite Daphne’s reassurances that she had time before they were at that stage, this all felt so serious now and one part of one sentence had sent her spiralling.

Draco trudged into the room with a yawn and flopped down on the bed, one arm coming up to bend above his head and the other reaching across the mattress to stroke the side of her hip with the back of his fingers. “Fucking hell...” He mumbled. “If you could do me a favour and try to refrain from almost dying in the next few days, that would be greatly appreciated,” he joked, letting his eyes fall closed. “I could really use a night or two to sleep in a bed rather than a chair.” He chuckled, and she knew he was trying to make light of the situation. Hermione sat up quickly, crossed her legs and began biting at the tip of her thumb. Draco immediately rolled onto his side and pulled himself up onto his elbow. “Hey? What’s wrong?”

“I think-” Theo’s voice shook, and he had to close his eyes, forcing the sight of them out in order to get out what he wanted to say. He cleared his throat and hid his shaking hands beneath the table. “I think we need to discuss the possibility that it might be time to withdraw treatment for Ast-”

Daphne jumped to her feet. “What?! No. No way!” Pansy pulled at the witch and into a comforting hold.

“Guys, come on... please don’t make me do this. Please don’t force me to advocate for her.” Theo’s eyes were dead, he had given up hope and Hermione knew how hard it must have been already to have brought this up. “I love her so fucking much it kills me, I won’t survive without her-”

“Theo, I know it’s taking a while, but I am trying to fin-” Hermione started.

“I know, Hermione, but right now, my wife is suffering. She made me promise her that I wouldn’t-”

“You are not killing my sister!” Daphne screeched at him.

“Fuck you, Daphne!” Theo shouted back. “I love your sister more than I love life itself. Nothing-” Theo took a breath to calm himself. “Nothing matters to me outside of her, which is why I am even bringing this up, so fuck you for even suggesting that her death-”

“She isn’t fucking dead!” Daphne screamed. Pansy was doing her best to soothe her and keep her from moving from flying at Theo, lovingly stroking her arm and offering quiet words.

Hermione looked to Ginny, followed by Blaise and Draco in desperation. Ginny’s mouth was half hanging open, and all she offered her was an unsure shake of her head. Blaise and Draco were both staring at Theo in horror. “I just need more time-” she tried.

Theo sighed. “What time, Hermione?! Her organs are on the brink of no return. I promised her.”

“You can’t do this, Theo!” Hermione argued, though she knew he was right. Time was practically up, and she knew that this conversation had to be one of the worst of his life, but the tightening in her chest told her that this wasn’t right. She could find an answer; she knew she could; she just needed time.

“She wouldn’t want this! Being hooked up to tubes, in a coma like this.” Theo argued, his voice cracking; there was no denying how much every word was killing him to say. “I appreciate how hard you have been working, but yo-”

if they could have a family meeting after the incident in Riddle Manor that morning before they headed back to Astoria, and while everyone had been happy to oblige, Blaise had been pulled into the ministry.

"We have a hearing date for ICOW." Blaise smiled at her and leaned against the kitchen island. Hermione sat up straight in her chair while little sparks of electricity danced across her skin.

The table around them gasped and offered positive affirmations. "Okay, and the bad news?"

"It's in two months time," Blaise responded hesitantly. Hermione's heart dropped. "What?! I can't do anything with that?! I won't have enough people on board by then?!"

Blaise nodded and shrugged. "Well then I have more good news for you, you have five years instead of two months because that's the stand down period to reheat a case."

Hermione's stomach turned to lead. That's it? Those were her options? Two months or five years?! A low ringing started in her ears while the rest of her world seemed to shrink around her. There was too fucking much to do and not enough time to do it. "Alright, so we get her a PA to manage her calendar, and we have meetings set up with every person we can in every time slot we can for the next few weeks. We start with those we feel confident about, and we can look into regional summits for convenience. Those that we walk away from and are not feeling great about can start infiltrating immediately." Draco rubbed her shoulder while Daphne formed a plan. Hermione nodded her agreement. It felt odd not to have to figure it out all for herself anymore, to have whole teams willing to help her achieve her goals; odd, but good - once she pushed past the uncomfortable, itchy feeling of handing over control, that is.

"For what it's worth, sweetheart, I think if anyone could pull this off, it would be you." Blaise offered her a confident smile. Ginny smiled at her in a way that only Ginny could, fighting off some of the doubt that Hermione had put on herself.

"Well if that's settled then..." Theo started, his tone was drowning under a weight of sadness and she did not like it. Over the last few days Theo had become especially quiet, more withdrawn than he had been two weeks prior, as if he had become a mere shell of himself.

Hermione hadn't been the only one to notice it. Pansy had commented several times on rotation that he seemed to have given up hope, not that it was a reflection of her but rather that there were just some things too big to fix. Hermione didn't agree, sometimes it took a while, and sometimes it was harder to find an answer but she believed there was an answer for everything.

It wouldn't be fair to him to let him get any deeper into this. At least not without all the facts, but those facts terrified her. She wasn't ready for marriage and all that, but she didn't want to lose him either. Even just the thought of it had actual physical ramifications of her chest tightening painfully and her heart pounding.

Hermione took a deep breath and scooted around to face him. "I need you to know that I can't have kids." She didn't pause for him to even process the confusion that statement brought on. "Even if I could, I wouldn't want them... I have seen and done too much in this life and have spent too much time dedicated to everyone else already. I mean... technically speaking, I can get pregnant, but it won't stick, not ever. It's a cost I agreed to pay, and so I need you to know that before this goes any further. If you want children, then you are wasting your time here, and we should end it now before we get too invested." She ranted, the words tumbling out of her at such a speed she wasn't sure if he had even understood any of it.

It didn't seem like it by the way he blinked his eyes and jerked his head. "Okay, slow down. Where did all this come from?" He chuckled, a glint in his eyes as he frowned in amusement.

Hermione looked to her lap, not sure quite how to explain it all. "I'm just..." She sighed, meeting the gaze that was burning on her face in resignation. "I'm just saying, before this becomes more than us navigating a new relationship and you growing your hair-" Draco stiffened, the playfulness falling from his features. "You should know what cards I have to offer. Children aren't one of them, and it's not something I will change my mind about."

Hermione bit her lip, nervous about how to tell him this next part. "The ritual that I performed?" Once again, she found herself avoiding eye contact with him as his frown turned more serious. "I had to negotiate with Death. He only let Daphne and Astoria go, curse-free, on the agreement that if I ever fell pregnant, he would take it from me. I have never wanted kids anyway, so it wasn't a cost I needed to really think about, but... you should know that in case it's a deal breaker for you."

The sunshine shone differently in his room than in hers. Her room was flooded with light from the large french doors, but it was soft; it didn't shine in directly and leave puddles of sunshine creeping slowly across the floor the way his room did. The air felt thicker here in his room in comparison to the fresh, crisp air in hers. So perhaps it was simply that, but right now, the air seemed extra thick as the silence hung between them.

Hermione began pulling at her fingers again, waiting for him to tell her that it was, in fact, a deal breaker. That she was right to tell him now because as much as he wanted her, he wanted mini Malfoys more. His finger reached out, curling under her chin and

tilting her face up to look at him. His passive features, as if she had told him that she wanted a pygmy puff, were not what she had expected. "Who told you?" He asked with a raised eyebrow.

"What?" Hermione asked in confusion.

"About the hair, Love." He reiterated with a roll of his eyes.

"Um. That depends..." Hermione shook her head, trying to regain her focus. "Did you listen to what I said about the rest of it?"

Draco shrugged. "You didn't want kids, so you made a deal with Death, and now you can't have them. It's fine; I was always happy to let the Malfoy line die with me anyway. We can always get a dog should the need for a life dependent on us arise." He waved it off with such flippant dismissal that an overwhelming sense of warmth washed over her. "Now, who told you?"

Hermione's face pulled into a beaming expression that made her feel aglow. She shifted onto her knees, kneeling over him and pressing her lips to his passionately. Draco rolled onto his back, taking her with him, his hands sliding up to clutch her on either side of her waist. She allowed the kiss to deepen as her emotions flowed through her and into him. Hermione pulled away before they could get too engrossed in it, placing a few quick, soft kisses on his lips. "Daphne, but you're not allowed to be mad at her because she died and all that; also, she only told me because I asked her after Ginny told me that Astoria might have mentioned something, but she also died and isn't much up to talking currently so..."

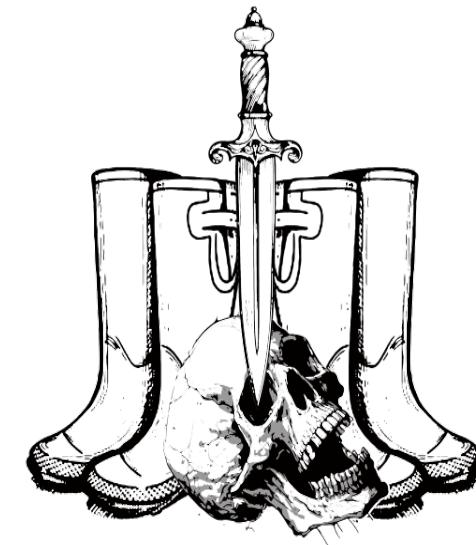
Draco brushed a strand of hair behind her ear, causing the butterflies to resurface. "Bunch of meddlesome fools," he grumbled.

"Well, you were taking your sweet time." Hermione teased playfully.

Draco cocked an eyebrow at her. "Oh really?" He rolled them over so that her body was trapped beneath his, "Because you were much better?" His fingertips moved to her side and tickled her, pulling a shriek from her, followed by a series of giggles as she squirmed and tried to get away.

His fingers settled, and she couldn't help but look up at him in adoration. She didn't give a fuck what Daphne said. Draco was a much greater threat to emotional annihilation than she was. The way his grey eyes looked down at her with a twinkle from his smile - yeah, she was screwed...she never had a chance.

Hermione had doubted she would have ever fallen in love because, reluctantly, she had to admit that her earlier assessment of stumbling had been wrong, but when she did it seemed she fell hard. "I don't want you to say anything but there's something else I think you should probably know." She swallowed and tried to still the vulnerability.



CHAPTER 41: GOOD NEWS AND BAD NEWS

So, do you want the good news or the bad news?" Blaise strolled into the kitchen just as Pansy was levitating down a pot of coffee and a long tray of pastries, his eyebrows raising at her.

"Uh, I guess we go with the bad news?" Hermione frowned and picked up an apricot danish.

Blaise shook his head. "Wrong, you want the good news first."

Hermione rolled her eyes and bit into the sticky pastry. "Then why bother asking? Fine, what's the good news?" They could all do with some good news. Theo had asked

a pub full of Death Eaters several months ago with only the untested rings Hermione had created as protection.

Around her, screams started to fill the room as people fell under the dragon's fire, their flesh melting away from their bodies before they turned to dust. The heat in the room was suffocating, coating her skin in sticky dampness, but the fire did nothing to the furniture in the room, hunting out only those who had failed to step through the flames of their own accord. The strength it took to maintain the spell was exhausting, and though her hand shook, her wand rejoiced in her use of the magic. Truth be told, she hadn't been sure if she would be able to cast the incantation in the first place; few could.

It didn't take long for the shouts and noise to die down as the blue dragon worked through the room quickly. Hermione turned back toward the chaos and saw with some relief that Adrian Pucey had survived the judgement, as had the Dumont man. Hermione looked into the black, mad eyes of Bellatrix Lestrange, watching her in understanding. It seemed that her husband had not survived the culling, and seconds later, when the dragon swooped down upon Bella, she fell too. Hermione would be the last thing she saw before her life ended; her infatuation with Tom Riddle had not been enough to save her in the end.

Hermione was surprised with the number of followers that did make it through the test, though she was not shocked to see that the majority of those still standing had come from the outskirts of the room, the ones who had not been considered 'worthy' before as they had lacked the gruesome desire to eradicate muggles in the old regime.

When there was no one left to judge, the dragon diminished in a wave that spread outward through the room, and dust fell. Those present looked around, almost as if surprised to find themselves still standing. "From this day forth, you place your trust in me and in Hermione Granger. We are working towards a better future, my brothers and sisters, a world where we no longer have to hide what we are. Those who failed to put their faith in us - they were cancerous, dangerous for society. They could not be allowed to continue to work alongside us, not when they were here to see us fail. My loyal supporters, welcome to the way of the future."

She continued before she could let him get the wrong idea and start panicking the way she was internally. "I love you Draco Malfoy."

way if that's where you want us to go, Sir." Beneath her, Draco's hold on her hip tightened possessively, and Hermione chuckled quietly.

Murmurs and chatter circled the table of varying degrees, with those that Hermione knew to be the most disapproving remaining silent. Tom caught her eye, slipping into the outer frames of her mind; he also did not try to push past the barriers, only offering the order to cast a single spell, one that took Hermione by surprise because it would most certainly decimate his numbers. Do it.

Hermione's panicked eyes moved to Draco's. If there was any doubt for any of them, then their only hope would be that the rings held against that kind of magic. The nod that he gave her was so small that it would go unnoticed by everyone else, but it was enough to reassure her. She turned back to the table and closed her eyes, drawing all of her energy to her core, building on it until her body felt ready to burst into flames. "Protego diabolica," she whispered; the pull of the powerful magic fought each word, attempting to resistance her, but she was stronger. Blue flames erupted out the end of her wand, small at first as it began to swirl around the perimeter of the room, opening its wings, growing and spreading out like a dragon.

Several people jumped up and tried to scramble away from the hot flames, but the dragon had encircled everyone, trapping them within its confines, and with Tom's anti-apparition ward, there was nowhere to go. Tom was the first to step backwards outside the circle of flames; a small hiss was the only noise he made, but other than that, he remained unharmed. That was the biggest shock of them all for her, no matter who else passed through unscathed. Tom placing so much faith in her was not what she had foreseen when she and Ginny had come here.

Because a *protego diabolica* allowed no room for doubt, any at all, even in a person's subconscious, and they would perish to the flames. Draco pressed a kiss to her shoulder and shifted her off his lap. Subtly, he slipped the hidden ring from his finger, pocketing it, all the while, he never looked away. He stepped backwards, away from her and into the fire. The blue of the flames shone in the reflections of his ice-grey eyes. Draco stopped, standing in the flames for far longer than necessary, but he remained unharmed. A quirk of his eyebrow that said, 'And you doubted me?' had her laughing a small laugh.

Draco stepped out of the fire completely, and she watched him slip his ring back on. Ginny pranced through, as did the other housemates. She was unsure if they, too, had removed their rings or not, but it didn't matter. Draco's trust in her was all she could think about and she knew without a doubt that ring or not, Ginny would have been fine anyway. She had already demonstrated that the second she had brought them into

grown used to the man providing. Draco pushed his chair back and pulled her onto his thigh. It was hardly the first time Draco had shown her affection in front of another Death Eater. He had never hidden the fact that they were an item, but he had yet to be in the presence of so many people who wanted her dead and hated her simply for the ‘filthy blood’ that ran through her veins.

Many of those at the table stared openly in disgust at Draco, who was looking up at her with unbridled affection. Her eyes met his, and her heart skipped several beats at the softness that she saw there. Eyes did not lie, and his eyes said that she was the fucking sun. A soft smile tugged at his lips. There was a gentle nudge at the barriers of her mind as his presence stroked against her; he wasn’t seeking access, though she was prepared to give it to him, just reassuring her that he was there. Hermione smiled back at him with adoration. Her feelings for him had come hard and heavy.

Feelings had not been on her radar, but she could also say with certainty that they never would have formed for anyone but Draco. He understood her in a way that no other romantic partner had been able to thus far, as if she was a book and only he could read the creases in the pages of her very soul. It was an overwhelming feeling, and one that terrified her because she knew that if this was to end, there would be no repairing the damage it would do to her.

“T-tom Riddle, there is not a corner of the world I would not follow you.” Bellatrix stumbled over her words, pulling Hermione back to the moment. Draco’s hand rested on her hip with his thumb stroking at her side softly.

“Ah, but in which world?” Tom was still glaring at her.

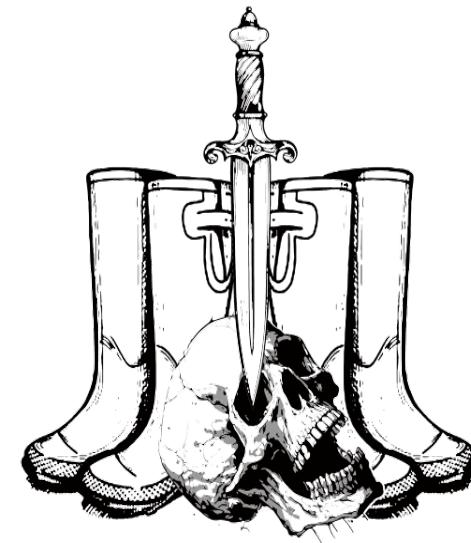
“I’m afraid I don’t understand?” Hermione rolled her eyes at the witch’s response. All of this was taking time away from Astoria. Time away from the exhaustive list of countries that she still needed to bring on their side.

“In which world,” Tom repeated, punctuating each word. “You say you will follow me to every corner of the world, but in which one? Does that apply to only the wizarding world, or does it extend to both?” Bella stared back at him in silence, and her lack of response seemed to validate his coldness. “What about you, Dumont?”

“I pledged myself to follow you to glory, Minister, and that stands in all capacities.” A burly-looking redhead man with a long, scraggly beard answered without hesitation.

Tom hummed, pleased with Dumont’s answer. “What say the rest of you, hmm?” Tom demanded of the table. “Are there any of you here who doubt me? Who doubt Hermione?”

Hermione locked eyes with Adrian, sitting opposite her a few seats down. He gave her a cheeky wink and a smirk. “I’m down for whatever our new darling throws our



CHAPTER 45: RESTORATION

The flash of the camera blinded her temporarily while the reporter’s hands trembled. Huddled in the corners of the shadows were people whispering and staring nervously at Dumont and Pucey’s teams working together with the building crews to restore one shop’s storefront. Next to her Tom was answering another journalist’s questions about their community ‘rebuilding’ day.

They had another team working on restoring Hogwarts alongside experts in construction restoration for sentient buildings that they had brought in from Ireland as part of a trade deal that Hermione had negotiated. Tom would be leaving shortly to go

with the media team to capture some of the progress happening there. Hermione, however, had opted to remain here in Diagon Alley and help Adrian smooth over some of the locals. It was their hope that they could have Diagon Alley restored to functionality by the end of the week.

So far, they had yet to run into any issues, but perhaps that was because Draco was glaring at anyone who so much gave them a second unkind glance. He hadn't said much since they had arrived. Hermione wondered if perhaps that was largely due to the fact that the last time they were here, she had nearly died. Ginny and Blaise had both chosen to attend the Hogwarts restoration instead for that exact reason.

She could understand that what had happened to her here had been horrific and had nearly cost her life, but it had just been another byproduct of war. For Ginny, however, it had been so much more traumatic. So far, they had fixed the old florists, the menagerie, and a sweets shop, but so much destruction had been done to Diagon Alley over the years that the majority of the street still had damage to repair in varying degrees.

The apothecary was next, and she hoped that the proposed business grant would entice people within the United Kingdom to help get businesses back up and running by offering them small business loans and discounted leases. Where possible, the ministry employees were currently trying to locate rightful business owners who had occupied the stores previously, but unfortunately, it was proving rather dismal as many of them had died or fled overseas.

Not all places had closed down or been abandoned. The Leaky Cauldron, for one, had never stopped running, a small speciality grocer, the post shop and of course, Flourish and Blotts - though it was now only Blott. Everywhere she went, Draco followed closely behind; she wasn't really here to be involved with the manual labour side of things and was more assigned to oversee the project for media coverage purposes.

The crews of labourers that had come from Ireland were making fast work of the structural repairs. Ireland had agreed to help with the restoration while they deliberated over what it would mean for their people if the Statute of Secrecy was removed, but Hermione was hopeful that they would see the benefits extended to both muggle and wizarding populations.

"Would you stop hovering..." She hissed quietly at Draco.

"After last time? Absolutely fucking not." Draco quipped back, glaring down a wizard as he walked by on his way to the leaky cauldron. The greasy-haired man was cowering under the following gaze.

he isn't going to." A few seats down, Pansy choked on the water she had been sipping on, the rest of her housemate's eyes growing round in shock. "If you will excuse me, I have better things to do with my time, like, oh, I don't know, changing the mother fucking world. So, on that note. Tom, please excuse us; I have meetings to plan. Might I suggest something though? Perhaps it's time for that little test I mentioned." Hermione turned to make her leave.

"Sit down, bitch. You do not get to come and go when you-" The wizard's disgusted rant was interrupted by the sound of Ginny throwing a knife into the man's throat, which in turn only caused further outrage by those around him as the man collapsed against the tabletop, thick red blood pooling out around his wide, unseeing eyes.

"Enough!" Tom roared from the head of the table, silencing some - but not all - of the increasingly disobedient Death Eaters. Because, in truth, most of them were not loyal to Tom or this new cause. At least half of them had only joined the ranks in order to justify the debauchery that they wanted to commit. Being Death Eaters just gave them free rein to rape, kill and torture whoever they wanted, and half of those leftover had no doubt only joined to avoid being killed themselves or because it was easier than fighting him. "Enough."

Hermione had anticipated that - the disapproval from the shifting of the goal. She had meant what she had said: Tom had allowed himself to be pulled down by the weight of the losers in his midst. The sheer amount of chaos had long since shattered whatever his original intent had been and turned him into the leader of an unruly gang of hooligans. Tom stood and faced the back of the room with his hands behind his back. He might have been making a decent effort to control himself and follow the rules Hermione had set out, but it didn't stop the tangible feeling of rage from radiating off him.

"Right." He turned around, waving his wand to activate an anti-apparition ward, eyes narrowed into slits that darted around the room. "Here's what is going to happen. You are all going to pledge your allegiance to me, Minister for Magic, Tom Marvolo Riddle - which to be clear, means putting your faith in Hermione Granger as well. To doubt her is to doubt me, and I have no room at my table for false loyalties. Starting with... Bella." Tom looked at the witch with such coldness that even Hermione felt uncomfortable.

"My Lor-" Bella lowered herself in a bow.

"No." Snarled Tom before she could finish. "Not Lord Voldemort, me, Tom Riddle ." Bellatrix spluttered, her mouth opening and closing for a second. Hermione edged closer to stand beside Draco's chair, seeking out some kind of comfort that she had

an attempt to calm her rage before she killed him prematurely. A few deep breaths and a roll of her shoulders had her feeling better.

Draco's hand reached out and grabbed hers, pulling her into his embrace and wrapping his arms around her waist affectionately. "You have this, Love. Breathe." He peered down into her eyes with such confidence that she believed him.

Behind her, Kingsley began a disbelieving laugh. "The High Commander... Fucking a traitorous mudblood whore? Unbelievable."

Draco's eyes turned to steel, bending down to pull the knife from her boot and striding toward the man with purpose, holding it up for the wizard to see before he yanked his head backward.

"Draco! I'm not—" Hermione's protests died on her lips as she watched Draco's hand squeeze Kingsley's jaw together, forcing his mouth open and pulling his tongue from within, slicing it off in one clean cut. A distorted warble of screams put an end to the silence once more. Blood spilt everywhere, all over Draco's hands, down Kingsley's neck and over the front of his shirt.

Draco stabbed the blade into the man's thigh so deep that his skin hit the hilt. "Talk about my girlfriend like that again, and she will have a hard job convincing me not to keep you alive and on the brink of death for the next forty years."

Warmth spread through Hermione's belly and cheeks. Even with Kingsley's blood all over him, he never failed to impress the shit out of her with his sex appeal. If anything, the blood only added fuel to the fire. Clearing her throat she pushed that thought from her mind and tried to focus on the task at hand.

"Well, now, how am I going to get him to talk?" Hermione whined, feigning annoyance.

Draco rolled his eyes. "Oh gee, I wonder... If only there was someone here that knew a highly skilled legilimens."

Hermione giggled. "Oh right... Is Tom around?" She teased, delighting when it pulled a feral growl from her boyfriend.

"Witch I swear..." Draco sighed. Hermione watched as he pulled his bottom lip between his teeth, his eyes twinkled with the amusement of their teasing as they roamed her body. She knew he felt the same heat that she did.

"Well, stop fucking around then." Hermione challenged, turning around and walking to the table that Ginny had so kindly prepared for her. Ginny knew from the few times they had tortured Death Eaters secretly in the past that Hermione had a preference for mild to medium pain over a long-term time period. In the long term, the constantly

changing but ever-present pain, in her experience - which, granted, was limited - tended to be more effective than the high pain over a shorter period.

Her eyes fell onto a wooden handled awl and her face immediately broke out in a grin. The sounds Kingsley was making already sounded like music to her ears. Reluctantly, she would need to cauterise his tongue and fingers, probably heal his thigh. She didn't want him passing out at all while they moved onto the next part of this interrogation.

Draco, sensing her obvious annoyance at having to heal this man even a little bit, stepped in to take over. "Thank you." She smiled appreciatively, collecting her chair and getting herself set up by his hand with fingers still remaining. The thought briefly crossed her mind to use the hand with all fingers now removed, but that ran the risk of causing the man to pass out. "Ready?" She looked to Draco, who was already staring down at Kingsley with determination. A simple nod of his head was his only answer.

Kingsley really did try to fight her as she collected one of his remaining fingers, but Draco's wand saw to it that his arm was immobilised quickly. "Now, Kingsley, I don't want you to be alarmed," she said in a sweet sing-song voice, "but this may burn just a little." She looked at him pointedly as she slid the awl underneath his nail and into the nail bed beneath it.

Another roar of pain had her ears ringing. She waited a few minutes for it to subside. Draco dove into his mind, "Now, Kingsley, I'm going to ask you some questions, and I want you to be a good boy and answer them properly in your mind. Do you understand?"

When she was met with silence, she forcefully wiggled the awl needle under the nail bed, eliciting more cries of anguish.

Draco snorted with laughter. "Sorry, Love, that was my fault; I forgot he can't talk." His tone suggested that he had forgotten no such thing.

Hermione smirked and ceased the movement. "I would like a list of all the other safe houses that you have access to and their locations," she stated, watching Draco for indicators of needing to loosen Kingsley up a little. He held up two fingers, waving her on. Hermione began to apply pressure in an upward motion. Kingsley's garbled scream cracked, his chest heaved while his whole body began shaking.

He was being attacked on two fronts. Kingsley was a competent occlumens; the question was how competent. Would he be able to keep Draco out while also coping with her assaults? A sickening ripping sound indicated the lifting of his nail. Draco's slight shake of his head was simultaneously disappointing and impressive. Red blood had smeared over the end of his fingers, as well as the metal of the awl. If Blaise was

here, she knew he would be itching to clean the mess Kingsley had created so far, but she enjoyed it. The art that she had created so far was payment for all the times she had bled for him, and she had had so few chances to fight anyone lately.

There was a muggle saying, 'bleeding like a stuck pig,' and by the end of today, she wanted to forever associate him with those words. Kingsley whispered a sound that vaguely sounded like 'please,' but given the sound was so distorted that she couldn't be sure. "Sorry mate, did you say something?" Hermione asked with false friendliness.

Draco flashed her a smirk. "He said please stop." He chuckled.

"Oh, poor darling, it's probably really painful, isn't it?" Hermione soothed with a nod of her head while picking up the next finger, taking a second to memorise every detail of his face as she shoved the point in underneath the nail bed. Kingsley's mouth opened and a wounded animal noise vibrated out of the back of his throat. "You know, this could end so much quicker if you just tell us what we want to know. You are going to die, Kings; no matter whether you give us the answers now or in a week's time - you will die. How much torture you endure in the meantime is up to you."

She didn't wait for Draco to encourage the movement; she began wiggling the awl to begin the process of separating the nail from the bed underneath. "Locations Kingsley, give us the safe houses."

Draco scoffed in disbelief. "Got them." Hermione pulled the awl out and smiled, patting the man's knee comfortingly. Draco stroked her hair, made his way to the door, and began speaking to Pansy, who was waiting in the hallway outside.

"Thank you, Kingsley. I appreciate that it must have been a struggle for your pride for you to give up, but just think - you probably just halved your torture time." Kingsley's eyes rounded, and looked at her in a panic. "Oh... You didn't think I was done, did you? I mean, part of me wants to thank you for turning me into this, but the largest part of me just wants you to suffer for all the emotional turmoil you caused me. Do you know how much and how long I hated myself? How long I questioned my self-worth because of you? Because you allowed everyone to treat me like a pariah?"

Hermione rose from her chair and glided across the room to the tools laid out for her and placed the awl back gently. Her wand would do for this next part: more precise, less blood getting on her, cleaner cuts. "I was hit in the face with a fucking crowbar, and you blamed me." Hermione hissed. She made her way over to Kingsley again and peered into his black eyes. "Now, I want to start by apologising. I'm afraid I have not yet had a chance to use this spell, so it might take a bit of practice, but I do appreciate you letting me learn on you. Did you know that skin is the largest human organ? Which means that when I peel it off, it's going to hurt like a bitch."

Kingsley, even through his cries, moved to grip the knife with his other hand and began all over again on his thumb, his wails louder, and the hilt of the knife pushed against the wound of his dominant hand.

Hermione tilted her head as she pieced the action together. He would be unable to grip the knife if he had removed all the phalanges on one hand and still had to remove more. So, working on that assumption, he had known for over six years. That was before she had cast the first Avada. That was before she had become this corrupt monster they were trying to claim her to be now. What justifications had he told himself at the time then? That she was too young and lacked the experience to lead a country? How relieved he must have been when Ron reported that first killing.

A small smile lifted the corners of her mouth ever so slightly. "Oh Kingsley... Kingsley, Kingsley, Kingsley." She tutted with a shake of her head. "You have been a bad boy, haven't you."

"Please!" Slipped through the fog in Kingsley's brain. Hermione leaned black with a shake of her head. The sawing motion continued, and slowly, one by one, the five fingers on that hand fell to the floor, followed immediately by the knife, which cluttered loudly against the blood-splattered tile. Kingsley made no attempt to quiet the wails falling from him as he stared down at his now useless hand.

Hermione bent to retrieve the knife. The entire thing was sticky with his blood, the shiny silver now stained with the red liquid, still warm beneath her fingertips. She let it dangle between her fingertips, dripping the excess blood to the floor before wiping the remaining fluid on her jeans and putting it back into the side of her boot for now.

"Finite." Hermione waved her hand, and the imperius slipped back from his mind.

Kingsley attempted to lurch forward, straining against the chains around his chest. "You fucking bitch!" He screamed, "You fucking bitch. I should have killed you when I had the chance!" His face contorted into a disgusted rage, soaked from his tears.

Hermione chuckled. "Well, yeah, I mean, that much is obvious. Would have served you much better than the campaign you started against me." Hermione shrugged casually.

Her nonchalant response obviously was not what he was expecting. "What the fuck happened to you?!" He sneered.

Hermione launched her body forward to collide with the back of the chair again. "You happened to me, Kingsley." She hissed. "You, Harry, Ron, all of those fucking cunts in that house who went with the flow of the sewage pipe you created, swimming down it like it was a fucking river." Hermione could feel the magic tingling at her fingertips. She stood and kicked the chair toward him and began pacing the room in

whispered aloud only so he would know that he would be forced to obey her commands, as he should have done willingly years ago.

Kingsley was strong-willed, but he was and always had been weaker than her - that's why it didn't matter what he had done, she was always going to come out on top. Hermione reached for the chair and flipped it round, straddling it with her arms resting on the back, she was going to enjoy this show. She reached down and yanked the knife from the side of her boot, taking time to admire the delicate carvings on the blade.

This knife had seen so much bloodshed, including her own on occasion. She handed Kingsley the knife. Behind her, Draco inhaled sharply in anxiousness, but she could feel the hold she had over Kingsley's mind. She knew they were safe and that Draco would be faster with a killing curse than Kingsley could be with a knife.

"For every year that you have let this war drag on unnecessarily for the sake of your pride, cut off one of your fingers." Hermione raised an eyebrow at him. Kingsley's hands shook, but he didn't have the strength to fight her control.

He placed one hand on his leg, fingers spread out across his trunk of a thigh. His hand gripping the knife moved slowly towards the digits. Hermione raised an eyebrow, curiosity winning out. She still wasn't sure of when the prophecy had come to be, how long the wizard before her had known about it. Harry had claimed to know for at least a year, and Ron denied knowing of it at all when Ginny had questioned him, but Hermione could smell the lie on his skin.

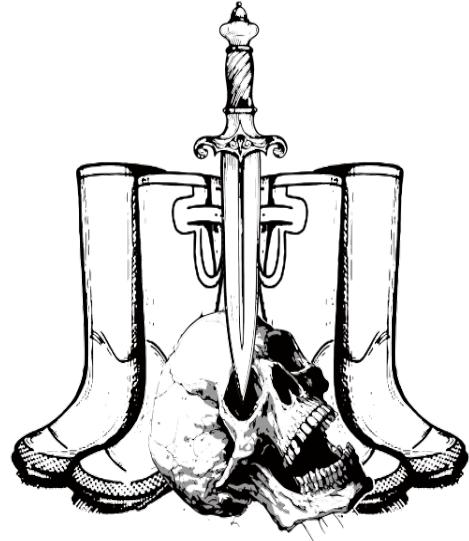
Kingsley gasped and cried out in agony as the glistening blade dug into his pinky finger; a line of thick red blood flowed out from beneath it and ribboned down his thigh. Most people expect bone to crunch or crack, and that's true for breaking a bone or crushing it, but when it is being sawed in half with a serrated blade, it sounds more like cutting wood.

The man grit his teeth and squeezed his eyes closed, blocking out the sight of it but Hermione couldn't look away, she didn't want him missing a single moment of this either. "Kingsley. Look at your hand, watch what you are doing."

He started openly sobbing but obeyed her command. Whines spilt from him as readily as the blood from his mangled finger. Hermione had hoped that she would find some kind of justice in this, some alleviation of dues owed, but the only thing she felt was curiosity. Curious, how far she could push him. Curious, how long he had used her in his games. Curious if his inevitable death would change a single thing in this world. A small snap sounded, bouncing off the walls as the bone broke all the way through. The small bloodied nub, mangled and raw as it was exposed to the air, the useless finger rolling and falling to the ground.

Kingsley looked at her in fear. A screech of pain came roaring out of him as she pointed the tip of her wand at the skin just below his elbow; an incision as deep as his fascia all the way around his arm brought back the ribbons of dark red blood streaming down his forearm and dripping to the tile below. She had to be careful; if she knicked one of the arteries, then it would be game over quicker than she wanted it to be. She jumped as his arm jerked involuntarily. "Whoops." She smiled sweetly at him.

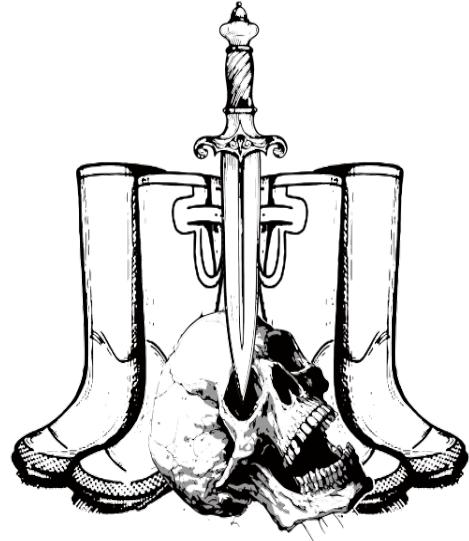
"Also, did you know that flaying is thought to have likely started with the ancient Assyrians of Mesopotamia?" Hermione rattled off casually before flicking her wand, tearing all the skin below the cut clean away from his body. The disgusting ripping sound echoed around the room, and the scream that bounced off the walls did feel like the justice she had been seeking earlier. She would be able to move on and leave this unfortunate period of her life behind her.



CHAPTER 47: GIVE THEM HELL

Hermione looked at the man she had once considered a mentor, a friend. How many lives could have been saved, how many souls, had he just handed the power to her when he had the chance? Would she have become who she is now? She hoped so because, as egotistical as it may be, Hermione did like herself.

His near-black eyes had never looked back at her with such terror before. He had been wary of her, sure, but if he had ever been truly scared of her, he had hidden it well. Right now, however, his eyes showed her every horrible truth. "Imperio," she



CHAPTER 48: READY TO START BEGGING?

W hoops," Hermione uttered, tilting her head. The artery she had accidentally hit continued to spurt blood in a final few pulsating rhythms before it stopped and flowed lazily from the open wound. She sighed in deep disappointment and flicked her wand, ripping the last of his skin from his body in one clean sweep. Red was everywhere in the normally white room.

It covered her hands, her wand, her clothes, and even Draco and his clothes. Pools of it spread across the floor toward her feet. Draco lifted her up and pulled her away from it. Turning her and kissing her deeply. "You are so fucking pretty." He mumbled

against her lips. Her legs wrapped around his waist. The torture itself hadn't done anything for her, but seeing Draco the way he was, coated in the blood of her enemies, had sparked something more feral in her.

Her hand snaked between them and up to his throat, where she pressed the blade against his skin. Draco immediately froze, his eyes opening to pour directly into hers. Fiery heat swam beneath the surface as his pupils dilated, leaving only a slither of grey around the outside.

He moved suddenly, slamming her against the wall, which jolted her, pushing the knife harder against him, resulting in a small, thin cut. His kisses bruised as he bit her lip, one of his hands diving into her hair, gripping it and yanking her closer to him. Electricity sparked through her veins and along every nerve. Everything else always fell away in times like this with Draco.

"I saw the look you gave me earlier at the house." His chilling whispers, hot on her ear, sent shivers down her spine. The blade was still wedged between them, though her hold on it loosened as he rolled his hips, pressing his hard cock against her. "You should know how many times I wanted to corner you in some dark alleyway." He rolled his hips again, pulling a moan from her. "Make you beg for me to fuck you."

Hermione straightened and gave him a challenging look. "Not even in your dreams."

A smug smirk took over his face. "Oh, is that so? Let's see about that then, shall we?"

"Don't you dare." She hissed with narrow eyes. Though truthfully, she hoped he would, it had been too long since they had tested each other's willpower, and she missed it.

His smirk grew and he waved his mask in place; that, combined with the pressure against her centre, had her fighting a whimper, but she wasn't going to let him win. "Fight it all you like Love, I'll only enjoy it more." He slipped into her mind but didn't push to go further than the outermost edges, a safeguard she realised, in case he did take things too far, and she needed him to stop.

She was dropped hard onto her knees on the tiles, his hands pinning hers high above her on the wall, the knife clattering to the ground nearby. Another wave of his hand and his clothes vanished. His cock, hard and thick, twitched in front of her face. Heat flooded her core, and a twisting in her stomach had her rocking her hips instinctively. One hand came down and squeezed her jaw until she not so reluctantly opened it. Above her, Draco's hold on her wrists tightened, pushing them back against the wall as his hips canted forward, pushing his cock into her mouth, her jaw strained under the ache of having to open wide enough for him.

The door opposite it revealed a man about her age, who quickly fired a hex her way the second he saw them. He was dead before his hex had even landed. "One," Hermione whispered, closing the door behind them and moving along the hallway.

The next door led to a bathroom, also empty, while the next room raised Hermione's count up to three with a single slicing hex that cut the throats of both occupants in one swoop of her wand. "Nice," Ginny whispered as she silenced the falls of the bodies.

"Thanks," Hermione whispered back before quietly opening the next door. Inside was Kingsley, asleep on top of his covers, one arm draped over his eyes. Hermione motioned for Ginny to cover her as she crept into the room, coming to a stop next to the man who had caused so many deaths. She pointed the tip of her wand, which thrummed with excitement, to the underside of his chin and he startled awake. Peering up at her with wide eyes. "Morning." Hermione chirped with a smile.

Elation couldn't begin to describe the feeling she felt as she watched him swallow deeply and pat the mattress slowly beside him for his wand. "Ah ah ah ah ah." Hermione tutted. Hermione bent down and whispered in his face. "Checkmate." That was all there was to say before she put him in a body-binding curse and knocked him unconscious. Just to be safe, she retrieved his wand and snapped it, throwing the discarded pieces on his chest.

"Come on, let's check the other rooms," Hermione whispered, leaving him stuck to the bed. The next room Ginny busted into interrupted one couple in the throes of passion, both dead before they could uncouple.

"Gross," Ginny grumbled. Unfortunately, the remaining rooms turned up empty, one of which had clearly been George's room, based on the familiar old Weasley jumper discarded at the end of his bed and the few photos he had of the days at the burrow pinned to the wall.

"Come on. Let's get that old fucker downstairs before he manages to escape again." Hermione said, slowly pulling George's door shut again. Theo and Pansy were lounging about on the Orders sofas when they returned but straightened up at the sight of her levitating Kingsley. "Five."

Theo sighed. "One. This place is boring, there's no one here." he pouted. Hermione eyed his foot that wouldn't stop tapping.

"Well, not no one," Pansy said, indicating to the stairwell that Ginny and Hermione had just come from. They turned to see Blaise levitating a beaten and bloodied Ronald Weasley.

"Bingo." Hermione grinned.

would once again be back to square one. Her eyes drifted nervously back to the house again.

"Why are you doing this?" George asked, following her eyes toward the house, and he sighed. "They're asleep."

Hermione looked at him, really looked at him. He looked tired. Not tired in the battle-hard kind of way that she and Ginny had become, but tired in the same way she had seen Harry become. She doubted that they got news of the outside world here, not if it was under Fidelius. If he had been here the last five years, then he probably felt pretty out of touch and torn."Because it's the right thing to do."

George laughed incredulously. "Murder?! Is the right thing to do?!"

Hermione sighed and looked up at the sky. "Ending the war, George, and yes, that means ending their lives. You don't know what's been going on."

"Then explain it to me." He pleaded with her.

Hermione shook her head. "We don't have time, perhaps if we all make it out the other side of the war then there might be a chance for a conversation."

George's eyes turned distant, and his face closed off. "Then I can't let you pass. You would be asking me to let my brother die, and I have already lost enough family members to this damn war."

"Hey, Weasley, catch." Draco tossed something small and yellow at the Weasley male, who had been removed from the war enough to catch the object on instinct. He turned the rubber duck over in his hand, peering at it in confusion. His eyes flicked back up to them for only a moment before he was pulled through his navel and away from the estate. "Portkey. He will land in New Zealand somewhere. I figure it will take him a while to find his way back here, and this way, no one is guilty of anything. He didn't let you through, and you two didn't need to kill him. Win, win."

Hermione reached up and kissed him softly. "Thank you," she whispered. Her reaction seemed to hurt him, and he just nodded absently, but she didn't have time to explain that it wasn't because of residual feelings for George that she was thankful. It was because he had saved Ginny from losing two brothers today instead of one. They had a job to do, and that conversation would have to wait.

The house was quiet as they crept through it. Pansy and Theo had chosen to scope the downstairs area while Blaise and Draco took the second floor, and Ginny and Hermione took the third. The hallway that opened up from the top of the stairs was just one long corridor with approximately half a dozen doors that were all shut leading off it. Hermione motioned to the first door, and they crept forward, opening it and peering inside; it was a bedroom, which appeared lived in but was empty.

Draco groaned and didn't wait, thrusting deeper and hitting the back of her throat. She had to breathe heavily through her nose to stop the urge to gag. He pulled out only to fuck back into her again, pushing her to the limit and pulling back, but the sounds he was making were sinful. She didn't want to stop him from making those noises. Feral, guttural groans that had the heat spreading between her thighs - not that she would admit that to him right now.

"Fuck, that's it, Love, choke on it...." He breathed in an almost pleading voice, continuing to snap into her mouth with increasing intensity. Hermione let her watering eyes roam upward, over the blood-stained abs, where his shirt had soaked through, all the way up to the mask of grey steel with his eyes, so black, staring out from underneath it. A small whimper crept up her throat, vibrating around him. "Oh fuck," he hissed, thrusting into her at a punishing pace. Every time she started to choke, he was pulling back only to push back in again, and fuck if it wasn't sexy as hell to see him like this.

She needed air; the burning in her lungs was screaming at her. Hermione didn't need to tell him because he reluctantly ripped away from her. She took in deep gasps, the ache in her jaw and throat from how he used her becoming more prominent in the absence of the continued assault. "Too fucking good." He muttered, closing his eyes and panting himself.

He yanked her up by her wrists and shoved her back against the wall, his hand sliding to her throat and gripping tightly. She needed this, the absence of control, but she would not let him win. Her gasp only seemed to spur him on. His other hand dipped below the band of her pants and down between her folds. Hermione squirmed, trying to get away from him before her body could betray her. His eyes flashed dangerously. It was too late; he already knew how incredibly soaked she was. "Ready to start begging?" He mocked.

Her attempt at wriggling away from him caused him to rut and grind his erection against her thigh. "Not going to happen." Hermione hissed in his face, tears from earlier still rolling down her cheeks. He pinned her hands above her to the wall, where they became stuck with the use of a sticking charm. It didn't matter how much she wriggled and squirmed; she was stuck, and her range was limited. Draco lifted his mask up and leant in close to her, and she could feel the energy sparking between them, powerful and intoxicating.

His tongue pressed flat against the side of her face, tracing her tears back up her cheek. He gave a hum of approval that sent flutters through her stomach and had her inner walls clenching around nothing. "You are so fucking pretty when you cry, Baby." He placed one soft, gentle kiss on her lips that didn't fit with the force with which his

fingers pushed into her cunt. "My pretty little liar..." His fingers curled within her, stroking at the sensitive parts within her, his mask slipping back in place.

She bit down on the inside of her cheek to stop from moaning. "And you're disgusting." Hermione gasped, her fingers above her head flexing as she tried to distance herself from him. The band already tightening in her abdomen would argue that if he was disgusting, then she was too. His fingers slid through her so easily, pulling on every one of her innermost strings like a puppet bending to his will.

"And you fucking love it, don't you?" Hermione could hear the grin in his voice; his thumb brushing over her clit had her legs shaking. His presence in her mind caressed her shields lovingly, but she could feel the underlying dark energy he had brought with him. She tried to kick him away from her, and it worked; for a moment, he stood there looking at her with a glint in his eyes.

Her pants fell away from her, ripped to shreds and leaving her exposed. Hermione heaved as he eyed her like the prey she was right now. The cold metal of his mask glistened under the lights overhead, making his eyes appear all the darker as they roamed over her hungrily before meeting her glare with amusement. "Say it...pretty pretty pretty pretty please..." he trailed off, waiting for her to say the words back at him.

Hermione stiffened her shoulders and gave him a disgusted look. "You're so cute when you beg."

He gave one hearty laugh and fisted his cock a few times, giving her a hum of amusement. Her eyes involuntarily dropped to the movement, and instinctively clenched her thighs to relieve some of the leftover tension from his earlier attentions. Unfortunately for her, he saw it. He stepped so close his erection nudged at her stomach, where he continued to stroke it. Small, breathy groans fell from his mouth with each caress. His palm came to steady himself against the wall next to her head, the muscles in his bicep rippling as he continued his jerking.

Hermione pressed her eyes closed. It shouldn't be legal for him to have this effect on her. Her cunt ached, desperate to be filled, but she wasn't about to back down now. "Eyes on me, Love." His tone was so demanding that she listened. She moved to kick him away again, but he caught her thigh with his hip and pinned it against the wall by leaning against it. That had been a huge mistake for her because now she only had one leg free, which was helping her stand so she didn't strain her shoulders by pulling on the sticking charm, and secondly, because the tip of Draco's cock was now jolting against her clit as he fucked his fist.

Hermione leant her head back against Draco's chest and felt the comforting thrum of his heartbeat. "Excuse me, you all wanted to play matchmaker and place bets. You can all suck it. Is everyone ready?"

The address was a small farm estate. When they landed, they landed on a small hill out the back of the main house, which was covered in a vegetable garden. George was crouched in the dirt not three metres from them, plucking beans. He looked up in surprise at their sudden appearance, his brown creasing slightly as he took in Ginny and Hermione first and then their companions. No one moved for a second, waiting to see who would make the first move, to see if he would sound the alarm. George sighed, put the beans into the basket and stood, dusting himself off. "Ron and Kingsley told me you had turned. I didn't want to believe it."

Their housemates didn't move, following hers and Ginny's leads. "Did they tell you that we put an end to that war as well?" Hermione queried with a raised eyebrow. "Or just that we are horrible people?"

George eyed her passively, his eyes drifting across the Death Eaters then back to Ginny. His hand made no movement to draw his wand. "What are you doing, kiddo? Are you really going to go through with this?" He asked in resignation.

"With killing them?" Ginny asked, shifting on one leg and folding her arms. Hermione eyed the house at the bottom of the hill. There were no signs of movement within, no faces peering back out in horror or hiding behind curtains. "Absolutely."

Ginny's affirmation visibly wounded him. "He is our brother , Ginny." George pleaded.

"He stood by while I was raped, George." Ginny snarled back.

Her older brother recoiled and paled. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about the day they tried to kill Hermione and kidnapped me. Ron, your brother put me in a body-binding hex and silenced me. He put me on the bed, sent Harry in, and locked the door behind him. Harry proceeded to rape me while Ron stood guard downstairs." Ginny spat, her rage evident.

"He didn't tell me," George mumbled.

Ginny scoffed. "I wouldn't expect him to."

"What about you, Hermione?" George's eyes drifted back to her; a sad familiarity within his eyes tugged at her heartstrings. George never wanted any of this. He had already lost his twin and both his parents, and here, he would be forced to choose between his sister and his brother.

"What about me?" Hermione shrugged. They didn't have time for this, any second now someone could look outside and see them, Ron and Kingsley could flee and they

himself a drink. Instead, he retrieved a can of Red Bull from the fridge, cracked it, and did not break eye contact with her as he slowly gulped the entire thing down.

"Fucking hell. Not the bloody Red Bulls again." Draco groaned as he reentered the sitting room, now dressed for a raid. Hermione's eyes trailed the way that his black shirt and vest clung to his frame. The way his eyes, ice-cold grey, shone from underneath his mask...even his pants clung to him and showed off just how solid his thighs were. Heat flamed in her abdomen; oh, she would definitely have to explore that later.

Draco felt her eyes on him and shifted to look at her in curious surprise. He slipped into her mind, and she let him in, fantasies of him fucking her in his ensemble floating around them. He scoffed a laugh and slipped from her mind again. His mood from before had dropped, and he noticeably turned to look out the sitting room windows into the bush beyond. "We're just waiting for—"

"Here! I'm here." Pansy sang as she swished into the room.

"Right then." Hermione pulled the parchment from her pocket and handed it around the group. Blaise looked at it and pressed a kiss to Ginny's head before going to change. Hermione and Ginny shared a look and mutually decided that they would not be donning their robes today. They wanted no anonymity about it.

The Order had been a thorn in her side for years now, and if she was going to achieve her goals, then she needed them to stop trying to disrupt her at every turn. Theo cracked another drink that echoed through the silence. "Merlin Theo, are you trying to give yourself a heart attack?" Ginny squeaked.

"Hey, I have to be on the ball. I have a title to maintain, Red." Theo winked and started stretching out his arms and shoulders.

Hermione huffed a laugh. "It's hardly a title."

Ginny gave her a teasing smirk. "Aw, Mi... are you feeling threatened?"

Hermione gave her best friend a withering look. "No! I can't be threatened by something he barely has."

"Big words for someone who is losing." Theo grinned. Hermione flipped him off but a smile still pulled at her lips. It was good to see Theo smile again, she had really missed it while Astoria had been on the brink of death, he had a way of making every situation seem lighter.

Draco pulled her back against his chest and kissed her shoulder. "It's okay, baby. He won't be gloating for long."

"Sickening." Pansy mocked as Blaise strolled back into the doorway who gave Hermione a wink of support.

Her moan was instinctual, but each little brush just felt so good. He was so close to her entrance, and the knowledge that he was this affected by her made her want to melt in a puddle. "I know it's killing you." He whispered breathlessly. "You know what I want to hear."

"Fuck you." Hermione bit out with a shaky voice; she wasn't entirely convinced she would win this one. She felt so empty, and he was right there, and gods, he was so fucking hot with the blood still smeared all over him and that mask in place with his blonde hair pulled messily away into a bun - hair that only needed tying in the first place because he was so certain that he wanted to spend the rest of his life fucking her and making her cum around his cock.

Her hips rocked forward again, and she tried and failed to pass it off as her trying to distance herself. "Well, that's the goal, isn't it, baby? To fuck me? I'm right here, so ready to fuck that tight little cunt of yours..." He moaned, dropping the cold metal forehead of his mask to her shoulder, "All you have to do... is beg." His movements became erratic as he got closer to his release.

"I told you, not even in your dreams." She struggled to push the words out. His presence in her mind pushed for entry. Curiosity got the better of her, and she allowed it. An onslaught of images flashed like a movie through her mind, various different occasions in which Draco was fucking her in different locations, different positions where she was pleading for more. The sight of watching his dick sliding into her sparked an overwhelming surge of lust. Dreams, she realised, that he had had about her.

The images changed to her spread out on a desk; it looked like an office in the chateau, with him on his knees, head between her thighs while he licked and sucked at her like a man starved. She could feel the way that version of her teetered on the edge, so close to exploding and cumming all over his face that she could feel it. She was certain a moan had actually sounded in reality.

That version of her sang like a canary, "Please, please, please, please, please ."

"Anything for you, Love," Draco answered smugly from between her thighs, his tongue hot on her clit, and she realised that she had repeated those words out loud. She had been so distracted by the dreams he was showing her that she hadn't noticed when he had sunk to his knees and started mimicking the images in her head.

"Oh, you slimy fucker- oh god..." She trailed off as he latched down around her clit, sucking on it while the tip of his tongue flicked over it. Hermione threw her head back and fought to hold on to the little strength she had left. His hands slid delicately

up her thighs, throwing the one he had pinned earlier over his shoulder, which only opened herself up to him more.

His hand dropped after that, and when it returned, it returned to her entrance, pushing something cold and solid into her. A loud gasp rippled out of her at the realisation that it was the handle of the knife from earlier, his hand closed around the top of the hilt, protecting her and keeping her away from the blade. The feeling of something finally inside her eased the ache a little, especially with the aid of his tongue flicking against her with just enough pressure. "I said, eyes on me." He growled.

Her eyes dropped to his, and seeing the hunger in his gaze looking back up at her was enough to send her flying over the edge. "Shit baby - that's it, give it to me. Fuck me, you're so fucking sweet." He lapped at her, the knife being yanked away again and his tongue diving in to drink up her release. Her cries bounced off the walls around them.

Draco knelt up and grabbed her around her waist; the sticking charm, which had been holding her upright more than she had realised, released and she collapsed into his hold. He caught her, but he spun her and lowered her onto the ground face down, pushing her thighs apart. She tried to close them again. Hermione felt him checking in her mind to make sure she was still okay, and when she didn't protest, he shoved them apart again, rougher this time and started to drive into her.

Her back arched and her mouth fell open in a protest, but the overwhelming wave of pleasure had it coming out more like a strangled cry. "Shhh, fuck - just a little bit more." He ground out as he bottomed out. One hand held him up upright above her while he rolled his hips slowly back before thrusting forward into her again forcefully; his other hand came around and gripped at the front of her throat, pulling her back toward him. "Such a good fucking girl you are." He growled huskily in her ear. "Say it, I want to hear you beg."

"Please, please, Draco." Hermione cried out, the need to feel him sliding in and out of her like silk, to have him filling her and stretching her, overpowered the need to fight him. She wanted this too much, needed him to make her feel like only he could. His constant presence in her mind stroking at the pleasure centre in her brain, pulling the strings that had the muscles in her abdomen clenching painfully in anticipation of each thrust. Her desperation to climax had her half-delirious; each rut into her drove her closer to that edge.

"You were so mouthy before, and now look at how prettily you beg." He grunted. Her magic coursed through her, lighting every nerve in response. Each snap of his hips, purposeful and deep, hit perfectly.

Hermione turned to him slowly and raised her eyebrow. "Jealous are we? I'll have you know that George and I never dated. We just slept together from time to time." Blaise and Ginny looked on with amusement, quietly sharing looks with each other.

"Oh yeah, and that's supposed to make me feel better, is it?" Draco drawled sarcastically.

Hermione rolled her eyes and groaned. "I don't know what's going to make you feel better, but it's a non-factor for me. It's not as if you haven't slept with other women before me." She retaliated.

"Neither you nor I have the risk of running into any of them, ever." Draco glared at her; his mood over it was actually so ridiculous it was funny.

"Oh my gods, it's not like there was much risk I was going to run into him, Draco. It's not exactly something I can control. What do you want me to do about it? Not go? Cause that's not happening. What do you think I'm going to do exactly, see him and decide to jump on his dick?" Hermione exclaimed in frustration.

"I don't want you to do anything, but I'm allowed to be annoyed by the fact that he has."

"Please don't finish that sentence." Ginny interrupted. "For everyone's sake, especially mine."

"Fine," Draco concluded, drinking down his whiskey and stalking from the room.

"I can't imagine George just standing aside and letting us take them, knowing they are going to die." Hermione theorised.

Blaise raised his eyebrows in agreement. "So then he dies?"

Hermione looked at Ginny with uncertainty. Something about that didn't feel right. She was the first to slice down anyone, and she never cared, but somehow... George felt wrong. "I don't think he is a threat. Even if we took Ron, he wouldn't come after us, I don't think." Ginny sighed, obviously feeling the same way.

"I guess we just see how it goes? The address was on a Fidelius Charm, so we don't have to worry about wards going off at least." Hermione noted. Issues with George aside, one thing was for certain: Kingsley and Ron could not get away. They would die painfully and imminently.

"Where's Theo? Back at the hospital? We should probably take him and Pansy in case, right?" Ginny looked between them. An uncomfortable silence fell between them while everyone sipped their drinks and stared at nothing.

"I was summoned?" Theo joked, flouncing into the room in his Death Eater robes and gumboots. He went straight to the bar; unlike the others, though, he did not pour

"George." Hermione and Ginny whispered at the same time. Well, that made things immediately more complicated. They had come to an agreement on how to handle Ronald, but they had not yet discussed what would happen should they cross paths with the others.

"Thank you, Ren, this means a lot," Hermione spoke softly.

Ren nodded and chewed his tongue momentarily. "Give them hell." He said, concluding their conversation.

The group didn't speak on their way home. Tension was thick in the air around them. Draco seemed especially broody while Blaise kept throwing Ginny nervous looks and stroking her hand. Ginny made her way straight to the bar as soon as they landed, pouring everyone drinks and throwing herself on the couch. "Alright, so are we just turning up, or what? Knock on the door, bang, Avada him on the doorstep like James Potter in 1981?"

Hermione snorted into her drink, "Merlin, Gin."

Ginny shrugged. "Well, I'm not wrong, am I? But is that the plan? That what we're doing?" She asked as she looked between them all.

"I don't know, but what are we going to do about George?" Hermione asked the redhead.

"What about him?" she shrugged casually and nonchalantly.

"Well, I know what your stance on killing Ron is, but what's the stance on George?" Hermione elaborated. It was easy to feel nothing towards Ron's death; he had earned it. Pushed them both to their limits and committed a few too many acts of betrayal against them, but George had not. He had left earlier on in the war, moving at Kingsley's request to a safehouse overseas to help them. At the time, Hermione didn't think much of it, but perhaps now that she thought about it, it had been intentional.

Ginny thought about it for a second; the same internal conflict that Hermione had was clearly one that Ginny felt, too. George had been there when Hermione had started using the killing curse, but he was gone before she reached her peak. He only saw the side of her that was still hurt by the choice to utilise it and was even more devastated by her teammate's reactions to it. "I suppose that depends on whether or not he intends to stand in our way?"

"Well that's up to you, He's your brother, Gin." Hermione wouldn't do anything that she wasn't comfortable with, she also didn't know if she had it in her to kill George.

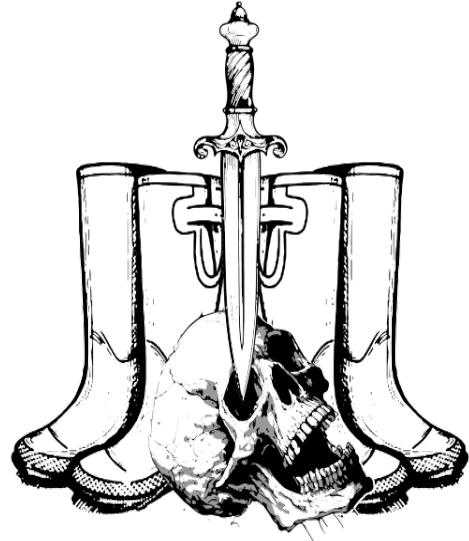
"And your ex-boyfriend," Draco grumbled bitterly under his breath.

"Harder, please." She whined, pushing her hips back against him. Her skin felt like it was on fire, every muscle tingled, and the walls of her pussy clenched tightly around him, so close to euphoria. The sounds of her arousal were loud, but they were drowned out by the primal groans coming from Draco and the desperate cries coming from her.

Draco's hand moved from her throat to her waist to act as an anchor as he slammed into her. "Hermione." He whispered. "Fucking cum for me, baby, please, I need to feel it." His hand slid lower, the hard metal of his ring rubbing over her clit at the same time as he pushed the overwhelming feeling of his own pleasure into her mind.

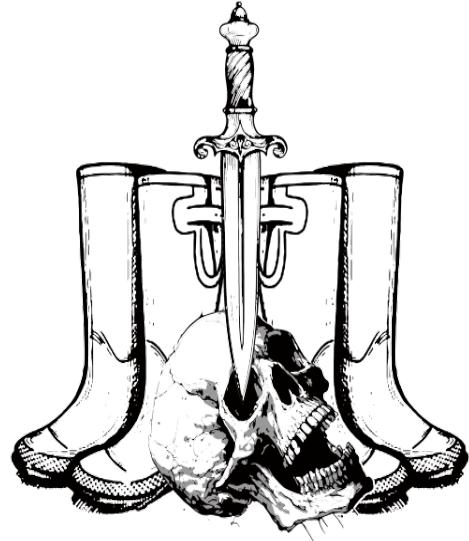
It was too much; her cunt clamped down around him tightly as she hurtled through her orgasm. Everything ceased to exist around her, and she was aware in only the vaguest of senses that she was being incredibly loud, and so was Draco - his hips stuttering as he yelled her name and caught them both as her arms gave out from under her. For a moment, she swore she could see sounds while her brain was still processing what the fuck had just happened, her walls fluttering around the cum he had filled her with, her heart beating out of her chest.

"Even better than I dreamt of," Draco muttered smugly against her shoulder, but her mind was gone; all she could do was nod absently while she tried to return to earth.



CHAPTER 46: FOUND

Reanuld waited until the foreign minister left before turning to them, his mood suddenly serious. “Apologies, I did not call you here to meet with Nicolau. We have found the people you are looking for. Ginevra’s brother and the Order fellow.” Reanuld held out a slip of paper toward her; scrawled on it was an address. Hermione turned to Ginny in shock, her heart now pounding. They found Kingsley and Ron?! A hot flush washed over her as she read the address. It was here in France. They were here in fucking France?! “My guy tells me there were two Weasley boys there; one of them is missing an ear.”



CHAPTER 49: WHAT'S WRONG WITH PINK?

Her mind was still in a haze when they finally summoned new clothes and made their way next door to check on Ginny, who had a far too amused look on her face (as did Blaise), while Ron, who was bound in chains, looked livid. Hermione turned and whacked Draco's chest. "The room wasn't silenced?!" She hissed. Drace shrugged, seemingly not bothered by their earlier show.

"No, no, it was not." Blaise chuckled.

"Fucking disgusting, nothing more than a slut." Ron growled under his breath. Hermione put a hand on Draco's chest, stopping him from reacting. This was Ginny's kill to make.

"Whoops, sorry about that." Hermione offered Ginny and Blaise with a pleased smirk.

Ginny shook her head with a small giggle. "Don't be, I nearly wet my pants from laughing so hard at this shithead's reaction to it. Best form of torture ever."

"Enjoy the show then, did you Weasel?" Draco drawled.

Ron spat in their direction with a sour look on his face. Hermione snorted at how pathetic he seemed. Somewhere along the way, Ron had let this bitterness twist him and turn him into such an angry person, which was ironic considering he took so much issue with her changing because her changing came with bloodshed.

"Did you get the safe houses?" Ginny suddenly perked up.

Hermione hummed and nodded. "Yep, a few hours ago. Pansy is already coordinating everything."

"So that's it then?" Ron snapped. "You're really just going to kill everyone in the order?"

Hermione quirked an eyebrow at him. "That's how victories are won, Weasley, but... no. People will have a choice. They can either get on board with the new government, or they can die as radicals, as the bad guys - because that's what you will be in the history books: a lesson."

"That is so fucked up, that's.... That's..." Ron shook his head.

Hermione laughed. "That's politics." She turned to her friends again. "Speaking of, I have some meetings tomorrow I need to prepare for. Are you okay here?"

Ginny waved her hand. "Yeah, we're done anyway." Ginny turned her head to look at her husband and batted her eyelashes. "Babe, could you?" Hermione knew it was one thing for Ginny to sign off on his death and another thing to actually be the one to kill her brother.

"No, wait, wait, wait... I... I'll get on board!" Ron pleaded.

Draco shook his head and muttered "Coward" beneath his breath.

"Oh no, you misunderstood. You don't get that option." Ginny snarled. "Not after everything you've done. I would ask you to say hi to Mum and Dad for me, but..."

"Go to hell." Ron snapped. His chest rose and fell with short, frightened inhales.

Ginny narrowed her eyes and gave him a tight-lipped smile. "See you there."

Blaise flexed his fingers, and Hermione watched as Ronald Weasley, aged twenty-five, began to slowly suffocate as he choked. His face turned as red as his hair, his eyes

Both Renauld and Louis looked to the floor and let out long, low whistles. Blaise and Ginny sighed, and Draco growled, "Watch yourself," stepping toward the man, but Hermione immediately blocked his path.

"I wouldn't insult or minimise Hermione in any way if I were you. He put one of my guards in hospital the night we met." Renauld chuckled.

"I would like to see him try." Leandro snipped.

"You really wouldn't," Blaise hummed from the corner while Ginny mumbled that she would. Hermione shot her a warning glare, to which Ginny responded with a smug smirk.

"Let's all calm down, shall we? Leandro, sit down. I want to hear more about this."

"Hi, you wanted to see us?" Hermione smiled, hesitantly slipping into the room to allow the others to enter as well.

"Hermione, this is Nicolau Gusmão, Prime Minister of Portugal, and this is his head of security, Leandro Brito. We were just discussing the latest speculations regarding Alessia Calcio, and your name came up." Renauld indicated to the wizards opposite him, giving her a small, barely decipherable nod.

"Oh I see. Hello, pleasure to meet you both." Hermione stepped towards the men who had stood to offer her a hand shake, Leandro's eyes narrowed on her and gripped her hand a little too tightly. Hermione gave him a thin cold smile. "Mr Brito, was it? What seems to be the problem?"

"I do not trust people who can flip their allegiances overnight." He growled.

Hermione hummed and squeezed his hand tighter. "Then it's a good thing it wasn't overnight, then hmm?"

"Leandro, please, settle down, hmm?" Nicolau sighed, placing his hand on his guard's shoulder. He moved past him and offered his hand. "Rumours out of Italy are that Alessia is blaming you for the crash in her popularity. Says that you orchestrated it all, that somehow you brainwashed people. Says that you turned people against her."

Hermione knew that her smile said to much but she also saw the impressed sparkling glint in Minister Nicolau's eyes. "I'm sorry to hear that she is having such a hard time but I hardly see how it could possibly be my fault, she wouldn't even hear our proposal when we approached her. I was there for maybe twenty minutes and she practically yelled at us the entire time." Hermione offered sweetly.

The minister hummed while Renauld and Louis tried to hide their amusement. "Renauld here was just telling me about how impressed he is with your ideas for the future. He told me that he's had the opportunity to view some of your inventions, but when asked to elaborate, he could not."

Hermione gave him a knowing smile. "That is correct. If you would like to view them then you and Mr Brito would need to sign contracts first. Safety precaution; I can't have people taking my ideas and what not, I'm sure you understand."

"Of course. Now, what's this I hear about taking on the International Confederation of Wizards?" Nicolau asked, sitting back down.

"It is my goal to remove the Statute of Secrecy—" Leandro's booming laugh drowned out the rest of what she had to say.

"You'll be wasting yours and everyone else's time on that one little girl." He said, his voice thick with condescension.

bulging and becoming bloodshot, his mouth gasping for air that never came. Eventually, the red colouring made way for purple as his feet started to jerk, and most unfortunately, a horrid smell began to fill the room - the smell of defecation.

"Oh god." A chorus of disgusted sounds came from the four of them as they blocked their noses and tried to turn away from it, to escape it. Then, it all just stopped. He was still and very, very dead.

Draco rushed to the door and pulled it open for everyone to escape the room, slamming the door shut behind them, all of them breathing in the fresh air of the basement's corridor. "Fucking hell, that was rancid." Hermione spluttered. "How the hell are we going to get rid of him now? Cause I am not going back in there." Hermione questioned.

Draco grimaced. "How do you feel about cremation?" He asked, looking at Ginny expectantly.

Ginny snorted. "Like it's an amazing idea if you want to set the chateau on fire."

"I'll take that risk." Draco deadpanned back.

"Don't be ridiculous. Can't Zimmy help?" Hermione suggested hopefully.

Gasps came from both Blaise and Draco simultaneously. "Hermione Granger! Are you suggesting we abuse our poor senior elf?"

Hermione gave them a pointed look. "Would you rather deal with it yourself?"

Blaise grimaced. "Fair point. Zimmy?"

The small elderly elf popped up out of the ground and glared at them. "The bodies is already gone. You owes Zimmy a bag of Skittles." The grumpy little elf looked up at them. "Sour ones this time, the big bagsies."

"Consider it done. Thank you, Zimmy." Blaise bowed to the creature, who huffed in annoyance and popped away again. Hermione stared at the man, waiting for an explanation he hadn't given.

"Theo discovered Skittles a few years ago. It started as a bribing technique, but it's quickly become a 'bonus', if you will, when the more unsavoury jobs arise, and even when they haven't." Draco said, seeing her face.

Hermione tried to imagine the little elf eating Skittles and snorted. "Okay, well, you probably should have told us that. I've been getting him to clean for me for weeks."

"Oh well, yeah, you probably owe him a bag then too. Don't worry; he will invoice you when he feels it's time."

"He'll...invoice me," Hermione repeated.

"Yep. Anyway, what do you say we all go out to dinner to celebrate?" Draco straightened. "Daphne is going crazy, and I'm pretty sure she is going to murder Pansy

if we don't do something to get her out of that room. We could even see if we can't break Astoria out for a few hours, get her and Theo out of the hospital?" He slid closer to Hermione and grabbed at her waist, pulling her to him. "Little wining and dining... early night in..." He whispered the last part suggestively.

"I shall go let Daphne know," Blaise said, looking at his wife for a while. His dark brown eyes slid over to Hermione and then to Draco, giving him a tip of his head.

Draco mercifully seemed to pick up on the message that Blaise was trying to portray because he cleared his throat. "I'll go see what I can do on the hospital front." Placing a kiss to the top of Hermione's head before he and Blaise strolled away down the hall.

Ginny rolled her eyes and shook her head. "Blaise is worried about me," she said, turning inward to bump her shoulder against Hermione's as they began a slow, meandering pace back toward the stairs.

"Because of Ronald?" Ginny nodded. Hermione eyed her best friend to make her own assessment. "Why?"

"I think he expected a reaction from me, even just a little one." Ginny sighed, rubbing her fingers through her hair. "But I kind of just feel... There is a tiny part of me, buried way down deep, that feels some type of loss. He was still blood family, but I wouldn't say I'm sad about it. He made his choice, and I made mine. I knew his death was coming the moment we left Dartmoor that day."

Hermione nodded and waited in silence as they climbed the stairs out of the basement, a hidden door at the side of the main staircase disguised as panelling being their escape from the lower level. Hermione had passed it a hundred times before she had seen its first use, and it was during Harry's temporary imprisonment that she learned of its existence.

"Come help me get ready," Hermione said, leading the way up to her room. She had been spending noticeably more and more time in Draco's room as of late. On the occasions she didn't, Hermione often woke up to him curled around her after having crept in during the night. It should have been alarming the way he would appear beside her, and she wouldn't wake at all, but she was choosing to see it as a sign that she innately knew he was safe. Plus, she always slept better when he was around anyway.

Hermione grabbed a packet of cigarettes off her bedside table and offered one to Ginny, who took one with a small smile. The patio was cool, the colder weather had started settling in hard and fast, and a breeze that had been sweet and summery only a few weeks ago now sent shivers down her spine. The sun had been replaced by grey, overcast skies. Hermione found a spot near the wall of her patio closest to Ginny's

"Oh, don't worry, the tab for your stay will be covered under the war relief fund," Rayvenne explained. The witch reminded her a little of Luna; she had the same sweet disposition and dreamy expressions. It had been one of the reasons why she had advised Tom to hire her to manage displaced citizens - her demeanour would be reassuring to an already suspicious crowd. "And depending on how long was left on the lease, then the only thing we will need to worry about is finding a way to get you back in stock..."

Rayvenne's voice trailed off as they drifted out of earshot. "There, see? I didn't scare her off." Draco smirked smugly.

"Hermione!" Theo called, jogging down the street toward her again; his pink boots prevented him from running very fast, though it didn't stop him from needing a minute to catch his breath while he leant against his knees though. "There you are. Bloody hard woman to track down." He panted. "Louis stopped by the hospital looking for you. He said you and Gin needed to go see him and Renaud as soon as possible."

Hermione's heart started thumping in her chest. Renaud was casual in the way he handled business with her, treating her more like an old friend than a new business acquaintance so for him to want to see them so urgently, it had to be big. "I—" Hermione looked around, they had so much to do here still before the day would be through. "Right now?"

Theo smirked at her, "It must be so hard being popular." He joked.

Hermione poked her tongue out at him, "Yeah, well, you wouldn't know."

Theo made a dramatic stumbling motion with his hand over his chest, "You wound me, Princess."

The apothecary was restored to its former glory, and the jewellers next door was halfway done before she managed to get away. Ginny met her on the back patio as she arrived at the Chateau. "Any idea what this is about?" she asked.

Hermione shook her head before they were away again, Draco and Blaise following behind them. "No, but I suppose there's only one way to find out," she mumbled as they landed in the foyer of the building that housed the French ministry offices. By now, Renaud's staff knew who she was and didn't bat an eye when she walked through to his main office.

Celine, his secretary, waved them on through without looking up from her paper, still Hermione felt it was polite to knock before barging in. "Ah, here she is," Renaud said with excitement. In his office sat two official looking wizards in fine robes decorated with brightly coloured embroidery, neither of whom looked familiar to her. Louis was standing in the corner behind Renaud with a warm smile on his face.

that Tom had very little interest in but had spent a great deal of time claiming to care about was restoring leases to rightful owners where possible. It was a good look for the PR front.

"It was the florist's, Flo's Flowers," the witch whispered. Hermione looked at the newly finished building, its sign had been repaired and rehung, a wooden sign, painted green with white writing and little decorative flowers in the corners. It was only a small slither of a store, shoved in between the post shop and the apothecary.

"And where is your mother?" Hermione turned back to the witch, dirt covering her clothes and exposed skin. The witches' eyes turned distant and sad. "Oh I see, I'm sorry."

"She was caught in the fires that those people who attacked the other month set. Seven years, we laid low, we kept out of everyone's way and stayed alive, only for her to die because they didn't like who the Wizengamot appointed Minister..." She whimpered as she explained.

Beside her, Draco lost his aggressive stance. "My name is Draco Malfoy, and this is Hermione Granger."

"Faelynn, my mother was Flora." Faelynn nodded.

"Nice to meet you. Have you been living in the shop?" Draco asked in a hushed tone. Faelynn hesitated but eventually nodded. "Okay, well. Why don't we go get you put up in a room at the Leaky for now? We can have Rayvenne help you get back in there as quickly as possible...assuming you want to still be a florist?"

Faelynn stared at him in shock. "I... I can keep the store?"

"Well, there are technicalities that we will need to check, obviously, but wherever possible, we are trying to minimise the turnover. Our primary goal is to keep leases where possible - if you were working there with your mum before the war and wanted to keep the lease active, then we would be happy to help you see it through." Hermione explained.

Draco waved over a tall woman with blue hair and green eyes. "Rayvenne, this is Faelynn. Her mother was Flo of Flo's flowers." Rayvenne beamed and smiled at Faelynn. "We are going to put her in a room at the Leaky. Can you please help her with whatever she needs?"

"Of course, lovely to meet you!" Rayvenne began to lead Faelynn down the street towards the Leaky Cauldron, guiding her gently by the arm. "My father used to buy flowers from your store before the war. It was the highlight of my mother..."

"Wait." Faelynn looked around to find Hermione and Draco in a panic. "I don't have any money..." she said, her cheeks flaming in embarrassment.

room and sunk down to the ground, leaning against it where they would be sheltered from the wind.

Ginny slid down beside her and sighed in relief as she exhaled, examining the cigarette intensely. "I'm not sad he is dead," she declared firmly. "I'm sad that he was never who he should have been. George would have knocked Harry into next week if he had found out he was cheating; he would have done the same to Ron when he snapped your wand. He didn't sit by and let people openly talk shit about us - he didn't openly talk shit about us...He never would have stood by while Harry..." Ginny let her head fall to the side and looked at Hermione with a quiet acceptance. "Ronald was supposed to be my brother, but he just stopped. A long time ago. I'm not sad he is dead. I'm sad he wasn't my brother to begin with."

Hermione nodded, offering her pinky out to the redhead who exhaled a tiny laugh and took it with her own. Hermione's magic pulsed through her and buzzing across the surface of her skin and transferring to Ginny's, a promise of solidarity, to be by her side, always. A promise she had made a thousand times over the years. "The level of stupidity in some people is astounding to me."

Ginny's forehead dipped into a confused frown. "What?"

Hermione exhaled and looked into Ginny's eyes, "I mean, he would have to be, right? To not want to do everything he could to make your life better? I'm not even your sister, and there is nothing I wouldn't do for you because of who you are as a person. I'm just saying that he must be fucking stupid not to see that."

Ginny bumped her shoulder into Hermione's and rested against it. "Can't keep doing this," Ginny mumbled as she took a deep breath. "Blaise and I are not not trying."

Hermione blinked at her. "What," she laughed. "What does that even mean?"

"We aren't trying for a baby, but we aren't stopping anything from happening either." Ginny shrugged.

Hermione lurched upright. "Wait, are you serious?" She looked at her seriously.

"Yes?" Ginny exhaled slowly. Hermione stared at her, in shock, unsure how the knowledge that one day soon Hermione was going to be an aunt was seemingly not big news. Hermione eyed the cigarette as Ginny put it to her mouth again with narrowing eyes before reaching out and snatching it from the witch, who straightened. "Hey!" Ginny snapped.

Hermione threw it away on the ground in annoyance. "If I had known that, then I would never have offered you one!"

Ginny rolled her eyes. "Dramatic much? I'm not pregnant yet."

Hermione shook her head. "Nope. Not risking it," she dismissed, vanishing her own smoke too and climbing to her feet. "Come on, you can pick out my outfit while I shower. I'm pretty sure anywhere that lot is likely to take us would frown upon me being covered in someone else's blood."

And there was a lot of it, apparently, if the water in the bottom of her shower was anything to go by. She hadn't realised the extent of how much of Kingsley's blood had gotten on her, dried, and become stuck to her skin, but washing it off felt like starting over. Finally, she could sink into the depths of this new life without worrying about retaliation from the beasts lurking below the surface.

Her skin was nearly raw by the time she felt she had scrubbed it all clean of the sticky residue, her hair sweet and smelling of vanilla and raspberry. Ginny had dressed into a black chiffon dress that finished just past her knees with long sheer sleeves and a pinched waist by the time Hermione had emerged from the shower. A knee-length, form-fitting, glittery grey dress with a nice black dress jacket was waiting for her. "Get dressed, and I'll do your hair," Ginny mumbled as she did her own.

By the time they made their way downstairs, everyone was showered, dressed and waiting in the sitting room, casually lounging about and chatting while the wireless played softly in the background. Astoria and Theo brightened as Hermione and Ginny walked in. "Hi, guys!" Astoria sang cheerfully.

"You have been broken free, I see." Hermione smiled.

Astoria shrugged. "I have been given an overnight pass, but if there are any issues, I have to go back. I've been given strict rules to follow, not to get too excited or drink any alcohol or to get too cold." The blonde witch rolled her eyes. "Or do anything that resembles living."

Hermione scoffed. "Well, I, for one, am thrilled to see you." Her eyes shifted to Draco, who was eying her with appreciation. There was just something about the way his white dress Oxford shirt sleeves were rolled halfway up his arm, exposing the black snake on his forearm and the unbuttoned collar that melted her insides like lava. Their eyes clashed, and she could see the fire burning beneath the surface, his presence jumping into her mind and caressing the edges seductively.

Hermione bit her bottom lip and fought the smirk of anticipation as she sat on Astoria's other side. "How are you feeling?"

"Alive. They keep pumping me full of potions that are helping my organs to regenerate, but it's slow going. I can't feel it anymore, the curse. It felt thick in my veins, but I didn't know that's what it was until it was gone. I owe you my life, Hermione Granger." She finished seriously with her eyes glistening with unshed tears.

Hermione turned around and whacked Draco lightly in the stomach. "Seriously. If you're not going to behave, you can go home. You are not helping our image, sulking and broody and intimidating everyone. We are trying to get people to trust us, remember, to trust Tom? It's not going to help if you're following me around like a feral guard dog."

"Oh, I am, am I?" Draco smirked and pulled her in against him, a cheeky smirk taking residence on his face. "Maybe if you would stop trying to die on me—" Hermione rolled her eyes at his dramatics and silenced him with her hand over his mouth, to which Draco raised an eyebrow.

"Enough. You make it sound like a daily occurrence, and I'm sick of hearing it. I am fine; I am alive and well and getting pissed off with you treating me like I'm about to drop dead in the street," she said quietly.

Draco's face softened. "I can't help it..." He mumbled behind her hand. "Ginevra isn't here. If someone attacks..."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Relax, would you? I don't think even Kingsley or Ron are stupid enough to attack in front of reporters." Hermione peered into a shop beside her; despite the front windows being smashed, what had once been Fred and George's joke shop remained relatively untouched. Apparently, it wasn't something many people sought supplies from. George was listed as one of Diagon Alley's previous tenants who had fled the country, and his role within the Order had been minimal enough that he seemed to have slipped under the radar. At least for now - the truth would likely come to light when they dug deeper into it. She hoped that wherever George was, he was staying out of trouble.

"I can't help but worry." Draco's voice allowed some of the vulnerability to come through.

Hermione took his hand and led him down the street, meandering slowly and observing as glass was repaired and stones put back into the walls they had fallen from. "Psst. Excuse me miss?" A nervous-looking woman whispered from the shadows. Draco immediately straightened, but Hermione shot him a warning glare before he could scare away the young lady who had no doubt been living it rough if her appearance was anything to go by.

"Yes? Can I help you?" Hermione asked with a small smile, stepping closer to her.

"I was just..." The witch eyed Draco warily, and Hermione shot him another warning glance. "I was just wondering... what will happen to my mother's shop?"

Hermione brightened, "Oh. Which one was your mother's shop?" Hermione scanned the buildings as if there would be a woman waiting for her. One of the things

"Have you heard Miss Granger's proposal, Minister?" Jen tilted her head, her brown hair framing the glasses the witch wore.

"Not only have I heard of it, but France has already voted unanimously in favour of it." Renauld smiled proudly back at the Swedish Minister.

"Unanimously? It has?" Jen seemed a little thrown off by that knowledge.

Renauld nodded. "I believe that Portugal, Columbia and Spain have all reviewed the information Hermione provided them recently and have already decided on their vote as well."

Hermione's eyes widened, her head whipping around to look at the man who she had come to consider a friend in surprise. "They have?"

Renauld straightened "Yes, sorry, I thought they had found you already. I was talking to them all earlier, and they mentioned they were hoping to discuss the outcome with you tonight."

Hermione inflated with anticipation, trying to get a read on Ren's face, the smile appeared promising. "Well that's brilliant!" Hermione exclaimed.

"I must say, it has rather sparked my interest. You said you will be providing information folders?" Jen asked cautiously.

"Yes." Hermione smiled, "They will be distributed at the end of the evening as each person leaves."

"Then I shall look forward to reading it." Jen Svensson smiled somewhat stiffly, giving a tip of her head in acknowledgement and strolling away.

Hermione waited until she was out of earshot before she spun on Renauld. "Do they all really have answers for me?!" Hermione bounced with excitement. It was amazing to know that she already had France and Ireland behind her, but if she could get a few more in the bag, then she would feel a lot less panicky about the fact that in three weeks time, they would be going before the International Confederation board where her petition would be heard. She only had three countries in support and at least the same number again as being against it.

The absence of Alessia did not go unnoticed by Hermione, nor did the absence of the Turkish Magical President, Emir Tasci, who had not been very receptive to her so far. "Yes, mon ange, they do. I can see that asking you for a dance now would be pointless until you have your answers, so come along; we shall go find them."

The gentlemen in question were lounging about in their chairs at their table, pecking at peanuts that she was almost certain had not been on Astoria's approved menu choices and laughing loudly with one another. Nicolau smiled brightly at her approach. "Eh! There she is. See, lads, I told you we would find her eventually." The man

chuckled, perhaps a little inebriated - if the empty whiskey glasses were anything to go by.

The Colombian President chuckled. "Ignore him, Miss Granger; he cannot hold his liquor." Baltasar teased, seemingly just as drunk though.

Jon Peris, the Spanish Prime Minister, indicated for her to sit and join them. "We were looking for you earlier, but we found the bar instead," he explained with a bashful smile and a slight hiccup.

"Oh?" Hermione laughed, the three of them reminded her of three drunk uncles one might see in a sitcom, "I suppose that is a worthy distraction."

"We have news for you," Baltasar started. "It has been the consensus of the Colombian government that we are in favour of your proposal and hereby offer our support to the cause."

Hermione straightened up and beamed. "Oh, President Baltasar, that is brilliant! Thank you so much!"

"Here, here!" Nicolau and Jon both cheered loudly, raising their glasses and sloshing them slightly.

Baltasar shook his head in amusement. "Drunken fools, the both of you."

"You are one to talk!" Jon hiccuped. "You were the one that needed to sit down, if I recall."

"You do not recall, Jon; this idiot stumbled into the table and fell into a chair." Baltasar jabbed his thumb at Nicolau.

Jon looked to be thinking very hard about it before roaring with laughter. "That's right!"

Nicolau looked outraged. "Hey! It attacked me."

Hermione giggled in amusement. She should probably arrange for their portkeys home to be distributed to their guards sooner rather than later. They would all no doubt be feeling their hangovers tomorrow. Nicolau jumped at the sound of her laugh. "Oh! Hermione! There you are! We were looking for you!"

"Yes, she knows that." Jon chuckled and shook his head.

"I wanted to let you know that the President and I are in agreement to sign the petition." The Portuguese minister slurred.

"Spain, too." Jon hiccuped again.

"That is wonderful news, you three. Thank you so much!" Hermione clapped her hands together.

Behind her, Renauld chuckled. "Gentlemen, would you mind terribly if I stole Miss Granger for a dance?"

Nicolau waved her off excessively, accidentally smacking Jon in the face, who, after a moment of shock, burst into joint laughter with Nicolau. "Not at all, not at all. Save a dance for me, would you?" Baltasar cried out.

"Of course, President." Hermione grinned and slipped away with Reanuld toward the dance floor, catching Astoria on the arm on her way past the witch, who was seemingly having the time of her life gossiping away with a group of witches. "Could we please organise the portkeys to find their way to Nicolau, Jon, and Baltasar's guards shortly? Tell them there is no pressure, but it seems their bosses are not far from passing out." Hermione whispered into the blonde's ear, who giggled and nodded.

Reanuld twirled her out before spinning her back into him, keeping the positions of his hands much more professional than last time. "Congratulations." The wizard smiled at her warmly.

"Thank you, Ren. Your support throughout all of this has been amazing." Hermione smiled at him. Her eyes landed on that of Louis, watching them protectively from the outskirts of the room. She gave him a small nod of acknowledgement that he returned with a half smile.

"Nonsense. The only support I have given you has been what you have earned. If not for you, I would not still have Louis, and if it had been your British minister to approach me, then I likely would have turned him away. It was the insight to the brilliance that is your mind that led me here." Reanuld said as he twirled them around habitually. Hermione didn't know the steps, but she found she didn't need to when Ren guided her the way he did.

"Do you want kids?" Hermione asked suddenly.

His eyes twinkled in understanding. "I did see that part of your proposal, Hermione. I was rather intrigued; I won't deny it. However, I think that perhaps our lives are too secretive and chaotic at this stage for Louis and me to think about children."

Hermione hummed in understanding. "Yes, Pansy said something similar." Hermione mentioned casually. It wasn't quite how that conversation had gone with her housemate but perhaps the seed would implant itself in the depths of his brain and should they choose so, they could reach that conclusion on their own.

"And you?" Reanuld challenged.

Hermione shook her head. "Not in the cards for me."

"And your wizard knows that?" Reanuld looked far away over her shoulder. Hermione turned her head and saw Draco watching her, not in a rage of jealousy this time but as if he was admiring a classic painting. Blush rose in her cheeks, and the butterflies flipped.

Astoria, who, following her release, demanded that their first stop be the ministry to begin preparations, had really pulled off a spectacular feat. Hermione doubted that the ministry had ever looked so good. Silvery, shimmering stars glistened overhead, an enchantment that outdid the Hogwarts Great Hall by a mile. Black circular rugs had been placed under tables, and silver and black fabric draped along the walls gave it a less cold and sterile feel. Floating crystal chandeliers cast a white glow around the room, while grouped pillars of candles in the centre of each table softened the contrast.

In the corner, a small group played musical instruments while people in all white carried around trays of canapés and flutes of champagne. The room was bustling with the noise of various leaders from around the world, and Hermione had to hand it to her - Astoria had pulled it off. Even the seating chart took into consideration which leaders were in conflict, keeping them as far apart as possible and grouping countries that were considered allies together.

Not that Hermione suspected that anyone would go so far as to cause a fuss here, but all parties had been required to commit to a temporary peace treaty while in attendance anyway. "...I think it is the next logical step for our population. This isn't the 1700s; muggles aren't burning people at the stake anymore, and realistically, I believe that the benefits to each side outweigh the need for secrecy. It made sense then when Muggles were still stuck in their advancement, but surely you have seen where they have ended up, Minister Svensson."

Jen Svensson, Swedish Minister for Magic, hummed in thought. "While that is true, I believe that this requires more thought than to be rushed through; what is the hurry?"

"I will be honest with you: I personally would have preferred to take my time to meet with each country and discuss it in depth, talk about what any concerns for your people might be and what the future would look like for them. However, The International Confederation of Wizards has set a hearing date, as I am sure you are aware, and it was a lot sooner than anticipated. I have, however, provided a folder for everyone with as much information as I thought was relevant to give everyone a chance to look it over before the hearing..." Hermione trailed off as someone approached her.

"Ah, good evening Minister Thibault. How are you?" Jen smiled over Hermione's shoulder.

"Very well, thank you, Minister Svensson. Hermione, as always, lovely to see you." Reanuld smiled at her as he stepped up beside her.

to news outlets around the world, marking the end of a brutal seven-year conflict that has left indelible scars on the magical world.

A copy of the letter, penned by an apparently senior member of the group, was delivered by owl early yesterday morning and read as follows:

“To the Ministry for Magic and the people of the public,

After over two decades of relentless struggle and the pursuit of our vision for a safer world, it is with heavy hearts and weary spirits that we, The Order, collectively announce our decision to disband. Our mission, born of a deep-seated desire for the establishment of a just society free from oppression, has come at a great cost to all parties involved. The suffering inflicted upon our world can no longer be justified, and the time has come to seek a new path.

We recognise the pain and destruction the actions of both sides have caused, and we extend our deepest regrets to those who have suffered. Our intentions, however noble in origin, have led to outcomes that contradict the very principles we sought to uphold. It is in this spirit of reflection that we step away from the fight in hopes that no more unnecessary bloodshed may occur.

To the people of the magical world, we implore you to continue striving for a world where justice, equality, and freedom reign supreme and to think seriously about the kind of place you want to leave behind for our future generations. May our departure serve as a catalyst for renewed dialogue and a new effort towards healing and rebuilding.

Signed,

The Arch-commander of The Order of the Phoenix.”

The implications of this announcement are profound. The Minister called for a ceasefire several months ago, which sparked an attack on Diagon Alley, killing several local residents in a fire. The Order, known for their militant approach to the ministry’s governance, has been a shadow over our community for some time. Which begs the question, does their decision to disband signal a true end to the war and should they be allowed to simply slip away into the shadows if they promise not to do it again?

Reactions to the letter have been mixed. High Commander Draco Malfoy welcomed the news, expressing hope for a new era of reconciliation and progress. “This is an opportunity for us to finally be able to rebuild and move forward together,” he stated. Conversely, some remain sceptical, questioning the sincerity of The Order’s intentions and warning against complacency. It seems that the old saying is relevant here that only time will tell.

She nodded and turned her attention back to the French minister. “He knows. He suggested we get a dog if the need ever presented itself.”

“If he ever mistreats you, just know that I am willing to turn a blind eye for you.” Renauld offered seriously.

Hermione laughed loudly. “I will keep that in mind.”

The song started to wind down just as Tom approached them. “I was wondering if I could cut in for the next song?” He smiled politely at the French minister.

“Ah, of course.” Renauld withdrew a step and bowed to Hermione before disappearing into the crowd.

Tom was a lot stiffer than Renauld had been but no less friendly toward her. “It seems to have been a successful evening,” he noted.

“Yes, I would say so. Astoria did a great job,” Hermione hummed in agreement.

“I have been hearing a lot of people singing your praises, too,” Tom stated pointedly.

Hermione tipped her head in thought. “Perhaps, but I still think that there’s a lot of resistance. We may need to prepare for more infiltration in a few places,” she whispered in a hushed tone.

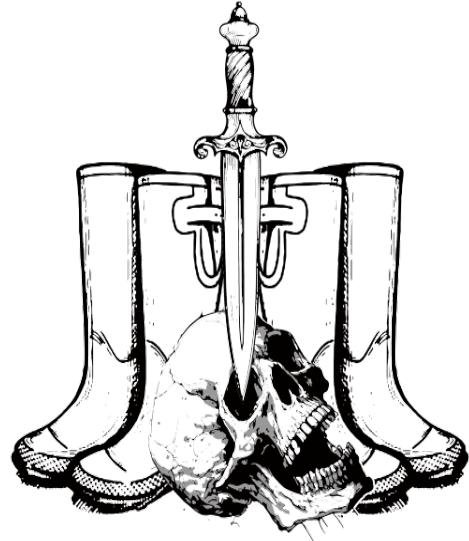
Tom scanned their surroundings carefully. “I just received word that Italy has called for a vote of no confidence.”

Hermione gasped, “That’s brilliant!”

“I believe I have swayed Germany and Thailand to come on board as well,” Tom noted with a puffed-up sense of pride.

Hermione smiled at him genuinely. “This is going to happen, Tom, you watch, then we just need to work on elevating your position again and again until you are the forefront of every decision the world makes.”

“With you on my side I have no doubts.” Tom praised before twirling her around under the watchful eye of almost every world leader in attendance.



CHAPTER 52: A GALA AND THREE DRUNKEN UNCLES

The terrorist group The Order gives its official notice of surrender following Minister Riddle's increasing success.

In an unexpected move that has stunned both ministry officials and reporters alike, the radical rebel group known as The Order has announced its decision to disband and cease all hostilities. This declaration comes via an anonymous letter sent

The others jogged to catch up to her. It almost felt too easy to roam the halls again. The occasional ghost would pass her by, raving about how much better the castle was now that it was repaired; one or two, she recognised as people who had lost their lives at the battle. “Do you think they will hire old Professor Binns as the History of Magic teacher again?” Ginny groaned out loud.

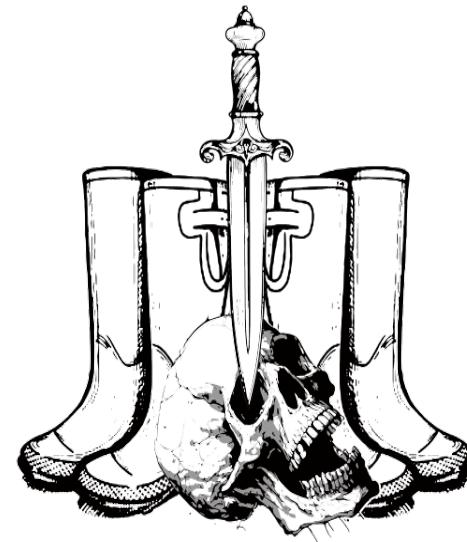
“I would say he would be rather offended if they didn’t, given that the whole reason he didn’t pass on was because he wasn’t done teaching. Besides, it’s a professor they don’t need to pay - which, right now, isn’t a bad thing considering how much money has gone into repairing the community and business loans and whatnot.” Draco answered, looking around the halls.

Hermione was sure the school felt so much larger the last time she had been here. She wasn’t any taller now than she had been then, but she felt bigger somehow. Before, the war had been predominantly fought within these walls for her. She had been a different sort of young than she was now, a more innocent and naive version of herself that still believed in the good triumphing over evil. Now she understood there was no such thing, only those with power and those with the desire to take it. That version of Hermione would never have even considered ending a life, but that version of her was dead, rightfully so.

“When we were here the other week overseeing the building repairs, I kept waiting to see Fred. I imagined he would have been here floating around and causing chaos with Peeves, getting into all sorts of mischief, but I can’t even find Peeves.” Ginny opened the doors to the Great Hall, and it was like stepping back in time. The gaping hole that had been in the wall on one side of the room was solid once more, and the ceiling overhead glistened with the same enchantments it always had. Tables and benches had been righted, and though empty, you never would be able to tell that there had once been over a hundred dead bodies lining the rows. Now, they all just stood there in the middle of the hall, looking at it as though it had never happened. In a few weeks, a train full of students would be travelling here for a catch-up year, and come next September, the school would be operational as normal.

“Feels strange, doesn’t it?” Ginny said. “To think this once felt like home?”

“I don’t know... I know what home feels like now, and this wasn’t it.” Hermione offered her a smile.



CHAPTER 53: THE VOTE

It had been a gruelling four hours so far. The hearing room was so large that the warming charms kept shorting out every twenty minutes or so, and given that it was in a large castle that was made of stone, it made for a tedious task of continuously restoring them.

“The United Kingdom votes in favour of the petition.” Tom spoke loudly and clearly, the signatures required for the petition floating into the pile of ‘for’.

“Serbia does not support this notion,” an elderly old man snapped, sending his papers, unsigned, toward the ‘against’ pile.

"Monaco does not support." Another page drifted over to join the rest.

One witch on the hearing committee looked smug about that fact. They had not been very impressed with the petition being brought forward, and Prudence Grimwood had made it clear that she least of all supported this motion.

"Bulgaria agrees to the abolishment." A gruff-looking wizard voted. Hermione's heart was pounding in her chest. The majority of the hearing so far had been her arguing the case on why this was a necessary course of action for their world to take. She had been grilled on her stance on muggle rights and how she could possibly be opposed to the obliviation of muggles when she had Obliviated her own parents.

"Cyprus are against." Each 'no' vote had a sinking feeling of dread growing in her stomach. It was going to be so close, and she was losing confidence in her ability to pull this off. The last few weeks had been a nightmare of meetings after meetings, answering questions that nearly every country had about their proposal, and while she hated every minute of it, she knew it had to be done. They needed to get this across the finish line because she couldn't wait another five years to do this again.

"Germany is for." Draco slid his hand over to her and gripped her thigh. She knew it was an attempt at reassurance, but she was too wound up right now for it to have much impact.

Hermione did a quick count in her head; her heart dropped, and she sunk in defeat. The deciding decision would come down to one vote - a vote that she already knew the answer for. Because of those who remained, she knew whose votes she could count on; they had already pledged their support, but it would mean that the deciding vote would come down to Italy.

Alessia, despite her own impending vote of no confidence, was still the elected official, and she had never looked so sour as she did now sitting there in the stands. She had not stopped glaring daggers at Hermione since she had walked into the hearing room that morning. Alessia couldn't prove Hermione had caused the damage to her career, but she was fairly certain. She wasn't wrong. Hermione had no regrets about what she had done, and she had tried to remain optimistic in the sense that if the vote came back as a no today, she would have the opportunity to plant the necessary changes within certain governments to guarantee the passing vote when she came back in five years time. It would just be exhausting trying to maintain the control they had already gained over the last few months over that length of time.

America, New Zealand, Portugal, Spain and Columbia all voted in favour of removing the Statute of Secrecy. Hermione sighed. "We've lost." She whispered under her breath.

"Oh, well, that's great!" Hermione smiled awkwardly, sensing the tension from the older witch. "I didn't realise you were."

"Let me make myself clear, Hermione. I am not sure what has gone on since I left," Her eyes roaming over to Draco and the other branded Death Eaters, "but I have no interest in whatever game you are playing at. My interest is in shielding yet another generation from becoming mindless puppets." Andromeda lowered her voice to a hiss as she stepped closer to Hermione.

"Mindless puppets?!" Ginny snapped beside her.

"I will not stand by and let it happen again with Teddy's generation. Do you understand me?" The underlying threat in Andromeda's voice did not go unnoticed by Hermione, who stared back at her in mild annoyance.

"If you will remember correctly, Andromeda, it was not my generation who started this war. I want nothing more than for it to be over. This isn't some nefarious plot to brainwash children, we are simply trying to rebuild society."

"I don't believe you." Andromeda hissed through gritted teeth

"Watch yourself, Aunty," Draco warned quietly, but Andromeda ignored him.

"No one asked you to." Hermione snarled back. "But before you start flinging around accusations that you know nothing about, it might interest you to know that I am trying to make this world a better place, trying to end the bloody war. It's all good and well for you, you left. You ran away, and I understand why, okay, I do, but you don't get to come in here now and start criticising me for staying and finding a way out of the hell hole that had become our country." Hermione glared back at the woman in annoyance. "Perhaps you should have done your research before coming back. The Order has been the one keeping this war going far longer than what was necessary; I'm just fulfilling a prophecy. Pleasure to see you again."

Hermione turned and stalked away from the witch. It wasn't much of a pleasure, truth be told, but Hermione understood why Andy was behaving the way she was. She had left the country with little to no trust in anyone from either side. She had trusted the Order to keep her husband safe, and he had been hunted down. She trusted the Order to keep her daughter safe, and she had died hand in hand with Remus. Her friends had all died or been driven to insanity, and all she had left was Teddy, but it didn't mean Hermione needed to stand around and listen to her bullshit threats. As if she wouldn't be able to kill Andromeda in the blink of an eye if she wanted to... but three dead former headmasters, killed while on the job, might be a bit much for applicants to overlook.

"Ugh." Ginny scoffed, "Didn't you spend enough time in this hellhole?"

Draco shrugged. "I don't think I got the chance to truly appreciate it while I was here."

"I'll come with you." Hermione smiled.

"That's what she said," Theo mumbled under his breath before tilting his head and looking at the castle. "Do we know who the new headmaster is?"

She shook her head. "No, I left it entirely up to the Magical Education Department."

"It's odd that they haven't announced it though, right?" Ginny asked as the group turned and slowly began to wander back inside.

"Maybe they haven't filled the position yet?" Blaise theorised.

"Wanted: Headmaster for Magical boarding school, position vacant due to death of the previous two as well as the Deputy Headmistress and a multitude of teachers. Will need to be experienced as the school has just reopened after seven years of being a war-stricken wasteland, as it was used as a battlefield where a lot of people died - see aforementioned Headmaster. You will be required to deal with several years' worth of students who have had limited or no education and will likely be distrustful of the staff and your authority as the last facility was run by insane, curse-happy psychopaths," Theo rattled off with a grin.

"I don't know what you mean; it sounds like a great position." Blaise shrugged with a snicker.

"Yeah, well, let's hope whoever the new Headmaster is doesn't think it a good idea to store three-headed dogs in corridors or think it appropriate to let the school remain open should another basilisk start roaming the halls." Hermione drawled as they strolled through the great entrance.

"I assure you I will not." A stern voice sounded behind them. Hermione and Ginny spun at the familiar voice. The tall, thin woman with curls as wild as her sisters, though better contained, stood before them.

"Andromeda." Hermione gasped. "You're the new Headmistress?"

"I am." The witch eyed each of them individually with suspicion. The last she had seen of Andromeda was the night after the battle of Hogwarts, where she had gathered up her belongings and fled with her grandson Teddy. Claiming that she wanted nothing to do with the bloody war; it had taken everything from her, and she would not let it take Teddy, too. Minerva had pleaded with her to think of the Order, but Andy had made up her mind, Order be damned. Now she stood tall before them, looking down her nose ever so slightly at their group and no doubt judging each of them.

Draco's hand squeezed her thigh sympathetically, slipping into her mind in an attempt to offer her reassurance. "It will be okay; we will have more time to prepare next time." Draco sighed. Hermione didn't know what to say. She knew he was trying to help, but right now, she just felt an overwhelming feeling of defeat.

It just all felt never-ending. While the war and this petition were not connected, she had formed a correlation to them in her head. As such, without both victories, it felt as though she had neither - and the thought of remaining so heavily in politics for the next five years was exhausting.

"Italy..." Alessia's eyes locked with hers across the room. "Supports the decision." She snarled reluctantly. Hermione's jaw dropped; surely she had misheard.

"What did she say?" Hermione breathed, leaning forward. Alessia's papers floated across the room and landed gracefully on top of those in favour of the petition. Hermione's mouth snapped shut, her eyes widened, and her hand reached out to grab at both Draco and Ginny's arms, her fingertips digging into their flesh with what she imagined was enough force to draw blood.

"The council has heard the majority vote in favour of abolishing the Statute of Secrecy. We will be taking a brief intermission while the council deliberates," Prudence snapped angrily, banging the gavel and storming out the side door. Her colleagues, in varying degrees of intrigue, annoyance, and excitement, followed after her.

Hermione whipped around to look at Draco and then Ginny. "What the fuck just happened. Which one of you did something?" Hermione hissed, a little accusatory.

Ginny grimaced and unfurled Hermione's fingers from her arm and patted the top of her hand in a show of condescending comfort before shaking out her own arm, which did, in fact, have angry red half-moon circles indented into her flesh. "She said," Ginny started with a sigh of relief, "That majority is in favour. You hit your sixty percent. And I didn't do anything, so don't look at me."

Hermione spun around to Draco, who endured her iron grip without complaint. "I didn't do anything. Love. Scouts honour."

Leaders from around the world shuffled out of the hearing room to stretch their legs for the first time since the session had begun. Hermione caught sight of Alessia among them and jumped up to follow her, catching up to her just as the witch turned down the corridor towards the restroom. "Why did you vote in favour? We would have lost if you had said no."

Alessia sighed deeply and turned, tilting her head toward the ceiling in annoyance as she did so. "You have been nothing but a pain in my side for months now. I will likely

be voted out of parliament next month, and if that happens, I know you will have someone planted on the inside to replace me.”

“That doesn’t explain why you voted yes.” Hermione shook her head, not following the Italian witches’ reasoning.

“I do not like you, nor do I approve of your methods. I can appreciate, however, that some of your arguments make sense, and I can see how some of your proposals warrant further exploration. You are not at all how Kingsley described you to be and exactly as dangerous as he said at the same time.” Alessia glowered at her.

Hermione’s heart started pounding in her chest. “Wait... what?”

“I assume your Prophet received our letter okay?” Alessia seemed to find a small victory in the shock on Hermione’s face and no doubt on Ginny and Draco’s as well. “I did not know of the prophecy when I met you. In the event of his death, Kingsley had safeguards in place. His journals transferred into my possession. I do not approve of you, Miss Granger, but I have to trust the process and trust that the good I have seen come from that monster in there is only the beginning. I will find a way to remain in power, and I will be keeping an eye on you - on all of you. Now, if you’ll excuse me...” Alessia turned and strolled away, leaving Hermione reeling with the information she had been given.

“I...” Hermione turned to Ginny and Draco in surprise. “I don’t even know what to say to that.” Hermione threw her arms out to the side.

“Who knew killing Kings would have been the final nail in the coffin for the Order, too.” Ginny raised an eyebrow and tracked the retreating Italian.

“Come on, we should be there when the committee comes back,” Draco said, his hand reaching out to sit at her lower back and guiding her back to the hearing room and to their seats.

“So what happens now?” Ginny asked. “I mean, like, what are they deliberating in there?”

“Technically, they could choose to ignore the majority and vote with the minority,” Draco started. “But it wouldn’t be a good look. Hermione could challenge it and put in a request to have it heard by a second committee for a breach of governing rights, but then everyone would need to vote again. It would probably piss a lot of countries off as well because, by all rights, Hermione has the win here,” Draco explained.

Slowly, the world leaders began to file back into the room and take their seats, some choosing to take up conversation with their neighbours and others choosing to sit and sulk over their vote being the minority.

here today to celebrate. The corridors and classrooms of this school were once filled with the promise of our future’s tomorrow.”

Hermione watched the faces of the crowd who seemed to be hanging on his every word. Many, she was sure, had been sure they would never see these doors reopen.

“The war we are leaving behind us cast us too far into the shadows of uncertainty and fear, and yet, even in the darkest of times, when the Order rebels had us on the back foot, hope never abandoned us. We have rebuilt these walls with the same tenacity and spirit that carried us all through those dark times. The scars of war may remain, but I say to you, wear them with pride - as they are a testament to the resilience of our people. For today, we are not merely here to reopen a school but to reignite a flame, a flame that represents the courage, loyalty, ambition, and pursuit of knowledge found in the foundations of our people and in this school’s students.”

Murmurs of support and agreement flowed over the crowd in a wave, another round of flashing cameras chasing it. Hermione smiled a pleased smile; the anxiety over how well today would be received melted away. “You did a good job with that speech.” Blaise leaned in to whisper to her.

“It is a place where we can celebrate our differences, and the magic within each and every one of us is honed and respected. I won’t take up any more of your time; I know everyone is excited to see for themselves the restoration that has taken place, but I will leave you with this: Hogwarts is not just reopening. It is rising, like a phoenix from the ashes, stronger and more vibrant than before. Together, we will take this horrific part of our history and transform it into a legacy of greatness, one that says we will not be defeated. May the magic within you light the path forward towards a better future. Thank you, and finally, may I say... welcome back to Hogwarts.”

An eruption of applause filled the courtyard and echoed off the stone walls. “That was cheeky.” Blaise raised an eyebrow at her.

Hermione smirked smugly. “I haven’t the faintest idea what you’re talking about.” It had been an argument that had only taken some convincing, the claiming of the phoenix in the wake of his new government. Her reasoning was simple: by stripping the Order of its symbol, it shifted some of the narrative of good back to them. This moment would go down in history, and she hoped that that quote would be among them, blurring the lines between what was once the Order and the actions of the Death Eaters. Combined with the terrorist label that had been listed beside the Order and the positive image that Tom was building, had forever changed their perception. At least, that was the hope.

“Shall we look around?” Draco suggested casually.

"This is not what I had imagined I would be doing with my time when you approached me, Hermione." Tom sighed. The reform to his public reputation had not been an easy transition for him. He still had a natural inclination to just kill whoever argued with him, and the order to refrain had not been an easy one to follow for him.

Hermione reached out and straightened his tie. "I know," she agreed solemnly. "But I, for one, am proud of you, Tom Riddle. You have exceeded my expectations and followed every direction I have given you flawlessly. They are eating out of your hand now and very soon, we can move on to the next stage. It won't be long." She patted his tie down and gave a nod of approval. "There. Perfect." She smiled, meeting his piercing gaze.

"I believe it is you who has exceeded expectations here. Best not keep them waiting." Tom straightened his shoulders and took a deep breath before ducking from the room and into the courtyard where the residents of Hogsmeade, a few patrons who had made the journey, and a series of journalists were waiting. Hermione waited a minute and followed him out, avoiding the main stage and slipping into the shade of a tree next to the podium that had been erected for Tom's speech.

"Everything okay?" Draco asked in a hushed voice as she approached the group.

Hermione raised her eyebrows in agreement. "Yep, he's frustrated, but we're good."

Draco frowned in confusion and slipped into her mind, the safer alternative than discussing it out loud. She let him in and he analysed the conversation that Hermione had had with the Minister, humoring his understanding and slipping from her mind again. "The gala next week will cheer him up, and if not then we can explore... alternative means to keep him satisfied."

"That sounds like you plan to pimp him out," Ginny muttered beneath her breath as she strolled up behind them.

"That is not a thought I want to think about, nor is it what I meant." Draco scowled in disgust. Tom approached the podium, and a flash of lights from the reporters' cameras blurred her vision with their bright lights. His voice portrayed a man of confidence and charm as he smiled widely for the crowd. "Way less creepy now that he has a proper face," Draco mumbled, and Hermione swallowed the chuckle that threatened to surface.

"Welcome, ladies, gentlemen, and esteemed media. Today, we stand on hallowed grounds. Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry stood for centuries as a pillar in our society, leading our ancestors to greatness, which is why, after seven long years of darkness and strife, it is with immense pride and profound joy that we have gathered

All Hermione could do was sit and watch as the second hand ticked around the giant clock on the far wall. Ticking in debate for the future of the wizarding world. Five thousand, two hundred and forty-eight ticks. It was a lot of ticks to sit waiting in limbo to decide if her fight was over, if she could move on and live her life now...

If she had given enough.

The doors opened, and her immediate reaction was relief because Prudence looked as pissed off as Alessia had, and if she was pissed off, it was probably a good indication that she had not gotten what she wanted. "The council has reached a verdict in the case of petition 693-SQV: application to overturn the Statute of Secrecy bill, with a sixty percent majority vote being held globally. The council..." Prudence glowered, "Supports the global consensus and rules that the bill will be overturned"

Cheering rang out through the crowd of those who had voted in favour, but all Hermione could hear was the whooshing of blood in her ears. She had done it. She had fucking done it.

"With the additional condition that all elected officials will form a new provisional council of Unified Nations and will meet bi-monthly to ensure that the success of this ruling is continued. If it is found to be a threat to our society, then the council will submit an appeal to this board immediately." She banged the gavel again. "The hearing may be dismissed."

Hermione couldn't believe it. They had won. Draco guided her through her daze out of the courtroom, nodding their thanks and shared enthusiasms with those who threw congratulations and celebratory remarks their way. He guided her to the portkey point, and Hermione finally snapped to as the pulling sensation at her navel whisked them away to their home in France - landing face to face with her housemates, who were all pacing the dining room anxiously.

"About bloody time!" Pansy shouted, "Well, what happened?!"

"We won," Hermione whispered so quietly she may as well not have spoken at all.

"What was that Princess?" Theo frowned.

Hermione looked up at their anxious faces and smiled. "We won!"

Cheers erupted from the group, and they all started bouncing around in excitement.

"Well, that's it then, we're getting shit-faced!" Astoria chanted, rushing off into the sitting room to start mixing drinks. A moment later, music floated through, and everyone started migrating into the sitting room. Daphne and Pansy flopped down on the couch in the same position that they had been in the first night she and Ginny had arrived in the house.

"Well then, what now?" Theo asked expectantly, perched on the armrest of the sofa.

APOSTASY

“What do you mean?” Hermione asked.

“I mean what’s next on the great agenda of Hermione Granger?”

Hermione stood there for a moment and thought about it. A smile pulled at her lips that continued to grow. “Who knows.”

Drinks started floating their way; Hermione caught hers and recognised it as an excitabull. Draco eyed his own with scepticism, sniffing it and scrunching his nose before taking a cautionary sip.

“Oh, no thanks,” Ginny said, shaking her head as Astoria got ready to send one the redhead’s way. “I can’t drink anymore.”

“What? Why not?” Daphne frowned in confusion.

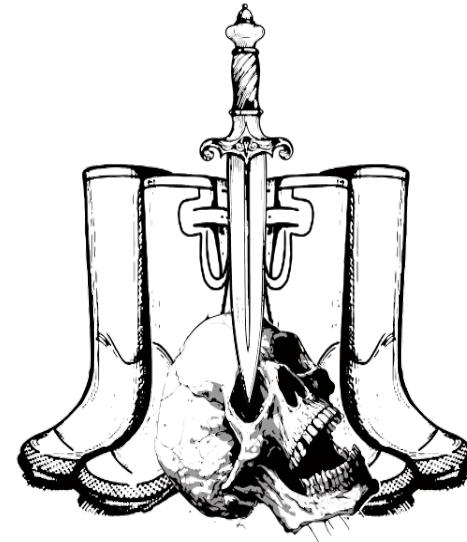
“Oh my god! Are you actually?!” Hermione screeched, spilling some of her drink over the side of her glass. Blaise flexed his hand and vanished the mess.

“Wait, what? What’s happening?” Theo asked.

“I’m pregnant.” Ginny smiled at the group. The shocked silence didn’t last long before everyone started screaming their excitement again.

“We’re having a kid??” Astoria beamed and started jumping up and down. Hermione’s eyes met Ginnys across the chaos of everyone jumping around.

They had done it, the war was over and although they still had a way to go, victory was theirs.



CHAPTER 51: HOGWARTS

Ready?” She gave the man before her an appraising look. Tom was dressed in an all-black fitted suit today, and in just a few minutes, he would be required to go and make a speech and ceremoniously cut the ribbon to the reopening of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. The press had been having a field day about it for the last week, making a lot of speculations about staffing, curriculum, whether or not they would follow the plan that had been provided, and what it would mean for the students who had not been able to attend over the last seven years.

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“Personally, I’m holding out hope that Madam Kronk is alive and kicking somewhere.” Theo grinned.

“The divination store? That old bird was certifiably insane,” Blaise argued.

“Yeah, but her readings were always highly entertaining.”

“They should be, considering the prices she was charging for the utter bullshit she would spout.” Draco laughed from beside her.

“I used to joke that she would be Theo’s second wife.” Astoria laughed and sipped on her coffee.

“Merlin Tor, she was like a hundred and twenty years old,” Pansy exclaimed.

“And also not at all morbid as hell to plan your husband’s second marriage?” Daphne added sarcastically. Astoria grinned and shrugged.

“That’s nothing. You should have heard some of the shit your sister used to say to me.” Theo scoffed, piling some fruit salad on his wife’s plate.

“Well, she’s not going anywhere now,” Daphne said pointedly, giving her sister a filthy look.

“Except Disneyland,” Ginny said casually despite the confused looks from the table.

“Ginny has always wanted to go to Disneyland. It’s her goal for once all this political bullshit is done.” Hermione explained when Ginny failed to.

“It’s not just that. We have family dinners; I vote that once a year, we do a family vacation too. Merlin knows we have all fucking earned it.” Ginny tacked on.

“Does it have to be Disneyland every year?” Pansy queried, “Cause if we’re doing that, I have always wanted to visit Tokyo.”

“When this is all over, we can make a bucket list,” Hermione suggested, waving her fork around in a circular motion.

“What in the fuck is a bucket list?” Ginny frowned.

“You know, like a list of things you want to do before you kick the bucket...” When they all continued to stare at her in confusion, she sighed. “It’s a muggle saying. It’s another way of saying before you die.”

Astoria snorted. “Well, it’s too late for Daphne and me then.” A collective groan sounded around the table. “What! What good is dying if I can’t use it for joke material?” Astoria laughed.

"Yes, and I can plan the gala of the millennia from the comfort of my hospital bed." Astoria declared. Several groans came from her housemates, namely Pansy, Daphne and Draco, but Astoria ignored them, turning her attention to Hermione instead. "Tom is naturally persuasive and incredibly charismatic. He might have forgotten that for a while, but he is getting back to that, thanks to you. Get him together in a room with dozens of other leaders, and combined with all of us singing your subtle praises, you will have countries flocking to follow you two."

"That's not a bad idea, Stori," Blaise said thoughtfully.

"Please say you will let me?" The blonde witch pleaded. "I haven't been able to help anyone in any type of way for a really long time, Hermione, and I am going crazy in that bloody hospital."

"Sure? I don't see why not?" Hermione shrugged, reaching for an English muffin and the scrambled eggs. "I'll let Tom know."

"Really?!" Astoria straightened with a huge smile; Hermione suspected that Astoria needed this more than she had let on. The witch had spent her whole life with the knowledge that she would die at a young age, and for a large portion of those years, she had been too sick to really get much enjoyment out of the life she wanted. "Thank you, you won't regret it."

"I'm thinking that we can hold it at the ministry in the function room; we will need to invite the press, of course," Hermione shared a look with Pansy, who was smirking smugly at her and Daphne, who gave her a look of 'you don't know what you've gotten yourself into.' While Astoria continued to rattle off plans, ideas and things that would need to be done, "Hermione, of course, will need a new gown - and probably all of us, now that I think about it." Hermione shook her head and let her ramble excitedly, glad for the excuse of eating to just nod and hum her agreement on occasion.

"So—" Ginny purposely interjected excitedly, "Who's excited about Diagon Alley being finished this week then?"

"I think the bigger struggle will be filling the shops again, I know the ministry is having a hard time tracking down the owners that are still alive." Daphne rattled off while cutting into her sausage.

Hermione's eyes locked with Ginny's and she knew that the redhead was thinking of George and the joke shop. As far as the ministry was concerned, he had fled the country several years ago and, given his absence from the front lines, that made sense for them to continue to believe. Hermione wasn't sure if he had found his way back after Draco's little portkey incident but perhaps, if he had, he would be able to return to a relatively normal life.

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Astoria was busy placing coffee for everyone around the table while Blaise stirred something in the pan by the stove, Ginny leaning against the counter next to him, gossiping about something or other with Theo. Pansy and Daphne both carted things from the fridge or bench to the table, which was now covered with dishes of sausages, toasted English muffins, bacon, fried mushrooms and tomatoes, fruit salad, yoghurt and poached apple halves that gave off a slight aroma of cinnamon. The wireless had made its usual appearance, playing a soft French song.

“Oh good! I was worried we would have to send a search party.” Ginny teased at Hermione and Draco’s arrival. It had taken her longer to get dressed than she normally would, but it seemed that the night before, Draco had vanished her clothes after their dinner instead of just removing them, so she had to steal one of his t-shirts and a pair of his shorts that only managed to stay up because of the drawstring.

“Very funny. You, Ginevra Zabini, are hilarious.” Hermione drawled, rolling her eyes.

“Oh, someone’s in a mood. Didn’t you do your job properly, D?” Pansy smirked.

“He definitely did,” Hermione stated firmly, grabbing a cup of coffee and adding sugar and cream. “I’m just...drained, I guess... Sorry.” Hermione sighed, sinking into the chair Draco pulled out for her. Blaise tipped the contents of the pan into a large bowl, and everyone moved to sit down. Hermione took a moment to appreciate that they hadn’t been able to sit down and do this at home in far too long. Going out to dinner had been nice, but this was her favourite type of meal.

“An apology from the great Hermione Granger?! Quick, someone mark the calendar!” Theo teased. Hermione flipped him off without so much as a glance his way, instead eying up the scrambled egg that Blaise had just placed down in the centre of the table.

“Cut it out, you lot. Of course she’s tired.” Astoria admonished. “She’s been busy—”

Daphne snorted, “Yeah, being fucked.” Even Hermione chuckled despite the withering look she sent Daphne’s way.

Astoria glared in her sister’s direction. “Saving my life,” she hissed, ignoring the eldest Greengrass. “Fixing Tom and advising him, meeting with leaders around the world all the damn time, and...” Astoria shrugged her shoulders in agreement. “Enjoying some well-earned intimacies... which is why I have decided that I am going to step in and help you as my way of saying thank you.”

“Tor, you have two weeks left in the hospital,” Theo warned in a way that said there would be no debate about it; Astoria would be going back to the hospital by the required ten o’clock check-in.

His hands roamed her body, caressing it and leaving behind a trail of his static energy that clung to her, compounding and building towards some bigger shock.

Draco sat up to take one of her nipples in his mouth, sucking and kissing at the flesh, working his way over her chest, up her neck, and finally pulling her into a searing kiss. One of her hands wove into his hair and tugged lightly at the roots, massaging her fingertips into his scalp while she continued to rock against him. She felt too warm with her approaching orgasm, but the feeling of Draco's cool skin against hers sated her need for just a little while longer. "So beautiful...All mine... forever...In this life and the next." Draco's hushed words sent shivers down her spine.

Her hips had begun to roll against him with more urgency, chasing both hers and Draco's release. He was close; she could feel it by the sporadic movements of his hips and in the heavier way he was breathing. His hand came up to cup her face, and she could feel the love pouring off him and through his kiss and into her. "You're mine, and I'm yours." She gasped right before waves of pleasure began to roll through her, clamping down around him and gripping at his cock, still stroking through her.

A desperate whimper of "Oh fuck, Hermione, baby..." before stuttered a few thrusts up into her and wrapping his arm around her waist, pulling her tight to him with one hand and curling his fingers through her hair with the other, his lips brushing lightly against hers as he let out a choked rasp, heat filling her as he found his own release.

Slightly shaky, he pulled her back down with him still tucked against his chest, stroking her hair and showering the top of her head with needy kisses. "That was a hell of a wake-up call, Love." He mumbled, his vulnerability clear in his voice.

A sharp knock at the door made her jump. "Hey, lovebirds! Time to get up, family breakfast!" Theo's voice called through the wood. The sound of his retreating footsteps followed him down the hallway.

Beneath her, Draco sighed and made no effort to move. "Galleon for your thoughts?" She whispered.

He pressed another kiss to her head. "Spoilers... Just thinking about how much I love you is all."

She turned her head and placed a kiss on his chest. "I love you too... but if we don't get up and get down stairs then we might not make it to the end of the day to continue this."

A low chuckle bubbled up out of him. "Well, we wouldn't want that now, would we?"

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of his chest. She could close her eyes, still her mind, and feel his heart beating against her shoulder. She knew that if it all went to hell tomorrow, she would still have this moment right here.

She shifted onto her side carefully to face him and memorise the hard lines of his face that softened whenever she looked at him. Her fingers moved to carefully sweep the hair away from his face without disturbing him. It was getting longer all the time, and it made her heart lurch proudly, knowing that he was growing it for her. She stretched up and pressed a soft kiss to his lips, barely brushing them, but still, the sparks of electricity flowed through her.

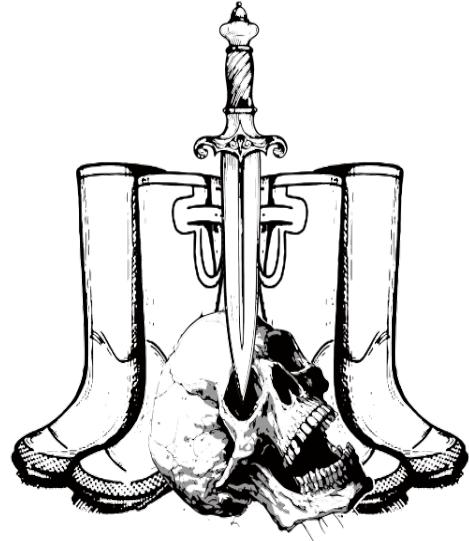
She kissed him again harder this time, and even still predominantly asleep, he responded - pulling her flush against him, his hand spreading across her lower back and holding her firmly, his erection twitching at her front. Her abdomen clenched in anticipation; the man only needed to exist, and she would be ready for him. Draco's hand, which was currently under her head, curled around, his fingers snaking through her hair. A dreamy hum vibrated against her lips while Draco rolled onto his back, taking Hermione with him to lay atop him with her legs clumsily moving to either side of his hips.

Draco deepened their kiss slowly, lazily in his half-asleep state. Hermione's core was pressed right against his erection in all the right ways. She gave a small roll of her hips, coating him in her arousal and causing his mouth to part in a quiet gasp. She repeated the action, but this time rolling far enough forward that she could line the tip up with her entrance and ground downward before sliding back, guiding him into her.

A low groan fell from Draco's lips, his brows pulling into a frown; Hermione arched her back as she lowered herself down fully. The steel grey of his eyes made an appearance, blinking up at her slowly. His hips lifted slightly to meet her while his fingertips tightened their purchase on her as he sighed in relief. "I love you." She whispered against his lips before sitting back and rolling her hips again. Hermione's movements were unhurried and deliberate. Most of the time, she preferred hard, rough, fast-paced sex, but this morning, she was in no hurry. It was more about the need to connect on a spiritual level.

His hands moved to her hips affectionately, rubbing up and down her thighs. "Gods, I love you too, baby." His voice was husky and groggy from his interrupted sleep. His cock was buried so deeply in her that even her smaller motions felt incredible.

The morning sun shone into his room, flooding it in a golden hue and providing extra warmth. Their gasps and quiet moans plucked like a symphony from their souls.



CHAPTER 50: DREAMS FOR TOMORROW

Hermione's eyes fluttered open, and she allowed the calm to wash over her and pull a small, content smile from her lips. Draco lay pressed against her; his face shoved into the side of her neck where his sleepy little breaths warmed her skin, hair falling in his face, his arm draped across her stomach lazily and his cock hard against her side.

The level of love that she felt for this man scared the shit out of her, but it made her all the more grateful to have it. In moments like this, when it was just quiet and calm, and no one was dying, she could lay there and count the breaths with each rise and fall

Hermione waved her off with a smile. “I’m starving. Where are we going anyway?”

“Le Comptoir du Relais.” Draco said into his glass before taking a sip.

“Sounds fancy,” Ginny stated.

“The lobster tail with celery root risotto and parmesan emulsion is really good.”

Daphne offered, her hand trembled as she tried to flex her fingers.

“Steak tartare for me.” Theo shook his head.

“I see you’re out of your gumboots for the occasion, too,” Hermione noted with a smile.

“D wouldn’t let me wear them,” Theo grumbled quietly.

“You know they come in other colours, right?” Hermione raised an eyebrow at the man.

Theo looked at her in horror. “They were a gift, and I love them as they are! What’s wrong with pink?!”