

She sat up and squinted, trying to focus on the sound of his voice. He was on the floor, hand pressed to his shoulder and blood pouring from his ear, but he was alive. Wounded. Pale, and visibly shaking. But alive, nonetheless.

She breathed a sigh of relief and forced herself to her feet, ignoring the way her muscles screamed in protest as she stumbled down the hallway, wand in hand, following the path of the Death Eaters.

"Hermione! Wait!" Neville screamed from behind. "Wait for me! Colin and Seamus can handle them for a few minutes! Just wait and I'll come with you!"

"Stand down Neville," she commanded over her shoulder, her own voice croaking as she fought off a scream from the stabbing pain behind her skull. She guessed she had a skull fracture; possible swelling in her brain. She would need Fleur to examine her if she ever got back to the base. "I'm not risking them getting hurt. Stay there and stay safe. I'll come back for you."

He shouted something in response, probably yelled for her to come back. She was already rounding the dark corridor, too far gone to hear him.

Hermione followed the narrow hallway, one hand on the wall for support and the other grasped around her wand. Eventually, she heard shouting and the sting of hexes flying through the air. Seamus and Colin were close.

The sound of the duel spurred her on, thawing the ice in her veins enough to allow her to break into a sprint.

Her jaw tightened when she found them. One of the Death Eaters was gripping the wooden box tightly as their eyes darted around the hallway, looking for an escape.

Greevey was doing well against the tallest Death Eater, shooting hex after hex and forcing the cloaked figure against the wall, forcing him into a vulnerable state. Harry would be proud; he'd trained him well.

Seamus, however, was struggling. His two attackers got him with an acid hex to the knees. He howled in pain and clutched the burning flesh as he fell to the floor.

The Death Eater advanced, his wand illuminating green from the tip as he stalked towards Seamus. He held his wand in the air, readying the curse-

"Avada Kedavra!" A green light shot from Hermione's wand, and hit the attacker square in the chest.

He stumbled, and his body went limp before his lifeless corpse slumped onto Finnigan.

Finnigan pushed the body off him with trembling fingers, crawling to free himself as he stared at Hermione with panic-stricken eyes.

"I-thanks," he choked, the pain evident in the way his face twisted.

Hermione nodded, then started to look around.

*Shit.* Colin and the other three Death Eaters were gone.

Hermione retrieved the small Portkey from her pocket - a gold ring wrapped in a silk handkerchief to keep it from activating - and handed it to Seamus. "Find Neville, get past the wards I set up, and get out of here."

"But you and Colin..."

"It's fine. I'll find him and the artefact," she said, forcing herself to offer a small smile despite the panic she felt.

She wasn't sure if could do this. She wasn't sure if she was strong enough to do it again. There was no other option.

"You and Neville need medical attention," she said sternly. "And you're no good to me if you're injured. Find him and get out."

"Okay. Don't get caught, Hermione."

She didn't bother helping Seamus to his feet. She didn't have time, just handed him a potion for the pain and took off running. She cast a Silencing charm on her boots so they wouldn't alert anyone of her advance. She needed to be quick, *silent*. Her stomach twisted, lurching with dread the further she got down the stone path. She should have been able to hear Colin by now, shouldn't she?

She should have heard him shouting, screaming? If he was still alive, then surely he would-

*Maybe he's not alive?* she thought as she took another corner too fast, having to hold the wall to stop herself from toppling over. Maybe they already killed him, maybe they already-

No! He was alive. He was alive. He was alive. *He was alive.* He had to be.

She skidded to a stop when the hallway forked. Two paths; both completely eclipsed in darkness, not a sound emitting from either. She had no clue which the Death Eaters had taken; which path Colin was probably being dragged down.

Had they split up? Had Colin been taken down one, the artefact down another? Without giving herself chance to second guess her decision, Hermione followed her instincts and took the left path.

The silence was almost deafening as she sprinted. Her legs burned with the effort as she propelled herself forward. She forced herself faster, to take larger strides and ignore the pain in her lungs.

As it turned out, Colin was alive.

Her eyes locked onto his panicked gaze the moment she rounded the final corner. They'd roughed him up a bit in her absence. He had a deep cut above his left eye, his cheek was bruised and swollen, and blood poured from a wound on his left calf.

The three Death Eaters were there; evidently decided against splitting up. Maybe they figured they had a better chance of fighting Hermione and Colin off together? But if that was the case, then why hadn't they killed him? Surely they knew they had a better chance if they did - three against one and all that?

"Evening Granger," one of the masked figures said as he clutched Colin's shoulder, pulling him further into his chest. The tip of his wand stuck into Creevey's throat, almost deep enough to cut. "We wondered where you'd gone."

The one with the artefact chuckled darkly. The other had their wand trained on Hermione's chest.

"Let him go," she bit, her eyes sweeping the room, looking for something; anything to get them out of this situation.

"Not so fast Golden girl," the second said as he twirled Colin's stolen wand. "Drop the Anti-Apparation wards you set up and give us your wand. Then *maybe*, we'll think about letting you live."

Hermione liked to think she was logical. Fair. Level-headed to a fault. She always put the needs of The Order - of the war - above and beyond herself. Beyond anything. Killing Voldemort and winning the war was of paramount importance.

Nothing else mattered.

Nothing.

Four of the cloaked figures formed a barricade around the one that carried the wooden box. The air cracked as they started to Apparate - only to pop back into existence a second later.

"They've warded the area!" the tallest Death Eater shouted, whirling to aim a black-coloured hex at Hermione's chest. She deflected it with the precise flick of her wrist, then retaliated. "Use the item!"

"What item?" Hermione started to shout as she cast a binding hex, encasing one of the attackers in thick metal chains which caused him to fall to the ground.

One of the figures withdrew something silver from their pocket; a long, blade-looking item with a sapphire attached to the hilt. Hermione recognized what it was a heartbeat too late.

A Whaltera Dagger.

As soon as he touched the gemstone, a blast of dark energy pulsed from the object. It didn't affect the other cloaked figures; they'd thought ahead, or wore some type of charm to prevent them from the effects of the dagger.

Hermione and Neville were not so fortunate.

Black magic radiated from the silver in a searing flash, exploding from it with a force so powerful it knocked Hermione and Neville into the air. She hissed when her skull connected with the wall behind her. Was sure she could feel blood at the back of her head.

The dark magic from the blast seemed to seep into her skin. She shivered against the foreign entity as it crept up her body like ice water. Dark hexes tended to do that; the violent, repugnant brand of magic always left the victim cold, feeling like their heart was turning to ice, their breath visible and frozen as though they were standing in the middle of a blizzard - like it was turning them into a corpse.

Hermione touched her temples. There was a violent ringing in her ears, and her vision was blurred as she watched the fuzzy shapes of four Death Eaters step over her and run down the corridor.

The fifth was dead, strangled past the point of suffocation through her own hex. "Hermione!" Neville called through the high-pitched ringing.

Neville's weary gaze locked on hers from the other side of the tunnel. He withdrew his wand, his jaw tight as he motioned with his chin towards the end of the hallway.

Hermione shook her head. "*Not yet,*" she mouthed. She wasn't sure if Neville could see through the darkness. Hoped he could though.

They needed to be united if this mission was to be a success. They couldn't put a foot wrong. If they just stuck to the plan everything would be fine.

The pair were eclipsed in total silence again.

Hermione tapped the edge of her wand to the coin in her pocket, signalling that the others should be in position. It burned back in response; two sharp pulsations of heat. Finnigan and Creevey were ready.

Hermione took another deep breath through her nose, exhaling slowly out her mouth as she readied herself.

Then there it was, the sound she'd been waiting for.

*Footsteps.* The unmistakable click of boots hitting the flagstone, echoing, magnifying off the concrete walls of the narrow labyrinth they were passing through. She made eye contact with Neville again. "*Fine,*" she mouthed.

"*Four,*" he nodded.

"*Three,*" Neville responded when the footsteps got louder.

"*Two,*" she said silently before stepping forward and shooting an exploding hex at

the left wall behind the Death Eaters. The stone crunched under the force of her spell. The impact shattered the immovable concrete and collapsed the wall, sealing the four assailants with Hermione and Neville.

The narrow corridor was engulfed in smoke and debris from the blast.

An eerie silence followed. There wasn't a sound. Nothing.

Then everyone sprang into action.

"Protect the artefact!" the smallest Death Eater, the one who carried the box, shrieked as they sharply withdrew their wands.

But did that extend to Colin's life?

She could kill the Death Eater with the artefact easily, possibly the other one too. They stood so close together it could be possible, just one flick of her wrist. She could grab the Artefact before their bodies hit the floor. The item was important, it could help them win the war, change the stakes and save so many lives.

But that would mean sacrificing Colin.

The second she extended her arm to cast the curse, his captor would surely end Creevey's life. He was on the other side of the corridor; she wouldn't have time to kill him too.

The ultimate utilitarian question: Could you sacrifice one life to save a thousand?

As Hermione stared at Colin, she noticed the way his eyes darted to his assailant's torso, then to her, then to his wand. Signalling something to her. He had a plan.

Well, they didn't really have any other option, did they?

Hermione nodded.

Colin twisted his body, jutting his elbow out violently into his captor's ribs. The Death Eater jolted and lowered his wand momentarily as the wind was knocked from his lungs from Colin's manoeuvre.

In the same moment, Hermione cast a powerful knockback jinx at the other Death Eaters, her spell sending them flying into the concrete wall with immeasurable force. The one with the artefact got it worse. Their skull shattered, blood spraying up the stone with the impact and killing them instantly. The other was temporarily knocked out.

Hermione retrieved the artefact and threw Collin his wand back. She raised her wand to kill the last Death Eater, her arm extending and the spell dying to brush past her lips and end their life -

"No, don't kill him!" Colin said as he walked to Hermione's side. He placed a hand on her shoulder, his face full of concern, his eyes kind. "There's been enough killing tonight. Let him go. He's too weak to stop us now."

"Fine." Hermione lowered her arm, her eyes narrowing at the cloaked figure clutching their chest. "But if you follow us, I will kill you, do you understand?"

She didn't wait to see his answer. The pair took off running towards the exit.

"I can't believe we got it!" Colin shouted minutes later, glee clear in his tone despite the way he was panting. He was slower than Hermione, a slight limp in his jog from his injury.

"We're not safe yet!"

As soon as the words left her lips, a green curse shot between them, narrowly missing Hermione's cheek as it propelled past them and disappeared down the black hallway. She turned, still running, to see the last two assassins - the one she had spared included - sprinting after them. Their fury was evident in every long stride they took; their hatred visible in the way their arms jutted out violently with another killing curse; Hermione and Collin ducked to avoid it.

"We can't make it out!" Colin panted. "They're gonna follow us to the apparition point! My leg is fucked, I can't run any faster! We need to do something!"

"I have an idea!" Hermione called back as she aimed her wand at the stone walls. She cast the first spell she could think of, and the stone hummed with the magic shed infused in them. The walls creaked as they began to move; the stone scraping across the floor as they started dragging slowly towards each other.

"Nice one!" Colin laughed. "They're too far behind us, they're gonna get squished!"

"Don't get cocky!" she said as a small light became visible at the end of the corridor. The exit. They were so fucking close. "We still need to get out. Don't fall! Don't stop running! We can make it!"

Hermione and Colin's pace increased considerably, their legs moving faster than ever before as the light got larger and larger. Her lungs burned with the need for oxygen. Her legs ached, screaming for her to stop.

The hallways continued to close in, the rocks getting closer together, the hallway becoming narrower. They had to go single file, Hermione leading the way as the walls got tighter. The air was starting to become hot and stifling, suffocating.

Hermione tried to stop the relief from creeping into her chest. Tried to stop herself from smiling the further they got down the hallway.

They were so close. They could make it. They were going to survive this. *Both of them.*

Curses continued to shoot past them; the blinding green lights coming faster, more chaotic as the Death Eaters realized they were too far behind them to survive

She supposed her own code name, *Lilith*, wasn't that ambiguous either.

She'd picked it carefully, and purposefully. *Lilith*, the first woman, created for Adam in the garden of Eden. The woman who believed she was equal to Adam, and therefore she didn't need to lay beneath him. She wouldn't, in fact. Wouldn't bend to lower herself. She was strong, immovable in her beliefs.

They were qualities that Hermione always strove for in herself. Her Gryffindor courage and stubbornness had always planted her in the spot; unshakable in her beliefs that The Order had to win, that good had to conquer evil, and the war must end.

By whatever means necessary.

She'd met with Medusa many times to exchange information. Both concealed with their hoods, masks upon their face, and voice-altering charms cast on their voice boxes; doing everything in their power to conceal their identities.

She had no idea who they were. She knew he was a man from his staggering height and broad shoulders. His physique could only be described as that of a soldier; battle-hardened. It went beyond simply being toned, every muscle in his back and arms were defined and rippling with their deadly overuse.

Hermione and Medusa had probably shot countless curses at one another on the battlefield since the war began. They'd probably nearly killed each other a dozen times without realising it.

It was common practice for all Death Eaters to enchant their voice-boxes while on duty. And Medusa's had a deep bravado, the vibrating effects of the spell only adding to the masculine undertone. It was almost a growl most of the time; deep and controlled like a lion - but that was all she knew about him.

Hermione was the only soldier The Order deemed intelligent - and lethal enough - to be able to meet the opposition on neutral grounds and defend themselves if anything went wrong, should he change his mind and lure her into a trap.

That, or she was expendable enough. She suppressed a shudder.

She supposed Ron might have been selected if things were different, if the war had taken a different turn. But he hadn't been on a mission in years....

With a tilt of her head, she signalled for Neville to get in position against the opposite wall, laying a trap for the Death Eaters on their way down the tunnels.

the slate clean and give the Order a new lease of life; a fighting chance - Merlin knew they needed it.

"I have a bad feeling about this," Neville whispered from beside her; his voice croaking nervously. "Are you sure they're moving it tonight?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"I just am!" Hermione snapped, irritation prickling at her chest. She wished Neville would just shut up; now was not the time for a conversation.

She knew the artefact was being moved tonight, and was certain there would only be five Death Eaters guarding it.

Voldemort was trying something new. Likely thought fewer numbers would draw less attention, and therefore lower the risk of any unwanted interference.

It was being moved through a series of underground tunnels just outside of Derbyshire. A secret labyrinth-like maze with countless connections, which could lead to Chatsworth House, disused coal mines, or even as far as Sheffield. A perfect way to avoid being seen, but also an opportunity for the Order to sabotage them. Trap them in a maze like rats and steal the artefact. It was simply too good an opportunity to miss.

Hermione knew it was being transported tonight, because Medusa had told her.

*Medusa*, she snorted internally. What a ridiculous code name for a spy.

*Medusa*, the beauty who was seduced by Poseidon in the temple of Athena. Medusa, who enraged the Goddess so much, she punished her the only way she saw fit - by transforming her into a monster. Changing her hair into snakes, and giving her eyes so deadly they turned men to stone as soon as they looked upon her.

She had wondered if the mole was trying to be poetic. Metaphorical, even. If they were trying to demonstrate that they, too, had been seduced by Voldemort, by his power and promises of inconceivable strength. Whored themselves for him. Sold their souls to the devil in exchange for riches and wealth beyond imagination, and turned themselves into a monster in the process.

As much as she resented this ridiculous façade, Hermione couldn't deny that Medusa's intelligence was never wrong. They'd proven, time and time again, that they were incredibly useful to The Order. *'A valuable asset', 'irreplaceable'* Shacklebolt had said. *'Of Unparalleled usefulness'*.

this. They were undeniably going to be crushed when the stones connected but their fear was affecting their aim. The curses missed, hit the walls, the stone, the ceiling instead of their targets.

Finally, Hermione crossed into the light with a scream of elation. Unable to stop the sound from passing her smiling lips as she became free of the hallway and the fresh air hit her face. She was outside, with Colin.

They were safe.

The stone walls connected a heartbeat after they were free, compressing the Death Eaters trapped inside. There was an audible crunch, a sickening squishing sound as their bones and organs were crushed under the force of the stone walls pressing against each other.

But Hermione wasn't focused on that. She was too busy holding Colin in her arms.

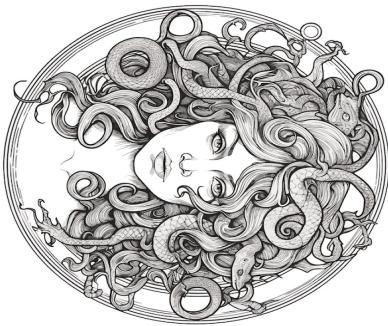
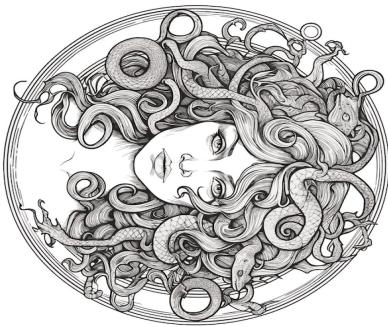
Colin, who had stepped in front of Hermione when one of the attackers had cast a killing curse in a last-ditch attempt at revenge before they were crushed to death.

Colin, whose chest had taken the violent green hex that'd slipped past the stones *just* before they connected.

Colin, who now lay dead in Hermione's arms.

# CHAPTER 2

# CHAPTER 1



DON'T GET CAUGHT

YOU'RE NOT GOING OUT  
THERE AGAIN!

*18th November, 9 years after the Battle of Hogwarts*

Silence.

Nothing.

Not a fucking sound.

Hermione took a deep breath. She closed her eyes and pressed herself into the stone wall behind her. She trained her ears on the quiet, waiting for the footsteps she knew were on their way towards her.

She just needed a second. Just a moment to catch the Death Eaters off guard and steal the artefact they carried. She knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that they were moving it today. Knew this could be a chance to change the tide of the war, to wipe

Ron gripped Hermione's shoulders, his blue eyes swimming with unshed tears.  
“Mione, they almost had you! They almost bloody killed you!”

She wished he would just *fuck off*; she hated displays of emotion like this. She resisted the urge to slap him, barely. “You’re completely overreacting. *I am fine*. I’ve done missions like this a thousand times before and nothing has ever happened. This was an isolated incident.”

## SECRETS AND MASKS

"I don't care!" Ron shouted. "They killed Creevey, and Finnigan said you were two seconds away from getting Avada'd yourself! Those slimy git almost had you! You're not going on another mission ever again—"

Irritation swept up Hermione's spine, anger heating her skin. "Don't you *dare* tell me what I can and cannot do! I am more than capable of looking after myself!" She crossed the boardroom to the closed liquor cabinet and swung the doors open, reaching with familiar fluidity to retrieve the half-empty gin bottle and single glass on the highest shelf.

Ron could go fuck himself if he thought she would offer him a drink. She was far too angry. Far too infuriated by his relentless attempts to keep her in the base; to control her. She'd learned some years ago that Ron would be quite happy to throw her in a cage of his own craftsmanship. Lock her up like a wild animal and throw away the key if it meant she was safe. The very concept made her blood boil.

She kept her back to him as she unscrewed the lid and filled the glass. She tipped her head back and downed half the tumbler's contents, her throat burning with the bitter, unsweetened gin. She could feel Ron's eyes on her back, judging her as she drained the rest of the glass with another tilt of her head.

"You don't know what it's like for me when you leave here," he said. She didn't turn to face him. "You don't know what it's like when you leave and I don't know if you'll ever come back. If s—"

He cut himself off with a strangled sob, but she still refused to turn around. She planted herself firmly to the spot. Couldn't bear to have him look at her with those sad blue eyes and beg her; make her promise she wouldn't go on another mission, like he always did when she'd had a close brush with death. She'd broken too many promises since the war began, she didn't want to break another one. She was tired of it.

"Please Mione. Please don't go back out there. It's not safe. One of these days something is going to happen, and you won't come back to me." She heard his feet scrape awkwardly across the floor as he came to stand behind her. "And I need you to come back to me."

Hermione spun to look at him, her nostrils flaring with anger. "I'm not yours to lose Ron. I haven't been yours for a long time."

Ron's expression fell; eyes wide and mouth agape as he stared back at her.

Hermione grabbed the gin bottle by its neck and shoved past him to the exit, making sure to connect with his shoulder on the way past. Hoped it hurt him, too.

“Say hello to Romilda for me. You’re going to make an excellent father.”

Hermione sat in the frozen garden, alone, drinking her gin; any thought of a coat or blanket forgotten through her fit of rage. She cast a warming charm on her clothes instead. It wasn’t as effective as a real coat or open fire, but it would do.

She was still wrapped head to toe in her mission uniform; black knee-high combat boots, tight black jeans, a matching fitted leather jacket, and numerous knives and spare wands strapped to her through thigh and arm holsters. Her bag was sprawled on the floor beside her with an undetectable extension charm on it; filled almost to capacity with potions, maps, more weapons, and pre-made bombs. Ready for anything.

She looked nothing like she had in Hogwarts. All traces of that innocent girl who constantly had her nose in a book were gone. She was battle-hardened; they all were. The war affected everyone differently, but Hermione felt considerably different. She was a soldier now. Nothing more, nothing less.

She laid flat on her back, twirling her wand between her fingers as she stared at the falling snow. She turned some of the snowflakes into small birds, and changed others to vibrant changes of pink or purple with a flick of her wand.

She used to love this garden. Used to love sitting out here alone, inhaling the scent of the different plants and flowers that grew here. There was something homely about watching the flowers bloom and spread open, baring their souls to the sun above their heads. This garden used to be a sanctuary for her; a place that gave the promise of new life.

Not anymore though. All the plants were dead, nothing had grown here for years. Yet another thing the war had taken.

“Thought I’d find you out here,” Harry said as the door to the garden creaked open.

Hermione didn’t speak, instead focused her magic on gathering falling snowflakes and transforming them into a bear. She watched the snow bear roar silently into the air, its body expanding with each added snowflake that hit him.

“I brought a blanket,” Harry said quietly, breaking the uncomfortable silence that was stretching between them. “And cigarettes.”

Hermione’s eyes finally swept to meet his.

*He could do this forever, dance with her for eternity*

## SECRETS AND MASKS

Based on Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling

Relationship is Hermione Granger/Draco Malfoy

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9 years after the battle of Hogwarts, the war still rages on and everyone is much changed since their days at Hogwarts.

Hermione is the most lethal soldier in 'The Order', spending her days on rescue missions to free captured Muggleborn slaves and fight on the front line. For years, she's been meeting in secret with a spy within Voldemort's ranks to exchange information.

But when she's captured and made prisoner at Malfoy Manor, of all the dark and evil ways she'd envisioned Malfoy would torture her, she never quite imagined anything this horrific.

"They did, but I'm the Chosen One," Harry teased with a wink. "I have my ways.

Remember?"

"Of course," Hermione couldn't help but smile. "How silly of me to forget."

It used to be so easy to be with Harry. They used to be able to talk about anything, *everything*. There was a time when there wasn't a topic too silly or personal, or a problem too big. They used to be able to solve anything together.

She didn't know how to speak to him these days. Didn't know what to talk to him about, or how to fill the uncomfortable silences that always seemed to stretch between them.

"You had a close call today," Harry finally said, his voice soft as it broke through the tension.

"I did."

"Ron's terrified you're not going to come back next time you go on a mission." He took a large gulp of gin, his face crinkling with disgust as he swallowed. "Wants Kingsley to put a ban on you. At least for a few weeks."

Hermione's eyes snapped to Harry. A deep crease formed between her brows.  
"You're not serious?"

Harry nodded.

"That's... that's ridiculous! That's completely out of the question!" Rage twisted through her body, colouring her veins like acid. "He cannot be serious! If he thinks I'm going to sit here while everyone else—"

"Don't worry," Harry said quickly, gripping her shoulder and pulling her back down when she started to get up. "I already went to Kingsley and said it's not an option. You're too valuable on the field Hermione, he can't risk grounding you."

Harry sat down beside her with a smirk. He threw a thin blanket over both their legs, and handed her the already lit cigarette. "Thought that might get your attention."

Hermione laughed and set the gin bottle down. She took the cigarette from Harry and inhaled deeply, feeling the nicotine burn her lungs beautifully on the way down. It had been far too long since she'd done this. "How did you manage to get these?" she asked, the exhale engulfing her in smoke. "I thought the factories stopped making these after the evacuations?"

The relief she felt was indescribable; an immeasurable weight lifted off her chest. She hated fighting, hated that she had to kill every time she left these concrete walls. But it was better than being trapped within them. To Hermione, nothing was worse than that. Not a thing.

“Thank you.” She snatched the bottle back and drained the last of its contents, feeling her anger start to dissipate as the alcohol numbed her senses. She wished she’d brought another bottle out with her.

“Don’t mention it.” Another strangled, lengthy pause stretched between them before Harry spoke again. He never was good with awkward silences; she could always rely on him to speak first. “Neville said you killed today.”

Except when topics took this direction. On occasions like these, she would welcome the discombobulated atmosphere. Would welcome the restless, twitchy unease if it meant they didn’t have to go down this road. *Again.*

Hermione stayed quiet, her eyes on the snow falling above her head as she waited for Harry to undoubtedly pass his judgment on her.

They all hated killing; Hermione particularly despised it. But this was war, and they were losing. Badly. They didn’t have the luxury of using non-lethal hexes anymore - not when the enemy had grown as strong as they had.

She wished Harry would understand. Wish he would see that sometimes light magic simply wasn’t enough. Sometimes, killing was the lesser of two evils. Surely it would be better to kill a few hundred Death Eaters, a few thousand monsters if it spared the lives of millions of innocents?

Harry never saw it that way. Even as they looked over the half-massacred area of London that surrounded them, he didn’t see it. Even though the majority of the buildings were crumbling, windows exploded and blackened from bombs, all traces of life non-existent, he still didn’t change his mind. Always came up with some emotive speech about how things needed to burn before they could grow again. Something about finding a daisy poking up in the ashes, and hope always being possible no matter how much destruction lay around them.

He was reminding her more and more of Dumbledore each day.

She wondered if being encircled by this much decay and destruction felt as normal to Harry as it did to her. If seeing the Muggle capital in such an apocalyptic state didn’t make his stomach twist uncomfortably anymore, just like her.

Deep down, she knew it didn’t. Resented him for it, in fact.

## SECRETS AND MASKS



*Emerald\_Slytherin*

Harry hadn't been out on the field much in the last four years, not since the first bombings. The Order had started working with what was left of the Muggle armies some time ago. The mixture of magical and technological warfare seemed to thwart Voldemort's advances for a time. His armies - made entirely of Pureblood witches, wizards, and magical creatures - didn't know the first thing about Muggle tanks, helicopter gunners, or bombs.

It worked well for a time; until the smaller warheads started being dropped. Until Harry, Hermione, and a team were sent to investigate a drop sight to search for possible survivors, and Harry saw the hundreds of skeletal, burnt bodies lying on the ground; the mass grave of Death Eaters caught in the blast. The sight of it snapped something in him. Sent him off in a fit of rage. He said The Order was becoming as detached as Voldemort, and that killing wasn't the answer. He'd begged the senior members to stop using bombs, and find a way to defeat Voldemort without the use of such Genocidic weapons.

Harry didn't go on many field missions after that.

Despite The Chosen One's pleas, Kingsley and the Muggle Prime Minister still worked together. After all, their alliance did give The Order a slight edge for a while.

But Voldemort was learning quickly.

"Neville said you used another Unforgivable, too?" Harry asked.

"I did. And if I hadn't, we would be burning the bodies of two of our friends tonight instead of just one." She could feel Harry's stare burning a hole into the side of her head. She chose to ignore him, focusing instead on pulling another drag of nicotine into her lungs, and the gentle buzz forming at the back of her head.

"It's not your fault Hermione. You did everything you could, I'm sure Collin-

Hermione groaned and squeezed her eyes closed, as though that would somehow drown Harry's voice from her ears. "Don't. Don't do that Harry."

"Do what?"

"Pretend like this isn't my fault. That curse was meant for me," she snapped, even more irritated now that the cigarette in her mouth had expired. She let it fall to the floor and crushed the bud with the heel of her boot. "I should be dead. It should be my body you're burning tonight, not his."

"Don't say things like that! If anything happened to you it would be a catastrophe-

“And what happened to Colin isn’t?”

Harry’s expression fell. His eyes tightened, and his mouth pressed into a tight line.

“You know I don’t mean that.”

Needing to do something with her hands, Hermione found her wand and started to manipulate the falling snowflakes again. “It should have been me,” she whispered. “I wish I’d never let him come on that mission.”

“He knew the risks. He died protecting one of his friends. It’s how he would have wanted to go.”

Hermione scoffed, a mixture of irritation and guilt colouring her tone. “Is that supposed to comfort me?”

“No, I suppose not.”

“I almost let him die tonight,” she found herself admitting, wasn’t sure why. The words tore their way up her throat of their own accord; maybe she needed to get the weight of it off her chest.

Harry said nothing, just watched intently as he lit another cigarette and handed it to her. He didn’t smoke himself, but he’d started carrying a packet with him sometime ago. Knew many of the refugees craved them. Knew the majority of the soldiers needed them to get through the day. Hermione was the latter.

She accepted it eagerly and took a deep drag, adding to the addictive buzz in her skull. “There was a moment when he was captured; three of them vs me and Colin. One had the artefact, one had their wand pointed at me, and the other had their wand at Colin’s throat.” Another pause as she took a deep breath, steadying herself for the rest of her confession. “I knew I wouldn’t be able to take all three down, so I had a choice; Colin, or the Artefact.”

“You wouldn’t have done it,” he affirmed, his brows knitting together in a reassuring way that only Harry could do, showing that he believed in her. It made Hermione’s chest tighten.

“There was a second, fuck, a split second where I genuinely considered letting him die so I could take it. Kingsley did say it would change the tide of the war, swing it in our favour.”

“You wouldn’t have done it,” Harry repeated, his voice trailing off, not sounding as confident. “I know you; you couldn’t have. You would have saved Colin.”

## SECRETS AND MASKS

"That's the thing, I don't know anymore. I don't know *me* anymore. You haven't seen the bodies in the street the way I have."

"I know I haven't. I know things are different, believe me, *I know*. But you can't think like that Hermione. The reason I didn't want anyone killing and using dark curses is because it changes you. Dark Magic changes you."

Well, she knew that was true. She'd felt it herself. Felt that repugnant brand of magic sweep into her bloodstream the first time she'd killed all those years ago, when she was barely nineteen. It was an act of self-defence. She hadn't wanted to kill the Death Eater who'd attacked her on an evacuation mission, but it was the twenty children she was trying to rescue from Hogwarts dungeons, or the cloaked figure with the wand aimed at her chest.

She'd made the obvious choice.

Her body had moved instinctually. The curse had brushed past her lips before she'd even realized she was doing it. She'd already lost a small group a few weeks prior because she'd shown mercy to a Death Eater. That time a young girl, Alice Foster, was killed by the very assassin Hermione had spared. Then another; then another. She wasn't about to let it happen again. It had traumatized her, taking a life. Given her night terrors and panic attacks, and shackled her with guilt so heavy she could hardly breathe from the weight of it.

Ron had been there for her back then. He'd held her in his arms, kissed her face, soothed her and told her everything was going to be okay. But, there was only so much even Ron could take. Her catatonic state, her vacant stare and inattentiveness had effectively driven him into the warm, comforting arms of Romilda Vane. Or at least, that was his excuse. She wasn't sure anymore. Didn't really care.

Killing became much easier after that. Just an act of war. A battle tactic. She became strangely detached to the act, until over time, she didn't lose a wink of sleep over it. Chose to comfort herself with thinking of the lives she'd saved by sending another dark soul straight to hell. She'd probably end up there herself, when all this was over.

"I worry about you Hermione, we all do," Harry said, taking her hand and squeezing it lightly.

"You don't need to. I can take care of myself."

"I know you can. You took care of me and Ron for years, honestly, I don't think we would have made it past the first year without you."

They both laughed silently, just one short puff of air, like old friends. Sort of.

"I know you hate to relinquish control, but I think you need something to distract you. Something else so you don't spend every waking hour of your existence thinking about this war."

"I don't have anything else, Harry. There is nothing else for me."

"You'd feel differently if you found someone."

Hermione snorted and shook her head. "That's your advice? Find a boyfriend? Get married? Have a baby or two? Do you think that would give my life meaning? We're in the middle of a war, and we're losing Harry, badly. Bringing a child into a world like this would be incredibly selfish and—" She winced the second the words left her mouth.

"Irresponsible?" Harry asked with a small laugh. "Yeah. I thought the same thing when I found out Ginny was pregnant the first time. But it changes you, Hermione, being a parent, it's the most wonderful feeling in the world."

"It's certainly changed Ron," she added, the acid clear in her voice as she pulled another drag of nicotine into her lungs. "He's like a different person since Romilda found out she was expecting."

Eventually, when the snow got thicker and the temperature dropped, they decided to retreat inside. They couldn't put off the inevitable anymore, they needed to prepare for Colin's funeral.

The Order had made the decision a long time ago to forgo burials. They didn't have the time or the resources for a real funeral. Shacklebolt had decreed that graveyards were too open; too risky for everyone to gather outside and '*he sitting ducks for an attack*'.

They opted for pyres instead. The older, more senior members of The Order argued that it was easier this way. They could gather deep underground, at the very bottom level of their base, and say goodbye to their fallen friends respectfully. Together. The vents in the basement would suck the fumes and smoke from the tight space, and a few layers of magic could help conceal the smell.

It never worked entirely though. The bouquet of burning flesh always seemed to linger in the air. Grotesque. Vile. No one would eat for days afterward. Didn't have the stomach for it.

Hermione stared at her hands as the mist from her shower eclipsed the bathroom. Crimson. Still thick with Colin's blood. Not blood from the killing curse that should have been hers. No, this was from a different injury. A deep gash across his leg that must have happened before she found him and Seamus.

But it was still his blood, nonetheless.

She stripped quickly, threw her blood-dripped clothes into the hamper and stepped into the scalding water. She scrubbed at her arms and hands, wiping furiously to rid herself of Creevey's blood, of the evidence of her failure. But it wouldn't go away.

Why ... ?

Why couldn't she fucking get it off!

Her skin seemed to hiss in protest; the flesh raw as she scratched it with the loofah again and again and again. But she couldn't get it off. No matter how hard she scrubbed, Colin's blood seemed to be fused to her skin.

Hermione leaned against the shower wall and slid down the tile. Unable to keep the tears that screamed from her eyes, unable to choke back the sob that ripped its way up her throat as she screamed. She screamed and she cried until her limbs ached and her throat was hoarse. Her body convulsed, lungs threatening to collapse as she allowed herself to let go. To feel.

She so rarely got to feel anymore. She'd witnessed so much death, seen so many bodies burnt beyond recognition. Sometimes, she just needed to let it out. Let the grief wash over her, exorcise herself of those emotions, vanquish them from her body by her private tears or screams.

Until eventually, there weren't any tears left. And she was left empty, again.

Everyone attended Colin's funeral. Every single surviving member of The Order of the Phoenix tore themselves from their tasks to pay their respects - except for Kingsley and a few other senior members. They were probably too busy cooing over the artefact.

They had to cast several extension charms to lengthen the basement so everyone could fit into the tight space. And as the funeral began, everyone huddled together, clutching onto one another for comfort and support.

Despite only being several months younger than Harry, Colin still looked very young. He'd had a small growth spurt somewhere around the age of fifteen, but he

looked small. Innocent. It might have been his blond curls, or that his cheeks had never quite lost that youthful roundness, but Colin had always looked several years younger than his age. Always looked closer to being sixteen than in his mid-twenties, and if possible, he looked even younger now the colour had left his cheeks.

Harry made a speech. He gave a small eulogy of Greevey's life; his accomplishments, his undying loyalty, and infectious smile that seemed to lift the spirits of everyone around him. '*A pure soul*', Harry said. *'One of the best'*.

Muffled sobs filled the air as attendees cast fire hexes to ignite the pyre. Most began to file out when the burning started, too upset to watch the body of one of their own burn to ashes.

Hermione stayed - she always did. Harry, Seamus, Ron, Luna, and Neville too. They all stood side by side in silence, watching the flames lick higher and higher, eclipsing their friend and disintegrate him into nothing. And as the familiar smell of a burning body filled the air, Hermione prayed to every god she could think of - Muggle or otherwise - that Colin's death hadn't been for nothing.

The dragon started to turn at the other side of the field, ready to make another pass over their heads. It roared again, the low vibrations of it made Hermione's skin pebble. Its mouth and underbelly ignited, illuminating with fire.

"Get the girls!" Hermione shouted. "Quickly!"

Harrison leaped forward. He knocked another Black Masks unconscious and snapped their wand while Hannah sprinted to the back of the carriage. She quickly disintegrated the locks and swung the doors open.

"You're safe," Hannah cooed as she outstretched her hand, eyes locking with the terrified girls inside. "It's okay. You're safe."

"Got any ideas?" Tonks shouted as she cast a shielding charm over the carriage.

"Maybe one." Hermione fumbled in her bag, then threw the Cloak of Invisibility to Harrison. "Use this to conceal the carriage and take the girls to safety. We'll stay here and distract the Black Masks. Hopefully it'll give you enough time to escape."

Harrison's eyes widened with realization. He opened his mouth, presumably to protest, but Hermione cut him off.

"We don't have time to argue! There isn't another way! Get the girls and—"

The little sunlight they had was blocked by a demonic shadow. The dragon was directly overhead, high in the sky and nose-diving with incredible speed towards them.

"Go!" Hermione screamed, the terror clear in her voice as the dragon's mouth opened. "Now!"

Hannah and Harrison quickly mounted the Thestrals. Harrison pulled the reins tight and forced the beasts into a run. Hannah cast a charm on the cloak, extending it with magic so it would be large enough to cover the carriage and Thestrals.

The dragon started to close in, every flap of its huge wings propelling it closer.

"You need to go quicker," Hermione hushed through clenched teeth as she knocked out another assailant. Her eyes swept from the carriage, to the approaching dragon, and then back again. "Come on, you need to be quicker!"

The Thestrals finally pulled the carriage into the air, their small wings bowing, perfectly in sync as they dragged the box from the ground. Hannah caught Hermione's eye, gave a small nod - probably a thank you for saving her life - and magically draped the cloak over the carriage and the thestrals.

And then they were gone. Disappeared into nothing as they made their escape - with the slaves.

Mission completed; the girls had been saved.

As the remaining Order members started to Apparate to safety, Hermione and Tonks stayed behind to do a final headcount. Hermione scanned the battlefield for anyone too weak to escape on their own. She refused to leave anyone behind.

Susan Bones: dead.

Xander Lowe: dead.

Robert Marks: dead.

Kyle Elliot: dead.

Hannah and Harrison: escaped.

Josh Rhodes: escaped.

Lee Brooks: escaped.

Hermione hadn't seen the dragon breathe fire, but she felt it. Fucking hell, *did she feel it*. Even though she was at least a few hundred feet away from the beast, as soon as the dragon opened its mouth and its flames collided with the ground, it felt like a bomb had been detonated. A tsunami of impossible heat smashed into her body and sent her flying into the air.

She landed flat on her back, the fall stealing her breath. She tried to get up, but the throbbing aches in her body pulled her back down.

The beautiful grass was completely eclipsed in fire around her. Through the roaring flames, Hermione thought she could hear someone praying that she was still alive.

The heat continued to increase, getting much, much too hot. The flames were inches from her body. Hermione tried to blink through the pain, tried to force air into her lungs -

Nothing worked. She couldn't breathe. She didn't care that it would probably taste like smoke. Didn't care that it would be inhaling in the ashes of her friends' disintegrated bodies. *She just needed to breathe!*

"Hermione!" a voice pleaded somewhere in the distance. "Please get up! Oh please, please get up!" The voice got louder; cool hands clasped around her neck and magically draped the cloak over the carriage and the thestrals.

shoulder and lifted her off the ground. "Hermione, can you hear me? I can't Apparate you if you're not conscious! It's too dangerous! Please open your eyes."

"...T... Tonks?" Hermione's vision cleared slowly, coming back into focus the more she blinked.

"Oh my ... I thought we lost you." Tonks' vibrant red hair came into view. She was hovering above Hermione; severely burnt but *alive*.

The once blue-grey sky was now black, covered in thick, heavy smoke and ash flittering through the air.

Hermione struggled, but managed to raise herself onto her elbows. "We need to go," she said. Her fingers fumbled for her wand to Apparate. "I'm fine."

"Okay, let's get you out of here."

All the Death Eaters had been immobilized, either unconscious or bound with unbreakable chains or ropes. Unable to move but watching.

The only threat was-

The dragon.

Adrenaline shot through Hermione. White-hot searing adrenaline that pushed the dizzying ache from her skull and cleared her vision immediately.

How could she have forgotten? Where was the dragon?

"Steady," Tonks hushed as she pulled a panicking Hermione to sit up straight. "You're bleeding everywhere—"

Tonks never finished her sentence.

Her words were cut off. Her tender whisper died on her tongue as her lungs were sliced in half. The hex, that Hermione didn't see, ripped through Tonks so violently that it tore her body in half, and left a jagged, crimson line from her left shoulder to her right hip.

Hermione tried to lurch to her feet. A scream tore its way up her throat as both parts of Tonks' corpse landed either side of her with a thud, but before she had even reached her wand, unforgiving chains wrapped around her. They pinned her arms to her sides and bound her legs together, making her unable to support her weight. She fell onto her back again, screaming. The more she fought against the restraints, the tighter they bound her. The metal dug into her skin, bruising and biting as she

And then she heard it. A loud clap of thunder that wasn't thunder at all, but gigantic reptilian wings beating against the air.

The roar started low. The sound was hoarse but then it deepened. The crescendo was ear piercing. Hermione's hands instinctually flew to cover her ears to shield her from it. It was hideous, she swore she could feel it vibrating in her blood. Seamus was right, it really did make the very earth shake.

The moment she saw Black Shadow, Hermione knew she was going to die. The dragon appeared over the cliff top quicker than she thought imaginable, its gargantuan wings propelling it quickly over the hilt before baring down.

A male figure sat proudly between its shoulders, Demon mask firmly in place. As the dragon circled the battlefield from overhead, its shadow blackened the earth. Every flap of its wings felt like being hit by an invisible tidal wave. Hermione fought to keep her feet planted firmly to the floor, focusing on not falling over despite the unforgiving force.

The dragon opened its mouth as it came back towards them; an amber light emitted from within.

Hermione felt the heat of its breath before a single flame had even left its mouth. The wave of fire moved at an immeasurable speed, quicker than she could even think of a possible shielding charm. Not that it would have done any good. No spell was powerful enough to shield her from that. Flames shot from the reptile's jaws, exploding onto the grass and disintegrating Kyle and Robert instantly.

They never had a chance of escaping it. Didn't even have enough time to scream.

The Gold Masks triumphant cackle raised the hairs on Hermione's arms. "You're dead," he laughed cruelly, manically. "You're all fucking dead now, little girl."

Fuck Kingsley.

Hermione cast a final hex, the white light connecting with the Gold's torso with such a force it sent him careening over the edge of the cliff, leaving him to the mercy of the jagged rocks beneath. She imagined it killed him instantly, the mixture of gravity and the height probably pulled him towards the earth with such velocity that his body exploded upon impact. Hoped it didn't though. Hoped he survived, just so he would suffer. Lay there for hours in agony while he waited for the sweet kiss of death.

She forced her eyes forward when she heard an Avada collide with someone behind her. Forced herself to keep calm, keep her composure, and only cast a Stupefy at the Gold when Susan Bone's ear-piercing scream resonated through the air and her corpse fell to the ground.

The Gold chuckled from under his mask when her curse missed his chest, shooting over his shoulder and disappearing into the thick clouds behind him. Her anger was affecting her aim more than it should be.

Hermione saw red, and started to cast any hex she could think of in quick succession. The curses fell past her lips quicker than ever before, each one forcing the Gold Mask back another step. She wasn't allowed to cast lethal hexes, but surely if he retreated to the edge of the cliff and fell, that wouldn't count, would it?

"Your cadets aren't doing too well without your help," the Gold said, his arms swinging violently in every direction as he attempted to deflect her advances. "Don't you want to help them?"

"I will," she spat as a powerful white light almost broke his shield, inching him back several paces. "After I'm finished with you."

Hermione was so absorbed in her duel that she didn't see Xander fall. So overcome with rage that she didn't see his chest explode from the force of Parkinson's hex, decorating the once-beautiful meadow of grass crimson, organs and blood mixing in with the dirt. The sight made Hannah vomit.

The Gold Mask continued his retreat. His feet were just inches from the cliff drop.

Out the corner of her eye, Hermione saw Parkinson be engulfed in chains. She heard her fall to the floor, screaming and thrashing while Harrison checked her for concealed weapons.

Hermione tried not to feel too elated when Lee restrained another Black Mask and threw their wand over the edge of the cliff.

"Expelliarmus!" Hermione shouted.

The Gold dropped his wand like it'd given him an electric shock. It flew quickly into the air, and then landed delicately in Hermione's palm.

The battle was almost over. They could do this. They were going to win. A part of her couldn't believe it -

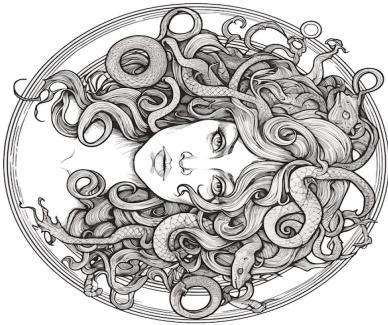
tried to kick her legs out. They crushed her chest and squeezed her lungs as she twisted on the ground, practically suffocating her.

Over her screams, she heard the thunderous clap of wings. The ground shook violently as she looked up to see Black Shadow land a few feet away from her. It flapped its colossal wings, and a final bone-chilling roar emitted from deep in its chest. It lowered its head and shoulder to the earth -

"Hermione fucking Granger," the Demon Mask -Tonks' murderer - sneered as he dismounted the dragon. His voice was sharp as a blade but strangely familiar, even through the voice altering charm. "We've been looking everywhere for you."

"A trap!" a Black Mask shouted as he moved to disarm Josh and Robert. "Call for backup!"

## CHAPTER 5



### A TALENTED LITTLE MUDBLOOD

The Gold Mask reached into his pocket and tapped something. Hermione tried to stop him, casting a strong knock-back jinx at him as she sprinted into the battle, but he blocked it with a simple flick of his wrist.

Non-lethal spells always were easier to block. It was one of the reasons why she hated using them on the field. They were pointless. Child's play.

She could feel the Gold smiling under his mask as he threw a green curse at her. He knew they were using less dangerous magic. He knew they undoubtedly had an advantage.

This was not good. This was not *fucking good*. They needed to wrap this mission up quickly.

Hermione duelled the Gold, knowing she was the best equipped to keep him occupied whilst the others fought the Black Masks. If she couldn't kill him, she could at least distract him and stop him from killing her friends.

Tonks disarmed one Death Eater easily. She snapped their wand the moment it landed in her palm, and then cast a charm that encased their body in thick metal chains to prevent their escape. She always followed her instructions to the letter.

Hermione knocked the Gold to his knees, and was *just* quick enough to cast a shielding charm in front of Robert before an Avada could connect with his chest, saving his life by less than a second.

"Eyes open!" she shouted as the Gold Mask pulled himself to his feet. A green curse shot from his wand. She deflected it with a shield. "Immobilise the others! We need to get this over with quickly!"

Curses and hexes of every colour shot around the field. White. Blue. Orange. Red. The vast majority were that deadly, sickening shade of green. The Death Eaters weren't taking any chances.

Several narrowly shot past Hermione, just missing her elbow, her legs, her head. Her shielding magic was always *just* quick enough to protect her. It seemed that she was the primary target, which wasn't a surprise really. She was the leader of this group, and one of the most lethal members of The Order. It made sense they would want to take her out quickly. Eliminate the biggest threat first, and then watch the rest crumble. That was exactly what she was doing with the Gold Mask.

**12th December**

Hermione's throat was sore. Merlin, it was *fucking sore*. She didn't think she'd ever screamed this much in her life.

Her wrists were cut. Blood trickled down her arms as she thrashed against the metal restraints he'd bound her with again and again to no avail.

She'd tried to fight with every fibre of her being to get away from the Demon mask. She'd tried to head butt him, kick him, even tried to bite him as he'd roughly yanked her to her feet and dragged her across the field. She'd gotten a few good

Despite the unexpected cover of the wind, Hermione still held her breath, still kept herself as still as possible as the targets neared the others. She narrowed her eyes as they passed the concealed forms of Hannah and Lee. The cloaks of the Black Masks must've been inches from them. Their boots must've been practically brushing against Hannah as they made their way past.

One of the black masks stopped suddenly. So did Hermione's heart.

The cloaked figure - the smallest of the group - turned slightly, and stared down at the *exit* spot where Lee was crouching. They tilted their head to the side, shuffling awkwardly on their feet as the other Death Eaters and the carriage continued with their route, pulling further away from them.

Hermione's grip tightened on her wand. They couldn't see Lee; she knew that they couldn't -

The small Death Eater took a cautious step forward.

Tonks inched around the corner of the lighthouse, wand drawn and pointing at the enemy.

Hermione aimed hers as the Black Mask raised their hand, reaching towards Lee. Their fingers stretched outwards, searching for purchase -

"Parkinson," the Gold Mask shouted, voice cutting through the tension like the crack of a whip. "Get back into formation!"

The Black Mask instantly snatched their hand away and turned to face the carriage. "Sorry, sir," a feminine voice answered. She quickly re-joined the group and resumed her place guarding the right side of the carriage.

*Pansy Parkinson;* Hermione had wondered if she was still alive. Apparently so, although she'd not managed to work her way up the ranks yet. Still at the bottom of the pile despite her father's undying loyalty and servitude to Voldemort.

Hermione's heart restarted, and seventeen seconds later, the carriage was in the centre of the trap.

Everyone leaped into action. Kyle and Harrison disarmed the Death Eaters that guarded the left side of the carriage; Hannah and Susan did the same on the right.

The Thestrals squealed as the Order members popped into existence. Startled, they reared onto their backs legs, and flapped their wings defensively while the Death Eaters drew their wands.

shots in; a satisfied smirk on her face when he'd lifted her onto the dragon's back, putting her in the perfect position to kick him in the chest with the flats of both her feet.

The smirk vanished, however, when he'd retaliated with a very ungentle Stupefy between her eyes.

She'd been mostly unconscious after that. She'd woken a few times, jolted awake by the thunderous clap of reptilian wings, but it was only temporary. Her eyelids always fluttered closed before she could get a grasp on her surroundings.

Hermione's senses - and her fight - started to return when the city of York came into view some hours later. She was still a little groggy when the dragon circled the cathedral, but by the time it landed on the cobbled streets, she was wide awake.

The Demon Mask curled his fingers around Hermione's restraints, pulling her right alongside him as he slid off Black Shadow's back. He cast a charm on her chains, loosening them *just* enough to allow her to walk.

Not that she had any intention of doing so.

As soon as he started to drag her along, Hermione dug her heels into the ground and pulled back. They struggled for a moment or two, but eventually the Demon Mask huffed, and cast a wordless hex that knocked the air from Hermione's lungs. She collapsed from the intensity of it, but the Demon didn't seem to care; just grabbed the chains around her shoulders, and dragged her backward through the streets.

The exact location of Voldemort's base had never been known to The Order. They knew it was somewhere in the North Yorkshire area, somewhere easily accessible with plenty of Floo connections. They guessed it was somewhere elaborate and ostentatious, but he moved so often it was nearly impossible to pinpoint the exact whereabouts.

Thinking back now, Hermione was furious that she didn't realize it before. York Cathedral; what an obvious place for his centre of operation. It was the perfect stadium; large, regal, a demonstration of his strength and wealth. The perfect place to showcase his growing power. The high, jewelled windows and lustrous gold trimmings were sure to allure new recruits, seducing them with mirages of riches and power. It sang of all the promises his loyal followers could attain, if they served their mighty lord well, of course.

Maybe Voldemort considered himself a king amongst his loyal dogs. He never seemed the type for jewels and gold before, but greed and illusions of grandeur always did do interesting things to the mind.

The cathedral itself was breath-taking. Hermione didn't think she'd ever seen a place so grand, even before the war. It was undeniably bursting with magical energy; a fortress of solid beauty and endless possibilities. Even if it was warped by Voldemort's repugnant influence, it still was quite bewitching to behold. As she was dragged across the floor and the stone cut into her legs, she couldn't help but think how truly magnificent the building was. A triumph to Muggle architecture. It was no wonder Voldemort wanted to make it his own, manipulate it to show that Wizarding folk were vastly superior. Even though the silk tapestries were replaced with dark curtains, and the images of Christ were transfigured into serpents, it still took Hermione's breath away.

She imagined the pews were previously filled with rows upon rows of men and women, all with kind eyes and gentle hearts, hymn books clutched to their chests as they peacefully worshipped their God. The image almost warmed her.

But there were no kind eyes in the room now. Rows of cloaked figures replaced them; filled with masks of Black and Gold metal. Their hearts were like ice; dead as the people they'd murdered when they took over this Holy place and made it their centre of operation. There was no warmth in here now, not anymore.

The air was particularly freezing. Hermione's breath frosted in front of her as she panted and struggled against her restraints. There would be no warmth from prayers to erase the chill that was seeping into her bones.

Dementors circled overhead, bowing and floating softly on the ceiling of the cathedral. Their black cloaks eclipsed the murals of angels and cherub's, covering them like ominous shadows, like the grim reaper itself.

*Well, that explains the cold,* Hermione thought bitterly. Their proximity sent a chill down her spine.

Voldemort sat on a dark throne at the end of the aisle. His long, grotesque nails were wrapped around the edges of the armrest. The Demon Mask threw Hermione at his master's feet and then knelt beside her. He bowed, and when she didn't follow his lead, he grabbed the back of her neck and pushed her head to the floor.

Maybe Hermione was wrong. Maybe Voldemort didn't think he was a king amongst his loyal Death Eaters. Maybe he thought he was a God to them, their own

he'd said. '*No need for fatalities.*' Hermione didn't miss the way his eyes narrowed a fraction at her when he gave the order.

She and Shacklebolt were usually on the same page when it came to killing; neither liked it, but both thought it was necessary. Apparently, Shacklebolt was going to appease Harry on this mission. She wondered how long it would last.

Voldemort had chosen a different means of transportation this time. After the tunnels were used against his soldiers during the last raid, he'd chosen a more open route for this task. The Death Eaters were transporting the girls via foot across the coastline, and the interception point for this mission was the White Cliffs of Dover.

Normally, the Death Eaters travelled by Apparition or Portkey, but slaves and priceless artefacts complicated matters. Those methods left the Death Eaters vulnerable, made it harder to cast hexes and transfigure shields to protect whatever they were carrying. The uncertainty of Apparition risked damaging fragile cargo, and the risk of splinching was increased tenfold if the 'cargo' in question was fighting and clawing and trying to escape.

Voldemort didn't like taking risks like that, not with objects of such importance. He'd rather risk the lives of his generals than damage an object he wanted. Would rather chain up the artefact or slaves, throw them in a carriage and have his soldiers march them across the continent - and the Order planned to use that to their advantage.

The wind howled furiously around the open coastline. Waves crashed against the base of the cliff beneath them, smashing into the rocks to create loud booms as the earth was worn away by the sea. It was the perfect cover for their mission. Hermione couldn't have planned it better herself. Maybe the hum of a tank's engine wouldn't have been that noticeable after all. She would need to keep working on her cloaking spells, maybe there was a way they could be utilized on the field more if the weather conditions were similar to this.

The carriage came into view over the hilltop at 2:53, right when Medusa said it would.

The large, ordinary wooden box was pulled by two Thestral's, and twelve cloaked figures flanking all sides. Eleven Black Masks, and one Gold Mask. Medusa had been right. Voldemort wasn't taking any chances this time. He was looking for blood.

The group waited silently, pulses noticeably quickening as the carriage and its guards neared the trap.

Tonks nodded. She fiddled with the edge of her sleeves and tapped her boot to the earth. Her nerves were tangible, almost crackling around her. She hated being away from Teddy - hated it considerably more since Lupin's death - but she was a fighter. She refused to stay at home while other people put themselves in danger.

"Ron is going to be so angry," Tonks murmured as she drew her wand. "He didn't want you to go on another mission so soon. You know he's going to kill you, right?"

Hermione snorted quietly. "He doesn't get a say in what I do. He has his own family to worry about now."

"He does," Tonks agreed. "But he cares about you. He just wants to keep you safe."

*Safe in my cage more like.* Hermione shook the thought away and tapped the coin in her pocket with the edge of her wand.

"Are the others ready?"

When the coin burned twice in response, Hermione nodded.

The Muggle armies had been keen to get involved with this raid. They wanted to retaliate after their own officers were taken as hostages a few weeks ago, but later decided against it. This operation required stealth and patience. They needed to be silent and unnoticeable while they laid the trap, and helicopters and tanks were not exactly the quietest things in the world.

Ten Order members had been selected for this mission, Hermione and Tonks included. Harrison Waters, Kyle Elliott, Josh Rhodes, Hannah Abbott, Susan Bones, Robert Marks, Lee Brookes, and Xander Lowe.

The plan was simple enough and involved everyone working in pairs. The group was already scattered in a circle on the field, wands drawn and concealed under a few layers of magic to make them completely invisible.

Hermione and Tonks were hidden behind the lighthouse a few paces back, acting as scouts. Once the Death Eaters were in the middle of the circle, surrounded on all sides, the attack would start.

The strategy was to disarm as many Death Eaters as possible, and then go after the carriage to retrieve the girls. No Anti-Apparation wards were set up; they needed a quick getaway once the girls were free.

Shacklebolt had given firm instructions that there was to be no killing curses on this mission. No guns. No bombs. No lethal hexes. *'It's a review mission, simple as that.'*

dark prince who had been resurrected, born again from the ashes of the old war to rise and lay claim to the newer, more lenient world. A world which had grown a little more tolerant of muggleborns, and even formed a small, secretive alliance with Maggots.

Somehow, that thought terrified her more.

"Well, well," Voldemort cooed quietly. "What do we have here?"

"My Lord," the Demon mask greeted. "I have brought you a gift."

"I can see that," Voldemort answered. "Did you acquire this gift on your latest mission?"

"Yes, I."

"You let them get away!" a sharp voice bellowed, and the punishing grip left Hermione's neck. She lifted her head to see a Gold Mask marching towards them, blind fury evident in every stride he took. "You fucking idiot! You let them get away with the girls!"

"Careful *Gold*!" the Demon mask sneered, voice calm but biting as he stood, irritated at being interrupted mid-sentence. "I suggest you choose your next words very carefully. We wouldn't want our Lord to think you've forgotten how to address your superiors, would we?"

"Superiors? You're joking, aren't you?" The Gold stopped in front of the Demon, pointing his finger at that horrible, toothy mask. "The Order got away with the slaves because of you! You don't deserve the horns on your head you useless!"

The Gold's words were cut off in a grunt, followed by a sickening gargle. He took a shaky step back, and his hands flew to his stomach to delicately touch the silver dagger that was embedded to the hilt in his lower chest. Hermione guessed it was lodged between two ribs; the squelching sound she heard was probably his lungs filling with his blood. The Demon had just punctured the lung of another general, and Voldemort was *smiling*.

The Gold fell to his knees in front of Hermione, choking and grasping his chest. She instantly dragged herself backwards, jumping slightly when her shoulders connected with the Demon's calves.

Voldemort's menacing chuckle resonated through the cathedral walls, the chilling sound echoing, magnifying as the other cloaked figures joined in. A symphony of death if she'd ever heard it. An opera of inhumanity.

Hermione's heart hammered violently in her chest, but she forced herself to remain calm. If they killed their own so easily, so without remorse, what in Merlin's name were they going to do to her?

"You never were one for second warnings, were you?" Voldemort said, a small smile at the edges of his lips.

"No. I suppose I'm not," the Demon answered simply; his voice still altered by the charm.

Hermione's brow furrowed as she stared up at his mask, as if she might be able to see through the metal if she concentrated hard enough. Why did he sound so familiar?

"And that is why you are so valuable to me, and why you have earned your place by my side, over other, more pitiful generals." Voldemort tsk'd as his eyes flittered to the choking Gold on the floor. "Such a disappointment. Never mind, Rodolphus?"

"Yes, my Lord," one of the Gold Masks answered from across the cathedral. He stood from his pew and bowed his head to his master like a dog.

"Would you be so kind as to take your brother and heal his wounds, *before* he bleeds to death on my new rug?"

Both Rodolphus and Rabastan Lestrange were Gold Masks, that was interesting. Arthur Weasley was correct, it was a shame Hermione wouldn't be able to tell him.

"Yes, of course, my Lord," Lestrange said as he made his way towards them. He gripped his brother harshly by the elbow, ignoring his yelp of pain as he dragged him to his feet and led him into a private room at the back of the Cathedral.

"And Rodolphus?" Voldemort called just before they closed the door.

"Yes, my Lord?"

"Do remind him to respect his superiors. Next time, I will let him bleed to death if he speaks out of turn to a Demon. He needs to remember his place."

"Of course. I will ensure that the message has sunk in before I heal him." Rodolphus bowed his head a final time, then disappeared behind the door.

There was a sense of finality in the movement, and Hermione wondered if Voldemort even expected him to survive. Probably didn't. Probably already had fifty Black Masks eager to jump in their superiors' grave. They probably would have stabbed him too, given the chance. She didn't imagine there was much order

## CHAPTER 4



### SAFE IN MY CAGE

#### **12th December**

"I have a bad feeling about this," Tonks whispered as she drew a calming breath, concentrating on changing her hair from the vibrant shade of orange it currently resembled. They couldn't afford to be seen right now.

"You worry too much." Hermione craned her neck around the side of the lighthouse, trying to get a better view. "We'll be fine. Medusa has been gathering intelligence on this for weeks. It's a simple in and out mission."

"You trust him?"

"Yes. He's never been wrong before."

"The dragon- FUCK!... the dragon was back!"

Hermione looked at Cormac's burnt face and froze. "Black Shadow?"

"Yes," he panted, writhing in agony. "Bla-black Shadow was there?"

Hermione had only seen it once. If the ace up the Order's sleeves was muggle machines, then Voldemort's was Black Shadow.

The dragon was an exceptionally large beast. It had pure black scales, eyes that seemed to glow like Satan, and a wingspan akin to that of a football field. It was twice as big as the Iron Belly she'd ridden while looking for Horcruxes, maybe even three times as large.

It was only ever ridden by the male Demon Mask.

The dragon had earned its name by its gargantuan size. The only warning it was ever present in battle was the giant, demonic-looking shadow on the ground before the field was eclipsed in searing heat.

Seamus had survived an attack by Black Shadow once. Had the common sense to hide under a pile of bodies when the beast flew overhead a final time to check for survivors. He said its flaming breath was hellfire itself. Hotter than anything he'd ever come across. It'd melted the strongest iron, disintegrated bodies to ash and left nothing alive. He said its roar made the very earth shake, and the sound of its wings beating against the air was comparable only to loud claps of thunder. Unforgiving.

Heart-stopping.

If Black Shadow was being utilized on the field more, then 'The Order was fucked.

amongst the lower ranks. They were probably always at each other's throats, willing to do anything to get promoted. Like dogs in a fighting pit, mauling each other for the chance of a shinier, more prestigious collar.

"Is it true what he said?" Voldemort asked, his eyes drifting over to his chief general again. "Did the girls getaway?"

"They did, my Lord," the Demon said, wiping the Gold's blood from his black robes. "But I acquired something much more valuable instead."

Hermione couldn't help the gasp that escaped her lips when the Demon half-turned and gestured towards her. Or that her heart stopped for a moment when Voldemort's hollow, ghost-like eyes landed on her. His stare was intrusive, stifling, like he was cutting her open, filing through her layers of skin as if they held her secrets.

"Who is this?" Voldemort asked.

"Hermione Granger." The Demon snarled the words, as though saying her name left a foul taste in his mouth. "Potter's favourite mudblood."

Voldemort tilted his head to the side at the mention of Harry's name. He narrowed his eyes, and his grip on the elder wand tightened as he looked her over again, as if he was seeing her for the first time.

"Our intelligence officers tell me that despite her being a mudblood, she is very high ranking in 'The Order,'" the Demon went on. "It's probably the reason why they're losing so badly. Having one of their kind as their highest ranking general just shows their inferiority to you, my Lord. You should never trust a mudblood to do a wizard's job."

The cloaked figures sneered under their masks at the Demon's comments, all chuckling cruelly as they whispered amongst themselves.

Hermione raised her chin and squared her shoulders, keeping her eyes locked on Voldemort. She refused to be intimidated. Refused to allow them to think her weaker because of her blood. She was just as deadly as they were. If the Demon hadn't already taken her wand, she'd prove it. They could go to hell if they thought she wouldn't slit all their throats without a second's hesitation.

"When I saw her on the field," the Demon said, "all of our soldiers were neutralized, and two Order members had already commandeered the carriage and were making their escape." The Demon looked down at Hermione in a way that caused a shiver to run down her spine, like someone walking on her grave. "I knew

I only had enough time to intercept one; prevent a few meaningless slaves from being freed, or capture one of the most vital members of The Order.”

“I can only imagine the secrets she must know,” Voldemort said, nodding his head in approval. “And she will make an exceptional bargaining chip. The perfect damsel in distress to lure Potter out of hiding. You made the right choice, as usual. Consider your duties completed for the day. Remove your mask, you deserve a drink.”

A slave was brought forward; a small girl dressed in threadbare robes and a metal collar and chain clamped around her neck. Not that it was needed. The girl was undoubtedly a muggle, or a muggleborn dosed high with Anti-Magic potions. She wasn’t a threat; the collar and chain were purely symbolic. A tool to demonstrate her place amongst the purebloods. To show her secondary status. How truly fucking sickening.

As the shivering girl stepped forward, the silver platter she held shook in her hands. She offered a flute of bubbling champagne to Voldemort, then to the Demon. Her captor snatched a glass with one hand, the other reached for the back of his head. Hermione watched his gloved fingers elegantly slip off the hood of his robes to reveal startling white-blonde hair.

Her breath caught in her throat when he removed the metal from his face, and she locked onto those familiar, cruel grey eyes. The eyes of her childhood bully. The vile, unfeeling traitor who’d watched her writh and scream on his parlor floor years ago while his own aunt tortured her. His eyes didn’t burn the way they used to though. Didn’t flicker with resentment. Didn’t glisten the way they had when he’d turned away from her that day, when she’d lay screaming begging for his help. They were cold now.

Draco Lucius Malfoy. He was still alive. Still as loyal to Voldemort as ever. Still a Death Eater.

No, he was so much more than that now. He was a Demon Mask. She realized she couldn’t think of a more suitable title for him. He really was a soulless demon; a monster. He’d killed his cousin hours ago. He’d ripped her into two pieces, and now he was sipping champagne with the evilest wizard of all time with a smug smile on his face.

Although she suspected they’d crossed paths in various war zones over the years, Hermione hadn’t seen his face since the battle of Hogwarts, and he’d changed considerably since then. His shoulders were broader now and his arms were wrapped

This scream was different. It was agonised; a blood-curdling wail of pain. The scouts must’ve been back from their mission.

Hermione shot out of bed, snatching her wand and satchel from her bedside table, and sprinted to the infirmary. “What happened?” she shouted as soon as she crossed the threshold into the makeshift hospital. Her hands automatically dove into her bag for pain potions she kept there.

“Sneak attack near Manchester,” a young healer named Kirsty, said, her voice trembling as much as her hands while she tried to pin down the writhing wizard beneath her. “They... they tried to disarm one of his bases but it was a trap.”

The wizard thrashed when Kirsty added Essence of Dittany to the burnt flesh around his shoulder. He gnashed his teeth together, and hissed as the sting of the medicine interacted with his injuries.

Hermione stood beside his cot. “I’ll take this one,” she said, jutting her chin to the other beds of injured soldiers. “Go tend to the others.”

Kirsty released a heavy sigh. She looked like she was on the verge of tears. “Thank you.” She quickly schooled her expression, and then turned and ran to one of the injured, her dark blonde hair poking in every direction as she went.

Hermione surveyed the wizard on her bed, trying her best to drown out the screams around her.

Cormac McLaggen was almost unrecognisable. His skin was severely burnt. Scorched flesh covered half his face and the crisp ivory bone of his cheek and eye socket were visible. The left half of his body was burnt beyond repair, meaning he would have little use of his left arm and leg. There wasn’t a healing charm in the world strong enough for that type of extensive nerve damage. She just hoped she could repair enough tissue in time so he wouldn’t lose them completely.

“What spell did this?” Hermione asked.

“I...it was... eughhhh!” McLaggen squeezed his eyes closed, screaming in pain when Hermione cast a charm to disinfect the wound on his shoulder. “MOTHER FUCKER, IT HURTS SO MUCH!”

“Please calm down, try to breathe. I can’t get you an antidote if I don’t know what spell caused this.”

“Wasn’t - eughhhh - wasn’t a spell!”

“Then what was it?”

“Who?”

Medusa held his hands behind his back, and started to circle her again. “Well, one is Shacklebolt’s daughter, so I’m sure he’ll be very eager to rescue her.”

“Why now?” she asked, her mind already formulating a hundred different strategies. “Who are the others?”

“Are those really the most important questions right now?” he hissed, voice low as a whisper but sharp as a blade.

She tried again. “Where are they taking them?”

“To The Dark Lords headquarters,” he answered, tone lighter, a purr; apparently pleased with her question. “He means to keep them close and use them as a bargaining chip later. I believe he wants to use them to draw Potter out. A trade; seven lives in exchange for one. You lot are stupid enough to fall for it. Hero complex and all.”

*Fuck*. Medusa was right.

Harry would undoubtedly want to offer himself in exchange. Wouldn’t be able to stop himself from being a sacrificial lamb, especially if young witches were involved. They couldn’t let that happen. The prophecy was clear; Harry needed to be the one to kill Voldemort. He was their last hope. If Voldemort got his claws into Harry, the war would be over. There would be nothing left to fight for.

“It will be a simple operation, in and out,” Medusa said. “Can you manage that?”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

She turned to leave, her hands already reaching for the portkey in her bag -

“Oh, and Liliith?”

“Yes?” she asked without turning around to face him.

“Send your best soldiers on this one. The Dark Lord is furious that his last mission was intercepted, he’ll be meaning to draw blood this time.”

## 2nd December

Hermione woke to a scream.

It wasn’t unusual. She quite often rose to the shouts of petrified soldiers waking from night terrors and screams of people calling out to loved ones that’d been murdered in battle.

in thick muscle, but he was still slender. Built still fit for a seeker. His skin looked like marble, cold, perfect, not a blemish in sight. His features were even sharper, rivaling the most beautiful renaissance paintings she’d ever seen. His high cheekbones were more prominent, jawline more angled. He looked elegant, graceful, and absolutely fucking lethal.

“You!” Hermione hissed, unable to keep silent as rage twisted through her in a way it never had before.

Malfoy’s eyes snapped to hers. An amused smirk decorated his sharp features as he looked at her.

“You fucking monster! How could you?”

Malfoy cocked his head to the side, amused. “Care to elaborate, mudblood?”

“You killed Tonks!”

“And?”

“*AnR*” Hermione blinked furiously. The room full of murderers ready to decapitate her on a second’s notice forgotten through her indescribable anger. “She was your cousin. She was a mother!”

“She was a filthy blood traitor,” he snapped, smiling as he sipped his champagne. “She’s no family of mine.”

“Don’t you feel the slightest bit of remorse? Where’s your humanity?”

Malfoy scoffed. His eyes darkened as he took a step towards her. The movement was slow, fluid, predatory. “My only regret is that it was quick. I wish I could have made it last, made her suffer and realize what a fucking colossal mistake she’d made in choosing the wrong side *before* the light left her eyes.”

“You’re a monster.”

Malfoy grabbed her chin, his smile turning positively menacing as he tilted her head back to look at him. “I believe the term you’re looking for is *Demon*.” He pushed her back with one sharp shove.

Hermione fell onto her back, dark chuckles echoing around the cathedral when she got caught in her chains and couldn’t get up. Malfoy drained the last of his champagne, then took his place beside Voldemort.

“Well, as much as I do love to be entertained by a fiery little Mudblood, there really is no time like the present, is there?” Voldemort said as both his and Malfoy’s eyes turned back to her. “Let’s see what Order secrets she has, shall we?”

With the sharp snap of his fingers, two Black Masks were at Hermione's flank. They pulled her to kneel once more; one gripped her shoulders while the other curled his fingers under her chin and the top of her head, preventing her from turning away.

Voldemort rose from his chair rather elegantly. He placed his empty flute back on the tray, his robes swaying around him as he stalked toward Hermione.

Hermione tried to twist away, but the grip on her face was too tight. She couldn't move. Couldn't do anything. She prided herself on being brave. The thought of begging made her feel sick, but if the Order's secrets were on the line - if their very survival depended on it - she had to try. Had to know that she'd given it all her all; tried everything and left no stone unturned.

Her eyes locked onto Malfoy's, and she made one last attempt to plead with him. "Please! Malfoy, please don't let him do this!"

He couldn't have changed that much, could he? They'd gone to school together; they'd grown up together. Surely there was still some humanity left in him? Some small shred of human decency that inclined him to see that this was wrong, that he shouldn't let Voldemort look through her memories? Shouldn't there?

"Please!"

But she found nothing there. He just stared blankly back at her; no light in his eyes or flicker of regard for her screams. His eyes were like stone. Dead.

"Get the fuck away from me!" Hermione spat as she tried to pull away from the elder wand. The fingers on her face dug more forcefully into her skin, bruising as they held her in place. "Shhhhhhhh, this will only take a moment." Voldemort pressed the wooden tool between her temples, and then barged into her mind.

Despite his downright predatory stance and sharp tongue, Hermione had always thought he was interesting. Found their small battle of wits and sparing matches of words oddly enthralling. Sometimes she thought - if circumstances were different - she might have actually found him appealing -

Then she remembered which side he was on. Remembered which master he'd chosen to serve, and the thought was extinguished as quickly as it'd ignited.

No, there was nothing redeemable about Medusa. No matter how much intelligence he leaked. He was a monster. A vile, inexcusable murderer. He'd probably killed so many of her friends. Probably murdered hundreds of Muggles and slept like a baby at night.

"They're moving some girls in a few weeks," he said, derailing her train of thought. "Seven in total, I believe."

Bellatrix. She didn't even try to conceal her identity most of the time; her wild, untameable black hair clearly visible beneath her hood.

Nothing was known about the male Demon Mask other than he was relentless on the field. Lethal. A monster. The handful of times he'd been seen on the battlefield he'd left a sea of corpses behind him, no survivors.

The aim of the Demon masks was to instil fear, and they did the job perfectly. The masks themselves were grotesque, but incredibly intricate. The top half was a pure black human skull, similar to the black masks; the lower jawbone was an animal's - a wolf's or a lion's, perhaps. The jaw was made of striking crimson metal with long, sharp prominent fangs that stretched up either side of the mouthpiece. The most renowned feature of the Demon masks were the horns, two huge, elaborate things made from the darkest metal, that curved out from their temples to cast the most sinister shadow.

But Medusa wore a simple black mask. Nothing unusual or fear-inducing about it. It was a facade if she'd ever seen one.

Hermione knew that he was high-ranking. She guessed a Gold Mask, possibly turned out of spite for being deemed not worthy or dangerous enough for a pair of horns. He wouldn't have been able to gather this much information if he wasn't in the inner circle. He was intelligent too, frustratingly so. He'd managed to pass on invaluable information for years, completely compromising Voldemort's power and giving The Order a chance. So many lives had been saved and battles won because of him.

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water. She suppressed a shudder. "You are full of surprises Lilith, even after all these years."

"Why do you care what house I was in? What difference does it make to all of this? Are you going to switch sides, again, over some pathetic, long-forgotten quidditch house rivalry?"

He came to a stop in front of her. He was close. Much, much too close. Their chests were almost touching. "Perhaps. Maybe, after all these years of our secret meetings, I'm growing curious as to who exactly is under that mask of yours."

"I'll show you mine if you show me yours."

"You first," he said with a nod of his head. She could hear the smile in his voice.

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him, knowing he couldn't see from under the porcelain, doll-like mask she was wearing. She was dying to know who he was, to figure out which of Voldemort's loyal dogs had betrayed him.

Voldemort had started ranking his generals early in the war, rewarding loyalty and devotion by ensuring that different levels of his army wore different masks. A way to showcase their ruthlessness, and intimidate The Order.

At the bottom of the pile were the Black Masks. They wore the usual dark, cast iron masks; the ones that had given Hermione nightmares when she was at Hogwarts. They were nothing to her now. The majority were freshly trained and new to the ways of war. They were still lethal, but most of the time they were just impulsive. Eager to show their worth to Voldemort, but easy to manipulate. They made excellent hostages for interrogations, usually sang like canaries on the first night - no curses needed. Harry encouraged capturing those types of soldiers, probably saw it as more humane, seeing as they broke quickly.

Next on the hierarchy was the Gold Masks; the second in command. There were maybe thirty in Voldemort's army. Highly trained, and immeasurably dangerous. Their masks were skulls crafted from the finest gold, every curve, and dip of the metal shining and covered in spikes. They were incredible on the battlefield, vicious killers that spared no one. Hermione guessed they were Voldemort's oldest followers; Yaxley, Rodolphus and Rabastan Le Strange, and Bart' Grouch Jr. The fights always ended in multiple Order members' dead if Gold Masks were on the field.

The highest-ranking Death Eaters were the Demon Masks. Voldemort's right hands. There were only two of them; a man and a woman. The woman was obviously

She knew there might be a time she would be captured. Knew with every fibre in her body that if she were, the Death Eaters would want to search her memories. She had far too much valuable information; knew countless secrets, battle strategies, secret bases, and carefully thought-out tactics. Her mind was simply too valuable a tool for Voldemort not to invade and use against The Order. So naturally, she'd planned for this exact possibility.

Hermione took a deep breath and pictured the intruder in her mind. Pictured his magic as a physical being, a tangible force that she could grasp, and then flew her walls up so high they knocked him back. She envisioned pushing him from her memories, visualized him sailing through the air so punishingly fast, like he was free-falling, and out of her head.

Voldemort gasped as he was thrown out of her mind. He fell back, his nails curled around the armrest of his chair to steady himself. He pressed a hand to his chest, glaring at Hermione as he drew deep breaths through his nostrils. He looked infuriated, but intrigued.

Hermione was breathless. Pushing him out of her mind so violently had exhausted her but she was ready, should he try again. He wasn't getting in. She wasn't going to let him. Not a chance.

"My Lord," a Gold said. "Are you alright? What happened?"

Malfoy just stared at her. Eyes tight, jaw tighter. Emotionless.

"Remarkable," he whispered, the astonishment clear in his voice. "She tore me from her mind."

"That's ... that's not possible," the Gold said. His mask snapped in Hermione's direction and then back to Voldemort.

"Do you think me a liar, Yaxley?"

"N-no... no, of course not, my Lord."

"I don't think I've ever seen a Mudblood possess such talents." Voldemort straightened, and dusted off his robes. "I admit, I didn't think their kind was capable of such magic."

Hermione continued to glare at him. Her chest heaved from exhaustion, the dizzying pain in her temples was almost enough to make her collapse but she ignored it. She raised her chin high, and turned her lips upwards into a small smirk.

"You were right to capture this one," Voldemort said. "I can only imagine the secrets she must have. No one is trained that thoroughly at Occlumency if they don't have anything to hide."

"Shall I bring in the appraisers my Lord?" one of the Black Masks said, twirling a stay curl of hers between his fingers. Hermione jerked away from him. "I think this one will be worth a pretty penny. I know Bart' Crouch Junior is in the market for a new slave. He adores his mudbloods."

The room erupted into dark cackles and whispers. Hermione suppressed a shudder.

Voldemort would undoubtedly want to search her memories routinely. He'd keep searching and searching, and he'd bide his time until she slipped, but he wouldn't care less where she was kept in the meantime.

Hermione knew what was likely to happen to her now. She'd saved enough girls on her missions throughout the years to know what happened when young witches were captured. She'd untied enough of them from beds, saw their bruised wrists and ankles- sometimes cut to the bone where they'd tried to free themselves. She'd seen enough blood-soaked sheets to know what was likely to be awaiting her.

Maybe she would be sold to Rodolphus. Or Yaxley? Maybe they would kill her quickly. She'd always had a theory that most Death Eaters had pain fetishes, that they liked to torture the poor girls while they raped them. Cut them, stab them, tear pieces of flesh from the bone while they had their way with the screaming witch beneath them. They were considered the lucky ones. They only ever lasted a night or two.

Yaxley removed his mask, and passed the other cloaked figures to kneel in front of Hermione. "If it would please you, my Lord. I would very much like to have this one. I would pay whatever my Lord sees fit." He cupped her chin, a gesture meant to be tentative and gentle, maybe? It made her stomach lurch and her skin to pebble in the most sickening way.

The room fell into choked silence when Hermione spat in Yaxley's face. The Death Eater jumped back in shock; eyes blown wide as he furiously wiped the saliva from his face.

A pureblood, - one of Voldemort's most loyal followers - with a mudblood's spit across his face. She could only imagine the humiliation Yaxley must've felt. It almost made Hermione giddy.

something I'm not. I know what I've done, I know who I am. Do you know who you are?"

"What are you getting at? I don't have time for games. *Spit it out!*"

Medusa chuckled under his mask. His pace slowed a little, but he didn't stop circling her. "How does your Order feel about some of your foot soldiers casting killing curses? I hear from a very reliable source, that the Granger girl has become quite the little murderer, and I know she's not the only one. They wouldn't have sent you to me, into the snake pit as it were, if they didn't think you could defend yourself. So, I wonder, how much blood is on your ledger?"

It was a test if she'd ever heard one. A challenge. An open invitation for an execution. He knew the effect he was having on her, probably guessed it from the way her chin jutted out defiantly, or the deadly green light illuminating from the tip of her wand.

Hermione took a calming breath, feeling her shoulders tense and relax before they slumped altogether. She finally lowered her wand. "More than I would like. It keeps me up at night, as it should. But this is war; we don't have time to be gentle anymore."

"Indeed. Spoken like a true Death Eater," Medusa said as he finished another rotation. She could feel his gaze burning into hers as he made another round. Examining her, dissecting every twitch of her hand and micro movement. Sizing her up. "I wonder, were you a Slytherin back in Hogwarts?"

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"Ah, it seems I was mistaken. Only a Gryffindor would roar at such an accusation. You lions are all the same; your bark is always worse than your bite."

Hermione snorted, feeling her lip twitch upwards into a sort of smirk. "I can prove you wrong if you'd like?"

"Yeah? What were you thinking? Small Knockback jinx to the knees? Little blinding hex to leave me vulnerable for ten minutes? I know you lions don't like to use lethal curses if you can help it."

"How about a hex that boils the blood in your brain?" she asked, loving the way he paused at her words, like it caught him off guard. "Nothing brightens up your Tuesday evening quite like seeing a man fall to his knees in agony."

Medusa chuckled at that, his shoulders shaking as he started walking again. The sound was menacing, vibrating low in his chest. It slid down her spine like freezing

"I don't have time for games *Medusa*," she snapped, the charm on her voice box unnaturally distorting the words. "What's the information?"

"Ah, ah, ah, not so fast," he said, waving his index finger at her. "First things first, you made a right cock-up last week. I told you to be careful. You almost lost the artefact. Do you have any idea how valuable that thing is?"

Her fingers twitched to hex him. "My cock up? Are you serious? The team followed your instructions! And thanks for telling us about The Vhalteria Dagger by the way; they almost died because of that thing! If it's anyone's fault, it's yours because of your shitty information!"

Medusa tilted his head to the side. She could tell he was mocking her, even from underneath his mask. "I wasn't there. Don't blame me because your team was underprepared. I gave you enough; the location, the time, the size of the group. Everything else is on *you*. Your teams' failure is on *you*."

Hermione couldn't help but flinch, or stop her spine from straightening.

"I take it you lost one of your own?"

Hermione stayed silent. The grip on her wand tightened, her knuckles turned white as she swallowed the bile in her throat. Colin's death was still too fresh, like scratching an open wound. The impulse to lash out was growing stronger, each cruel torment from Medusa's tongue another lashing that pushed her towards the edge.

God, how she wanted to kill him some days. Wanted to tear his eyes from his skull and shove them down his throat just to silence him. He always seemed to know how to get under her skin, rile her up to the point the rational part of her brain dulled and she was a slave to her impulses.

That couldn't happen today. She needed to be calm. Couldn't risk pissing him off and losing their rat. Couldn't kill him right there on the spot like a dog. No matter how much she wanted to. He was too valuable; his information was too important. "I'll take that as a 'Yes' then."

"Why are you even doing this?" she snapped, an acidic litl creeping into her voice. She didn't lower her wand. "Isn't it a little late for redemption for you? How much blood is on your ledger?"

"Oh, I've lost count, sweetheart. The list goes on and on." Medusa started to circle her; predatory, the way a wolf circles a baby deer. "But I don't pretend to be

"How dare you!" Yaxley leaned forward, and smacked her across the face with the back of his hand.

She swore she felt her cheekbone crack under the pressure. It hurt like hell; she tasted blood in her mouth, but she couldn't keep the smile off her face. Hermione could only imagine how deranged she must have looked; blood colouring her gums, head swaying from the dizzying pressure of the slap as she gritted at the Death Eater in front of her. Her possible captor, the man likely to be her future rapist.

A brave, hot-headed Gryffindor to the very end. She wondered if McGonagall would have been proud?

"No, this one isn't to be sold," Voldemort said. He studied Hermione for a moment, then turned to Malfoy. "You said this is Potter's favourite Mudblood, did you not?"

"Yes, my Lord," Malfoy said from beside him. A loyal dog on a leash if she ever saw one.

"And you are certain she is a vital member of The Order?"

"Yes, my Lord," Malfoy repeated. His expressionless face tightened a fraction. "I believe she would be most valuable to us. I've seen her on the field, and despite her inferior blood status, she's absolutely lethal. I'm sure Potter would do everything in his power to get her back."

"I thought so. Well, in that case, Draco, you will take her."

Hermione felt all the blood drain from her face. Her smile vanished as quickly as it had appeared.

"As you wish." Malfoy bowed his head, not a hint of humanity in his voice.

Oh God, no, Hermione thought. Not him. Anyone but him.

Fenrir's chair scraped against the floor as he stood. "But my Lord, Malfoy has always detested our use of slaves! She would be wasted on him!"

"She will not be his plaything, McNair," Voldemort snapped, irritated. "Not if he doesn't wish her to be. Malfoy is the best Legilimens we have, and I have something special in mind for this one. If anyone can break her, it's him."

Panic washed over Hermione like ice water. This could *not* be happening.

If she was given to Malfoy, he would find out everything; the Order's base, the safe houses, the bunkers, Medusal He would know everything! She wouldn't be able to keep him out, she knew that. Despite her countless hours of research on mind

barriers and memory locks, despite the immeasurable hours she'd spent practicing, Malfoy's skill at Legilimency was legendary. There wasn't a slave alive he hadn't forced a confession from. Not a secret untold or a fruitless interrogation when he'd gotten his hands on an Order member. Voldemort was right, he was going to break her.

"Draco, give me your hand."

Malfoy obediently stepped forward. He pulled the leather glove from his hand and offered his palm to Voldemort, not flinching when his master sharply ran the tip of the elder wand over his palm and sliced a deep, jagged cut into his skin.

With a flick of Voldemort's wand, Malfoy's blood seeped from the wound and floated into the air. When it was gathered in a neat crimson ball, Voldemort cast another charm on it. The incantation slipped past his lips so quietly Hermione couldn't hear it. Malfoy's blood glowed and bubbled for a moment, then stilled.

Voldemort took a step toward Hermione. "Cut the mudblood's neck."

Hermione gasped as she felt the cool edge of a blade press against her overheated skin. She squeezed her eyes shut-

"Not her throat, you idiot," Voldemort hissed. "Have you not heard a single word I've said? She has valuable information on the enemy. I do not want her dead. Yet."

The blade against her throat pulled away. Hermione opened her eyes and released a ragged breath. Voldemort looked incandescent, murder glowing in his eyes.

"... I don't understand, my Lord," the Black Mask, the one with the blade, fumbled.

"Cut her neck *at the back*, near the top of her spine," Voldemort ordered. "I've cast a charm on Draco's blood. If he is to be her captor, we want to make sure she cannot escape."

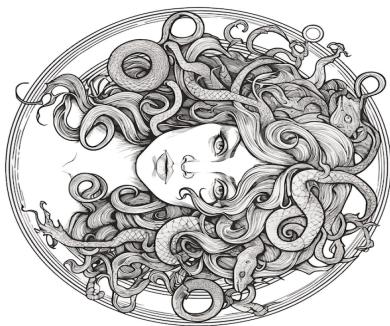
Hermione squirmed as the Black Mask pushed her to the floor and crushed her face to the blood-soaked rug. The other pinned her shoulders down, trapping her.

"You see my friends," Voldemort said as he stood over her. "This blood ritual will tie the mudblood's life to Draco's. It will link them."

Her hair was brushed up from the base of her neck, exposing her skin.

"It will tie their lives together."

## CHAPTER 3



### MEDUSA

**29th November**

"I didn't think you were going to show," a deep, gravelly voice said from behind. "Thought you'd forgotten all about me."

Hermione spun toward the sound and drew her wand, aiming it at his throat on instinct. The tip lit with a small green light; the killing curse ready, the incantation at the tip of her tongue.

"*Wom, wom, now*, easy there killer." She could hear the smirk in Medusa's voice as he held his hands up, showing her that he wasn't armed - not yet. She knew all too well how quickly he could draw his wand and point it at her temple; he'd done it enough times during their meetings. "Don't shoot the messenger, *Lilith*."

Malfoy's gaze swept to hers. Even in her mind, his eyes were just as cold. Just as unfeeling. He regarded her impatiently. "No? Don't feel like talking?"

Still, Hermione didn't speak.

"Fine, if that's how you want to be. Let's have a look in that big brain of yours, shall we?" His robes brushed against the back of her hand as he made his way toward the entrance. It left a chill on her skin and caused a shiver to run up her spine.

Malfoy lifted his foot and brought it down against the iron door in a punishing kick.

The door remained unmoved.

He brought his foot up again and smashed the heel of his boot against the iron. The noise ricocheted around them, it vibrated through the air like the harsh beat of a drum, but the door was still sealed shut. As immovable as the candles in her new prison cell.

Hermione smiled.

## CHAPTER 7



### TIME IS A CRUEL MISTRESS

**22nd December**

Throughout her incarceration at Malfoy Manor, Hermione came to realise that time was a cruel, selfish little mistress.

Time was uncaring. Unsympathetic. She didn't care that with each tick of her clock, Hermione felt her tenacious Gryffindor spirit slipping away, felt the fire in her belly and that burning courage extinguishing with each rising sun. That each day, when Malfoy sharply assaulted Hermione with his particularly cruel brand of Legilimens magic, a small part of herself chipped away. Or that he was tearing away at her, shredding her psyche apart as he tore through her mind. Time didn't care that she felt herself starting to weaken, splintering, *piece by painful piece*.

No, of course not. Time didn't care about trivial things like that. She didn't care about the war or the millions of lives that had been lost during her rotations. She didn't care if Voldemort won or if he stamped out what was left of The Order and the world was eclipsed by his darkness. The only thing time was concerned with was ensuring the moon set each evening, and that Helios pulled the sun to rise each morning with his golden chariot.

Time's goals were simple, unambitious; to bring the promise of a new day. The hope of a fresh start, a clean slate.

Even if some people didn't want another day. Even if hope was a luxury that some people simply couldn't afford anymore.

The days dragged on and on. Hermione repeated the same boring, mundane routine with each rise of the sun.

Her mornings started with Malfoy bursting her bedroom door open - the sound of the wood hitting the wall violently always jolted her out of what dreamlike state she'd been plotting in.

He would offer her the anti-magic potion.

She would refuse it with a sharp; "*fuck you,*" or "*Go to hell.*"

Malfoy would command her to drink it, more forcefully the second time.

Hermione would either smack his outstretched hand away or spit in his face; whichever seemed the more appealing at the time; whichever she felt would turn Malfoy's stomach the most. More often than not, she chose to spit.

He would react in one of two ways; either paralyze her with a hex and pour the liquid into her throat, or pin her against a surface, pry her mouth open and force it down like he had done on that first day. Like Hermione, he often chose the more volatile of the two options. The sick bastard probably got off overpowering her like that.

Afterwards, he would instruct a house-elf to wait with her while the potion took effect, and he would disappear. The elves would talk to Hermione while they waited for him to return, trying to defuse the awful strain in the atmosphere. The elf would chat quite casually to her while she threw a fit, ignoring her as she overturned all the furniture in her room and punched the walls in a fit of rage.

"Indeed. And how would you do it now? What possible punishment do you think is worthy of the sins I've committed?"

Hermione stared at him. She narrowed her eyes, clenched her jaw. "There's not a punishment to atone for the things you've done. You're fucking monstrous, even the devil couldn't punish you."

She swore she saw Malfoy's lip twitch upwards. "I couldn't agree with you more."

As quickly as he entered her mind, Hermione threw up her defences. She fought past the excruciating force of his dark magic, and focused.

She envisioned a building. A fortress of her own making, with high, impenetrable brick walls and a thick iron door. It was fifty, maybe sixty stories high. It looked like a hotel with rows upon rows of small windows, perfectly symmetrical to one another.

She could do this. This was what she'd trained herself to do; store all her memories in a safe place within her mind, build the walls so sturdy, so unbreakable, that even the most skilled Legilimens couldn't tear them down. Her memories were safe. Unreachable.

Draco whistled as he materialized beside her. He tilted his chin towards the sky, taking in the large structure in front of them. "You have been busy, Mudblood."

Hermione said nothing, just narrowed her eyes and studied him. He seemed completely unfazed by her attempts to keep him out of her memories. He looked at the building she'd created to keep him from her secrets with a sort of bored astonishment. As though he was shocked that someone like her was capable of creating something like this, even though it wouldn't keep him out forever. Nothing would.

He hadn't been kept out of many people's minds. She imagined bleeding secrets from others was as easy to him now; as natural as breathing. He was going to have to work a lot harder to get hers. She would make him writhe, fight, tirelessly search her head to find them. She hoped it would possess him. She hoped, with a sick sort of elation, that the failure would drive him mad, unhinge him and keep him up at night. She needed him distracted, preoccupied with something else so she could escape.

Or she needed to find a way to break their bond and kill him herself.

"How many years have you been training in memory blocking?" he asked, still appraising the building in front of him.

Hermione remained silent.

"It's fine," she breathed, her heart fluttering slightly when the tiny elf's voice croaked. She didn't mean to upset him. He seemed very sweet, she just didn't have time to ponder his feelings right now. She needed to focus, needed to think of an escape plan.

The sound of the bedroom doors bursting back open shot through Hermione. As Malfoy stepped into the room, she spun to face him, backing away until her spine touched the cream wall. She knew better than to put her back to him.

Malfoy smiled when he noticed. "I'm curious Granger, how many people have you killed? Twenty? Fifty?"

"Not nearly enough Death Eaters!" she spat, inching closer to the bathroom. Maybe if she sprinted, she could lock herself inside? Maybe that would buy her a minute or two?

"Don't even think about it, Mudblood."

Malfoy lunged forward, his hands braced on the wall either side of her head. She jumped when he smacked the wall beside her face, blocking her escape route.

"Humour me," he said. One of his hands curled under her chin, tilting her head back to meet his cold gaze. "How many times have you thought about killing me?"

"In the last twenty minutes?" Hermione challenged, her lip starting to curl in disgust from having him touch her. "Or ever?"

Malfoy scoffed. "Ever."

"Hundreds. Probably thousands."

He used one hand to withdraw his wand from the holster on his bicep. The other remained locked under her chin. "When was the first time you thought about killing me?"

"The night you killed Dumbledore," she said. "That was the night I realised that you were a traitor."

His eyes tightened. He brought his wand up. "How did you plan on doing it?"

"I thought about knocking you unconscious, dragging you to the Astronomy Tower, and pushing you off."

"Interesting," he purred, pressing his wand between her brows. "Very poetic of you."

"I thought the punishment should fit the crime."

And when Malfoy eventually reappeared, he would barge into her mind. His magic would bludgeon into her skull like a sledgehammer, and then the image of him would appear in her mind right alongside her.

Their routine within her mind was just as repetitive. They'd stand side by side and stare at the fortress she'd made to keep him from her memories, he would make a snide comment - usually about her appearance or lack of creativity in her design - then he would charge forward and try to break down the doors.

It took him four days to get them open.

He'd smiled smugly at her from over his shoulder when he'd done it; his eyes burning triumphantly as he entered the hotel and Hermione had followed closely behind. His smile had vanished when they'd entered a long, stretched out hallway, lined with dozens upon dozens of different coloured wooden doors, all as reinforced as the one into the hotel.

Hermione had organised her mind thoroughly during her training in memory blocking. She'd spent her isolated evenings honing her craft, filing each memory away behind walls and doors and locking the most important memories away, as far from his reach as she could manage. She intended to make this as difficult for him as possible. If he thought she would give up her secrets easily, he was very fucking mistaken.

Her maddeningly thought-out filing system, coupled with the will of her psyche and years of training had the desired effect. When he'd failed to force that door to her first real, tangible memory open by the end of the sixth day, Malfoy started to become volatile.

He was growing more frustrated by the day. His failed attempts to uncover even the *smallest* of her memories scratched at his confidence, and the more she wounded his pride, the more unhinged he became. And the more dangerous. He'd started searching her mind more sporadically after the first week. At random intervals, multiple times a day. Each session was more painful than the last, but Hermione held strong. She could do this. He'd crack before she did, she'd make sure of it.

After Malfoy pulled out of her mind, Hermione woke on the floor screaming, gasping and panting for breath. In many ways, the aftermath hurt more than the initial intrusion.

Legitimency was an exceptionally invasive type of magic. Intimate but unwelcome. It was punishing, overly taxing on the subject's body, and certainly not meant for continuous, everyday exposure. Malfoy's relentless use of the spell would

have certainly caused concerns if the Ministry of Magic was still around. Probably would have earned him a good decade in Azkaban, but the Ministry wasn't there anymore. He wouldn't be carted away to rot in a cell for his inhumane actions. He wouldn't sit in the corner of a mouldy cage, paranoid, mind melting away as he waited for the kiss from a dementor.

No one was going to stop him. No one was coming to help her, so the torture continued. It gave Hermione something to fantasize about though. Gave her something pleasant to focus on while she lay bored in her pretty little cell.

By the fourth day of her imprisonment, Hermione had begun bleeding out of her eyes after their sessions. The first time she'd barely noticed it, too busy writhing on the floor, her vision blurred and temples throbbing. She'd been in too much pain to register the wetness streaking from her eyes -

Until it had started to pool on the floor beneath her.

On the fifth day, she'd started to bleed from the corners of her mouth after their sessions and by the seventh day, it started to streak from her ears too. The harder she fought against the spell, the more she bled, and the more the pressure in her temples deepened to the point she wondered if her skull might fracture from it.

Malfoy didn't care. Didn't so much as batter an eyelid when she was on the floor, rasping, choking for breath. His eyes were always unfeeling, like he wasn't actually seeing her.

Hermione spent most of her day alone. Romy or another house-elf, Quinzel, brought her meals on a silver tray. At first, Hermione was uncooperative and refused to speak to the elves at all, never mind letting them know what her food preferences were. They would dawdle for a while, asking question after question while Hermione stared out the window and onto the lavish gardens, refusing to respond.

Her rudeness did nothing to deter the elves' spirits. It was sweet, really, how determined they were to get to her to eat, particularly at breakfast. If she wasn't so scared or so utterly consumed with the need to escape, she would've gladly eaten anything they put in front of her.

It wasn't that the food they brought wasn't appealing. Quite the opposite; it was all absolutely mouth-watering, but Hermione had no appetite. They brought every breakfast food imaginable to entice her; scrambled eggs on toast, waffles, yogurt and berries. The trays were always lovingly prepared. The silver was always perfectly

Another house-elf who lives here, Quinzel, says roast potatoes are nasty and gross. But Romy doesn't think so. Does Miss like roast potatoes?"

Hermione ran to the wooden door beside the bed. She was right, it was a bathroom. It was completely tiled with shiny, marble slates, decorated with silver furnishings and had a huge, copper bath under a window ledge. Any other day, Hermione would have admired it. Today, she was too busy planning Malfoy's murder.

She screamed in frustration, her hands flying to her head. Her panic rose when she realized there was nothing there she could use to attack him either.

"There's no need to get so upset," the elf murmured, fidgeting with the edges of his dark green pillowcase. "If Miss doesn't like roast potatoes, Romy will happily make something else. Romy makes very nice cheese sandwiches. Would Miss like those, instead?"

Hermione walked over to the burning candle on the bedside table. Maybe she could burn him? Maybe she would burn the curtains, burn the whole place down and use that as a distraction? Maybe she could escape? Surely Malfoy cared about his precious Manor enough that he wouldn't see it burn?

Apparently, he'd already considered this possibility, and prepared for it. The candles were charmed, sealed to their position on the bedside table. She ran her hand over the open flame, thinking maybe she could at least burn herself. Suicide wasn't an option she'd ever considered before, but her life wasn't worth risking the entire Order.

But as it turned out, that option had been torn from her as well. Although she could feel the heat of the flame, it didn't burn, didn't scorch the skin no matter how close or how long she held her hand over it. Malfoy had charmed those, too.

Hermione kicked the bedside table with all her rage. "Fuck!"

"Okay, no cheese sandwiches," the elf said. "What about lasagne? Romy makes very nice Lasagne! If Miss would—"

"Romy," Hermione spat, almost vibrating with anger as she pinched the bridge of her nose. "I appreciate your offer to prepare me dinner, but if you don't be quiet, I'm going to smother you with those pillows. Okay?"

"Okay," the elf whispered after a few moments of silence. "Romy is sorry. Romy doesn't mean to make Miss angry."

huddle around the fireplace wrapped in a blanket, and share stories while they drank on a Friday night; a perfect start to their weekends.

Red wine reminded her of warmth. Comfort. *Family*. It had always been her favourite, the sweetest treat she could ever imagine.

Not this wine though. This wine tasted like ash. It burned on the way down, made her stomach lurch in sickening anticipation as it slid down her throat.

Once Malfoy was satisfied that she'd swallowed it, he released her.

Hermione sagged onto the floor, choking, desperate to pull air into her starved lungs. She clawed frantically at her throat, fighting the dizzying nausea that buzzed around her as the room slowly swam into focus.

She'd been so close to death, to suffocating at his hands, and Malfoy didn't care.

"Romy," he drawled as he stood over her, watching, emotionless as ever.

"Yes, Master?"

"The potion takes twenty minutes to take effect. I have a few things I need to take care of. Watch our newest little pet, and make sure she doesn't vomit while I'm gone."

"Of course, Master."

Malfoy looked her over a final time before he left.

Hermione was going to kill him; she would make sure of it. Even if it killed her, she was going to end Draco Malfoy.

The elf banished the shattered glass before Hermione had a chance to snatch a piece. She pulled herself to her feet, ignoring the crippling ache in her chest, and frantically searched the room.

"What would Miss like for dinner?" Romy chirped happily.

Hermione didn't respond. She pulled open the drawers of the dresser and shuffled through the clothes there, looking for a weapon. She found nothing, so she sprinted to the wardrobe and swung the doors open, hoping she could fashion a coat hanger sharp enough to slit Malfoy's throat. No luck there either; they were all charmed to be immovable from the rail. Malfoy had thought ahead.

"Does Miss like lamb? Romy likes lamb," the elf said, nodding his head and looking thoughtfully at the ceiling. "And roast potatoes. Romy loves roast potatoes.

polished, and a freshly cut white tulip was always laid next to the blunt cutlery. Every time, the elves were absolutely downtrodden to find the food untouched.

Hermione's hunger strike lasted six days. Until her stomach practically turned in on itself when Romy entered her room, and brought with him the aroma of sugar and warm batter. Pancakes covered with syrup and butter - her favourite.

She nearly wept with happiness as she swallowed the first bite. She inhaled the entire tray in five greedy mouthfuls. She ate more after that. Only ever picking at her food and tearing off small pieces, but her tiny mouthfuls seemed to please the elves, and certainly spurred their creativity in the kitchen.

"Miss is free to wander the manor," Quinzel announced on the tenth day, setting down a silver tray and smiling at Hermione. Today's dinner was a chicken pasta bake, another white Tulip laying elegantly by its side.

"I've told you a hundred times, it's Hermione, not Miss," she answered, irritated and refusing to move from her perch on the window ledge. "And how do I know that your master hasn't warded the house to set me on fire as soon as I leave this room?"

Quinzel gasped and her tiny hands covered her mouth. "Master would never do that! The elves would be very cross if he burnt the house down, there would be a lot of mess."

Hermione snorted at the image that popped into her mind. "Of course. We can't have any mess, can we?" she asked bitterly.

"Quinzel can promise Miss that Master has not set any wards within the house that would harm Miss," the elf said sternly. "Master has ensured that Miss is safe and cannot harm herself or others, but no wards have been set up within these walls that would hurt her."

*Nothing within these walls*, Hermione's mind sharpened at Quinzel's choice of words. She finally tore her gaze from the gardens and studied the elf. "Has he set up wards *outside* of the manor that would hurt me?"

Quinzel looked awfully uncomfortable. Her bright pink eyes were on the floor as she shifted her weight between her small, bare feet. She fidgeted with the edges of her bright fuchsia pillowcase as she said, "Master just needed to be sure that Miss wouldn't be able to escape."

Well, that was an interesting piece of information. Hermione hadn't left her room since she'd been captured. She'd assumed that Malfoy wanted to keep her confined to her room, that she'd be zapped with an electric current or burnt alive by wards if she tried to leave her cell.

Strangely, she felt safer confined to her own space. She'd memorised this room by now, felt she knew it better than she did her own bedroom within the Order's base. The familiarity of it comforted her. She knew every curve of the wood on the desk, and every crack in the cream paint. She felt like it would be harder for Malfoy to get the jump on her from in here. He couldn't surprise her here, there were no hidden traps or nasty hexes that could catch her off guard. She was safer in here - sort of.

Hermione flinched when the door to her room suddenly burst open but she didn't turn around. She leaned her head against the glass window, refusing to acknowledge that he even existed.

"Evening Quinzel," Malfoy's said; his tone rough and biting. "*Mudblood*."

"Malfoy," she replied, keeping her eyes on the beautiful garden below, watching rain pelt down and darkened the grass. "Three times in one day? Oh, I am a lucky girl!"

"I aim to please, Granger."

"Doesn't your master have a more important mission for you?" She snarled each word, making her disdain for him crystal clear. "You are his prized show dog, aren't you? Surely there's a better use of your time than this?"

She heard Quinzel gasp from behind her. Felt the air shift and crackle under Malfoy's rage.

*Fantastic.* If she could sour his good mood even in the slightest, it would be the highlight of her day.

"On your feet Mudblood, let's get this over with."

She leaned further into the glass instead. "Fuck you."

"Don't make me drag you off that window ledge by your hair," Malfoy sneered.

"Because you know I will."

*That* she did know. He'd done it twice since her arrival when she'd refused to cooperate. She wasn't in the mood for a repeat performance today, her head hurt too much already.

Malfoy sighed towards the ceiling. He shook his head, and when he met her gaze again, his eyes were pure fucking stone. "Have it your way then."

He grabbed her chin quicker than Hermione thought possible. He stepped forward, roughly pressing his body against the length of hers, and sealed her to the wardrobe.

Her hands immediately flew to her defence when he tilted her head back. She hit his shoulders, punched his arms, tried to shift her weight to kick him. Nothing worked. Maybe it was his brute strength, or maybe she was still just so weak from blood loss and hexes. Whatever it was, it made her attacks completely ineffective. He didn't flinch, didn't even pause a fraction when she screamed and thrashed against him.

Hermione realized in those moments that she was completely vulnerable, so indescribably helpless. She didn't think she'd ever been so scared in her life, and Merlin, how she fucking hated it.

Malfoy forced her mouth open with bruising strength. His other hand pressed the glass firmly to her lips and forced the liquid down her throat. There wasn't much, barely a mouthful. When he'd drained the glass, he threw it against the wall where it shattered before into tiny pieces, and then sealed his large hand over her mouth and nose. The movement forced her mouth to close, preventing her from spitting the concoction out, but it also stopped her from breathing.

Her arms flailed around her as she tried to escape. She curled her fingers around his wrist and dug her nails into the skin, trying to pry them away from her. Nothing worked, he was immovable. Her eyes widened with panic as he watched her. His grey ones were incompletely unfazed by her struggles, by her undeniable terror. They were cold. Dead as stone.

Hermione's lungs burned with the need for oxygen. The dizzying ache returned to her skull as the room started to swim out of focus.

She needed to breathe! She just needed to *breathe!*

The more she fought against him, the more her lungs screamed in protest. She didn't have a choice. It was swallow the damn wine or suffocate.

Hermione had always loved red wine. She loved the fruity texture and the musky scent that accompanied it. It reminded her of Harry and Ron, of sneaking bottles of it into the common room during their final year at Hogwarts. How they would

to rescue Lavender Brown in time. Parvati Patil's wrists, cut to the bone with the metal cuffs that she'd fought against.

Hermione knew both of these girls well. She knew they wouldn't have surrendered willingly when they were sold into slavery. They would've fought their captors with all their strength, and the only thing that would've dulled that fight, would've been potions the Death Eaters had forced down their throats.

If Malfoy wanted Hermione bound to this bed, he was going to have one hell of a fight on his hands. She would make sure of it.

Malfoy stared at her for a long minute, trying to work out what she was thinking. The moment he understood, he burst into cruel laughter. "Oh, for Merlin's sake, you really think I'm going to rape you? Make no mistake, I wouldn't touch you if my life depended on it."

Hermione refused to lower her accusatory gaze. Or relax at his words. She didn't trust him in the slightest. Malfoy was one of the only two Demon Masks in Voldemort's army. The list of sins he'd committed to attain that title must've stretched as high as the Astronomy Tower. He'd sold his soul to the devil in exchange for a pair of horns. And if he could do all that, the title of rapist probably wasn't above him either.

"Do you think I'm an idiot Granger?" Draco asked, stepping closer to her. "If anyone is adept at wandless magic, it's you." He took another step. "I'm sure you've thought of a thousand contingency plans in case you were caught without a wand, being the prized know-it-all you are." And another.

Hermione retreated; panic washed over her as he matched her step for step.

"Why do you think I cast so many hexes on you?" Draco teased. "I needed you dizzy. Weak. *Vulnerable*."

She gasped when her back connected with the wardrobe doors.

Malfoy closed the distance between them with a final step, trapping her there. "This is an anti-magic potion. Nothing more. Nothing less. It will cancel whatever magic is running through your veins and can conjure without the use of a wand. Now, you can either drink it yourself, or I can force it down your throat. Which is it going to be?"

Hermione glared up at him, nostrils flaring as she balled her hands into fists at her sides with what little movement she had. "*Fuck. You.*"

Hermione stood with a huff. She dragged a hand through her hair as she turned to face him. "I don't know why you bother, you're not going to find anything." Her breath caught in her throat when she finally looked at him.

He was covered in blood. It was on his knuckles and hands, striking against his pale skin. It ran all the way up to his wrists. Jagged flecks of crimson were slashed up and down the front of his robes, evidence of cutting curses. He reeked of death; the stench of it was enough to make her stomach flip.

"Whose blood is that?" Hermione asked.

Malfoy cocked a brow. His lips twitched up at the edges. "Do you want a list?" "Whose blood is that?" she snapped, unable to tear her eyes away from the red that crusted between each finger; that hung beneath each nail.

Malfoy took a confident step toward her. "It's hard to say, I don't remember all their names. I am the Dark Lord's prized dog, as you so eloquently put it, I am his demon. I have a lot of important tasks."

"Don't joke about this! Whose blood is that?"

Malfoy simply shrugged in response, and the sight of his sinister smile made her already hollow chest ache.

"God, you're a fucking monster," Hermione said. "Why are you doing all this? If you do get into my memories and see where The Order's base is, Voldemort will kill everyone inside."

Malfoy said nothing, just drew his wand and took a step toward her.

Hermione started to back away. "Your cousin's child is with The Order. Teddy is a relative of yours, your own flesh and blood, and they will kill him if you uncover my memories." For every step she took, Malfoy followed. When he backed her against the bathroom door, she tried again, "He's a child. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

Malfoy gripped her throat with his free hand and pinned her against the wall. He tilted her head back, making sure that she looked into his eyes when he responded, "Not a fucking thing."

Hermione drew a deep breath, refusing to show the terror that crept up her spine. Defiant, as she always was. "Are you really that far gone? Isn't there any good left in you, at all?"

"Oh, Granger," Malfoy placed the tip of his wand at her temple. He leaned in close, his nose brushing hers. "What makes you think there was anything good in me to begin with?"

Malfoy kicked the wooden door hard enough to make it shake. The wood crunched on impact, splintering under his rage, but didn't open. Didn't budge an inch.

"That's not going to work," Hermione sang. She watched the performance from across the hallway, leaning against another door with a smirk on her face.

"Oh do shut the fuck up!" Malfoy snarled without looking back at her. "It's bad enough I have to enter your mind to begin with, I don't need your God-awful voice ringing in my ears while I'm here!"

Hermione snorted and folded her arms across her chest, settling in to watch the show.

They'd been in her mind for almost twenty minutes and Malfoy had failed to make any progress. He'd been attempting to batter down this door since their arrival, and his failure was the most amusing thing Hermione had seen in weeks.

He was relentless with his method's tonight, and was getting angrier by the moment. Hermione had lost count of the number of hexes he'd cast against the poor door. He'd tried everything, every dark curse, fire hex and exploding jinx. Hermione knew - even a few she didn't recognise - but nothing worked. Eventually, he'd become so enraged that he'd resorted to kicking the door down.

Hermione couldn't stop the joy that bubbled in her chest watching his anger get the better of him. She'd been thorough with sealing her memories away, even more so with protecting them. She'd made sure he wasn't going to get in.

The great Draco Malfoy, Demon Mask, Voldemort's right-hand man, thwarted by a filthy little Mudblood. There was irony in there somewhere, she was sure of it.

He deserved to suffer. She wanted him to be so consumed with his own failure that it drove him mad. It all paled in comparison to what he'd done. It wouldn't be enough to atone for the lives he'd taken or cleanse the blood that soaked his hands - but it was awfully fun to watch him fall apart.

"It's only a matter of time Granger," Malfoy hissed through clenched teeth. He stepped back, and aimed a particularly strong fire hex at the door.

"Romy?" he said quietly, cold eyes still on hers. He didn't lower his wand. Less than a heartbeat later, a house-elf appeared beside him with a pop.

"Yes, Master?" Romy asked, his large green eyes glittering eagerly, ready to serve.

"How can Romy be of assistance?"

"Fetch me a glass of red wine," he said, digging his wand into her skin a little more firmly before dropping it. "And an anti-magic potion."

"Of course, Sir." Romy bowed his head, and then vanished with a snap of his tiny fingers.

Malfoy and Hermione said nothing as they waited for him to return. Neither looked away, the atmosphere crackled between them as they glowered at one another. The air was hostile; thick and heavy with their disgust for one another.

*Fucking hate you,* she thought, hoping he might somehow be able to hear it through their unknown blood connection.

I hate you.

The pop of the elf reappearing didn't make either of them lower their gaze.

I hate you.

I hate you.

I hate you.

"Here you go, sir," the elf said happily, handing the two items to his master.

Malfoy added the clear potion to the wine, eyes still locked tauntingly on Hermione's. He swirled the glass in his hand to mix the two liquids, the movement so elegant and refined it looked like something out of a black and white Hollywood film. He really was the perfect aristocrat, when he wasn't busy being a mass murderer.

He extended his hand, presenting the glass to her. "Drink," he said; a command, not a request.

Hermione snorted and took a step back. "You're barking mad if you think I'm drinking anything you give me. Get that thing away from me, heaven knows what you've added to it!"

Flashes of the girls she'd unchained from beds over the years swam through Hermione's head like a Rolodex of horror. Blood-soaked sheets when she'd failed

He was the sole heir to the Malfoy line, and the last remaining Malfoy. She couldn't even imagine what type of wealth he must have, or the gold and riches he must've reaped from being Voldemort's chief general; his most loyal dog.

Malfoy looked Hermione over as he stepped into the room and locked the doors behind him, an amused expression on his face. "Concocting a brilliant escape plan, are we?"

"I will find a way out of here!"

"No, you won't," he said slowly, confidently. "You're trapped here, Mudblood. *Augh! th!*"

"The Order will come for me, they're going to find me, and they're going to break this bond between us," Hermione said, taking a step towards him and tilting her head to look him in the eye. "And when they break that bond, I will be the one to kill you. Make no mistake, as soon as this vile little connection between us has been tethered, I will slit your throat *with a smile on my face.*"

Malfoy didn't respond immediately. He narrowed his eyes and cocked his head to the side, assessing her. His gaze was entirely predatory, like he might Avada her any second. Any moment.

Hermione's hand instinctually twitched towards her empty wand holster on her thigh.

Malfoy grinned when he noticed, running his tongue across his top teeth. "I wouldn't expect anything less from you, Golden Girl. Fearless to the very end. You are a true Gryffindor, aren't you? My own little lion cub, here to do whatever I see fit."

Hermione raised her chin defiantly. She refused to show how his words sent a chill down her spine. She narrowed her eyes instead.

Malfoy's smile grew malicious. He stepped closer, drew his wand, and dug it under her chin. "I'm going to have such fun playing with you." He was sizing her up; toying with her the way a panther torments an injured gazelle. He knew she was trapped. He knew she had no possible way of escaping. Not yet, anyway.

This was all a sick little game to him. A way to pass the time, keep him occupied until Voldemort summoned him for another mission. Another assignment, where he would probably murder her friends, and assassinate the very soldiers sent to find and rescue her.

Smoke and heat engulfed the room but when it cleared, the door remained unopened.

Hermione giggled, knowing it would grate his nerves. "You've tried that a hundred times and it hasn't worked," she teased, couldn't help herself. "You may want to rethink your technique."

Malfoy whipped around to face her, his rage clear in the twist of his brow and curl of his lip. He looked deadly. Lethal and unhinged.

Hermione was getting to him. Her smirk grew.

Malfoy marched toward her like a bull charges after a matador. Hermione half expected to see steam blowing out from his nose.

"I would wipe that smug smile off your face if I were you Granger," he roared, stopping his strides when their chests were pressed together. He leered down at her, towering over Hermione's small frame. It would have been intimidating if they weren't in her mind.

He couldn't hurt her here, not really. Any pain he inflicted wasn't real, only the after-effects were. This was her mind. While they were here, she had more control. Certainly more than she did when they were on the outside, at least.

Malfoy' slip curled in disgust. "What are you smiling at? I will get into your memories, it's only a matter of time. So what, exactly, do you find so fucking amusing?"

"What? Can't you hear my thoughts?" she asked. Her spine straightened against the doorframe. She refused to cower below him. "Doesn't this awful little connection allow you to do that?"

Malfoy made a disgusted face. "Fuck, no! It's bad enough you're living in my house, having your deranged little thoughts bouncing around my head as well would be a fate worse than death."

Well, at least that answered one of her questions.

Malfoy spun on his heels and stalked back toward the battered door. "Let's get this over with. I don't have all day."

"Keeping you from something, am I?" Hermione asked. "Is there a bit of Christmas shopping you need to do?"

Malfoy snorted and withdrew his wand. "Funny, you can keep track of the days, but you can't change your clothes." His spiteful eyes raked over her entire body before he started another round of fire hexes at the door.

Hermione threw him an obscene gesture. She wasn't sure he saw it. She hoped he did though.

She hadn't changed her clothes since he'd captured her. Strangely, the wardrobes and chests of drawers in her cage were filled with clothes. Beautiful ones. Rails of garments in the softest silks and every style and colour she could think of. There must've been a hundred dresses and skirts hanging in the wardrobe, each as lavish and expensive looking as the one next to it.

She'd run her hands across the wool cardigans in the drawers a few times. They did feel nice, soft and warm, inviting her to pull them from their drawers and rid herself of her tight, restricting jeans. But the thought of wearing clothes that Malfoy had purchased and possibly picked out for her made her feel sick.

So, ten days on, she remained in her battle uniform. She hadn't showered since she'd been here. She couldn't bear to strip. The thought of shedding her clothes and being naked in Malfoy's house unnerved her, made her feel defenceless, so she hadn't.

Instead, she asked

the elves to cast cleaning and drying charms on her skin and clothes each morning and night. It wasn't nearly as relaxing as running a hot bath and submerging herself in the bubbles the way she really wanted to, but it meant that she was clean, and that she didn't have to wear anything hanging in the wardrobes.

Because wearing clothes that Malfoy had picked out and touched was akin to having him touch her himself.

And that was a fate worse than death.

being naked and showering in Malfoy's house.

Hermione said nothing, just studied him as the atmosphere strained between them. She refused to show any of the terror she felt on her face. Instead, she twisted her expression with disgust, making it clear how thoroughly repulsed she was by him. She couldn't show weakness, fear. She wouldn't.

"If you weren't so important to The Dark Lord," he said, nails digging into her arm, "I'd kill you right now."

"If I still had my wand," she hissed back, leaning in and raising her chin, "you'd be dead already."

Malfoy huffed a laugh, and threw Hermione into the unfamiliar room. She stumbled, but caught herself on a wooden desk before she could fall. She spun to face him; her survival instincts thumping through the fog in her brain. *Never turn your back on your enemy. Never leave yourself exposed.*

Her eyes darted around the room, looking for a possible escape route, a weapon, anything she could use.

Well, this certainly wasn't what she expected when she considered what sort of cage Malfoy would keep her in.

It was a bedroom. A very large, very regal-looking bedroom. All the furniture was made of the same dark oak as the double doors, and the walls were painted a warm shade of cream. There was an enormous four-poster bed in the centre of the room that was lined with expensive-looking, crisp white sheets and perfectly plump emerald green pillows. Next to the window was a desk with a vanity mirror sitting proudly atop. There were several dressers scattered around the room, a wardrobe, and a dark green armchair. There were lit candles everywhere, and the same silver vases with white flowers she'd seen when she entered the manor. All incredibly simple and elegant in design. All nothing like she expected Malfoy to own.

The west side wall was swallowed by a bay window that looked out onto the gardens, probably sealed with no possible way to open it. There was another door to the left of the bed, she imagined it led to a private bathroom. She figured Malfoy would want to keep her confined to her own space, her own inescapable little birdcage. He wouldn't want her to get her filthy, Mudblood paws on his nice things. Probably feared she'd infect them with some strange, completely non-existent plague with a single touch.

The furnishings looked much more expensive than anything the Order could ever own, but they probably cost nothing compared to the wealth Malfoy had accumulated. This was probably a servant's quarters; the very dregs of his wealth.

"I've seen her disintegrate those little metal boxes of yours with one breath," he said, the grip on her arm tightening, bruising. A threat. "I've heard the screams of men when she melts the walls and trapped them inside. Your soldiers are nothing to her."

Their scowls lingered on one another. Their glares were like daggers.

Merlin, she fucking hated him. With the exception of Voldemort, she didn't think she'd ever hated anyone the way she did Malfoy. He was so cruel, just for the sake of cruelty. Like a child holding a magnifying glass over a herd of ants, scorching them to death just to hear their tiny screams. *Fucking sadist.*

Being Voldemort's deadliest soldier wasn't just a job for him, he enjoyed it. Revelled in it.

She felt her hands ball into fists. They shook at her sides as rage twisted through her. "Do you even care?"

Malfoy sighed, his face growing indifferent. Bored. "You'll have to be more specific."

"Do you even care about how many people you've killed? Doesn't it bother you - even in the slightest - how many hearts you've stopped from beating?"

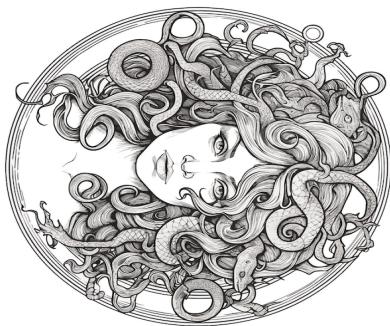
He snorted, cocking a brow as the corners of his mouth lifted into a wolfish smirk. "It doesn't bother me at all. It's part of the job. I consider it a perk of my role, watching your precious Order members sniffling and beg for their lives. Sometimes, it's the highlight of my fucking day."

Hermione couldn't help herself. Before she realised she was doing it, she raised her hand, and slapped him across the face. As hard as she fucking could.

It jerked Malfoy's head to the side; her palm burned from the force of it. She could feel the rage vibrating off him. Could feel dark magic crackling around him, making the air grow cold. It reminded Hermione of the chill she felt deep in her bones whenever she was near a dementor.

Malfoy didn't turn back to her immediately. He stared at the wall, jaw tightening and throat bobbing. Considering. She noticed his hand flex around his wand. He closed his eyes and drew a deep breath that made his nostrils flare. When he finally opened them and tilted his head back to her, his expression was venomous. *Feral.* "You get that one, Granger," he hissed, stepping closer and curling his fingers around her arm tightly. Hermione swore her heart stopped. "But if you do that again, you will regret it, I will *make* you regret it. Are we clear?"

## CHAPTER 8



### MISSING IN ACTION

**23rd December**

Hermione sat in her usual spot on the cushioned window ledge in her room, knees pulled to her chest and her arms wrapped around her calves; her very own perch in her birdcage.

A snowstorm had befallen the manor overnight. The once green grass and perfectly pruned rose bushes were transformed during the moonlight. The gardens were untouched, not a single footprint distorting the crisp white snow. If possible, it looked even more alluring now, almost enchanting.

Hermione had become quite fond of snow since the start of the war. She used to hate it. Thought the wretched stuff was nothing but an inconvenience that left everything around it cold and miserable.

She adored snow now, because it hid the evidence of the war. It covered the destroyed buildings and concealed the burnt meadows where battles had been fought. It covered the blood on the streets and made everything... new again. *Fresh.*

Hermione could never be in a bad mood when there was snow outside, the children living in the Order's bases wouldn't allow it. The little ones turned positively feral with joy at the sight of the stuff. Their laughter and screams of delight as they piled on their waterproof coats and enchanted thermal scarves, all so they could venture outside to build snowmen, were infectious, always had been.

It was a wonderful thing to see the children of war actually being children for a change. It was just a small reprieve from the murders and bombings going on outside; awful things that their innocent minds were completely unaware of, but it was a reprieve nonetheless, and they deserved it more than anyone.

As Hermione looked out onto the grounds, she wondered if the children were already up and playing outside. She wondered if Harry and Ginny's children, Rose, Fred and Severus, had already dragged their parents outside by their sleeves and demanded that they make snow angels with them. Her thoughts took a dark turn when Harry's gleeful face flashed behind her eyes. Her thoughts - filled with children's laughter and crooked snowmen a moment ago - were suddenly bleeding back into the war. She couldn't help it. Her mind always did veer back in that direction quicker than the snow would melt.

She started to wonder if the others would still be searching for her, even after all these weeks? Were they searching for her right now? Were they trudging through the streets in the knee-high snow to find her, instead of spending time with their families? Their *real* families?

Probably not. Probably assumed that she'd died on the field that day with Tonks. She would just be another name on the long, never-ending list of the dead now.

'Hermione Jean Granger,' Harry would say in her eulogy. 'Fallen soldier, missing in action. Presumed dead.'

She realised, with a stabbing pain in her chest, that's all she was now; a soldier.

She wasn't someone's lover. Wasn't even someone daughter anymore. She gave commands, formulated battle plans and rescued slaves from the Dark Lord's clutches, but she was just a soldier. A lethal assassin. A killer. A person who'd murdered hundreds more Death Eaters than anyone else in The Order.

Was she really any better than Malfoy?

"Why didn't we ride her here?" she found herself asking, needing to distract herself from the pain.

"Does it matter?"

"No. I suppose not, I was - eughhhh - just curious."

Malfoy's cold, grey eyes snapped to hers irritably. "I've had a very long fucking day, and I didn't fancy the two-hour ride on her back in the pissing down rain. She knows the way home."

Hermione opened her mouth, another question burning to slip past her lips, but the look he gave her snapped her mouth shut.

He started walking faster through the Manor; Hermione tripped over her own feet as she struggled to keep up with his long strides. As he dragged her along, she tried to take in as much of her surroundings as she could, already plotting her escape.

The manor felt different than the last time she'd been here. It was still dark, the decor still largely teaming with Dark artefacts and gothic paintings; the image of aristocratic wealth. But there was a warmth here now. A strange blanket of comfort that she didn't notice last time. It was just little things. She noticed silver trimmings on the edges of the curtain sashes, and countless silver bowls with small trinkets inside. She saw a vase with beautiful white roses on a window ledge, an elegant candelabra with citrus-smelling candles burning atop of them, and perfect, hand plumped cushions placed across a dark green chaise lounge on the second story landing.

They were all very simple things really, but added together, they softened the atmosphere. They made it a home. *Almost.*

Malfoy veered sharply to the right and towed her down a narrow hallway. There were rows and rows of portraits lining the walls; countless pairs of unforgiving grey eyes glaring down at her as she went by. Their stares were just as cold and disgusted by her as their relative who'd brought her here.

"Aren't you worried about her? Your dragon?" she clarified when his eyes narrowed in her direction.

Malfoy scoffed, just one short puff of air through his lips. He stopped outside a set of large, dark oak double doors with brass handles. "No, I'm not. You've seen her on the battlefield, Granger. Do you really think one of your soldiers could stop her? That one of your pathetic little metal machines could do anything to her?"

Hermione found the strength to glare at him.

dragged me to your master. Heaven knows what kind of dark and evil blood curse he's infected me with. I'm in pain, I've lost a lot of blood, and my skull feels like it's trapped between a vice. So if you don't mind, I would appreciate it if you would give me a minute to catch my breath before you haul me into whatever torture chamber you have in there!"

"My, my," Malfoy scoffed, "someone still has a temper. I thought you Gryffindor's were supposed to be nice?"

"Give me back my wand, and I'll show you how *nice* I can be!"

"Oh, I would love to see you try," he said. She could hear the sadistic smirk on his face.

The rain started to pick up. Hermione thought some of the droplets that pelted against her back might've been hail, but she didn't look up to check.

Whatever it was, Malfoy wasn't a fan. He gripped her arm harshly, yanked her up straight, and dragged her up the stone path towards the manor.

The short walk saturated them both. Hermione's wet curls clung to her face; her clothes were heavy and dripping water by the time they reached the doors. Malfoy opened them with a flick of his wand and forced her inside.

His sharp movements jolted her, intensifying the pain in her skull. "What about... eughhhh." She ground her teeth together as he towed her beside him; the pain much easier to manage if she focused on something else. "What about the dragon?" "What about her?"

Her?

Black shadow was a *her*? That tiny facet of information thwarted her more than it should have. She didn't know much about dragons, only ever busied herself with learning the basics; possible weaknesses, strengths and breeding habits, things that might come in handy on the field should she ever find herself trapped between a stone wall and reptilian jaws. She figured dragons weren't really an area she *needed* to know about. There weren't many left, and Charlie Weasley was an expert. If the Order ever needed information on one, he always had the answers.

But the fact that the gigantic beast that'd turned countless Order members to ash, and whose roar gave survivors like Seamus night terrors, was female, surprised Hermione. She wasn't sure why. Her brain was too fuzzy to analyse it further.

"What makes Miss happy?" Romy asked when he appeared in her room that afternoon, setting down a silver tray at the foot of her bed, the same place the elves always left her meals.

Hermione tore her gaze away from the gardens to look at the elf. His eyes were burning questions, concern clear in the downturn of his tiny mouth. "I'm sorry. I don't know what you mean?"

"Well, Romy and Quinzel have noticed that Miss is very sad all the time. And Romy and Quinzel do not like sadness; it makes our hearts feel poorly."

Oh, what a sweet, sweet little thing. How could something so pure of heart and completely devoid of darkness serve a master as cruel as Malfoy? How had his malice and brutality not squished their bright little souls?

When Hermione finally escaped, she was going to take the elves with her. She swore to it. She was going to show them a better life and more kindness than they thought possible to make up for the inhumane treatment they undoubtedly received here.

Romy jumped on the ledge to sit beside her. "We would like to do whatever we can to cheer Miss up. So Romy is asking, what does Miss like to do to make herself happy?"

"Lots of things," Hermione answered sullenly, trying her best to offer the kind elf a reassuring smile. It didn't reach her eyes, not the way it used to. She stared out the window again. "Hardly any of that matters anymore."

"Would it help Miss if Romy provided one of these things?" Romy could bring more pots of tea? Does Miss like reading? Master has a huge library filled with books. Romy could bring books?"

She suppressed a shudder. In her youth, she would've probably fainted at the opportunity to browse the infamous Malfoy Manor Library. She could only imagine the ancient tomes and priceless first editions that must've been stored there. Now, however, she couldn't think of anything worse than touching a book that he'd held in those blood-soaked hands of his.

"It's alright," Hermione said. "Don't trouble yourself, Romy."

"Romy would like the trouble, Miss. Romy and Quinzel are very fond of Miss Granger, it would make us very happy to cheer her up." He shuffled closer, and

rested his warm little hand on her thigh. "What makes Miss feel better on days when she is sad?"

Hermione drew a deep breath, feeling her eyes prick with tears. She couldn't remember the last time someone had shown her this sort of genuine kindness. She still couldn't look at him. If she looked, then she would break. The tears would spill and she'd be unable to stop them. She couldn't look at him. She just couldn't.

"I like to paint," Hermione whispered honestly. "On days where I feel alone or sad, I like to paint."

Painting had always been a secret hobby of Hermione's, something she kept to herself. There was something incredibly soothing about picking up a brush and swiping bright and vibrant colours across a canvas. It was a different type of therapy to reading.

For as long as she could remember, she'd been obsessed with knowledge. Hungry for it. Throughout her entire adolescence, she'd been greedy with the need for books. The need to soak up every word and spell and just *learn* had always far outweighed anything else. She absorbed everything, no detail escaped her eager mind, and she could recall everything she'd ever read in almost instantly.

But sometimes that was the problem. Her head was *too full*. She was bursting at the seams, threatening to explode with the sheer amount she stored behind those tired brown eyes.

Painting was different. It was a *release*. A way to rid her mind of the buzzing voices, the constant chatter and the need to solve problems and just... let it all out. Smear the canvas with whatever she wanted and forget the stifling need to know everything and save everyone.

Merlin, she didn't realise how much she missed it until she said it out loud. She would've traded anything to have a canvas and brush in her hand...

Or a cigarette.

As Hermione stared at the crisp, untouched snow, pretending it was a canvas and imagining the shapes she would paint in it, she noticed a shadow form. It was small to begin with, like a tiny inkblot on an otherwise pristine piece of paper. She thought she'd imagined it at first, but the longer she stared, the larger it became. She watched it expand, darkening and swallowing up the snow. It took her far longer than it should have to realise it was a shadow.

A black shadow.

blood burned. Each thump of her heart brought a fresh wave of impossible heat. It felt like acid was pumping through her body. Boiling. Sharp. In a way, she welcomed the discomfort.

A small part of her felt like she deserved it. Why should she walk away somewhat unscathed, when five of her teammates were dead, disintegrated to ashes on a burning field? She'd failed them. She deserved some form of retribution.

Freezing December rain pelted down on top of them; Hermione felt it cleaning the dried blood in her hair. It was quite calming, to feel the crimson drop from her chin. Seeing the crimson puddle on the floor brought a strange sense of clarity with it. Like washing away the vile reminder of her failure.

She tried to breathe in the scent of the rain, breathe it in and forget where she was and think rationally -

But Voldemort's words rang in her head. Unforgettable. Fear mongering. "If he dies, she dies."

"Till death do you part."

Hermione suppressed a shudder. She bent over slightly, one hand curling around her knee for support while she massaged her temples with the other. She was dizzy, she felt as though the ground was swaying beneath her feet. She thought she was going to throw up any moment -

"For Salazzar's sake," a voice sneered from beside her. "Stop being so fucking dramatic."

"Oh, will you just *fuck off!*?" she snapped without looking up, fearing the movement might damage her already fragile equilibrium. "I'm in far too much pain right now, the last thing I need is your judgment. Now, do me a favour and *fuck off!*"

If she weren't so nauseously helpless, she would have hexed him to oblivion by now. It was sickening, really, how powerless she felt. Since the war began, Hermione had been a force to be reckoned with. She was strong, courageous, lethal, a fucking lioness.

She hardly recognized herself now.

The tables always did turn quickly in war.

Malfoy gave an irritated sigh. "Come on Mudblood, we don't have all day."

Hermione ground her teeth together. "Didn't I already tell you to fuck off? You've taken my wand, assaulted me with I don't know how many hexes, and then

# CHAPTER 6

Hermione flung the windows open. She grabbed either side of the frame for support and leaned out as far as she could. She'd managed to convince the elves days ago to unseal the windows, having finally assured them that she wasn't going to throw herself to her death the first chance she got. They'd done as she'd asked but added charms around the open space, just to make sure. She could open them as far as their design allowed, but magic prevented her from leaning out the windows *too far*. Still, it was better than nothing. At least she got to feel a breeze on her face now and again.

Hermione craned her neck towards the sky, and squinted into the darkened clouds until she saw what she was looking for.

At first glance, she thought Black Shadow was falling. It took until the dragon was much closer for Hermione to realise that the beast hadn't been shot out of the sky. Her wings were tucked in tightly at her sides; she was nosediving towards the gardens. *Fast*. Much, much too fast. She was hurtling towards the earth like a meteor. At two hundred feet above the manor, she showed no signs of slowing down. Not at one hundred and fifty feet. Or even one hundred.

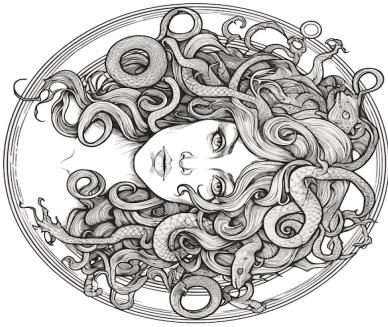
Maybe Hermione was wrong, maybe the dragon was falling after all. She held her breath when the dragon reached around fifty feet, leaning back and bracing for the earth-shaking impact of that huge, scaled body colliding with the floor.

But Black Shadow opened her wings at the last second, beating them powerfully against the air and halting her descent *just* before she hit the ground. Each flap was like a loud clap of thunder that hurled up the fallen snow below her, causing small flurries to swirl and dance as she lowered herself to the ground.

When the dragon's back legs touched the gardens, a splash of crimson tainted the crisp white snow below her, and the earth shook under her weight like a small earth had suddenly struck. She reared her head toward the clouds and released an ear-piercing roar that made the hairs on Hermione's arms stand on end. It wasn't like the other roars Hermione had heard from the dragon. It wasn't the threatening hiss she'd thrown Hermione way when Draco had dragged her onto her back at the cliffs of Dover, or the deep rumbling battle cry she'd made as she roared into battle. This was pained and hoarse. More of a shriek than a roar.

Black Shadow shook her huge head as if she was dizzy, spraying more of her blood onto the snow.

She felt ridiculously weak; her veins were liquid fire from whatever dark magic Voldemort had metastasized her with when he'd linked her life to Malfoy's. Her



## I'D KILL YOUR RIGHT NOW

**12th December**

Hermione didn't expect Malfoy to be gentle when he Apparated them, but she didn't think he'd be *that* rough.

She almost vomited when they reappeared in front of his Manor. His magic was so violent it left her feeling unsteady and an excruciating pain throbbing between her brows. She suspected he'd done it on purpose; a cruel tactic to keep her vulnerable. She was much easier to transport if she was disoriented.

She could hardly stand up, much less fight.

She felt ridiculously weak; her veins were liquid fire from whatever dark magic Voldemort had metastasized her with when he'd linked her life to Malfoy's. Her

an order to the house-elves. Hermione didn't hear what he'd said, another wail of pain from the dragon drowned his voice out, but she caught the look on his face. His brow was twisted with fury, his teeth exposed in a snarl. He was seething. Angrier and more murderous than she'd ever seen him.

The elves appeared straight away, their tiny arms filled with bottles of every coloured potion and herb imaginable. Hermione watched Draco sharply draw his wand. A pale blue light emitted from the tip as he cast - what Hermione assumed - was a healing charm below the dragons left shoulder.

She roared again and threw her head into the air. The sound was more splintering this time around, like a thousand screams all at once. Hermione's hands flew to her ears to shield her from it.

Malfoy cast charm after charm on the dragon as the elves fussed over her injury. His movements were frenzied, desperate.

Hermione and Malfoy had screamed at each other countless times since her capture. They'd seethed in each other's faces and pushed and shoved one another, but there was always a sense of eerie calm in Malfoy. He was always controlled, always had absolute authority over his emotions. He only showed the things he needed to, things that were useful to him; anger, spite, malice. Any other time, his expression was the ideal poker face, giving nothing away. He couldn't have looked further from that now. He looked bloodthirsty. *Unhinged*.

Malfoy sharply spun to face the house, and Hermione's heart stopped when those cold blue-grey eyes immediately found hers - only they weren't so cold anymore. They were burning. He barked another command over his shoulder, his expression stuck in that murderous scowl, then started to march toward the house, his eyes on Hermione with each step.

He was coming for her.

Hermione couldn't help the way she started to panic. Couldn't help the way her chest tightened, or how the air in her cage suddenly became hot and stifling. There was something in Malfoy's eyes, something feral, like a tiger trapped behind bars too long. She couldn't put her finger on exactly what it was, but it fucking terrified her.

Without giving herself chance to second guess what her instincts were screaming at her, Hermione did the one thing she hadn't done in twelve days. She left her cell.

She pushed the door open quickly, swinging it open so suddenly that it smashed into the wall and left a dent in the plaster. Her stomach lurched with fear when she

A cool blade pressed against her, at the junction where the base of her skull met the top of her spine.

"Whilst our Demon will be unaffected by this ritual."

"The mudblood's life will be linked to his. If he dies, she dies."

A deep slice was lashed across Hermione's skin. She hissed and ground her teeth together to keep from screaming.

Her own blood seeped from the wound and trickled down her neck. It pooled around her, coating her chin and face as she fought to get up. To move. To do anything to stop this from happening.

But, as before, the grip on her shoulders and head was too tight, too secure. She was helpless. And she fucking hated it.

"The only way Malfoy would let her escape the Manor would be if she killed him," Voldemort said. "This ritual prevents her from doing so. It also prevents her precious order members from killing him, should they attempt to rescue her."

A scream tore its way up Hermione's throat when the boiling, magically charmed blood, Malfoy's blood, seeped into her system. She thrashed and screeched on the floor as she felt it spread through her body, searing like acid. It travelled down her spine, using her muscles and tendons to carry it to the very tips of her toes. The cursed blood metastasized itself to every possible fibre of her being like cancer. She felt it everywhere, felt him everywhere.

"You are now bound together. Tied forever by blood," Voldemort whispered, his voice dripping in venom. "*Till death, do you part.*"

Tim? Was that his name?

“See the thing is mate,” Theo said, a sly smile spreading across his face. He increased the pressure of the blade, and a thin streak of blood seeped from the small incision he’d made on Melanie’s throat. “I don’t believe you.”

Or was it Tom?

“What the fuck is wrong with you! We’ve told you everything we know! I swear!”

Or maybe it was Tim... Tim... Hawthorne?

“just let her go! You can do whatever you want to me! just let her go!”

*Tom Thorne!* That was his name! He was Ravenclaw’s Quidditch captain!

“Oh for Salazar’s sake, can we just try this Malfoy’s way and get this over with?” Blaise said. He sat on one of the remaining stools in the bar, leaning against the wall behind him and twirling his wand absentmindedly between his fingers, “We’re clearly not getting anywhere this way.”

Theo threw Blaise a sadistic little smirk. “I’m just getting started. Don’t worry, I’ll get what we need. Just let me have a little fun first.”

“You’ve already had your fun,” Blaise said coolly, his expression bored. “You’ve been at this for two hours and haven’t gotten the results the Dark Lord has asked for. Perhaps you’re losing your touch, Theodore?”

Theo straightened like he’d been cracked with a whip. His smile vanished, and a furious scowl coloured his face. “Me? Losing my touch?” he shouted, pointing the blade at his chest to illustrate his point. “Are you having a fucking laugh?”

Blaise’s lips pulled into a smug smile. He shrugged, and crossed his ankles casually as he let Theo mull over his assessment.

Blaise was always calm, always refined and dignified; the patience of a saint, despite the egregious sins he committed daily. Blaise was intelligent and devilishly quick-witted. His sharp and warped mind could always conjure the vilest and most horrific punishments.

Like Theo, Blaise had an excellent imagination when it came to torture, but he never lifted a blade or touched his victims. He didn’t need to. He favoured psychological torture over the psychical. Preferred to torment a person’s mind rather than soil his robes with their blood. He knew exactly how to get under someone’s skin, knew precisely where to stick the metaphorical knife in to extract the most pain and unhinge his victim, with nothing more than his wit and sharp tongue. He often

had them writhing, desperately trying to claw their chests apart as a reprieve from the mental torture he ensued.

In many ways, Theo and Blaise were as different as Yin and Yang. Theo’s undeterrible fury was perfectly in sync with Blaise’s calm demeanour. Theo’s short fuse and willingness to cast a killing curse if anyone so much as quirked a disapproving brow at him, was diminished by Blaise’s ability to remain composed, to see the bigger picture and know the wait would be worth the reward.

They were polar opposites of one another, but complimented each other perfectly. Well, when they played together nicely.

“How could you think that I’m losing my touch?” Theo snapped, losing his patience. “Look at the state of these two, they’re blubbering messes, *because of me!*”

Blaise quirked a brow. His smirk grew but he remained silent. He was trying to get under Theo’s skin, irritate him to the point he snapped, likely wanted him to slaughter the hostages in a fit of rage and end their interrogation early.

Blaise wanted to get home, back to his wife.

His plan had the desired effect.

Theo’s nostrils flared with anger. He drew a deep breath, his eyes burning, then spun and threw the blade with a strong jerk of his arm, sending it straight into Thorne’s skill.

The Ravenclaw died almost instantly. The enchanted blade cut through his bone like it was butter from the power of Theo’s throw. It sliced between his eyes and pierced his brain before he’d even thought to scream. His blood sprayed up the wall at the impact, joining the crusted scarlet that clung between each brick there. The poor bloke’s eyes widened for a second, blood trickled between his brows and down his nose. He choked, the sound curling in his throat, and then his head fell forward, limp against his shoulders.

There was silence. Melanie was still for several moments, frozen in terror, not even breathing as she stared at her partner’s lifeless body. Horrified.

Then she screamed. She screamed and screamed and screamed, each wail reaching a new decibel as she thrashed against her restraints.

The trio left her to it for a while. Let the helplessness of her situation sink in that little bit deeper, let her veins turn to ice through her fear - a brief intermission before Theo restarted the performance.

The moment Theo took a predatory step towards Melanie, she started spilling secrets like they'd forced Veritaserum down her throat. "The Order is still looking for Granger!" she cried. "They're planning a raid at your base in Newcastle in the next month or so!"

Theo carried on slowly stalking toward her, his lips turning upwards in the corners. Broken glass from the window crunched under his boots as he approached

"They figured that must be where you're keeping her!" Melanie continued, her voice growing more desperate with every step Nott took.

Theo pulled the blade from Tom's skull, causing more of his blood to spray and join that already decorating the walls and floor. He turned back to her, holding the dripping dagger teasingly in front of her.

"They know she's still alive!" Melanie squealed when he pressed the blade against her chest, the end nicking the skin covering her sternum. "Please! I'll tell you everything, anything you want to know!" Tears streaked down her face and mixed with the blood collected around her cheeks. "Just please, please don't kill me!"

Theo retracted the blade, and turned back to face Draco and Blaise. He couldn't have looked more smug if he tried. His smile was practically beaming as he folded a single arm across his chest and took a deep, theatrical bow. "*Tiaaaaaaa!* And that's how it's done, ladies and gentlemen!"

Draco couldn't help but clap. The theatrical little bastard always did get results. Vital information and a show, it really was a joy to watch him work. "Well done Nott. Spectacular show."

Theo smirked at Blaise as he straightened. "Are you satisfied that I still have it in me, *Zabini*?"

"Yes, yes, I'm absolutely quaking in my boots," Blaise said sarcastically. He wore a triumphant smile as he walked towards the back of the bar. "I'm sorry for ever questioning your methods, *Theodor*."

"*M?* Losing my touch?" Theo spat, making a disgruntled face as he walked back towards Melanie, ready to extract the rest of the information. "Pfffft, he's lost the plot. If anyone is losing their touch, it's you!"

Draco quirked a brow. "Excuse me?"

Theo pressed the cold blade against the girl's bare, blood-soaked shoulder and dragged it lightly across her chest as he circled to stand behind her chair. "Let's not play these games, sweetheart. I know you know where Potter is." He leaned down, and pressed his chest against her back. His lips ghosted across her cheek as he spoke. His other hand wound around her body, his palm skating across her hip to keep her in place. "Now, be a good little girl and tell me where he's hiding."

Draco leaned against the broken jukebox with his arms folded across his chest, wondering who would have ever thought that Theodore Nott would have been so cruelly gifted in the art of torture. He'd been worried about him at the start of the war. Worried that his friend, the quiet Slytherin with mousy brown curls and gentle eyes, wouldn't be able to cope with the dark tasks he would be assigned.

Theo had always been the quiet sort back in Hogwarts, always had his head down, eyes on the floor and doing everything in his power to go unnoticed. His father had forced him to take the Dark Mark just nine months after Draco had, and he'd done nothing but fret about Theodore in the months that followed. He'd worried that his oldest friend would crack under the pressure, that he would crumble and cry and refuse to inflict pain on others.

Apparently, Draco's worry wasn't necessary. Theo was nothing like that now. Nothing like that small, quivering boy that used to shake at the mere mention of a Dementor.

Theo was strong now, powerful. He'd grown into his confidence, and adapted this deadly lifestyle far easier than Draco had ever anticipated he would. There had been resistance at the start, something holding him back and preventing him from embracing the darkest parts of himself, and reaching his full potential as a bloodthirsty Gold Mask. Then one day, he stopped resisting. Like the flick of a switch, he'd snuffed out that part of himself and became the ruthless bastard he was today.

And now his methods of torture and interrogation were legendary amongst the Death Eaters.

The girl hostage, Melanie, screamed when Theo tugged her hair back, exposing her throat so he could press the blade against it.

"Leave her alone!" the male prisoner shouted - Draco couldn't remember his name. The bloke jerked in his chair, fighting against his restraints while his partner begged for her life. "We already told you we don't know where Potter is! We weren't in the same base as him!"

Theo crouched down in front of her, folded his arms, and rested them on top of her trembling thighs. "Just tell us where Potter is, and this will all be over. I promise."

"The girl whimpered and shook her head, her body trembling uncontrollably. "I... I can't... I don't know w-where he is... I promise... I've... I've never seen him."

Theo rolled his tongue on the inside of his cheek. His eyes narrowed in irritation.

"That's not the answer we were looking for."

The bar that hosted this afternoon's interrogation was in one of the deserted areas of the city. It might've been a nice place once upon a time, but the war had twisted and bent it into something malevolent. Looters had pillaged and destroyed it long ago, the windows were all broken, shattered glass covered the floor, and all the furniture was burnt and broken and overturned.

Where they'd once been laughter and joy, there was now screams. The stone walls - decorated with violent red slashes from Nott's efforts - were excellent at magnifying their hostages' cries. Their wails of pain ricochet off the stones, reverberating and building until a chorus of screams rang continuously through the air like music. A constant, never-ending loop of suffering.

The smell was - fuck... that could only be described as decay itself. The mixture of blood, perspiration and the salty tang of tears hung in the air, vile and unmistakable. It didn't help that the wooden floor was sodden, the boards had absorbed the blood hours ago and were refusing to let go of the stench.

It was all part of Theo's interrogation technique; pick the most awful, fear-inducing stage for torture, set the mood and give the victim a taste of what was to come. He wanted their stomachs to knot when they saw the splattered blood on the floor. He wanted their lips to tremble when they saw the weapons that he'd neatly lined up on the counter, ready to use to force an extraction out of them - by whatever painful method was necessary. He wanted them terrified, frightened to death and soiling themselves before he'd even laid a finger on them, and only when they would beg for their lives, would he begin his performance.

Theo stood and reached across the bar to retrieve a long silver dagger. "Now, let's try this again, shall we?" The dim lights overhead cast sinister shapes across his face, exaggerating the hollows under his eyes and the sharp angle of his chin. It made him look all the more unhinged, ore dangerous, and certainly more menacing to his victims.

"You heard me," Theo said coldly as Blaise re-emerged with a dust-covered bottle of bourbon. "You've been trying to get to Granger's memories for how long now? Two weeks? And all you've gotten out of her is a silly childhood birthday party?"

Blaise took a lengthy swig of the alcohol. A soft groan escaped his throat as he swallowed, and then he passed the bottle into Theo's greedy fingers, a peace offering.

They never did bicker for long, and they always reconciled at the bottom of a bottle of scotch or whisky.

Theo drained half of what was left before he handed it to Draco. "She's living in the manor, getting fed and given free roam to explore the grounds. Honestly mate, I think you're going soft."

"Hermione is at Malfoy Manor?" Melanie gasped, only to cringe away when the three men sharply turned to glare at her. She didn't speak again, chose to cower in her chair as though that made her invisible. Forgettable.

"The Dark Lord doesn't care about Granger's memories. We know that eventually we'll capture one of these lot who knows where Potter is, and we'll break them," Draco said before he took a swig of the bourbon. It burned beautifully on the way down. "They'll tell us where Potter and the rest of the rats are, and we'll stamp them out for good. Even if we don't catch anyone with that information, we can always use her to lure Potter out of hiding. You know he loves a good damsel in distress."

"So why search her memories at all?" Blaise asked as Draco passed him back the bottle. "Surely we could just store her in a dungeon somewhere until the Dark Lord wants to use her as a bargaining chip?"

Draco pushed the hair out of his face, then answered, "Searching her memories is an excuse to get inside her head. I'm only doing so because the Dark Lord is convinced there is a spy amongst our ranks."

Blaise paused and looked at Draco, the bottle just inches from his lips. "A spy?" Draco nodded. "We have a traitor, gentlemen. A rogue snake whose slithered from the pit to leak secrets to our enemy."

Theo made a face. "What makes you think there's a traitor?"

"There have been too many instances where secret missions have been intercepted over the years, and he believes someone within the ranks is leaking secrets to the Order. Given her high status, we both believe Granger may be the one they've been leaking the information to."

"Who would be so stupid as to betray the Dark Lord?" Blaise asked.

Draco shrugged. "Someone in the inner circle."

"*Oh yeah*, does that mean we're all suspects?" Theo laughed. "You gonna cart us away for interrogation, Malfoy?"

"You're all far too gifted at mind blocking to allow anything so simple," Draco answered. "No, the Dark Lord thinks I will find the answer in Granger's head, no matter how tedious an exercise it is."

"So that's it?" Theo asked. "That's why you're spending all these hours prying her mind apart? Just for some secret meetings that may or may not even be there?"

"No, it's just a secondary assignment. The Dark Lord has more sinister plans for the Mudblood."

"Such as?" Blaise asked, brows quirking with intrigue.

"Nott," Draco said, eyes shifting to Theo. "Over the years, you've seen Granger on the battlefield, haven't you?"

Theo gave a curt nod.

"And, despite her being a Mudblood, what did you think?"

Theo's brown eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Honestly?" he asked, as if it might be a trick of some sort.

"Yes, honestly," Draco encouraged. "What did you think of her skills on the field?"

Theo rolled his tongue on the inside of his cheek, seeming to consider his response carefully. When he finally answered, his voice was low, sort of... wistful. "She was incredible. I was lucky to escape with my life. She cut down our Black Masks like they were nothing, just obstacles in her way. I've never seen anyone that gifted at killing except for... well... you, Malfoy," he continued hesitantly. "If she fought for us, I think we would have won this war years ago."

"Granger is the backbone of the Order, she always has been," Draco said as he reached for the bottle. Blaise reluctantly handed it over. "She's their chief strategist and most lethal general. They're crumbling without her, running around like scared little children without their mummy."

"Yes, we know that," Blaise said. "Potter will do anything to get her back, and they would die before they let anyone hurt her."

The Order had become relentless in their attacks since Granger had been captured. A raid at one of the Dark Lord's bases had been attempted every day since her disappearance. Not that it did them any good; it always ended in failure. Always resulted in the bodies of their soldiers piled high, decapitated, often burnt far beyond recognition.

They were sloppy without her. Disorganised. Their stunt with the magically concealed tank was a stroke of dumb luck, everything else they'd tried in the last few weeks had been an astronomical failure. Having their chief strategist and most lethal soldier snatched from their grasp had clearly diminished their confidence. Just as Draco had predicted, the Order was crumbling without her. Potter was probably throwing a fit back at their base, demanding that every available officer be deployed and searching tirelessly for her.

Draco knew he'd been right to capture her that day. He'd been sure that she'd prove to be a powerful pawn to make the Order fall. She was much more useful to the Dark Lord's regime alive than she was dead. Even if it was tempting to imagine all the ways he wanted to kill her. Sometimes, it was the highlight of his fucking day to fantasize about how lovely it would be to wrap his fingers around her throat and *gouge*; squeeze and squeeze until the light left her eyes. Other days he thought it might be more satisfying to torture her a little first. Make it last. Gouge her pretty brown eyes out, and make her writhe and beg for death before he granted her that mercy.

The list of possibilities went on and on. He added to them daily, sometimes twice a day, depending on how tenaciously she'd fought him with the Anti-Magic potion that morning.

The Order would do anything to ensure her safe return, literally anything. probably chuck in whatever was left of the Weasley clan as well just to have Granger back. If Potter was the face of the resistance, then Granger was the backbone, and they were falling apart without her.

How utterly fucking perfect.

"Come on sweetheart," Theo hushed, his voice soft as a whisper.

The terrified girl stiffened in the chair she was bound to. The coarse ropes that were wrapped around her body dug into her skin as she cringed away from him.

Draco; their leaders had instructed them a long time ago that if the infamous Demon Masks were ever on the battlefield, they were the primary targets.

His dragon had swerved *just* in time to shield him from it, but it meant she bore the worst of the attack.

The ear-piercing screech of pain she'd emitted had been so gut-wrenching, so agonized, that Draco was sure she was going to die. He'd been convinced that she would fall from the sky, that they would both plummet towards the earth at such speed his body would've explode upon impact.

As it happens, however, dragons are very resilient, and very ill-tempered when in pain. She'd torn the metal box and her assailants apart with her claws before the poor bastards had even had a chance to reload their weapons. Draco had been smiling under his mask the entire time, unable to stop the cruel sense of satisfaction he'd felt as their screams had rung through the air. Payback really was a bitch.

"I'm sorry you have to be cooped up in here," he whispered as he ran his fingers across the wound for a final inspection. "You'll come home soon, I promise."

She didn't respond. She was far too busy tearing slices of flesh from bone to notice him or her healing injuries.

Draco hated that he couldn't stay with her longer, or that his visit had to be cut too short in favour of the other duties that needed his attention today. This afternoon's to-do list was far too long and morbid than this festive time of year should have allowed.

Assignment one; *Feed the dragon.*

Assignment two; interrogate captured Order soldiers for information on Potter's whereabouts.

Assignment three; return home and search Granger's -

Even thinking her name brought his blood to boiling point. Despite her captivity, Draco blamed her for what had happened to his dragon. The muggles tanks had gotten quicker; their bullets were more dangerous and had become more difficult to manipulate lately, and he would bet every galleon in his vault that Granger had something to do with it. He could just see her now; bent over a desk, her hair a wild, untameable mess, deep in concentration, pieces of parchment scattered messily around her as she tried to figure out ways to thwart the evil, mindless beast that turned their beloved soldiers into ash.

"*Sympathetic?*" Theo drawled, completely lost.

"*Sy,*" Draco sneered, running his tongue across his top teeth as he smiled. "How do you think they will cope if one of their own, the almighty Golden Girl herself, turns against them?"

Theo and Blaise didn't answer. Draco could practically see the gears in their head turning as they worked through his cryptic response. After several seconds, both their eyes widened as the realisation of Voldemort's twisted plan finally dawned on them.

When they both smiled, Draco continued. "How fast do you think they will fall to their knees if they Apparate onto the battlefield with the intention of saving their lost damsel, only to discover that she now fights for us?"

# CHAPTER 10

He ran his fingers across the jagged wound lining her ribs, the scar grew taunt and then relaxed as she inhaled and exhaled. They were healing nicely, much faster than he'd expected. The deep open wound under her shoulder - the one that Draco was sure had punctured something vital - was only a scar now. Fresh, black scales were quickly growing around the vulnerable skin to protect it, her armour reforming.

The injury had come from a raid. All they had to do was overturn a resistance base known to be associated with Potter. It was supposed to be a simple in and out mission with very little numbers and next to no interference.

How wrong their intelligence had been.

The base was heavily armed, infuriatingly well prepared, and all the civilians and possible hostages they'd been sent to capture were already under the base and out of reach. Large gunners were already set up, and countless soldiers - wizard and muggle alike - had already been in perfect formation with their weapons drawn and loaded when the attack had started.

The Dark Lord was sure someone had tipped the Order off about the raid, but all the preparation in the world couldn't have prepared them for the onslaught that ensued. The siege had already begun when Draco rode in on the dragons back. The majority of the Order soldiers were already deceased or close to it. The only remaining threat was the three metal tanks that were guarding the entrance, their last line of defence. Although their barrels were pointing high in the sky and waiting for Draco and his dragon to arrive, they were no threat. She disintegrated them instantly; the thick, muggle made metal melted easily under the heat of her flames.

His dragon had been ready to make another pass over the base, all she had to do was blow the front doors off to allow the Death Eaters to get inside and snatch the hostages. She'd opened her mouth when the door was in sight, the scales on her back growing hotter as she gathered fire, but just before she'd released that explosive breath, a fourth tank had appeared out of nowhere, just suddenly cracked into existence. Draco had realised - a second too late - that the large machine had been concealed with magic. A few pathetic, easily detectable layers of magic that he would have noticed if he'd been paying more attention.

His dragon had paid the price for his ignorance.

Draco swore that his heart had stopped beating when a shell left the tank the very second it had materialised. A piece of metal the size of a broomstick had exploded from the barrel when they'd been a mere thirty feet away, far too close to evade the thing, and coming at them far too fast for him to cast a shield. They were aiming for her eyes didn't help either.

For a long time, Hermione just stared at it with her brows knitted together. She must've looked insane; sat up in bed, her back pressed firmly against the headboard, not blinking and her hair a wild mess - she imagined the dark purple bags around her eyes didn't help either.



## MRS ZABINI

**25th December**

Hermione woke on what used to be her favourite day of the year sluggish, exhausted, and to a gift sitting proudly atop her window ledge.

She blinked and immediately rubbed the sleep from her eyes when she saw it, thinking she'd hallucinated the box that was elegantly wrapped in shiny green paper. She hadn't. No matter how many times she blinked, no matter how furiously she rubbed at her eyes, it remained.

For a long time, Hermione just stared at it with her brows knitted together. She must've looked insane; sat up in bed, her back pressed firmly against the headboard, not blinking and her hair a wild mess - she imagined the dark purple bags around her eyes didn't help either.

Scandinavian Firethorn Dragon's only chose one rider. They paired themselves with a single witch or wizard for life and never answered to anyone else. They wouldn't even allow another person the joy of flying on their backs unless their master had permitted it. Their decisions were final. No second chances. No exceptions.

But the Dark Lord had still tried to make her subservient to him. The crazy bastard had tried to bond with her from the moment she'd clawed her way out of her egg. He'd tried to feed her by hand, tried to soothe her, and he'd even tried to teach the tiny thing to breathe fire, but it all ended with little nips and the edges of robes set afame. In the end, she wanted nothing to do with the dark wizard. She only ever wanted Draco and to this day, wherever he was, she followed.

His dragon was ruthlessly possessive, territorial of what she thought was *hers*. He belonged to her as much as she belonged to him.

Draco knew she needed to be here, and that she was being treated by Voldemort's best healers. But she wasn't at the Manor, she wasn't *home*, and the separation was stifling.

The dungeons beneath the cathedral were far too small for a beast as magnificent as her. This concrete cage was more of a prison than anything else. She needed to be outside, wings spread and head held high like the elegant being she was. She didn't belong here. She belonged at the manor, with him and what was left of his small - albeit highly dysfunctional - family.

"Hello beautiful," he whispered when she stopped in front of him.  
Her nostrils flared and relaxed, inhaling the scent of her dinner. Her ruby-coloured eyes watched him as he ran a hand across her scaled snout, waiting for him to tell her she was allowed to eat the corpse that was within her reach.

"I've missed you."

She nestled her large head into Draco's palm and hummed in the back of her throat, a purr, her admission of happiness for their reunion.

With a snap of his fingers, the cow's body fell to the floor with an audible squelch. She moved away from his palm, inching towards her meal, and Malfoy used the distraction to walk along the side of her body. "Go on then," he said, jutting his chin towards the cow. "Don't mind me, dig in."

As soon as she started to eat, Draco began inspecting her injuries. As much as he trusted the healers, he needed proof that she was on the mend.

By observation, the gift looked harmless, nothing sinister or malevolent about it. It was small and square, compact, roughly the size of a microwave, and tied with a silver ribbon that was carefully threaded together to form a bow at the top. The wrapping paper was that deep shade of green that one could only associate with Slytherins - the one they all wore proudly like a badge of honour; the colour she recognised in the halls of this manor and in the hue of the leather armchairs. The same vile shade of green that hung in the tapestries in York Cathedral, the ones she had stared at while she screamed as Voldemort had mutilated her with dark blood magic. The shade of green that made her feel sick.

The more she stared at it, the more confused she became - and the more suspicious.

The elves couldn't have gifted her the box. They wore the same pillowcases each day, and although Hermione had never detected any signs of physical abuse on their small bodies, she doubted Malfoy afforded them luxuries like galleons or gifts. They were slaves to him; objects meant to serve and obey, as much of a possession as this manor was.

That only left Malfoy himself, but that possibility sounded just as ridiculous as the elves did. He wouldn't send her a gift, he just wouldn't. He was horrid and cruel. They hated one another. His mere existence repulsed her, and every breath she took was an insult to him and his malicious ideology. He wouldn't send her a gift unless it was meant to cause her harm. Well, that was a theory she could work with. She wouldn't have put it past Malfoy to tamper with the thing, charm it so it grew legs and teeth and spontaneously tried to maul her to death. She imagined he would have gotten a sick little thrill from watching her nose be ripped from her face on this usually joyous day.

Perhaps it was laced with an exploding charm? Or maybe it contained the decapitated head of one of her fallen friends? That was certainly something he would do; murder one of the opposition during a battle, slice their head from their shoulders and deliver it to her disguised as a gift. A threat wrapped in shiny green paper.

Sometime later, her breakfast materialised on its own - without the aid of a house-elf. Apparently, Malfoy had given the tiny creatures the day off. How fucking noble of him.

Hermione didn't eat her breakfast that morning, just continued to stare at the box as her mind worked and worked and worked over what it could possibly be. By the time her lunch appeared - a full Christmas dinner - she moved.

She slid out of bed, ignoring the mouth-watering scent of roast potatoes and cranberry sauce - and approached the offending box slowly, carefully, pausing between each timid step. The exploding charm theory was probably the most likely - so she decided it best not to sprint towards the wretched thing.

She lightly ran a finger over the top of the box, half expecting it to detonate at the most delicate touch. To her surprise, it didn't explode when she picked it up and it wasn't ticking either. It was lighter than she'd imagined, it caused no strain at all on her muscles to balance its weight in one hand. She shook it once, and her breath hitched when she heard something rattle inside. It sounded like several things, several *small* things knocking into one another.

After inspecting it for half an hour, she slammed the gift down on her bedside table and sat in her usual perch. It must have been at least one o'clock in the afternoon, possibly even two, and Malfoy still hadn't stormed into her room for their Legilimency session.

Was he giving her the day off too? Did he think a little break from their sessions was akin to some kind of gift? Was that another *present*?

By four o'clock Malfoy was still nowhere to be seen, and Hermione was growing restless. She thought about exploring the manor like she had done the day before, but eventually decided against it. If he wasn't going to show up, she didn't want to risk running into him accidentally.

A day without having to see Draco Malfoy's spiteful blue eyes sounded fucking wonderful.

As she discovered on the 23rd, Malfoy hadn't set up any wards to zap or burn her if she tried to leave her room, so she'd spent the following day exploring his home. He spent hours of his day roaming through her head, tirelessly searching for any scraps of her memory he could get his claws on, so it was only fair if she spent her free time searching his home, running her fingers across every surface and contaminating every piece of furniture with her '*dirty Mudblood*' paws.

She'd even broken a few vases yesterday while she'd explored, hoping that they were indecently expensive, or priceless and irreplaceable family heirlooms, but, of course, Malfoy was infuriatingly thorough, and the shards had magically repaired themselves seconds after she'd destroyed them. It was still satisfying to smash them though, so she continued to do it anyway. Perhaps there was a limit on how many times they would repair themselves? She could only hope.

While he walked, he concentrated his magic on levitating the corpse of a large cow behind him. The animal's blood dripped sporadically from an incision on its throat, leaving a trail of scarlet on the scratched concrete.

Drip.

Drip.

Draco whistled again and brought the body closer to his side, hoping to draft the scent of the kill into the tomb and entice the beast within.

A deep rumble cut through the eerie silence, the vibrations of it rattling against Draco's chest. The temperature spiked suddenly, and then she was there.

It wasn't big enough for his dragon down here. The ceilings might've been high to him, but her colossal size made it difficult for her to move through them. Her chest and tail scraped across the floor as she struggled to crawl towards him.

As soon as he saw her, it felt easier to breathe. The uncomfortable tightness he'd carried in his chest eased, and the sickening lurch he'd carried in his stomach since their separation softened.

He hated that the Dark Lord had *misled* her be kept under their base of operation while she healed.

He said he wanted to keep an eye on her to ensure she received the best care. He wanted her to recover as quickly as possible, not because he cared for her like Draco did, but because he couldn't have his most lethal weapon out of commission for too long.

The Order was terrified of his dragon, as they fucking should be. For many, she was a nightmare come to life; a winged demon materialised on the battlefield and hungry for their screams. The mere sight of her often reduced even the bravest men to a puddle of desperation. Her roar alone brought the most valiant Order soldiers to their knees.

She was majestic and powerful. And she belonged to Draco.

Although his mother had given him her tiny egg before her passing, Draco had been convinced that his master was going to take the dragon for his own when he learned what species she was, that he'd snatch the egg right from Draco's pale fingers when he realised the destruction her flaming breath would one day cause. He had, in fact, countless times since she'd hatched, but it wasn't meant to be.

# CHAPTER 9

She'd explored almost every inch of Malfoy's home on Christmas Eve. She'd wandered the grounds, explored the vacant hallways and the disused drawing rooms, and found nothing. Nothing she could fashion into a weapon. No secret passageways out of the manor. No weakness in the wards surrounding the estate. Nothing. Not a thing.

The only things she had learned was the vast reach of the wards he'd set up. He'd given her some slack on her dog leash; there was no section of the grounds off-limits to her. She could wander around the maze of snow-covered flower beds, under every tree and stretch of land, and even as far as the Malfoy Family cemetery - although she'd stayed clear of that area yesterday. An involuntary shiver had run down her spine when she'd noticed the rows of curved, snow-covered headstones, tombs and mausoleums, and she'd turned on her heels and practically sprinted in the opposite direction.

She couldn't help herself, so she'd tested the boundaries a few times. She'd sensed when she was approaching them; her blood had hummed slightly, and if she squinted very hard, she could see the air ripple and quiver with the wards. She'd tried to cross the threshold twice in different areas, just to see what would happen. The moment her fingers made contact with 'The Ripple' - her name for it - her palms had grown cold and pressed against something hard and firm, like a cold glass wall.

Both times she'd tried to pass through it, increasing the pressure in her hand to test for weaknesses, and both times, she'd managed to count to four before her body had been overcome with a chilling sensation. Her temperature had dropped so rapidly it felt like having a dementor wrap itself around her body, and both times, she'd only managed to hold her hand to the ripple for a few more seconds before the freezing pain had spiked, becoming so severe that she'd jumped back with a yell of pain, and had to hug her body in search of warmth. She'd felt so cold afterwards, she'd been surprised to see her fingers hadn't turned to icicles when she looked down at them. It certainly felt cold enough for them to.

From the way her blood felt like it turned to ice in her veins, Hermione imagined that it had everything to do with the blood ritual Voldemort had used to bind her to Malfoy with. She shuddered thinking of what other side effects she hadn't discovered yet. It took almost twenty minutes for her body to thaw out enough for her to have use of her fingers again.

The only relatively positive thing Hermione had found on the grounds, was a beautiful cherry blossom tree. A gorgeous, tall tree with winding silver branches, pale pitch black.



## SWEETHEART

TW; scenes of torture and graphic depictions of violence and slaughter

**24th December**

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

Draco whistled when he entered the cavern. He squinted into the darkness, searching for the figure he knew was there as he walked further inside. He held a lantern in his hand, the flame charmed to be unnaturally bright and vigorous, emitting much more light than it should. Salazar knew it needed to; this tomb was pitch black.

pink flowers, and a small wooden bench shaded beneath it. She imagined it would have been a nice spot to read in.

By six o'clock that evening, Malfoy still hadn't made an appearance, and Hermione still hadn't left her room. She thought about going to bed early - it was probably a good idea to give her body a much-needed rest to prepare for what was likely to be a torturous day of memory searching and splintering doors tomorrow - but she couldn't relax. No matter how long she closed her eyes and nestled into the thick covers of her bed, she couldn't switch off, because she knew the box wrapped in shiny green paper was still there, watching her, taunting her.

So with an irritated huff, Hermione threw the covers off her body, and spent the remainder of what used to be her favourite day of the year experimenting with creative - albeit futile - ways to destroy the vile little gift *without* opening it. If nothing else, it gave her something to pass the time on that miserable, snowy evening.

## 26th December

Hermione sat on her perch with her eyes closed, listening to the birds sing their morning tune while she meditated.

She concentrated on filing her memories away, carefully crafting new walls and reinforcing the doors in her mind, ready for when Malfoy came for his first visit of the day. She worked on filing the most important memories at the back of her mind, visualised them at the very top level of the hotel. She pictured the doors transforming to steel, pictured the wood eroding away to leave shining metal in its place. Strong. Impenetrable.

She expected this morning's session to be particularly biting, expected him to make up for their lost day yesterday by barging into her mind mercilessly. She expected him to make it hurt, and he did. Fuck - *did he make it hurt*, but he never said a word about the charred, brutally misshaped box on her bedside table, so neither did she. Not even the next day. Or even the day after that.

## 4th January

Despite the 'merciful' reprieve Malfoy gave her on Christmas Day, their exercises were starting to wear thin on Hermione by the start of January. She felt herself growing weaker by the day.

The blood loss caused by their sessions always left her feeling dizzy and lightheaded afterwards. It was taking her longer to recover each time, longer to drag

"All that effort," Hermione seethed, forcing as much malice into her tone as possible, "and this is all you got. A six-year-old girls birthday party. You must be so disappointed."

"On the contrary Granger," he said, voice low as a whisper but just as venomous as hers, "this tells me everything I need to know."

Now, that did catch her attention. She turned her head, finally tearing her face from her mother to glare at the intruder next to her.

Merlin, she fucking hated him.

"Your mind isn't as impenetrable as you like to think it is." He took a step towards her, intending to see her cower away from him no doubt, but Hermione didn't move. She rooted herself in the spot, and raised her chin defiantly. "You're breaking," he said, "and it's such a fucking pleasure that I'm the one to break you."

He let the words linger between them before he turned on his heels and marched out the room. Hermione watched him take a sharp left when he was over the threshold, undoubtably on his way to rip another door off its hinges and barge into another one of her memories.

She cast one last glance at her mother, committing the gentle lines of her face to memory, and then sprinted after him.

Because the only thing worse than having Malfoy run around in her mind, was having him do it alone.

When her mother planted a kiss on her younger selves forehead, Hermione balled her hands into fists. Her eyes burned with tears. Her chest felt cold and... empty.

"Well, I must say, I am disappointed," Malfoy continued. "I expected more from you. Where's that feisty little bitch gone?"

"Enough, Malfoy," Hermione spat. "Just... enough." She could feel him watching her carefully; those cold, icy eyes of his taking everything in.

Hermione didn't look at him, she couldn't take her eyes off her mother. She'd forgotten how beautiful her mother was, and the gentle elegance that she just naturally seemed to exude. She'd been the purest of souls; would've done anything for anyone, no matter what it cost her. She was selfless like that. Pure.

For a long time, Hermione had thought the cruellest moment of her life was erasing her parents' memories of her, but that paled in comparison to never getting to see them again before they were murdered. No, the cruellest moment was learning her memory erasing charm had faded three years after its conception, and hearing that her parents had returned to their family home to frantically search for their daughter, only to be tortured and executed by the very Death Eaters that hunted them.

It's not your fault, they were in the wrong place at the wrong time,' Shacklebolt had said, as if those two little sentences were enough to comfort her. They hadn't. Not in the slightest.

She'd found no peace in his words. No peace in anything.

Until she'd tracked down those same Death Eaters and murdered them herself. Then, and only then, she'd felt... solace. Sort of.

"You know this is useless," Hermione whispered, feeling tears prick her eyes as she watched her parents. "This doesn't tell you anything about the Order."

Malfoy didn't respond, but she knew he was still watching her. Probably dissecting every twitch of her brow and flutter of her lashes as she tried to keep her tears at bay, checking her for a weakness he could exploit like the unfeeling psychopath he was.

She wouldn't let him see her weak. Wouldn't let him see she was breaking. Not now. Not ever.

herself up off the floor after every session so she could make her rounds of the manor. Despite exploring the estate each day, she still hadn't found anything useful to her escape, but the bench under the cherry blossom tree had proven to be a good spot to meditate in - as long as she asked the elves to cast a warming charm on her clothes beforehand.

Fuck - she missed her magic.

Malfoy had found more of her memories since he'd knocked down that first door. In just under two weeks, he'd torn his way through her psyche, leaving doors splintered and torn from their hinges. He only ever saw little things; a few childhood moments that she adored and cherished.

He saw her father put a seven-year-old Hermione onto his shoulders on a trip to the zoo so she could see the animals more clearly, the first time her parents had taken her to the ballet when she was eight, and the time she'd fallen off of her bike when she was nine. They were all silly little moments, but they acted as a line of defence, another barrier that Malfoy had to break through to get to her more important, more precious secrets. All they did was slow him down, but that was better than nothing.

The doors didn't open immediately for him; he still had to fight his way through. Hermione felt it each time he forced himself into a new memory, felt a sharp pain at the back of her head, a deep stabbing sensation that forced her to clench her teeth together each time a door was ripped open.

It was strange to watch herself growing up, to relive those memories of the girl who used to look at the world with such wonder and think anything was possible. It was stranger still to have Malfoy watch it with her.

As soon as he'd forced a new door open, his urgency seemed to vanish from his posture, and he glided into each room leisurely, unhurried. Despite the apparent urgency of his task, he didn't seem to be in a rush when they watched her memories unfold. More like the opposite seemed true. He took his time with each new memory, as if they were somehow just as important as the location of Harry or The Order's battle plans.

She'd expected him to move on once he saw that the room held another insignificant memory that was of no use to Voldemort. She'd expected him to turn around and march furiously to the next door, not saunter into the room, find a perch or wall to lean on, and then watch her grow up.

He seemed weirdly fascinated by their Muggle activities, like he almost enjoyed observing how the 'lesser species' lived. She caught the way his brow furrowed slightly, the only flaw in his otherwise expressionless face, when he'd watched her and her mother dance in front of their television when she was nine, copying the steps of the dancers on the screen with elated giggles.

She didn't miss him cock his head to the side, a tiny movement she would have missed if she weren't observing him so closely, when he'd watched her younger self and family pile into a caravan on their family holiday, huddling together and sheltering from the unexpected rain.

He made snide little comments along the way like the bully he would always be; he took stabs at her awkward posture, made never-ending comments about her hair, and even-

Hermione was dragged from her meditation by three delicate knocks on her bedroom door.

To start with, she thought she'd imagined it. Malfoy didn't knock when he was ready for her. Not once, not ever. He just barged in, often swinging the door open so violently it added to the ever-growing dent in the plaster on the other side of the wall. So why was he knocking now? Maybe she'd imagined it. She was so bored, deathly spiritless. She'd probably hallucinated it. Her usually busy mind had probably created the sound to entertain herself. Or maybe she was finally starting to go mad. Hermione turned from the window and stared at the door, waiting to hear Malfoy's snide voice from the other side of the wood.

Knock, knock, knock.

No, definitely hadn't imagined it.

Curious, Hermione swung her legs off the window ledge and walked towards the sound. She stopped in front of the oak doors, her fingers curling around the brass knob while she pressed her ear to the door. "Hello?" she asked quietly.

"Hello Granger," a soft, feminine voice said from the other side.

Hearing another woman's voice took her completely off guard, Hermione couldn't help but gasp and jump back. She stared at the door, eyes wide and mouth agape. Who was that?

"Would you be so kind as to open the door?" the voice asked, still soft as a whisper. "I do think it's time we met. Don't you?"

Hermione stared as a child version of herself skidded into the room, singing, followed by a group of other children all wearing bright pink party hats and sashes. It was her party; her 6th birthday party, if she was correct.

It was a silly memory; one she wasn't sure why she locked away so tightly. It seemed insignificant in comparison to the other secrets she carried. Trivial when compared to the Order's bases, Harry's location, or even her secret rendezvous with Medusa, but it was her earliest real memory so she felt protective of it. It was... precious to her. Personal. Certainly not something to share with the Death Eater who stood beside her, the one with blood still dripping from his hands.

"God, I thought your hair couldn't get any bushier than it was back at Hogwarts," Malfoy spat, watching a younger Hermione lead her friends to the sofas to play games. "It seems I was mistaken."

Hermione didn't answer him. She had no answer. She was far too angry, far too panicked by the turn of events this afternoon had taken.

Despite everything she'd done to keep her memories safe, he'd gotten in. His rage had fuelled his Legilimency skills in a way she never thought possible. He'd barged into her psyche with unimaginable power, and forced his way through that first door by sheer indignation.

What was she supposed to do now? She could practice her blocking techniques all day long, but if his rage fuelled him to this capacity, it would only be a matter of time before the rest of her doors crunched under the heel of his boot. What if she tried to-

Her mind froze from its downward spiral. Her breath caught in her throat when her mother stepped into the living room. Her mother. Her angelic, pure soul of a mother was holding a birthday cake with six flaming candles atop. Hermione hadn't seen her since...

"What's the matter little lion?" Malfoy asked, the cold edge returning to his voice. "No insult you want to spew? No spiteful comeback? No positively Gryffindor speech about how good will triumph over evil?"

Hermione swore her heart ached when her father appeared from the kitchen holding an ancient-looking video camera the size of a brick. Her mother placed the cake on the coffee table and instructed all the children to gather in a circle, and then the gleeful chorus of 'Happy Birthday' filled the room.

She forced herself up onto her elbows. She tried to push the dizzying ache away and focus on what Malfoy was doing. Focus on the threat.

He went straight for the charred and splintered door that he'd been working on for days, and he didn't pause in front of it, didn't hesitate for a second. She watched as he swiftly lifted his left leg, his robes swaying violently behind him, and brought his foot down in a punishing kick.

A loud cracking sound shot through the air.

Hermione thought she was going to be sick.

The door that Malfoy had spent days trying to force open with no success, was now open.

No, it wasn't merely just open. It was completely gone, violently ripped from its hinges under the force of his kick.

Neither of them moved for a few moments, neither breathed. They both just stared at the crater that once held the lock to Hermione's first precious memory.

She counted twenty frantic beats of her heart before Malfoy looked at her from over his shoulder. He threw her the most sadistic smirk she'd ever seen, and then disappeared through the new doorway.

Hermione was on her feet before he'd crossed the threshold.

She recognised the room the moment she stepped inside. Beige walls with cream carpets, sturdy wooden furniture and worn leather sofas all pointed towards a small television box. She didn't need to see the pictures sitting on the shelves to know exactly where she was. It was the place she'd dreamed of going back to since the war had begun. Fantasized about how euphoric it might feel to step into this exact room, at this exact moment.

Because it was her childhood home, and it wasn't there anymore. Nothing remained of this safe haven in the outside world. It was nothing but a pile of ash and bones now; just another thing the war had taken from her.

Malfoy stood in the cosy sitting room, his arms folded across his chest as he leaned against the wall. She realised as she came to stand beside him, that he didn't look angry anymore. His triumph appeared to have doused the fires of his rage. He looked snug. His lips lifted in the corners as he watched the memory before him with rapt attention.

Did someone else live here? No, that wasn't possible. Hermione had explored the manor every day for almost two weeks. She'd spent hours and hours wandering the halls and gardens, if someone else lived here, she'd have run into them by now, wouldn't she?

"Who are you?" Hermione snapped strongly, confidently, despite the unease she felt creeping into her stomach.

"Won't you please open the door? I would hate to have our introduction through a piece of wood. It's so much more personal to do it face to face."

Hermione kept her hand firmly clasped around the doorknob, her muscles refused to twist the handle and let the stranger in. Her pulse quickened, and her mind started to buzz with a hundred questions. What if it was a trap? What if she was another Death Eater? What if she was armed? Hermione wouldn't be able to defend herself. Did Malfoy know she was here?

After a few seconds of hesitation, Hermione drew a deep breath and pushed that panicking voice to the back of her mind. She started to twist the handle.

Because, no matter who was on the other side of that door, they couldn't be worse than Malfoy.

Hermione froze when she locked onto a pair of brown eyes. Her skin pebbled under her jacket and her gut-twisted uncomfortably, both common responses when one first caught a glimpse of a poltergeist.

Because the owner of that soft voice, the blonde that stood in the doorframe, looked *exactly* like someone Hermione knew to be dead.

The rational part of her brain told her that the petite woman standing in front of her *wasn't* a ghost, she couldn't have been. She lacked the opacity that all poltergeists possessed. Her skin was pale but *soft*, and she certainly didn't have the soft blue tint of the undead, but still ... she looked *just like her*; a mirror image of that girl with flowy blonde hair that Hermione had shared classes with at Hogwarts.

There were some differences though, if Hermione looked closely enough. The girl in front of her was slightly shorter and paler than her deceased older sister. She had a much smaller frame than Hermione could remember Daphne ever having, her waist and hips were narrower, and her face was a little fuller. There was an artificial flush colouring her cheeks, and her full lips were painted an eye-catching shade of red.

In truth, the woman was dazzlingly beautiful. Hermione couldn't remember the last time she'd seen anyone as striking, as undeniably alluring as the woman stood in front of her. Her brown eyes practically sparkled under her long, mascara coated lashes. Like the rest of her, her hair was perfect; softly styled golden curls wove their way to her shoulders, catching the light as she tilted her head to the side. She was dressed modestly, in high heeled black stilettos with a black, tea-length dress that nipped in elegantly at her small waist and flared out in a tiered A-line skirt. The top half of the dress was embroidered and had short, lace-covered sleeves. She looked as though she could be on her way to the Opera, not roaming the halls of this lonely manor.

"Do you know who I am?" the blonde asked, beaming.

Hermione nodded. "You took me off guard, I thought you had long brown hair?"

The woman's expression fell slightly. Her smile dropped for a moment as her dainty, perfectly manicured fingers twisted the handkerchief in her hands.

"Astoria Greengrass, isn't it?"

The blonde's smile returned, wider and brighter than before - it made dimples appear on her cheeks. It was an authentic, kind smile, one Hermione didn't expect. It made her stomach twist uncomfortably. Suspicious. "It's Astoria Zabini, now."

Ah, yes, of course. Hermione had almost forgotten that life went on as normal for those under Voldemort's leash. Weddings for his followers were probably great big events, nothing like the tiny, reclusive things the Order called 'weddings'. Harry and Ginny had said their vows inside a rubble filled base, Luna and Neville said theirs in the infirmary at one of the Order's bases after an attack. Astoria Zabini's wedding was probably nothing like that.

It seemed... strange, that weddings and such lavish events still went on despite the war around them. It seemed wrong, unfair that the Death Eaters and the rest of Voldemort's loyal follower's lives were relatively normal; a world apart from the constant stream of death the Order was forced to endure.

The territories between the opposing sides were clearly divided. The areas under Voldemort's boot were largely unchanged; the streets were full of people, bars and restaurants remained open, and shops were still packed and running normally. By all accounts, life went on as normal. No, better than normal, they thrived - and all they had to do was swear loyalty to Voldemort. Swear their loyalty to the madman and vow to fight at his side, and he would protect them and give them riches and land

A searing pain spread through the back of her head when he grabbed a fistful of her hair. He yanked her backwards roughly, flipping her onto her back so he could crouch over her.

Hermione still tried to fight him. Still tried to get as many kicks and punches in to thwart him for as long as possible, but without magic, Malfoy was a lot stronger than she was. He pressed the length of his body over the top of hers and crushed her under his weight. She couldn't kick him like this, but she managed one strong punch against his jaw before he caught both her wrists in one hand and pinned her arms above her head, silencing her struggles once and for all.

Hermione screamed in frustration, knowing that he'd beaten her. She tilted her chin down, intending to catch his eye when she spat in his face, but froze when she caught his expression.

Because his eyes weren't simply burning, they were set afame. An intense blue fire was roaring around his irises.

And then he forced himself into her mind like a fucking sledgehammer.

The force of Malfoy's spell knocked the wind out of her. Even inside her own head, she was left panting and gasping for breath on the floor, and her vision was blurred from the building pressure in her temples.

It had never hurt like this before. On the outside yes, but not in her own head. She was faintly aware when Malfoy materialised behind her. She heard his boots click against the floor of the hallway they were in, felt a chill run down her spine when Malfoy's damp robes dragged across her back as he stepped over her body.

He was almost vibrating with rage as he marched toward the door. She could taste his anger. It coloured the air with a deadly, metallic twang.

"What the-euughhhh," Hermione choked, trying to pull herself up onto her hands and knees. She'd fucking crawl after Malfoy if she had to. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

This was bad. This was very, very bad. He shouldn't be in her mind right now, not when he was this rampant. Who knew the type of damage he could do to her psyche while he was this volatile.

"The pain isn't real," she told herself. "It's not real, it's all in your head."

She moved on and checked every cupboard, forcing herself not to scream in frustration when she found nothing useful in their either. Everything was locked down and secured in place with magic. She couldn't even use a frying pan to defend herself. She was helpless. *Again.* With a low growl, she swung open the pantry door and squeezed herself inside - *without a weapon*. She kept the cupboard door open just a crack, not enough to be seen, but *just* enough to keep an eye on the entrance.

When Malfoy stepped into the kitchen, Hermione held her breath.

The way he stalked around the room, the way his blood-soaked fingers trailed delicately over the granite countertop, it could only be described as predatory. His shoulders were loose and his head was bowed slightly like a panther. He was searching for her, hunting her.

"I know you're in here Granger." His voice was practically a purr.

Hermione pressed her shoulders as close to the back of the cupboard as she could, hoping, praying that he couldn't hear the violent beating of her heart.

He made a rotation around the kitchen island, his fingers leaving a trail of blood on the countertop. "I'd come out if I were you, *little lion*. I'll only make the Legilimency more painful if you don't play nicely."

When he disappeared from her line of sight, Hermione's heart seemed to hammer on the outside of her body. It felt impossibly loud. Loud enough for him to hear. Each beat was almost painful, like being hit with a tiny fist.

Malfoy yanked the door to the cupboard open. The suddenness of it startled Hermione so much that she almost screamed. *Almost.*

Her adrenaline fuelled her. Fear and panic shot through her system and replaced her blood with fire. Moving very quickly, she used all her strength, leaned against the back wall, and used the flats of both her feet to kick his calves.

She heard something snap.

Malfoy doubled over himself, growling in pain as he used the doorframe for support.

And Hermione made her escape. She quickly crawled under his body and out of the cupboard.

But Malfoy was just a heartbeat quicker than she was.

and jewels. Unfortunately for the Order, many had taken that option at the beginning of the war.

The area's not under Voldemort's 'protection' were a stark comparison to the former. Those areas were desolate, war-torn. There wasn't a building without damage, nor a window unbroken or a bridge left untorn for miles and miles around. Most took refuge underground, burying themselves deep into the rubble, forming caves like animals while they waited out the rest of the war.

Only the Order's bases were safe, concealed by magic and enchantments, and buried just as deep underground. The streets were vacant and quiet, mutilated corpses and skeletons decorated the pavement and every street corner. The smell was repugnant, the air never seemed to be free of the stench of death and rot. Those areas were similar to that of Chernobyl. Apocalyptic. But those areas were where Hermione's base was. They were her *home*, and she'd give anything to be back there now. Trade everything she owned to be back in that war-torn, destroyed area of London that surrounded The Order's central base. She'd welcome that smell of burning flesh in the basement, because it would mean she was home and free of this fucking nightmare.

"Congratulations on the nuptials," Hermione answered bitterly. "Sorry, I didn't think to send a gift for the happy couple."

Astoria chuckled, the smile still clear on her face as she studied Hermione. "I'm sorry I didn't get the opportunity to introduce myself yet," she said, completely undeterred by Hermione's rudeness. "I've been visiting friends in Paris for the last few weeks. When Draco said you would be joining us, I was so upset that I wouldn't be there to greet you."

"Wait," Hermione's hand shot up and silenced Astoria mid-sentence. "You live here too?"

Astoria nodded. "We all do: myself, my husband Blaise, and Theodore Nott."

Well, that certainly didn't make Hermione feel any better. Living under the same roof as the notoriously bloodthirsty Demon Mask was bad enough, but two other known Death Eaters as well? Both likely just as ruthless and cold-hearted as the first? Hermione forced herself not to shiver.

"Blaise has been in Germany on an assignment for the Dark Lord since Christmas, and, well the house is so large, it's no wonder you haven't run into Theo yet," Astoria said quickly. "Sorry, I'm babbling. Do you mind if I come in?"

Hermione's brows knitted together. "This is *your* house."

"But this is *your* room," Astoria answered immediately, as if that was obvious. "I wouldn't want to intrude on your privacy."

"Your fearless leader doesn't share the same opinion," Hermione spat, feeling anger start to heat her blood. "He walks through my memories freely. He kicks down doors in my head and leaves me with blood pouring out of my ears."

Astoria smile faltered a little. Her kind eyes darkened. "I am sorry about that. I'm sure Draco doesn't mean to hurt you—"

Hermione couldn't help but snort. Her hands gripped the wooden doorframe tighter. "Oh, I think he does. I think he gets some sick thrill out of torturing a mudblood."

Astoria's reaction ... confused Hermione. She seemed to tense at the word. She clenched her jaw, and fidgeted with the white piece of cloth between her fingers.

"You didn't open your gift," Astoria said, changing the subject. Her gentle eyes flickered to Hermione's left, and she followed the blonde's line of sight to the massacred gift box on her bedside table.

Suddenly, things started to click into place; the homely, welcoming touches around the house, the vases with beautiful flowers, the sweet-smelling candles. They were all things Hermione couldn't associate Malfoy decorating his home with, because he hadn't. Astoria had. Now that Hermione had met her, she could see Mrs Zabini's feminine touch in a lot of the furnishings here; in the curtain sashes, the silver trinkets and perfectly plumped pillows.

And in elegantly wrapped gift boxes.

"You sent that?"

Astoria nodded. Her smile grew kinder by the second, if that were even possible. Hermione could feel some of her hostility weakening the longer Astoria smiled at her. Could feel the icy walls of her bitterness melting, thawing slowly under Mrs Zabini's warmth. It was starting to make her feel on edge.

Hermione wasn't used to this type of casual conversation anymore. The only ones who'd shown her any type of kindness since she'd been here were the elves.

"Yes, I thought that you shouldn't be without a gift on Christmas," Astoria said. "I know you're being forced to stay here against your own will, but I wanted you to have a little something. Something to make you feel at home."

stepped over the threshold and into the unknown, she forced herself to beat it down, and took off running.

Hermione sprinted down the left corridor. The portraits whispered as she ran past them, glaring and tsk'ing, all with the same cold, unfeeling blue eyes. She ignored them all, focusing instead on keeping her breathing as even and quiet as possible.

She came to a stop near a grand, spiral staircase which forked; one path led to the gardens, the other into an unexplored area of the manor. She had no idea where she was going. She had no weapon to defend herself, no plan.

She couldn't leave the estate, the elves had admitted that much to her, but maybe there was somewhere she could hide from Malfoy? A secret passageway or a small cupboard somewhere? The house was ostentatiously large, there had to be hiding places somewhere! Malfoy would find her eventually, but that didn't mean she couldn't stall him for a while. She'd told him time and time again that she intended to make his searches through her mind as strenuous and difficult as humanly possible, and she intended to keep her word.

Loud footsteps echoed behind her; the unmistakable click from the heels of a boot against wooden floors. Malfoy must've been closing in on her.

"Granger," a familiar, sinister voice called. He snarled the words, his rage palpable in every syllable. "You can't seriously think I won't hunt you down in my own house?"

Hermione sprinted down the stairs, taking two steps at a time and forcing herself to her feet when her ankles gave out on the bottom step. She moved on instinct and took the path that led her deeper into the manor. She guessed that she had a better chance at hiding if she was inside the house. There weren't many hiding spots in the garden, not that she could see from her window, anyway. Plus, Black Shadow and the elves were probably still out there. Dragons tended to be volatile when injured. They were exceptionally more dangerous and eruptive when they felt vulnerable, and Hermione didn't fancy being burnt to a crisp while she looked for a hiding spot.

Her chosen route led her to a large kitchen. She ran to the drawers and tried to yank them open, but they wouldn't budge. She tried again, wrapping both her hands around the brass handles and using her bodyweight to pry them open. Her fear felt strong enough to choke her when she realised nothing was going to work. They were immovable, probably sealed shut with magic. Malfoy really was a thorough little bastard.

"Enough!"

"Oh, the lioness has *teeth*," he teased.

When he approached, Hermione forced herself not to move. She held her breath, and tried to ignore the delicious way the smoke clung to his robes.

"Just wait until I have my magic back," she seethed. "You'll see just how sharp my teeth are when they tear your throat out!"

The corner of his lips twitched as he withdrew his wand. "Believe me, Granger, I can't wait to see you try."

"Come on Mudblood," Malfoy sneered from the doorway, his face twisted into that nasty snarl he always wore. "We don't have all day. I have some of your friends locked away that are just dying to be tortured."

"Oh, would you just FUCK OFF!" Hermione snapped from the other side of the white hallway.

The corridor looked unrecognisable from what it had weeks ago. The once pristine white walls were charred and burnt in places from Malfoy's efforts to force them open. Most of the frames were empty now, the doors ripped from their hinges and leaving nothing but a dark abyss in their place.

Malfoy drummed his fingers against the wooden doorframe, his irritation growing through her defiance. "I won't ask again. Come, or I'll gouge your pretty eyes out and display them on my fireplace."

Hermione squared her shoulders. "You know anything you do to me in here isn't real."

Malfoy sighed and pushed himself away from the door. He walked towards her, shoulders hanging low and predatory, and stopped when Hermione could feel the chill of his body.

She refused to cringe away from him. Her pulse quickened as he studied her for a few seconds. His cold grey eyes were hard as stone as they slid over her frame, dissecting every nervous twitch of her hand and furrow in her brow.

"I know." He brought his hand to her face slowly, gently, as if he were about to tuck a stray curl behind her ear, only to grab a fistful of her hair. He yanked her head back roughly, and a searing pain throbbed against Hermione's skull as he tilted her head up to look at her. "But you do feel it, don't you? The pain?"

"Get your hands off of me!" She curled her fingers around his wrist, trying to dig her nails into his skin as hard as she could. He didn't seem to feel it.

"Answer the question, Granger," he whispered, dragging her face towards his. "The pain might not be real, but you feel it. Don't you?"

She hissed as he tilted her head back further. The ache intensified as she struggled and glared up at him. She didn't admit it, she wouldn't, just writhed and punched his chest until he released her.

She gave his chest one last spiteful push, then stormed her way to the open door.

"Let's just get this over with!"

Malfoy followed, chuckling under his breath as he trailed behind her. "I thought so."

Hermione stepped through the doorway quickly, feeling the Demon Mask uncomfortably close, and into a familiar stone covered corridor. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath once she was over the threshold, relishing in that familiar scent of parchment and ink that always filled the air in this castle.

God, she missed it here. Missed everything about the school that had been a sanctuary to her for years-

"For Salazar's sake," a low, irritating voice drawled from behind her. "Another fucking Hogwarts memory? Really Granger? I know you peaked in school, but this is pathetic, even for you."

Hermione's hands twitched, wishing she still had her wand. "I know you're sick of the Hogwarts memories. You told me yesterday when we watched Ron, Harry and I run away from that three-headed dog. You told me the day before that when you watched me almost get crushed to death by that mountain troll-"

"That memory wasn't actually that bad," Malfoy interrupted wistfully. "I'd like to watch that one again, do you remember which door it was behind?"

"And the day before that when we watched the sorting ceremony?" She whirled around and stretched onto the tips of her toes so she could shout in his face. He didn't back away an inch, instead, his lips twitched in the corner. "I don't want you in my head any more than you want to be here! It's bad enough you're tearing your way through my memories quicker than I can stop you, so I certainly don't need you making snide little comments along the way!"

Malfoy opened his mouth, but she cut him off before he could even form a single syllable.

"Now, if you would just shut the fuck up so we can continue our little tour and I can get you out of my head as quickly as possible."

Without giving him chance to make a malicious retort, Hermione spun and marched down the corridor.

The empty halls had filled with students while she'd been screaming at him, and before long she noticed a head of red hair and followed it, knowing her younger self wouldn't be far behind Ron.

When she heard the heels of Malfoy's boots click against the flagstone as he followed her, she picked up her pace. His longer legs made it impossible for her to outrun him, but it wouldn't stop her from trying.

After several minutes of quiet stalking, Ron joined her younger double in the courtyard.

Malfoy's robes brushed against her hand as he stood beside her. "I swear your hair gets bushier with each new memory. Muggles know what combs are, don't they?"

Hermione bit her tongue until she tasted blood.

"The red coats are coming," Malfoy teased quietly as a hoard of wizards wearing bright red and gold robes appeared from the far archway, all with brooms firmly grasped in their hands while Harry dragged his behind him.

Hermione had forgotten how awkward Harry had been in those younger years, how his fringe hung into his eyes, and how his robes always looked far too big for his thin frame. She smiled when he pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

'There was a hiccup in the pace of the red hooded figures when an army of emerald robes sauntered into the courtyard.

Wood cursed under his breath. "Where do you think you're going, Flint?"

The two opposing armies stopped in front of one another.

"Quidditch practice," the leader of the emerald robes answered coldly.

"I booked the pitch for Gryffindor today."

"Easy wood," Marcus grinned, pulling a piece of parchment from his robes. "I've got a note."

No matter how dry her mouth ran or how much her fingers itched to snatch it from him, she wouldn't take it.

He was being cruel again, taunting her just because he could. Even after all these years, he was still a bully.

Hermione stepped away from him, she needed to, she could feel her resolve weakening the longer she remained in the smoke cloud he'd created around them. She dragged a hand through her hair and started to pace the room, counting backwards from a hundred in her head as she worked to quiet her hammering heart.

"How's the escape plan coming?" he asked after a few moments of silence.

"Fuck you," she spat through clenched teeth.

He sat on her perch and leaned back casually against the glass window to watch her. He was toying with her, letting her panic and irritation dance through her blood before he went in for the kill and barged into her mind. He'd realised days ago that he seemed to have more success with accessing her memories if he riled her up first. The doors into her mind were *a fraction* weaker if he got under her skin before he tried to smash his way through.

Usually, she was able to remain calm. She knew what he was doing, and was able to think it through and stop herself from giving him what he wanted. Not today though. He'd tapped into her hidden weakness for the little cancer sticks, and was using it to his advantage.

"Got any more brilliant ideas of how you're going to kill me yet?" he asked.  
"Fuck you."

Malfoy took another long drag. "No? Nothing?" he asked, the exhale fanning another intoxicating wall of nicotine in her direction. She forced herself to keep pacing. "I'm disappointed. I thought your brilliant mind would have found a way to slit my throat by now."

"Fuck. *Y'all!*"

"Someone's not very friendly today." He took a final drag and threw the butt out the window. He stood and straightened his robes, keeping his mouth closed so smoke billowed out of his nose. "Aren't you Gryffindor's supposed to be nice and brave to a fault? I thought that was why so many of you die on the battlefield? Unable to stop your hero complex from shining through. I can't tell you how many of your red and gold friends I've cut down over the years..."

untainted with flecks of crimson the way they usually were. "Someone is a little jumpy today." He quirked a brow. "Need something to calm your nerves?"

"I am not jumpy!" she spat, her face twisting into a scowl as she tried to calm the violent beating of her heart. "You just startled me! You should learn to knock!"

The words died on her tongue when he reached into his robes and wordlessly withdrew a packet of cigarettes. Her mouth ran dry when he placed one between his lips, and lit it with the tip of his wand.

He squeezed his eyes closed when he inhaled, tipping his head back towards the ceiling as the nicotine washed into his lungs.

He was completely exposed like this; every inch of his pale throat was on display and itching to be sliced open. If she had a weapon, she would have gladly done so. When he exhaled slowly, he was engulfed in a thick sheen of grey smoke that covered him like a sinister halo. Malfoy smirked when he looked at her again, giving her that signature lift of his brow when he saw that her hands were balled into fists. Fuck, he'd noticed her weakness for the tiny little sticks. Smug prick.

He kept his eyes on hers as he took another drag, and Hermione's stomach twisted when he took a step towards her. She forced herself not to retreat, forced herself to stay rooted in the spot as he closed in. He stopped when their chests were almost pressed together, when she had to tilt her chin upwards to catch his eyes, and then he released the breath he'd been holding, and the smoke hit her like a brick wall.

Her knees almost buckled. The nicotine washed over her and - *fuck*, it was indescribable. She knew she missed smoking; it was always the one thing that calmed her nerves completely, and having a taste of it teased against her tongue was euphoric. Mouth-watering.

Her eyes glued themselves to his mouth, unable to tear them away as the end of the cigarette ignited when he pulled in another long drag. He pulled it from his mouth, and after he'd released another intoxicating breath that made Hermione's eyelids flutter, he extended his hand to her and offered her the cigarette.

He was teasing her with it. He knew she wasn't going to take it, that she would rather shove a red-hot fire poker down her throat than wrap her lips around the same butt he had, no matter how much she wanted one.

Young Hermione and Ron wrinkled their noses as they inched towards the conflict. Her impossibly wild hair bounced with every confident stride she took. Ron swallowed nervously as he trailed behind her.

"Here she comes," the Death Eater beside her smirked. "The little lion cub; claws out and ready for a brawl!"

"Do you ever stop talking?" Hermione hissed as Wood took the parchment and started to read aloud.

"I, Professor Severus Snape, do hereby give the Slytherin team permission to practice today, for the need to train their new seeker." Wood sighed heavily, annoyed, and scrunched the parchment into a ball. "You've got a new Seeker? Who?"

The sea of emerald robes parted to allow a boy with white-blonde hair and a familiar spiteful expression to step forward.

"Malfoy?" Harry asked, tone just as bewildered and confused as the expression he wore.

"That's right," young Malfoy said proudly. "And that's not all that's new this year." He made a show of leaning his broom against his shoulder, making sure everyone noticed how the perfectly polished wood caught the light.

Everyone's eyes slid over to the other Slytherins, realisation dawning on all of their young faces when they noticed the matching brooms.

"Merlin, I forgot what an insufferable little show off you were," Hermione muttered.

Malfoy scoffed. "What good is there in having nice things if you can't lord it over others and show them their place?"

"Spoken like a true spoilt brat."

Ron's eyes were wide as saucers as he studied the brooms. "Those are Nimbus 2001's! How did you get those?"

Marcus Flint's lip curled. "A gift from Draco's father."

"You see Weasley," Young Malfoy sneered, "my father can afford the best."

"At least no one on the Gryffindor team had to buy their way in," the young Hermione said with a smirk. "They got in on pure talent."

Hermione's eyes slid to Malfoy's as they watched what happened next.

She saw his jaw tighten slightly as his younger self step towards Hermione. His young blue eyes looked her up and down, and his lip twitched into that spiteful curl before he said the words that had defined and wounded her younger self so painfully, like the red-hot brand of cattle, and that she'd been clawing her way to escape ever since. "No one asked your opinion, you filthy little Mudblood."

Hermione was aware that her younger self gasped. She knew that her thirteen-year-old self was quivering all over, and that her eyes were swimming as she fought to keep her tears in, but she didn't watch it.

Instead, she studied the Malfoy beside her. His expression was blank and unreadable, eyes just as dead as they ever had been, but she noticed that he ran his tongue across the inside of his cheek, the only flaw in his poker face.

Ron sharply withdrew his wand and stood protectively in front of Hermione.

"You'll pay for that one Malfoy!"

At the time, Hermione had been glad that he had. She'd been grateful for the cover so she could discreetly wipe away a few traitorous tears. Not now though. She wanted Malfoy to see the way his words had affected her that day. Wanted him to see how something as small as one word could cause as much pain as a physical blow, like a stab to the heart.

After all, wasn't that one word what this whole war had been about?

They watched Ron's curse backfire, and the hoard of spiteful green cloaks that chuckled and sniggered as he began to vomit slugs.

"We need to get him to Hagrid's!" Harry shouted as he hauled a pale Ron to his feet. "He'll know what to do."

They followed the children drag Ron to the hut at the edge of the school grounds.

Hermione knocked furiously on the wooden door while Harry rubbed soothing circles into his friend's back. Before the door could swing open, the young Hermione turned on her heels and started walking back towards the castle.

"Where are you going?" Harry shouted as she quickly ascended the hill. "We need you--"

"I've forgotten something in the castle," she called over her shoulder. Her voice broke slightly on the last word. "Hagrid will know what to do."

Malfoy didn't say a word as they followed her double over the crest of the hill and into the castle, trailing her all the way to the girl's dormitories in Gryffindor tower.

All the men were incredibly delicate with Astoria. They all treated her like she was made of glass and never left her on her own for long, but there was something different about the way Malfoy treated her; it was... protective. As though the world were too much of a dangerous place for someone like Astoria, and she needed to be shielded from the hazards outside.

They spent an infuriating amount of time sitting on the bench under the cherry blossom tree, the one that had quickly become Hermione's favou- *the most vulnerable* place on the estate. She found them there often, huddled close together and sharing whatever was in that mysterious flask in her hands. Malfoy always had a cigarette in his mouth while they sat on the bench and talked, and it took almost every ounce of self-control Hermione had not to ask him for one.

She hoped he hadn't noticed that she always swiftly left the vicinity every time he had one in his mouth.

Astoria didn't laugh as much with Malfoy as she did with Nott or Zabini. Their conversations always looked much more serious, but he always had a small smile at the edges of his lips when they were together.

During their walks, Astoria would often suddenly unlink their arms and step in front of Malfoy, blocking his path and forcing him to stop and look at her. Hermione would watch from her window as she took his face in her hands - Malfoy had to bend down slightly to allow her to do so - before Astoria would say something to him. Hermione could never make out what it was, but Astoria always wore a stern look on her face whenever it happened. Her eyes were always fiercely determined, her brows always furrowed in the middle. Malfoy would shake his head at her, and then they would link arms again and carry on as though this bizarre exchange had never happened.

Hermione was dying to know what they were saying -

"I never took you for a peeping tom," a low voice whispered from beside her. It was much closer than Hermione had expected, close enough she could feel his breath on her neck as he spoke, and the suddenness of it almost made her fall off her perch.

Hermione whipped around to face Malfoy, tripping over her own feet as she stumbled backwards and tried to put as much space between them as possible.

He smirked, folded his arms across his chest, and leaned against the wardrobe to study her. He was dressed in his Death Eater robes but they appeared clean today,

And, like Hermione, Astoria liked to wander the grounds of the estate each day as well. However, unlike Hermione, Astoria never did so unaccompanied.

Some days Nott escorted her. Hermione had run into them on Tuesday in the hallway outside her room. The pair had their arms linked and were whispering and giggling to one another as they made their way past Hermione. Astoria had a glass of red wine in her hands that day.

Most of the time Zabini chaperoned her. Hermione had almost knocked into the pair outside the main kitchen on Thursday. Astoria had smiled sweetly and asked if she wanted to join them for a drink. Blaise had narrowed his eyes at her. The blonde had white wine that day.

Yes, Hermione had learned a lot about Astoria since her return to the manor, but she'd learned even more about Malfoy.

It was a strange thing indeed to see the way he and Astoria acted when they were around one another. Hermione had watched them walk together countless times over the past week - she walked with Malfoy almost as often as she did with her husband. Their arms were always linked together whenever Malfoy escorted her, and Astoria often rested her head against his shoulder - the part she could reach, anyway - as they made their rounds.

Their relationship reminded Hermione of a loving brother and sister. There was a softness to Malfoy whenever he was with Astoria, a kindness that Hermione had never seen in him. He was gentle in the way he handled her, in the way his eyes twinkled slightly while they spoke, and the way he took her hand to lead her up any staircase or slight incline of a hill, as though she weren't capable of walking up them without assistance.

The fact that Malfoy had a kind bone in his body - even a minuscule one - had shocked Hermione to her core. The first time she'd seen Malfoy take Astoria's hand and help her off the leather armchair she was perched in, Hermione's jaw had almost hit the floor.

She'd been so shocked, thought it so out of character for him, that she immediately mistook it as a trick of the light. A one-off. Because if there was one thing she was certain of - above anything else- Draco Malfoy *did not* possess a drop of tenderness or human kindness in his veins, never had.

But then she'd witnessed a similar thing happen the next day. And then the day after that.

Her younger self swung the doors open and marched inside; her face twisted into a very serious scowl as she searched the room. Once she was satisfied that she was alone, she released a ragged breath, slumped onto her four-poster bed, and cried.

Malfoy's brow furrowed when the younger Hermione dropped her face into her small hands and began to cry into them. She sobbed and sobbed until her face turned red, her cheeks were saturated with her tears, and the sound of her choked little cries filled the silent dormitory.

Hermione had expected Malfoy to make a comment, to laugh, to make fun of her or at least make one cruel remark. But to her surprise, he said nothing. Not a fucking word. He just watched, never tearing his eyes from her younger version as she bawled.

Malfoy's hands were balled into tight fists at his sides. Hermione noticed it, but she didn't comment.

After a long, long time, her younger version raised her head and drew a calming breath. Her face was red and glistening with her tears, and they both remained silent as she wiped her cheeks with her sleeves. She took another deep breath, pinching her eyes closed on the exhale, then opened them again and started to ruffle through her trunk.

Eventually, the younger Hermione found what she was looking for, and a little of the sadness seemed to ease from her features when she pulled a single paintbrush and canvas out. She sat cross-legged on the floor, and continued to draw steadily breaths as she gazed out the window and started to paint the skyline that stretched outside.

"Well, I didn't expect that," Malfoy finally said, that cruel smirk peeling its way back onto his sharp features. "Did your passion for art really stem from me? Did my comment get under your skin that much?"

Hermione ground her teeth together. "Don't flatter yourself."

#### **14th January**

"Look whose 'ere!"

"Ah, come to see the show?"

"You've got to be fucking joking," Malfoy muttered, dragging his heels as they made their way down the embankment. "Why did you think to file this memory away?"

"You! You foal, loathsome, evil little cockroach!"

"Do we have to watch this?" Malfoy asked. "Really?"

Hermione folded her arms and leaned against the stone behind her, settling in as her younger version pressed the tip of her wand into Malfoy's throat. She smirked when his bottom lip started to quiver, but she didn't answer the Death Eater stood next to her.

"You are a vile little bitch," the older Malfoy mumbled angrily.

"And you're an insufferable, prejudice wanker," she replied as her eyes slid over to watch him. "Have I told you that I hate you today?"

"Not since breakfast."

"Oh, that means I'm behind schedule. I am sorry for slacking," Hermione said. "Just to stop any confusion, I think you're the worst human who ever lived."

Malfoy cocked a brow. "Including the Dark Lord? That's quite the compliment."

"I don't think he's classed as human for a long time. So you have the crown for sadism for the time being."

"Hermione no!" Ron's voice droned in the background. "He's not worth it."

When Hermione's younger double punched his, the Malfoy beside her tentatively touched his nose.

Hermione's smile grew when the younger Malfoy's head smacked against the wall. The sound of his skull crunching from the impact rang through the air, the sweetest music she'd heard in weeks.

"Fucking bitch," he growled when his younger self made a run for it. "That hurt."

"I know." Hermione smiled. "It was meant to."

"You know you broke my nose that day, don't you?"  
Hermione bit her lip to keep from laughing

"Took Goyle forty minutes to reset it, and even he didn't do it properly. Stupid bastard," Malfoy sneered. "My nose wouldn't stop bleeding for days afterwards."

shirts and long woollen cardigans that were just as soft and warm as she'd imagined they would be.

She still kept her mission uniform tucked under her bed, she couldn't bear to part with it completely.

Her refusal to use the inviting copper bath had melted as quickly as her refusal to change her clothes, and now she'd added another new activity to her daily routine; a nightly bath filled with exquisite smelling salts and lotions.

The first bath had lasted a total of forty-five seconds. She hadn't been able to sit there any longer. She couldn't bear to lower her guard for even a *second* more, no matter how many times she'd repeated that she was safe, and no one was going to barge in.

By her second attempt, she managed one minute, the night after two, then three. By the fourth night, she figured if Malfoy was going to barge into the bathroom while she was naked, he would have done it by now, so she started to relax. She still found it impossible to switch off entirely, but it did calm her nerves a little - and being clean again certainly made her feel more human.

Astoria had a keen interest in healing magic and restorative potions. There was a large building on the right wing of the grounds which was separate from the house, and Astoria had converted it into a Potions storage unit with several cauldrons and workstations.

The inside of the building was humid and dark, and the shelves were stacked with every ingredient and potion Hermione could think of. She found Astoria and her husband cooped up inside almost daily, fussing over ingredients and parchment with a simmering cauldron between them. Whatever they were trying to cook up either smelled incredibly sweet, or awfully bitter - depending on the day. Astoria always offered Hermione a kind smile when she entered and asked if she wanted to join them.

The scowl Zabini threw Hermione told her that she was in fact *not* welcome to do so. She always politely declined.

Astoria's hands were solemnly never empty. The petite blonde always clutched a glass of wine between her manicured fingers - either red or white - or a silver flask if she was outside. Hermione had guessed it was filled with coffee or tea to begin with, just something to warm her hands, but she wasn't so sure anymore.

No matter how heart-warming those moments had been, Hermione still didn't believe in soulmates. Those couples were clearly suited for one another, they loved each other deeply and would die to protect their significant other, but were they destined to be together?

No, not to Hermione's way of thinking.

She thought her beliefs on soulmates was immovable, unchangeable - until she saw the way Zabini and Astoria were together.

Their devotion to each other was like nothing Hermione had ever seen. They didn't merely just love one another, that didn't even *begin* to scratch the surface of how they felt, it almost seemed insulting to refer to them that way. It was as if their significant other was the centre of their entire universe. If Astoria was Zabini's heart, then he was her blood. Both vital to one's survival, but unable to exist without the other. They *needed* one another.

Hermione smiled as she watched Zabini twirl his wife in a circle. He pulled her hand towards his mouth and placed a delicate kiss on her gloved knuckles. Snow flurried under Astoria's long skirt as she grabbed his face and sealed their lips together. Hermione had watched them do this almost every day since their returns to the manor.

She thought the novelty might wear off after a few days, that they would grow tired of one another, and their public displays of affection would vanish. It didn't.

They reminded Hermione of a pair of lovestruck teenagers. Their hands always firmly clasped together, lips even firmer together, hardly ever apart and always laughing. Despite the disdain Hermione felt towards Zabini, she couldn't deny that the love they had for one another brought a certain warmth and light to the dark halls of the manor.

Hermione had learned a lot about Astoria since their first meeting. She'd learned that the blonde was always impeccably groomed, her hair and make-up were perfect, and she was always dressed as though she might need to attend a ball or gala at a moment's notice.

She'd learned that Astoria had wonderful taste in fashion. On closer inspection, the clothes she'd stocked Hermione's wardrobe with were all perfect and wildly expensive, most with labels written in French or Italian. The clothes didn't seem as offensive or scary now she knew Malfoy hadn't touched them, so Hermione had been wearing them daily. She only chose simple garments; Muggle denim jeans, T-

Now, that did make Hermione laugh. Her hand flew to cover her mouth to muffle the sound, but her shoulders shook and gave her away.

"A little. There's something satisfying about a filthy Mudblood making the great Malfoy narrow his eyes. "Think that's funny, do you?!"

Draco Malfoy bleed."

His lip curled back.

"I bet your father was furious."

"I didn't tell him."

It was Hermione's turn to raise a brow. "Too embarrassed?"

Malfoy rolled his tongue on the inside of his cheek and quickly changed the subject. "You showed me this memory on purpose, didn't you?"

Hermione shrugged. Her eyes swept back to watch her younger self talk with Harry and Ron. Merlin, her hair really did look awful at the back.

"Why?" Malfoy asked.

She observed the cold glint in his eyes, then answered honestly, "I wanted to see if it would hurt you."

Malfoy didn't appear to have an answer to that, so instead, he just watched her, and it sent an involuntary shiver down her spine.

"I wanted to see if this memory, which was obviously deeply embarrassing for you, would hurt you as much as you've hurt me."

There was a beat of silence, then he asked, "And do you think it did?"

"No," Hermione answered. "Not nearly as much as I wanted it to."

"Is there a memory of yours that you think could hurt me?"

Hermione swallowed, but before she could answer him, the memory started to fade around them. The colours distorted and the landscape started to twist and turn in on itself. There was a flash of white light, then they landed back in her room.

Hermione caught one of the posters at the foot of her bed, and used it for support when she started to cough and choke. This was entirely normal; the force of his spell always left her feeling like the wind had been kicked out her lungs whenever they returned.

What wasn't normal, however, was the red liquid on her hands when she looked down at them. She was coughing up blood. Well, that was new.

Hermione curled over herself. She placed her palm against her chest as thick clumps of blood forced their way up her throat and out her mouth. It seemed to go on for ages, it felt like hours had passed before she was able to pull any air into her lungs.

Once her coughing had subsided into a quiet pant, Hermione's knees wobbled so badly that she slumped onto her bed. She tried and failed to sit up. Instead, she stared at the carpet, and fought off the dizzying pressure in her head that made it almost impossible not to topple over.

Her breath hitched when a cold hand caught her chin; her eyes snapped up to meet a pair of grey ones staring intently at her.

Malfoy was much closer than she'd expected. He was kneeling in front of her, and there was a slight furrow in his brow. Even in this position, his tall frame made him eye level with her and for reasons she didn't understand, she couldn't make herself look away from him. Or push him away.

Maybe it was the blood loss? Or the excruciating headache? Perhaps both.

Her chest flushed when Malfoy's cold thumb wiped across her mouth and cheek, presumably clearing some of the blood that was gathered there. His hand was softer than she imagined it would be. His grip was quite gentle. His eyes never left hers.

The seconds ticked by, and as her breathing steadily returned to normal, so did her strength - and her rational thought.

"Don't touch me," she tried to hiss as she leaned out of his touch, but it sounded weak and unconvincing, even to her own ears.

Malfoy let go of her chin and the loss of touch felt strange... hollow. Her skin almost itched with the need for contact again. He stood in front of her and banished the mess of blood with the flick of his wand. "Romy."

"Yes, Master?" the tiny elf asked as he cracked into the room.

"Bring Granger some Pepperup potion," Malfoy ordered, his cold eyes still uncomfortably trained on hers. "And some blood replenishing potion."

"Of course, sir. Would Miss Granger need some of Mrs Zabini's special potions?" Romy asked. "Or the normal ones?"

She'd repeated the phrase when she'd narrowly avoided green curses as she'd dragged Charlotte Sheldon's corpse through a burning building, when Jason Aldo had died in her arms two years into the war, and each time they burned the body of another fallen soldier.

It was a phrase that Hermione knew well, but even she had to admit that if he would still be as cheerily optimistic about the future if he could have seen how the bodies would pile high in the streets. If he knew how many children would die in the first year. Or how many of his beloved students would turn their backs on one another and murder their friends on the battlefield.

The world had become a much more sinister place since he'd made that speech. There wasn't a lantern strong enough to banish the kind of darkness that had eclipsed the world since his death. Some places weren't meant to shine anymore. The world was tainted now; all the light had been snuffed out to leave an endless sea of emptiness in its place.

Dumbledore's words had lost meaning to Hermione over the years. As the war dragged on and the corpses piled higher, she'd found it harder and harder to rationalise the words, but now, as she stared out the window and watched Astoria and Blaise wander the gardens together, hand in hand with smiles on their faces, she found herself reminded of them.

Despite everything, despite the war and decay and the state of the world, they had found one another.

Hermione had never believed in soulmates. Always thought the notion of one person being perfectly matched to another was ridiculous - and quite frankly childish. The idea that two souls who were so undeniably suited would somehow eventually find one another - even in the most ridiculous and outlandish of circumstances - had always seemed absurd, even comical...

Maybe it was because the logical part of her brain always relied on evidence and facts to prove a hypothesis, or maybe the war had just made her cynical. Whatever the reason for her stubbornness, she'd never once deferred from her beliefs on the matter. Not when she'd watched Harry and Ginny take their vows. Not when Luna and Neville had had their first child. Or even when Ron had protested his innocence, and declared it wasn't his fault that he'd fallen for Romilda, they were just simply .

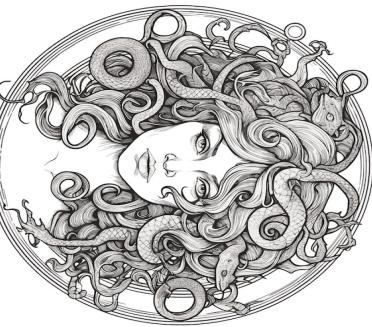
Malfoy's jaw tensed, irritated, as if Hermione wasn't supposed to hear that. "The normal ones will do, and be quick about it."

The green-eyed elf fidgeted with the edges of his pillow case. "O-of course. Romy will be right back."

"And bring her something to eat."

"Yes, Master." The elf clicked his fingers and vanished from her room.

Hermione stared at Malfoy; he still hadn't taken his eyes off her. She cleared her throat, and wiped her mouth with the sleeves of her grey cardigan. "Why are you making him go to this much trouble? I always bleed after our sessions, you've never cared before."



## LION CUB

"I don't know how much you know about the human body, Granger," Malfoy sneered sarcastically, "but you've lost far too much blood today to be considered normal. The Dark Lord requires you to be in good health, and he would be rather pissed off if you met your end through something as trivial as blood loss." He turned and started to leave, but he only got as far as the door before he paused. "And Granger?"

"Yes?"

"If you're going to graffiti my wall, make it something more creative than a lake and trees."

### **10th January**

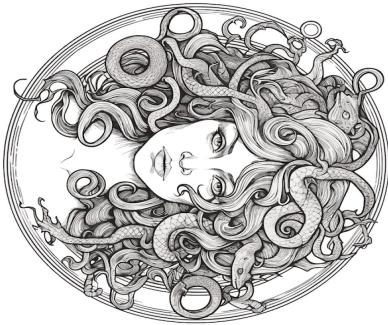
"Happiness can be found, even in the darkest of times," Dumbledore had once said. "If one only remembers to turn on the light."

Hermione had replayed that speech a thousand times over since the start of the war.

In the beginning, she'd used it as a focal point. The phrase had grounded her. Pulled her from the dark direction her thoughts usually took, and gave her strength. She used it to drag herself through battles, to remind herself that the Order could win this war, that there was light at the end of the tunnel, they just needed to hang on and stay strong.

more bearable. She had been doing that from the beginning, first with the clothes, and now with this incredibly thoughtful gift.

## CHAPTER 12



### A SOUL WORTH SAVING

Not giving the stubborn part of her brain chance to catch up, Hermione swung her wardrobe doors open and grabbed a white shirt dress she'd admired in there days ago and a silk scarf. She stripped quickly - ignoring the way her instincts were screaming at her that this was a trap - and changed into the dress. It felt odd at first, to rid herself of the uniform she'd worn everyday for nearly a month, almost like shedding a second skin. She felt cold, exposed, but she ignored it.

She used the silk scarf to tie her hair into a high ponytail, then she grabbed the box and removed the tubes of paint. Using a dinner tray as a palette, she squirted a large amount of green and blue paint onto the silver, delighted to find the tubes had been charmed to never empty. She liked Astoria even more.

Hermione drew a deep breath as she stared at the pristine cream wall that was opposite her window, her chosen easel. She wondered if Malfoy would be infuriated if she ruined his wall with her art. She secretly hoped he would. Hoped he would fly into a vicious rage and smash something. It was always fun to watch him lose his temper, and there wasn't anything else he could punish her with anyway.

Her heart a wild, excited beast in her chest, Hermione dipped her brush into the large dip of blue paint, and placed a broad stroke against the untainted wall. Then she placed another. And then another.

She felt the tightness in her chest ease with every stroke. Felt the noisy chatter in her head - the one that fussed over escape strategies and Order secrets - quiet with every brush of the paint. By the time her art had started to take shape, by the time the image of a lake with tall trees started to appear on her canvas, the voice was nothing more than a gentle whisper.

Hermione painted for hours and hours and hours, and she so enthralled in her artwork, so transfixed as she covered the once cream wall in vibrant shades of blue and jade, that she never felt a pair of curious grey eyes watching her from the doorway.

TW; substance abuse

*20th January*

Hermione and Malfoy pushed their way through the sea of students as they followed her double walk through the busy castle with Harry. It was hard to keep up with them in this memory, and even harder to hear their conversation through the roaring chatter going on around them.

Even though Hermione knew, in the rational part of her brain, that the sea of students weren't actually there and therefore she didn't need to be mindful of their shoulders, she still was. She still bent and ebbed her way through the crowd to avoid knocking into their small bodies. It was a force of habit, the war had engrained it

close enough for Hermione to smell the mixture of blood, whisky and tobacco that clung to him. "What a pleasure it is to finally see you again. I've been meaning to come and say hello, but you know, duty calls. Order members to kill and torture and whatnot."

"Yes, I can imagine that your position can be very time-consuming. Does Malfoy let you have any days off?" Hermione asked, loving how quickly Nott's smile faded. "I can imagine it's quite difficult to take orders from your best friend."

What remained of Nott's smirk twisted into a scowl.

"Is it easy for you?" she continued. "Watching your best friend outrank you? Become a Demon Mask and be your superior in every way? I imagine your father wasn't so proud."

Nott huffed aggressively. His brown eyes sparked with anger. "You're lucky the Dark Lord has forbidden anyone besides Malfoy to touch you."

Hermione winced.

Nott licked his lip and studied her. His eyes roamed up and down her body, sizing her up. "If I were you, *Golden Girl*, I'd be a little more careful of what I say to scary Gold Masks," he whispered, leaning in totower over Hermione. She didn't cower away, didn't so much as move an inch.

He observed her for another moment, then turned on his heels and started to walk away. "Have fun during your Legilimency session today," he called over his shoulder. "Malfoy was in a foul mood today during our meeting, so I'm sure it'll be extra fun."

Hermione watched Nott leave. She didn't realise that she'd been holding her breath until his brown curls had disappeared around the corner. When he was gone, she closed her door, ran to the bedside table, and tore the green paper from the charred gift box.

Her heart fluttered when she flipped the lid open. It was tubes of paint and three paintbrushes, each with different size bristles and long pale oak handles. She ran her fingers across the polished wood, feeling tears prick her eyes as she revelled in their smoothness.

This was why Romy had been asking Hermione what cheered her up when she was sad. Astoria had sent the elves to investigate. She'd been trying to offer Hermione an olive branch; a small act of kindness to make her incarceration a little

into her, made her automatically want to be mindful and protective over small and helpless things - even if they weren't really there.

Malfoy, however, didn't suffer from the same affliction. He marched through the hoards of smaller witches and wizards and regarded them as exactly what they were; nothing. Projections of Hermione's mind. He didn't bend and veer his shoulders to allow them to pass, instead, he barged straight through them, and their bodies evaporated into thick clouds of smoke as he walked through them like ghosts.

By the time she rounded the next sharp corner, Hermione had caught up with her younger version, and was walking side by side with Malfoy. She still struggled to keep up with his pace. One of his long, smooth strides matched two of her shorter ones. She had a feeling he was doing it on purpose, just to make her breathless and piss her off. Again.

"Tell me what Arthur said?"

"If Dumbledore is travelling, then it's news to the ministry," Harry replied, his eyes on the floor and far away. The younger version of Hermione opened her mouth to say something, but was cut off when Harry sharply met her eyes again, as if inspiration had suddenly struck. "But, what about this? That night at Borgin and Burke's? Draco was looking at a vanishing cabinet."

Hermione felt Malfoy's cold eyes slide to her face at the mention of his name. She kept looking forward, and forced herself not to shiver under his gaze.

He'd been doing that a lot recently, almost daily since she'd started choking up blood after their sessions. His eyes tended to drift over and watch her while her memories unfolded before them, studying her a lot more intently than the memory he was supposed to be observing.

The elves seemed to be growing concerned about the amount of blood she vomited after their sessions, and had started supplying her with Pepper Up and Blood Replenishing potions afterwards. Malfoy didn't seem to care though. He was still just as relentless as ever, and refused to drop the length or number of sessions despite the elves advice - but he had started to watch her and somehow, Hermione found that worse.

She'd rather him ignore her or spew degrading insults about her 'fragile Mudblood health', or make a joke about the 'lesser species' not being able to handle this kind of harsh magic and then pretend she didn't exist afterwards- like he had been doing since her arrival. Now he seemed to be going out of his way to be as close to her as

possible while they walked through her memories, shoulders practically touching, close enough she felt a cold chill from his proximity.

His constant observations were starting to unnerve her. She felt like an ant under a magnifying glass, twitching away from every movement, anxiously awaiting the moment he turned the glass towards the sun and burned her with it. It was bound to happen eventually, and the waiting was making her skittish.

There was something in his eyes while he watched her, in the way they raked over every minuscule twitch of her hand and lift of her brow that made her tense up. She'd been a bundle of nerves for days because of it. She couldn't sleep; her nails were bitten to the quick, and her hair was even wilder than usual from the constant tossing and turning in her bed. He didn't try and hide the fact that he was looking at her. He seemed completely unfazed when she caught him staring and threw him the most malicious scowl she could conjure.

But as much as his observations and frustratingly close proximity were getting to her, all that paled in comparison to the way he held her eyes when she stared back at him. She often felt trapped under his gaze. The way he looked at her ... It fascinated her. He stared at her eyes as though they held the answer to some question he hadn't spoken aloud, like he was looking for something, and she had no clue what it was.

The younger version of Hermione made a face. "What would Draco want with a vanishing Cabinet?"

Out the corner of her eye, she saw Malfoy quirk a brow. She kept moving, still refusing to look at him.

"You tell me?" Harry asked.

"He looks different, don't you think?" her younger self asked Harry. "Draco? Almost ill."

Hermione's eyes slid to look at Malfoy. Her stomach dropped when she saw how he was watching her younger double.

His expression was blank but there was a glint in his eyes, a tiny, barely noticeable ember.

Hermione realised, with a sickening twist in her chest, that she would have missed it herself if she weren't watching him so closely.

Harry snorted. "Who could tell the difference?"

"Mrs Zabini," Nott said as he set her down and placed a kiss on the back of her hand. "Why, don't you look as beautiful as ever. I take it this dress is new?" Zabini narrowed his eyes at them.

"It is. It's from my trip to Paris," Astoria beamed, giving a practised twirl as she spoke. "Do you like it?"

"It's marvellous sweetheart, looks absolutely breath-taking on you," Nott cooed. Hermione's pulse quickened when his brown eyes landed on her. "Dare I say, it might even look good on the mudblood."

"Theodore!" Astoria clapped Nott around the back of the head like a mother would to a naughty child. "You know I hate that word!"

"Ouch, was there any need for that Totori?" Nott hissed, tenderly rubbing the back of his head. "That fucking hurt!"

"Granger is a guest here and I won't have you speaking to her that way!"

"I live here too, and I'll speak to her any way I want!"

"No, you will not! You will treat her with respect and if you think—"

"Right," Zabini's voice cut through the bickering pair. He strode towards his wife, grabbed her by the waist, and carefully flipped her over his shoulder.

Astoria continued to scold Nott as Zabini carried her away, again, sounding like a mother telling off a misbehaving child.

Nott silently threw several obscene gestures at her while Zabini's back was turned. "I'll be back tomorrow, Granger!" Astoria called before she and Blaise disappeared around the corner. "You and I will have that drink! I'll make sure of it!"

As Astoria's voice faded away, Nott and Hermione were left to glare at one another.

Like Zabini, Hermione had heard stories of Nott's growing brutality since the start of the war. His methods of torture and skills of extraction were practically legendary, and nightmare-inducing. He'd killed hundreds, thousands, possibly as many as Malfoy had. The working theory within the Order was that Nott killed simply because he liked it, which was why he was so talented at it.

"Nott," Hermione greeted bitterly.

"Granger," he answered, his tone cold and biting, despite the smirk that peeled its way onto his features. He took a few steps toward her, stopping when he was

Hermione tried to look away, it felt wildly intrusive to watch the couple in their tender reunion - even if one of the parties was a mass murderer- but she couldn't. She was oddly transfixed by the display. Found herself watching with a sort of blatant awe that someone so soaked in deadly violence, someone who killed so easily and without remorse could hold their wife in such a tender way. That someone whose hands were soaked in so much blood could love someone the way Blaise so clearly loved Astoria. He adored her, there was no denying that.

"Astoria, my darling, the light of my life," Zabini whispered against her mouth. Astoria broke the kiss to look at him, but he didn't put her down. "Whatever are you doing roaming around the walls unescorted? I thought I gave clear instructions that you were to be naked in our bed when I returned from Germany?"

Hermione's face grew hot.

Astoria gave a teasing gasp, then giggled and playfully smacked Zabini on the arm.  
"You pig!"

"I've been away from you for far too long," Zabini smirked. "Now, answer the question; is there a good reason you aren't blissfully naked upon my return?"

Had they seriously forgotten Hermione was there?

Astoria grinned back at him. "Well is there a good reason you've returned without a present for me? I thought I told you not to return until you found me the most lavish and wildly expensive necklace you could carry-"

"Oh, for fuck sake, would you two just get a fucking room?" a cold voice sneered. Hermione whipped her head around, and found none other than Theodore Nott standing at the other side of the hallway, his own gold mask in his hand.

Fear twisted through Hermione's body. She was stood in a hallway with two lethal, extremely dangerous Gold Masks, known assassins and torturers, without a wand.

"Theodore!" Astoria squealed. She swatted her husbands shoulder and wiggled in his arms until he reluctantly set her down. The height difference between them was ridiculous. Astoria's heels easily gave her an extra six inches, but Zabini still towered over her.

Astoria skipped towards the new Death Eater and threw her arms around his neck in the same manner she had her husband, and, just like her husband had. Nott picked her up and swung her around in the air. Hermione got the impression this was the usual greeting the Death Eaters met her with.

"Awwwww Granger," Malfoy said, that spiteful snirk finally reappearing as the memory faded around them. "I didn't know you cared so much about me."

"That was different."

"How so?"

"That was when I thought you had a soul that might be worth saving."

As soon as they landed back in her room, Hermione's spine violently curled in on itself and she dropped onto her hands and knees. Her shoulder's lurched sharply as that grotesquely familiar taste of blood burned its way up her throat.

Malfoy stepped back as the first wave of crimson splashed against the carpet, and she wished more than anything that he'd just *fuck off* and leave her to vomit a pint of blood in peace.

Her lungs burned with the need for oxygen, scarlet tears streaked from her eyes as wave after wave of blood forced its way up her throat. She felt a warm trickle creep out of her ears, sliding down her jaw to join the rest of the mess.

Minutes ticked by, but Malfoy stayed, watching as she wheezed and choked pathetically on the floor.

"Why..." Hermione gagged again as another thick clump choked her on its way out of her mouth. "... Are you still... here?"

Malfoy didn't say a word, but she heard the floor creak as he shifted his weight, presumably to kneel in front of her like he'd started to do after their sessions. One of his cold hands cupped her chin, again, like he'd started to do when her coughing fits began to subside, and she was too weak to fight him as he gently tilted her head back so he could look at her.

Hermione tensed up when she met his eyes. He carefully moved her face to the side to check the blood coming out of her ears, and when he tilted her head again and stared into her eyes, her skin pebbled. She wasn't sure why, probably the blood loss.

What was he looking for? Whatever it was, he clearly wasn't having much luck finding it. He was spending longer and longer examining her after each session, spending a few extra seconds each time -

A strange thump formed in her chest when his cold eyes flickered towards her mouth, and her breath hitched when he ran this thumb lightly across her bottom lip.

It was such a simple movement, a gentle pressure that was obviously meant to wipe some of the blood still collected on her mouth, but it froze her in place.

What the fuck was wrong with her? Why wasn't she cringing away from him? She watched his eyes flicker over her lips again, and she swore she could see something burning again. Something small, a tiny flicker in his grey irises. Something *alive*.

But why wasn't she trying to hit him? She should be swatting his hand away with enough force to break it.

Malfoy took a deep breath through his nose, his fingers curling tighter against her jaw.

She should be screaming at him for touching her this way.

He drew another gentle swipe across her bottom lip, almost like he couldn't stop himself, and Hermione suppressed a shudder.

The second brush of her lips seemed to thaw the ice in her veins, and she found the strength to lean out of his touch. She shuffled backwards until her shoulders rested against the foot of her bed.

"I told you not to touch me," she sneered weakly, wrapping her trembling fingers around one of the posters and using it to drag herself to her feet. "Do that again, and I will snap your thumb right off."

Malfoy watched her for a few more seconds. He clenched and unclenched his jaw several times, then banished the mess of blood, whirled around and left, slamming the door a little harder than necessary on his way out.

And he did indeed run his thumb across her lip the next day after she'd finished coughing up blood, and Hermione made true on her promise to try and snap it off. It was just a shame that she was too weak to make good on her threat.

## **28th January**

Hermione's arm ached as she strained to reach the top corner of the wall. She stood on the wooden desk, on the very tips of her toes so she could dab dark blue paint in the corner to finish this section of her mural.

In just under a month, she'd almost covered half of the first wall, and she had no intention of stopping anytime soon. The mural started - much to Malfoy's chagrin and constant artistic critique - as a lake with half trees scattered around it, but as the portrait expanded, so did the vast landscape she'd created. She'd extended the lake

Hermione opened her mouth to speak but closed it again, not trusting herself to respond. When Astoria noticed her unease, she started babbling words tumbled out of her mouth almost too quick for Hermione to understand. She swore the blonde didn't pause to take a breath.

"I know you don't want to be here, but I just think it would be a shame if we don't get to know each other. I understand that this is the last place you want to be, really, I do, but I want to make your confinement here as enjoyable for you as possible. The elves tell me you've been wandering the grounds every day? Well, there's a spot towards the left side of the estate that has a very nice veranda, it's actually attached to mine and Blaise's bedroom, and it's a lovely spot for a drink. I could ask the elves to set up a firepit? And of course, I would cast warming charms and you're welcome to any coat or robe in my wardrobe. We could get a bottle of wine and..."

"Astoria, darling," a low, husky voice called from the edge of the hallway, causing both women to twist towards the source.

Blaise Zabini. Hermione hadn't seen his face since the battle of Hogwarts, although she expected that their paths must have crossed on the battlefield over the years.

Zabini was known to be incredibly dangerous. The Order had guessed years ago that he must have been one of the Gold Masks.

He strode towards the women confidently, wand in a holster on his arm and his gold skull mask hanging loosely between his fingers, displaying it proudly to Hermione, warning her. He set the mask down on a shelf as he made his approach. He gave Hermione a glare, his lips curling up in disgust while his eyes raked her over from head to toe, making sure she knew the level of revulsion he felt for her.

The loathing in his expression vanished, however, when he looked at his wife. The abhorrence in his eyes, and the deadly way he held his shoulders softened, and even that disgusted curl of his lip faded into a wolfish smile. With a softness Hermione wouldn't have thought possible from a Death Eater, from a deadly *Gold Mask*, Blaise wrapped his arms around his wife's slender waist and picked her up.

Astoria squealed as he twirled her around in a circle. Her legs curled upwards at the knee as she wound her arms around his neck and kissed him deeply, longingly. The sort of kiss that spoke of nothing but pure devotion and adoration. The sort of passionate kiss that wives gave their husbands before they went off to war.

It was an ancient Viking torture method that involved restraining the victim while the skin was torn from their back, slowly, painfully. From the Orders intelligence, Voldemort had insisted that all his Death Eaters were present for the spectacle.

Hermione couldn't imagine what Astoria must have thought. Or bear to even *think* about how sickening it must have felt to watch her sister's ribs be torn from her spine one by one. She could only hope that Daphne had already died from shock before her lungs were pulled through the gap to create her 'wings'.

Astoria didn't deserve to witness her only sister go through that kind of torture. No one did. She'd known this woman for barely five minutes, and she could already see that Astoria was soft and gentle, fragile. Completely breakable and not equipped for the ways of war. She'd probably never even set foot on a battlefield.

Astoria looked up. Her eyes were swimming as she sniffed. "Thank you."

"We heard she refused to attack a muggle hospital?"

"A children's hospital," Astoria clarified. "Her... loyalty to the Dark Lord only stretched so far." She paused to cough suddenly into her handkerchief, and Hermione used the distraction to look at her left forearm. The skin was clean, untainted by the malevolent image of a skull and snake. Astoria hadn't taken the Dark Mark. That was... unexpected.

Hermione was sure that Daphne had taken the mark only a few months after the battle of Hogwarts. She'd guessed that her father had insisted his oldest daughter join the ranks as quickly as possible, that it was the greatest honour to do so. From an outsider's perspective, it seemed that he would have been the type of father to encourage both his daughters to bear that honour.

"I'm sorry," Astoria's voice was muffled into the fabric. "I've been a little under the weather lately, the snow doesn't help..."

"Did you need something?" Hermione snapped. "I expect Malfoy will be here soon for our third session of the day."

"Yes, yes, of course, I do apologise for keeping you." Astoria smiled sweetly. "I'm sure you're very busy concocting escape plans and ways to kill Draco, so I'll just get right to it."

Hermione pursed her lips. Was... was Astoria trying to crack a joke?

"I was wondering, seeing as I'm back now and will be spending much more time around the house, if you would like to join me later for a glass of wine?"

all the way down to the skirting boards, and covered the once cream walls with fishes and deep-sea creatures she'd read about as a child. She'd made her underwater creations as colourful as possible, painting the fishes and merfolk in vibrant shades of orange and yellow to add some much-needed variety.

Of course Malfoy hated it, so naturally, Hermione adored it.

If she carried on at this pace, she guessed she would be able to cover every wall in her cage by September. Then what was she going to do? Start over? Or perhaps she could somehow start on the ceiling? Maybe she could paint constellations and shooting stars there?

She wiped the perspiration from her forehead and stood back to admire her work. The top section of her mural had stretched into a vast skyline, covered with mountaintops, clouds and treelines. The colours weren't as eye-catching as the fishes were, but Hermione was quite fond of the blends of colour.

She felt they complimented each other well. She'd been smiling the whole time she'd painted them, imagining how blissfully wonderful it might feel to scratch a broom from Malfoy's cupboard and fly so high she could run her fingers through the fresh nimbus clouds.

She'd thoroughly enjoyed working on this section, thought it was some of her best work, so why did she feel like something was missing from the vast stretch of sky? She couldn't add more clouds, the mural wasn't lacking in fluffy strokes of white and grey. No, it was lacking something else; she just couldn't put her finger on exactly what it was...

With a shake of her head, she dismounted the desk and pulled the silk scarf from her hair, running her fingers through her tangle of curls while she contemplated what was escaping her masterpiece. She ran one of the taps in her bathroom, and once the sink was filled with cold water, she splashed her face and looked at her reflection in the mirror.

She was covered in flecks of blue and white paint, it was scattered across her cheeks and neck, and there was a large smudge across her nose. She splashed more icy water on her face, but it did nothing to rid her skin of the unnatural colour. That was the thing about magically charmed paint; although the colours were gorgeously vibrant and beautiful to work with, they were a nightmare to get off your skin.

It took forty-five minutes of soaking and vigorous scrubbing in the bath to remove it all, and by the time she was finished, Hermione was sore and *exhausted*. Absolutely bone numbingly exhausted.

She was losing far too much blood after her Legilimency sessions with Malfoy, and even after taking both a Blood Replenishing Potion *and* a Pepper Up potion, she was still weak for the rest of the day.

She found that most simple activities were starting to take their toll on her body, even towel drying her hair after her evening bath left her breathless.

She was starting to grow tired of her fragility. It was one of the reasons she forced herself to paint each evening no matter how tired she was. Malfoy had taken everything from her; her freedom, her wand. She wasn't going to let him take her artwork too.

She wondered if perhaps she should consider asking the elves to increase the dosage of the potions? Or maybe there was a reason Malfoy had her restricted to one of each every day? Maybe it was another tactic to keep her weak and vulnerable? There was only one way to find out.

Hermione changed into a pair of leggings and a black T-shirt. She threw a knee-length cardigan around her body and sluggishly left her room. The walk to the kitchens took her far longer than it should have, but the manor was eerily quiet at this time of night, so at least she got time to mull over possible escape plans while she walked.

"Good evening, Miss," Quinzel chirped as Hermione swung the doors to the kitchen open. "Is there something Quinzel can help Miss with?"

"Yes, please," she answered quietly, pulling the cream cardigan tighter around herself and hugging its warmth. "Another Pepperup potion would be lovely, thank you."

The elf nodded and levitated a crystal glass from the cupboard. "Of course, it is no trouble at all Miss."

Well, that theory was extinguished as quickly as it'd burned to life.

As the elf hummed and busied herself with preparing the drink, Hermione used the distraction to study her. Quinzel was a relatively small house-elf and very quiet. She was polite and certainly friendly, but she never spoke unless she needed to. In the whole time Hermione had been here, she'd only had a handful of exchanges with Quinzel, and they all contained fewer than fifty words between them.

Romy, on the other hand, seemed to never be able to stop himself from talking. He reminded Hermione a lot of Harry. He seemed to hate silences of any kind, and often rambled on about anything and everything as a means to fill any uncomfortable

What an odd creature the blonde before her was. She was the wife of a Death Eater, a known killer and likely to be a highly standing general in Voldemort's army, and here she was, genuinely concerned about the welfare of her husband's mortal enemy.

Hermione could feel the gentle warmth of her kindness. There was nothing fake or disingenuous about it. She was genuinely pleased that Hermione was here, and even anxious enough about her well-being that she thought to get her a small gift for Christmas.

As Astoria spoke, another thought popped into Hermione's head. "The clothes? Was that you, too?"

Astoria nodded again. "I'm sorry if they weren't to your taste. As I said, I didn't know you would be joining us, so I didn't have time to get anything else." She was very expressive with her hands while she spoke, and the large diamond on her wedding ring caught the light with every wave and dip of her hand. "I ordered what I thought you might like, but if they don't fit, I would be happy to charm them to alter the sizing. I remembered that you and Daph were the same size when we were at school, so I thought ..." Her eyes drifted to the floor and her voice trailed off. She pulled her bottom lip between her teeth, hard, so hard Hermione was surprised she didn't break the skin. She looked terribly uncomfortable all of a sudden. Sad. Like she was dying to say more but dare not.

"I was sorry to hear about your sister," Hermione said honestly, fighting the urge to reach out and comfort the witch in front of her. Compassion or not, she was still the enemy. She didn't deserve to be embraced or comforted.

But maybe a small mercy was okay?

"We heard that Voldemort killed her for disobeying a direct order. I was very sorry to hear about her passing."

That was the understatement of the century. Voldemort didn't just kill Daphne, he bludgeoned her.

His need to make an example of her in front of the other Death Eaters had led him to incite the most grotesque, vile punishment he could think of. Her apparent 'soft spot' for Muggles had inspired him to punish her *'in the most muggle way possible'*; the Blood Eagle. Even the name made Hermione's stomach lurch.

each time. "You cornered Dumbledore in the Astronomy Tower! You disarmed him! Snape wouldn't have killed him if you didn't set it up perfectly!"

Malfoy clenched his jaw, nostrils flaring indignantly.

"You are the reason Snape cast the curse! You are the reason Dumbledore is dead! And you are the reason thousands of people have lost their lives!"

Her doubles screams rose in pitch but the Malfoy in front of her stayed silent, just as speechless as he had been when she'd cried for his help the first time this memory had played out.

Hermione raised her hands to push him again, intending to send him careening into the wall behind him, but she misjudged his height.

Her hands unexpectedly landed on his neck, and when her palms touched his exposed skin, she felt a crack. A strange tingling sensation swept up her arm, her blood hummed like she'd received an electric shock, and then the drawing-room and her screams were gone.

The room quickly turned in on itself. The furniture bent and twisted out of shape, there was a bright flash of light, and then floor vanished beneath her.

Hermione landed in the middle of a stone path with a painful thud. The fall knocked the breath out of her lungs, and an all too familiar dizzying pressure formed around her skull. God, she hated Legillimency.

She got to her feet, and pressed the heel of her hand against her temple to try and relieve the ache there.

She was in the middle of a street, in what looked like a city. There were high buildings on either side of the road, all with floor-length windows on each level that stretched high into the sky, and pieces of shattered glass covered the floor, littering the pavement with a layer of frozen shards.

It was dark out. She guessed the early hours in the morning due to the biting cold and the way her breath fogged with each exhale, but there were no stars out. No moon to stare at to try and judge the time.

At first glance, she didn't recognise the city.

Malfoy was nowhere to be seen. She waited one minute. Then two. The longer he failed to materialise, the more uneasy Hermione became.

Something was off.

She started to walk down the cobbled streets, but she didn't recognise any of the buildings she passed. She followed the path down a row of shops with broken windows and the farther she walked, the more confident she became that she hadn't been here before.

Hermione stopped when she came to a sign with burnt edges, the words Nottingham Square' and an arrow pointing to the left etched into the metal. It confirmed what her instincts had been screaming since she'd materialised here. She'd never been to Nottingham.

And she wasn't in her memories. She was in Malfoy's.

How was that possible?

She didn't have magic, she hadn't so much as felt the faint thump of it in her veins in months. She'd tried everything from simple unlocking charms to warming jinxes but nothing had worked - Malfoy had made sure of it. The anti-magic potion he drugged her with daily snuffed it out of her. So how the fuck was she here?

Could she have developed a tolerance for the potion over time? Had her body naturally got used to the dosage, and weakened its desired effects? Hermione had never read of anything like that happening before, but then again, she doubted there had been much research on the topic. It could be possible... Couldn't it?

A noise to the far-right startled her. Hermione whirled around, expecting to find Malfoy standing there with murder in his eyes -

But she was still alone, and she intended to make full use of that wonderful advantage.

Hermione hurried down the street. She wasn't sure how long she had left before Malfoy found her, and she refused to leave here emptyhanded. This was the opportunity she'd been praying for; a chance to learn something about him; a hidden advantage or a weak spot she could exploit.

A few minutes into her search, something caught her eye at the far edge of the street. One hundred, maybe two hundred feet away. It was only small, a single flame from a lonely lantern, but she followed it.

The light led her to a market square, and it wasn't until Hermione rounded another corner that she realised the lantern wasn't as lonely as she originally thought. There were a hundred or so tiny flames all clustered together, and they weren't really lanterns at all. They were torches held by cloaked figures.

Hermione's initial reaction was to draw her wand, years of sending hexes at cloaked figures had bled that instinct into her. Instead, she made herself push forward to stand at the back of the mob, because this was one of Malfoy's memories, and maybe there was a way she could use this against him.

The cloaked figures were gathered around a tall, grand building with stone pillars and a huge clock at the top. It had a triangle-shaped roof with dozens of figures carved into the stone, and two lion sculptures - turned to face one another- guarded the steps to the council house.

Every member of the crowd concealed their faces behind black or gold metal masks.

Voldemort stood in front of the large double doors at the top of the steps, and all the whispers silenced when he raised his hands - and the elder wand - in the air.

"Welcome, my friends," Voldemort cooed. "Thank you for joining me on this fine evening. I'm sure you're all very eager to learn why I called you all here."

Hermione wove through the ghost-like figures in the crowd, ignoring the violent hammering of her heart. "They're not real," she chanted. "They're not really here. They're not real."

She could breathe a little easier when she broke free of the sea of Death Eaters and came out at the front of the gathering. She hadn't been able to see the four figures at the bottom of the steps when she was on the other side.

They were huddled together in a tight line, and were only attendee's without masks.

"What exactly did you hope to gain here Granger?" Malfoy growled through clenched teeth. "Was this some exercise in control to show you had some power over me? Well, you don't. And you're..."

Hermione stepped closer, turning her back on the gruesome scene to stare up at the Death Eater. "I thought you needed to be reminded of the consequences of your actions."

Malfoy pinched his eyes closed. She could faintly hear the sound of him grinding his teeth together but her doppelgängers screams were too loud to be certain.

"All this is your fault," she continued, unsympathetic to his discomfort. "You set everything in motion when you killed Dumbledore."

Malfoy's eyes snapped back open. "Oh for Salazar's sake, this again? I didn't kill the old bastard! Snape was the one who cast the killing curse..."

"Although we are winning this war," Voldemort continued, "although Potter's forces are dwindling and we find ourselves growing stronger with each new rise of the sun, I must admit, I find myself... disappointed."

Nott stood on Astoria's left and somehow, the look on his face concerned Hermione more than Astoria's ever could. His expression was vacant and detached,

The Demon Mask beside her was deadly silent. He was working to keep his eyes vacant and empty, but Hermione noticed them flickering. She'd shaken his control when she'd trapped him here, and now he was struggling to build his walls back around himself.

"I was trying to ask for your help." Hermione forced the words past the lump in her throat, if only to drown out her younger versions walls. "I was screaming for you to save me, to help me, to just do something."

There was a shuffling sound. Hermione knew from memory that Bellatrix had pulled herself to her feet. The Cruciatus curses would start any second...

"But I couldn't get the words out," Hermione continued quietly. Her hands balled into fists, and her nails cut into her palm as Bellatrix threw the first unforgivable curse into her shivering body. "And you just put your head in your hands and ... turned away."

Another red curse coloured the hallway. Another violent scream echoed off the walls.

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"No, you killed him! You may not have fired the bullet, but the gun was in your hand..."

"Snape killed him..."

"just because you lowered your wand, doesn't erase the fact that it's your fault he's dead! You let the Death Eaters into the castle!" Hermione screamed, accentuating every 'you' she spat by shoving his chest, so hard he fell back a step

Something in Malfoy had changed. Something glowed behind his eyes. Not rage, something stronger, more primal. It wasn't until he dragged her face to his, their noses almost touching, that Hermione recognised what it was.

Fear. Blind, blood-curdling fear.

The thought of reliving this particular night made her want to be sick , but if it hurt Malfoy- even if it inflicted the tiniest bit of pain - then it was worth it.

"BRING IT BACK!"

Hermione smacked his hands away, forcing him to release her while the memory erupted into chaos behind them. "No! What happened here was your fault! You could have stopped this, so you're going to stand here watch it!"

"Cissa, put the boys in the cellar!" Bellatrix's high pitched voice rang through the air. Real or not, it still raised the hairs on the back of Hermione's arms. "I want to have a little conversation with this one. Girl to girl."

At the mention of her name, Malfoy's head snapped up to his mother, like he couldn't stop himself. His eyes were glued on her as she backed Harry and Ron towards the dungeons. He tugged at the collar of his robes, loosened them with trembling fingers.

"This is meant to be in my vault in Gringotts," Bellatrix hissed. "How did you get it?"

Hermione heard her younger self scream. She heard a bang, and a crunch that told her Bellatrix had knocked her to the floor, but she didn't turn to see. Instead, she watched Malfoy.

"What did you and your friends take from my vault?"

"I didn't take anything!" Hermione squealed. Malfoy winced beside her. "Please, please, I didn't take anything!"

"I don't believe you!"

The next few minutes felt like they went on for hours. Her younger version screamed and thrashed and cried on the floor as Bellatrix hacked at her arm with a blade. Hermione swore her scar burned to life, that she felt each tear and rip of the dagger as Bellatrix drove it into her skin again and again and again.

"I was crying out for you," Hermione found herself admitting. She wasn't sure why.

as though his soul had left his body and only a sack of bones and flesh remained. There was no emotion on his face, a stark contrast to the broken girl next to him.

"I don't ask for much from you, do I?" Voldemort asked, earning a chorus of 'No, my Lord' from his loyal followers. "I treat you well, do I not? I reward you handsomely when you please me? I give you strength, power, and protection from those who would dare to harm you?"

"Yes, my Lord."

To Hermione's surprise, Zabini was the furthest away from Astoria. He looked as though he may vomit at any moment. His skin was a little green, and he had a hand pressed firmly to his stomach as if he was trying to stop himself from keeling over.

"That is what I was afraid of," Voldemort sighed, his claw-like fingers tapping the edge of his wand. "This is why it pains me so when one of you cannot follow a few simple orders." He gestured to his left, and two Gold Masks appeared from a hidden doorway, dragging a woman with them.

As soon as Hermione saw Daphne Greengrass, she felt sick.

Her Death Eater uniform was torn all over to show the dozens of cuts and burns that decorated her skin. Her face and neck were covered in bruises, her top lip was split open, and there was a thick clump of blood matted in her dark blonde hair.

She was bound with thick metal chains that wrapped around her body and bound her wrists together, making escape impossible. They dragged behind her as she walked, making a noise that sounded like nails on a chalkboard.

Hermione should not be here. She should most definitely not fucking be here.

As two Gold Masks began to lead Daphne up the steps, Astoria lurched forward and started to scream.

Malfoy moved quickly. He grabbed Astoria before the sob broke free, probably anticipated it, and wrapped his arms around her. He crushed her back against his chest, muffling her cries with his hand while the other wove around her ribs to hold her in place.

Daphne whirled and caught his eye. A pleading expression snapped onto her abused face before the Gold Masks sharply turned her around and forced her up the steps.

Astoria squirmed in Malfoy's arms, trying to break free while black tears slipped down her face to gather on the back of his hand.

Zabini and Nott remained motionless. Lifeless, as they watched Daphne walk up the steps to stand beside Voldemort and face the crowd.

"This girl," Voldemort hissed, curling his fingers toward Daphne, "has betrayed us. She has grown soft for the Muggles. She cares for their lives and their mutts more than she does her own kind."

The crowd booed and hissed, but Daphne remained strong.

She held her chin high, her shoulders square and fire burning in her fierce brown eyes. She didn't look scared. She didn't tremble or show an inch of weakness.

Nott looked as though he were reaching into his pocket to grab something, but Daphne noticed. She shook her head gently in his direction and pursed her lips. They held each other's eyes for a long time. Everyone else seemed oblivious, too busy watching Astoria writhe or too enthralled in Voldemort's degrading speech to be aware.

Life seemed to burn back into Nott when he stared at Daphne. Hermione swore she saw his jaw tremble slightly, swore she saw tears gathering in his eyes.

With another shake of Daphne's head, Nott lowered his arm and slumped. He swallowed, and then the cold emptiness returned to his eyes.

Daphne looked away.

While Voldemort's speech went on, Hermione was transfixed with Malfoy and Astoria. He lowered his hand from her mouth and wrapped it around her shoulder, hugging her protectively to his chest, then whispered something into her ear.

Hermione quickly moved to stand beside them.

"Breathe, Tonks," the younger version of Malfoy said, his voice shaking almost as much as Astoria was. "You need to breathe."

"I... I c-can't" she sobbed quietly. Tears dripped from her chin. "... I. I can't... he's going to... I can't watch..."

"You need to. You can't look away while he does this," Malfoy hushed, securing his arms tighter around her. "If the Dark Lord thinks you sympathise with your sister, he'll kill you right alongside her."

Astoria whimpered as Daphne was made to kneel before the crowd.

wasn't for Narcissa, Harry would have been dead a long time ago, and Voldemort would have won this war.

The Order owed Narcissa an unpayable debt, which was why Hermione couldn't bear to think about how painful Voldemort must have made her death, or how long he must have tortured her for her unforgivable betrayal.

And why she knew this memory would kill Malfoy to relieve.

Malfoy's breath hitched when his mother grabbed his doublet arm and guided him away in the same manner she had her husband. When she took his younger versions face between her hands, Malfoy reached his limit. "I'm not watching this."

He sharply turned and marched back towards the door, his Death Eater robes swaying around him as he made his escape -

But Hermione had no intention of letting him get away.  
If this memory made him uncomfortable, then she'd make him watch every second of it. Make him relive every painful tick of the clock and endure every scream, just like she had.

She drew a deep breath, pinched her eyes closed, and as Malfoy's footsteps got quieter, Hermione focused. She didn't have magic, but this was still her mind.

She pictured the door; its height, the size of the frame and the hallway on the other side. And then she imagined it disappearing, and evaporating into nothing.

There was a soft swooshing sound behind her, then Malfoy skidded to a stop. "No! What the fuck did you do?"

Relief flooded through Hermione, warming her chest and thawing some of the dread in her veins. He'd fallen for it. Blindly charged headfirst into the slaughter that she'd prepared.

"Bring the door back Granger!" Malfoy seethed, his tone low and venomous. "Now!"

"No."

"Bring. The. Door. Back! Now!"

"No!"

Malfoy whirled and stormed towards her. His grey-blue eyes were burning murderously just like they had when his dragon was injured. His fingers shook when he grabbed the collar of her T-shirt.

It only lasted a second before he slammed his Occlumency walls back up, but that was enough. He'd felt something, and Hermione knew that she was right. This memory would hurt him - she just needed to keep him here.

"Well?" Bellatrix asked. Her claws fisted in Harry's hair as she dragged his face upwards. "Is it him?"

The younger version of Malfoy swallowed nervously. He shuffled his weight between his feet, his reluctance clear in the way his eyes flickered from the floor, to Harry, and back again. "I... I can't be sure."

"Draco," Lucius' voice was a hiss. He stood behind his son, wrapped a hand around the back of Draco's neck, and squeezed. The tumbler in his other hand shook, his rings clinking against the glass with his trembling fingers.

There was something oddly satisfying about seeing the once proud and wildly respected Lucius Malfoy reduced to this; a quivering, half-crazed shell of the man he used to be.

"Look closely son," he whispered in that same persistent, nagging voice. "If we are the ones to hand Potter over to the Dark Lord, everything will be forgiven. All ... will be as it was. Do you understand?"

Hovering over Draco like that, he reminded Hermione an awfull lot of a demon. She supposed in some ways, Lucius was just that. The devil on his only sons shoulder, filling his head with poisonous whispers about riches and power to seduce him toward the darkness.

"Now we won't be forgetting who actually caught him, I hope, Mr Malfoy?" one of the snatchers asked.

Lucius winced. "You dare talk to me like that in my own house?!"

Narcissa glided forward and wrapped her fingers around Lucius's arms. "Lucius, darling," she whispered gently. She pried him away from her son, eyeing Draco with concern as she guided Lucius towards the fireplace. "That's enough."

If Lucius was the devil on Draco's shoulder, then Narcissa was the angel. Hermione had always thought Narcissa was compassionate - and in a way, merciful. Everything she ever did was to protect her family. Hermione could understand that. There wasn't anything she wouldn't do to keep her own safe.

Hermione always felt some small spark of sympathy for Narcissa Malfoy. In the end, she'd spared Harry's life and lied to Voldemort in the forbidden forest. If it

"This girl has betrayed us, in the worst possible way," Voldemort seethed. "If she loves her muggles so much, then she will die like one."

He conjured a set of ropes around Daphne's wrists, and Astoria's knees buckled as they were tied to opposite podiums, forcing Daphne to spread her arms, leaving her wide open for the slaughter.

Malfoy's arm's tightened again, concealing Astoria's shaking as best he could. "You need to calm down."

Astoria shook her head furiously. Tears slipped down her face faster. "I can't... this is... I can't watch this." When another sob broke through her lips, Malfoy's hand flew to her mouth again.

A few Death Eaters turned to look at her. Malfoy glared at them until they turned away.

Hermione hadn't seen this much emotion in Malfoy since his dragon had been injured. His eyes were frantic, his fingers trembled against Astoria's mouth, and his voice was more emotional and panic-stricken than Hermione had ever heard it. He looked desperate. Hopeless.

"Tori please, please calm down." His eyes kept flickering from stoic and cold, to burning and distressed. It was as though he was desperately trying to build his Occlumency walls but couldn't. As though he were trying to fly them up and protect himself, only for them to crumble instantly. "He'll kill you if he thinks you're a sympathiser. Daphne doesn't want you to die."

The way Malfoy's usually strong voice broke near the end, the pain laced in the last word, made Hermione's chest tighten.

"Please calm down Astoria," he whispered again. "I can't lose you, too."

Astoria convulsed when Voldemort conjured a blade. The silver caught the light of the torches before he used it to slice the back of Daphne's uniform open. The two Gold Masks pushed the pieces of shredded fabric down to reveal her back, shoulders, and ribs. There was no doubt, if Malfoy wasn't holding Astoria up, she would have crumbled on the floor.

"I promised Daphne that I would keep you safe," he said quietly, desperately. "I'm going to keep you safe. I don't care what I have to do, I will keep us all safe. Do you understand?"

Astoria nodded but before Malfoy could continue, she reached out to her left.

Nott's stoic expression broke when she grabbed his hand. He sharply turned his head to stare at Astoria, and just for a second, his eyes were broken. He squeezed her hand tightly in his own, took a deep breath, and then turned back to watch the execution.

Hermione couldn't watch anymore. She just.. couldn't. As one of the Gold Masks stood behind Daphne, an axe high in the air, she turned and pushed her way back through the cloaked figures.

A door had appeared on the other side of the mob, and Hermione was all too quick to lurch forward and grab the handle. She didn't care where it led her. Didn't care if it took her right back to Malfoy's drawing room and she had to watch herself being tortured by his aunt again and again and again. Anything would be better than this.

She swung the door open and stepped inside, only to come face to face with a pair of deadly, ghost-like eyes.

Hermione's heart lurched in her throat. She was distracted by the fear that twisted through her she didn't realise where this door had taken her for a moment. When she saw the familiar stone pillars - now tainted with violent flecks of red - she knew where she was. Back in Malfoy Manor.

Voldemort's red eyes slithered to his side. He whispered and chuckled something to his loyal serpent on the floor, bent down so she could wrap herself around his arm, then Apparated.

Hermione nearly vomited when she saw the drawing room. She'd seen many battlefields over the years, she was no stranger to the smell of rotting flesh and stagnant decay, but this memory - fuck, Malfoy's memory - was one of the most gruesome things she'd ever come across.

The smell hit her first. It battered into her senses like a sledgehammer. The foul, stale odour of flesh at the early stages of decay wasn't something you could confuse with anything else. The room reeked of blood, the dark floor was sticky with it. Her boots clung to the floor with every tentative step she took inside.

'The smell, however, was nothing compared to what she saw.'

Parts of Lucius Malfoy's body were scattered around the drawing-room, all matted with crimson and flesh torn jaggedly at the edges. One arm lay near the window, the other near the entrance. His torso was sprawled across the dining table,

She'd been planning this for days, carefully filing through her memories and reorganising the doors in her hotel to make sure he saw this memory next.

If this was going to work, he needed to believe she didn't want him to see this memory - just like all the others. She needed him to be cocky enough to let his guard down, and not realise what room he'd entered until after she trapped him there.

She'd laid the trap perfectly, she just had to hope - get on her knees and fucking pray - that he took the bait.

Hermione gave one last irritated huff to sell her performance, then barged her way past him and through the doorway, jabbing her elbow into his ribs as she went.

"Good girl," he chuckled from behind.

Despite the shiver that ran up Hermione's spine when she entered the room, she kept her expression blank, masking the terror she felt threading itself through her bones.

He needed to see this. If any of her memories could hurt Malfoy, this was the one. This one could crack him open and make him bleed the way she wanted. She just needed to keep him here long enough for it to hurt.

Hermione kept walking until they were in the middle of the dimly lit room - at least twenty-five feet from the door that had brought her here. Malfoy followed closely behind, almost side by side.

As the room materialised around them, Hermione tapped her foot nervously against the dark wooden floor.

The drawing-room had an ostentatious looking chandelier hanging overhead that probably cost more than her parent's house, high ceilings with smooth stone pillars, a large fireplace made of the same satiny mineral, and the few pieces of furniture that were scattered in the room were just as dark and miserable as the flooring.

Hermione knew the room well, but the sight of it made her stomach lurch so much she thought she was going to be sick. She took a deep breath to steady herself.

Nine ghostlike figures appeared in front of her; two snatchers, Ron, Harry, a younger version of Hermione, three figures with icy blonde hair - and one with thick, wild curls and murder in her eyes.

Malfoy paled when he realised where they were. He froze when he saw his mother, and Hermione saw that same little emotion flash behind his eyes; a single spark of lightning against the otherwise grey sky.

his legs were splintered and mangled into the metal chandelier, and his decapitated head lay next to the fireplace.

He looked as though he'd been like that for days. His skin had taken on that unmistakable blue-grey tint of a corpse and the flesh was bloated, ready for the next stage of decomposition. The most unsettling part of his appearance was the expression on his face. Although his eyes were glassy and vacant, his face was twisted into a perpetual scream, frozen, never to move again.

And then there was Malfoy himself. Fuck - Hermione had vowed to never feel an ounce of sympathy for him. But how could she not pity him? How could she stop her heart from twisting painfully when she saw him crumpled and hunched on the floor, with his mother's broken body in his arms?

Narcissa's chest heaved with every shallow breath she took. She looked as though she were just clinging onto her last threads of life. Every inch of her body was covered in blood - whether it was hers, or her husband's, Hermione wasn't sure. Although she remained largely intact, there were small pieces of her missing: a couple of fingers, a large chunk of flesh from her shoulder, her left leg.

Hermione crouched down beside Malfoy to get a better look at the damage. He looked so young. Sixteen, maybe seventeen. His features were still sharp and angled like they were now, but the youthful roundness that Hermione remembered was there.

She thought that this memory couldn't have been more than a few months after the battle of Hogwarts, until she saw his suit. It was the same black, tailored suit he'd worn in the Room of Requirement that day. This wasn't months after the battle, it was days.

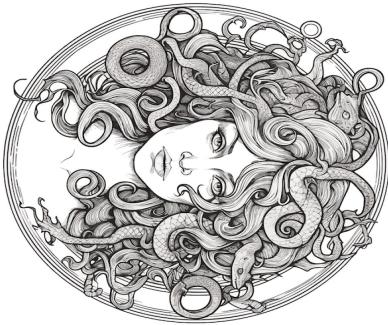
Malfoy's entire body trembled as he held his mother in his arms. Tears streamed down his face, and his breath shook with each low sob.

"It's alright," Narcissa hushed. She reached up with bony fingers to cup Malfoy's face and wiped some of the tears from his cheek, smiling weakly at her son while he quietly sobbed above her. "It's alright, sweetheart. It's m-my ... time."

He had the audacity to snort. "I was a gentleman long before I became a Death Eater, Granger." When she didn't move, his smirk twisted into a vicious scowl. "You know I could just drag you through it, don't you?"

Hermione folded her arms across her chest, her nostrils flaring with practiced revulsion.

## SHARDS OF GLASS



**2nd February**

Malfoy extended his arm toward the open doorway. "Ladies first," he said smugly. Hermione's brows shot into her hairline. "Since when are you a fucking gentleman?"

He had the audacity to snort. "I was a gentleman long before I became a Death Eater, Granger." When she didn't move, his smirk twisted into a vicious scowl. "You know I could just drag you through it, don't you?"

Hermione folded her arms across her chest, her nostrils flaring with practiced revulsion.

"Shhhhhh," Narcissa took hold of his face and forced him to look at her. "It's too ... late." Her breath grew laboured as she choked each word out, as if it was becoming painful for her to even speak.

Malfoy choked on another sob. "T-this is all my fault... I-I'm sorry... I-I..."

"No. This... is not... your fault... D-don't you ever... think that..."

Narcissa was quiet for several moments. She stared up at Malfoy and caressed his face, as though she were soaking up every last moment with him before she closed her eyes for the final time.

"Draco, you need to listen... to me v-very carefully... Do you understand?"

Malfoy sniffed, but nodded his head.

"If you're... going to survive Voldemort's reign... you need to be strong... and never let him know... what you're thinking." Narcissa paused when a dry cough tore its way up her throat, colouring her pale lips and chin red. Malfoy wiped it away with shaky fingers.

"Do you... remember what I taught you ... about Occlumency?"

He nodded feebly in response.

Narcissa's hand left Draco's face, and Hermione watched as she weakly rested it over her son's heart. "We'll... do it together.. alright?"

Again, Malfoy nodded, just one sharp jerk of his chin.

"Just listen ... to my voice," Narcissa whispered, weak, her end growing closer. "Close your eyes."

Malfoy pinched his eyes closed. It only made him look more vulnerable. More broken.

"There's nothing else here ... nothing is going on around us ... It's just me .. and you."

A sob started to burn Hermione's throat, dying to break free. She'd never seen Malfoy like this. So vulnerable. So ... scared.

"Now, take a ... deep b-breath."

They both inhaled deeply, together.

"I want you to ... release it s-slowly, can you d-do that?"

He'd killed and tortured thousands of innocent people and slaughtered his cousin without batting an eye. He was bloodthirsty and cruel. He didn't deserve her pity or her sympathy, what he deserved was to suffer. Hermione was determined to be the one to hurt him. If she couldn't bruise his body without hurting hers, then she would redirect her aim, and target his mind.

Or his heart, now she knew he might actually possess one in that cold chest of his.

It was Nott who broke the silence. "So where were you tonight?"

Malfoy released the breath he'd been holding, allowing smoke to pour from his mouth like fire from a dragon. "A meeting with the Dark Lord."

Nott raised a brow. "And why wasn't I asked to attend?"

"It was to discuss the raid in Newcastle. Your talents are required elsewhere."

Nott nodded and nursed his bottle. "I didn't realise the Dark Lord encouraged drinking and sloppiness at his meetings?" he asked in an accusing tone, waving his hand over Malfoy's creased shirt and messy hair.

"Blaise and I needed a drink afterwards. One drink turned into several and ..."

"Why the sudden need to wet your whistle? Couldn't you have done that at home?"

Malfoy took another drag. His shoulders slumped against the wall, defeated.

"Parkinson went on a raid last night, and she hasn't come back."

For a little while, Nott was silent. "You think the Order captured her?"

"It would appear that way."

"Shouldn't we be planning a rescue mission? Surely the Dark Lord can track her through her Mark?"

Malfoy shook his head. "He's tried, there was no connection."

"So she's dead," Nott said coldly; a statement not a question.

All Malfoy could do was nod.

"A toast then," Nott took a large swig of his Firewhisky, almost draining what was left before he handed the bottle to Malfoy. "To another fallen friend."

It was strange, how seeing Malfoy distressed made Hermione's chest ache in a sickening sort of way. The way it made her skin feel cold and hands clench into fists without her permission.

She'd been fantasising about hurting him like that for months, so why did it make her feel ... what? Uncomfortable? Sympathetic?

From the moment he'd torn his Demon Mask from his face in the cathedral, all Hermione had been able to think about was how she was going to kill him. She was going to murder him the very second their bond was severed. She wanted to mutilate him in the most cruel and painful way she could think of - *because he deserved it.*

Malfoy nodded, and his trembling seemed to ease a fraction when he released the breath.

"Now imagine a s-small piece of... glass... hold that glass ... in your hand... I-imagine the weight... of it." Hermione swore she heard Narcissa's lungs rattle. "Now I w-want you to picture ... that shard of glass expanding ... P-picture it reaching out." Another pause to cough. "C-covering your body ... like a shield."

Malfoy nodded. A deep crease formed between his brows when Narcissa choked again.

"N-nothing can get in, a-alright... Nothing... Not if you... don't want... it to."

When Malfoy didn't answer her, Narcissa shifted in his arms, and rested her hand against his cheek. He opened his eyes slowly and took a deep breath. Hermione didn't think she'd ever be able to get the desperate way he sobbed his next word out of her head. They would be buried there forever.

"Don't leave me mum... p-please... please don't leave me~"

Suddenly, nails dug into Hermione's arm, and she whirled around just in time to catch a pair of familiar, murderous grey-blue eyes before the room faded out of existence.

Malfoy slammed Hermione into the wall the second they reappeared in her bedroom. "WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING!?"

The rage in his eyes made her forget how to speak. "... I don't know... Malfoy I don't even know how I..."

His fingers left her arms, only to curl painfully around her throat. Hard. "IF YOU DO THAT AGAIN I WILL KILL YOU! DO YOU HEAR ME!?"

Hermione instinctually tried to pry him off, but he squeezed harder.

He jolted her against the wall, causing her head to smack against the plaster. "DARK LORDS ORDERS OR NOT, IF YOU EVER DO THAT AGAIN I WILL FUCKING KILL YOU!"

Hermione didn't get the opportunity to argue with him, or point out the thin line of blood that streaked from his left nostril. Before her brain had caught up, Malfoy released her and charged out the room.

The walls shook when he slammed the door behind him, and Hermione slid down her wall into a heap on the floor, her mind filled with familiar screams, flaming

torches, and a fractured voice from someone she hadn't realised was so utterly broken underneath those blood-soaked robes.

"Don't. You. *Dare*," Zabini hissed, uncharacteristically cutting Malfoy off. He scooped his wife up in his arms, cradling her protectively against his chest and keeping his eyes on her sleeping form, then got to his feet and carried her to their bedroom. Astoria clutched her empty bottle as though it were her only lifeline.

"Why did you give Astoria anything?" Malfoy snapped as soon as Zabini disappeared around the corner. "You know her body can't handle-"

"*Relax*," Nott hushed, holding up his hand. "She'll be okay once she's slept it off. We took the same stuff, and I'm completely fine."

"That's not the point!" Malfoy started to pace the hallway. His hands trembled as he ran them through his hair. "She can't-*suck*. Why did you think it would be a good idea to-"

To Hermione's surprise, Nott silenced Malfoy with four simple words. "Today is Daphne's birthday."

Malfoy froze. He had his back to Hermione so she couldn't see his face, but every muscle in his shoulders and neck went taut with tension, as though he may snap at any moment. He was quiet for a while, the only movement she could see was him spinning the silver ring that decorated his left pinkie finger.

Eventually, he let out a ragged breath, leaned against the wall and slid down it to occupy the space Astoria had claimed minutes ago.

His descent was just as graceless as Astoria's had been. He sprawled messily across the floor; one leg stretched in front of him, the other bent at the knee so he could rest his elbow on it. His expression was dark, empty. His lips were pressed into a thin line, and his teeth were clenched so hard it looked like his jaw might shatter.

"*Fuck*," he whispered in a voice low, almost a growl. "I forgot it was today."

Instead of replying, Nott handed Malfoy a cigarette.

Malfoy placed the bud in his mouth and lit it. "You should have reminded Blaise. You know he likes to be around whenever Astoria takes a turn."

"Tried to," Nott mumbled. "But he and our fearless leader," his gold ring with the Nott family crest glittered as he gestured to Malfoy, "were nowhere to be seen. She was crying and desperate and wanted help. So I helped her."

Malfoy took a deep drag of his cigarette rather than respond. He pinched his eyes closed, tilted his head towards the ceiling, and held the smoke in his lungs. If Hermione was being honest, she didn't blame him.

Nott shrugged, rolling his tongue against his bottom lip while he continued to pat himself down. "Just something I picked up from the black market." He eventually found what he was looking for, a packet of cigarettes, and he placed one in his mouth and lit it with a silver lighter.

He took a slow drag before he answered an incandescent Zabini, even took the time to hold a smoke-filled breath before he responded, as if he had all the time in the world. "It was supposed to cheer her up and I specifically advised her *not* to drink so much if she was going to take it. But you know what a lush she's become—"

"Do not joke about this Theodore!" Zabini snapped, then sharply turned back to his wife. He muttered profanity under his breath as his fingers skated across her skin, checking her for injuries. He stilled when he noticed the state of her arm. "What—"

"She cut herself when she broke that vase," Nott cut in, the cigarette in his mouth bobbing with every word. "The stuff we took was an upper, but it had a numbing agent in it." He paused to take another drag. Smoke billowed out his mouth when he added, "The problem is, when you mix this shit with alcohol, the numbing agent gets a lot stronger."

Zabini stared at his wife's face, silent, and so obviously in pain that it made Hermione's chest ache.

"She didn't want to feel anything today," Nott continued. "Guess it worked a little *too well*, because she didn't feel a thing when one of the shards sliced into her arm."

Zabini quickly withdrew his wand and waved it over Astoria's small frame. A blue light emitted from the tip and knit the cut back together. Another flick of his wand banished the blood.

Just as Zabini slid his arms under Astoria's knees and around her shoulders, Malfoy emerged in the crowded hallway.

His appearance was almost as unkempt as Astoria's. His hair hung messily into his eyes and he wore dark trousers and a creased, white button-down shirt with the sleeves pushed up to his elbows. He had the top few buttons undone, allowing Hermione to notice the gleam of a thin silver chain that hung loosely around his throat.

Malfoy's cold eyes flickered from Astoria, to Nott, then back again as he quickly put the pieces together. "Did she—"

## CHAPTER 14



### SHE DID WHAT!?

*4th February*

"She did *what*?"

"It's not funny Theodore."

"Yes, it is!"

"No, it really isn't."

"Oh, but it is!" Theo's laughter bounced off the walls of the underground tunnel they were trying to sneak through. "Hermione fucking Granger, filthy Mudblood and stain to all purebloods of the earth, managed to get into your head - WITHOUT A *WAND!*"

Draco had never wanted to Avada someone more in his life. "I swear on Salazar's grave, if you don't drop this."

"Not funny? Oh no, it's not merely funny. It's fucking hilarious!" Theo continued, not the least bit bothered when Draco pointed his wand - sparking with green magic - at his face. "It's so funny I can't breathe!"

Draco grit his teeth together. "Oh, how I wish that were true. How I wish you would choke on your laughter until you suffocate. Heaven knows my life would be so much simpler without your constant theatrical insubordination!"

They carried on walking through the abandoned London Underground, blindly following the disused tracks. It was like a void down there, any light snuffed out and replaced with that spine-tingling darkness that made your gut twist with each heartbeat, anxious for the tiniest movement. Even the Lumos charms the three of them cast felt muted.

The tunnel went on for miles and miles, and the sporadic and unpredictable drip of water from a burst pipe overhead was starting to wear thinly on Draco's patience - that, and Theo's incessant snickering.

The air was cold and unfriendly, the all too familiar chill that could only be caused by the darkest of curses hung in the air. Horrid, but unmistakable. There were thousands of skeletons and bones lining the walls. Although most of the bodies were scattered across the floor or sat up against the sides of the tunnel, some seemed to be fused into the wall like a catacomb. It would have been chilling if it weren't such a common occurrence these days. Bare skeletons completely stripped of flesh weren't fear-inducing when you'd seen thousands of them. Skulls didn't make your skin crawl when you had one branded on your arm for all eternity.

"I still don't understand how Granger managed it," Draco growled out as they rounded another dark corner. "It should have been impossible. She's been taking the anti-magic potions for month. She shouldn't have had anything to draw from."

'They should be close. If their intelligence was correct, they would be able to hear the refugees - the ones desperately trying to get to the Orders base - any minute. There was no way out of the tunnels, Draco had made sure of that. They were sitting ducks.'

"Do you think she's built up a tolerance over time?" Blaise asked. "Or perhaps it could have something to do with that pesky tampering in her brain that you've been up to?"

The air quickly filled with his trepidation, growing so thick and cold it made the hairs on the back of Hermione's neck stand on end. She was just about to close her door and leave Nott to his quiet apprehension when Zabini rounded the corner, and then the atmosphere shifted entirely.

Zabini froze the second he saw his wife. Nott cursed under his breath before Zabini ran and knelt in front of her. He pushed away the hair that had fallen over her eyes, and cupped her small face in his hands. "Sálazar, you're ice cold! Daring?" he asked frantically, pupils blown wide with terror and hands shaking. "Astoria, can you hear me?"

"Don't... want... you hear," she groaned, and feebly leaned out of his touch. "Today... you weren't here... you... left me."

Zabini's expression fell. His lips parted.

"You... said you... you wouldn't leave me... but you did," Astoria mumbled. Her eyes were still firmly closed, and her head rolled against the side of the wall as she spoke, loose and weak against her shoulders. "But Theo didn't leave."

Zabini opened his mouth but then slowly closed it, unable to find the right words. Nott watched them but carried on drinking.

"Have you taken something?" Zabini asked quietly.

A crease formed between Astoria's slender brows.

"Astoria, can you hear me?" he repeated, stroking her cheeks reassuringly. "Have you taken something?" His panic reached new levels when she still didn't answer him, not even when he shook her slightly. "Darling, I can't help you if you don't tell me what you've taken."

Astoria couldn't seem to form a coherent response, whatever substance was running through her veins was clearly preventing her from doing so. Instead, she groaned, and the crease between her brows deepened.

"Leave her alone mate," Theo hushed while he patted down his pockets, looking for something. He seemed completely unfazed by Astoria's deteriorating state - as if her bizarre behaviour were entirely normal. "Calm down, she'll be fine. She was feeling a little upset, so she asked me to..."

Blaise whirled around. His lip curled as his temper sparked. "Do not tell me to calm down!" The look on his face didn't seem to faze Nott, but it scared Hermione to death. "I will not calm down until you tell me what you've given my wife!"

but she stumbled and whirled back around to face the wall. Despite her bare feet, she looked incredibly uneasy, as if she might topple over with any step.

"Take it easy sweetheart," Nott mumbled. "Don't hurt yourself just to prove a point."

Astoria grinned sheepishly as she slid down the wall into a graceless heap onto the floor opposite Nott. "I don't feel hurt." Even her smile looked bare. Astoria looked... spent, like a woman who'd lost everything and simply had nothing else to give. "I feel numb."

Nott watched her through his lashes. "Isn't that what you wanted?"

Astoria nodded, and her eyes started to flutter closed. "Mmmmmmm. You're a good friend Theo." Her voice was thick and exhausted, begging for sleep. "Don't... tell Blaise."

Sleep found her moments later. Nott smiled as the sadness in her expression finally softened. "I won't. You know I'm good at keeping secrets."

The only sounds that filled the hallway were Astoria's quiet breaths and the occasional slush of alcohol as Nott drank alone. He studied Astoria carefully, watching the gentle rise and fall of her chest as she slept. There was something haunting about his expression, an empty sadness in his brown eyes as he lay there, unmoving, completely still and just.. stared.

Hermione had seen more than her fair share of death since the war had started. She'd seen more disfigured bodies than she could count, and held more of her friends in her arms while they died by the age of nineteen than anyone should in a lifetime. After witnessing such horrific things, she would always drag herself to her shower and bathe in scalding water until all traces of death were banished from her skin. But before that, before the water could wash away the blood and dirt and rot, she always looked at herself in the mirror.

And she always saw the same thing, that same vacant stare, the same glassy eyes and crazed emptiness in her expression. It was a look of humility, the look of someone who knew their own mortality, and felt the weight of their insignificance in this whole wide world. The look of someone who knew their time was coming and that their luck would run out eventually, and then they would just be another name carved into a headstone.

It was the look of someone who felt completely fucking lost, powerless.

And now, she saw that same pain and helplessness reflected in Nott's brown eyes.

"Yeah," Theo said, dragging his wand over the bones in the wall. "What's up with that? What exactly are you doing to her?"

Draco snorted. "That's a little above your paygrade, *Gold Mask*." He caught the sexually obscene gesture Theo threw him out the corner of his eye.

"What did it feel like when she entered your mind?" Blaise asked.

Draco rolled his tongue on the inside of his cheek. How was he supposed to answer that? That it felt wildly intrusive? That it intrigued him to no end that Granger - *fucking Granger* - had been able to enter his mind without a wand? That someone whose very blood was supposed to make her weaker than him had managed to do something so undeniably brilliant, that he hadn't been able to stop thinking about it since? That it had been so indescribably painful to have to see his mothers death all over again? And that somehow, somehow, the pity he'd seen on Grang- the *Mabholas face* made him want to scream?

No. He couldn't say any of that, so he decided on the easiest answer. "It hurt." Blaise held his wand a little closer to Draco's face. "Did you bleed afterwards?" he asked, studying Draco closely.

"Yes."

"Where from?"

"My nose."

Blaise nodded, and his eyes flickered towards the ceiling, deep in thought while they walked and walked and walked.

Draco usually hated stagnant silences. They usually made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up, pumped adrenaline through his body and forced his killer instincts to sharpen. Made him alert to everything, minuscule creaks in floorboards, wands being drawn, and magic gathering in the shadows. They meant danger, a predator lurking in the shadows waiting to strike.

But worst of all, silences meant that the strangled cries of those he'd tortured and killed throughout the years had an opportunity to find him. Silences opened a window, left a gap in his busy mind for the screams to creep in and torment him, drag across his skull like the scrape of a blade and get their revenge for the monstrous things he'd done to create them. It was the reason he slept with a record player on, charmed to never end, a constant loop of music to lull him into sleep and drown out those infernal screams.

Missions, however, were different. On those occasions, he revelled in the silence. He used it as a focal point, let it sharpen his instincts to spot and eliminate a threat long before it ever got close to him.

It was a shame Theodore always had to fucking ruin them.

Draco and Blaise whirled around, aiming their wands on instinct when a loud crunching sound reverberated through the tunnel behind them. Green magic lit up the darkness, only to reveal that there was no intruder, no threat, just Theodore Nott, holding the arm of a skeleton he'd just pulled out of the wall.

When the other two Death Eaters glared at him, Theo grinned and waved the extra arm at them like it was a toy.

Anger heated Malfoy's chest. "Why would you need that?!"

Theo's grin stretched as he pulled a silver ring with a glittering sapphire from a bony finger and waved it in front of his Lumos Charm, the gem cast interesting flecks of blue light against the gloomy, corpse-filled tunnel walls. "Not like he's gonna need it, is it?"

Draco shook his head, whirled around, and started storming down the train line again.

"Oh lighten up Malfoy," Theo sang from behind, Draco swore he heard him skipping. "What's the point in all this if we can't have a little fun? You really do want to suffocate all of life's joys, don't you?"

"Not nearly as much as I want to suffocate *you!*"

Finally - *fucking finally* - Draco heard what he'd been waiting for, voices. Several low, urgent whispers. "Masks on gentlemen," he hushed. "This is supposed to be a stealth mission."

"*Aye, ay!* captain," Theo said, using the skeletal arm to give Malfoy a theatrical salute before he slipped his mask in place.

Draco and Blaise did the same, and with a unison flick of their wrists, they all cast distorting charms on their voice boxes.

"Remember, this mission isn't about slaughter, it's about gathering intelligence," Draco whispered as he pressed his back against the wall. He craned his neck around the corner, eyeing his prey. Just as predicted, there were nine possible hostages in the caves; six men, three women. "We need to capture as many of them as possible."

Both the Gold Masks nodded.

Both of them were staring at chunks of a smashed vase on the floor. Astoria blinked at the mess once, twice, then giggled.

"His mother bought that vase."

Nott took a swig of the bottle in his hand. "Malfoy will kill you," he muttered. "Astoria scoffed. "It's *jumie*, the moody bastard has charmed *eeeeverything*." Her voice didn't sound right. Her tone was slower, darker than the high-pitched ring she usually spoke in and the words were slurred. "It'll repair itself in a second... just waatch."

Hermione extended her arm theatrically towards the pile of shards, and that's when Hermione noticed the streak of blood that was seeping from a deep cut on Astoria's bicep, but the blonde didn't seem to be able to feel it.

Astoria's usually impeccable beauty was gone, she looked a shell of her radiant self. She looked like she hadn't slept in days. Her skin was pale and grey, a striking comparison against the violent stream of crimson that flowed down her arm and into the dip of her elbow. Her red lipstick was smeared down her chin and her mascara was smudged under her eyes and across her cheeks, evidence of dried tears. There were dark, almost black roots at the top of her head, and they looked all the more noticeable against the frizzy, artificial blonde underneath it.

However, the most drastic change in her appearance was her eyes. They were usually sparkling, but they were bloodshot now, cold and detached, and lacking the usual welcoming shimmer and kindness Hermione always found in them.

After a few seconds, the shards on the floor started to vibrate, and soon enough, the pieces moved and mended themselves back together.

"Seeeeeeee," Astoria sang. She lifted her bottle high in the air and drained the last of its contents. "I told you not to worry." She tried to take another swig but then frowned suddenly. She tipped the bottle upside down, squinted up its neck, and when nothing came out, she sighed in frustration. "Why is all the wine gone?"

Nott scoffed. "Because you drank it all you bloody alcoholic."

Astoria's brow furrowed sluggishly. "Hey! That's not a v... very nice thing to say."

"Yeah?" Nott asked, wearing a loose grin. "Come over here and show me I'm wrong!"

Astoria took a step toward Nott and raised her free hand in the air - as if she were going to swat him around the head like Hermione had seen her do countless times -

the question? Before Hermione could press the matter further, Quinzel hopped off her stool and pushed a chilled glass against Hermione's knees. Even through her leggings, its coldness caused her breath to catch.

"No time for questions," Quinzel said sternly, urging Hermione to take the glass of blue liquid before she started to shoo her from the kitchen. "Romy and Quinzel have many tasks to do before sunrise, and Miss Granger is only getting in our way."

Quinzel hastily guided Hermione to the door, and locked it when she was on the other side. She must have cast a silencing charm too, because when Hermione pressed her ear against the door to eavesdrop, she couldn't hear a sound.

Hermione sighed heavily and started walking back to her room. She sipped the potion as she walked, feeling the effects start to take by the time she came to the winding staircase. Her muscles felt much stronger when she reached the top, and by the time she reached the end of the lonely hallway where her bedroom was, she almost had a spring back in her step.

She fussed over the elf's strange behaviour once she was back in her room. She ran over the ingredients she'd seen Romy unpack, and tried to pair them with potions she knew required those particular herbs -

A loud crashing sound suddenly cut through the quiet.

Hermione's eyes snapped to her door whilst the rest of her body stilled. An eerie silence followed, and she counted five of her heartbeats before she heard voices, two voices. One was a man's, deep and gravelly, while the other was high and feminine. She couldn't make out whether the woman's voice was laughing or crying.

Hermione slowly walked towards her bedroom door and pressed her ear to the wood. Although muffled, she was sure the feminine voice was Astoria's, but she couldn't quite place the male voice.

There were several loud bangs and then a smash, which sounded an awful lot like something ceramic shattering.

Hermione gingerly opened her door. It was just a small crack, only wide enough to peer one eye through the gap and investigate. She was right, Astoria was stood in the hallway, about twelve feet away, clutching an almost expired bottle of red wine clumsily in her hand while the other gripped the wall for support.

Nott sat on the floor with a bottle in his hand, leaning against the opposite wall with his legs stretched out in front of him.

"That means we need them all *alive*," Draco said sternly. Both he and Blaise turned to stare at Theo.

Theo's head whipped between his friends, feeling their accusatory glares, even through their masks. "*What?*"

"I mean it Theodore," Draco hissed. "*No killing*!"

Theo gasped. "I would *never*! I am shocked! Utterly appalled that you would think-"

"I mean it, Nott! No. Bastard. Killing!"

There was a stretched silence. Theodore tapped his foot quietly on the floor and his fingers tightened and then relaxed around his wand. For a second, Draco thought he was going to disobey.

"*Time!*" Theo raised his hand, palm towards Draco, and used the skeleton hand that he was *refusing* to let go of to draw an imaginary cross over his chest. "I solemnly swear - on my shrivelled black heart - that I will not *intentionally* kill one of the opposition."

"Thank you," Draco sighed.

"But if one of them happens to walk into my Avada, it's not my fault!"

The attack went exactly as Draco had anticipated it would.

As usual, Blaise had followed his orders religiously; he'd whipped around the corner the instant Malfoy instructed him to, and cast a strong - non-lethal - knock-back jinx that'd rendered two of the hostages unconscious. He'd quickly bound their wrists and legs with unbreakable chains, and then tied their restraints together neatly. Incapacitated. Alive. Bound so securely that they had no possible chance of escaping.

Yes, as expected, Blaise had proudly followed every instruction Draco had given, and - as usual - Theo had ignored every fucking one.

"Did you really have to kill *that* many?" Blaise seethed through gritted teeth while he banished the mess of blood and mangled flesh from his robes. "The Dark Lord will be furious. He wanted them *all* captured, not three out of nine!"

Theo shrugged. "He's a big boy, I'm sure he'll get over it," he said, dragging the bound bodies of the unconscious hostages through the tunnel and out of the exit at Westminster Underground Station.

As soon as they were outside, Draco tore his mask from his face, closed his eyes, and drew a deep breath, pulling the clean air deeply into his lungs, hoping to wash the stagnant odour that seemed fused to the walls of the tunnels.

His dragon was curled in a tight ball on London Bridge, her tail waving gently behind her while she chewed on the remains of a horse she'd picked up on the flight here. She reared her head as Theo approached her, and when he laid the hostages near her feet, she bared her fangs and a low rumbling sound emitted from low in her chest.

Theo dared to get a little closer. He reached his hand towards her - trying his luck - but his tail promptly flew between his legs when she snapped her teeth just inches from his face.

He jumped back, holding his hands up in surrender, and slowly stepped away.

"Alright, alright! Don't get your scales in a knot!"

She kept growling until he was at least twenty feet away from her.

"She really doesn't like me, does she?" Theo asked.

"She doesn't like anyone," Blaise quipped, standing back as Malfoy levitated the hostages onto the dragons back, "apart from her *Daddyl*."

Draco was quiet as he conjured an extra set of chains around their bodies, and secured them onto some of the spikes lining the dragon's spine. He didn't think they would wake up any time soon, but he thought it best not to risk it.

He mounted his dragon, and when he'd settled between her shoulders, she stretched her colossal wings, readying herself for the flight to Voldemort's base. Theo and Blaise would have to Apparate home.

"Malfoy," Blaise said. "I've been thinking."

"About?"

"Granger," he clarified quickly. "About how she got into your head."

Draco cocked a brow, intrigued. "Go on?"

"How much do you know about the blood ritual the Dark Lord used to bind her to you?"

"Only what he's deemed necessary," Draco admitted. "Only that it links her life to mine, and allows me greater access into her mind."

silences. And she'd noticed, if uninterrupted in his ramblings, he often said more than he was supposed to.

As if she'd conjured him with her mind, a cracking sound echoed around the grand kitchen, and Romy appeared behind her with a cloth sack over his shoulder.

"Good evening, Quinzel!" he said, eyes on the bag as he swung it to the tiled floor and started removing the herbs and trinkets collected in it. "Romy is sorry he's late. He went to the market to get the ingredients Mrs Zabini needed, and he ran into another elf. He was very nasty and rude. He said that when his Master attended dinner here a few months ago that he didn't like the roast potatoes that Romy made. *Can Quinzel believe that?* Romy was very cross with him, and wanted to throw this Bezoar at his head for his rudeness. Of course, Romy didn't do that, because that would—" He looked up suddenly, and Hermione couldn't help but smile as a small blushing coloured the green-eyed elf's cheeks. "Miss Granger!" he squeaked happily. "Romy is very pleased to see you! Romy didn't want you to think him rude when he didn't bring Miss her dinner this evening. You see, Miss Astoria wanted him to go and get ingredients for her special potions and—"

"Romy," Quinzel cut in, annoyance clear on her small face. "Would you go to the storage building and get Quinzel crushed snake fangs?"

"Hold on a second. Romy?" Hermione asked, stopping the elf before he could escape. "What makes Mrs Zabini's potions so special?"

His green eyes widened considerably but he didn't answer the question. Quinzel had stopped preparing Hermione's drink and was watching him, her pink eyes narrowed to slits and her lips pressed into a thin line. Clearly, Romy had said too much, *again*.

"Is there a special ingredient?" Hermione pressed on, hoping her insistence would encourage him to slip. "Or is it the potion itself that's special?"

"Well..." Romy's eyes trailed to the floor, and he started to pick at his nails, obviously uncomfortable with the situation he'd found himself in, but that just made Hermione all the more curious.

She knew Romy wasn't supposed to mention Astoria's potions, she could tell from Malfoy's reaction that it wasn't something Hermione wasn't supposed to know about. But *why?*

Astoria spent an awful lot of time in her potion's lab, so it wasn't exactly a secret that she had a passion and flair for brewing. So why didn't the elves want to answer

"Do you understand me? He doesn't have much time left." Hermione inched a little closer and reached her hand towards him, even released a shaky breath when the dragon did not attempt to tuck Malfoy's body closer to her. It was working, she was getting through to her. "I promise, I won't do anything that will hurt him. But I need to act now, if I don't, he's going to die."

The dragon stared at her for several seconds, seeming to consider Hermione's words with undeniable intelligence. But when Malfoy choked again and groaned in pain, the dragon's mind was made up. Her growl vanished into nothing. She slowly uncurled her body from around Malfoy's, and stepped back to give Hermione space to work - but she didn't take her eyes off Hermione. Or retract her fangs.

Hermione crouched next to Malfoy's still form, grabbed the blood-soaked fabric around his neck, and with a strength she didn't know she possessed, ripped his robes apart. She tore the fabric all the way down his body until she saw a gleam of silver from his belt buckle, then parted it to pool at his sides, leaving him shirtless.

At first glance, she couldn't see the source of the bleeding. There was just so much blood, his skin was drenched with it. She noticed a simple silver chain around his neck that seemed to glitter in the little sunlight it caught. It looked as though there were two silver rings threaded into the chain, but Hermione ignored them. She tore off a large piece of the cream cardigan she was wearing, and used it to quickly wipe the blood from Malfoy's chest.

The first dab against his chest made him jerk, and Black Shadow hissed, fangs extended in Hermione's direction.

"It's alright!" Hermione shouted as the dragon inched closer. "I'm not trying to hurt him! I need to clean the blood first!"

Black Shadow didn't back away an inch, but she didn't move closer either. When Hermione had mopped up most of the blood, she looked down at his torso, and gasped at what she saw there. He was covered in scars, some larger than others. There were large silver slashes across his chest, a clear trophy from the Sectumsempra he'd survived during sixth year, but there were others, too. A cluster of scars across his right abdominal muscles, a deep slash lining the abs under his rib cage, and what looked like a stab wound just above the V lining his hip bones.

It was years and years of trauma splayed across his otherwise perfect marble skin; a map of every brush with death and battle he'd fought. She guessed some came from Voldemort himself, punishments for failed missions. She imagined the only

punishments he deemed acceptable came at the end of a blade or hex; screams and lost blood over confessions and penance.

But Hermione couldn't focus on that now, because blood was already seeping from the fresh wounds, the scars that were yet to heal. She had to work quickly. His skin was inflamed, angry and red and split jaggedly, all centred around five small holes in his chest. Bullet holes.

Hermione choked back the bile that had risen from her stomach. "Oh god. What happened to you?"

What was she supposed to do now? She wasn't a healer, she was a soldier. She killed and maimed and won battles. She took lives, she didn't save them.

Her knowledge of healing magic and potions was strictly limited to battle wounds. She knew enough to stop the bleeding and keep soldiers alive until the medics could get to them- but that was it. She didn't know the first thing about safely removing bullets, and she didn't have a wand!

Calm. She just needed to stay calm.

She could do this.

Hermione pulled back and looked around, searching for something she could use, and almost screamed with joy when she noticed the potions storage unit on the other side of the grass bank. She jumped to her feet and sprinted towards the building. "Keep him warm!" she called over her shoulder. "I have an idea!"

She felt the earth shake slightly under her feet as the dragon moved to puzzle against Malfoy.

Hermione swung the doors open and immediately ran to the shelves, desperate, praying there was something she could use. Unfortunately, most of the life-saving potions were charmed and sealed down, but luck was on her side. She was able to gather several Blood Replenishing Potions, a Knit Me Salve, and two potions to ward off any infections he might have developed. There were a pair of forked tongues on the workbench, the exact thing she could use to pry the bullets from his body, but, as she guessed, they were charmed to the desk. Vital, immovable, and absolutely useless to her.

Malfoy choked on the floor when she knelt back down beside him. His face was screwed up in agony. She swore he'd gotten paler in her absence.

"Thank you," Hermione breathed to the dragon while she hastily uncapped the potions. "You probably bought me a few extra minutes."

The dragon huffed- in what Hermione assumed was acknowledgement - and backed away a little to give her room to work again.

Hermione placed each potion on the grass beside her, all organised in what order she would need them, and then stared back at Malfoy's chest. She drew a deep breath - trying to steady her trembling hands as best she could - then plunged two of her fingers and her thumb into the first bullet hole.

Malfoy roared in pain, his features contorting while his back arched sharply.

Hermione placed her other hand across his shoulder and guided him gently back to the floor. She splayed her palm and pinned him down while she continued to work. She curled her fingers, trying desperately not to wretch as she felt around the torn muscle and blood in search of the bullet.

Malfoy jerked furiously underneath her, growling in pain while his voice broke off into a scream. Hermione just pressed down harder, trying to keep him still. She curled her fingers again, and couldn't hold back an elated gasp when the tip of her index finger came into contact with something cold and metallic.

"I've found the first one!" she said, breathless. "This is going to hurt, but I need you to be as still as possible while I get it out," she added, hoping he heard her over his screams.

Slowly, Hermione drove her fingers in deeper and curled them around the bullet. He jerked sharply again, his fingers digging into the damp, blood-soaked grass around him. Hermione gripped the bullet between her thumb and index finger and steadily, carefully, pulled it out.

Malfoy's scream faded into a ragged gasp, and when her fingers left his body, he slumped against the grass.

His blood smeared across her skin when she rested her palm across his chest. She tried not to wretch at how it pooled around her fingers when she pressed down. She applied the potion for infection into the first wound, and then did the same thing with the Knit Me salve, breathing a small sigh of relief when the first hole knitted itself back together almost instantly, a small silver scar the evidence it'd been there to begin with.

One down, four to go.

"I'm not going to hurt him," Hermione said in a low voice, pleading with the beast. "I want to help."

The scales on the dragons back and neck went rigid, seemed to stand on end and vibrate as she growled.

Hermione drew a deep breath and forced herself to keep going, forced her legs to take another step, and then another, and then another, despite the fear she felt slicing through her blood. "I'm not going to hurt him," she repeated softly, eyes locked on the dragon. *I swear.*

Black Shadow growled again as Hermione slowly lowered herself into a crouch beside Malfoy. She used her tail to drag him closer to her body and out of Hermione's reach.

"It's alright," Hermione whispered. "He's going to be alright." She thought she was getting through to the beast, that she caught a glimmer of understanding in those glowing red eyes, but when she stretched her hand towards Malfoy's chest, intending to examine the injuries, Black Shadow gnashed her teeth and lurched forward, fangs just inches from Hermione's trembling palms.

Hermione yelped and drew back. "I'm not going to hurt him!" she yelled, cradling her hand to her chest. "I'm trying to help, and I can't do that if you won't let me touch him!"

Black Shadow growled again, the sound like a low rumble of thunder. The heat around her body seemed to increase, as though she were gathering a flaming breath.

Hermione felt a bead of sweat form across her temples. She drew another deep breath and willed herself to stay calm. "Please, please let me help him."

Malfoy didn't have time for this. *They* didn't have time for this.

"There's no one else here. I'm the only one that can do this. I need you to trust me."

The dragon's lip curled further. Her fangs extended menacingly.

"If you don't let me help him, he will die." Hermione might have imagined it, but she thought she caught a flicker in the dragon's eyes. "He's lost far too much blood, he's going to bleed out."

Black Shadow's hiss seemed to get a little quieter, Hermione took that as a good sign and carried on.

Despite the dragon's efforts, Malfoy showed no sign of getting up. His eyes were still tightly closed, and the movement of his chest grew more sluggish with each passing second.

Hermione moved to help him, hands already outstretched and automatically reaching towards him, but then stopped when a sinister little voice - or perhaps the voice of reason - slithered into her ears.

If she let him die, then she'd die right alongside him. She'd save countless lives and her memories, Harry's location, Medusa and the Order would be safe.

He did deserve it, didn't he?

He was a monster. A ruthless, calculated, cold-blooded killer. This whole war had started when he'd helped assassinate Dumbledore. He'd set everything in motion that day so he deserved this didn't he?

It would be a pitiful death. He wouldn't go out in a blaze of glory or in the heat of battle. He wouldn't be remembered as a dark and ruthless war criminal. He'd die alone, spluttering and choking on his own blood, because a *Mudblood* refused to save him. There was some dark and poetic justice there, Hermione was sure of it. Some cosmic force, some balance in the scales that Draco Malfoy, he who craved power and respect and strength, would die alone; a pathetic, undignified mess.

But, as she stared at his lifeless body, watching the blood pour faster from the open wounds, Hermione realised she couldn't let him die.

Because even though all of the vile and disgusting things he'd said to her since her capture were flashing between her ears, she couldn't really hear them. Couldn't hear the malice and venom those words had previously held, because they were all drowned out. They were all eclipsed, smothered by that broken sob she'd heard as he'd held his mother in his arms.

As much as Hermione hated him, as much as she'd fantasised about his death since she'd been captured, if he died, then so did she.

And she wasn't ready to die yet.

Hermione walked cautiously towards Malfoy, holding her hands high in the air when the dragon's head snapped up. The beast flashed her fangs in warning as Hermione approached, and that same threatening hissing sound rolled from deep in her scaled chest.

"Hermione wasted no time, and pressed her fingers into the second bullet hole. "Shhhhhh," she whispered, shaking, as Malfoy started to scream again. "It's alright, Malfoy. Shhhhhh. I know it hurts, but it will all be over soon."

Forever the quick study she was, Hermione got the second bullet out much quicker than the first. The third in even less time, and the fourth took her mere seconds.

Malfoy screamed and jerked through every single one, his fingers tearing large clumps of grass from the earth as she extracted the bullets one by one. The only time he showed any sign of calmness was when she was steadily applying the anti-infection potion and smearing the Knit Me salve across the open wounds. By the time she dabbed the salve into the fourth bullet hole, every inch of his body was slick with sweat, and he'd grown very still. His face wasn't even twisted with pain anymore. He looked so different when his expression wasn't moulded into that scowl that she swore was permanently etched into his face. There was a softness to his features, in the beautiful curve of his jaw and angle of his cheekbone.

In another life, she might have thought him appealing. If they weren't sworn enemies, on opposite sides of a war that was tearing the world apart, she might even have admired the way his features looked to be torn straight from a Renaissance painting.

But they were enemies. They would go back to finding ways to kill each other after this, and Hermione extinguished those thoughts as quickly as they sparked to life.

Before she started work on the fifth and final bullet, she delicately threaded her fingers through his hair - ignoring how soft it felt in her hands- and supported his head. She cradled the back of his skull, and gently guided his head off the ground as she brought the bottle of Blood Replenishing potion to his lips.

"You need to drink this," she said softly, trying not to panic when he didn't immediately follow her instructions. "Draco, can you hear me? You need to drink this."

He was still for a few more moments. His chest went up and down gently, and then a crease formed between his brows. "D-did... you just... call me... Draco...?" he panted weakly, and the edges of his lips twitched into a smirk. "T-there's a... f-first."

"Less joking," she quipped, all business. "More drinking."

"S-Salazar... you are bossy ... when you're ... angry." He took the potion without further complaint, and after he'd drained the entire thing, Hermione guided his head back towards the earth and started work on the final bullet. It took her less than six seconds to find, and Hermione was so elated that she'd managed to extract it so quickly, she didn't realise Malfoy had been deadly quiet throughout the process.

As soon as she registered his silence, her eyes snapped to his face. Her stomach dropped when she saw that his eyes were closed. He wasn't breathing.

"Malfoy?"

Silence.

"Malfoy?" she repeated, more urgent the second time.

Nothing.

"DRACO!?"

He didn't respond. Didn't move an inch. He was as still as a corpse.

Hermione's hands flew back to his chest, and a fresh wave of panic knocked the wind from her lungs.

She couldn't feel his pulse.

She pressed down harder, the Knit me salve forgotten through her terror as she struggled to find the thump of his heart against her hand. He was cold, his skin was freezing against her palm. Blood seeped from the final wound on his chest and pooled around her hands and down his body.

Black Shadow whined and inched closer.

Hermione couldn't feel his heartbeat. Why the fuck couldn't she feel his heartbeat? Her hands glided down his arms and wrapped around his wrist. She couldn't feel a pulse there either; nothing, not even the faintest thump of life.

She'd failed. She wasn't able to save him.

Hermione sat back, eyes on his still face as the dragon shrieked and cried behind her. Fainture seemed to seep into her blood like ice water, weighing her down and squeezing her lungs.

So, that was it then. She was going to die, right here, on the blood-soaked earth. All alone and-

No.

Malfoy, that spiteful little wanker, was doing this on purpose! Even though it'd been an accident, he probably saw this as payback for barging into her mind. She'd known that he would want to even the playing field and restore the balance of power between them, she just hadn't expected her punishment to come at the end of reptilian jaws.

Hermione opened her mouth, a foul and entirely unladylike insult on the tip of her tongue, but then stopped.

Malfoy's posture was always impeccable, annoyingly flawless. His spine was always perfectly straight, his shoulders broad and hands often clasped elegantly behind his back: evidence of years and years of etiquette lessons. He couldn't have looked further from that now. He was slumped, swaying on the dragons back, and his head hung forward and loose between his shoulders. He looked dizzy, like he might topple over at any moment.

The dragon stopped growling and turned her head to look at her master out the corner of her eye.

It wasn't until Malfoy pulled his Demon Mask from his face, revealing that his eyes were squeezed shut and streaks of blood were dripping from his mouth and forehead, that Hermione understood what was wrong. He was hurt. Badly.

Malfoy swayed again. His chest heaved, and arms shook as he struggled to hold himself up.

Hermione was just about to use the dragon's distraction to make her escape, but then Malfoy slipped. His arms gave out and he fell from Black Shadow's back. There was an audible crunch when his spine hit the rough gravel, and he spluttered, a fresh spray of crimson seeping from the corners of his mouth on the impact.

His dragon gave a low, panicked sort of cry and bowed her head.

Malfoy's robes were matted with blood, concentrated around the small holes on his chest and shoulders. He choked again, the sound hoarse and raspy. Causing more blood to spill from his mouth.

The dragon curled her body protectively around him. Her tail dragged him gently towards her while she softly nuzzled his shoulder, trying to use her snout to warm him into life. When he still didn't move, she nudged closer and did it again, and again, each movement more gentle than the last, even though her whimpers grew in volume and urgency.

This descent was different. It was cautious, her hind legs touched the earth softly, and she was very meek when she lowered her clawed wings onto the grass. However, as soon as she was safely on the ground, she opened her mouth, and the sound that came billowing out of it was anything but gentle. It was a shriek; a blood-curdling scream that made Hermione's heart lurch. The sound was intense and seemed to go on forever, like thousands of nails scraping down a chalkboard all at once.

And fuck - it was *loud*. Hermione's hands flew to her ears to shield her from it, sending her cup of tea falling to the floor. The noise of the ceramic shattering on the stone paving caught the dragon's attention, and she closed her mouth with an audible snap. Her cry cut off instantly, and she whipped her head towards Hermione.

Hermione's heart stopped. Her veins turned to ice as those glowing red eyes locked onto her.

The dragon stared at her for a few moments. She held her head high in the air, and her eyes seemed to flicker with something, some unfamiliar emotion that Hermione didn't think was possible for a dragon to possess.

Admittedly, she didn't know much about the gigantic creatures, but she didn't think they led highly emotional lives. They were intelligent, fierce and majestic, but did they feel emotions? Hermione didn't think so. But she could have bet her life that the way the dragon was looking at her now, the way that the colossal beast with no natural predators' eyes seemed to glisten and flicker, that she was scared.

Hermione took a cautious step to the side, and the dragon exposed her fangs when her foot crunched against the shattered mug. Her heart restarted in a flutter. Blood pounded in her ears -

The dragon stepped forward slowly, her front claws - the ones at the bow of her wings - dug into the grass. A low rumbling sound started to vibrate from deep within her chest, not quite a growl, but still menacing nonetheless. The dragon started to dip her head, and opened her mouth to reveal sparks of fire gathering in the back of her throat.

Hermione took another step to the side, but when the dragon lowered her head a little more, her jaw almost scraping across the ground, she saw a masked figure sitting between the beast's shoulders. Rage suddenly burned through Hermione, evaporating the crippling fear she'd felt at being inches from a dragon's exposed fangs.

No - this wasn't how she was going to die. It couldn't be, she refused to let this be the way she met her end. She didn't go through Hogwarts, spend years searching for Horcruxes and fight in a hundred smoke-filled war zones all for it to end like *this*.

With a fierce determination that seemed to melt the ice in her veins, Hermione crouched over Malfoy. She pressed the heels of her hands against his breastbone, and started to do compressions.

"Don't you die on me!" she panted with the first push on his chest. "Don't you dare die on me Malfoy!" She pushed down harder, ignoring the blood that splashed up her arm and onto her face. "I swear to God, if you die on me -" another compression. "- I will hunt you down -" she pressed down harder, and felt her arms start to burn and ache with her effort. "- I will tear through the gates of hell, just to find you and kill you myself!" She swore she felt the faintest thump of his heart under her hand. "Do you hear me?!" She did another compression, and felt a more definitive flutter against her palm. "You are not allowed to die!" She dug the heels of her hand in firmer, feeling a thick bead of sweat trickle down her temple and jawline. "*I forbid* you from dying here!"

Black Shadow inched closer. The low whining sound she was making grew in pitch as she watched Hermione fight to save her master.

"I said I would be the one to kill you - and I'm going to keep my promise Malfoy -"

Suddenly, Malfoy's eyes flew open. He gasped loudly and pulled in a desperate lungful of air. He bolted to sit upright, his nose brushed against Hermione's and his lips grazed hers. The suddenness of his action made Hermione jump, but she found herself frozen in place when she caught his eyes. Because they were blue, the purest, most eye-catching shade of blue.

The cold, vacant quality from his Occlumency was gone, a trait she now realised must have morphed his irises into that grey hue she saw daily. His eyes were bottomless now, an endless ocean of blue and fuck - she'd be lying if she said they weren't the most beautiful things she'd ever seen.

He panted in front of her, each ragged, starved gasp blasting a wave of hot air against her face and lips.

He was so close, so close she could taste him.

Blood.

Smoke.

Earth.

Spearmint.

And fresh parchment.

His heart might have finally restarted, but hers had stopped beating.

She stood and was just about to go back inside, when a dark shape in the sky caught her attention; a single inkblot against the white clouds, an inkblot she now recognised as a dragon flying high overhead, and dive-bombing towards the estate. Hermione had seen the dragon more times than she cared to count. She always kept her distance from the beast, she felt it was wise to do so, but despite the constant exposure and daily glimpses of shiny black scales, dragons weren't something you could ever '*get used to*', and Black Shadow was certainly no exception to that rule. Her gargantuan size and blade-like teeth still made Hermione's heart stop anxiously mid-beat.

As Hermione watched the dragon steadily lower herself to the ground, she knew that one snap of those enormous jaws would tear her in half. The dragon was a walking death warrant, a constant reminder of how small and helpless Hermione truly was, and how easily the thread that held her lifeline together could snap in an instant. It was enough to make anyone on edge.

The dragon flapped her wings against the air as she carefully lowered herself toward the ground, each beat hurling a fresh wave of biting cold air against Hermione's face. The windfall she created picked up the closer she got, causing Hermione's curls to whirl around her face.

She was landing much closer than Hermione would have liked. She couldn't have been more than fifteen feet away. The February air was freezing, but heat radiated from Black Shadow's body as she steadily drew closer. She didn't seem to notice Hermione, her head frantically whipped from side to side like a snake as though she were searching for someone. She looked towards the house, then to the gardens, then to the cemetery, then back to the house again.

The dragon seemed to be taking her time descending. She was being very delicate, and holding her torso as still as she possibly could. It struck Hermione as odd, she usually threw her weight around when she landed, knowing that her size and strength afforded her no punishment or repercussions for her carelessness. Every landing on the ground usually left large divots of upturned earth in the usually pristine grass, usually left bushes crushed and rose upon rose of beautiful flowers trampled on.

The elves - Quinzel especially - always looked very cross when they saw the mess the dragon had made, but they never voiced their annoyance, just replenished the earth, restored the flowers, and went on with the rest of their day - even if Quinzel did sometimes mutter about dragon scaled shoes under her breath afterwards.

A week without Malfoy was bliss. Absolute fucking bliss.

It felt as though she'd been on the verge of drowning since her arrival, and his absence had finally allowed her to break the surface and take that first glorious lungful of air. Her head felt much better, and the lack of haemorrhaging and blood loss meant her strength had steadily begun to return, and she found she had no use for Pepperup potions by the third day of his leave.

Malfoy upped the dosage of the anti-magic potion; two shots a day, morning and night. Hermione wasn't surprised, she'd expected him to after she'd wandered into his memories, even if it was an accident. Malfoy was many things, but stupid wasn't one of them. He'd probably figured that out she'd developed a tolerance for the potions the same moment she had, and would probably up the dosage again in a month or two.

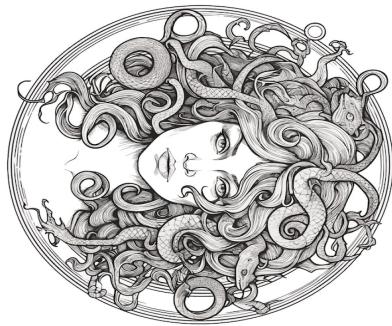
There were many things that Hermione enjoyed about Malfoy's absence. The reprieve from Legilimency, the space to breathe and plot her escape, and the lack of dark magic clinging to the walls of the manor. But the thing that made her giddy and put a spring in her step, was that she got to sit at the bench under the cherry blossom tree, completely undisturbed.

She knew it was silly really, for someone who'd taken as many lives as she had to enjoy something so childish, but she didn't really care. She wasn't sure why, but she felt a strange sense of calm wash over her whenever she sat on this bench. She was always drawn back to it, felt like it cleared her head sitting there, allowed her time to mull over her thoughts in quiet, and admire the beautiful greenery around her.

The gardens were gorgeous. Despite her forced captivity here, even Hermione had to admit that. The snow had melted from the grounds, taking the stains of the dragon's blood with it and leaving rose bushes and pockets of daisy's ready to bloom in its wake; the promise of new life. Large clusters of flowers grew everywhere, of every variety and colour all waiting for their time to bloom and twist towards the sun. Some had started to flower early, and Hermione had grown to admire a few white Peony's that had cheated their way to bloom early.

Hermione took a deep breath, inhaling the sweet scent of those same flowers while she stared at the clouds above her head. She cradled a cup of tea in her hands, hugging its warmth and clinking the ceramic with her nails while she studied the sky. She looked for shapes in the clouds, hoping some small inspiration on what her mural was lacking might spark. Despite doing this for almost five days, it still hadn't. She sighed heavily and drained the last of her mug.

## CHAPTER 16



### DIRTY LITTLE SECRETS

**23rd February**

Hermione didn't see Malfoy for days after his 'accident'. After he'd shakily dragged himself off the blood-soaked grass, battering her hand away when she offered to help him walk, Malfoy became a ghost.

She didn't see him once, no strands of white-blond hair dashing around the manor, or even a glimmer of those shiny, black horns of his demon mask that he wore so proudly.

She'd expected him to take a few days off from their Legilimency sessions, heaven knew he needed it. Legilimency wasn't just taxing on the subject, although not as severe, extensive use still took its toll on the caster as well. With the amount of blood

he'd lost, she'd expected he would give her an extra day or two before he resumed their exercises.

The first day went by without a hiccup or complaint from Hermione. And so did the second. But then two extra days of freedom stretched into three, then four, then five, and by the sixth day, she started to grow anxious.

Perhaps his injuries were worse than she'd realised? What if there was internal bleeding that she hadn't been able to stop?

No, he must have been fine. He had to be alright, because she was. She felt as strong as she ever had.

No, he was certainly alive.

Weak? Maybe.

Wounded pride? Possibly.

Avoiding her? Definitely.

### **1st March**

Despite Malfoy avoiding her like the plague, Hermione swore she could smell him everywhere she went. Swores she could still taste the ghost of him on her tongue; blood, smoke, earth, spearmint and fresh parchment. Unmistakable, and so undeniably Malfoy that it made her head spin.

But that was nothing compared to his eyes.

They haunted her more than anything else. She was couldn't stop thinking about them, those crisp, beautiful, bottomless blue eyes were everywhere she looked, even if Malfoy himself was nowhere to be seen.

His absence gave Hermione more free time than she knew what to do with, so she channelled her extra energy into working on her mural. She hadn't realised her obsession had gotten so out of hand until she'd stepped back to admire her work, and saw that she'd painted a flower - a Peony - in the *exact* shade of blue his eyes were. She couldn't even remember mixing the paints to find that perfect shade. She'd erased the flower with one furious swipe of white paint and stormed outside.

That was what had led her to the bench under the cherry blossom tree.

So why did she feel so guilty every time she saw him now? Why did pity swell in her chest every time she heard his voice? Why was it that every time he cast the Legilimency spell - the only word he'd spoken to her since her intrusion - that the sound of his choked, strangled sob rang between her ears?

She'd been right; his broken voice had buried itself into her head. The quiet little whimper that had slipped past his quivering lips was scratching inside of skull. Malfoy had been different with her since the day of 'the incident'. He was much colder than when she'd first been captured - if that were even possible. He didn't try to tease her anymore, and he didn't rile her up before he barged into her head. He wouldn't even look at her. He was distant and detached, searched her mind wordlessly and watched her memories unfold without giving her so much as a sideways glance.

In a way, Hermione was thrilled that he couldn't seem to bring himself to look at her, because it meant she had won. She'd gotten to him. She'd wounded him. It was a small win, but a win nonetheless.

The few times he was forced to look at her, in those fleeting, *necessary* moments he looked into her eyes right before he forced himself into her mind, his eyes were dead. Emotionless. His Occlumency crafted into a protective wall around him. Strong and impenetrable.

No, Hermione wasn't sorry for what she'd done, she was just sorry for the things she'd seen.

She hated that every time she looked at him and saw the wall of Occlumency in his eyes, all she could think about were shards of glass and his mother's body, lying broken in his arms. She hated that every time she watched him escort Astoria around the estate, all she could see was the protective way he'd wrapped his arms around her, how he'd trembled as he'd held her up, whispering promises to keep her safe in a broken and frightened voice.

Hermione regretted the hurt and pain and heartbreak she'd seen in his eyes and wished she could fucking erase it - because it was all she saw when she looked at him now. And they made him appear warmer, *more alive*, and they were making it harder and harder for Hermione to remember the *demon* he really was.

# CHAPTER 15

She'd been out there all morning, her face tilted towards the sky with her eyes closed while she basked in the unexpected February sun. It had been freezing last week, and although she still had a cardigan wrapped around her body, she found she didn't need to cling to it for warmth as much as she had a few days ago.

Hermione listened to a group of small birds chirping somewhere nearby. She drew a deep breath, smiling a little as the sun warmed her cheeks -

The birds stopped singing, and her face suddenly felt very, very cold.

Every muscle in her body went rigid. She didn't have to open her eyes, or hear that familiar flap of wings to know what loomed overhead, steadily growing nearer and nearer.

And if Black Shadow was here, then Malfoy would surely be with her.

Hermione wasn't sure why the thought of seeing him again instantly made her feel on edge, or why the prospect of seeing those impossibly blue eyes lit a small spark of something in her stomach. Was that nervousness? Or excitement?

Whatever it was, she worked to extinguish it.

She kept her eyes tightly closed, and she fought the urge to clench her hands into fists as the windfall the dragon created picked up, hurling her curls around her face. She knew that the dragon was close, but she still couldn't help but jump when its hind legs touched the ground, and the bench shook violently under its colossal weight.

Another tremor hit when the dragons front claws hit the earth, and Hermione's eyes snapped open to watch the beast slowly lower her neck and shoulder to the ground.

Malfoy slid off of her back, his knees bending softly as he landed on the ground. He stayed by her side for a moment, and ran his gloved hands across her scaled shoulder.

Hermione's heart jumped when he turned to face her. He was wearing his Death Eater robes, the black demon mask firmly in place and covering his expression. She tried to keep her face impassive, neutral and giving nothing away, but when Malfoy's dragon sharply turned her head towards Hermione, her breath caught.

The small dent to his pride wasn't nearly punishment enough to atone for the things he'd done. It wouldn't even come close to wiping the blood clean from his ledger, but it was a start. It was proof that she could hurt him, she just needed to bide her time and wait for another opportunity. He deserved to be punished. She wanted to break him, to give him a taste of his own medicine.



## READY TO DIE?

**5th February**

Hermione wasn't sorry for what she did. Not in the slightest.

She wasn't sorry that she'd somehow - by some unexpected miracle, a happy fucking accident - managed to get into his head, or for the memories she'd intruded on. Why should she be? It was no different than what he'd been doing to her for months. No worse or crueler than anything he'd done to her a hundred times over.

The small dent to his pride wasn't nearly punishment enough to atone for the things he'd done. It wouldn't even come close to wiping the blood clean from his ledger, but it was a start. It was proof that she could hurt him, she just needed to bide her time and wait for another opportunity. He deserved to be punished. She wanted to break him, to give him a taste of his own medicine.

The dragon bowed her head as she approached, that low grumbling sound vibrating from her chest as her teeth lined up with Hermione's torso.

Terror crept into Hermione's bones. She held up her hands and took a step to the right, intending to move out of Black Shadow's path, but when she tried to take another, Malfoy's hand shot up.

Hermione stared at him, watching as he quickly pulled his Demon Mask from his face and shook his head at her, indicating she should stop. He looked just as nervous as she felt. His eyes were narrowed, and his lips were pressed into a tight line.

The earth under Hermione's feet shook as Black Shadow stalked her. When the dragon stopped in front of her, her panicked eyes darted to Malfoy again, pleading that he command his pet to stop, but he just shook his head.

His gloved hand was still raised, palm still facing Hermione. "Keep still," he mouthed slowly. "Don't move."

Hermione held her breath, her eyes involuntarily pinching closed when the dragon moved even closer.

The heat that radiated from her scaled body was almost stifling; it was humid and dry, like being stood next to an open flame; a part of her wondered how Malfoy could stand to be so close to her all the time.

Black Shadow curled her body around Hermione, her scaled cheek rested snugly against her chest while she nudged the witch back against her torso.

Hermione's muscles ached as she worked to lock them in place. The dragon curled herself tighter still, almost constricting like a python - although it didn't exactly hurt, or cut off her air the way Hermione had expected it to.

She met Malfoy's eyes again, pleading with him to stop this, to do something and not let his beast maul her to death. He owed her. Surely saving his life - although she'd done it for entirely selfish reasons - had earned her a more merciful death than *this?*

The heat continued to rise as Black Shadow pressed tighter into Hermione's body. Her hands shot up, and she laid them against the dragon's cheek and tried to push her away. Black Shadow's scales were warm and rough under Hermione's palm, like touching a piece of coal that had jumped from the fire minutes ago and was already cooling.

He drew a deep, final drag, crunched the expired butt under his boot, then stood and took her arm. "I'm leaving on the 12th," he said as they made their way back towards the manor.

Astoria looked up at him.

"The Dark Lord has an assignment he needs me to take care of in Italy," he continued. "I'll only be gone for a few days."

"Oh, well then that'll mean Hermione will be on her own for a day or two." Astoria pursed her lips, her eyes on the clouds above, deep in thought, a trait she'd inherited from her husband. "I'll have to get the elves to set charms so her meals appear in her room. I wonder if there are any particular meals she would—" Astoria sighed when Draco arched a brow. "Don't tell me you've forgotten already? I reminded you on Monday that Blaise and I are going to Germany next week, and Theo has to be in Manchester for a few days."

"Sorry if I can't remember everything, Tori. I'm a little busy being the Dark Lord's chief general and torturing countless hostages to remember every mundane detail you blather on about," Draco growled, and then instantly regretted it. He'd already snapped at Astoria once today; he might lose his drinking partner if he did it again. "Can't the house-elves watch her?"

"No, we're taking them with us."

"Why?"

"Hermione is not a dog Malfoy," Astoria interrupted. "She's more than capable of being alone for a few days. It might do her health - and her sanity - good to have a break from us all. Heaven knows the constant stream of death and blood you boys pour into the manor can be stifling."

Draco didn't trust himself to respond. Instead, he tilted his head towards the house, intending to trace patterns in the brick while he listened to Astoria's ramblings, only to lock onto a pair of warm, honey-coloured eyes from a bedroom window high above, and for some reason, he found himself unable to look away. They were eyes that used to look at him with such malice and anger and hatred burned into them. Eyes that were fierce, and glowed with a type of determination that only a lioness could conjure.

But those eyes - fuck, those eyes held nothing but sympathy and pity when they looked at him now, and he fucking hated her for it.

Astoria scoffed and drained what was left in the flask. "Like I would tell you what it is and lose my advantage - and don't try and change the subject. You spend an awful lot of time with Hermione, don't tell me you haven't noticed how lovely she is?"

"Has anyone ever told you how blissfully annoying you are?"

"I've seen the little glances you give her when you think no one's watching."

"Like a blonde cockroach, just begging to be squished?"

"-you're spending hours and hours in her head, it's only natural that you would form a connection with her."

"You're looking for things that aren't there, Astoria," Malfoy sneered, the exhale engulfing him in smoke. "I spend time with her because I am required to do so at the Dark Lord's request. Achieving the goal he's set requires time and patience. Unfortunately, I can't complete it from a distance." He groaned when he realised his cigarette had expired. He crushed the butt under the heel of his boot and lit a fresh one before he continued. "And those 'little glances' that you're referring to are merely my checking of her physical health. The Dark Lord requires her in top condition if she's to be useful, and I can't have her tripping and breaking her neck down the stairs because she's dizzy from blood loss."

"You think she has pretty eyes," Astoria cut him off, her lips twitching into a smirk. "Even if you do want to gouge them out, you still think they're pretty."

If Astoria had slapped Draco across the face, it would have shocked him less. He stared at her, eyes wide and mouth hanging open slightly. She really didn't miss a thing; she was an insightful little bleeder.

When Draco stayed quiet, her smirk stretched into an enormous grin. "Your ancestors didn't make the walls very thick when they built this estate, and you're very loud when your angry."

"It's impolite for a lady to eavesdrop~"

The tiny blonde dismissed him with a wave of her hand. "I don't blame you. Her eyes are quite beautiful, but she has a smile that could melt ice." She stood from the bench and flattened non-existent creases in her skirt, then turned back and smiled at Draco. "I think it could even melt the ice around your cold little heart, if you let her." She gave him a look and held out her arm, an invitation to continue their walk, and he was grateful for her willingness to change the subject.

Malfoy's eyes were wide and frantic. He took a step forward, looked as though he were opening his mouth to breathe a command at his beloved pet, but then he stopped.

Because then the dragon did something neither Hermione nor Malfoy expected.

She purred.

At first, Hermione thought she'd imagined it. She must have. The dragon was trying to crush her, so why would she be purring? But then Black shadow did it again, the sound much more recognisable now. Hermione knew what she was listening for. She even nuzzled her warm cheek into Hermione's still open hand as she coiled her body tightly around her, and it wasn't until Malfoy's brows shot into his hairline that Hermione realised what was happening.

The dragon wasn't trying to suffocate her, she wasn't trying to hurt her at all. She was trying, in her own way, to comfort Hermione. She was trying to thank her for saving Malfoy's life.

Moving ridiculously slow, Hermione rubbed her palm against the dragon's head. She was sure the creature would be able to feel how her hands shook while they petted her, but she made no effort to move. In fact, the dragon seemed to mewl at the touch, cooing like a feline as a soft clicking sound emitted from her throat. It was minutes before the beast gently released Hermione and walked away. Malfoy watched as she passed him, his eyes were thoughtful and contemplating as she found a patch of grass she liked and curled herself into a tight ball to rest. The way she slept, with her tail curled around her body and her snout tucked beneath one of her wings, reminded Hermione an awful lot of Crookshanks.

"You looked worried," Hermione said quietly, watching a little crease form between Malfoy's brows. "I thought you were going to let her eat me."

Malfoy slowly shook his head, eyes still on his dragon as she warmed her scales in the sunlight. "She's never done that before."

"Done what?"

"*That*," he said, gesturing to Hermione. "Been affectionate with anyone besides me. She won't let anyone else even touch her."

Hermione's brows furrowed. "You're not serious?"

"Deadly," Malfoy snorted. "Not even the Dark Lord can go near her. At first, I thought she just didn't like Death Eaters but she's the same with everyone. She

tolerates Astoria, but even she can't go near my dragon without risk of losing a finger." He shook his head again, and seemed to lose some of his bewilderment.

Malfoy sat on Hermione's bench, and pulled a packet of cigarettes from his robes. He kept his eyes down as he lit one and took a long drag, then tilted his head towards the sky and slowly exhaled, fanning a thick stream of smoke into the air.

Hermione's mouth ran dry as she watched him.

When Malfoy met her eyes again, he patted the empty space on the bench beside him, gesturing for her to sit. She was hesitant at first, she thought it might be some sort of trick, but when he lit a second cigarette and held it out to her, all of her restraint vanished.

She all but sprinted to the bench. She sat as far away from him as it allowed, and took the cigarette with greedy fingers.

Malfoy was silent as she took the first drag, but she could feel his eyes on her. She mirrored him, tilting her head towards the sky as she held the smoke in her lungs. It burned beautifully, better than she remembered, she almost didn't want to let it go.

She moaned quietly as she released the smoke from her mouth, and she thought - although she wasn't entirely sure - she saw Malfoy's tongue dart out to wet his lips when she did. She was half-drunk on that first intoxicating, mouth-watering lungful of nicotine though, so she couldn't be sure.

Hermione closed her eyes and took another deep drag, relishing in her long missed addiction. The bud was halfway to expiring before she could tear her attention away from it enough to speak again. "How are your wounds?"

There was a few seconds of silence before he answered. "They're fine." He cleared his throat, and Hermione swore he sounded uncomfortable. Maybe even nervous. "Thank you... for what you did."

He could feel Astoria watching him from over the top of her flask. "She's quite beautiful, don't you think?"

Malfoy took another drag and tilted his head towards the clouds. "Is she?" Astoria tsked; he practically heard her eyes rolling in her head. "Don't pretend you haven't noticed."

Hermione nodded and brought the butt to her lips again. She didn't open her eyes to check, but she swore she could still feel his stare burning into the side of her face.

It ended all too quickly. Just as that buzz started to form around her temples, the butt expired. Hermione tried not to be too disappointed, tried to keep the dismay off her face as she dropped the nub to the floor and crushed it under her boot.

She started to tap her foot to the gravel, agitated. She needed something to distract her, something to stop her thinking about the dark wizard still smoking beside her. Now she didn't have her own smoke cloud to shield her, she started to become

weren't even worthy of wearing the simple Black Masks to begin with. The Dark Lord's ranks would be stronger without them.

The next night he'd sought out Astoria's preferred medicine, and tried to find peace at the bottom of a bottle of aged whisky. Astoria had been all too eager to join him, and the pair had raided his father's liquor cabinet like excited children on Christmas morning. Astoria passed out around 2 am, Draco around 4.

Astoria elbowed him suddenly when Granger appeared from behind the cluster of blooming Crocus flowers. She had her black cardigan pulled tight around her body, and a cup of steaming tea in her hands. She froze when she saw Draco and Astoria. She paused mid-step, and her eyes widened a fraction. Then she offered Astoria a warm smile, gave her a little wave, and left in the direction she'd come from. She didn't look at Draco.

"She seems quite taken aback when she finds us sitting here," Astoria said as Granger's bushy hair disappeared around the corner. "I think she's grown quite fond of this bench."

"Has she?" Draco drawled, uninterested.

"Mhmm." Astoria paused to sip from her flask. "It's odd, don't you think? That she would find herself drawn to this particular bench, over all the others scattered around the estate?"

"Not really."

He could feel Astoria watching him from over the top of her flask. "She's quite beautiful, don't you think?" Malfoy took another drag and tilted his head towards the clouds. "Is she?" Astoria tsked; he practically heard her eyes rolling in her head. "Don't pretend you haven't noticed."

"She's a filthy Mudblood Astoria. She's only here because the Dark Lord has used for her. If he didn't have plans for her, I'd have already ripped her liver out and fed it to the dragon."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Don't lie to me Draco, you know you've never been any good at it." The bench creaked as she shuffled closer to him. "Ever since we were children, I've always been able to tell when you're lying."

"Really?" he huffed. "And what *exactly* gives me away?"

irritation for his rudeness, anger for snapping at her, and compassion when she noticed the anxious way he twisted the silver ring on his pinkie finger. Eventually, she sighed, leaned against the bench, and withdrew her silver flask from a pocket in her dress.

Draco took another drag of his cigarette.

Astoria leaned away and made a face when he exhaled. "I wish you boys wouldn't poison yourself with that awful stuff."

He looked at her out of the corner of his eye and smirked. "Really? How are your forms of poison any better than mine?" he asked, tapping the edge of her flask.

"Touché Draco," Astoria chuckled quietly, then took a healthy swig. "Touché indeed."

He was glad when Astoria started up a conversation about bleaching spells shortly after that, her animated chatter about caring for her altered blonde hair distracted him from the dark turn his thoughts had been edging towards. As always, Astoria had hit the nail right on the head. She wasn't nearly as dim as she liked people to believe she was.

Draco hadn't been able to get Granger out of his head since her intrusion into his mind. He'd tried to, Merlin he'd fucking tried. As soon as he'd left her room, he'd Apparated to Voldemort's base and spent the next several hours channelling his rage into torturing the hostages there. It didn't work. The pain didn't lessen when he'd sliced the finger of one of the male hostages off, the ache in his chest - the one that had been tightening, threatening to suffocate him since he'd seen his mother's limp body in his arms - didn't ease when he'd crushed the hand of another.

The more curses he'd cast, the more he realised his efforts were futile, and the more palpable his rage became. His anger had gotten the better of him eventually, as it usually did. He'd cast a hex a little too harshly while thinking about the pitiful look he'd seen in Granger's eyes, and ended up slicing Katherine Thomas's head off her shoulders in one clean swipe.

Voldemort would have been furious if he'd found out that *another* of the hostages had prematurely expired. Luckily Draco had the common sense to dispose of the body, and alter the memories of the guards watching the hostages before they'd realised what he'd done. The Dark Lord would think the guards - two new and utterly useless Black Masks - had suffocated her to death while securing her chains. He'd kill them for it, but Draco didn't really care about that. They were useless,

acutely aware of Malfoy. Of how close he was to her, and the way he smelled Earth. Smoke. Spearmint. Fresh parchment.

She needed a distraction. *Now*.

"Do you get injured on the field a lot?" she found herself asking, wasn't sure why. She heard him snort, saw a wave of grey smoke come billowing out of his mouth out the corner of her eye. "It's not something I make a habit of, no."

Hermione nodded. Her foot resumed its tapping on the gravel.

Seeing through her pathetic need for a distraction, Malfoy continued. "I've not had an injury on the battlefield for a long time, especially when I'm with my dragon."

He paused to take another drag. He only held it in for a second before he spoke again. "She always protects me and I'm usually quick enough to cast shields or deflect those nasty bullets your muggle friends use."

Hermione nodded again and found herself shuffling a little closer to him, trying to inhale sneaky pockets of second-hand smoke.

"The mission was going very well," he went on, "but I knew something was wrong the second I looked at those soldiers. The guns were different, the bullets even more so. No matter what charm I cast, they refused to be manipulated. They just came barrelling towards us and there was nothing I could do to stop them."

A thought suddenly struck Hermione. She twisted to face him, lifted her legs onto the bench, and crossed them before she asked, "How were the guns different?"

Malfoy quirked a brow when he noticed her change in posture, and how close she was sitting to him. Her bent knee was almost touching his hip. "They were larger, and seemed to be made of a different type of metal."

Hermione nodded. She subconsciously bit her lip to keep from saying more, although she instantly released it, Malfoy noticed, and seemed to catch on that she was holding something back. She could almost see the gears turning in his head, and his lips twitched when he realised. "The bullets and guns were charmed."

Hermione said nothing, she didn't need to. The bewildered look on his face was reward enough on its own.

His eyes flickered as he stared at her. "I take it that it was your handy work?"

Hermione fought to keep the grin off her face. "Just something I was working on before you snatched me away."

He carried on looking at her for a few more moments, almost like he couldn't stop himself, and then he laughed. A real, authentic laugh; quiet and breathy. One that made his eyes crinkle at the sides and a little flush colour his cheeks. "If that isn't karma, I don't know what is." He shook his head, still laughing. "My first serious injury on the battlefield in almost two years, and it was somehow *your* doing."

Hermione couldn't help but chuckle with him, even if it was only for a few seconds.

"*Fuck me-* even locked away and held hostage, you still manage to be a pain in the arse on the battlefield. How is that even possible, Granger?"

Before Hermione could answer, a huffing sound caught her attention. The noise came from the dragon. She had one eye open, and was growling while Quinzell started to replenish the grass she'd dug up with her landing, muttering and stomping her tiny feet while she worked.

"Your dragon really is beautiful," Hermione found herself admitting. "I've never really taken the time to look at her before. I suppose it's harder to truly appreciate how beautiful something is when you're terrified of it."

Malfoy didn't say anything, just rested his arm across the back of the bench and twisted back to face his dragon.

"I must admit, I'm embarrassed to say I don't know much about dragons."

"Something *you* don't know?" Malfoy asked sarcastically. "There's a sentence I never thought I'd hear."

"What breed is she?"

"Scandinavian Firehorn. She's the last one, as far as I'm aware," he said, and his eyes softened fondly as he looked at his dragon. "They were a deadly race, which is why the Vikings bred and raised them. Astonishingly fast. Almost indestructible once they're fully grown. They were considered to be the most intelligent of all dragon species." His voice was so low and soft as he spoke about her, much gentler than Hermione had ever heard it.

Although she was dying to ask him questions, dying to dip her toe in and learn, she resisted. She didn't want to interrupt him.

"They're a very stubborn species, so stubborn that it almost led to their extinction." The butt he'd been nursing finally expired, and he crushed it under his boot before he continued. "When they hatch, they pair themselves with a single rider

His eyes snapped from the floor to meet her inquisitive stare.  
"Something on your mind?"

Draco shrugged as he guided her past the rose bushes that were yet to bloom this year. "No."

Astoria fell quiet. She didn't say a word as Draco led her past the winding Wisteria plants, or even as they rounded the lake on the East Side of the grounds. By the time they reached their bench - the one under the cherry blossom tree - Draco started to grow irritable, and the screams started to whisper to life again.

He transfigured a blanket from a black handkerchief in his pocket, laid it down gently on the bench, then gestured for Astoria to take a seat.

"Are you alright?" she asked as he sat beside her. "You haven't been yourself for the last few days."

"Yes."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes!"

"Because if you're not, then you should tell me."

"I'm fine Astoria," he hissed through gritted teeth. He withdrew a packet of cigarettes from his robes and lit one with the tip of his wand. His other hand stretched against the back of the bench, drawing invisible patterns on the polished oak with his index finger.

Astoria had the common sense to allow him a few merciful drags before she continued with her inquisition. "Is it because of what Hermione saw in your mind?" she asked, her face full of concern. "The memory of your mother?"

Draco's hand tightened against the back of the bench. "No."

"I know it must have brought a lot of things to the surface. It must have been painful."

"No, it wasn't," he hissed again, venomous enough to make Astoria wince slightly. "Salazar, you're as bad as your husband. I've said it once, I've said it a thousand times, *I don't want to talk about it*. Not with Theo, not with Blaise, and certainly not with you."

Astoria stared at him for a moment, her lips pressed into a tight line while dozens of emotions flashed behind her brown eyes; concern for his unkempt appearance,

Draco couldn't speak. Everything Blaise said made perfect, logical sense. It would explain why he bled afterwards and she didn't; how she'd gained access to two of his most painful and secretive memories with no effort at all; why it took him so long to find her, and why she was able to hide from him, even in his own head. He'd been looking for her magical signature, for an intruder, a foreign tingle of magic that shouldn't be there. He'd never thought to look for his own.

"You essentially gave her the keys to your memories," Blaise continued when Draco didn't answer. "Whether she's aware that she can do it again is another matter entirely."

*Again.* That one little word snapped through Draco like the crack of a whip. "Not a chance. She's not getting into my head again. I'll up her dosage of the potions. She can drown in them for all I care."

### 9th February

Draco was quiet when he escorted Astoria through the grounds that afternoon. He listened, tight-lipped and eyes on the floor, while her gentle voice prattled on about expensive diamond necklaces she desired and exotic wines she'd discovered in Paris.

He was listening, but he couldn't really *hear* her. His mind was miles away, too occupied with possible magic chann - *stealing* - witches to absorb her words. It wasn't that he didn't enjoy his walks with her; sometimes they were the highlight of his day. Astoria wasn't merely his oldest and closest friend; she was his sister.

Ever since they were children- forced to play together by their mothers- Draco had always found her company soothing. She always cheered him up, always seemed to know exactly what to say to banish those nightmarish thoughts that sometimes scratched away at him. Whether she distracted him with magazines about A-lined skirts, or forced him to craft jewellery boxes for her like when they were children, Astoria always seemed to find a way to distract him, and make him smile. It shouldn't have been surprising really. She was a charming, sweet little thing, drawn to all things shiny and beautiful. She reminded Malfoy of a magpie. If magpies had drinking problems...

Astoria had always occupied a special place in Draco's cold, black heart. Which is why, after twenty-five years of friendship, he should have known that the artificial blonde beside him did not like to be ignored. Ever. Under any circumstances.

She broke his thoughts by jarring him gently in the ribs. "Boring you, am I?"

for life. As I said, they were bred from Vikings. All they know is strength and power, they're drawn to it. So naturally, they only want to pair themselves with the strongest warriors."

Hermione nodded thoughtfully. "That makes sense, it's like a survival instinct. Natural selection. Strength attracts strength."

Malfoy nodded. "Exactly. However, when they can't find the strength they're looking for, the eggs go dormant. Her egg had been in my family for around four hundred years. Everyone thought it had died long ago, so it sort of became a family heirloom." He started to twist one of the silver rings he wore, the one with the Malfoy family crest on his index finger. "My mother always insisted the egg was still alive, just sleeping, waiting for the right warrior to pair with." He chuckled quietly. "She used to tell me bedtime stories every night about dragons and flying. Father hated it, of course. Said she was filling my head with nonsense and fairy tales and distracting me from school." He changed rings, alternated to twisting the smallest one on his pinkie finger. "She would never let me touch the egg though. Always insisted that I leave it alone. She even put it on the highest shelf in the manor so I couldn't get to it. Just before she passed, she told me it was time and that I was ready."

Malfoy paused, and tilted his head to look at Hermione. When he saw that she was still listening with fascination probably burning in her eyes, he carried on.

"So, after they...died, I went straight to the egg. As soon as I touched it - I felt my magic seep into it. It was like she was testing me, checking to see if I was strong enough. Seconds later, she hatched."

Hermione didn't know how to respond to that, so she didn't. She just watched as the dragon slowly settled down to sleep again, her thoughts filled with a blue eyed child frantically stretching to snatch a dragon egg that was just out of his reach.

As the seconds ticked by, her agitation start to spark back to life. She clenched her hands into fists and began tapping her foot again.

Malfoy stirred beside her, and when she looked at him, he was holding another cigarette out towards her, already lit.

She moved to snatch it, but before her fingers found their purchase, he pulled his hand away and held the cigarette just out of her reach.

"I'll give you this," he said slowly, eyes on hers. His voice was soft and velvety, it gave her goose bumps. "If you answer one question."

Hermione was all too quick to answer. "Shoot."

"Why did you save me?"

Her expression twisted into something nasty without her permission, it was probably a reflex at this point. "It's not like I had a choice," she spat, a little harsher than she meant to. "If I would have let you die, then I would have died too."

Malfoy stared at her for a few moments, and Hermione found herself unable to look away. Although his eyes were mostly grey, a small sliver of that ocean blue was clinging around the edges. It was only a small thing, something she might have missed if she weren't looking at him so closely.

Malfoy rolled his tongue on the inside of his cheek, then drew a deep breath. He closed his eyes, and when he opened them again seconds later, the tiny glint of blue was gone. His Occlumency walls were high and secure.

He wordlessly handed her the cigarette, despite her answer clearly not being the one he wanted, then leaned back on the bench, as far away as the small space allowed, and stared at his dragon.

"I thought about it, about letting you die." Hermione wasn't sure if it was a lie or the truth at this point. "There was a second when you were lying there, bleeding out and so fucking close to death, that I realised I could. I could have just stepped back and let it happen."

She watched Malfoy clench his jaw.

"It's not as though you don't deserve it. You've earned a death like that a thousand times over."

Malfoy twisted his ring angrily, but didn't say a word.

"But then I realised I couldn't. I couldn't let you die like that. And when Black Shadow—"

Malfoy sharply turned his head to look at her from over his shoulder. "What's a Black Shadow?"

"That's the name the Order gave your dragon," she clarified, figuring it wasn't damaging to reveal that tiny facet of information. "Black Shadow."

Something flashed behind Malfoy's eyes again, some minuscule emotion that Hermione couldn't place burned around the edges before it quickly diminished. He looked back toward the beast in question, and his expression abruptly grew closed off. He drew a deep breath, then sighed, "It's Narcissa."

Blaise nodded thoughtfully. "Do you think it could link you in other ways? Perhaps there's more to it than he's led you to believe? I've been going through some of the ledgers in your family library."

"Oh just spit it out would your?" Theo snapped. "Some of us have better things to do than stand around here all day, gossiping like old women!"

"Go on then!" Draco hissed, irritated. Theo might have been one of his oldest friends, but his patience was steadily drying out for the sarcastic Gold Mask. If Theo didn't bite his tongue soon, he would risk losing it. "Run along, off you go, before I think of a suitable hex to punish you for your insubordination today."

A scowl snapped its way onto Theo's usually expressionless features. His lip curled, he took a step forward and pointed his wand at Draco.

His dragon growled again. Her gums retracted as she took an aggressive step towards Theo, causing the very foundations of the bridge to shudder under her weight.

Theo immediately lowered his wand and took several cautionary - and smart - steps back. He glared at Draco for several seconds, squared his shoulders, and then apparated away with a violent crack.

"So?" Draco asked as soon as Theo disappeared. "What's your theory?"

Blaise met his eyes. "It's only a theory at this point. I'm not even sure if it's possible. The circumstances are quite unique, so I'm not sure how accurate a hypothesis it is." He fastened the cufflinks on his robes while he spoke, a habit he'd picked up years ago. It meant his thoughts were muddled, and Blaise often worked through that inner mess of thoughts by straightening his outward appearance. If his attire and expression were organised, then his mind would quickly organise itself to do the same. "I believe- and again, I'm not sure how possible this is - that she channelled your magic when she touched you, and then used it against you."

Draco's jaw went slack. "So you're saying she *stole* it?"

Blaise shook his head. "No, not exactly. Borrowed would be more accurate. Legilimency is essentially magic of the mind, and the blood curse the Dark Lord used to link you gave you greater access into her mind, did it not?"

Draco slowly nodded his head.

"Well, I think that your connection - coupled with a possible tolerance she's built up of the Anti-Magic potions over time - may have allowed her to channel your spell and use it to get into your head."

Ginny Potter walked into the room a few seconds later, with Rose's twin brother Fred and their youngest child Severus. Severus was resting on her hip with his arms curled tightly around her neck, while Fred fiddled with a small piece grey of metal that Harry was sure he was most definitely *not* supposed to have.

One thing Harry had always known for certain, was that the names he and his wife had given their children were perfect.

Fred, despite having Harry's green eyes and Ginny's flaming red hair, was the absolute reincarnation of the uncle he'd been named after. Although not as confident as his sister, he was mischievous, sneaky, and rather clever when he applied himself. Although Rose and Fred were a Potter in name, the Weasley blood ran just a little stronger in their veins, and he loved them all the more for it. Their uncle Fred would have adored them.

The youngest of their brood, three-year-old Severus, could not have been more different to the twins. Severus's hair was a much darker shade of red, and he had Ginny's eyes rather than Harry's. He was very quiet in comparison to his brother and sister; he preferred to play alone or listen to his mother read to him rather than cause mischief like the twins did.

Rose's eyes lit up when she noticed what Fred was playing with, and she summoned him over by urgently waving her small hands. Once he was close, they started whispering to one another immediately, no doubt plotting in the secret language they created when they were two-years-old. They really were the next generation of Fred and George Weasley, heaven only knew what trouble they would get up to when they were older.

"Kingsley!" Ron shouted as he limped into the office seconds later. His face was covered in ash and dirt, and there were blotches of blood scattered over his shirt.

Harry wasn't sure if it was his or someone else's - didn't dare ask in front of his children.

When Ginny caught sight of her brother, the blood between his fingers and the crazed, frantic look in his eyes, she scooped Fred up in her arms and rested him on her other hip. Harry kept his arms securely around Rose.

"You need to see this!" Ron panted. He strode past Harry, Ginny and the children like he didn't see them, and slammed both of his hands on Kingsley's desk. "We were out near Essex, and you need to see what we found!"

"Did ... did you go outside the perimeters I set up?" Kingsley asked, the calmness in his voice suddenly gone.

"Yes, but you won't believe..."

"How dare you disobey a direct order!" Kingsley rose from his desk, his face twisting into an angry scowl. "I specifically said that no one is to go beyond the boundaries, even for this mission! It's too risky and..."

"You can't expect me to just sit here and do nothing while Hermione is out there!" Ron bellowed back, tone stronger than Harry had heard it in years. "We've done it your way for months! I've sat here, listening to your orders..."

"Ron!" Ginny hissed, silently motioning to the quivering children on her hips. They'd never seen their sweet uncle Ron like this. Severus looked as though he were about to cry, while Fred's eyes were wide with terror.

Rose, however, was smiling. Although she'd nestled herself safely into the space against her father's neck, her head securely tucked under his chin, she was beaming with curiosity as she watched her uncle scream and shout.

"I cannot believe that you would disobey me like this!" Kingsley went on. "You have no idea of the dangers you've put the people of this base in..."

"Oh give it a rest, would ya?!" Ron leaned in and glared right back at Kingsley, refusing to be intimidated. "If you would just *listen* to what I'm saying, you'll see that..."

While Kingsley and Ron argued, Seamus and Terry boot shuffled into the holding a curious-looking charred box between them, both as crusied and battle worn as Ron. They sat the box down on Kingsley's desk, and took a cautious step back.

Kingsley's brows shot into his hairline. "What is that?"

"We found it outside of a destroyed children's hospital," Ron said, watching Shacklebolt closely. "It's from *them*."

Kingsley leaned away from the box.

"It's alright, it's not a bomb," Ron said quickly. "We checked it for every trap we could think of before we brought it here. It's safe." He kept his eyes on Kingsley as he slowly pushed the box towards him. "But you're going to want to look at what's inside."

Rose leaned out of Harry's arms and towards the box, undeniable curiosity burning into the green of her eyes as she tried to get a glimpse of what was inside.

Harry's arms tightened around her, and he guided her gently back towards his chest. "But dad—" she started to whine, wiggling in his hold and squirming to be free.

"No," Harry said sternly. "You can stay here with me, but you need to behave. Alright?"

The toddler scowled at him. "Okay," she huffed, pouting as she folded her tiny arms across her chest. If Harry weren't so nervous about what was inside the box, he would have found her expression hilarious.

Kingsley released an irritated breath, then placed his hands on the lid. He didn't break eye contact with Ron as she slowly lifted the top, making sure Ron knew how much trouble he was going to be in after this, but when he finally lowered his eyes and looked inside, he gasped and jumped back. His hand flew to his mouth, and his shoulders hunched as though he were about to be sick.

Harry stood immediately. He carefully passed a reluctant Rose to Terry Boot, then walked to the other side of the desk and dragged the box towards him.

Terry and Ginny quickly left with the children, and Harry made sure the sound of Ginny's boots clicking against the floor had vanished completely before he opened the lid.

Harry's first instinct was to mirror Kingsley, but he forced himself through it. Forced his hands to remain on the box, and not cover his mouth and nose as the smell of rotting flesh and flies battered into his senses.

The box had two things inside; a single blood-soaked, manicured, decomposing severed hand, and a note.

Harry swallowed his gag, and picked up the parchment. On the outside, he remained perfectly calm and composed, hiding the terror he felt clawing its way through his body. The letter shook slightly in his hand as he started to read the words that were written in an elegant, looped scrawl, perfect and refined; someone who'd had years and years of practice with a quill and ink.

"Dear Potter and the Order of the Gryffindorks,

Granger is alive - and no, this is not her hand. It belongs to your lovely scout, Melanie. She and Tom Thorne were captured a weeks ago and tortured for information by a couple of Gold Masks. This is the only piece of her that's left, thought you might want it, to bury, or burn, or whatever.

to understand, if he could just see how important Hermione was, he might let him go and help search for her. "She was always ready to help and do whatever was necessary, sacrificed whatever she needed to sacrifice for the greater good." Harry couldn't help the way his voice broke. "I mean, fuck - she Obliviated her parents, her only family, so she could come and help me look for Horcruxes."

Kingsley's stare was as empty as his eyes. He showed no signs of concern for Harry's distress, or that he agreed that Hermione was kind and brave. In fact, if their eyes weren't connected, Harry wouldn't have believed that Kingsley was listening to him at all.

"She does everything for everyone else," Harry said, "she never asks for anything in return, and now she's out there, all alone and thinking we've abandoned her. God knows what they're doing to her, and I'm just sat here—"

A sharp knock at the door interrupted Harry.

Kingsley raised his wand toward the door, looking at Harry sternly. "I trust I don't have to worry about you running off into battle as soon as I banish these chains?"

Harry stared at him for a little while, but eventually nodded.

With a wave of Kingsley's wand, the chains evaporated into a thin sheen of smoke. When the door creaked open, a small girl with bright red hair and twinkling green eyes came bounding into the office.

"Daaaaaad!" the five-year-old squealed as she jumped onto Harry's lap and wrapped her arms around his neck. "Found auntie Mione yet?"

"Not yet darling," Harry wheezed as his daughter's death grip began to cut off his air. For something so small and precious, she was freakishly strong - a trait she'd undeniably inherited from her mother. "We're working on it."

Rose loosened her grip and leaned back to stare at her father, her green eyes burning with questions. "Why not?" she demanded. Harry intended to respond, but his daughter cut him off - another trait she'd inherited from her mother. "You said her mission would be over soooooon. Soooooon is supposed to be close, not faaaaar away." She leaned forward and pressed her forehead against his, her long lashes brushed against his with each inquisitive blink, trying to stare him down and-

"Rose?" Ginny called from the hallway, her voice high and a little frantic.

"It's alright Ginny. I've got her!" Harry called. "We're in Kingsley's office!"

"Or they might have gone worse," Kingsley interrupted. He gestured for Harry to take the seat on the other side of his desk when he caught his eye. Harry pretended he hadn't seen and carried on pacing. "If you were on the field, you might have been captured as well, and then where would we be?"

"You don't know that!"

"Yes, I do," Kingsley said. Despite Harry's rudeness, his tone was just as soft and calming as it had been when Harry had barged into his office a few minutes earlier. "Believe it or not, I was chosen to be the leader of this force after Dumbledore's death for a reason. I know you don't always think so, but I know what I am doing Harry. Just be patient, I have faith this will all work out."

Harry kicked the swivel chair on the other side of the desk. It hurt his foot, but rather than yelp in pain, he continued marching the circle he'd created.

"Hermione was vital to morale. She was *-is*." Kingsley corrected when Harry's lip started to curl with anger, "our chief strategist and most lethal general. We haven't won a single battle since her capture, and I'm afraid the rest of the soldiers are losing confidence. Her capture has left ripples throughout the ranks, and no one feels much like fighting when they think we don't have a chance of winning. If we were to lose you as well Harry, I fear our troops' spirit will be snuffed out for good."

Harry slumped down into one of the chairs he'd abused. He dropped his face into his hands, feeling his anger start to diminish, only to be replaced by that dreaded sense of failure. That hollow, cold, heavy feeling in his chest that always made him want to curl into a ball and scream. "I just feel so... guilty," Harry said, voice muffled into his hands. "I feel like I've failed her."

Kingsley didn't respond, probably knew he didn't need to. He knew Harry well enough to know that if he kept his mouth shut, Harry would continue without prompt; sometimes he couldn't help it.

"Hermione was always there for us," he whispered. He felt broken, like a piece of himself had been snatched away, a piece he didn't realise was so important to him until it was gone. "She always knew exactly what to do. Always had a hundred contingency plans to get us out of any trouble we might find ourselves in before we'd even found it."

Kingsley started to tap his fingers on his desk.

"She was always there for me. Always." Harry's entire body trembled as he forced himself to sit up straight so he could look Kingsley in the eyes. He needed Kingsley

The Dark Lord plans a public announcement in the next week. Granger will be there, he means to use her as bait to draw you out of hiding- DO NOT FALL FOR THE BAIT!

DARK LORD WILL HAVE ALL HIS STRONGEST DOGS STANDING GUARD. IF YOU TRY AND THWART THIS ATTACK HEAD-ON, YOU WILL ALL DIE!

It'll start at 4 pm in Whitby, near the docks.

PLEASE, FOR THE LOVE OF ALL THAT IS HOLY, STAY AWAY FROM THE ATTACK!

I know Granger was the cleverest out of your lot, but surely the rest of you can rummage one brain cell between you and think outside the box?

Ha. Box. Do you get it?

Sorry, might be in poor taste.

Again, DO NOT GO FOR THE OBVIOUS ATTACK! You won't be able to touch Granger, and you'll just get yourselves killed.

All his best generals will be in Whitby, so his base in Sheffield will be left wide open and mostly defenceless. There are about twenty hostages there; Luny Luna and big ol' Hagrid included. Use this opportunity to get them out. DO NOT GO FOR GRANGER!

Be smart about this Potter, I can't keep sending you these helping hands if you're going to-

HAI! I did it again. 'Helping hand'.

As always, send Lilith my regards, I look forward to our next meeting when she's 'recovered'.

Medusa'

Half an hour later, Harry was sat on the edge of his bed, deep in thought as he stared out the window. He chewed on the inside of his cheek, replaying the argument he'd had with Kingsley - the one after he'd read Medusa's note - over and over again.

He'd been on his fifth replay when Ginny had burst into their bedroom like a whirlwind. She was always exceptionally calm when the children were around, but it was a different story when they were asleep.

"I can't believe Kingsley!" she hissed, swiping her brush through her hair so furiously that Harry was sure it must have been hurting her. "The nerve of him! I don't care if he's our leader, I don't care if he's the king of England, he does NOT get to order me around like that!"

Harry heard a loud bang behind him, and assumed she'd slammed her hairbrush down on the vanity table.

"We can't ignore the fact he's bringing her out in the open Harry," Ginny said quietly. "We can't leave her. It's too good of an opportunity to miss."

"How many Death Eater robes do we have in storage?" Harry asked, still facing away from his wife and looking out the window.

A minute passed by, then he heard the floorboards creak. The mattress dipped beside him, and then her slender arm was around his ribs.

Ginny rested her head against Harry's shoulder, and he instinctually laid his head on the top of hers. "Probably about forty," she said in a quiet, confused voice. "Maybe a few more if we can repair the stitching, some of the robes are in tatters. Why?"

Harry nodded. "And we have plenty of Death Eater masks?"

Ginny leaned back to look at him, but he kept his eyes forward. "I would say around fifty, although Kingsley doesn't like to keep them."

When Harry didn't say anything, Ginny placed a hand on either side of his face and forced him to look at her. Concern was etched onto every part of her delicate, freckled face. "What's going on?"

"You're right," Harry whispered. "We can't leave her."

A spark ignited in Ginny's eyes. "You have a plan?"

"Yes."

"And you want to keep it a secret from Kingsley?"

"Yes."

The mischievous smile that spread across Ginny's face was pure Weasley.

"We're going to bring her home."

Harry swallowed the lump in his throat. "Have you heard anything from them since they left?"

"Unfortunately not," Kingsley answered all too quickly. "But radio silence was encouraged on this mission. We didn't want to risk the opposition intercepting any of our transmissions and exposing us."

Sixteen hours on a mission outside of the base. It was far, far too long. They should have been back by now.

Harry should have been with them. What good was being the 'Chosen One' if he never left the base, if he just stayed back and let everyone else take risks while he remained safely behind the wards and protection barriers they'd set up? He should be leading the missions, a wand in one hand and a rifle in the other, just like everyone else!

Harry couldn't stand still. Couldn't stay within these concrete walls any longer. He needed to be out there, side by side with Ron and looking for Hermione.

Harry whirled around and stormed towards the exit, but before he could reach the doors, they flew closed, and a set of metal chains appeared and wrapped themselves around the brass handles like a pair of snakes, sealing him inside. He spun to face Kingsley. His expression twisted with the rage he felt clawing at his chest. "You think that will stop me?!"

"I'm afraid I can't allow you to go out on the field Harry," Kingsley said calmly, eyeing Harry from over his desk. "You're too valuable. You can't leave this base."

"But we need to get Hermione back..."

"No, what we need is to keep you safe." Kingsley sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. "I understand your urgency to rescue Grang..."

"Hermione," Harry corrected in a snarl.

"My apologies," Kingsley corrected himself, even though he looked very reluctant to do so. "I understand your urgency to rescue *Hermione*, but *you* are our priority."

"I can't just sit here and watch anymore!" Harry loosened the collar of his shirt as he felt that almost forgotten bite of anger claw higher through his body. He hadn't felt this angry in years, couldn't remember a time he'd truly wanted to lash out and hit something. "Hermione was captured because of me! If I was on the field, she would have had more support!" He started pacing again, and when a piece of furniture dared to cross his path, he kicked it viciously. "If I was on the field, things might have gone differently..."

"Talk about her like all she is is a soldier! She's a person! She's my best friend, and we need to get her back!" He took this fresh wave of rage out on a cupboard, leaving a boot sized dent in the oak.

Kingsley tensed in his chair. "Potter, I won't tell you again - *calm down*. We sent scouts out this morning to round up hostages that we can interrogate—"

A glint appeared in Harry's eyes. "When did they leave? Where are they? I'll go help—"

Kingsley raised his hand sharply, palm facing Harry and squishing his hope as quickly as it had sprung to life. "I'm still waiting for a report. Our scouts often don't come back at all, or only pieces of them do," he said, calm and composed, as he always was. "We need to proceed with caution."

Harry ground his teeth together. "How long?"

"How long what?"

"How long have they been gone?" Harry bit his hands clenched into fists at his sides.

Kingsley drew a deep breath, considering. It felt like a lifetime before he released it and finally answered, "We're approaching sixteen hours."

Harry's stomach dropped, dread washed over him like a tidal wave. "Who?" he asked, and when Kingsley didn't answer, Harry's voice grew borderline venomous. "Who. Went. On. The. Mission?"

"Weasley, Finnigan, Boot, and Moon."

Harry felt like the floor had vanished beneath him. He felt sick, dizzy. Ron had gone on a mission. He'd gone *outside*.

Ron didn't go on missions anymore. He'd hardly left the base since Bill's death, not that Harry blamed him. Fred's death had splintered something in Ron, and then seeing Bill torn to pieces from a dark curse Bellatrix had cast, right in front of him - well, it had finished the job. It had cracked him open and let everything that made Ron - *Ron*, pour out of him until he was empty. A shell. He hadn't been the same since. He was terrified of everything, every loud bang and scream of wind left him on edge and picking at the skin around his nails until it was bleeding and raw.

If Ron had gone outside willingly, then he must have been just as mindless with fear for Hermione's safety as Harry was.

## CHAPTER 18



### DEAD WITCH WALKING

**10th March**

"Your carriage awaits, *princess*."

"You're barking mad if you think I'm going anywhere with you!"

Nott had the audacity to tut and roll his eyes. "Jesus *fuck* - Malfoy said you were going to be difficult about this. Look Granger, I'm going to be honest with you, I don't have time to fuck about and play games this morning." He pushed himself off the doorframe he was leaning on and into Hermione's room. "Normally," he said in a low, playful voice, "I love games, fucking adore them. There's nothing more satisfying than toying with a witch."

Nott crossed the room in three easy strides, twirling his hand loosely between his fingers. Hermione took a few cautious steps to the left, putting the large four-poster bed as a shield between them, but Nott was all too quick to walk around it.

He stood a breath's distance away from her, a sly smirk peeling its way onto his features. "And believe me when I say, I really, *really* want to play games with you sweetheart." His eyes darkened as they raked over Hermione slowly, leisurely.

"There's nothing more satisfying than watching a pretty little thing squirm while they try and dissect every word I say, thinking every twitch of my hand could either be a curse, or a caress." He raised his hand towards her face as if he was about to tuck a stray curl behind her ear, Hermione instinctually tried to slap it away -

But Nott moved quicker than she did. He caught Hermione's wrist before her blow could land and dragged it down to rest against the bottom of her stomach. She tried to slap him with her other hand, but he caught that one too. She struggled as he pinned her wrists together with one hand, then sharply withdrew his wand and conjured a set of metal handcuffs around her wrists.

"I admire your tenacity, I really do," Nott said teasingly, his eyes down as he checked her restraints and put his wand back beneath his robes. "But the Dark Lord is rather pissed at me, and today we simply don't have the time to play." He looked up and caught her eyes again, the most devilish smirk cracking across his face. "He's planning on a very public announcement in Whiby, and you're the guest of honour. He's assigned me to deliver you there, all shiny and undamaged. No excuses, no exceptions. And he'll have my cock on a spike if we're late."

After being dragged through the manor by Nott - kicking and screaming the whole way - Hermione found a black carriage and two Threstrals on the gardens waiting for her.

As soon as they were in the air, she spent the entire journey discreetly checking for weak spots in her restraints, trying to find a rusting link or a weakness in the spell. Unfortunately, Nott's charm work was impeccable, just like it had been at school. The chains were unbreakable, strong as stone.

The carriage ride itself made Hermione feel sick. She'd never been good with flying. She'd always hated it; it made her feel dizzy and nauseous. She was too analytical for flying, that was the problem. There were too many things that could go wrong. Too many equations that didn't add up. Too many factors that could tip

"*Hom?*" Harry shouted. "How could you possibly be sure of that?"

"Because she's too valuable to kill," Kingsley answered simply. His tone was cold and detached, as if he were talking about an obscure item or a missing wand and not a person. Not Harry's best friend.

"Do you think so?"

Kingsley nodded once. "They'd be fools to kill her, and they know that. Make no mistake, they've probably tortured her in every way possible," Kingsley carried on despite Harry's wince. "But I have every confidence that she's alive."

There was a long, strained silence between them. Harry knew it was silly to get upset. He knew that Kingsley could be trusted, and that he was doing everything he could, but he couldn't help it. He was angry and on edge. Although his life had never gone the way he'd expected it to, he always felt in control. Always had an unwavering belief that everything would be alright, and that good would prevail in the end.

But since Hermione had been taken, he'd felt lost and frayed. As though his life was a tight, closely-knit ball and her capture had pulled a thread and caused everything to unravel. It felt a lot like in his fifth year at Hogwarts, when he'd been alone, terrified and plagued with scathing voices that told him he was useless while the world went to shit around him.

If he didn't have Ginny or his children, he swore he would have lost his sanity by now.

"We need to find her Kingsley," Harry said. "She can't be a prisoner for them any longer- she just can't."

"We're doing everything we can to get her back"

"WE'RE NOT DOING ENOUGH!" Harry started to pace Kingsley office. He kicked a nearby chair and sent it careening into the wall. "I should be out there right now!"

"I can assure you, I am doing everything I can. Granger is imperative to our victory, we've lost countless soldiers since her capture, and we cannot afford to lose an asset as lethal."

Harry stopped his pacing and glared at his superior. "Don't do that!"

A line appeared between Shacklebolt's brows. "Do what?"

the scales and send her hurtling towards the ground with no safety net and headfirst into a horrifying death.

## CHAPTER 17

She didn't think she could hate flying any more than she already did. Thought the short flight on the dragons' back after her robbery at Gringotts was the worst moment of her life. Then she was forced to share a carriage with two vicious, murderous Gold Masks, and she realised she would happily ride the Ukrainian Ironbelly again, from London to Australia with a smile on her face, a thousand times over.

Every time Hermione flinched, Zabini would narrow his eyes at her from across the carriage. Every time she shuffled on her bench, his hands would curl a little tighter around his wand - the wand that was *conveniently* aligned with Hermione's stomach, threatening her, reminding her that one wrong move might earn her an nasty Cruciatius curse.

Nott, however, couldn't have been more relaxed. He sat much too close to her and rested his arm on the back of her seat, and once he realised Hermione *didn't* like something he did, he became like a naughty child and did it again and again and again. No matter how many times she hit him, he continued to catch stray curls of hers and twirl them between his fingers. And no matter how hard she stamped on his foot, he continued roughly squeezing her knee *every time* they hit a bit of turbulence, just because he knew it got under her skin.

It felt like days before the carriage landed and the doors burst open. Hermione stood as the fresh air hit her face, but when Zabini scowled at her, she slowly sat back down.

While Zabini put on his mask and jumped from the carriage, Nott checked her restraints. Once he was satisfied, he threw her a wink, pulled the hood of her cloak up to hide her face, then put on his own mask.

Hermione was about to headbutt Nott, just because he'd pissed her off, but he dragged her to her feet and pushed her out the doors before she could slam her forehead against his.

The carriage had landed at the end of a stone dock. Nott stood behind Hermione, placed his hands on either of her shoulders, and started to guide her into a steady walk away from the ocean, and towards the town of Whiby itself.

They made their way through the rows of small houses that were clustered together up the winding stone path. Most of the windows they passed were broken



## A WEASLEY, NOT A POTTER

**4th March**

“We need to find her!”

“We will,” Kingsley sighed. “Potter, I promise we will. It won’t be much longer-”

“It’s been months!” Harry shouted. “We should have found her by now!”

“I know,” Kingsley sighed again, trying to mask his growing irritation. “Please, calm down.”

But Harry was not in the mood to calm down. He was *seething*. “We’ve wasted too much time! If she’s alive, Voldemort would have used her draw me out by now!”

“I’m sure she’s still alive.”

in, the gossamer curtains inside dancing gently in the wind, waving their burnt edges for all to see.

Nott didn't remove his hands as they walked. Instead, he curled his fingers around her shoulders and into the dip of her collarbone.

Zabini hovered close beside them. Hermione could feel his disgusted glare, even from beneath his mask.

The streets were filled with hoards of cloaked figures, all pressed tightly together and walking towards a derelict castle at the top of the hill. The sea of cloaks parted like the red sea when they saw the two Gold Masks, wordlessly giving the assassins a wide birth so they could guide Hermione through. It was probably meant to be a sign of respect, showing that they were thankful for the Death Eaters service to the Dark Lord - but Hermione caught several flinch in fear as the Golds approached.

The crowd joined them as they walked, forming a herd like locusts that followed them up the path and towards the Abbey.

"Nothing to see here folks," Nott sang as they made their way through the masses, "just a dead witch walking. *Dead with walking Dead with walking*."

"I'm *this* close to casting a silencing charm on you Nott," Zabini sneered from beneath his mask. "Now isn't the time for jokes and theatrics. We need to be on high alert. This crowd could be crawling with Order members."

Hermione heard Nott snort behind her. Saw Zabini's hand clench over his wand out the corner of her eye.

A platform had been made in front of the Abbey, constructed with tall dark wooden boards, strong oak beams, and a set of steps leading to the top. Hermione felt like she was being led to the gallows, all that was missing was the hangman's noose. The muscles in her neck ran cold at the thought.

A few dozen of Voldemort's loyal followers were already standing beneath the platform, eagerly waiting to hear their masters' wise words? There were some Black Masks and even fewer Gold Masks scattered in the hoards of cloaked figures, whilst most of the crowd was made up of civilians and other followers. They all wore dark, plain masks or had their hoods pulled down low to conceal their faces, but Hermione could still feel their eyes on her, burning her, trying to work out who was under her hood.

Nott guided her up the steps and forced her to stand on the right side of the platform, at the very front and on display for all to see. Just as Hermione started to

*pawnus.*" Tears slipped from the corners of her eyes. "He'll kill me and Blaise right on the spot. Probably torture Theodore and Draco too for helping keep it a secret."

"... I won't say anything," Hermione breathed, her voice was thick and quiet. She felt her chest tighten painfully as she stared into the blonde's eyes. "I promise, I won't say a word."

Astoria's smile returned. She closed her eyes, relieved. "Thank you. I knew I could trust you."

Hermione's mind started to race, working backwards on everything she knew about blood curses, hereditary conditions that caused blood loss and debilitation as severe as Astoria's, and came up blank. She couldn't recall a single herb that might soothe Astoria's pain, or a spell that could ease her symptoms further. It made Hermione feel more useless than she had in years.

"I'm... I'm so sorry Astoria," Hermione whispered. "I... don't know what to say." Astoria wiped her face with the back of her hand. "You don't have to say anything I made my peace with it a long time ago, but the boys... they still struggle. After what happened to Daphne, Draco swore he would do everything he could to protect me, to protect *us all*. We're more than just a group of friends that live together, we're a family."

Still unable to find the words, Hermione showed her sympathy the only way she could think of. She kept her hand tightly clasped around Astoria's and offered small, reassuring squeezes as fresh tears began to gather in Astoria's eyes.

"I know Draco has done awful things since the start of the war," Astoria said quietly. "He's sacrificed so much for us. He thinks he's damned himself straight to hell and that he doesn't have a soul anymore, but I don't believe that. Everything he's done has been to protect us. He lost one family, he refuses to lose another." Astoria closed her eyes and her hand tightened around Hermione's, she released a slow and shaky breath, and when she looked at Hermione again, her expression was nothing short of heartbroken. "He may be a demon by name, but I refuse to believe that a man who tore off his wings, only to use them as a shield to protect his family, could ever truly be soulless."

How was this fair? How was any of this *fair*? Astoria hadn't done anything wrong. She hadn't killed anyone. She looked as though she wouldn't hurt a fly. How was it that someone so sweet and kind was destined to suffer this way, yet someone like Voldemort, who wanted nothing but death and cruelty and suffering of others, was allowed to live without alms?

"But it's the reason all the boys fuss and hover around me. Why they treat me like I'm made of glass." Astoria paused to take a sip of her wine, and waited patiently for Hermione to do the same, as if Hermione needed the comfort as much as she did. "Blaise and I have been researching for years, and there are potions that help mask my symptoms."

Everything started to click into place for Hermione. The potions storage building that Zabini and Astoria seemed to spend hours and hours in. The strange smelling elixirs they brewed daily that Hermione couldn't quite place.

Mrs Zabini's special potions', Romy had said.

"I have good days and bad days," Astoria continued in a quiet voice. "Today was a particularly bad one. Most of the time you wouldn't know anything is wrong with me, but when my condition flares up, it makes me weak. Honestly, some days I struggle to get out of bed, but I always insist on going for a walk outside. Daphne always used to say the best medicine was a walk and fresh air, and sometimes I think she was right."

The way the men escorted Astoria around the estate daily, always holding onto her so tightly, like she might shatter if she were to fall. The way Malfoy always insisted on helping her up from her chair or taking her hand as he led her up a flight of stairs. They were doing these things because Astoria was weak - because she was dying.

Astoria leaned forward and caught Hermione's hand. "But please, please Hermione, you can't tell or share this with anyone."

Hermione opened her mouth to respond, to soothe, to offer reassurance, but she couldn't speak. Her throat was too tight, the lump there too large to force any words out.

"If the Dark Lord finds out about my condition, he'll kill me." Astoria squeezed Hermione's hand tightly, pleading. "He values vitality and strength above all else. My condition is everything he despises. Hell think that I'm tainted, that I'm

feel uncomfortable, just as that sickening sense of dread started to twist her stomach, Voldemort appeared, and a wave of helplessness shot through her like a physical blow. He had nine Death Eaters at his flank, shadowing close to him with their wands drawn, ready to jump to his defence at the slightest indication of trouble, eager to use their body as a shield to protect their master - or before anyone who dared to get close to him.

Hermione willed herself not to shiver when Voldemort's red eyes locked on her. She craned her neck and searched his bodyguards. Bellatrix stood on his right; she had her demon mask on but her hood wasn't pulled up, leaving her wiry black curls reaching in every direction, some of which had weaved between the horns on her mask like ebony spiderwebs. The rest were Gold Masks - Malfoy was nowhere to be seen.

Everyone in the crowd bowed their heads respectfully when Voldemort stopped in the centre of the stage. When Hermione made no effort to do the same, Zabini's fingers dug into the back of her neck and forced her into a curtsey. Just as Hermione was allowed to straighten and glare up at Zabini, a thunderous roar echoed from somewhere behind the Abbey.

The crowd gasped, some even screamed and shrunk away when Malfoy and his dragon landed on the ground just left of the podium. Narcissa bared her fangs and eyed the crowd as Malfoy dismounted her. The wooden stage was level with her spine, allowing him to effortlessly slip off her back and onto the platform.

The effect Malfoy and Narcissa had on the crowd was bone chilling. A sense of eerie calm washed over the cloaked figures when they'd laid eyes on their master. They respected him, worshipped him, were grateful for the luxuries and lifestyle he'd given them for their undying loyalty. They feared Voldemort, how could they not? Death and dark magic clung to the evil wizard like a second skin, it was fitting that he'd taken on the appearance of a snake.

The crowd were obviously scared of Voldemort, but they were fucking terrified of Malfoy and his dragon.

Hermione could hear the terror in the gasps and whimpers that rang through the sea of cloaked figures when Malfoy sharply snapped his head towards them. She could almost taste the crowds' fear when they all scattered back as Narcissa gave another threatening roar in their direction.

The only thing Hermione wasn't sure of was who they were more afraid of, the dragon, or the Demon.

Malfoy crossed the podium and bowed toward Voldemort, but to everyone's surprise, he didn't walk to the empty space on his master's left. He went to the right, and Bellatrix's entire body tensed when the other Demon Mask stopped in front of her.

"*More,*" Malfoy's gravelly, altered voice hissed. "Or be moved."

The smile that peeled its way across Voldemort's pale skin was grotesque, triumphant. "I would do as your nephew says. You know he always stands on my right, my favourite always does."

Bellatrix bared her teeth, a movement meant to show defiance, but Hermione noticed her hand tighten around her wand, her knuckles turning white with the strain she was putting on them. After a few seconds, she reluctantly stood on Voldemort's left, allowing Malfoy to take her place.

Voldemort chuckled quietly before he stepped forward and raised his hands in the air, gathering the attention of the crowd. "Welcome all!" Although his voice was soft as silk, it rose the hairs on the back of Hermione's arms. "Thank you for joining me here today."

"There was a small, muffled chorus of "Our pleasure, my Lord," and "Anything for you, my Lord," before Voldemort continued.

"Although I know you could never grow tired of the bloodlust, and your favourite lullabies are the songs of screams." He paused with a smile on his face while his followers snickered and chuckled darkly under their masks. "I sense that you are all growing tired of the war - and for this, I do not blame you."

Zabin's fingers curled tighter around Hermione's arm, securing her in place.

"The war has taken much from us all, and I am so very proud of the way you have fought for me. I am thankful for the sacrifices that you have made, *for us.*" He paused again, allowing the crowd to murmur their agreements and thanks. "However, I do believe the end is near. For years I have sought a way to secure our victory, and our tenacity has been rewarded. A gift has fallen onto my lap: delivered by the wings of a demon and dragon rather than an owl!" Another pause, this time there were cheers and applause; Voldemort's grin stretched higher. "And this gift - this perfect opportunity - is just the thing to bring Potter to his knees, and wipe the Order out for good."

Hermione jumped when he sharply gestured towards her, and a sickening knot formed in her stomach when every head in the crowd sharply turned towards her.

Hermione stayed quiet, watching Astoria from over the top of her glass while she took the first sip of her wine. It tasted fantastic, fruity and earthy. She could tell straight away that it must have been expensive.

"In public, she adored all her husbands, doted on them and gave them all much more affection than she ever did Blaise. In private, well, no one besides Blaise really knows - and he won't talk about it. But, the one thing everyone does know, is that each of her husbands died suddenly and in strange circumstances."

Hermione took another sip. "You don't think she...?"

"There was never any evidence of foul play, but they were all childless and incessantly wealthy, and his mother inherited every sickle after their deaths."

Hermione wondered why Astoria was telling her any of this, why she felt it important to reveal all these incredibly personal details of her husband's life.

"You see," Astoria continued, shuffling closer to Hermione and resting her free arm across the back of the sofa, "Blaise was brought up to believe that blood is power. His mother married those wizards because of their blood status and the rewards their blood could grant her upon their death. He was taught that blood doesn't just establish status, he was taught that blood *is* currency, and worth a thousand times its weight in gold. He thought that the purer ones blood, the healthier they were, and therefore purer bloodlines were simply better and superior to others. He honestly believed that Muggleborn's blood was actually dirty and that it made them weak. It's why my condition affects him so, because for a long time, he couldn't understand it."

Hermione sipped her wine, needing to do something to stop her from reaching out and comforting the witch beside her.

"It doesn't matter that my family is one of the sacred twenty-eight and that my blood is astonishingly *pure*. None of that matters, I'm still ill. No amount of gold or blood purity will change what's wrong with me. He can't fix me, and it kills him." Astoria's eyes glistened as she spoke. Her voice grew hoarse, Hermione thought she might be willing herself not to cry. "I have a blood curse," she continued. "It's hereditary and incurable. There's nothing to be done about it."

A lump formed in Hermione's throat. A knot twisted in her chest.

"I probably won't make it to fifty - and that's fine," Astoria added quickly. "I've made my peace with it, sort of."

Astoria draped the blanket over Hermione's knees the moment she was seated. "It's funny, isn't it?" the blonde asked quietly, staring at the doorway her husband had disappeared in. "How a Gold Mask, one of Voldemort's most lethal killers, could be bossed around by someone as small and breakable as me?"

Hermione found herself smiling back at Astoria, she couldn't help it. Astoria just seemed to have that effect on everyone, her warmth always seemed to melt the cold and hostility of anyone around her. "He adores you."

Astoria's eyes travelled down to her hands, and she picked at her nails while she spoke. "I feel awful really that he has to put up with me; that he has to clean up my messes and take care of me the way he does. Of course, he does it without complaint. He's been cleaning up messes his whole life, I think it's just second nature to him now."

Hermione's brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"

Astoria looked up. "Do you know much about the Zabini family?"

Before Hermione could answer, Zabini returned with a bottle of red wine and two glasses. He unscrewed the cork, then set the glasses and bottle down on the coffee table, making sure the one with the crack at the bottom was in front of Hermione.

Zabini didn't leave immediately. He shuffled his weight on either foot, straightened the already perfectly symmetrical pictures on the walls, and fidgeted with the trinkets that were laid above the fireplace.

Astoria remained silent, watching him with narrowed eyes.

When Zabini realised Astoria wasn't going to speak until he left, he huffed, placed a lingering kiss on her forehead, and slowly exited the room.

Astoria rolled her eyes, and repaired the crack in Hermione's wine glass with a simple flick of her wand. "You'll need to excuse him. He was brought up to detest Muggleborns."

"And you weren't?" Hermione cut in, unable to stop herself.

Astoria carefully filled both glasses and handed one to Hermione, taking two long healthy sips of her own before she said, "Blaise had a... complicated upbringing. His father died when he was very young, and his mother was an incredibly beautiful woman who... married well. Seven times, to be exact."

They couldn't see her face, they didn't know it was her, but why could she feel hundreds of pairs of eyes glaring at her hatefully, even through their masks? Why did it make her skin crawl to have a hundred masks, all bearing the image of a skull, turned towards her?

Nott paused for a few moments, letting the anticipation build. She could feel him smirking behind his mask as he pulled her hood down.

The instant the crowd saw Hermione's face, they gasped.

Nott and Zabini stood close behind her, each with a hand curled tightly just above her elbow to prevent her from doing a runner - not that she would have gotten far. She was unmistakable. She'd probably tried to kill most of the Death Eaters standing below her. Probably killed even more of their friends and families.

The crowd hissed from underneath their masks, several even drew their wands - although they kept them at their sides. Hermione had expected that. She wasn't even surprised when some started to spit in between slurs and death threats. She couldn't hear most of it; there were simply too many to be able to distinguish everything, but she caught the odd word and sentence.

"Dirty Mudblood!"

"Crucio her!"

"Filthy Order cunt!"

Hermione pretended she didn't hear them.

"Cut her open!"

"An Avada's too good for her!"

"Flay her!"

"Peel her skin off!"

She pretended they weren't there at all.

"Peel her eyes out!"

"Put her head on a spike!"

As she tilted her chin in the air and let the insults bounce off her tough skin, a movement to her left caught her eye. About three rows back, one of the cloaked figures was shining something in her face, trying to catch her attention. They were wearing a mask but it was very different to the others in the crowd. It was white, a porcelain doll mask. Hermione's breath caught in her throat.

It was her *Lilib* mask.

The Order was here. They'd come for her.

The euphoric sense of relief she felt was like nothing she'd ever experienced, like she'd had her lungs trapped between a vice for months, and had finally been allowed to breathe. Despite the elation, despite the pure fucking joy she felt at the prospect of being free, Hermione forced herself not to react. She didn't move, didn't so much as lift a brow. She watched the Order member wearing her mask raise their palm to Hermione and then gently - *so gently* - lower their fingers towards the floor once, twice, three times. It was a signal Hermione knew. A signal she'd *invented* years ago and drilled into new recruits when she trained them for stealth missions and sneak attacks. A signal she used when words were too risky, too dangerous.

'Duck.'

Hermione swallowed and nodded gently once, something everyone else would have missed.

"You see," Voldemort continued, although his voice seemed to fade through the roaring of blood in her ears.

Hermione drew a deep breath and released it slowly.

"This girl, despite her filthy blood?"

The Order member reached into their robes.

"-she is Potter's favouri-"

The Order member shot a green hex at Hermione, and she dived into a crouch on the floor, the tight grip Zabini had on her arm dragging him down with her.

The violent streak of green light shot over their heads. Nott deflected it with a jarring flick of his wrist. He stepped forward, and there was a split second of silence before he threw his arm and retaliated with a killing curse that was twice as powerful.

The masked Order member never stood a chance. Chaos and screams erupted before his corpse had even hit the cobble floor.

Curses of every colour shot from the ends of wands on both sides, bullets zipped through the air, and smoking grenades were tossed from those gathered in the crowd. Thirty, maybe forty of the cloaked figures ripped their Black Masks away, and Hermione caught glimpses of Order members, of her friends that'd come to her rescue, before Zabini dragged her to her feet.

Astoria swatted him away with an irritated look on her face. Her expression relaxed when she noticed Hermione in the entrance, and she smiled sweetly while Zabini passed her a steaming mug.

Astoria sniffed the mug, then screwed her face up in disgust. "What's this?"

"It's herbal tea," he answered softly. "It has-"

Astoria raised her hand to silence him; her ring sparkled as it caught the light of the fire. Why hadn't Hermione ever noticed that the band looked too big for her finger? She was sure it didn't look like that days ago.

"Take it away," Astoria bit, pushing the offending mug back into her husband's hands. "And don't return until you've brought me and Hermione something proper to drink."

Zabini stared down at Astoria for a few seconds. He pressed his lips into a tight line, sighed, and then nodded.

Hermione stepped into the room, but as she passed Zabini on his exit, he grabbed her arm and pinned her in place.

He leered down at her, nostrils flaring and eyes burning. "Make no mistake Mudblood, if you so much as utter a word about this to anyone who doesn't live in this house, I will end you."

Hermione's breath caught as his hand tightened around her arm.

"My wife means more to me than anything. She is my life, my very reason for existing. If you do anything, anything at all that may cause her harm or risk exposing her condition, I will kill you." He leaned in and dug his nails into her skin, elaborating his threat. "I do not care that the Dark Lord has deemed you valuable. If you betray her trust, if anything happens to her, I will torture you in ways even the devil couldn't imagine."

Hermione swallowed nervously.

"Do you understand?"

"Yes," she answered quickly. When Zabini released her and stalked out of the room, she released a long, shaky breath.

Astoria smiled and patted the empty space on the sofa beside her.

Hermione hesitated, but when Astoria peeled back one of the blankets and shuffled to make more room, she found herself moving.

"Yes, I do," Zabini argued. Although his arms were tense and straining, Hermione got the impression his wife's strength was nothing compared to his own. He was trying to appease her, probably didn't want to wrestle her away and risk hurting her already fragile frame. "Anyone could search her mind. The Dark Lord, Rodolphus, *Bury!* If she shows them what she just saw—"

"She won't!" Astoria pleaded, her voice high and frantic. "I know she won't! If she understands the consequences, she'll lock it away as tightly as her other memories!"

Zabini brought his wand back toward Hermione's temples. "I can't take that risk. She's a Mudblood, she can't be trusted!"

"Yes, she can!" Astoria jumped again, curled her hands around her husband's bicep, and used her body weight to drag his arm down and away from Hermione's forehead. "Just let me explain it to her!"

Zabini took a deep breath through his nose. His nostrils flared as he stared down at his wife.

"Please," Astoria added softly. She cupped his face between both her hands, and stroked her thumbs across his cheekbones. "Please, let me speak to her. If she knows what's going on, she won't show anyone. She will keep our secret, I know she will."

Zabini's eyes fluttered back to Hermione. She braced herself for a punch, a hex, a spell, anything. To her surprise, he released her.

"Meet us in the small sitting room in thirty minutes, the one opposite the drawing-room." Zabini turned and started guiding his wife away. "I trust you know the way?" He didn't wait for a response.

Half an hour later, Hermione stood in the doorway to the '*small*' sitting room, her heart swelling as she watched Zabini fuss over his wife.

Astoria sat in the corner of a dark leather sofa that occupied most of the room, as close to the roaring fireplace as she could without getting burned. The embers exaggerated the deep hollow rings under her eyes and the very sharp angle of her cheek. If anything, they made Astoria look more delicate, fragile.

Although Astoria was close to the warmth and wearing a thick robe, Zabini wrapped blanket after blanket around her, clearly not taking any chances. He threw one around her shoulders, tucked another underneath her thighs like she was a child, and when he tried to wrap another - even fluffier - throw around her shoulders,

"Protect the Dark Lord!" He slapped Zabini's hand away from Hermione's arm, then grabbed her wrist and pulled her tight against his body. "I don't care if you have to use your body as a human fucking shield, get him out of here first, and then aim to kill!"

Narcissa instantly went on the attack. She leaned on her back legs and extended her wings, using them as a shield to protect Voldemort. Sparks were already gathering at the back of her throat when she opened her mouth, and the ground shook when she released an explosive, skin melting breath that disintegrated both Order members and Voldemort's supporters. The air instantly grew hot and thick from the wave of fire. Smoke clouds rose from the bodies of the screaming witches and wizards, and ashes fluttered and danced in the air from the charred flesh that had already peeled off their bodies.

Malfoy spun towards his dragon. "Take the Dark Lord to safety!"

Voldemort stepped toward Narcissa, but she growled and bared her fangs in warning, ignorant of the hexes and bullets that zipped past her, aiming for her head.

"I'm not fucking around!" Malfoy sneered. "Get him out of here. NOW!"

The dragon hissed a final time, then reluctantly shuffled to the edge of the podium to allow Voldemort to climb onto her back. She gnashed her teeth when Bellatrix tried to mount her as well- apparently even dragons had limits to their patience. She gave one last look to Malfoy before she leaned back and started to flap her wings.

As she started to lift off the ground, four Order members sprinted towards her and conjured metal chains - presumably to wrap around her legs and wings to prevent her from escaping with Voldemort - but before any of the restraints could find their purchase, Malfoy used a spell that Hermione didn't recognise, and ripped a nearby metal lamp post from the ground. He sliced his wand through the air, drew a jagged line, and then whipped the wooden tool sharply in the direction of the soldiers. The metal pole shot forward, quicker than any bullet, and with one foul swoop, it impaled all of the Order members straight through their chests.

It looked as though they were very quick deaths. Hermione could only hope they died instantly.

With the assailants dead, Narcissa and Voldemort escaped without anymore interference, and once they'd disappeared through the thick clouds above, Malfoy went on the attack. "Kill the rest!" he ordered as he started to drag a kicking Hermione down the podium and across the cobble streets. "Leave none alive!"

It was a bloodbath. There were bodies everywhere. Broken. Disfigured.

Hermione saw Terry Boot's corpse at the bottom of the podium with his left arm torn off, only to find to the missing appendage a few meters down the street, still holding a gun. She saw a Gold Mask with a gaping hole in their chest, flesh burnt and ribs on display, and she saw Vicki Simpson's decapitated head - though she had no idea where the rest of her body was.

There were just so many corpses. It was horrific. It was grotesque.

It was *war*.

As Malfoy towed Hermione through the smoke and fires and shooting curses, she caught a glimpse of Nott. He was backed against a wall with his wand firmly in hand while twelve muggle soldiers pointed machine guns at him.

Despite his obvious disadvantage, Nott's posture was anything but frightened. He looked confident. Lite, yet murderous. The first wave of his wand tore the guns from the hands of the soldiers that wielded them. The weapons floated in mid-air, the bewildered muggles fumbling to try and snatch them back as they floated to Nott's side. Another wave of his wand flipped the guns over, pointing them to aim at their previous owners. And with a final flick of his wrist, the guns open fired, and the soldiers were torn to pieces by their own bullets.

Hermione saw Zabini too; his slow and graceful movements were easily recognisable after weeks of watching him escort his wife around the manor. She watched him stalk behind a group of three wizards like a panther, watched him wave his wand delicately behind their heads, causing their eyes to go blank and their bodies to go slack. There was only a split second before Zabini's Imperious curse took effect, and the three wizards dropped their wands, rested the barrel of their guns against their temples, and pulled the triggers.

Malfoy took a sharp corner, but then stopped suddenly. The unexpectedness made Hermione knock into his back. She peered around his shoulder, half expecting to see her friends or an ambush, only to see the dull metal of an armoured tank. And the turret was pointing straight at them.

Hermione squeezed her eyes closed and braced herself for the cannon fire.

This was obviously a rescue mission to recover her, but Malfoy was standing right there, and he was a *Death Eater*. She knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that although her skills were invaluable to the Order, if a soldier had a clear shot to kill Voldemort's most lethal Death Eater, they would take it, no matter how close she

Astoria and Zabini's eyes snapped up. The second they locked on Hermione - when they realised what she must have seen - Zabini lurched to his feet, pure murder on his face and fury blazing in his brown eyes.

Hermione ran. She barely made it to the other side of the hallway before Zabini caught her.

He grabbed her shoulder in a punishing grip, flipped her around to face him, and threw her against the wall. One of his hands pinned her there while the other reached for his wand.

Hermione pounded her fists against Zabini's arms as she fought to free herself. He jolted her again, smacking her head against the wall behind her so hard a buzzing formed between her ears and the room swam out of focus.

She was faintly aware of a set of screams that weren't hers, of heels clattering against the wooden floor, and frantic pleas to put Hermione down - but she couldn't hear them over the pounding of blood in her ears. She knew Zabini was snarling in front of her, knew his eyes glowed, furious but *fuzuki*, as he pinned her against the wall - but she was dizzy and her head was swimming, so she struggled to focus on it.

She felt something thin and pointed press against her forehead, right between her eyes, but before Zabini could utter whatever incantation he'd thought to punish her with, something stopped him.

The solid grip that pinned Hermione to the wall didn't diminish but the room slowly started to come back into focus, and so did the voices.

"Blaise!" Astoria screamed. As Hermione's vision cleared, she could see that the blonde was trying to wedge herself between Hermione and her husband, and her hands were high in the air, trying to snatch his wand away. "Leave her alone!"

"She's seen too much, Tori," Zabini snarled, digging his wand a little harder against Hermione's skin. "She can't remember this!"

Hermione felt a tingling sensation where Zabini's wand met her skin, evidence of magic gathering. A spell was forming -

"Oblivi-

"NO!" Astoria jumped, and managed to grab Zabini's wand. She fought with him to lower it. "No, don't hurt her! You don't need to do that!"

As Hermione peered around the corner and into the small-*jish* washroom, she saw a mess of blonde hair crouched over the toilet.

Astoria was on her hands and knees and had her back facing Hermione. Her fingers were curled around the base of the toilet while she vomited into the bowl. Zabini crouched protectively behind her, one of his hands rubbing circles into her back while the other fisted her hair to keep it out of her face.

Astoria's spine curled as another gagged wretch was torn from her throat.

"It's alright darling," Zabini's caresses moved to his wife's shoulders, offering reassuring squeezes while she jerked and vomited. "It's alright. Breathe darling. Breathe."

Astoria sucked in a desperate breath and started to choke. She sounded breathless, like she couldn't pull air into her lungs no matter how hard she tried. When her shoulders shook violently, Zabini swiftly removed his deep emerald tailored jacket and wrapped it around her shoulders.

Hermione watched, fascinated - again - as Zabini fussed over Astoria. He was so delicate with her, every touch was tentative and gentle, like the slightest pressure might shatter his beloved wife. His expression hardened when Astoria started to heave again. His mouth twisted down at the corners, and he winced when she started to whimper in pain.

When Astoria was done, she leaned back and Zabini was all too quick to gather her up in his arms. He leaned on the wall facing the door. Hermione was watching from and dragged Astoria with him. He pulled her tightly against his chest, one hand cradled her small face while the other wrapped around her waist and hugged her tighter still. He placed kiss after kiss against her clammy forehead, whispering promises and affection that Hermione couldn't quite hear as Astoria shook against him.

Astoria twisted to face the doorway, allowing Hermione to see the mess on her face. Astoria's chin and jaw were covered in blood; thick, striking crimson that pooled around the edges of her mouth, and dripped down her chin and across her jaw.

Astoria wasn't just vomiting. She was vomiting blood. A lot of it.

Hermione started to retreat, meaning to give the couple some much-needed privacy, but on the second step, she found a loose floorboard, and it creaked loudly under her weight.

As Hermione tensed for the impending shell from the turret, Malfoy moved. He cast a Knockback jinx that was so powerful, so fucking *vicious*, that the force of the spell flipped the tank. The large armoured machine rolled in the air, then landed upside down on the floor with a deafening crack. The tank exploded on its collision with the ground, disintegrating those trapped inside in a wave of searing heat.

She would just be collateral damage. A Martyr.

Malfoy didn't wait to see if there were any survivors. He took off again and dragged Hermione through the battlefield with him.

It could have been the deafening screams and war cries, could have been the ear-shattering grenades or booming explosive curses, but she didn't hear the all too familiar click of machine guns being reloaded. And as Malfoy sharply took another corner, they came face to face with a line of muggle soldiers, crouched down and machine guns all pointing at their chests; a firing squad.

Hermione wasn't sure if the soldiers even saw her. The Demon Mask was unmistakable and fear-inducing, like something torn straight from the most hellish nightmare. The *instant* they locked onto those curved ebony horns, they opened fire. They were aiming for Malfoy not her, but the grip he had on her arm and the tight way he angled her magicless body meant the soldiers couldn't get a clear shot without running the risk of hitting her.

As fast as Malfoy flew up a blue, almost translucent shield around them, a few of the bullets were just *a little* faster. A small flurry managed to sneak past the barrier just before he set it up, zipping past their elbows and shoulders and cracking the stone wall behind them but one bullet-*just a single stray bullet* - was aimed a little more accurately before it left the barrel of its gun, and tore through Hermione's right thigh.

She screamed when she felt it slice into her muscles, she couldn't help it. It had been so long since she'd been injured like that she was blindsided by the pain. Malfoy caught her as she fell back against his chest. He supported her weight as she staggered on her feet, and the hand that was curled around her restraints move under her weight.

to wrap around her waist, holding her up while the shield around them absorbed the rest of the attack.

The bullets just kept coming, the sound of them hitting the magical barrier like a violent hailstorm against a glass roof. Hermione was sure the shield was going to break. Was sure it was going to shatter with the sheer force of the attack and allow the rest of the bullets to impale them - but it never broke, didn't so much as ripple as it absorbed bullet after bullet.

One of the Order members called off the gunners, Hermione wasn't sure who. She only heard them shouting into a radio that Hermione was too close, and that she wasn't to be hurt during this raid.

"*Revive mission!*" she thought she heard him scream into the device. "*Don't hurt her!*"

The gunners stopped firing, but the damage was already done.

Hermione screamed in pain and desperately tried to apply pressure on her leg with her bound wrists. No matter how hard she bared down, blood seeped between her fingers faster than she could stop it. They'd hit something vital, probably severed an artery in her leg. If they didn't do something quickly, she was going to bleed out.

Malfoy dropped the shield with a sharp wave of his arm. He brought his wand to his side, and Hermione was faintly aware of his shoulder jerking when he cast a hex that sliced each of the soldiers in half. He tried to drag her again, but a searing pain shot up her leg the instant she tried to put any weight on her right foot.

She curled over, hands on her knees, forcing herself to breathe through the pain.

Malfoy crouched beside her. "Can you walk?"

"I... *ughhhh* - fuck." Hermione tentatively put her right foot on the floor with the gentlest pressure, but the pain that shot up her leg knocked the air from her lungs. She shook her head. "No! No, I don't think so."

There was a few seconds of tense silence before he spoke again. "I need you to wrap your arms around my neck," he said. "I'm going to carry you, but I need you to help me." There was an urgency in his voice. A low, panicked undertone that she didn't quite expect to hear from him, not when he was speaking to her. "I need my wand hand free so I can protect us, so I need you to hold your weight. Can you do that?"

Hermione's chest tightened. "What did you just say?"

"Her name." Malfoy jutted his chin toward the sleeping beast. "My dragon's name is Narcissa."

## 2nd March

A noise jolted Hermione out of her trance. A strange, gargling noise, like someone was choking or drowning. She whirled around, still holding a steaming cup of tea in her hand, and scanned the dark hallway behind her.

There was very little light at this time of night. Or was it the early hours of the morning? She had no way of knowing really, the walls were empty of clocks.

Hermione strained her eyes, trying to use the streaks of silver moonlight seeping through the gaps in the curtains to catch the outline of someone stalking behind her, but there was no one there. As far as she could tell, she was alone.

The hallway was quiet for several long minutes, and every muscle in Hermione's body tensed as she listened for the foreign noise. She was just about to give up and return to her room - like she'd been intending to - when she heard it again. It was louder the second time, more frantic and wheezing, like the subject was struggling to breathe.

Hermione's instincts screamed at her to turn around, sprint back to her room and lock the door behind her. There was a little safety in her cage. The person that was making that strange noise couldn't attack her by surprise. At least she'd be able to see them coming.

She thought about it, she really did. For about three seconds.

Then she set her mug down on a nearby window ledge, and quietly walked towards the sound.

It led her to a small washroom on the ground floor of the estate. She supposed it was small in comparison to the others in the manor; Hermione assumed it was a guest bathroom that'd been used for gala's and events when Malfoy's mother used to entertain.

Despite its smaller size, it was no less grand. It still had the same wildly expensive-looking furnishings, the taps were sterling silver and polished to perfection just like everything else on the estate, and the same black marble tiles lined the floor and walls.

"All you cared about was cutting them down, and making them feel the same pain and hurt you felt! Making them pay for killing your family!"

"Stop it!" she screamed. The burning in her eyes got worse, the sting started to blur her vision but she still kept the tears in, refused to let them fall. "just stop talking!" She could feel the dam about to burst. Cracks in the foundations, tears struggling, fighting to break free.

"Because in those moments you were ruthless, merciless, a fucking monster." Malfoy bowed his head, and his lips grazed her cheek as he whispered, "Because in those moments, you were *just like me*."

"Stop saying that we're the same! We're not the fucking same!"

Malfoy leaned back, his eyes on hers as he licked across his bottom lip. "No? Do you really believe that?"

Hermione raised her hand to punch him, to force him out of her way before her heart shattered for good, but Malfoy caught her. He snatched her left wrist before the punch could meet its sweet target, and the other wrapped around her waist to flip her around. He pressed her back tight against his chest and caged her in, pinning her against him as she struggled in his arms.

Hermione lowered her head, trying to find her bearings so she could kick his feet out from under him -

Malfoy's lips glided to the shell of her ear. "I look in the mirror Granger."

"Nol!" She kept her eyes on the floor and tried to crunch his boots under her own.

"Look in the mirror!" he hissed, tone low and menacing and vibrating against her spine.

She didn't listen. She tried to twist her body, tried to jut her elbows into his ribs - The hand on her wrist vanished, only to reappear suddenly beneath her chin. His nails dug into her skin like the fangs of a viper, and an iron-strong force tugged her face upwards-

"LOOK IN THE FUCKING MIRROR!"

The way he roared the words, the low bravado in his voice, the way his chest vibrated, it was oddly thrilling, masculine, commanding attention. She jumped, her head snapped up before she could stop herself - Her heart sank at what she saw.

Because he was right. He was absolutely *fucking right*. Looking at them; him, her reflection curled in his arms, they were exactly the same.

The same heaving chests.

The same hateful, rage twisted expressions that only a soldier knew. The ones that were tired, frustrated with the commands they had yet to complete, and angry thinking about the missions they'd failed.

The same vacant eyes that spoke of war and death and so many burning corpses it made her feel sick. A look only an executioner could recognise. And the blood - There was so much blood on her too, she hadn't realised. The same blood that was matted in their hair, distorting and darkening the strands and saturating their clothes.

Hermione stared at their reflection, at the same blood that streaked down both their temples and across both their chins.

Seamus's blood...

Then her heart finally shattered, and the dam burst.

She shook in his arms, whimpering and choking as grief like no other crashed into her with the force of a fucking earthquake.

He was right. They were the same.

He was a monster and so was she.

They were exactly the same. She could hide behind the Order and her distorted illusions of morality and nobility, but in the end, she was no better than him.

She didn't care who she killed if it protected the Order. She didn't care who she butchered if it brought them one step closer to Voldemort's defeat. And she certainly hadn't given a fuck about Charlotte and Mark when she'd tortured them, mauled them, left them bleeding and broken for days before she finally executed them.

Because they'd killed her parents, and she thought they deserved it.

In those moments, she was Judge, Jury and Executioner, and she hadn't cared about those her blood fuelled rampage left behind.

Hermione trembled against his chest and watched tears fall from her eyes, mixing with the blood and dirt as they slid down her horrified face and past her sobbing lips.

"I should have let you die," she whispered, choking as those traitorous tears gathered on her chin, and then finally dropped onto the floor.

She felt two beats of his heart against her spine before his lips found her ear again.

"Yes. You should have."

"Is everything alright? I heard shouting and... what in Merlin's name happened to you two?"

The instant Malfoy heard Astoria's voice, the way it cracked and broke near the end, his hold on Granger loosened.

She immediately jutted her elbows into his ribs, tore herself from the cage he'd wound around her, and stormed towards her freedom, but not before she stopped in the doorway. Not before she'd returned the favour, pointed the barrel at his temples, and taken a shot at him too. He doubted she could help herself; imagined it was as much of a reflex to her as it was to him after all these years of war.

"You were wrong about him Astoria," Granger rasped. Through the mirror, he watched her stop in front of a wide-eyed Astoria. "He might have torn off his wings to protect the rest of you, but he doesn't have a soul, not anymore. There isn't a shred of anything *good* left in him. He may have been your brother once, but he's nothing more than a Demon now."

And then she just... left. Not another hateful stare or disgusted glance in his direction, and Malfoy just watched her go.

There was a few seconds of silence before Astoria caught his eye in the mirror.

Her usually soft and compassionate expression was twisted into a vicious scowl. A scowl that was aimed at him.

"What did you do to her?" Astoria demanded, her hands curling into fists at her sides.

Malfoy sighed heavily. He leaned his forehead against the cold glass and pinched his eyes closed.

He just needed a moment, just a *minute* to collect himself, to calm his nerves and rebuild the Occlumency walls he felt splintering around him before Astoria started with her firing squad of an inquisition. It was a shame he knew she wasn't going to give him that mercy.

"Draco, what did you do to Hermione?"

"What about Charlotte Roth?" Malfoy asked. "Or Mark Kinghold? You remember them, don't you Granger?"

Hermione stopped. Despite the warmth of the fire, she felt a chill as cold as The Demon Hex spread through her body.

Of course she remembered them, how could she not? Those names were tattooed onto her soul, branded onto her skin, unforgettable, no matter how hard she tried to wipe them from her memory.

"I bet Kingsley never signed off on their executions, did he? You went rogue on that one, I'm sure. Did you know that Charlotte had a husband?" Malfoy cocked a brow. "Did you know that she had a son? A little four-month-old boy waiting for her at home?"

Hermione didn't want to hear this. She *wouldn't* hear this.

"Or did you know that Mark was two years younger than us in school?" Malfoy went on. "He was eighteen when you killed him, hadn't even mastered a fucking Imperius Curse before you butchered him."

"Shut up!" Hermione retreated another step, flinching when her back connected with the cool glass mirror behind her.

Malfoy closed in and slammed a hand on either side of the frame, trapping her against the mirror. "Did you ever stop to think about that? No, of course you didn't, because it didn't matter to you! They killed your parents! They killed your mother and father, and they deserved to burn!"

Hermione pounded her fists against his chest, trying to force him back so she could escape. He didn't budge, immovable as the marble statues he so often resembled. "Fuck you!"

"In those moments, all you cared about was revenge!"

"Stop it Malfoy! I don't want to hear..."

"It didn't matter that the people behind the skull masks had families, loved ones, people that would mourn them..."

"Let me go!"

"Because in those moments, all you cared about was killing them!"

Tears burned Hermione's eyes. "Shut up!" she seethed through gritted teeth.

again, and it took everything in Hermione to hold her ground and not step away. "If I were a betting man, I'd say the blood on your ledger tallies up just as high as mine. You've probably executed just as many Death Eaters as I have Order members."

"That's not the same! I didn't want to kill them! I didn't want to kill anyone!"

"So what then? Just because you're on the '*Good Side*', you think that your sins don't count?" Quick as a flash, he was in front of her again, towering over her, trying to throw her off balance. "Do you think that just because the people you've butchered wore a skull mask and had a snake on their forearm, that somehow your soul is clear? That you're somehow better than me?"

"I am better than you!" Hermione screamed, raising onto the tips of her toes so she could better look him in the eye. "You kill like it's a sport! You kill without mercy, like it's fun, I hate it! I don't want to do it, but this is *war!* We don't have the luxury of mercy anymore! Not when Voldemort has grown as strong as he has!"

"You're right, this is war," Malfoy sneered, his eyes as cold and lifeless as ever. "So let me ask you this; out of all those masked figures that you've murdered on the battlefield, how many do you think had wives waiting for them at home?"

If he'd punched her in the stomach, it would have hurt less. "I... that's not- that doesn't mean-"

"How many of those poor souls that you've executed were someone's daughter? Someone's son?"

Hermione took a step back, but Malfoy followed, looming over her, burning her with the truth. "Stop it!"

"How many of those Death Eaters that died screaming at the tip of your wand had children?"

Hermione took another step back. Malfoy followed.

"All waiting for them to come home-"

"Stop it!"

"-and you were the reason they never made it?"

Another retreat from her, another pursuit from him.

"Stop it! Just stop it!" Hermione blinked furiously, trying to dull the burning in her eyes. She wouldn't cry in front of him. She refused to. "We're not the same! We are not the fucking same!"

He groaned against the glass, his breath misting the pane. "Just give me a fucking minute Tori, *please*!"

"No!" Astoria bit immediately. "What did you do to her?"

"Well, she was going to find out eventually. What was that old muggle phrase? Rip the bullet out? Bite the band-aid off?"

"The Dark Lord entrusted me with a special assignment for Granger. I've been working on it for months, casting small hexes in her head and laying the foundations," he muttered against the mirror, his eyes still closed, refusing to look at her. "It's supposed to turn her to our side, make her a weapon for us. Today, I tested the hex out on the field."

He could hear Astoria grinding her perfectly polished teeth from the doorframe. "What. Did. You. Make. Her. Do?"

"She killed Finnigan."

Malfoy winced when he heard Astoria's shocked gasp. He tried to stop himself from reacting, tried to keep his face as stoic as he could and concentrate on shards of glass and icy walls - but he couldn't.

Since Granger's capture, since the first time she'd slapped him across the face, Malfoy had craved the opportunity to make her squirm.

She was trapped behind enemy lines without a wand, alone, and completely defenceless. Anyone else would've trembled with fear at the sheer helplessness of their situation - but not Granger.

If she was scared, she never showed it.

No matter what he tried, no matter how many anti-magic potions he forced down her throat or how many times he pressed his wand against her temples, she never showed even a flicker of fear in those honey-coloured eyes.

Yes, she'd been angry and nervous, but never *sared*.

There was something fascinating about her unwavering defiance. Something exhilarating about her strong backbone that refused to bow; how the embers in her chest could never be doused.

Granger was fucking shatterproof. The wildest stallion that simply refused to be broken in, and the idea of being the one to break her had consumed Malfoy of late. He'd felt possessed with the idea, ravenous with the need to see how her pretty eyes would look when they were scared.

Well, he'd finally gotten his wish.

The Golden Girl was frightened of him, so scared that her whole body had trembled when she'd stared at their reflections in the mirror.

He'd broken her. He'd made her heart bleed and achieved the goal his master had set him with sparkling results.

But why didn't it feel as euphoric as he imagined it would?

Why did his stomach twist thinking about the crippling defeat in her eyes? Why did it make him feel sick to think about the tears that had slid down her cheeks?

Malfoy knew what it was, the thing that caused a sudden, long-forgotten chill to scratch deep in his chest. The thing that caused the hairs on the back of his neck to rise, and an awful hunch to creep into his stomach.

It was guilt.

Guilt for what he'd done to her, for what he'd turned her *into*.

And guilt was the thing that had started to be his undoing.

He'd felt his control slipping for weeks, ever since she'd saved his life. Since he'd been on the cusp of death and felt the souls of those he'd murdered grasping at his ankles, dragging him down to hell. When he'd been so close to the end, only to be saved by his enemy.

Ever since he'd opened his eyes on the blood-soaked floor, lunged forward and tore the shackles of the dead off his arms, only to brush across the softest lips he'd ever-

No, he couldn't afford to think like that. He *wouldn't* think like that.

But her eyes - those fucking eyes had been the first thing he'd seen, the things that had stirred something in him, and ignited some long-forgotten emotion.

As though she'd stepped on the frozen lake that was his Occlumency - stomped onto it with the force of a fucking bull - and now the lake was splintering. Cracks were spreading across his walls like glittering spiderwebs, zipping through the ice faster than he could repair them.

He'd tried to fix them, but exhaustion and a heavy conscience he thought he'd buried were making it harder and harder for him to Occlude; to keep those walls up and protect himself. He could barely keep them up for an hour at a time now, and it was all Granger's fault.

always been. You're still deadly. Still just as fucking merciless. But that impulse to kill? That desire to sink your teeth into your prey and tear them apart? It's still there, I just redirected your aim."

Hermione felt like she was going to be sick. She swore the room started to spin around her.

"I'm the only one that can cast the spell, and when you're under it, the gazelle's that you crave to hunt aren't going to be wearing masks with black skulls or gold skulls or even demon horns, they're going to be your friends." Malfoy leaned in closer, chasing Hermione as she cringed as far away from him as the sofa would allow. He was everywhere, all she could see were those nasty grey eyes and the blood that was matting in his hair. "And Granger, that's why the Dark Lord wanted you for the spell." Suddenly, his face twisted into the most barbaric smirk she'd ever seen. The blood that streaked down his face clung to every dimple and curve, cutting his already sharp features into more threatening angles. "Because deep down, under all those gold trimmings and self-righteous Gryffindor bullshit, you're *just, like, me*."

Like the crack of a whip against her spine, Hermione's fear and guilt vanished, and all she could taste was anger. She lurched forward, not caring that her nose knocked his as she pushed herself off the back of the sofa.

"We're not the same!" she snapped. "Don't you dare say that we're the same because we're *not*!"

Malfoy didn't move an inch. He smiled down at her, even dragged his tongue across his top teeth as he looked her over from head to toe, again. "Oh, but we are. We may be on opposite sides of the war, but we are *exactly* the same."

Hermione pushed his shoulders with all the strength she could conjure. It gave her some breathing room, gave her enough space to duck under his arm, get off the sofa and take residence next to the mirror. She felt better when she was standing, less at a disadvantage, even if she was still much shorter than him. "No! No, we are nothing alike!"

Malfoy whirled to face her and cocked his head to the side. "Funny, how you talk about me not having a soul, that I've sold it, that I'm going straight to hell, but did you ever stop to think that maybe you don't have a soul anymore either?"

Hermione's lip curled. Her hands balled into fists.

"Taking a life is just as sinful, no matter which side of the war you're on. One life isn't worth less than another," Malfoy practically purred. He started to approach her

the most important question, but it was the first thing that popped into her head so she went with it. "I've been taking the anti-magic potion for months—"

"Now, that was actually rather tricky," Malfoy huffed, shaking his head. "Anti-magic potions douse the drinker's magical abilities, in normal circumstances, you wouldn't be able to touch my magic. But after a lot of debate, and a lot of help from Blaise, we figured out our blood connection allows you to channel my magic. Borrow it - if you like."

How could she have let this happen? How could she not have felt what he was really doing?

"It only works with my blood," Malfoy continued, "which is why we infused my wand with some of my blood a few days ago. It means that when you hold my wand, you can channel my magic, wield it as your own." He sharply withdrew his wand and waved it in front of her face, teasing her with the one key to her escape. "Although you broke through the spell too quickly. We'll need to continue our sessions so I can strengthen the connections of the spell!"

Hermione lurched forward to snatch his wand, but Malfoy's hand curled around her throat before she could reach it. He straightened his arm, his cold rings biting into her neck as he held her *just* far enough that her greedy fingers couldn't grab his wand.

"Why me?" she asked. The tips of her fingers tingled, the promise of magic inches away. She strained her arm, fingers stretching-

Malfoy released her throat, but not before he used it to push her back against the back of the sofa with a powerful shove. He stuck his wand back inside his robes with a smile on his face.

"You could have done this to anyone," Hermione rasped, choking pathetically as she nursed her bruising throat. "Heaven knows you've captured more than enough Order members over the years. So why me?"

Malfoy snorted. His eyes raked over her slowly from head to toe while he rolled his tongue on the inside of his cheek. "There's a reason the incantation for this spell translates, '*Demon, rise*' he said in a low, spiteful whisper. "You see Granger, it doesn't change you. Doesn't change who you are. It just taps into the darkest parts of yourself the things you would rather keep buried, and brings them all to the surface." His cold eyes lingered on hers, raising the hairs on the back of her arms. "Whilst you're under this spell, you're still that ferocious little lioness that you've

Salazar - he was tired. He was so exhausted he could barely stand, and his sister was looking at him with such hate and disappointment that it made him want to throw himself off the roof.

"Don't look at me like that!" Malfoy snapped as he turned to face Astoria. "Whatever I did, I did for *us*! To protect our family!"

Astoria shook her head. "You didn't have to do that! You could have waited and found another way."

"No, I couldn't. The only people who knew about this assignment were me, the Dark Lord, Bellatrix, and her husband. The Dark Lord gave me very clear instructions; if an opportunity presented itself in Whitby where I could safely test if the roots of the Hex had stuck, then I was to take it."

Malfoy needed something to take the edge off. Something to drown those sad brown eyes out of his mind before he marched into her room and plucked them out himself.

He crossed the drawing-room, swung the doors to the liquor cabinet open, and grabbed the first bottle he could reach with shaking fingers. He pulled the cork off and drank until his throat burned.

Finnigan was on the floor, weaponless. Granger was with me. The alley was empty. And then Rodolphus Lestrange waltzed around the corner at the wrong time! He took another swig of the bourbon. "There was no reason I shouldn't test the hex! No possible excuse for me not to do a trial run!" Another pause, another large swig.

When he spoke again, his voice was low and hoarse, the potent alcohol finally taking hold of his vocal cords. "You want to know the worst part? I didn't want to do it. *Fuck* - I didn't want to do that to her. I didn't want to make her kill her friend, but I didn't have a fucking choice!"

He could feel his control slipping again, wild anger sneaking through the cracks. He grabbed the bottle by its neck, whirled around, and threw it at the wall.

He could practically hear his ancestors hissing their disapproval as the smell of wasted bourbon burned his nostrils.

"I didn't have a choice!" Malfoy seethed. "If I didn't test the hex, Rodolphus would have reported me! He would have seen it as a sign of weakness and ran to the Dark Lord faster than a snitch leaves the fucking crate!"

Astoria took a cautious step closer, careful to give him a wide birth as his anger roared to the surface. "But you're a Demon Mask, his loyalist supporter. Surely he wouldn't?"

Malfoy cut her off in a snarl. "He would replace me like *that*!" he snapped his fingers aggressively, illustrating his point, "if he thought I'd lost my edge. He wouldn't hesitate, even for a second, to replace me if I wasn't the most ruthless, bloodthirsty bastard at his disposal! His ranks are like a shark pit; if the others smell even a drop of blood or weakness, they'll tear me apart for the chance to take my place! I do these things because I have to, not because I want to!" Malfoy roared, all teeth and anger and pain. "I do these things to protect us! So the Dark Lord doesn't turn his attention to us and take a closer look at what's going on! So he doesn't notice Nott acting out, or you and your husband disappearing every two seconds! Do you think it doesn't tear me apart, thinking about what I've done?!"

Astoria's grave brown eyes glistened. She opened her mouth, but Malfoy cut her off again.

"He's in my head all the fucking time, whispering and hissing orders!" Malfoy's shoulders started to tremble, his fingers shook even more so as he jabbed them against his temple like knives. "Kill this wizard Draco! Behead this witch Draco!" He dragged his hands to the back of his head and pinched his eyes closed as all these emotions just bled out of him, on and on, worse than any wound he'd ever received on the battlefield. "Torture this one! Pluck that one's eyes out! Kill this one, now that one. Again and again and again." Fuck, it hurt. It fucking hurt to let himself feel again. He'd forgotten how excruciating guilt felt when he didn't have a shield to hide behind. "It's all the time! Never-ending fucking poison in my head! Every bastard day, hour after hour!"

Astoria's hand wrapped around his shoulder, her warmth flooding him as she tried to drag him down into an embrace, comforting him even when they both knew he didn't deserve it.

Malfoy shook out of her grip and started to pace the room.

He was a monster. He wanted to break something, smash something. He wanted to make everything *bleed*.

And Astoria couldn't be near him when he exploded like that. He needed to get away from her, needed to get *her* away from *him* before his murderous impulses got the better of him.

Lord didn't have another plan for you? Did you honestly think he was interested in your memories? Didn't you think that maybe, *just maybe*, he might have another motive for linking your life to mine? For having me drag myself through your mind every bastard day?"

Hermione just stared at him. Too shocked to blink. Too scared to breathe.

"The Dark Lord couldn't give a fuck about your memories - it was all a ploy, a decoy. Something to keep you distracted while I focused on the true task he'd assigned me. It was a bonus if we learned something along the way. The reason he had me '*search your memories*'," he crooked his fingers as he spoke, "the only reason I was ever in your head to begin with, was to plant The Demon Hex."

A cold shiver ran up Hermione's spine, a phantom chill from the memory of that vile spell that had crept up into her body like ice water, the thing that had frozen her veins, flayed them from her skin and used them like marionette strings. It was the thing that had controlled her, made her do something she never would have dreamed of doing of her own free will.

*The Demon Hex*. She'd never heard of a curse like that, never even read so much as a whisper of a spell as demonic in name or nature. The unknown of it all scared her more than it probably should have.

Hermione tried to find her voice. She willed herself to say something, argue with him, *anything!* But she couldn't, couldn't do anything but listen in horror as he laid out what he'd been doing all along.

The slow, careful way Malfoy moved around her before when he was trying not to frighten her had disappeared, like it had never been there to begin with. When Malfoy leaned over her, his shadow completely eclipsed her, blocking out any warmth from the fire. She instantly felt cold.

"You made it all too fucking easy, do you know that?" he sneered, even his breath on her face felt cold. "The blood connection the Dark Lord has bound us together with gives me greater access into your mind, and every time we had one of our Legilimency sessions, I was laying the foundations of the hex. You were that preoccupied with building walls and reinforcing doors in your hotel, keeping your memories *safely*, that you didn't notice what I was really doing in your head."

Hermione couldn't breathe. Her lungs pinched together, but she pushed through it. She needed to know more. Needed to know how the spell worked. How she could stop him from doing it again. "How... how could I use magic?" It probably wasn't

And he knew just the way.

He stopped when he was in front of the fireplace and whirled to face her. "But this is the price we pay to keep our family together. You like to live in this house, don't you?" he asked spitefully. "You like the luxuries our service to the Dark Lord grants us? Like to attend the parties and galas and fucking society events he puts on? Well, this is what they fucking cost!"

Astoria's eyes slowly raked over the blood on his robes and face, but she didn't say a word.

"This is the price we pay for your pretty dresses and your expensive wine?" He held his arms out either side of him, even did a little twirl so she could see the full depths he'd let himself slip to for *years and years and years*. "This is the blood that I pay to keep our family safe!"

Astoria drew a deep breath, blinking back tears. "And you think all this is worth turning Hermione into a monster for?"

"Oh, now you want to play the moral card and pretend you have a sense of decency?" he taunted, knowing it was cruel. She was so close to leaving, she just needed a little push. "You can watch us kill, you'll turn a blind eye to that, but *this*? This crosses some fucking line that you've decided to draw? You don't get to pick and choose when you want to be noble Tori! You don't get to watch us walk through the gates of hell, burn our feet on the coals, and then decide that *this* is too far!"

"Watch your mouth Malfoy!" Astoria hissed. She stepped closer, and an angry crease appeared between her brows.

"Or what? What are you gonna do? You sit here all day, with your perfectly manicured nails and your bottles of expensive vodka and..."

Astoria cut him off with a bruising slap across his left cheek. The strength of it twisted his face back towards the mirror, forcing him to stare at his nightmare of a reflection.

It took three long, calming breaths before he could face the blonde in front of him again.

"Your mother loved you more than she loved anyone," Astoria sneered through gritted teeth. "She wanted you to live. She would have done anything to see you survive - but *that*?" She took a step back and waved her hand over the blood and dirt and dark magic that clung to every inch of him. "She never wanted this for you. She smirked she despised, "I expected more from you. Did you really think that the Dark

Malfoy tried to stop himself from wincing but Hermione saw it, caught the way his shoulders jerked like she'd slapped him, how his eyes pinched closed and his nose wrinkled with the ghost of pain.

Hermione caught it all, but she didn't fucking care. It didn't soften the ache in her chest, or stop the way her heart felt like it was breaking. She was so angry she felt dizzy, but her pain, her grief, it was starting to outweigh that anger and she couldn't let that happen. Not yet.

Seamus's frightened expression was clawing at the back of her mind, reminding her of what she'd done, the horrific thing Malfoy had *made* her do.

She would need to deal with it all eventually; the shame, the sorrow, the anguish. But now wasn't the time. She would lock it away, force it behind steal doors like a damn, and face the consequences later. Because she knew that when her grief crashed through those doors with the force of a tidal wave, it would drown her, swallow her, and she didn't know if she was strong enough to recover from that.

Her anger was all she had so she needed to hold onto it, channel it, use it to strengthen those doors, stop them from shattering, and find a way to break whatever monstrous spell Malfoy had put on her.

"Haven't you done enough?" Hermione forced herself to hiss. "Haven't you killed more than your fair share? Isn't it enough that you've condemned yourself to hell, do you really have to drag me along with you?!"

Her words pushed Malfoy over the edge. He scoffed and stood up straight, shoulders broad and square. He turned to face away from her, but she could see his reflection in the floor-length silver mirror that hung from the wall. She watched him close his eyes and draw a deep breath, his features relaxing into smooth expressionless marble, and when he opened his eyes again, Hermione's breath caught.

They were completely grey. Cold. Not a sliver of blue to be found.

Hermione almost didn't recognise him when he turned around to face her again. She'd never known Occlumency alter a person as much as it did Malfoy. The change in him was instant, like the flick of a switch. He went into the mirror one person, and came out someone else. Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde. It was one of the most terrifying things she'd ever seen.

"Honestly Granger," Malfoy sneered, his lips twitching into that sadistic little smirk she despised, "I expected more from you. Did you really think that the Dark

would turn in her grave if she could see what you've become." Astoria gave one last lingering scowl before she shook her head and left the drawing room.

And Malfoy was left to destroy the place in peace.  
He tore the pictures from the wall as though they'd spat in his face. He kicked the coffee table as though it had murdered his father.

And he punched the mirror again and again and again, until his knuckles were drenched with blood, until the pane was as cracked as his Occlumency walls, and until he couldn't see the reflection of the demon staring right back at him.

Hermione's hand instinctively moved to her throat, lightly massaging the area with shaking fingers.  
It wasn't until Malfoy stopped just inches in front of her, his knees brushing against hers in the ghost of a touch, that Hermione noticed his eyes. They flickered, burned with something intense, something primal that she'd not seen in him. They were more blue than grey, only a thin sheen of silver clung around his pupils.

"I'm not going to hurt you. I promise." Malfoy held up his hands, palms facing Hermione, showing her that he didn't have a weapon while he carefully kneeled in front of her. "You were shell shocked. You wouldn't stop crying. I was talking to you, and it's like you weren't there - like you couldn't even hear me." He extended his hand toward her -

"Don't fucking touch me!" she screamed, cringing away from him. "You did something to me! You made me... kill Seamus."

Malfoy dropped his hand, his expression twisting into something she would've easily mistaken as hurt if it wasn't on his face.

A mixture of terror and anger crept into Hermione's body, scalding and freezing her, leaving her skin feeling hot and her blood running cold. "Seamus was on the floor, and then you grabbed me. There was this fog... and then I-oh *gad*." Her hand flew to her mouth to muffle her sob. "I couldn't... he was right there- I couldn't- I tried to stop - but I couldn't! I killed him!"

Malfoy's eyes drifted to the floor. She could have sworn he looked ashamed. If she weren't so scared, if she couldn't feel the flames of anger gathering in the pits of her stomach, she might have felt sorry for him.

If sympathy was what he craved, he'd need to look elsewhere. She would sooner curl her hands into fists and punch him than offer even a shred of comfort.

"What did you do to me?"

He didn't answer.

"Malfoy," Hermione whispered hoarsely. Her eyes burned with tears she refused to shed. "What the fuck did you do to me? Why did you make me kill my friend?"

She hadn't stepped over the corpses of her friends while Malfoy had dragged her through the streets.

She hadn't killed Seamus.

She was alright. She was *safe*.

It was a nightmare, just a sick and twisted nightmare.

But then she noticed the dried blood on her hands. The blood that was matting between her knuckles and crusting around her fingernails. But that ... She hadn't ...

Hermione quickly wiped the moisture from her forehead, but she didn't find sweat when she looked down at her sleeve, just more blood.

She started to feel sick. Her chest heaved as her breath started to leave her in rapid, terrified pants. Her stomach dropped when she threw back the blanket around her legs, revealing a new scar from a bullet in her thigh-

"Granger, are you alright?"

Despite Malfoy's words being soft as silk, Hermione jumped and spun toward his voice.

Malfoy stood behind the adjacent sofa. He wore a concerned expression, and his hair hung messily into his eyes. His hands were fisted tightly on the backrest of the sofa, the veins in his hands protruding with the strain. It looked as though the fabric might give way and tear at any moment, the silver rings he wore on almost every finger looked like they were cutting into his skin.

And then there was the blood. Malfoy was fucking drenched in it. It covered his robes, was dyeing in his white-blonde hair, and streaking down every inch of his face from temple to chin.

"What happened?" Hermione's voice didn't sound like her own, it croaked, raw.

The words burned her throat on the way out. "Why ... why am I...?"

Malfoy watched her for a few moments, jaw clenching and unclenching several times before he spoke. "You're back at the Manor."

"Yes, I gathered that thanks," she hissed, couldn't help herself. "How did I *get here*?"

Malfoy watched her carefully as he released the death grip he had on the sofa. He started to approach her slowly, taking one cautious step at a time the way one would

## ANGELS IN THE GARDEN



### 10th March

"Time heals all wounds."

Funny, Hermione had never really paid much attention to that phrase before, just considered it something her frail, declining hero of a grandfather used to say.

"*Time heals all wounds, my darling*" he used to say to anyone who needed to hear it, a twinkle in his eyes and moustache crinkling with his smile. "*Time, and a good cup of tea,*"

No matter how shallow or mountainous a problem was, they were his answer to everything.

## CHAPTER 20

He would murmur it to her grandmother whenever he put the kettle on the stove - even as technology advanced, he'd refused to adapt, and preferred the old method of pot and fire to heat his beloved cup of tea. Said it tasted better. Hermione agreed.

He'd said it to Hermione's mother as he added milk and two sugars - just the way she liked it - and handed her a mug after she'd had a near-miss car accident.

He'd hushed it into Hermione's hair when she fell off her bicycle as a child. And that time she was bitten by a squirrel.

He'd even said it at her grandmothers funeral, whispered it under his breath as he'd watched the coffin that held his soulmate be lowered into the ground, his parting love letter to her carried by the wind until they would meet again.

Hermione was sure she'd found the one thing that time, or even the best cup of tea, could never heal.

She was certain, as she lay screaming in a bath filled with Seamus's blood, that time couldn't heal the crater that was forming in her chest.

She knew, as Astoria lathered her hair with shampoo and peeled chunks of matted flesh from her curls, that no amount of time could heal this pain, this wrenching fucking grief that felt like her spine had been ripped from her body and was being used to strangle her with.

No, time couldn't heal this.

Not in a week.

Not in a month.

Not even in a year.

And a good cup of fucking tea certainly wouldn't do the job either.

### **28th March**

"What do you think, Hermione?" Astoria chirped. "Which do you prefer?"

Hermione's head snapped up to stare at the two different bunches of flowers Astoria was holding over the new vase on her bedside table; white roses, or pink peonies.

Hermione gave a tight-lipped smile, then turned in her perch to face the window again. "I'll leave it up to you. Your taste is much better than mine."

He hadn't murdered one of his oldest friends, someone who'd gotten him blind drunk on the most bitter and potent Irish whisky when he'd gone through a breakup - but she had.

The man was very close to her. She could feel his cold forehead pressed against hers, could feel his breath on her face.

"I'm so fucking sorry." His fingers started to tremble as he held her. "I didn't have a choice. I had to do it. *You* had to do it."

The girl was still screaming. Why hadn't anyone calmed her down yet? Why wasn't anyone helping her?

"Please, *please*, little lion. Granger, you need to calm down."

He wanted her to calm down? She was fine. She was calm. She was floating on a cloud. She was -

Something thin and solid pressed against her forehead. It tingled, she felt little sparks of something scratch across her skin.

Then everything went black.

And the woman stopped screaming.

Hermione bolted upright like she'd been shot. Her hand flew to her chest, feeling her heart hammer painfully against her palm. Blood roared in her ears, and a thick bead of sweat trickled down her temple.

She was laying on the sofa in the drawing-room, the one she'd shared a glass of wine with Astoria in days ago. The fireplace was crackling with embers, and there was a thick wool blanket thrown across her legs but ... she couldn't remember how she'd gotten here.

She guessed she'd wandered in on one of her evening walks, that she'd been enticed by the fires warmth, laid down for a few minutes, and then fallen asleep.

Yes, that must've been it. She hadn't been to Whitby. She hadn't left the manor at all. She'd dreamt the whole thing. The Order hadn't come to rescue her. There was no battle, no speeches from Voldemort and no hisses from a crowd of cloaked figures.

off, starts rambling on about nonsense to distract the person from the nightmarish thing they'd just witnessed, and allow the body time to work itself into a state. Brings up trivial things like the colour of the sky while their panicking heart slowed into a more normal, healthier beat, and drags up obscure passages from books they'd once glanced over while the body labours to lower their temperature back down from searing.

And shock was the reason why, as Hermione stared at the pile of blood and flesh and broken bones that used to be Seamus Finnigan, her friend, the first thought that popped into her head was, *Do I have enough shampoo to wash his intestines out of my hair?*

She had just killed - no, she'd fucking *executed* one of her oldest friends, cut him down in cold blood, and the first thing that popped into her head was shampoo.

Shampoo? SHAMPOO? Fucking hell, *really*?

She probably didn't have enough though. She'd probably have to ask Malfoy for

*No!* No, she would not ask Malfoy for anything. Astoria would find her another bottle. She'd bring baskets full of the most expensive products if Hermione only asked her. She'd probably offer to wash the blood from Hermione's hair herself,

sweet girl.  
A minute passed. And then another. Each tick of the clock dragged something else back into focus.

Was that... was someone screaming?

Yes.. it sounded like it. It was a girl. A woman. She sounded awfully upset.

She sounded familiar too, but Hermione couldn't quite place where she'd heard that scream before.

Cold hands were on her face again. Thumbs were stroking across her cheeks.

And grey-blue eyes were staring at her.

"I'm sorry," a man whispered quietly, frantic, voice shaking. "I'm so sorry."

Sorry? Why should he be sorry? He hadn't killed Seamus, Hermione had.

He hadn't butchered his friend, someone who used to steal books in destroyed library's and bring them back to the Order's bases, just because they thought he might like them - Hermione had.

Astoria sighed heavily behind her, a little defeated, then started clipping the flowers with her wand.

In the weeks following Seamus's death, after Astoria had washed the blood from Hermione's hair, after she'd held her in the bath while she'd sobbed and mourned her friend, she'd barely left Hermione's side. She became like a protective mother bee, constantly fussing and hovering over Hermione's every move.

Despite her small size and delicate demeanour, her protectiveness was far more effective than Hermione would have given her credit for. None of the men would go near Hermione if Astoria was around. Wouldn't so much as step over the threshold into her bedroom if Astoria was perched on the window ledge with her. Not her husband. Not Nott. And not even the Demon Mask to who the window belonged.

Hermione had refused to leave her room since the attack. She didn't want to. The thought of running into Malfoy, the thought of seeing the puppet master behind her marionette strings made her skin crawl.

She'd hidden away instead. Locked herself in a tower, threw the key out the window, and curled herself into a ball while she festered in her guilt and sorrow. It was a stupid idea, she knew that.

Months ago, the thought of being in a cage terrified her but now, she welcomed the idea with open arms. She would rather shackle her wrists and bind herself to the floor than risk going out there and ending the life of someone else she'd sworn to protect. She never wanted to leave this cage again, would happily die and rot in here by herself if that's what it took. It was no less than what she deserved.

Astoria, however, had other ideas. The petite blonde seemed determined that no matter how much Hermione wished she could wrap her own fingers around her throat and squeeze the life from her lungs, she would always be there to ease the pressure, to allow Hermione to *breathe*.

And if Hermione refused to go outside, then Astoria was determined to simply bring the outside *to* her.

She brought her freshly cut flowers from the gardens each morning, all beautiful and charmed to smell exquisite. Each evening she would run Hermione a bath filled with expensive bath salts and bubbles so soft they felt like they were made from spun silk. And she replaced the elves with their delivery service and insisted that they dine together. Each mealtime Astoria would softly enter Hermione's bedroom

pushing a silver trolley - two plates of food on the middle rack - and a steaming pot of tea and two mugs on the top.

It seemed that the idea of a good cup of tea could solve anything in a time of crisis wasn't lost on even the most purebred of wizarding society, something that was passed down from one generation to the next. The irony of it almost made Hermione chuckle; that blood supremacists all nursed their cups of tea the same way Muggles did - the lesser species they wanted to burn from the earth. If only they knew how similar they were under those few layers of magic.

Yes, Astoria's kind gestures weren't lost on Hermione, but she appreciated the effect Mrs Zabini had on Malfoy far more than any trinket she could offer.

True to his word, Malfoy had tried to resume their 'Legilimency sessions' the day after Whibby. He'd arrived in her room the next morning, even had the courtesy to knock before he sheepishly opened the door. He'd approached Hermione slowly, eyes on the floor and shoulder's slightly slumped -

But when he'd noticed Astoria sitting on the window ledge beside her, he'd frozen, and the very instant Astoria's lips had curled in disgust, he'd left. Hermione had brushed it off as a fluke, but then a pattern started to emerge. Each day, Malfoy would knock, enter Hermione's room, see Astoria, and then leave.

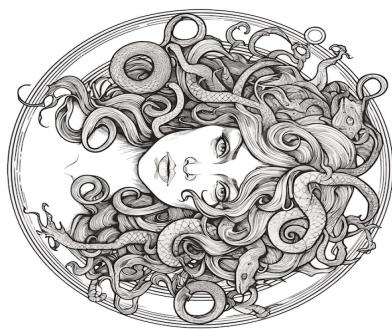
She wasn't sure what the reason was, or why he couldn't bring himself to barge into her mind while his sister was there - quite frankly she didn't care. It didn't really matter as long as he stayed away from her and out of her head.

Astoria couldn't protect Hermione every day, her condition only gave her the strength to be her shield for a few days at a time. So twice a week, when Astoria's blood curse bound her to her bed through spouts of fragility and coughing up blood, Malfoy would seize the opportunity, still keeping up the pretence of 'searching' Hermione's memories' even though she now knew it was a wasted exercise.

Hermione wasn't sure what she could do within her own mind to keep him from planting the hex. On their first session, she'd tried to remain calm, ignore the image of him in her mind as he watched whatever memory was unfolding, and tried to concentrate. She'd tried to feel for the hex, feel for an intruder, a strange tingle of magic that shouldn't be there - but there was nothing. Not a thing she could distinguish as he worked this new foul brand of magic into her brain like a parasite.

Despite not being able to feel what he was doing in her mind, she still fought him every step of the way. She did everything in her power to slow him down. She

## CHAPTER 19



### DR JEKYLL. MR HYDE

#### **10th March**

Hermione had read a long time ago, in another lifetime, that the body often does strange, inexplicable things when a person goes into shock.

Shock was probably the reason she felt like she was floating, and why she couldn't really hear anything going on around her. She knew someone was speaking, knew there were voices, but they were distorted and muffled. Like she was submerged underwater, eavesdropping on a conversation going on above the surface.

What shock did to the mind, however, was even more astounding.

Hermione remembered reading that when a person witnesses something too horrific for the brain to comprehend, the mind detached itself. Sort of ... switches

in her hand, but she had no control, had no way of stopping it. She felt like a marionette, a puppet with no idea of who was pulling her strings.

She caught Seamus's expression before the curse hit him, the confusion in his eyes, the fear, the realisation that he was going to die, and then the hex connected.

It was like a bomb had detonated inside Seamus's body. His chest exploded from the inside out, blood sprayed up the walls of the alleyway and all over Malfoy and Hermione. They were drenched with it, their clothes and faces were saturated with his blood, and pieces of his mangled flesh caught in their hair.

The cold fog evaporated from Hermione's body as quickly as it had appeared, but she didn't feel warmer. She felt frozen. Her muscles locked in place like pieces of ice as though she'd been petrified.

Because Seamus was dead, reduced to a pile of bones and torn flesh, and Hermione had been his executioner.

punched him while he tried to press his wand against her temples, kicked him, screamed, spat in his face, and tried to keep her hotel as strong as she could even though she knew it was pointless. He wasn't actually searching her memories, but she couldn't just sit there and *do nothing*.

Hermione tried with everything she had, summoned every ounce of Gryffindor courage and fire in her belly to keep those doors locked.

But Malfoy had broken her. He'd crushed her spirit under his boot and left her crumpled on the floor, bleeding, defeated.

And the hotel in her mind? The walls and doors she'd spent months reinforcing to keep him out? Well, they crumbled like fucking sandcastles swept up in the tide. Just as weak and broken as her spirit.

Malfoy waltzed through her memories easily now, glided from one to the next effortlessly now he was met with little resistance.

Hermione didn't even flinch when they'd watched Dumbledore's body fall from the Astronomy tower, or when they'd watched her younger double Obliviate her parents. She didn't even shed a tear - not a single fucking one - when they'd witnessed the first time she'd killed someone. Didn't feel even the smallest of tremors in her chest as the memories replayed, when the guilt had overtaken her, when she'd screamed and cried and shook in Ron's arms, agonized over what she'd done.

Hermione didn't feel any of it, because her heart was already broken.

"Hermione?" Astoria's calm voice cut through her thoughts again for the second time that afternoon. She was growing more attuned to when Hermione needed a distraction. "What did you want for dinner today?"

Hermione stared out the window instead of answering.

"I was thinking of asking Romy to make a lasagne. He always serves it with roast potatoes, and you know how much of a good mood it puts him in to cook those," Astoria went on, insistently trying to pull a conversation out of Hermione. "I've never known a house-elf to be so fond of something. I'm sure if he was smothered to death in roast potatoes, he would die happy."

Knock, knock, knock.

"Don't come in here!" Astoria sharply put the vase of flowers she was nursing down and glared at the door.

There was a brief silence, then the door started to creak open.

"Didn't you hear me?" Astoria snapped as Malfoy stepped into the room. "We don't want *you* in here! Get out right now!"

Hermione couldn't see what colour his eyes were, they were still on the floor and a few strands of his hair had fallen forward to cover his face. He looked different, conflicted, almost vulnerable.

"I can't do that that *Tori*." Everything about Malfoy's posture screamed uncomfortable. His shoulders were slumped, and the veins on the back of his hands were straining as he balled them into fists at his sides. "I have an assignment I'm needed on today..."

"*And?*!" Astoria cut in, her tone pure venom.

Malfoy gave a low, heavy sigh and pinched his eyes closed. "The Dark Lord has ordered that Granger comes with me- that I test the hex again."

Hermione's heart dropped into her stomach. She couldn't go out there with him. She couldn't risk hurting another one of her friends. He'd have to drag her out of here kicking and screaming.

"Don't you dare come anywhere near me." She jumped from her perch and backed away from him slowly, inching towards the bathroom door. "I'm not going anywhere with you!"

Malfoy's eyes snapped up. They were a mixture of colours, slightly more blue than grey. He wasn't quite Mr Hyde, but he wasn't exactly all Dr Jekyll either.

"Granger," he clenched his jaw. "Please don't make this any more difficult than it has to be." He reached into his robes, presumably to grab his wand-

Astoria moved quicker than Hermione thought possible for someone with her condition. "*Espellumus!*"

Her aim wasn't perfect, Malfoy's wand didn't land in her own palm as it should have. Her inexperience with the spell caused it to fly into the far end of Hermione's bedroom, but judging from Malfoy's horrified expression, the fact that she had managed to disarm him at all was worrying.

Astoria raised her wand and aimed it at his throat. "Hermione, get behind me."

As soon as Hermione was behind the blonde, Astoria's free arm wound around her waist to pull her protectively against her back.

"Breathe for me," he told her. "That's it - I've almost got it out. Just a little more, breathe."

The bullet *finally* popped out of her leg, and the cool wave of a healing charm spread across her thigh the moment it was free.

Hermione sighed in relief, her eyelids fluttering closed as she sagged against the brick wall. She felt dizzy and lightheaded, her body in a sort of trance through what she could only assume was blood loss. She snapped out of her trance, however, when she felt cold hands cup her face, icy thumbs drenched in blood sweeping across her cheekbones -

"GET AWAY FROM HER!" a thick, Irish voice called from the end of the alleyway.

Hermione's eyes snapped open. Malfoy spun towards the voice, and with two flicks of his wrist, he rid Seamus of the wand and gun he'd been pointing at them.

As Seamus dove for the gun on the floor, a Gold Mask appeared behind him. The Death Eater raised their wand, about to cast a killing curse while his opponents back was turned, but Malfoy raised his hand to stop them.

The next few seconds happened very quickly. So quickly that at first, Hermione thought she must have been dreaming.

While Seamus fumbled with his gun, Malfoy wrapped an arm around Hermione's waist and dragged her back towards him. He pressed her in close, her back flushed against his chest, and a shiver ran up her spine when his lips grazed her ear and he whispered, "*Daemonum, ortho.*"

The words were cold, detached. The soft tone he'd been speaking to her in only moments ago nowhere to be found.

An icy fog swept across Hermione's brain. The way it eclipsed her body reminded her of a Dementor, as though ghost-like fingers were trailing across her temples. It crawled down her arms and stomach, leaving everything it touched cold and tingling, and by the time it reached her toes, she felt nothing like herself. She felt hollow, empty, as though she'd been pushed out of her body.

Before her brain could command her muscles to stop, Hermione reached around and snatched Malfoy's wand from his fingers.

She'd never felt anything like it. She was aware of what was happening; that she'd spun around and taken aim against Seamus's chest. She knew that she threw a Bombarda hex at him, and saw the violent stream of light leave the tip of the wand

Hermione thought about running, about kicking him as hard as she could and making a break for it, but another pain stabbed across her leg, teasing her with the reality of her situation. She couldn't run, she probably wouldn't make it to the end of the alleyway before she bled out or ran into a hex. Whether she liked it or not, in this moment, she needed him.

So, with a deep breath through her nose, she rested her palms on his shoulders, and prayed he couldn't feel the way her fingers trembled.

"When it hurts, *squeee*, alright?"

Hermione just nodded.

Malfoy hovered his wand over her injury; his lips twitched into another smirk.

"Granger?"

"Yes?"

"Do you trust me?"

Even through the pain, Hermione couldn't help but snort. "Not in the slightest, but I don't really have a choice, do I?"

The only response he gave was a scoff, just one short puff of air through his lips, then waved his wand, and a pain like no other shot through her leg.

Hermione screamed before she could stop herself. She dug her nails into his shoulders, too distracted with the excruciating pain to really appreciate the way his muscles rippled under her touch. Her own muscles seemed to lock in place as the bullet started to twist out of her leg.

The process was so fucking slow. It was wise for Malfoy to extract the bullet slowly, but half of her wished he'd just tear the thing out, rip the bandage off and be done with it. The bullet had ruptured something vital, so tearing it out too harshly could risk severing more arteries and blood vessels. Hermione knew this way was safer, but it didn't help with the pain.

"*Shhhhhh*, it's alright. I've got you." Malfoy's voice was soft as honey, a world apart from Hermione's shrieks. He squeezed her hip reassuringly as he twisted his wand, coaxing the bullet out another inch. "*Breathe*. Good girl."

Hermione swore she held Malfoy's shoulders with enough force to snap bones, her grip growing tighter and tighter each time she felt the bullet move. If she did hurt him, he didn't say anything.

"Astoria," Malfoy warned in a low, dangerous tone, even though his hands were raised as though he was a soldier mid-surrender. "Don't do this."

"Then don't make *her* do this!"

Hermione almost couldn't believe what was happening. It didn't seem real that Astoria, the fragile witch whose life was as delicate and breakable as a strand of unicorn hair, could be pointing a wand at the most feared Death Eater in the country to protect her, and Malfoy couldn't seem to bring himself to retaliate.

He must have known wandless magic. Someone didn't become as dangerous as he was if they weren't adept at lethal curses without the need for a weapon. So why wasn't he attacking Astoria? It would be easy for him to overpower her. She'd cast one simple disarming spell, and her chest was already heaving with exhaustion. It would be incredibly easy for him to knock her out and drag Hermione out of here, so why wasn't he doing it?

Astoria took a step to the left, inching closer to the door and pulling Hermione with her.

Malfoy took a step to the right, away from their exit but closer to his wand. "You know I don't have a choice Tori." He took another step, so did the girls. "The Dark Lord has given me orders."

"I don't care!" When Malfoy crouched toward his wand, Astoria cast a weak fire hex at his feet, forcing him back a few paces. "You're not taking her out there! You're not making her kill again!"

Malfoy's lip curled. His eyes darkened as they fluttered to Hermione.

"Hermione, run!" Astoria shouted, her wand shaking in her hand as her condition started to claw her strength away. "I can keep him here for a few minutes, long enough for you to go and hide!"

That was one instruction Hermione didn't need to be told twice. She took off running and was down the corridor in seconds, sprinting towards an escape she had no hope of finding. She took a corner, and then another, ignoring the searing heat in her lungs and ache in her legs. She ran and ran and ran. Down the halls, through the kitchen, and burst open the doors until she was outside and the cold air was biting her overheated skin.

She needed to find somewhere to hide, somewhere he would never expect to find her. But where the fuck was she supposed to go? She'd explored every inch of this

hell hole a hundred times over. She'd seen everything, inspected every corner and not found a single trap door or hidden archway she could-

She skidded to a stop next to the Wisteria plants. There was one place she'd never explored.

#### The Malfoy family graveyard.

She could see the plants weaving around the cast iron fence from here, and the two pale brick pillars and glowing torches that lined the entrance. Her skin crawled at the thought of pushing open those rusting iron gates and stepping inside.

But she'd never set foot in there before, so she doubted Malfoy would ever think to look for her there.

Hermione drew a deep breath, ignoring the hairs that raised on the back on her neck when she creaked the ominous gates open, and sprinted inside.

She'd expected to see rows of headstones here, she knew that his lineage stretched back years into the past, but it couldn't have prepared her for this. She'd walked past the graveyard a thousand times, but she'd always kept her head down and averted her eyes to avoid looking beyond the gates. Her ignorance had left her blind, it was far larger than she anticipated it would be.

The graves went on forever. There were hundreds of them. Although the lawns and flowers were as well maintained as those on the estate, the headstones looked ancient and neglected. Some were withered with age, others so overgrown with ivy plants the inscriptions were barely visible. There were statues of angels everywhere she looked, all sculpted from the most beautiful marble, all watching over the grave of someone in the Malfoy family.

Hermione could practically hear Malfoy's ancestors hissing at her, rolling in their graves as she sprinted past their tombs and tall mausoleums. In the back of her mind, she wondered why certain family members were given such impressive crypts while others had to be satisfied with mere headstones - but she didn't dwell on it.

She took a left, and then another, searching for a large tomb she could hide behind. Fuck - she'd dig a grave herself if it meant she had something to hide in.

She jerked to a halt suddenly, because she wasn't as alone in the graveyard as she thought.

Her breath hitched when she saw him, and she instinctually dove to hide behind an eroding headstone. She waited, listening for approaching footsteps through the

Hermione nodded weakly, and as Malfoy curled his hand under her knees, she hooked her arms around the back of his neck. She hissed through gritted teeth, trying to ignore the pain in her leg as he gently lifted her from the ground and started to carry her through the smoke and debris.

The way Malfoy held her limited his movement, but he was still lethal with what he had. Every few seconds Hermione would feel his arm twitch, would feel the muscles in his bicep contract against her spine before a curse would shoot violently from his wand.

Hermione closed her eyes and tried not to focus on the throbbing pain in her leg - or the screams she could hear all around her. She tried to block them out and breathe him in instead, concentrate on spearmint and parchment rather than blood and rot, but it was impossible. The screams were simply too loud to ignore.

Minutes later, Malfoy took cover in an empty alleyway. He set her down as carefully as he could, much gentler than she would have thought possible from him, and ripped off his mask off. "Are you alright?"

"Oh yeah, don't worry about me," Hermione hissed as she leaned back and used the brick wall for support. "Just a little bullet in my leg, just like every other Wednesday." Her eyes snapped to his when she heard him chuckle quietly.

Malfoy stared at her. Although there was a smirk twitching at the edges of his lips, his eyes burned with concern as they flickered across her face. There were tiny flecks of blue there, like cracks of thunder against grey clouds. He watched her closely as he slowly knelt in front of her, her breath hitched when he placed a hand on her hip and pinned her to the wall. "I need you to be still Granger."

She tried to jerk away when the fingers on his right hand, the one that still clutched his wand, delicately skated below her puncture wound, but he just pinned her closer to the wall.

"It looks like it's severed an artery. I don't have time to cast an anaesthetic charm, and if I wait the few minutes it takes for the charm to take effect, you'll bleed out."

"What if we-ughhh!" Hermione lost her balance and accidentally rested some of her weight on her right leg, causing another searing pain to slice up her muscles.

With a curt wave of Malfoy's wand, her restraints vanished. "Put your hands on my shoulders, use me for balance and don't put *any* weight on that foot."

"Theodore," Voldemort said, his tone laced with so much authority Nott had no choice but to look at him, "I trust you are also well-rested? I have another assignment for you this evening, and I would hate to think my most vicious pedigree is too exhausted for the task."

Nott jabbed his tongue on the inside of his cheek, the movement was jarring, indignant, completely out of place for someone standing in front of their master. His shoulders almost vibrated, and his hands fisted tightly at his sides. Eventually, he huffed a shallow breath and answered, "Anything for you, *my Lord*"

"Excellent." Voldemort turned back to Malfoy. "I hear the trial in Whiby went well?"

Malfoy's fingers tightened around Hermione's elbow. She swore he tried to drag her a little closer to him. "Yes, my Lord."

"And the attack yesterday?" the dark wizard went on, dragging his claws down the elder wand in a threatening manner. "Did the Demon Hex work?"

"Yes, my Lord," Malfoy swallowed. "It... worked."

No, Hermione wasn't imagining it, Malfoy did drag her a little closer to him. She could feel his breath ghosting across the back of her neck.

"Although the mission didn't go as we expected. We didn't have an opportunity to capture the refugees, but a much better opportunity presented itself. The hex worked well, and Granger incapacitated most of the Order soldiers within minutes. I've never seen a fighter as fierce as her."

Voldemort flashed his teeth in a smile.

"Potter was there," Malfoy added, and Voldemort's triumphant expression instantly fell. "He showed up unexpectedly. Most of their fighters were already taken out - but when Potter saw Granger, he froze."

If Voldemort had eyebrows, they would have shot up. "Is that so?"

"Yes. He couldn't attack her. He had his wand pointed at her throat, he had a clear shot - but he couldn't do it."

All the Death Eaters stared at Malfoy with their jaws hanging open in disbelief.

Voldemort was very quiet as his red eyes slithered to Hermione, almost like he'd forgotten she was there. He looked her over once, twice, appraising her like she was a show dog he didn't realise he needed until it won first in show, and then the laugh that burst from his thin lips was like something out of a horror movie. The kind of

dark cackle that raised the hairs on her arms and caused her stomach to knot with dread.

"Well, this is a surprise," Voldemort chuckled. "The infamous Order of the Phoenix, the fearless Harry Potter, brought to their knees by a mere *Mudblood*." When he started to circle Hermione, Malfoy was forced to release her arm and step back. If she didn't know any better, she'd have sworn he seemed reluctant to let Voldemort get between them.

"Well done Draco," Voldemort purred as he finished his rotation. "Your work with the mudblood is inspired, you've turned her into the perfect weapon."

Malfoy moved, cautiously shifting his weight so that he could see Hermione's face. What was he looking for?

She jumped slightly when Voldemort pressed the tip of the elder wand into her right shoulder.

"She's just as deadly as you are, Draco," Voldemort hushed as he disappeared behind her again, dragging the elder wand across her skin as he went. Hermione forced herself not to panic when it scraped against her spine. "Just as ruthless. Just as merciless."

Malfoy's eyes drifted to the floor. A muscle in the side of his neck ticked as he clenched his jaw.

Voldemort appeared on Hermione's right again. His lips pulled back in a sickening sort of smile, and when he leaned forward, Hermione's nose wrinkled with the repugnant smell of dark magic. "And the best part? No Order soldier, not even Potter, could ever bring themselves to hurt her. She's the prized jewel in our arsenal, our most lethal weapon - and none of them will touch her." He reach out, his claws scraping across her skin as he tried to tuck a stray curl behind her ears -

Hermione cringed away from him, retreating until her hip knocked into a wooden bench behind her.

The other Death Eaters chuckled darkly as the realisation of Voldemort's sick plan finally dawned on them. Only Malfoy and Nott remained silent.

"She's one of us now," Voldemort said, "and they should know that." With a wave of his wand, Hermione's clothes transformed into women's Death Eater robes. They were much tighter than the ones the men wore, dipping in at her waist. They were longer, the gauntlets slimmer, their combat boots replaced with thigh high

heeled boots, and their was an elegant dip on the chest piece to leave her collarbone exposed.

This could not be happening. This could *not* be fucking happening.

There were too many Death Eaters here. One wrong move could earn her a crucio. She couldn't afford to be vulnerable right now. She needed to be strong.

*Aloft.*

Hermione willed her muscles to stay strong, to hold her high and proud and not show even a glimpse of the fear she felt eating away at her.

She wanted to tremble. Wanted to scream from the top of her lungs as those horrid robes shrouded her body. They were only thin pieces of cloth, but she felt like she was being dragged to the floor by their weight, suffocated by their tightness.

Voldemort stood back to admire his work. He tapped his claws across his chin, deep in thought. "What did you say her nickname was?" he asked, red eyes still locked onto Hermione.

"The Golden Girl, my Lord," Malfoy answered.

Voldemort smirked. "I thought so. Rodolphus?"

The Death Eater in question jumped to attention. "Yes, my Lord?"

Voldemort held out his arm and curled his fingers impatiently. "Give me your mask."

Rodolphus shuffled awkwardly on his feet. "She is to be... a Gold Mask already my Lord? A Mudblood is not worthy of that honour. Perhaps a simple..."

Voldemort cut him off with a Crucio, and while Rodolphus lay writhing on the floor in agony, his mask levitated into the air. "When we utilize the Mudblood, she will wear our robes."

One quick spell, and the mask began to deteriorate, melting quickly into liquid gold that gathered at the tip of his wand.

"She will not wear a mask," Voldemort said. "I want the Order to see her. I want them to be able to look in her eyes when she aims her wand at their hearts. I want them to know she fights for us now."

When he waved his wand again, the liquid began to float toward Hermione. She held her breath as it started to weave itself into her new clothes. It turned the silver gauntlets gold and danced along her sleeves and chest piece of her robes, embedding

Hermione let it glide over her like water off a ducks back, refusing to be intimidated.

But when Bart' Grouch Jr licked his lips, a revolting shiver ran through her before she could stop herself.

Barty had been relatively quiet since he'd been broken out of Azkaban. He'd been seen on the odd war zone over the years but as far as the Order knew, he wasn't much of a soldier anymore. He was more of a strategist these days; a genius of deception, much more useful hidden behind stacks of books and battle plans.

But he was *hungry* for the fight, that much was obvious in the frantic, almost depraved look in his eyes. In the way his fingers curled and flexed towards his wand every few seconds like he couldn't stop himself, like he was *desperate* to show that he belonged in war - he just needed a chance to prove it.

But the way he was looking at Hermione, the way he was looking at her *hips* made her want to wretch.

"Draco, Theodore, welcome." Voldemort stood when they reached the end of the aisle, his voice almost a purr. "I did wonder when you were going to get here."

"My apologies my Lord." Malfoy arched his back and bowed before Voldemort. Nott dragged Hermione down to do the same. "The mission yesterday exhausted us all, so we required a little more rest before we could Apparate here."

As they all straightened, Hermione's eyes flickered to Malfoy. He was lying. He hadn't slept in, she doubted he'd slept at all.

After she'd uncurled herself from his lap in the early hours of this morning, Malfoy had disappeared. He wasn't in his room, and no one had seen him around the estate all day. Not Astoria. Not Zabini. Even the house-elves hadn't a clue where he'd gone.

Hermione had dismissed it. She just assumed he'd needed time to himself, but why was he lying about it? What could possibly have been so important, so worth covering up, that he was lying to his master about it?

"Do not worry yourself Draco." Voldemort placed a hand on Malfoy's shoulder. "You have served me well. I think you've more than earned a little rest."

Malfoy nodded once, the muscles in his neck visible and straining against his skin. His whole body seemed uncharacteristically tense.

Nott stared at the floor, his expression as blank as his eyes.

Malfoy held her through all of it, rocking her, comforting her while his lips fused themselves to her hair, her forehead, whispering faint confessions of, "I'm sorry," and "You don't deserve this," over and over again.

"I'm so fucking sorry little lion," she heard him say when sunlight finally started to break through the kitchen window. "Fuck- why did it have to be you? Why the fuck did it have to be *you*?"

### **29th March**

Being back in York Cathedral after all these months made Hermione feel cold. It could have been the denentors circling overhead, hovering on the ceiling like omens of death. Or because all the candles had been blown out, extinguished by the Death Eaters as quickly as they'd ended the lives of the churchgoers that had lit them.

But no, in the back of her mind, Hermione knew it was neither of those things.

There was something else here, something dark and malevolent that made her blood run cold, and caused shivers to run up her spine like someone was doing cartwheels on her future grave.

And it was looking right at her.

Hermione forced herself not to shudder when Voldemort met her eyes. Forced herself to keep her chin high as Malfoy and Nott guided her through the cathedral doors and down the aisle.

He was sat on the same throne as last time. His dark green, dirt ridden robes were draped over the armrest as he twirled the elder wand in front of him.

There were fewer Death Eaters today, apparently only a handful of Gold Masks were deemed '*worthy enough*' to attend this meeting. They stood at the heels of their master, hovering, masks in their hand like the loyal dogs they were.

Hermione's presence wasn't appreciated at this '*word*' meeting - their expressions told her that.

Rodolphus and Rabastan Lestrange glared at her from Voldemort's right.

Corban Yaxley curled his lip in disgust.

Walden Macnair's fingers twitched towards his wand.

Antonin Dolohov narrowed his eyes and elbowed the Death Eater she didn't recognise next to him.

into every swirl and fleck and intricate pattern, and two pieces wove themselves into her hair and around either temple, softening into a headpiece to pin her hair back. It made her unmissable, but also unmistakable.

Everyone would see her. She would stick out on the battlefield like a single white dove in a viper's nest - but that was Voldemort's intention. His cruel joke. The Order's most lethal soldier had been snatched and turned against them, they'd see her coming, and none of them would have the heart to stop her.

This was it, this was the final nail in Hermione's coffin, the thing that would bury her and the Order right alongside one another.

Because Voldemort's plan was so fucking twisted and genius it bordered on sinful.

No member of the Order of the Phoenix would hurt Hermione - not a single one. Harry hadn't even been able to cast a stunning hex on her, so what chance did the others have?

Hannah Abbot wouldn't be able to throw a killing curse at her.

Neville wouldn't be able to point a gun at her.  
And Ron certainly wouldn't be able to pull the trigger if she was on the other side of it.

None of them would be able to hurt her - but Hermione wouldn't have a choice. She would end them all, cut them down, tear their hearts from their chests and crush it in front of their terrified faces, and then turn around and do the same thing to the next Order soldier.

And then another.

And then another.

This would crush the Order's spirit. It would completely shatter Harry in a way Hermione never imagined possible. This would be the Order's undoing, and judging by the ashamed expression on Malfoy's face, watching as a single tear escaped down Hermione's cheek, he knew it too.

It was a shame it was too little, too late.

## CHAPTER 22

But he didn't. Instead, he let her scream and attack him like a madwoman.

"Well, you got your fucking wish! Look at what you've done to me!" Hermione blinked, feeling her own eyes burn with tears - not She wasn't ready to cry yet! "This is all your fault! You're the reason I'm so angry!" Her fingers curled around the collar of his robes and she dragged his face down to hers. "You're the reason I want to break everything! So the least you could do is fight me! Do something! *Anything!*"

She felt him take a deep breath, felt the air swirl around her face as he inhaled, as if he was trying to take that rage, siphon it from the air around her and take it into his own lungs.

He stared at her for a few seconds, bottomless blue, not a sliver of grey to be found, then rested his forehead against hers. "I am doing something," he sighed, his voice so low and pained it made her chest tighten.

Because he was doing something.

He was standing there, offering himself up as the target for her anger. He'd baited her on purpose. He'd seen the bloodlust spilling out her, and knew she needed to exorcise it like a demon before it swallowed her whole. He was being the sacrificial lamb for the anguish that he'd caused.

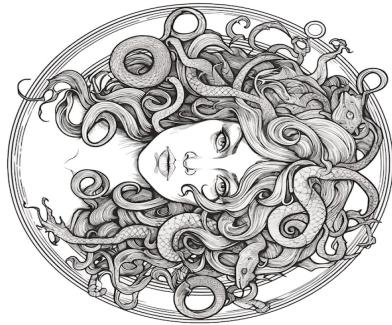
It was an apology, an apology she wasn't ready to hear, and it made her fly over the edge.

Hermione screamed and pounded her fists against his chest, over and over again, until her arms ached and her throat was raw and burning, until her screams merged into a strangled sob and her hands clawed against his collar.

*But it worked.* As the minutes ticked on, she felt exhausted. Empty. *Claimed.*

She slumped against him, burying her face in his chest as tears streamed down her face. She felt Malfoy's arms softly wrap around her, supporting her, holding her close as they both slipped down the cupboard door and onto the floor. When he pulled her into his lap, she didn't attempt to push him away. Oddly, she didn't want to. But she couldn't stop sobbing, or stop herself from feebly batting his chest, trying to punch him even though she was utterly spent.

Hermione had no idea how long they stayed like that; her curled up in his arms, screaming and soiling his robes with her tears. Had no idea how many times his arms tightened around her, crushing her against his body each time another breathless cry tore its way up her throat.



## ANOTHER ONE BITES THE

### DUST

**18th April**

The weeks following Hermione's audience with Voldemort were a blur. A blood-soaked, nightmarish, scream infested fucking blur.

Once he had the reassurance that the Demon Hex was effective, Voldemort became obsessed, and demanded that his *prized jewel* be utilised at every opportunity.

Hermione was thrown under the hex daily. They were smaller missions to begin with; disarming muggle bases, invading airfields, and destroying the tanks and helicopters that Voldemort despised.

Malfoy's eyes flickered when she punched his left shoulder harder than any of the other blows, the blue almost totally eclipsed the grey.

"You'll do anything for them! Open the gates of hell if it means they'll be safe, but fuck the rest of us! Who cares if we all burn! Just as long as they're safe!"

She hit him again and again and again, but he wasn't trying to restrain her. He wasn't even trying to retaliate.

Why the fuck wasn't he trying to hit her back?! They were enemies! They hated one another! She wanted him to lose control! She wanted him to attack her just so she could hit him back and expel some of this anger that felt like it was suffocating her.

She didn't want *this!* She didn't want him to look at her with those sad eyes. She didn't want his pity. She wanted him angry - like her - to tumble over the edge. She wanted to drag him down with her, make him feel everything she was feeling.

Hermione punched his jaw begging to get a rise out of him.

Malfoy ground his teeth together, but his hands remained firmly clenched at his sides. They didn't even flicker towards his wand.

"Hex me!" Hermione screamed, shoving his chest again with all of her strength. He hissed when his back connected with the cupboard door. She was hurting him, beating him the way she'd wanted to for months, and he wasn't fighting her back. "Come on, hex me! Hit me! *Do something!*"

His nostrils flared. His throat bobbed as he swallowed, and he just ... stared at her. The bluer his eyes became, the more the emotions he usually hid behind shards of glass bled to the surface. There was a sadness hiding there now. A hurt that came not from physical pain, but something else - but Hermione didn't want to see that right now.

"Don't just stand there!" she screamed, pounding her fists against his chest. "Curse me! Hex me! This is what you wanted, isn't it?!" She punched him again just below his collar bone. Although he didn't flinch, the pain growing behind his eyes was almost unbearable to look at. "This is how you wanted me to be, isn't it? Dangerous? Lethal?!"

He could have stopped her at any moment. He was so much stronger than she was. She was so small in comparison to him; his biceps were thicker than the tops of her thighs. If he wanted to stop her, it would have been all too easy for him to reach out, pin her wrists to her sides and cage her in.

The muggle armies had clearly been briefed about Hermione's position within the Order and her importance to Harry beforehand. She knew this, because each time a muggle soldier got a good look at her face, they lowered their guns.

And then Hermione would slaughter them without mercy.

Wherever Malfoy was, Hermione was dragged to follow like another dog on a leash. He stayed by her side on each mission to check her eyes and make sure she hadn't broken free of the wretched curse before the end of their assignment. A bodyguard Hermione didn't want, and certainly didn't need.

She was absolutely lethal while under the hex, everyone could see that. She was terrifying. Ruthless. *Inhumane*.

The Death Eaters who accompanied them on missions - the one's who'd hissed degrading insults at her when she'd first been brought before them - weren't just giving her a wide birth anymore, they practically bowed at her feet, in awe of her brutality and cold-heart.

The opposition never stood a chance. There wasn't a curse too dark or a spell too brutal that Hermione wouldn't cast it. She cut people in half with slicing curses, exploded some people's chests from the inside out, and sliced some soldiers' throats open so severely she practically decapitated them.

She spared no one. Not a single hostage was taken when she was being utilised, the hex simply didn't allow it.

She tried not to think about the people she killed. Tried to blur their faces from her mind and tell herself that this was a good thing, that she was sparing the poor sods more pain later on down the line. Saving them from hours and hours of cruel and barbaric interrogation. That she was granting them a torturous mercy.

It didn't really help. They were still people. Still men and women who'd stared at her with wide, terrified eyes before she'd snuffed the life out of them. They haunted her at night, tormented her nightmares with chants that all of this was her fault, that she should have let Malfoy die, that she should have pushed Collin out of the way and let that Avada kill her all those months ago.

She was driving herself insane trying to find a loophole in the hex. She fought it each time she was put under, clawed at it until her head throbbed and her psyche felt sore like an overstretched rubber band. She tried every mind blocking and mediation technique she could think of to force herself to wake from it.

And it all failed.

Each time she felt it getting stronger, feeding off her misery and pain like it was the finest delicacy, threading its vines of thorns a little deeper and demanding her cooperation.

Her routine had become the most tedious agony.

Kill. Bathe. Sleep.

Kill. Bathe. Sleep.

She felt like she was trapped in a hell loop; a never ending punishment to atone for the sins she'd committed since the start of the war.

Kill. Bathe. Sleep.

Kill. Bathe. Sleep.

On and on, the eternal fucking merry-go-round she was destined to never escape.

The '*Come down*' period after she awoke from the hex was getting worse each time. She felt like a declawed cat whenever she woke; agitated, and with so much pent-up aggression she had no way of channeling.

Even painting didn't provide the same solace it once had. She'd tried to tap a vein, bleed this anger out and smear it onto the wall - but all she could paint was blood and broken bodies and fire, confessing her sins of the day through brush strokes.

Hermione burst through the door and stormed across her bedroom, furiously unzipping her heeled boots and kicking them off her feet as she went. She ripped the crimson soaked gauntlets off her arms as she entered the bathroom, disappointed they didn't smash when she threw them onto the tiles. Her fingers - manicured with someone else's dried blood - trembled as she leaned over the copper bath to twist the hot water tap.

Her Death Eater robes were too tight. She felt claustrophobic, too warm, too wired, and *she needed to get these robes off now!*

She needed to get into this bath and wash the blood and ash and torn flesh from her body before she vomited. Needed to scrub every inch of her skin until it was raw and cracked and *uh* again. She'd sit in this bath for hours if she needed to. She'd scold herself, boil this parasite of a curse she felt -

"Granger!" a biting voice sneered from the doorway, getting louder with each passing second. "Will you stop running away for two bastard seconds. I'm not finished with you yet!"

toxin, clouding her rational thought and tunnelling her vision until all she could see and think about was the target of her rage. *Malfoy*.

The thorough bastard had thought ahead and charmed his wand beforehand. The second Hermione had snapped out of the hex, it'd burned her palm until she dropped it. She may have been weaponless again, but she was far from defenceless.

He wanted her angry? He wanted her to lash out? Kick him? Punch him? Fine, he could have it all!

She wanted to take this pain she felt festering inside her, this grief that was burrowing deep in her chest, rip it out and beat him with it! She'd make him the punch bag for her rage. She'd hit until her palms bled!

Hermione imagined that anger heating her skin, imagined it sliding down her muscles and into her palms, and pushed it into Malfoy's chest with all of her strength.

"That's it!" Malfoy sneered. "Don't stop there! What else have I done? What else have I *taken* from you?"

"You've turned me into a monster," Hermione hissed as she pushed him again. "You've made me attack my friends!" She hit him again, harder, more of a slap than a push. It gave her much more release than shoving him had, so she did it again. "You've made me *murder* people I grew up with! The people we went to *school* with!"

Malfoy was still standing tall and strong, but he wasn't smirking anymore. His mouth was twisted down at the corners, and a worried crease had appeared between his brows. The cracks in his eyes were intensifying, his occlumency walls were splintering, ocean blue bleeding through and taking over.

It was that breath-taking blue that made him look more vulnerable, beautiful. That deep, bottomless fucking blue that made her think she could see into his very soul, showing her how broken and damaged it was, even when she'd convinced herself that he didn't have one.

Hermione didn't want to think of him as vulnerable, or someone with feelings. He was a soulless demon! Nothing but a target for her anger!

She punched his chest, another wave of anger that shot through her arm and into him, trying to spark some flame in him, the ones that were burning her from the inside out.

"You've taken everything away from me!" Hermione hissed, punching him again. Her knuckles ached but he didn't retaliate. "You've done everything but brand me with the Dark Mark yourself! You don't care about anyone who isn't your family!"

They were back on his estate. It was dark outside, only a few thin rays of moonlight were streaking in through the clouds hanging over the manor. The kitchen they'd reappeared in was cold, someone had left a window open but Hermione hardly felt it. She was too wired, too hot and *angry*.

She could feel blood, shit-*someone else's blood*- matting in her hair again. Could feel more of it drying and crusting on her face, pulling her skin, making it feel tight and not her own.

God - she was so fucking angry she was bursting with it.

The first time she'd awoken from the hex, she'd withered on the floor like a broken little dove. She'd screamed and cried, hidden away under her clipped wings and prayed that the world would go away, that someone would come and just make the pain *stop*.

This time she was fucking murderous. She wanted to break something. *Anything!*

No - no, not just anything. She wanted to break Malfoy. Wanted to stand on his spine, snap the thing in two and be done with him forever. Heaven knew the world would be a better place without him.

Her anger must have shown on her face, because when she spun toward him, Malfoy took a cautious step away from her. His hands shot into the air; his rings glittering against the moonlight. "Easy, I'm not going to hurt you."

Hermione couldn't help but snort. "You hurt *me*?" She marched towards him, her anger rising into an inferno with every step she took. "You've already robbed me of *everything*! There's nothing left for you to hurt," she shouted as she pushed his chest with the palms of both hands - but he didn't move, didn't even flinch. In fact, he seemed to *enjoy* it.

A smirk twitched at the edges of his lips; cracks of blue lightning coloured the cold grey of his eyes. "There she is! There's the fucking little lioness I've been missing! I wondered where she'd gone."

Sick bastard.

Malfoy wrapped his hands around her wrists and held her there. He pinned her against his chest and leaned down, close enough for Hermione to taste spearmint and smoke. "Go on then Granger," he whispered. "Let me have it."

He was goading her. He knew she couldn't really hurt him, but she didn't care. She was far too angry to ignore the bait. Her anger was poisoning her mind like a

Hermione squeezed her eyes shut indignantly. Her fingers curled tighter around the lid of the copper bath. "Oh, would you just *fuck off* Malfoy! Can you not leave me alone -"

Cold hands suddenly locked around her arm, and a strong grip spun her around.

Looking at Malfoy after a mission was like looking in a mirror. As she stared up at him, she knew that the blood drying in his white blonde strands were matting in her curls too. That the same blood that streaked down his face was drying on hers.

She saw the same crazed, hollow expression in his eyes - the one that only soldiers fresh off the battlefield knew about. The one that only executioners with blood still dripping from their blades recognised, and it made her feel sick.

"I told you not to run off," Malfoy snapped. "You could have been injured, and don't think I didn't see you try and step in front of Theo's slicing curse!" He placed a hand on either of her shoulders, trying to hold her still whilst he checked her over, looking for wounds that weren't there. "What the hell is wrong with you? That curse would have torn you in half! You almost got yourself bloody killed!"

"Yes Malfoy," the keyword being *almost*, Hermione hissed, feeling her anger simmering dangerously close to the surface. She jerked in his hold, trying to fight him off, but his hands just squeezed her tighter. Inescapable. "I *almost* got myself killed! I *almost* stepped in front of a spell that could have ended my miserable existence, but guess what? Your Demon Hex stopped me from being able to do it!"

His fingers loosened a fraction. His lifeless eyes flickered.

"I tried, I really fucking tried to do it," she said, batoning his hands away with a sharp slap. "All I could think about was how lovely it would be to walk in front of that curse and let it tear me in two. How *relieved* I would feel to finally put an end to this sick little game you and your master have coined, and *not* have to murder for you anymore!"

Malfoy's lips twitched at the corner but he didn't say a word - Hermione didn't give him the opportunity.

"But you just couldn't help yourself, you had to put an end to that too, didn't you? *Every time* I tried to step in front of a curse, the strings of this hex pulled me back! I can't even kill myself anymore!" she screamed in his face as she drew her outer robes down her arms and threw them onto the floor. "So congratulations,

there's another thing you've taken from me! Hip hip hurray! Your master will be so pleased with you!"

Hermione reached for the zipper at the back of her neck. Staring at his face, she saw the moment he realised she wasn't going to wait for him to leave the room before she stripped.

He caught her shoulders again just as her fingers curled around the tag. "Don't you fucking dare take your clothes off!"

"Oh grow the fuck up Malfoy." With one sharp jut of her elbow towards his jaw, Malfoy released her. "You've barged through years of my memories, I'd say that's a thousand times more intimate than seeing me naked, wouldn't you?" Her hands returned to the zip -

"This isn't a game!" Malfoy growled through gritted teeth. "Stop fucking around."

Hermione's lip curled in a snarl. "Or *what*? What are you going to do?"

His nostrils flared as he stared at her, apparently without an answer, so she carried on.

"I'm your master's new favourite toy, and he can't have his new 'prized jewel' taken out of commission, can he? You can't hurt me anymore."

Somewhere in the rational part of her brain, Hermione knew she might regret this later. Somewhere her subconscious was screaming that this was a bad idea - the worst, most awful decision since the beginning of fucking time - but she couldn't really hear it right now.

That part of her was tucked away, buried deep under layers of anger and the terrified eyes of those she'd slaughtered that day. Drowned out by the symphony of those that'd begged and screamed for their lives at the end of her wand.

And she was still covered in their blood. She could smell it on her clothes and skin, burning the stench into her nostrils.

Hermione didn't care that Malfoy hadn't left the room yet. She was getting into that bath and scrubbing the ghosts of the day off her whether he was in here or not. He could bring in the rest of the Death Eaters for all she cared. Crack open a bottle of champagne and enjoy the show.

All that mattered to her was getting this uniform off. *Nom.*

her arms and over her palms, lacing itself through her fingers so it could control every inch of her.

This time she *studied* it; the way it made her veins hum and her pulse quicken to the point she felt like she was vibrating; her whole body alert and ready for everything.

Malfoy had been right, the Hex did bring with it a blinding sense of clarity; both sharpening and edging her sense. She could see everything. Could hear every leaf rustle in the trees above her head, and the bones in Malfoy's hand grinding together as he'd clenched his fists beside her.

All hunters' instincts, all brought to the surface with two Latin words.

The thing she didn't expect however, was the emotions it dragged to the surface. Not happiness or joy or even wonder. No, those emotions wouldn't serve the Hex's purpose. The spell fed on dark magic, it gorged on brutality and pain. The Hex wanted her to kill and destroy, the types of things that only the darkest of curses could achieve.

And the thing about dark magic, is that it's fuelled by emotions; pain, rage. The more heartbreak, the better. The more anguish, the stronger the curse.

So the hex brought it all to the surface. Every life that'd been lost because of her. Every mission that'd failed because she'd been too slow or made the wrong move. Every time she'd held someone in her arms as they'd died. The hex replayed them all like a cruel Rolodex of pain and horror, fuelling her anger.

There were a lot of things the hex did to her body that she hadn't realised last time, but the most significant thing, the thing she was ashamed of, was the way it made her feel lethal. Powerful. Like she could do anything, bring down any building or end any army with a flick of her wrist.

If she weren't aiming the wand in her hand at her friends - the people she'd sworn to protect no matter what - then she might have actually enjoyed the effects.

As the curse faded and those ghost-like fingers trailed backwards out of her body, a *real* cold hand grabbed Hermione's wrist. Quick as a flash, the ground vanished from beneath her feet and the air shifted as she landed somewhere else.

Those same hands cupped her face the instant they finished Apparating. "Granger, look at me." Malfoy tilted her face up to meet his eyes. "Shhhh, it's alright. You're safe. Look at me~"

Hermione smacked his hands away. "Don't touch me!"

## CHAPTER 21

Hermione kept her eyes on Malfoy's as she started to drag the zip down her back. "You've kidnapped me and planted that awful hex in my head," she said. When the zip reached the base of her spine and the fabric sprang apart, Malfoy's breath hitched quietly.

"You've made me murder soldiers you knew weren't going to defend themselves, not if it meant hurting me." She pulled one of her arms free of the constricting leather uniform. "They were *good* people, and you made me kill them." Pressing her free hand against the fabric on her chest to cover her modesty, she freed her other arm from its sleeve. "And now your master is planning on using me to eliminate the entire organisation of people that I've spent years protecting."

As soon as she let go of the fabric, as soon as it fell to the floor and left her chest completely bare, the tension in the air became tangible, heating the space around them and stifling the oxygen.

Malfoy's eyes were glued to Hermione's, unwavering, but burning with the desire to indulge in the temptation she was offering.

And strangely, she found that she *liked* it.

Since he'd brought her here, Malfoy had always been in control. He'd held all the cards and Hermione had been powerless to stop him. In comparison to the state of the world, her nudity was a silly thing, small and of no real consequence. But in that moment, as she hooked her fingers around the waistband of her trousers and knickers, she felt the power shift between them.

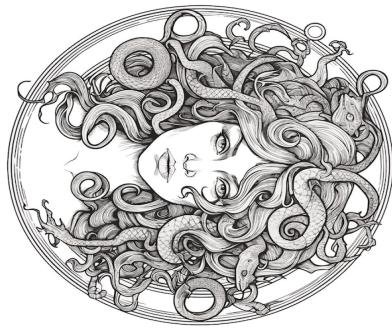
For once- *just of this once-* she could practically taste the moment the scales tipped in her favour. With his eyes burning and jaw rigid, she knew she was the one in control - and fuck - it made her feel powerful, ignited some fire in her lower abdomen and spurred her on.

"You've taken everything else from me Malfoy," she said quietly, confidently holding his gaze as she bowed forward and peeled her trousers and underwear down her legs.

The air got thicker, perfumed with tension in the most delicious way.

Hermione straightened, her spine proud and tall, and stepped out of the fabric. "After everything you've done, do you think it really matters if you see me without clothes on?"

This time she was aware of the hex, of the way it started at the base of her skull, tingling as it stretched across her brain and down her spine. She'd felt it spread down pushing her movements.



## THE GOLDEN GIRL, REBORN

**28th March**

Waking up from the Demon Hex felt different the second time. Hermione couldn't remember much about her first experience with it; it'd been too unfamiliar, too sudden. She'd been so swallowed up in her panic that she hadn't noticed anything else going on around her. It'd felt like being dragged under a harsh wave, twisting and flipping under the current with no sense of which way was up or down.

The second time was both easier and a thousand times worse. She had more self-awareness, she could *feel* the curse and marionette strings on her arms pulling and pushing her movements.

This time she was aware of the hex, of the way it started at the base of her skull, tingling as it stretched across her brain and down her spine. She'd felt it spread down

She was completely naked, exposed, vulnerable, but it was the strongest she'd felt in months. She felt empowered in her nudity, in baring her femininity like it was the sharpest knife in the rack.

Malfoy's entire body seemed to go rigid. He clenched his jaw, the muscles in his neck straining to move – but he didn't lower his gaze. His eyes were locked on hers, and Hermione found herself pinned, almost trapped by the look in them. They were mostly grey but there were cracks, ocean blue fighting to break the surface.

She was getting to him. She was making him uncomfortable.

*Good* - she intended to make him fucking *squirm*.

Hermione took a step back and held her arms wide on either side of her, putting herself even more on display than she already was. "Go on then," she challenged.

"Take a look."

Malfoy rolled his tongue across his bottom teeth. His hands twitched into a fist but his eyes didn't move.

"What's stopping you?" she went on, determined to make him cave, *no min*. She took a step back and sat on the lid of the bath, impatiently tapping her nails against the copper. "Take a peek. I dare you, *Draco*."

Malfoy took a deep breath, his shoulders twitched, and just when she thought he was about to turn around and leave, his eyes flickered downward.

A satisfied tingle ran up her spine when she noticed the change in his eyes the moment he gave in.

Malfoy sucked in a harsh breath through gritted teeth, and groaned in the back of his throat as he traced over every curve and dip of her waist. Taking his time. Drinking her in *inh* by *inh*. His gaze was one of the most intense things she'd ever experienced, she could practically feel his eyes as they roamed across her body.

Hermione couldn't remember the last time a man had seen her naked, and she was certain none of them had ever looked at her like *that*. The look in his eyes was primal. The need to claim and possess burned around his irises. He looked fucking *hungry* – it almost made her mouth run dry.

Hermione couldn't take her eyes off him, and he certainly couldn't look away from her. She felt her chest heat, could feel a flush colour her cheeks when his gaze landed on the space between her hips.

And then he took a step towards her, and her pulse thumped in her veins.

"HARRY GO!" Granger finally found her voice, and she screamed so loud it would be a miracle if she didn't tear her vocal cords with her panic. "PLEASE! NOW!"

Theo raised his wand when the two surviving Order members apparated to safety. Malfoy stopped him. "Let them go. We've done more than enough damage here today."

Potter's eyes lingered on Granger for a second longer, devastated, absolutely shattered, before he touched the Portkey in his pocket and vanished.

"Fuck, Malfoy you did it!" Theo cheered, patting his friend on the back. "You've found Potter's weakness. The Dark Lord will be so pleased with you!"

"Yeah, he will be," was all Draco could say.

He didn't feel much like celebrating, or any of the pride he thought he would've felt in this moment. Looking at Granger, he felt nauseated.

Because the Golden Girl was on her knees, her fingers digging into the mud as she screamed and cried and shook with a grief so heavy it looked like it was going to drown her. It was the most painful fucking thing Draco had ever heard - and it was all his fault.

"Wait!" Malfoy held out his arm, using it as a barrier to prevent Nott from interrupting.

"I'm gonna fucking kill him!" Theo growled as he raised his wand. "I'm gonna rip that fucking stupid scar right off his forehead!"

"Fuck sake Nott, just wait!" Malfoy bit, snatching Theo's wand. "*Look!*"

"Hermione, whatever they've done to you, we can fix it!" Potter shouted, pleading from across the forest. "You don't need to do this!"

Granger didn't say anything. She twisted her wand, aiming it a little more accurately over Potter's heart.

"Potter has a clear shot," Theo breathed, barely more than a whisper. "Why isn't he attacking her? He could kill her so easily right now."

Potter's nostrils flared. His chest heaved as he inched a little closer to Granger.

"Drop your wand, Hermione!"

"He could kill her, but he won't," Theo went on, astonishment colouring his tone. "He knows what she's done. He knows how lethal she is and that she's on our side now, but he won't hurt her."

Granger took a step towards him. The tip of her wand sparked with magic, the green smoke glowing brighter.

"Her arms are shaking," Theo whispered over Draco's shoulder. Even with the voice-altering charms, he sounded worried. "Should they be doing that?"

"She's fighting the hex," Draco said, observing the way her entire right arm and the wand she held shook violently. She was still in there, trying to claw her way to the surface and stop this. He couldn't help but smirk. "Did you really expect anything less from her?"

"Hermione, please, *please*, don't do this!" Potter pleaded once more. His voice broke near the end, and it seemed to shatter something in Granger.

She screamed, an ear-piercing, fucking heart-breaking scream. She cut her wand to the left *just* before the curse left the tip, sparing Harry's life by a mere second. The killing curse she threw was so strong, so filled with rage, that it cut a poor tree in half when it made its impact. Splinters of wood and debris from the blast flew towards them like bullets, but Potter didn't move an inch. He just stared at Granger, horrified, like he was going to be sick.

Malfoy closed the distance between them quickly. His eyes lingered on her body the entire journey, on her breasts, her hips, her waist, almost like he couldn't look away. He stopped in front of her, close enough she could smell nothing but spearmint and smoke.

Her heart stopped when he leaned forward.

Shit.

Malfoy's eyes slipped back to Hermione's lazily, almost drunk. His nose brushed against hers.

Was he going to -

He raised his hand -

No, he wouldn't dare.

Her breath caught in her throat. Her heart stopped mid-beat.

He wouldn't *fucking* dare.

Malfoy pressed closer, his chest just inches from hers. She could feel his breath on her face -

She suppressed a shiver when she felt the cold bite of his rings as they gently grazed the left side of her ribcage-

Just as she braced herself for his touch, he reached around her and twisted the taps that were just behind her hips.

Water immediately stopped running from the faucet. Malfoy held her eyes for five more heartbeats before he sharply spun on his heels and left.

As he slammed the door behind him, Hermione released the breath she didn't realise she was holding, and sank into the bath she hadn't realised had started to overflow.

### **20th April**

Don't look at them.

Hermione whirled around and cast a slicing hex, decapitating the muggle soldier that'd been firing at Nott's shield.

Don't look at their faces.

She threw a Bombarda at another. His legs exploded from underneath him as though he'd just stepped on a landmine.

Don't look at them.

When she threw another curse at a shop window, the glass exploded and disintegrated the sniper posed there.

Don't look at them.

Another terrified soldier lowered their weapon, only to be cut down by Hermione.

Don't look at their faces.

And then another

Don't remember their eyes.

And then another.

Hermione willed her muscles to stop. She fought her arms each time they jutted out to cast curse after curse after curse - but nothing worked. As usual, she was powerless to stop it. A slave to the Demon Hex.

Her spirit was almost as broken as the city of Lincoln around her. The place was crumbling, smoke rose high in the air, there were fires everywhere, and bullers and curses zipped from every direction - but none of them were aimed at Hermione.

Voldemort had expected this mission to be quick, easy, without so much as a hiccup. He'd learned of a secret base near the old university, and had ordered his followers to destroy it.

Hermione's heart had dropped when Voldemort had given the instructions, knowing that he was right - the attack *would* be easy. They'd be met with very little resistance.

Only a handful of soldiers resided there. This particular base was used as a safe haven for refugees. It was a shelter; a peaceful place where children could play and families could be reunited. It stocked medicine and food, not guns and bombs. The Death Eaters would overthrow it quickly, descend on it like a pack of hungry wolves on a lonely, injured deer.

Only this time, the base wasn't defenceless.

This time, The Order was prepared.

The children and refugees were already evacuated, and replaced with formations of experienced wizards and soldiers with machine guns. Snipers waited on the rooftops, and tanks had been brought in, all primed and aiming their barrels at the very alleyway the Death Eaters apparated into.

This was what he wanted, wasn't it?

It turned out that Draco didn't need to do much to thwart this attack, Theo and Granger seemed to have it covered.

A few Order members slipped through the cracks and managed to land nasty hexes on the Black Masks. All eight of them were dead in minutes, either too slow to defend themselves or too stupid to retaliate.

The attack was almost finished, only two Order members remained, and then a third appeared from behind the treeline; a wizard with jet black hair and green eyes, who was quick enough to disarm Nott and send him flying into the air with one wordless spell.

Potter.

He was on the other side of the treeline, maybe fifteen feet away, but he was unmistakable. Like a ghost from the past, resurrected after years of being absent from battle.

As Theo landed on the floor with a loud grunt, Granger spun around. She aimed her wand at Potter, the tip gathering a deadly green light -

But then she stopped.

Everyone froze.

Draco watched Potter quickly raise his own wand to Granger out of instinct, an automatic defense, and then nothing happened. Potter wasn't attacking her. She wasn't attacking him.

As Draco watched the two of them, he was sure that the earth had stopped turning. They just stared at one another, wands drawn and deadly, two best friends, on opposites sides of the war.

Potter's green eyes widened with terror when he noticed the blood and ash that clung to every inch of her. He clenched his jaw and looked at the mess of bodies around him, then back to Granger, then to the bodies, then her again.

"Hermione, what did they do to you?" Potter's voice shook, despite the firm hold he had on his wand.

Granger's expression flickered. A deep crease formed between her brows, and her jaw seemed to be almost vibrating with tension.

Theo lurched back to his feet. He snatched his wand from the mess of fallen leaves on the ground, and marched towards Potter with murderous intent -

"Why are we stopping?" one of the Black Masks groaned, Draco hadn't bothered to learn his name. "There's nothing—"

"*Shhhhh.*" Malfoy pulled Granger a little closer. "Don't move until—"

"You're too paranoid," the Black Mask snorted as he strode forward, confidently knocking shoulders with Draco as he drew deeper into the forest. "There's nothing here—"

The Black Mask was lucky a bullet suddenly shot from the treeline and pierced his heart, because if it hadn't, Draco would have killed the stupid cunt himself, and he would have made it last.

The instant the Death Eater perished, the ambush started. Members of the Order of the Phoenix jumped from behind the covering trees, wand in one hand, a gun in the other, and began firing both at the group.

There were a lot more of them than Draco had anticipated. The Black Masks followed his pre-given commands, and began casting shields and protective enchantments while Nott and Draco went on the offensive. Curses zipped past Draco as he took out his mother's wand. He gave Granger one last lingering look, checked her eyes, then handed her his own wand.

The change in her was... astounding. The second her slim fingers curled around his wand, she came *alive*. Her eyes were still dead and her skin was still dull, but she was there! She fought like no one he'd ever seen. She was ruthless, organised, intelligent - fucking *gloomy*.

Granger used everything around her, completely attuned to her surroundings and anything she could use to her advantage. Before Malfoy even had the opportunity to count the number of threats, she whirled around, curls spinning around her face, and shot a wordless hex that ripped a large tree from its roots. The forest floor shook, and with a simple flick of her wrist, she brought the tree back down, and crushed two Order members underneath it.

Theo seemed to be in silent competition with her. For every Order member she killed or incapacitated, he butchered two.

She shot hex after hex, binding some of their assailants in chains whilst others received green curses. She was powerful and relentless, the way he knew she would be.

An unexpected tightness suddenly formed in his chest when she killed another Order member he didn't recognise.

Medusa had clearly warned them.  
And the attack was a bloodbath.

"*Another one bites the dust!*" Nott sang from nearby, tapping his foot to the imaginary beat as he decapitated a witch. Hermione didn't recognise. "*Another one bites the dust.*"

She whirled around and cast a knockback jinx, throwing a muggle soldier harshly into a concrete wall behind him. His blood splayed up the brick on impact. She hoped it killed him instantly.

"Ouch! He'll feel that in the morning!" Nott shouted. He always wanted to start conversations with her in the middle of a fight; Hermione had no idea why. "I would have sliced the smug pricks head off, but that's just me."

She saw him cast another slicing curse out the corner of his eye; it cut another three wizards in half from shoulder to hip. Over the course of their missions, Hermione had quickly learned that was Nott's favourite method of execution, on par with turning soldiers own guns against them.

"*Ooooooooooh,* did anybody else see that?" Nott cheerily proudly, as though everyone enjoyed killing as much as he did. "Three in one! That's got to be a new record, surely? I demand to know who's keeping the score and that that was counted appropriately?"

A muggle soldier leapt from around a hidden corner, rifle aimed at the pair, but Nott cast a killing curse before the poor sod had the chance to fire.

"Another one bites the dust," Nott started to sing to himself again, verbally affirming the addition to his kill count. "And another gone, and another one gone, another one bites the dust."

Another soldier appeared from behind a burning car, grenade in hand- that made the soldiers head explode. "*Another one bites the dust—*"

"For Salazar's sake," the Demon Mask beside Hermione growled. "If you don't stop *fucking* singing, I swear I'll tear your tongue out and shove it down your bastard throat."

A soft blue leather jacket in the distance caught Hermione's eye. She turned toward it, and felt like the whole world had stopped turning on its axis when she noticed the witch it belonged to.

He did what he had to do.

She meant nothing to him.

Fleur Weasley. Hermione hadn't seen her in months, and the sight of Fleur's blonde hair, pulled high into a ponytail and matting with blood, almost made her knee's buckle.

Fleur was severely injured. She had one hand pressed firmly against her ribcage, blood pooled between her fingers as she limped towards a destroyed building, presumably to take cover.

But then the Hex took over.

Hermione started stalking towards the building - a crumbling restaurant - wand drawn and poised.

No. No. She couldn't kill Fleur. She was the best healer The Order had. Her skills were unmatched and miraculous. Her death would be a catastrophic loss to them.

Hermione knew that, but it didn't stop her.

She tried to fight the hex as it propelled her forward. Tried to dig her heels in, make her legs stop moving. God - she just wanted to make it all stop!

But she couldn't. No matter how hard she tried, the Demon Hex had clawed itself too deep, and it made her want to fucking scream.

As she charged forward, the hex was unforgiving. It brought every painful memory she had to the surface, tormented her with everything that hurt her, that could make her *angry*. How the world had vanished beneath her feet when Kingsley had told her about her parent's death.

The rage she'd felt when that same leader told her there was nothing to be done, and that the Order wouldn't be retaliating.

The euphoria she'd felt as she slit Charlotte Roth's throat.

The vengeful way her veins had vibrated with triumph when she'd carved each layer of Mark Kinghold's skin away. How indescribably *good* it'd felt to remove each of his fingers one by one before she finally executed him.

All those moment flashed behind her eyes again and again as she marched toward the restaurant, the pain relaying on a constant loop as she stalked after Fleur.

Hermione could hear her screaming the moment she walked through the doorway. Her adrenaline spiked, and she felt the hex intensify at the sound. She felt

"Sooooo," Theo said after a few minutes of quiet walking. "What's so special about these refugee's we're tracking anyway?"

Granger's arm twitched under Draco's palm.

"It's not the refugee's that we're interested in," he said, his eyes on Granger while he answered Theo's question. "It's the Order members that are going to come and rescue them that the Dark Lord wants."

He wanted her to do something, *anything* just so he knew she was still in there.

Theo pulled a dagger from his robes and started flipping it over as they walked. "How many?"

He wanted her to grab the knife - just to prove that she was still in there somewhere, buried deep beneath the Hex.

"Hopefully no more than ten," Draco answered, "you know they like to keep their heads down."

It was right there. Just within her reach -

Theo snorted. He balanced the hilt of the knife in the palm of his hand for a few seconds, then flipped it over to play with it again.

Draco wanted her to fight him. *Fight them*. Fight the Hex. His pulse quickened when her eyes flickered to the weapon.

Her brows furrowed as she watched Theo. Her lips pressed into a tight line, but then her cold eyes slid forward again, and Draco's hands balled into fists.

*Fuck*. He really had broken her.

A rustling of leaves to the left suddenly caught his attention. Draco stopped, raising his hands so the group behind him did the same.

Everyone drew their wands and fell into a strained silence.

The forest was quiet. Too quiet. It seemed as though everything had frozen; the birds stopped chirping, and even the leaves stopped rustling in the wind. Something wasn't right, Draco could feel it.

He could feel Theo frowning at him from beneath his mask. "Fuck sake Malfoy - possessive much?" he huffed. "If I didn't know better, I'd say you were growing attached to the Mudblood."

"I need to keep her close to me," he lied, dragging Granger just that little bit nearer. "Just in case she breaks through the hex quicker than anticipated."

For once in Theo's life, he was right.

Granger didn't look good, not in any sense of the word. The Demon Hex truly lived up to its name. It was a succubus, a parasite that was draining the little lion right in front of his eyes. The hex had taken the rose tint from her cheeks and the olive hue from her skin, and made her look pale and gaunt. It looked like it thinned her skin too, stretched it too tightly over her cheekbones and jaw.

But the worst thing the hex took, that thing that made his stomach knot every time he looked at her, was the fire in her eyes. If'd doused the flames and reverted them back into empty coal. Her eyes had no honey now, no warmth, they were pure black. As black as his heart.

He imagined it was all deliberate. Probably a visual representation of the hex so the caster could see when it was in effect, and be able to notice when the spell was weakening, but he fucking hated the way it made her look.

Granger didn't say a word as they made their way through the dark forest, hadn't uttered so much as a lonely syllable since they'd apparated here to meet the eight Black Masks who were accompanying them on this mission. She could speak, the hex didn't prevent her from saying what was on her mind, but she was refusing to.

Her eyes would slide over to him every few minutes. Each time her lip would curl in disgust, her dead eyes would rake over him slowly. And each time the knot in his stomach would twist a little tighter.

Fuck - he wished she'd do something. Slap him. Punch him. Kick him in the balls. *Anything!* It was stifling to see her this way, docile, quiet. It felt ugly, made his skin crawl to see her so lifeless. It wasn't right. It wasn't *her*.

*It's just another mission. She's nothing* he'd chanted like it was a fucking mantra. Over and over again, willing it into existence, praying it would ease the tension in his stomach.

She meant nothing.

She was a means to an end. A tool to the Dark Lord.

its influence clawing across her brain, threading itself tighter around her, searing her veins like acid, twisting every muscle and commanding her to kill.

Hermione sprinted to the kitchens at the back of the restaurant, broken glass crackling under her feet as she ran towards the source of the screaming. Fleur's eyes shot up as soon as Hermione burst through the doors, a mixture of shock and relief colouring her delicate features. She was sat on the floor, leaning against a reflective metal fridge. Blood poured from a deep gash along the right side of her torso, and one of her ribs poking out of the wound.

"Hermione?" she said breathless, as her wand stilled over the deep injury. "What are you doing 'ere?"

"*Go on,*" a new, deadly voice hissed in the back of Hermione's mind - the curse manifested. "*Kill her.*"

Fleur was dangerously weak. It would be all too easy to kill her. All too easy for Hermione to knock her to the floor and crush her delicate windpipe under her boot. "*Kill her,*" the voice encouraged, low and seductive. "*Do it.*"

Hermione was overcome with the impulse to kill. She wanted to tear Fleur's organs from her body. Scalp her. Break her ribs, sever them from her body and use them to pluck her eyes out.

"Hermione?" Fleur panted. "What is the matter with you? What is the matter with your eyes?"

"Kill her."

No. Not Fleur. Oh God - she couldn't kill Fleur.

When Hermione aimed her wand at Fleur's chest, Fleur's eyes widened with fear. She tried to defend herself on instinct, but Hermione had always been fast charms. She disarmed Fleur before she'd even taken aim.

"That's it, she's defenceless," the voice persisted. Hermione's temples throbbed as she fought against it. "Do it. Do it now. It will feel so good. Better than the others."

Hermione caught her reflection in the metallic surfaces of the cupboard doors. She saw a monster with black eyes and blood dripping down her face, and knew there would be no going back from this. After she killed Fleur, she would truly be lost to the hex, the darkness forever branded on her soul. There would be no coming back to the light.

Hermione raised her wand. An all too familiar green light began to gather at the tip -

“Expelliarmus!”

Malfoy’s wand flew out of Hermione’s hand to soar across the kitchen, and land in the palm of its rightful owner.

Malfoy tore his mask from his face, the expression underneath stem and fierce. “Granger,” he hissed, storming towards her. “Stop!”

But the hex wasn’t finished with Hermione yet. And they were in a very large kitchen, still stocked to capacity with sharp, glittering utensils.

As Malfoy drew closer, Hermione ducked under his arm and grabbed one of the large carving knives from the kitchen island. Her vision started to narrow, tinting red as the need for bloodlust poisoned her while that murderous voice whispered in her head, encouraging her, weakening her fight.

She marched towards her prey, revelling in Fleur’s horrified expression and the terror in her eyes.

Hermione flipped the knife in her hand, pointed the blade, and lunged for Fleur

But before she could slit her throat open, Malfoy had her. His hands caged around her wrists in a bruising grip and he dragged her back, ignoring her kicks and screams, and slammed her down on the island in the middle of the kitchen.

“Enough!” Malfoy hissed, hovering over her. He held one of her wrists in each hand and pinning them wide either side of her.

Scaring anger boiled through Hermione. The Hex clawed its way up her spine as she fought to get Malfoy off her. She jerked her wrist, hoping to nick his arm with the knife -

Malfoy’s lips suddenly grazed the shell of her ear, “*Daemonium, somnum.*”

The instant he said the words, the hex started to retreat. Hermione felt like everything else went dark, she couldn’t see, couldn’t focus on anything else but the spell.

It clawed across her body as it receded, fighting to be free. It moved quickly, pain sliced through her as the hex dragged its thorns backwards across her veins, unwilling to be caged again - but it was worth it. Was worth the awful pain in her

roaring of blood in her ears, and when they never came, she slowly peeked over the top of the stone.

Nott sat crossed-legged on the floor in front of a grave she couldn’t read. There was a kind, almost gentle warmth in his eyes as he chatted quietly to the headstone, as though he were speaking to the ghost the grave belonged to.

His gold mask was thrown carelessly on the floor, and Hermione watched him wave his wand once, twice, and seconds later a wreath of pink peonies materialised on the grave. He said something to the headstone, then chuckled quietly to himself. She’d never seen Nott laugh before, or the lines that decorated the skin around his eyes when he smiled.

Hermione silently moved closer, mindful of every step she took. She couldn’t risk crunching a stray branch under her boot and alerting Nott to her presence. She’d seen him on the battlefield, and knew all too well how quickly he could whirl around and end her life with a single hex.

Well, she certainly was in the right place, should things take that unfortunate turn.

As she got closer, she realised the grave he was sitting in front of was unmarked. It wasn’t aged like many of the others here. It looked as though it couldn’t have been more than a few years old but the stone was barren, not a single engraving or scratch of any kind. But there were tinkets laid at the base of the grave; a silver bracelet, an orange candle, a small stuffed bear with a bow tie, and a silver ring with a large glittering sapphire that-

Strong arms suddenly wrapped around her waist, and cold lips glided to the shell of her ear.

“*Daemonium, ortus.*”

“Is she alright?” Theo slowed his pace, and ducked his head so he could get a better look at the face of the witch walking beside him. “She doesn’t look so good.”

Draco didn’t like how closely Theo was hovering. The hand that was wrapped around Granger’s wrist dragged her a little closer to him.

Because it meant that they really were the same. The same person, both as ruthless and protective as the other; both with blood dripping from their hands and hoards of angry souls nipping at their ankles, waiting for them in hell.

They were the same - just on opposite sides of the war. In the end, was her soul any less tarnished than that of the demon in front of her?

Hermione's lips never left his, even as she delicately wrapped her fingers around the hilt of the blade. She moaned into his mouth as his thumbs kneaded her hips, even as she raised the dagger high in the air behind him. And she nipped at Malfoy's bottom lip, delighting in the way he shivered above her, even as she brought the blade down against his back.

But as always, Malfoy was just a heartbeat quicker than she was.

He snatched her wrist before she could do any damage. He pinned her hands against the wall behind her, high above her head, and tore his lips from hers. Despite her attack, he didn't back away an inch. He pressed his forehead against hers, their breathing perfectly matching in quick, sharp pants, blasting air against the other's lips.

"Are you really... so desperate to escape," he hushed against her mouth, his lips brushing against hers with every word he spoke, "that you'd kill me... even if it means you'll die alongside me?"

"You've turned me... into a weapon... that can kill all my friends," Hermione panted, her voice hardly audible through the roaring of blood in her ears. "You didn't... give me... a choice..."

Malfoy pried the knife from her fingers, pinning both her arms high above her head with one hand, while the other toyed with the weapon she'd tried to butcher him with. "That's war, Granger. You kill my friends, I kill yours. Potter finds ways to weaken the Dark Lord, and I turn you into the ultimate weapon to stop him. I keep you locked away in my tower, you try and slit my throat. On and on, the cycle never stops." Malfoy pressed the blade against her throat, the metal almost as cold as his lips. "How long can you keep this up? How long are we going to keep playing this game, *little lion?*"

"Not until one of us is dead," she hissed immediately, a reflex, feeling the blade move against her throat as she spoke. "*'Until death do us part'*, remember?"

Malfoy pressed the dagger harder against her skin, and she willed herself not to cringe away from the threat.

"I won't stop trying to kill you," Hermione whispered, Malfoy's lips just a breaths distance away from hers. "I won't stop, and neither will you. I meant it when I said I'm going to kill you. I don't know how, but believe me, when you finally meet your end, the reason your name is going to be engraved on a headstone is going to because of *me*. You're going to die because of a *Mudblood*." Hermione refused to open her eyes. She didn't want to look at him, didn't want to know which Malfoy she was speaking to. "So either give me that knife back so I can kill us both, or slit my throat, and let me go alone."

There was a pause, a silence that seemed to stretch on for an eternity while she waited to see what direction her fate would take.

"Would he do nothing, and keep her in this personal hell loop he'd created? Or would he stab her in the heart, and send her to meet the devil himself?"

"'Til death do us part' you say?"

Hermione felt the air whirl around her face as he inhaled, and just when she thought he might take pity on her, just when she thought he might grant her the mercy of death, Malfoy chose a different torture, and pressed his lips against her neck in a single, agonising, fucking *smooching* kiss.

"What makes you think you'll be rid of me in death?" Hermione couldn't help but shiver as his lips glided up to the shell of her ear, goading her, threatening her in a lover's whisper. "What makes you think I won't follow you there, just so our game never has to end?"

He was everywhere. All she could feel around her was him; his arms caging her in, his breath against her. All she could taste was him, the whisky on his tongue, and the aftertaste of smoke on his lips. All she could smell was *him*.

And it still wasn't enough. She wanted *more*.

## CHAPTER 24

Why did she want more? Why did she need more?! Craved more. Practically fucking ached for it.

Her hands continued their exploration of their own accord. They danced along the edge of the towel and around his back-

There was a knife tucked into the waistband of his towel. The hilt of the blade was familiar, but unmistakable against the fingertips of an assassin like her.

Hermione should have expected it really. A killer with a ledger as dripping in blood as his was would never truly be unarmed. There would always be something, a hidden blade, a sharp splinter of glass tucked away and concealed, ready to wield at the slightest change in the wind. Never at a disadvantage. Never truly vulnerable.

And just like that, without the aid of the Demon Hex, Hermione's instincts shot to the surface.

Even though her veins seemed to vibrate as Malfoy kissed her, even though her body was reluctant to let him go just yet, that need to kill, that desire

to tap into her enemy's vulnerability and gain an advantage was just *a little stronger*.

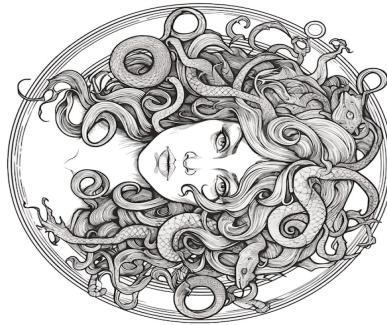
Hermione was a soldier first. She was a killer of Death Eaters first, and then a lover second. Never the other way around. Her gut twisted with the realisation.

Malfoy had been right all along. She didn't need the Hex to be ruthless, those instincts were *all* hers.

It didn't matter to her that Malfoy was wand-less, vulnerable and kissing her more fiercely and with more passion than any man ever had before. She was still reaching for the knife. She'd stab the devil in the back without a moment's hesitation. She'd kill them both, commit two of the most gregious and ultimate sins in one foul slash of silver and not feel even a shred of guilt.

Malfoy would do it, she was sure. If the roles were reversed, if he was held captive and forced to raise his wand to Astoria, Zabini or Nott, and Hermione was the only thing standing in his way, he'd cut her down without question. Of course he would. But that answer - although she knew was true - haunted her much more than it should have.

She wasn't enticed by the taste of his lips; she was just drunk. No one could ever taste that good, she must have imagined it.



## BURIED ALIVE

**23rd April**

She shouldn't have kissed him.

She absolutely should not, under any fucking circumstance, have fucking kissed him.

It was a mistake. A momentary lapse in judgement. She didn't enjoy the kiss, she couldn't have. She must have been drunk. Yes - that was it. She was hammered off that ridiculously expensive whisky that she'd been guzzling like it was no stronger than watered-down butterbeer.

She wasn't enticed by the taste of his lips; she was just drunk. No one could ever taste that good, she must have imagined it.

Inch.  
Of.  
Him.

She must have been hurting him. The way she dragged her nails down his chest while she kissed him must have hurt. Knew the way her fingers kneaded across his shoulders as she dragged him closer must have been painful.

But he never stopped her or made any attempt to push her away. Instead, he held her *tighter*, drove his nails in *deeper*, bit her lips *harder*.

His hands weren't soft or comforting, they were rough and calloused. They didn't skate across her skin, didn't soothe or knead with care the way other men had handled her in the past, like she was fragile, breakable. Malfoy dragged them down her spine as he kissed her, his nails digging into her hips as he pulled her to the very edge of the bureau.

God - It wasn't supposed to feel like *this!*

It was wrong. It was so fucking wrong, but she couldn't stop herself, didn't want to.

She should push him away. Should punch him across the jaw, kick and scream and sprint back to her cage and lock the door.

There were a dozen ways she could hurt him to make him release her but instead, she moaned against his lips when one of his hands wrapped around the back of her neck and *squeezed*.

There was nothing gentle about the way he dragged his tongue against hers.

Nothing soft about the biting pressure at the back of her neck, cutting off her air in a way that made her feel dizzy, lightheaded in the most appealing wayshe never dreamt could be pleasurable. She found that she liked it more than she should have, liked the feel of his cold fingers biting into her overheated skin, so much so that she moaned when he squeezed again.

"Fuck," Malfoy growled against her mouth, squeezing again and causing another whimper to spill from her lips and onto his. "Do that again - *need* to hear you make that sound again."

Hermione wrapped her hands around his narrow hips, forcing him closer, pressing him against her.

Malfoy didn't taste powerful, the feel of his tongue dragging across hers wasn't maddeningly delicious. She didn't ache for more, or lean forward and kiss him more deeply because she wanted to, it was the whiskey clinging to his lips than she craved. Not him.

A thrill hadn't shot up her spine in the most euphoric way when he'd grabbed the back of her neck and squeezed, she was still just on edge, still hanging onto the aftershocks of adrenaline from the battle at Lincoln.

The way his body had reacted to her hadn't made her stomach coil in triumph. The way his deadly muscles, those arms that'd killed thousands, had shivered and rippled under her palms hadn't made her purr like a satisfied kitten. She was still just wired, on edge after seeing so much death on the battlefield that day.

She'd just needed something to take the edge off, a release, and Malfoy just happened to be *there*.

And that was fine with Hermione. Completely fucking fine.

Heaven knew Malfoy had been using her as a tool to keep the Dark Lord's favour since he'd captured her. He'd turned her into a weapon, made her assassinate innocent muggle soldiers and forced her to kill Seamus. He'd used her, so she wouldn't feel guilty about using him, just this once.

She would be fine. It was just a mistake. It wouldn't happen again; she wouldn't *let* it.

She wasn't dancing with the devil, just using one to exorcise her demons.

### **25th April**

*Fuck sake.* Draco shouldn't have kissed her.

Fucking, shitting, bollocks!

He should have pulled away. Should have grabbed a fistful of her wild, fucking ridiculous curls and yanked her back, smacked her head against the wall and reminded her of her place. That she was in his house. That he was in charge. That he was the one in control.

He'd thought about it; planned on wiping that devious little smirk off her face the moment he'd noticed the stolen bottle in her paws. Should have wrapped his fingers around her throat and fucking *squeezed*. Maybe that would make her remember who he was, what he was capable of.

He'd charged towards her like a raging bull, anger flaring and blood boiling, but the instant she'd raised her leg and dug her heel into his skin, he was under her spell. And the very heartbeat she'd quirked her brow in a challenge and took another defiant swig, he knew he was fucked.

Aside from the Dark Lord himself, no one had challenged Draco like that in years. No one dared to. Not another Gold Mask, and certainly not a witch without a fucking wand. Bellatrix sometimes reared her head, but her tail always promptly flew between her legs whenever Draco so much as bared his teeth. Usually all it took was one spiteful glare to make her quickly fall back into line.

And Theo - well, the theatrical Gold Mask might as well have been a disgruntled teenager. He lashed out, had tantrums, and challenged authority whenever the tide hit him the wrong way, but he didn't mean anything by it. It was all a show, another performance he put on for everyone else's benefit.

Granger, on the other hand, meant every insult she spat at him. She challenged him at every corner, and she wasn't afraid to use that pretty mouth of hers to rile him up, get under his skin, ignite the fireworks and watch him explode in a blaze of anger.

He swore his cock hardened just thinking about the triumph in her eyes when she'd dragged her stiletto over his heart, itching to press forward, break the skin and puncture his arteries.

Granger was different. She hated Draco, that was certain, but she wasn't intimidated by him. She didn't quake with fear at the horns on his demon mask like everyone else. After the initial shock of the Demon Hex, she'd recovered, grown stronger, adapted to her new reality and become more resilient. Granger was fierce, brazen to a fault, and that was the very heart of Draco's problem. The little Gryffindor *intrigued* him.

No matter how long he studied her, no matter how much he thought he knew her, she always managed to surprise him.

In a world where strategy was everything, and knowing your enemy was the difference between life and death, Granger was the unknown. He could make a few educated guesses on how she might react to his words or a wand at her throat, but he was never wholeheartedly confident, could never truly predict which strategy she would jump on - and he fucking *hated* that about her.

And it was supposed to be quick, just the chaste pressure of lips and knocking of teeth. It was supposed to be nothing. She'd been sure she was going to hate it, that it was going to make her feel sick.

It wasn't supposed to feel like ... this.

He wasn't supposed to... taste like this. Intoxicating. Delicious. Powerful.

The deep growling sound he'd made at the back of his throat wasn't supposed to coil in her stomach-

A large hand suddenly caged around her throat, and a sharp, strong pressure pushed her back and stole his lips from hers.

Hermione's eyes snapped open. Malfoy was staring at her, there was a soft flush to his cheeks, and his chest heaved as his breathing matched hers, leaving him in quick, short pants. His eyes were blue, only a thin sliver of grey clinging to the edge of his pupils. He didn't let go of her throat, and his thumb swept across her bottom lip as he searched her face, her eyes. She wondered what he was looking for, what he was going to do next, if he'd fly off into a rage at the thought of having a filthy Mudblood kiss him -

But then his lips were back on hers.

It wasn't supposed to feel like this.

He wasn't supposed to kiss her back hungrily, with an intensity and fire she'd never felt before.

She wasn't supposed to enjoy it, crave more, or thread her fingers through his hair and pull him closer.

Malfoy's hands slid into her hair, fisting her curls. He drove his tongue into her mouth, and she swallowed his groan when she nipped his bottom lip.

Hermione widened her legs to invite him closer, and the bottle of fire whisky - his prized possession a mere few moments ago - fell to the floor where it smashed and decorated the floor with crystal white the liquor was soaked up by the emerald green rug. Wildly expensive. An irreplaceable family heirloom. Completely forgotten. Malfoy nestled his hips between her thighs, and the thin fabric of the towel he wore left nothing to the imagination. She felt everything.

Every.

Hard.

than anyone, more thoroughly than anyone in your Order knows you. And certainly better than that precious weasel you have waiting for you at home.”

In an instant, the strange pooling in her stomach shifted, only to be replaced with that familiar bite of anger. Murderous fucking anger. “How dare you?! What gives you the right to think you know me?! You don’t know the first thing –”

“Oh, but I do. I know the most intimate part of you.” He placed the confiscated bottle on the bureau next to her hip, and when his hand was free, he curled it under her chin. “I know your *mind*. I know how that enchanting brain of yours works. I’ve spent hours in *there*,” he let go of her chin and tapped his fingers against her temple, “searching your memories and watching you grow up. I think that qualifies me when I say I know you better than anyone else alive. I’ve spent far longer in your head than Weasley ever spent between your legs.”

That crossed a line she hadn’t realised she’d drawn. Hermione kicked her leg out, forcing him to release her face and take a few steps back. “Watch your mouth before I –”

“Before you do *what*?!” Despite how she was pushing him back, Malfoy pressed forward, reclaiming the space she’d drawn. Even as she dug her heel into his chest with a bruising force, he didn’t stop, not until he was close again, not until her thighs bracketed his hips. “So what exactly are you going to do? Surprise me, Granger, I fucking dare you –”

His words, the way he surrounded her air sparked something in her, something fierce and lithe, and her Gryffindor spirit roared back to life. It took over, some primal instinct, some need to prove herself that pushed everything else away, because before she even realised she was doing it, Hermione lowered her leg back to the bureau, took his face in her hands, and dragged his mouth to hers.

It wasn’t supposed to feel like this.

It was supposed to be a power move; to show that he didn’t control her, not when she wasn’t under the influence of the hex. It was supposed to show her tenacity, her impulsiveness, show how she could do what she wanted, when she wanted, just because she wanted to.

It was supposed to take him off guard; show him that she could be unpredictable, that he didn’t know her or her mind. That he didn’t know what she would do or what she was capable of.

She was strong, untameable. As unpredictable and ferocious as wildfire. He never knew which direction she was going to burn and destroy. Granger kept him guessing, dancing on the edge of the blade. He didn’t think he would ever tire of their game. He could do this forever, dance with her for eternity while the rest of the world turned to ash around them and he would never be bored.

He couldn’t help but chuckle at the symmetry of it all. That a Mudblood, someone who Draco had been raised to believe was beneath him and inferior in every way, had managed to captivate his attention so entirely. His father would be vomiting in his grave if he could see the depths his son had sunken to.

A flash of green smoke brought Draco back. As the smoke cleared, he stopped back, giving his master a wide birth to exit the fireplace and stride into the pub. Voldemort dusted the Floo powder from his robes, and made his way to the door.

The floorboards creaked under Draco’s boots as he followed, and he tried to focus on the sounds they made instead of the repugnant, acidic stench of medicinal potions emitting from the dark wizard in front of him.

After holding the door open and allowing Voldemort to pass through, Draco trailed closely, always a step behind, never shoulder to shoulder, never equals, and he couldn’t help but notice the Dark Lord didn’t seem quite ... himself.

His skin looked paler in the little sunlight that snuck through the clouds overhead. His shoulders were a little slumped and protruding out beneath his tattered robes, and the veins on his neck and hands darkened with each passing day, straining against the thin skin on the back of his hands. He looked ill, declining. If Draco were being honest, Voldemort looked *old*.

“Are you any closer to learning the location of the Order’s new central base of operation?” The Dark Lord asked when they rounded a corner near a destroyed shopfront and started walking down the cobbled hill and towards the council house. “Bellatrix tells me Potter’s forces are growing in strength and number, that our use of the Mudblood has inspired others to join in an effort to win her back.”

“Ah, aunt fucking Bella, the cunt who never seemed to die, the loyalist of the Dark Lord’s followers. She’d been itching to replace Draco for years, looking for every opportunity she could to prove she was the better of the two demons on the Dark Lord’s shoulders.

Although he couldn’t see Voldemort’s face, Draco could hazard a guess at his master’s expression by the way he twirled the elder wand in his hand. The

movements were sharp and jagged, his nails tapping an irritated rhythm against the wooden tool.

"Unfortunately, *for once*, my aunt is correct," Draco folded his arms delicately behind his back, the only thing stopping him from turning around and hexing his undying, overly obedient aunt beside him. "Although none of them will attack the Mudblood directly, I have noticed an increase in their numbers. They seem to be attempting to capture her, but rest assured, I am always by her side. None of them ever get close enough to her to succeed."

"I see," Voldemort said quietly. "I'm sure you understand that this is an advantage we cannot afford for them to gain, not this late into the war. If this spy leaks any more information, I fear we may fall right at the final hurdle.

"That won't be a problem, my Lord," Draco answered. "I have several leads which..."

"If it would please you, my Lord," Bellatrix cut in, and Draco resisted the urge to gnash his teeth in her face - just about. "I fear my nephew may not be up for the task. Perhaps I should take over in the search for the spy?"

Well, it appeared Bella had brought her balls with her today. If'd be interesting to see how long she could keep them.

Bellatrix was just another dog at Voldemort's heels. She was dangerous, feral and eager to serve, but she was obsessed with their master. Pathetic, begging for any scraps of approval that he would occasionally throw her. She'd do anything for him, perform any trick without question, no matter how pitiful it made her look. It was no wonder Voldemort preferred Draco.

He turned to scowl at his aunt. With the Dark Lord's back still turned, he might *just* be fast enough to hex her. He'd get punished, but a few crucio's in the back would be worth it.

"I think he finds himself, rather, *stretched*, what with the assignment of watching the Mudblood, searching for the spy and taking care of the other children. Perhaps I should search the Mudblood's memories, see what I can drag up." Bellatrix grinned confidently, flashing her rotten teeth. "How is Theodore, by the way? Is he still awfully upset with me?"

Draco's hand twitched towards his wand.

Just one second, that was all he needed. Just one fucking heartbeat, one curse to send her careening into the brick behind her. Maybe he'd get lucky and she'd smack

"Fuck you!" Hermione bit, her tone sharp enough to cut despite the smell of spearmint and smoke and fuck knew what else that battered her senses. "Sparing Fleur's life doesn't make up for forcing me to kill Seamus. I was just as close to him as I was Fleur, maybe even more so."

Malfoy's eyes darkened. Violent grey storm clouds eclipsed the blue.

"Where was your moral compass then?" Hermione twisted her foot, pressing her gold heel harder into his chest. "Where was your compassion then, *Demon*?"

Malfoy's fingers tightened around her ankle. His rings began to dig into her skin. "So no, you don't get a '*thank you*', and you don't get my appreciation for sparing one life when you've taken thousands! In case you've forgotten, I fucking loathe you."

"So you've told me, Granger. Yesterday, and the day before that, and the day before that," Malfoy said, his tone growing in venom to match hers. "So, what are you going to do now?"

When the hand around her ankle slid higher to caress the back of her calf, Hermione's cheeks flushed with a mixture of building anger and something else.

"Punch me?" Malfoy asked. His fingers danced across the back of her knee, coaxing her muscles to relax, to invite him closer. "Kick me?"

She exhaled, letting him push her leg back so he could step forward.

"Strangle me?"

Another step closer. Her knee was almost touching her shoulder.

"Spit in my face?"

Her fingers tightened around the neck of the bottle in her hand.

"You've done it all a thousand times Granger, and it's getting a little old. Surely you can concoct something a little more creative. A little more ... *fun*."

Hermione scoffed, even as she took another swig of his beloved whisky, trying to regain some of her stolen power, tip the scales back in her favour. "You think you know me so well?"

"Yes, I do actually." Malfoy's answer caught her off guard, and he used her distraction to snatch his prize. He took a deep swig of whisky straight from the bottle, groaning and pinching his eyes closed as he swallowed. "I know you better

Hermione's pulse quickened as his thumb dug a little harder into her ankle.

"Something... oh I don't know..." Malfoy's grin stretched even higher. "Blonde and French, maybe? The Dark Lord has wanted her for some time. She's your best healer, isn't she? Presenting her head would've earned me a great deal of recognition. He might have let me off with one crucio rather than ten."

That.. that didn't make sense. Another thing that didn't add up.

"If you knew how valuable Fleur was, then why did you let her go?" Hermione asked. "Why would you stop me from killing her?"

Malfoy said nothing, just continued to stare at Hermione, as if the answer was completely obvious, as if it was right in front of -

Oh.

No, no it wasn't right in front of her. The reason he'd spared Fleur, the missing string she'd been searching for, *Malfoy* was staring right at it.

But that raised more questions than it did answers.

"Don't pretend you spared Fleur's life for me."

Malfoy cocked his head to the side, and leaned in a fraction closer. "Who else would it be for sweetheart, if it wasn't for you?"

Hermione tried to think clearly, to command her muscles to straighten her leg and keep him away - but she couldn't. It could have been the alcohol clouding her judgement, the sinful things his fingers were doing to her ankle, or the burning look he was pinning her with. Whatever it was, it made her relax, made her bend her knee slightly and invite him a little closer.

"Why?" she asked.

"I've spent months in your head Granger, watching your memories," Malfoy said, inching closer with what little movement she allowed him. "I know how close you and Fleur were before you were brought here. Killing her would have crushed you."

Hermione tried to snort, but it came out as more of a moan as his thumb found a tender spot at the back of her ankle. "So what? You do one slightly redeemable thing, and you think I should be grateful?"

Another flick of blue cracked against Malfoy's eyes. Dr Jekyll was getting closer. "Well, a '*thank you*' certainly wouldn't be totally remiss."

her head, crack it open like an egg. *Salaqur*, what a glorious start to a Saturday morning that would be.

"I appreciate your concern auntie, but it's misplaced." He whirled to face the other demon and stood in front of her, blocking her path. Her black eyes widened when they snapped up to his, her confidence draining quickly. "I've searched all of the Mudblood's memories up until the moment of her capture, and now *everything* she knows, we know too."

Bellatrix's nostrils flared irritably.

"And you know what?" Draco asked sarcastically. "Most of it was useless. The spy used a codename when they sold us out. Medusa, and they altered their voice, making them impossible to trace. And the Order had abandoned all their bases by the time we learned their locations. They knew that I would eventually get that information out of the Mudblood, and they'd planned accordingly. Probably cleared out and relocated weeks before we arrived. So no, I don't think it's a good idea for you to search her memories, because there's nothing left to learn."

Draco leaned forward, towering over his aunt. She took a step back, her metaphorical balls shrivelling at the venom in his voice. "But if I were you, I would spend less time worrying about me, and spend a little more time satisfying your husband. I hear he got himself into a bit of trouble with a Muggleborn witch at the tavern?"

Voldemort chuckled darkly and turned to watch the pair. He usually enjoyed watching his two prized hunting dogs rile each other up. He liked his demons on edge, angry and irritated, wands burning in their hands and ready to kill without a moment's hesitation.

"Maybe if you paid more attention to your marriage, your husband would keep his cock in his trousers," Draco went on, smirking as Bellatrix flinched back slightly at his accusations, "and he wouldn't risk losing it. I heard the bitch almost sliced it off entirely? Poor bastard, I hope you weren't planning on making a few heirs?"

"Now, now Draco, put your fangs away," the Dark Lord's snickered, giving the pair a stern look before he turned and continuing towards their destination. "As entertaining as it would be to watch you tear each other apart, I require both my demons in one piece if you are to secure my victory. Your family feud will need to wait until after Potter and the rest of the filth are dead and buried."

"Of course, my Lord." Draco bowed his head respectfully and fell into step behind his master again. "I will ensure that we squish the order like the ants they are."

"That's the problem with ants." Voldemort stopped and waved his wand at the floor near both the demon's feet.

A cloud of green smoke appeared, and a single ant made entirely of mist materialised from the vapour. The steam ant scurried quickly along the floor, scared, moving in erratic lines as it desperately tried to escape.

"They're nothing on their own, insignificant, helpless, at the mercy of anyone who happens to step on their hill." As Voldemort spoke, he pulled up the bottom of his robes and sharply stood on the ant, smiling as its tiny body evaporated into smoke around his foot. He was quiet for a few moments, letting his words sink in, then his expression turned sour, and he raised his wand again. "But stood together?"

He waved the elder wand again to create an anthill of the same green vapour. A lonely ant crawled out from the snout. And then another. And then another.

Within seconds, thousands of ants began to pour from the snout like water from a faucet. The entrance of the smoke hill broke open as more and more fought their way out, drawing over one another, frantically fighting to make their escape. The wave of smoke ants marched towards Draco and Bellatrix like an army, an angry hoard, and Draco forced himself to remain as still as possible as the vapour gathered around his boots.

He *knew* they weren't real, but he could *feel* them. Could feel their cold, tiny legs on his body as they crawled up his legs, and their tiny mouths nipping and pinching his skin as they bit his hips on their ascension up his torso. Could feel their numbers – although impossible – weighing him down, trying to drag his body to the floor as they crawled higher and higher, over his chest, his collar bone, swarming around his throat.

Draco almost couldn't breathe, the sheer force of their numbers gathering on his ribcage made his chest feel tight, like they were crushing his lungs.

Fuck, fuck - no he wasn't imagining it. He really couldn't breathe. There were too many. They were everywhere!

His cool façade dwindled. He tried to bat some of them away, vigorously flicking the ones that were gathering on his shoulders and crawling up his neck. But he

"I think you're the one who needs to be careful." Hermione dug her heel in a little harder against his chest, hoping to draw blood. "One false move, and my heel might just scrape your heart."

"I thought you said I didn't have one?"

"There's only one way to find out," she said slowly, oddly enthralled by the way he dragged his tongue across his lower lip. "I'm willing to take a *stab*—" she pressed her heel down even firmer, feeling his fingers tighten on her ankle. "-carve you open and see if your chest is as empty as I think it is. Just say the word."

He snorted, apparently as enthralled with their dangerous little game as she was. "As much as that sounds like a fucking delicious way to die," the hand on her ankle squeezed, "I'm afraid you'll have to be gentle with me. I'm a little delicate this evening."

Her forehead creased, remembering how he'd palmed the back of his neck when he'd entered the room minutes ago. "What happened?"

Malfoy cocked a teasing brow, in the way only Malfoy knew how. "I'm sure you can guess how the Dark Lord rewards his general's failure. The higher the ranking officer, the more the disappointment, and the greater the disappointment, the more severe the punishment."

Hermione jerked when the fingers on her foot started to rub small circles into her boot, massaging the ball of her ankle as he spoke. His eyes never left hers.

"I'm sure you can imagine how I was rewarded after today," he said, his voice practically velvet, dripping honey as she relaxed into his fingers. "So you'll need to forgive my irritation. Because the thing I've been craving to get me through the evening – the medicine's I *need* – is being drunk right in front of me, by the very witch responsible for my punishment."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Come on cub, you're a clever girl. Figure it out."

Hermione's lips twisted into a frown without her permission.

Malfoy smiled when he noticed. "The mission today was my failure, I underestimated your friends, and the blood of the Death Eaters we lost today is on my hands. The Dark Lord considers the loss of magical - *pureblood* - a great loss, but it would have softened the blow a little if I had something to offer him as a penance. A gift to make up for my failure."

Holding his gaze, Hermione straightened her leg slightly to push him back a step, making him watch as she took another slow swig of the whiskey he was so desperate to get his hands on.

Malfoy's throat bobbed, his eyes drifting to the bottle pressed against her lips. The first blue splinter appeared in his irises; a crack of lightning against grey clouds, a step closer to Dr Jekyll.

She'd answer '*no*' if anyone asked her if she enjoyed this, and it would be a lie.

Hermione had always liked getting the upper hand, basked in the knowledge that she was always the smartest person in the room. She knew she was a force of nature, someone most people were afraid of. A woman most men wouldn't dare cross, wandless or not. It was one of the things that made her such a good soldier - and an even better general.

Hermione was used to being in control. She was comfortable in the seat of power that the Order had assigned her, but fuck - with her boot pressed against Malfoy's bare chest, her heel hovering over the heart of one of the most feared and lethal men in the country, she didn't think she'd ever felt more powerful.

She'd missed this, craved it since she'd felt it slither across her skin since the incident in her bathroom the day before. She wished she could bottle up this addictive, intoxicating feeling that only triumph -

But then Malfoy's eyes slipped back to hers. He stared at her through his lashes, flashed her a smirk that would make even the devil blush, and she felt the scales tip back in his favour.

Malfoy slowly raised his left hand, and her stomach knotted when he wrapped his fingers softly around her ankle. "Dangerous game you're playing here, Granger," he said, his voice low and gravelly enough to make her insides flip. "I'd be careful if I were you - teasing a man with his own whisky might not be the cleverest idea you've ever had. Do it again, and you might not like the consequences."

It was a threat she couldn't ignore. An opportunity to bare her fangs that she absolutely couldn't miss. So, Hermione leaned back and slowly brought the bottle back to her lips, holding his gaze as she took another long, defiant swig.

The edges of Malfoy's lips twitched, the smirk stretching higher on his face. Another blue crack appeared in his eyes.

couldn't get them off! Panic bubbled in his chest as the smoke army crawled up and up -

Bellatrix drew a panicked breath as the ants swarmed up to her shoulders. Her arms flew into the air, frantically trying to swat the insects away. She lost her balance and toppled backwards. As she started to fall, the insects crawled over her face and eclipsed her entire body, but as she fell to the floor, the ants on both demons bodies vanished, evaporating into nothing more than vapour, as though they were never there to begin with.

"Together," Voldemort hissed, "they could bury us."

Draco curled over himself, his hands braced on his knees for support as he fought for breath. Bellatrix was equally as shaken. She crouched on her hands and knees beside Draco, panting and gasping, desperate for breath.

Voldemort's message was clear; defeat the order, or be buried alive with their dead.

"Yes... my Lord," Draco gasped shakily as he straightened his spine and tried to stand tall again. Bellatrix had yet to recover. "As the sole remaining Malfoy, you have my word. You will have your victory soon."

Voldemort began walking again without another glance at his generals, his dark robes dragging on the cobble stones as he left his Demons to regain themselves.

Draco and Bellatrix put their masks on, as they always did when they were required to make a public appearance, but mostly, Draco just wanted to hide his face. Voldemort's 'lesson' had the desired effect. He felt jittery, and although he knew Bellatrix had been affected more so than he had, he still didn't want her to see it.

As the trio reached their destination, Draco felt his stomach drop; it always did whenever he was forced to return here. Nottingham Council house, the Dark Lord's favourite theatre for executions.

Today's hangings had a wonderful view, any one of the witnesses today could attest to that. The sun was beginning to set to the West, leaving a beautiful pink blanket draped across the sky, dusted with small pockers of fluffy clouds. The cobbled streets in front of the council house were filled with an audience, those the Dark Lord deemed loyal - and influential enough - to carry the message of the day.

Every spectator had their hoods pulled high and their heads bowed low out of respect for the Dark Lord, and all faced the stone building that would hold today's spectacle.

The gallows had been built at the bottom of the steps leading to the councilhouse, evenly spaced between the marble lion statues. It was a huge structure, created with large wooden beams, and five ropes hanging from a polished oak beam overhead.

Voldemort stood at the very edge of the platform, Bellatrix and Draco flanking either side, a demon on both his shoulders.

"Welcome all!" Voldemort slowly raised his arms, gaining the crowd's attention. "Thank you for joining me this evening, although, I must admit, I wish it were under better circumstances."

Five muggles stood on the platform, all battered and bruised, most with tears streaking down their faces and knee's knocking together as they trembled. Only one stood tall and unafraid; a broad, older gentleman with thick arms and a greying beard. They all had coarse hoops already secured around their throats, their final, and most sinister necklaces they would ever wear.

"These muggles are soldiers for the Order, captured when they tried to break into our bases to retrieve information."

The crowd - and the demon beside Draco - hissed under their breath. Draco remained silent. He could still feel the ghosts of the ants crawling across his skin. He fought off a shudder as he felt them on his neck.

"This species are vermin, a disease on our earth, one we cannot allow to continue and contaminate us with their filth. If the roles were reversed, do you think they would pity us?"

"*No!*" the crowd hissed, stepping forward, closer to the carnage.

"Friends, if they were the stronger of the species, do you think they would spare us?" Voldemort continued, his voice growing in bravado as his speech went on, enthraling the crowd. "Allow us to live? To breathe their air and grow stronger?"

"*No!*"

"No, they wouldn't. Their filthy technology grows more lethal each day, all with the purpose of killing us. Their guns shoot faster, their bullets crafted to be stronger, intended for us. To kill all of us."

Bellatrix shifted her weight beside Draco, her bloodlust rising, itching to be closer.

Hermione realised she hadn't thought this through, not really. Clearly, the alcohol had numbed her senses, forged a whisky scented wall in her mind that prevented rational thought from winning.

This was obviously a bad idea. He may have been wandless, even the playing field between them a little, but he was physically much stronger. Even if he couldn't use wandless magic - which she very much doubted - he would still overpower her. Could still throw her the wall and wring her neck until she passed out.

But she knew he wouldn't, his master wouldn't allow any real harm to come to her. She was too valuable and precious to Voldemort's regime.

So, for the second time that week, Hermione chose the riskier - and more entertaining - path. Just because she wanted to. Just because she *fucking could*.

Malfoy met her eyes when she dug the heel of her stiletto into his skin, hoping that if she bore down hard enough, she might be able to pierce his cold, black heart.

"The eyes are the windows of the soul, and by extension the soul itself, so that to make a contract with one's soul so as to starve the world of any profit from it is rather like making a Faustian contract with the devil." It was funny how much that old sonnet reminded Hermione of Malfoy these days. It felt almost created specifically to describe Malfoy men. She wondered how far his family line went back, if Shakespeare himself had known of men with white-blonde hair and eyes that changed colour with each rise of the moon, and coined the phrase especially for them.

Hermione had come to the conclusion that the man who held her captive was split down the middle into two entirely separate people. Malfoy, and the Demon Mask, the two as different as Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde. Although they were both part of the same coin, the two Malfoys' wore very different faces, and their eyes were the indicator of which of the two souls she was speaking to.

Malfoy, the broken man with the beautiful blue eyes, whose only goal was to keep what little remained of his family alive, and who'd vowed to keep them safe. And the Demon with grey eyes, the persona, the one born in blood and war, the cold bastard who was the only one of the two that was ruthless enough to keep that oath.

Now, his eyes were mostly grey, which meant she was playing with the demon, Mr Hyde.

in front of the wall with the false panel. He stared at the secret door, and a deep crease appeared between his brows as he traced a finger down the outline of the trap door.

Her breath hitched when she realised she'd left the door wide open, and her entire body tensed with nervous anticipation when Malfoy's eyes snapped to hers.

For a few heartbeats, they just stared at one another, neither saying a word.

His eyes dragged over her slowly from head to toe, and she could see his realisation the moment it etched itself onto his face. Could see the very heartbeat he noticed that their roles - albeit temporarily - were reversed. Now, he was the one practically laid bare, weaponless, and she was the one draped in robes of blood and decay.

Malfoy narrowed his eyes at the blood covered gauntlets she still wore. Then he noticed the bottle in her hand, and his sharp features twisted into a scowl. "Is that...?" he barked. "Is that the Heresy whisky?!"

Hermione simply shrugged, unable to stop the satisfied little smirk that peeled its way onto her face as she took in his abhorrent expression. The way his eyes widened when she slowly brought the bottle back to her lips was priceless. It gave her more satisfaction than punching him in the face ever could. She didn't get many victories these days, so she intended to hang onto this one for as long as she could. Make it last.

"You little fucking thief!" Malfoy bit as he marched towards her. "Do you have any idea how much that bottle cost? It's a family heirloom, it's probably worth almost as much as this estate!"

"Mmmmm," she hummed slowly, keeping her eyes on his as she took another lengthy swig. "I thought it tasted expensive."

When he was close enough, he reached out to snatch the bottle from her, but before he could grab his prize, Hermione sharply raised her right leg to press her boot against his chest, just below his collar bone.

Malfoy froze. His breath caught as his eyes trailed down to where they were connected, where she was keeping him at bay. There was a moment of stilled silence between them, the only sound came from the crackling of the fire and the elevated beating of her heart.

"Well, I say, no more."

With a sharp snap of his wrist, the elder wand twirled in Voldemort's clawed fingers, and the wooden floor vanished underneath the hostage's feet.

Four of the muggles were lucky. There were four sickening cracking sounds that rippled through the air; their necks breaking instantly against the unforgiving ropes. But one muggle, one poor unlucky bastard had a stronger neck. The older man, the unafraid one, his eyes bulged as he swung from the rope. His face turned red. His toes started to curl - but he didn't die straight away.

He did look like a soldier. Draco thought as he watched the broad man's body jerk, fighting the asphyxiation. It looked like it would take him a while to finally give in, but Draco secretly hoped he would. There was no dignity in a death like this, it wasn't a soldier's death, wasn't clean and honourable. A man who put his life on the line to protect those he cared about, who wasn't afraid of death when it came for him didn't deserve to die like this. Slow and painful, frothing at the mouth while everyone watched.

But Voldemort wasn't finished with today's performance.

Two Gold Masks stepped forward and conjured a vertical, wooden beam that dug into the ground just in front of the gallows, and a third appeared from the back of the crowd, another hostage fighting in his arms.

Draco's chest tightened when he saw her.

He knew, logically, that the girl who was being tied to the wooden beam, hands bound behind her back and brown curls clinging to her face couldn't possibly be the little lioness he had at home. She couldn't be.

Granger was still at the manor, probably perched on her window ledge, a glass of wine in her hand while she bitched to Astoria about what a monster he was.

"This witch," Voldemort hissed, pointing the elder wand towards the quivering girl, "has betrayed her own kind."

This girl was shorter than the Golden Girl. Clearly younger, curves less exaggerated and face still retaining that youthful roundness in her cheeks.

No, she wasn't Granger, but those wild curls framing her face, and *those eyes*, brilliant and burning - they reminded him so much of her.

"She joined our ranks mere months ago," Voldemort said, "a Black Mask, the very bottom of the pile-"

No, she couldn't have joined Voldemort's army. This girl looked young, much, much too young. She couldn't have been older than seventeen, she was too young to choose this lifestyle. No matter what crime she'd committed, she was certainly too young for this severe punishment.

Draco didn't know what to do with himself. His heart rate picked up, blood roared in his ears.

"-and yet, before she even had the opportunity to earn my respect, she had chosen to betray us. She has been healing our hostages, freeing them, and sending them back to the Order."

A sob escaped the young girl's lips, and she lowered her head towards the ground. "I think, if she loves her muggles so much, then we should treat her as such, don't you agree?"

A chorus of cheer's and encouragement rang through the crowd like a wave, all the witnesses hypnotised by the Dark Lord's words.

"Do you know what muggles did when they suspected someone of being one of our kind, all those years ago?" Voldemort asked. "They tied us to the stake, and burned us alive."

Draco hooked his fingers around the collar of his robes to loosen them. Had they always felt this tight? Had they always dug into his skin like this?

"Demon," Voldemort smiled, looking back over his shoulder at Draco. "If you would please, put this sivelling girl out of her misery."

The terrified girl's head snapped up, and Draco felt something twist in his chest when he met her eyes.

Her eyes ... wide and brown and *terrified*. Eyes so similar to ones he'd fantasised about plucking out. Eyes he'd thought about countless times, wondered what they would look like as he squeezed their owners throat and watched the light go out in them.

Draco felt the walls of his throat constrict, cutting off his air.

He didn't think he could do this.

It was all too much, too familiar and too alien all at the same time. The location and the Dark Lord's words reminded him of Daphne, brought all those painful memories of her execution flooding to the surface. And this girl, this girl looked so

A low, almost painted groan snapped Hermione out of her alcohol buzzed train of thought, and her eyes immediately snapped to the doorway.

Malfoy didn't see her when he entered the sitting room, her residence in the dark corner hid her from view. His eyes were squeezed shut in pain; his head tilted towards the floor as he massaged the back of his neck with the palms of both hands. He wore nothing but a black towel that was tied around his waist, his entire body glistening with water from the bath he'd obviously just taken. His hair was dripping wet and hanging over his eyes, and two wedding rings hung from the thin metal chain he wore around his neck. They were both silver, one plain with a thick band, and the other more dainty, elegant with a huge tear-shaped diamond attached to it.

As Malfoy treaded into the room, thin streaks of water dropped from the edges of his hair to trail down his body, over the scars that covered his chest, streamed down over his torso and into the V that dipped around his hips.

Malfoy hadn't returned to the manor with Nott and Hermione after they'd been forced to retreat in Lincoln. The mission was a complete failure, they'd lost countless soldiers and gained nothing. No hostages, no weapons. Absolutely nothing Voldemort must have been furious; the thought was almost enough to make Hermione smile.

Voldemort had demanded that his demons meet him at York Cathedral for a 'mission debrief' afterwards, but the worried expression Nott had worn the entire carriage ride back to the estate had told Hermione it was much more than that. Voldemort's pride must have been seriously wounded, and he blamed Malfoy.

Hermione had expected Voldemort may punish his chief general for today's failure, but she hadn't expected *this*. Malfoy's shoulders and chest were saturated in bruises. Angry purple and black marks splashed across almost every inch of his torso like blotches of paint. There were layers of abuse, from the jagged line of a healing wound on his ribs, to the largest bruise on the left side of his neck.

She counted twelve small, jagged lines that splayed across his chest and wrapped around his bicep. Although they were thin and looked like they were already healing, they zipped across his skin like hairline cracks in glass. Hermione had never heard of a curse that caused an injury like that, but they looked incredibly tender.

Whatever Voldemort had done to Malfoy, he had taken his time and used various methods, meaning to extract pain, draw out every scream he could.

Hermione stayed very still as she assessed the damage. She didn't make a sound, didn't even breathe as she watched him cross the room in three easy strides and stop

There was just too much she didn't understand, and no matter how many times she replayed the day's events over and over again in her head, she was no closer to an answer.

Every time she thought she'd made sense of Malfoy's strange behaviour, every time she thought she'd threaded her analysis together, the stings didn't connect. There was always some piece of information escaping her, a missing thread that pulled her entire hypothesis apart at the seams.

Why had he stopped her from killing Fleur?

Why had he let her go?

It didn't make sense, and she couldn't stop obsessing over it. She felt like she was chasing a poltergeist, always reaching out, only for her vision of the truth to evaporate in her fist like smoke. The failure was almost maddening.

As soon as she'd arrived back at the manor, Hermione had needed something to take the edge off, something to calm her erratic nerves and keep her hands busy. Her nails certainly couldn't take any more stress, they were rather unsightly, bitten to the quick through a mixture of restlessness and anxiety. Astoria would have a heart attack when she saw them.

She'd tried to busy herself with exploring the manor for the hundredth time, and that was what had led her to this particular sitting room. It was on the right-wing of the house, and was far larger and grander than the one she would occasionally share a drink with Astoria in, with much more elaborate furnishings and an even more ostentatious fireplace.

Although Hermione had never been in anyone else's bedroom - she could open the doors and peek inside, but charms on the entryway prevented her from entering - she knew Malfoy's room was just at the end of this hallway. She usually kept away from this wing of the house, wanted to avoid running into *him* wherever possible, but tonight she felt almost drawn to it. She wasn't sure why. Told herself it was because he was likely to have the more vintage - and therefore more potent - alcohol stashed here.

Hermione's instincts were right. Not fifteen minutes into her search of this sitting room, she'd found a hidden panel - a false wall next to the crackling fireplace that was charmed to never extinguish - with six dust-covered bottles hidden inside of whisky, wines, and another brown liquid she hadn't tried yet.

much like Granger. It caught him off guard, the way his blood ran cold when he looked at her. He didn't know if he could watch her burn.

This wasn't right. The girl didn't deserve this. He didn't-

A low grumbling sound vibrated from behind him, the air beginning to heat as Narcissa approached. Voldemort insisted she was always close whenever he was out in public, a dangerous deterrent. She'd been laying in wait at the back of the Council house, but Draco's growing distress must have drawn her out to his defence.

Bellatrix and Voldemort stepped away as Narcissa stood behind Draco. Her scaled chest warmed his back and her winged front claws curled protectively on either side of him, ready to defend, eager to attack.

The crowd gasped and stepped back, shrinking away as the dragon bared her fangs, but Voldemort, however, couldn't have looked more pleased. He grinned triumphantly at her, red eyes glowing, mirroring that of the beast that guarded Draco.

"I couldn't have planned this better myself," Voldemort cooed, laughing as he pointed at the witch still tied to the stake. "Please, do the honours, *Narissa*."

Draco didn't say anything, he didn't need to. He knew his dragon could sense his fear, could feel the panic that was seizing his muscles, freezing him in place, rendering him useless. So, in that moment, she did the thing that Draco couldn't bring himself to do. She tipped her head back, opened her mouth as wide as she could, and blew a fire-filled breath at the poor, cruelly young witch, and engulfed her body in flames.

The crowd was forced back a step, their hands flying to cover their faces as a blast of searing heat swept through the air.

But Draco didn't move. He didn't even really notice the temperature rise, or how the gauntlets on his arm warmed and grew uncomfortably hot from their proximity to the fire.

He didn't notice it, because all he could think about was the sound of the girl screaming.

They even had the same screams! That high pitched, fucking ear-piercing scream that sounded like nails dragging down a chalkboard, that felt as though it flayed his skin and sunk into his bloodstream. A scream that had haunted him for nearly a decade, and felt like a life sentence.

Draco felt sixteen again. Sixteen, in a windy tower, scared out of his fucking mind, pointing a trembling wand at his headmaster's chest. When he'd had his whole future

riding on a single task, a horrific murder, and he'd been too afraid to pull the trigger. Sixteen, head between his hands and shaking, listening to a girl cry and beg for his help as she was tortured on his parlour room floor, and fear had seized his muscles the way it did now.

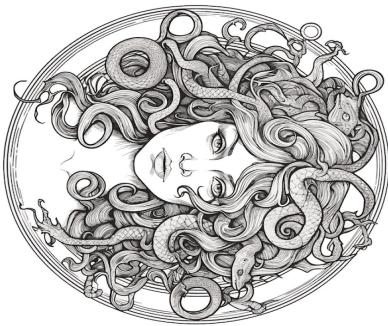
For the first time since he'd earned his horns, as another witch with brown curls screamed and begged for help, Draco had to look away.

He couldn't bear to watch, uncharacteristically, he didn't have the stomach for it. Couldn't bear to watch her face twist in agony as she was engulfed in the flames, or stand to watch her skin slide off the bone as she cooked from the inside out. He tried to look back, willed the muscles in his neck to contract, commanding them to twist his head back towards her and watch.

He tried, but he just couldn't do it.

Instead, he trained his stare on the hanging man, still alive, eyes still bulging and clinging to life, as the screams of the witch who looked so much like Granger went on and on and on. And all Draco could think of, as he watched the other lifeless corpses swing above, is that he hoped the little lion hadn't fastened a noose around his own neck.

## TASTED EXPENSIVE



**20th April**

The stolen Firewhisky burned Hermione's throat beautifully on the way down. It wasn't as good as the cigarettes she craved, but it pacified the need well enough.

She sat in one of the drawing rooms atop a hip-high wooden bureau. Her feet didn't touch the floor, and the metal stiletto of her thigh-high boots bounced off the doors as she swung her legs gently back and forth. She hadn't bothered to change out of her Death Eater robes; her assassin skin. The first thing she usually did after missions was get in the bath, but she felt far too wired to relax her muscles in bubbles and salts the way her body desperately needed her to.

## CHAPTER 23

"See, she's gone now. She's safe," Malfoy whispered as his knuckles grazed Hermione's cheek. "Now I need you to do something for me. I need you to breathe, can you do that?"

Hermione nodded slowly, fighting the horrid way her ribcage seemed to be squeezing her lungs, and took a long breath.

Malfoy's lips twitched into a smirk. "Good girl."

She took another deep breath, and then another. He kept watching her, never breaking eye contact as she worked to slow her gasps into a slower, more natural rhythm.

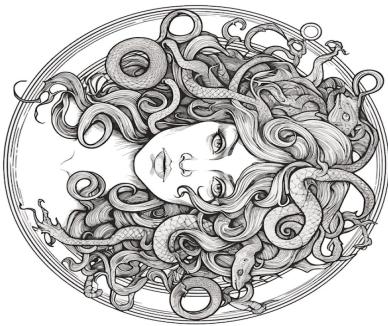
"You let Fleur go," Hermione found herself saying, toes curling as the demon dragged his thumb across her bottom lip.

"I did."

"Why?"

Malfoy opened his mouth, his eyes - blue and fucking *beautiful* - trailing down to her parted lips, but then Nott burst through the kitchen doors, and Hermione never got her answer.

## SUFFOCATED? OR BEHEADED?



**30th April**

Rebecca Stewart: decapitated.

Daryl Ivy: ripped in half.

Josh Harper: chest carved open.

Hermione punched her fist through her bedroom wall. She didn't care that her violence destroyed a section of her mural, or that the ageing brick underneath tore her knuckles apart as it bit into the stone.

She just wanted to break something, snap anything within her reach!

## CHAPTER 25

She spun around, her Death Eater robes swirling around her as her anger searched for another target. Another prey to sink her teeth into and destroy.

That's all she ever wanted to do when she came out of the hex.

Smash something.

Kill.

Break things.

Kill.

Rip everything apart.

Kill.

Kill.

Kill.

Kill.

Kill.

Her killer instincts were still heightened, her bloodlust still at the surface, clawing to break free. She felt like a kettle that had been brought to boiling, simmering and ready to burst, but the lid was still screwed on too tight. She had nowhere to go, no room to explode.

Milo Lopez: skull fractured from her knockback jinx.

She was so fucking angry and she had no one to take it out on. She needed something; someone to sink her teeth into and tear apart until this ache was gone.

Peter Elfish: crushed under a tank that Hermione had flipped on top of him.

Her robes were too heavy, saturated with too many other people's blood to count. They were weighing her down, dragging her to the floor. A cruel reminder of what she'd done today.

Marcus Pollard: chest exploded from the inside out.

Or had Hermione sliced his throat open? Turned the end of her wand into chains, wrapped it around his neck and suffocated the poor bastard? Or did she do that to Chloe Gray? Or Kevin Allen? She wasn't sure, she'd killed so many today.

She kicked her bedside table and sent a vase full of flowers falling to the floor. A biting pain shot up her foot, her toe hurt, but it did nothing to soothe the rage. Didn't dull the fires of the festering guilt she felt twisting in her stomach. So she did it again. And again.

head that felt like her skull was being cracked open, because it meant that the hex was gone.

The unexpectedness of her freedom knocked the air from her lungs. She felt dizzy, a buzzing rang in her ears as everything came into focus.

She took in a large gulp of air. And then another. And another. She couldn't get enough, had it always tasted this clean?

He was still hovering over her, his eyes bluer than she'd seen them in weeks. "Shhhhhh, it's alright." One of Malfoy's hands was on her face, his cold knuckles grazed her cheek soothingly. "It's alright, it's gone. It's gone."

"Oh my... oh my god - Fleur." Hermione panted underneath him. Her panic started to return, and it grew and grew as she regained control of her body. "Where is she? I didn't- oh God- I couldn't-"

She tried to get up and look around, but Malfoy pressed his body closer, smothering her in his robes and trapping her against the counter.

Hermione couldn't breathe. Her airways started to constrict. Tears stung in her eyes.

What if Malfoy hadn't gotten to her in time? What if she'd still managed to-

"It's alright. You didn't hurt her," Malfoy whispered urgently. He took her face between his hands and forced her to look at him again. "She's alright, but you need to calm down."

"I can't." Hermione sobbed. "Where is she? I need to-"

There was a small clatter of dishes knocking together from the other side of the kitchen. Malfoy's head snapped up to glare at the witch who'd created the disturbance.

"Ne reste pas là," he hissed at Fleur, his tone a stark contrast to the almost lullaby he'd been caressing Hermione with. "Ettes-vous sourd?"

Hermione tilted her head and caught Fleur's bewildered expression.

"C'est votre seule chance, partez maintenant avant de changer davis!" Malfoy snarled again. "Pars maintenant!"

Whatever Malfoy said, Fleur didn't need to be told twice. She quickly snatched her wand from the floor and disappeared with a sharp snap of apparition - but not before throwing Hermione one last confused and frightened glance.

# CHAPTER 26

Hermione's fingers flexed toward the weapons, itching to grab one and aim it between Malfoy's eyes. She resisted, just about. She had to force herself to take a step back. Her instincts screamed that this was a trap. Something to distract her while he stabbed her in the back.

She met his stare and searched his eyes, trying to work out which Malfoy she was playing with today. They were mostly grey, the blue almost non-existent.

"Go on, pick one up." Mr Hyde nodded towards the weapons. "They won't bite."

Hermione's gaze flickered back to the guns. Her stomach twisted in nervous excitement when she noticed a sleek handgun with a gold chamber.

She'd hated guns at the start of the war. She thought they were vile, repulsive things that caused nothing but suffering and tears and heartache for those caught on the wrong side of them. Far too dangerous, yet so easy to get hold of.

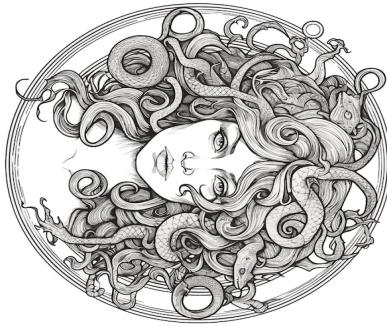
Most of the time, Hermione used magic on the battlefield. Chose to end the lives of blood supremacists with sharp spells and powerful hexes, showing them how lethal, how fucking powerful a Mudblood could be.

But there was something about pointing a gun at a Death Eater that made her smile. Hermione knew what it was; she'd known for years.

Voldemort was scared of guns. For him, guns represented muggle strength. Guns showed how powerful the '*the vermin*' could become. It didn't matter that they didn't have magic or spells or brooms, they had technology. They'd advanced, forged weapons and bombs powerful enough to demolish buildings and sever arteries effortlessly, and guns were the start of that revolution. They showed that even the strongest wizard could be powerless against a none magical person, all it took was a scrap of metal and a twitch of their finger.

Hermione had told her about Voldemort's fear on their first meeting. She assumed it was a peace offering, proof to show his betrayal was real, and the Order had run with that information. It was one of the things that forged the bond between the Order and the muggle armies, united their visions and strengthened their connection.

Hermione always carried guns after that, multiple firearms secured in holsters on her thighs, easily accessible, and she'd been all too happy to point the barrel at gold Pistols, rifles, handguns; there were so many of them, of every shape and calibre she could think of, all arranged into neat lines on the dining table the Demon Mask had guided her to.



## A DIFFERENT TYPE OF EXORCISM

**1st May**

"What the fuck is all this?"

Malfoy lacked the common sense to hide his eye roll. "What does it look like?"

A firing squad, that was the first thing that came to Hermione's mind as she looked at the table of guns in front of her. A death sentence waiting to happen.

Pistols, rifles, handguns; there were so many of them, of every shape and calibre she could think of, all arranged into neat lines on the dining table the Demon Mask had

She hadn't touched one for months. There were so many here. So close, but just out of reach.

Malfoy must have charmed them. He had to have done. He'd probably boobie trapped every single one to explode with the slightest touch from her hand. Or electrocute her the moment they came into contact with her skin. There was no way he would let her anywhere near such dangerous weapons otherwise. Hermione knew Malfoy was up to something, but she couldn't help herself. Her mind was already abuzz with a thousand different scenarios. A Rolodex of a hundred different possibilities.

Malfoy stood in front of the table, blocking her path with one hand resting on the edge, his fingers tapping an even rhythm onto the wood. He was so close to her, she could smell parchment and smoke clinging to his open black shirt and trousers like a cologne.

She wouldn't be quick enough to kill him, but what if she ducked under his arm and made a grab for one? Would he catch her before she could reach them?

If she did manage to get a gun, at best she would barely have time for one shot. If she missed, he would disarm her and drag her back to her bedroom. If she missed, it would be game over, and she might not get a chance like this again.

But maybe that wasn't her only option.

Maybe the guns weren't a weapon to murder him with. She could still use them to escape, but maybe she needed to take a different route. One she'd thought about, toyed with the idea, but never had the means to achieve.

Her pulse hammered loudly in her chest. She was sure Malfoy would be able to hear it.

Could she do it? Was she quick enough to grab one, point it at her head and pull the trigger? It would certainly be easier than shooting him. It left little room for mistakes, the chances of her surviving were non-existent, zero.

She'd been waiting for an opportunity like this for weeks, ever since she'd learned the true extent of the Demon Hex. Her life wasn't worth the entire Order of the Phoenix. If she could just grab one, maybe she could -

"Don't even think about trying to kill yourself with those," Malfoy snapped, his fingers growing irritated against the table. "That's not why I've brought them here for you."

of her instantly, without a moment's hesitation. It was like it was instinctual. He protected her like-"

He cut himself off. He had more to say, Astoria could tell by the way he chewed on the inside of his cheek, physically restraining his mouth from moving.

"Like what?" she urged. "Please, *please*, tell me."

Blaise looked up again, and brought his wife's hand up to his lips to place a kiss on her knuckles. "Like I would protect *you*."

Astoria's breath hitched. "And then what did he do to the Order member? The one who almost hurt Hermione?"

"He cast a hex, more furious than I've ever seen him, and slit Sean's throat open so severely he decapitated the poor swine."

Dark Lord did, and she had no problem manipulating him when she wanted something.

"Blaise, tell me how he was injured," she commanded, cupping his chin under her delicate fingers and tilting his head up, forcing him to look at her. "The wound was very deep, the pressure from the hex that caused it almost cracked his skull. Draco never gets hurt on the field. He said it was nothing, but something doesn't feel right, so I need you to tell me what happened."

She didn't think she'd ever seen Blaise look more uncomfortable. His jaw was tight, and his lips were pressed into a tense line as he studied his wife's pleading expression. After several long seconds, he closed his eyes, sighed heavily, and completely surrendered.

"It all happened very quickly. A member of The Order - I think his name was Sean Tyler, he was in Slighorns potion class with us at Hogwarts - cast a slicing curse, but it missed and rebounded off the walls."

As he spoke, Astoria poured a strong, antiseptic potion onto a cloth and began to treat Blaise's wounds. She started on the most severe, the angry jagged wound on his shoulder, and then worked backwards.

"It was coming straight for Granger, but she was too busy suffocating another witch to see it. So Draco stepped in front of her and took the curse, right in the back of the head."

Astoria stopped applying Essence of Dittany onto his arm and stared up at her husband. "He protected her?"

Slowly, Blaise nodded.

"Why would he take the curse for her and let himself get hurt like that? I thought Draco was quick with charms? Surely he had enough time to cast a shield?"

Blaise opened his eyes and watched his wife, urging her to continue healing him while he explained. "He could have. Draco's charm work is incredible, I do not doubt that he could have cast a shield in time, if he'd really thought about it."

"So what are you saying? He took the curse for her on purpose?"

"It would appear that way." His eyes trailed down, and he took her hand in his own. "The curse was weaker because it rebounded. Although it wasn't strong enough to kill, it would have hurt Granger like hell if it hit her. He stepped in front better than she would have liked."

Then why had he brought her here?

"I've already magically altered the guns," he said. "If you try and use it on yourself, the bullets will melt as they leave the chamber."

"And how, *exactly*, have you managed to do that?" Hermione asked sarcastically. "You should never underestimate me, Granger. There's a reason I'm the Dark Lord's favourite." Although Malfoy scoffed, offended, he was smiling. "It wasn't hard, your DNA is all over this house. It wasn't hard to deconstruct it."

As Malfoy spoke, one of the guns floated gently in the air and began to take itself apart.

"Have a look at the pieces, and charm the guns to recognise your special signature."

The scraps started to twist in on each other, and that's when Hermione noticed a thin blue line of magic that travelled down the inside of the barrel.

*His* DNA. *His* magic. Apparently, the combination yielded sparkling results.

"If you try and use one on yourself, the guns will recognise you, and the magic I've infused in the chamber will melt the bullets as they leave the chamber."

Even Hermione had to admit, that was clever. She doubted even she would have been that thorough, but she wasn't about to tell him that.

"Why do you even have these?" Hermione bit. "I thought your master disapproved of muggle weapons."

"He does, but they're not mine." Malfoy quirked a brow, the ghost of a smirk playing at the edges of his lips. "They're for you."

"Why?"

"Let's call them a gift."

"Why would you give me a gift? And more importantly, why do you think I'd accept?"

"Well, you have no problem accepting them from Astoria." Malfoy waved his hand once over the short black summer dress she wore. "So I didn't think you'd object to a small token from me, especially when my gift feeds that violent appetite of yours."

Guns over dresses. Weapons over high heels. She hated that Malfoy knew her better than she would have liked.

"I'd rather cut my hand off than touch anything *you've* given me."

Malfoy rolled his tongue on the inside of his cheek. His grey-blue eyes raked her over from head to toe, irritated. Her response clearly wasn't the one he wanted. Maybe he thought she'd be impressed?

"Astoria thinks you need something to channel your rage into," he told her. "She

knows you're in pain, and she's under the impression that if you don't find an outlet for it soon, you'll explode."

Hermione took another step back, away from the demon that was trying to entice her with weapons and violence. "If that's what she thinks, then why are *you* here instead of her?"

He folded his arms behind his back, looking the perfect picture of wealth and elegance, and started to walk around the table, appraising the goods. "She thinks that because I'm the source of your anger, I'm the most suitable Guinea pig."

He made a full circle around the table, bowing his head slightly to get a better look at the guns. He seemed slightly fascinated by them, admiring the gleam of the metal and the smoothness of the handles as he passed. But he never touched them. His hand remained firmly behind his back.

Was Malfoy scared of guns, too? Was that something Voldemort had passed down to his generals? Instilled a fear of the muggle made weapons into his soldiers so that they wouldn't leave any chances? Draw their wands at the first sight of one, and shoot to kill?

"I don't get it." Hermione couldn't help but quirk a brow. "She wants you to be a target for my anger?"

"Oh no, you *do* get it." Malfoy looked up suddenly, his smirk stretching higher. "And although Astoria might be right, I'm far too valuable to the Dark Lord to let you go wild. If you hurt me and put me out of commission, I'll be out of a job, and we can't have that, can we? But don't worry, I've got another idea. Something I'm sure you're going to love."

His attention drifted from the table of deadly weapons, apparently something in her expression was much more interesting. He stalked towards her, his shoulders low and predatory. He started to circle her, his hands still clasped behind his back and a dark expression twisting his features.

Hermione forced her spine straight and chin high in the air. Defiant. Unaframed. "Don't you think you've done enough?" she hissed, forcing as much malice into her

Draco saw red. "I thought you said we didn't have any healing potions left?"

"Did I?" Astoria smirked. "*Whoopties*."

She'd lied to him. They weren't out of potions, they weren't even running low. The elves carried dozens of potions and herbs in their arms, two of everything on Astoria's shopping list.

The spoiled witch had made him sit through her knitting his head back together - without the aid of pain relief - on purpose. Probably saw it as some form of retribution for what he'd been doing to Granger. Her own painful form of justice, delivered at the end of a blunt needle and perfectly manicured nails - that he'd probably fucking paid for!

"You're a spiteful bitch," Draco muttered under his breath. He marched to the same cupboard Theo had, seeking the same liquid medicine.

"And you're a nasty, rotten, cunt," Astoria answered immediately, voice soft as a bell, despite her unladylike words. "I suggest you come up with a way to release Granger's anger as quickly as possible. There's only so many times the fixtures will repair themselves. Your ancestors won't be too happy if she tears this house apart, and I certainly won't stand in her way."

Draco didn't say anything. He took a lengthy swig of the tequila he'd snatched, threw Astoria an obscene gesture over his shoulder, and stormed out of the kitchen.

As Draco slammed the door behind him, Astoria's brows knitted together. "Blaise?"

"Yes, darling?"

"How did Draco get hurt today?"

Surprisingly, he didn't answer her, which was extremely odd. Blaise, although one of the most feared Gold Masks in the country, had always been at the mercy of his wife, practically melted into putty in her hands. Whether it was jewels, gold, or even something as simple as information, whatever she wanted, Blaise would immediately provide her with it. No questions. No hesitation. Theo knew it. Draco knew it. Merlin, even Blaise himself knew it.

Astoria may have been fragile in a hundred different ways, as weak as a withered flower caught in a blizzard, but she had more power over her husband than even the

Yes, Draco had known Blaise was going to get injured on this mission, and Astoria gasped and sprinted to his side when she saw him, just like he knew she would.

“ROMY!” she screamed, hands tenderly dancing over Blaise’s injuries to assess the damage. “QUINZEL!”

The elves in question appeared with a sharp crack.

“Hello,” Quinzel said, quiet and direct, as usual.

“Evening, Mrs Zabini. How can Romy be of assistance on this fine spring-”

“Bring me as many healing and pain potions as you can carry, Essence of dittany, Mandrake leaves and Fluxweed! NOW!”

The elves vanished without another word.

“What happened to you?” Astoria asked frantically, pulling her husband’s robes from his body so she could better assess the damage. “Why didn’t you come home straight after the mission if you were hurt this badly?!”

“The Dark Lord wanted to see me and Theo.” Blaise hissed as Astoria started casting healing charms, one after the other in quick succession. “I thought I told you no healing magic.”

“Oh shut up,” Astoria snapped. When he tried to stop her, she batted his hand away and cast another spell.

Her magic was weak, her healing charms were no where near as strong as they ought to be. Although they didn’t knit the wounds back together, they did stop the bleeding, and that made her feel useful. Made her feel like the boys *needed* her, and she wasn’t just a withering burden to them.

Amongst the chaos, Theo rolled his eyes and made his way to the kitchen cupboards - presumably for whisky. Or Vodka. Any alcohol he could get his hands on really. He found what he was looking for quickly, and as soon as he did, he whirled around and made for the exit.

“Don’t you dare leave here Theo,” Astoria commanded, even though her eyes were glued to the bleeding wound on her husband’s neck. “I need to see your injuries!”

“Sorry, can’t stay!” Theo called over his shoulder without looking back. “Got a date with this bottle and a hot blonde.”

The elves appeared as Theo retreated into the peace and quiet outside.

words as she could. “I don’t want you to be a bullseye for my temper tantrums. I don’t want anything from you! The further away from me you are, the better.”

“Salazar, you’re feisty this morning, aren’t you?” He disappeared behind her left shoulder, and Hermione willed her muscles to stay in place. She wouldn’t follow him. She wasn’t playing this game. “I’d say the lioness has woken up on the wrong side of the cave.”

He appeared in front of her, his eyes flickering with something. He looked her up and down as he passed, and then disappeared over her shoulder again. “It’s not about what you *want*, it’s about what you *need*.” He was closer than she’d expected, his cold breath tickled the back of her neck, pebbling her skin. “And whether you like it or not Granger, you *need* me.”

A bolt of anger shot through her. She whirled around, catching his arm and stopping him mid-step. Her nostrils flared, and his lip curled back in a snarl.

“The only thing I *need* from you, Malfoy, is to put a knife through your carotid artery.” She stepped into him, her chest pressing against his, and stretched onto the very tips of her toes so she could better look him in the eye. “The only thing I *need* from you, Demon, is to watch the fear in your eyes as you choke on your own blood.”

“Is that how you’d do it?” The way he was looking at her, smirking and eyes burning as if discussing her murdering him was the most erotic thing in the world, almost made her shiver. In a sick way, maybe it was. It certainly sent a tingle up her spine just thinking about it. “Slit my throat? I always imagined you’d do it slower, make it last.”

“I did too, but at this point, I’d do just about anything,” she hissed, her own eyes flickering with excitement. “As long as I get to kill you, I’m not picky. I’ll take whatever I can get.”

“Then it’s a pity you can’t kill me right now. I’m sure you’d get immeasurable pleasure from picking up one of those guns and shooting me in the head.” He leaned down, his nose almost brushed hers. “Right here. Right now.”

Hermione wasn’t quick enough to catch her smirk. “Oh, you have no idea. I *drum* about it.”

“Imagine you do,” Malfoy whispered, smiling broadly. “I wouldn’t be surprised if you touched yourself at night, thinking about how spectacular it would be to cave my head in with your boot.”

Hermione raised her chin, inching closer. "I thought you couldn't read my mind?"

She couldn't help the way her breath hitched when his tongue darted out to wet his lips. She lowered herself back to the ground, suddenly apprehensive about being pressed up against him, nervous about having her mouth so close to his.

"Whilst you're under the Demon Hex, it brings all your painful memories up to the surface, doesn't it?" Malfoy asked. He didn't pause to allow her to confirm before he continued, "The Hex needs you to be angry. It needs your rage and pain billowing to the surface to power its dark magic and make you all the more lethal. It drags all those awful, crippling emotions to the surface, and makes you more of a killer than you already are. And all that rage doesn't just vanish when you come out of the Hex? Does it?"

She knew he was flinging her up on purpose. Trying to light the match of her anger, set the sparks flying until she combusted. She knew it, but still took the bait. Her skin felt hot. Anger started to bubble in her veins. "Shut up!"

"When the Hex is gone and you see all those bodies lying on the floor, all those people you've cut down, their throats hanging open because *you* slit them –"

"That's enough, Malfoy!"

"Limbs missing because you tore them off."

"I said that's enough!"

"All that pain doesn't just go away, does it?" he asked quietly, calmly. "It's still there, festering inside you with nowhere to go."

"So what? You think to exorcise my demons, I need to use one?"

Malfoy laughed again, that same throaty laugh that made his eyes crinkle at the sides. "You don't miss a thing, do you? I had hoped the poetry of it all wouldn't be lost on a *Mudblood*."

Merlin, she wanted to hit something, preferably him.

Preferably in the face. A hundred times.

With a baseball bat. Or a chair if that was her only option.

There was a chair right there. It looked nice and heavy. Surely enough to cause damage if it were smashed in someone's face repeatedly.

No! No! Hermione pushed the thought away as quickly as it sprang to life. She wasn't doing this with him, not today. She didn't trust Malfoy. He was up to

something to hit. She can break everything, anything she likes, just as long as it stops *her* from breaking."

"If you think it will help, then go upstairs, drag her out of that room and hand her a knife," Draco challenged. "I'll do anything if it makes her stop screaming like that."

Astoria's spiteful hands stilled. His words had caught her off guard, all the fury drained from her features as she stared at Draco's reflection in the mirror.

"I can't listen to that anymore Tori," Draco whispered, the fire of his own anger dwindling. "I hear it everywhere, every fucking time I close my eyes, I hear her screaming."

The gentleness, the compassion that always glowed around Astoria returned. For a moment, she wasn't angry at him anymore. For a moment, she was his sister again; his caring, gentle, angelic sister who always seemed to know exactly what to say, who was always there for him, even if they did bicker like cat and dog.

"It isn't weakness to show a little mercy to your enemy, Draco," she said quietly, her voice pleading. "It won't think your armour to show a little compassion, it just shows you have a heart, even if it has been stained with the blood of those you've killed."

And with that, the final nail in the coffin, Astoria returned to her work, and they didn't speak again. Mere seconds after she finished knitting his scalp back together and placed her tools on the table, the kitchen doors burst open, and Blaise and Theo sauntered into the room.

Although Theo was covered in blood from today's carnage, he didn't have a scratch on him. He did have a slight limp in his step from a stray curse he'd walked into, but that was the only evidence he'd even been involved in a fight at all.

Blaise, however, looked a mess. His robes were torn and flecked with blood, most of it his own, and a streak of crimson dripped from his temple and down the side of his face.

Draco had predicted this. One look at Blaise that morning had told Draco he wasn't in the right frame of mind for a mission. He'd been distracted, far too worried about the declining health of his wife to fully concentrate on the task at hand. His mind was a hundred miles away, unaware of his surroundings, and he'd almost gotten himself killed because of it.

"-I can't let her go, if I did, it would put us all at risk."

"-but you could go a little easier on her."

"A little easier on her?" Draco couldn't help but snort. "I don't go into her mind anymore, and I've given up my searches through her memories. What more do you want?"

"You've only done that because you've laid the foundations of the hex deep enough and you've already sifted through all of her memories." Astoria jabbed the needle again, spilling her irritation into his injury. "You've learned all of her secrets, so you do not need to go into her mind anymore. It's not mercy if you're only giving it up because it doesn't benefit you anymore."

"What do you want me to do about it? She fucking hates me, how exactly do you think I might be able to help her? She's more likely to stab me than she is to accept help from me."

Astoria's eyes flashed, burning with her growing temper. "Well, she's certainly felt better in the past when she's hit you. Maybe letting her stab you wouldn't be the worst idea in the world! I'll even hold you still for her!"

"You think that will make her feel better? She uses me as a human punching bag, and what? You think all this anger she has will just vanish? That she won't be in pain anymore?"

As the pair argued, there was another crash upstairs, the unmistakable crunch of wood splintering. Granger was on the warpath again.

"This is tearing her apart." Astoria's voice grew louder so that she could be heard over the chaos upstairs. "Every time you make her kill, it's like you're ripping a petal from a flower. A piece of her dies, and then another, and then another. Soon, there's going to be nothing left of her."

Another loud thud from upstairs, another heartbroken scream. "You're the reason she's in so much pain. Don't you think you should be the one to ease her suffering, too?"

Fuck, why wouldn't Granger stop screaming? Why wouldn't she just stop?

"You need to give her something to focus on, an outlet to pour all that pain and anger out onto," Astoria said, tears gathered in her eyes. "She needs to smash something? Give her something to smash. She wants to hit something? Give her

something, she just didn't know what. And she refused to play a game if she didn't know all the rules.

Clenching her hands into fists, Hermione took a deep breath, then turned away from him. She tried to clear her head, and ignore the shiver that ran up her spine as she scanned the space around her.

This room always made her feel cold. This fucking twisted nest of a room with dark wooden floors and smooth stone pillars and a crystal chandelier hanging above. The parlour might have been spotless, thoroughly cleaned and beautifully maintained, but in Hermione's eyes, it would always be ugly.

It didn't matter that the acidic lilt of disinfectant spells was strong and unmistakable here, she could still smell her blood clinging to the floorboards. It didn't matter that it had been years since she'd laid on that floor, on that exact spot while his aunt had carved her arm to pieces. The wound still felt fresh. She could still feel the cold metal of the dagger slicing against her skin, blood dripping down her arm.

Hermione rubbed her scar, fighting the sudden chill she felt from being stood in the space that had almost been her coffin years ago.

Is that why he'd brought her here? Because he knew this room made her uncomfortable? Irritable? Did he want her to destroy the place?

She caught his eye again and studied his expression. She stared into his grey eyes, trying to figure out what secrets he was keeping behind that glass wall he kept up around his heart. What was he up to?

"Well, I'd say I've ruffled your feathers enough for now," Malfoy said. "Let's give you something to sink your teeth into, shall we?"

With a flick of his wrist, three targets appeared at the far end of the room just in front of the fireplace. They were all shaped like men; tall and ugly, crafted from the darkest metal with huge bulking frames and unremarkable expressions on their faces.

*Oh.* So that was what the guns were for.

He turned back to her with a triumphant smirk, as if this ridiculous display was supposed to impress her. As if she was somehow supposed to look at these targets and, what? Blow up? Suddenly be overcome with bloodlust and the need to kill?

Well, if that was his goal, it wasn't working.

Was she irritated? Yes. Was she murderous? Towards him? Yes. Towards the targets? No.

Her lack of enthusiasm must have shown on her face.

“No?” he asked, twirling his wand loosely between his fingers. “These not to your liking? Well, I think I have an idea on how I can make these a bit more appealing to you.”

Malfoy jerked his wand in the direction of the targets. They were slowly covered in a soft blue light and within a few seconds, started to change. Their frames disintegrated a few inches and melted into more slender shapes, and the blank expressions they wore morphed into ones she knew; ones she despised and made her blood boil.

All of the targets now looked like Death Eaters, each with a flowing black robe and gold mask.

Hermione’s adrenaline spiked. Her heart sped up. She looked back at Malfoy, her eyes narrowing in suspicion. She didn’t say a word, tried to look as uninterested and unimpressed as she could, but her fingers twitched towards the guns, betraying her.

“Pick your target, Gryffindor,” he cooed, cocking that signature Malfoy brow she hated almost as much as she did him. “You know you want to.”

“Piss off.”

“Don’t be shy, pick up a gun.”

“Why? So it can blow my hand off as soon as I touch it? *No thank you.*”

“You still don’t trust me?”

“No.”

The Demon Mask rolled his eyes for the second time that morning. “You’re so suspicious. It’s adorable.”

“Fuck. You!”

“Go ahead, grab one. It’ll make you feel better.”

“No, it won’t.”

“Yes, it will.” Malfoy stepped closer, crowding her space and drafting the scent of smoke and parchment in her direction. “Give it a try.”

“No!”

And although he really, really didn’t want to ask for Astoria’s help, fumbling around with a needle and making himself look like a complete twat was certainly the lesser of two evils, the less painful blow to his ego.

So, without another word, he sat back down on the stool, and Astoria resumed her work.

“I take it that you still haven’t forgiven me then, Tori?” Draco found himself asking, needing to distract himself from the pain. “For what I’ve done to the Mudblood,” he corrected himself when Astoria pulled the needle in warning.

“No,” she answered immediately, eyes on her work, “I haven’t.”

“Then why are you healing me at all? Surely you’d get more satisfaction out of seeing me suffer?”

“I did consider it, but there’s a diamond necklace that’s coming up for auction.” Astoria caught his eye in the window and scowled. She placed the bloody needle in a silver tray to soak, then disinfected a fresh one with a clear liquid, threaded a thin black wire through the hole, and began stitching again. “I want it, and I’ll feel guilty about buying it with your families money if I let you bleed to death on the kitchen floor.”

“And why am I buying you a necklace?”

“As an apology for being more of an arsehole than usual for the last few weeks.”

Before Draco could respond, another loud crash from the bedroom upstairs caught their attention.

Astoria paused, her eyes wide with concern and her mouth twisted down at the sides. They both stared at the ceiling for countless seconds, as if they might be able to see through the floorboards if they concentrated hard enough.

“She can’t keep going on like this Draco, it isn’t fair,” Astoria said, although her voice lacked the venom it had previously been dripping in, she sounded concerned now. Sad. “You need to fix this, and you need to do it quickly.”

“What do you want me to do, let her go?” Even as he spat the words - curled his tongue around them like they disgusted him - he felt his chest tighten, and a strange, uneasy tension coiled in his stomach. “That will never happen. She’s too valuable to the Dark Lord, and he entrusted me to keep an eye on her. She’s *my* hostage. *Mine* to guard. *Mine* to watch over.”

“I’m not saying that you should let her go.”

"Since when - augh-since when do you listen to your husband?"

Apparently, Astoria was finished speaking to him. Instead, she showed her growing disdain for her brother by pulling the thread back harshly enough to tug his head back.

Draco hissed in pain.

Astoria dug the needle in again, more forcefully than all the other times, and the little smirk on her face was the last straw. As the needle pierced his skin again, scraping across the bone, the last of Draco's patience broke.

He smacked his fist against the table, the marble top shuddered under his palm as he jerked out of her spiteful little hands. "For fuck sake Astoria I know you're usually blind drunk by this time of the day, but can you at least *try* and get your withdrawal under control whilst your stitch my head back together?!"

Astoria caught his reflection in the window. She narrowed her eyes, and her red painted lips curled back in a snarl. "If you think you can do a better job, *Demon Mask*, then be my guest!"

Draco opened his mouth, an insult already at the tip of his tongue, but Astoria was already cutting him off.

"Go on then." She stepped back and held her hands wide in either side of her, letting the needle and thread fall against his back. "Hurry up. Chop chop, before your blood stains the new tiles."

Not to be outdone, Draco's hands flew to the back of his head. He stood from his stool and fumbled with the needle for a second, trying to see if he could see the back of his skull in the windows reflection-

But it was all fucking useless. Astoria knew that.

The wound was at the very back of his head. There was no chance he'd be able to see it himself, and an even smaller possibility he'd be able to stitch it back together without assistance.

He thought about conjuring a set of mirrors, thought if he angled them just right he might be able to see the injury, but he decided against it.

Malfoy's were many things; selfish, arrogant, could often be downright fucking nasty - but the one thing that mattered more than anything, was worth its weight in gold to him and all his ancestors, was his pride.

He took another step towards her. Hermione didn't budge, refusing to retreat. "Just fire one bullet. I promise you'll enjoy it."

"Malfoy," she hissed through gritted teeth. "I'm warning you. Back. *Off*!"

Sensing that he wasn't going to piss her off to the point she snatched a gun and pointed it at his face this way, Malfoy tried a different approach. He took a step to the left, and quick as a flash, he was behind her. He leaned over her, his left arm trailing down the length of hers before he laced their fingers together.

"What are you doing?!" Hermione twisted, trying to jerk her elbows into his ribs, but Malfoy's other arm wrapped around her waist. He tugged her backwards with an iron grip, crushing her spine against his chest. Inescapable. "Get off of me!"

"Relax. Don't you trust me?" His cold lips glided to the shell of her ear, like they had done so many times, and Hermione braced herself for the Demon Hex. She squeezed her eyes shut, her blood running cold as she waited for those two little Latin words that turned her into a monster.

But they never came.

As she jerked again, trying to kick him, Malfoy's strong arms tightened, tugging her closer as he whispered, "Fight all you want cub, but I'm never letting you go."

Her arms stilled, her fight starting to slip through her fingers like water. Her head started to spin, the mixture of confusion and the feel of his breath on her neck making her feel dizzy.

What the fuck did *that* mean?

"We'll take this nice and slow, alright? One step at a time."

Without allowing her to answer - or regain her fight - he bent their arms and directed her to pick up the sleek, black and gold handgun she'd been admiring earlier. It felt good in her hands, made her feel secure, stronger, a little more in control. As she dragged her fingertips over the safety latch, with a gun in her hand and a demon at her back, Hermione realised that she had two options.

She could fight, thrash, and try and assassinate Malfoy. Or, she could play along, and try to work out his intentions.

Well, they say curiosity killed the cat, and hadn't he been calling her his '*little lion*' for weeks?

"I'm going to tell you a little secret Granger. I've always detested guns," the Demon practically purred in her ear, his voice low and gravelly and fuck- it sent a

shiver riding up her spine, “but in your hands? I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything more glorious.”

The hand on her waist held her steady, the other directed her arm, pulling it up, aligning the gun with the targets.

“But you already know that, don’t you?” His voice drafted fresh waves of smoke against her skin. It made her mouth water.

Hermione shifted her gaze to the targets, trying to clear her head so she could focus and play the game.

“You already know how strong you look, don’t you?” The hand on her waist squeezed. A knot formed in her lower abdomen. “How fierce you look with that weapon in your hand?”

Her heart started to hammer loudly in her chest. His words shouldn’t affect her like this. She needed to be calm, composed, but how could she when he kept leaning in? How could she focus when his thumb kept stroking across the back of hers, pebbling her skin?

Her palms began to sweat, the gun started to slip between the moisture, so Malfoy shifted their hands, forcing her index finger to curl around the trigger, and held her steady.

“You like the way it makes you feel, don’t you?” he whispered. She could feel his heartbeat against her spine, their rhythms perfectly matched, elevated. Excited. “You like the way holding this weapon makes you feel strong, untouchable, don’t you?”

She did. Whether it was sick or not, she fucking did.

“*Don’t you?*” He pinched her waist, demanding her attention, making her yelp.

“Yes!”

“I thought so. Now, I want you to pretend those targets are someone you hate.” He inched ever closer, lips grazing her ear. “Can you do that for me?”

Hermione, apparently without words, simply nodded.

“Good.” She felt him smirk against her cheek. “This person you’re thinking about, is it a man? Or a woman?”

“A man,” she answered impulsively. “A Death Eater.”

“I want you to think about the type of mask he wears. Picture it in your mind for me.”

“Ouch, motherfucker! Could you not just use the Knit me salve?”  
“Nope,” Astoria snapped coldly as she dug the needle in again, a little too harshly to be accidental. “All gone.”

“Where are the elves?! Can’t they do this?!”

“They’re not available. They’re out running errands for me.”

Draco bounced his knee. His nails bit into his palm. “Can I at least have a potion for the pain?!”

“Run out of those, too.”

Astoria was hurting him on purpose. Draco was sure of it. She wasn’t healing him with the care and compassion she usually did. With a concerned look on her face and the weight of the world on her shoulders. Her movements were sharp now, punishing. Her aggression towards him palpable at the end of the needle she continuously dug into his skin. Pulling the thread sharply enough to cause his head to snap back. Angling the needle *just right* each time so the metal dragged across the bone.

But it only lasted a moment, less than a tenth of a second. Astoria wasn’t a complete sadist. She extracted just the right level of pain to make Draco’s toes curl with each pull of the thread. She was still furious with him, and she was making sure he knew it.

He tried to lean out of her touch, but Astoria dug her manicured nails harder into the side of his head and yanked him back towards her. “You’ve run out of all the bastard healing potions?!”

“Yep.”

“There’s not a single -*jukk*, ouch! There’s not a single healing potion in the storage cupboard?!”

The corner of the artificial blonde’s lip twitched into a tiny - completely fucking sadistic - smirk. “That’s what I said, isn’t it?”

“What about healing magic?” he growled when she jabbed the needle in again. “Or anaesthetic spells?”

“Blaise said I wasn’t to use magic that would put a physical strain on me.” She pulled the thread with a quick jut of her arm, no consideration to the sharp pain it sent up Draco’s skull. “Doesn’t want me to overexert myself and risk being bedbound anymore than my condition requires me to be.”

His glass wall stretched over his chest, so close to his heart, so close to blocking it all out until he felt nothing. His walls felt fragile, delicate as a thin sheet of ice covering a lake. He tried to stretch them higher -

Something else smashed upstairs and he heard glass fall to the floor. Draco fought, but he felt hairline fractures appear in his own glass walls.

Just a little more.

Then Granger screamed. A low, agonised scream of pain. Not physical pain, the shriek that echoed from upstairs wasn't blood curdling like someone who was being tortured. No, no this scream spoke of a different type of pain, internal, emotional distress. It was so much worse than the prior, it sounded heartbroken, worse than anything Draco had ever heard, a symphony of suffering, of fucking emptiness, and it shattered the last of his control.

The scream caused the cracks in his Occlumency walls to expand in a violent flurry, shattering the protection he'd built around himself. His walls splintered and popped, like pieces of glass freeing themselves from a windowpane, and fell to his feet.

What the fuck was wrong with him? Why couldn't he shake off this guilt? This crippling, hollow ache in his chest, every fucking time he thought about the witch upstairs?

Why was he having trouble occluding? He used to be superb at it, could craft a thick and unbreakable icy wall within seconds to protect himself, block out everything he didn't want to feel. Now, no matter how much he concentrated, he was struggling to cast even a weak one, and then they were crumbling within the hour.

He wasn't this person. He didn't feel things anymore. He didn't care about anyone who wasn't his family - his *real* family.

Blood isn't thicker than water, Draco had believed that for a long time.

*Astoria Blaize Then Narissa*. They were his family, the only ones that mattered anymore. Protecting them was all he cared about.

That softer side of him, the side that used to worry about outsiders, hadn't existed for a long time. He'd tipped that part of himself out, and packed it into a wooden box when his parents died. Then he buried that box when Daphne had died.

He couldn't -

She did just that, pictured the grotesque piece of armour, the way the metal curved around his face and disappeared under the hood of his robes.

"I want you to think about all the horrible things he's done to you. The way he's made you feel. Helpless. Frustrated."

She did as he instructed, and her anger sparked, almost stabbing across her chest like an open wound. She tilted the gun towards the middle target.

"Remember all the times you've wanted to kill him?"

Her arm, the one holding the gun, suddenly felt stronger. Her anger like liquid steel pouring down her limbs, gathering at her fingertips.

"all the time's you've wanted to carve his heart out of his chest, but you've been too powerless to do anything."

Suddenly his hand left her waist, and she jumped when she felt it land on her thigh. His fingers were cold, biting against her overheated skin.

"Tell me, how does that make you feel?"

"Angry," Hermione bit, almost shaking with rage. She felt on edge, wired, ready to snap. "Like I want to break something."

"Good," he whispered, his nails digging into her skin. "Do you hate him?"

"Yes."

"Do you want to make him bleed?"

She closed one eye, tunnelling her vision, eyeing her prey. "Yes!"

"Then let him have it. Pull the fucking trigger, Granger."

She did just that, and with a simple curl of her finger, a bullet exploded from the barrel with a loud crack. She squeezed her eyes shut, and her arm jutted back with the violent force. There was a heartbeat of eerie silence, and when she opened her eyes again, there was a hole in the targets right cheek.

"There she is," Malfoy chuckled in her ear. "There's the lioness."

Hermione couldn't help but smile. She even laughed once, just one short puff of air through her lips as she stared at the stream of smoke rising from the puncture wound she'd created.

The rush of power, the tidal wave of adrenaline that overcame her was almost equal to the release she felt. It was astounding, the way something as simple as pulling the trigger lifted the heavy feeling on her chest, the one she'd been carrying

around since Seamus's death. Truly amazing, how shooting a bullet at an immovable target loosened the strain in her ribs and made it easier to breathe again.

But the reprieve was only temporary. Within seconds, her anger started to creep back in, the ever-present black cloud over her heart reappearing, and she was twitching for more like the addict she was.

"Go on," Malfoy encouraged, his voice husky and dripping in something Hermione didn't quite recognise. "Don't stop, do it again."

She squeezed the trigger again, and as another bullet exploded from the barrel and punctured the targets hip, another wave of relief crashed over her.

So she did it again, and again, and again.

The gun was enchanted to ensure the barrel never emptied, so Hermione just kept shooting, chasing the release, that euphoric rush of power and thrill that she could only find by pulled the trigger in her hand. Malfoy squeezed her hip with every shot, encouraging her, guiding her through her bloodlust.

The room quickly filled with smoke from her relentless use. The smell of burning graphite and nitro-glycerine whirled around the open space, perfuming the air with its heady scent.

As the barrel refilled itself for the fourth time, Hermione didn't notice when Malfoy let go of her arm. She was too enthralled with the pattern of puncture wounds she'd created, her deadliest art work yet.

It wasn't until he moved her hair over the opposite shoulder, she remembered she wasn't alone. And it wasn't until she felt his cold lips brush against her neck, that she remembered *why* was standing behind her.

"Do you have any idea what you look like right now?" She shivered when she felt his teeth scrape across her pulse point. "How fucking *beautiful* you look with your fingers curled around the trigger?"

Hermione paused. She started to lower the gun -

"Did I say you could stop?" Malfoy's voice was muffled as he pressed a kiss into her neck.

She tried to do as he said, but the gun suddenly felt a dozen times heavier.

"*Keep*-" Malfoy's hands skated higher; he dragged his cold fingers across the outside of her thigh, taking her dress with them, "-*fucking*" he paused when he got to her hip, his thumb dancing across the thin band of her underwear, "-*shoving*"

He needed to get her out of his head. Get her far away, where she couldn't bury herself into his psyche. He needed to protect himself.

"There's nothing else here." He pictured his mother's voice in his mind, smooth and comforting, as he always did when he struggled with his control. "Nothing is going on around us. It's just me and you."

He imagined her stood next to him, talking him through the exercise, willing him to relax.

"Now, take a deep breath."

He did as she instructed, feeling his ribcage expand. His lungs ached with the stretch of fresh air.

"I want you to release it slowly, can you do that?"

He almost nodded. He counted to eleven in his head, and then exhaled.

"Now imagine a small piece of glass. Hold that glass in your hand-

Another pinch of the needle, moving slowly down the length of his skull. He fought to regain control, concentrating harder, picturing his mother's voice more clearly.

"Imagine the weight of it in your hand."

He balled his hands into fists and concentrated on the sharp edge of the crystal.

He imagined it cutting into his palm -

"Now, I want you to picture that shard of glass expanding. Picture it reaching out-"

He did just that, feeling his skin tingle, his occlumency walls starting to build.

"-covering your body like a shield"

The glass in his hand grew, it covered his hand and travelled up the length of his arm, concealing his body, protecting him.

"Nothing can get in, alright? Nothing, not if you don't want it to."

His body temperature dropped as his walls climbed higher. They were almost at shoulder level -

There was another crash upstairs. His walls rippled, fragile, not solid enough yet to withstand the resistance.

*Come on*, he growled internally. He could do this. He could fucking do this.

Draco had done unspeakable things to keep what little remained of his family alive, so Granger's pain shouldn't have mattered to him. She was nothing, a pawn, a weapon, a gun the Dark Lord needed to secure his victory.

It shouldn't have mattered to him that she was distraught upstairs, tearing her room apart because that was the only way she knew how to deal with the boiling rage she felt.

Another sharp pinch at the back of his head. Draco ground his teeth together harder. Swore he heard something crack.

It shouldn't matter to him that today's raid had been different, that the Order had chosen to change tactics and send witches and wizards with the muggle soldiers, all personally recruited by the Golden girl herself, only to have their throats slit by their former teacher.

It shouldn't have mattered to him that killing them had crushed her in a way he'd never seen before. The way she'd cried and shaken when he'd brought her out of the hex shouldn't have affected him like this. The way she'd looked around the pile of bodies around her - all broken and bloodied - and found the faces of people she'd raised and trained into soldiers, all dead because of her, shouldn't have buried itself into his brain.

No, none of that should have mattered to him.

It shouldn't have, but it did.

He didn't know why. Had no clue why he couldn't stop thinking about her. Why every crash and fresh sob that echoed from the room above made him flinch, a hundred times more painful than the needle at the back of his head.

*Shit* - he didn't think he'd ever be able to forget that look in her eye. That lost, fucking broken emptiness that had swept across her honey coloured eyes like a toxic gas, choking the fire they usually held.

Draco closed his eyes, trying to focus on shards of glass and solid walls and willing that awful image out of his mind. He wouldn't allow her to do this. Making him question his actions, holding him back and forcing him to look at the trail of bodies he'd left on his pursuit to power. He wouldn't let her do this. He wouldn't let her make him weak, make him freeze up when the eyes of Voldemort's followers were watching him. He wouldn't let her make him *vulnerable*. Conflicted.

After all these years, he couldn't afford to grow a conscience, and he refused to allow her to force him into one.

Hermione drew a deep breath through her nostrils, willing herself to concentrate. She shot the target again, aiming for its eyes, but she missed and caught its shoulder when Malfoy started massaging circles into her skin.

"Who are you thinking about?" he asked huskily. He pulled her back slightly, pressing her more firmly into him. "Who is it you're imagining shooting right now?"

Hermione tried to ignore him. Tried to distract herself by emptying the barrel again. She was still angry, still hot and bothered and murderous, his fingers skating across her skin didn't douse those fires, but she felt a different type gathering now. A different sort of knot twisting in her stomach.

"Don't ignore me." He squeezed her hip. "Who are you shooting? Whose head are you caving in with that gun?"

"I really don't think you want to know."

"Oh, I *really* do."

Hermione shot another round, turning her attention to the fresh target on her left.

"Tell me." Malfoy's calloused fingers dragged lower to curl around the inside of her thigh. "Please."

"No."

"Tell me who it is." His thumb was dangerously close to the lace of her knickers. "Tell me whose lit that fire in your eyes."

She released a slow breath. The targets other eye exploded as she fired another round. She tried to shoot again, aiming for the forehead, but then Malfoy pressed another kiss against her neck, and Hermione almost forgot how to think.

She moaned before she could stop herself. Was sure she would have dropped the gun entirely if his fingers weren't still laced through hers, keeping her and the rifle steady.

"*Granger*," he kissed her again, his cold lips against her collarbone, "*-tell me-*" he dragged his tongue up her neck slowly making her shiver, "*who-*" he took the shell of her ear between his teeth, "*you're shooting*"

"You."

His entire body teased behind hers, and for a few seconds, he didn't move.  
Shit. Shit. *Shit!*

What was she thinking?! There was a row of guns on the table next to him, another clasped between their fingers, and she'd just confessed she'd been picturing - *famalizing* - that he was the one she was shooting.

It was a deadly mistake. She'd taken the bait, walked straight into the trap like a blind mouse, and now the gauntlet was about to drop on her neck. She braced herself for it, for him to snap, spin her around and make her face whatever punishment he had in mind.

But he didn't. Instead, he moaned against her neck, no - it was more of a growl than a moan; deep and primal, unlike anything else she'd ever heard.

"Say it again."

Hermione's heart stopped. "W-what?"

"Tell me again," he sighed. "Who are you shooting?"

"You."

"Again," he snarled, even as he hooked his thumb into the lace of her underwear. "Who are you thinking about?"

"You." Her legs suddenly felt unsteady as Malfoy dragged her underwear to the side. "You, Draco. I'm shooting you."

When his fingers brushed against her centre, the air was siphoned from her lungs, and her knees almost gave out when he traced the length of her.

"Fucking hell Granger, you're soaked," he hissed, scraping his teeth across her neck again. "I knew you'd like this. Fucking knew this would turn you on."

Hermione tipped her head back against Malfoy's shoulder. She squeezed her eyes shut and opened her mouth in silent pleasure.

She shouldn't be letting this happen. She absolutely should not, under any fucking circumstance, be letting him do this. She should break his arm, should snap it clean off for having the audacity to think he could touch her this way.

Who did he think he was, thinking he could touch her like this?! But more importantly, why was she *letting* him?

His fingers dragged back and forth over her slowly, lighting up nerve endings she'd completely forgotten fucking existed. She jerked in his arms, her free hand snapped backwards and dug into his thigh for support.

porcelain shattering and wood splintering as she destroyed everything that *daid* to cross her path.

He shouldn't care that she was in such distress. He shouldn't care that this mission had torn her apart, that he could see her spirit withering right in front of his eyes.

He didn't care - *he didn't*.

Granger was nothing to him, just a means to an end. She was just another hostage, something he'd needed to offer Voldemort at the time to keep his position as his master's favourite. Granger was a token of his undying loyalty. A symbol of his commitment to Voldemort and the cause they'd set out to achieving.

His family needed him to keep Voldemort's favour, be his most ruthless killer, his commanding officer with all the answers, and he'd gladly offered Granger up as a sacrifice to protect them.

He simply refused to lose anyone else. The thought of adding another headstone to the family cemetery, the thought of another blank headstone staring back at him because he wasn't allowed to carve a name into it, because they weren't allowed even the *simpliest of dignity in death* ... it was unthinkable. Impossible. So fucking painful it made him want to scream.

Draco had sworn to do whatever it took to keep his family safe, and he had. Since Daphne's murder, he'd done whatever needed to be done. He'd dragged himself up off the floor, not caring how many people he'd have to kill or how many skeletons he'd have to crawl over, taken his seat, and ensured his master looked at him with nothing but gratitude and pride.

He'd executed whoever Voldemort needed him to execute. Killed whoever his master felt needed to be killed. Burned down houses Slaughtered entire towns, and never regretted a second of it.

It didn't matter if it fractured his soul, because it meant that his family were safe. It didn't matter if he'd damned himself to the fires of hell, because it meant they were still breathing. Alive, and *together*.

His victim's sacrifice was his shield. The blood on his hands might as well have been the elixir of life; because it made Draco and his family untouchable, too frightening to betray, and far too valuable to Voldemort's regime to even think about harming.

Friends that were now dead, because Hermione had killed them all. Not Malfoy. Not the sadistic Theodore Nott. No, not even the Dark Lord had laid a finger on them.

Hermione had killed them. Murdered them all where they stood, her eyes cold and wand arm strong as she watched the life leave their eyes, even if she was dying on the inside. Screaming, begging for it to stop.

She tipped the gold gauntlets off and threw them at the window. The glass shattered under her rage, the entire panel freed itself from the frame and fell to the floor in hundreds of small shards.

Hermione dropped to her knees, unaware of the broken glass sinking into her skin as she curled over herself and screamed. She couldn't feel anything, was numb to everything but the way her chest shattered and cracked with every fragile beat. She screamed and screamed and sobbed into the floor.

The broken glass vibrated underneath her. The jagged shards clinked together as they floated into the air. They glided softly back to the frame and effortlessly arranged themselves into their proper place, restoring the abuse she'd caused.

If only the shattered pieces of her heart were so easy to fix.

Draco's hand fisted against the kitchen island as the sewing needle pierced his skull again. He sat on a high stool, his knee bouncing sporadically as he studied his healer in the window's reflection, watching a hundred emotions tumble off Astoria in sharp waves while she knitted his scalp back together.

Anger, as she stabbed the needle in the back of his head again. Impatience, as her manicured nails dug a little deeper into his scalp and twisted his head in the direction she wanted. Disgust, as her lip curled while she inspected the injury she clearly didn't want to heal. Satisfaction, as he flinched when she pulled the thread a little harder than what was necessary to pull a tender - and still bleeding - wound back together.

The incision ran from the very top of his skull - right down the middle - all the way to the beginning of his spine, which meant the sewing process would take quite some time, and Astoria seemed intent on making his recovery as painful - and awkward - as she could.

Draco clenched his jaw, trying to focus on the sound of his teeth grinding together rather than the pinch of the needle breaking his skin for the fourth time. He could hear Granger pacing her bedroom above. Could hear her trashing the place;

*Please, touch me.*

But she wouldn't allow herself to, wouldn't let herself sink that low. Instead, she rocked her hip backwards again, feeling the tip of his finger sink into her, and that seemed to be all the confirmation Malfoy needed.

His finger dipped inside her effortlessly, sliding through her arousal and immediately finding that spot deep inside that most men missed entirely. He crooked his finger against it, and Hermione jerked in his arms when he did it once, twice, three times.

Her walls clenched around him, and Malfoy groaned into her neck.

"Fuck, your cunt is so tight," he hissed. "I can feel everything, every flutter." He twisted his hand, and added a second finger. Hermione whined. "Every spasm." His thumb found her clit and started drawing slow, even circles over her, perfectly in time with each crook of his fingers. "I can feel *everything*."

Jesus, what was wrong with her?! If someone had told her yesterday that this is how she'd spend the next morning, she would have spat out her tea in disgust. Would have laughed in their faces at the sheer lunacy of their accusations.

Because it was impossible. Unthinkable.

And yet, here she was, stood in the parlour room she'd once been tortured in, with the hands of her enemy - the man she'd fantasised about murdering more times than she could count - buried between her legs, while she massacred targets she imagined were him.

It was the most fucked up scenario she could ever imagine, and yet, somehow, the most erotic thing she'd ever experienced.

Her entire body felt alight, blazing in hellfire. Each ripple of pleasure through her blood was a thousand times better than any punch or kick she'd hit him with.

Malfoy paused at her entrance. His cold rings lingered on her overheated skin, middle finger dying to push forward. He was right there, so close, but he wasn't moving. She realised he was waiting for her, waiting for a command, a plea, but Hermione refused to beg.

"What do you want, Granger?"

"*This.*" She tried to rock into his fingers shamelessly, but he hissed and held her still.

Would it be better than emptying a barrel against his temples, too?

Hermione tried to lower the gun and concentrate on the sensations racing through her, but Malfoy held her arm, keeping the gun aimed at the target, even as his finger brushed against her pelvis. "Did I say you could stop?"

How could she be close already? He'd barely touched her and she was already teetering dangerously close to the edge.

"Malfoy, I can't - fuck, *oh god*," she moaned when his thumb pressed down on her clit, hard, making her legs tremble. "I can't shoot anymore, I need—" She cut herself off with another moan. When her back arched, she found something hard pressing against her spine.

"Yes, you can. I know you can." He released her arm, and his free hand came to join the other between her legs, the fingers of one massaging her clit while the others crooked inside her slowly, making her toes curl. "Do you want to come?"

"Yes," she hissed, clenching her teeth together so hard they might shatter.

"Do you want to come on my fingers?"

"Yes."

"Then hit that middle target," he smiled against her cheek, "right between the eyes."

She was sick to want this, she knew that. It was sick that she was getting off on this, but she couldn't help herself.

She wouldn't have been able to stop even if she wanted to. His words. The husky tone in his voice. The gun in her hand. His fingers. His lips on her neck, and the feeling of strength that rushed through her with every bullet that exploded from the barrel. It was all an intoxicating mix, addictive, one that she was powerless to resist. The gun shook as she took aim again, and Malfoy's fingers slowed into teasing touches as he waited to see where her shot would land.

She pulled the trigger, and groaned when the left side of the target's jaw exploded. She tried again. Her second shot landed on the corner of the target's lip. The third on its cheek. She wanted to scream when the fourth took off its ear, inching towards its destination, but just out of reach.

Despite her misses, Malfoy was merciful. His fingers swirled over her clit faster, adding pressure the closer she got to the bullseye. There was a pressure in her lower abdomen, like an elastic band was fused into her skin, and it was stretching tighter

This raid had been so much worse than all the others. Hermione had been forced on, and she didn't know if she could survive another.

Why did the Order have to send witches and wizards today? Why did they have to send people she *knew*? People she'd helped save on battlefields? People she cared about? What were they trying to do? What were they trying to accomplish?

"*Hermione, you don't need to do this!*" Harriet Stone had screamed, pleading with a fierce intensity in her eyes, just before Hermione had sliced her in half with a flick of her wand.

"Stop this Mione! Stop this and come home with us!" Marcus had growled as he'd deflected one of her relentless attacks. "We know you're in there! This isn't you!"

Hermione stopped, the toe of her boot still wedged into her bedside table.

Had they realised she was under some sort of spell while she was slaughtering them all? Had they seen past her Death Eater roles? Seen past the blood dripping from her gauntlets, and realised she wasn't doing this of her own free will?

Did they know she was still one of them? Still as loyal to the Order as she ever had been, just trapped, held captive in her own skin? A slave to her own ferocity and murderous tendencies?

She stepped back, felt her chest tighten and squeeze her lungs.

Did they know about the Demon Hex? Had they studied it? Was this some tactic to try and get through to her? Show her familiar faces, women she'd laughed with, men she'd drank with, and what? Break the Hex? Were they trying to reach through the cloud of smoke in her head, snap the marionette strings and bring her real spirit - her true self - back to the surface?

If that was true, then it was a catastrophic failure.

All it did was add to her torture. All it did was snuff out the one comforting blanket of anonymousness that she'd been so desperately clinging to, and left her cold and broken and so aware that it made her feel sick.

Because her victims weren't nameless anymore, weren't unknown muggle soldiers whose expressions she could blur from her mind. She couldn't erase the faces of those she'd killed today, because they were her friends. Friends she'd laughed with, cried with, crawled through smoke-filled battlefields and fought side by side with.

Nott growled towards the ceiling. "Bollocks! That's the only monologue I know and you've had to ruin it! Why do you always have to shit all over my fun?"

"Well, why do you always have to play with dead things?"

"*"Well why do you always have to play with dead things,"*" Nott mocked in a deeper tone meant to be Zabini's. "God you're such a boring bastard! You'd think being married to a hush would make you a little more fun."

Theo's comment slapped the smirk off Zabini's face. He scowled at Nott, then picked up a dust-covered bottle of whisky from the seat next to him and took a healthy swig.

"What.?" Crouch asked from somewhere out of Hermione's line of sight. "Where on earth did that come from?"

"Takes after his wife that one, doesn't he Myers?" Nott twisted the decapitated head so it faced him. Hermione thought she was going to be sick when he flexed his arm so it jutted the corpse, making it look as though the head were talking. "*"Yes Theo, he does. Can sniff out a drop of alcohol anywhere that one can. Drawn to the stuff like a shark is drawn to blood."*"

As horrifying as the vile display was, Zabini didn't react in the slightest. Just shook his head, flipped Nott an obscene gesture, and took another swig of whiskey, as if it was the most normal thing in the world.

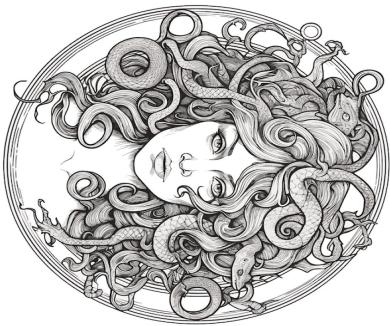
And throughout the entire exchange, Malfoy did the one thing that made Hermione's stomach churn. He stood there, watching as Nott toyed with the severed head - the head of someone they all knew - and he *smiled*. It was a tiny movement, just the smallest upturn at the corner of his lips, but she saw it, and it almost knocked the breath from her lungs.

Because it made her remember what a monster he was, what monsters they all were. Heartless fucking bastards, with no regard for the dead if it wasn't their own, and Hermione was living in their nest.

A smile could do a lot of things, could do a lot of good, Hermione had seen that first hand.

She often wore hers like a mask to conceal how she actually felt. She plastered one on when she trained new recruits, flashing it like a promise when she told them about the confidence she had in the Order's future and their victory, even through the small periods where she'd lost faith herself.

## CHAPTER 28



### THE DOLLHOUSE

**5th May**

It really is strange, how a smile can change so much.

How something as simple as the smallest upturn of a person's lips, just the pull of a few muscles, can suddenly change someone's whole perspective.

A smile could do a lot of things, could do a lot of good, Hermione had seen that first hand.

She often thought Harry used his like a suit of armour to protect everyone. He used it daily, wearing it when he went through battle plans or helped out in the infirmary. He offered it to everyone and anyone who needed it, hoping that if they saw that the Chosen One was smiling and confident, then there was light at the end of the tunnel. They just needed to be patient, to hang on.

The med-witches of the Order used theirs differently. Theirs were more of a mercy, a different form of medicine. In those torturous moments when Fleur knew that she was about to lose patients, she always did the same thing. She'd draw a slow breath, sit on the edge of the bed, take their hands in her own, and offer them her most gentle smile.

The effects were always the same. The instant she would smile down at them, the panic would ease from their eyes, as though her warmth melted away the pain in their bones, warded off all the discomfort, and allowed them to just float. Without pain. Weightless, until they gently drifted to that other place where hopefully the world was kinder. Fleur always held their hands until the very end.

Of course, rationally, everyone knew the smiles the nurses offered didn't actually relieve pain, but they seemed to ease the suffering of those on death's door, like it helped them accept their fate, and welcome the blackness.

It was a kindness, really. The world had become such a dark place since the beginning of the war, and the last thing many people saw before they met their end was blood and screams and green curses. Those who were able to slip off peacefully with the lovely face of a healer smiling down on them were considered the lucky ones.

Hermione had always hoped that when her time came, when the war finally caught up with her and all her clever little ideas had abandoned her, that she'd look up and see someone she knew smiling down at her as she took her last breath.

Yes, Hermione knew first hand how much good something as simple as a smile could do in times of war. So it had never occurred to her how much damage one could do, too, if it was worn at the wrong moment.

But then Malfoy had smiled.

He'd fucking *smiled* as Theo held up a decapitated head. And he'd kept smiling, even as he watched his friend play with it, like it was the most normal thing in the world.

"Keeping him alive would be a waste of our time, and I refuse to stand around here all day while you get your jollies off torturing the waste of space."

"But surely we could have found a use for him!" Grouch shouted. "Perhaps we could have used him for bait to try and lure Potter?"

"He was just a foot-soldier. He was a few years older than us in Hogwarts, and he was a complete moron," Malfoy snapped back, authority in every syllable. "He's about as useful to Potter's regime as a newly recruited Black Mask is to us - and you expect Potter to - what? Drop everything and come running to save him? Oh, dear Bart, you have slipped haven't you? Best leave the strategy to the young blood, mate. Unless you want the Dark Lord to hear you've lost your edge?"

Malfoy chuckled, and the last of Crouch's confidence must have drained because he didn't say another word.

Hermione peaked through the thin gap in the curtains in time to see Myer's head roll across the floorboards. Nott smirked mischievously when it stopped next to his boots.

Nott took a fistful of Myers curly black hair, and picked up the severed head like it was a toy. He took his new prop centre stage, the spotlight hitting him perfectly, then raised the decapitated head high in the air, cleared his throat, and exclaimed; "O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou, Romeo? Deny thy father and refuse thy name; or if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love and I—"

"Wrong play, Theodore," Zabini interrupted from his red velvet audience chair, his feet perched on the headrest in front of him and hands clasped elegantly in his lap.

"Nooooo, it's definitely right." Even though his back was facing Hermione, she could tell Nott was frowning. "The two leads are absolute dickheads and die, get themselves blown up or some shit, and then years later the narrator bloke digs up their graves and picks up one of their skulls—"

"No, it's not. The scene where the lead holds the skull in his hand isn't Romeo and Juliet. You're thinking of Hamlet." Zabini quirked a brow, amused. "But the depth of your knowledge on Shakespeare is truly astounding Theodore."

Nott dropped his arm, the severed head splashing fresh blood up the length of his robes before it hung loose at his side. "Seriously? The skull thing isn't from Romeo and Juliet?"

Zabini shook his head.

"Yes."

"Alright," he whispered. "If that's really what you want, I'll do it for you. But you need to do something for me in return."

"Anything?"

God, she'd do anything to make the screaming stop. She'd sell her soul to him if that's what he wanted. Just as long as he put Myers out of his misery.

"Promise me you'll stay in this room while I do it."

Of all the things she'd expected he might want from her, that wasn't on the list.

Hermione's brow furrowed. "Why?"

"I don't want you to see it happen. I don't want—" He looked away and stared at the wall above her head again, as if he were ashamed of the truth.

"You don't want what?"

She instant she nodded, Malfoy let her go and stalked out the room.

Hermione really tried to keep her promise, and she did - for about fifteen seconds.

As soon as she was sure Malfoy wouldn't be able to hear her footsteps behind him, she was on the move. She just needed to see, to make sure that the demon would keep his word, and her heart sank when she noticed a wall of red velvet blocking her path. Malfoy had drawn the curtains, he'd known she wasn't going to keep her word.

So would he keep his?

She walked as lightly as she could towards the curtain, her eyes on the floor and trying to avoid the pieces of broken glass and bones scattered across the boards. As she slowly approached, she heard the clicking of Malfoy's boots from the other side of the curtain. She heard him hiss a curse under his breath, heard the swoosh of magic gathering, and then a sickening squelching sound as Myers' head was sliced from his body.

Hermione had never been more grateful for a murder.

"What the fuck mate!" Nott barked, furious. "I wasn't finished with that!"

"Yes, you were. He'd already told us everything he knew, which was much more than I ever expected we'd get from him." Malfoy's voice was cold, emotionless.

Even as it had happened, Hermione was adamant that she must have imagined it. That it must have been a trick of the lights, or that the events of the day had been too much, and her mind was playing games with her. But no, no matter how long she stared at Malfoy no matter how much she squinted and willed that slight upturn of his lips to disappear, it didn't.

The instant they reappeared in the gardens of his estate, Hermione tore Malfoy's arms from around her waist and stormed towards the estate. If his touch hadn't been necessary to Apparate her here - and she hadn't been so desperate to get out of that bloody theatre - she wouldn't have let him touch her at all.

Half an hour ago, the loss of him at her side had left her feeling helpless, a slave to the Demon Hex. Half an hour ago, she'd wanted nothing but to hear his voice so he could bring her out of the dark curse.

Now, she couldn't get far enough away from him. Now, the thought of him standing next to her, touching her, made her skin crawl.

Her insides knotted and flipped every time she replayed the memory in her head. She had so many emotions simmering, too many to count, all fighting their way to the surface so quickly she felt like she was going to be sick.

She just needed to get away. From *him*.

Needed time alone to think and breathe and work through her feelings, and she couldn't do that with him standing next to her.

She was heartbroken, grieving for those poor soldiers that she'd murdered today. She was horrified at what she'd done to Myers, even as he begged for his life. But the most definitive emotion she felt was anger. She was so fucking angry at Malfoy that she could taste it, bitter and metallic in her mouth.

She was almost as angry with him as she was with herself - because she'd let him touch her. She'd *muzzled* him to touch her.

She'd kissed him, and she'd practically purred into his mouth when he'd kissed her back.

She'd let him wrap his arms around her after bringing her out of the Hex, and she'd felt safe.

She'd let him touch her, *really touch her*, in the most intimate way, and he'd brought her release with the same hands he'd used to slice Myers' head from his body. With the same fingers that were usually drenched in blood - her friend's blood.

And the most fucked up part? The part that made her feel sick now to just think about? Before she'd caught that smile, she'd wanted him to touch her again.

"Granger?" Malfoy hissed from behind her. "Where do you think you're going?"

She ignored him and carried on storming through the enormous grounds. She passed the wisteria plants, her pace increasing as she neared the manor.

"Granger, answer my question!"

His voice wasn't getting quieter, no matter how fast she walked. A split second after she reached the front door and grabbed the handle, he caught her wrist and spun her around to face him.

"Get your hands off me Malfoy!"

"Then don't ignore me! Where are you in such a rush to run off to?"

"Are those guns still locked up in your old parlour room?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Because I want to shoot something." She snatched her wrist back and held it against her chest. "Preferably you, but I'll settle for targets that I can pretend have your spiteful face on them instead."

He narrowed his eyes and scowled down at her. "What's gotten into you all of a sudden?"

"What's gotten into *me*? Oh, I don't know." She took a step back, pressing herself against the front door while her hands slid towards the knob, inching towards her escape. "Maybe I've just witnessed the man whose held me captive for months behead someone we went to school with."

Malfoy's expression tightened, growing irritation painted his face. "I killed him because you asked me to Granger, or have you forgotten that little detail?"

"You're right, I did ask you to kill him, but I didn't ask you to stand there and watch while your friend used his decapitated head like it was a prop in a play! It's a good thing your mother isn't alive to see what you've become!"

"He won't tell you anything, not if it risks exposing their location and putting his family in danger. He'll do anything for them, even if it means being tortured for weeks."

She felt Malfoy swallow, his throat bobbing against her forehead. "I know."

"So kill him."

"If Grouch suspects I've euthanised him when he could still be useful to the Dark Lord, i'll put my position at risk."

"So make something up! Tell him Myers is worthless! Tell him that he's an idiot and that he doesn't know anything!" Hermione begged, still buried in his robes. She didn't want to move, didn't want to risk the screams getting louder. "You're a Demon mask, if you say he's useless, he'll believe you."

He was quiet for a few moments. It felt like an eternity before his hand left her neck and cupped her chin. And then, with a sort of gentleness she didn't think he was capable of, he tilted her face so she was forced to look at him.

Icy blue stared down at her, only slivers of grey clung around his pupils like thin strokes of ink. "Is that really want you want me to do?"

"Yes," she managed to fight off the shakes that were wrecking her body to nod just once, "it is. I'm sure."

Malfoy clenched his jaw, the muscles in his neck visible and straining. The expression he wore was a mask. She could literally see him trying to build his Occlumency walls back around him.

"He's suffered enough. Give him this way out." She blinked, trying to clear her vision as more tears burned their way to the surface. "Show mercy, just this once. Please."

He stared at her for a while, studying every flicker of her eyes and micro-expression on her face, looking for any indecision or doubt on her part. He didn't find any, because there was none.

Myers shouldn't have to die, but it was much kinder than what would wait for him at Voldemort's base. Much more humane than the pain Theodore would be able to inflict. He'd never see his wife and son again, but he'd be at peace, without pain, and in a time of war, that was much more than most people got.

Eventually, Malfoy sighed, and his thumb gently swiped across her cheek, wiping away the tears that had gathered there. "Are you absolutely certain?"

"Malfoy, please," Hermione sobbed, "make it stop."

Another crunch. Another scream.

Malfoy's arms squeezed around her. He rested his chin on top of her head, and she burrowed into his chest, tucking herself in tight. One of his hands slid through the blood in her curls and gently started massaging the base of her skull.

"Please, make it stop."

She heard Myers gargle. Then a wet choking sound, like he was drowning in his own blood.

"Now come on, mate," Nott laughed, playing with his food. "You'll have to speak up a bit, I can't hear you."

"Please. Please, I can't listen to this anymore."

"What do you want me to do?" Malfoy whispered into her hair.

There was a third and final crunch, louder than all the others, and Hermione couldn't take it anymore.

"Kill him," she whimpered into his robes. "Put him out of his misery."

Malfoy's body tensed. "Granger, you're not thinking clearly!"

"I am. Nott will torture him for hours, and heaven knows what Voldemort will do if you take him back to his base."

Myers waited again. Hermione buried herself against Malfoy.

"You know I can't do that, cub," he murmured into her hair. "Myers knows more than he's letting on. He has more information to give. I can't just kill him."

She did know that. Oliver wasn't just another soldier; he was a general, a strategist, and a bloody good one at that. He'd risen up the ranks quickly at the start of the war, and Hermione knew he would have invaluable information at his fingertips.

But Myers was clever and *strong*; he always had been. Even as Hermione had been stabbing him, he'd been working on his escape, trying to manipulate her into letting him go, pulling on her heartstrings and reminding her of the family he had.

"Yes, he does," Hermione whispered, "but he won't tell you anything. He has a wife waiting for him back at the base, and a son."

"I know."

As soon as she'd uttered the words, Hermione knew she'd taken it too far. The moment she mentioned his mother's name, the air around Malfoy changed, and he became unhinged.

He lunged forward, wrapped his hands tightly around her throat, and viciously shoved her against the door. She hissed in pain when she smacked her head against the wood, but despite the dizzying pressure at the back of her skull, her hands flew to her defence, trying to pry his fingers from her throat on instinct.

She'd known he was going to react this way. Known suggesting that Narcissa would be disappointed in him would hurt him, uncage his demons and tap into that malicious part of him that wanted to break and hurt things. She knew it would make him lash out, but she didn't care.

She was so angry with him. And herself. She felt betrayed, and so fucking lonely that her heart physically hurt with each beat. So she couldn't help but twist the knife she'd sunk into his back, because then at least she wouldn't be the only one in pain.

"Don't you dare bring my mother into this! You ungrateful cunt!" Malfoy roared. His shoulders shook with rage, even if his eyes held nothing but sadness. "Do you have any idea the risk I put me and my family in by killing Myers for you?"

*Go fuck yourself*, she wanted to say, but she couldn't. His fingers were too tight around her neck.

"I did you a favour, Granger! You asked me to kill him, and I did it! For *you*! Do you have any idea what the consequences would have been for me and my family if Grouch had figured out I gave Myers a mercy killing? He'd have gone straight to Voldemort!"

Hermione started to feel dizzy. Her head felt heavy, her throat burned with the need for oxygen.

"The Dark Lord doesn't tolerate disloyalty. You saw what he did to my mother! To *Daphne*! He'd have killed me right on the spot, and then who's going to protect the rest of my family? Who's going to protect Astoria and her secret?"

He squeezed her neck tighter, pouring his anger and hurt into his fingers, and likely bruising her windpipe.

"But I still did it. I killed him because *you* asked me to! I put myself and my family on the line to do as you asked, and this is how you fucking repay me?"

"Don't pretend you didn't enjoy it," she tried to spit back, but the grip on her throat drained the vicious tone she'd wanted in her voice. "I saw the look on your face while you watched Theo! You *smiled*!"

His fingers twitched, loosening just enough for Hermione to slip her hands through the gap and push him off and away from her. She curled over and clutched her throat, feeling his eyes on her as she gasped for air.

"After everything you've already lost ... after your own mother ... died in your arms ... how can you have no respect for the dead?" she panted, her voice hoarse due to the abuse on her vocal cords. "He was a father ... someone's husband ... and you just stood there ... and watched Nott play around ... with his corpse, like it was a toy."

There was a long pause before he spoke.

"Don't talk to me about loss Granger. Because no matter how much you think this war has taken from you - or me, for that matter - I can assure you, Theo's lost so much more."

She looked up and met his eyes again. Icy grey stared down at her, his occlumency walls were up. His expression was just as sharp and malicious as his tone of voice.

"He wasn't always this ruthless. He had compassion once, and a heart, but you couldn't even begin to imagine the things this war has taken from him. The only time there's life in him now is when he's inflicting pain on others. The rest of the time it's all an act, a performance he puts on. And when he's alone? He's a fucking zombie, like someone tore his soul straight out of his body, and left nothing but a shell behind."

The image of Nott sat on the floor outside her bedroom all those months ago flashed behind her eyes. The way his expression had dropped as soon as Astoria had passed out. The vacant, haunting look that had crept into his eyes when he knew he was alone, when he didn't have to 'perform' anymore.

"So you know how he fills that shell? With other people's pain. He kills your fucking Order members."

Hermione couldn't help but wince.

" - and he tortures them..."

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have..."

"Why did you leave me with Bartv?" Hermione cut in, her voice pure venom as tears slipped down her face.

"The Dark Lord needed to speak to me urgently, and I thought you would be safe with him for a few moments. All the threats were dead, Myers was immobilized, and I'd taken my wand away from you, so I assumed the Hex would just ..." He stopped himself suddenly. He looked at the wall behind her head and dragged his tongue on the inside of his cheek.

"You assumed the Hex would *what*?"

Malfoy drew a deep breath through his nostrils. "Because it couldn't use you anymore and there were no threats, I assumed that it would just let you go - but I can see now that I was very wrong. I'm sorry. Truly, if I'd have known what..."

Whatever else Malfoy had wanted to say, Hermione didn't hear it. It was drowned out by Myer's screams. Nott must've picked up where she'd left off.

Another scream quickly followed the first; a high pitch, ear-piercing cry that made Hermione's stomach knot just thinking about what Nott must've been doing to him.

She pinched her eyes closed, and her hands flew to cover her ears and shield her from the God-awful noise. She could feel her entire body trembling as the sounds of Myer's being tortured again filled the room. The unmistakable sounds of bones breaking. Slicing hexes. Skin being torn off.

They seemed to be on a constant, never-ending loop. They weren't sounds anyone could ever get used to, not even after years of war, and Hermione's knees finally gave out when a particularly sickening crunch echoed through the tight space they were in.

The moment she touched the floor, Malfoy was there. He knelt beside her on the floor, dragged her into his arms, and this time, she didn't have any anger left to push him away.

She winced when Myers screamed again. She buried herself against Malfoy's chest, thinking if she nestled herself in far enough, his robes might muffle the sound. They didn't. Even backstage, the acoustics still worked a little too well. She heard everything, every scream and wail of pain, as if she was stood right next to the victim himself.

"If I had more to say, I would tell you *ughhh!*" Myer's voice broke off, something crunched.

buried her face against his chest and cried into his robes. "I couldn't stop it - It's-it's getting stronger..."

Malfoy held her tighter, his skin cold but his arms comforting, both things she didn't want to feel from him.

"*Shhhh*, you're safe now. I promise." She thought she felt him plant a kiss on her forehead, but she was shaking too much to be sure. "It's gone now. You're going to be alright."

"No, it's not going to be alright!" Her anger finally won the tug of war, and she pushed Malfoy back with all the strength she could conjure. He fell back a few steps, and the loss of his arms around her wasn't as freezing as it should have been. "Where the fuck were you?! You left me alone, in the Hex, with Barry Grouch Junior of all people! Why Malfoy? Where did you go? Why did you leave me alone with him?!"

"Listen to me right now, you need to calm down..."

"Don't you dare stand there and tell me what I need!" She marched back towards him and used the flats of both her hands to push him again. "You didn't care what I needed ten minutes ago, why should it matter to you now?!"

Malfoy didn't say a word. He stared down at her, eyes hard as stone and mouth twisting at the sides.

"I needed you to bring me out of the Hex I needed - I needed you - and I couldn't find you!" Hermione screamed in his face, devastated, as she realised the dependence she'd grown on him. The reliance she had on a Death Eater, the very man responsible for her pain. "Everywhere I looked, I couldn't see you, all I could see was the knife in my hand and Myer's blood. All I wanted to hear was your voice, to hear you break the spell, and instead, there was only Myer! Just screaming and screaming because I was stabbing him!"

"Granger, I..."

"I needed you Malfoy. I needed you, and you weren't there - No! Don't you dare fucking touch me!" She stepped back when he reached for her.

He dropped his arm. A blue hairline fracture appeared in the cold grey of his eyes.

"It's bad enough that I can't do magic without your wand! And I can't Apparate unless you're touching me because of this stupid blood curse. Voldemort bound us together with, but today? I don't think I've ever felt more helpless, and it's all *your fault*!"

She inched towards the door, reaching for the handle so she could escape. She didn't want to listen to this. She didn't want to know why monsters did what they did.

"...and he makes them fucking scream and beg for their lives. He does everything he can think of to fill that empty hole in his chest and make him feel like a person again. And do you know what? It's made him one of the most feared and dangerous men in the country."

The cold brass of the handle met her fingers, but Malfoy slammed his hands on the door, either side of her, trapping her.

"So yes Granger, I fucking *smiled*!" He closed the small distance between them and sneered in her face. "I smiled, because it's nice to see some life in him! It's nice to see that despite everything this war has taken from him, he's still able to find joy in something."

"You really don't care about anyone who isn't your family. Do you?"

"No. I don't."

"What about Tonks?" Hermione asked, forcing her chin high in defiance, despite her heart battering against her ribs. "She was your cousin, she was your blood, and you sliced her in half like she was nothing!"

"She wasn't my family, she never was - but I haven't thought blood is what ties a family together since my mother died." His lips twitched into a small smirk, and Hermione couldn't help but notice how forced it looked. "I don't care what happens to anyone else. All I care about is the health and happiness of the little family I have left, the family I chose. And I couldn't give a fuck if the Order has to pay the price for that. I'd let Theo decapitate a thousand of your muggle soldiers. He can display their heads on my mantelpiece if that's what it takes to make him feel whole again."

"Is that what will happen when Voldemort decides that I've outlived my usefulness?" Her question took him off guard. His expression fell, the fake smirk crumbled as quickly as he'd forged it.

"Are you going to just stand there when he sends me to the gallows?" Hermione asked. "And watch while he orders one of you to cut my head off?"

His eyes twitched, not quite a flinch, but it wasn't nothing either.

"Are you going to hide behind your Occlumency walls while Theo parades my head around like it's a toy? Are you going to *smile* then?"

She wondered what his reaction might have been if his walls weren't up, what his expression might've been if he weren't protecting himself behind his icy shield. If the thought of her head being thrown carelessly around by his best friend might have been unsettling for him. If it might splinter that cold, dead heart of his, and make him feel something for someone else who wasn't his family.

If there were cracks, he didn't let them show.

His eyes were grey and lifeless. All traces of blue were snuffed out, along with the little shreds of kindness that accompanied them. He looked her up and down, rolled his tongue on the inside of his cheek, and scoffed cruelly.

Despite the malicious mask he wore on his face, he spoke the next few words very softly. He whispered them, almost caressing her with each syllable, and Hermione didn't know if they were a threat on her life, or a vow to keep her forever.

"Do you honestly believe that I would let you go that easily?"

#### **6th May**

"You couldn't have brought out the expensive stuff? Fuck sake Barry, you're a cheap bastard. Aren't you?"

"Usually guests drink the whisky they're provided with and don't insult the hosts choice's, *Theodore*."

"Well, *usually* the hosts bring out stuff that doesn't taste like warmed up cat piss."

"I would watch your mouth if I were you -"

"Or you'll do what?" Theo scoffed. "What are you gonna do, old man? Hit me with your walking stick? Clip me around the ankles with your stroller?"

"Can't we all just sit down and have a quiet drink together?" Blaise groaned, squeezing his eyes closed and pinching the bridge of his nose. "What happened to gentlemen treating each other with respect?"

"I won't have him speaking to me like this! Not in my own house!" Grouch whirled around to sneer at Draco. His face was flushed red with anger; his eyes wide and bloodshot. "Aren't you going to say anything? He's your subordinate, isn't he?"

"I find that when Theodore is in the mood for good whisky, nothing will stand in his way." The corner of Draco's lips lifted. "Probably best to just step back and let him get what he wants. *Before* you lose a finger or two."

He didn't say a word as she screamed and pounded her fists against his back, wailing that she wasn't finished with the hostage, that he was *her* prey, not Theodore's.

He carried her to a destroyed dressing room just off stage. Hermione could hear Nott chuckling darkly through the cracks in the door.

The Hex hadn't wanted her to kill Myers yet, but the thought of Nott having all the fun without her was stifling.

She charged for the exit, but Malfoy caught her elbow and dragged her back into the room. With his wand still drawn and tucked between his fingers, he took Hermione's face between his hands and released her from the Hex.

She cried from sheer joy when she felt it receding from her mind and giving her back control of her body. She drew a deep breath and looked down at her hands, flexing her fingers the way she wanted to - but then she saw the blood. Then she remembered where she was, what she'd been about to do, and she broke down.

"Oh my God - Myers!" she sobbed, voice trembling as much as her hands. "I was torturing him!"

"It's alright, Granger." Malfoy wrapped his arms around her, catching her just as her knees buckled. "You're safe -"

"But Myers! I was torturing him- I - I - I tried to stop it! I tried to stop it but I couldn't -" Her eyes burned, tears slipped down her face quicker than she could wipe them away. "I just kept stabbing him - I couldn't - I - and then Barry - h - he kept telling me where to stab him... where it would hurt the most and I couldn't - I -"

"Shhhhh, it's alright. It's alright." Malfoy pulled her tight against his chest. He held her close while he whispered against her forehead. "I've got you. The Hex is gone. Barry is gone. It's just me and you here, no one else."

Hermione was so confused she felt like her head was about to crack open. She didn't know what to do or what to think.

She wanted him closer, but as far away from her as physically possible. She was so angry she wanted to hit him, but so wracked with grief that she wanted to bury herself in his robes and sob until her throat was raw.

"I couldn't do anything - he just kept screaming and I-I." She pounded her fists against Malfoy's shoulder as hard as she could, again and again, even as she

"Nothing, I didn't touch her. She seemed quite in distress after you left. You should have seen the way she was looking at our hostage. Poor thing didn't know what to do with herself."

As Crouch spoke, Malfoy wrapped an arm around her waist and drew her into his side. Whether it was protective or possessive, Hermione wasn't sure. She was too busy looking for the knife, eager to puncture Myer's liver.

Crouch's tongue darted out to wet his lips. "She looked so small and lost, but you should have seen the way her eye's lit up when I gave her that knife. I'll be thinking about it while I have my cock in my hand for weeks."

"She's not here to torture for us, *Junior!*" Malfoy roared. "She's not a toy for you to wind up for your amusement!" Violent anger seemed to tumble off Malfoy in waves, the tip of his wand crackled with dark magic, magnified by his thinning temper. "She's here because she's a marvellous assassin, and I have half a mind to lift the Hex right now and let her show you herself!"

"I meant no harm." Crouch tried to keep his tone light, but his eyes hardened as he leaned back in his chair. "I was merely curious about how the Hex works."

"I don't give a fuck! Do you have any idea how valuable she is? How important she is to the Dark Lord? She's the prized jewel in his arsenal. She's worth a thousand of you, Jr, and if I find out you've done anything that will compromise her, anything at all, my dragon will be picking your bones out of her teeth for weeks." Malfoy twisted his wand menacingly. "Do you understand?"

Crouch swallowed nervously, but managed to nod once.

Just as Hermione located the knife, Malfoy started to pull her in the opposite direction. He towed her backstage, but just before she stepped through the red curtain, she caught a glimpse of Nott and Zabini passing through the theatre doors.

Nott's face lit up when he noticed Myers, already dripping blood and bound to a chair. A gift, all ready for the slaughter. She might as well have tied him up in a fucking pink bow.

But the Hex was still awake, still irritable and hungry, and it forced Hermione to fight, to struggle in Malfoy's arms and inch back towards her prey. She was so relentless that Malfoy had to throw her over his shoulder like a petulant child to get her away from Myers.

Theo flashed Crouch an impish grin and stuck his tongue out, like a child does when their parent sides with them over the sibling they're at war with, before he strode across the parlour room to fiddle with the lock on the liquor cabinet. It wouldn't take Theo long to get them open, like everything else in Crouch's house, the furniture was cheap - and therefore easily breakable. And Theodore's foul mood was sure to aid his lock picking skills.

Draco reached into his formal robes and retrieved a packet of cigarettes. He placed one in his mouth and pulled out his wand, just as Theo swung the cabinet doors open and started rifling through its contents.

"I cannot believe you're letting him get away with this," Yaxley's voice was quiet, but far from timid.

Although Draco's attention was solely focused on lighting the bud with the tip of his wand, he could tell Yaxley was scowling at him.

"You should learn to get your dog on a leash, or has the Demon Mask lost its power of intimidation over the years?"

"I don't know." Yaxley flinched when Draco sharply looked up from his cigarette. He took a deep drag, keeping his eyes on the nervous Death Eater as he exhaled. "Has it?"

While Yaxley tried to relocate his bollocks, Theo picked up a bottle and scowled as he read the brand on the front. "Cheap," he muttered, throwing it carelessly behind him.

Crouch gasped as it smashed on the floor. "How dare you be so careless with my things?" he hissed, but Theo wasn't paying attention. He was already reading the label of another bottle.

"Nasty." He threw that one away with the same blasé manner, then reached for a third, which promptly joined the others on the floor. "Ew." As did the fourth. "Would rather shit in my hands and clap than drink this one." And the fifth.

Apparently, eighth time was the charm, and after throwing seven bottles on the floor - and the room was filled with the bitter scent of cheap whiskey - Theo found what he was looking for. A dust-covered bottle of bourbon, twenty years old. Not the most expensive, but certainly more than Crouch could afford.

Theo pulled the cork off with a wave of his wand, downed a healthy swig, and took his seat beside Draco - with his feet on the table.

Draco shook his head and sipped at the glass of red wine that Crouch had given him. Theo was right, it tasted like shit, but Draco always did have better table manners than his friend.

After scowling at Theo for an extended period, Crouch huffed and sat down at the head of the table. He clicked his fingers with an irritated snap and moments later, five of his 'Dolls' swept into the room.

At this late stage in the war and victory almost within his grasp, Voldemort's reign had almost eclipsed the entire country. He was happy to divide the spoils amongst the loyalist of his followers. And Voldemort's reign was as bountiful as it was drenched in blood.

The more ruthless the dog and more devotion they showed to the cause, the greater the gifts Voldemort would give them. Most preferred jewels and gold, as Yaxley did. Others preferred drugs and alcohol, like Theo. Whilst a select few were granted land and titles, like Malfoy.

Crouch Jr, however, had a very different vice. He preferred women, Muggle girls or Order supporters who'd been captured in warzones. Some of the girls he brought himself, but most were gifts from Voldemort as a reward for his unwavering fealty. That was the reason the older generation of Death Eaters had christened Crouch's estate, 'The Dollhouse'?

The girls that Crouch picked out were all beautiful, they always were. Gorgeous things with long legs and hair like spun silk. Girls that he liked to dress up, shower with expensive satins and lace that they were forced to wear while they 'served' him. Girls covered in layers of glamour charms to hide the abuse on their bodies. Girls that had complex silencing charms on their voice boxes, preventing them from screaming or asking for help.

His beautiful, voiceless prisoners. His little dolls.

"So, to what do we owe this pleasure, Crouch?" Draco asked as two of his girls gathered a mop and brush and started cleaning the mess Theo had made. "You never usually like to invite the young blood to your dinner parties."

The other three girls carried silver trays containing dinner in their hands, and one by one, they started spreading them across the table.

"I wanted to apologise for my behaviour in the theatre," Crouch said, but his eyes were on one of the girls as he spoke, looking down the top of her dress as she set

Where was Malfoy? Where *the fuck* was Malfoy? He was the only one who could bring her out of the Hex-

"If you twist the blade to the right," Crouch's voice grew excited as he watched the performance she was putting on, "it'll scrape across his nervous system. Won't kill him, but it'll hurt like hell."

Again, she listened to Crouch, twisting the blade as he instructed and watching Myer's jerk. The wail of pain he made was higher than the others, blood-curdling. The Hex was delighted. Hermione just wanted to sob.

Why had Malfoy left her alone like this with Crouch Jr? He never left her side when she was under the Hex. He always kept a close eye on her, and she usually resented it.

Now, the one time she needed him, he was nowhere to be found.

"Try his neck this time," Crouch instructed. "There's plenty of sensitive muscles there. Lots of places that will be excruciating to cut, but won't kill him. Not if you're careful."

If Malfoy were here, he'd stop her from doing this, wouldn't he? He'd done it before. He'd pulled her out of the Hex before she took it too far and murdered Fleur. Yes, he'd done it before, so he'd do it again.

Wouldn't he?

Fuck, she really hoped so.

Hermione raised her arm, the marionette strings pulling the blade back, ready to slash it across his throat, but a sharp heat flared through the hilt of the knife, and Hermione dropped it with a hiss.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing, Crouch?!"

Hermione didn't think she'd ever been more grateful to hear Malfoy's voice.

He was at her side quicker than the laws of physics allowed, wand drawn and pointed at Crouch's chest, the tip gathering magic in that deadly shade of green.

"I was just learning about the Hex from our prized Mudblood," Crouch chuckled, palms up in surrender. "She's quite rapturous when she's making someone bleed, isn't she? For a moment I almost forgot that she was a Mudblood."

"What did you do?!"

and then he'd left Hermione and Party Crouch Jr to guard Myers before he disappeared somewhere in the theatre.

He'd taken her wand, but he hadn't brought her out of the Hex, and it needed more. The eight soldiers that Hermione had already killed weren't enough for it. Its appetite had grown accustomed to the piles of bodies she left behind, and it hadn't had its fill yet.

The curse was clawing across her skull, ravenous for more screams. She'd been agitated just looking at Myers.

The curse needed more. More pain. More wails of agony. More. *More.*

She needed to slice his throat. Cut his arm off. Needed to do something to stop the way the Hex was scratching at her insides and making her skin feel as though it were on fire.

And then Grouch had handed her a knife, and while Hermione slowly tortured the poor soldier, the Hex had been feasting on his screams like scraps at the bottom of a bowl.

She twisted the knife again, the curse delighting in the way Myers shrieked, even as fresh tears slipped down Hermione's face.

The Hex yanked the strings, and Hermione's arm jutted back, nicking an organ or two as she sharply pulled the blade from Myer's body.

Before her captive had the opportunity to catch his breath, Hermione thrust the knife back into his body, aiming lower this time, trying to scratch his liver.

"I'll admit, I was disappointed when the Dark Lord said I wouldn't be able to have you, Mudblood," Grouch mused, watching from the first row of the audience.

"But I can see now why you were given to Malfoy. You have a natural talent for pain, just like him. You make quite the pair."

Oh God, she couldn't do this anymore.

"Although, I would like to see you become a little more ... unleashed!" His chair creak from behind her, presumably he'd leaned in to get a better look. "Stab him about an inch lower next time darling. It'll hurt him more there."

His words intrigued something in the Hex, made the beast rear its head. There was a moment's pause before it commanded Hermione to stab Myers again, right where Party had instructed.

his steak down in front of him. "I meant no disrespect when I gave the Mudblood that knife. I was just curious about the Hex."

"And women," Yaxley chuckled. "Don't forget about the women."

"If you wanted to suck up to the boss," Theo cut in, still sulking, even though his bottle was almost half drained already, "you should have spent less gold on dressing up the girls, and more on the liquor."

The first hour of their meal was rather ... uneventful.

Theo pouted and nursed his whisky. Blaise chatted idly with Crouch about the new shipments of Acromantula venom that he was experimenting with. And Draco smoked cigarette after cigarette to wash down the vile wine as he discussed a new possible raid they were planning in Sheffield.

By all accounts, the start of the evening could have been considered pleasant, if it wasn't for the dolls. The older generation of Death Eaters adored Crouch and his little playthings. They fought for invitations to his parties - and for the opportunity to 'borrow' one of the girls for an evening or two - whereas the younger blood were kept at arm's length.

Draco was glad to never receive an invite. It meant he never had to make up an excuse for not attending.

It wasn't as though the concept of slavery was anything new, and it had become widespread as Voldemort gained strength. No, it was *how* the girls were slaves that had always made Draco scrunch his nose in disapproval, and he knew Theo and Blaise agreed.

He'd captured his fair share of Order members and blood traitors over the years, men and women alike. He'd dragged them into dungeons, and tied them to chairs so Theo could interrogate them. And after they'd extracted all the information they needed, he'd executed them.

That was the way it should've been. They'd served their purpose. They couldn't aid Voldemort's victory any further, so, they should be put out of their misery. That's what they deserved.

They didn't deserve ... this.

This hollow fucking empty existence. Forced to serve men who slipped their hands up their dresses whilst they poured their wine. Forced to smile and grit their

teeth, knowing that showing their discomfort meant a Crucio as punishment. Or worse.

Despite the uncomfortable edge they made creep into Draco and Theo's stomachs, they were able to hide their distaste for the Dolls. But for Blaise, the chivalrous bastard, they were a subject he just couldn't bite his tongue on.

"Crouch, I know this is your house," Blaise said from over the top of his wine glass, trying to keep his tone as gentlemanly as possible, despite the way he flashed his teeth in warning, "but I would prefer if you didn't have your hand shoved up that poor girl's skirt whilst I'm still eating."

"What's the matter Zabini?" Crouch raised a brow, but didn't remove his hand from its offending position. "Having a wife made you go all soft?"

"That's hardly the case," Blaise scoffed. "Some of us were brought up with some fucking table manners. There's a time and a place for such activities, and I would hardly say a dinner party full of other gentlemen is the time to have your cock stuffed in places it ought not to be."

"Oh, I see you heard about my last party," Crouch teased.

Theo put his fingers in his mouth and made an overdramatic gagging noise.

"Don't knock it until you've tried it boys." Yaxley's arm snaked around another of the dolls' waists as she set down another tray. "I will never understand your generations disapproval of the Dolls. In my opinion, they're the Dark Lord's greatest gift."

"Maybe because we can get a woman on our own," Blaise cut in. "And we don't need to force them into our beds."

"Ah that's right, I almost forgot about your beauty of a wife. I remember Greyback saying he saw her at one of the Dark Lord's galas. Said she had the most fuckable looking mouth." Crouch licked his lips. "You'll have to bring her next time. I wouldn't mind swapping one of my blondes for yours. But if her cunt looks as lovely as her mouth does, I might not give her back."

Blaise's shoulders tensed. Theo finally looked up from his whisky.

Draco squeezed his eyes shut. Because in three, two, one -

Blaise slammed his goblet down on the table and stood, nothing but murder in his eyes. "Don't you *dares* talk about my wife like that you *vile* -"

"Oh dear, hit a nerve, have I?" Crouch snickered.

and bear witness as she was transformed into the villain of this performance, the monster in this theatre of the damned.

Hermione had come to realise that the Demon Hex was more of a beast itself than a curse. A predator shrouded in magic, that cast strings over her limbs and used her as a puppet to incite its dark will to feed its murderous appetite. It manipulated her instincts. Made her angry, heightening the bloodlust so her dark curses would be more lethal.

It made her slaughter everyone, butcher anyone in her path, just so it could gorge itself on the corpses she left behind.

While she was under the Hex, all that mattered was the hunt, *the kill*. The beast took everything else, stripped Hermione of everything that made her her, and left her with nothing but a hunger for screams and dark magic crackling at the edge of her wand.

It didn't matter that she knew Myers and his wife, or that she'd taught their son a few levitation spells. None of that mattered, because the hex was planted too deep, threading its claws through each and every one of her muscles until it had complete control of her body.

"Please! Hermione! Plea!" Myers voice abruptly cut off when she twisted the blade, making it scrape across his ribs.

Please, just let her kill him. He didn't deserve this! She should just make it quick. But the Hex didn't want to listen to her. It didn't want to kill him yet, it hadn't fed enough.

This mission was supposed to be dangerous with lots of Order resistance, which was why Hermione had been utilized. This derelict theatre was supposed to be a new stronghold to stock their supplies, filled to the brim with bombs and guns, and Voldemort wanted it taken out. Quickly.

But when they arrived, the base was barren, freshly cleared out and evacuated. There were only twelve soldiers left doing their final checks before they abandoned this area for good. If Hermione and the group had arrived only ten minutes later, they would have escaped with their lives, but as it happened, luck wasn't on their side.

Voldemort wanted one hostage left alive for interrogation, which was the only reason Myers was spared. Malfoy had quickly disarmed and bound him to a chair,

She should just slit his throat. Stab him in the heart. Let him go peacefully! He didn't need to be in any more pain-

"They need me! Please, let me go! I won't tell anyone!"

Death was more merciful than ... this.

"I'm begging you!"

God, she couldn't look - this was ...

"Hermione, please ... Please, don't kill me."

She winced at the way his voice trembled. Her eyes locked on his, her fingers twitched around the knife in her hand, but it didn't stop her from driving it into his torso. Again.

The hostage - Oliver Myers - jerked in the chair he was bound to. He threw his head back, howling in pain. Despite the derelict state of the abandoned theatre that hosted their interrogation, despite the crumbling walls and the cracks that ran along the stage, the acoustics were undamaged. They carried the sound of his screams perfectly each time, magnifying it, echoing the pain.

Hermione's eyes burned, tears slipped down her cheeks as Myers' blood pooled around her hand. She tried to pull back and retract the blade, stop his pain, but she couldn't, she had no control. The Demon Hex was pulling the reigns tight, commanding her violence.

She caught her reflection in the splintered mirror off stage, and what she saw made her want to scream herself. She looked like a monster, an image torn straight from a nightmare. Eyes black and lifeless, blood streaking down her face and robes as she drove the knife into Myers' helpless body again and again and again.

And there was nothing she could do. She was powerless to end his suffering. A murderous slave in her own skin.

"*Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!*" she shrieked internally, searching for anything she could use to claw back control of her own body. She looked, but as always, there was nothing. There was no weak link in the Hexes armour. No vulnerable point she hadn't yet discovered.

She couldn't reach the strings that controlled her, so instead, she was left to watch as some other entity took control and made her do things she'd never dream of doing, not even in her most vile nightmares. Could do nothing but scream and cry

"I will tear your tongue out!"

"I would apologise if I were you, Crouch," Draco sighed and reached for another cigarette. "Unless you gentlemen don't mind my Gold Masks putting you in the infirmary."

"I would like to see you little shits try!" Crouch spat. "It's about time someone put you in your place!"

Both Vaxley and Crouch sharply withdrew their wands, but when Theo stood and picked up his steak knife, the pair froze like deer caught in headlights.

Theo played with the knife with confidence, showing how skilled he was with a blade. "Go on, try it. If you think you've got the balls?"

Crouch and Blaise glared at one another for a moment, neither one breaking eye contact. Eventually, when Theo did a particularly threatening slicing motion with the knife, Crouch growled and sunk back down in his chair.

"I *apologise* for speaking about your wife that way," he hissed through gritted teeth. "It won't happen again."

Blaise accepted the apology - albeit reluctantly - and slowly took his seat again. But the scowl refused to vanish off his face. No matter how many glasses of wine he drank.

"Speaking of beauties," Yaxley cleared his throat, trying to defuse the heavy atmosphere that had befallen the parlour. "Where is the lovely Mustang? Will she be joining us this evening?"

The quirk of Theo's brow couldn't have looked more disapproving if he'd tried. "Mustang? That's the name you've given to one of your dolls?"

Crouch grinned and tapped the rim of his glass for one of his girls to refill. "She's a gorgeous thing, but spirited. Took me almost four years to break her in, and even now, she fights me at every corner."

"She's not the best at serving, or hosting for that matter," Yaxley interrupted. "But she's a marvellous creature to look at."

Crouch laughed and pulled down the collar of his shirt, revealing a plate of silver metal - about the size of a textbook - that covered the left side of his chest. The metal was fused into his body, the skin around it raised and bumpy. "Had to have this installed when she stabbed me with a bread knife," he laughed. "If she'd of aimed an inch higher, she would have punctured my heart."

The old pair started whispering to one another, and Crouch chuckled darkly at something that Draco couldn't quite hear.

"Anything you'd like to share with the glass, gentleman?" Draco said, tone light but irritated. "Or would you just prefer to sit there gossiping like a pair of teenage girls?"

Surprisingly, Crouch didn't snap at the bait. He caught one of the dolls by her hip as she passed him. She tried her best to hide her wince as his hand skated to her backside. "Be a dear and go and fetch the mustang. She hasn't joined us in so long, and I think she'd enjoy coming out to play this evening."

The blonde girl, who couldn't have been older than twenty, nodded and gave a tight-lipped smile before she left the room.

"Any word on this spy yet?" Yaxley asked as Draco finished his fifth glass of wine. "I heard you're having trouble locating them?"

"You still haven't caught them yet?" Crouch sucked air through his teeth. "I would get a wriggle on if I were you. Otherwise someone else might beat you to the punch, and catch the traitorous bastard before you do."

"If it's so easy, then why haven't you been searching for them?"

Yaxley shrugged. "Whose to say we haven't been looking for Medusa ourselves?"

"That's a little above your paygrade, isn't it?" Draco cocked a brow, and took a deep drag of the cigarette in his mouth. "How do you know the name of the spy? That information was supposed to be kept between myself, Bellatrix, and the Dark Lord."

Yaxley smiled, flashing his yellow teeth. "I make it my business to know these things."

"Careful what you say, mate," Draco warned. "If you weren't so fucking unreliable, I'd think you were a suspect."

Yaxley's expression abruptly grew very stern. "I would never betray the Dark Lord. I would rather die than turn my back on him."

Suddenly, there was a loud clatter in the doorway. All of the Death Eaters quickly spun towards the sound. Another girl stood at the threshold to the dining area - the Mustang had finally made her appearance.

She was even more beautiful than the other girls, with full lips and long black hair that flowed down her back, all the way to the base of her spine. Her hands were

## CHAPTER 27



## THEATRE OF THE DAMNED

**5th May**

"Please, just let me go!"

Oh God, how was he still alive? He'd lost so much blood, he should have died ages ago.

"I swear, I've told you everything I know! You have to believe me!"

Hermione just wanted him to die -

"They don't tell me much! I'm nothing! I'm just a soldier!"

This was so cruel. He didn't deserve this-

"I have a wife at home! A son waiting for me!"

For a few moments, a few beautiful - fucking euphoric few moments - Hermione just floated. She wasn't a monster. She hadn't murdered her friends. She wasn't a pawn for Voldemort.

She was empty, cleansed and free of all the demons that haunted her, real or imaginary. And merlin, she wanted to drown in that feeling.

It felt like hours before the world came back to her, and when it did, Malfoy was panting too.

"When I do that again," he hushed, breathless, "you're going to look at me when you come."

Hermione twisted in his arms and looked up at him. Their breath mingled in the tight space and pools of blue stared back at her, only small cracks of silver clung to life around the edges of his eyes.

"What makes you think ... that I'm going to let you ... do that again?"

A lazy grin stretched across Malfoy's face, and the sight of it made her clench her thighs around his hand.

"I know there's going to be a next time, because although it may not have been exactly what I had in mind in terms of stress release," he kept his eyes on hers as he slowly pulled his hand from her body; "this was better. This was the type of exorcism you needed. And that feeling of release? That *freedom*? It's addictive, and you're going to crave it again."

His gaze trapped her, made her freeze in place as he popped his fingers into his mouth and *smoked*. And Hermione wondered, as she watched the demon lick her arousal from his fingers, which would give her the greater release?

Kicking him to the ground, dragging her nails down his back and fucking him until her bones felt raw;

Or aiming the gun in her hands, and shooting him between his eyes?

raised and palms open, the bottle of wine that had just slipped from her hand was shattered on the floor.

It was easy to see that she was Crouch's favourite. Her green dress was clearly more expensive than the others, the material embroidered with emeralds, and she wore jewels around her neck and wrist where the others were bare.

But the most remarkable thing about her wasn't her impeccable appearance, or how her skin seemed to glow in the candlelight. It was her eyes; wide and green, and staring at Theo like she'd seen a ghost.

The other girls gasped and flinched away from the pile of glass at her feet - poor things probably expected a beating from the mess the newcomer had made. But Crouch ... he seemed a little too pleased with Mustang's response.

It made the knot in Draco's stomach twist uneasily. Crouch was up to something odd expression on his face. He almost looked confused looking at the stranger.

The girl opened her mouth to speak, and Crouch erupted into a fit of dark laughter when no noise left her lips. "Oh, would you look at that? I think my girl has taken a liking to you, Theodore."

Her head snapped to Crouch. Her eyes hardened, and she cupped her throat gently with her hand.

"I'm afraid I don't share," he smiled and beckoned her over with his index and forefinger. "Not this one, at least. She's very special to me. And I've taken excellent care of you over the years, haven't I?"

The girl didn't move towards Crouch, not even when he snapped his fingers in an irritated fashion, ordering her to stand at his side.

Unlike the other girls, Mustang didn't try to hide her revulsion for Crouch or Yaxley. She didn't put on a brave face or force herself to smile through it. Her disgust was clear in every inch of her expression.

Crouch lunged forward, snatching the girl's wrist. He dragged her against his chest - even as she tried to fight him off - and slid his hand into the top of her dress so he could pull it down, exposing her shoulder and collarbone. With a wave of his wand, he removed the glamour charms.

The abuse on her skin was deep. There were bruises and slash marks everywhere, some pale and fading, while others were angry and fresh. Although he liked the dolls to look perfect and pristine when he hosted, the illusion was clearly dropped when the doors were closed.

“But you don’t always behave, do you? Sometimes, you don’t know how to do as you’re fucking told.” Crouch licked across one of the largest slashes on her neck.

The Mustang squirmed in his arms, her face twisting as though she were about to vomit.

Suddenly, Theo stood and marched out of the room.

The Mustang followed him as he left, her attention solely on Theo as Crouch viciously pushed her to the floor. She managed to catch herself before her head smacked against the tiles, but she nursed her wrists as she stood, so the fall must have hurt her more than her stony expression let on.

“Well, don’t just stand there,” Crouch smirked cruelly, tapping the edge of his glass. “Get on your knees and clean up your mess, pretty girl.”

While the Mustang fumbled awkwardly with the dustpan and brush, Draco excused himself, feeling the girls eyes on him as he left. He found Theo with his hands in his hair, pacing Crouch’s small kitchen back and forth.

“You alright, Not<sup>it</sup>? ”

Theo kept walking but shook his head. “No. There’s something wrong with that girl.”

“The Mustang?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s probably just the cheap whisky -”

“That’s not it,” Theo interrupted. “I can’t put my finger on what it is, but there’s something not right with her. I can *feel* it.”

“Well, your instincts are never wrong on these sorts of things. Do you think she could be a threat to Grouch?”

“Did you see the mess she’d made of his chest? Of course she’s a fucking threat - but I don’t think that’s what’s bothering me,” Theo growled, dragging his hands down his face. “Fuck - I don’t like this mate. I have a really bad feeling about her.”

and tighter with each brush of Malfoy’s fingers. The ones inside her stayed slow and gentle, deliberately teasing.

She was so close. She was so close she couldn’t concentrate on the targets. Her arms trembled, her vision was hazy and blurring through pleasure, making it impossible to hit her mark.

“That’s it, keep going,” Malfoy sighed, nipping and licking across her pulse as she fired bullet after bullet. “You’re so close, aren’t you? I can feel it.”

The bullets inched towards their destination, carving holes along the cheekbone of the dummy.

*Please.* Her legs started to shake. Her hips arched back towards his cock, still hard and grinding into her spine. *Please, please, please.*

The movements of on her clit grew erratic, dragging against the sensitive tissue faster, his own need rising to the surface. Up and down, down and up, then left to right, right to left, then up and down again.

“Give me one more.” He twisted his fingers inside her, and the elastic band stretched tighter. Almost ready to snap. “One more bullet right between the eyes, and then I’ll let you come.”

So close. She was so fucking close it *hurt*. If he would just crook his fingers against that spot a *little harder*:

She let go of his thigh, needing both hands to keep the gun steady. She drew a deep breath and closed one eye. She pulled the trigger, and a bullet sized hole appeared right between the target’s eyes.

“Good girl.” He took the shell of her ear between his teeth, and the fingers inside her finally rubbed against *that* spot that made her see stars. “Go on, come for me, little lion.”

She came with a scream and finally let her arms fall to her sides, but she didn’t drop the gun. Her cunt clamped around his fingers, holding him there as rivets of pleasure washed through her in hot waves, one after the other.

The relief that course through her was indescribable. There was nothing, like the world fell away, and all she could focus on was the way her muscles spasmed and her breath leaving her lungs.

He knew that neither of the girls on the floor was the Mustang, but his heart still sped up all the same. He didn't have that feeling that gut instinct that something was wrong, the one he'd felt when he saw her.

Still, it didn't stop the disappointment he felt when he saw their faces -

There was a loud, deafening crash from behind him.

Quick as a bullet leaving the chamber, Theo whirled around. The tip of his wand sparked with black magic, a deadly curse already gathering at the tip-

But there was no need. Crouch had knocked over the whisky bottle on his nightstand with his gangly limbs, but he hadn't woken.

Theo stayed still for a few minutes to make sure Crouch was truly in a deep sleep. Minutes that felt like fucking hours while he waited for the old git's snoring to fill the room again.

Once he was back in the safety of the corridor, he leaned against the wall and sighed, defeated.

*Fucking hell. Where was the Mustang?*

That strange girl that he'd never seen before, but was hauntingly familiar. She'd wanted to tell him something. He could see it in her eyes. She'd been dying to speak to him, but she wasn't here.

Had Grouch hidden her away on purpose? Had he suspected that Theo was going to break in to see her, so he'd gotten rid of her for the night? Had he lent her to one of his friends? Yaxley? Greyback?

No. No, he said he didn't share her. He said that she was his favourite, but that sounded more like a punishment than a privilege.

Theo walked quietly back through the estate, replacing all the locks and charms on every door as he went. Once outside, he made his way back toward the front gates so he could Apparate home -

He noticed something he'd missed on his arrival.

A small stone building on the south side, a similar size to the one Astoria used to brew and store her potions.

A stable.

*No. Grouch wasn't that sadistic, was he?*

Theo chewed the inside of his cheek while he toyed with the idea. Crouch had christened the girl Mustang. A wild horse, unbreakable and spirited, but he wouldn't actually keep her in a stable. Would he?

He knew the answer.

"Oh, bollocks to it," he growled under his breath, already walking toward the building.

Yes, Crouch was indeed sadistic enough to keep a beautiful girl in a pit fit only for an animal.

As soon as Theo entered that stable, that feeling was back. That strange hollowness in this chest. That God awful fucking twist in his stomach muscles that made him want to be sick.

*What was that? Was she here? Had she been here?*

He stroked the back of his right hand, nursing the snakehead as he eagerly scanned the area.

Apart from a few heaps of straw and a smell that burned his nostrils and made his nose scrunch up, the stable was empty. So why did he have this odd shiver running up his spine, like someone was standing right behind him, running those cold fingers up and down his back, over and over again, trying to alert him to a danger he couldn't see or hear?

The feeling concentrated when he stared at the vacant right hand corner. He cast another detection charm, just to be sure.

There was nothing there, not a stray rodent scurrying in the darkness or a bird that had chosen to nest in the straw.

He was completely alone.

Theo apparated back to Malfoy. He walked through the grounds, ignoring the dragon sleeping soundly on the grass, and made his way towards the estate.

He found Astoria in one of the smaller sitting rooms. She was passed out on the sofa, her hair messily sprawled across her face and mascara smudges under her eyes. She was still dressed in one of her tailored ballgowns, pale pink and sparkly, just like her.

"Party for one tonight, is it Greengrass?"

A crease formed between Astoria's brows. Her hands tightened around the almost empty bottle of vodka in her hands, clutching it as though it were a lifeline. "Go away Theodor-a," she ground.

"Ouch, hit me where it hurts. That's not very nice of you." He carefully sat down on the edge of the sofa and stroked away the hair that was covering her face. "Where's Blaise and Draco?"

"Mission for the Dark Lord," she grumbled without opening her eyes. "Took Hermione, too."

Theo frowned. "I didn't ask about the Mudblood."

Even inebriated, Astoria tried to swat him for his foul language. She missed, clumsily whacking one of the sofa cushions instead, but the intention was there. Theo couldn't help but give a throaty laugh and shake his head. If the little pisshead wasn't so broken inside, if the world was kinder and she wasn't deteriorating by the day, she would have had the world in the palm of her manicured hands.

"Come on, princess Grey Goose," Theo whispered, hooking his arms under her knees and shoulders. "Let's get you tucked up in bed."

She moaned quietly as he picked her up. She didn't open her eyes. Her head lulled clumsily against his chest, but she refused to let go of her precious bottle. "Draco knows you went to Grouch's."

"Could have guessed that myself, thanks."

"He's not very happy with you."

"Could've guessed that too. You're not very helpful when you're drunk, are you?"

Astoria shifted in his arms. He assumed she tried to hit him again, but she was too drunk to manage it.

"How was the gala tonight?" he asked as he climbed the stairs, feeling the concerned - but unsurprised - eyes of the portraits on the blonde in his arms.

"Fine. Greyback was there."

"Really?"

"And Rodolphus." She nodded, her eyes still closed. "And Yaxley."

"And you were wearing this dress?" Theo whistled as he eyed the low cut pink fabric. "I bet they were putty in your hands, weren't they?"

If Blaise or Draco were here, they could have searched their memories easily and confirmed Theo's suspicions. They could have made up for his lack of skills in the art of Legilimency, and proved that Grouch was no good and needed to be cast out. Or executed.

Theo would gladly offer himself up as executioner. Salazar, he could only imagine the satisfaction he'd feel staring down at Grouch's slimy, untrustworthy face, knowing he was about to chop it clean off his skinny neck. He'd play with him a little first though. Maybe sneak him a potion to heighten the agony, keep him alive longer. Prolong the pain.

Or perhaps he'd miss?

Slicing Charms weren't always the most accurate offensive spell, everyone knew that. They required precision and focus. It would be easy to 'shp' and leave deep slashes across Grouch's shoulder. Or accidentally chop off an arm. Or Both.

It wasn't like that sort of thing hadn't happened before.

Theo had once seen an executioner be so nervous when he brought his axe down that he missed the neck he was aiming for. Fifteen times. He'd hacked away at his victim with each swing but missed everything vital, leaving him alive but in agony. Muscles torn and blood spraying across the witnesses faces but never delivering the fatal blow. The traitor's head had swung all over the place before someone had finally took pity and Avada'd the poor bastard.

If Theo did the same thing, no one would think anything of it. They'd probably just assume he'd had too much to drink beforehand.

Yes, it would've been nice if Malfoy or Blaise were here to search the Dolls' memories so Theo could live out his fantasy. But they weren't. And neither was the Mustang, so he crept out of the room, closed the door behind him, and moved on.

Grouch's chambers was the final room Theo checked. He held his wand close as he pushed the door open, just in case.

The man of the manor was fast asleep, naked and sprawled across his sheets while two shivering girls curled together in a heap on the floor. They both had long dark hair, but he couldn't see their faces clearly in the darkness.

Theo drew a deep, steady breath as he approached. He took each step carefully, watching out for any loose boards or creaks in the wood.

Draco shouted something as Theo left, but he didn't hear it. He was already too far gone, charging out of the room, ready to Apparate to the one place his commanding officer had forbidden him from entering.

Theo's luck was better and worse when he came to the third bedroom. It was only a storage room as far as he could tell, but there must have been something of value inside because Crouch had cast three traps on the floor.

The room itself was a hoarder's paradise. He spent almost thirty minutes going through the mess of dusty silverware and chipped trinkets.

He scanned a few of the crumpled letters on the floor. They didn't hold his interest enough to read them to the end. There wasn't anything even remotely incriminating on them.

Theo had no idea why Crouch had thought to protect this room with spells. There was nothing here, just piles and piles of old shit and broken cups. Although a red music box with a small silver ballerina inside did catch his eye, so he pocketed it and went on to search the next room.

Theo knew the dolls were in the fourth bedroom by the ridiculous amount of locks and enchantments on the door. It took him almost three minutes to disable all of them.

One large mattress covered the floor, magically extended to reach from skirting board to skirting board. No pillows or blankets. Blood and Merlin knew what else stained the grey fabric and in the middle, all piled on top of one another, were twelve sleeping girls.

The Dolls all seemed to be dreaming soundly, the different colours of their hair all blending together as they huddled as one for warmth and safety.

Theo stepped closer, keeping the Lumos charm as low as possible as he studied their bruised faces. They were all covered in slashes and bite marks. Some had fading abuse along their necks and shoulders, and one unlucky girl had a deep, angry slash along her right breast.

They were dead to the world in every sense. They didn't stir as Theo walked slowly around them. Probably drugged. Perhaps exhausted, if the hollow circles under their eyes were anything to go by. Whatever Crouch had done to them, they were defenceless like this, easy targets for him to snatch and have his way with.

Astoria snorted but changed the subject. "Did you find what you were looking for tonight?"

"No - but I did find a red music box. It even has a little ballerina inside it. I think she spins when the music plays."

"She'll like that." Astoria's lips pulled into a sleepy smile. "You should charm it to play Blue Monday. Or Sweet Dreams. Or anything by Queen or New Order. Those were her favourites."

"*Everything from the 80's is superior*, I remember." Theo matched her smile. "I'll see what I can do."

Astoria fell asleep shortly afterwards. Theo gently kicked her bedroom door open, tucked her and her bottle of Vodka into bed, swamping her body tiny with fluffy blankets and pillows.

With the pishead taken care of, Theo grabbed a bottle of bourbon from the kitchen and went outside. While he walked, he placed a lit cigarette in his mouth and pressed the tip of his wand against the music box. He poured his magic into it, feeling the wood vibrate against his palm as he concentrated on changing the melody. He wasn't sure if it was going to work, but it was worth a try.

When he was in the cemetery, he wound the key at the back of the box as many times as he could without breaking it, then gently laid it at the base of the grave with his other gifts.

Theo lifted the lid of the box, and the soft, sort of twinkly music that always sang from those types of music boxes started to play. But it didn't sing a lullaby like it should.

The song sounded a little different due to the high pitched strings of the music box, but Theo's charm had worked. *Bohemian Rhapsody* by Queen was playing, could as abell.

Just like Wizard chess pieces do when they're called upon, the tiny ballerina came alive when the music started. As though the notes had loosened her joints to allow her to dance. Or try to, at least.

The little ballerina bowed on her frame. She did a little twirl, then stopped and frowned up at him.

"What's the matter?" Theo asked, bending down to talk to her. "Not the type of song you're used to dancing to?"

She shook her head.

"Give it a minute. I used to hate it too, but it'll grow on you."

She angrily folded her arms across her chest, clearly unimpressed, but Queen was very seductive. All too soon, she started to tap her foot to the unfamiliar beat. Her hips started to sway, and by the time the first chorus kicked in, she found her rhythm. She learned the song quickly, twirling elegantly within the box.

Theo couldn't help but smile as he watched the ballerina dance to the distorted song, because it was *her* song. Her *favourite* song.

Playing at *her* grave.  
On the headstone that wasn't allowed to bare her name.

At the shrine he'd created for her, the one that she wasn't supposed to have.

"Sorry, I only know the charm work to get it to play one song," he whispered to the headstone. "But hopefully with enough practice, I can get it to play others. I'll add some New Order songs when I figure it out. And that Bronski Beat song you love."

When the song faded into silence, the metal dancer stomped her feet furiously until Theo wound the box back up again. As soon as the song restarted, so did her dance.

"*Everything from the 80's* isn't that right, Daphne?" He slowly sank to the floor and sat on the grave, lightly tracing the smooth marble of her headstone as he spoke to her, as though she were still here. "I'll try and find you a Rubix cube the next time I'm out. You said they were from the 80's, didn't you?"

He checked the second guest bedroom, and cursed under his breath when he found it just as vacant as the first.  
"I'm not fucking around, you ignorant little shit!" Draco strode towards him, every syllable dripping with authority. It was a shame Theo wasn't in the mood to listen. "Don't you dare step foot on that estate! That is a fucking order, Theodore!"  
"You're really going to pull rank on me? Now?" Theo's wand twitched in his hand. Violent magic gathered at his fingertips. "I don't need your permission."

Draco's eyes flickered with anger. "I would put your wand away if I were you, Gold Mask."

"Yeah?" Theo stepped closer, almost nose to nose with his best friend. His superior. He raised his wand and pressed it against Draco's collarbone. "What the fuck are you going to do, Demon?"

Blaise stepped between the pair before either had the opportunity to really hurt the other. He knocked Theo's wand out of the way, and used his broad shoulders to create a physical wall between him and Draco.

"That has nothing to do with it!" Theo argued. "There's something wrong with her, and if you or Blaise would just come with me and search her mind..."

"No," Blaise answered immediately, firmly. "If Draco says it's not a good idea, then I trust his instincts". His voice was soft and easy like it always was, but today it scratched at Theo's nerves much worse than any sneer.

The only time Blaise ever shouted - the only time anyone ever got a rise out of him - was if someone mentioned Astoria. The patience of a perfect gentleman that one, unless someone insulted his beloved wife, then the beast in him came out to play.

Theo came to a stop at the first room he found and cast a diagnostic charm. Once he was sure there was nothing inside, he quietly twisted the dusty handle and stepped inside.

It was a small and barely decorated guestroom. And she wasn't there.

Theo closed the door and carried on his search.

"Fine! Fuck the both of you!" Theo grabbed his wand and threw on his outer robes. "I don't need your help! Those charms on her voice box shouldn't be too hard to remove! I'll go there and speak to the Mustang myself!"

He checked the second guest bedroom, and cursed under his breath when he found it just as vacant as the first.

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“What? You think I don’t know how to break into another person’s house without being caught?” Theo scoffed. “It’s fucking Bart! He’ll be that busy with his cock buried in one of those girls he won’t even notice I’m there!”

Once he got to the front door, Theo cast another detection spell. There was an acid hex on the handle designed to melt the flesh on any intruders hand who tried to open the door. Theo banished it without difficulty, quietly opened the door, and entered Crouch’s scruffy manor.

“Your ignorance will get you killed Theodore.” Draco said, pushing himself off the chair he was sitting in. “Ise your head, the reason the Dark Lord doesn’t let Crouch out on the field anymore is because he’s too clever to risk losing! Are you listening to me? Crouch is a fucking genius! He knows how to be invisible, and how to kill you without even being in the room as you!”

“I’m not scared of Crouch.”

“Well, maybe you fucking should be!” Draco sighed. He squeezed his eyes shut and took a deep drag of the cigarette that was still in his mouth. “Look, Theo. Think about this for a moment. Crouch is one of the most devious men I’ve ever known, and he’s clever. Everything he does has a purpose. We only know what he wants us to know. And last night - he brought the Mustang out for a reason. I don’t know why, but he wanted us to see her.”

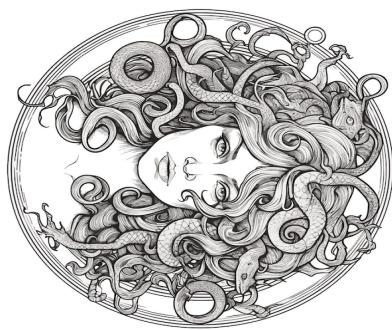
It was deadly silent. The only sound Theo could hear was the slow and even thump of his heart.

He couldn’t see a thing in front of him, as though someone had draped a thick, unforgiving blanket of darkness over the house that swallowed everything; light, sounds, even souls if given the chance. Casting a Lumos charm, he crept through the house with sharp eyes, checking every corner.

Draco eyed Theo closely. “He wanted us to get a good look at her and question everything. Why he keeps her locked away, why she reacted the way she did when she saw you. If you go there tonight, you’ll be walking right into a trap. We’re so fucking close to winning this war. I won’t have you looking like a traitor and executed at the last minute because you liked the look of a pretty girl!”

Theo kept to the shadows. He pressed his back against the wall as he slid down the hallway, making sure he was completely out of sight, just in case someone might be wandering nearby.

## CHAPTER 30



# A DEMON MASK, A MUDBLOOD, AND A PSYCHOPATH WALK INTO A BAR

*15th May*

“This is just what I needed today,” Malfoy hissed in a voice as sharp as the slicing hex he threw over his shoulder, cutting the head off a muggles neck in one clean

motion. "To be stuck in the middle of fucking Bournemouth, pinned down by gunfire, with a Mudblood," Hermione felt him scowl at her beneath his mask, "and a psychopath."

Kneeling on the other side of Hermione, Nott chuckled to himself. "That sounds like the beginning of a really funny joke."

Something whistled over the upside down tank they were hiding behind. A wave of adrenaline shot through Hermione when she saw the grenade. Prined. Smoking. And laying at their feet.

Malfoy pointed his wand toward it, but Nott was quicker. He magically picked up the bomb, then sharply whipped it back where it'd come from, not a second before it exploded and disintegrated the muggle soldiers that had thrown it in the first place.

Pleased with his display, Nott did a little theatrical bow. "And for my next act; a joke. A Demon Mask, a Mudblood, and a psychopath walk into a bar. The psychopath says to the Demon—"

Malfoy pointed his wand at his subordinates chest. A warning, clearly not in the mood for jokes and theatrics due to the danger they were trapped in. "I dare you to finish that sentence, Theodore. I really do."

"Alright, alright. Don't get your bloody wand in a knot." Nott threw his hands up in surrender. The gold mask on his face was covered in blood, but when Malfoy lowered his wand, Nott pretended to wipe imaginary sweat from his forehead. "Someone's a bit cranky today."

"A bit fucking cranky? We're in the middle of a warzone, surrounded by some muggles with guns and tanks—"

"No, that's not it," Nott interrupted. "You've been a right sour bastard for days."

"Oh, do you ever stop talking?"

Nott shrugged. "I thought a joke might do you good. Raise team morale. Lighten the mood."

"You know wordless magic, right, Theodore? You'd still be able to kill those soldiers if I cut your tongue out and shoved it up your arse, wouldn't you?"

"Granger certainly looked like she wanted to hear it." Nott nudged her playfully with his elbow. "Didn't you, sweetheart?"

Hermione didn't answer. She'd been under The Demon Hex for the longest period she ever had been before- around three hours - and the curse showed no

"No, that's out of the question," Draco hissed back, the words fanning a fresh wave of smoke out of his mouth like a dragon breathing fire. "The Dark Lord is growing paranoid and more anxious by the day. That makes him more lethal."

Theo growled towards the ceiling and started pacing the cosy seating room again. He didn't need a fucking speech about battle plans and strategies. He just needed Draco to listen.

"We should have won this war by now," Draco continued, "but every time we get close, this spy leaks vital information and Potter gains just a little bit more of an advantage. Now is not the time to go breaking into other Death Eater's houses in the middle of the night and searching their property- just because you 'have a feeling' that something is amiss."

Theo materialised outside of the iron gates in an almost ghost-like silence. The sound of his Apparation as quiet as smoke disappearing in the wind.

"But what if Theodore's right, and there is something off about him?" Blaise's smooth voice cut through the tension. He was sat on the velvet armchair closest to the fire, eyes on the flames while he fiddled with his cufflinks - deep in thought. "If Crouch is this 'Medusa', surely the girls would have seen something to incriminate him? Perhaps questioning the mustang might not be the worst idea."

Theo waved his wand in a circular motion, and the rusting metal creaked and groaned in protest as he forced the gates open.

"Not a fucking chance in hell!" Draco snarled. "It's far too risky. There's no evidence that Crouch is the spy. He's been nothing but loyal to the Dark Lord for years- even before our time. He may not be at the top of the hierarchy, but he'll do anything to get there- and I doubt he would risk that position by betraying the Dark Lord."

With another wave of his wand, Theo checked the boundary for traps and hexes. When he found nothing, he stepped over the threshold.

"If we're caught breaking into his house, how will that look to the others?" Draco started twisting the ring on his pinkie finger. "There's a spy in the nest, and if we look like we're turning on one of our own, it will only make us look like the guilty party."

Theo had already cast a silencing charm on his boots, and he floated down the stone path silently like a poltergeist returning home.

warn Master Malfoy, but he said to leave Theo alone. Said that he would want to be outside so he could be close to the grave.”

“Whose grave is he sitting at?” The instant the question left Hermione’s lips, Astoria and Romy tensed.

Two pairs of eyes frantically whipped to Hermione. Romy’s seemed to glaze over as he stared at Hermione, while tears started to gather in the corner of Astoria’s.

Quinzel narrowed hers in suspicion.

Astoria’s lips trembled, but just as Hermione thought she was going to answer her question -

“We is not allowed to speak of it, are we, Mrs Zabini?” Quinzel cut in with a stern tone of voice, as though she were telling Astoria off. “Master Malfoy has forbidden for us to talk of it. *Hann’ he?*”

A strange look flashed across Astoria’s face as she stared down at the elf, but surprisingly, Quinzel glared back up at her in a way one wouldn’t expect an elf to look at one of their masters. The entire exchange was off. The roles were reversed. The house-elves authoritative tone had stopped the lady of the manor mid-sentence.

After a few moments, Astoria shook her head and banished the tears from her eyes. Quinzel’s glare softened into her usual expression.

“Yes, you’re quite right Quinzel.” Astoria dusted imaginary specks of dust off her dress before she offered Hermione a forced smile. “I think it’s time we opened a bottle of wine, don’t you?”

#### **8th May, 02:30 am**

“I’m not having this conversation again,” Draco snapped. “Theodore, you’re not to go near Crouch’s estate!”

“But you know he’s up to something!”

“Yes, he is! That’s why we’re all staying away from the slimy bastard until I know precisely what cards he’s holding and what he plans to do with them!”

“But you said yourself that my instincts are rarely wrong about this sort of thing, and I’m telling you, something’s off about the Mustang!” Theo cut in, his rising anger starting to simmer dangerously close to the surface. “She knows something, and if you would just come with me to Crouch’s manor and search her memories-”

signs of loosening its grip. It seemed to be threading itself deeper, digging its roots into her skin like the thorns of a rose vine and pulling her where it wanted her.

White Nott and Malfoy bickered, Hermione listened to the bullets pelting against the side of the metal tank.

The bullets stopped suddenly. As the muggles reloaded their weapons, Hermione counted.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

The bullets started again, clattering against the side of tank with enough force to rattle the thick metal. Hermione’s ears started to ring.

They were being fired from a heavy-duty machine gun, the type that was so large that it needed to be propped up on metal legs so that it could be aimed effectively. If any of the Death Eaters were to step into its path, they would be torn in half from the sheer force of the bullets.

The gun had seemingly appeared out of nowhere; Hermione assumed it’d been concealed with enchantments. Neither Malfoy or Nott had had the opportunity to destroy it before bullets had started to explode from the thick barrel. If Malfoy hadn’t quickly sliced his wand to drag an overturned tank toward them as a shield, all three of them would’ve been dead by now.

Even if they were now trapped behind said tank.

The bullets pinning them down were too strong. Hermione had helped develop them before her capture. They were infused with magic, charmed to break through any protective wards like knife through butter. Even a magical barrier wouldn’t offer any protection.

And judging by the tight hold Malfoy had around Hermione’s waist, he knew it too. He’d grabbed her as soon as he’d laid eyes on the gun, and he hadn’t let go of her since.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

Five.

"This tank thingy isn't going to hold much longer chief," Nott taunted, knocking the side of the withering metal and watching as a piece of the tank crumbled away. The bullets were doing exactly what Hermione had designed them to do. They only had a minute or so before the tank was completely disintegrated and they were vulnerable. "Any suggestions on how we're going to, you know, get out of the firing line before those muggles blow us to bits?"

Eight.

Nine.

"I could use you as a distraction if you'd like?" Malfoy said sarcastically. "Throw you out, and while they poke holes in you, me and Granger could get away. Sound fair to you?"

Eleven.

Twelve.

"Or," Nott suggested, "I could just flip this tank over and squish the bastards. Problem solved. Soldiers dead. Battle won. Dark Lord happy. Theo happy. And we'll be back in time for happy hour. Perfect. Easy peasy lemon squeezy."

Sixteen.

Seventeen.

"No, no, no. Not 'easy peasy' you fucking moron," Malfoy hissed back, the altering charm on his voice box making the words a deep vibration. "If you flip the tank, that magically altered muggle gun will explode, and guess who's in the blast radius? Oh, I know. *Ug!*"

Twenty-one.

Twenty-two.

Another pause.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

As she watched Nott, Hermione realised that Malfoy was right. When he was alone, when he thought that there was no one watching him, or he didn't have a target to inflict pain, Nott was a shell. More of an empty carcass than a man.

If Malfoy hid behind his occlumency walls, then Nott hid behind his jokes. His theatrics were his shards of glass. It was all a show. When the spotlight was focused on him, he was a Jester, and when he was alone, the pain was clear on his face. In his eyes. Every part of him.

The grave looked slightly different this time. It was still unmarked, clean and lacking the name of a ghost, but the trinkets laid around it were completely different. The silver bracelet she'd seen last time was replaced by a gold necklace. A troll doll with bright pink hair lay where the small stuffed bear had been before. And there were four candles now instead of one, all of different colours and stages of use.

But the flowers ... they were the same. A fresh wreath of pink peonies.

Hermione had only seen Nott without his Death Eater uniform once. That night in the corridor with Astoria, he'd been facing the other way so she hadn't been able to see his hand. He wore a jumper today, and with his sleeves pushed up to his elbows, she got a full view of his tattoo.

Half of a snakes head was etched onto the back of his hand, its body cutting around his wrist all the way up to his elbow. The serpent was split right down the middle, its left eye in the centre of Nott's hand while its forked tongue darted down his middle and ring finger.

Hermione thought that the snakes head and body would expand onto his palm and under his wrist, but when he twisted his hand, the underside of his skin was clean. The tattoo was unfinished, incomplete, like someone had torn it straight down the middle and stole the missing piece.

"He is wearing the same clothes as yesterday," Romy said quietly.

"He is," Astoria whispered, watching Nott.

"And they is all wet. Has master Nott slept out here last night? In the cold? And the rain?"

"It would appear that way." Astoria cleared her throat softly, almost like she was trying to dislodge something stuck there. "Yesterday must have ... been a sad day for him."

"But Theo should not be sleeping outside in the rain, he will catch cold," Romy carried on. "Romy noticed Master Nott was not himself last night, and he tried to

"That is because Romy is not very observant. Or he would get distracted by roast potatoes and not accompany Mrs Zabini properly! There are more important things in life than potatoes!"

Romy gasped, and Hermione gave Astoria a questioning look. The blonde just shook her head, slightly irritated, and whispered, "Blaise worries. Thinks I need a bloody entourage just to take a walk."

Their roles quickly reversed as they entered the cemetery. Hermione asked question after question, trying to distract herself from the chill that was spreading up her spine. She had always hated cemetery's, but she despised this one with a passion.

Graveyards were supposed to be peaceful places, little sanctuaries where people could visit and feel closer to those they'd lost. They gave families a place to focus their grief, a calming oasis where they could leave their sadness, and hope it didn't follow them back into their lives.

But not this one. This one was as sinister as it was hair-raising. It had perfectly manicured lawns, blooming flowers and elegantly carved angel statues guarding every corner, but being here made Hermione feel cold.

Everything about this place felt unnatural. She felt almost sick with dread, like Malfoy's ancestors might sense that a Mudblood was walking amongst their graves, and that their revulsion for the 'lesser' and 'unworthy' might somehow reignite the spark of life in them. That they might be filled with a hate so powerful it rose them from the dead, just so they could claw themselves up through the earth, snatch Hermione's ankles, and drag her down into their graves-

Suddenly, Astoria froze. Hermione was yanked to a stop beside her.

Because they weren't alone in the graveyard. The dead had joined them. Well, almost.

Nott hadn't seen them approach. He was sat on the damp grass, his legs crossed at his ankles and chin resting in his hand. It hadn't rained since the early hours of this morning, but his clothes were completely sodden, and little droplets of water fell from his damp curls. He occupied the same spot he had the last time Hermione had seen him in the graveyard, staring at the same headstone, his eyes just as dull and lifeless as the dead buried beneath him.

All too quickly, the bullets restarted, but Hermione had her formula. Twenty-two seconds of aggressive ammunition. A four second window to reload.

"Okay, well there was no need for that tone," Nott retorted. "You've definitely soured the mood now mate. So the only thing that will fix it is a joke."

Five.

Six.

"Don't you dare."

Eight.

Nine.

"What did the late tomato say to the other tomatoes?"

Thirteen.

Fourteen.

"Don't worry, I'll ketchup."

Sixteen.

Seventeen.

"That's it, hold my wand. I'm going to walk in front of those bullets. I can't listen to you and your pathetic dad jokes anymore!"

"How rude. I was proud of that joke. Took me ages to come up with it."

Twenty.

Twenty-one.

Hermione shot up, the strings of the Hex dragging her to stand and aim her wand.

"Oppugno!"

As her palms hummed with magic, a large bullet shell that was laying at the base of the tank shot into the air. Much faster than any of the four soldiers operating the machine could react, the charmed shell flew through the air and into the neck of the closest soldier. The bullet severed every artery and blood vessel in its path, then whipped out the other side of his neck and punctured the throat of the soldier standing beside him.

And then the next.

And then the next.

The four bodies fell to the floor in unison, their eyes blown wide and mouths twisted open as blood oozed from the holes in their necks.

There was a moment of eerie, dignified silence, then Nott stood.

"Jesus fuck - Granger, even I have to admit, that was *impressive*. Killing four muggles with a single bullet? Their own bullet? That's my speciality." He threw an arm around her shoulder and dragged her into his side as though they were old friends. "Well, they do say imitation is the strongest form of flattery. Does that mean you have a little crush on me, sweetheart? Should we pop off somewhere? Find a quiet little cupboard? I'm sure Malfoy wouldn't mind holding the fort while I bend you over and—"

Malfoy shot a powerful, crackling green curse. It zipped past Nott's right ear, burning the side of his robes slightly. Hermione turned just in time to see it collide with a witches chest behind her, killing her instantly.

"Finished flirting now, Theodore?" Malfoy hissed, waving his wand in a threatening manner. "Ready to put your cock away and actually do your fucking job?"

Nott sucked his teeth irritably underneath his mask. He let go of Hermione, but his fingers flexed around the spiked wand in his hand, as though he was dying to hex Malfoy. Instead of lashing out, he channelled his anger on the Order soldiers around him, throwing slicing curses at his enemies throats in quick succession.

Malfoy quickly joined in the carnage, casting green and black killing curses at anyone who dared to try to attack him or Hermione.

And the Hex forced her to do the same.

The scene quickly turned gruesome. One Hermione wanted to forget entirely, but would undoubtedly see when she closed her eyes that night. Bodies piled high. Smoke rising in the air. And thick blood flowing through the cobble streets. The most horrific painting she'd ever seen, and she was one of the artists.

However, there was a small mercy. From a place she never expected.

Above the zipping noise of bullets leaving their chambers and the screams of the injured, there was another sound. A low scraping sound coming from beneath her feet. It was very quiet to begin with. Almost inaudible, but it was getting louder and louder.

By the time they'd walked through the large kitchen doors and out onto the gardens, she'd already given Hermione a run-through of the floor length pink dress that she planned to wear for her gala tonight. And when they reached the blooming rose bushes - charmed to be a vibrant shade of orange - she'd explained in vivid detail how she'd acquired her new prized possession; a diamond necklace with a pale ruby in the centre - that looked expensive enough to fund an entire faculty at Hogwarts for years.

Hermione listened through it all with a smile on her face, even laughed when Astoria described the horrified look on Malfoy's face when he realised how much the necklace had cost him.

About half an hour into their tour, they passed Quinzels while she was weeding, and she quickly dropped her tools and followed. Astoria sharply pulled Hermione to the left and almost dragged her into the Malfoy family cemetery - presumably trying to lose the newcomer - but Quinzels had already fallen into step behind them.

Astoria rolled her eyes.

"Don't feel like you have to walk with us, Quinzels. I know that you're not a fan of the graveyard."

*That makes two of us*, Hermione thought bitterly.

"No, Quinzels would like to walk with Mrs Zabini," Quinzels squeaked sternly, cleaning the mud from her pillowcase, "and Miss Granger."

"But what about the weeds?" Astoria asked. "What about the Venomous Tentacula? It's grown quite a lot recently, and you know it tries to nip Narcissa if she's feeding near it. Perhaps you should tend to that nasty little bleeder instead? Cut down some of the leaves so it can't annoy her, before she burns the thing to cinders."

"No, Miss. Quinzels will come back to it later," she answered, narrowing her pink eyes at Astoria. "Mr Zabini says all other chores can wait if Mrs Zabini is walking the grounds. 'Accompanying her is number one job,' is what he says."

Out of the corner of her eye, Hermione saw Romy make a face. "Master Zabini has said that to Quinzels?"

"Yes, yes. Many times."

"He has not said that to Romy," he sulked. "He always says number one job is cleaning the house."

"I'm alright..." Astoria shoulders hunched as she drew a deep breath, trying to gather herself. "I can walk... I can do it... I just need a moment to collect myself. Please don't tell Blaise."

"I won't."

"He'll just worry if he knows," Astoria whispered, breathless. "He'll panic and he'll blame himself, even though there's nothing he can do. There's nothing anyone can do."

Romy reappeared beside Astoria with a quiet snap, three phials in his hands.

The first was filled with a clear liquid, the second of something dark red, and the third a dark blue shimmering substance. Hermione recognised the first two as Pepper up and Blood Replenishing potions. She assumed the third must have been *Mrs Zabini's special potion*.

Romy extended all three phials to Astoria. Hermione studied how her arms shook as she reached for them – barely supporting her weight on the headrest of the chair - before she sighted and downed them one at a time.

Astoria stayed propped up by the chair for several moments while she waited for the potions to take effect, bowing her head low and taking deep breaths.

Eventually, she straightened and gave a bright smile. A warm grin that masked the illness within. "I'm sorry for the slight delay. So, are you ready for our walk?"

"Perhaps Mrs Zabini should be wearing more appropriate footwear if she is to go walking around the manor?" Romy suggested. "Perhaps she should not be wearing shoes with such high heels..."

Whatever Romy had been about to say, the glare Astoria threw the tiny elf silenced him mid-breath. He stared awkwardly at the floor as Astoria hooked her arm through Hermione's and guided her into the hallway, eager to start their walk through the grounds.

Romy walked closely behind them, fiddling with the edges of his pillowcase and muttering to himself.

It seemed that Astoria was doing all she could to stop Hermione from asking questions about her condition. She chatted about everything and anything while they walked, quickly changing the subject whenever she sensed that Hermione was about to bring it up.

The noise itself intrigued the Hex. Caught its attention enough to let Hermione lower her wand and stop killing for a moment.

Malfoy and Nott were too distracted with their own killing sprees to notice. They seemed to be in silent competition with one another, each trying to kill more than the other so they could be crowned the victor of whatever little game they were playing. Toxic, murderous masculinity at its finest.

Curious and sated for the moment - with most of the Order soldiers lying dead on the floor - the Hex encouraged Hermione to investigate the strange noise. Her brows furrowed as she drew closer, noticing that the pebbles on the ground closest to the noise had begun to vibrate -

She realised what it was a second too late.

A bomb, dug deep into the earth. Right below her feet.

There was a deafening crack, like two boulders colliding mid-air, then the ground vanished beneath Hermione's feet. Malfoy whirled around. She couldn't see his face, just the sharp point of the horns on his mask before she dropped through the hole that had just appeared below her.

There was another loud bang as she fell through the crater. The gap above her head closed, stealing away the little sunlight she'd been looking up at, sealing her underground.

It was pitch black. Hot air and the smell of explosives whirled around her as she fell. She wasn't falling for long, maybe two seconds, three at the very most, but the unknown of it all made it feel much longer.

A sharp pain shot through her hip and right leg when she landed on - what she assumed - were jagged rocks. The impact knocked the air from her lungs, and forced her to inhale a deep breath of thick dust from the explosion.

She tried to squint through the dark, but dust was everywhere, grey and heavy and clouding what little vision she had. It felt like being sealed in a tomb. There was no light. No air. She couldn't see. Could barely breathe through the debris.

The Hex forced her to her feet, and she hissed in pain when she tried to put weight on her left leg. It wasn't broken, but it forced her to move in an awkward limb. She ran a hand tentatively on the rocks around her, trying to work out the best way to escape -

And then she realised she wasn't alone in this pit.

“BOMBARDAP” a deep voice called through the fog, and a second later, a blinding white light shot in Hermione’s direction.

She deflected the spell with ease, forcing it sideways with a flick of her wrist to explode the wall beside her and knock fresh debris and smoke into the tunnel. She raised her wand and wordlessly cast a Lumos, illuminating the face of her attacker, of the man who’d trapped her in this underground tunnel.

Hermione hardly recognised Cormac McLaggen at first. His face was so different. She was sure that Fleur had done her best to heal him, but there was only so much even she could do.

Hermione remembered the damage well. She’d tried to help repair it herself all those months ago. Extensive burns by dragon fire were very tricky to heal. It was a miracle he was even able to stand. And yet, here he was, staring at Hermione with a burning fury in his eyes and magic crackling at the end of his wand.

Whilst the right side of his frame was still broad and strong, the left was anything but. His left arm swung uselessly at his side, and he dragged his leg loudly across the floor as he inchéd closer to Hermione. He was bald on the left side, the newly formed skin on the left side of his face tender, raw, and pulled so tight across his cheek it looked painful.

“You!” He shot another Bombarda at Hermione, and she blocked that one just as easily as she had the first. “You fucking traitor!” Cormac threw an exploding curse, Hermione sidestepped it. “Fucking murderous bitch!” He threw another curse, and then another, each rolling into the next, but she could counteract them all. She was a better duellist than Cormac was, and he only had use of one arm.

He raised his wand again, his mouth open and ready for the next incantation, but the Hex commanded Hermione to go on the offensive.

“Avada Kedavra!”

Green light exploded from her wand.

Luckily Cormac leapt to the right just in time. Her attack missed him by *inches*. He tried to step back as Hermione advanced, but his foot caught on a loose rock and he fell to the ground.

She mercilessly threw another unforgivable curse at him. He countered it, his wand shaking in his hand, before he started to drag his body backwards across the gravel like a wounded animal.

crossed the threshold. Or set afame. Or impaled with a thousand needles as she’d expected.

“So, what can I help you with this morning?”

“Well, I had wondered if you wanted to go for a walk through the grounds with me,” Hermione answered as she scanned the enormous and elegantly decorated room around her. It was at least four times as large as her own bedroom, with dark emerald green curtains and elegant silver furnishings. “But if you’d prefer to stay indoors...”

Astoria twisted to face Hermione and raised her hand, silencing her mid-sentence. “Yes, I would love to go for a walk with you Hermione. Don’t you start treating me like I’m made of glass like the boys do. I’m perfectly fine.”

“Astoria, I think maybe—” Hermione tried to cut in, but the blonde spoke over her.

“I walk around the estate every day. No matter the weather -”

“I know. But I think you should look -”

“-and no silly blood curse is going to stop me-”

“Astoria!” Hermione snapped, her voice sharp enough to make the witch listen. “Look at your face.”

A crease formed between Astoria’s brows. She twisted back to the mirror, and gasped quietly when she saw her reflection. The glamours and artificial tint to her cheeks was still there, but evidence of her declining health remained.

Astoria’s eyes swam over as she took in the thin stream of crimson trickling from her nose. She wiped the blood away with her fingertips, trying to cover her discomfort with laughter.

“It’s nothing. Honestly, if anyone else had a nose bleed, no one would bat an eye, but when I have one?” She stood and adjusted her diamond earrings. “Well, you would think that the whole bloody world is falling apart.”

She took a step towards Hermione, but wobbled on her feet. Her knees almost gave out, and she was forced to clutch the back of her vanity chair for support.

Hermione rushed to her side, but again, Astoria held up a shaky arm to stop her. Romy gave Hermione a sad look before he disappeared with a snap.

one. The toll it took on her body was exasperating, and it was only going to get worse as the claws of her illness sunk deeper.

It took Astoria several moments to get her breathing under control. When she finally did, she sat up straight - the posture of a true lady - and stared at herself in the mirror again. She leaned in and touched the side of her face, lightly caressing the perfectly polished skin. She smiled softly when her fingers brushed into her new blonde roots.

There was almost a haunting quality about Astoria's beauty, something unsettling but familiar at the same time, and Hermione couldn't quite figure out what it was.

Astoria smiled at the tiny elf's reflection in the mirror. "How do I look?"

"Perfect," Romy grinned back. "Just like her, Miss."

And then it fell into place, and Hermione's chest tightened. Because there was only one person that they could have been talking about, and Romy was right, Astoria did look *just* like her sister.

Hermione had noticed the similarities between the Greengrass sister's the instant she'd met Astoria in January. As soon as she'd opened her bedroom door, Hermione had been taken aback by their likeness. She'd even questioned if the woman that stood in front of her was a poltergeist.

Their features were already similar, but with Astoria's hair charmed to be the exact shade of dark blonde as her older sister's, the resemblance was striking. Eric.

Astoria caught Hermione's reflection in her mirror, her smile widening as she waved her into the room. "Good morning, Hermione. Did you sleep well?"

Hermione hesitated in the doorway, unsure. She knew charms were placed on the boundary of each residents' bedroom - besides her own - to prevent her from entering, and although she knew that Astoria would never do anything to hurt her, Blaise was another matter.

Astoria watched her curiously, then her bright eyes widened when she realised. "Oh, silly me, I completely forgot. Romy?"

The green-eyed elf smiled and snapped his fingers toward the doorway. "There you go, Romy has removed the spells. Miss Granger can enter now if she'd like!"

Hermione took a deep breath and stepped into the room. She squeezed her eyes shut, half expecting Blaise to have kept it from his wife that he'd added extra charms to their room to '*keep the Mudblood out!*' Surprisingly, she wasn't zapped when she

Whatever he'd planned to do, whatever his intention for trapping Hermione in these tunnels was, he wasn't going to succeed. She was going to kill him.

"It's not me! Hermione wanted to scream. I'm not doing this! Please, just go! Don't let me hurt you! Don't let me kill you, too!"

But she couldn't force the words out. It was as though the Hex had grown hands and had wrapped them around Hermione's throat, trapping her pleas, stopping him from seeing her inside the monster she'd become.

Cormac kept retreating, crawling backwards until he came to the edge of the tunnel. A dead end. There was nowhere for him to go. He was trapped. He looked up at Hermione, that fury in his expression was gone. He looked so scared now. Eyes wide and frightened as he hunched against the wall.

And the Hex didn't care. It pulled the strings tight, forcing her to raise her wand high in the air. Green smoke gathered -

Her wand - Malfoy's wand - suddenly burned in her palm. The pain was awful, like holding an open flame, and strong enough to make her drop his wand with a quiet yelp.

For a moment, Hermione couldn't understand what was happening.

But then she felt the Demon Hex receding.

It shouldn't have been possible. Malfoy was the only one who could bring her out of the Hex. He was the only one who could free her, and he wasn't here. She was still trapped underneath the dirt and the grime and the rubble. There must have been at least four feet of rocks between them.

It shouldn't have been happening, but it was. She could *feel it*. Could feel its torturous hold on her slipping away. She stared at her hands in amazement, feeling the weight of the vile curse being lifted higher and higher -

And then it was gone. Then she was *free*. She was the one in control.

But Cormac didn't know that.

And now she didn't have a weapon to defend herself.

She heard him drag himself to his feet. She looked up in time to see him aim his wand, right in the centre of her chest.

Hermione help her hands up, showing that she wasn't armed, that she wasn't a threat anymore. "Cormac," she pleaded, taking a step away from him. "It's alright. I'm not going to hurt you. It's me - you need to listen very carefully..."

“Bombarda!”

Hermione ducked, diving towards the floor just in time to miss the curse as it exploded the wall behind her head.

“Cormac, please!” she tried again, ignoring the biting pain in her knees and palms as she tried to crawl towards him. “That wasn’t me before Malfoys had me under a Hex! It wasn’t me killing all those people! Please, please, believe me! I would never—”

“Shut your mouth you traitor!” He shot another curse at her, but it missed when she lunged for his ankles. She knocked him off balance and sent him toppling towards the floor with her, and she heard - rather than saw - his wand clatter against the rubble and roll away.

“We don’t have time for this! You need to listen to me!” Hermione shouted desperately. She crawled beside him and stared down sincerely into his face, trying to make him believe her, to make him see. “You need to Apparate us back to the base! I will explain everything. I promise! Just please Cormac, listen to me!”

Panic started clawing at her chest. She didn’t know how long she had before Malfoy found her. This was her chance to escape. A beautiful opportunity that she never dreamed would fall into her lap. She couldn’t mess this up.

“I’m not taking you anywhere!” Cormac bellowed, just as he brought his fist up sharply and punched Hermione in the nose. She fell backwards, an awful pain spreading across her face as Cormac straddled her hips and leaned over her. “What, is killing our soldiers on the battlefield not enough for you? You want me to take you back to our base, just so you can slaughter everyone who’s too young to fight back?”

Hermione tried to fight him but he pinned her arms at her sides and bracketed his thighs over them, trapping her under his weight.

“I’m not going to listen to a word you say, traitor!” Cormac brought his knuckles down on her face again, cracking something under her cheek, and there was nothing she could do to stop him. “Do you know how many of our friends you’ve killed?”

Hermione jerked her legs up in a feeble attempt to force him off of her but he was too heavy, his bulking frame too large for her to move without the aid of magic.

“Do you know how many people I’ve watched burn on the pyres because of you?” Another punch. Something else cracked, possibly her nose. “I told the others that we should just kill you!” Another punch. “I told Shacklebolt that you were too

“Perhaps you should not do both spells this morning, Miss,” Romy suggested from inside the room. “Perhaps she should just do the glamour’s on her face? Or just her hair? But not both Miss, Miss does not need to do both.”

Astoria didn’t answer, but Hermione heard what sounded like pieces of wood sliding against one another. She assumed it was drawers opening and closing.

“Perhaps Mrs Zabini should not go out at all today. Perhaps she should just get back in bed and ...” From the way Romy’s voice quietly trailed off, he must’ve realised that Astoria wasn’t listening.

Hermione peaked her head around the doorframe and stared into the Zabini’s bedroom.

Astoria sat at her vanity table, staring at herself in the mirror. There was a sadness in her eyes and a frown pulling at her delicate features, like she hated what she saw staring back at her.

Although she was fully clothed in an expensive tea-length dress and impossibly high heels, she looked anything but radiant. Her eyes were sunken back in her head, her face gaunt and features lifeless. Thick dark brown roots poked out from the top of her head, and the blonde underneath was frizzy and dry.

Astoria looked nothing like the immaculately put-together woman she usually was. Even the skin around her bare shoulders and collar bones looked thin and grey. It was the first time Hermione had ever thought she truly looked ill.

Watching herself carefully in the mirror, Astoria drew a deep breath and picked up her wand.

It shook terribly between her fingers but when Romy offered his aid, she held up her other hand to refuse him.

Three twists of her wand was all it took for Astoria to resemble herself again – but those small movements exhausted her.

Although all external traces of her illness had vanished, although her skin was warm and glowing again and her hair its usual golden blonde, the simple spells knocked the wind from Astoria’s lungs. Anyone would have thought she’d been punched in the stomach from the way she leaned over the table and gasped, panting and choking for breath.

It was such simple magic. Even a third year at Hogwarts wouldn’t have broken out in a sweat casting it, and yet it crippled Astoria. Her beauty came at a cost, a high

# CHAPTER 29

dangerous, and Potter that we should kill you on sight! But they didn't listen! They never listen to me!" he bellowed, spitting each vicious word as he brought his fist down on her face again and again and again. "I won't let you kill any more of us Granger! You're going to pay for what you've done! You're going to die! Right here! Right now!"

Cormac just kept hitting her. Kept smashing his fist into her face and breaking everything his knuckles came into contact with. She was sure that her jaw must have been broken.

There was a ringing in her ears. Blood pooled in her mouth and ran from her nose, covering her face and drenching her hair. It mixed with the drying blood of those she'd murdered earlier, until she didn't know where their blood ended, and hers began -

But then, just like that, Cormac's weight vanished.

Hermione sat up and spat out the metallic blood from her mouth, blinking through the wetness matting in her lashes. Cormac was on the other side of the tunnel, laying on his back and gasping for breath. Malfoy was stood in front of her, shielding her.

Malfoy muttered something in Latin, sharply waved his wand in a motion that Hermione didn't recognise, and then Cormac started screaming.

It all happened very quickly, almost instantly.

Cormac started to disintegrate. Hermione had never seen a curse like it. His skin cracked and lit up, like his veins had turned to molten lava and exploded before his body turned to ash and fragmented into nothing, like he'd been burned by fire from a dragon.

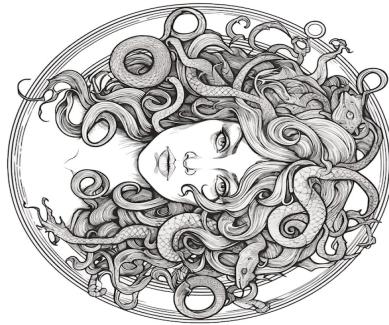
As she stared at the floating shards of ash that were once Cormac, Malfoy knelt in front of her and started healing her injuries.

Hermione paused on her side of the hallway, her hand raised and ready to knock. The door to Astoria's bedroom was slightly ajar, open enough for her to hear the conversation going on inside, but closed *just* the right amount to keep her hidden.

"It's alright," Astoria soothed. "I can do this. I *want* to do this."

"But Master Zabini said that Miss ought not to be using spells that could put a strain on herself!"

"Oh hush you. I would hardly call a few glamour and hair spells strenuous."



## QUEEN, OR NEW ORDER?

*7th May*

"Please Miss, let Rony help."

Hermione paused on her side of the hallway, her hand raised and ready to knock. The door to Astoria's bedroom was slightly ajar, open enough for her to hear the conversation going on inside, but closed *just* the right amount to keep her hidden.

"It's alright," Astoria soothed. "I can do this. I *want* to do this."

"But Master Zabini said that Miss ought not to be using spells that could put a strain on herself!"

"Oh hush you. I would hardly call a few glamour and hair spells strenuous."

Malfoy's hand froze. His eyes snapped up to hers. "Yes, I did," he answered coldly. Matter of fact, no emotion, no remorse for the life he'd just viciously taken.

Another wave of his wand banished the blood from her face and robes “He hurt you, so I killed him, and I’d do it again in a fucking heartbeat.”

“Please my Lord it wasn’t our fault!”

The Dementors circled overhead, drafting freezing air through York Cathedral to raise the hairs on Hermione’s arms.

The Gold Mask, the one Voldemort had deemed ‘responsible’ for today’s mission, trembled furiously in front of her. His knees knocked together and his mask shook as he spoke.

“Please have mercy! I beg you! I will do better! I didn’t see them! They must have used some sort of cloaking magic! It wasn’t my fault!”

Voldemort was seething with rage, incandescent and murderous. Dark magic crackled in the air around him, like little sparks of lightning.

Something was off. Hermione could feel it.

As far as she was aware, the Death Eaters had won this battle. Bournemouth was in ruins, and The Order’s new safehouse there had been raided and destroyed. That base had proven to be vital, a collection of weapons and medicinal potions larger than any other.

Voldemort had pulled all his strongest and most lethal generals away from their usual posts to ensure this mission ran smoothly. He knew this base was vital to the Order’s survival. It was there last medical centre, their final sanctuary, and he wasn’t leaving anything to chance.

They may not have managed to capture any slaves, but the loss of this base would be catastrophic to Shacklebolt and the rest of the regime. This attack was a success. So, why was Voldemort so angry?

“Someone must have tipped them off!” The Gold dropped to his knees, pleading and snivelling as the Dementors inched that little bit closer, eager to feed. “The Spy! The Spy must have told them about our attack! They must have known that the chamber would be unguarded and they could—”

“I will hear no more of this vulture who has chosen to side with those filthy blood traitors over their own kind!” Voldemort sprang from his chair and began pacing the cathedral. The Gold lowered his head in cowardice, trying to hide himself. “When we locate this foul traitor, I will see to their punishment myself!”

“We can’t leave yet. Party is up to something. There’s fuckery somewhere, I just don’t know what his angle is yet.”

“I know,” Theo agreed, still pacing. “I’ll get some more liquor in him, that usually gets his tongue wagging.”

Draco nodded. “And if you think the girls going to be a problem, I’ll have a word with Grouch-”

“No!” Theo winced, realising he’d answered too quickly. “I mean—eughh, I don’t know!” He stopped pacing and stared at Draco. “It’s probably nothing ... but when she looked at me, I got this weird feeling like a shiver up my spine.”

“And what do you think that means?”

Theo let out a slow breath and leaned on the wall behind him. “I have no fucking idea.”

“Have you seen her before?”

“Nope.”

“Well, she certainly looked like she recognised you. If the Dark Lord gave her as a gift, she’s either with the Order, a muggle, or a Muggleborn.” Draco folded his arms across his chest and leaned on the opposite wall. “Perhaps you’ve tortured her family members over the years? Or maybe even her? It would certainly explain why she was so surprised when she saw you.”

“I doubt it. Pretty sure I would remember if I ever interrogated someone who looked like her.”

“After all these years, don’t the faces of those you’ve killed all just blur into one?”

Theo huffed a laugh, staring at the ground. “You would think, wouldn’t you?”

A few minutes later, Draco and Theo returned to the dining room, and the evening resumed without another hiccup. The Death Eaters chatted casually, and the Mustang joined the rest of the dolls hosting. She brought plates of silverware out when she was instructed, and refilled glasses of wine when they were empty, but she wouldn’t take her eyes off Theo.

And Draco couldn’t help but notice, that no matter which direction the conversation took, Theo couldn’t seem to look away from her, either.

She didn't think it might actually be true until she saw Malfoy's reaction. Wasn't until she heard his breath hitch and saw his eyes widen a fraction that she realised there might be some weight to her ridiculous theory.

Terror swept through her. She pinched her eyes closed, as if that might be able to hide her from it. "Oh my god. He did show me how I'm going to die, didn't he?" Her hand covered her mouth just as a fresh sob wrecked its way up her throat. "After Voldemort is done with me, he's going to order you to execute me, isn't he?"

"It wasn't real," Malfoy repeated calmly. "You're being ridiculous. It was just a vision, something the seers came up with while they were bored. None of it was real,"

"Then why do I still feel dead?! I can still feel the fire on my skin and the ropes around my neck and I - and I don't know what to do - I don't know how to fix it. I can still feel his magic inside me! I can't get rid of it! And the fire won't go away! I feel - f-feel like Voldemort killed me in those visions. I feel like he killed me, and I'm still dying now, like he trapped me in death! Like I'm just his broken little thing. This dead thing that's burning and in pain and I can't - I don't!"

A sharp pain suddenly shot through her left knee. Her eyes snapped back open. Malfoy was glaring at her. The tip of his wand was smoking, freshly used.

"Finished with your little pity party?"

Hermione stared at him in disbelief. "Did ... Did you just... hex me?"

"Yes, I did. I would have done anything to get you to just stop fucking crying," Malfoy sneered, unsympathetic to the tears slowly slipping down Hermione's cheeks. "Pull yourself together! Pity doesn't suit you, Granger. Weakness doesn't suit you."

"You really are an arsehole." She wiped the back of her hand roughly across her cheeks, trying to banish the evidence of her weakness. "You have no idea what it was like to experience..."

"For fuck sake, listen to yourself! You're a mess. Did the Dark Lord take your back-bone when he entered your mind? Did he snatch that away along with your courage?!" His voice was cruel and cold, but his eyes were burning. "Have some fucking pride, Granger. Don't stand there and feel sorry for yourself. You're better than that. You're stronger than that, or at least I thought you were."

Hermione's spine straightened like he'd struck her across the back. She raised her chin, her nostrils flaring indignantly. How fucking dare he.

Malfoy smiled cruelly at her. "The other Death Eaters used to tell stories about you. Did you know that? They used to say that you couldn't possibly be a Mudblood because you were too powerful. So fucking talented at murdering our soldiers it was like you were born to do it."

Her hands clenched into fists at her sides. Anger flared in her chest, even if a few extra tears did slip down her face.

"So what if you saw a vision of me killing you? Does that mean you have to stop fighting? Does that mean you have to stop trying to kill me first?"

With a snap of his fingers, a gun appeared at his side. He didn't touch it. It levitated in the air, hovering close to his shoulder. He waved his wand over the barrel, and a soft blue light eclipsed the firearm before it floated into Hermione's hand. "You want to feel alive again Granger? Then shoot me."

She searched his face, looking for a sign that he wasn't being serious. That this was a sick joke she didn't understand the punchline to.

There weren't any.

"I've taken some of the charms out of the gun," he explained, tilting his head to the side and playing with his wand. "Don't get any ideas, you still can't hurt yourself with it. The gun won't fire if you try and shoot yourself, but you can shoot me with it instead."

Hermione tested the weight of it in her hand. It did feel different, lighter but colder.

"The gun won't reload itself, so you've only got one round. Twelve bullets. Is that enough for you to do some real damage?"

Hermione glared at him. "You're forgetting that if I kill you, I die too. Won't that put a kink in your masters' plan?"

"Only if you actually hit me." He smiled and ran his tongue across his top teeth, taunting her. "Think you're up to the challenge?"

"If this is your idea of a joke," she said quietly, "then you're just as sick Nott."

"This isn't a joke." He took a step back and held his arms out wide on either side of him, giving her a clear shot. "Go on, shoot me."

Her eyes flickered down at the gun. She thought about shooting him, she honestly did. Merlin knew she'd been thinking about it for months. Fantasized about it.

A week ago, she'd have pointed the barrel at his head and pulled the trigger without hesitation. Would have killed him and herself without a second thought or regret.

A week ago, she'd have welcomed death with a smile on her face.

But a week ago Voldemort hadn't been in her mind.

A week ago, she wasn't scared of death.

She met Malfoy's eyes again. "No."

He sucked his teeth, growing more irritated. "Go on, shoot me."

"No."

"You've wanted me dead for months, haven't you? Spent hours plotting how you'd do it if you could?" He took a step closer.

Hermione backed away. "I'm not going to shoot you, Malfoy." She tried to keep her voice even, but it shook, even to her own ears. Trembled as much as the gun in her hand did.

"You know you want to."

"No."

"Come on, Granger. Do it."

"No!"

"No? Perhaps I'm going about this the wrong way. Maybe you need some motivation. I could go and see which of your friends the Dark Lord has chained up in his basement? Maybe if one of their lives were threatened, you'd feel differently about shooting me."

Hermione's breath hitched. "You wouldn't dare."

"I think we both know I would." He wore a hunter's expression as he stalked towards her. Cruel and excited. She imagined it was the one he wore under his Demon Mask when he was massacring dozens. "Let's see, who do we have imprisoned at the moment ..."

"Stop it."

"There's a lovely boy called Thomas. Quite young though, I think he was a few years younger than us at school."

"Stop it! Just stop it!"

little control she'd had on her emotions, and the tears she'd been so desperate to hold back streamed down her face without permission.

"When Voldemort went into my mind, he didn't just show me the future. He made me live it" she said quickly, tearing off the band-aid. "He showed me what his victory would look like! What it would mean for the rest of us! He showed me Order members getting slaughtered and your dragon burning and mauling everyone, and I felt everything he showed me!"

Tears blurred her vision, but she thought she caught a blue crack appear in Malfoy's cold eyes.

"I felt her teeth in me! I felt her tearing me apart, and then it all vanished, and I was tied to a post, and I couldn't see anything!" she choked, struggling to gulp down air as she sobbed. "I couldn't move, and then your dragon, she - she crawled up to me - and then she opened her mouth and set me on fire! Your dragon burned me, and I could feel it! I can still feel it! I thought that if I shot myself, I could bleed some of his magic out of me, and I wouldn't have to feel like this anymore! I thought it would get his magic out of me, and this feeling would stop!"

Hermione hadn't imagined it. There was a crack in his grey eyes, a few blue splinters in his occlumency walls.

"And you were with her!" she screamed, feeling her whole body start to tremble. "I only saw her for a second. The only time I saw anything was when she set me on fire, and you were there! You - you were stood right next to her! You were watching - your eyes were dead and cold, and you just stood there did nothing! You just let me burn!"

"Granger, you need to calm down," Malfoy said calmly, an emotion Hermione couldn't quite place colouring his tone. He outstretched a hand towards her. "It was just a vision, it wasn't real..."

"But it felt real! You said my name! You said my name and then your dragon set me on fire! I think he showed me how I'm going to die. I think - he showed me how you're going to kill me."

Even as she said the words, a part of her didn't believe them. Thought they were just panicked ramblings, a way to ease the fear she felt weighing on her chest and reorganise her frenzied mind.

He was quiet for a few moments, mulling over her words. When he spoke again, his voice was softer, lacking the venom it was usually dripping in whenever he spoke to her. "Why do you want to shoot yourself?"

She chewed on the inside of her cheek. The fire was still on her skin. Getting hotter and hotter. She pulled the gauntlets off her arm and started scratching her forearm, trying to relieve the burning, the maddening itch that just wouldn't fuck off.

She considered telling him for a brief moment before she squished the thought entirely. He wouldn't understand. She didn't *numb* him to understand. Or show him this weakness.

She whirled around to face him. "Why do you care?"

"Like it or not, you're my responsibility. *My* problem. My burden to bear." He took a step closer. "Whilst you're in my care, I can't have you blowing holes in yourself now, can I? I'm not a patient man, you already know that. So I'll only ask you one more time, why do you want to shoot yourself?"

"Leave me alone."

Malfoy took another step towards her. "Granger, what's wrong?"

The fire felt like it was spreading upwards. Her head buzzed and ached, like someone had replaced her blood with acid. It was burning. "Leave me alone, Malfoy."

He took another step closer, and Hermione's hands slid into her hair. The fire in her head was getting hotter. She raked her nails across her scalp. She was on fire. Her head was on fire and it wouldn't go away.

"What's the matter with you?" he asked.

She was still on fire. Her breath started to leave her in sharp pants. She couldn't breathe. The fire was in her skin. The dark magic was still in her skin -

"Granger, why do you want to shoot yourself?"

"Because I need to do something to make me feel alive agin'!"

Malfoy froze. "What?"

There. She'd said it. The thing she didn't want to say out loud. The Achilles heel she didn't want to admit she had. The confession undid something, obliterated the

"Or there's Milliecent Bulstrode. I know you two weren't the best of friends, but she pissed the Dark Lord off so she's currently having her fingers chopped off one by one in his dungeon. I'm sure I could sneak her out."

For each step Malfoy took towards her, Hermione took one back.

"Or maybe we've got a Weasley or two chained up?"

Her back connected with one of the stone pillars. She was trapped. He'd herded into a corner like a sheep to slaughter.

"I hear they're a dying breed these days. Maybe you'd feel differently about shooting me if I had my wand at one of their throats?"

Her fingers flexed around the gun.

"Or maybe I could just go after Ron. He's been looking for you for months. He's furious that he hasn't found you yet."

Her heart pounded in her chest. Red began to tint the edges of her vision. Malfoy kept advancing, getting close and closer.

"Shut up," she hissed through gritted teeth. The firearm trembled in her hands.

"He's almost blind with rage. He'll be so easy to catch."

"Shut up!" Hermione screamed, raising the gun to point it at his chest. "Shut up!"

"Shut me up then! Don't give me the chance to kill him! Shoot me first!"

Hermione pulled the trigger.

As the bullet left the chamber, Malfoy flicked his wand to the left. The bullet zipped past him, exploding a large chunk of the wall behind him.

"Again!" He stepped forward, and another red curse exploded from the tip of his wand. "You ou only have eleven bullets left. Better make them count. Aim to kill. Shoot me like you hate me!"

She stepped back to avoid his curse and pulled the trigger again.

Malfoy swept it away with a flick of his wand, then shot another curse at her.

Ten bullets left.

"Aim like that won't save the Weasel. It's like you're not even trying!"

Nine.

"It's like you don't want to save him! Like you want me to kill him!"

Eight.

"He'd be so easy to kill. You know he would."

Every time she fired a bullet, Malfoy swept it aside easily, like it was nothing.

Six.

"It'll be so much fun. Theo and I will have a ball. I bet his skin will slice off the bone like butter."

"Well rip his fingers off and scalp him. Slowly. And he'll die because you let him. Because you were too scared to help him."

Four.

"Poor little broken Golden Girl. Too scared of death to help her friends."

Three.

"Too broken by a vision to save the people she cares about?"

She pulled the trigger again, but Malfoy wasn't as quick this time. The sharp wave of his wand was just a fraction too slow, and the bullet went straight into his left shoulder. He hissed in pain, and stared as thick blood started to pool from the wound she'd just created.

She'd shot him.

She'd actually fucking shot him.

Hermione gasped and stepped towards him. But she didn't lower the gun.

Malfoy grabbed her chin and pushed her back against the stone pillar. He squeezed her face, nails digging into her skin like he was trying to hurt her. Like he wanted to hurt her.

Their noses were touching. She could feel his breath on her face -

Like it was second nature, a reflex, Hermione placed the barrel of the gun underneath Malfoy's chin and pulled the trigger.

She swore her heart stopped when she heard the click of the chamber. She closed her eyes, waiting for her life to end when his did.

But she'd miscounted.

But that was weeks ago, and now she clung to the hope that the charms had somehow weakened through neglect, because she was desperate.

The gun shook in her hands, the barrel trembling against her. She pulled the trigger, but nothing happened. She tried again. The gun clicked, the handle grew warm in her hand, but it didn't fire.

She pulled the trigger again. And again and again. Each time the barrel failed to empty, a new wave of helplessness washed over her. Tears started to prick her eyes.

The gun in her hand suddenly evaporated as though it were made of smoke. Was it ever there to begin with? Or had she just imagined it? Had Voldemort really broken her mind that severely in just a few short minutes?

Without letting herself dwell on that possibility, she dashed towards the table of firearms. She reached down, intending to snatch a small rifle, but the table and all its contents vanished.

However, a sharp snap of fingers had already altered her that she wasn't alone in this room.

She hadn't lost her mind. Not yet, anyway.

"Bring the guns back Malfoy."

"Why? So you can fail to shoot yourself again?" he sneered coldly from the doorway. "No. I don't think I will. Although, I've got to say, I thought your aim would be better."

Hermione kept her back to him. She couldn't bare to face him, not when she was so close to tears. "There's nothing wrong with my aim! It's those stupid charms you've put on the guns! Take them off and I'll show you!"

"Oh, so your hearing isn't impaired after all then? You're not deaf, just an ignorant little shit when others are calling your name. Good to know."

"I'm not in the mood for games Malfoy. Not now. Not after what Voldemort?"

She cut herself off, and began grinding her teeth together to distract her from the stinging in her eyes. Tears so close to breaking free. "Just bring back the guns. *Nom.*"

"They won't do you any good. I'm not taking the charms off them. Even if I do give them back to you, you won't be able to hurt yourself with them."

Hermione snorted and pinched her eyes closed. She wouldn't cry in front of Malfoy. She wouldn't. "Well then maybe I'll just shoot you instead," she laughed bitterly. "That ought to cheer me up."

He probably thought that she'd lost the plot from the way she was sprinting across the grounds like a madwoman. She could hear him calling her, shouting for her to come back, demanding to know what had gotten into her.

Or at least she thought she could hear him calling her. She didn't know anymore. She was so confused. She didn't know which of her feelings were real and which were just remnants of Voldemort's magic.

Dark magic that was still *inside* her. Festering, crackling underneath the surface, igniting the flames that were still bathing her and making her want to wretch.

If that was what death really felt like, there was no wonder Voldemort never wanted to die.

The feeling wouldn't go away. She couldn't shake it off, like a bad dream she couldn't wake up from. She felt hot all over. Swore she could still feel the ropes around her wrists and flames licking across her skin. Fuck - even her skin didn't feel like her own anymore! It was itchy and uncomfortable, like something was crawling beneath the surface. Like he was crawling inside her, burrowing his magic deep.

And the flames wouldn't go away! She still felt like she was dying, a burning corpse just clinging to life.

She wanted this feeling *gone*. She'd do anything to be rid of it. She'd cut her arm off if that's what it took, if that would make the fire just stop.

Hermione swung the doors to the large drawing room open and stormed inside.

The room was exactly as she'd left it weeks ago. Three targets still lined the East Wall, all wearing Black Masks and dark robes shrouding their bodies. The table was still there, rows of guns and firearms still spread evenly across the surface.

She marched to the table and picked up the first gun she saw. She pressed the barrel against her right hip and drew a deep breath.

There were no essential arteries in that area. Shooting herself there would hurt like hell, but the thought that she'd be able to bleed Voldemort's dark magic out of her herself was too appealing to not at least try it.

Malfoy had charmed the guns so she couldn't take them out of the room, and the ones preventing her from shooting herself were unbreakable. She couldn't use them to kill herself, nor could she use them to aid her escape. Hermione was sure that he'd left the guns inside this room on purpose, teasing her, torturing her with the near possibility of escape.

She was out of bullets. The chamber was already empty when she'd pulled the trigger.

For a few moments, neither of them said anything. She opened her eyes and found Malfoy staring at her. He pressed his cold forehead against hers. He was breathing as heavily as she was, blasting the smell of smoke and spearmint against her face. It made her mouth water.

"You were really going to kill me, weren't you?"

"Yes," she panted, their breaths mixing in the small space between them. "I told you I would never stop trying. And I meant it, I just forgot for a moment. I forgot ... myself, and my promise to kill you."

His mouth crashed against hers. His lips were colder than she remembered. For the briefest of moments, she froze in place, still as a statue.

Then she dropped the gun and clung to him. She took his face in her hands and swirled her tongue against his, desperately chasing the feel of his mouth as though she'd been starved for it. Because those flames? That fire that was on her skin and in her blood? They seem to dull, drop a few degrees as his lips pressed against hers and his hands roamed across her body.

And she wanted *more*.

"This doesn't change a thing," she sighed against his mouth, even as her hands fumbled with his belt buckle and tossed it aside. "I still hate you."

"I know."

He cast a slicing hex down the length of her body. It stung and the shock of it made her gasp, but it left a clean rip down the centre of her uniform. Easy for him to rip apart.

"I'm still going to kill you."

He was still bleeding. The bullet wound on his shoulder still fresh, but forgotten. His blood pooled around her fingers as she dragged her hands across his chest, over his scars, along his collarbone.

"Don't forget that," she said. "I'm still going to try and kill you again tomorrow."

"I know." He grabbed the edges of her clothes and tore them off her body, taking her bra and knickers with it. He attacked her mouth again as he threw the shredded fabric aside. Harder than before, biting, sucking. "*I know.*" He kicked off the rest of

his clothes, then hooked his arms under her thighs. He picked her up and pressed his body against hers, pinning her against the stone support beam behind her.

She shook and gasped against him. His skin was ice cold. It was working. The fire was dwindling. It was working but she needed *more*. She wrapped her legs around his waist, her nails biting into his shoulders as he lined himself up.

But he didn't move, not immediately, the way she wanted. Not until she ground her hips against his, searching for friction. Not until she coated him with herself and showed him that she wanted him. Needed him.

"I don't hate you," he growled, spilling malice into her mouth. "I fucking *hate* you."

She felt him smirk into the kiss, then he surged forward.

There was nothing gentle about it. Nothing tender about the way he thrust in, bottoming out in one sharp motion.

Hermione bit down on his lip to keep from screaming. She was over-stretched. A sharp pain of the most delicious sort shot up her spine and made her toes curl.

"Fuck," he hissed into her mouth, swallowing her whine as he started to move. Hard. Fast. Deep.

She could practically feel the malice in each thrust. Each angry snap of his hips expelling the hatred, the anger, the disgust he felt for her. The elastic band sprang back to life in her stomach. Already taunt, pulling tighter and tighter -

And he was still kissing her. Still biting across her lip. Abusing the overheated flesh as he thrust up again and again and again.

The stone cut into her back. The rings around his neck scratched her chest raw. Her head smacked against the pillar with each furious snap.

But the fresh pain meant she was *alive*. Each snap chased away the heat on her skin. Like fighting fire with ice. Ice to make the fire go away. Pain to quiet the dark magic in her veins. Those were the ingredients, the antidote to the black magic Voldemort had used to enter her mind.

He released her mouth, only to fasten it against her neck. Like he couldn't bear the distance, like he still had to be connected to her, like the feel of him inside her body wasn't enough. He scraped his teeth against her pulse point. She shuddered, the band in her stomach tightening.

Hermione kept screaming, praying that when Voldemort finally left from her mind, she'd never have to experience this kind of dark magic again. Hoped that when he finally decided that she'd had enough, he'd take this pain and darkness with him. But he didn't.

When he finally let her go, the pain didn't fade. He may have released her from whatever spell he'd used to show her the visions, but he didn't release her from the fire.

She pulled in a sharp breath as the room reformed around her. She was back in the Cathedral. She knew that. There was solid ground underneath her feet. Someone had their hand pressed against the small of her back, holding her up straight.

But why could she still feel the flames?

She looked down at her hands - the only patch of skin she could see in her Death Eater uniform - and found unblemished skin where she'd expected to see scorched flesh.

It didn't make sense. Voldemort's magic was gone, so why could she still feel the fire burning her? Why could she still feel the ropes cutting into her ribcage, binding her to the stake?

He wasn't in her mind anymore, so why could she still feel his magic inside her? Crawling underneath her skin like an insect.

"Now you know what awaits your friends in the future, Mudblood." Voldemort pressed his wand under her chin and forced her head up to look at him. His red eyes glowed, triumphant. "So tell me, after seeing all that death, after feeling all the suffering that awaits you and your friends, is it me who should fear death? Or is it *you*?"

When Malfoy apparated them back to his estate, Hermione felt nothing like herself.

She thought the awful feeling in her stomach would loosen the further away she got from Voldemort, that the flames and feeling of death would let her go as soon as there was some distance between her and the one who'd caused it.

It didn't. Just another thing she was wrong about.

As the air whirled around her and damp earth materialised underneath her feet, she jerked out of Malfoy's hold and stormed towards the manor.

But Hermione still couldn't see or move!

There was just darkness around her. Darkness and a growl. And the temperature just kept rising. It was like being locked in a sauna. She could breathe a little, but the air was sticky and dry and burned her throat when she inhaled. Sweat trickled down the side of her temple, gathering on her exposed collarbone and neck.

Her heart was beating violently in her chest. Blood roared in her ears.

It's just a vision, she tried to tell herself, willing her body to calm down. It's not real. It's not real. Nothing that happens to you here is real. This isn't your death. This won't happen to you. It will be over soon. Just calm down -

"I would say that I'm sorry, that I didn't see this coming," another voice said in the darkness. A cold voice. A voice she recognised. "But I think we both always knew that this is how it was going to end for us. Didn't we, Granger?"

No.

A blazing fire was suddenly hurtling towards her. It lit up the room, and Hermione saw Malfoy's grey eyes and vacant expression as he stood beside Narcissa, before she was engulfed in the flames.

The light only lasted a second before she was thrown into the darkness again.

Hermione screamed as the dragons' fire licked across her skin. The pain was excruciating. Indescribable. Worse than anything she could have imagined. Acid, fire curses, nothing came close. Her blood boiled and bubbled in her veins instantly. Her skin cracked and blistered, peeling back from the bone like it was trying to escape the impossible heat that was inside her veins.

Even though she was on fire, Hermione still couldn't see. She was in total darkness. Alone and on fire. No one was coming to save her. No matter how loud she screamed, no one was coming to help her.

And the burning just went on. On and on, never-ending, like she was frozen in this fire.

The sound he made against her neck- the groan, caught somewhere between torture and ecstasy- made her squeeze around him.

There was a hiccup in his pace. A brief pause he used to seal her more firmly against the wall, pressing his chest against hers and smearing his blood on her like he was trying to sign her to him. His hands skated higher and squeezed into her hip bones, anchoring her to him.

And then he really started to fuck her.

"I hate that you're in my head," he hissed, babbling harred against her neck as his thrusts grew angrier, hurtful stretching the band tighter and tighter, "-all the fucking time."

Hermione dragged her nails down his back, cutting them against his spine as he snarled insult after insult.

It wasn't awkward like it'd always been with Ron. Wasn't slow and passionate like it'd been with Viktor. Or even rushed like it'd been that one time with Cormac. This - this was fucking Camal. Ruthless.

Their kisses bruised the other. Their bites and scratches drew the blood of the other.

And God how she loved it. Was almost ashamed of the way she loved it. Of the way his insults zipped across her skin like a second touch. Of how she wanted to hurt him, even though he was inside her, dragging his cock across her walls in a way that had her panting, writhing, legs shaking. Of how she thrilled when she pressed her fingers against the bullet wound on a particularly hard thrust, making him hiss. A mixture of pleasure and pain. Tit for tat. He hurt her, so she hurt him back.

But most of all, she was ashamed of how it made her feel alive. In control. More like herself than she'd ever felt.

"Salazar, I fucking loathe you *mudblood*." His hips snapped up harder on the word, exalutating the insult to punch the air in her lungs. "You have no fucking idea," he sucked on her neck, and bit down on her collar bone as his thrusts grew faster, more frantic, "how much I hate you."

"So you - so you keep saying." Her hands wound themselves into his hair, fistling, pulling the roots just as harshly as he was grinding into her. The fire on her skin now a dull ember. The dark magic in her veins almost forgotten. "So make me believe it." She leaned her head down, and he shivered when her lips grazed his ear. "Fuck me like you hate me."

"You're always there- like a fucking ghost. Won't leave me alone - haunting - everywhere I look."

"Fuck - Malfoy - that's it. Just like that," she moaned, screwing her eyes shut and tilting her head towards the ceiling. "That's it. Don't stop. Don't you fucking dare stop."

Fuck - nothing should feel this good. Nothing this wrong should feel this good.

"Pluck your eyes out if they weren't so pretty-" he bit into her skin. "Fucking tear you apart if you didn't feel so good."

It was all too much. The feel of him inside her. The words. The kisses. The bites. It stretched the band too tight. Her thighs started to shake. Her muscles started to spasm -

"I'm - I'm going to-"

"Open your eyes," he groaned hoarsely. His hair tickled her chin as he looked up at her. "Look at me."

"No."

"Look at me," he commanded, thrusting faster, desperate, as his release drew closer. "Don't you fucking dare come without looking at me."

She opened her eyes, but kept her head tilted towards the ceiling. An act of defiance in her own way. Her middle finger to his demand.

She'd looked up at this ceiling once before. Stared at it while she'd been tortured and traced the contours of the paintwork as she'd clung to life all those years ago. And she'd rather stare at it now than look at him when her orgasm came crashing through her.

She didn't look at him, refused to. Not when her mouth dropped open in a silent scream. Not when her muscles seized around him, or even when she felt him growl and twitch inside her.

They slid down the podium together. Utterly spent. A tangle of limbs sprawled on the floor. The malice between them doused for now. Another exorcism completed.

As soon as they were on the floor, Malfoy dragged her underneath his body. He held her tight against him, one hand digging into her spine while the other splayed across her chest. He stared down at her, his eyes flickering from the bruises forming

When Avada's were thrown across battlefields and hit witches she knew - Angelina Johnsson, Sarah Chamberlain, and even ones she didn't know - Hermione felt the killing curse collide with her chest and stop her heart.

And the executions were no different. When he showed her the gallows that stretched high in the sky and the lines of slaves with robe necklaces, Hermione felt a noose around her own neck. And when the trap door vanished beneath the slave's feet, a sharp pain shot around Hermione's neck.

She couldn't breathe. Something was cutting off her air.

She couldn't *breathe*. Couldn't scream. Couldn't shout for help. She fell to her knees, her hands flying to her neck to unhook the noose and let her breathe. But there was no rope. Just a solid pressure that was biting down harder and harder into her throat -

And then it all just vanished.

All the images. All the screams. They all just disappeared as though it was nothing more than a dream, and Hermione was left in total darkness. Alone.

The air around her wasn't cold anymore. It was hot and stuffy.

She tried to raise her hand to blindly feel her way through the darkness, but she couldn't. Her hands were bound tightly behind her back. Coarse ropes were wrapped around her wrists and stomach, binding her to a tall wooden pole behind her.

The air around her was getting hotter. Each tick of the clock raising the temperature another few degrees. She jerked against her restraints, testing for weaknesses -

And then she heard it. A deep rumbling in the darkness. A growl, like rolls of tumbling thunder. Her head snapped up, and although she couldn't see anything, she immediately knew what was closing in on her.

The temperature spiked as the beast drew nearer, but Hermione's blood ran cold. Only a dragon's growl could have that unique effect on the body, and as far as she knew, there was only one dragon that Voldemort had on a leash.

Narcissa was behind her, then she was in front of her, then behind her again, walking in tight circles and getting closer each time. Hermione could feel the ground shudder with each step she took, shaking under her colossal weight. She could hear her wings and tail scrape across the ground. Could feel stifling heat radiate from her black scales.

She tried to look away and search for what Voldemort wasn't showing her, but again, for what felt like the hundredth time since she'd been captured, Hermione had no control. She was powerless.

It was a thousand times worse than being under the Demon Hex. She couldn't move, not unless he told her she could. She always compared the Demon Hex to being tied up by marionette strings, controlled by a monster breathing down her neck, guiding her to act on her worst impulses and feed its appetite, but this was different.

This felt like the monster was *inside* her. Like the monster *was her*. She and Voldemort were the same person. And he wanted to watch the prophecy be retold, so she had no choice but to watch it as well.

As Voldemort's magic shifted, the visions changed. The landscapes and burning churches were gone, and the visions twisted into battles. Dozens of battles in different locations, each warzone snapping into the next. A blur of violent images, countless deaths, and screams that seemed to roll into one.

And somehow, Hermione could *feel* them. She felt it all, experienced each death as though she were the victim.

Death. That was the only way Hermione could describe it. Voldemort was showing her what death must be like. What death must feel like.

Every new vision brought a new wave of pain, a new possible way to endure death. She must have died a hundred times over while he showed her image after image of her apparent future.

When he showed her famous muggle statues being torn from their posts and shattering against the ground, Hermione felt the earth shake violently beneath her boots.

When he showed her Zacharias Smith being engulfed in flames from Black Shadow's mouth, Hermione felt them licking across her skin. She felt her blood boil in her veins, felt the skin on her arm melt as her entire body was eclipsed in searing heat.

When the same beast mauled a team of muggle soldiers in a ruined city, she felt its fangs cutting through her skin. Could feel her bones crushing under the strength of the dragon's jaws. Could feel her flesh slicing open, being torn apart as though the dragon were devouring her.

on her lips, the harsh rise and fall of her chest, and then the blood - his blood - smeared on her sternum, her breasts, her stomach.

His breath was cold and heavy, but it hitched slightly when her fingers wove themselves into his hair, kneading, massaging the roots she'd just abused.

"The next time I fuck you," he breathed, his voice gravely as his hands slid up her neck, "you're going to look into my eyes when you come."

"And the next time I try and kill you," she whispered back, "the gun I use won't be out of bullets."

Blue lightning over a dark silhouette - perhaps a castle, but it vanished before Hermione could be sure.

And the number four. Hermione saw it everywhere. It kept flashing in between each image, a plip, like a cigarette burn on a piece of film.

As the doors of a church she didn't recognise burnt, the number four suddenly flashed in front of her eyes before the vision snapped into the next. And it kept happening.

The support beams on a bridge broke, allowing the structure to fall into an icy lake below.

Four.

The handgun was reloaded with a single round of ammunition.

Four.

Bricks cracked and splintered. A high tower fell and shattered on the ground.

Four.

Another crack of blue against a black sky.

Four.

The church again.

Four.

The gun.

Four.

The bridge.

Four.

The bell tower.

Four.

Dark blue lightning.

Four.

Four.

Four.

Four.

Four.

Four.

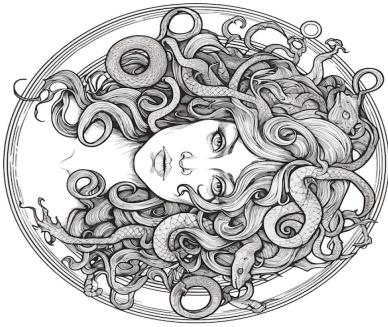
Four.

Four.

Four.

"Does she have to make such a mess while she eats?" Blaise asked.  
Draco rolled his eyes. "Yes."  
"Did she catch that horse on the flight here?"  
"Yes."  
"Then why couldn't she *eat* it on the flight here?"  
"Because I knew that Theodore was going to be late, and I needed to keep her occupied. If she ate it on the way, then she'd grow bored and even more irritable than she already is. And you know what dragons do when they're irritable? *Eat people*. Specifically, people who get on my nerves."

## SIGN OF THE CROSS



You should be taking notes, said a voice in the back of her head. You should be focusing on his mind instead of yours.

To have a glimpse into Voldemort's mind. To see what he had seen and know his plans for the future. It was a pivotal moment. A chance that Harry would have leapt at if he were given the opportunity.

After his 'death', his connection to Voldemort's mind had been almost completely tethered, and the Order had suffered because of it. They'd lost their advantage. Harry couldn't predict Voldemort's next move anymore or get a sense of what scared the Dark Lord and where the weaknesses in his armour were.

'Don't look at what he's showing you, think about what he isn't showing you, what he doesn't want you to see,' the voice persisted, urging her to listen, to ignore the obvious and pay attention to the shadows. You're in his mind. Take this opportunity. Learn from it. Study it. There has to be something here. Something that could help Harry and the Order.

But she didn't need to focus on his mind, because she could already feel it in her own. His magic had already glided over her, connecting her to him and threading his influence so tightly over her it felt like she *was* him, and he *was* her.

He wasn't just merely showing her his mind, he was her mind, and she was his. The realisation struck her too late. She froze with fear. She couldn't move. She wanted to be sick.

His mind was a dark place. Cold and repugnant, and he wanted her to see *more* of it. He wanted to show her what the Seer's had foretold. His future. His victory. The Order's defeat.

None of the images he showed her made any sense to begin with.

Buildings exploding.

Thick smoke rising into the air.

Violent flashes of green light.

An ordinary black handgun with a gold handle.

A church on fire.

A bridge collapsing into a frozen lake.

A stone bell tower crumbling.

Draco didn't need to see under Blaise's gold mask to know that he was rolling his eyes. "Well, she's getting blood all over my robes."

"Then maybe don't stand so close to her while she's having her lunch?"

"And there's some intestine on my shoe..."

"She's a dragon, Zabini," Draco sighed, shaking his head as he used his wand to levitate a piece of meat from the corpse beside him. "Table manners aren't very high on her list of priorities."

He threw the treat into the air. Narcissa raised herself onto her hind legs to catch it. She shook her head violently as she chewed, severing the flesh like a shark after a fresh kill to spray more blood across the grass.

Blaise backed away several more spaces out of the 'danger zone'. "I still don't understand why you had to bring her on this mission," he sneered under his breath, banishing the few - barely there - specs of blood from his robes with a harsh wave of his wand. "There's nothing for her to do here."

"You heard the Dark Lord. He wants her to come on every mission." Draco threw another piece of meat into the air for her to catch- a leg, this time. "No matter how small."

"But look at this place." Blaise waved his arm out to the side. "*There's nothing for her to do here.*"

Although Draco didn't care for his tone, the snarky bastard was right. There was nothing for the dragon to do here, because there was *nothing* here. No houses. No cars. No trees. No civilization of any kind. The only building for miles around was the abandoned church Voldemort had ordered them to investigate. Even the ground itself was dying, the grass yellow and brittle while the earth cracked itself open in search of nourishment.

This small patch of land was forgotten and dead, but hidden away enough for it to be a perfect hiding spot for refugees.

Blaise began to pace behind him. "Where is that bloody psychopath? Surely Nott has enough class and *decency* to come when he's been called upon? I would have thought so, but apparently torturing depraved souls just *cannot* wait until tomorrow."

"He'll be here soon," Draco clipped. "He didn't arrive home until the early hours of this morning, and when he did, he was dripping in blood, and reeked of tequila and drugs and Salazar knows what else."

“Whose blood-”

Draco sharply raised his hand to cut Blaise off. “I didn’t ask. He wasn’t in the mood for questions. I just told him to clean up, get whatever substances he’d taken out of his system, and meet us here.”

“Well, how long does it take to wash some blood out of his hair?”

“You’re rather grouchy this morning mate. Something on your mind?”

Blaise stopped pacing. “I just want to go home. Astoria’s ... not well. I didn’t want to leave her at all today. Her condition is getting worse.”

Draco’s eyes flickered to Blaise’s before he could stop himself. “I thought you upped the dosage of the potions she’s on?”

“I did,” Blaise answered, his voice thick and slightly hoarse. “I’ve been able to plant most of the ingredients we need around your estate. We can grow most of the herbs and plants we need in a healthy supply, but certain ingredients are more tricky to get hold of, and are only used for blood curse related illnesses. We can’t grow them ourselves, and we can’t bulk buy them on the black market without raising suspicions-”

“And the last thing we need is people asking questions and possibly learning about Astoria’s condition,” Draco affirmed. “I know. We’ll figure something out. I promise.”

Blaise didn’t respond, but Draco could hear him fiddling nervously with his gauntlets.

By the time Draco had run out of body parts to keep his dragon occupied with, Theo made his entrance. Despite being over half an hour late, he made no apology for his lateness. He didn’t say a word as he walked past Draco and Blaise and pushed the church doors open.

“Stay out there girl!” Draco told his dragon, “I promise, this won’t take very long.”

Narcissa huffed indignantly. She bared her fangs at Theo, then curled into a ball and settled on the grass to rest. Draco felt her watching him until the very moment he entered the church.

The muggle church was a striking contrast to the grand cathedral that Voldemort used as his central base. It was small and run down, room for no more than thirty people inside, what looked like years of neglect chipped away at the paintwork, and a thick layer of grey dust gathered on the wooden benches.

## CHAPTER 31



### WHAT DEATH MUST FEEL LIKE

**15th May**

It started as a tingle between her brows. Just a few sparks of magic where Voldemort was pressing his wand into her skin. It was uncomfortable, painful, but nothing she couldn’t grit her teeth through.

But then the pain got worse, grew until Hermione could recognise it as dark magic. The evilest kind. The type that raised the hairs on the back of her arm. And it just kept getting stronger and stronger. Short, sharp bursts of pain lashed across her temples like she was being whipped with metal chains while Voldemort threaded his influence over her mind.

And allowed her access into his.

them. You're dying - slowly, by the looks of it - and you know who's responsible? A bunch of wizards and witches who used to be scared to say your name."

"Silence! You do not know what you are talking about, you foolish girl!" Voldemort hissed. "Death is a weakness! Something reserved for the fifth and the vermin! A penance for a life ill spent! I am not dying, nor can I be killed! Your muggles cannot kill me! Your precious Harry Potter cannot kill me!" He charged towards her like a madman, the tip of the wand in his hand still sparkling with the remains of the killing curse he'd used moments ago. "I have seen the future! My reign will be endless, and born from the blood of those muggles you defend so foolishly!"

He pushed Malfoy aside, grabbed a fistful of her hair, and yanked her forward, "Here," he said as he dug the tip of his wand between her eyes. "Let me show you what the Scers have shown me! Let me show you exactly what awaits you and your muggle companions, Mudblood!"

"Silence! You do not know what you are talking about, you foolish girl!" Voldemort hissed. "Death is a weakness! Something reserved for the fifth and the vermin! A penance for a life ill spent! I am not dying, nor can I be killed! Your muggles cannot kill me! Your precious Harry Potter cannot kill me!" He charged towards her like a madman, the tip of the wand in his hand still sparkling with the remains of the killing curse he'd used moments ago. "I have seen the future! My reign will be endless, and born from the blood of those muggles you defend so foolishly!"

Thick cobwebs clung to every inch of the building. They hung on the curved ceiling like tapestries and covered the decorative metal crucifixes and goblets. The lancet windows lining each wall were covered in dust and grime, and the large stained glass window at the top of the aisle was smashed, decorating the floor with broken glass.

At the very beginning of the aisle - closest to the entrance - was a bowl of water resting atop a tall stand, and when Theo noticed it, he took off his gloves and mask and bent over it.

Theo pinched his thumb, middle and index finger together and dipped them into the water gently, before he touched his forehead, then the centre of his chest, then his left shoulder, and then his right.

"You're not seriously making a sign of the cross, are you?" Blaise asked, disbelief clear in his voice as he took off his own mask and placed it on a bench beside Draco's.

"What? That's what you're supposed to do when you enter these places, aren't you?" Theo shrugged, but his eyes flickered to the large decorative Crucifix at the end of the aisle. "I don't know what tricks these muggles had up their sleeves before they abandoned ship. I don't want to burst into flames just because I didn't dab some dirty old water on me."

"Between you and our fearless leader," Blaise said, nodding his chin towards Draco. "You've probably killed at least ten thousand people. Do you really think a bit of Holy Water is going to make a difference?"

Theo stared at Blaise thoughtfully. He looked at the Crucifix, then the bowl of water, then back to the Crucifix. "Yeah, you're probably right." He placed his wand and mask on a nearby seat and went to grab either side of the bowl. "Better just tip the whole thing on our heads, just to be sure..."

Draco caught his arm before he could pick up the bowl.

"What?"

"Look at the water," Draco whispered, his eyes glued on the large silver basin in question.

Theo huffed angrily but followed his commanders' instructions.

The water was deadly still - until it wasn't. A single ringlet appeared in the centre of the bowl, rippling out in all directions like a tiny wave until it stretched to the edge of the bowl. A sign of movement. Something was hiding underneath.

Draco dropped down onto his haunches and examined the basin. Sure enough, there was a switch hidden underneath. After a detection spell showed no signs of magical interference, he flipped the switch and the stand the water bowl was resting on slid to the side, revealing a hole with a spiral staircase hidden underneath.

"Make yourself useful," Draco said, turning to Theo and gesturing towards the void. "Down you go."

Theo looked at the hole, his grimace strong enough to make his nose crinkle. "I'm not going down there. Fucking stinks."

"Come on, we've finally found a hole as dark and depraved as you are." Draco patted his friend on the back once, a hard slap that inched Theo a little closer to the edge. "You'll have a great time down there."

"Fuck off," he huffed, uncharacteristically not in the mood for games. "I'm hanging out my arse, and you want me to go exploring a dark, underground cave? Cheers, but I'll pass."

"You have two options, Theodore. You can either walk down those steps willingly." Draco's hand slipped to the back of Theo's neck. He squeezed hard enough to make Theo tense. "Or I can kick you down them."

After a moment of hesitation, Theo batted Draco's hand away and rolled up his sleeves. "Alright, alright! Fucks sake, I always get stuck with the shit jobs!"

"Well, maybe if you didn't act like such a brat," Blaise muttered, "then maybe you wouldn't be treated like one."

"*Well, maybe if you didn't act like such a brat,*" Theo mocked, imitating Blaise as he stomped down the steps like a child having a tantrum, "*then maybe you wouldn't be treated like one.*" As he descended, his voice got quieter and quieter, until only faint mutterings of '*absolute piss-take this is,*' and '*fucking markers, both of them,*' echoed up the steps behind him.

Draco shook his head, then he and Blaise began their own search of the building. They checked everything on the ground level; under the benches, behind the pulpit, and even emptied shelves of Bibles to search for more hidden switches and trap doors.

Fifteen minutes into their search, they had swept the entire building twice, and found nothing.

The Locket: Ron shattered it with the Sword of Gryffindor.  
Harry: Voldemort 'killed' him in the Forbidden forest, only for him to be resurrected minutes later.

Hufflepuff's cup: despite the way her young and innocent hands had shook, Hermione had destroyed that one herself.

So what had they found?

The missing Diadem? The Horcrux that Malfoy had managed to steal from the Room of Requirement before Harry, Ron and Hermione had been able to find it? The one he'd probably presented to his master like a gift, and hadn't been seen since.

Or maybe it was the snake? Maybe Harry had learned the location of the pit that Voldemort had been keeping her in all these years, and they'd manage to cut her head off?

Or perhaps he'd figured out what the mysterious 8th Horcrux was? The one Voldemort had created in a desperate attempt to prolong his life after the Battle of Hogwarts?

Because its conception was after Harry's 'death' – and his connection to Voldemort was weakened - he couldn't see what the new Horcrux was, only sense that there was a new obstacle for them. They'd never had any leads on it, but maybe they'd had a breakthrough in Hermione's absence?

She supposed it wasn't really important which one it was. The important thing was that it was destroyed. It was gone. Obliterated, and because of it, because of the combined effort of the Order, because of the blood, the sweat, the tears and brave sacrifices of those lost, Voldemort was weakening.

That thought was enough to make Hermione smile.

"Do you think this funny, girl?" Voldemort shouted, the blacks of his eyes narrowing with rage, making him look even more snake-like than he already was.

"Yes, actually," she chuckled quietly before she could stop herself. "I do."

Voldemort clenched his clawed hand into a fist.

Malfoy tensed beside her.

"Because all your '*power*', all that killing, and all those Horcruxes that you created, have ended up being useless." Hermione raised her chin high, voice strong and echoing off the walls of the cathedral. "Because those muggles that you think are beneath you? Well, they've banded together, and you're losing this war because of

His breath left him in sharp, ragged pants as he glowered at the rest of his followers. Hermione couldn't help but thinking that he looked... tired.

Fatigue showed in almost every inch of his being. His skin was paler than Hermione could ever remember it being. His shoulders were slumped and protruding underneath his dark robes. The veins on his neck and hands were darker, and hollow purple rings coloured the skin underneath his eyes. He looked more like a skeleton than a man. Dried crimson clung to the edges of his mouth, almost like he'd been coughing up blood. In many ways, he looked like Astoria after one of her episodes -

And then Hermione understood.

Voldemort's health *was* declining. He *was* weak, and there was only one thing that could weaken a wizard as depraved as Voldemort.

The Order had destroyed another Horcrux.

They'd done it. After years of dead ends and false leads that ended up nowhere, they'd finally found one! The first one in so many years, and destroyed it, shattering a piece of the Dark Wizards soul right alongside it. That was what Goyle was talking about. He'd been entrusted to guard the chamber where Voldemort kept one of the Horcruxes, and the Order had sneaked right passed him and stolen it.

The attack today must have been a diversion to tease out Voldemort's strongest generals. Gather them all together and lure them away to leave the Horcruxes less protected, just so the Order could steal it from right under their noses.

Just like in a game of chess, they'd sacrificed a base, but destroyed something so much more valuable in return.

And Voldemort had no idea. He hadn't known that one of his fortresses had been breached until it was too late. Until he'd felt a part of himself shatter, a piece of his soul being sucked out as though a Dementor had taken it.

So there was hope. Harry had been right. Even after all these years, there was hope.

Hermione could barely contain her excitement. A wave of joy like nothing she'd ever felt swarmed across her chest and heated her skin. She started running through the list of Horcruxes in her head.

Marvolo Gaunt's ring destroyed by Dumbledore.

Tom's diary: destroyed by Harry in the Chamber of Secrets.

"This mission is a little beneath us," Blaise said, using the tip of his wand to brush the torn tapestries aside and check for anything unusual. Like he couldn't bear to touch the muggle artefacts with his own hands, even with gloves on. "Surely some Black Masks could have done this?"

"They could have," Draco answered, "but the Dark Lord asked us to do it. So here we are."

He felt Blaise staring at his back. "Why the sudden importance on muggle churches? He's never cared to check them before."

"Because they destroyed another one."

"The Order?"

"Yes, the bloody Order, who else would I be talking about?" Draco dragged a hand through his hair, his patience thinning by the second. There was nothing here, but the Dark Lord would have his head if he turned up empty-handed. "They found and destroyed another Horcrux. There's only two left now. The Dark Lord is growing weaker, and you know that only makes him angrier, and much looser with the Avada's. We can't afford to fuck up right now. So please, just do as I say, and search the bloody church so we can go home, yeah?"

Blaise was quiet for a few moments while they continued their search. When he spoke again, his voice was strained. "The Horcrux they destroyed - it was the Diadem, wasn't it?"

Draco put down the rosary beads he'd been inspecting. "Yes. It was."

"So he wants us to raid all the churches in the country that have a bell tower?"

Slowly, Draco sighed and nodded.

"And bridges with lakes underneath them?"

Another nod.

"He thinks *my* visions are coming true." Blaise's voice trailed off. Draco turned to find him staring at the floor, lost in thoughts that Draco knew were horrific.

"It doesn't mean anything. Just because the Order found the Diadem, it doesn't mean that you have the gift of foresight."

Blaise met Draco's eyes. "Doesn't it? An awful lot of the things I've seen in these visions have become reality."

"Coincidences, that's all."

"I was right about Potter finding the Diadem, and Granger being on the field that day in Dover." Blaise sighed. "The only reason you were on standby for that mission and were able to capture her was because I said she was going to be there."

Blaise's words started to tumble out faster. The calm edge he usually spoke in was gone. His voice was tense, panicked. His control slipping.

"The Dark Lord didn't believe me, but look what happened. The Order intercepted the attack, just like I saw in my dream. And Granger was there, just like I said she would be. I told him Potter would get the Diadem, I showed him my vision, he didn't believe me, and now look what's happened? They've destroyed it!"

"I thought you didn't believe in all this vision bullshit?"

"I don't - *I didn't!*" Blaise squeezed his eyes closed and shook his head. "My mother always said I had the gift, and I always thought it was bollocks. But just lately it's like everything I dream comes true."

Draco didn't know what to say. He had no words, so he said nothing. Instead, he folded his arms across his chest and leaned back on the empty Bible stand behind him.

"If I truly have the gift of premonition, then I do not want it. I'm afraid to sleep at night. I'm afraid that every horrific thing I see in my nightmares will happen when I open my eyes."

Physically, Blaise was fine, but he looked in more pain than Draco had seen him in a long time. His shoulders heaved as his breath left him faster, his fingers straining around the wand in his hand.

"What if everything I see really does come true? What if the Dark Lord wants to see all of the premonitions I've had?" It looked as though Blaise were struggling to breathe. He clutched his chest, his hand trembling as he spoke. "He'll see Astoria and figure out that she's ill. He'll see the vision I had where she..."

Draco pushed himself off the shelves and took hold of Blaise's face. "He isn't going to ask to see the rest of your premonitions, because they *aren't* premonitions."

He shook him lightly, forcing him to look at him. "Astoria isn't going to die. We're going to find a cure for her and she's going to be fine. You're going to grow old together and have children, and continue making me want to retch with your bloody ridiculous need to be attached to one another every second of the day. Afright?"

Blaise drew a deep, shaky breath and nodded. His eyes were swimming with the tears he was trying to hold back.

Malfoy's fingers dug into Hermione's arm as Voldemort passed them. He dragged her a little closer into his side, further out of his master's furious path.

"This cannot happen again! Do you hear me?" Voldemort roared. "We cannot allow this vermin to do this to me! *To us!* We must squash them now! We will pull all our forces! We will use the trolls! The Dementors! The Acromantuls! We will kill them all! If we must, we will storm their houses and burn them in their beds while they sleep!"

Something in his ranting seemed to inspire him, and he whirled around mid-sentence to face Malfoy and Hermione.

"The dragon! We will use her! She will be taken on every mission! She will knock their metal birds from the sky and burn all their bases to the ground! *Every base!* Whether it holds wizards, muggle soldiers, or children, I do not care, I want them all dead! I want to see their bodies melting! I want to hear their screams! Let them be so loud they ring in the air for months! Forever!"

The way Voldemort flashed his teeth, the way his black eyes burned with excitement as he described the massacre and his jaw vibrated like a rabid dog as he pictured children burning made dread twist in Hermione's stomach. He looked unblinking, a man on the edge, and more dangerous than anything she'd ever seen.

"Of course, my Lord," Malfoy answered. He bowed his head in respect, and used the movement to discreetly drag Hermione behind him a little. "Whatever you wish, it is yours. She will be glad to be of use to you."

Voldemort's robes swirled around him as he started pacing again, drafting a wave of something rotten and putrid in Hermione's direction. She wanted to gag from the stench of it.

"Now," Voldemort hissed quietly as he stopped in front of the Gold Mask who'd failed him today. "As for you, Goyle."

"N-no, p-please, my Lord ... H-have m-mercy..."

"Avada Kedavra!"

All the Death Eaters remained poised and silent, many didn't so much as blink as Goyle's lifeless corpse fell to the floor with a loud, grotesque squelch.

"Let this be a lesson to all of you!" Voldemort said. "Goyle had one job today. He begged for more responsibility. Begged for me to let him guard the chamber, and he failed me."

"Nor. Still don't feel like speaking? Alright then." He twisted his wand, and the deep slashes around his heart started to rip open. The skin started to split in different directions. His bones broke apart -

"Kill whoever he asks us to kill."

The priest started to pray aloud, screaming for Draco to see reason and stop this, but Draco felt nothing for him. No swell of concern in his chest or flicker of remorse as he pried the priest's skin apart, carving a path to rip his heart out.

He was numb everything. The only thing on his mind was the task at hand. And Daphne's voice just egged him on. Looped over and over in his head, reminding him of the promise he'd made to her and that he didn't have her to lean on anymore. She was little more than a ghost in his head, because he'd let her down.

She'd died because he wasn't careful enough to hide her betrayal, or ruthless enough to slaughter the guards at her prison cell and drag her to safety himself.

He hadn't leaned into his bloodlust or earned the horns on his head when she'd been executed.

He'd failed Daphne. But he wouldn't fail Astoria.

He cast another violent curse, the force of it swished the priest's robes to the side, and then Draco saw it. A magical object, clasped onto the belt of the muggle priest. He took a step closer. "Is that a Deluminator?"

The priest choked, struggling to form words through the blood in his mouth.

Draco snatched the object and examined it closely. It *was* a Deluminator.

There was only supposed to be one of those in existence. Draco had seen in Granger's memories that Dumbledore only invented the one, a tiny dark green object that could entrap light from any nearby source. But this wasn't the one Dumbledore gave Weasley. It was smaller and purple rather than green.

It wasn't too far-fetched to assume the Order had deconstructed it so they could see how it worked and then build their own to distribute amongst themselves.

Maybe the Dark Lords paranoia wasn't as ill-placed as Draco had disregarded it to be. Maybe the churches did have contact with the Order. He'd thought the idea was ludicrous when Voldemort had suggested it, but there was clearly some truth in it if the object in his hand was any indication.

Draco waved the Deluminator over the priest's face. "Where did you get this?" His silence wasn't appreciated, so Draco placed his boot against the man's sternum

and pressed down. "Answer my question." He bore down until he heard something crack. "Who-?" he dug his heel down a little more, "-gave-" more pressure, "-you-" another crack, "-*that*?"

The priest coughed and spluttered, covering Draco's boot with more blood. He could have spoken, but he shook his head, refusing.

Growing, Draco pressed his wand against the priest's temple and entered his mind. Because he was a muggle with no magical ability whatsoever, Draco was able to comb through his memories easily, quickly see through years of his life in just a few short minutes.

He watched the effects of the war in fast forward, and found that the priest life was just as repetitive now as it was before the war. His routine changed from busy Sunday Services and weddings, to hiding in the derelict church and taking in any poor souls who happened to need shelter.

It was all very boring until a week ago, when two wizards had entered the church and asked if they could take shelter. The priest agreed, and the next morning the wizards gave him a Deluminator as a 'thank you' for his kindness.

Draco replayed the memory a second time. And then a third. The encounter itself wasn't too incriminating. It could have been a coincidence, but the time around the memory itself had been tampered with.

There were pockets of lost time. Only small pieces, five minutes here and there. Draco would have missed it if he wasn't looking so closely. But the evidence was clear, the priest's memory had been altered.

Maybe he'd seen something he shouldn't have? The Order wouldn't have had the heart to kill him, but perhaps they'd erased his memories instead? Maybe they were covering their tracks? Or protecting him? Whatever the reason, it was highly unlikely Draco - or anyone within the Dark Lords ranks - would be able to retrieve the memories. It was rare that memory erasing charms failed - Grangers parents just happened to be very, very unlucky - and only the witch or wizard that cast them had any hope of ever undoing them.

With no more information to give, the priest was no longer useful. One sharp wave of Draco's wand was all it took to pull the priest's heart from his body and send it flying across the room.

As he gargled on his last breath, Draco stepped back, drew a deep breath and closed his eyes. He tilted his head towards the ceiling and pushed his hair out of his eyes as he exhaled.

Although he hadn't been able to get any evidence of Potter's location, one thing was clear; The Order had a connection with the churches.

"The lake. The gun. The church. Four. It's all connected," Blaise had said earlier today. "Like loose edges of a fabric. I can see it. I just can't see what pulls them all together."

Did the Order somehow know about Blaise's visions? Did they think the churches were linked to Voldemort's downfall? Were they searching them, too? Maybe one of their own Seers had had a similar vision, and they were decoding it to try and secure the Orders victory rather than the Dark Lords?

It was a possibility. Many Seers in the past had reported having similar visions of the same event right before it happened.

But if Blaise's vision was right, then maybe he was right about Astoria. And if he was right about Astoria, then maybe he was right about Granger's execution -

Draco pushed the thought aside as quickly as it had sprung to life, letting it slide off the icy walls before it could do any real damage.

That was the problem with this type of Occlumency. It was a fucking fantastic bit of magic, but this level of numbness couldn't be held for long periods of time. It required absolute concentration, and something as simple as a panicked thought could cause a fracture that zipped across the ice until it brought the whole shield down.

His family were counting on him. He couldn't crumble now.

He quickly glanced at the clock on the wall. It had taken him too long to extract the information, almost two and a half hours. He sighed heavily and walked over to where Nott was still curled up against the wall. He kneeled down and took Notts face in his hands. "How are you holding up?"

Nott didn't answer, didn't even look at Malfoy. He stared at his feet while his breath left him in panicked little rasps.

"I need you to stay in here for a few minutes while I go over my findings with the Dark Lord. Then we can go home."

Again, Nott didn't say a word.

used a sticking charm to pin his arms and legs wide either side of him. "Let's see if taking out your heart really does take your God away."

"You do not have to do this. It is never too late for redemption," the priest said, strangely calm as Draco stood over him. "If you repent now for the lives you have taken, all will be forgiven."

"If you want your God to save you, I would spend a little less time worrying about me," Draco hissed, wordlessly casting an incantation and feeling his wand vibrate with magic, "and a little more time praying for him to save you."

A stream of silver light shot out from the edge of his wand and started tripping the priests' skin open. He screamed in agony as he fought against the sticking charms, but Draco hardly heard it.

Daphne's voice was still in his head. An echo of the promise he'd made to her years ago replaying over and over again;

"*It's our job to protect the others, Draco,*" she'd said to him, just three weeks after the Battle of Hogwarts, when her own Dark Mark was fresh on her skin. "*I'm the oldest, but you're the strongest.*"

"If you think your God can protect you from *me*," Draco hissed as he made another incision on the priest's chest, drawing closer to his heart, "then pray to him!" "We need to be the ones who make the difficult choices, and do the things the others can't."

Deep, angry cuts appeared on the priests skin like he'd been cracked with a whip. He screamed in pain and started to mutter something but it was very quiet. Draco threw another curse. And then another.

"If Voldemort asks us to cut someone's head off," Daphne had said, "you hold the fucker down and I'll swing the axe."

"Come on Father, you're going to have to do better than that!" Another curse across his sternum. The priest clenched his teeth together. "How is your God going to be able to save you if he can't hear you?"

"If he asks us to drown a village, we ask which one."

"I still can't hear you!" Another curse just below the priests' collarbone. Something cracked, and thick blood started spilling from the wound. "Pray to him louder, with feeling this time!"

"We do whatever he asks us to do."

Draco stared down at the priest and started to circle him. He moved very slowly, making sure to be close enough his robes brushed against the priests gold cross each time he passed him. Teasing him with the possibility that he might strike at any moment without warning.

"Enlighten me, Father," Draco said, his voice as dead as his eyes as he dragged his wand across the priests back. "What are you praying for? What is it you think your God can give you?"

"S-strength," the priest spluttered, raising his chin slightly as if that might mask the way it trembled. "F-for the strength to e-endure this ... monstrous test."

Draco quirked a brow, but the rest of his face remained cold and expressionless. "The strength to endure? Is that all? Why don't you ask him to strike me down instead? End all this pain and allow you to get on with the rest of your life?"

The priest didn't respond. He closed his eyes and whispered another prayer, but yelped when Draco slashed another curse across his back.

"Do you think your God can hear you all the way down here?" Draco stopped in front of the priest and glared down at him. "Do you think he can save you from me?"

"God is always w-with me, so I know I am always safe." He paused to swallow. "He is always in m-my .. heart."

"So what happens if I pluck your heart out?" Draco crouched down, his elbows resting on his knees, and leaned into his hostage. "Does that take your God with it?"

"Do what you must, but I will tell you nothing," he said the words strongly, with confidence, but he flinched when Draco pressed his wand against his throat.

"Are you sure you don't want to talk to me? I am a Demon in this army. You saw the mask I wear. You coward at the horns on my head." Draco dug his wand a little deeper into the priest's neck. "You could save us both a lot of time—" he twisted it threateningly, the end sparkling with magic, "- could save yourself a lot of pain if you just tell me what I need to know."

Again, the priest didn't answer. He looked at Malfoy knowingly, as though he were trying to appeal to his better nature, see into his soul, before he realised that he didn't have one, and lowered his head to pray again.

"Well, if you're not going to tell me what I want, I think we should test my theory, don't you?" With a violent flick of his wrist, the priest fell onto his back, and Draco

"Everything is going to be alright - I promise."

Draco hadn't seen Theo have a panic attack like this in years, and he hardly recognised him now. He couldn't let the Dark Lord see him like this. Although he doubted Voldemort would look at Theo long enough to see the desperation in his eyes, if Theo left this room without a speck of blood on him, they were fucked.

If the bloodthirsty soldier - the man who wore blood and guts around his neck like medals - left an interrogation spotless, Voldemort would get suspicious. And they didn't have time to stay behind and answer unnecessary questions.

If they were going to get out of this Cathedral quickly, Draco needed to be thorough. He could leave nothing to chance.

Straightening from his crouch, Draco walked back over to the priest and stood over his body. He dipped both his hands and wand into the blood flowing from the corpse, then returned to Theo's side.

Nott didn't even flinch as Draco wiped the blood over Theo's robes. Wasn't so much as a hitch in his breath as Draco flicked his wand over. Theo's face and splattered it with blood, making it look like he'd been standing close by when the priest was injured, close enough to be the one who cast the slicing hexes.

"I need you to stay in here for about twenty minutes while I share my results with the Dark Lord," Draco explained quietly, keeping his voice barely above a whisper. "And then I need you to come and join us so we can Apparate home. Can you do that?"

Theo managed a small nod. It was the tiniest movement, but it was there.

The Dark Lord was waiting for Draco when he left the interrogation room. He sat on his throne, an urgent expression on his face as he tapped his nails against the armrest.

Barty Crouch Jr was smiling in front of Voldemort, the Mustang standing close beside him. She was wearing another lavish silk gown. A sleeveless number with a low neckline and a large slit up the side that Draco was sure Barty had put there himself.

She twisted uncomfortably against Crouch. He just dug his fingers tighter into her arm, preventing her from escaping.

The Mustang watched Draco closely as he approached. Her inquisitive green eyes darted from the blood on his robes, the blood dripping from his wand, to eventually land on his cold eyes.

"Jr," Draco smirked. "What brings you here?"

Grouch cast him a sideways glare. "Not that it is any of your concern, Malfoy, but I am hosting an event tonight, and the Dark Lord has graciously agreed to grant me more jewels for this one to wear."

"Have you finished with the interrogation?" Voldemort asked when Draco bowed respectfully in front of him, dismissing Bart' with a wave of his hand.

The Mustang narrowed her eyes at him.

"Yes, my Lord, and it proved to be quite useful," Draco answered. "Once Nott got his hands on him, the poor bloke sang like a canary. You know hostages tend to crumble whenever he's involved."

"What interrogation?" Grouch asked, annoyed and hurt. "What hostages?"

The Mustangs lips slid into a small smirk, clearly finding pleasure in Bart' s distress at being left out, again. Draco couldn't help but smirk with her.

Before Voldemort could disclose any further information, Blaise appeared from his own interrogation room. He quickly joined Draco's side and bowed towards his master.

"Ah, what perfect timing," Voldemort almost smiled. "Please, gentlemen, tell me what you have discovered."

"I found this on the priests' belt." Draco held up the Deluminator and offered it to the Dark Lord. "After Theodore loosened his tongue, he told us this that he had been visited by two wizards a little over a week ago," he said. Occlumency allowing him to keep his tone strong and confident, concealing the lie. "He said they took refuge in the church and gave him this Deluminator as thanks. I searched his memories afterwards to confirm, and although it is true, his memory appears to have been tampered with so we don't know anything more."

The priest, kneeling in a prayer with a gold cross clutched between both hands, howled in pain as a large chunk of flesh was ripped out of his shoulder. He was surprisingly resilient. Draco had been at this for almost two hours, and he had yet to force a confession out of him.

The priest hadn't said a word when Draco had cast fire hexes along his lower back, or slicing curses on his legs, or even when his toes had been cut off one after the other. He screamed his way through each wave of torture, but he didn't reveal anything.

He did mumble though.

Draco hadn't been able to make sense of the ramblings to begin with. Eventually, he understood what the fool was doing. Praying. Each time he came close to spilling a secret, he would recite the same little words over and over again until the pain passed.

Draco didn't have time for that - and neither did Astoria.

The elder wand sparked in Voldemort's hand.

"Were there pieces of his memory missing, too?" Draco asked.

as that door had closed, he'd slid down the wall, pulled his knees to his chest, and dug his fingers into his hair.

Theo had possessed a deranged quality about him for years. He was psychotic in his brutality, and there was a maddening aura about the way he was able to tear a soldier's arm from their body and then play with it like it was a toy.

This was different. The way he rocked back and forth, muttering under his breath as he stared at the floor spoke of a different kind of madness. He looked like he belonged in Azkaban rather than the Dark Lord's army.

Draco had sealed the door with a strong locking charm to make sure Voldemort wouldn't know. But seeing his oldest friend who came alive at the sound of other people's screams be reduced to ... this, unnerved him down to his core.

Voldemort would slit Theo's throat if he saw him.

Draco just hoped Blaise could keep his own fear in check long enough to get the information out of his hostage.

Theo would be no help until the poison passed through his system, so while he sat in the corner of the room, utterly useless, Draco forged on, and cast another dark curse.

Lucius's statement was supposed to be a warning, but turned out to be the best fucking piece of advice his father would ever give him.

Because he was right. Fear was powerful, damaging beyond measure. In the years since taking the mark, Draco had seen first-hand what fear could do, even to the bravest man.

Fear was poison; a snake bite that started in the mind and dragged along veins and muscles like a corpse across a floor until it devoured its victim whole. He'd watched fear cloud the minds of the most ruthless generals, watched it seize their muscles and render them useless like a deer caught in headlights, paralysed with fear.

Fuck, fear was a tool Draco often used himself in interrogations. Dangled it in front of hostages like a loaded gun. Watched it swell in their eyes until they split secrets they never would have dreamed of telling if they weren't so terrified of him or what he might do to them.

And if fear was a poison, then Occlumency was the antidote.

Draco supposed it was fitting; one parent handing him a loaded gun while the other showed him how to use a shield.

Occlumency walls numbed everything. They allowed Draco to reach into his own chest and take out the emotions that would otherwise cripple him. Fear. Compassion. Guilt. They were things he didn't need when he wore his horned mask. Things that would only hold him back on the battlefield. Screams didn't reverberate off icy walls the same way they did open air. Cries for help slid off the surface. Occlumency allowed him to switch off. Drown his guilt and empathy and allow him to focus on the axe in his hand and the blood at his feet.

He owed his demon mask to Occlumency. Without it, he would never have been ruthless enough, so without fear or compassion, to ever be deemed Voldemort's 'favourite demon'.

Occlumency was the reason he was able to cast aside the fear and desperation he'd felt when he'd learned of Astoria's accident and instead, focus on the task the Dark Lord had given him.

Unfortunately, that fear had already taken Theo. The idea that they might be too late to save the last Greengrass or that she was already dead was choking him.

The moment Draco had seen that terror creep into his eyes when Voldemort forbid them from going home, he knew Theo was done. He'd managed to keep himself together briefly while they walked into the interrogation room, but as soon

Blaise eyed Draco carefully and nodded. "Yes. Only small amounts over the hours he hosted the witch wizard."

"They have erased their memories?" Barty asked. "Why would they erase such small pieces? My Lord, perhaps you should let me speak to the hostages and I can—"

"That will not be possible, Jr," Draco interrupted. "You know Theodore's methods of interrogation are ruthless. Although he was able to get the prisoner to speak, the levels he had to go to were too much for the muggle's body. He creaked shortly after I clarified his story was correct."

"My hostage is similar, my Lord," Blaise added. "Although he is still alive, I had to push his psyche to the limit to get a confession. I'm afraid his mind is beyond repair. He'll be no more use to you."

"That is to be expected," Voldemort sighed and massaged his temple with one hand. "They are muggles after all. They are so much weaker than us, both in body and in mind, it is to be expected that they would crumble when faced with such power. Thank you, Draco, Blaise, you have served me very well today."

The doors to one of the interrogation rooms opened, and Theo suddenly joined Draco and Blaise. His eyes remained downcast on the floor but the Dark Lord didn't seem to notice, he was too busy admiring the blood on Theo's robes.

Going over their findings with the Dark Lord was painful and drawn out, like pulling fucking teeth. And it was only made worse by Barty being there.

He wanted to know every detail, every word the priests had uttered, where the churches were, and vivid accounts of the items inside the churches. His constant questions and theorising aloud seemed to irritate the Dark Lord so much that after fifteen minutes, he ordered that Barty take any jewel he wanted for his doll and leave. Immediately.

The Mustang - whose eyes had been locked on Theo from the moment he entered the cathedral - stared at Nott until the very moment Crouch apparated them away.

With the distraction gone, Voldemort continued to flesh out the next stages of his plan, and the longer he forced them to stay in the cathedral, the more Draco could feel his Occlumency walls start to fail him. His resolve was weakening. With the priest dead and the information extracted, he had nothing to distract himself

with. No task to focus his frustration on. No victim to force screams out of and pull his mind away from what was - or wasn't - happening at the manor.

It had been almost four hours since Romy had told them of Astoria's accident, far longer than Draco would have liked, and the Dark Lord just kept fucking talking, going over the details again and again so he could better direct his next move.

When his hands started to tremble, Draco folded his arms behind his back. He took deep breaths through his nose, trying to calm his mind with every exhale and refocus his Occlumency. Reinforce the walls.

None of it fucking worked. Splinters had already formed in the ice. Faint hairline fractures, but they were there. Their existence undeniable and impossible to remedy.

Five hours after Romy and Quinzell's intrusion, the three of them were finally dismissed, and they apparated back to the manor with a violent crack. The sound of them reappearing on the estate was like a bomb detonating. It scorched the grass and left a dent in the earth as they materialised out of thin air.

As soon as they were back on the estate, safe and away from prying eyes, the calmness they'd all clung to disappeared. The three of them sprinted into the house.

They skidded to a stop briefly when they made it through the kitchen and into the ground-floor hallway. The staircase was drenched in blood, an unnatural amount was smeared around the base of the stairs and crusting between the tiles.

This was where Astoria must have fallen, and seeing it was far worse than anything Draco could have imagined. There was just ... too much blood.

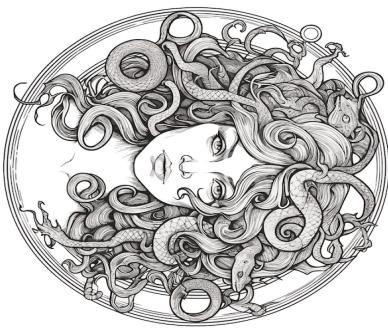
The first definitive crack appeared in Draco's Occlumency wall. Not a fracture like the others. This one was deep and stretched high across the ice.

They only stared at the mess of blood for a second or two before they started running again. They took the steps two, three at a time. Draco could hardly hear anything else through the roaring of blood in his ears.

His heart started to beat faster. The ice thinned as the cracks zipped higher, deeper. Fear crept back into his veins.

All the things he hadn't allowed himself to think about before, all the things his Occlumency had shielded him from, started to bleed through the cracks, making it harder to breathe or think clearly.

## PRAYERS AND PROMISES



### **16th May**

"Fear will destroy you if you let it, Draco. But remember, if administered correctly, fear can also be the most dangerous weapon on earth."

His father had told him that once. Mentioned it briefly over dinner while Draco stared down at his untouched food, moments before the Dark Lord swept into their home and branded Draco with the Dark Mark.

At the time, Draco had assumed it was his father's way of embarrassing him into submission. If'd worked perfectly. The words had rang inside his head so loudly that he'd raised his chin defiantly, met the eyes of his master, and offered up his arm without complaint - at least on the outside.

## CHAPTER 33

A cold chill washed over his spine, a familiar numbness sweeping into his chest where his heart used to be.

When he opened his eyes, he felt no trace of himself, even inside his own body.

He was anaesthetized with numbness.

Desensitised to the screams of the priest as he grabbed him by the scruff of his neck, and his nails scraping across the flagstone as he dragged him into a room for interrogation.

The only thing he could hear, above the roaring of blood in his ears and the slam of the door behind him, was a feminine voice. Soft and clear as a bell.

"It's our job to protect the others, Draco."

He had to do this.

"I'm the oldest, but you're the strongest"

He had to do this quickly.

"We need to keep this family together. We need to be the ones who make the difficult choices, and do the things that the others can't."

By whatever means necessary.

"We need to keep them safe. Promise me that no matter what happens, we'll always do that?"

Because he'd made Daphne a promise. A promise to always protect their family and do whatever the Dark Lord asked in order to keep them alive and together and safe.

He'd broken it once when he let Daphne die. He refused to lose another sister.

Granger was sat up straight with her back leaning against the wooden headboard, her eyes closed and chin tilted towards the ceiling. Her hair was piled on top of her head, loose curls stuck out in every direction while others clung to her clammy forehead.

Astoria's head rested in Granger's lap. Granger had an arm draped over Astoria's back almost lovingly, like she'd been rubbing her shoulders before sleep had eventually found her as well.

Although Astoria's arms were clean as they wrapped around Granger's hip, there were flecks of blood across Granger's face and hair. Either too tired to clean herself up, or unwilling to leave Astoria's side.

What if they were too late? What if Granger hadn't been able to save Astoria? What if she was already dead? Would Blaise be able to keep it together if she were? Would Theo crumple seeing her body? Would Draco?

The second story landing was something torn straight from a horror novel. There was blood everywhere. Red handprints were smeared on the wall and messy streaks were on the floorboards like a body had been dragged across it - but they ignored it. They ignored it all and just kept running. Following the trail of blood through the manor.

Another crack in Draco's walls. A deep fissure that popped the ice around it. The wall wouldn't hold much longer. His emotions started haemorrhaging to the surface faster, becoming stronger, more real.

The beginnings of fear crept back into his veins. Guilt started to weigh heavy on his chest again.

Please be alive; it was all Draco could think. Please be alive. Please, please, please be alive.

The blood lead to Astoria and Blaise's bedroom.

Blaise grasped the handle and flung it open -

They all froze when they saw her. Then. *Together*. Curled up in Astoria's bed like sisters.

The room was a mess. Another blood trail stained the wooden floorboards and disappeared into Blaise and Astoria's bathroom. Beside the bed was a mess of bloodied fabric. Probably the clothes that Astoria had been wearing when she'd fallen.

Granger was sat up straight with her back leaning against the wooden headboard, her eyes closed and chin tilted towards the ceiling. Her hair was piled on top of her head, loose curls stuck out in every direction while others clung to her clammy forehead.

And Astoria ... she wasn't moving. Her skin was grey, more corpse-like than Draco had ever seen it. She was deathly still.

"No, no, please no," Blaise whispered quietly, his voice thick and almost unrecognisable. "She looks ... dead."

"Dead," Theo said, having finally found his voice again. "Astoria looks like she's dead."

They were too late.

They'd failed - Draco had failed.

The realisation caused the last crack in his occlumency walls - the final nail in the coffin - and just as the wall fell, just as the tidal wave of emotions he'd been suppressing pulled Malfoy under, Granger opened her eyes.

As though he'd been petrified, Blaise stopped moving. He looked frozen with fear.

"Then we shall go back," Quinzel said as she took hold of Romy's elbow. "We can!"

"Actually, that will not be possible," Voldemort interrupted. "I will need you two to stay here as well. It is feeding time for Nagini, and all my elves and servants are out doing other tasks. You two will need to do this for me."

Romy and Quinzel's ears drooped submissively.

"Of course, sir," Quinzel said. She bowed her head and grabbed Romy to make him do the same.

Draco's chest got tighter, another stomp on his sternum when Blaise and Theo turned to stare at him with panicked eyes. Pleading. Desperate.

They were fucked, backed into a corner and looking to him for guidance. A way out.

And Draco didn't fucking have one.

Slowly, so carefully that the Dark Lord missed it, Draco shook his head.

Because one thing their master valued in his followers, above loyalty, above wealth, was strength. He loathed fragility, cut it out of his ranks like a cancer.

If they disobeyed him and left to help Astoria, it would surely mark her as 'weak', brand her as damaged, poisoned, and he would kill her. He would kill them all, assume one tainted apple had rotted the entire orchard and Avada the lot of them.

The only option they had was to stay here and hope they could complete their tasks quickly. Hope Granger could keep Astoria alive until they were released from their duties.

So, with a hollow ache in his chest and a deep inhale, Draco closed his eyes, and focused on shards of glass and icy walls.

He imagined his emotions. His fear. His pain. His empathy. He imagined them all, pictured them as tangible substances he could grasp in his hand, feel in his palm. Then he imagined ripping them out of his chest, throwing them over the wall he'd built, and sealing the gap.

"You will do no such thing," Voldemort's voice was venomous and loud, almost a screech.

The elves cringed away from him.

"I have given the three of you tasks, and you will not leave here until they are completed. We are on the cusp of victory, now is not the time to get careless when there is much work that needs to be done."

Blaise stared at their master with a horrified expression. "But my Lord - my wife. If she has fallen, I should be there to..."

"Your wife completed her education at Hogwarts, did she not?" Voldemort asked, running his snake-like tongue across his cracking lips.

Blaise swallowed nervously. "Yes. Her final two years were cut short due to the war, but she had tutors and passed every course on the curriculum."

"Then healing a simple wound on her head will be nothing for her. It's child's magic."

Child's magic that she's too weak to do herself, Draco wanted to say.

"A little tumble down the stairs is nothing. The elves are exaggerating, she will have barely more than a scratch on her little head."

Her condition made her bones brittle and weak. A little tumble down the stairs' could crack her skull open.

"It should take nothing for her to heal that herself!"

But she couldn't even do a Glamour charm without getting out of breath!

"She will be fine. She does not need you."

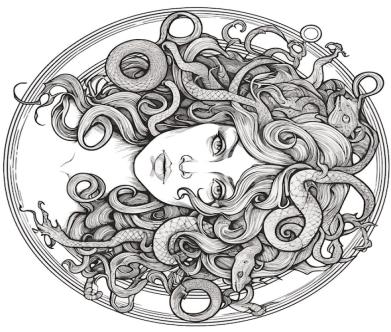
Fuck. Fuck. Fuck!

"But my Lord," Blaise tried to plead, that broken edge slipping back into his voice. "If you would just allow me to go home and check on her..."

"Your presence is needed here, Zabini. I will hear no more of this. Not unless you want to be replaced," Voldemort said the last word slowly, a threat. He leaned forward on his chair, and a menacing green light crackled around the elder wand. "If you do not think your wife is capable of such simple magic, then maybe her family aren't as strong as I thought they were. Maybe I should just let the last Greengrass die, let the last flower wilt, and be done with the wretched line for good."

His walls were down. It made him look so much younger.

## CHAPTER 34



### EMPTY GRAVES

**16th May**

The first thing Hermione saw when she opened her eyes was Malfoy's face, and for whatever reason, she couldn't seem to look away.

In all her years of warfare and all the battlefields she'd fought on, she didn't think she'd ever seen anyone look so desperate, so utterly fucking lost and vulnerable that it made her stomach twist and her chest feel empty. She'd never seen him look so... open. It was almost scary to see him like that. His hand shaking as he clutched his chest. The distraught look on his face.

And his eyes... They were the clearest, ocean blue she'd ever seen.

For the longest time, no one said a word. The Death Eaters just stared, their eyes flickering from Hermione, to the head in her lap, then back again. They brought a fog into the room, the air suddenly thick and crackling. Hermione felt it like a heavy boot on her chest.

"Is Astoria..." Blaise whispered after a moment. The way his voice broke was enough to tear Hermione's attention away from Malfoy - for a moment. "Is she...?"

Although he was speaking to Hermione, his eyes remained fixed on his wife, looking for a tiny rise of her chest or flutter of her lashes. Desperate to see a sign of life.

Out of the three of them, Blaise understandably was fating the worst. He looked almost insane with guilt. The image of a man who would open the balcony doors and happily throw himself over the edge if Hermione didn't give him the answer he wanted.

Luckily, she did.

"She's alright," she managed to say, her own voice hoarse and thick with exhaustion. "I managed to slow the bleeding and get her stable shortly after Romy and Quinzel left to get the three of you."

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, the relief was palpable.

As soon as Hermione said it out loud, a wave of relief swept through the room.

Theo exhaled as though he'd been punched in the stomach. He leaned against the doorframe, the emotions he felt apparently liquefying his bones until he could no longer stand on his own.

Blaise clapped a hand over his mouth, his eyes glazing over with tears as he sobbed quietly into his palm.

Malfoy just stared at Hermione. Unmoving. As still as the Renaissance paintings she often thought he resembled. She couldn't be sure if he was even breathing.

Hermione cleared her throat, fighting the sudden tightness gathering there. "She'll need plenty of rest and blood replenishing potions - but after a few healing charms she'll be fine."

Blaise took a cautious step closer. "How did you... You don't have magic..."

"The muggle way. She split the back of her head open when she fell. I haven't managed to close the wound - you'll need to do that with magic as soon as possible

"It is Miss Astoria," Romy said quickly. "She was walking around the house - and Romy told her not to wear such high heeled shoes! Romy told her not to wear them, sir! He said she would fall and hurt herself, but she did not listen!"

Draco's chest tightened as though someone had stamped on it with a boot.

"She fell and banged her head on the stairs, sir."

No.

"There was so much blood! Blood everywhere!"

No. No. No.

"Romy and Quinzel tried to fix it, but Miss is very weak!"

This couldn't be happening.

"Miss does not have many Blood Replenishing potions left! Miss was going to brew more when Master Zabini got home, but she fell. We does not know what to do! We has tried everything, but we cannot stop the bleeding."

Not now. Not ever. Not again.

"Her blood cur..."

"Her blood makes us *queasy*, Sir," Quinzel cut in. Draco could only pray that Voldemort hadn't picked up on Romy's almost slip. "So we is coming to get you. Because Romy and Quinzel is not good at this type of healing magic. We used what little potions we had in stock, but they has not worked. And Miss Granger does not have a wand - or magic."

"Is Granger with her now?" Draco rushed, unable to stop himself a second time.

Out the corner of his eyes, he caught Blaise's panicked stare flicker to him.

"Yes, she is," Quinzel answered. "She has been helping to stop the bleeding with-Quinzel paused and her eyes drifted to her hands nervously, " -muggle methods."

"I will not leave my wife in the care of a Mudblood! I will go..." Blaise started, only to be silenced by Voldemort.

"You will go nowhere, Zabini," the Dark Lord hissed, raising himself off his throne slightly. "I have not dismissed you yet, and I have a task I need you to complete urgently. I am afraid it is likely that you will not see your wife at all tonight."

"I'll go then," Theo offered. He drew his wand, ready to Apparate.

"Yes, my Lord," Draco said, bowing his head respectfully and trying not to flinch when he felt dark magic sweep through the air. He didn't need to look up to know that Voldemort's wand was poised, itching for deadly use.

"Are you absolutely sure there wasn't anyone else there?"

The priest whimpered as Theo dragged him forward, making him kneel at Voldemort's feet.

"Yes, my Lord," Draco repeated. "We checked it half a dozen times and there was nothing else there."

"Very well then. Zabini, Bellatrix picked up a hostage in Devonshire," The Dark Lord said after several very quiet - very tense - moments of silence. "He will not talk. Claims he is impervious to physical pain so he requires your particular skill set to extract information."

Blaise accepted his task with a gracious nod.

"Malfoy and Nott, you will interrogate your hostage until he reveals something useful, and tomorrow, you will search the next church. And then the next. And then the next."

"Of course." Draco straightened out of his bow and folded his hands behind his back. "We will do everything in our power to secure your victory."

The priest shrieked when Theo grabbed the back of his neck and flashed him a sinister grin. "Come on then, Father. We're going to have such a good time, I can already tell you're going to be a screamer."

"I - I don't know anything! I swear," the man sobbed, desperately clutching the gold cross around his neck like it was a life raft in the ocean. "Please. Please, let me go..."

A loud pop of Apparation cracked through the Cathedral. Romy materialised beside Draco with a distressed look on his face, and half a second later, Quinzell appeared, looking just as frightened.

"Sir! Sir, you must come quick!" Romy shrieked, his small hands flapping about in the air. "You must all come quick! Romy and Quinzell needs help! There has been an accident at the manor!"

Immediately, Blaise and Theo flew to the elves. "What type of accident?"

*Is Granger alright?* was the first question Draco wanted to ask, but caught it before his tongue had the chance to curl around her name.

- but I did slow the bleeding by ripping a piece of my dress off and using it as a compress." Hermione's eyes flickered down to the head of blonde hair in her lap. She started to draw circles across Astoria's back, avoiding Blaise's eyes. "But she was unconscious and so cold from the amount of blood she'd lost. She would have died if I didn't get her warm, and I suspected she'd have had a spare blood replenishing potion in your room in case of emergencies." She jutted her chin towards the empty bottle on the floor, confirming her suspicion was correct. "I don't have magic so I couldn't levitate her, but I didn't dare leave her to fetch a blanket and check your room, so I had to drag her up here."

The sharp hitch in Blaise's breath made her flinch slightly. She half expected him to hex her for not being careful enough with his delicate wife.

"I suspect she'll have some minor bruises and scratches along her back." Hermione rushed through the words, wanting to make it abundantly clear to Blaise that everything she'd done had been in Astoria's interest. "And you may want to cast some healing charms on them when you heal her skull, just to be safe. I'm sorry, but it couldn't be helped."

"Of course, I completely understand," Blaise said, his tone lacking all of the malice Hermione had expected to hear. That was odd. He'd never spoken to her softly.

Although he did still have his hand pressed against his mouth. Ah, that must've been why his words lacked their usual spiteful undertone, because there was no way Blaise would actually -

"I don't care what you had to do," Blaise said, "the important thing is that my wife is alive - because of you."

Well, shit. She hadn't expected that.

Blaise walked towards the bed slowly, cautiously, the way a person would approach a wounded animal. He dropped down on his knees on Hermione's side of the bed, and broke down. Tears streamed down his cheeks as he took Astoria's left hand in both of his and kissed her wedding ring. Then her knuckles. Her fingers. Every inch of her pale skin that he could reach.

"Thank you," Blaise sobbed, clutching Astoria's hand as though it were the only thing he needed in this world to be able to breathe. "Thank you, Hermione." A kiss to her knuckles. "Thank you for saving her." Another to her ring finger. "I don't know what I would have done if she -"

He cut himself off with another quiet sob. He glanced up at Hermione, and there was no hint of that spiteful expression he usually wore whenever he looked at her. He stared at her now with nothing but tears on his face and sincere gratitude in his eyes that hadn't been there before.

Hermione smiled back at him before she cradled Astoria's head in both hands and carefully laid her on the pillows. She shuffled out of bed to allow Blaise to take her place, and just as she got to her feet, Malfoy and Theo slid out of the room.

Hermione had no idea what possessed her to follow them. The two Death Eaters didn't appear to notice her. They weren't speaking, didn't even acknowledge one another when Theo veered off towards the kitchen and Malfoy carried on into his own wing of the manor.

She followed Malfoy down the halls, but stopped outside his bedroom door. He'd left it wide open, something he'd never done before. Careful to keep her feet just on the threshold, Hermione took a deep breath through her nose and peeked inside.

She wasn't surprised that his room was the biggest on the estate. Or by the dark emerald paint on the walls, the large oak four-poster bed, or even the two huge lancet windows that framed either side.

No, what did surprise her, however, was Malfoy himself. She found him hunched over, one hand clutching a poster of his bed while he roughly ran the other through his hair.

"Fuck - I'm sorry," he muttered. Even his voice didn't sound the same. "I'm so sorry, Daph. She almost- fuck!"

He straightened suddenly and stood tall. His entire body looked like it was shaking, and she watched from the doorway as he pulled his robes and shirt over his head and tossed them aside.

Thin rays of fading orange sunlight streaked through the windows, casting interesting shadows across the broad planes of his back and the dagger that was tucked into his belt. It was the same one he'd had tucked into his towel the night she'd kissed him. The one she'd tried to stab him with.

"What do you want, Granger?" The sharpness in his voice made her jump. Her head snapped up to see him glaring at her through the window's reflection.

*I wanted to see if you were alright,* was what she wanted to say - but she didn't. She swallowed the words instead. Forced them back down along with the strange thickness that had formed in her throat, and glared right back at him.

Draco turned to Blaise with a glare. "How did you even know about that?"

Blaise shrugged, the ghost of a smile tugging at his lips. "Astoria told me."

"He's married to the biggest gossip in wizarding Europe. If Astoria knows you fucked Granger, then of course she's going to tell him!" Theo chuckled, finally straightening and wiping tears from his eyes. "That woman knows everything! Don't you remember that time in fourth year when she caught Professor Trelawny stealing Snape's herbs for '*medial purposes*'? He made little air quotes by crooking his fingers. "Astoria had that shit passed around the school *and* the Ministry before Trelawney had even gotten a buzz." Suddenly, Theo's expression dropped. "Wait, wait. This was last night?"

Draco narrowed his eyes, which was apparently confirmation enough for Theo. "But Astoria told me that the Mudblood shot you last night?"

"She did shoot him," Blaise answered.

The priest flinched when Draco's hands flew into the air above him. "Can that fucking wife of yours not keep anything to herself?"

"So which is it?" Theo asked Blaise, ignoring Draco completely. "Did she shoot him? Or did he fuck her?"

Blaise smiled. "She shot him, and then he fucked her against a stone pillar in the drawing-room."

Theo's mouth dropped open. "Not in the same drawing-room that his aunt Bella tortured her in?"

When Blaise nodded, Theo almost dropped to the floor howling with laughter. Seething, Draco grabbed his mask by the horns and stormed towards the entrance. He kicked the door open furiously, the wood splintering under his boot, and snarled over his shoulder, "We're done here. Bring that snivelling mess with you!"

"She shot him, and then he fucked her." Theo shook his head and threw an arm around the priest, pulling him in close so he could lead him out of the church. "How many Hail Mary's do you reckon that's brought him then father? Three? Six? Nine?"

"This is the only thing you found in the church?"

"Life would be if I could wrap my fingers around her throat and just—" He raised his hands in front of him and squeezed, suffocating the ghost of air in front of him.

Blaise quirked a brow. "So fucking her last night was, what? A hate fuck? *I can't kill you, so I'll fuck you instead*, is that it?"

The last of Draco's patience expired. He drew his wand, but before he could hex Blaise into oblivion, there was a loud crashing noise behind him.

Draco and Blaise spun toward it and aimed their wands.

Theo had materialised from underground, and he wasn't empty-handed.

He had a quivering man of the cloth clutched in a tight headlock under his arm, the poor blokes face red and eyes bulging with lack of oxygen. The decorative gold plate that Theo had undoubtedly been trying to steal - and just dropped - rolled across the floor to create a noise like nails scraping down a chalkboard. He had a nuns headpiece on top of his head - which was crooked at an odd angle - and a bewildered look on his face.

Theo stared at Draco as though he'd suddenly sprouted a second head, his eyes blown wide and mouth hanging off its hinges. "You ... fucked Granger?"

Draco pinched the bridge of his nose. "Oh for the love of—"

"YOU FUCKED GRANGER?!" Theo erupted into hysterical laughter. He doubled over himself, briefly releasing the priest from the headlock to fold his arms over his stomach.

The young priest seized his opportunity and made a run for it, but a set of chains exploded from Draco's wand and secured around him before he could reach the exit. They pinned his wrists together and wrapped around his knees like a python, and he fell onto his face with a loud thud. Hopefully broke his fucking nose.

Draco turned to glare at Blaise. "I hope you're pleased with yourself!"

"Oh, my - Granger?! Seriously?! God, that's the funniest thing - I've ever heard!"

Draco thought Theo's laughter was starting to subside, but when he looked up at Draco, he burst out laughing again, twice as loud as before.

"Oh - been in such a shit mood all morning," he managed to choke out through fits of chuckling. "But that's cheered me right up. Holy fuck, I needed that!" He slapped his hand across his mouth and turned to the priest. "Oops. Sorry. Forgive me, father."

"You seemed off your game. Distracted," she lied, making her eyes flicker to the dagger at his back. "Thought I might take advantage. Stab you in the back while your mind was elsewhere, so to speak."

"I shouldn't have expected anything less from you." Despite the clear blue of his eyes, his tone was vicious, forced. "I suppose it was silly of me to think a lion would have the fucking compassion to not strike when its prey is distracted. You always do like to kick me when I'm down."

Hermione held his gaze as she stepped into the room. "Maybe so, but I'd wager that a lion still has more compassion than a Demon has."

His brow furrowed in the window. "You aren't supposed to be able to enter my room."

"I know. I asked Romy and Quinzell to take the wards off each bedroom before they left to fetch you. I thought there might be something in one of your rooms that could help save Astoria. I wanted to have every possible resource available. Just in case."

Malfoy glared at her for a moment longer before he shook his head and conjured a bottle of whisky. He removed the cork with a flick of his wand and took a large swig. He barely swallowed before he took another. And then another.

While he drank himself into a coma, Hermione looked past his reflection, and watched Theo storm across the grounds to disappear into the graveyard. "That unmarked grave that Nott always visits - that's where Daphne Greengrass is buried, isn't it?"

"No."

His answer caught Hermione off guard, and her eyes snapped back to his reflection. "I know it's Daphne's grave. I worked it out weeks ago, so there's no point in lying about it."

"You're right, the headstone is for Daphne." Malfoy paused briefly to take another swig of whiskey. "But she's not buried there."

"What do you?"

Malfoy spun around to face her. The expression he wore forced Hermione to cringe away slightly. "What exactly do you think happens when you betray the Dark Lord, hmm? Do you think it's just a slap on the wrist? A public execution and that's the end of it? Do you honestly think he lets loved ones bury the bodies of their relatives if they've been declared a traitor?"

He took another slow step towards her. His teeth might've been bared and his voice dripping with rage, but his eyes gave him away. Without his Occlumency walls to hide behind, Hermione could see the fear in them. Could see the scared little boy that hid behind the horns.

He was trying to frighten her. Scare her off before he said the wrong thing so naturally, Hermione rooted herself in the spot.

“What did Voldemort do to Daphne’s body?” she asked.

Malfoy flinched. He tried to hide it, tried to shrug it off and mask it by jabbing his tongue on the inside of his cheek, but Hermione had already noticed it. She could practically see the struggle in him, the need to remain cold and cruel wrestling with the desire to just let go.

“After Voldemort had Daphne killed,” Hermione asked slowly, holding his eyes and willing him to be honest, vulnerable, just this once, “what did he do with her body?”

“After the execution, after he hacked away at her and pulled every fucking - “ He shut his eyes and ground his teeth together as he desperately fought to keep control. “He gave her body to Greyback’s pack. Just like he did my fathers body after he executed him.” He smothered his face with his hand like he couldn’t believe what he was saying. He squeezed his eyes even tighter and dug his nails into his temples, reddening the pale skin there. The bottle of whiskey rattled against his silver rings as he trembled. “And just like he did my mothers body.”

Hermione’s chest tightened. Bile rose in her throat.

Malfoy drew a deep breath, trying to compose himself, and dragged his hand up into his hair. He held it there and opened his eyes. His jaw was tight, but the corners of his eyes were glistening, brimming with tears. “If you betray the Dark Lord, that’s it. There are no second chances. He loves sending a message to his followers, and you know what the message is here? Traitors are worthless to him, and if anyone is foolish enough to try, he’ll feed them to the fucking wolves.”

“Malfoy, I - “ Words suddenly failed Hermione. She didn’t know what to say, nothing seemed enough. Every thought she had was eclipsed with howls and werewolves fighting over a mangled corpse with dark blonde hair.

Voldemort wouldn’t have made Malfoy watch that too. Would he?

“I serve him because I thought it would keep the rest of my family safe,” Malfoy whispered hoarsely, almost a sob. “Before her execution, I visited Daphne in her

meant nothing. Just another notch on his death toll. Another drop of blood on his already dripping ledger.

But it did mean something. Fuck knew why.

Just thinking about it made him feel sick. The mere thought of her being bound to a post, hands behind her back and fire licking at her skin made him want to punch the wall beside him until his knuckles bled.

“You’re a hypocrite!” Blaise snapped, fury creeping into the corners of his eyes. “I can’t believe this! You tell me to keep it together and be strong, and then you do *this*? If the Dark Lord finds out you feel something for her, he’s going to kill us. You do know that, don’t you?”

“The only thing I *feel* for her is resentment. The bloody woman is a nightmare! She’s an insufferable know-it-all who thinks she’s clever enough to kill me!” Draco scoffed, the cigarette drafting smoke across his face with each word. “Trust me, Granger is much more likely to stab me than she is to kiss me.”

“Well I imagine that just makes it all the more exciting for you, Draco. You always did get thrills from doing dangerous things, dancing on the edge of a sword just to prove you could,” Blaise snarled, his lip curling back in disgust. “Does it make it fun for you, knowing that she’s going to try and kill you every time she’s given the chance? Do you get a thrill not knowing if each time you see her, she’ll kiss you or put a bullet in your brain?”

“Do you think I enjoy having her in my fucking head all the time? Watching her every move to make sure she hasn’t concocted another plot to kill me? Or herself?” He laughed bitterly, a mixture of festering anger and nicotine heating his cold chest. “If she dies while the Dark Lord still has use for her, he’ll kill our entire family. So you know what my first thought every morning is? Her! ‘Has she found a way to strangle herself in the night?’ or ‘What if the charms on the windows have failed and she’s thrown herself out of one?’”

Blaise’s eyes narrowed in suspicion. He opened his mouth, but Draco cut him off before he could speak.

“My last thought before I go to sleep is her! ‘What if the elves left a fucking butter knife laying around, and she’s managed to slit her throat with it?’” His fingers squeezed his cigarette so tightly the bud snapped in half, both pieces falling to the floor and leaving little smoke streams on their descent. “It’s just her! Her! Her! Do you know how fucking frustrating that is? Do you know how much more convenient my

It took several minutes, but Blaise managed to get his breathing back to a more natural rhythm. Once he'd calmed, Draco stepped back and began to search the church again. "Are you sure those are the only things you're worried about?"

Draco's brow furrowed. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Let's say - for argument's sake - that some of the things I've seen in my visions are correct," Blaise's eyes drifted down while he fiddle with his cufflinks. "If the Dark Lord does order you to execute Granger upon his victory, are you going to be able to do it?"

A cold, foreign feeling swept through Draco at the thought. He looked away, pulled out a packet of cigarettes and placed one in his mouth. "It won't come to that. She's too valuable."

"But if we win the war, he'll have no use for her."

Draco ground his teeth together as he lit the cigarette. "If he wins the war, she and Potter won't be a threat anymore. He'll have no reason to kill her."

"But what if he does?"

"He won't."

"But what if he does ask you to kill her? Then what are you going to do?"

Draco whirled around and snarled, the exhale fanning a wall of smoke out his mouth. "Then I suppose I'll just have to kill her, won't I? Just like I have to fucking kill everyone else!"

Blaise's expression fell. He stared at Draco with wide eyes. "You're *hitting*? You've grown a soft spot for the Mudblood, haven't you?"

Draco's expression twisted into a scowl. He took another long, deep drag. "Of course I haven't."

"Yes, you have. I can see it on your face." Blaise gave Draco a long look, taking him in from head to foot. "If he orders you to kill her, you won't be able to do it."

Draco shook his head and ran a hand through his hair, ignoring how his fingers shook slightly. "You're losing the plot. Those visions are messing with your head mate."

After years of service to the Dark Lord and all the executions and mass killings he'd carried out, death should have meant nothing to him. Her death should have

cell. She made me swear to stay loyal and look after the others. I thought that if I did whatever he asked and killed everyone he asked me to, he would never let anything happen to them." He dropped his face back into his hand, and it took everything in Hermione not to reach for him. "And then today - when Romy told us what had happened to Astoria - all I could think about was Daphne. How I'd let her down. And Voldemort wouldn't let us leave. There was nothing I could do because he wouldn't... I couldn't."

Malfoy turned away. He stared out the window, trying to hide from her, but she could see his reflection in the glass. The broken look on his face snapped something in her chest.

Hermione reached for him before she was really conscious she was doing it, but as soon as her hand grazed the cold skin on his back, Malfoy whirled around and threw the whiskey bottle at the wall. It smashed on impact, leaving a dent in the wall and the bitter smell whirling around the room.

"Oh fuck off, Granger! Would you just *fuck off!*" he snarled, all teeth and rage. "Why can't you just leave me alone! Why do you always have to be there!"

"Fuck me? Fuck *you!*!" She stepped away from him and pressed her back against the wall. "You were in pain so I was trying to help you, you narcissistic asshole!"

"You think you know me all of a sudden?" He placed a hand on either side of her and sealed her against the wall. "You think that just because you opened your legs, just because I've been *inside* you, that you *know me?*"

She tried to slap him on instinct, but he caught her wrist. She tried to punch him with her free arm, but he caught that one too then pinned both her arms above her head. "Let go of me, Malfoy!"

"Oh, we're back to 'Malfoy' again, are we? Make up your mind, mudblood."

"Why do you always lash out like this? Why is it whenever I think there might be something decent in you, a sliver of something vulnerable and *good*, you go and do this?" Hermione fought to pull her wrist free and glared up at him. "What happened to you to make you this cruel?"

"I'm cruel because I have to be! I'm cruel because it's the only way I know to keep the others safe! You want to see why I'm the way I am? You want to see my demons, Granger? Have it your way then!"

And then, with a vicious snarl and his hands vibrating with rage, Malfoy grabbed Hermione's face, muttered an incantation she'd never heard, and pulled her into his mind.

The air whirled around them both as the floor vanished underneath their feet. There was a flash of bright light, so blinding that Hermione had to close her eyes to shield herself from it. When she opened her eyes again, she wasn't in Malfoy's room anymore.

They'd materialised outside, on the East side of his estate. She recognised it from the tall rose bushes, in full bloom and charmed to be slightly different shades.

"Why did you bring me here?" she demanded.

His eyes flickered down to hers, but someone else answered for him.

"You need to breathe," said a voice from the other side of the rose bushes. It was Malfoy's voice but lighter, younger. It lacked the growl and grittiness he'd gained with age.

"Mother fucker!" hissed a woman's voice. "Merlin, this hurts so much!"

"I know."

Without really thinking about it, Hermione followed the voices, Malfoy walking close behind her. When they appeared on the other side of the rose bush, Hermione skidded to a stop.

Because Daphne Greengrass was sat on a bench - Hermione's favourite bench - clutching her left forearm while a younger version of Malfoy stood in front of her. They both looked very young. Seventeen, eighteen at the very most.

Even with her eyes shut and her face scrunched up in pain, Daphne looked the mirror image of Astoria.

"It hurts! It - eughhh!" Daphne smacked her fist against the arm of the bench, presumably trying to distract herself from whatever pain was plaguing her arm. "How can you stand it?"

The younger version of Malfoy scoffed. A tiny dragon with black scales was curled around his shoulder. Narcissa was no bigger than a cat, and flashing barely-there fangs at Daphne. "Patience and practice."

Daphne opened one eye enough to glare at both of them. "You're fucking with me, aren't you?"

"Foresight isn't real, the Dark Lord is just old and superstitious," Draco said as calmly as he could manage. "That generation is different. He's obsessing over these visions because he relied on them so heavily in the past. But none of it is real. You just got lucky with the Diadem prediction, and Granger being at Dover that day, but that's it. It was blind luck - "

"And what about what happened to your mother?"

Draco felt the blood drain from his face. He dropped his hands.

Blaise's eyes softened a fraction. "She was loyal to the Dark Lord for years. She offered him her home and money to support his regime, so how could I have known that she was going to lie to him?"

Draco drew a deep breath and forced himself to swallow. Because there was no way anyone could have guessed that. He certainly hadn't. No one could have known that his mother would betray Voldemort at the last second, or that she would almost hand the Order their victory.

No could have predicted it, not unless they'd *seen* it. Dreamt it. Prophesied it.

"If I was right about your mother, then I could be right about everything else." Blaise rushed through the words, hardly pausing to breathe. It was as though he thought if he spoke quickly enough, he might somehow sway Draco to his way of thinking. "The lake. The gun. The church. Four. It's all connected. Like loose edges of a fabric. I can see it. I just can't see what pulls them all together. But if I'm right about the Dark Lord's victory, then I must be right about Astoria."

"Stop it, Zabini. You're starting to spiral." Draco's hands balled into fists. "We can't do this right now. I've got the Dark Lord breathing down my neck everyday and an insubordinate Gold Mask whose out of control and refuses to follow instructions."

Blaise stared at him and took a deep breath, fighting to regain his composure.

"I've got a spy leaking invaluable secrets, and no fucking clue who they are. And every time I think I'm close to weeding them out, the trail goes cold and I'm back to square one." He started twisting the rings on his finger, a nervous habit he wished he could weed out. "The Dark Lord is relying on us, and I can't have you crumbling. We need to be strong. Together. It's the only way we're all going to make it through this war alive. Do you understand?"

"They're both beautiful, I couldn't possibly say. You go to these sorts of things all the time, I'm sure you know which is more appropriate." When Astoria threw her a displeased look, Hermione added with a smile, "But honestly, how is it that we're in the middle of a war, and your biggest problem is which dress to wear at a party?"

"*Goddamn,*" Astoria corrected, coyly pointing her nose high in the air and smiling so brightly her dimples shone. "And I know. You must think me terribly vain and selfish."

"Actually," Hermione laughed quietly as she re-joined Astoria on the edge of the bed, "I admire that you refuse to let it get in the way of your fun."

"Well, we must latch onto happiness wherever we find it." Astoria smiled, eyes twinkling in that way Hermione now knew was signature to the Greengrass sisters. "Because we don't know how long we will have in this life."

Now that Hermione had seen the version of the older Greengrass the Death Eaters knew, she found Astoria resembled her much more than she'd realised before. It wasn't just the physical resemblance; their similarity ran so much deeper than that. They both just seemed to radiate warmth and ease. Their smiles were infectious to those around them, and they both had the type of laughs that made everyone else chuckle, casting an illusion that everything was going to be alright.

Hermione's chest tightened slightly whenever she looked at Astoria's hair, now that she knew the reason behind it.

Hermione shook her head slightly and looked away, her eye zeroing in on the small spatter of faded blood on Astoria's cream wall beside her door. It was just a tiny mark, a few flecks of blood that were either missed by the cleaning charms used to wipe the memory of her accident away, or had soaked too far into the paint to be removed.

"Why is that stain still there?" Hermione asked. "I thought Zabini cleaned every inch of this room himself with charms."

Astoria was quiet for a few moments before she answered. "He did - but I asked him to leave those marks on the wall."

Hermione sharply turned to stare at Astoria. "Why would you do that?"

Astoria shrugged, but a sly smile was tugging at the edges of her pink painted lips.

"Well, I was hoping you might cover it with one of your murals."

"You know I can't"

"I know you're struggling with inspiration at the moment," Astoria cut in, "but you haven't been on a mission for a couple of weeks, and I was hoping the break from the Hex might have allowed the creative juices to flow again. Please. I love the paintings on your wall, and I hoped you might create something for me. There are some gorgeous flowers around the estate you could take inspiration from? You could paint me something with roses and lilies and doves and all those wonderful sorts of things."

Their conversation was interrupted by three delicate knocks on the door. Zabini stepped into the room, Romy pushing a tea trolley closely behind him.

"Darling," Zabini bent and placed a kiss on Astoria's cheek, then turned and nodded awkwardly in Hermione's general direction.

"Hello, Miss Astoria," Romy said, his happy chirp almost completely masking Zabini's awkwardness. "Hello, Miss Hermione. Romy cannot stay long. He is going to go to the market and get ingredients for dinner today. He is going to make cottage pie and roast potatoes. He hopes that is alright with everyone."

"Of course he's making roast bloody potatoes," Zabini rolled his eyes and started preparing the tea. Hermione noticed there were only two mugs.

Romy disappeared with a quiet crack. As Hermione got to her feet, Astoria slipped the thick duvet off her, but as she tried to get out of bed, Zabini reached out to stop her.

"Darling, I love you more than anything in this world," Astoria said sternly as she swatted his arm away, "but I swear on Salazar's grave - if you don't stop treating me like I'm made of glass, I'm going to beat you to death with my pink fur slippers."

Zabini was unable to keep the shock off his face, but he took a step back and started pouring the drinks.

"Right, well ... I'll make myself disappear then," Hermione said quietly. "I'll see what I can do about your wall, but I'm not promising anything."

Astoria's face lit up with excitement. "Oh, thank you, Hermione! You'll do an amazing job, I just know it!" she beamed, flashing a smile that made her look even more like her sister. "Let me know what colour paints you want, brushes, overalls, anything you need is yours! Oh, Blaise, how wonderful is it that Hermione will be painting us a mural for our room?"

Blaise nodded in acknowledgement but kept his head down, apparently busy preparing the tea even though he'd added sugar and been stirring the same mug for

almost a minute. Although he'd softened to Hermione, uncomfortable energy radiated around him.

Hermione took that as her cue to leave.

"Oh, and Hermione? The lilies I like are near the Venomous Tentacular plant. So if you do happen to run into Malfoy while you're there and end up arguing," Astoria smiled as Blaise handed her a mug, "be sure to move somewhere else before you fuck him. Alright?"

Hermione's cheeks flamed. "I still don't know why I told you about that."

"Don't worry, you're not alone." Astoria winked. "Everyone tends to tell me things they ought not to."

Hermione turned, not able to leave the room fast enough -

"Wait," Zabini said suddenly, making Hermione pause mid-step. He looked at her thoughtfully for a moment, pursing his lips, then conjured what looked like a silver travel mug and poured in some tea. "Sugar?" he asked, eyes down.

Hermione suddenly forgot how to speak. "Ern ... yes. One, please."

"She likes plenty of milk, too," Astoria chirped.

Zabini nodded, and while he added a generous amount of milk and sugar, Astoria and Hermione exchanged a bewildered look at one another. When he was finished, he put the lid on the steaming mug and held it out in front of Hermione.

"Thank you," she said quietly, awkwardly taking it from his outstretched hand.

"It's quite alright," he answered as he took his seat on the edge of Astoria's bed. "*Hermione.*"

She gasped quietly, a little stunned. Since she'd arrived, Zabini had only ever called her Mudblood, often going to great lengths to show her how much he despised her, how little he thought of her.

He'd been taught for years that her kind were vermin, lesser, no more civilized than animals. Yet she'd managed to save his wife without the aid of magic. Managed to keep the most important thing in his life alive with those same methods that were apparently 'beneath him'?

The cup of tea wasn't just a cup of tea at all. It was a peace offering. An olive branch. The apology she never expected.

in their hands. She'd expected him to turn around and leave, but surprisingly, he conjured himself a cup, made himself a drink, and took a seat by the window.

The first time it had happened, Hermione assumed it was a fluke. A one-off. Malfoy would knock, enter Astoria's room with an empty mug in his hand, nod to Hermione as he made himself a cup, and sit down.

He never said a word when he was there. He just sat in the same armchair, mug in his hands, and looked out the window while the girls chatted. Never contributing to the conversation, just ... listening.

He hadn't made an appearance today.

Hermione glanced at the small clock on Astoria's bedside table. Almost quarter past five, and he wasn't here. It was the first time he'd missed this little routine in weeks. She wasn't sure why it bothered her as much as it did.

"So what do you think?" Astoria asked. "Should I wear the red dress to the gala next week, or the green one?"

Hermione quirked a brow. "You almost died Astoria, do you really think you should be going to Gala's so soon?"

"Yes, yes - I know. I banged my head and almost bled to death. It was all very dramatic," Astoria sighed in mock horror - making fun of how close she'd been to joining her sister- and shook her head. "You needn't worry. You saved me, and in a week I'll be perfectly fine again."

Hermione pursed her lips and took a slow look at the blonde. She did look a lot better. Radiant, even. Her hair was perfect and her nails were polished. Her cheeks were artificially flushed and her lips painted a soft pink, but Hermione knew it was all a facade. Astoria was still dying, and no amount of cosmetics or glamour charms would change that.

"So," Astoria encouraged, jutting her chin toward the two ballgowns hanging from her wardrobe doors. "Which dress do you think is the prettiest?"

Hermione sighed and walked to the wardrobe doors to examine the gowns. She ran her fingers carefully over the expensive fabric. They were both incredibly intricate, and heavily embossed with tiny diamonds that Hermione was sure were real.

He imported expensive ingredients and exotic potions from abroad, and insisted the elves drop all their other chores to focus on brewing potions. Hermione offered to help, but Quinzel would just say the elves would do it better, faster, and then shoo her out the room.

Even when Astoria woke and insisted that she was on the mend, Zabini still hovered around her and carried her from their bed whenever she needed to bathe or use the bathroom. He could barely stand to be more than a foot away from her. Zabini looked *exhausted*, but he never complained. Not once.

Nott and Malfoy were no different. They visited Astoria's bedside multiple times a day – although Nott was banned on the seventh day when he tried to sneak Astoria a *'spécial cigarett'* that he insisted would help with any pain she may be feeling.

Unlike the boys, Astoria seemed rather unfazed by her near brush with death. She wasn't happy about being bedbound, but aside from the odd complaint about missing her heels and dresses, she was rather happy.

In the mornings, she would wake groggy and weak, drink her potions, change into a different silk sleep gown and matching robe, and then boss the Death Eaters around from the comfort of her bed with a smile on her perfectly glamoured face.

Malfoy was different since Astoria's accident.

He didn't leave the Manor unless he absolutely had to. He was called on assignments every few days, but he never took Hermione with him. Whether she wasn't needed or he was simply making excuses not to take her, Hermione wasn't sure. But she hadn't been under the Demon Hex for almost three weeks, and she was silently grateful for the reprieve. Even if it was only temporary.

Ordinarily, when they weren't on missions together, Malfoy kept his distance from Hermione. It almost seemed like he went out of his way to avoid her, either spending his free time with his dragon, walking Astoria around the estate, or locked away in his room.

With Astoria mostly bed-bound, Hermione spent an awful lot of time in Astoria's room. She brought her flowers from the garden and helped the elves bring Astoria's meals and pots of tea. She sat with her for hours and hours, just prattling on about none sense and keeping the blonde company. And Malfoy often joined them.

Five days after Astoria's accident, minutes after Hermione had wheeled a silver tea trolley into the room, Malfoy had knocked and walked inside. He'd frozen when he saw Hermione sitting at the edge of Astoria's bed, both witches with a cup of tea

Hermione threw Astoria one last confused glance - to which Astoria shrugged - and then left the room in a sort of bewildered haze.

When Hermione closed the door behind her, Blaise found his wife smiling at him. "What?"

"That was very nice of you. Thank you. I appreciate you being kinder to her."

"She saved your life - I could give her every galleon in my vault and it would never repay that debt," Blaise huffed sarcastically. "I hardly think making her a cup of tea is anything to write home about."

"I know, but I know her saving me has changed the way you think about her. I know it's going to take a little longer for you to trust her completely, but I do appreciate you making the effort. She's important to me." Astoria paused to blow on her mug. "And although he's not quite ready to admit it yet, she's important to Draco, too."

Blaise watched her for a few seconds before a knowing look flashed across his face. "You sent Hermione into the gardens on purpose."

Astoria's lip twitched, fighting a smile. "Did I?"

Blaise's brows furrowed in that adorable way Astoria loved - when he knew she was scheming and doing something she shouldn't, but he hadn't quite worked out what it was yet. "You know Draco will be back soon."

Astoria watched him from over the top of her mug as she took her first sip. "'You know he took Narcissa out to hunt and stretch her wings,'" he added slowly, putting the pieces together, "and you know she always lands on the field on the Southside of the estate. Where the Venomous Tentacular plant is." He narrowed his eyes at her. "Which is right next to the lilies you've just sent Hermione to look at."

"Are they?" Astoria's smile widened. "Doesn't ring a bell."

A chuckle erupted from Blaise's chest.

"You are - without a doubt - the most beautiful and devious witch I have ever met."

"And that is why you are so utterly obsessed and in love with me." Astoria kissed the tip of his nose, but as she leaned back to take another sip of tea, she was struck with an odd thought. "Aren't you supposed to be on assignment right now?"

“The Dark Lord charged my schedule. He’s dropped me from almost every guard duty for the next month,” Blaise sighed. “He thinks that if I’m more well-rested, I may have more visions that can help him win the war.”

Irritation knocked the smile off Astoria’s face.

“That’s ridiculous. You can’t manufacture premonitions of the future, they appear to you naturally. You can’t rush these things.”

“I know, darling.” He reached out with his free hand to cup her face, gently rubbing his thumb across her cheek. “But if it means he’s allowing me to spend more time at home with you, then I’m not going to correct him. Now, I only have until seven o’clock before I’m required at York Cathedral, and I intend to have you bathed and slowly fucked into nirvana before I leave. Twice.”

Astoria’s mouth dropped open. “What?”

Her husband quirked a teasing brow. “What? You said you wanted me to stop treating you like you’re made of glass, didn’t you? Now drink up, take off your clothes, and get in the bath.”

Although she almost dropped the mug through sheer shock, Astoria had never downed a drink quicker in her life.

Astoria was right, the lilies on this part of the estate were lovely. So vibrant and beautiful that they almost demanded inspiration be drawn from them.

Hermione had just finished picking a fourth specimen to use for a possible colour palette when the wind picked up unexpectedly, and despite there not being a single cloud in the sky, the plants she was admiring were suddenly covered with a black shadow.

She stepped back as Narcissa landed on the grass with a thud. The dragon landed much closer to Hermione than she expected, so close she could feel the warmth radiating from her scales.

Dry heat prickled across Hermione’s skin, reminding her of a different sort of flame. The one that had melted her skin to the bone in Voldemort’s premonition and clung to her still, even weeks later. A reminder she didn’t want to have. A ghost that second exorcism didn’t seem to get rid of.

Astoria’s recovery didn’t happen overnight. It took two days before she opened her eyes, and a further three before she could sit up in bed without any help. Despite the vast amounts of potions Zabini brought her and the hours and hours he spent casting - casting, and then recasting - restorative charms, the healing process was cruelly slow. The problem was her illness, as though the wretched blood curse absorbed all the charms and potions for itself and only left her body with the scraps. Zabini knew this, and despite the elves continually assuring him that Astoria would be fine, that it would just take time, he refused to sleep until she could tell him so herself. They couldn’t bring in healers without raising suspicions, so he took on every aspect of the role himself.

## OLIVE BRANCH



## CHAPTER 35

Malfoy flinched away from her at first. Probably expected her to hit him again. Or thought it was a trick and was waiting for her to reach for the dagger at his back to stab him. Again.

She used her hands around his neck to drag him closer. She moved her lips carefully against his, and slowly - so fucking slowly - the ice around him thawed and he kissed her back.

He wrapped his arms around her back and hugged her against his chest. He kissed her gently, tenderly, unsure, just the faintest pressure of his lips against hers. He kissed her again and again and again, but he never tried to take it further. His hands didn't roam her body or try to undress her. He just held her close, crushing her against his chest like he was trying to absorb her.

It was different to the other kisses they'd shared. It wasn't all teeth and bites and scratches. It was slow, soft, and felt a thousand times more intimate.

Eventually, when her lungs burned and her cheeks ached, she pulled away, but kept her hands around his neck, unwilling to let go of him just yet.

"Why did you do that?" he panted softly, resting his forehead against hers.

"You looked like you needed it."

"I thought you still wanted to kill me?" he asked, blasting cold air against her face, even as his arms tightened around her back and pulled her just that fraction closer.

"I do, but it's a lot harder to fantasize about stabbing you in the heart when I can see the reason why it's so broken."

Narcissa lowered her neck and left shoulder to the ground, allowing Malfoy to elegantly dismounted the enormous beast as though it were the easiest thing in the world.

He was dressed in all black; fitted trousers, leather boots that laced up to his knees, fingerless gloves, gauntlets, and a wand holster on his left bicep. The sleeves of his shirt were pushed up his elbows and he'd left the top few buttons undone, giving her a clear view of the chain and wedding rings around his neck.

Riding clothes, Hermione realised. But they reminded her of his old Quidditch uniform without the Slytherin green colouration.

Narcissa had a horse corpse clutched between her talons, more and more of its blood oozing onto the grass each time she squeezed and relaxed her hind legs. Malfoy gently patted her shoulder, but her attention was wholly fixed on Hermione.

The dragon started to approach, her teeth bared as a low hissing sound began to radiate from deep within her chest.

The ground shuddered with every step she took, the air growing hotter and hotter as she drew closer.

The uncomfortable heat in Hermione's skin prickled. She took a step away, a fresh wave of panic shooting through her when her back connected with a wooden fence that sectioned off the Venomous Tentacular plant.

She was trapped, and the dragon just kept advancing.

"Malfoy, what is she doing?" Although quiet, the terror in Hermione's voice was unmistakable.

"It's alright Granger," Malfoy said calmly. "Try not to panic."

"How can I not fucking panic when she's looking at me like she wants to use my bones to clean her teeth!"

Narcissa pressed her snout against Hermione's stomach and pushed her against the fence. Although it was somewhat gentle, burning panic swept through Hermione like she'd been injected with it.

The dragon inhaled deeply and nudged her. The low growling sound she made vibrated through Hermione, fuelling her terror.

Needing her hands free to defend herself, Hermione dropped her mug and the flowers she'd picked. Her palms burned as she pressed them against the beast's hot scales and pushed. She tried with every ounce of strength she had, but the dragon

didn't seem to feel it. She just nudged Hermione again, her snout heating Hermione's skin through her clothes like having warm coals laid on her stomach.

The vision Voldemort had showed her came screaming back to life. Being trapped and tied to a post. Unable to move. The heat rising and rising. Fire burning her skin. Her nightmare had been made real.

Hermione had been on hundreds of battlefields. She was no stranger to death, she'd brushed up against him more times than she could count, but she couldn't recall a time she'd ever been so terrified. Nothing even came close.

The dragons' teeth were millimetres away from her skin, her stomach, her vital organs. Just one bite would snap Hermione in half like she was nothing. Her mouth - the mouth that could breathe fire and melt tanks and burn the blood in her veins, just like it had in Voldemort's vision.

Hermione squeezed her eyes closed, the very bones of her beginning to tremble. "Make her stop, Malfoy!" she practically screamed. "Please. Please, get her away from me!"

Malfoy snapped his fingers and whistled sharply. Immediately, Narcissa backed away several steps.

Hermione took a deep, shuddering breath and turned around, hiding her face. Despite no longer being pinned to the fence, she didn't feel relief. Her hands shook as she held the wooden fence for support.

Malfoy was at her side in an instant.

"Don't you ever fucking let her do that to me again!" She saw him reach for her out the corner of her eye. She shrugged him off and focused on taking deep, steady breaths. "I'm fine," she lied. "I just need a minute."

"Granger, you're shaking. Are you alright?"

"Do I look like I'm fucking alright?" Her teeth chattered as she ground them together. "I can still feel Voldemort's magic crawling inside me. And the vision he showed me - the flames she burned me with, the fire- it all just came flooding back."

She had no idea why she was telling him this. She hadn't meant to. She'd been dealing with it on her own since Voldemort had been inside her head. Privately running herself a near freezing bath whenever she woke in the middle of the night to nightmares of being burned alive, or pacing the halls over and over to distract her from scratching her wrists raw to try and bleed that awful magic out of her veins.

me that it doesn't erase the horrendous things I've done, and that you're still going to try and kill me tomorrow?"

He squeezed his fingers, making hers constrict around his throat, guiding her to suffocate him. "Try and kill me again! Go on! I fucking dare you! Because I promise, as long as my family need me, you will never - *ever* - be able to kill me! I will do whatever I need to to keep them safe! I don't care if it damn's me to hell, I don't care if it shreds my soul into tiny little pieces to do it, I will always keep them safe! Always!"

Hermione felt frozen. She had her hands wrapped around his throat, her nails digging into the neck of the most vicious killer in Voldemort's army, and she couldn't squeeze. Couldn't will her muscles to contract and crush his windpipe like she knew she should.

Because it wasn't the Demon Mask she was staring at. It wasn't the man who'd butchered thousands and burned entire towns without an ounce of remorse.

She was staring at Draco, Dr Jekyll. The one whose eyes were so clear and blue she could see the guilt and pain written into every fleck of his irises. The one who'd sacrificed everything, sold his soul to keep the ones he loved safe, and proved that he and Hermione were more alike than she realised.

She'd done unspeakable things to protect her family, too. The first time she killed was to protect others she cared about. The first time she ever lost control of her rage and went on a murderous spree was when she butchered her parents' killers. She'd killed and tortured and damned herself to keep the Order safe, just like he had.

#Malfoy had said months ago that they were alike, and he was right.

He protected his own, and so did she, but not without remorse. She carried that guilt around with her like a scar, and apparently, he did too.

They were so different in blood and upbringing, on different sides of the same war and facing opposite directions, but more alike than either of them ever expected.

So instead of attacking him, she did the thing she never imagined she'd do.

She leaned forward, and kissed him.

Call it an instinct or a moment of weakness. Call it her bleeding Gryffindor heart that hated to see someone so broken. It didn't matter. He was in pain, and it was the only thing she could think of to fix it. A band-aid, a temporary remedy, but a remedy nonetheless.

He gets sloppy, misses meetings and skips raids, and if I wasn't there to pick up the slack, the Dark Lord would slit his throat for being so fucking inconsistent!"

Hermione couldn't speak. Couldn't breathe. All she could do was listen and watch Malfoy's emotions erupt out of him in a way she never thought possible.

"Astoria is so busy chasing the ghost of her sister in her reflection, she doesn't care that death is trying to find her! So I have to make sure that the Dark Lord doesn't find out about her curse!" Malfoy seethed, his eyes burning into hers. "And although Theo has grown into the most ruthless killer I've ever known, he's so fucking swallowed up by his grief that he doesn't think anymore! Doesn't listen! Not to me, not to anyone! He just goes around killing everyone who looks at him the wrong way because it's the only way he knows how to feel something! And it only takes one ignored command, one act of rebellion, and the Dark Lord will kill him! *Unless I cover for him!* Unless I climbed the ranks so I could hide his mistakes and hope the Dark Lord doesn't figure out that he's out of control!"

The pain in Malfoy's eyes. The way his hands shook. The way his voice trembled and broke off like he was holding himself back from tears. It was all too much.

"You think I don't feel guilty about those I've butchered? Do you think it doesn't fucking tear me apart to think about what I've done to everyone else? To *you*?" Malfoy asked. His body looked like it was vibrating as the mixture of anger and pain he never allowed himself to feel wrecked it's way through his muscles. "Well, I do! Without my Occlumency, I feel it all! I'm drowning in guilt, little lion, and it's all your fault! You came along and stomped your way across my walls until they shattered, and now I can't rebuild them anymore! I can't block it out the way I used to be able to! *And it's all. Your. Fault!*"

His hands tightened around her face but it didn't hurt. Almost as though he wanted to hurt her, wanted to make her feel an ounce of the pain he was in, but couldn't quite bring himself to do it.

"When I go to sleep, I see the heads of those I've killed rolling across the fucking floor. I hear screams of the people I've tortured, begging for their lives. I hear it all. Over and over again." He pressed his forehead against hers, his eyes scrunching up like he was in the worst sort of agony. "But it doesn't matter. I can't stop killing for him because if I do, he'll replace me and then who will look after my family? Daphne was so much better at this than me, but she's gone now, so there's no one else!" Suddenly, Malfoy took both her hands in his and wrapped them around his own neck. "So go on, Granger, tell me that none of it makes a fucking difference! Tell

She didn't want his help. She didn't need it.

"Why didn't you tell me you were experiencing side effects?" Malfoy asked quietly.

"I had the evilest wizard of all time poking around in my head showing me how I'm going to die, and I'm trapped here being forced to kill my friends against my will," she laughed bitterly. "I think a few lingering effects of his dark magic are the least of my worries right now."

Malfoy twisted the ring on his pinkie finger, considering. "Do you feel these after-effects all the time?"

"No, not always. It comes and goes in waves. I feel it particularly strongly when I'm stressed or angry ... or scared. Like its latching onto those emotions and feeding them - I don't know, it's not important."

Malfoy reached for her again, but she took a step back and turned away from him.

"It was all just a little too much. Just give me a moment and I'll be fine."

It took several deep breaths through her nose to quell the panic, and when she finally turned around, Malfoy was staring at her.

Narcissa was a still few feet away, sat on her back legs and watching Hermione curiously. Her enormous head was tilted to the side, an undeniable intelligence flashing behind her ruby coloured eyes. It was unnerving, the way the dragon was looking at her. A burning curiosity that made Hermione... uncomfortable. She flexed her claws, and the body she was holding squelched.

Hermione quickly looked back at Malfoy and started talking, needing a distraction. "Why didn't you join me and Astoria today?"

Malfoy blinked, clearly a little taken back by her abrupt question. "Narcissa needed to hunt and I wanted to get some fresh air I apologise." His expression grew a lot more open, bordering on teasing. That was when she noticed his eyes. A mixture of blue and grey. Walls half up. "I didn't realise my absence would be that missed."

"It wasn't," Hermione snapped quickly, her tone a little too harsh to be convincing. "It was just an observation."

Malfoy rolled his tongue across his bottom teeth, thoroughly amused. "I see. Well, I suppose if you missed me that much..."

"I did not *'miss you'*."

" -then you'll have no objection to joining me on a little mission this evening,"

"What mission?"

"The Dark Lord has ordered us to investigate all the churches in the country that have a bell tower."

"Because of the vision he showed me?" Hermione asked.

Malfoy's blue-grey eyes flickered. He nodded. "Yes - because some of the things that particular Seer showed him turned out to be true, he wants every aspect of their recent visions investigating, just to be safe."

"That Seer was right about the Horcrux being destroyed?"

Again, Malfoy nodded.

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because the next church on the list that needs investigating is in Hampstead Garden Suburb."

Hermione's heart fluttered.

"I'm going there tonight," Malfoy continued, "and I thought you might want to join me."

He was going to her old home. Her parents home.

"As far as I'm aware, that area is abandoned."

"It is," Hermione confirmed with a bitter edge. "Your friends destroyed it when they picked up my parents. I went back once with Harry to collect some personal items, just photos and odd bits of my mum and dad's, but the whole town is destroyed. Most of the buildings are completely torn down, one of the only things left standing."

"Is the church," Malfoy cut in. "I know. So do you want to come with me, or not?"

"You want to put me in those horrible Death Eater robes, put me under the Hex and take me back to my childhood home so I can, what? Investigate an abandoned church and butcher any poor soul who happens to be hiding there because I have no control of myself while I'm under the Hex?" Hermione scoffed and shook her head. "No, thank you. I'd rather stay here, let Theo saw my head off and use it as a bowling ball."

of her hand while Zabini froze up and watched in terror and Nott just stared at the empty picture frame in his hands.

But Astoria couldn't be stopped.

"No! Just let me do it!" was all she kept screaming as Malfoy tried to pull her out of the bathroom. "Just let me do it! I need to - I need to see -"

Malfoy eventually let her continue, but he hovered close by. Watching every slight twist of her wrist and inching closer every time the glass was level with her throat, ready to snatch it out of her hand if she decided to hurt herself with it.

When her brown hair was cut jaggedly around her shoulders, Astoria let go of the glass and grabbed her wand. She cried her way through an incantation and tapped the edge of her wand against her temple. Her hair was enveloped in a pale light before it changed from chocolate brown to dark blonde.

Astoria gasped quietly at her reflection. It wasn't the exact same shade as Daphne's hair - she must have perfected the spell over time - but it was very close.

Astoria drew a deep breath and stared at herself in the mirror. She ran her fingers through her new blonde hair, and despite the tears staining her face and the red blotches under her eyes, the resemblance to Daphne was remarkable.

And then Hermione understood.

The air shifted a final time, and the bright light brought Hermione back into Malfoy's bedroom.

She stared at him in silent horror. She couldn't believe what she'd just seen, what unbelievable weight he'd been carrying on his shoulders since his parents had been killed, and had only increased tenfold since Daphne died.

How was he still standing? How was he not crushed beneath it all?

"Now do you understand why I have to do the things I do? It's for them." Malfoy hissed, his hands still trembling as he held her face. "Because Daphne and I were the only ones who could keep it together. We were the only ones who were strong enough to protect the others, and then she died, and now it's all up to me."

Hermione's heart was thumping violently in her chest, threatening to shatter with each painful beat.

"Because Blaise is clever and cunning, but he's so fucking obsessed with trying to find a cure for Astoria - a cure that doesn't fucking exist - that he makes mistakes!"

He wasn't looking at her while Hermione spoke, but she couldn't take her eyes off him. He looked like he was in so much pain, she swore she saw tears gathering in the corners of his eyes.

"Everything she ever owned. Everything she ever touched was gone," Malfoy whispered, watching Astoria break down again. "We weren't allowed to bury her, and we weren't allowed to keep any reminders of her either. He wanted to make it as though she never existed."

Of all the punishments Hermione could ever imagine Voldemort delivering, this had to be the worst. He didn't just execute Daphne, he erased her from their lives completely. Keepsakes of the dead were important. Sacred to those left behind. How could Voldemort be so cruel as to take them away?

Before Hermione's capture, on days when she missed her parents, the only thing that got her through her grief was to wrap herself in one of her fathers' old jumpers or spray herself with a tiny drop of her mothers' perfume. Smothering herself with a memory of them because they weren't there to hold her themselves.

Losing a person was one thing, but having every trace of them stolen from your life? Having no pictures to glance at when you missed them was devastating. Almost unbearable to think about. It was no wonder Malfoy wanted to do everything in his power to protect the others from ever having to feel that again.

"What if I forget what she looks like?" Astoria sobbed and clutched her stomach. "I don't have any pictures of her anymore! What if one day I wake up and I forget what my own sister looks like!"

Moving quickly, Astoria grabbed a large piece of broken glass from the floor and ran into the bathroom. She stared at herself in the mirror, a sudden fierce determination on her face, before she grabbed the left side of her hair with her free hand, placed the sharp edge of the glass against her hair, and started slicing.

Tears slid down her face as she watched herself in the mirror. She gripped the shard tightly, too tight, the broken glass cutting into her hand as she roughly cut her hair off at shoulder length - the same length Daphne's was when she executed. Blood gathered around Astoria's hand and slipped down her wrists. Large chunks of brown hair floated to the floor and into the sink.

And as Astoria cried and bled and hacked away at her hair, Malfoy was the only one who wasn't paralyzed with fear. He tried to stop her. Tried to pry the glass out

"I wouldn't put you under the hex," Malfoy said quickly, almost angrily, as his eyes flickered over the white summer dress Astoria had given her. "And what you're wearing now is fine."

Hermione eyed him curiously and took a step back, growing wearier, more unsure by the second. "Why?"

"Like you said, the area is abandoned, so there's no need for you to be under the hex. It will only be the two of us, and as you well know, I'm more than capable of disintegrating anyone who might threaten us."

"Why?"

"Because I thought you might want to see your childhood home."

"But *why*?" Hermione persisted.

"For Salazar's sake Granger! Because the only times you've left this house in six months have been when you've been under the Hex to butcher people, so I thought you might actually like to breathe a little fresh air when you're not fucking murderous!" he growled and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Fuck sake, I try and do something nice for you and you make it so bloody difficult -"

"When do we leave?"

Malfoy dropped his hand and stared at her. "You're agreeing to go with me?"

"Yes," she said. "But only if you answer me one question, and you answer honestly."

"Depends on what the question is."

"Why would you do this for me?"

Malfoy's brows narrowed with suspicion. "You saved Astoria. You did something nice for me. I thought it was only fair if I did the same, but don't get any ideas about trying to escape. It will only be the two of us, you won't have a wand or magic, and if you even *think* about doing a runner, I will chain you up, throw you over my shoulder and carry you back to this house myself. Understand?"

Just as Hermione nodded, the ground shuddered like it was being struck with a small earthquake. Narcissa had torn a back leg from her horse corpse, and was crawling towards Hermione with it dripping between her teeth.

Hermione gasped, stepping back as the appendage was dropped at her feet with an audible squelch. What in the world -

Narcissa lowered her head to the floor, and nudged the blood drenched leg toward Hermione with the tip of her snout.

"What?" Hermione started, stunned and confused. "What is she doing?"

Malfoy watched the dragon closely, and when she nudged the body towards Hermione again and started making quiet little clicking noises, he smiled. "She's trying to apologise to you," he said, running his hand across her cheek. "She thinks she upset you earlier when she was trying to smell you, and this is her way of saying

'*sorry*'?"

"Well, why was she trying to smell me in the first place?"

"Because you smell like me. She could smell me on you." Malfoy looked at her again, and his eyes flashed with something primal. Something almost ... possessive. "And inside you."

The way he spoke, the growl in his voice, it made Hermione's toes curl.

"She doesn't like anyone besides me, she never has - but she likes you. So as far as she's concerned, you're under her protection. And that probably makes you the safest witch in the country."

"They've taken ... e-everything," Astoria sobbed. "E-everything is ... g-gone." "What?" Hermione tried to swallow the lump in her throat. "What does she mean?"

The Malfoy beside her clenched his jaw. "Exactly what she said. When Daphne died, they took everything."

Hermione really didn't want to watch, but she couldn't help herself. She looked around the room, trying to understand. Her eyes zoomed in on the empty picture frames. The silver frames were broken and the glass shattered, but there was no image in the centre. Not in any of them.

Had whoever had destroyed this room taken them? It seemed like such an odd thing to steal. It didn't make sense, so Hermione scanned the room again. There weren't any curtains in this room. No lampshades or candles or fancy pillows. Nothing that made a bedroom feel homely and personal.

As Astoria sobbed, Nott looked around the room in bewilderment. He picked up one of the empty picture frames, sat down on the edge of the bed, and stared at it. Hermione had seen that empty look on his face before... That cold, defeated stillness...

"Shhhh," Zabini hushed. "It's alright. It's alright."

"No, it's not!" Astoria pushed him away and lunched to her feet. "You don't understand! They've taken it all. Her clothes! Her jewellery! It's the same in every room! They took it all! Even the bedsheets that smell like her!"

"They've taken all the pictures of her, too," Nott whispered, eyes dead as he stared at the empty frame in his hand. "Every single picture of Daphne is gone."

The younger versions of Zabini and Malfoy stared at one another in horror.

"If the Dark Lord is one thing, it's thorough," the older Malfoy said. "While he executed Daphne, he had other generals come to the house and take all her things."

nothing inside, bare except for a few empty coat-hangers, she dropped to her knees and screamed.

Younger versions of Malfoy, Nott and Zabini ran into the room. Zabini immediately flew to Astoria's side, dropping to his knees so he could pull her into his arms.

"It's alright," Zabini cooed, stroking her head as he tried to soothe her. "It's alright, darling."

“Kill whoever he asks us to kill.”

There was another flash of light. When it faded, Malfoy stood before Hermione, but it wasn't the version she knew. He was twenty, maybe twenty-one. Stood in the middle of Nottingham City Centre with Zabini, Nott and Astoria by his side.

Astoria's hair was brown. Soft chocolatey curls trailed to the base of her spine and tangled in Malfoy's arms as he tried to hold her steady.

“No, I don't want to see this again.” Hermione spun to face Malfoy, putting her back to the gruesome scene behind her. “Take me back.”

She might've turned around, but she could hear everything.

Every swing of the axe as it was brought down on Daphne's back, every rib broken, her gurgled screams of agony, and Astoria's muffled sobs as she was forced to watch her sister be mutilated.

Hermione heard everything, but she didn't look. She couldn't. She kept her eyes on Malfoy instead, watching every emotion fly across his face. Heartbreak. Pain. Devastation.

Malfoy's blue eyes glistened as he looked past Hermione, toward the stage that held Daphne's murder. “You want to know me, Granger?” he asked hoarsely. His voice trembled almost as much as his jaw did. “You want to know what makes me tick? What drives me to do the depraved and awful things I do daily? Well here it is, soak it all up.”

The memory quickly twisted again. And a nother flash of light transformed the city centre into a room Hermione didn't recognise. It could've been one on Malfoy's estate. It was very similar in size and shape to a lot of the rooms in his house, and the layout looked like a mirror image of Zabini and Astoria's bedroom.

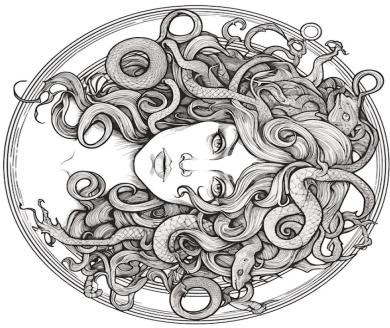
The room itself was a mess. It looked as though it'd been ransacked. Bedsheets were torn and thrown aside, and broken picture frames were scattered across the floor.

Astoria suddenly burst into the room.

Tears and mascara smudges strained her face, her long brown hair was a tangled mess, and she was wearing the same black dress she'd worn to Daphne's execution. This memory must have been later that evening. The aftermath.

Astoria sobbed as she stormed across the room, her fingers shaking as she reached the large wardrobe and swung the doors open. But when she saw that there was

## CHAPTER 36



### VULTURES

**4th June, 7:34 pm**

“Welcome, Zabini,” Voldemort said. “So glad you could join me this evening. I trust your wife is well and in good health?”

“Apologies for my lateness, my Lord.” Blaise bowed his head respectfully. “And yes, she is quite well. She's looking forward to attending your next Gala in the coming weeks.”

When Blaise straightened, Voldemort was staring at him intently. “Have there been any more visions that you wish to report?”

“None yet - but hopefully I see something soon that will aid your victory.”

Voldemort's hand tightened around the elder wand in annoyance, but eventually, he sighed and nodded. "Of course, I suppose it was foolish of me to expect you would see something else so quickly. I trust you are doing everything in your power to bring the visions forward. I eagerly await the next one you see."

"Of course." Blaise bowed his head again. "How can I be of service to you this evening?"

"There is an Order member in the dungeons that require your special skills," Voldemort answered. His voice had dropped the adoration it had been dripping in when Blaise had entered the cathedral. "There is something that requires my urgent attention. I need to leave and will not be contactable for the next few hours." His eyes flickered back to Blaise's. "But whatever he tells you, do not share it with anyone. Keep it to yourself until I or one of my Demons are available. There is a spy among us, and until we can weed them out, the circle of those I trust is small. Do you understand?"

"Yes, my Lord. Perfectly."

"Excellent." Voldemort spun his wand, preparing to Apparate. "Do whatever is necessary to get him to talk. Any tool or method - I do not care what you have to do, but I expect results, Zabini."

The hostage turned out to be Wesley Greenford, a Hufflepuff Blaise remembered from Hogwarts. He looked rather different now. His dirty blonde hair was scraped into a bun, and he'd traded his glasses for tattoos and a much broader frame. But as much as his outward appearance had changed, he still liked to talk. A lot.

In the two hours Blaise had been interrogating him, he'd used every technique imaginable to try and earn his release.

He'd used threats, which rewarded him with a Cruciio to the knees.

He'd used flattery, to which Blaise repaid him by tightening the chains around his body, suffocating him until he almost passed out.

He'd even tried his hand at bribery, offering his interrogator the ten thousand galleons he had stashed away, as though Blaise didn't have twelve lucrative estates - and even a fucking castle - signed to his name.

Yes, Wesley talked and talked and talked, but it was never anything interesting. Never anything even remotely *useable* - so Blaise was forced to get more ... creative.

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Malfoy caught her wrist before she could move. "You need to leave Theo be, Daphne. You can't interfere while he's taking the Dark Mark."

"But he—" Daphne winced when Theo howled in pain again. She stared at the house and rubbed the heel of her hand against her chest. "He's in pain. He needs me. He needs—"

"What he needs," Malfoy said sternly, pulling on her wrist, "is for you be calm, not get in the way while he takes his mark, and be there for him afterwards."

Slowly, reluctantly, Daphne allowed Malfoy to pull her back down on the bench. He wrapped an arm around her shoulder, and Daphne tucked her head under his chin, nestling herself against his neck.

"We need to be strong and stick together," Malfoy whispered into Daphne's hair. "That's the only way we're all going to get through this war alive. No matter what happens, it's our job to do that. To be there for the others and make sure they're safe."

Daphne nodded, but buried herself further into Draco's neck when Theo started screaming again. "We need to be the ones who make the difficult choices, and do the things the others can't."

Watching them like that, curled together, their arms wrapped tightly around the other and flinching in time with Theo's screams, was one of the

most heart-breaking things Hermione had ever seen. They were both terrified, both far too young to bare such a weight on their shoulders, and yet they were doing it anyway.

Seventeen, with no one else to turn to but each other. Left with no one else to protect them, so they were forced to bear the burden themselves.

"If Voldemort asks us to cut someone's head off," Daphne tried to say calmly, but her voice broke, "you hold the fucker down, and I'll swing the axe."

Malfoy nodded. His arms wound tighter around her body.

"If he asks us to drown a village, we ask which one."

Theo's screamed louder. Hermione felt her own chest tighten.

"We do whatever he asks us to do."

Another scream. Another flinch from Daphne and Malfoy. Another lash around Hermione's heart.

"And what about Theo?"

"I told him not to take the Mark but he wouldn't listen."

"He's done it for you. You do know that, don't you?"

"I know. But he's... he's not cut out for this, Draco. He's not strong enough for this." Daphne flinched slightly. "He's not a killer like me and you. 'The Dark Lord asked him to torture Ollivander yesterday and he could barely do that.'"

"He'll adapt. He'll get used to it."

"No, he won't" Daphne voice suddenly grew hoarse. "You didn't see him, Draco. It took him half an hour to conjure even a weak torture curse, and he threw up as soon as the Dark Lord left. You know Theo. He's soft. Gentle. I doubt he'd even be able to harm a fucking pixie if the Dark Lord ordered him to, so how's he going to Avada someone he knows?"

Hermione's brow furrowed. They couldn't be talking about the same Theo, could they?

Theo had always been quiet at school. The type of student who kept his head in books and eyes down in class. He was ruthless now. A cold-blooded killer. In some ways, he was more dangerous than Malfoy. Hermione had assumed Theo changed as soon as the war had started. That his first kill had unlocked something in him, uncaged the beast that'd always been prowling below the surface, and he'd been on a blood-soaked rampage ever since.

But the way Daphne's lip was trembling, the way tears started to gather in her eyes...

Was Hermione wrong? Had there been something else that set him on this murderous path?

But what could make someone turn so cruel and dangerous overnight? What could break someone so entirely, that one day the thought of harming another being made them vomit, and the next allow them to play with decapitated heads like they were nothing more than toys?

Daphne closed her eyes and drew a deep, shaking breath. "It's our job to protect the others, Draco. I'm the oldest, but you're the strongest."

A loud scream of pain cut through the quiet. Daphne lurched to her feet, her eyes wide and panicked -

Wesley screamed and thrashed against the chair he was bound to as Blaise waved his wand across the back of his skull for the fifth time.

Blaise had started experimenting when the clock read half-past nine in the evening, trialling the use of sound waves for torture, and the results were starting to blossom.

"Please, please!" Wesley begged as blood trickled from his ears and down the sides of his face. He was growing more unsteady in his chair with every new curse Blaise cast. If he weren't chained to the backrest, Blaise was sure that Wesley would've toppled over by now. "No more... I can't... I can't do anymore... just let me go, please mate. You don't want to hurt me, not really. We went to school together - I let you copy my Charms homework once -"

"You think dragging up ancient history is going to get me to let you go?" Blaise quirked a brow. "Oh, how utterly pathetic. There's no hidden morality here for you to guilt trip, Wesley."

"Please, Zabini," Wesley choked, and his entire body shook as he dropped his head towards his chest. "You're wasting your time with me. Just let me go."

"Not until you give me something useful."

"I don't know anything... please - there's nothing... I can't think-" Wesley started to sob loudly, annoyingly. His broken little cries dragged on Blaise's nerves like a child strumming all the strings on a violin at once.

But all hope wasn't lost yet - because as Wesley's cries reached a higher level, and as Blaise dragged a hand down his face and grit his teeth together, inspiration struck.

"Look, Greenford, I'll make you deal," Blaise said softly, as delicately as he could while the huge slab of muscle wailed like a toddler. "If you tell me something worthwhile, I will not kill you. I will even release you from this chair. How does that sound to you?"

Wesley knew something, Blaise was sure of it. Could tell each time he bit his tongue whenever Blaise cast another hex. By the way he hid his face, as though he was terrified that Blaise would see every secret he had if he made eye contact.

And that just wouldn't fucking do.

"It's strange, isn't it? How something as simple as sound waves can do so much damage," Blaise said, making Wesley flinch. "You see, it's all about vibrations. These spells I'm using are manipulating the vibrations and frequencies in your head,

scrambling your brain with sound waves. Quite literally liquifying it. I imagine it's absolute agony for you, and it's only going to get worse the longer I continue."

Wesley whimpered and tried to pull away, but the restraints prevented him from getting far.

"It's quite easy to control once you've had a little practice. And it gives me a lovely choice. I can kill you with it." He tapped his wand against Wesley's ear, hard, making him cry out. "Or I can keep you alive for hours and hours in this agony, *which I will do,*" he dragged his wand to the edge of Wesley's ear, making him wince again, "*if you don't talk to me.*"

Wesley shook his head and clenched his jaw. He squeezed his eyes closed, and his entire body tensed as Blaise brought his wand back to his left ear.

"Alright then. Don't say I didn't warn you." Blaise cast another curse - stronger this time - and the effects were instant. It was shocking, the way Wesley's body reacted. He started convulsing, vomiting on the spot. His eyes rolled into the back of his head while blood poured from his ears and nose like water from a faucet.

It was grotesque, disgusting beyond measure, but it did the trick. Cracked Wesley open like glass bottle, and when Blaise stopped the spell, secrets began to pour out of him.

"Alright, alright! I do know something! But please, please don't kill me if I tell you!" Wesley pleaded. "I know ... that Potter has something planned ... there's an attack in the next few days, but I don't know where..."

"That's not good enough." Blaise tapped his wand against Wesley's temples again. "What else?"

"... They ... they're looking for Horcruxes! They know there's more, and they're tracking them down one by one..."

"We already know that," Blaise hissed. "Give me something useful," he dug his wand in harder, and the poor bloke practically squealed and jumped out of his chair, "or I'll use that spell again, and we'll see how far your eyes will roll back when I turn up the pressure."

"No! No, please! Not again! I can't do that again..."

"Then give me something else!"

"There's a meeting tonight!"

The younger Malfoy chuckled again, but his face soon grew sombre as he followed Narcissa's flight path.

Daphne's expression fell when she noticed, seeing something that wasn't clear to Hermione. "You alright, blonde?" she asked, her dimples disappearing and smile twisting into a frown.

"Oh yeah mate, I'm just fucking perfect," Malfoy huffed and shook his head, suddenly looking and sounding a lot more like his older double. "It's been a few bloody weeks since the battle of Hogwarts, and in that time, both my parents have been executed, we've been drafted into a war we have no fucking business fighting in, and almost all of our friends have been forced to take the Dark Mark. So yeah, I'm doing fabulous, thanks for asking."

Daphne stared at him, seemingly deep in thought. A few heartbeats later, she sighed and patted the empty space on the bench next to her.

"I was just ranting, Daph. I don't want to talk about it."

"Well tough titte," she snapped, tapping her manicured nails against the bench in a way that left no room for arguments. "Sit your skinny arse down. Now." Malfoy muttered a few profanities under his breath but did as she asked. He settled himself onto the bench beside her, folded his arms across his chest, and stared at the Manor. Closed off. Defensive.

"The Dark Lord would have demanded Blaise and Theo take the mark eventually," Daphne hushed. "It was a brilliant idea to get them to offer to take it themselves. It shows their 'devotion'. Hopefully, he'll develop a soft spot for them because they were so willing to swear themselves to him. It's another layer of protection we can't afford to miss."

The younger Malfoy ground his teeth together. "They shouldn't have to take it at all. If I'd done a better job and killed Dumbledore then we wouldn't be in this..."

Daphne raised her hand to silence him. "That's not your fault and I won't have you blame yourself again. I took the mark to protect Astoria. I knew that if I offered my arm willingly, he wouldn't ask Astoria to take it."

The younger version of Malfoy started bouncing his knee nervously, but he nodded.

"Blaise took it for the same reason," Daphne continued. "But he also thinks that if he's loyal enough, the Dark Lord may give him access to the scrolls in his vault, and there may be something there we can use to help with her illness."

No, he and Daphne were equals. Best friends in every sense of the word.

"The little fucker!" Daphne howled. "She actually tried to burn me!"

"Oh don't take it personally, Daph," Malfoy tried to say, but he struggled to get the words out through his laughter. "She doesn't like anyone. She bit Theo yesterday and nearly took his finger off."

Daphne gasped. "Really? He didn't tell me that?"

"Of course he didn't," the young Malfoy chuckled. "He wants to appear masculine and protective to you, nor someone who almost lost a bloody finger to a tiny reptile."

"Be careful little Miss," Daphne waved her finger Narcissa, which only made her hiss at Daphne and curl her tail protectively around Malfoy's neck. "At the moment I'm still bigger than you are, and I've been itching for some new dragon leather shoes."

Narcissa - apparently already very intelligent despite her hatching state - tried to roar and breathe fire again, but it came out as more of a smoke-filled yelp, which only added to Malfoy and Daphne's amusement.

"I've never seen you like this," Hermione said to the Malfoy beside her.

"Like what? Ridiculous? Childish?"

Hermione looked at him out the corner of her eye. "Happy?"

His throat bobbed as he swallowed, and he started to twist the ring on his pinkie finger. He scoffed suddenly and shook his head, his eyes flickering back to watch Daphne and his younger self.

After a few more seconds, Hermione did the same.

The younger Malfoy placed his hand against his throat, allowing the tiny dragon to clamber onto his palm. He petted her gently before he transfigured a nearby rose into a rat and encouraged her to glide after it, practicing hunting.

"I would stop with the remarks about dragon leather shoes if I were you," Malfoy said. "In nine months she'll be big enough to eat you in one bite."

Daphne raised her chin high in the air and put on a fake, Shakespearean accent. "At which time I shall apologise profusely and bring her as many goats and cows as she wants, lest her eat me herself."

Blaise narrowed his eyes but didn't lower his wand. Kept it pressed against Wesley's ear like a loaded gun. "A meeting between *who*?"

"There's a spy!" Wesley gasped, desperately trying to catch his breath while he had the chance. "There's a spy on your side! Medusa! They're meeting someone from the Order tonight!"

"Where?" Blaise's heart started to beat quicker. His chest tightened with elation. "Where?"

"Where?"

"Quarter past ten!" Wesley choked and winced in pain. "London Underground ... Camden Town tube station!"

This was it. The break the Death Eaters needed. The information they'd been dying to get their hands on. Blaise couldn't believe his luck.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"Yes! Yes, I'm sure! I was there when Potter got the letter to set it up! It's happening tonight!"

Blaise sharply pushed his robes aside and pulled out his silver pocket watch. It was eleven minutes past ten. The meeting would be taking place in just four minutes.

Panic started to bubble in his chest. He wasn't prepared for this. Had no fucking clue what to do next. He didn't have time - he didn't

His thoughts started to come quicker. Different scenarios flashed behind his eyes as panic started to take over.

But he didn't have time to panic. He needed to think clearly. *Quickly*. So, he did what he always did when he was under pressure. He stepped back, drew a deep breath, and straightened his robes while he worked through his scattered thoughts.

He straightened his collar with a sharp tug.

The goal was simple; intercept the spy and kill them before the meeting. Stop the leak at its source, and swing the war back in the Dark Lord's favour.

He pulled his sleeves, aligning the seams with the stitching on his gloves.

The problem? His master had made it very clear that he wasn't contactable for the next few hours, and Blaise was not to tell another soul about the information he'd learned.

He checked his watch again. Twelve minutes past ten.

He adjusted the wand holster on his right thigh.

The meeting was taking place in three minutes. The only people Voldemort would trust with this information was Malfoy and Bellatrix, and there wasn't enough time to get the message to them and intercept the spy.

So, that left him with one option.

Go to the rendezvous by himself, and pray to Salazar that the Order member didn't bring any back up with them.

"You got what you wanted. Now let me out of this chair," Wesley whimpered. "You ... you said you would let me go ... that if I told you something worthwhile, you wouldn't kill me."

"I did, and I meant it." Blaise bent down so he was eye level with the hostage, and with a flick of his wand, he conjured a silver dagger. "So, here's what is going to happen. In ten seconds, I'm going to release you from this chair, and you're going to take this blade from me, and use it to slit your own throat."

Wesley winced and shook his head. "What? No! You lied to me!"

"No, I didn't. You misunderstood, Greenford. I said I would release you from this chair and that I wouldn't kill you. I never said you would leave here alive."

Unyielding terror swept across Wesley's expression. "No! No, I won't do it! I would never kill myself!"

"What makes you think you're going to have a choice?" and with those final words, Blaise aimed his wand and whispered, "*Imperio*."

Wesley had started to struggle, but as soon as Blaise said the incantation, a pale green light flashed over his eyes, and he stilled. An eerie calm washed over his expression, every trace of fear vanishing as though someone had swiped a cloth over his face, and left nothing but a blank canvas behind.

Blaise repeated the instructions and banished the chains around Wesley's body. He handed him the blade and stood back, and while Wesley helplessly slit his own throat open with a vacant, almost corpse-like expression and his body fell to the floor, Blaise pictured the London underground in his mind, and disappeared with a loud crack of Apparation.

### **8:15 pm**

"Does it look like you remember?" Malfoy asked.

"No."

"No." Both versions of Malfoy smiled. "Patience to get used to the dark magic, and practice at managing the pain."

Although her brown eyes were swimming with tears, Daphne smiled, flashing those same dimples her younger sister often wore. "You know neither of those are my strong suit, right?"

"Yes. I do."

"So what you're saying is that I'm fucked then?"

"Undoubtedly. It's been nice knowing you."

Daphne laughed - a ridiculous snort of a laugh that made the younger Malfoy laugh too. The Malfoy beside her even chuckled quietly. Hermione couldn't help but smile herself.

Wiping tears away, Daphne removed her hand from her forearm to reveal the Dark Mark festering against her skin, so fresh it looked like the snake was still moving. "Cheers - I needed that. Feels like it's been so long since I laughed. I've been such a miserable bitch lately."

"Oh really? You don't say?" the young Malfoy teased.

Daphne gasped and flicked her leg out playfully to try and kick him. He stepped over her to easily dodge the kick, but Narcissa took great offence. The tiny beast hissed and flapped her little wings furiously. She reared her head back and opened her mouth, but when she exhaled, only a few sparks ignited before they sizzled and died out altogether.

The young Malfoy and Daphne stared at the tiny dragon in disbelief. Narcissa shook her head slightly, a little dazed, and there was a second of bewildered silence before Daphne and the younger version of Malfoy erupted into laughter again.

The sight of Malfoy so carefree like that caused a strange warmth to spread over Hermione's chest. She didn't think she'd ever seen him so at ease with anyone. Not with Blaise, Crabbe or Goyle in their Hogwarts days. Not even with Theo or Astoria, who Hermione had realised were his closest friends.

She'd always thought his friendship with Astoria was sibling-like, but what he had with Daphne seemed to be so much more. Deeper. There was no romantic attraction between them, that much was clear, but their bond was more playful than his and Astoria's was. Malfoy was completely at ease with Daphne. He didn't hover protectively over her. He wasn't watching her every move like an over barking older brother, or looking at her like she might shatter at the slightest breeze.

steps dug into the different levels of his spine. Blaise hoped it broke his fucking back. It would be no less than the filthy vermin deserved.

The air was knocked from Medusa's lungs, and while he struggled to catch his breath, while he choked and spluttered on the floor, Blaise tore off his gold mask and stormed towards him.

He was so angry. So murderous that he couldn't think properly. He wanted to butcher the bloke. Impario him to slice his fingers off, and then his ears, then his tongue. Make him gauge his own eyes out and eat them.

But more importantly, Blaise wanted to look into the traitors' eyes, see the fear in them, the realisation that he'd been caught by one of the very people he'd been stabbing in the back for years, and watch the panic blossom when he pictured the torture that was to come.

Blaise hooked his fingers around Medusa's back mask and tore the metal from their face –

His heart stopped for a moment. And on the neck beat, it fractured straight down the fucking middle.

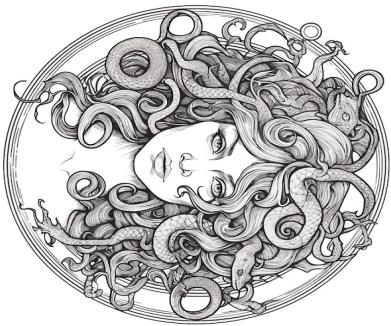
Because he was looking into the traitors eyes.

The eyes of the man who'd split hundreds of their secrets and betrayed them all.

The eyes of his best friend.

The eyes of Theodore fucking Nott.

## MEDUSA, REVEALED



**4th June**

Malfoy's Apparation was brutal. The air was knocked from Hermione's lungs when they materialised back on the grounds of his estate.

He released her before she could catch her breath. "Get inside the house," he hissed, his tone sharp and icy as he flicked his wand over his clothes, transforming them into his Death Eater robes. Another sharp flick conjured his Demon Mask.

To say that Malfoy was angry was the understatement of the fucking century. He was *seething*. Dark magic crackled around him. His jaw was clenched so tightly Hermione could see the muscles along his cheek rippling.

He was almost feral. Like a wild cat or a ...

## CHAPTER 37

A demon.

Hermione's gaze snapped to his eyes. They were still a mixture of blue and grey, but the blue was beginning to overtake. His walls were half up, but they were fading - quickly, by the looks of it. Whatever emotion he was feeling burned away the grey in his eyes like fire to iron.

"Where are you going?" she asked before she could stop herself.

"That's not any of your business now, is it Granger?" Malfoy looked down at his wand, his hands tightened around it as he prepared to Apparate again. "I won't tell you again. Get In. The *House*!"

"Why won't you tell me where you're going? It's a simple question."

"What does it matter?" He looked back at her, and every nerve in Hermione's body screamed that there was something wrong, that she couldn't let him leave.

She needed to redirect him. Give him another target to take his aggression out on

Romy appeared beside them with a loud crack. "Quick, Master Malfoy! Master Zabini is waiting in the drawing-room for you!"

"Not now, Romy," Malfoy hissed.

"But please, sir! It cannot wait!"

"I said not now, Romy!"

"It is very urgent! He is very upset and needs you to help!"

"Are you deaf? I said not now!"

"But he has captured the spy!" Romy interrupted, his voice suddenly sharp and loud enough to silence his master. "He has captured the traitor!"

Malfoy whirled around. The malice, the anger, drained from his face in an instant. "He's captured Medusa?"

Oh God - no.

Hermione's heart stuttered. This was not good. This was - *fuck!*

If Zabini had captured the spy, the Order was finished. Medusa was their last advantage. The only reason they'd managed to locate another Horcrux and destroy it right under Voldemort's nose.

you'd try and prove your worth by meeting the big bad Death Eater traitor and getting some information?"

Medusa laughed. Blaise's adrenaline spiked, his blood roasting in his ears.

How fucking *dare* he be so casual about his betrayal to the Dark Lord?

Blaise tried to keep a level head, to be calm while he waited for his opportunity to attack, but the strings of his patience were dwindling. The cords that held his composure together were snapping one by one, each taunt and laugh from the traitor like a fresh cut from a pair of scissors. Soon there would be nothing to hold him back.

Because if it wasn't for this traitor, Voldemort would have won the war years ago. If it wasn't for this Medusa, Blaise wouldn't have to keep going on missions, and he could devote all his time to searching for a cure for Astoria's curse.

If it wasn't for him, he might have found a way to save her by now.

"S - shut up!" The Order member shuffled on his feet, awkwardly backing away. "You don't get to speak to me like that... y-you Death Eater scum!"

"Ooooooh, big threats for such a little man," Medusa teased. "Why don't you find your balls and try that again, yeah?"

Blaise grit his teeth together. His hands started to shake.

"It's not my job to stand here and be insulted by y-you. So if you don't have any information, I'm going t-to leave."

"Alright, alright. Don't spit your dummy out," Medusa chucked again, and hearing how carefree he was, *laughing* as he betrayed his master, snapped what little remained of Blaise's patience.

He dropped the enchantment that kept him hidden and shot a powerful knock-back jinx at the Order member.

The poor lad was only young. He hadn't even thought to wear a mask to hide his identity. Blaise caught the shocked expression on his face before he was thrown backwards and smashed his head against the tiled wall behind him. He died instantly.

If Zabini had captured the spy, the Order was finished. Medusa was their last advantage. The only reason they'd managed to locate another Horcrux and destroy it right under Voldemort's nose.

Medusa flew into the air, hurtling backwards, and landed at the bottom of the tube station steps. There was an audible crunching sound as the sharp edges of the

And almost a decade of helping her hide the bodies of her ex-lovers, staying out of sight as he dragged their elderly corpses into furnaces had made him an expert at appearing invisible.

He would never have been able to steal the rare medicines he needed for his wife if his mother hadn't taught him how to stick to the shadows. He would never have been able to lie to his master if she hadn't taught him how to do it to law enforcement first.

If he didn't want to be seen, he wouldn't be. If he didn't want others to know something, they wouldn't.

Without his mothers' valuable life lessons, Blaise never would have gained this ranking in the Dark Lords army, and he never would have been able to sneak into the London Underground without making a fucking sound.

He stood in the depth of Camden Town station, his back pressed against the wall and hidden with a few layers of magic. He checked his pocket watch again. Fourteen minutes past ten. The meeting would be starting any moment.

He drew a deep breath through his nose. His fingers tightened around his wand

And then he heard it.

Footsteps echoed down the stairs and toward the tube station platform. And then, "Medusa," said a male voice. Young and nervous and skittish, like they didn't want to be there. "What's the information?"

"Bloody hell, were you raised in a barn?" asked a second voice, masculine but altered by a charm, making it impossible to decipher. "Manners cost nothing you know."

Boiling anger flared in Blaise's chest. The traitor. That vile, piece of shit who had sold so many of their secrets.

The two men appeared on either end of the platform at the same time, the Order member coming back the stairs as Medusa walked along the old tracks toward him.

"What's the information?" asked the Order member again, his voice still lacking confidence. "I ... I don't have all day."

"Oh yes, I'm sure your time at the Order is extremely precious," Medusa taunted as he hopped onto the platform. "How old are you, anyway? Fourteen? Fifteen? You sound awfully young. Been promoted from pot washing duty, have you? Thought

If Malfoy handed him over to Voldemort, the Order was fucked. If Malfoy killed him himself, the Order was fucked.

"Has he called the Dark Lord yet?" Malfoy asked.

Romy shook his head, his tiny hands trembling as he fidgeted with the edges of his pillowcase. "He has not called him yet, Sir. He wanted you to see him first, so you could decide what to do. All is ... not what we thought it was, Sir."

"Where is he?"

"He's in the parlour room on the left-wing, Sir."

As soon as Malfoy had a destination, a target, he took off. He charged through his manor like a mad man, taking steps two at a time, pushing doors open and kicking any inanimate object that dared to get in his way. Hermione almost had to break out into a sprint to keep up with him.

She didn't know what to do. She had to try and keep Malfoy calm, to keep Medusa safe and alive, but Malfoy was so angry. He was dangerous, shaking with violence. She wouldn't have been surprised if he Avada'd Medusa as soon as he laid eyes on him.

They made it to the parlour room in record time. Malfoy swung the doors open furiously, the handle colliding with the plaster as it crashed against the wall –

He froze when he saw what was inside.

Because in the centre of the room, in front of a roasting fire, bound to a chair with his hands tied behind his back, was Theodore Nott.

Blood dripped from a cut across Nott's temple, and his left cheek was red and bruised. Zabini must have roughed him up a little while he waited for Malfoy to arrive.

Nott smiled impishly when he saw Malfoy, even gave a little nod in acknowledgement as though this were all normal.

Malfoy's skin turned paler than Hermione had ever seen it. "You! You're the fucking spy!"

"*"Ehh, Gw'rryng,"*" Nott nodded in a slightly cockney accent. "What took you long so long? A bloke told me a joke once about a leader being late to his own meeting. Now hang on a second, how did it start ... oh yeah! So there's this big old ugly tyrant who sets this trap –"

Before Nott could reveal the punchline to his joke, Malfoy stormed across the room, and punched him in the jaw.

“You traitorous little cunt!” Malfoy took hold of Nott’s collar with one hand and punched him with the other, the strength behind the hit jerking Nott’s head to the side. “I’ll kill you!” Another punch. “Never mind the Dark Lord, I’ll fucking kill you myself!”

Zabini hooked his arms around Malfoy’s waist, and while he tried to drag him backwards, Hermione wedged herself between Malfoy and the chair and pushed his chest with every ounce of strength she had.

Malfoy put up a furious fight. He was fuelled by anger. The layers of betrayal and hurt feeding his muscles like a steroid to make him almost inhumanly strong. And all the while, as Hermione and Zabini struggled to pull him away and Malfoy fought to get another punch in, Nott just laughed, flashing his blood-soaked gums and teeth and grinning like he’d won some sort of prize.

“Fucking hell mate, is that really how you’re going to start this interrogation?” Nott chuckled as he spat some of his blood onto the floor. “Come on. Lube me up a little first. Make me scared. Make me wanna confess. Don’t just go straight in dry.”

“This isn’t the time for jokes, Theodore!” Zabini hissed through gritted teeth, using all his weight to pull Malfoy backwards. “This is not funny.”

“Oh, it is a little bit funny.”

“Shut the fuck up, Theo!” Hermione turned her head just enough to glare over her shoulder. “Or Medusal Or whatever the fuck your name is!”

“Oh, she speaks!” Nott’s face lit up excitedly. “My partner in crime! The Thelma to my Louise! The Bonnie to my Clyde!”

Malfoy’s movement’s started to slow. Hermione’s brows knitted together and “You knew I was Lilith?”

“Yep,” Nott answered, curling his lips around the ‘P’ to make it pop. “Figured it out a few months ago. You were captured and then all of a sudden the meetings stopped? And then someone else started wearing your mask? I’m not the brightest snake in the grass, but even I could put the pieces together. It’s nice to finally meet you properly, sweetheart.”

Malfoy lunged again, but Zabini’s solid footing kept him from reaching Nott. “All this fucking time, you were the spy!?”

They obviously didn’t have a fucking clue, but apparently Malfoy wasn’t taking any chances.

Hermione felt like she didn’t take a single breath until the four of them Apparated away.

Malfoy still didn’t look at her. And as bizarre as the thought was for Hermione to wrap her head around, it almost felt as though he *couldn’t*.

“We need to leave.” He roughly pulled his hand away from her mouth and caught her elbow. He kept his eyes on the floor as he pulled out his wand and prepared to Apparate them, but she could see the rage burning around his irises like dragon fire. Scorching and fucking deadly. “We’ve been here far longer than I expected. I have somewhere I need to be.”

#### 10:14 pm

If Blaise owed his mother one thing, it was his skill at being a ghost.

She’d been a mistress of deception and charm, but she could be invisible when she wanted to, and it was a talent she’d engraved so deeply into him that it was almost natural to him now. As easy as blinking.

He used to think it was a strange thing to want to teach her son, to sneak in and out of an area without detection, but if nothing else, he was grateful to her now. Even if it had ruined his childhood. Even if it had made him a freak amongst wizards and witches from a young age.

The hours he spent sneaking around and cleaning up his mothers’ messes had given him a marvellous skillset. Her lessons had propelled his career as a Death Eater much further than he ever thought possible, but most importantly, they’d helped his wife.

Years of helping her pick out - and dispose of - phials of poison, had given him a knowledge of rare potions. Knowledge that now helped him mask the symptoms of Astoria’s blood curse.

Years of flying to Aurors, keeping a straight face and repeating, “*No offens, I do not know where my stepfather is. Oh, I do hope he's alright,*” every time one of her husbands went missing had made him an excellent liar. He could tell even the most outlandish lies now and no one would ever suspect a thing. Not even the Dark Lord.

She knew he couldn't see them, knew Malfoy's charms were still up and strong, keeping them out of sight, but she swore Barty looked right at her - just for the briefest moment - when he walked over the doorway.

*'Creepily thin, almost ghoulike'*, Cho had described Barty as once. She was exactly right.

There was a crazed, erratic quality to the way he looked around the room. It reminded Hermione an awful lot of a rabid dog, frothing at the mouth and shaking, teeth bared and eyes darting quickly to every corner, on the hunt.

"He's either going to have Malfoy execute the little Mudblood," Grouch's tongue darted out to wet his lips in that stomach-churning way it always did. "Or he's going to let me add her to my collection."

The hand on Hermione's mouth tightened. Malfoy's eyes darkened, the muscles in his neck straining as he tightly clenched his jaw.

"I hope it's the latter," Yaxley added as he joined Crouch in the tiny room. "She would make a fine Doll - but I do hope you'll let the rest of us play with her?"

Malfoy's heart started to beat faster. Hermione felt it hammering against her own chest like a jackhammer.

"I may," Crouch's tongue darted out again. That, coupled with the way he said the next few words, made Hermione wretch silently. "After I'm done with her, of course."

It felt like a fucking eternity before they left. Despite not being nearly as thorough with their search as Malfoy had been with his, Crouch, Yaxley and the two Black Masks were still in the church far longer than Hermione would have liked.

It felt like they would be discovered at any moment. They never came within a few inches of Malfoy or Hermione, but they always felt too close, always felt like if they lost their footing or tripped, they might brush against Malfoy's arm or shoulder and reveal their hiding spot.

Hermione was on edge, her nerves splintering every time Crouch or one of the others drew a little too close. She clung to Malfoy's shoulders so tightly she wouldn't have been surprised if he had bruises there in the morning. But no matter how hard she squeezed, he never made a sound. Didn't even look at her. His eyes remained glued on Crouch, Yaxley, the doorway, looking for a sign that they knew Malfoy was there.

"Afraid so," Nott shrugged and sucked his teeth. "I know it's probably not the birthday present you wanted, but you've got to admit, it's a hell of a good fucking surprise, isn't it?"

"You fucking betrayed us!" Malfoy jerked forward again. Hermione dug her palms into his chest and forced him backwards.

Nott tutted and rolled his eyes. "You make it all sound so terribly medieval when you say it like that."

"Malfoy, please calm down." Hermione stepped to the left, blocking Nott from his line of sight. "You don't really want to kill him, this is just the anger and shock talking."

"Don't want to kill him?" Malfoy snarled. "I want to rip his fucking ribs from his chest and poke his eyes out with them!"

Nott wiggled his eyebrows. "Ooooooh, don't tease me with a good time if you're not going to deliver," he taunted, thoroughly enjoying it when Malfoy lunged again.

It took several minutes to get Malfoy calm enough for Hermione and Zabini to let him go. A task they would've accomplished much quicker if Nott kept his mouth shut. Zabini had to cast a silencing charm just to stop him from nailing Malfoy up and undoing their good work.

"Do you have any idea the position you've put us in?" Malfoy asked when he'd finally shook Zabini's arms off him. He may have stopped fighting, but his voice was still sharp and vicious. "Or do you not care that the Dark Lord will probably have all our heads for this?"

Zabini removed the silencing charm he'd placed on Nott to allow him to speak, to defend himself. He didn't. Chose to just shrug instead. He stayed like that for a moment or two, not saying a word, and then his eyes flickered to Hermione, and he smirked at her.

She couldn't believe that she was finally meeting Medusa. That the mystery of who was behind the mask was over. It almost didn't seem real.

In all the years that she'd been meeting him, and all the months she'd been in Malfoy Manor, living under the same roof as him, she'd never suspected that Theodore Nott could be Medusa. The thought had never crossed her mind. Not once. Because it was completely ludicrous. So fucking bonkers that she'd never even considered it.

She'd thought about it a lot, drew a picture of the type of person Medusa must have been in her mind, and Nott just ... didn't fit the profile she'd imagined.

Hermione thought that Medusa was an older Death Eater. Someone of a lower ranking who'd grown tired of others being promoted over him, so he'd lashed out in his own way and betrayed the master who refused to recognise his 'greatness'. Punished his failure to see his potential by leaking secrets and damning the whole regime.

Sometimes she thought Medusa had wanted fame or glory. That the wealth and jewels that Voldemort paid his soldiers in weren't enough, and he wanted something more definitive. Wanted his name in the history books over gold. To be branded as the spy who brought down the darkest wizard of all time.

One or twice, on very rare occasions, she thought that perhaps Medusa was a sympathiser. That maybe they'd chosen the wrong side at the beginning of all this, got swept up in the current, and now it was too late for them to get out. She thought that maybe this was Medusa's way of escaping, each secret they leaked another brick that forged the path of their redemption.

But none of that pointed to Nott.

He didn't want power. He was comfortable as a Gold Mask, and didn't care about gold or jewels. He craved blood and murder, not wealth or fame. And he certainly wasn't a fucking Order sympathiser. He never showed even a shred of compassion or mercy to an opposing wizard on the battlefield.

There was something Hermione was missing. A piece of the puzzle was hidden from her.

Zabini placed a hand on Malfoy's shoulder. "What are we going to do?" he whispered.

"I don't know."

"Shall I call the Dark Lord?"

Malfoy glared at Nott. His nostrils flared incandescently. "Not yet."

"Erm, helloo?" Nott called, leaning forward in his chair as far as his restraints allowed. "Can we please use our outside voices so the filthy traitor can hear you and be involved in the conversation? *Thank youuu.*"

quicker you can return to the Dollhouse, and the quicker you can have one of my girls' lips wrapped around your cock."

Barry Crouch Jr was in the church. Hermione had seen enough to know that he was desperate to win Voldemort's favour. If he saw Malfoy, he would rat him out in the hopes of taking his place.

Her breath started to leave her quicker. Malfoy held his hand over her mouth, smothering any noise she may have made.

They were pressed so closely together, their chests melting into one another. She could feel his heart beating wildly in his chest. A panicked rhythm against her ribs.

Four different sets of footsteps started to echo in the main church behind them. They all wandered in different directions, but some were drawing closer.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Slowly, cautiously, Malfoy released her wrists and pressed his index fingers against his lips. 'Shhhhh,' he mouted. 'Please, be quiet.'

Hermione nodded and tucked her elbows in slightly. She rested her palms on his shoulders and let him press against her more firmly, making themselves as small as possible.

Malfoy kept one hand on her mouth.

"I recognise this area," Yaxley said, his voice much, much closer than was comfortable. "Haven't we been here before?"

"Yes, we have," Crouch laughed quietly, sounding as though he was just the other side of the door. "This is where the Granger Mudblood used to live."

Hermione tensed. Malfoy softly shook his head, pleading for her to be quiet. "What do you suppose the Dark Lord will do with her once the war is over?" Yaxley asked.

"I've already asked him if I can have her."

Every muscle in Malfoy's neck went rigid as he sharply twisted to look at the empty doorway.

"He said he hasn't decided what he is going to do with her yet," Crouch went on. There were several footsteps, then Crouch walked into the tiny room Malfoy and Hermione were hiding in.

This type of magic was incredibly advanced and took years of practice to perfect. It was a very useful enchantment, but the list of its flaws was almost endless. It only covered very, very small areas - usually only one person within a very tiny space - and it couldn't be held for long.

Those very flaws were the reason she'd selected the people she had for her mission in Dover. They were the only ones who'd been able to master the charm enough to conceal themselves, so they were the only people she could have used for her strategy that day.

And it was also the reason - Hermione guessed - that Malfoy was pressing against her so tightly and sealing both of them against the wall. He was trying to make their bodies as small as possible, smothering her frame with his so they both could remain hidden under the enchantment. And not be seen by whoever had just walked into the church.

"This is a fucking waste of time!" a voice she didn't recognise sneered from the entrance. "Why do we have to be the ones to check this church?"

"We already know there isn't going to be anything here," another added with a grunt. "This place is a shit hole! You can already tell from the outside that it's abandoned!"

"That's quite enough of that gentlemen," Corban Yaxley replied. "We are here because the Dark Lord asked us to personally investigate this mess of muggle architecture, and we're not leaving until you've checked under every piece of rubble. So get a move on. *Nymp!*"

Hermione met Malfoy's eyes. A mixture of grey and blue stared back at her, but the terror in them knocked what little breath she had left out of her lungs.

They weren't supposed to be here. Voldemort hadn't ordered Malfoy to undertake this mission. He'd brought her here by himself, under the lure of investigating the church, but it was just that. A lure. An excuse - a fucking lie.

He'd brought her here to see her parent's old home, probably thought it would make her feel better, and searching the church that just happened to be around the corner was an excuse. He'd gone behind Voldemort's back to do her a kindness, and Hermione didn't want to even think about what he would do if he found out his favourite Demon hadn't followed his instructions, even if it was just a one-off.

"Remember, lads," chuckled a fourth voice. Hermione's stomach twisted with dread. She'd recognise that voice anywhere. "The quicker we're finished here, the

"If I were you Nott," Zabini's hand tightened on Malfoy's shoulder as he took a step towards him, ready to pull him back if necessary, "I would be very, very fucking quiet."

Nott sighed rather dramatically. "Look, I know I'm skating on thin ice right now, but there's no need to shout-"

"Thin ice?!" Malfoy scoffed, nothing but rage in his voice. "Thin fucking ice?!" The ice is gone! Cracked into oblivion you fucking little prick!"

"Honestly mate," Nott said, rolling his eyes. "You're really lucky Granger finds this aggressive, shouty thing sexy, otherwise you'd never get a shag."

Surprisingly, Malfoy didn't take the bait. Didn't snap or bite back the way Nott obviously wanted him to. Instead, he looked down at his oldest friend, his expression eerily calm and disgusted, and said quietly, "Daphne dedicated her entire life after Hogwarts to serving the Dark Lord. She did it to keep you and Astoria safe. She would have done anything he asked of her, and you betraying him? That just tarnishes everything she did."

Every bit of humour vanished from Nott's face. "Don't you dare speak about her. I'm doing this *for* her."

"She wouldn't have wanted you to-"

"Well we don't know what Daph would have wanted do we?" Nott snarled. His eyes darkened as he clenched his jaw. "Because Voldemort fucking killed her! She was his favourite general! He liked her more than he liked you! And he still fucking killed her! Still executed her right in front of us and made me watch!"

Malfoy winced slightly, but Nott only seemed to get more enraged as the seconds ticked on. As though he were siphoning it from Malfoy.

"He took my whole fucking world!" Nott bit, his voice growing hoarser with each syllable. "He made me watch as he killed the love of my life - my whole fucking reason for living! Of course I was going to betray him! Of course I was going to want Potter to kill him once and for all! I want that evil fucker dead just so I can stand over his grave and spit on it myself!"

*Oh, God.* It all made sense.

Daphne. Daphne was the missing piece.

The anger. The lashing out. Sitting at her grave for hours on end, even though she wasn't there. Sleeping outside, just so he could be close to the memory of her.

With his eyes wide and face flushed red with anger, it was the most alive Hermione had ever seen Nott. But it wasn't life. Not really. It was heartbreak.

"But you've killed for us," Zabini said. "You've killed thousands of Order members. You've practically made murder a sport. How could you kill them if you were on their side?"

"I'm not on their side," Nott answered. "I'm not on anyone's side. I don't give a fuck who wins the war - I just want Voldemort dead."

Malfoy didn't seem to have any anger left. Didn't seem to have anything left. He flexed his fingers and rolled his jaw as Nott told him everything, revealed every detail of his secret agenda. But he didn't look happy. Or relieved at finally having achieved the goal he'd been working towards all this time.

Instead, he looked ... Hermione couldn't put a name to it. Betrayed? Lost? Hurt? "And if I couldn't kill Voldemort myself..." Nott exhaled slowly then took a deep breath, freezing the weight that'd likely been weighing on his chest all these years.

"Then I was going to do everything in my power to make sure that Potter could."

"But why you?" Zabini asked. "Why did you have to be the one who betrayed him?"

"Because it's my fault that she's dead."

"No, it's not." Zabini took a step towards Nott, finally confident Malfoy didn't need pulling back. "The Dark Lord ordered her execution because she refused to attack a children's hospital in Bristol - that has nothing to do with you."

"She didn't refuse to destroy the hospital," Nott interrupted, and although his voice started off as a snarl, it broke in the middle, then cut off into a sob. "I did."

Malfoy closed his eyes and tilted his head towards the ceiling, lost for words.

"What do you mean?" Zabini asked, astonished. "Crouch Jr said..."

"I know what Crouch said, but it was a lie. Daphne covered for me. We were on the mission together, and Voldemort had put Tobias Jones in charge."

"I remember that mission," Malfoy breathed, his eyes still squeezed closed. "Jones wanted to move up the ranks, so Daph agreed to step down for the day and let him run the mission under her guidance as practice."

"Really? So nothing happens if I do this?"

Hermione gasped quietly when the tips of his fingers brushed against the back of her hand. He was cold - almost freezing - and it felt like having morphine rubbed across an open wound.

"Does it feel better when I do this?" Malfoy's touch was featherlight and suddenly not nearly enough. "Does the fire - the one you apparently *don't* feel at this very moment- dull anymore when I do this?"

"Y-yes ... no!" She sucked in a sharp breath. Her eyes fluttered closed. "Yes. It - it does ... A little."

"And what about when I do this?" he asked, his voice dropping to that husky growl as his fingers skated up her bare arm, making her shiver slightly.

She melted into him without realising. She leaned into his chest, and her head rolled against his shoulder while his cold hands worked their magic, stronger - better - than any cooling charm she could think to cast.

"And this?" His lips grazed her neck. When he kissed the base of her throat, a quiet little whimper snuck its way out her mouth before she could stop it. "Does it feel better when I do this?" Another kiss. "Talk to me, little lion." And another, soft and moving up the length of her neck. "Tell me how it feels."

*More*, she wanted to say. Had to bite her bottom lip to trap it inside.

The hand around her shoulder moved, his icy fingers skating around her throat -

A sharp cracking sound suddenly echoed around them. And then another. And another.

Only one type of magic made that sound. Three people had Apparated into the church.

As Hermione spun around, Malfoy smothered her mouth with his hand and shoved her against the wall. He sealed her into the tight space by pressing his body against hers. She placed her hands on his shoulders and tried to push him back, but he caught both her wrists with his free hand and held them against his chest.

He hissed a concealing charm under his breath, and the air around them blurred slightly. He'd made them invisible. Hidden them from whoever was coming into the church with the same enchantment her group had used to hide themselves at Dover when she'd been captured.

"I'm not," she said, even as she picked up one of the small broken trinkets off the floor and placed it on a shelf in front of her, just for something to distract herself with. She couldn't bare to look at him. "But the sooner you realise there's nothing here for you to find, the sooner we can leave." She felt Malfoy watching her as she looked through the tiny room. Felt his eyes on her and pretended not to notice, pretended he wasn't there at all.

"Can you feel it now?"

"Can I feel *what* now?" she snapped, struggling to keep the venom from creeping into her voice.

"The Dark Lord's magic."

Yes, she wanted to say, but she caught her tongue before the words slipped out. "No. Why do you ask?"

"Because it's fucking freezing in here. You're wearing nothing but a tiny scrap of fabric, and there's not as much as a single goose-bump on your skin."

Hermione chose not to answer him. Chose to busy herself with picking another broken trinket off the floor and arranged it on the shelf, even as she heard his footsteps behind her, getting louder and louder –

He stood right behind her, so close she could feel his cold breath on the back of her neck.

"What does it feel like?" he asked.

"Like my skin is on fire and bugs are crawling across my bones," she said as she picked up a half expired candle and placed it back on the shelf. "It's like I'm reliving the moment Narcissa burned me at the stake. Like I'm reliving my death before it even happens. I can feel the fire on my skin. It's faint, and sometimes dull, but it's still there. It's ... not exactly what I would call pleasant."

"What do you do when you feel it?"

"I run myself a cold bath and sit in it until the fire goes away."

There was a brief silence, then, "Cold things make it go away?"  
"Sometimes."

"And the flames?" he whispered, fanning cold air against her neck. "Do you feel them now?"

"No," she lied again.

Nott nodded. "She didn't like it, but she had it in her head that Jones had suspicions about me, so she thought it might butter him up a little. Keep your friends close and your enemies closer and all that."

"What suspicions?" Hermione asked.

All three Death Eaters turned to look at her, but it was Nott who answered her question without pause. "They suspected that I hadn't killed anyone yet, that I didn't have it in me. And they were right."

"You hadn't killed anyone before Daphne died?" Hermione gasped, running through the dates in her head. "But that was almost... three years after the Battle of Hogwarts?"

"No, I hadn't killed a single person at that point," Nott answered quietly. "I'd tried to kill, Daph spent hours and hours trying to teach me how, but I could never manage it, just used to freeze up and cower like the frightened little boy I was." His eyes drifted towards the floor. "But Daph always covered for me. She pretended some of her kills were mine and lied to the Dark Lord about it. He never suspected a thing, but Jones and Grouch Jr did."

"So what happened on the mission?" Malfoy's voice was sharp, but he still wasn't looking at Nott. Still hadn't opened his eyes.

"To begin with, it all went fine. We were told of a few potential areas that the Order was planning to use as bases to store medical supplies. Daph blew them all up without any difficulty, and I managed to capture a few dozen Order members to interrogate."

Nott looked at Hermione as he filled in the gaps, giving her every piece of information she was missing as though they were old friends having a catch-up. The red flush on his face had started to travel down his neck, but she wasn't sure whether it was from anger or sadness.

"We were all finished and ready to Apparate back here, but Jones got another message from the Dark Lord to blow up the hospital nearby, just to add another nail in the Orders coffin."

Although Malfoy had asked the question, Nott looked at Hermione while he spoke. Like he couldn't look at his best friends. Like she was the only one he could confess this egregious sin to.

"Now, the thing you need to know is that a couple of months before this, I sort of... broke down mid-mission," he rushed through the words, still only speaking to

Hermione. "It was the same sort of mission in the sense we had to blow up potential bases the Order could use to store medicine in. Me and Daph were together - and I saw these bodies on the floor." He took a deep breath and swallowed. "Two bodies - a mother and her child. They'd burned to death in the blast we created and I just ... lost it. I felt so guilty I could hardly stand up. Just kept saying, *'this is our fault. We did this'* over and over again like a fucking broken record. Daph tried to calm me down, but I ... I couldn't shake it, and Jones saw me. Daph covered for me, like she always did. Said I'd been hit with a charm and was disorientated or shell shocked or some other bollocks like that, but that night she was convinced.] Jones knew."

Zabini was just staring, eyes as wide as saucers and mouth hanging open slightly. Malfoy had turned his back to them, hiding his face.

"So after the mission in Bristol, Jones ordered me to blow up the hospital - and I couldn't do it. I couldn't -" Nott's voice and shoulders started to tremble. "I couldn't - I froze up. So Jones - he tried to call the Dark Lord. He said - he said he was going to rat me out - tell him that I should be executed for being such a coward."

"Which he would have done without question," Zabini said shakily, his expression nowhere near as strong and restrained as it usually was. "He would have cut your head off, put it on a spike and left your body on display as a warning. We all know he would have done. We've seen it done a hundred times over the years."

Hermione knew that was true. She'd seen it herself in the early stages of the war. She'd vomited the first time she'd seen a Death Eater's head impaled on a spike, maggots eating their eyes while their rotting corpse laid beside them.

The crime of a traitor laid out like a piece of art, and the punishment that would follow.

It used to be such a common thing at the beginning, when Voldemort was weeding out those who had sided with him through cowardice over loyalty. But after a while, the Death Eaters accepted their choice, accepted that it was too late to change their fate, and the bodies lessened.

"Yeah, he would have done," Nott agreed, "and Daphne knew it too. So she killed Jones before he could say anything."

"Daph killed Jones?" Zabini prodded. "In front of witnesses?!"

"Yes. Samuel Dillon was there, but she didn't care. She killed him to protect me. So he wouldn't say anything." Nott could hardly speak. He started choking on his words, almost incoherent through a mixture of anger and heartbreak. "After she

"I see," was all Hermione could think to say. "And what did your master think when he found out you'd fucked his new favourite weapon?"

"I haven't told him. I haven't told anyone what transpired between us in our drawing room," he scoffed again and quirked a brow. "I'm not a complete gossip and don't go running off telling people every detail of my life like you seem to."

"I didn't tell Astoria that we fucked because I wanted to gossip," she snapped, anger heating her chest. "I asked her for a potion, and she coaxed it out of me."

A deep crease formed between Malfoy's brows. "A contraceptive potion?"

Now it was Hermione's turn to scoff. "You honestly think I would have had sex with you if I wasn't already on a form of contraception? Don't be daft, I cast a permanent contraceptive charm on myself years ago."

"But you've been taking the anti-magic potions since December -"

"It doesn't matter - it won't be affected." Hermione's tone was sharp enough to cut Malfoy off. "It's a form of medicinal magic, so it can't be reversed by anti-magic potions. If you broke your leg and healed it with magic, the bones wouldn't rebreak themselves if you started taking anti-magic potions years later, would they? It's the same principle."

The crease between his brows deepened a fraction. "No, I suppose not."

Hermione wasn't sure exactly what set her off. The accusation that she would be so careless could have been what rolled the spark wheel of her anger, or perhaps it was the ghost of her parents clinging to her, an old wound made fresh again by looking around her old family home. Most likely it was a combination of the two, mixing together like the chemical glands in a dragon's mouth when they exhaled, igniting her anger like a flaming breath.

"But don't worry, my charm work was perfect - even then - and since I'm the one who cast the charm, I can't get pregnant unless I remove it myself, so there's no risk of little half-blood Malfoy's running around and soiling your oh so fucking prestigious family name," Hermione hissed before she whirled around and stormed towards the little room that had no door.

She couldn't lock him out, couldn't even slam the door behind her the way she really wanted to. She had nowhere to hide from him while she cooled down, and of course, he fucking followed her, just like she suspected he would.

"I thought you weren't going to help me search this church?"

"She already liked you, but she didn't know if you were trustworthy. Smelling me on you just solidified her confidence in you. She thinks that if I was willing to be that close to you, that intimate with you, then her instincts about you must have been correct."

Hermione couldn't help but snort. "She already liked me! Did she tell you that herself?"

"In a way - yes."

Sensing she wasn't going to drop the subject, Malfoy sighed, put down the book he'd been inspecting, and turned towards her. He placed his hands on the edge of the table behind him and leaned back. "Scandinavian Firehorn's are incredibly intelligent creatures, and - unlike a lot of other species of dragon - they lead very emotional lives," he said slowly. "My dragon and I - we have a bond. We're connected. I know what she's feeling, and she can feel what I'm feeling."

"Like reading each others' minds?"

"No, it's not quite as strong as that. We get a sense of the others emotions. I can tell when she's frightened and she can tell when I'm anxious or angry. I suspect it's the reason we're so good in combat together."

He looked down at one of the bibles on the table and started idly flipping through the pages. Almost like he didn't want to look at her while he was saying any of this.

"She's liked you from the beginning, almost felt drawn to you. I felt it the moment she saw you on the cliffs of Dover the day I captured you." He paused on a page, stopped speaking for a moment or two to read something, then carried on. "She was as fascinated with you as I was. A great big bloody dragon had appeared on the field, burned a few of your teammates to ashes with one breath, and you carried on fighting. Stayed behind to make sure everyone else had Apparated to safety as though either of us couldn't have ended you like *that*."

Hermione jumped slightly as Malfoy snapped his fingers.

"She thought you were brave and fierce - thought you were even fiercer when you picked bullels out my chest the day I was shot." He looked up at her, and there was something in his eyes that made every nerve ending in Hermione's body want to shiver - but she kept it in, managed to keep still and stony-faced as his eyes raked her over from head to foot. "So naturally, now you smell like me, she feels she can trust you."

killed Jones, Grouch Jr Apparated onto the field, and - and Dillon just took off. He - he sprinted towards Grouch - and tried to tell him everything, but Daph killed him too, she - she Avada'd him straight in the back before he could say too much. But it was t-too late. He'd already said - he'd already"

It was Malfoy who asked the question on everyone's lips. "And what exactly did Dillon say?"

"He said Nott isn't with us anymore. Nott killed Jones."

"But how could Daphne take the fall for you if Samuel already said that you killed Jones?" Hermione asked, confused.

"Because he didn't say *which* Nott he was talking about." Nott choked and dropped his head. "Daphne was my wife. When we got married, she took my last name, and it's my name that gother killed. She turned and attacked me when Crouch Apparated onto the field, made - made it look like she'd betrayed the Dark Lord and that I was trying to stop her. That I was loyal to him and she wasn't." He started to sob, heaving low in his chest. "She took the fall for me. Sacrificed herself to protect me. I should have been executed, not her."

"We all lost her that day," Malfoy said hoarsely, finally turning toward them again. "We know how you -"

Nott's head jerked up to glare at Malfoy. "Don't you fucking dare say you know how I feel! You don't! You've never been in love with someone, Malfoy!" he roared in anger, even though his face was damp with tears, even though they were still running down his cheeks. "You don't know what it feels like to love someone so much that you can't fucking breathe without them!"

Suddenly, the double doors swung open again and Astoria burst into the room. "What the bloody hell is going on in here?!" she shouted as she stormed towards them, her pink silk night robes swaying and almost hiding Romy completely from view as he trailed behind her. It was easy to forget how small Astoria was when she wasn't in her high heels - and how quickly she could move in a pair of slippers.

Zabini stepped in front of Astoria just before she reached Nott.

"What on earth do you think you're doing?" she snapped and glared up at him. "Let him go!" She tried to step around him, but Zabini matched her step, continuing to block her path.

"Get out of here!" Zabini shouted, panicked. "I am not messing around, Astoria! Leave!"

Hermione had only ever heard Zabini raise his voice a handful of times, and she'd never - ever - heard him speak to Astoria like that. If the change in his tone bothered Astoria, she didn't show it. She was too busy trying to find a way around him. She even pushed him a few times to force him out of her way.

"Let me see him!"

"Tori, you need to go," Malfoy's voice cut through the couple's bickering. "The less you know about what's going on here, the better."

"This is ridiculous!" Astoria shouted, trying and failing to duck under her husband's arm. "He is our friend! He doesn't need to be chained up like a dog!"

"I don't want you involved in this!"

"I'm already involved, you idiots!"

"*Tori,*" Nott warned. "Don't do this."

"Oh for goodness sake!" Astoria growled, dropping her arms. "He isn't the only spy!" She closed her eyes and tilted her head towards the ceiling, in a stance that reminded Hermione an awful lot of Malfoy.

"What are you talking about?" Zabini hissed. "He's the traitor. I caught him giving information to an Order member."

"*Tori,*" Nott said again. "Don't you dare."

"Theo isn't doing this alone!" Astoria huffed and opened her eyes. "I've been helping him from the beginning. I'm Medusa, too."

Malfoy and Zabini froze. Their expressions fell together, and the room fell dangerously silent.

"What?" Astoria snapped. "You think I'm too delicate and fragile to be able to get information? You think I'm too weak and too self-absorbed to be able to pay attention to Voldemort's secrets?"

"No. No. No," Malfoy whispered, shaking his head slightly as he looked at Astoria. "She's lying! She's trying to protect him. She isn't Medusa. She can't be."

"I'm not lying." Taking advantage of their shock, Astoria shoved past Zabini and began tugging at Nott's restraints. "I gather all the information, I get all the secrets that Voldemort doesn't want getting out, and Theo meets Lilith to leak it."

"You're... both in on this?" Zabini's voice was thick with disbelief. "You're both Medusa?"

"Good, because I won't do anything that will hurt the Order." Hermione folded her arms across her chest and leaned against the wall behind her. "Not of my own free will, anyway."

"I know," he called over his shoulder. "Just sit back and make yourself comfortable."

A cold breeze swept in through one of the broken windows. Neither of them had changed, and Hermione revelled in the feel of it as it rolled across her bare arms, dousing the uncomfortable heat in her skin.

The light was fading quickly outside. Hermione watched in silence as Malfoy inspected the table at the very end of the aisle and looked behind the tapestries. He was very thorough with his search, inspecting underneath the tables and quickly flipping through copies of bibles as though there may be secrets hidden between the messages of God.

"Does your dragon like everyone you sleep with?"

Malfoy looked over his shoulder at her and quirked a brow. "That's what you want to talk about right now?"

Hermione shrugged. "Would you rather we discuss what you did to the priest you found at the last church you raided? Or what you're going to do if you find another poor soul hiding in this church?"

He took the time to glare at her before he answered her question. "No," he said coldly, turning his back to her again to search through the stacks of bibles. "She doesn't."

"Then why does she like me all of a sudden? Is it really just because I smell like you?"

"Not at all. I lived with Astoria, Theo, Daphne and Blaise long before she hatched. I spend a lot of time with them, so naturally, some of my scent is on them as well and she still tries to bite each of their heads off if they get too close to her."

"So it is just people you've had sex with then?"

Malfoy laughed. Not loud enough for her to hear, but the steady shaking of his shoulders gave him away. "No. I've fucked Pansy a hundred times throughout the years, and my dragon still hated her. You and I fucking had very little to do with it."

"Then what?"

He took one more look around the small room. He opened a little drawer that had been emptied years ago. "Is there anything in this house that you want to take with you?"

"No. I took everything of sentimental value years ago," Hermione answered immediately, seeing no reason to lie to him. "When I look around this room now, I don't see my home - all I see is pain. So no, I don't want to take a reminder of that with me."

He stared at her for a moment, then nodded and made his way down the stairs. When he got to the bottom, he opened the front door and held it open for her.

"Ladies first."

They walked down the stone road to the church in silence. The sun was starting to set, disappearing over the top of the destroyed houses, and the streetlamps - what was left of them - had just flickered on as they opened the church doors.

Hermione had been in this church a few times as a child. She'd never had a religious upbringing, but there were a few times during her early childhood where her mother and father had brought her here. Just one or two Christmas services or neighbourhood Christenings, attendance via social requirement rather than religion.

It was a relatively small church - now. It used to be a lot larger, used to have a high ceiling with elegant wooden beams running across the top. That was gone now. The ceiling must have been blown to bits during an attack and now when Hermione looked up, she saw open sky.

Most of the church's foundations were gone. The walls were still relatively high, but with the ceiling obliterated and almost all of the windows broken in, the space looked bare and derelict. There wasn't much left standing. Just room enough for a few wooden pews, a small area at the front for services, and an open doorway to the left side of the aisle that led to a smaller room, the door blown off its hinges and discarded on the floor.

What little was left inside the church looked like it had been cleared out by looters. The shelves and table at the end of the aisle were bare - it wouldn't take Malfoy long to search the entire place from top to bottom.

As soon as he closed the doors behind him, he began his search. "I don't expect you to help me," he said as he walked down the aisle.

After instructing Romy to banish the chains she couldn't break on her own, Astoria nodded.

Nott shook his head as he stood. "Fuck it, if she's decided that she's going to tell you everything, you might as well have the truth. Astoria is Medusa. She's the brains behind this whole thing. I'm just a humble servant. A post-man that delivers her messages. It's all her," he announced proudly, looking at his partner in crime in admiration. "It's always been her."

"We're in this together," Astoria said. "I would never have been able to get the information to the Order without you. You're just as much Medusa as I am."

"How long has this been going on?" Malfoy interrupted.

"Since the day after Daphne's execution," Astoria answered quickly. Honest. "The two of you had duties, so Theo and I decided to drown our sorrows. We spent the whole night talking about Daphne, about what he'd taken from us and how he should be the one who was dead, and that was it. That was how Medusa was born. Out of whiskey and hatred and the need for revenge."

"This doesn't make any sense!" Malfoy dragged a hand through his hair. "Where are you getting the information from? You don't know any of the Dark Lord's secrets, Tori. You don't know battle plans and locations of Horcruxes. Only the inner circle knows that sort of thing, so who else is giving you this information to leak?"

"All of you."

Malfoy dropped his hands and stared at her. "The fuck is that supposed to mean?" "I get it from all the Death Eaters - there's not one source that's giving us all this information," Astoria said. "It's all of you. Even you and Blaise have given away a secret or two over the years. I've found the odd plan left out on a desk or overheard a conversation between the two of you that I wasn't supposed to..."

"I came up with the name Medusa," Nott smiled. "Thought it was very fitting..."

"Sorry mate," Malfoy bit. "But I think the least of my concerns right now is how you two came up with the bloody name of your treachery!"

Nott rolled his eyes but wasn't deterred. "But the name is everything! Think about it, what is Medusa? What does she look like?"

"Oh, would the pair of you stop talking in riddles and fucking answer..."

"Wait, Malfoy," Hermione said softly. "I think I understand what he's saying."

Malfoy turned to stare at her, his brows pulled together in confusion. “What?”

“Astoria said that all of you are the leaks, she’s getting her information from all of you,” Hermione started, slowly putting the pieces together herself as she spoke.

“Medusa has a head full of snakes, and all the Death Eaters have snake tattoos.”

Malfoy’s lip curled. “So?”

“So, that’s just it. Astoria *is* Medusa. She’s the beautiful maiden, the brains behind the whole thing, and all the Death Eaters are her snakes, the ones she gets her information from.”

“That would explain why you’ve never been able to pinpoint precisely who the leak was,” Zabini said. “And why you couldn’t trace the secrets that were being leaked back to one specific person. Because it was never one person to begin with. It was all of us.”

Malfoy’s eyes widened. “How did you get the others to talk and not realise what they were doing?”

“Why do you think I always insist on going to the Gala’s Voldemort puts on?”

Astoria raised her brows. “Do you think I enjoy making idle conversation with the people who cheered when my sister was executed? That I like being in the same room as the ones who held her down and swung an axe into her back? No, I go to get information. People trust me, they tell me things they shouldn’t. It’s like they can’t help it, and Salazar knows that your slimy Death Eater friends like to look at me when they’re drunk.”

Zabini and Malfoy stared at Astoria in silent horror. Like they couldn’t believe what they were hearing. Like they didn’t want to believe it.

“I go to those parties, I get myself all prettied up, I wear a low cut dress and sip on champagne and the Death Eaters flock to me like flies on shit! They think I’m pretty but stupid, so they don’t watch their drinks because they don’t think they have to. They don’t see me as a threat. They don’t think that poor little Astoria Zabini could ever be clever enough to slip a little Veritaserum in their whiskey,” she laughed quietly, probably relieved to finally get this off her chest. “They tell me everything. Secrets just pour out of them and then all it takes is a quick Obliviate and they can’t remember a thing they’ve told me. Assume they had too much to drink at the party and have nothing more than a hangover.”

“Where the fuck did you manage to get Veritaserum from?” Malfoy asked suddenly. “The Dark Lord used the last of his supplies years ago, which is why we

detailed picture of a coastline she’d created the summer before she, Harry and Ron had started searching for Horcruxes.

It was all there, her entire artistic career all safely stored in a tiny metal box. “I can’t believe he kept these,” Hermione whispered, a faint smile starting to crack her face. “It was a sort of tradition me and my dad started. Every year on our family holiday instead of buying a postcard,” she took the painting at the top of the pile and flipped it over to reveal her father’s neat handwriting on the back, “he would tell me to paint a picture of the place we visited and make my own.”

“So, that year you went to...” Malfoy flipped the painting back over. “Is that supposed to be a palm tree?”

“It’s the Eiffel Tower you prat! I was only five when I painted this.”

Malfoy straightened his arms and squinted at the paper in his hands, even tried experimenting with a few different angles, as though the painting she’d made as a small child might somehow be an abstract masterpiece if he looked at it in *just* the right way.

Hermione snatched the paper from him, crammed it back in the box, and closed the lid. When she looked back at him, she swore his lip twitched as though he were trying to fight a smile.

They explored the rest of the house, and didn’t speak again until they came to the final bedroom her mother used as a dressing room.

“My mother used to have a room like this,” Malfoy said as he looked at the rows of empty coat hangers that lined each wall. “Used to have all sorts of dresses and gowns. Had more bloody shoes than Astoria does, and that’s saying something.”

“Where is that room now?”

Malfoy’s nose crinkled slightly, almost a wince, but not quite. “It’s gone... I - pretty but stupid, so they don’t watch their drinks because they don’t think they have to. They don’t see me as a threat. They don’t think that poor little Astoria Zabini could ever be clever enough to slip a little Veritaserum in their whiskey,” she laughed quietly, probably relieved to finally get this off her chest. “They tell me everything. Secrets just pour out of them and then all it takes is a quick Obliviate and they can’t remember a thing they’ve told me. Assume they had too much to drink at the party and have nothing more than a hangover.”

“Take them? Burn them? Just like he did Daphne’s?” he scoffed and rolled his tongue on the inside of his cheek. “Yes. He did.”

Hermione nodded silently, then asked, “And all her things? Did Voldemort-”

“Take them? Burn them? Just like he did Daphne’s?” he scoffed and rolled his tongue on the inside of his cheek. “Yes. He did.”

through years of her memories, paid close attention to the Orders battles strategies and secrets, but something as silly as her childhood birthday party had left an impression on him.

Hermione nodded, and when she made her way towards the stairs, Malfoy followed. He kept close by as Hermione slowly walked through each room.

She hadn't been back here for years, hadn't felt the need to. Anything that held sentimental value to her had been boxed and was stored at Order safe houses, but with hundreds of miles between her and any physical reminder of her family - her old life - she thought she might feel different. Thought she would want to savour each precious second that she got to spend here.

She didn't.

Instead of feeling any type of comfort or happiness, she just felt sad and empty. Looking at each room, seeing the cracks in the walls and the mould on the ceiling just left a bitter taste in her mouth.

The one sense of will you still keep, occupied with the watchful Major.

He seemed vaguely intrigued with everything, looking over every abandoned item Hermione hadn't thought important enough to take with her with an intense

curiosity. She found him examining an ancient mobile phone, and then staring at an electric hairdryer in her old bedroom like it was going to sprout legs and bite him.

He tried to hide his interest. Every time she caught him looking a little too invested in something, he would shrug it off and his expression would grow the picture of boredom.

She knew him well enough by now to know that he was pretending, trying to hide behind an icy wall, even if it was splintered and cracked, allowing only the tiniest glimpses of himself to squeeze through the gaps.

"What's this?" he asked when they passed through her parents' room. "Did you  
see it?"

Hermione peeked over his shoulder to find him holding the small metal box her father kept in his draw. It was rusting and very thin, only designed to keep important letters and documents inside, but instead of copies of birth certificates or bank statements, her father had filled it with paintings. Her paintings. Dozens of them, ranging from a very questionable-looking beach shed painted as a child, to a more

have to interrogate our hostages the old-fashioned way! The key ingredient in that potion is Knobberknott feathers, and no one has seen one in a decade so no one can brew the potion anymore!"

"The less you know about all of this," Astoria smirked, using Malfoy's own words against him, "the better."

Malfoy flew into a rage again, and as he seethed and screamed at Astoria, at Nott, Hermione worked through everything she'd just heard.

She'd always thought the codename was an attempt at irony, the spy's way of covering their soul to Voldemort and turned themselves into a monster for

many more like the one described by

Hermione couldn't believe how wrong she'd been. In her anger, in her fucking hatred for the Death Eaters, she'd assumed them all evil and soulless.

She'd never considered Medusa's other origin stories. The ones that were far darker and twisted than the one she'd clung to...

In the other legends, Medusa was beautiful and innocent, and Poseidon wanted her. In those other stories, Medusa rejected him, so Poseidon took her by force, and when she asked for help from those she trusted, she was turned into a monster.

Nott and Astoria were both Medusa. Hermione could see it now.

They didn't want this life, they didn't want any of it. They were forced onto a path they never wanted and robbed of everything they'd once held dear. They'd both lost everything, and Nott had turned into a killer - into a monster - to protect the both of them.

“Voldemort had her killed right in front of me, Malfoy. *My sister.*” The usual sharpness in Astoria’s voice pulled Hermione from her train of thought. “He needs to pay for what he’s done. To Daphne. To Theo. To me and you and this whole family. I don’t have a lot of time left in this world, and Theo and I made a promise to one another that before I die, we would make that sick bastard pay for what he’s done to us.”

Although the words were obviously meant to soothe, they did the opposite.

All of Malfoy's earlier anger returned tenfold. He whirled around and kicked the chair Nott had been bound to, sending it careening into the wall.

"Draco, please calm down." Astoria reached for Malfoy, but he jerked away from her.

"Do you have any idea what you've done, the pair of you? You've practically signed all our fucking death certificates with your little act of rebellion!"

"This isn't just about rebelling!" Astoria shouted back. "The Order can win this war! Potter can kill him! If you would just give us a little longer -"

"You want me to let this carry on?"

Astoria shook her head. "No, I don't want you to turn a blind eye and let us continue leaking all these secrets. I want you to help us."

"What do you think this is? A family bonding experience? You're off your fucking rocker if you think I'm going to help!"

"Just think about it, Draco. You're his right hand! You know everything about his plans!" Astoria pleaded, grabbing Malfoy's hands. "We've only been able to feed the Order little pieces of information at a time because we were worried you would figure out it was us! But if you help us, we will be able to help Potter so much more! We could tell him where all the Horcruxes are and the best ways to defeat his army! They could have the war won in a year!"

Malfoy shook his head. His eyes flickered to Zabini. "And I suppose your decisions already been made, hasn't it?"

Zabini was quiet for a moment. He looked at Astoria, and then Malfoy, but eventually, wrapped his arms around his wife and kissed her. "Astoria is my wife," he said, pulling back slightly to look at her. "There's no decision to be made. If she is with the Order now, then so am I."

"Don't pretend like you haven't thought about it before, Malfoy," Nott said suddenly. "Or have you conveniently forgotten that conversation?"

Malfoy narrowed his eyes, but his lips remained tightly closed, refusing to play Notts game.

"Don't go all shy now," Nott replied, grinning. "You remember, it was just before we had to watch Daph's execution." He stepped towards Malfoy until they were eye to eye, almost chest to chest. "I was a fucking mess, and she'd asked you to come and look after me. You went through the same thing when Voldemort killed your parents. You were forced to watch him torture and kill them as punishment for your mums' betrayal. I asked you how you got through it, and do you remember what you said?"

"Better? Or worse?"

"Worse."

"Was it a mistake for me to bring you here?"

"No." Hermione paused to swallow the lump in her throat. "I just... it's a lot to take in. It's hard to be here after all this time."

As she glanced around the charred space, she hardly recognised what used to be her old living room.

Death Eaters had destroyed the house when they'd captured her parents. They'd burned the curtains, torn the sofas apart, smashed the bookcases and left gaping holes in the plaster. They'd snuffed out the warmth and familiarity these four walls used to hold, and years of neglect had finished the job.

Time had been a pack of vultures to this place. Had picked the scraps clean off the carcass, peeled the paint off the walls, allowed mould to eat away at the floorboards and weeds to grow through the broken windows to eclipse the walls until all that was left was bones and a shell of the place she used to adore.

"It's smaller than it looked in your memories," Malfoy said aloud, looking around the room, taking everything in.

It was odd to see him in her childhood home. He'd seen it in her memories, the image of him had stood beside her while he'd gone through the moments of her life with a fine-toothed comb, but actually having him there, stood next to the burnt remains of her sofa, was another thing entirely. It was strange to watch him run his hands over the broken tea set on the coffee table. To see him pick up the chunk of plastic that used to be the remote control for their television and flip it over in his hands.

He looked entirely out of place, but fascinated at the same time. Like he didn't have a clue what anything around the room was, but was drawn in by each strange object nonetheless. There was a spark of something in his eyes as he looked around, that same curious fascination she sometimes saw when he looked at her.

"This is the room that held your birthday party," he said, still not looking at her. "Your fifth birthday, wasn't it?"

He'd remembered.

It was the first memory of hers he ever saw, and he'd remembered. Again, she couldn't help but think it was a strange thing for him to take interest in. He'd poured

how many anymore. I tried not to care about anything else. Tried to tell myself that each time I killed, it was necessary. That every notch on my death toll was like another layer in my family's armour.”

Hermione felt like each time she saw another one of Malfoy's memories, each time he let her in, she understood him more and more. Could see even more clearly why he had become so lethal, so ruthless.

Like the image of Medusa she'd drawn up in her mind, she had a separate one for Malfoy. A painting of her own creation; a demon with sharp horns and blood dripping from his fingers, but each new memory she saw changed that painting, swiped another piece of the canvas clean and revealed something underneath. Something softer, more humane - and far more hurt than she would've realised on her own.

“It used to be easy to shut myself off from what I was feeling. I used to imagine taking my feelings out of my chest, putting up my walls and then throwing them over it so I was just numb all over. I didn't use to feel a shred of remorse when I decapitated people. Didn't used to feel a thing when I killed people we went to school with,” he said, his voice dropping to a whisper. “I didn't feel anything. My chest was empty and I was dead inside. But then ... you came back into my life, and it became so much harder to shut myself off... I started feeling things again ... I started to—”

He closed his eyes and tensed his jaw. Hermione could see him trying to put his occlumency walls back up, trying to protect himself before he said too much.

But Hermione refused to let him hide from her. Not when she was finally starting to breakthrough.

“Don't put up any more occlumency walls,” she pleaded, taking his face between her hands. “Don't hide from me.”

His eyes snapped open and he looked down at her for a moment. He flinched the same way he had when she'd kissed him in his room - bracing himself against any sign of physical affection as though it were an attack.

Hermione's heart seemed to beat painfully in her chest.

He was so used to death and torture, he didn't know how to respond to tenderness. So used to using his hands for killing - to seeing them as a tool to inflict pain- that he didn't always recognise that they could be used for comfort.

Malfoy didn't know what to do with himself. He tried to look away, but Hermione tilted his head and forced him to meet her eyes.

She needed to tread very carefully. He was on the cusp of something, so close to the edge of the cliff but hanging on by the very tips of his fingers. She'd always assumed he were the loyalist of Voldemort's followers, but it seemed in recent months that that wasn't exactly the case.

He didn't serve his master out of love or devotion to the cause, he served him to protect his family. Just like Daphne, fighting in his army was a means to an end, and with his family's life threatened, that loyalty - that was already hanging by a fucking thread - had been tested.

The murder of his parents was the first blow. Having to witness their deaths was like an axe being swung into the side of a tree; the foundations were still there, but there was a gaping hole in the centre.

It was almost severed completely when Daphne was executed, but the need to keep the others safe was what kept him hanging on. He had to make sacrifices to keep it standing, had to close off his heart, cut pieces of himself off and use them to prop the tree up, but it was there. Still standing, the illusion of loyalty.

After all these years, there were only a few threads left. But it seemed Voldemort's indifference to Astoria's near brush with death had caused a devastating cut to his loyalty, and the reveal of Medusa's identity had delivered the final blow.

The tree hadn't quite collapsed yet. It was cut in half, no connections remained, but it was frozen, hanging suspended in a moment of weightlessness.

One more nudge would do it, but he had to be the one to make the decision. If he felt backed into a corner, if he felt pushed into a decision that wasn't entirely his, he would lash out and push in the opposite direction.

Hermione needed to choose her next words very, *very* fucking carefully.

“Please, don't shut me out, Draco. Not now.” She took a step closer, stretching onto the tips of her toes so she could try and be eye level with him. “Just let me in. Just this once, tell me what you were about to say.”

The conflict in him was tangible. Almost visible. She could see him wrestling with it. Could see the indecision in the blue of his eyes. The fear. The panic. The uncertainty. She could see it all without his occlumency.

Malfoy rolled his jaw, took a deep breath, and on the exhale, he confessed.

"I saw what killing other people did to you. I saw how much it hurt you, and it killed me because I was the one making you do it," he whispered. "It's becoming harder and harder to Occlude. I feel guilt and remorse. I feel sadness and pain, and you know what? I fucking hate you for it Granger." He tried to hiss the words at her, tried to pour as much malice and hatred into them as he could, but in the end, it just sounded hurt and full of emotion - emotions he'd repressed for years and years.

"I hate that you've made me feel things again. I hate that I can't seem to kill anymore without thinking about how it's going to affect you, if it's going to make you angry or break your heart."

She expected him to pull back, to bat her hands away and sneer down at her, but instead, he leaned into her touch, nestling his cheek against her palm like he'd wanted to do it all along.

"I hate that I can't stop thinking about you. I hate that every time I'm in the same room as you, all I can think about is *this*." He caught her wrist and used it to press her hand more firmly against his cheek. "It's driving me fucking insane. I can't think straight. All I can think about is touching you. Or you touching me. About how soft and warm you are. But more than anything? I fucking hate that you've revived something in me that I thought I'd buried a long, long time ago. I hate you for it, Granger, I really, really do."

"I know," she hushed back, stroking her thumbs gently across his cold cheeks when she felt him start to shake.

"You've killed just as often as I have, so you feel it too, don't you?" he asked. "The pain? The guilt?"

All Hermione could do was nod.

"How can you carry all this around with you? How does it not crush you to think about what you've done and all the people you've killed?"

"It does crush me, Draco. Every day, I think about all the people I've killed, and every night, I sweat to God I can see their faces when I close my eyes, but it doesn't stop me, I still kill people all the time. And you're right, I wouldn't think twice about killing one person if I thought it would save two. I consider the people I kill monsters, but their deaths still haunt me. I hate that this war has turned me into someone who can kill. I hate it, but I can't change it," she hushed. "Sometimes, the guilt is so heavy it feels like it's crushing me. Sometimes, when I think about all the

"Yes."

"Did it help him get through her execution?"

"I don't think anything could ever help a person witness their soulmate being butchered in front of their eyes." She felt Malfoy's eyes on her face. "But yes. I don't know what she said to him, but when he came out of that dungeon afterwards, he was ... different."

"And is it true what Theo said about Daphne being Voldemort's favourite Death Eater?"

"Yes. He always had a soft spot for her. If she hadn't died, I'm sure she would have been promoted to a Demon Mask rather than me."

Despite herself, Hermione looked at Daphne once more. At the bruises on her face and the burn marks on her arms and shoulders.

She was Voldemort's favourite, and he'd turned on her in an instant. He'd had no problem ordering his subordinates to torture her at the first sign of betrayal. So what would he do to Theo and Astoria if he knew they'd been aiding in his demise for years? It was almost too horrific to even think about.

The memory started to fade around them, and Hermione was engulfed in a familiar blinding light before she materialised back in the Malfoy family cemetery. "Why did you show me that?" she asked, her impulsive tongue already curling around the words before she'd found her footing again. "Why did you want me to see Daphne like that?"

Malfoy stared at Daphne's grave, one hand still resting atop it. "Because I always thought that moment was where it started for me. I'd killed people before that, but I'd always been rather humane about it. Always tried to use curses that wouldn't hurt or would kill quickly - and then after that, I changed. Suppose I was born again, baptised in blood and all that metaphorical bollocks."

Slowly, Malfoy let go of the headstone and turned to Hermione. His eyes were mostly blue, only the faintest line of silver clinging to life.

"I'd watched my mother and father be executed, and having to go through the same thing again years later ... it was all too much. After watching her execution and seeing how easily replaceable we were, I became ruthless, and it wasn't long before I became a demon in both name and nature." He released a slow breath, letting his words sink in. "I wanted to earn the horns on my head because I thought it would keep the others safe. I've killed so many fucking people Granger, I don't even know

the large tear-shaped diamond on his mother's ring caught the little light in the dungeon before he tucked them safely back into his robes and straightened his collar. He turned his attention back to the memory he was showing her, so Hermione did the same.

"It's going to be fine, Draco," Daphne breathed, reassuring her friend as though he were the one about to be executed rather than her. "You're going to get through this and keep the others safe. You don't need me anymore."

Malfoy didn't say another word for several minutes. He just stared straight ahead, watching his younger self plead with Daphne to let him save her, to let him blow the bars off her cell and let her escape, even though he already knew her answer.

Daphne wouldn't let him. "It's too risky," she just kept saying over and over again. "Voldemort will know it was one of you. Hell think you're sympathisers and hell kill you all. It's better this way. Just let me go."

"What the fuck am I going to do without you, Daph?" the younger Malfoy sighed, "I can't... I don't know how..."

"You'll be fine. You're more than capable of looking after the others on your own," she said, smiling sweetly as tears gathered in her eyes. "You don't need me anymore."

"Theo isn't going to be able to get through this," the younger Malfoy breathed eventually, when he'd finally accepted that she wasn't going to let him save her, that he'd allowed her to die. "And even if he does, he's never going to be the same again afterwards."

Daphne was quiet for a heartbeat before she asked, "Can you send him down? I ... I need to ... I want to see him one last time."

The younger Malfoy looked up at her and his fingers tightened around the bars of her cell. He opened his mouth then closed it again, seemingly without words.

"Please, I'll make it quick. I won't say anything that will set him off or make him think that he can save me." Tears welled in Daphne's eyes, and she squeezed his arm again in comfort. "I just ... I need to see him one last time. I ... I need to say goodbye."

Hermione had to look away, suddenly overwhelmed with emotion. Her chest felt tight, and her eyes were beginning to burn. "Did you let Theo say goodbye?" she asked, trying to distract herself from the wave of sadness that had just crashed over her.

people I've killed I can't fucking breathe - but do you know what makes it bearable? Knowing that at the end of all this, at the end of the war, that I've done everything in my power to keep the people I love safe, and that the world will be a better place because Voldemort won't be in it. He won't be able to hurt anyone anymore, and that means that I won't have to hurt anyone either."

Malfoy didn't say anything for a while. He stared at her and went completely still, as though he'd turned into a marble statue right in front of her.

Time stood still as she waited to hear his decision. Seconds passed, perhaps minutes, Hermione had no way of knowing for sure, but what she did know, was that when he'd made the decision, there would be no going back.

"I can't serve him anymore. I don't ... I don't want to serve him anymore," he whispered, pained, defeated. "I don't want to keep killing for him. What's the point in carrying all this pain and guilt around if he won't keep my family safe? If he's just going to let them die or behead us the instant we step out of line, then I don't want to be his puppet. I don't want to be a cog in a machine that I don't believe in anymore."

As soon as he said the words, it was like a weight had been lifted from him. Malfoy closed his eyes and rested his forehead against hers. Almost collapsed into her, like his body had been held up with strings and the confession had severed them all. He had nothing left holding him up now. "I don't want to kill for him. I don't want ... I don't want to be his demon anymore."

"Are you saying that-"

"I'm saying that it's going to take me a few days to wrap my head around all of this, but I think Astoria and Theo are right."

Hermione's heart stopped.

"I think it's time Voldemort paid for what he's done to my family, Granger. I think it's time he paid for it all. And the best way to overthrow a regime is to make it crumble from the inside."

# CHAPTER 39



Daphne was obviously familiar with the name. She knew what was going to happen to her, but rather than cry or scream or shake, she simply nodded, accepting her fate. She reached through the bars and squeezed Malfoy's shoulder, revealing the huge snake that decorated the back of her left hand and wrist in dark ink.

Hermione's breath caught. The other half of Theo's tattoo. The missing piece of him, right there on the back of Daphne's hand.

"Theo doesn't wear a wedding ring," Hermione whispered. "And neither did Daphne. Voldemort didn't take those too when he killed her, did he?"

"They didn't wear rings," Malfoy answered. "It's tradition in pureblood families that when a witch or wizard dies, their wedding rings are removed before their burial and given to their heir."

"Yes, all the families of the Sacred Twenty-Eight have had their wedding bands in their families for hundreds of years," Hermione said, feeling her chest jump slightly when Malfoy looked down at her out the corner of her eye again. "I read about it the summer before I started Hogwarts. It was all very new to me, so I wanted to make sure I knew as much as possible beforehand, so I wouldn't..."

"Get left behind? Of course, you read about it before you'd even set foot in Hogwarts, bloody know it all." Malfoy scoffed quietly, and after he shook his head, he started watching the memory again. "But no, Daphne and Theo didn't wear rings at all."

"Why not?"

"They didn't think they were enough. They wanted something that would last long after they were buried together. They thought tattoos were more permanent, so they got those instead."

"But would Voldemort have taken them, if he could have?"

"I suppose so, yes - why do you ask?"

"I've been wondering about something," Hermione started. "The rings you wear around your neck..."

Malfoy looked at her again. She saw a slight twist in his brow before he reached into the collar of his robes and pulled the metal chain out. "These rings?"

"Yes. Are they...?"

"My parents' wedding rings?" he finished for her. "Yes. I took them after they died." He let her examine them from a distance for a second or two, let her see how

hair, high cheekbones and bright green eyes. She was hugging her knees to her chest and curled into a ball in the corner, trying to stay out of sight. Her clothes were torn and her arms were covered in burns and cuts.

And in the other cell was -

“Daph?” called a familiar voice, just seconds before a younger version of Malfoy appeared at the bottom of the stone steps that led into the dungeons. “Daph?”

“Oh, Halle-bloody-lujah!” Daphne chuckled softly, her voice quiet and gentle like a doves purr. She smiled sweetly from inside the bars, highlighting the deep split in her top lip and the bruises along her cheekbone. “I was terrified that the last face I was going to see before I was sprung off the mortal coil was going to be Party’s!”

Hermione gasped quietly. “Is this—”

“This is the last time I saw her before she died,” Malfoy said. “I didn’t think I could bear to stand back and watch another person I cared about die. I so desperately wanted to get her out, but she wouldn’t let me.”

“Is Theo alright?” Daphne asked, making the younger version of Malfoy sigh and wrap his fingers around the bars of her prison cell.

“He’s a mess,” he answered. “Fucking inconsolable. I’ve tried everything, but I can’t calm him down. I honestly don’t know how he’s going to get through this.”

“He has to. If he crumbles - if any of you crumble - the Dark Lord will see it as a sign of weakness and he’ll kill you all. Theo has to be strong. He just has to be.”

“I know, but I don’t know what to do!” the younger Malfoy argued. “The Dark Lord wants to make an example of you. He’s called everyone to watch. He’s using your death to send a message to the others that failure to comply isn’t an option. It’s serve him or die.”

“Of course he does. Never one to miss the opportunity to send a message, is he?”

Daphne laughed humourlessly. “What does he have planned for me?”

The younger Malfoy didn’t respond and his eyes flickered to the floor.

Daphne whistled gently and laughed again. “Oh dear - is it that bad?”

“He says that because you’re a muggle sympathiser, he wants to punish you like a muggle. He wants to execute you using an old Viking method. It’s called the Bloody Eagle.”

Now fully recovered from her accident, Astoria had wanted to throw a birthday party for Malfoy, and his absence had not gone down well with the newly revealed Medusa.

She’d originally decided to postpone the celebration until Malfoy came home, but when he failed to return after three days, or four, Astoria’s patience finally depleted and she announced they would be having the party without the guest of honour.

Unfortunately, Blaise and Theo were called on separate assignments that evening so Astoria and Hermione were left on their own to drink. And talk.

They spent the evening in one of the cosier sitting rooms, sat on opposite sides of the same sofa, exchanging stories over their glasses.

Hermione talked about her childhood, retelling stories of her parents and the holidays they used to take as a family. Although it was clear that Astoria didn’t know much about muggle traditions, she did ask about the ‘metal boxes on wheels’, and gave Hermione a knowing smile as she described the caravan’s her father used to rent for their summer holidays in the South West of England.

And Astoria - she talked about Daphne. Endlessly. How she’d always envied her sister’s natural beauty, how Daphne had shielded her from her father’s alcoholism as a child, how she’d guided her through years of elocution lessons and taught Astoria how to walk in the highest heels without toppling over.

She smiled brightly and laughed as she talked, but her expression grew sombre when Hermione asked her about her father.

Astoria didn’t say much about him, only that he’d died on an assignment very early on in the war - a mere few months after Voldemort’s resurrection - and that after his very small - and very private - funeral, Narcissa Malfoy had opened her arms and her home to the orphaned Greengrass’s, and they’d lived at the manor ever since.

Astoria had choked up as she finished the story, but as a few tears escaped, she wiped her cheeks, downed the remains of her glass, and swiftly changed the topic of conversation back to Daphne.

It warmed Hermione’s heart to see Astoria talk so freely and openly about her sister. Even though she understood the reason she never had before.

Daphne’s name had become taboo around the manor since her death. She’d been labelled as a traitor by Voldemort, a disgrace, so even uttering her name was seen as treason. But there’d been a shift in the Manor since Medusa’s

identity had been revealed. The others hadn't known if they could trust Hermione, but now their interests aligned and they were on the same side of the war, the walls had dropped, and everyone could speak freely about their fallen friend.

Blaise was a little reserved when Hermione asked about Daphne, but Theo - Theo seemed to come back to life whenever she was brought up, as though the very word 'Daphne' breathed life back into him. There was still a sadness in his eyes, but he was animated again. He smiled a little whenever someone else talked about her. Would listen quietly whenever Astoria told stories of their youth or Romy retold the times shed tried to teach him the dance moves to her 80s songs.

Theo smiled through it all, but never spoke about her himself. It was too painful for him.

Astoria and Hermione had gotten through three bottles of wine - and halfway through a brown bottle of something that Astoria swore was tequila - before they'd finally called it a night.

Getting drunk with Astoria might have seemed like a silly thing to do, childish, given the drastic turn of events. But Hermione fucking needed it.

Since Voldemort had entered her mind, she'd felt ... different. She felt like herself, but off. Fragments of Voldemort's magic - even weeks after he'd left her mind - remained. She could feel them. Couldn't shut it off or stop herself from focusing on it.

Dark Magic had side effects, Hermione knew that. The darker the magic, the higher the price it demanded on the body. Torture curses could result in nightmares and killing curses left stains on a wizard's soul. She'd read it a hundred times and experienced it a hundred times more - but the after-effects of Voldemort's magic? They were brutal.

She could grit her teeth through the feel of his magic crawling just a few lawyers underneath her skin, but the nightmares? And the feeling they left behind? They could *fuck right off*.

He'd used his dark magic to force his consciousness into her mind and show her the vision of the future, to make her feel it, *like it*, and it seemed her body was struggling to forget what it felt like to die.

Hermione had nightmares most nights. The same moment of being tied to a wooden stake and burning to death replayed over and over until she woke with a scream and her skin still on fire.

"But... it was a children's hospital?"

"That wouldn't have mattered to Daph. She didn't possess that little moral compass that you hang onto, Granger." His eyes flickered down so he could watch her out the corner of his eye. "You kill because you think it serves the greater good - that taking one life is justified if it saves two, correct?"

Reluctantly, Hermione nodded.

"You think that killing a few thousand Death Eaters is justified if it saves the lives of a million muggles, but Daph and I don't share your utilitarian view. All we cared about was our little family, and she would have killed ten thousand people if it meant the five of us would be safe. It would have broken her heart to do it, but if one of our lives were on the line, Daph would have Avada'd every child in that hospital herself."

Daphne screamed again in the background; Hermione fought the impulse to cover her ears.

"So, when she refused to attack that hospital, I assumed that something must have gone wrong on the mission. That it didn't go the way she'd planned so she panicked and the others saw that as weakness." Malfoy winced as another gurgled scream sounded around them. "I assumed that when she'd lashed out and killed Jones and Tobias, that she was spiralling and panicking, trying to cover her mistake. I should have known better. I should have known that she'd done it on purpose. I should have..." He dropped his face into his hand and took a deep breath that rattled in his lungs. "I can't even imagine how the guilt must have been tearing Theo apart all these years."

When the flaming torches around them flickered and started to fade, Hermione assumed she'd be pulled out of his mind and land back at the graveyard, but she didn't.

The flames were snuffed out as Daphne took her last breath, but instead of being absorbed in a flash of brilliant light, Hermione was engulfed by smoke from the torches. The smoke surrounded them until Hermione couldn't see anything else, and when it cleared a few seconds later, she wasn't in the town centre anymore. She was in an underground dungeon.

There was something else Malfoy wanted to show her.

They stood in front of two prison cells, both with rusting iron bars and almost completely covered in darkness. In one cell, there was a young girl with long black

of things - not all of them good - but I've never known a more selfless person than she was. She would have done anything for the Dark Lord if it meant the rest of us were protected.”

The tenderness in Malfoy's voice, that smile that Hermione would never - ever - admit she was actually quite fond of, vanished as a blood-curdling scream rang through the air.

Malfoy started talking louder, quicker, talking to Hermione as if he were trying to drown out the sounds around him. “But her biggest weakness was that she was a control freak. The bloody woman didn't have an impulsive bone in her body. She wasn't exactly the smartest witch alive, but she was crafty. Everything she did - every move she made was thought out and obsessed over hundreds of times before she did it.”

His nostrils flared as something crunched in front of them. Hermione didn't turn to see what it was. Didn't want to see whether it was Daphne's ribs that were being cracked or if it was her spine that had been broken.

“But she was so obsessed with her need to plan everything and know everything in advance that she was often blinded by it. She couldn't think on her feet, didn't know how to, and if something deviated from the plan she'd made, she'd panic and go to pieces.”

Another crunch, this one long and drawn out like something was splintering, but it was almost smothered by Daphne's scream.

“She knew it was her Achilles heel, so she never let that happen, did everything she could to never let anyone or anything get the upper hand on her. She used to spend hours and hours with Blaise trying to get him to make predictions on missions, even though he insisted that he wasn't a Seer. She planned every mission down to the last detail, hand picked those who would accompany her and left nothing to chance. She was always looking at the bigger picture. Everything she did had a purpose. Everything she did was to win the long game.”

Another scream. The crowd cheered.

“Which is why I could never understand why she didn't just grit her teeth and get on with the mission that day like she normally did. I didn't understand until today, until Theo said-” He stopped and rolled his jaw. “She loved him so much. She would have done anything to protect him, and I do mean anything. Including destroying a hospital full of patients.”

She thought that getting inebriated with Astoria might help. That if she downed *just* the right amount of whisky, it might numb her body and her mind enough to give her a peaceful nights sleep.

It didn't, and when she woke in the early hours of the morning, her veins like acid and her nerves remembering what it felt like to be burned alive, Hermione had run herself an icy bath and submerged herself until her lips were blue.

Just like she had the night before.

And the night before that.

And the night before that.

Hermione looked so tired as she stared at herself in the mirror. There were heavy circles under her eyes, and her lips were almost white from her cold bath.

She wore nothing but a red silk robe that Astoria had given her. Her hair was still dripping, and the thin material was completely sodden and clinging to her back, providing a welcome chill against the ridges of her spine.

She could see herself shaking in the mirror. Her reflections lips trembled from the extreme cold she'd forced herself to endure but she still felt hot. Uncomfortable in her own skin.

Astoria, however, looked the absolute picture of health.

Her skin was glowing and her hair was smooth and styled into an elegant ponytail. She was wearing a strapless white dress that nipped in at her small waist and flowed out to her knees, making her look the absolute image of a 50's housewife, and it was all topped off with six-inch heels and her favourite ruby necklace.

Astoria had strode into Hermione's room as she gotten out of the bath, and she'd taken one look at her before asking Romy to fetch a phial of hangover potion.

The very moment the tiny Elf had reappeared, Astoria took the phial from him and thrust it into Hermione's trembling fingers. “Drink this,” she commanded.

Hermione obeyed without complaint. As soon as the liquid slipped down her throat, the fuzziness in her head began to clear, and by the time she'd drained the glass, the nausea in her stomach was nothing but a memory.

“How do you feel?”

“M-much-” Hermione's voice was hoarse with sleep. She cleared her throat and tried again. “Much better. Thank you.”

Astoria stood behind Hermione and stared at her reflection in the mirror. She smoothed out her already pristine hair as she said softly, "Not a problem at all. We have plenty of it pre-brewed for emergency cases - with the amount of whiskey and wine the boys get through, I find it's better to have hangover potion stocked in healthy supply."

Hermione lifted a brow. "Just for the boys?"

Astoria stopped fussing over her hair and smiled down at Hermione. "Oh, the little lion has her claws back, I see the potion has taken effect."

Before Hermione could respond, there was a loud shrieking sound outside. The ground of the manor shook for a moment, and when Hermione and Astoria ran to the open window, Narcissa had landed in the garden with Malfoy sitting proudly between her shoulders.

Hermione watched him slide off his dragon's shoulders and land gently on the ground beside her. He petted her shoulder softly for a few moments, then turned his head to find Hermione's eyes. She'd been trapped by his eyes before, and although she couldn't see what colour they were from this distance, she found herself unable to move just the same.

Astoria's pink painted lips curled. "He's back?! Oh, I would wring his pale little neck with one of my scarves if they weren't so bloody expensive!"

After Rony had cast drying charms on Hermione's hair and she'd changed into a short red summer dress, she and Astoria entered the small drawing-room, right in the middle of Malfoy and Theo's argument.

The green suede sofa and armchair that occupied this room were swivelled around so that they faced the fireplace with the coffee table stationed between them.

Theo stood over two bottles of whisky on the coffee table while Blaise sat alone in an armchair with perfect posture. His expression was bored, but he smiled brightly when his wife entered the room.

Malfoy was sat alone on one of the large sofa. He sat very casually, one leg crossed over his knee, an arm draped over the back of the seat while the other rested atop the armrest.

"Yes, we used to joke that vanity and manipulation came with the Greengrass family dimples," Malfoy chuckled quietly, and the ghost of a smile played at the very edges of his mouth - just for a moment - before it vanished again. "Daph was a lot

We knew everything about each other, but I could never understand why she suddenly turned on Voldemort that day and refused to follow his orders."

"Maybe she didn't want to kill for a person she didn't believe in anymore," Hermione offered.

"No, Daph was a survivalist. Her mother died when she was eight, and her father was fucking useless. Used to drown himself in drink to cope with his grief. It was up to her to make sure that she and Astoria didn't drown with him, and that's what she kept doing until the day she died. Serving the Dark Lord was just a means to an end for her. She thought it was the best way to keep Astoria safe, so that's what she did, by any means necessary."

"I didn't know that. Astoria never mentioned it."

Malfoy just shook his head. "She wouldn't have. Grief is a bit of a taboo subject in Pureblood society. It's seen as a weakness by the older generations, a side effect of improper breeding. The Greengrass's would have been seen as social pariah's if anyone found out how her father had gone to pieces, so Daph covered it up, and Astoria never talks about it."

"I'm sorry to say that I never spent any time with her when we were at Hogwarts. I feel like I would have liked her."

"You probably would have. She was a lot like Astoria. Same kind smile and dimples, although she did share Theo's sadistic sense of humour. They used to play the most vile pranks on everyone in Slytherin house. I'm sure that the pair of them fell in love while plotting ways to wind Snape up."

Hermione could see the coldness around him thawing slightly as he spoke about Daphne, and she couldn't help but smile a little. "She sounds like she was a wonderful person. I'd like to hear more about her - if that's alright?"

Malfoy was quiet for a moment before he continued, "Daph was very kind and affectionate to the four of us, but very cold and distant to everyone else. She was very resourceful and calculated. She was vain and spoiled - like Astoria - and she could be very charming and manipulative when she wanted something -"

"Also like Astoria," Hermione smiled, hoping a small attempt at humour might ease that pain she saw in his eyes. It did, a little.

this," he said, so quietly she wasn't entirely sure if he meant to say it aloud. "Every Fucking Day."

The crowd around them abruptly fell silent when Voldemort started speaking, his voice sharp as the axe that he would soon butcher Daphne with.

This was only the third time Hermione had been forced to watch this memory, she didn't know Daphne at all, and it still made her stomach twist hearing Voldemort's cold voice. Still made her want to wretch when she thought about what was going to happen in a few short minutes.

"I watch it to remind myself that everything I do, no matter how brutal or awful or horrific it might be, that it's all worth it. It doesn't matter if it breaks me to do it, or if it tears me apart inside, because it's all worth it." Hermione watched his throat bob as he swallowed. "I watch it to remind myself that I need to do those things. That I need to do everything I can to make sure that something like this will never happen to someone I care about again."

He flinched slightly when the axe was brought down on Daphne's back for the first time - but he didn't look away.

"It's all felt worth it before. I always felt like I was doing the right thing, and as long as I served the Dark Lord, my family would be safe," he whispered, his hands balled into tight fists at his sides. "But then Astoria fell down the stairs. She almost died and the Dark Lord didn't care. Didn't even blink. She was bleeding and dying on my floor and he just—" His voice broke and he took a deep breath to calm himself, to put himself back together. "And now... I don't know what to think anymore. I don't know what's real anymore."

For the second time that evening, Hermione didn't know what to do. No words felt big enough to ease the suffering she saw in him. Even if she'd had access to her magic, she couldn't think of a single spell or enchantment that could erase the pain in his eyes.

So all she could do was watch him torture himself with what he so obviously thought was his failure. Again.

"I've known Daphne since we were three years old," he said after a few minutes, still refusing to look away from the mutilation happening right in front of him. "We may not be blood, but she and Astoria are my sisters in every sense of the word. We grew up together, spent every birthday and Christmas and summer holiday together.

He'd changed into a pair of black trousers and simple white shirt with the top few buttons left undone. His sleeves were rolled up to his elbows, and his silver rings clinked against the side of the tumbler in his hand.

"You know we could have had this team meeting without you, don't you?" Theo snapped. "I've been leaking secrets for five years."

"Six," Astoria corrected with a roll of her eyes.

"Yeah, six! *Thank you*, Toril Six bloody years, and you didn't have a clue!" Theo scoffed and held his arms out wide on either side of him. "So I think you'll find that my espionage skills are unmatched, thank you very much."

"Oh yeah?" Malfoy cocked a brow. "You think you're the king of espionage? Then fucking spell it."

Theo snatched one of the bottles from the coffee table and threw Malfoy an obscene, one-fingered gesture.

"I would lose the finger if you want some of that whisky," Malfoy drawled, and as he raised his glass to his lips, his eyes flickered up and found Hermione again. They were an uneven mixture of grey and blue, but, uncharacteristically, the blue was overtaking Mr Hyde didn't have full reigns.

"Sorry *bass*," Theo mocked and turned the bottle over in his hands to read the label. "Ooooooooh, he's brought out old Daddy Malfoy's stash. This must be a special occasion."

"You're back," Hermione greeted quietly.

Malfoy's mouth twitched into a smirk. "Very observant. Ten points to Gryffindor."

Always the hostess, Astoria began pouring everyone a glass of whisky and handed them out.

Blaise kissed her hand as he accepted his. Theo knocked his head back to down his in one, then held out his empty glass for another. Hermione accepted hers with a smile, and as she turned to sit down, Malfoy shuffled over slightly on his sofa and patted the empty space beside him, inviting her to sit with him.

Hermione tried to stamp it out, but she couldn't help the way her pulse quickened as she took her seat.

Very dramatically, Theo cleared his throat. "Alright then boys and girls, let's get this show on the road. Are we all sitting comfortably?"

Everyone except Astoria nodded. She hadn't stopped scowling at Malfoy since she'd entered the room. "Don't you have anything you want to apologise for?" she snapped, her painted lips twitching slightly with anger.

Malfoy rolled his eyes. "Oh for - what is it you think I've done now?"

Astoria knocked her drink back and poured herself another.

"You've been gone for five days you absolute wanker! You find out that we are the spies, and then you just bloody disappeared! You didn't leave a note! You didn't tell anyone where you were going or when you planned to return! And then you just waltz back in here and casually open not one - *but two* - of your father's whiskey bottles and act like nothing is amiss?!"

"Oh, I see," Malfoy drawled sarcastically. "So it's not that I went missing that's annoyed you, but that I've opened my father's whiskey without telling you?" He sucked his teeth, shaking his head. "Oh, how silly of me to forget that the alcoholic would favour sprits over her family."

Astoria made a displeased face. "They are the ones that must never *ever ever ever* be touched under any circumstances! You've never even let us know where you hide them, so please forgive my surprise that you've suddenly decided to bring them out!"

Hermione sipped on her drink as she watched the pair, trying to hide her amusement. If Malfoy knew how much his and Astoria's relationship - and their constant bickering - reminded her of Ron and Ginny, he would probably Avada himself.

"I never told you where I hide them because I knew if you got your greedy bloody fingers on them, then there would be nothing left," Malfoy retorted. "I was waiting for a special occasion to open these, but if calling a team meeting to plan espionage against our leader doesn't class as a monumental event, then I don't know what does."

"Do not change the subject!" Astoria folded her arms across her chest and began tapping her foot sporadically on the floor, her annoyance thumping out from the end of her high heels. "Where have you been?"

"I've been setting up potential safe houses for us."

Astoria's scowl fell. "Why would we need a safe house?"

Did ... did the dragon know that Hermione was scared of her? Did she know that Hermione couldn't bear to be close to her, and she'd given her breathing room on purpose? Did she want Hermione to go and comfort Malfoy?

The answer was obvious.

"Thank you," Hermione whispered, completely astonished at what she'd just seen.

Narcissa huffed loudly. When she settled herself down and closed her eyes, Hermione walked through the gates.

She found Malfoy standing over Daphne's grave, one hand resting on her headstone while his face was dropped into the other. He held an almost expired cigarette in his hand, the burning tip poking out between the fingers that covered his face while a thin stream of smoke hovered above him. It was awful to see him like that. Hunched over a grave that was empty because they didn't have Daphne's body to bury. Watching over a headstone that was bare because her family weren't allowed to carve her name into it.

They hadn't been allowed to give Daphne anything in her death. Not a funeral or burial of any kind. This grave was the only connection any of them had left to her. A secret place they'd collectively decided was *hers*, where they could mourn her and try to be close to her - and her name wasn't even on the fucking headstone.

Malfoy didn't hear Hermione approach, didn't so much as exhale when she stood at his side. His eyes were closed and he looked deep in concentration, almost like he was meditating.

Tentatively, Hermione reached out and touched the side of his face. As soon as the tips of her fingers brushed against his cold skin, she was pulled into his mind.

She materialised beside Malfoy in the centre of Nottingham. They stood in front of the Council house, surrounded by a pack of Death Eaters with flaming torches.

Hermione knew this memory, she'd already seen it twice before. He was watching Daphne's execution.

"Why are you here?" she asked, her eyes on his face rather than the scene in front of her. "Why would you want to watch this, willingly?"

Malfoy didn't look at her as he spoke. He stared straight ahead, the flames around them illuminating the blue of his eyes and the sharp angles of his jaw and cheekbones. "I watch this memory every day to remind myself why I'm doing all of

"So as far as she's concerned, you're under her protection. And that probably makes you the safest witch in the country."

"He's ... he's in there ..." Hermione asked in a shaky whisper, jutting her chin towards the graveyards entrance. She cleared her throat and tried again. "Is he in there?"

She knew the dragon couldn't respond, but Hermione swore - fucking swore - that the way she chuffed and sharply jerked her head downwards like a horse sounded an awful lot like a 'yes'.

Hermione inched a little closer, keeping her back pressed against the iron gates and ignoring the terror that kept prickling across her skin. She could do this. She could -

She froze when a thick wave of hot air blasted across her face.

Hermione tried to keep her expression passive and her breathing even, but her heart was beating wildly in her chest.

Just one more step. Just one more step and she could veer past the dragon and get inside the graveyard...

She couldn't make her feet move.

Because as the temperature increased as she got closer to the dragon, so did the reminders of the vision.

Because as she was pressed against the iron gate, reminders of being bound to a wooden post with her hands tied behind her back came flooding back.

Because as heat radiated around the dragon's body, that fire sparked back to life. Reminding her what it had felt like to die, to be tied to a stake while she burned alive.

What her death was probably going to feel like...

Hermione grit her teeth together and tried to bare her way through it. She tried, but she couldn't move.

She exhaled in a rush, defeated, but just as she resolved herself to turn and leave, the dragon backed away. Hermione watched, a little dumbstruck, as Narcissa shuffled backwards to give Hermione clear access through the iron gates without having to be too close to the beast.

Astoria's hand slowly covered the enormous ruby around her neck. She stared at him, her angry expression softening by the second, before she sighed and nodded. "Yes, of course. I understand. You've sacrificed so much for us over the years." She chewed on her bottom lip before slowly releasing the necklace from her grip. "They're just things. I can leave them behind if I must. Thank you for finding the safe houses. And for agreeing to side with the Order with us. I know it can't have been an easy decision, but I appreciate it nonetheless."

Malfoy leaned forward, picked up one of the bottles, and sat back against the sofa once more. "Did you honestly believe that I would betray the Dark Lord and put us all at risk without ensuring - that if anything should go wrong - everyone in this room will be safe?" He poured himself another glass, then refilled Hermione's. "If we get discovered, we'll need places to hide, so I've spent the last few days setting those up."

That made sense. Malfoy was nothing if not thorough. He'd set up a ridiculous amount of wards around the manor before Hermione's capture. It was almost obsessive, the lengths he'd gone to ensure she couldn't harm herself or others, so it was to be expected that he'd show the same obsessive nature in protecting his own.

"Well, don't leave us in suspense," Theo teased. "Where are they?"

"The first one is an abandoned farmhouse in Yorkshire."

Astoria scoffed. "A farmhouse? As in somewhere pigs and cows and chickens are kept? Oh please be joking." When Malfoy didn't respond, Astoria's eyes grew wide in disbelief. "Oh please, *please* be joking. Please say that you do not seriously expect me to trudge through mud and dirt in heels that cost nine thousand galleons?"

Malfoy narrowed his eyes. "It's a little nicer than that - but yes, Tori. That's the idea. We need places remote and out of the way, but with bunkers that are big enough for Narcissa to sleep in so she's out of sight. The first safe house is a little fortage with plenty of space to keep emergencies supplies and three bedrooms -"

"Only three bedrooms? But where will I keep my dresses? My jewellery?"

Malfoy sighed, his patience visibly thinning. He sunk down a little so his head rested against the backrest of the sofa as he tilted his head toward the ceiling. "If we get discovered, we will have only moments to get to safety. There won't be time to pack, we'll only be able to take the essentials, and we will need to be discreet. So that means no heels. No dresses, and no fucking necklaces with diamonds the size of my fist."

In the end, no matter how much her material possessions meant to her, Astoria had a kind soul, and the admiration and love she bore for Malfoy was easy to see.

Theo whistled awkwardly and rubbed his hands together. "Alrighty then. Now that all that lovey-dovey bollocks is out of the way, shall we get on with the main event?"

Blaise was the first to speak. "Malfoy and Bellatrix know the Dark Lord better than anyone else does," he offered, using the glass in his hand to point to his commanding officer. "He trusts you with almost everything, so if anyone knows how to get under his skin and go unnoticed, it's you."

Hermione downed the rest of her drink and held out her glass for Malfoy to refill.

"He's right. Where do you think we should start?"

"I've been thinking about this a lot over the past few days," Malfoy said, his eyes on the bottle as he topped off Hermione's drink. "And I think the best way forward is to carry on leaking secrets to the Order, but I think we need to make more of a show of it." After he'd refilled his glass, Malfoy handed the bottle to Theo and leaned back against the sofa. "The Dark Lord's mind isn't as strong as it once was. Since the Order has destroyed another Horcrux, he's growing more paranoid. He's coming apart at the seams, and I think the best weapon we have at our disposal is his fear and paranoia."

Hermione's brows knitted together. "You think we should use his own fear against him?"

Malfoy looked at her out the corner of his eye and nodded. "The things he values above all else is the loyalty of his followers and his own vitality. He wants to live a long and prosperous life, and he wants those around him to be so loyal that they would take a bullet for him. If he thinks those around him aren't loyal anymore, he'll snap, and it'll make it so much easier for Potter to kill him."

Astoria and Theo shared a look, and a wide grin stretched across Nott's face. "Told you we should have brought him in on this years ago."

Astoria rolled her eyes.

"The more paranoid he is," Malfoy continued in a low, tense voice, "the more mistakes he'll make, and it'll make him so much more vulnerable. We need to make him feel that he's all alone in this, and if we do it properly, we can make him do our dirty work for us. He needs to suspect everyone. He needs to think that each and every one of his loyal dogs has abandoned him, and that we," he raised his index

Because Narcissa was huge and lethal and *breathe fucking fire*.

Hermione had seen her obliterate people with a single breath. She'd heard stories of the beast that ripped metal tanks apart like they were nothing and knocking helicopters out of the sky for sport.

And one day - if the vision Voldemort had shown her was correct - she was going to kill Hermione.

Narcissa opened her eyes as Hermione approached. She shook her head, waking herself up, and two thick streams of smoke whistled out of her nostrils as she raised her head off the ground. She remained on the ground, and although she didn't relax much, holding her head proudly in the air and her body defensive, she watched Hermione carefully.

"She likes you," Malfoy had told her earlier that evening. "My dragon doesn't like anyone, but she likes you."

Trying to swallow her fear, Hermione took a deep breath, and oh so fucking slowly inched towards the entrance.

She took one step. And then another. Tiny little movements that had her creeping towards her destination little by little.

Hermione couldn't help but flinch when Narcissa started to growl. She squeezed her eyes closed and pressed her back against the iron gates as tightly as she could.

She waited for Narcissa to attack. Waited to feel teeth on her skin and claws digging into her legs. But they never came. And it took Hermione far too long to realise that the noise Narcissa had made wasn't a deep predatory growl, and was actually more of a low chirping sound. Not quite a purr, but not quite a bird's chirp either.

Hermione slowly opened her eyes and released the breath she'd been holding. Narcissa was still watching her, her red eyes glowing like fiery torches in the night.

The dragon tilted her head curiously to the side. The movement didn't make her any less threatening, but more ... intelligent. Like this might be a game. A way to play with her food for a little while before she indulged.

Hermione's survival instincts were screaming at her. Every muscle in her body wanted her to flee and strangely, the thing that held her in place was Malfoy's voice, looping around in her head. Encouraging her.

Hermione tried the small drawing-room on the same wing next. After discovering that half of his family had betrayed him - and another's loyalty to his wife had coerced his betrayal as well - Malfy would feel angry and hurt, and would want to numb that pain - possibly with his father's whisky. The room was vacant, but her assumption wasn't too far off. The false wall that hid his father's hoard was open.

He'd been in here, so only two potential hiding places remained.

The portraits on the walls tutted and hissed as Hermione walked past them on her way to the kitchen, muttering under their breath that Malfoy's foul mood was probably her fault. That she'd caused him to storm through the halls like a raging bull not an hour earlier.

She ignored most of them, like she usually did, but when one portrait - an elderly Malfoy at least five generations deceased and looked an awful lot like Lucius - made a particularly vile remark, Hermione threatened to deface him with her own paints, and his mouth quickly snapped shut.

Cold air whirled around her as she pushed the kitchen doors open and stepped into the gardens. The moon was full and bright and high in the sky, casting silver lights on the lawn and flowers in bloom around the estate.

Hermione checked the bench under the cherry blossom tree, unsurprised to find it vacant. She was almost positive Malfoy was in the graveyard - in the very last fucking place she wanted to be - but she still had to tick it off her list before she carried on.

She shivered as soon as she saw the cemetery gates, that horrible feeling like someone was walking on her future grave creeping up her spine. She'd been prepared to just grit her teeth and get on with it, but paused suddenly mid-step.

Because curled into a ball and sleeping soundly as she guarded the cast iron gates, was Malfoy's dragon.

Terror swept through Hermione as soon as she saw Narcissa, she couldn't help it. It was biology. Her body's natural reaction was fear, and her instincts were screaming at her to run to hide, to get as far away from the colossal beast and her *mouth* as soon as humanly possible.

Even with her tail curled around her body and wings tucked in tightly, she blocked the entire entrance to the graveyard. There was no way Hermione would be able to get into the cemetery close to the beast, almost skin to scale. That thought alone almost made Hermione turned around and run.

finger and made a small circle, gesturing to all those in the room, "are the only ones that he can trust."

"I agree," Blaise whispered. "But how do we achieve that?"

Malfoy took a sip of his drink. "It won't be easy, and it won't be without sacrifice," he said, tapping the side of his glass as he spoke.

"On the outside, we will need to appear as normal and as loyal as possible, so that means we need to continue to go on missions, follow every instruction he gives and execute without question." He turned to look at Hermione. "And it will mean that you will still have to come on assignments with us when you are required to."

A sickening knot formed in Hermione's stomach. She tried to quiet it with the sting of the whisky.

"And it will require all of us to work with the Order, but if we do this right, we'll be able to leak secrets and whittle down Voldemort's army until it's nothing."

Hermione smiled. "I like that idea - but isn't it dangerous to burn the candle at both ends?"

"It's more like killing two birds with one stone." The hint of a smirk flashed across Malfoy's face. "We know all too well that if Voldemort suspects one of his own has betrayed him, he'll execute them without a second thought."

Theo winced.

"...so I say we use that to our advantage for a change."

"So how do we make that happen?" Theo's voice was sharp before he took a long swig of the whisky straight from the bottle.

"The Dark Lord's inner circle has always been very small, and it's only been made even smaller since the Order destroyed another Horcrux," Malfoy replied. "So I say that every few months, we pick a target, leak some information, and then we frame them. Make it look like they were the mole the entire time."

"And then we move on, and do the same with the next target?" Hermione breathed, her mind already working ahead, trying to put the pieces together despite the missing variants.

Malfoy nodded. "And then the next. And then the next. We'll need to be very careful that what we leak cannot be traced back to us alone, so we'll need to work very slowly, and we'll only be able to leak very small pieces of information at a time, but the things that we do leak - well, they'll fucking cripple his regime."

"Would it still be wise to search the memories of the Death Eaters we frame?"  
Hermione asked.

"Perhaps just to make sure that they do actually know the secrets you're leaking? That way it can't be traced just back to you, and it'll make it so much easier for us to frame them."

"Yes. We'll leak the secrets in a way that can only be traced back to those we've targeted, and the Dark Lord will be so busy hanging and burning those we've framed, he won't realise that he's whittling his own army right down for us himself!" Malfoy paused so he could take another drink. "Just to be thorough, we'll have to execute a few ourselves. Make it look like they were so paranoid for betraying their master that they offed themselves before he could, but I take it you're not opposed to getting your hands a little dirty if it serves the greater good?"

Hermione shook her head. Her pulse thumped slightly when Malfoy smirked back at her.

"But surely that plan can only go on for so long?" Blaise asked. "Eventually we're going to run out of other Death Eaters to pin the leaks on, and we'll narrow it down to the four of us?"

"That's what the safehouses are for," Malfoy answered curtly. "Eventually he'll know it's us and we'll need to escape to one of them, but I'm hoping that we've done enough damage to his ranks and Horcruxes by then that Potter will be able to kill him quickly."

Theo raised his hand. "*Pleeeeease* can we start with Crouch?"

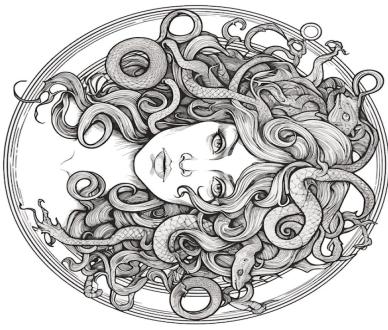
Malfoy shook his head. "I agree that Jr needs to go, but that little bastard is clever. If we start suddenly showing an interest in him, he may figure out what we're doing. I think it would be wise to keep Crouch at arm's length for now, but we will work our way around to him Theodore. I promise, both of you."

It was clear Astoria and Theo blamed Crouch for what'd happened to Daphne.

They'd waited this long to avenge her, they could wait a little longer. They already knew how they were going to make Crouch pay, and if the resentment burning in their eyes revealed anything, they were going to make it painful. Indescribably painful.

Hermione hardly blamed them. She'd heard enough stories about the infamous Dollhouse to know that the world would be a much, much better place without the filth that was Party Crouch Jr.

## CHAPTER 38



### IT ALL FELT WORTH IT, BEFORE

**5th June**

Hermione let Malfoy cool down for about an hour before she went searching for him.

Despite the vast size of his estate, she could easily narrow down his hiding place. The walls of the manor were dark and cold, meaning there were only a handful of places that would give him comfort.

She checked his bedroom first. Her reasoning was simple, logical. His entire world had been flipped on its axis, so he'd want familiarity. It made sense that he'd seek solace in his own room, with his own belongings and comforts, where everything felt grounded and known and *safe*. She was almost sure he would be there, but she found it empty; his bed still made and undisturbed, so she moved on.

He was hurting inside, but no amount of lashing out could mask that. And he knew that.

"Draco," Astoria said gently. "I'm so sorry we didn't tell you. We never meant to hurt you."

"Hurt me?!" Malfoy reared, his eyes bluing, losing their grey shield as he came apart at the seams. "It's a little fucking late for that now, isn't it?!"

Suddenly, a soft chiming sound started emitting from Zabini's robes. Everyone turned to watch him take a silver pocket watch out of his Death Eater uniform. "It's midnight." He waved his hand over the device and it stopped singing. "It's the 5th of June."

Astoria opened her mouth, but Malfoy cut her off before she could speak.

"Oh, fantastic! What a fabulous gift it is, to find out I've been living with vultures and snakes all this time!" he shouted, turning on his heels to storm out the room.

"Happy fucking birthday to me!"

Malfoy slammed the doors behind him just as aggressively as he'd opened them, and when the paintings on the wall stopped shuddering, Theo cleared his throat, turned to Hermione, and asked, "Well, I think he took that alright, don't you?"

The Order would need something first. A peace offering. An olive branch of some sort.

Both sides had killed and seen the other at their worst. Hermione wondered if a handshake of peace would mean anything if both parties were drenched in the blood of the other. If nothing else, she had to at least hope it could.

"They need to know that they can trust us," Hermione said. "I think we need to arrange a meeting with them to show that you're not with Voldemort anymore."

Malfoy clicked his tongue. "And just how do you suggest that we do that?"

"I could go to the meeting and show them my memories."

Malfoy's face immediately twisted into a scowl. "Out of the question. If they get caught and the Dark Lord decides to search their memories as well, we're fucked. It's too risky."

Hermione already had something to counter with. "I'll pick someone who is skilled at memory blocking, that way if they get caught, they won't be able to see the meeting and they won't see that you've betrayed him. If someone from the Order

This plan of Malfoy's was... good.

It was thorough, well thought out, and dealt with Voldemort's ever-growing circle. It solved the problem of his loyal followers, would turn them against each other and would eradicate lethal generals, and it would give Harry access to Horcruxes. It covered everything, and gave the Order all the tools they'd been missing to win the war.

It could work. It could actually fucking work.

And for the first time in a very long time, Hermione felt hopeful.

"Alright, that's all well and good, but I think we're all missing the most obvious question here," Blaise interrupted. "How are we going to make this work with the Order?"

Like a balloon had been popped in her chest, the joyous feeling that Hermione had been clinging to vanished.

Fuck - Blaise was right.

If this plan had any hope of success, the Order and the Death Eaters had to work together. They had to *trust* one another.

And for that to happen...

searches my memories, they'll see that you're all sincere and that this isn't a trick. They'll see all the horrible things that Voldemort has done to you all, and it will show them that this betrayal is real and that they can *trust* you."

Theo and Astoria exchanged a glance.

"It could work," Astoria breathed.

But Malfoy wasn't listening. He leaned in closer to Hermione, furiously snarling his next words. "And if they try and take you back? Then what happens?"

Hermione didn't give an inch. She sat tall with her nose high in the air, refusing to be intimidated. "They won't."

"But if they do the our entire plan is ruined Granger!" He leaned forward again, crowding her space, but again, Hermione stood her ground. "If you disappear, the Dark Lord will know we've been in contact with the Order and then we're all dead!"

"Who's to say they even want me back after the things you've made me do to them?" she hissed, her voice equally as loud as Malfoy's. Equally as venomous.

"Alright, alright!" Theo crossed the room and squeezed onto the sofa between them, acting as a barrier so they couldn't physically attack one another. "I know that fighting is basically your two's foreplay - and that's fine, everybody has their kinks - but there are still a few things we need to hash out here. So let's carry on with the meeting, and then you two crazy psychopaths can have at each other's throats? *Kay?*"

Hermione and Malfoy glared at one another, her nostrils flaring with irritation while he rolled his tongue on the inside of his cheek, something she'd noticed he often did when he was on the cusp of losing his temper.

"Okay, onto the next order of business." Astoria smiled, elegantly trying to defuse the heavy atmosphere that was quickly filling the room. "Hermione, obviously this plan doesn't work without you, so what do you want in exchange for helping us?"

Hermione's eyes snapped to Astoria's. "What?"

"Come on Granger, don't play coy." Theo patted Hermione's knee. Malfoy leaned forward slightly when he noticed Theo squeeze. "I'm sure your list of demands is as long as Draco's cock, so come on, out with it."

Hermione almost choked on her whisky. Malfoy just glared at Theo until he let go of her knee. While she cleared her throat, Hermione wracked her brain. In truth, she hadn't even thought to ask for something in exchange.

Malfoy's expression was completely unreadable. Other than a slight twitch at the corner of his lip, his features were completely stoic.

"You looked me dead in the eyes, and you said the only thing that helped, the only thing that made watching the worst moment of your life bearable, was thinking of all the ways you would have killed Voldemort if you had the chance. You said you'd use a muggle gun, do you remember?"

"Shut the fuck up!" Malfoy grabbed Nott's collar and dragged their faces together. Astoria, Zabini and Hermione moved to his defence, but Nott held up his hand to stop them, telling them to trust him, that he could do this on his own.

"You said that a gun is a symbol of everything he hates. It's a reminder of how far muggles have come, how they've advanced so much that they could even kill him. You said that of all the ways he could die, that a muggle gun would scare him the most, and that if things were different, you would have loved nothing more than to stand over him."

"That's enough!"

"- point the barrel between his eyes, and pull the trigger."

Malfoy exhaled in a rush. He released Nott and stepped away. "That's it? That's your fucking defiance? You're trying to get the Dark Lord killed because I said - once, when I was a different person - that I would have done it myself if I could have?"

"Are you really a different person?" Nott asked. "Or have you just buried him so far under your Demon Mask you struggle to see him anymore?"

Malfoy's hands slid into his hair and closed his eyes again. He started scratching his temples like he had a migraine. "I can't believe you've done this," he said under his breath. "I can't believe that all this time ... I've been doing everything I could think of to keep this family safe. I've killed people! Hundreds of people!" His eyes snapped open and his tone changed. Grew into a growl, rage-fuelled and angry. "I've tortured myself with the things I've done for years! I've sold my soul and never asked for a thing in return, and you've been doing this all along?"

His voice may have been a furious, vicious snarl, but the pain in his eyes ... the betrayal ... that was palpable.

Malfoy was angry, yes, but he was *sad*. He'd had the rug pulled from beneath his feet. Everything he thought he knew and was concrete in his life had been obliterated in an instant. The uncertainty of it all must have been terrifying, and he was protecting himself the only way he knew how.

Hermione studied his reflection in the mirror. His eyes were a perfect mixture of blue and grey today.

"I like these things." He smirked at her through the mirror and hooked his fingers into the empty gun holsters on her thigh. "They look good on you."

Hermione scowled back at him. "They look even better when they have guns in them."

"I don't doubt that," Malfoy chuckled under his breath, and one sharp tug on the holster dragged her back against his chest. "If you ever decide to give me a belated birthday present, I wouldn't object to you pointing a gun at me, when you're wearing these."

She kept her eyes forward and watched his reflection bend down slightly, just before his cold lips brush against her ear.

"And only these."

"Oh, fuck off!" Hermione jumped forward and swatted his hand away. "You're such an arrogant prick."

"And you're absolutely *stunning* when you're trying to kill me."

Hermione charged out of her bedroom without looking back at him, partly because they were in a rush, and secretly because she didn't want him to see her smirk. Or blush.

Good Godrick, what was wrong with her?

They walked through the manor together, side by side. When they reached the gardens, Hermione held out her arm for him to Apparate them to the airport. She could Apparate by herself now she had her magic back, but she reached for him more out of habit than necessity.

Malfoy didn't take her arm. Instead, he carried on walking, and after a bewildered pause, Hermione followed him across the grounds.

"It's almost quarter to three," she said curiously. "We need to go to the airport."

"I know."

"Well, aren't we going to Apparate there?"

Malfoy didn't say another word as he led her through the gardens, but he wore a cocky smirk the entire time, clearly hiding something.

Hermione followed him until they reached one of the large fields that bordered the edge of his estate, and when she saw Narcissa curled into a tight ball, her heart leapt into her throat. "You cannot be serious?"

Hearing the panic in Hermione's voice, Narcissa started to stir. The giant dragon shook her head as though she was trying to shake herself awake, then stretched her wings and got to her feet.

Hermione heard Malfoy chuckling beside her, but she couldn't tear her eyes away from the beast. "Scared, Granger?"

"If you think I'm riding her to the airport, you've lost the plot."

"Oh, don't be like that," Malfoy teased, cocking a brow in that smug way only he knew how. "You've already ridden one dragon, riding another shouldn't be so difficult."

Hermione took a step backwards, not in the mood for games. "No. Not a chance."

"You have nothing to worry about."

"Apart from getting burned to death."

"You're perfectly safe."

"Unless she bites me!"

"Look," Malfoy snapped, losing his patience. "Cissa is dangerous and your friends are scared of her. We don't know what we're walking into today, and if the Order is planning an ambush, we'll need her."

Hermione knew he was right. Although she'd tried to be as delicate as possible with her note, the cryptic message and 'regime change' would likely have set the Order on edge. This meeting was the unknown for both sides. The Order was probably just as nervous as the Death Eaters, and if Kingsley decided to send reinforcements... Well, it would have been foolish for Malfoy and Hermione not to take extra precautions as well. Just in case.

She was just about to slap on her most sarcastic smile and get on with it—

But then Narcissa opened her mouth. And although Hermione knew that the dragon was *probably* just yawning, the sound that came out of her mouth was loud and so fucking intimidating that it snapped what little confidence Hermione had like a stick under a boot.

Sensing that she was about to bolt, Malfoy stood behind her, grabbed her arms and spun her face his dragon. Hermione fought to get away - as she always did - but he held her firmly. His grip was tight; each attempt she made to flee pushed her further into his chest, and each time he took a step toward Narcissa, Hermione was dragged along with him.

"No, Malfoy!" she snarled, squirming in his grip as she tried to jut her elbows into his ribs. "I'm not doing this!"

"*Shhhh*, it's alright." His voice was infuriatingly calm as he forced them another step closer. "She's not going to hurt you."

A loud growling sound started to emit from Narcissa's chest, and her colossal fangs caught the light as she opened her mouth.

"No! Let me go! I can't..."

"Yes, you can," Malfoy encouraged. "You have nothing to be afraid of."

Narcissa inched forward and dropped her head so that her teeth were perfectly in line with Hermione's stomach.

Hermione's heart started to beat faster -

The air grew warmer as Malfoy forced them closer -

She jumped when Malfoy's cold fingers laced through hers. He raised their conjoined hands and very carefully, stretched them towards the dragon.

Hermione cringed away. She twisted in his arms as much as she could and buried her face into his chest.

The air around her palms grew hotter and hotter, until -

Narcissa's scales didn't hurt like Hermione's panicked mind had convinced her they would. They were warm and rough, but they didn't burn.

She waited for the dragon to react, to bite her, to lash out and set her afire, but was instead greeted with a soft sort of noise that made her palm vibrate.

Hermione opened her eyes to find Narcissa watching her closely. Her eyes were as red and deadly as an open flame but strangely, just as gentle. Hermione had never noticed that before.

"I told you, didn't I?" Malfoy practically purred in her ear. With his hand still intertwined with hers, he began to gently stroke Narcissa's snout. "She isn't going to hurt you."

She'd changed so much since the last time she'd worn it, she realised as she stared at her reflection in the vanity table mirror. Her frame seemed a little smaller now, her cheeks looked thinner and the material didn't feel as tight or uncomfortable around her waist. Her hair was much longer too, the ends almost touching her hips now.

But more than the physical, she felt better in herself. A little stronger.

True to his word, Malfoy had taken her off of the anti-magic potions and given her wand back, and the feeling of magic running through her veins again was indescribable. Just being able to dry her hair herself with a wave of her wand made her feel more like herself than she had in months.

She checked the clock again, *14:33*.

Needing something to do with her hands, Hermione twirled her wand between her fingers and tapped her foot against the floorboards. Her head was buzzing. A hundred different scenarios were running through her mind.

Would the Order even turn up to the meeting?

Would they be unarmed?

What would happen if they brought reinforcements?

What if they tried to capture her?

What would Malfoy do if they -

"You know, those floorboards cost more than most muggle flats," a deep voice drawled from the doorway, "so if you continue to dig a hole in them with your boot, expect to receive a bill from me."

Hermione laughed quietly without turning around. "Yes, because we both know you wouldn't be able to afford new ones otherwise."

"If Astoria keeps buying herself a present with my family's money every time I piss her off, then the Malfoy vault will be drained in a decade."

Hermione scoffed and checked her uniform again. "Decade? Have you seen the ruby bracelet she brought herself because you ruined the birthday surprise she planned for your?" She shook her head as she fiddled with the collar of her leather jacket "Carry on at this rate, and I give it two years before she's cleared you out of house and home."

The floorboards creaked one, twice, and then he was behind her. He was wearing his Death Eater robes, his mask nowhere to be seen.

Medusa, and company?

Hermione had written their note, and although Theo and Malfoy had insisted she couldn't sign her name - or even tell them she was safe in case the letter was intercepted - she hoped that someone might recognise her handwriting and put the pieces together themselves.

After she'd finished writing it - both Death Eaters hovering over her shoulder and tittering away like bloody owls - Theo took the note to the new rendezvous point.

Before Hermione had been captured, all the meetings between her and Medusa had been arranged like this. On separate days once a week, they would drop off any correspondence, and the other would pick it up. It was the safest option and meant that neither knew the true location or identity of the other.

The notes used to be left in a derelict factory in Swindon, but after Hermione had been captured, the wise decision was made to change to an abandoned Post Office in Sheffield. The new building was just as war-damaged as its predecessor but it served its purpose.

Theo had dropped Hermione's letter off the day after the groups 'team meeting' and two weeks later, they received a response,

East Midlands airport. Runway outside gate 1.

26th June. 15:30'

'That was it. That was their bloody response. Hermione's stomach had dropped with dread the moment she'd read it - because gave her *nothing*. She had no idea if anyone had realised that she'd written the note or if they even trusted the information in it.'

And two days was an awful long time to wait to find out.

Hermione glanced at the new clock on her bedside table - the one she'd demanded Malfoy get her the moment she'd received the letter from the order.

14:30. She and Malfoy would be leaving very soon.

Chewing on the inside of her cheek, Hermione zipped up her old mission uniform. She'd been a bundle of nerves since they'd received the Orders letter, but putting on this outfit, feeling the leather hug her skin ... It felt like a piece of home.

As if backing Malfoy up, Narcissa started to make a chirping sound in the back of her throat, similar to that of a bird, almost as though she was trying to soothe Hermione.

As Hermione confidence grew, Malfoy let go of her hand and let her explore the dragon by herself. She caressed Narcissa's cheek as she walked down the side of her enormous face, and after a while, she couldn't remember what she'd been so terrified of. She was still intimidated by the beast, her irrational fear brought on by her nightmares and Voldemort's vision weren't going to vanish just by a simple touch, but they seemed just that now. Irrational.

Yes, the dragon was huge and fierce and could snap Hermione in half with a single bite. She could kill her easily, but she wasn't going to. She didn't *want* to.

Malfoy stirred behind her. "We need to get going."

Without needing to be told, Narcissa flattened her shoulder to the ground, and Malfoy climbed on before staring down at Hermione. "Are you coming, or not?" he said, and he leaned down and held out his hand for her.

Hermione didn't want to fly. She really, *really* didn't, but she didn't have much of a choice.

So, without letting herself dwell on the statistics of her falling off, or thinking - even for a moment - about how on earth she was going to hang on, Hermione drew a deep breath and took his hand.

Malfoy pulled her onto Narcissa's back and set her in front of him so that her back was pressed against his chest and his thighs bracketed hers. He let her get comfortable and find which of the sharp spikes on the dragons back she could hold onto most comfortably. When she was ready, he whistled once, and then Narcissa raised herself onto her back legs.

The sound of her wings beating against the air as she took off was so much louder from this angle. It was a miracle Malfoy hadn't lost his hearing after all these years of flying on her back, and if Hermione hadn't have been so scared of falling off, she would have released her death grip on the spikes and covered her ears to muffle the noise.

The flight to the airport - much to Hermione's chagrin - was awful. Absolutely fucking awful. The strong winds screamed in her ears. The cold air made her throat and face hurt, and the way the dragon's body bent and ebbed as she rode the wind made Hermione want to vomit.

From the moment they'd taken off, she'd kept her eyes closed. She didn't want to see how far the fall would be if she lost her grip and fell, and she didn't open them again until Malfoy told her the airport was in sight.

Although calling it an 'airport' felt like a stretch. Scrapyard seemed more fitting...

Aeroplanes with their windows broken in were discarded along the runway, along with shuttle buses and baggage trolley's with flat tyres.

After circling the sky, Narcissa found an area behind a bunker that was clear enough for her to land on. When they finally - fucking finally - did land, Hermione's feet couldn't touch the ground fast enough.

She slipped off the dragons back and immediately hunched over herself with her hands resting on her knees. "I am never - *ever* - doing that again. I think I'm going to throw up."

She practically heard Malfoy roll his eyes as he dismounted Narcissa. "I did tell you that keeping your eyes closed would only make you feel worse, but you and your bloody Gryffindor blood didn't want to hear it."

Hermione shivered as another wave of nausea twisted in her stomach. "God, I hate flying."

"I know. You told me that repeatedly on the way here."

"I hate you."

"Yes, you told me that, too."

"How long do we have before the meeting?"

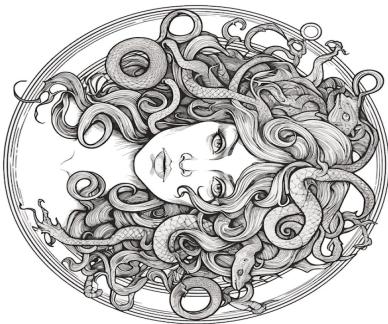
"They should be here in a few minutes," Malfoy answered. "So I give it ten before we're leaving."

Hermione fought off the heavy sickness gathering in her head and stomach enough to scrunch her brows together. "What?"

"The others and I, we have a bet. I think it will take less than ten minutes for negotiations to break down." He shrugged. "Tori has some faith, she wagered fifteen galleons that we'll make it half an hour before everything goes to shit."

"Well, that just fills me with confidence," Hermione spat, words dripping in equal parts venom and sarcasm. "If you're going into this with that attitude, then I doubt negotiations will even last that long."

## CHAPTER 40



### DRAGONS BITE

**26th June**

The letter they sent was simple and to the point:

'Dear Order of the Phoenix,

There's been a change in regime on our end - which we are sure is in your best interest - and we wish to arrange a meeting to discuss said changes, and also, how we move forward from here.

We request the presence of Ronald, Ginevra and Fleur Weasley.  
Time and location up to your discretion.

Regards,

He must have only just walked into the drawing-room, Blaise was too much of a gentleman to not have made his presence known beforehand, but Hermione's cheeks still flamed, nonetheless.

"What do you want, Zabini?" Malfoy hissed without turning around, still looking at Hermione.

Blaise cleared his throat rather awkwardly. "We are being summoned by the Dark Lord."

"Yes, I was well aware of that five minutes ago when my arm started burning thank you very much." The softness in Malfoy's voice was gone, replaced by that coldness she often associated another person. "Wait for me outside. I'll be there in a minute."

Despite the obvious dismissal, Blaise didn't move.

"Is there something else you want to say?"

"No," Blaise said after a few moments of tense silence. "Nothing at all."

"That's what Theo said," Malfoy chuckled again, thoroughly amused. "He bet four hundred that it'll be less than two minutes before someone's got an Avada on the tip of their tongue."

Hermione straightened and glared at him. "Is that why he wanted to come to this meeting? Just so he could watch it blow up?"

"Yes," Malfoy smirked, absentmindedly stroking his dragon's neck. "Loves a good show that one, sick little bastard. That's why I didn't let him come."

"Why would you bet on something so important?" Hermione bit before she could stop herself. "It's not a game! Don't you want this plan to succeed?"

"No, Granger, I'm just putting my families life on the line for the hell of it." Malfoy dared to roll his eyes again. "Of course I want this mission to bloody succeed. But it's called *having fun*. Perhaps you've heard of it?"

Narcissa had begun to purr - sort of - when Malfoy found a particularly sensitive spot behind the largest horn on the right side of her face, but the gentle sound suddenly morphed into a rumbling growl. She bared her fangs, and just before Hermione could question what had angered her, three loud cracks of Apparation echoed from the other side of the airport.

The Order was here.

"Perhaps you two should stay out of sight," Hermione said, inching towards the edge of the bunker and towards terminal three. "Just for a moment, while I see whose turned up."

The look Malfoy gave her was pure irritation. "Really? And what gives you that idea?"

"The Order are terrified of Narcissa. If they see her here right away, they may see it as an act of aggression and the whole meeting could be ruined. I think it's best if she stays hidden unless we need her."

Hermione could tell by his glare that Malfoy agreed with her, but as she started to walk towards the terminal, Narcissa tried to follow.

"No," Malfoy commanded. "Stay - she'll be back in a moment."

Hermione tried to leave again, but Narcissa whined and inched after her. Nervous energy radiated from her scales. She tried to follow Hermione again, but when Malfoy shook his head, she huffed and dug her claws into the gravel. She was clearly agitated, but she didn't move again.

Hermione's eyes flickered up to Malfoy. "Just give me a chance to make the introductions. As soon as they're a little more relaxed, you can come."

Malfoy's jaw was tight and his eyes were hard. He gave her a curt nod, and then Hermione left.

Gate 1 was just around the corner. Hermione's heart was doing somersaults as she walked down the abandoned runway. She could hear her pulse in her ears and feel it in her fingertips. Every impulse in her body was telling her to grab her wand, that holding it or twirling it between her fingers would be just the thing to calm her nerves, but she dug her nails into her palms instead.

The Order was going into this meeting as blind as she was. The only times they'd seen her over the last few months was when she was under the Demon Hex, when she'd been slaughtering their friends by the dozen, and she didn't know if they realised that she wasn't doing it by her own free will.

The trust she used to have with them was hanging by the thinnest thread, and if she walked around the corner with a weapon in her hand, then what little foundation they had to build upon would shatter.

As she reached the edge of the runway, Hermione took a moment to steady herself. She started to count in her head and when she got to three, she rounded the corner and stepped onto the gate.

Three masked figures waited for her on the runway, two women and a man, all wearing different variations of Hermione's Liith mask, all tapping their feet anxiously on the tarmac and fiddling with the weapons in their hand.

As soon as Hermione rounded the corner, the tallest tore his mask off his face. Ron's armour dropped the moment he laid eyes on her. He looked as though he'd seen a ghost. "Hermione," he whispered. His eyes grew wide and his jaw seemed to tremble. "Is that ... is that really you?"

Hermione smiled before she could stop herself. "Hh," she breathed, voice choking slightly. It'd been so long since she'd seen him, and although their friendship hadn't quite been the same the last few years, tears stung her eyes as she looked at him. "It's me."

The two women beside Ron hesitantly pulled off their masks. Ginny and Fleur looked no less shocked to see Hermione than Ron was, but they didn't seem to share his enthusiasm. They were both understandably tense, and seemed to tighten their hold on their weapons as Hermione approached.

"I don't care."

"But there's a gap -" she moaned as he sucked on her clit again. "Someone ... Oh god - someone might see us."

"I don't care - but you need to look at me."

"I -"

"Look at me!"

Her eyes flickered back to his and her entire body started to shake. "But what if s-someone ... s-sees us?"

The elastic band was stretched so tight. She was right on the edge -

"I don't give a fuck." His hand left her breast and dropped between her legs. She felt his fingers swipe across her entrance. "Just stop talking and come," he pushed his fingers inside and crooked them, "for," another crook as his lips closed around her clit, "me." And another as he sucked, *hard*.

The band snapped so hard Hermione couldn't breathe. Blinding pleasure siphoned the air from her lungs. It blocked out everything all she could feel was his tongue and fingers. All she could see was his blue eyes. And if someone had appeared in the doorway at that very moment, she wouldn't have given a fuck either.

As her trembling somewhat subsided, Malfoy unhooked her leg from around his shoulder and eagerly kissed his way up her body as he rose to his feet. He took his time, made sure to swirl his tongue over her nipples and across her collar bone, her pulse point, her jawline, every inch of her skin he could reach.

"Does that prove my loyalty?" he bit against her neck. The low gravel in his voice made her shiver. "Or do you require another round for the message to really sink in?"

"Shut up."

Malfoy's hands fisted her curls as she grabbed his collar and dragged his mouth to hers. He tasted of smoke and whiskey and *her*. Salty and sweet and -

"Malfoy," Blaise snapped.

Hermione froze. Malfoy winced and pulled away slightly - but he didn't let go of her. Despite her state of undress, his broader frame swamped her easily. There was no way Blaise would've been able to see her body. Her modesty was ... somewhat protected.

Like she'd struck him with her wand, Malfoy let go of her. He pulled back and looked up at her. His eyes were blue and open and hurt. He looked so vulnerable like that, on his knees in front of her, hands held out, palms facing her in surrender.

If he hadn't sworn to help the Order, he would have been so easy to kill. Her palms twitched, secretly eager for a weapon.

"You don't want me to touch you."

"No, that isn't it," Hermione panted, trying to get her breathing back under control. She watched him as she slowly laced her fingers through his hair. "I just wanted to see if you would stop if I asked you to."

Malfoy chuckled darkly. He smiled up at her, and the glistening on his chin made her want to pull him back between her legs and close them around his head.

So she did. With a fresh thrill shooting up her spine, she tugged his head back between her legs, and lost herself in the feel of his mouth.

He seemed to lap at her hungrily after that, like he had something to prove. His tongue was greedy as it moved against her. Faster, with more pressure than before. His shoulders nudged her thighs, opening her more to him. The hand on her hip snaked up her body to grab the neckline of her dress and with a sharp yank, he pulled the fabric down, ripping it until it pooled at her waist.

She wasn't wearing a bra. He took advantage and palmed her breast, squeezing and rolling her nipple between his fingers while his mouth toyed with her. Hermione's fingers dug harder into his shoulder and hair as she started to tremble, using him to hold herself up as her bones felt like they were liquefying.

And all the while, as he licked and sucked and nipped at her sensitive core, he whispered little praises to her, hushing choruses of '*good girl*', and '*shhhh, I've got you*', over and over again like a prayer. And what he was doing to her ... The way he was making her feel ... It certainly felt like worship.

So close. She was so close.

Hermione tilted her head back as she neared the edge, and her heart fluttered when she looked straight ahead.

Malfoy hadn't locked the door. The doorway was vacant but ajar. There was a sizeable gap that anyone could look through and see them - like this.

"D... Draco," she whimpered, pulling harder on the strands of his hair, guiding him the way she wanted. "The door .. you didn't .. *fuck-* you didn't close it."

"How are you here?" Ron choked. "How did you manage to escape?"

"I didn't," Hermione answered slowly, carefully, trying to reign herself in. This wasn't the time to be emotional. For now, she needed to be calm, collected. She needed them to see they could trust her. "I've been living with Medusa since I was captured. I'm the one who wrote the note, and they sent me here to discuss the next stages of their plan."

Ginny's eyes widened and Ron beamed with triumph as he turned to his sister.

"I told you that was her handwriting!" He whipped back to Hermione, his face and neck flushed red. "I knew it was you who wrote that note, but Kingsley didn't believe me!"

"Harry did," Ginny said, her tone completely dead and monotone and so unlike Ginny that it made Hermione's heart twist. "But that doesn't mean it's actually her."

"What are you talking about?" Ron asked, sounding slightly offended. "Of course it's her! Look at her! It's Hermione! It's *our* Hermione!"

"We do not know that for certain," Fleur said.

Ron scoffed and shook his head, apparently appalled by Fleur and Ginny's suspicions. "Alright then, tell us something that only Mione would know."

Hermione had expected this. She'd guessed that they wouldn't have trusted that it was her. Immediately. She knew they'd want her to prove her identity in some way. If the roles were reversed, she'd have demanded the same thing.

What she hadn't expected, however, was the cold look in Ginny's eyes.

"That won't work," Ginny interrupted. "She's been with them for seven months. Hermione's memory blocking skills were good, but they could have broken by now. We can't trust that it's her just from something so trivial."

"You think they could be using Polyjuice potion to trick us?" Fleur asked. Hermione noticed her hand twitch towards her pocket.

Hermione fought the ever-growing urge to reach for her wand. "I can understand why you would think that," she said gently, trying her best to keep her tone as light as possible. "But it's me." She held her hands wide either side of her and took a step closer, looking submissive. Cooperative. "I understand that this is a lot to take in, but if you would just allow me a moment to explain..."

Ron, however, was the complete opposite of calm. "Look!" He pointed to the holster on her thigh. "That's Hermione's wand! How could she have that if it wasn't her?!"

"That doesn't mean anything!" Ginny was right, of course it didn't. "She's their hostage, they would have taken her wand from her the moment they captured her in Dover!" Right again. "They could have given anyone Polyjuice potion and then given them Hermione's wand to trick us."

Everything Ginny was saying was correct, but Ron wasn't listening. He charged towards Hermione, arms open wide and ready for embrace, but Ginny and Fleur were quicker than him. Fleur pointed her wand at Hermione, and Ginny held hers against Ron's chest, halting him mid-step.

"Gin -" Ron snapped. "What the bloody hell are you doing?!"

"We don't know it's her! We need to be absolutely sure before we -"

Ginny, Fleur and Ron froze as the ground started to shudder; one small earthquake after the other, the vibrations getting more intense each time.

"What the fuck?!" Ron shouted.

"It's a trap!" Ginny joined Fleur and aimed her wand at Hermione. "We should never have come here -"

The next few seconds happened in a quick flurry of activity.

Fleur, Ginny and Ron hissed in pain and their wands flew into the air and in the next moment, Malfoy appeared in the gate, all three weapons in his palm, Narcissa following closely at his side.

His expression was cold as stone and his eyes were almost pure grey. He'd been occluding while he waited.

As Ginny, Fleur and Ron all pulled small handguns out of their pockets and pointed them at Malfoy, Malfoy aimed his own wand at Ron, and Narcissa growled as fire sparked in her mouth.

Well, this had turned into a fucking disaster. And in less than two minutes, Malfoy and Astoria were going to be out of pocket.

"Granger, get behind me!" Malfoy sneered, his eyes cold as they locked on Ron. "Now!"

She'd intended to keep composed. Silent. She'd wanted to make him earn her means, her hands, anything she chose to give him, but the very heartbeat he wrapped his lips around her clit and *sucked*, she snapped.

"Fuck," Malfoy hissed, that same husky growl creeping into his voice. "You taste as good as you feel!"

The first few swipes of his tongue against her were soft and gentle, just the faintest of pressure, as though he were savouring the taste of her - at first.

It lasted a minute, perhaps two, but all too soon, the gentleness of his mouth vanished, and he became ravenous.

He didn't take his eyes off her face as he lapped at her, or as he dragged the tip of his tongue over her clit and circled it slowly, once.

"*Oh god,*" she moaned.

Twice.

"More," *please*, she almost begged, but bit her lip to trap the words. She wouldn't beg him. Not now, not ever.

Three times.

"When it feels good," he hummed, his mouth still pressed against her, vibrating through her with each word, "*squeez*, alright?"

Hermione nodded feebly while she panted above him. She must have hurt him. Her own little crescent moons from her nails must have been marking his shoulders like he'd marked her thigh with his teeth. She had to have been hurting him but if she was, he didn't say anything.

Hermione jerked when his tongue circled her entrance, teasing it with quick, light strokes, and when he finally sank into her, she squeezed him so tightly she thought she'd broken the bones in his shoulder.

Pressure was building in her stomach. The elastic band was tightening - but she wasn't ready to let it snap yet.

"Stop!"

She gasped at a sudden sharp pain on the inside of her thigh. Her eyes snapped open to find Malfoy staring up at her, a little red crescent moon marked into her inner thigh from his teeth.

"Eyes on me." He placed a soft, almost affectionate kiss on the reddened mark. "Do not look away, understood?"

He caught the edge of her dress and pushed it upwards until it gathered around her waist, and his teeth and tongue both abused and soothed the newly revealed skin. One hand held her in place whilst the other hooked a finger into the waistband of her underwear.

Malfoy kissed along her hipbone while he toyed with the red elastic between his fingers. He didn't pull it down, just sort of rolled and stretched it in his hand.

"I must say Granger," he whispered, his cold breath drafting across her nerves in a way that almost made her knees buckle. "Red certainly is your colour, but I never thought you would be one to match your dress to your knickers."

"F-full of surprises, me." She tried to keep her voice light, natural, but it trembled when he licked the junction between her hip and her underwear.

Malfoy chuckled as he started to pull the fabric down her legs. "Finally, something we agree on."

He let her step out of them, and when his hand travelled back up her thigh, right up to her hip, he guided her leg to wrap over his shoulder, bring her much closer to him. And his mouth.

"Put your hand on my other shoulder," he said. "Use me for balance."

Hermione was putty in his hands. She knew it, he knew it. His mouth was so close to her centre, she probably would have done anything to get him to just move forward, and yet, she ignored his instruction. Couldn't help but just be a little bit rebellious, even given what he was about to do.

Instead, she reached behind her and rested her hands wide on either side of the mantlepiece.

Malfoy's eyes darkened. He smirked and ran his tongue over his teeth as he stared up at her, and God, it was the most erotic thing she'd ever seen. "Fucking stubborn little cunt as always. Let's see how long that lasts."

"No," Hermione snapped as she stepped in front of Malfoy. "You're making this worse!"

Hermione was the only one who hadn't drawn her wand. She stood between the two sides, neutral, refusing to add fuel to the fire, even if it did leave her defenceless.

Malfoy didn't take his eyes off Ron, but a muscle strained in the side of his jaw. "Then at least draw your fucking wand and defend yourself!"

Oh, he really was going to make this difficult, wasn't he? "No, they're not going to hurt me, and you're not going to hurt them!" Loosening a long breath, she gave Ron and the others a pleading look. "Please, everyone just needs to take a minute and calm down."

Ron and Ginny shifted their guns so the barrels pointed at Malfoy, one between his brows, the other at his heart.

Malfoy cocked his head to the side, and a green light gathered at the tip of his wand.

"Give us back our wands, Malfoy!" Ginny threatened.

"Gladly," Malfoy hissed. "After you lower your gun, Weaseltits."

When Fleur cocked her gun, Narcissa's predatory growl deepened.

Ron's finger curled around the trigger of his gun. "What the bloody hell are you doing here, Malfoy? How did you know about this meeting?"

"Well, I think I should know about it, considering Granger arranged the entire thing on a piece of parchment that *I* brought."

For the briefest moment, Ron's scowl fell. "You ... you what? You can't be Medusa! That doesn't make any sense!"

"No, I'm not Medusa. But think of myself, Granger, and my dragon as a sort of package deal," Malfoy said, cocky as always. "Wherever Granger goes, I go," he chuckled and twisted his wand threateningly. "And wherever I go..."

Narcissa stalked forward, and the Order members shranked away when she exposed her fangs.

Malfoy smirked. "Well, you get the idea."

Ron puffed out his chest and his nostrils flared with anger. "You don't fucking scare me, filthy Death Eater!"

A dangerous look flickered across Malfoy's face, the kind that made Hermione's blood run cold. He quirked a brow, and the green light from his wand grew stronger and started crackling -

"That's enough, both of you!" Hermione charged towards Malfoy and caught his wrist. "This isn't helping! Put your wand down!" She fought with him to lower his arm, but he was too strong. His wand didn't move an inch. "Oh for God's sake!"

Hermione changed tactics and caught Ginny's eye. "I swear to you, Malfoy can be trusted -"

"You expect us to believe that?" Although Ginny's tone was pure venom, she wasn't holding her gun as firmly. She was starting to doubt herself. "Fleur said that he's a Demon Mask. He's killed thousands."

"He wants to change -"

Malfoy jerked his wand, itching to throw a curse. "'*Wand*' is a very strong word -"

"Oh shut up!" Hermione whirled back to Malfoy and scowled up at him. "Now is not the time!" She turned back to Ginny with a pleading expression. "Please, I know it sounds mad - but he's not with Voldemort anymore."

"Why should we believe that?" Ron cocked the gun in his hand. "A decade into the war and he's just suddenly decided to switch sides? Yeah, seems really likely that!"

Hermione growled in frustration and pinched her eyes closed. "You don't know what it's like on their side! You don't know what Voldemort has put him and his family through -"

"Granger," Malfoy interrupted. "Do not speak for me -"

"If you interrupt me again, I swear to God, I will cast a silencing charm so powerful even your grandchildren won't be able to speak!"

Out the corner of her eye, Hermione saw Ginny's lips lift at the corner - just a fraction.

Needing a moment to calm herself, Hermione studied Malfoy. He wasn't looking at her; he was glaring straight ahead, analysing the threat. He was so hard to read when he Occluded, but if she had to guess, she'd say that he was nervous. Perhaps even scared.

And why shouldn't he have been?

She was sometimes ashamed of it, the way being in a seat of power made her veins sing, and now, with the most ruthless Death Eater on his knees in front of her, her veins were practically a riotous symphony.

So, with a deep breath and a smirk on her face, Hermione leaned against the fireplace and opened her legs a little further apart.

"There's a good girl."

It took every ounce of strength Hermione had not to moan when he started running his hands up and down the backs of her thighs. They were just slow explorative touches, but the sensations they ignited in her body were anything but innocent.

The first kiss he placed on her right thigh - just above her knee - made Hermione jump and scrape her shoulder blades against the fireplace. Her legs felt as though they'd liquified, and she leaned further back on the marble for support. She thought her body would familiarise itself with the feel of his lips after the first kiss.

It didn't.

When he placed a second kiss slightly higher than the first, she fought back a whimper, and when he dragged his tongue across the inside of her thigh, she thought she was going to pass out.

Malfoy's hands were cold and soothing and everything she wanted; a heavenly release from the fire in her skin. But his lips? Fuck, they were colder. Hell personified.

He carried on touching her, carried on kissing and licking towards the edge of her dress, and the sensations didn't lessen the more he touched her. Each kiss left little shockwaves on her skin. Each time his hands kneaded and massaged the backs of her legs, she felt herself getting lighter, more breathless.

And his eyes never left hers.

"What's the matter?" he whispered between kisses. "You had plenty you wanted to say to me a few moments ago. Where are your insults now?"

Hermione couldn't speak. Could hardly fucking breathe. Her eyes fluttered closed as she let herself relax into his hands and mouth. Her back arched -

"Yes, the wand that *you took from me!* It's not a self-sacrificing gesture to return something that you stole!"

"What else do you want me to do to prove my loyalty to you!?"

For every step Malfoy advanced, Hermione retreated.

"Do you want it in writing, Granger?"

Hermione's eyes darted around the room, looking for a way around him.

"Do you want me to slit my wrists open and sign my name in blood!?" Her back connected with something solid, the edge of the marble fireplace, she thought, but before she could move, react, *escape*, Malfoy was in front of her. He slammed his hands down on the mantle either side of her shoulders, with enough force to make her flinch. "Do you want a contract drawn up?"

He pressed his body against the length of hers, sealing her against the empty fireplace-

"Or do you want me to get down on my fucking knees for you?!"

And despite being trapped, despite the obvious danger, Hermione's pulse jumped in her veins.

Malfoy seemed to notice. "Unless ... that is what you want?"

"Would you? If I asked you to?"

Malfoy never broke eye contact with her.

Not when his large hands slowly flittered to her sides, almost swamping her entire rib cage on either side.

Not when she put the gun on the marble shelf behind her head.

Not even when he slowly sank to his knees in front of her.

Malfoy dragged his hands down the length of her body as he went down. "Are you going to make room for me then, little lion?" he asked, looking up at her. Hermione jumped when he wrapped them around the backs of her thighs.

Her mouth ran dry as she stared down at him, and that same little thrill she sometimes felt lit up her nerves. The one she only felt when she was with him. When she was in control. On top. *Winning*.

"What?" Ginny gasped. "Why?"

"I saw them both a few months ago during an attack." She spoke every softly and very slowly, making sure every word she said was understood. "Hermione was under that spell that makes her kill the people on our side..."

The group had agreed that the only way to branch trust with the Order was for them to know everything. They would search Hermione's memories and see every awful thing that Voldemort had put them through, the years of abuse he'd subjected them all to, and know this betrayal was genuine. And absolutely fucking deserved. It was undeniably the best way forward, but it was also the riskiest. It meant showing the Order everything, laying all their cards on the table, including their unanimous decision to betray their master.

Only a select few Order members would be allowed to know exactly who had betrayed Voldemort, and although only those with excellent skills in memory blocking would be selected, if they were captured, it would only be a matter of time before Malfoy and his families agenda was revealed.

Yes, this plan was the best move, but Malfoy was risking a lot, and Hermione felt it was only fair if she eased his nerves.

He flinched slightly when she caught his wrist again.

"I know this must be very difficult for you. You're putting an awful lot of faith in people you don't trust," she whispered softly, and his eyes flickered down to hers briefly when she squeezed his wrist. "But I *promise* they can be trusted. I wouldn't do anything that would risk exposing you or your family, but they need to know what you've been through - it's the only way they'll understand."

Malfoy's nostrils flared, but eventually, the violent magic at the end of his wand faded away.

"*Thank you.*" Hermione smiled, and when Malfoy nodded, she faced Ginny and the others again. "If you search my memories, you'll see that not only am I telling the truth, but that this is the best thing to happen to the Order since the start of the war."

No one spoke for a few moments. There was a heavy silence, the atmosphere thick and heavy with nerves and adrenaline and then, seemingly out of nowhere, hope came from the person Hermione had least expected.

"We can trust Malfoy," Fleur said, and everyone turned to look at her. "I believe it."

"The Demon Hex," Hermione clarified, relieved that at least one person in the Order knew she wasn't murdering her friends by choice.

"Yes - Hermione was under the Demon Hex." Fleur smiled. "I was injured and bleeding, Hermione was going to kill, but Malfoy stopped her."

Ron whirled around and glared at Malfoy. "It must have been a trick."

"No - it was no trick," Fleur said strongly. "He stopped her from killing me, and then he let me go. I do not understand why you did it, but you saved my life that day, so for that, I am going to give you the benefit of the doubt now."

"I appreciate that Fleur," Hermione sighed. "But before you search my memories, I need you to promise that whatever you see will stay between the inner circle, and only be shared to those on a need to know basis?"

"Agreed." Fleur took a step forward, but Hermione held up her hand to stop her.

"I mean it," Hermione warned. "If you're going to win this war, then you need him. You're going to see a lot of things that could damn Malfoy and his family. We're trusting that after this, if we help you, then you won't do anything that will risk exposing him or putting his family in danger. Agreed?"

Ginny and Fleur exchanged heavy looks before they both nodded, "Agreed," in unison.

Ron, however, made no such promises.

Ginny made it clear that they weren't going to exchange information until she could be sure Hermione was really who she said she was, and in the hour it took to prove that she hadn't taken any Polyjuice potion, the group came to a truce.

Malfoy would give the others their wands back, the Order would throw their guns to the far side of the gate, and once they felt it was safe, Fleur, Ron and Ginny would take it in turns to search Hermione's memories. There was no chance Malfoy was going to let any of them anywhere near his head, but Hermione hoped that if they searched hers, it'd be the first step in building trust between them.

Fleur volunteered to go first.

Hermione found it incredibly easy to have Fleur in her head. Her magic was soft, like having satin draped across her temples, but *quick*. Without Hermione trying to keep her out, she could skim through an entire day of memories in a few seconds.

Fleur was open and saw each memory for what it was, flipping through each new day as though they were pages in a book. She saw how close Malfoy was to his family,

"Granger," a voice she knew all too well sneered behind her, getting louder as his footsteps brought him closer. "I suggest you get back in that sitting room so we can finish our conversation before I drag you there by your fucking curls!"

She whirled and pointed the gun at his chest. She couldn't actually shoot him again, the charms were back on the guns, but her anger was making her feel theatrical. "I threaten me like that again - I dare you."

Malfoy paused in the doorway, one hand curled tightly around the frame as he scowled at her. He was angry. Very, very fucking angry. The kind of angry that made his nostrils flare and his chest heave. "You're a right nasty little cunt, do you know that?"

"Excuse me?"

"You play nice, watch my memories with me, get me to drop my occlumency walls just so you can tug on my vulnerability, and then the second I say I'm willing to help Potter, you change, just like that." He snapped his fingers together, the sharp sound echoing off the walls. "Now you've gotten what you wanted, you're back to shoot me again."

"I thought *you liked it* when I shot you."

His eyes twitched. "Don't play games with me. I am not in the mood. What more do I have to do to get you to trust me?"

"Trust isn't magic, I can't just wave my wand and make it so. After everything you've done to the Order, *to me*, you can't expect me to just trust you overnight."

"Well you should," Malfoy snapped. "Do you have any idea what I am risking for you? I'm putting my family on the line to help you and the Order."

"Don't pretend that you did this for me. You decided to switch sides, I didn't have anything to do with that decision."

He pushed himself off the wall and started charging towards her. "I'm taking you off the anti-magic potions."

"As you should! It's the least you could do after everything you've put me through!"

"And I'm giving you back your wand! I'm giving you back the very tool you need to kill me!"

Rage seemed to tumble off him in waves as he stalked towards her, and there was something in his eyes that made every nerve in Hermione's body scream: *Rum'*.

Malfoy's eyes. "The Hex is there for your protection; to ensure that you do the things that need to be done, and it takes the blame off of *you*, and puts it onto *me*?"

Hermione's fingers tightened around the glass in her hand so much she was surprised the crystal didn't pop.

"This needs to be done, Granger," Malfoy explained. "I'll do what I can to take you on as few missions as possible, and we'll work something out with the Order, but this is non-negotiable. For this to work, you need to carry on killing Order members."

"You can't ask her to do that, Draco." Astoria rushed to Hermione's side, wrapped an arm around her shoulder, and pulled her against her side. "It's not fair."

"No, it's not fair," Malfoy snapped, "but it's *necessary*. We need to play this property if we're all going to survive. We're going to have to do things that we don't want to do, unspeakable things, and if that makes me a terrible person, then so be it."

Hermione couldn't hear any more of this. She just ... couldn't.

Turning on her heels, she stormed out of the room. Malfoy was right, she knew he was right, but it didn't make it any less painful.

Betraying Voldemort was a dangerous game. If they put one foot wrong, if they made a single fucking mistake, everything could be ruined. This plan was as thorough as it was fragile.

They needed to pretend all was normal. That she was still under their control and Malfoy was loyal as ever with one goal in mind - securing Voldemort's victory.

Hermione needed to put Voldemort's defeat above herself, above her own feelings and her fucking soul if that was what it boiled down to.

If this was going to work, they needed to carry on as normal - and that meant being put under the Demon Hex.

If this was going to work, she needed to carry on killing Order members, and that thought alone almost broke her heart.

how heartbroken they all were when Daphne had been executed and how her death had left a hole that no one could fix.

Hermione had thought about locking more private - and more explicit - memories away, but felt that if she did, it would only raise suspicions. Might cast the illusion that she was hiding something and rock the already tender foundation they were trying to forge.

If this was going to work, she needed to be honest and open about her time at Malfoy Manor.

And everything that had transpired within its walls.

An involuntary blush crept onto Hermione's face when those moments approached, but Fleur, ever the lady, chose to graciously sidestep them.

When Malfoy's hand had disappeared up Hermione's dress when she'd shot targets, Fleur smiled and moved on. When they'd ripped each other's clothes off a few weeks later, Fleur flipped the page before Malfoy had even picked Hermione up.

She paid equal attention to all the things Malfoy had done, the killing and the hours torturing hostages, but she seemed more interested in his interactions with Hermione.

The times he'd wiped blood off her chin after their Occlumency sessions. The smirk that sometimes played on his lips when they fought one another. The bond he had with his dragon, how no one else could come close to Narcissa, but how that same beast now felt an attachment towards Hermione. The guilt on his face each time Hermione came out of the Demon Hex, and the way he would hold and soothe her when she'd break down afterwards.

When Fleur was finally caught up, she pulled out of Hermione's mind, placed a hand on either of her shoulders, and gave her a warm and knowing smile.

And then it was Ron's turn.

"I'd be careful if I were you, Weasley," Malfoy laughed as Hermione prepared to let Ron in. "You might not like what you're about to see."

From the moment Ron entered her mind, Hermione had the overwhelming feeling that it was a mistake – because unlike Fleur, he seemed to have an agenda.

Hermione charged into the large drawing-room and made her way to the table of guns. She picked her favourite up and aimed at the mannequins lined up against the far wall. She pulled the trigger, but her trembling arms pulled the bullet to the left and carved a chunk out of the wall rather than her intended target.

It felt like he was looking through her memories with blinkers on, purposely ignoring the tender moments that Hermione was trying to show him to focus on the bad instead.

He kept lingering on specific points, horrific moments as if he were trying to remind Hermione that Malfoy was - and had always been - a monster.

He clung onto the images of her bleeding and vomiting blood on her bedroom floor at the start of her capture. He lingered on their fights; the times he'd had his hands wrapped around her throat, all the way's she'd thought about killing him, and replayed the first time she'd been under the Demon Hex over and over again. How scared she'd been, how she'd cried, the grief she'd felt.

And then he saw their time in the drawing-room together. He saw Hermione shoot targets with a black and gold gun. He heard the way Malfoy spoke to her. How he touched her -

And then Ron's entire aura changed.

He fast-forwarded through the memories that followed quickly, completely ignoring the things that Hermione wanted to show him. He didn't care about seeing Astoria's accident or the guilt Malfoy had shown in his bedroom that evening. He didn't want to see how Cormac had tried to kill her, how he'd beaten her and if Malfoy hadn't saved her, then she would have been dead.

No, he didn't care about any of that. He didn't want to see the good in Malfoy, he just flicked through her memories until he found the day she'd shot Malfoy and everything that followed.

A searing pain lanced down the centre of Hermione's skull as Ron jerked out of her mind.

She hissed and bent over slightly, and the first thing she heard as the airport materialised back around her was Ron's voice.

"I can't fucking believe this! You're shagging him?! Have you lost your marbles?!"

A look of pure horror snapped onto Ginny's face. "You're not, are you?"

"You're focusing on the wrong things!" Hermione argued. "That has nothing to do with this!"

"It has everything to do it!" Ron screamed back. "He's bloody brainwashed you! He's got you so far under his thumb that you don't see that this is all a trick!"

"No, he hasn't I knew exactly what I was doing!"

"You are the Dark Lord's favourite weapon. For this to work, we need to carry on and act as normally as possible so we don't arouse suspicions. Which means when there's a raid or a battle, you're going to be put on the field whether you like it or not." Malfoy's voice dropped to a whisper, but the quietness only made him sound angrier, more sinister. "So I'm asking you, without being put under the Demon Hex, could you kill your friends?"

"I ... "

"Could you slice their heads off like you have been doing for the last few months? Could you set them on fire and throw them into brick walls so violently that their little heads explode?"

"That's enough, Draco," Astoria warned, a hard, protective edge creeping into her eyes. "You've made your point."

"We've all seen what you can do Granger. We've all seen how lethal you are, and anything less than that will raise suspicions."

"I can use non-lethal hexes!" Hermione argued, already knowing it was pointless. Malfoy was right, no matter how much she wished he wasn't. "I can still fight and look lethal without actually killing them!"

Malfoy looked like he wanted to laugh. "The other Death Eaters have been frozen in awe of your talents. They've watched you slaughter seven people with a single curse - how do you think it will look to them if you suddenly start using non-lethal attacks?"

The same word just kept repeating in her head, over and over again, almost beating her senses with the same ten letters.

Suspicious.

Suspicious.

Malfoy was absolutely right. Anything less than her best would raise suspicions. Anything less than butchery and cruelty on her part would get them all killed.

She'd dug this grave herself by showing how deadly she could be, and now those skills were going to bury her.

"If you don't go under the Demon Hex, you and your fucking bleeding heart won't be able to kill them, and then the entire ruse will be up!" Rage flickered in

being low and quiet, revealing no emotion, his eyes were open and almost totally blue. He was telling the truth.

Hermione had expected as much, but she had to ask. "I want my wand back."

"Alright - but while you're on assignments with me, you'll need to use my wand to keep up the ruse."

Hermione nodded in agreement.

"Anything else?" Malfoy asked.

"The Demon Hex has to go."

"Not a fucking chance."

Hermione blanched. She stared at him with wide eyes, and felt that familiar bite of anger begin to simmer back to life in her chest. "You're not putting me under that hex ever again."

"No. That is simply not an option."

"What makes you think that it's up for discussion?" Hermione lunched to her feet and leered over him, suddenly too angry to be seated. "I am never, ever going under that Hex again!"

"No, you're right - this isn't up for discussion." Malfoy got to his feet, easily glaring down at her given their height difference. "If I don't put you under the Demon Hex when we're on assignment, the entire ruse will be up, so I'm sorry, but the answer is no. This is for your benefit, not mine."

Theo slowly - and with very little grace - slid off the sofa and escaped to the other side of the drawing-room, snatching a bottle of whiskey as he got out of the 'danger zone'.

"Then I'll pretend!" Hermione argued.

"Oh, *you'll pretend*, will you?" Malfoy scoffed cruelly, speaking down to her as though she were a child. "Why didn't you say that before? That's just put *all* my fucking nerves at ease!"

Like the roll of a spark wheel on a cigarette lighter, Hermione's rage ignited. "You don't have to be such a wanker about it! I can pretend to be under the Hex if I need to be!"

"So you think you'll be able to kill your friends without the Hex, do you?"

Hermione's expression dropped. "What?"

"Oh really, just like you knew what you were doing when you killed Seamus!" Like he'd stabbed her straight in the heart, Hermione flinched.

Narcissa started growling again.

Malfoy came to stand behind Hermione.

"That's enough, Weasel," he sneered coldly. "Another word out of you, and I won't think twice about turning you into dragon feed." The husky tone in his voice should have been warning enough for anyone to back off, but it fell on deaf ears with Ron. He was too angry to really hear it.

"Don't tell me it's enough! You've done something to her! You made her kill her friend, and there's no way that my Hermione would ever fuck a monster like that!"

Malfoy's hand closed around Hermione's arm. He dragged her behind him as he stepped into Ron and glared down at him. "Well maybe that's because she's not yours anymore. Ever think of that?"

"Perhaps it is best if we adjourned this meeting for today," Fleur suggested calmly. She wrapped a hand around Ron's shoulder and gently pulled him back. "We know they can be trusted. Perhaps we should arrange another meeting for next week, and go back and discuss with Harry..."

"And let Hermione go back with him?" Ron shouted. "No, she's not safe there!" Very quickly, Ron ducked around Malfoy and grabbed Hermione, but the very heartbeat his fingers closed around her wrists, Narcissa lunged.

Ron screamed and stumbled backwards as the dragon charged towards him. He released Hermione's arm, allowing Malfoy to drag her out of harm's way and give Narcissa a clear path to her prey.

Ron fell to the floor with a loud crunch but Narcissa didn't stop. She was looming over him in an instant, a menacing roar vibrating from her mouth as she hovered her huge teeth and jaw over Ron's stomach.

Fleur stood frozen in shock.

Ginny launched a few curses at the dragon, but they bounced off her thick scales like droplets of rain on a boulder.

"Malfoy!" Hermione pleaded. "Get her to stop!"

Malfoy shook his head and chuckled darkly, thoroughly delighting in Ron's terror.

Ron tried to scamper backwards, but Narcissa dug her snout into his stomach and bore down, trapping him there. His arms and legs flailed in every direction, kicking and punching.

Hermione doubted the dragon could even feel his attacks.

But just as she opened her mouth and her teeth grazed Ron's ribs, Malfoy snapped his fingers and Narcissa backed away.

"Bit of advice, Weasley," he said, still laughing. "Dragons bite."

The charms made her feel like she was living in a padded cell, or a child that had every dangerous object within reach '*safely projected*'. It was unnecessary and demeaning and she wanted them gone.

"Why would I take wards off the house that would give you the ability to hurt yourself?" Malfoy cut in. "Or do you have a hidden desire to go abseiling out the window?"

Hermione glared at him once more. "It's about trust Malfoy. I am trusting you to keep your word and betray Voldemort, so I need you to trust me. I need you to take the wards off and trust me not to hurt myself, or you, with my new freedom."

Malfoy's lip started to curl.

"I am not a child, Malfoy," Hermione snapped. "Take. The. Wards. *Off!*"

"Alright, the baby gates come off," Theo agreed quickly, suddenly the champion for peace. "What else?"

"I want taken off the anti-magic potions."

"Consider it done," Malfoy answered in a heartbeat, "but I am assuming there's more that you want?"

"Can you reverse the blood ritual Voldemort used to bind my life to yours?"

"Yes."

He was quiet for a few moments, considering his answer. "No, it was Voldemort's magic that bound your life to mine, so only he can unlink us." Despite his voice

The new hope they'd given her - and the satisfaction of Voldemort's own generals betraying him - was payment enough, but if they were willing to offer her extra incentives, well, Hermione had never been one to miss an opportunity.

"I want the wards taken off the house," she said firmly. "Because you're helping the Order, I have no reason to kill Malfoy anymore, or myself, so I want the charms taken off. All of them. On the windows. The cutlery. Even the ones on the candles and the fireplaces. They all need to go. Non-negotiable."

It was a silly thing to ask for, yes, but she wanted it nonetheless. She'd gotten used to them. She could hold her hand over any open flame in the house without it hurting. She could open the windows, but couldn't sit on the ledge and hang her legs outside.

The charms made her feel like she was living in a padded cell, or a child that had

Companionship and seeking out a partner were part of the human experience, but how could he be with someone else when'd already found the one? His other half?

There wasn't just a hole in his heart that only Daphne could fill. His heart just wasn't there anymore. She'd taken it with her when she'd died, so rather than fill that empty space, he just filled someone else's bed.

Yes, that would be his plan for the evening. Once the gala was over and everyone was tucked back in their beds, safe and sound and probably shagging the night away, he would go out.

Theo started running through a list of pubs in his head as he walked to the bathroom door but just as he reached for the handle, it swung open. He jumped back to avoid being hit. He reached for his wand, ready to curse whichever moron had almost taken his nose off – but the hex died before it reached his tongue.

Because the Mustang was stood in the doorway, alone, and she was staring right at him.

For a moment, he didn't know what to do.

And for a moment, neither did she.

They both just stared at one another, frozen in place.

Mustang looked just as stunned to see him here as he was to see her. She looked at the door and then back to him. Crouch had made it clear that he didn't share her, Theo didn't want to think about what Crouch might do if he saw them together - but Mustang didn't move.

She stared at Theo again as though she was contemplating the same thing. Theo couldn't understand it. Why would she be weighing something like that? As though being caught here with him was worth whatever punishment Crouch might put her through? As though he was worth - anything.

Before his brain could offer any ideas, Mustang suddenly slipped off her ridiculously high heels, and after scooping them up off the floor, she charged towards him, pushed him backwards into one of the bathroom stalls, and then closed the door behind her.

“What the fuck are you?” Theo started, only for Mustang to slap a hand over his mouth and shake her head.

She stared into his eyes as she brought her index finger to her lips and mouthed, “*Sshhhh.*”

Only moments later, the door to men's room burst open. Judging from the voices, it sounded like Rodolphus and Rabastan Lestrange. They didn't say much, just chatted idly amongst themselves as they stood at the urinals on the other side of the bathroom.

The tiny stall was barely big enough for one person, never mind two, but each time Theo tried to leave, Mustang just shook her head and pushed him against the wall - and she was surprisingly strong for such a small woman.

After the two Death Eaters finally left, the Mustang took her hand off Theo's mouth. They waited a few moments to make sure they were really alone, then slipped out of the stall. The moment they stood in the bathroom again, Mustang began talking. Or trying to, at least.

Her mouth started opening and closing erratically as though she was shouting. No, no more like screaming at him, and her hands - still holding her shoes - waved in every direction as she spoke inaudibly.

She clearly had a lot she wanted to say to Theo. He tried his hardest to read her lips as best he could, but it was no use. Her mouth was moving too quickly.

“I'm sorry - I can't understand you.”

The Mustang didn't stop. Just kept silently shouting and pointing her finger at his chest. She started making hand signs but again, Theo was lost, and getting equally as frustrated as she was.

“Sweetheart, I don't know what you're saying!”

She growled silently towards the ceiling and snatched his wand.

“Oil. The fuck do you think you're doing?!”

She pointed the tip of Theo's wand against her throat and shook it. She wanted him to take the charms off her voice box that prevented her from speaking.

Fuck knew how he was going to explain what he was doing if anyone saw him, but he thought it worth a go. At the very least, it might give him a good laugh later.

“Alright, just give me a second. *Finito.*”

The Mustang opened her mouth, but no noise came out. He moved his wand a little further down her throat and tried again - but nothing happened.

On the third try, he wrapped his free hand around the back of her neck and pulled her closer, thinking that the spell might be more effective if he cast it from both his wand and fingers at the same time.

It wasn't. The enchantments Crouch had used to silence her were too strong.

Mustang started to grow angry. Her lips began moving faster, and she almost scratched his face with the heels in her hand as she sharply cut her arms into the air.

She was desperately trying to communicate something to him - but her furious expression was only riling Theo up more.

"I don't know what you're saying!" he screamed at her. "I don't - you can make all the hand signs you want petal, I don't have a fucking clue what they mean -"

Mustang slapped him across the face. Very hard. She stared up at him, her chest heaving as she pursed her lips.

"What the fuck did you do that for?" Theo snapped, a little stunned by the intense burning in his cheek. Salazar - she could make dark wizards weep with a slap like that. "You little-"

She grabbed either side of his face and yanked his head toward hers. Her eyes were green fire as she stared at him with a fierce determination that made his toes curl slightly. No one ever looked at him like that. Not anymore.

Theo's anger started to choke as he stared back at her. That white-hot rage, that impulse to break things and hurt people started to drain away. As though she were siphoning it out of him through her palms.

"What is it about you?" he whispered. "Why do I always feel this way when you're around?" Before he even realised what he was doing, he reached up with his right hand and palmed her cheek.

Mustang's eyes fluttered closed as she leaned into his touch.

Suddenly, Theo wasn't so angry anymore. Suddenly, that God-awful emptiness in his chest he'd carried around since Daphne died - it wasn't gone - but it felt a little... What? Fuller? Less empty? He didn't have the right words.

Theo was so distracted by the sudden calmness he felt in her presence, he didn't realise Grouch had stormed into the bathroom until he cast a Crucio at Mustangs back. As she dropped to the floor with a silent scream, Grouch threw Theo against the sink and angled his wand beneath his chin.

Even after all these years, he still didn't know exactly what was in the stuff. Didn't want to know. Didn't care to. It dulled his senses and numbed the ache in his chest. It did what he wanted it to so he never questioned it.

Theo felt wired as he stared at himself in the mirror. His muscles were taut and tight, begging for release. Begging for him to do something. Anything to make himself forget. To bathe his hand in someone else's blood just so he wouldn't think about Daphne. To pull someone else's heart out just so he could remember what one felt like when it was still beating, still alive and in one piece.

Once Astoria was back in the manor, Theo would indulge. Perhaps he'd go to a bar, find a random whore and charm her into taking him back to her place. It'd been so long since he'd been with someone, and he had his magic bag of white powder with him...

It was pathetic that he couldn't have sex without it anymore. That he needed something artificial in his system just to find other women somewhat attractive enough to sleep with.

It wasn't that he felt like he was cheating on Daphne when he shagged someone else. He never really looked at them long enough to see if they were appealing or not, but it wouldn't have mattered - because they weren't *her*. They weren't Daphne. They didn't look like her and they didn't smell like her, so he couldn't get hard.

The powder, however? It changed that. It made him numb. Disorientated him enough that he could pretend - just for a little while - that they were who he wanted them to be.

It was sick and wrong, he knew that, but Malfoy never judged him for it. Said he'd been through enough and should do whatever he needed to do to make the days bearable.

And it wasn't as if the women ever picked up on his indifference - and even if they did, they didn't care enough to mention it. It took him so long to come just once that they often enjoyed themselves once, twice, even three times before he crested that hill.

Theo didn't want a partner, but sometimes the loneliness got to him more than any curse he'd been struck with on the battlefield. Sometimes, he just wanted to feel a warm body under his own so he didn't feel so cold and dead inside anymore.

Blaise was on his feet the second he heard her voice. "Are you alright?" he asked frantically. When he took her face between his hands and started checking her for injuries that weren't there, Theo was reminded why they'd chosen to hide Medusa from Blaise all these years. "I've been so worried..."

Tori placed her hands on either of his shoulders and gently pushed him back. "And I've told you before that you worry too much. I am fine." One of her hands snaked its way to cup his cheek. "He didn't touch me and he's now flat out in the hallway sleeping off the Veritaserum."

"Did you get everything you needed?" Theo asked.

"More than what we needed." Astoria smiled sweetly at him before she turned back to Blaise. "But that's enough business talk for tonight. I believe you owe your wife a dance?"

As Blaise hooked his arm through Astoria's and guided her into the crowd, Theo took his leave. He scanned the dancers as he made his way towards the bathroom, not really sure what he was looking for until his eyes found hers.

Mustang was perched on the arm of the chair Crouch was sitting in, a bored look on her face as she refilled Crouch's glass. She watched Theo carefully until the very moment he slipped through the door to the men's room.

The large white tiled bathroom was empty, and arrived he'd relieved himself, Theo had a moment alone. It wasn't just that he didn't want to re-join the party, he just needed a break from Blaise - and Astoria - if he was being totally honest with himself.

He understood Blaise's obsessive paranoia for his wife more than he let on. Understood that burning desire to protect the person that made you whole - but sometimes it was too difficult to be around them.

Theo loved and thought the world of Astoria and Blaise. He'd never met a couple more perfect and destined to be together than the Zabin's. But being around them, seeing the devotion of their stares and the mountains they'd move for one another... it was a constant reminder of what he'd lost, of what he was never going to get back, and he just needed to get away from them for a moment.

If he didn't have to keep his wits about him at this gala just in case something did happen, he would have buried his nose in the bag of white powder he had in his pocket hours ago.

"What did she tell you!?" With his eyes wide and teeth bared, Crouch looked like a wild dog. His nostrils flared as he dug his wand into Theo's skin. "What did she say to you!?"

Theo smacked Crouch's wand to the side and pushed off the sink. He loomed over Crouch and sneered down at him. "She didn't tell me anything because you've taken away her voice!"

Her mouth still open in an inaudible wail, Mustang wrapped her arms around herself as her spine curled inward at an unnatural angle.

Blaise suddenly charged into the bathroom. He strode inside with calm purpose, but skidded to a stop when he saw the scene in front of him. "What in the world..."

"Drop the curse!" Theo hissed. "She's had enough!"

"Oh, she's not had *marily* enough!" Crouch smirked, but just as he licked his lips in that vile way he always did, the pocket watch on his suit started to sing. His smug expression dropped the moment he heard it.

Before the clock had finished its second chime, Crouch stopped the Crucio that was wracking its way through the Mustangs' body and ran towards her. His movements suddenly became frantic - even a little panicked. As the girl caught her breath and tried to sit upright, he pulled a silver flask from his robes and flipped the cap open.

Mustang's eyes widened when she saw the flask. She started to fight Crouch as he leaned over her and tried to force its contents down her throat.

Theo stepped towards her without really thinking about it. "What is in that flask?" Crouch didn't answer. While Mustang kicked and punched every part of him within her reach, he grabbed her face and pried her mouth apart.

Mustang jerked her head away from the open flask. She caught Theo's gaze as she fought Crouch, her arms and legs flailing in every direction, and the look in her eyes, fuck - the helplessness he saw there cut him right down to the bone. He didn't know why.

"What's in that flask, Crouch?" Theo demanded, just as magic began to spark at his fingertips.

Why was he reacting this way? He didn't know this girl. He didn't owe her anything - yet for some reason, as he stared into her terrified green eyes, he was

overcome with the need to protect. To snatch her out of Crouch's grip and Apparate her home.

What was wrong with him?

"Anti-magic potion," Crouch grunted, struggling to keep the girl's face still in his hands.

"She's a witch?" Theo asked. For some reason, that little facet of information set him off. He sharply drew his wand and charged towards Crouch -

Blaise caught his arm before he could do any damage. "Stop," he hissed under his breath, using the vice-like grip on Theo's arm to hold him back. "Don't make a scene."

Blaise was naturally so much stronger than him - fucking bastard. Unless Theo used magic, he didn't have a hope of getting free.

He still tried though. Still lunged toward the girl even though he knew he wouldn't reach her. "She was going to tell me something!"

"It doesn't matter," Blaise whispered, yanking Theo back again when he tried to lunge again. "You can't do anything that will raise suspicions. We need to keep a low profile. All of us."

"But he's hurting her!"

"That doesn't matter!" Blaise tightened his hold on Theo's arm and discreetly dragged him back. "The plan is more important. Think of the plan. *Think of Daphne.*" At the mention of her name, Theo stilled.

Because Blaise was right. Everything Theo had done for the last six years was for her. It was all for Daphne. The whole plan had started when she'd died. Medusa had been created for her. The entire betrayal was built on avenging her - and nothing was more important than that. Nothing.

Not even the Mustang.

The three of them watched her leave, watched her black curls bounce as she picked up a bottle of bourbon from a table and wove her way through the crowd back to Crouch.

A strange feeling remained in her absence. A heaviness that couldn't be explained, but Theo could tell by the looks on Blaise and Astoria's faces that it was shared between the three of them.

"Who was that?" Astoria whispered.

"One of Party's dolls," Blaise answered quietly. "He calls her the Mustang." Theo didn't see their expressions, he was still looking at the spot the Mustang had disappeared in.

"She looks sooo ..." Astoria trailed off.

"Familiar?"

"No, that isn't it. There's ... something strange about her but I can't quite put my finger on what it is. I've never met her before, but when she looked at me, I felt like I could trust her. It was almost like I ... Like I knew her."

"That's funny," Blaise said. "Theodore said the exact same thing."

As soon as Astoria left to start a conversation with Scabior, Blaise became insufferable. She'd been with him for almost an hour working her magic, and the entire time - the entire fucking time - all Blaise did was whittle about his wife.

To begin with, Theo played the good Samaritan and listened, but charity was no longer in his nature, and he'd fought through his headache for about as long as he could stand it.

As he stood and unbuttoned his waistcoat, Blaise's worry reached a new obsessive level. "Where are you going?" he panicked. "Have you seen something?"

"No," Theo sighed. "I haven't."

"Have you heard something then?"

"The only thing I've heard for the last hour is you and your bloody moaning."

"Then why are you leaving in such a hurry? Are you sure you've not seen something, and you're just not telling me so I don't?"

"For Salazar's sake mate, I just need a piss!"

"I'm so envious of you boys," hushed Astoria's voice behind him. "The line for the ladies room is atrocious. I haven't been able to go all night."

Theo didn't need to look up to know who it was. That strange twisting sensation in his chest told him it was her.

The Mustang, dripping in diamonds and dressed to the nine's in a floor-length silk red dress with a slit up the side.

Blaise tensed as Mustang studied Astoria's bag. There was a phial of Veritaserum inside. If the Mustang saw it, if she showed anyone, the plan would be ruined.

Mustang tilted the bag from side to side, smiling as she watched the jewels glitter as they caught the low lights from the ballroom.

Theo itched to snatch his wand. He could kill her wordlessly, make it look like an accident. She had a glass of wine in her hand. It wouldn't be too much of a leap for the other party goers to believe that she'd had too much to drink. That she'd slipped and banged her head.

He didn't want to kill her. She'd done nothing to him. She was innocent, but if the plan was at stake, if Daphne's legacy was threatened to be ruined, he'd do it in a heartbeat.

Astoria and the Mustang stared at one another. Theo watched Astoria's eyes widen slightly, but she didn't look scared the way she ought to be. She certainly looked shocked, but more ... fascinated, as though she was looking at something that Theo couldn't see himself.

Mustang stared back just as intensely for a moment, her eyes almost glistening, then offered a bright smile that touched her eyes and looked so genuine it almost made Theo's heart swell. It might have done, if it was still beating like a normal person.

The Mustang stepped forward and gave Astoria back her clutch, but she didn't leave straight away. Instead, she reached forward to catch some of Astoria's hair that had fallen out of her updo when she'd stumbled, and oh so slowly, tucked the strand back into place.

"Mustang?" Crouch sneered from somewhere in the crowd. Mustang flinched slightly at the sound of his voice. "Where have you gone, pet? Where's my drink?"

Mustang gave Astoria another smile and left.

But not before her eyes had lingered on Theo. Not before she'd looked at him in a way that made it feel like she was seeing right into his soul.

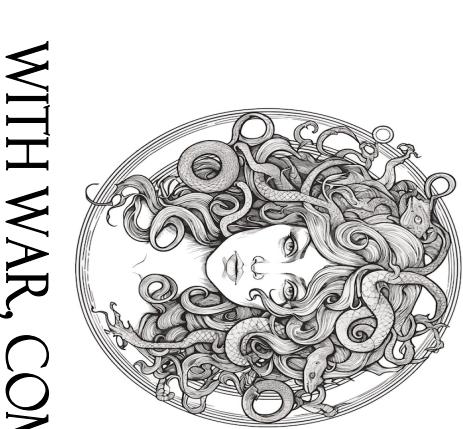
**WITH WAR, COMES SACRIFICE**

**4th July**

Utilitarianism follows the belief that the right course of action is the one that *'causes the greatest good for the greatest number of people.'*

It doesn't care about morality or feelings or a persons soul; its only concern is the end game. If ten people were trapped in a burning building, it would be justified - encouraged, even - to let four burn to save the remaining six.

If it doesn't matter how horrendous or gruesome an act is. If it saves the lives of many, then it's worth it - no matter the price the fewer have to pay.



## CHAPTER 42

Hermione had adopted that belief since the first time she'd killed. She'd clung to it. Cried herself to sleep repeating it until she conditioned herself into believing that taking one life was justified if it saved two. She'd never have gotten through the war otherwise.

But as the town of Bradford lay burning around her, as the corpses of muggle soldiers fell to the floor after being hit with curses she'd cast, and wizards pawed at their own throats because she'd slit them open, Hermione's belief faltered. Just for a moment.

This plan depended on her being under the Hex. She needed to kill so Voldemort would think Malfoy was still loyal. Killing a hundred more people could save thousands.

With war, came sacrifice. The Order knew that Kingsley had accepted that. He'd agreed to sacrifice a few soldiers to secure the survival of the rest of the Order. Sacrifice a few pawns to draw out the oppositions Queen so they could slaughter her and win the game later on.

This raid of the Order's base in Bradford was the first of those sacrifices. A hostage had given Yaxley the location after a few hours of torture, and although Malfoy had tipped Kingsley off the night before about the impending attack, people were still going to die. An obscene amount of people.

Voldemort was sending too many of his soldiers, and he wanted Narcissa to be utilised too. Kingsley simply didn't have the resources to get everyone - and all the medical supplies and weapons being held there - out before the raid started. The solution? Sacrificing a handful of brave soldiers to hold back Voldemort's army while they got their vital equipment out, and later, when Voldemort realised the Order must have known about the attack beforehand, Malfoy was going to pin the leak on Scabior.

Sacrificing a few of his own soldiers to whittle down the Dark Lord's army was a price Kingsley had agreed to pay. Hermione suspected that he was hiding that information from Harry. There was no way he would ever agree if he knew. Sacrifice was for the best - but it didn't break Hermione's heart any less. Didn't mean it didn't crush her soul just that little bit more every time she snuffed the life out of another person.

soon as Scabior spotted her across the room, already a little tipsy and wobbly on his feet, Theo knew that the snatcher never stood a chance.

Astoria had done her research beforehand. She knew Scabior liked gold, so she wore a yellow dress with gold accents. She knew he had a preference for breasts over arse, so she wore an extremely low cut dress that pushed her tits so far up they might as well have had a welcome sign branded upon them.

"There's your man," Theo whispered in Astoria's ear, gently tilting her face toward Scabior. "Go get him."

As soon as Astoria's eyes landed on the snatcher, he was lost. He stumbled and stood on Karkaroff's wife's toes, earning a squeal from her and a smack on the shoulder for him.

Astoria was going to chew him up and eat him alive, poor bastard. Theo thought that they should seriously consider renaming her Black Widow. It suited her so much better.

As Scabior made his way to the bar, Astoria downed her glass and gave her husband a kiss, but as she tried to make her leave, she wobbled on her feet and fell back slightly. Theo and Blaise discreetly caught her before she went down too far, but neither managed to grab her clutch as it slipped between her trembling fingers and clattered against the tiled floor.

"Darling," Blaise whispered frantically. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine." Astoria furiously swatted his hands away and glared up at him. "Let go of me, we don't want anyone to see."

"What happened?"

"I just had a dizzy spell, I'm fine."

"You're putting too much pressure on yourself. If unwell darling, you need to go home..."

"I am fine!" Astoria half whispered, half hissed through gritted teeth. "I can rest when I go home. We need to start whittling down the army, and no bloody illness is going to stop me."

Blaise opened his mouth, but Astoria's hand shot up to silence him.

"I won't hear any more of this," Astoria scolded. "I need to do this. For Daphne." She bent down to pick the gold clutch up off the floor, but another feminine hand beat her to it.

They chinked their glasses together and downed their drinks, and when a server carrying a tray of full flutes passed them, Theo snatched two and handed one to his sister-in-law.

Blaise joined them shortly afterwards - his meeting with the Dark Lord had caused him to run slightly late - and the three of them found a table while they waited for the liquor to affect the other guests so they could set their plan in motion.

“What do you think Hermione and Draco are doing?” Astoria asked somewhere around ten o’clock.

“Either avoiding each other,” Blaise guessed, one arm draped around his wife’s shoulder while the other swirled the glass of whiskey in his hand. “Fighting. Or fucking.”

“I bet ten galleons on the latter,” Astoria said.

“Pffft, not a chance,” Theo matched. “I’ll bet you twenty that there’s at least one room on fire when we return?”

Astoria smirked and nodded as she took another sip of champagne.

At around eleven-thirty, they decided that the other guests were drunk enough. Astoria led the way, as expected, and dragged the men into the crowd.

In another life, Tori could have been an actress. It was remarkable, the way she could smile with ease and flatter people she’d rather see dead.

Theo had always thought that the Greengrass sisters were like snake charmers. They were beautiful and alluring, but they just seemed to have a way with people that couldn’t be explained. It was magic. A person only had to look at one of them to be enchanted, and once under their spell, people hung off every word they said, were almost hypnotised by their warm smiles and soft laughter.

It was a mesmerising thing to witness.

When Astoria complimented Rookwood’s dress robes, he blushed so hard he had to excuse himself. When she laughed at one of Rodolphus Lestrange’s jokes, he smiled wide enough that it almost cracked his face. And when she told Yaxley she thought he’d gained some muscle, well, the slimy old bastard almost came right then and there.

The crowd were putty in Astoria’s hands, they always were - it was the reason Medusa had been such a success for all these years, and it was the reason why, as

Narcissa was being used as a surprise tactic, so after Malfoy had found a place to hide her in Bradford - and put Hermione under the Demon Hex and Apparated her to the rendezvous point where Theo and the Death Eaters were waiting - he’d gone into hiding with his dragon. Biding his time.

The battle had been going well for the Order to begin with. They’d brought in tanks and helicopters, and they’d made short work of most of the Black Masks Voldemort had sent, but as soon as Malfoy and Narcissa had soared onto the field, the Order’s chances were slashed to nothing. The moment the Order soldiers had heard that ominous clapping of reptilian wings and seen the demonic horned rider sitting between her shoulders, they’d started to panic. Some of them had even apparated away, too scared to risk being on the same battlefield as a dragon and a demon.

Malfoy and Narcissa were extremely dangerous individually but together, they were unstoppable.

Narcissa knocked helicopters out of the sky with ease and melted tanks with a single breath while he slaughtered soldiers and collapsed buildings with a wave of his wand.

Their fighting technique was flawless. Each time Narcissa passed over the battlefield, she would dip low, low enough that her enormous body eclipsed the sunlight and cast a black shadow on the floor, and release a flaming breath, and while she burned everything in her path, Malfoy would cast curse after curse and butcher any soldiers lucky enough to escape her fire. No offensive spells could touch either of them. Every time someone cast a curse - aiming for Malfoy - Narcissa would twist her body to protect him and the curse would bounce right off her thick scales. Whenever tanks aimed at her, Malfoy would use magic to flip the tank or redirect the shell as it left the chamber, killing more of the Order’s soldiers instead.

As per Hermione’s suggestion, the muggles had altered the machinery so that they could be operated remotely, meaning that no lives were lost when Narcissa blew them to bits. Hermione secretly thanked her lucky stars that they still trusted her enough to listen.

Two hours into the attack, Bradford was in ruins. Visibility was low. Thick, black smoke rose into the air from fires on the ground and cars, probably abandoned years ago, lay over-turned or on fire from the battle. The air was uncomfortably hot from the fires. Buildings lay broken and shattered glass covered the floor. There were flames everywhere. Screams everywhere. Disfigured corpses and body parts sprayed up the pavement and blood ran down the streets.

As Hermione bore down and crunched the throat of a soldier under her boot, the Demon Hex delighted in his screams. When she began casting a slicing curse down his right arm, tearing flesh apart and crushing bone as she went, the dark curse practically purred with satisfaction.

And although Hermione couldn't see Theo, she could *hear* him.

"Just killed another one! I'm on a roll today!" he called through the chaos, his voice light and joyous, like a child at a fairground while a chorus of soldiers screaming and begging for their lives echoed around him. "Come on Granger, you better get to work if you wanna catch up sweetheart."

The Order was not a fan of Theodore, Kingsley had been *very* explicit about that. If Malfoy hadn't have been so firm on the matter, he never would have received a conditional pardon in the first place. And despite the negotiations and pleas, Theo refused to give up his favourite hobby. He still killed without mercy. Still slaughtered whoever he wanted to whenever he felt like it. Kingsley had tried to convince him to kill more humanely, to kill in a way that would cause the least amount of pain, but as suspected, Theo didn't listen. He didn't want to. It was too fun for him give up.

A spark of familiar green light flashed behind the wall of smoke to Hermione's left. Theo's silhouette was illuminated for a moment in the light of the killing curse he'd just cast, and the smoke cleared slightly as the body of an Order soldier fell to the floor.

*Mammata! Just killed a man!*" Theo sang, his silhouette dancing - and becoming clearer through the fog - as he celebrated his kill. "*Put a gun against his head, pulled my trigger now he's dead.*"

The Hex finally allowed Hermione to slit the soldier's throat and end his suffering. As his agonised screams abruptly cut off and she diverted her attention to another victim, another soldier began to advance on Theo.

The muggle probably thought he was distracted. Too busy singing and dancing to notice the red dot from her assault rifle hovering over his chest, right over where his heart used to be.

But Theo was never distracted when it came to his bloodlust. It always bubbled just below the surface, especially when he was in a good mood. He whirled around, still dancing, spinning on the tips of his toes until he faced the soldier.

She went to pull the trigger and end his life, but Theo cast a Stupefy powerful enough to send her flying into the air. She landed flat on her back, and as she fought

"There you go," she said when she was finished, stepping back to appraise her work. "Now you look perfect. And so handsome I could eat you."

She smiled sweetly up at him, but when she noticed that he wasn't really paying attention to her, her eyes followed his, and her smile dropped when she realised what he was looking at.

"I can't believe he's here," Astoria whispered, a disgusted edge creeping into her usually soft voice.

"I should rip his fucking spine out," Theo hissed under his breath as red started to colour his vision. It was all wrong. Grouch shouldn't be here. He shouldn't even be *breathing* after what he'd done to Daph.

"No," Astoria said. "As entertaining as that would be, you shouldn't. The time isn't right yet."

"He's the reason Daph's dead. The time was right the moment he dobbed her in with the Dark Lord."

"I know," Astoria hushed. "No one hates him as much as I do, but it's always been risky to go after Grouch. We're the only ones who have a grudge against him. If he dies under suspicious circumstances, who do you think are the first people the inner circle will point their fingers at?"

The two of them, that was the honest truth. Besides the Order, the only people with a reason to want Grouch dead were the two of them. Everyone within the Dark Lord's ranks loved Crouch. He was a war hero. The only wizard brave and clever enough to aid the Dark Lord back into power all those years ago. The inner-circle respected him and the soldiers loved his dolls.

No, Theo knew he couldn't touch Grouch yet. Didn't mean he hated it any less. Astoria stood at his side and squeezed his hand encouragingly. "He'll get what's coming to him," she said quietly. "We'll make sure of it but for now, there's nothing we can do."

"As long as I get to kill him eventually," Theo murmured as he took a sip of champagne. "That's all that matters."

"Of course." Astoria smiled and raised her glass to him. "To the evening going as smoothly as possible, and eventually," her voice dropped to a whisper, "*you killing that sick bastard over there.*"

Theo's lips twitched into a smirk. "Now there's a toast I can get behind."

Most of the Death Eaters used these gala's to show off. Flaunt the riches and rewards they'd earned from their master to prove that they were, in fact, Voldemort's favourite.

It was all sick. Sick. Sick. Sick.

Theo's hands tightened around the champagne flute in his hand as he spied Party Crouch Jr across the dancefloor.

As usual, Grouch was slithering between Death Eaters with a doll on his arm. The blonde with him tonight had sad eyes and a tiny frame he'd wrapped in a silver dress that looked two sizes too small for her. She kept her eyes down as Grouch dragged her alongside him, parading her round like a little show dog and angling her body so everyone could get a good look at her.

Theo would have loved nothing more than to snatch that glass of wine out of Grouch's hand, smash it against the wall and drive the broken pieces into his slimy neck -

"Honestly Theodore," Astoria sighed, pulling him out of his violent - and quite frankly delightful - daydream, "were you raised in a barn?" She tutted as she began adjusting the bowtie around his neck. "This is crooked and don't even get me started on your collar."

"I combed my hair back for this," Theo bit before he could stop himself. Astoria didn't flinch at the snarl in his voice. She was attuned to his behaviour after all these years, no matter how volatile he could be. "And I put on a bloody tie, what more do you want from me woman?"

Even though Astoria had picked out Blaise and Theo's outfits for the event - black three-piece suits with gold waistcoats that matched the accents on her yellow gown - apparently the way he'd put said suit together wasn't up to par with her vision.

Astoria gasped sarcastically. "Oh my, *you put on a dicky bow?* And you combed back your hair *all by yourself? Someone alert Rita Skeeter!* You poor little muffin, you must be exhausted!" With his bowtie tightened, she set about fixing whatever he'd done wrong with his collar. "Want to talk about effort? My dress is so tight I can't breathe properly, and my heels are so high my toes are numb. But beauty is pain my dear, so shut up moaning and hold my glass so I can fix you."

Theo's eyes drifted back to Grouch as Astoria adjusted his suit jacket and waistcoat to her liking.

for breath and fumbled with her gun, Theo switched songs and danced his way towards her, hips swaying and fingers clicking to the beat in his head.

*"When I was just a baby,"* Theo sang as he circled around her. "*My mama told me, son.*" He waved his wand once to rip the large gun out of the soldiers hand. It levitated above her as Theo continued, *"Always be a good boy.*" Another flick of his wrist made the gun twist above the soldier, swivelling until the red dot that was previously hovering over Theo's heart was aimed between her eyes. *"Don't ever play with guns."*

"Oh God, no, please!" the soldier screamed.

"But I shot a man in Reno. Just to watch him die."

"No! Don't!" Her hands shot up to cover her face to protect herself, but it was too late. As Theo flicked his wand a final time, the trigger was pulled by an invisible force, and the soldiers head exploded grotesquely as the bullet left the chamber.

*"And when I hear that whistle blowin,'"* Theo spun on his heels again and did a little dramatic bow to Hermione, *"I hang my head and cry."*

A wave of fire suddenly exploded on the ground near Theo and disintegrated two muggle soldiers that had been silently stalking towards him and Hermione.

"Bloody hell, Malfoy!" Theo shouted towards the sky. "Watch where you're bloody flying that thing! You almost got me!"

Narcissa roared loudly as she soared over their heads, and the strong undertow from her wings distorted the smoke and almost knocked Theo off his feet.

As the battle dragged on and the strings of the Demon Hex pulled Hermione to kill and kill and kill, she tried to keep her mind away from what she was doing, who she was killing, and tried to comfort herself with the good this mission was going to achieve.

The Order soldiers - although the majority had been murdered - had managed to kill at least thirty of the forty Death Eaters that had accompanied her on this mission. It might have been a small dent to Voldemort's army, but it was still a dent, nonetheless.

The evacuation was almost complete. Hermione could see less and less soldiers fleeing from the Order's barracks with medical supplies and guns. And today was the 4th of the month, and the bell tower - the one less than a few feet away and built around Bradford City Hall - was still intact and standing tall.

Perhaps her paranoia about Blaise's vision had been misplaced. She'd never put much stock into visions before. Used to go out of her way to tell Harry and Ron what a crock of shit she thought Trelawney's prophecies and her classes were, so why was she worrying so much about one now?

Yes, it had felt real. Yes, she'd felt every death Voldemort had shown her, and her own had felt frighteningly real but logically, if she thought about it, that could have had more to do with his presence in her mind than the vision itself. He could have been using his dark magic to trick her, create the illusions of pain in her mind to scare her into submission.

Perhaps Malfoy was right. Maybe she'd panicked about the vision too much, worried herself silly with nightmares and -

Something hot hit the left side of Hermione's rib cage. A Knockback Jinx - she guessed - had just hit her. The attack wasn't lethal but it was strong. She was sure something was bruised, possibly bleeding beneath her Death Eater robes.

"Stay down, Hermione," said her attacker as he closed in on her.

She almost didn't recognise Zacharias Smith. His dark blonde curls and face were drenched in blood, and his cool green eyes watched her carefully as she touched her injury, feeling it sting and ache already.

"I don't want to hurt you, but if you carry on attacking Order members then I will." It wasn't an idle threat. They hadn't exactly been friends before her capture, but she knew he had a kind heart. He was strong and athletic, but he never wanted to fight anyone unless he absolutely had to - which had always puzzled Hermione as to why he'd found a best friend in the brute that was Cormac McLaggen.

Hermione had always gotten along with Smith on the battlefield.

He was a perfect soldier, always followed whatever instructions Hermione gave him. He didn't like it, but he'd kill if he needed to. No questions asked.

The Demon Hex, however, didn't share his kind heart. It pulled the strings and demanded Hermione to jut her arm out and cast a violent green curse at him.

Smith deflected it with a flick of his wrist. "Last warning Hermione. *Stay down.*"

Hermione cut her arm to the left and the torrent of an overturned tank shot towards him. She'd intended to smash it into the side of Smith's body, but he ducked just in time to avoid it.

Whether it meant four people, four deaths, or the 4th day of the month - the number four had to mean something. She just had no idea what.

Malfoy pulled the cigarette out of her mouth rather roughly. "That vision is not going to come true," he snapped before he took a deep drag. "I won't let it."

"Yes, you would." Hermione turned just enough to watch him out the corner of her eye. "If the lives of your family were on the line, you would kill me in a heartbeat to save them."

Malfoy eyes flickered, turning just a tiny bit bluer.

"And if you did anything that would threaten the Order," Hermione continued, her lips twitching a little at the corners, "I wouldn't hesitate to kill you either."

He smiled - just a bit. Just enough to show her little dimples on the side of his face. He pulled the cigarette out of his mouth and offered it to her. "Then I suppose it's a good thing we're on the same side for now."

Hermione matched his smile as he slipped the butt between her lips again. "Yes - for now."

The air in the ballroom was heavy with perfumes and flowers, the smell so thick and enhanced with magic it made Theo's nose burn.

A jazz band were tucked into the corner of the room, quietly playing a tune he didn't recognise to create a gentle - and elegant, if you liked that sort of thing - sort of ambiance. The white walls were draped in gold and cream sashes, thousands of white roses spilt out of their gold vases and sprayed up the walls like bizarre pieces of art, and great big massive gold chandeliers hung from the ceiling, charmed to twirl in the air and cast little rainbows on the floor.

The Carrow's had really gone all out for this gala.

Theo hated these types of things. Honestly fucking despised them. He didn't see the point in putting on suits with collars so tight they cut into his neck and making idle chit chat with wizards he despised.

Most of the people in this room had cheered when his wife was executed. They'd boo'ed when she'd fought back and cheered when she'd screamed in pain, and yet here they were wanting to shake his hand and make small talk about the fucking weather and the strength of the galleon.

"Nothing," He leaned forward and gently pulled the cigarette from her mouth to take a long, deep drag of his own. "Are you nervous about tomorrow?"

Voldemort had sanctioned a raid. His best generals were to launch a brutal attack on a town the Order were using to restock magical weapons. Hermione was to be utilised – like normal – and be put under the Demon Hex for the first time in weeks.

"Yes," she replied.

"I wouldn't be taking you on this raid if I could help it," he said, fanning a thick wave of smoke out his mouth. Hermione couldn't help but lean in. He turned the cigarette over and slipped it back between her lips.

"I know that -but we don't really have an option, do we?"

Normalcy was the double-edged sword of their betrayal. It'd help the Order exponentially, but was going to tear Hermione's heart to pieces.

Again, it really was for the best. Even the Order agreed - although reluctantly at first. Only ten of them knew who had betrayed Voldemort to make sure no one would pull their punches on the battlefield. Which meant only ten of them knew she didn't really have a choice in any of this... Hermione didn't know if that made her feel better or worse.

"The raid tomorrow," Hermione whispered. "It's in Bradford."

"It is. Your point being?"

"There's a bell tower there." She paused to take a drag. "At Bradford city hall."

"And?"

"And tomorrow is the 4th of July."

There was a moment of tense silence before Malfoy asked, "Are you worried about Blaicc's vision?"

Hermione didn't respond. She concentrated on the stem of the flower she was painting and the cigarette in her mouth.

Of course she was worried. That vision had been playing on a constant loop in her head since Voldemort had shown it to her. The images were burned into her mind whether she liked them or not. Buildings exploding. A church on fire. A bridge collapsing into a frozen lake. A bell tower crumbling. And the number four. Four. Four. *Bloody four*, over and over again.

Smith was true to his word. He gave no more warnings. As soon as he regained his balance, he went on the offensive. But for every hex he cast, Hermione threw two.

Smith was tall and broad, physically strong but light on his feet. He'd always been an excellent duelist, one of the best soldiers the Order had, and he blocked Hermione's attacks as quickly as she could cast them.

Hermione heard Narcissa roar menacingly overhead, and while Zacharias's eyes flickered up towards the sound, she tried to explode his head with a Bombarda. He deflected it.

She threw a strong Avada at him, but he sidestepped it and retaliated with a jinx that caught her right shoulder. Again, it wasn't fatal, but it knocked the bone out of its joint, leaving it limp and useless at her sides, making her vulnerable.

Smith was able to dodge or counteract every spell Hermione cast, and the Demon Hex was growing frustrated.

Hermione's irritation began to affect her aim. She started throwing curses faster, stronger, but nothing hit. And there was something else. Something coming from Malfoy's wand.

Was that, resistance, she felt? It'd never done that before. It had always listened to her, in many ways – although she tried not to think about what it might mean - it felt right to have it in her hand. His wand was as well suited to her as her own was.

But now, as she cast killing curse after killing curse, it felt like it was resisting her. Almost ... fighting back.

A slicing curse tore into Hermione's hip. The curse was strong enough to knock her into an abandoned car behind her and pop the glass out the windscreen. She felt her bone crunch and blood pool in her uniform. She screamed in pain and dropped to her knees.

Narcissa roared again. It sounded like she was getting closer.

Grinding her teeth through the pain, Hermione cast a slicing hex. It hit Smith in the leg, but it wasn't as strong as she'd intended, the blood she'd lost - and likely Malfoy's wand - weakened the curse so it only gave Smith a limp rather than cut his leg clean off like the Demon Hex had wanted it to.

The Hex was screaming at her to move, to get up and rip Zacharias apart for daring to attack her, but she could hardly sit upright. She was losing too much blood too quickly -

The pain was almost unbearable. Her arm shook as she tried to heal herself, but she collapsed onto her back before she could seal the wound. She screamed and clutched her injury, trying to stop from bleeding out -

She tried to breathe through agony that was swallowing her body, but then, just as Smith stood over her, she felt something else.

The Demon Hex was receding.

She didn't know how but for the second time, she'd broken out of the Hex.

It wasn't slow and painful like last time. She didn't feel the claws of the Hex as it fought to stay in control.

It was gone instantly. Like blackout blinds being yanked up and flooding a dark room with blinding sunlight. The suddenness of it took Hermione's breath away. She gasped and sat up sharply, the pain in her hip and shoulder almost completely forgotten - for a moment.

"Hermione," Smith said, sounding a little startled. "Your eyes ... they're normal again. Does that mean..."

"What?" Hermione caught her reflection in the pieces of broken windshield on the floor.

Her eyes were completely black whenever she was under the Demon Hex, as though her pupils had bled out and overtook the entire surface. Her skin was a shade paler and it brought a horrendous gauntness to her features.

Her eyes were normal now. Brown and rich. There was a flush to her skin and roundness to her cheeks.

She didn't know how but she'd done it. She'd broken out of the Hex.

"It's me," Hermione said as she looked back up at Smith, sure to keep her voice even and her movements slow as not to startle him. "But you need to go -"

Smith blinked in astonishment. His mouth fell open like he didn't know what to do. "Hermione ... I'm sorry," he said, eyes widening at the pool of blood at her side. "I didn't -"

"It doesn't matter," she interrupted. "You need to go, now, before -"

She picked up her brush and started mixing colours together again, working to create a soft pink for the flowers petals.

When she added a little more white to the mixture, Malfoy hadn't left.

When she swirled the paints together, still nothing. She heard footsteps as she began to drag the brush along the wall - but he wasn't sitting in but to her surprise, he sank to the floor and sat cross legged beside her. Rather close too. His knees almost brushed against hers as he made himself comfortable.

Apparently he didn't want to be alone tonight. And neither did she.

They stayed like that in silence for some time; Hermione painting and Malfoy just watching. Occasionally he would wordlessly hand her the tube of paint she was reaching for, or hold the wooden palette out in front of him so she could mix more colours together. It took him a good long while but eventually, he started to relax.

"My packet of cigarettes is over there," Hermione said, jutting her chin toward her vanity table. "Would you mind getting them for me?"

That'd been another term Hermione had later added onto her ever-growing list of demands for helping Malfoy; a packet of cigarette's every few days. He didn't seem to mind getting them for her, but Astoria wholly disapproved of the habit.

"Don't your legs work?"  
Hermione almost smiled. "Obviously they do, but I'm filthy," she said, holding her paint covered hands up to him. "So do me a favour."

Malfoy looked at the box on her table, but instead of getting up, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a packer of his own. She watched his long fingers take one out before he turned it over and held the bud over her mouth. "Open up, cub."

Hermione's pulse jumped at the promise in his words. As she silently obeyed, he gently placed the tip between her lips, and held her stare as he lit the end with the tip of his wand.

Hermine closed her eyes as she took the first drag. Even moaned quietly as the nicotine filled her lungs. When she opened them again, she found Malfoy watching her closely. "What?" she asked, suddenly a little self-conscious.

On the surface, he looked completely relaxed - but there was one flaw in his perfect poker face.

Hermione glanced down to catch him fidgeting with the ring on his pinkie finger, anxiously using his thumb to twist it from one direction to the other. He might've been all jokes and cocky bravado tonight, but he was just as nervous as she was.

Not that she blamed him.

Astoria had been invited to another Gala. She was using it as an excuse to frame their first target, Scabior - and Hermione and Malfoy had been forced to stay behind.

It was the right strategy really. Everyone agreed that Malfoy shouldn't go. The plan depended on normalcy. They needed to pretend that everything was as it always had been and that nothing had changed.

Malfoy had never attended one of Voldemort's galas before so it'd only draw attention if he suddenly began going now, and invite questions and watchful eyes at a time the group really needed to stay unnoticed.

Because Blaise and Theo had gone to the odd gala over the years - Blaise to accompany his wife and Theo to, well, raid the complementary free bar - they'd escorted Hermione just in case anything did go wrong. Their really was nothing to worry about with the two of them acting as her bodyguards, but Hermione still felt ... off.

And one look at Malfoy told her he felt the same.

"Are you alright?" she asked him without really thinking.

Malfoy scoffed and narrowed his eyes at her. "What kind of stupid question is that? Of course I'm alright. Why wouldn't I be?"

"It's okay to admit that you're worried about them." She put her paintbrush on the mixing board and swivelled to face him. "I'm worried too..."

"I'm not worried."

"Do you want to help me paint? It might ease your nerves."

"I don't have nerves."

"Alright." Hermione held her hands up in surrender, and sensing that Malfoy was far more comfortable keeping his walls up for the moment, she turned back to her mural. "But if you do want to talk about it, you know where I am."

"Look at the Mudblood's eyes!" one of the Death Eaters sneered, stopping his duel to point at Hermione from a few feet away.

The two Black Masks closest to him finished their kills and turned to stare.

"She's broken out the Demon Hex!" one of them hissed.

"The Dark Lord needs her! She cannot get away!" Another drew his wand.

"Restrain her!"

Before Hermione could react, one of the Black Masks cast a wordless hex and thick chains exploded from his wand. The spell hit her dead on, and threw her onto the floor as the rough chains pinned her arms tightly to her sides and bound her legs together.

Smith reached for her - presumably to help - but was forced to step back when one of the Death Eaters shot a curse at him.

As Hermione fought against the chains, three Black Masks surrounded her. Even if she hadn't been trapped, she wouldn't have been able to get away.

"We can't transport her while she's struggling like this!" one of them hissed. "This ought to quieten you down!" He jabbed the edge of his wand between her temples. He muttered something Hermione couldn't hear, and a powerful wave of magic surged forward and smacked her head against the hard floor beneath her.

Hermione felt dizzy. A ringing formed in her ears as the back of her head throbbed with pain. The masks above her head became blurred, became nine rather than three.

She thought she heard Narcissa roar. Thought she felt the ground shudder and wall of heat surround her.

Before she passed out, Hermione thought he saw several things.

She saw the enormous blurred jaws of a black dragon lock around the upper body of one of the Death Eaters and hoist him off the ground. Heard his wails of agony as he was torn apart and heard a dull thump as his severed lower torso flopped onto the ground.

As the remaining Black Masks tried to flee, she saw another Death Eater - one with two horns protruding from his mask - cast a slicing curse that was so powerful, so fucking angry, that it tore through the bodies of the Black Masks like a knife through butter. The violent streak of silver light kept going. It soared through the

air until it slammed into Bradford City Hall with such a force it smashed through the brick foundation.

She saw Narcissa rear her head back and breathe an explosive wall of fire that burned Zacharias Smith to ash.

And then she saw the bell tower wobble for a moment before it fell and shattered on the floor, and destroyed half of Bradford city hall with it.

When Hermione woke, she was in her bedroom in Malfoy Manor. And she was alone.

She sprang to her feet with a sharp gasp and started to panic. The raid had taken place at mid-day, but it was pitch black outside. She must have been asleep for hours. She was still wearing her Death Eater uniform but it was free of the blood and ash that'd been on there before. She could move her shoulder again, and when she gingerly pressed her hand against her hip, she found no pain, not even the slightest bit of discomfort.

Someone had healed and cleaned her.

"If you know what's good for you," a dark, cold voice sneered from somewhere in the darkness, "then I suggest you lie back down and rest."

"Malfoy," Hermione whispered. She tried to squint into the darkness but she couldn't find him. "What happened..."

"I won't tell you again," he seethed again. His voice was full of anger. "For once in your life, do as you're fucking told, *and lie down!*"

Hermione heard five of his footsteps before she saw him. He strode into the moonlight streaking in through her bedroom window. He was still wearing his Death Eater robes but unlike hers, his weren't clean. There was a deep slash across his right cheek, the whites of one of his eyes was punctured and full of blood, and the right side of his jaw looked as though there was a bruise forming.

There was blood drying on his knuckles. Hermione didn't know if it was his or someone else's.

"How long have I been out?" she demanded, completely ignoring his instructions. "Where have you been? What happened?"

Malfoy's eyes burned with anger. "I've been at Scabior's execution," he snarled as he stopped in front of her. He smelled like cigarette smoke and blood.

"Too anxious to sit still," Hermione mumbled without turning around. She was sat cross legged on the floor, her back to Malfoy as she focused on the task in front of her. "Thought I'd work on her mural instead."

Malfoy scoffed quietly in the doorway. "Mmm, I can see that. And you thought you'd channel that nervous energy by painting ... What is that supposed to be? An inside out umbrella?"

"It's the outline of a flower."

"That's a very strange looking flower, *Granger*."

"It's a Squill, *Malfoy*," she chided back, the sarcasm in her tone a perfect mirror of his. "That's the shape they take when they bloom."

"Looks crooked to me."

"That's because it's not finished yet."

"You look a right mess. Wasn't that dress white this morning?" She assumed he eyed the paint covered shirt dress she was wearing, but didn't turn around to check. "How have you managed to get more paint on your clothes than on the wall?"

"Oh please, please fuck off Malfoy."

"And there's a massive streak of it in your hair."

"If you only came here to criticise me you'd better piss off right now, or else..."

"Or else what?" There was a teasing lilt in his voice, but Hermione wasn't in the mood. "What are you going to do to me?"

"I'll Bombarda your ribcage wide open," Hermione warned, her attention still on the mural, willing the picture she had in her mind to take shape on the wall.

"Oh come on, you can do better than that."

"I know how to cast wordless Avada's. You'd never hear your death coming" "Hmmm. Not very creative."

"Drop it, Malfoy," Hermione sighed. "I'm not in the mood tonight." She turned slightly so she could study him out the corner of her eye.

He was leaning casually in the doorway in his usual attire; black trousers and a white button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up. His eyes were an mixture of grey and blue.

- in a message relayed through Ginny - that there would be no pardon for Theo, Blaise or even Astoria, until Malfoy had proven his loyalty.

And how exactly did Kingsley want him to prove himself?

By giving the Order a fucking Horcrux.

The problem was that since the Diadem had been destroyed, Voldemort had increased security around the remaining Horcruxes.

Only Bellatrix and Voldemort knew where Nagini was being kept, and the eighth Horcrux he'd created - a gold medallion - was moved every few weeks and its care entrusted to a different Death Eater in random order. It would be very tricky to get their hands on the medallion. Getting it to the Order would undoubtedly reveal their betrayal, so they needed to take care of his army first.

Voldemort's demise couldn't happen overnight, both sides seemed to be in agreement of that, at least. So to ensure they didn't make any mistakes, it was decided that they would take it slow. Deathly slow, as it were.

For the next twelve months, the Death Eaters would whittle down Voldemort's army from within - by continuing to leak secrets and frame specific members of the inner circle - and while Voldemort was distracted executing the traitors, Malfoy would get the Order the medallion and find out where Nagini was being kept.

After the terms were reached, Theo, Blaise and Astoria seemed very hopeful. They popped open a bottle of champagne and toasted to their success. Astoria even started planning a victory party for when Voldemort was finally dead and buried, but, like Hermione, Malfoy was quiet the entire evening.

And Hermione wondered, as she watched him from across the sitting room and sipped on her celebratory champagne, if he was thinking about the same thing she was.

Kingsley had chosen his words very, very specifically. If Voldemort was defeated, he'd agreed to pardon Malfoy's family<sup>7</sup> for any and all war crimes that they'd committed or witnessed.

But he never said that pardon extended to Malfoy himself.

"Of all the places I thought I'd find you tonight, Astoria and Blaise's bedroom was not at the top of my list."

The beginnings of rage licked at Hermione's pulse. "Don't say it was for me. Don't you *dare* say that it was for me."

3rd July

Hermione's entire body froze. "You framed him already? I thought we were going to wait a few days before we pinned the leak on him?"

"After the fucking disaster that was today's mission, it couldn't wait. Scabior had to go."

"What did you say to Voldemort? Tell me exactly what happened."

"I told Voldemort I had reason to believe that Scabior was the spy, and the evidence against him was substantial." Malfoy's voice was cold and unfeeling and not nearly as elated as she'd expected it to be. "Yaxley found letters at his house; pieces of parchment signed by Potter to arrange meetings, a chest full of Deluminators, and a letter promising him a full pardon upon Voldemort's defeat. He didn't need much else to be convinced that Scabior was the spy. He had a noose conjured for him before he could protest his innocence."

Malfoy started to advance, and the way he was looking at her, the way his eyes burned like hellfire made Hermione's pulse quicken. He was angry, absolutely fucking murderous, and by the looks of it, she was the gasoline that had started that fire.

"What happened to your face?" she asked as she stepped back.

"Scabior put up a bit of a struggle before his execution, but that's not my concern right now."

Out the corner of her eye, Hermione saw her wand on the edge of the bed. She felt much safer once she knew it was within reach. She stopped retreating and raised her chin so she could look him in the eyes. "The other Death Eaters from today's mission - they're dead, aren't they?"

"Yes," he answered. No emotion. No remorse.

"All of them?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

He had the audacity to cock a brow. "I think you know why."

Malfoy cocked his head to the side and leaned in a fraction closer. "Who else would it be for if it wasn't for you?" Despite the softness of his words, there was no

affection in his voice. No gentleness. Just rage. So much fucking rage it practically radiated around him like a second skin. Armour of a different kind.

"This isn't what I wanted!" Hermione shook her head. "You shouldn't have killed those Black Masks. If Voldemort finds out..."

"He's not going to find out because I killed everyone that saw me." Malfoy sighed, pinched the bridge of his nose and squeezed his eyes closed. "Do you have any idea the risk I put us in today? The risk I put all of us in, because of you?"

Any concern Hermione felt for Malfoy's wellbeing vanished. Anger prickled across her chest. Her fists clenched with the impulse to hit something. How fucking *dare* he after what he'd done today?

"How is any of this my fault?" Hermione shouted as she scowled up at him, mirroring his rage. "I wasn't the one who went off plan and slaughtered people for no reason!"

"It's your fault because when I saw what Zacharias Smith had done to you, when I saw what those Black Masks were doing to you, nothing else mattered to me! Do you hear me? *Nothing Else Matters!*" He stepped closer and glared down at her, all teeth and anger. "I didn't care about helping the Order or avenging Daphne anymore! I didn't care if my cover would be blown or what might happen to me if I were discovered! All I could think about was killing them! Killing all of them! Killing everyone who'd ever even thought about hurting you!"

Hermione gasped before she could stop herself.

"I killed them for *you!* To protect you! And I couldn't stop at just them! There couldn't be any witnesses! If the ones that hurt you had to die, then they all did!"

"But you weren't protecting me! If anything you've just condemned me to death!"

Hermione argued. "Don't you see what you've done? You destroyed the bell tower..."

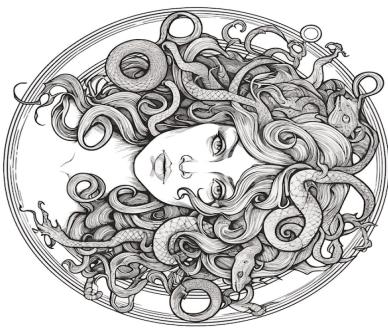
#### **29th June**

"I wouldn't have had to destroy it if those fucking Black Masks hadn't been standing in front of it!"

"That doesn't matter! You hit it with a slicing curse and made it crash to the ground, just like in Blaise's vision! It fell because of you!"

"Oh for Merlin's sake, are you still going on about that bloody vision? It's not going to happen!"

## **MUSTANGS AND CHAMPAGNE FLUTES**



## **CHAPTER 41**

To Hermione's surprise, negotiations with the Order didn't completely break down after that first meeting. After a two-day silence, Medusa received an invitation for a second meeting, and after another – even tenser – discussion at East Midlands airport, an agreement was reached. Sort of.

The key to the plan was Malfoy, and although the searches through Hermione's memories had proven that his betrayal was genuine, the Order wanted something more definitive before they would trust him completely. Kingsley had made it clear

She watched him thrust in deep. Hermione moaned and her back arched off the bed.

"-anymore?"

Her eyelids started to flutter. The band in her stomach stretched tighter -

Suddenly, Malfoy hissed and dropped his head into her neck.

After all these months together, she knew his voice almost as well as she knew his body. Knew which groans meant he was close to coming, and which hitches in his breath meant that she'd done something he liked, but that sound, that sharp hiss that he always tried to cover up by hiding in the crook of her neck, she knew what that meant too.

His forearm was burning. Voldemort was calling him, and he was refusing to go. Again.

"You need to go," Hermione whimpered, even as she raked her nails down his arms and snaked them around his back, digging into his muscles as they rippled and tensed every time he slid in and out of her. "He's expecting you."

"He's not calling me."

"Yes, he is. You need to go. You can't -oh God - you can't keep him waiting."

"Yes, I can," he groaned when she licked up the side of his neck. "He's had my loyal, unwavering service for ten fucking years; he can wait another fifteen minutes until I've finished with you."

He'd done this before. Told her that this was more important, that being inside her was more -

Knock, knock, knock, knock.

At the sound of someone at her door, Hermione jumped. She tried to wiggle out of Malfoy's hold, to cover herself, but Malfoy's fingers just tightened in her hair, held her still as he filled her with his cock over and over again. Undeterred by their intruder.

"Granger," Theo called from the other side. "Be a good lass and tell Malfoy to get his pale arse in his uniform. The Dark Lord is calling us."

Hermione pushed Malfoy from her neck and glared up at him. He shook his head, an impish grin stretching across his face as he sank into her again. Slow and deep. Sinfully slow. Heavenly deep.

His intentions were clear, despite his friend being outside, despite his forearm burning and his master calling him, he had no intention of stopping what they were doing.

"You need to go," she told him.

"No," he whispered back. "What I *need* to do is fuck you. Lie to Theo, make him leave. I'm not done with you yet"

"Malfoy's not h-*fuck*." She bit her lip to stifle a moan when one of his hands trailed from her hair, down her stomach, all the way down her body to play with her clit. "Malfoy's not here."

The other side of her door was deadly silent, but just as Hermione thought her prayers had been answered and he'd left, Theo snapped, "I know you're in there Malfoy! He's calling us, and you know boldie Voldie doesn't like to be kept waiting! Hurry up!"

She began to tremble when he started peppering kisses and bites across the side of her neck and face.

"Come on Malfoy!" Theo shouted. "We need to *goooooood!*"

"Don't listen to him," Malfoy said against her throat. "Focus on me. On *this*. On what I'm doing to you."

"I'm seriously not leaving!"

"Fuck off Theodore!" Malfoy bit, voice sharp as an axe but lips gentle as he kissed Hermione's throat.

"Mate, do you really think you can slag while I'm outside?" Theo asked, and Hermione could hear the smile in his voice; the kind he only had when he was brutally murdering someone or causing mischief. "I can be awfully loud when I want to be."

Hermione felt her legs start to shake. Felt her cunt start to contract -

"Fuck, not yet, Granger." Malfoy slowed his pace. He gained more control of his thrusts, but started to slide *deeper* - if that was even possible. "Just hold on a little longer for me. Can you do that?"

Hermione squeezed her eyes closed and nodded. She dug her hands into his shoulders and bore down, needing to hold onto something to distract herself.

"Good girl." He leaned down and kissed her slowly, lazily, drunk on pleasure. "That's it, hold it back for me. Just a few more minutes. Such a good girl!"

"Maaaalfoooooy!" Theo sang. "I feel a song coming on!"

"I'm going to kill him." Malfoy's pace didn't falter, but his words came out as an angry snarl. "I'm going to rip his fucking vocal cords out and strangle him with them so he can never, ever interrupt us again."

"He's.. he's not going to go away. Maybe we should stop."

"You sure you want to stop?" he teased, smiling against her lips. Clearly a rhetorical question.

She couldn't hold it back much longer. She was so close. Her chest heaved and she grit her teeth as that burning pressure built and built. The band was going to snap. Just a few more seconds. Just a few more strokes of his cock and that would be it -

But then it started.

Theodore Nott, on the other side of her bedroom door, singing a fucking Queen song while his best friend's cock was buried inside her.

"I want to break free!"

Malfoy stilled.

"I want to break free! I want to break from your lies - yeah, your fucking lies, Malfoy! You're so self-satisfied, I don't neeeeeed you!"

Although Theo had a lovely singing voice - that certainly sounded a lot better when he wasn't using it to celebrate his slaughter - it was the absolute last thing Hermione wanted to hear at that moment, and the orgasm she'd been so desperately reaching for vanished in a puff of smoke.

"I've got to break free! God knows I've got to break freeee!"

Hermione cursed towards the ceiling as Malfoy tore himself from her body and summoned his shredded Death Eater robes from across the room.

"I've fallen in love! I've fallen in love for the first time, this time I know it's for real! I've fallen in love!"

She'd never seen Malfoy dress so quickly. Despite the quick charm he'd cast to repair the damage she'd caused to his clothes, he pulled his robes on so angrily she was surprised they didn't tear again.

"God knows - God knows I've fallen in love!"

It was an idle threat, it always was. Every time he fucked her, she told him it was the last time. Whispered it in his ear as he drove into her again and again. She knew it was a lie, but the way he always - always - reacted to that little sentence was worth it.

Malfoy flipped her over so that she landed flat on her back, and the moment she tried to get up, his hands flew to her forearms and pinned her to the mattress. "Say something silly like that again," he glared down at her, hair damp with sweat, chest and neck glistening, muscles tight and tense, "and I'll bend you over my knee, *little lion.*"

He was always rough with her. She was always rough with him, too, but that was because he *let her.* Let her bite him and overpower him and do what she wanted with him, because it was what she needed.

He knew that when she'd had a bad day, when she'd killed someone she knew, when she'd killed anyone she considered a good person, that it would tear her apart, and rather than let her torture herself with what she'd done, he offered himself up. Let her take all the pain and rage she felt and take it out on him.

He took what he wanted from her, he took pleasure where wanted it, but he always made sure she got what she wanted, made sure he took care of her.

Always made sure that she came back to him for more.  
"Are you sure you want to stop doing this?"

"Yes."

Malfoy smirked down at her. "Really?"

Suddenly, both his hands flew into her hair. His forearms bracketed either side of her face and he held himself up on his elbows. She hissed as he pulled her head up and made her watch the place where their bodies were connected.

"Look, Granger," he panted. "Look at how well we fit together."

Her breath hitched as she watched his cock slowly sliding into her. And then out. And then back in. It was a beautiful thing to watch, to see him disappearing inside her. Hypnotic. Sensual.

"Look at how well you take me." He rested his forehead against hers, blasting cold air against her face with every sharp exhale. "Think about how good this feels, and then tell me you want it to end." His fingers tightened her hair. "Think about how good I make you feel, and then tell me that you don't want this..."

None of it mattered because she didn't trust him. Didn't trust that dark, possessive edge that he held. And the way he'd killed so easily for her, the way he'd been able to slaughter anyone and everyone who dared to even think about hurting her, it scared her.

Yes, there was a lot of things she'd learned about Malfoy over the last five months. But the thing she liked the most? The thing that kept her up sometimes just thinking about? She learned that just before he came, in that millisecond of suspended pleasure before he let go, his Occlumency walls would drop completely and just for a second, just for the sweetest second, he looked so open and his eyes were that beautiful shade of blue. Those endless, clear pools.

He never looked more alive than he did in those moments. He never looked more beautiful. More vulnerable. Or more terrifying.

"This doesn't mean - *fuck* - this doesn't mean anything," she panted, her voice muffled against the mattress. "It's just fucking"

"Yes," Malfoy replied rather breathlessly. "You've said that already."

"It changes nothing."

"You've said that as well."

"This is the last time we have sex."

"And that." He sharply pulled her backwards and yanked her hips higher, the other hand squeezed around the back of her throat and pressed her into the bed, deepening the arch of her spine the way he wanted. The way that made pleasure dance in every nerve in her body and made her scream into the mattress every time he slammed into her. "Several times this evening. In fact," he pulled out of her slowly, "I believe you said the same thing yesterday," he slammed back into her, burying himself tight to the fucking hilt. "And the night before that," out, "when I fucked you in the drawing-room," in, "and the night before that," out, "when *you* fucked *me* on the kitchen floor."

He knew what he was doing. Knew exactly what to say to make her breath hitch. Knew exactly where to touch to make her shiver.

He snapped his hips and buried himself back inside her. The band in her stomach stretched tighter. That familiar burn of near orgasm flamed in her lower abdomen.

"I mean it this time. This is it. No more."

As Malfoy charged towards the door, Hermione grabbed the bedsheet, and she managed to cover herself *just* as Malfoy swung the door open.

*"It's strange, but it's true* - Oh, hello Malfoy!" Theo beamed sarcastically. "How're the balls? Feelin' pretty blue right now?"

Malfoy grabbed Theo by the scruff of his collar, and after she'd watched Malfoy drag him down the corridor, Hermione flopped back on down on her mattress. She clenched and unclenched her fists as she stared up at the half-finished mural on her ceiling.

She was wound up, irritated and frustrated beyond all measure.

And if Theodore singing Queen songs while he killed hadn't ruined the beloved artist for her before, he certainly fucking had now.

# CHAPTER 44

her shoulders and stomach, but she'd never been embarrassed about those. She'd never wanted to glamour them. They were war wounds. She'd earned them. Fought for them. Felt proud when she saw them in the mirror because they reminded her of how much she'd been through.

But the stretch marks, they were just ... *there*. Something she'd never thought of as an imperfection until she felt his hot gaze staring at them. The first time he'd seen them, Hermione had been sure that he was going to make a snide remark, but to her surprise, he kissed and ran his tongue across them. And had continued to do so at every given opportunity.

She learned that he never - ever - took off the chain that had his parents wedding rings threaded through it, and that he sometimes fiddled with it after they'd had sex, when his mind was hazy and he thought she wasn't looking.

She learned that he was just a little bit self-conscious about the Sectumsempra scars across his chest and upper stomach. He never told her that, but whenever she ran her fingers or tongue across them, she would feel him tense underneath her seconds before he would drag her mouth to his or pin her hands above her head and fuck her harder.

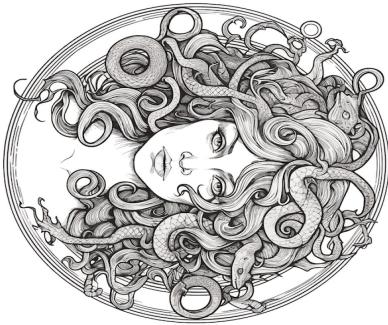
She learned that, although he never said it out loud, it irritated him that she never let him sleep in her room. Not after that first night. That was her only rule. He could throw her around and kiss her until her lips bled and she couldn't breathe, but he couldn't spend the night in her bed. Couldn't sleep next to her.

That was too much. It was too familiar. It was too intimate. It blurred a line that she needed to keep clear.

Yes, she enjoyed the feel of his cock inside her and yes, she enjoyed their fights. The danger. The way he excited her.

It didn't matter that her nightmares had dulled since they'd been sleeping together, her body and mind too exhausted to dream, or that the feel of his cold body pressed against hers, on her, inside her, took her mind off the way Voldemort's dark magic seemed to spark in her veins after every mission, like it awoke from the aches. Same rubble from the collapsed roof and torn bibles covering the floor.

As Voldemort felt the strength of his army depleting - and as the Order started to claw back some of the power they'd lost at the start of the war - he'd begun to clutch at straws. He was clinging to fools' hopes and old prophecies these days, convinced that Blaise's visions held the answers and that there might be something in the churches to swing the odds back in his favour.



## A BEAUTIFUL THING TO SEE

**5th December**

The new church the Dark Lord had sent Draco to investigate was the same as all the others he'd searched.

Same huge wooden doors with religious inscriptions carved into the frame. Same broken stained glass windows and thick cobwebs draped over the pews and between the aisles. Same rubble from the collapsed roof and torn bibles covering the floor.

As Voldemort felt the strength of his army depleting - and as the Order started to claw back some of the power they'd lost at the start of the war - he'd begun to clutch at straws. He was clinging to fools' hopes and old prophecies these days, convinced that Blaise's visions held the answers and that there might be something in the churches to swing the odds back in his favour.

To his credit, Blaise had been making an effort with Hermione. He'd begun to strike up conversations about the mural she'd painted in their bedroom and ask questions about other pieces she planned to paint. It was rather obvious he was only doing it per Astoria's request, but he never mentioned anything about her evenings with Malfoy so she couldn't complain.

Theo, however, thought it was hilarious. Absolutely, knee slappingly hilarious. Repeatedly said that Hermione and Malfoy's 'hate fuck sessions' - as he'd christened them - were the funniest thing he'd ever heard, and did everything he could think of to make the pair of them uncomfortable. He made jokes and rude gestures whenever he saw Malfoy and Hermione together, and had started to announce his entrance and cover his eyes theatrically whenever he walked into a room, despite already knowing that Malfoy and Hermione were on opposite sides of it.

"Harder."

"I know."

"Harder, Malfoy."

"I know."

"Harder - fuck - *eughhh*, harder!" Hermione's words were cut off as Malfoy drove into her deeper. He squeezed her hip again, then dragged his hand up her body, along the dip she'd created in her spine, and wrapped it around the back of her neck.

She couldn't remember what the argument this evening had been about. She supposed it didn't really matter what started it, it'd still ended the same. Tearing each-others clothes off, Hermione on all fours, arse in the air while Malfoy pressed her into the mattress and pounded into her from behind.

It was just sex, that was all it was. Just a way to channel frustrations. She told herself that repeatedly. Reminded Malfoy of it every time he slid his cock into her for the first time.

Admittedly, Hermione had learned a lot about Malfoy in the last five months.

She learned that whenever he was close to coming, he would bite his hand or finger to stop himself, to help him hang on just that little bit longer.

She learned that he had a sort of fetish about wrapping his hand around her throat and squeezing while they had sex - and that she rather liked that too.

She learned that he had a fascination with the stretch marks that ran across her hips. Scars from hexes that had caught her on battlefields over the years decorated

Although Draco thought the idea was fucking ludicrous, the Order didn't think so. They wouldn't disclose who, but one of their own Seers had seen a similar vision to Blaise's; a string of churches, a gun, a cluster of roses, a gravestone, and a heart that beat six times before it silled for good.

It was this vision that had prompted the Order to begin searching churches across the country, and was the very reason that when Draco, Theo and Blaise had searched the same places of worship later, they found them empty - or terrified Priests who'd refused to leave their temples and had been given Deluminators to help hide when the opposition came searching.

Because the similarities in Blaise's vision and the Order's were so similar, both sides felt it beneficial to continue searching the churches just in case there was any truth in the theory, and if they did find anything, Draco had agreed to turn it over to the Order and lie to Voldemort, further sealing their alliance while his master fell further into despair. Two birds, one stone and all that bollocks.

This particular church - that was somewhere near Nottingham City Centre - seemed to have been abandoned in much more of a hurry than the others. The priests had left crucifixes and crosses behind - probably too scared running from whatever had driven them away to take them with them.

That, or they knew that they couldn't protect them against the dark wizards that came knocking on their doors.

"Oh for fuck's sake," Theo snarled a moment after he'd swung the church doors open - late and stinking of whiskey. *Again*. "Why is *she* here?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Draco saw Hermione's nose crinkle in anger. Her lip curled slightly and she clenched her hands into fists.

"The Dark Lord wants this church thoroughly searched," Draco said. "Just like he's wanted all the others searched, and four pairs of eyes are better than three."

Theo scoffed loudly, obviously trying to get a reaction out of someone, probably Granger. "Oh, I am sorry, have we switched sides, *again*? Are we back to serving Voldemort? There's that much espionage going on these days, it's hard to keep track of who's on what side."

Draco smirked and folded his hands elegantly behind his back, looking down his nose at Theo as he spoke. He wasn't taking the bait. Knew it would just piss Theo off all the more if he simply didn't react. "I know you have the brain size and attention span of a goldfish, but do try and think it through, Theodore."

Irritation flashed across Theo's face. He pressed his mouth into a hard line, his brows twisting into a scowl.

"If Voldemort is correct and there is something in these churches that could help him win the war, then we absolutely do not want him to find whatever he's looking for," Draco said slowly, softly, speaking to Theo as though he were a child. "Correct?"

Theo nodded slowly, one curt dip of his chin.

"And you, myself and Blaise," he continued, gesturing to the third wizard - the one who'd already been at this church for two hours and was frantically looking through the shelves for something interesting, "are pureblood wizards raised in pureblood families. We know nothing about muggles and their Gods and their places of worship. Still with me?"

Again, Theo nodded, growing more pissed off by the second.

"But Granger was brought up in the muggle world. Her parents may not have been religious, but she knows a lot more about this stuff than we do, so if there is anything here that's out of the ordinary, she's a lot more likely to pick up on it than us. Isn't she?"

Theo sucked his teeth irritably. His eyes flickered to Granger, then to Malfoy, then back to Granger for a moment before he scoffed again and shrugged his shoulders. "Mate, if you're incapable of being more than five feet away from her at all times, then just fucking say so," he said, grinning. "You don't need to invent a whole bloody excuse. Just go and shag her in the backroom or something. We'll wait."

"I'm not inventing anything. Granger knows what she's looking for and she's just as motivated to kill Voldemort as we are."

Theo rolled his eyes and walked towards the silver bowl near the entrance. "Okie cokie. If you say so." He peeked at the bowl, but when he saw that the water inside was dirty and full of fallen debris from the ceiling, made a displeased face and backed away. "But if the other Death Eaters turn up and see she's not under the Demon Hex - or in her uniform - then don't come crying to me."

"If any of the others show up, Narcissa will alert us and Granger can apparate home before they see her. Or did you not notice the bloody huge black dragon standing guard outside the church?"

In the first week of August, Hermione had slapped him for almost tearing Ron's arm off in a raid in Leeds. Malfoy said it was an accident, Hermione said she didn't believe him, and he responded by throwing her over his shoulder, bending her over the vanity table in her room, and making her watch in the mirror as he fuck her from behind.

The next day, an argument while brewing healing potions to give to the Order led to a tryst on the floor in the potions unit, and a disagreement on how to frame the Carrow's ended with Hermione riding him until the insides of her thighs were sore.

And despite her best intentions, she was spending almost every evening with him by the end of September, tied up in her bedsheets while he fucked her into nirvana.

Sometimes Hermione initiated it. Sometimes Malfoy made the first move, but it always started with an argument. Whether it was because she thought he was showing no mercy against muggle soldiers on a mission or they disagreed on how to frame another Death Eater in the inner circle, it always ended the same. The two of them screaming in the others face, chests pressed together, nose to nose, teeth bared and roaring hatred at one another, and then the most passionate, sensual, carnal sex she'd ever experienced. The kind of sex that had nails raking down the others back and teeth biting every inch of the other to keep from screaming. The kind that left them both drowning in white-hot pleasure, their entire bodies trembling in ecstasy while they forgot their own names.

Sex seemed to be the only way they could work together.

Rather than throwing an Avada at her head every time she disagreed with him, and - in his opinion, kept putting herself in unnecessary danger - Malfoy would channel the rage he felt into his hips and fuck her relentlessly.

Rather than shooting him between the eyes every time he killed mercilessly, Hermione would bite down on his shoulder - where she often drew blood - and ride his cock until the urge to kill him had passed.

But Merlin, how she fucking loved it. Loved the way he looked at her in those moments with fire in his usually icy eyes. The things he said to her. How he didn't seem to care about anything else other than *her*.

Although they'd planned on keeping it to themselves, Astoria learned all too quickly that they were spending every night together. She approved of course, quite literally popped open a bottle of champagne to celebrate when she'd found out, but her husband was silent on the matter.

And then another.

And as the months dragged on and more and more witches and wizards he'd known for decades started to stab him in the back, Voldemort began to unravel. He was growing more paranoid by the day, more unsure of who he could trust and if anything that came out of his followers mouths were truth or not.

Hermione hadn't seen him but from what Malfoy had told her, he sounded like he was falling apart.

Malfoy couldn't catch all the 'traitors' himself. He couldn't take all the glory. He knew it'd look suspicious if he was the one to keep catching the traitors, so he, Theo and Blaise started planting damning evidence where they knew others would find it.

Malfoy left incriminating evidence on Dolohov in the potions closet in York Cathedral the day before Bellatrix was due to take stock. Blaise altered a Order soldiers memories right before their interrogation with Grouch so they'd confess to witnessing Karkaroff meet with Harry to trade information - despite never having seen him before. And Theo Imperio'd Thickenesse when he was on guard duty to release all of the captured hostages right as Bellatrix was making her rounds.

All three of them were executed that same night. No questions asked. No mercy shown.

In less than five months, they'd managed to help the Order exponentially. They'd incriminated and caused the execution of three of Voldemort's favourite - and most bloodthirsty - generals, and killed his most skilled snatcher.

And in five months, Hermione had lost count of the times she'd let Malfoy slip between her legs.

Although she'd meant it at the time, it wasn't the last time she let him fuck her. Far from it.

At the end of July, Hermione had started an argument with Malfoy over his 'methods' after they'd successfully framed Dolohov. She said he was moving too quickly with the plan, and he shut her up by wrapping his hand around her throat and fucking her on the kitchen island.

A week later, a sparring match to practice offensive spells grew vicious, and after she'd hit him with a particularly hard - and unnecessary - Knockback Jinx for correcting her footwork, he'd smacked the wand out her hand and took her against the wall.

"Yes, yes, I've heard this song before. Biuu... scary lizard outside. Will barbecue and eat anyone who isn't you or Granger. Message received loud and clear, captain."

Although Theo half-walked, half-skipped into the church, he refused to drop the starkly attitude. After he'd flicked through bibles and found nothing, he loudly ripped out pages and carelessly threw the empty shell over his shoulder. He made sure to hopscotch across the broken glass on the floor and smashed the few windows that had remained intact, seeming to delight in the gare Granger threw him when he'd broken the last one.

Everything Theo did was to cause a reaction, like a toddler throwing a tantrum because no one was paying him attention. He hadn't tortured or been on a 'proper' mission for over a week. He was bored because of it, and a bored Theo was a very volatile creature.

He couldn't sit still. Another person might have mistaken the way he drummed his hands against the back of the wooden pews as a sign of boredom, but Malfoy knew he did it to stop himself from biting his nails, keeping his anxiousness hidden. Another person might have mistaken the way he hummed and sang odd little tunes to himself as a way to fill the tense silence, but Malfoy knew it was just so he couldn't hear his own thoughts.

He always did this. Malfoy knew him well enough to recognise the pattern. The habit so strong it was bordering on addiction. He wanted another victim. A poor soul he could crack open, break and bleed and occupy himself with. To be someone else's monster just so he didn't have to deal with the ones in his head.

So, because he couldn't get his hands on anyone, he wanted everyone to be on edge. Wanted them all agitated and jumping at the slightest noise, just in the hope that they might over-react, cast a curse, start a fight with one another and provide him with a source of entertainment for a few minutes.

Malfoy was adapted enough to ignore Theos antics. And apart from the odd glare or curse under her breath, Granger seemed to fair quite well, but the only person who was able to ignore him entirely, was Blaise.

Blaise ransacked through the church quickly, elegant but efficient, examining and cataloguing everything he found before he moved on to the next thing. He acted as though Theo wasn't even there at all, simply stepped over the bibles he'd destroyed and ignored every attempt Theo made to get his attention.

He had much more pressing things on his mind than the psychopath next to him who was looking for trouble.

The Order might have seen the visions being shared between Blaise and their own member as a positive thing, but Blaise didn't. In the weeks since they'd made that revelation, he'd started to panic more than usual. He hardly slept. Hardly ate. Hardly left Astoria's side if he didn't absolutely have to.

Because in his mind, if that vision was correct, then he was sure that his vision about Astoria was correct as well. He'd already been plagued with the idea that he was going to lose her, that she would be taken from him too soon, and now, he was consumed with it.

An hour into their search, they'd found nothing, and when Theo broke yet another gold - and probably priceless - candelabra out of nothing more than sheer boredom, Granger seemed to be at the end of her patience.

"Oh for the love of—" she hissed, eyes briefly snapping up from the wooden pulpit she was crouched under to glare at him. "Do you have to break every single thing that you touch?"

Theo whistled and spun on his heels, and when he faced Granger, he was wearing an impish smirk, pleased that someone was finally playing. "What was that, princess? I couldn't hear you over the hypocrisy coming out of your mouth."

"Hypocrisy?" Hermione snapped, there was a fire growing in her eyes. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, nothing at all," Theo mocked as he walked towards her. He stopped a few feet away from her and picked something up off the floor, a small marble sculpture of a woman. "I just find it funny that you've gone on and on about how you want to kill Malfoy since he captured you, yet fast forward a year, and you're shagging him every night."

"What does that have to do with the church?"

"Nothing," he said as he turned the sculpture over in his hand. "It's just a funny world we live in, don't you think? Full of sinners and hypocrites who love to tell me off for simply having a bit of mischief, when they spend their days killing their friends and their nights in bed with their enemy."

As always, Granger didn't react the way he thought she was going to. He'd assumed she was going to bite back - and he wouldn't have been opposed to her throwing a torture curse at his friend, either - but instead, she held her composure and started flicking through a bible she found on the floor and ignored him.

"'Yea,'" Malfoy had responded coldly.

"Do you mind if I give her this?" Hagrid had continued as he'd held up the piece of meat. "I brought it for 'er especially. Don't worry, it ain't poisonous or nothin'."

The dubious look on Malfoy's face had been priceless. He'd looked to Hermione for help, and when she'd nodded in encouragement, Hagrid had thrown the treat high in the air and Narcissa had reared onto her back legs to catch it.

"It's a neck joint from a Grindylow," Hagrid explained as Narcissa violently shook her head and tore at the meat. "Read somewhere that's their favourite food."

If Narcissa's frantic bites into the treat didn't confirm that theory, then the way she nudged her enormous snout against Hagrid's robes and sniffed, searching for another, certainly did.

Whilst Narcissa had investigated him, Hagrid had raised his hand to pet her. Luckily, he had the common sense to retract said hand before she bit it off.

Although Narcissa never let Hagrid touch her - or Hermione, or Malfoy - he always brought her treats whenever he attended meetings with Ginny and Fleur. And she liked those. Always loomed over Hagrid and sniffed his robes until he gave her whatever part of a Grindylow he'd brought for her, then she'd skulk back to the far end of the gate and eat while the meeting went ahead.

And as Hermione and the Death Eaters' relationship with the Order grew harmonious, Voldemort's inner circle had descended into chaos.

Malfoy's plan was working flawlessly. After Seabior's very public - and very gruesome - execution, Voldemort had hosted a celebration; thought he'd finally weeded out the poison from his ranks and that victory was within his grasp at last, but less than three weeks later, another poisonous rat emerged.

Dolohov; another member of the inner circle that Voldemort thought he could trust with his life had betrayed him - or so he thought.

Voldemort had ordered his execution promptly. Despite Dolohov protesting his innocence, the dark wizard didn't want to listen to excuses or more 'lies'. The evidence Malfoy had planted was too concrete, too incriminating to ignore, and he'd called hundreds to watch as he was tied to a podium and Greybacks pack savagely tore him apart - whilst he was still alive.

But then another traitor emerged a month later.

And then another.

Ron didn't come to many of the meetings. He was very angry with Hermione. Could hardly look at her, and the few times he did scowl in her direction – with disgust and hatred filling his eyes - Narcissa would hiss at him until he looked away.

Fleur always wore a sweet smile from the moment she Apparated to their meetings, whereas Ginny ... Ginny was quiet and reserved. She was thawing to Hermione as time went on, - just the odd little smile here and nod there. It was much slower than Hermione would have liked, but she supposed the presence of an Avada happy Demon Mask - and a carnivorous dragon who looked at her brother like he was a slab of meat – didn't particularly ease her nerves.

Neither witch liked having Narcissa there, but they'd accepted her presence was necessary. They rightfully gave the dragon a wide birth during the meetings, but they often flinched when she tore pieces of her dinner off the bone. Or moved a little too quickly for their liking. Or looked in their directions. Or growled. Or bared her fangs. Or did anything other than sit there like a stone gargoyle.

One person who was happy to see Narcissa, however, was Hagrid. Because he never left the Order's bases - they liked him to stay indoors to move heavy machinery around and act as the last defence in case they ever were attacked - after many weeks of begging from him, the Order deemed it safe enough to allow him to attend a meeting.

He'd only come a handful of times so far, acting as a sort of bodyguard for the women in Ron's absence. He'd sobbed with happiness when he'd seen Hermione for the first time. It'd taken her several minutes to reassure him that she was fine – and several more before his sobs had quietened completely. He'd obviously missed her very much, but as soon as he knew she was safe, his eyes locked onto the enormous dragon behind her, and he was transfixed.

*"Oh crikey!"* he'd whistled as he'd wiped tears from his blotchy face. *"She's a beauty, isn't she?"*

Initially Narcissa was not a fan of the giant. Hermione was sure that she was going to incinerate Hagrid the moment he stepped towards her - it certainly looked like she wanted to. She'd bared her fangs and begun to make an exceptionally loud growling noise, but then Hagrid had pulled a large chunk of slimy meat from God only knew what kind of animal from his robes, and she'd gone quiet.

*"Sandianian Firehorn, ain't she?"* Hagrid had asked Malfoy with a proud look on his face.

Well, not entirely, she didn't have that much composure. She still flipped him the bird while she scanned the pages.

*"Fuckin' hell she's boring."* Theo sighed. He turned to Malfoy whilst he tossed the figurine idly in his hand. "Don't know what you see in her mate."

Although her brow twitched in annoyance, Granger didn't react.

"Do you think Bell's raid went well today?" Theo asked aloud, and when no one answered, he carried on. "I hope it did. Hope she rounded up loads of hostages. Least then I'll be able to have a liiiiittle bit of fun today."

It was obvious what Theo was doing. He was fishing, throwing a line, saying the most outrageous things, hoping that something would hit a nerve and she'd start a fight with him.

"Anyone ever heard of rat torture? No? No one?"

Still, nothing. Not even a nibble.

"It sounds siiiiick. Basically, you get a rat cage, cut it in half, and attach it to a person's abdomen–" he tapped his lower stomach with his index fingers as he demonstrated, "- then put a rat in the cage, and then heat the cage. Can you guess what happens next?"

Silence.

"Anyone? Anyone at all?"

Granger moved on to another book.

Blaise cast a detection charm on a gold cup he'd picked up to see if it held any secrets.

Malfoy smiled, seeing Granger start to shift through the pages more furiously, losing her patience.

"Well let me tell you - as the cage gets hotter, the little rat gets all worked up and tries to escape. And what does it do to escape you ask? Yep, you guessed it; burrow and bites its way through the person's stomach. Eats its way through the skin and intestines, doesn't stop until it comes out the other side. Didn't the Weasley's used to keep Pettigrew as a rat? That'd be funny, to see them killed by their pet–"

And there it was. The bite that Theo had been fishing for.

Granger sharply snapped her book shut and slammed it down on the table.

"*Ooooooooh,*" Theo mocked. "Was that supposed to scare me? Whatcha' gonna do with a book? Read me those commandment things until I die of boredom?"

"No, but a hex that boils the blood in your brain sounds nice to me." Although Granger's nose crinkled, in that way it always did when she was losing her patience, she was smirking.

Theo grinned wickedly, and Malfoy got the feeling he was on the outside of a joke between the pair.

"I'd leave her be if I were you, Nott," Malfoy chuckled quietly. "She'll have your balls cut off and mounted on a fucking spike quicker than you can say Salazar."

Theo gasped theatrically and slapped a hand over his mouth. "Malfoy! How dare you use that foul language! You are in a house of God!"

"Says the man who has robbed several churches."

Again, Theo gasped, louder than the first time. "I most certainly have not!"

"- defaced bibles in every way imaginable."

"Lies," Theo protested, shaking his head like a bad actor. "Vicious lies--"

"- and kidnapped and beat a priest he found at one of said churches."

"I did no such thing!"

"Yes, you did."

"No, I don't think so. I think I'd remember something like that."

"You found him in an underground tunnel, beat the shit out of him and then robbed the place."

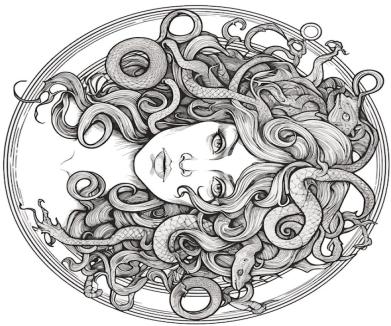
"That doesn't sound like me at all."

Appearing as if out of nowhere, Blaise stood behind Theo, and with the posture and grace of a perfect gentleman, he swatted Theo around the back of the head, with a bible.

"Ouch! Motherfucker!" Theo hissed. He palmed the back of his head and scowled up at Blaise. "The fuck was that for?!"

"Astoria's life is on the line! Your sister-in-law's life!" Blaise snarled. "Can you not - for once in your fucking life - put your petty games and selfish need to be entertained aside and act in the best interest of someone else?!"

## CHAPTER 43



# NO QUESTIONS ASKED. NO MERCY SHOWN.

**29th November**

Over the next five months, the alliance with the Order went from strength to strength.

Hermione and Malfoy met with them every other week - always at the same gate in East Midlands airport - and while they discussed the next phase of the plan or any problems or opportunities they felt might be coming, Narcissa would lay behind them and mail the corpse of a horse she'd picked up on the flight over.

“Fucking hell,” Malfoy hissed. His voice dropped, became that deep, gritty growl that she sometimes heard when she closed her eyes. “Don’t come yet - don’t you fucking dare come yet.” He started to thrust into her faster, the strokes of his cock more uneven, like he was losing himself in the way she felt. Losing himself in her.

“If you come, then I will.” He squeezed her throat tighter. “Not ready yet. Haven’t had enough yet. Please.” His shoulders and back started to tremble under her hands. “Please. Please, don’t - fuck- don’t come yet.”

She’d been trying to hang on, clinging that burning feeling of pleasure she always felt just before she flew over the edge, but hearing his voice break like that, hearing him plead with her to not come, to hang on - just for him - snapped the band.

Her orgasm tipped through her so violently that her muscles seized up and trapped her scream in her throat. For a moment, there was nothing, just a searing pleasure like nothing she’d ever experienced and never, ever, wanted to end.

She heard Malfoy groan in her ear as he followed her over the edge. Felt his body jerk before his heavy frame collapsed on top of her.

Hermione lost count of the minutes it took for them to catch their breath, Malfoy didn’t move. He buried his head into her chest and slipped his hands under her spine so he could hug her body against his.

She hadn’t realised she’d been absentmindedly stroking his hair until he twisted his head to look up at her.

Watching her closely, Malfoy began to kiss his way back up her body. “If this is really the last time we fuck,” he whispered softly between kisses, with a smile that threatened to take her breath away, “don’t you think we should make the most of it?”

He made her come three more times before they were spent. And when they eventually did pass out, when her bones were heavy through war and pleasure, she fell asleep with the arms of a demon wrapped around her.

And although she’d never admit it if he asked her, she’d never felt safer.

Theo bore many titles. Psychopath. Trickster. Torturer. Mass murderer. He was heartless in a lot of ways, but never when it came to Astoria.

As Blaise spoke, Theo’s expression fell. The façade of the cruel trickster vanished, and revealed the scared brother-in-law underneath.

“Alright. Alright - shit - I’m sorry. So, Granger,” Theo started, finally ready to make an effort. “Seeing as you’re the expert on this church bollocks-”

Granger stared at him cautiously before she responded. “I never claimed to be an expert-”

“I know that you’re supposed to do the hand cross thingy with the dirty water in the bowl-”

“It’s called Holy water, and it’s not supposed to be dirty-”

“But what’s these weird cross things about?” he asked as he picked a half-broken one off the floor and started to examine it. “Is there like an initiation process and you have to make one of these to join or something?”

Malfoy watched Granger stare at Theo for a few moments. She blinked at him, visibly taken back by the change. He could tell she wasn’t sure whether his new interest or not was genuine.

Her eyes met Malfoy’s across the church, like she was looking to him for reassurance.

“Go on,” Malfoy smirked. “Be the insufferable swot we all know you are. I’m sure you’ve read a least a dozen books on the subject.”

“The crosses are ... a symbol of the son of God dying on the cross for the sins of man,” she explained hesitantly, turning back to Theo. “The churches display them as a symbol of his sacrifice. They’re supposed to protect people from evil spirits and ...” Suddenly, Granger paused and bit her lip, unsure of whether or not to continue.

“*Fuuuuuum?*” Theo encouraged.

Granger’s eyes flickered to Malfoy’s. “Demons.”

With that one word, the seriousness in Theo’s expression vanished, and the jester came back out to play. He whirled to face Malfoy and stretched his arm as straight as it would go. He shoved the cross - that he was holding upside down - in Malfoy’s face and started to scream; “Be gone, you foul demon! The power of this cross thingy forces you to -ouch! Zabini! I swear to shit that if you hit me one more time with that fucking bible, I will shove it up your arse!”

An hour later they'd still found nothing, and after a small debate between themselves, they decided to complete one last sweep of the church before they called it quits and went home. To speed things up, Blaise suggested that Theo and Granger took the left side of the building while he and Malfoy looked over the right side and the back office.

Blaise was up to something, that much was clear. He'd always been the quiet type, but when he'd failed to utter a single syllable ten minutes into their search of the office, Malfoy couldn't help but speak up.

"Whatever it is, say it, Zabini," Malfoy said as he checked the bureau drawers - again - and found nothing.

Blaise turned and gave his friend a sharp look. "I didn't say a word."

"Precisely. You insisted that we pair up together to search this side, it's obvious you wanted me alone and Granger out of the way, and yet you haven't said a word to me since we came in here. You clearly have something on your mind," Malfoy sighed. He took a cigarette out of his pocket and lit it. "So whatever it is, get it off your chest. *Now*."

"I have some... concerns."

Malfoy checked under the oak desk that swarmed the centre of the room as he took the first drag of his cigarette. "Care to elaborate?"

"About the Mudblood."

At the mention of Granger, Malfoy's eyes shot up. "Go on."

Ever the gentlemen, Blaise closed the door and sealed off the room with privacy charms before he continued. "I'm concerned that your feelings for her are clouding your judgement on missions."

"And your reasons for that are?"

Blaise blanched slightly, a little taken aback. "You're not even going to deny that you have feelings for her?"

Malfoy sat on the desk and folded his arms across his chest. He took another deep drag, relishing in the way the smoke filled his lungs and hoping the nicotine buzz would kick in before this painful conversation reached its peak. He needed to tread carefully, Occlumency walls up and cards close to his chest.

"I don't really see the point." He pulled the bud from his mouth and tapped the ash from the end. "You and Tori are convinced that I feel something for her. I doubt

If stung at first, being so overtly stretched open. The muscles in her leg ached and burned, but she shared that pain by biting down on his bottom lip and fisting her hands in his hair.

Malfoy started to move. His thrusts were long and deep and angry. He pulled out almost all the way each time only to slam back into her to the hilt and punch the air out of her lung.

"I think about my hand wrapped around your throat every night," he growled, lips and teeth latched onto her earlobe as one of his hands fastened around her throat, pinning her between the bed and his cock. "Pounding into your cunt." He squeezed her throat, cutting off her air in a way that doubled the pleasure throbbing through her veins. "*Burned in you.*" He drove into her eagerly. Viciously. He kissed and bit the side of her face hungrily. "Fucking you so hard it wipes that smug little smile off your pretty face."

Just like the last time they'd fucked, there was nothing gentle about their touches. He kissed her like he wanted to hurt her, because that was exactly what he wanted to do. She dragged her nails down his back like she wanted to draw blood, because she did.

Passion fuelled by hatred, that was what it was. The only way Hermione could think to describe it.

It was a temporary fix, a band-aid to their problem. They would still hate each other in the morning. She would still want to bruise him for killing for her, and he would still want to hurt her for making him vulnerable - but this was another solution. Another way to tear the other apart without actually killing each other.

She could feel his anger in his palm as he squeezed her throat in time with his thrusts.

Malfoy was ruthless with her. It hurt, the way he tossed her around, pinned her to the mattress and angled her body the way he wanted. It hurt, but in the most delicious way. In a way that made her toes curl and her eyes roll into the back of her head.

Hermione felt herself nearing the edge far too quickly. Felt her legs start to tremble, her cunt start to clench and spasm. The band stretched to its limit, ready to snap.

"Your move, little lion," he whispered. "What is it going to be? Are we going to fight until one of us is bleeding on the floor?" She shivered when his cold lips glided to the shell of her ear. "Or are you going to let me fuck you until your throat is raw from screaming my name?"

Hermione paused for a moment.

Then grabbed his face and smashed their lips together.

She felt him smile into the kiss when she used his own tricks against him, wordlessly casting a slicing hex down the front of his robes so she could tear them from his body. She could smell the blood on his knuckles as he ripped her clothes apart with his hands.

Once their clothes were shredded and removed, Hermione threw her wand onto the pile of torn fabric on the floor. Malfoy caught her jaw in his hand and angled her face so he could drag kisses down her throat.

"This is the last time we do this," she hissed as he licked across her pulse point.

"We can't - oh god - we can't do this again."

"If you say so."

"I mean it - this is the last time we have sex."

"Well then, we'd better make it count, hadn't we?" Malfoy leaned back slightly and she watched him spit into his hand. He fisted his cock, groaning low in his throat as he ran his hand over himself once, twice. He met her eyes again on the third pump, and smiled when he realised she'd been watching him.

"Do you want to know my little secret?" he asked. "Since the first time I heard what you sound like when you come, I haven't been able to stop thinking about it.

*About you.*" He held himself up on his elbow, and kept his eyes on hers as he aligned himself with her entrance. "Practically full myself to sleep every night with my hand wrapped around my cock," he pushed inside her with one sharp snap of his hip, Hermione gasped, her back arching as he stretched her open, "and the image of you and your pretty little mouth in my head."

He didn't give her time to adjust, not even a second to catch her breath. Roughly yanking her leg up so that her knee curled over his shoulder, he leaned in and trapped the back of her other thigh against his chest. The change in position was only small, but it allowed him to slide so much deeper inside of her, skating dangerously close on the line of pain and pleasure.

anything I say will change your mind, so this conversation will be over much quicker if I don't argue."

Blaise's eyes were piercing as he studied him.

Malfoy fought the urge to twist the ring on his pinkie finger. "So," he encouraged as he took another drag of his cigarette. "Do continue. I'm fascinated to hear whatever theory you and your wife have cooked up."

"Well, look at today, for example," Blaise said, holding a hand out towards the door. "You've brought her here when we didn't need her. You've been shagging her for six months and you're already making excuses to spend more time with her."

"Oh don't give me that." Malfoy slipped off the table and started to check the room again, putting his back to Blaise. "Even you can't deny that she's much more useful here than we are."

"You're late for missions and meetings with the Dark Lord because you want to spend more time with her."

"Well forgive me for not wanting to take my cock out of the witch I'm fucking just to go and sit around a table of wizards I despise," Malfoy scoffed, eyes down as he checked the desk drawers. "How many times have you been late for meetings over the years because you were busy shagging Tonks?"

"You suck when she kicks you out of her bed," Blaise went on, ignoring Malfoy's jibe and speaking over him. "You killed a handful of Black Masks because they were hurting her - even though it wasn't part of the plan -"

"Not technically true. There was no part of the plan that said I couldn't kill them."

"And I've lost count of the times she's broken out of the Demon Hex."

That was true. In the last five months, Granger had broken through the Demon Hex more times than Malfoy cared to keep track of.

It'd happened in Birmingham a few weeks ago, when Cassie Turner almost caught her, and a few weeks before that, when a muggle soldier had her cornered. She'd done it at a raid in Leicester, a battle in Hull, once she'd even come to when she'd had her wand pressed against a soldiers throat, seconds away from slitting it open.

Although Malfoy had noticed each breakthrough as it had happened, Granger had managed to hide until he could get to her and put her back under the curse before the other Death Eaters had a chance to notice.

"What does that have to do with any of this?"

"The Demon Hex," Blaise started, "you said it feeds off negative emotions. Rage, pain, desperation. All of those, correct?"

"What about fear?"

"I'm sure it would feed off of that as well, but I don't think the Hex necessarily lets her feel fear."

"I'm not talking about her fear," Blaise interrupted. "I'm talking about yours."

Malfoy scoffed humourlessly. "What fear? I'm not scared."

"You were scared of losing her that day in Bradford, when she was dueling Zacharias. Theo said that the moment Zacharias caught her with a powerful Hex, when it looked like she was hurt, she broke through the Hex. That's a bit of a coincidence, don't you think?"

Malfoy stopped what he was doing and finally turned to face Blaise. He felt his icy walls shudder.

"Theo told me what happened," Blaise went on. "It sounded awful. I bet you were terribly scared, weren't you? When you saw blood pouring from a wound on her side. When you heard her scream in pain and knew there was nothing you could do?"

It was true, but Malfoy didn't say a word. He kept his eyes on Blaise and exhaled slowly, releasing the wall of smoke from his mouth.

"Don't you think it's funny, that the very moment you thought she was going to die, when you were scared that you were going to lose her, she broke through the Hex? The one that's been so deeply rooted in her head that only you can bring her out of it?"

"Coincidence. That's all."

"I thought so too, but then I remembered the first time she broke through the Hex, that day in Bournemouth when Cormac got hold of her."

A crack in his wall appeared, a small, hairline fracture. Easily repairable, but shouldn't have come through so quickly. He couldn't keep them up for long these days.

"Don't you remember? There was an explosion, the ground collapsed and she fell through it, and then the rubble sealed the hole before you could get to her," Blaise said. "I couldn't see your face - you still had your mask on - but I could tell how afraid you were - and then moments later, Granger broke through the Hex."

She felt heat flare in her lower abdomen. Felt her heart start to beat faster and violently against her ribs. And from the way he smiled down at her, she was sure he could feel it too. "You're sick in the head, do you know that?"

"If I'm so sick in the head," he rolled his hips again, and a sharp wave of pleasure flared up her nerves, "*then why are you *not* for me?*"

"I could kill you so easily right now," Hermione said, forcing her voice to be even and strong, even if her thighs began to tremble when Malfoy slipped his hand between their bodies. "It would only take one curse. Just one word."

This thumb grazed her inner thigh, and even through the thick material of her uniform, her nerves lit up. Her head fell back against the pillows and she opened her thighs a little further to let him slide closer.

"Go on then," Malfoy chuckled. "Do it. I dare you. Let's see who's quicker at killing The Golden Girl." He stared down at her, still smiling as his hands tightened around her throat. "Or a Demon Mask."

He was infuriating. He was dangerous and lethal but when he looked at her like that, with that hunger in his eyes... Fuck - all she could think about was how hot her skin felt, how her veins were burning with dark magic and how much better she felt when his icy hands touched her, squeezed her, kneaded and bit her skin and made her forget what it felt like to be burned alive.

She wanted to kill him so much she couldn't breathe just thinking about it.

She wanted to fuck him so badly she felt like she might explode if she didn't. Being with Malfoy was like dancing on the edge of the sword. She could say the wrong thing at any moment, taunt him just a little too much, and he'd kill her.

And that was half the fun. Malfoy was *exciting*. Being with Malfoy was exciting.

It was thrilling to see how far she could push him. Practically made her veins dance to see him erupt because of something she'd said or done. Being in control had always made her glow a little different. But having Voldemort's favourite demon, one of the most powerful men in the world lose his composure, because of her? Well, there wasn't anything more addictive than that.

"We're in the middle of a war, Draco." She was so close to her wand, she could feel its magic beginning to warm the tips of her fingers. So close. Just a little bit more... "You can't kill everyone who tries to hurt me."

A sinister look flashed across his face. It made his eyes darken and his features seem sharper. It made him look... like a demon. "Can't I?"

The moment her fingers closed around her wand, Malfoy moved. He wrapped his hand around her neck and trapped the curse she'd been about to cast in her throat. His cold eyes watched her as he dragged her across the room and slammed her down on the bed. He didn't let go of her throat as he lowered himself on top of her and crushed her into the mattress with the length of his body.

Hermione dug her wand under his chin. He followed her weapon. For just a moment, his eyes flickered down to her lips, and when they found her eyes again, he cocked a brow.

He may have had his hand wrapped around her throat, he may have been able to crush her windpipe with the slightest change in pressure, but she had the upper hand.

"If you're not going to act with the Order's best intentions," Hermione whispered, twisting her wand under his chin as she let a few sparks of magic graze his skin, "then maybe I should just kill you right now."

"Perhaps you should," he smirked. "Salazar knows that with me out of the way, you'll be able to get back to your Order so much quicker. I'm sure Weasley would welcome you back with open arms- but if I'm dead, what happens to your chances of winning this war?"

"We'd figure something out. We always do."

"I don't doubt that." Her breath caught when he leaned down to brush his nose against hers. "You're such a clever girl."

Hermione couldn't help but shiver as his fingers tightened around her throat.

It was wrong that she liked this. Liked the danger of being held like this. The intensity of his stare. The feel of his cold, strong body pressing down on hers. Wrong in a dozen ways, but felt so right in a hundred more.

"If I don't kill you, you'll kill so many more people," Hermione breathed.

"Innocent people. Good people, like Zacharias."

"You're right. I'd kill a thousand people to keep my family safe, but I dare say that I'd kill just as many to keep you all to myself." Malfoy's free hand curled around

Malfoy remembered the moment so vividly. Remembered the way his head had turned when he'd heard the explosion. Remembered the way his heart had pounded in his chest when he'd saw Granger fall through the hole, and the way it had stopped beating altogether when the rubble sealed the gap, when he couldn't get to her, when he'd had no idea if she was alive or dead.

He'd not felt that hopeless since -

"What exactly are you getting at, Zabini?" Malfoy hissed, patience expiring as quickly as the cigarette in his mouth.

"I think the reason she's been able to break out of the Hex is you. You care for her, Malfoy, much more deeply than you're willing to admit, and because of it, the Hex only has her hate to hang onto, not yours."

Malfoy could feel the unease radiating off his dragon the moment they landed outside York Cathedral. He felt it when she glided down through the clouds and the city came into view underneath them. Felt it even stronger when he slid off her back and landed on the cobbled street beside her.

"Easy there," he said as he ran a hand across her scaled cheek. "It's alright. I'll only be in there a moment."

But Narcissa wasn't looking at him. Her large red eyes were focused straight ahead at the cathedral. She growled loudly and the scales that lined her spine stood on end, like she was trying to warn off someone that Malfoy couldn't see.

She hated being separated from him. She was always on edge when there was a wall between them, when she couldn't easily defend him if he needed her, but her unease was always at its strongest whenever he was with Voldemort. Dragons could sense dark magic, could smell it in the air, on a person's robes, in their blood, and the type of darkness that thumbed in Voldemort's veins always made her react like this.

The cathedral doors opened, and as soon as Bellatrix stepped through them, Narcissa snapped her fangs and gave a loud snarl.

His aunt drew her wand and the dragon inched forward. She angled her body to shield Malfoy and started growling low in her throat. "Draco!" Bella sneered. "Control that beast and get inside! That is an order!"

Narcissa's hatred for the Dark Lord was equal only to the distrust and revulsion she felt for his aunt, and although the green light illuminating from the edge of the

witches wand wouldn't have hurt the dragon, she interpreted it as a threat to Malfoy - and she started to hunt the danger.

"What is it doing?" Bellatrix started to panic. "We don't have time for games! Stop it!"

"Sorry Auntie, I don't take orders from you, and neither does she."

Narcissa roared again and stalked closer to the witch. She opened her mouth wide and started to bow her head, and as entertaining as it would have been to see her swallow his aunt whole, now wasn't the time, and he called off the dragon just before her fangs sank into Bellatrix's shoulder.

After his aunt had shaken off her fear - and Malfoy had calmed Narcissa- he opened the church doors and stepped inside, and as he walked down the aisle to kneel before his master, he revelled in the pitiful sight before him.

The change in the Dark Lord was astounding. He looked almost unrecognisable from the creature he'd been five months ago, when dark magic used to crackle around him, when he could petrify even the bravest wizard with a single glance from those bright red eyes.

Now, he looked nothing like that. Stress and paranoia do interesting things to the body, that, coupled with the loss of the first Horcrux in a decade, well, it was no wonder Voldemort looked like shit.

His physical health had declined considerably since the Order had destroyed the diadem, and the paranoia that his generals were betraying him- and the fear of defeat - seemed to be helping the process along. His skin looked grey and rough, thin and scaled, almost snake-like. His eyes were crazed, frantically flittering around the room, and his dirty robes looked much, much too big for his body. He looked like a walking corpse. Like a skeleton desperately clinging onto the edges of life and sanity, but not enough strength to hold onto both. Sooner or later, he would have to let one go.

As the Dark Lord heaved a cough and curled over the armrest of his throne, Bellatrix and Crouch rushed to his side. They were like dogs, the pair of them. While Bartk knelt in front of Voldemort and tended to him with spells - looking every inch a frightened mongrel licking their masters' wounds - Bellatrix was more direct. More fierce. She screamed and wailed angrily at the Black Masks that guarded the doors, ordering them to bring in the unicorn she'd hunted that afternoon.

"*But it did happen!*" she hissed back. "Today is the fourth day of the month! The bell tower fell, and Zacharias was burned to death by dragon fire! He was burned to death by your dragon!" She pushed his chest in anger. "You let Narcissa burn him alive, just like Blaise saw in his vision! You made the vision happen! You're not protecting me!" Another push. "You're the thing that's going to kill me!"

Oh, *I know* Narcissa burn Zacharias, did I?" Malfoy mocked, smirking down at her and licking his top teeth.

Hermione blanched slightly. "Didn't you?"

"No. I *told* her to."

Hermione flinched but Malfoy carried on. He seemed encouraged by the fear growing in her eyes, and he smiled down at her like a predator revelling in their kill as he explained, "I told her to melt the skin right off that sorry bastard's bones. And you know what? *I fucking loved it!* I loved watching that slimy pricks fingers burn off, because he'd hurt you with them! I loved listening to his screams as he burned to death, because those same vocal cords had uttered spells that'd hurt you!"

A roaring began in Hermione's ears. She couldn't believe what she was hearing. "Zacharias was one of the best fighters the Order had left! His death is going to be felt within the ranks! They're going to struggle without him!"

"I don't care."

"He didn't mean to hurt me!"

"I don't care."

"I attacked him first!" She beat her fist against his chest. "He was just defending himself!"

"*I. Don't.*" Malfoy caught her wrist and pinned them against his chest. "*Fucking.*" His grip tightened, squeezing to the point of bruising "*Car.*"

Hermione's wrists stung as she ripped them out of his grasp. "He didn't attack me again after I broke out of the Hex!"

"Doesn't change the fact that he'd already hurt you."

"He wasn't going to hurt me again." Hermione reached towards the edge of the bed, her wand just a breaths distance away from her fingers. "You didn't need to kill him."

"No, I didn't need to. *I wanted to.*"

"While Blaise and Astoria are living happily ever after because of the pardons you fought for, and Theo is free and doing Merlin only knows what with the freedom that you got him, what are you going to do?"

"That's not really any of your concern. Is it?"

"Seeing as there's no way to unlink us and therefore my life will be tied to yours until the day you die, I would say that yes, Draco, it is my business, actually."

At the mention of his given name, Malfoy tilted his head to the side and smiled, flashing the dimples that he hardly ever wore.

"What?" Hermione demanded.

"You should do that more often."

"Stop changing the subject!"

"I like it when you call me Draco."

She rolled her eyes and playfully nudged his leg underwater with her foot. "I know you do."

"If you know I like it, then why don't you do it more often?"

Hermione smirked and tilted her head to the side, mirroring him. "Because I know you like it, Malfoy."

She hated to admit that she loved it when he was like this with her. Relaxed.

Content. A part of her even thought he might look happy.

"Why don't you want to talk about what you'll do after the war?" she asked.

"Because I don't see the point."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't."

"But *why?*" she pressed on.

"Why won't you let me sleep in your bed?"

Hermione blanched. Her nose crinkled. "What's not... we're not talking about that, we're talking about you."

"Oh, I see how it is. It's alright for you to ask me questions that I'm uncomfortable answering, but oh no, if I ask the same of you, well, that's just crossing a line."

She had to admit, he had her there. She couldn't expect him to reveal something so personal without at least be willing to do the same.

"So," she started, "what do you propose that we do about that?"

A devious smile stretched across his face. "How about we make a deal?"

"A deal?"

"Yes. If I promise not to lie to you, then will you promise to be honest with me?"

She couldn't help but smile back at him. "Alright," she agreed, throwing caution to the wind, making a deal with the devil and all those other metaphorical clichés.

"But only if I get to ask the first question."

Malfoy nodded and drummed his fingers against the lid of the bath. "You have yourself a deal."

"Why did you do this tonight?"

His mouth twitched. "You'll have to be a little more specific."

"*This,*" she said, gesturing to the bath, to him. "The salts. The candles. Why did you do this?"

She'd expected him to make a lude comment, tease her about wanting an excuse to get her naked or something of the sort, so when he spoke again, she was so shocked by the honesty in his tone that she almost choked on thin air.

"Because I wanted to spend time with you."

That was it. The honest truth. No lies in his voice or secrecy in his almost blue eyes. He was really doing this.

"Why?"

He shrugged and looked at the water again, starting to draw random patterns in the few bubbles that remained. "Perhaps I just wanted to see what it'd be like to spend time with you when we weren't fighting or fucking." His eyes flickered back to hers and his stare - the intensity of it - fuck, it made her close her thighs together.

"Perhaps, I wanted to see if there was anything more between us."

"And is there?"

"Ah, ah, ah." He stopped her by waving his index finger at her. "I'm not answering another one of your questions until you answer one of mine. If the weasel had been quicker at that first meeting, and he'd managed to Apparate you back to one of the Order's bases, would you have come back to me?"

Back to me.

Not back to this house, or back to this rebellion that they'd been cooking up for six months.

Back to *him*.

"Yes," she answered, honest. "Because if I didn't, the ruse would be up and all of you would be executed - including Astoria, and she doesn't deserve that. None of you do."

"I see," he hummed. "Is that the only reason?"

For a moment, she didn't know how to answer his question. She wanted to lie, to brush it off, but he'd been honest with her, she at least owed him the same, didn't she? "No, it wouldn't have been the only reason."

Malfoy cocked a brow. "Care to tell me what this other reason is?"

"Ah, ah, ah - Tit for tat, remember? I ask you one question, then you get to ask me another one," she said, mimicking him by waving her index finger at him. "Why don't you want to talk about what your plans are after the war?"

His gaze turned hot and icy at the same time. His eyes burned as they roamed over her features, her cheeks, her neck - even her mouth - before they eventually landed back on her eyes, and when he spoke, his words froze her in place. "Because I think we both know that no matter what happens, my future and yours, they aren't going to be together. Yours is bright and shiny, and mine is somewhere else ... somewhere dark."

For some reason, his words cut deep. Sliced through her nerves like a knife. She didn't know why, but the pain was resounding, it almost felt real, she couldn't help but prod him further.

"Why?" she asked. "If Voldemort is killed, it'll be because of you. The Order wouldn't have a chance of getting Horcruxes or whittling down Voldemort's army if you weren't helping. Who's to say that you wouldn't be celebrated like a hero too?"

Malfoy huffed a dry laugh and tapped his rings against the side of the bath. "I could kill Voldemort myself, and I would still just be known as the Demon Mask. I could stand over him, wand in hand - fuck, no, even a muggle gun in hand - pull the trigger and end his fucking life, and all anyone would ever say about me is 'Remember the time he tried to kill Dumbledore?' Or, 'Remember the time he burned so and so?' Or beheaded such and such?'"

"But I've killed..."

Without even looking at her, he held up his hand and stopped her mid-sentence. "You killed your friends because I put you under the Hex. You killed because I made you. It's my fault. Any blood you've spilt whilst you've been here is on my hands, not yours."

"Maybe, but there's still the court of public opinion."

He still didn't look at her, but a deep crease appeared between his brows. "What public opinion? You are literally the definition of a prisoner of war. I kidnapped you,"

"Yes, but..."

"- took away your magic and your wand."

"I know..."

"- locked you away and searched your memories for months while I planted the Hex in your head"

"Again, I know that, but..."

"...and then I forced you to kill for me," Malfoy finished, still looking at the ceiling and voice starting to take on that familiar tone of a snarl. "If Kingsley doesn't see that, Potter will. Trust me, when all this is over and Voldemort is dead, the world is going to be your oyster. You're going to be celebrated as the hero that you are. They'll write songs about you and offer you so many book deals you won't know what to do with yourself. The first few years will be hectic, but then eventually, when everything settles down, you'll find yourself a bloke, have a few kids, live happily ever after, and everything will be rainbows and smiles and all that other lovely bullshit that occurs at the end of a good novel."

It was probably true. Her relationship with Harry might've been strained before her capture, but there was no way he would let anything happen to her. Ever. No matter what she'd done or who she'd killed, he always saw the best in her. He would vouch for her. Tell everyone and anyone that would listen that it wasn't her fault and she'd been forced to do all the awful things she'd done.

He'd tell everyone that ... that Malfoy forced her to do them.

"But where does that leave you?"

Now, this did seem to catch his attention. He opened his eyes and lowered his chin to look at her again. "What about me?"

Reluctantly, she sat up and twisted in the water so that she faced him. "Can I talk to you about something?"

Malfoy cocked a brow as she moved back and leaned against the opposite side of the bath, their legs still laying along each others but now running in opposite directions. "You can talk to me about anything you want, but unless you plan on covering your tits, I can't promise I'll listen."

Hermione splashed him before she rearranged some of the bubbles to cover herself. "You're such a prick."

"I'm a man and you have the most gorgeous - and distracting - tits I've ever seen," he smirked. "It's not my fault, it's basic biology."

"Well, my boobs are covered, does that mean that we can be adults now?"

Malfoy smiled and leaned forward, stretching out his hand, but she smacked it away before it found purchase on her chest. His shoulders shook as he laughed quietly. "Alright, sorry. I've got it out of my system. Go on then. What did you want to talk to me about?"

Hermione nodded and drew a deep breath, finally ready to talk about the thing that'd been hanging over them for months. It was a discussion they needed to have, but she had no idea how it was going to unfold. "All those months ago, when we were negotiating terms with the Order."

"Yes?"

"You fought for pardons for Astoria, Theo and Blaise," she started, idly running her fingers through the warm water at her side. "You said that it was not up for discussion and that if they didn't at least agree to consider it, then you wouldn't help..."

"I did."

"But Kingsley never promised you'd get a pardon."

Malfoy smirked at her from across the bath. "Caught that, did you?"

"Of course I did. He never promised me one either. Not explicitly, anyway."

Malfoy scoffed and leaned back against the lid of the bath. He stretched his arms out and rested them against either side of the bath, then he closed his eyes and tilted his chin towards the ceiling, the picture of ease and contentment. "You're the bloody Golden girl, Granger. When all this is over, if Kingsley doesn't grant you a pardon, there's no way Potter wouldn't."

Hermione opened her mouth to speak, but Malfoy didn't stop.  
"It doesn't matter what I do anymore Granger. I'm damned. People only see me as a monster, and it's my fault, I helped them forge that painting, practically handed them the brush myself. All anyone will ever see in me anymore is the demon horns, and they're right to."

"I don't." She thought she would've regretted her confession, thought she'd have wanted to grab the words and shove them back down her throat as soon as she said them, but she didn't.

Instead, she felt lighter. Like it was a relief to get it off her chest.

Naked, with her enemy, with nothing but clear water between them, they were equals. Both equally as able to kill the other, but equally as vulnerable. For the first time, she felt like she could be honest. Open to him in a way that felt more intimate than letting him between her legs.

Malfoy's eyes burned. "What?"

"I don't just see the horns when I look at you," Hermione breathed. "They're still there. I can still see them, but they're not all I see anymore. You've done awful things, yes, but there's a lot of good in you, too."

It was the truth, the truth that no one else knew. Kingsley wouldn't see it, neither would Ron, but Malfoy had sacrificed and lost so much since the start of the war, and he was risking losing what little he had left to help them.

Yes, he was doing it for the preservation of his family - he wasn't totally selfless - but he was still helping. Willing to sacrifice his own life to keep them safe, to kill Voldemort himself or die trying. And he'd done more damage to Voldemort's ranks in six months than the Order had done in ten years.

Her hand absentmindedly wandered to her shoulder, the one that had been sore and aching, but now felt fresh and painless.

No one would ever believe he could be kind or gentle. No one would ever believe the type of man he could be, because all they saw was the man he wanted them to see; The ruthless, bloodthirsty Demon Mask. The one that had collapsed countless Order bases and had a kill count in the thousands. The one everyone feared and was too scared to challenge or disobey for fear of how he might retaliate.

He had compassion inside him, he had a heart, he just kept it under lock and key, practically suffocated it with icy walls.

"When the war ends, your life will still be linked to mine," she said. "It doesn't matter what you've done, Kingsley won't be able to execute you without killing me too, and as you said, Harry wouldn't let anything happen to me."

"I'm not going to Azkaban," he said coldly. "I'm not going to rot away in a cell for the rest of my days. I just won't."

No, he didn't deserve to be caged, and he wouldn't be, she'd make sure of that.

"So you'll do what, then? Go on the run?"

His smirk grew into the beginnings of a smile. "Perhaps - it's not like Potter or anyone else would be able to stop me."

"I'll get you a pardon, Draco, I promise," she said. "After everything you've done, you deserve to be free."

"We'll see," he smirked. "But I won't get my hopes up. So go on then Granger, in another life, in this fantasy land that you've cooked up where we win, Kingsley doesn't go back on his word, and everyone - including me - gets given a magical pardon and the world is all rainbows and love hearts, what are you going to do?"

"In another life," Hermione said, playing along with his joke. "I would ... well, I don't know. Before any of this happened, I always thought that I'd work for the Ministry, but now I -"

Now, the thought of sitting behind the same desk day after day, filing reports and signing documents, getting paid to read and research it just ... it didn't appeal to her the same way it had when she was younger. After seeing so much death, she wanted to live. Wanted to do everything, not repeat the same motions day after day until she died.

"I'd travel," he said out of nowhere, derailing her train of thought.

"Travel?" she asked, the water still warm around her. "Where would you go?"

"Everywhere. I'd see everything. I'd do everything. Live what life I've got left in me to the fullest."

Suddenly, her mind went back to the pictures on his wall. The landscapes. The lakes. The mountains. Maybe the pictures on his wall weren't just pictures at all. Maybe they were more like windows, windows into another life, another life that he wished he could have, places he wanted to go, but didn't think he'd get to see.

"You could come with me."

"*Sbbbhbbh*," he whispered in a soothing tone. His hands disappeared under the water and bubbles and came to rest on the side of her ribcage, his fingers stretching down across her stomach. "Just relax and let the potions work their magic."

"You could have just given me the muscle relaxing potion. We didn't have to go through this whole debacle."

"I could have," he murmured into her hair, resting his chin on the top of her head, "but then I wouldn't have heard your reaction when I did this."

The hand on her stomach disappeared. She felt something move beside her thigh, Malfoy whispered something, and a second later, the water started to change. It was as though the water below became a reflection of the night sky. Suddenly, there were hundreds of little bright lights under the water, like dozens and dozens of little fireflies were dancing in their bath, their lights shining through the little gaps in the bubbles.

"Oh, my ..." her voice trailed off as she watched the lights flash and sway. "How did you..."

"It's something in the ingredients of the pink potion," he said. "They're not harmful, but they dissolve into your muscles and get rid of the tension there."

And sure enough, one by one, the little lights did just that. Hermione watched, fascinated as the lights swam and danced around the bath, and then, one by one, sank into an area of skin and disappeared, and then the healing properties really kicked in. Within a few minutes, she felt revitalised, like she'd received a deep tissue massage all over body. She was still a tiny bit sore in places, but she felt much, much better.

They stayed like that for some time, just watching the lights, letting the healing properties of the potions sink into their muscles. Every so often Malfoy would slowly trail his ringed fingers down the length of her arm or play with the strands of hair that were trying to escape her bobble, idly twisting and untwisting the curls around his index finger.

It was peaceful to be with him like that, to spend time with him when they weren't at each other throats. She dared to let herself think about how much she liked it, to have his strong arms wrapped around her, to feel his chest against her back and feel ... protected? Content?

They didn't say much to one another, but eventually she felt his lips against the shell of her ear and heard him whisper. "Something on your mind, cub?"

She sighed in contentment and leaned her head against the lid. Her eyelids fluttered closed, and she inhaled deeply, letting the scent of lavender and citrus fill her nostrils.

“Better?”

Hermione hummed in agreement but didn’t open her eyes.

“Good. Now, make room for me.”

Immediately, Hermione’s pulse thumped in her veins. Her eyes shot open, and she jerked to sit upright. “You’re getting in with me?”

Malfoy chuckled softly as he started to unbutton his trousers. “Well, it is my bath, and those are my muscle relaxers that you’re soaking up.”

It wasn’t as if the bath wasn’t big enough for the both of them. It was huge, much bigger than the one in her room and easily big enough for two people - maybe even three - it was just ...

She’d never been in the bath with a man before. She’d not even let him share her bed because she thought it was too intimate -

She looked away as Malfoy undressed, tried to keep her cheeks from flaming when the water stirred as he stepped inside, tried to keep her heart an even beat when he sat down behind her.

It didn’t matter that she’d seen him naked a hundred times, the moment she felt the inside of his thighs bracket her hips, her heart stopped, and when he stretched his long legs out so that they ran on the outside of hers, her heart picked back up at twice its normal speed. The obnoxiously large bath suddenly felt so much smaller with him inside it.

She felt incredibly awkward to begin with. Apart from his pale legs on either side of hers, she couldn’t see him. She still had her back to him. She didn’t know what to do. How to sit. Or what to do with her hands.

She hugged her knees to her chest and shuffled away, trying to put as much space between them as the bath allowed -

She jumped when she felt his cold hand close around her good shoulder.

“What are you-”

He very gently pulled her backwards until she was lying on his chest. Her shoulders were still submerged but her chin lay just above the surface of the water.

Hermione scoffed and splashed him again. “Come with you? Have you lost the plot?”

“Does that really sound so bad? Me and you. Alone. Traveling the world together. Fighting and fucking in every country until we’re old and grey. The thrill of it would keep us young for years.”

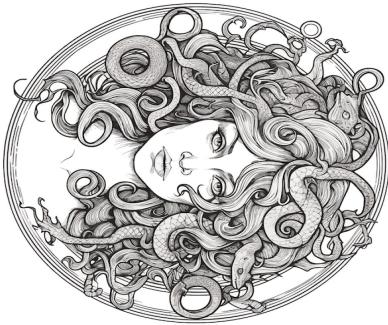
“We wouldn’t get old and grey - we’d kill each other within a few years.”

“Maybe.” He leaned closer, closing the distance between them, and it took everything in Hermione not to shiver as his cold hand found her knee, and slowly glided up her leg to rest on her hip. “But think of the fun we’d have.”

She shook her head and laughed, and although she smacked his hand away, she couldn’t help but smile with him. “In another life, I think I would have liked that.”

“Another life.” He smiled as he leaned back against his side of the bath. “Yes, in another life, maybe.”

# CHAPTER 46



He said the words so casually, even laughed and shook his head afterwards, like it meant nothing. But as he turned his attention back to the bath, Hermione's eyes drifted over the infamous scar, the one that started on his chest and spread out like a crack in a marble statue, the one that trailed across his shoulders and wrapped around his collarbone like vines, stretching to reach the base of his throat.

The beautiful imperfection, the chip in his armour that proved he wasn't nearly as strong and unbreakable as he liked others to think he was.

She'd already guessed that he was a little self-conscious about it, but it seemed that that particular scar ran a little deeper than the skin.

"Harry felt awful about it afterwards," she said as she took another step into his bathroom. "He didn't realise how powerful the curse was, he never meant to scar you like that."

Malfoy scoffed and ran his hand through the water, checking the temperature. "He got lucky, that's all. Caught me in a moment of weakness. I'd love to see him try and do it again now."

He stood from his perch beside the bath and held his hand out towards her. "Come on, Granger," he said, tilting his head towards the copper. "In you get."

A year ago, the idea of doing this was ludicrous. A year ago - fuck, even a few months ago - she'd taken great pleasure in the thought of slitting his throat open. A year ago, she hadn't bathed for God only knew how long because she didn't trust him, didn't want to strip naked and lower herself into scalding water because she didn't want to leave herself vulnerable like that, and now, a year after her capture, there she was. In the bathroom of the very man who'd captured her, about to take *his* robes off her body and get in a bath *he'd* run for her.

She summoned a bubble as she made the last few steps towards him, and after she'd scraped her hair into a very high - and very messy - bun on the top of her head, Malfoy helped her undress. He was very delicate with her, gently lifting his robe from her shoulders, easing her arms out of her own and careful not to irritate or knock her already sore muscles, and once her clothes were in an elegant pile on the floor, she got into the bath.

The water was hot, but not scalding. As she slowly submerged herself in the bubbles, she could feel the salts and potions he'd added, could practically feel them caressing her skin and burrowing into her muscles the moment she sank into the water.

**18th December**

"Draco cannot seriously expect me to live here? You wait until I get hold of him, I'll wring his pale neck until his face turns blue."

Hermione tried her best to ignore the petite blonde as she carried the last box into the abandoned farmhouse. Astoria had been on this rant from the moment Hermione had apparated the both of them here from Malfoy Manor, and in the forty-five minutes Hermione had been going back and forth between the two buildings, transporting supplies, Astoria had yet to take a breath.

over the ceiling, making it feel almost like a cave. There was hardly any light, if it weren't for the few dozen candles that he'd scattered around the room, she doubted she'd have been able to see anything at all.

Well, that explained the fire spell.

There were few furnishings inside; just a large black marble sink on the right-hand side of the room, a toilet, and a black wooden cabinet of drawers, all on opposite walls but all facing what was clearly supposed to be the main feature in the room, the huge copper bath that Malfoy was kneeling beside.

His shirt was off and discarded on the tiles. He had a few bottles on the floor beside him, and she watched as he picked one up, a little mesmerised by the way the muscles in his chest and bicep moved while he poured purple salt into the bathwater. Then she watched him do the same thing with another bottle, and then another.

“What are you doing?”

“Brewing Draught of Living Death,” he answered without looking up at her.

“What does it look like I'm doing, Granger? I'm running a bath.”

“Yes, I can see that.” She rolled her eyes. “But *why* are you running a bath?”

“Because you were right. There isn't exactly a potion or spell that can ease muscle pain entirely, but there are other remedies that can help.” He took the cap of the fourth and final bottle beside him. He poured the contents inside, and when the pink glittery liquid hit the water, a thin layer of frothy bubbles started to form. “These are potions that Astoria has been getting for me for years. I'm not sure of all the ingredients, but they help with the aches and pains I get.”

Despite the air being hot and thick with steam from the bath Malfoy was running,

the black stone tiles were icy cold under Hermione's feet as she stepped inside. “You get muscle pain too?”

He stopped what he was doing for a moment and looked up at her, like he wasn't

sure what to say next. There was a little more blue in his eyes than what had been there a few minutes ago. His Occlumency walls seemed to be coming down, whether it was deliberate or not, Hermione couldn't tell. “Yes,” he answered softly.

“Sometimes in my shoulders and lower back, but mainly in my chest. It seemed that, well,” as he spoke, one of his hands briefly - and tentatively - touched the infamous scar on his chest and tangled in his silver chain, “let's just say that sometimes I'm reminded of when Potter got the upper hand on me even when I have a shirt on.”

“I mean, honestly! *He comes from money!* The Dark Lord pays him for his services in land and gold, he's worth a fortune. The man is dripping in Galleons, and this is what he gets us as a safe house? Surely he can afford an upgrade! Slip someone a bit of money and get us somewhere nice?”

“That's not exactly how espionage works, Astoria,” Hermione chuckled as she set the last box down on the kitchen table, ignoring the way the ancient wood creaked in protest. “There isn't exactly a catalogue of possible safehouses we can flip through and pick whichever takes our fancy. We need to think strategically, and strategically, this place has everything we need.”

In truth, Hermione thought the farmhouse that Malfoy had found for their potential safe house was lovely. It was a lot smaller than the manor, but it only made it feel more homely, and it had everything they needed.

They needed security, four walls they could safely hide behind with windows big enough to keep a lookout in case anyone found them. The farmhouse had that. It was small, but solid. The floors were all panelled with pine boards that matched the beams that ran across the ceiling. There were plenty of windows, all scattered around the house meaning they could see threats coming from every angle.

They needed somewhere large but covered where Narcissa could sleep, and just outside, there was a metal overhang that was filled with hay and straw. The farmers that previously resided here must have kept their cattle and livestock inside of it. It was rusting in places, but with a little work, they could easily accommodate it into a nest for Narcissa to sleep in. Without magic, it would have been a tight fit, but Hermione knew enough extensions charms to make it work.

Narcissa usually slept outside under an open sky, but she was too easily recognisable, so the overhang was the perfect place to keep her hidden - and the number of cows and goats in the nearby field were sure to sway any aversion the dragon may feel about her new sleeping quarters.

They needed somewhere remote and out of the way somewhere enough distance from the cities that no one would find them, somewhere they could get lost. The farmhouse had that. It was in the middle of nowhere. Apart from the herds of animals, there was nothing else there. No buildings, no houses, just fields all around. Miles and miles of just green with no signs of machinery or civilization as far as the eye could see.

Yes, it was small and neglected. Yes it only had three very small bedrooms. Yes, the wallpaper was peeling back from the walls, and yes the kitchen and living room were dusty and cramped, but Hermione found it had a certain charm to it.

Her favourite part of the safe house, however, was the living room. It was small and in the corner of the house, with a stone curved archway instead of a door. There were two leather sofas and a matching armchair in the room and a bookcase that was filled an entire wall, stacked with titles she'd read before. But it wasn't the furniture that she admired - or the books, oddly - it was the fireplace. A huge, open space with a metal basket of logs next to it.

In another life, she could've seen herself living in a place like this.

If the war hadn't have happened, if things were different, this safe house was just the sort of place Hermione thought she would have lived in. Could just see herself peering through the large open windows in the morning, watching the sunrise from the comfort of her own bed. Could just see herself walking around the fields in the day and curling up in front of the fire at night with a book.

The farmhouse was rustic, but charming. Small, but earthy. It had a quality that seemed to have been lost in modern architecture. Like being in a little time capsule of the past, when things were simpler and people weren't glued to their television screens.

All it really needed was a thorough clean, a few licks of paint, and the furnishings updating.

Although the plan was working flawlessly, Malfoy was starting to get nervous. He felt the risk for his family was mounting every time they framed someone new, so, as a precaution, he'd suggested that Astoria and the elves get the safe house ready and start taking healing potions and emergency supplies over, just in case they were caught.

To his way of thinking, if they got the farmhouse ready now, if and when they were eventually exposed, they would already have everything they needed and could disappear and make their escape quickly.

Of course, Astoria had ignored almost everything he'd said and instead of bringing essential healing potions with her, she'd brought nothing but shoes and dresses.

Sensing that Astoria was probably going to have a small stoke when she saw the farmhouse, Hermione accompanied her to try and 'soften the blow', as it were, but

They never spent any time in his bedroom. Each time they were together, they always ended up fucking or fighting in obscure places - like the potions storage unit or on the kitchen island - or in Hermione's bedroom. They never, *ever*, spent time in his room. In fact, for the year that she'd been living in this manor, she'd only been in his room once, after Astoria's injury, and back then she'd not had the opportunity to really look at it. Take it in, see the parts of Malfoy's personality that he kept hidden from the rest of the world.

She hadn't had time to notice the various pieces of artwork hanging from the dark emerald walls last time. Hadn't noticed the dozens of portraits of landscapes and lakes and mountains, some frozen, some swarmed in sunlight while others were draped in a blanket of stars and moonlight, all from different corners of the world, all darted over his wall like windows to another, faraway place.

Looking at his bed, Hermione assumed that he slept on the right side - judging from the one lonely bedside table beside it - but the last time she'd been here, she hadn't noticed the books stacked on top of it.

She eyed the door he'd disappeared behind, and when she was confident that he wasn't watching her through the crack he'd left, she walked over to his bed and picked up the book that was sitting on top of the pile.

It was a book she recognised, *Prophecies, Visions and their meanings*, by Malcolm Fitzgerald. She remembered the title from the recommended reading list in Trewlany's Divination classes, remembered scoffing at the title and resisting the urge to throw the wretched book across the library.

She couldn't understand why Malfoy had a copy. He'd gone to great lengths to tell Hermione over and over again that he thought visions were bullshit and that it was a waste of time to try and decipher their meanings, and yet here, on his bedside table, at the very top of the pile, was a book on just that.

She frowned and crouched down to get a better look at the other titles. There was a book on caring for dragons, which she wasn't surprised to see. Underneath that was another on Dark Spells and slicing curses, again, given his preference of chopping peoples heads off during battles, that didn't surprise her. And at the bottom of the pile was that... a book of poetry?

The sound of Malfoy's voice muttering a fire spell caught her attention, so she quietly padded over to the mysterious door and peaked her head around the corner.

It was his private bathroom. The room was completely covered in shiny black tiles, the same ones that covered the entire floor crawled up the walls and stretched

he'd pulled away, but one of his hands gently weaved into her hair, and he used it to keep her in place.

He stared at her for a few seconds, as if he was deciding something, and then he sighed and let go of her. He climbed off the bed again and shook off his outer robes. He wrapped his dark robes around her shoulders like a blanket, covering the tears he'd made down the front of her uniform.

"Come with me," he said as he grabbed her wrist and pulled her to her feet.

The stubbornness in her reared its head on instinct, making her pull back slightly and plant her feet to the ground. "Where?"

He turned back to face her, and the hint of a smile threatened to break across his cold expression. "Are you ever going to trust me?"

"You're asking me that while your hands are *literally* covered in the blood of people you killed today?"

"Takes one to know one," he said, looking her up and down slowly, eying the blood on her torn robes, and lingering on whatever was drying in her hair.

Hermione couldn't help but glare at him.

Malfoy closed his eyes, tilted his head towards the ceiling and sighed loudly. He banished the blood from his robes and skin and cocked a brow at her. "Is that better?"

Intrigued, but not at all relaxed, she let him lead her through the Manor. One or two of the portraits tutted and hissed under their breaths as they made their way past them, but most just turned their backs or hid just out of frame until Malfoy and Hermione were on the other side of the corridor.

He guided her to his bedroom, and once they were inside, he let go of her wrist and disappeared behind another door on the far side of the room. Hermione stared at the unfamiliar wooden door, and after a few seconds of silence, she heard the familiar sound of taps being turned and water starting to run from the faucet.

What the fuck was he doing? Was he running a bath? For her? *In his room*?

No. No, that was a fucking ridiculous idea.

She clutched his robes tighter around her and looked around while she waited for him to come back.

nothing could have prepared Hermione for the disgusted - and quite frankly terrified - expression that had snapped onto the blonde's face when she'd first laid eyes on what could possibly be her new home, should things go array.

"Don't worry, we don't actually have to live here unless Voldemort finds out we've betrayed him." Hermione smiled when Astoria eyed the cobwebs gathering in the deep ceramic sink. "It's just a precaution."

"Well, I suppose we don't have to worry about Voldemort killing us off anymore - or even my blood curse - this '*precaution*'," the petite blonde snarled, crooking her perfectly manicured fingers, "is going to finish the job off for both of them."

"God, you're so dramatic. It's a safe house, not a bloody torture chamber."

"Are you sure?" Astoria scoffed. "Have you seen those sofa cushions? Not a torture chamber my arse - my eyes hurt just looking at them."

Hermione smiled and shook her head. She should have known that even espionage wouldn't change Astoria.

"This place is hideous."

"Do you really think so?" Hermione asked as she pulled her wand from her pocket and with a sharp flick, all the sealed boxes opened with a quiet snap. "I think it's lovely."

"It's cold."

"That's because the fire probably hasn't been lit in years. It'll be fine once we get it started."

"It's very small."

"Again, it's a safe house. It's supposed to be out of the way enough so that no one will find us, but just big enough to keep us and essential supplies safe. It's not meant to be huge and luxurious."

"Believe me, Hermione, I've been in castles and ballrooms across the country. No one could ever accuse this place of being luxurious." Astoria's red-painted lips curled in disgust as her eyes scanned the room. "It's tiny."

"It's cosy."

"It smells funny."

"No, it doesn't. You're just trying to pick fault with it because you don't like it."

Astoria's frown deepened, a tell-tale sign that she was running out of faults with the safe house. "The windows are crooked."

"No, they aren't."

"It's filthy."

"It's been abandoned for years. It just needs a little sprucing up."

"Or burning to the ground," the blonde muttered bitterly under her breath.

As they explored the rest of the house together and divided up the rooms, Astoria couldn't have looked more out of place if she'd tried, walking about in a tailored blue dress that probably cost more than the house itself, balancing on her gold platform heels and trying to avoid the dust on the floor as though it might burn her if she got a spec of it on her skin.

The faces she made as she walked around the cottage were hilarious. Her eyebrows would lift high whenever she found something displeasing, and she'd closed her eyes and looked away – practically shivering in disgust – when she'd seen the dust and grime that covered the bathroom tiles.

"And this will be yours and Blaise's room," Hermione said as she led Astoria into the master bedroom.

As predicted, Astoria marched straight to the wooden wardrobe and swung the doors open.

"This is it?" she gasped as she looked at the tiny space that was to hold her things. "Where's the rest of it?"

"Don't worry, I can cast an extension charm on the wardrobe so you can fit more inside it."

"But what about my shoes? Where will they live?"

"There's space on top of the wardrobe for about five pairs."

"Five?!" the blonde gasped. "Five pairs?! Oh please, oh please, Hermione, you sweet girl, tell me this is a joke!?"

When Hermione shook her head, Astoria flopped down on the bed with a vacant expression on her face.

"Oh, my -" she signed, clutching a hand to her stomach. "I need to lie down for a moment."

*her* hands, robes completely parted down the middle and baring scratches from *her* nails, lips a little swollen from *her* mouth and neck red in places from *her* bites.

He looked vulnerable, not dangerous.

He looked flushed.

He looked uneasy.

He looked ... like *her*. Marked by her a dozen different ways. Almost every inch of his pale skin that was exposed was marked or claimed by her in one way or another.

But why did she like that?

She'd never considered herself possessive before, and why should she? He wasn't hers. And she certainly didn't regard herself as his, but as she stared at him, taking in the marks she'd left, a side of her she didn't know existed almost purred with satisfaction.

"You didn't hurt me," she said before he'd even had the chance to ask. "I'm fine. I'm just a little sore."

It took a moment or two before he dropped his hands, and even longer before he crossed the room and lay on the bed beside her again. He didn't believe that she was alright, she could tell as much by the way his eyes flickered over her, looking for an injury that wasn't there.

"Seriously, Malfoy. I'm fine. I've just been overdoing it lately. I've probably just pulled something," she laughed weakly. She made a show of rolling her shoulder again, trying to convince him that she was fine, but as the sharp ache seared her muscles again, she winced, and there was no way he didn't notice it. "There are hundreds of healing spells and potions, but not one bloody thing for muscle aches and overuse. It's ridiculous, isn't it? You would think someone would have created a potion for that by now." She caught his face in her hands, but just as she tried to drag his mouth back to hers and kiss him again, he pulled away.

A sharp jolt of rejection crashed into her like a slap in the face.

Fuck - he'd never done that. She didn't know what to do. She'd never even thought of what she'd do if he rejected her.

Moving on instinct, she tried to kiss him again, trying to gloss over what'd just happened, slap a plaster over that awful feeling that had sunk into her stomach when

"Yeah?" he smirked against her skin. "Don't just tell me. *Show me.*"

She undid the front of his robes quickly and yanked them apart. She ran her hands over his neck and shoulders, the cold skin of his chest like ice on her overheated hands. Her hands slipped around his back, and she pulled him down on top of her, delighting in the sharp groan he made when she dragged her nails down his back.

"There's a good girl," he hissed.

"Shhhhh," she hummed against his mouth. "Less talking. More undressing, remember?"

Talking was the last thing on her mind at that moment. She was always buzzed after a fight, always on edge and a bundle of adrenaline, and the feel of dark magic in her veins just amplified that, a reminder of all the dark curses she'd used and the lives she'd taken. In a way, she was sort of thankful for it. Grateful, that she still felt little sparks of Voldemort's magic in her system after all these months, like little embers in a fire that roared brighter whenever she was angry or used particularly dark spells. She'd started to think of it as a sort of penance for the things he'd done. A little painful, uncomfortable, but not wholly undeserved.

She may have been killing for the greater good, but that didn't mean she should walk away unscathed.

Still, she supposed it was a good thing she had Malfoy. A good thing that she could lose herself in the feel of his hands and his body after battles and raids, that he took her mind off the effects until they passed and she forgot about them.

He caught the edges of her torn robes, but as he started to yank them apart, a sharp ache burned in Hermione's shoulder. She hissed through gritted teeth and flinched away from him.

In an instant, he was gone. His lips left her neck and his weight vanished from on top of her. She sat up and searched for him. He was standing almost halfway across the room, hands up - palms facing her - his expression was guarded and closed off, but, as they'd grown to do, his eyes gave him away:

He thought he'd hurt her.

He hadn't, but he thought he had, and the guilt was clear and bleeding into the grey of his eyes like ink in water.

He was trying to show her that it was an accident, that he wasn't a threat, but all Hermione could focus on was how .. unthreatening he looked. Hair all ruffled from

While Astoria contemplated what life would be like on a ration of stilettos, Hermione summoned the boxes the blonde had brought with her and started to shuffle through them.

"If we do end up here, we'll be fugitives, Tori - you're hardly going to be walking down cawalks, so why do you need so many shoes?"

"Just because we're fugitives does not mean we have to dress like heathens."

"So Malfoy asked you to bring potions and knives and you brought ..." Hermione whistled as she pulled the highest pair of silver platforms she'd ever seen out of the box. "These? If we're attacked, what good are these going to be?"

Astoria reached out and snatched the sparkly shoes from Hermione. "You just let me worry about that, and no more negative energy around my shoes. It will make them sad."

Again, Hermione rolled her eyes. "You know Malfoy is going to be furious with you for ignoring him? Hell likely throw those out in the mud the moment he see's them?"

Like someone had threatened the life of her firstborn child, Astoria gasped and clutched the platforms protectively to her chest. "*Shhhhhh*, my babies will hear you!"

Luckily, Hermione had the common sense to pack the weapons and medical supplies, and as the pair walked downstairs to unpack those boxes, an almighty crashing sound erupted from the kitchen.

"Oh no! This is not good!" a voice squeaked. "Oh, dear! Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear!"

"Romy?" Hermione asked as the women re-entered the kitchen. "Is everything alright?"

"No! No, everything is not being alright!" the little elf sobbed. "Look at these pans! They is a mess! They will be taking hours to clean! They is not good pans for cooking! Not good at all!"

The look Astoria threw Hermione could only be described as snug. "See. *He understands.*"

After calming down a hysterical Romy - and after Astoria had a glass or two of the wine she'd sneaked in her suitcase to calm her nerves - they started cleaning the house together.

Hermione charmed a sweeping brush and mop to thoroughly clean the floors in every room and a duster to take care of the cobwebs, and while the charmed brushed did their jobs, Hermione went around the house and magically cleaned the curtains.

Romy cleared all the cupboards in the kitchen. He used magic to clean the plates and pans, and he scrubbed the cupboards, surfaces and dining table until they were sparkling.

Quinzel popped in while they worked, checking their progress and bringing them food and more of the essential supplies that they needed, and although she'd made little comments to begin with, while Hermione and Romy cleaned, Astoria sipped her wine and worked to make the farmhouse more homely.

Astoria couldn't use a lot of magic to help, with her condition even the simplest spells exhausted her, but she helped where she could. She asked Hermione to transfigure some of the many mismatched glass tumblers into vases, which she filled with the daises that were blooming outside and scattered around the farmhouse. She placed scented candles where she felt they were needed, plumped and rearranged the pillows in the living room, and added the finishing touches that made a house a home – all while wearing seven-inch heels.

By that evening, the four of them were exhausted, but the farmhouse was finally - in Astoria's opinion - 'less torture chamber like', and when Malfoy and Narcissa landed on the field just outside of the grounds, Astoria and Hermione dragged themselves back to their feet and went outside to greet them.

Astoria made sure to take her half-filled glass of wine with her.

"Malfoy," Hermione greeted. "Cissa. How was the flight?"

"It was fine," he answered. "We kept high in the clouds until we were just overhead to make sure no one saw us, but unfortunately it meant this one couldn't pick up any dinner on the way over."

Narcissa huffed and shook her head slightly, sounding awfully irritated.

"Well that isn't very good," Hermione greeted as the huge beast pressed her snout against her torso and nudged her gently, her way of saying hello. "I bet you're starving, aren't you? You poor thing."

Hermione had grown a lot more comfortable around the dragon over the last few months. She wasn't an idiot, a small part of her still recognised that the dragon was dangerous and could break her in half with a snap of her jaws, but it was just a small voice in the back of her head after all these months, easily ignorable.

He told her that they'd signed their death warrants the moment they'd raised their guns at her.

As they'd apparated back to his manor, she'd told him she wasn't trying to break out of the Hex, that it'd just happened, and he'd shut her up by pushing her against the wall and kissing her.

And that was what had led them here. Pressed against each other in her bedroom. Covered in blood and ash from the battle, covered in death yet clinging onto one another like a lifeline.

She wrapped one of her legs around his waist, and without her needing to tell him what she wanted, Malfoy hooked his hands under her thighs and picked her up. She wrapped her other leg around him and kissed him over and over again as he walked them across her bedroom.

Never breaking contact from her lips, he sat her down on the edge of the bed and kneeled in front of her, yanking the gold headpiece from her hair as he nipped and kissed her neck.

"You're so cruel," she whispered as she started to unbuckle his belt and trousers.

"I am."

"And ruthless."

"Yes."

"You're not even sorry, are you?"

"Me? Sorry?" he mocked. "For beheading the people who raised their guns at you? I think you're mistaking me for someone else." He stared up at her as he unzipped her thigh-high boots and peeled them down her legs. "What would I have to do," he kissed the inside of her thigh as he threw her boots across the room, and even through her trousers, she still shivered, "to get you naked underneath me, wearing only these boots?"

She leaned back on the mattress and braced herself up on her elbows, watching as he kissed up her leg, her hips, the parts of her stomach that were exposed, all the way up to her neck. "Maybe if you show some compassion for the people you needlessly butchered today, I might consider it."

Malfoy tutted and sighed dramatically, fanning his cold breath against the side of her face. "Shame. Another day, perhaps."

"God, I hate you."

"Yes."

"I can't believe you," Hermione murmured between kisses. "You went too far."

"No, I didn't." He pressed her against the wall and deepened their kiss. "He deserved everything he got."

"No," another kiss, "he didn't." She fisted her fingers in his hair and yanked his

body tight against hers, not caring if it hurt him, only that she needed him closer.

"You—" kiss, "—could have—" kiss, "—let him go."

"No, I couldn't."

"Yes, you could."

"No, Granger." He let go of her throat and wordlessly cast a slicing charm down the front of her Death Eater robes. He pushed his hand inside the fabric so he could palm and squeeze one of her tits. "He had to go."

"No, he didn't. He—" Hermione yelped as Malfoy pulled her bottom lip between his teeth and bit down. "Ouch!"

"How about you stop fucking talking," he growled, releasing her lip and moving to attack her neck, "*and start taking your clothes off.*"

She moaned and knocked her head back against the wall as he licked across the pulse in her neck. She felt dizzy, lightheaded, and it had nothing to do with the bump she'd received on her head in battle.

Oh God, this was so wrong. Half an hour ago, they'd been on a battlefield. She'd been under the Hex and casting Avada's as quickly as she could throw her arm while Malfoy and Narcissa disintegrated everything and everyone in their path.

She'd broken out of the Hex just as the battle had begun to draw to a close, come back to her senses as the majority of the Death Eaters had apparated away and four muggle soldiers had her backed into an alleyway, but rather than ruthlessly slitting their throats - like she would have done if she were still under the Hex's influence - she'd tried to Imperio them to 'play dead' and hide until the battle was over.

But, of course, Malfoy didn't want to take chances like that. He'd quickly killed the soldiers and started screaming at her to be more careful.

She told him that there were no witnesses, that most of the Death Eaters were already gone and there was no reason for him to kill the muggles.

She still hated flying on her back to meetings with the Order, but she'd grown to appreciate Narcissa. Grown to recognise the intelligence behind her glowing red eyes, and the heart behind her warm scales. Yes, she was a beast, but she was sentient, she had a personality. She could be dangerous, but she could be gentle too. She had a soul behind her teeth and claws.

Just like someone else Hermione knew.

"Well, we'll fix that, won't we? You're going to love it here," Hermione said as she ran her hands underneath Narcissa's scaled chin, finding the sensitive spot she'd discovered the dragon liked to be petted. "There's a field just over there," she jutted her chin towards the East, "with herds of horses and cows and goats. You can have midnight snacks anytime you want."

The dragon purred and leaned into Hermione's hands, too distracted to react at all when Malfoy slipped off her back and landed on the grass.

Out of the corner of her eye, Hermione could see a small smile cracking the edges of his features. "You're getting so good with her," he said quietly. She swore she heard pride creeping into his voice. "No one would believe that you used to be terrified of her."

Astoria kept her distance and nursed her wine, silently observing the pair, trying - and failing - to hide her grin behind the red liquid in her glass.

Hermione and Malfoy smiled at one another before he levitated the trunks he'd brought with him off Narcissa's back and gently put them on the floor.

"Do you need help unpacking your things?" Hermione asked, but as she dropped her hand, Narcissa nudged her warm snout under her elbow to encourage her to continue. "We've finished getting the house ready. Your room is on the ground floor."

Malfoy's expression hardened. "That was supposed to be your room."

"There are only three bedrooms," Hermione answered, shaking her head slightly. "Blaise and Astoria have the master—"

"And that room has the biggest wardrobe," Astoria snapped, suddenly not so silent anymore now wardrobe space was on the table. "So if you want it, you'll have to fight me for it."

"Theo will have the guest bedroom, and I figured you'd want to be on the ground floor - seeing as it has the biggest window to keep a lookout and you'd be closer to Narcissa, so I'll sleep on the sofa in the living room."

"Granger," Malfoy growled towards the sky. "Honestly, woman, I picked that room for you."

"It's already arranged so there's no point in arguing with me," Hermione interrupted with a smirk. "There's no other way around it."

"Well, that's not strictly true," Astoria offered, and Hermione didn't have to look at her to hear the smile in her voice. "The two of you could share a room. Just a thought."

Hermione's smirk fell.

The wind picked up considerably, howling and biting across everyone's skin like blunt, icy little knives.

"The two of you should get inside," Malfoy said. "I'll be with you in a minute. I need to make sure Narcissa has something to eat first."

"I can take care of that," Hermione answered quickly, almost like it was a reflex. "You go inside."

Malfoy cocked a silver brow and smirked at her. "Really?"

"Yes, I'm sure. I'll take her to the fields with the horses."

The sound that vibrated from the dragon's throat let everyone know that Narcissa thought that was a marvellous idea, and it was apparently the only bit of confirmation Malfoy needed.

He nodded thanks to her before he linked arms with Astoria and escorted her inside. They chatted while they walked together, but the moment they were in the kitchen, he released her arm and hastily made his way to the window.

"So, how many pairs of shoes did you bring?"

Although he'd started a conversation with Astoria, Malfoy wasn't looking at her, wasn't even facing her. His eyes were far away, watching Hermione pet and talk to the dragon through the kitchen window.

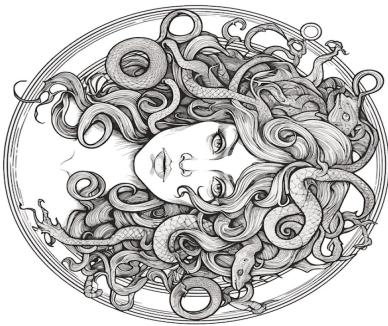
"Not nearly as many as I wanted to - but Hermione said she was going to cast an extension charm on my wardrobe so I could fit more in."

"Mmmmm," was all he hummed in response, clearly not listening.

"I brought loads of dresses," Astoria said, testing a theory.

"Did your?"

## CHAPTER 45



### IN ANOTHER LIFE

**16th December**

"Did you really have to break that muggles arms like that?"

"Yes."

"And behead that other one?"

"Yes."

A cold hand gripped the small of her waist the other closed around her throat, keeping her pinned in place while his lips and tongue fought with hers.

"And that last soldier?" she asked, trying to keep her voice a snarl, acidic, but hearing the malice die through her breathlessness. "Was killing him really necessary?"

As the cathedral stopped shuddering, everyone was silent. The only sound was Voldemort's heavy, furious pants. He stared at everyone in the room in turn, chest heaving, unicorn blood still dripping from his chin and evil in his eyes. He looked furious, murderous, fucking blood-hungry, and absolutely off his rocker.

The Dark Lord was losing it. Falling apart in both body and mind. It was a fucking beautiful thing to see, and for the first time in his life, Malfoy hoped that there was an afterlife, just so Daphne could see what Voldemort had been reduced to in her name.

"And jewellery."  
"That's nice."  
"And ballgowns."  
"Lovely."

"Didn't bring any of the medical supplies or weapons that you asked for," she went on, inching closer and searching for any sign she was irritating him, like this confession should have been. "They took up too much room in my trunk. It was either a life-saving medical kit, or my silver platforms, but you know how I feel about my heels."

Nothing. No reaction. No snarl or scalding of any kind. Not even a fucking irritated twitch of his brow. It wasn't until Hermione and his dragon disappeared into one of the fields that she somewhat got his attention back.

As she poured him a glass of red wine - and refilled her own - Astoria couldn't keep the smirk off her face.

"Thanks," he said as she handed him his glass and stood beside him. "What do you think of this house?"

"I absolutely hate it."

She watched his brows crease in the middle before his eyes flickered down to hers. "Then why are you smiling?"

"Because I know."  
"You know what?"

"The bookcase? The open fire? The huge empty walls that would look beautiful with a bit of artwork on them? Of all the farmhouses in the country, you picked this one because you thought she would like it. Didn't you?"

He was wearing his poker face, expressionless and giving nothing away. "What makes you say that?"

"Because if we weren't at war, it's exactly the type of place she'd want to live in."

#### 24th December

"I really don't want to go tonight."

A long, cold silence was the only answer Astoria received.

"Christmas Eve is supposed to be a happy time. A night you spend with family and those you love, and I've got to spend it at this stupid Gala. Drinking with people I wouldn't feel sorry for if Theo Avadat them right in front of me," she scoffed humourlessly, just one short puff of air and sharp jut of her shoulders before she shook her head. "Is it terrible of me that I wish I still had the strength to do it myself? Stupid blood curse. It is very inconvenient."

No one asked her why she felt like that, but she answered the question anyway.

"The Carrow's are the target tonight. They've been causing quite a bit of trouble for The Order, so Kingsley and Malfoy agree that they should go next."

The wind howled and roared in the dark sky, but it didn't drown out a response, because there was no one there.

"Alecto has been busy developing these awful ... smoke pellet ... things, I don't know exactly what they are, but they've been used against the Order quite a few times and the effects are gruesome. Make your lungs and organs swell to the point you literally explode from the inside out." Astoria had always been very animated when she spoke, waving her hands in one direction and another while she told the story. "Theodore said they used them at a raid yesterday. Said they made one poor soul's body pop like a balloon. Guts and bones flying everywhere apparently." Astoria shivered as she cut her arms out either side of her, acting out the scene Theo had described. "Of course, that's only what he said, and I suspect he'd added a little theatrical flair when he'd told me the story. You know what he's like."

Another long, eerie sort of silence.

"And Amycus is ... well, I'm not quite sure what he's been up to, but they come as a pair. We can't frame one without the other, and with Voldemort coming apart, we can't really risk him making weapons that could hurt the Order."

More silence, but it didn't really bother Astoria. She just spoke through it, told her story over it, let the sound of her own voice fill the silence, creating the illusion that she wasn't alone. Wasn't talking to herself like a complete nutter.

"Blaise and Theo are coming with me, of course, and while I'm with Amycus, Theo is going to wine and dine Alecto and see what she knows. He looks so lovely in the grey suit I've picked out for him; I hope you don't mind? I've made sure Blaise's suit is the same shade of emerald green as my dress so that we match and - oh dear, I just realised! I haven't shown you my dress yet!"

The Black Masks did as instructed, and while Bellatrix slit the unicorn's throat and gathered its blood in a phial, Malfoy stood and did nothing. He remained poised and dignified. Silently watching his master with his hands folded behind his back.

Even in his weakened state, he wouldn't have wanted to be pandered to or treated like a frail old thing, so Malfoy didn't.

He knew -above all else - that Voldemort hated displays like this. He thought himself powerful. Above silly things like death and weakness. That they were reserved for the unworthy. The months he'd been vulnerable before his revival, reduced to nothing more than a grotesque foetus like creature that relied on Nagini and a rat for survival were the most shameful in his life.

Bellatrix smacked Crouch's hands away and barged past him so she could feed Voldemort the unicorn's blood. It took three phials before he seemed more like himself again, and when he'd recovered somewhat, when he realised what he looked like and how frail he'd seemed moments before, he was enraged.

"Get off me!" Voldemort hissed as his strength steadily returned to him. "I don't need your help!"

He dug his wand into Bellatrix's stomach and screamed a Stupefy enchantment. Bellatrix was sent hurtling across the cathedral with the force of the spell. The wall shuddered and something cracked when she hit the East sidewall. Malfoy hoped it was her fucking spine.

"Do you hear me!?" Voldemort screamed. "I don't need your help! I don't need anyone's help!"

Crouch flinched away as Voldemort turned his wand on him.

"I don't need you to tend to me! What I need is the three of you, out there, finding those who have betrayed me!" He shot another curse, this one at the ceiling of the cathedral. "Go! Find them! Now!"

The dark green light exploded from his wand like a streak of lightning and shook the building violently. The mural bore most of the attack, and one of the gold beams that lined the ceiling came loose from its foundation and fell.

Malfoy and Bellatrix cast shields to protect themselves - Barty cast one around himself and their master - and while they were untouched by the falling rubble, the Black Masks were not so quick. They were crushed instantly under the weight of the beam.

# CHAPTER 48

by himself. He'd most certainly had help. As far as the eye could see, everything was normal, but the eyes couldn't detect the tension in the air. Eyes couldn't see past the gentle jazz music and sense the tension and suspicion. Eyes couldn't see past the forced smiles the guests wore and feel the mounting unease that filled the room like poison.

Draco had told her that Voldemort had encouraged this event to go ahead. He wanted to cast the illusion that everything was normal, that he was thriving and there was nothing to worry about. He wanted his followers distracted, drunk on glittering parties and champagne flutes so they didn't see the chaos and anarchy that was going on within the inner circle. And as the guests mingled and socialised around her, Astoria nursed her gin martini at the bar and watched.

Theo was already with Alecto. It'd been far too easy for him to charm her into having a drink with him in private. She'd had a thing for him for years, used to ogle at him from across the table in the Death Eater meetings and volunteer to go on missions with him. However, as soon as Daphne had noticed her obsession, she'd quickly stamped it out.

Years ago, Alecto had tried to grab Theo's hand when she thought no one was looking, Daphne had seen, and politely told Alecto that if she ever touched him again, she would cut off the offending limb - and anything else she tried to touch Theo with.

Alecto had stayed far away from Theo after that, but her resentment for Daphne had only grown, and she'd been all too vocal about her approval to execute Daphne - 'the traitor' - all those years ago.

Astoria just hoped Theo had the restraint to search her memories like they planned and not kill her on the spot, even if it was what she deserved.

Blaise had popped off to speak to Yaxley a few minutes ago, and while Astoria had intended to keep an eye on Amycus, to wait for him to get to just the right level of tipsy before she made her move, she'd hardly paid him any attention.

Instead, she'd been mesmerised watching Barry Grouch Jr and his dolls.

He'd brought three girls with him. They were all exceptionally young and so gorgeous that they pulled the eyes of every Death Eater in the room. The first one Astoria noticed was a petite blonde with blue eyes and a full thick fringe that she kept trying to hide behind. Her hair was curled to shoulder length and she wore a shimmery pink dress and diamonds around her neck. The second girl she saw had blue eyes and fiery red hair that was curled to perfection and trafted all the way down

This Gala was just as beautiful as all the others Astoria had been to. Littered with men wearing their finest robes and women in their most lavish jewellery, showing off the wealth their service to the Dark Lord had afforded them. The walls were just as filled with laces tapestries, vases just as overflowing with exotic flowers and tables just as filled with expensive champagne.

As far as Gala's went, Astoria thought Yaxley was doing an alright job of hosting, although she recognised that the décor was far too elegant for him to have chosen

to her hips. She wore a bright scarlet dress with a deep V on the front that left nothing to the imagination. And the final girl was tall, much taller than the other two. She had shoulder-length brown hair, brown eyes, high cheekbones and full lips. Crouch had dressed her in a one-shoulder black dress, and although she looked nothing like her, she was the same tall, lean build as Daphne had been.

It was vile to watch how Party treated them, but no one else seemed to really take notice. They got him drinks when he snapped his fingers. They sat on his lap when he told them to and kissed him when he said so, and they all looked at the floor whenever Crouch spoke to someone else, expressions as dead as their eyes.

They were all beautiful, but it was a sad beauty. Lifeless attractiveness. The same type of beauty that could be found on mannequins in shop windows. They didn't glow or smile, they looked empty. Empty little dolls that Crouch had the strings to, puppeting their lives just as he'd puppeted Daphne's execution.

"She's not with them." Astoria didn't have to turn around to know that it was Theodore. "He never brings the Mustang with him anymore."

He ordered himself a whiskey - and another gin martini for Astoria - and she heard the barstool beside her creak as he sat down.

"I know. I've only ever seen her that once," she said as she downed what was left of her drink and reached for the fresh one. "You don't think he killed her for trying to talk to you, do you?"

Theo took a healthy swig of whiskey before he answered her question. "No, he said she was his favourite. He likes her too much to get rid of her." Another swig drained the last of the glass, and after he put the empty tumbler back on the table, he signalled the barman for another. "Although I don't necessarily think that's a good thing."

Astoria shivered slightly. Her stomach churned in disgust, and she attempted to settle it with another sip of gin. "Poor thing is probably better off dead. They all are."

A few minutes later, Blaise pulled himself a stool beside his wife and ordered himself a drink. He kissed her cheek as he sat down on the other side of her, and they made idle chit chat and took bets on which room Hermione and Malfoy would fuck in that night whilst they waited for Amycus to down a few more drinks.

Astoria had been just about to make her move, when she spun on her chair and bumped into the last witch she ever expected to see at one of these Galas.

He took his wand out and cast another Lumos charm as he took the gift from her. He tried his best to hide it, but she saw the way his eyes widened when he took the gift, and she heard the way his breath hitched slightly when he pulled back the silver-blue wrapping paper and saw what was inside.

"Is this ...?" he asked, his voice trailing off as he stared at the simple wooden picture frame in his hands.

"The northern lights?" she answered, smiling. "Yes. I thought it might be a nice addition to the pictures on your bedroom wall. I've always wanted to see them. It's one of the first places I'd want to visit when the war ends."

His eyes flickered up to hers for a brief moment. "Did you paint this?"

"Yes."

His eyes drifted back to the picture in his hand. He ran his fingers delicately over the glass, his touch was feather-light, barely there, like he was scared he might crack the glass with anything other than the faintest touch.

He opened his mouth and then closed it again. She'd never seen him at a loss for words before, and she never expected he'd be rendered speechless by something so simple.

"Thank you," he whispered after a few moments. "This is the most thoughtful gift anyone has ever given me." He looked up at her again. He caught her hand in his own, and holding it just as carefully as he'd run his fingers along the glass frame, he brought the back of her hand to his mouth and kissed her knuckles. "You always manage to surprise me."

"Why are you so surprised by a simple act of kindness?"

He scoffed and lightly squeezed her hand in his. "Maybe it's because I feel like I don't deserve it - least of all from you."

is getting on and how much Theo misses her, and then I pour a dribble of whiskey on her headstone and leave.”

“Why the whiskey?” she asked, brows quirking in intrigue.

“Because when we were teenagers, Theo, Daphne and I used to break into my father’s supply and steal it.” She heard him laugh bitterly in the darkness, saw the flash of perfect white teeth in the little light she had. “We’d sit under his desk in his study, hiding, and pass the bottle between ourselves until we got caught or one of us threw up.”

Hermione couldn’t help but laugh at the image that popped into her mind. She could just see the scene he’d described; Daphne, Theo and Draco, barely teenagers, sneaking through the dark halls of the manor, arms crawling across the expensive carpets to try and sneak into Lucius’s study undetected, giggling like idiots and noses crinkling in disgust as they downed the expensive spirit.

“Do you ever talk to her about me?” she asked as she passed the bud back to him. She wasn’t finished with it. She hadn’t even taken another drag, she just wanted to see his face again.

“Ah,” he smiled a little after he took another drag, eyes crinkling at the corners slightly. “Well, that’s between me and her, I’m afraid.”

Hermione smiled back at him, but she wasn’t sure if he could see it. “Where’s all this come from?” she asked. “Why are you telling me all of this?”

He shrugged and placed the bud back between his lips. “Didn’t we agree to be honest with each other from now on?”

They had, that day in the bath, but Hermione had just assumed that their little truce would end when the bubbles had dissolved and the bathwater had eventually run cold. Apparently, in his opinion, the pact was a little more binding than that, and she didn’t see a reason to argue.

“Well, in the spirit of being honest with each other,” she whispered, reaching into her pocket. “I have another agenda for seeking you out tonight. I’ve brought you something.”

Through the little light from the cigarette, she saw suspicion dance in the grey that was left in his eyes.

Hermione pulled the small rectangular parcel out of her pocket and handed it to him. “Merry Christmas, Draco.”

“Sorry, deary. Didn’t mean to startle you.” The shrill, God awful sound of Bellatrix’s voice had always gone through Astoria. Always made the hairs on the back of her arms raise and made her stomach knot nervously, and coupled with the way she flashed her rotten teeth, Astoria had to work extra hard to keep the smile on her face.

“Bellatrix. Party,” Astoria greeted warmly. All smiles and politeness, all fake and practised. “How lovely to see you both.”

Bellatrix looked like she’d fought to get into the Gala, quite literally like she’d had to brawl at the doors to force her way inside. She was wearing a low cut black dress that looked like it was at least twenty years old and would have been much more at home in a rubbish bin. Her nails were long and as discoloured as her teeth, and the wonders of a comb were lost on the infamous female Demon Mask, and apparently, so were glamour charms.

“Why, Ms Greengrass, you are a vision,” Party chuckled, smiling in a way that Astoria supposed was meant to be devilish and handsome, but just made her want to wretch instead. “You make my girls look like the back end of a Grindylow.”

Crouch Jr was flanked by the three dolls he’d brought with him, and Astoria noticed the way they all flinched slightly, as if it were a crime to be less beautiful and appealing to Crouch than another woman was.

“You’re too kind, Crouch,” Astoria answered, nodding her head in thanks even though she’d much rather punch him in the throat. “But how could you say such a thing? The ladies you’ve brought with you are beautiful. And it’s Astoria Zabini, now,” she said, holding her hand up and letting the diamond on her ring glitter in the lights. “Remember?”

“Of course, how silly of me to forget.” Crouch Jr licked his bottom lip and grinned wickedly at her. “Although, I’m not sure why you changed it. Greengrass suited you much better. So much prettier.”

Although Astoria kept the sweet smile on her face, the way Crouch Jr looked at her made her skin crawl. His beady eyes raked over her, lingering on the parts of her legs that her dress left exposed. She instantly wished she’d worn a floor-length gown rather than a knee-length one. He didn’t try and hide the fact that he was ogling her, either, despite her overprotective husband standing right at her side.

“Careful, *Jf*,” Blaise said, wrapping his hand protectively around her waist. “Try and charm my wife whilst I’m stood beside her again, and I may just have to put you in your place.”

"Careful, Zahini," Crouch responded. "Talk to me like that again, and I might just take your wife for myself."

Theo was deadly silent from his stool. Bellatrix cackled loudly and sipped her wine, crazed eyes flickering between the men.

Blaise had never been one to brawl in public, but everyone knew Astoria was the exception to that rule, but just as she'd been sure her husband was about to throw the first punch, Blaise stood and hooked his arm through hers. "Crouch. Bellatrix. I'm going to need my wife back for a moment, so please, do excuse us."

Astoria nodded the pair goodbye and let her husband guide her away. He smiled down at her and chatted animatedly as he pulled her through the crowd, the image of calm and ease, but as soon as he'd pulled her into a private room, his expression changed completely.

"What's the matter?" Astoria asked.

Blaise checked every corner of the room and cast a silencing charm before he would speak. "The Dark Lord is calling Theo and I."

Astoria felt the practiced smile drop from her face. "No, we can't leave yet! I haven't talked to Amycus!"

"There's no time for now. Darling, I can't leave you alone here and I can't keep him waiting..."

The sound of the door creaking open snapped Blaise's mouth shut.

"Relax, it's only me," Theo whistled as he peeked his head through the gap. "But we need to *gooooo*."

"Get inside and shut that door," Blaise snapped. "Now!"

Theo rolled his eyes but for once, did as he was told. "Alright. Sorry *mum*."

"I can't leave until I've talked to Amycus," Astoria started. "The two of you should go to Voldemort, I'll stay here and..."

"Absolutely out of the question," Blaise interrupted, his eyes widening in horror. "You can't expect me to leave you here..."

"I'll be okay..."

"No. If you get caught and I'm not here to protect you..."

"Mate, she'll be fine," Theo hushed, crossing the room and patting Blaise's shoulder. "She's a big girl. We were running this hustle for years by ourselves and

Losing his parents - his mother especially - had hurt him immeasurably, but losing Daphne had destroyed him and everyone else that remained in Malfoy Manor.

Daphne would have thought this was daft, you know," he suddenly said out of nowhere.

Hermione's brows furrowed as she stared at him through the darkness. "She would have thought what was daft?"

"This," he said, gesturing to himself and then the headstone. "The way we're all so attached to this grave even though she's not buried here. If she could see us, she'd shake her head and say that we've all lost the plot. She'd say "*Life is for the living and you're wasting it by sitting next to a piece of bloody muck?*" She'd say, "*You want to honour me? Then go and drink whiskey until you can't see and dance on the tables until you can't feel your feet!*" Daph loved life, was always the life and soul of every party, and she'd slap us if she could see how miserable we all are without her."

He laughed bitterly to himself and shook his head, but there was no humour in his voice.

"She'd think it was silly the way we all dote on this grave, but honestly, this piece of rock is the only thing that makes any of us feel connected to her anymore," he whispered, eyes heavy and on the empty headstone below. "Theo brings it gifts every day because that was the way she was in life, always perfectly put together. And Astoria honours her with the material things. Daph loved clothes and shoes, so Astoria visits her grave every day and gives the bloody headstone a fashion show. It's ridiculous, but we all do what we can to keep her alive, even if it's just in our own heads."

"And what do you do?"

He turned in his chair slightly and even though she couldn't see them, she could feel his eyes on her. "Just... sit and talk to her."

"About what?"

Malfoy put the cigarette bud to his lips and inhaled. "Sometimes I read to her, just little extracts from books that I think she'd like or poems I think she'd enjoy." He paused to take another drag, and as he exhaled a thick stream of smoke, he passed the cigarette to Hermione. She could see his expression softening each time it was illuminated in the cigarette's embers. "But mostly I tell her about the things she's missing. I update her on what's been happening on missions, I tell her how Astoria

Hermione's eyes snapped down to find Malfoy staring up at her. He had his wand in his hand and had wordlessly cast a Lumos charm so she could see him. Perhaps he thought it would be easier to reason with her if he could see her reactions, she didn't know, but it meant she could see him too. Thick streaks of blue were breaking the grey in his eyes, like light bolts of lightning against a dull sky.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, and she felt his hand tighten around her wrist like he thought she was going to bolt if he didn't keep an iron grip on her. "I didn't mean that, I'm sorry. Please, stay - stay with me."

"Why should I if you're just going to speak to me like shit?"

"Because I don't want to be alone tonight."

There was no hesitation in his voice, and something about his eyes and the way he said those words ... undid her. Doused whatever fiery anger had been sparked by his temper.

"Alright," she answered after a moment. "But if you speak to me like that again, I'm gone. Understand?"

Malfoy nodded, accepting the terms, but he didn't let go of her wrist until she sat back down beside him.

Hermione folded her arms across her chest, but when he held the whiskey bottle out to her, a peace offering, she snatched it from him and took a long sip.

Malfoy took another cigarette out of his pocket. He lit it with his wand and then put the tool back in his coat, making the only source of light the cigarette end again.

Despite his apology, he wasn't quite ready to speak for another few minutes, so they didn't. Instead, they sat in silence, wordlessly trading the whiskey bottle and cigarette between each other, smoking and drinking side by side, and it wasn't until the bottle was almost halfway to being empty that he finally broke the silence.

"I am sorry, Granger," he said. "I didn't mean to snap at you the way I did."

"I know," she sighed. "And I'm sorry today is so difficult for you all. I can only imagine how painful it must be."

She saw Malfoy nod out the corner of her eye. She couldn't see his face, but she could tell he was still staring at Daphne's grave.

Listening to him now, she couldn't help but feel sorry for him. He and Daphne may not have been related by blood, but they were as close as brother and sister.

she was alright whenever I left her on her own. She knows what she's doing. She doesn't need you to protect her every waking moment of the day."

*Thank you,* Astoria mouthed to Theo.

He smiled and winked back at her.

All the men around the manor coddled Astoria, they had ever since they'd learned about her blood curse, and it'd only gotten worse after Daphne's death, but Theo was a little different. He didn't suffocate her like Blaise sometimes did, and he didn't treat her like she might break at the slightest touch like Draco. If she told Theo that she was strong enough to do something, he believed her. He always let her do what she needed to do, and believed that she had the strength to do it.

It took a few more minutes of discussion - and Theo being forced to hand over the dagger in his robes to Astoria for protection *and* a 'panic button' charm being placed on the perfume bottle in her bag, meaning that Theo and Blaise would be alerted if she needed them - before Blaise was persuaded to leave her. She walked the pair of them to the entrance and waved them goodbye as they Apparated away, and for the next hour, she enacted the plan by herself, just as she had done many times before.

Amycus was all too easy to charm. The moment she'd handed him a gin martini - the cocktail she'd learned was his drink of choice through her quiet observations - he was putty in her hands, and within twenty minutes of getting him into a private room, she had him spilling invaluable secrets as though they were nothing more than tit bits of gossip, including a new base in Kent that Voldemort was in the process of setting up.

When she was eventually finished and he was sleeping off the hangover Astoria had helped to induce, she obliterated him, leaned him - somewhat comfortably - in the armchair he'd fallen asleep in, and made her escape.

She slipped back into the party effortlessly, grabbing a champagne flute from a nearby waiter and socialising with the first Death Eater she came into contact with, making sure her presence was known. Waves of nausea and fatigue washed over her throughout the night- a side effect of her blood curse and the Obliviate she'd used to erase Amycus's memory of their interactions. Her hands shook, but she chased the tremors away with champagne and gin. She was downing her fourth glass and discussing the latest fashions with Rabastan's wife, when she felt cold breath on the back of her neck.

"Why don't me and you go somewhere a little more..." the low voice hushed. "Private, Ms Greengrass."

Astoria turned slightly to see none other than Crouch Jr leering down at her. Crouch gave Rabastan's wife a look, and she nodded her goodbye and promptly left the pair alone.

"I already told you, It's Zabini now," Astoria corrected him, again, knowing that he was trying to irritate her intentionally. "And no, thank you. I'm fine."

"One drink won't hurt, love," he teased as he leaned in closer. His breath reeked of cheap liquor, it took considerable effort for Astoria not to wretch right then and there. "Come with me, Yaxley keeps the real gin in his private quarters."

"Thank you, but again, I'll have to pass."

Crouch draped a hand around her shoulder and pulled her into his side. "The room is this way."

"I said no." She tried to elegantly wriggle out of his grasp, but Crouch's long fingernails dug into her arm.

"Don't be like that, one drink. I promise you'll enjoy yourself. I'm much more fun than your husband."

Astoria cocked a brow as she stared up at him. "Do you understand the meaning of the word, '*no*?'"

Crouch licked his lips and again, his eyes flickered down to her legs. "Not when it comes from the mouth of something as pretty as you, no."

Although Astoria's heart was in her throat, beating at what felt like a million miles an hour, Crouch wouldn't have known. To look at her, Astoria was calm and perfectly composed.

It was a bad idea to be alone with Crouch, but it wasn't like she had the strength - or the magic - to fight him off, and even if she did make a scene and ask for help, she doubted anyone would have interfered. After Daphne's 'betrayal', the Greengrass family's reputation was tarnished, and Crouch had been considered a bloody war hero since he'd helped resurrect Voldemort.

Her presence at these events was merely tolerated. Yes, men liked to look at her and women liked to pick her brain about the latest fashions, but that was it; it wasn't real, they didn't like her any more than she liked them. Her only real friends were those who lived in Malfoy Manor, and if it wasn't for her husband's rank as Gold

"How long have you been out here?" she asked, trying to draw a conversation out of him. As Hermione blew the smoke out her mouth, she flicked the ash off the end.

"A while." His voice was clipped, almost monotone, no real feeling behind it.

"How long is a while?"

"A while."

Hermione nodded and took another drag. "Did Astoria say what time she would be back?"

Malfoy rolled his jaw and leaned his head back against the chair, still not in the mood for conversation. "No."

"Do you think the Carrows will be easy targets tonight?"

"I don't know."

"What do you do when you come out here?"

"This," he answered, voice growing a little sharper, a little more irritated, a little more alive.

"Do you talk to Daphne's grave?"

"Yes."

"What do you talk to her about?"

"Granger," he hissed, finally looking at her again. "If I wanted to fucking talk to you about it, then I would. Alright? So either sit there quietly, or fucking leave me alone."

Hermione sat frozen in her chair for a moment or two, watching his chest heave in anger and his nostrils flare, and after a brief pause, searing anger shot through her veins. "Alright, have it your way then," she snapped as she dropped the expired bud to the floor.

She didn't care how upset he might have been, she wasn't going to be spoken to like that, not when she was only trying to help. She should have just fucking stayed in her room.

She sat up sharply from her chair, but just as she squashed the cigarette under her boot and turned to leave, an icy hand closed around her wrist.

"Wait!"

bud ignited, the embers casting just enough light to illuminate his face, and she was able to see him properly for the first time that day.

The stress was clear on his face, evident in the lines around his eyes and the tightness of his jaw. She could see in his eyes how tired he was. He looked like he hadn't slept in days, and his eyes were almost completely grey. He'd been occluding, heavily, by the looks of it.

"Why are you out here at this hour?" she asked. "Aren't you cold?"

He held up his other hand, the one on the other side and hidden in shadow. In the little light she had, she saw the outline of a whiskey bottle.

"Ah, nothing like Firewhiskey to warm your bones up," Hermione nodded, understanding. "Although I am a little offended that you've raided your father's stash, and have cigarettes, and you didn't ask me to join you."

She held out her hand for the bottle, and he wordlessly passed it over to her and took another drag of his cigarette. The whiskey was nice, it was the same brand she'd stolen from his father's supply once. She took three swigs before she handed it back to him.

Minutes later, he still hadn't spoken, still hadn't looked at her. He clearly wanted to be on his own, but something in his eyes told her not to leave him alone.

"When was the last time you slept?" she asked, and after a few seconds silence - when it became clear he still wasn't going to answer her, she added, "Because you look like shit."

His cold eyes finally flickered to hers. "Yeah?" Malfoy huffed, the exhale fanning smoke in her direction. "You look like a bloody Dementor, dressed all in black. All your missing is the hood."

His voice was hard and his eyes were dead, but at least she'd managed to get a reaction out of him. It was a start.

Hermione leaned into him slightly and inhaled some of the second-hand smoke.

Earth. Spearmint. Fresh parchment and smoke. It was so uniquely him, and she hated that it had become her favourite mix of flavours.

"Can I have a cigarette?"

He took another drag, slipped the cigarette out of his mouth, and offered her the end. She took it with greedy fingers and inhaled deeply.

Mask - and Draco and Theo's ruthless, murderous reputations - she probably would have been outcast from society years ago.

People were nice to her out of fear of what Blaise, Draco or Theo might do to them if they weren't - but Crouch didn't seem to share that fear. He liked to play games almost as much as Theo did, and she got the awful feeling that he'd been bidding his time for a chance to play with her.

She knew Crouch wouldn't kill her. He probably wouldn't hurt her physically, either; she doubted even he was brave enough to do that, but whatever reason he wanted to be alone with her for, it couldn't have been good.

Astoria looked around the room, and those around her averted their stares, brave enough to turn a blind eye to Crouch's behaviour now her bodyguards weren't here to protect her. She stared back up at Crouch, and although the smile on his face made a chill ride up her spine, she didn't see another option, and so, she went - somewhat willingly - with the man who'd done everything but slice the axe into her sisters back himself.

Blaise would have had a stroke if he knew what she was doing, but Astoria hoped that if she played along, if she humoured Crouch for half an hour, his obsession might die and he'd let her go.

And if the worst happened, she had the panic button to call the boys.

And Theo's dagger tucked away in her purse.

She let him guide her through the crowd and into a private room on the second floor. The walls were painted a deep red and the lights were dimmed to the darkest setting. There was a bar in the corner, fully stocked, and an obnoxiously large velvet sofa in the middle of the room. Crouch's dolls were already there, lined up against the wall and eyes cast down at the floor.

Astoria tried to quiet the way her heart hammered violently in her chest as he guided her to the sofa and urged her to take a seat. He walked over to the bar, and although his back was facing her, she heard liquid being poured and the clinking of ice against glass.

"I take it gin is alright?" he called over his shoulder.

"Yes, fine, thank you."

When he'd finished with the drinks, he flopped down on the sofa beside her and placed the two glasses on the table. He sat uncomfortably close to her and she jumped slightly when he placed a hand on her exposed knee.

"Your girls are all very lovely," Astoria said, trying to take control of the uncomfortable situation. "Why don't you tell me their names?"

"Their names?" Grouch scoffed, as if it was an outrageous thing to ask.

"Yes. What do you call them?"

Her fake interest in the girls seemed to do the trick, because, after a brief deliberation, Grouch got up and sauntered over to them. And Astoria could breathe a little easier when there was some much-needed space between them.

She put her clutch on her lap, the panic button within reach if she needed it.

"Well, I call that one," he started, gesturing to the blonde, "Angel."

Astoria smiled warmly at the girl. "Angel? That's unusual. Why did your mother call you that?"

Again, Grouch laughed loudly. Astoria noticed the way Angel and the brunette flinched at the sound.

"She can't speak, love," Grouch smirked. "None of them can, and her mother didn't call her Angel, that's what I named her when I got her."

Although Astoria smiled and nodded once, inside, she wanted to scream. She'd always known that Grouch was a vile man, the worst sort of person that could ever exist, but this? This was too much. It wasn't enough for him to dehumanize the girls by keeping them as slaves. It wasn't enough that he took away their rights, their interests, it wasn't enough that he crushed their spirits in every way imaginable by Merlin only knew what he did to them each night.

He gave them pet names as well, as though they were nothing more than dogs to him. Objects that he owed and had the right to rename.

"Why do you call her that?" Astoria asked, trying to keep Grouch distracted while she discreetly opened her clutch, the panic button getting closer.

Angel had been very still throughout the entire interaction. Her pale blue eyes were dull as she stared at her sparkly heels, but the moment Grouch's hand closed around her slim arm and yanked her to his side, her mouth dropped open in a silent yelp and her eyes snapped up.

And in the instant they locked with Astoria's, Astoria was frozen.

*Help me.* The words were so clear on the poor girl's face they might as well have been written into her irises.

safte house setting up more protections, Hermione had nothing to distract her from the truth that was staring her right in the face.

She missed him, was starting to crave his company when he wasn't there. She'd held out for as long as she could. She'd spent most of Christmas eve alone, busied herself with tweaking the mural in her room, willing herself to stay away and wait for him to come and find her.

But by eleven-fifty two pm, she was bored of painting, she'd bathed - alone - completely dried her hair, and had nothing else to take her mind off a pair of grey-blue eyes.

She used to hate his eyes. Used to fantasise about plucking them out and throwing them into an open fire, or putting a bullet right between them. But now, fuck - now she spent hours thinking about them.

About them watching her, the way they sometimes did when he thought she wasn't looking ...

What they might look like lit up by the fire in the farmhouse ...

How blue they might look when his Occlumency walls were completely down ...

She shouldn't have gone to him. He clearly wanted time to himself, and she should have honoured that - but when she'd glanced at the clock and read twelve-fifteen in the morning - Christmas Day - her decision was made.

Because whether he wanted her there or not, no one should be alone and miserable on Christmas morning.

She'd dressed quickly, grabbing a pair of leggings and a thick wool jumper and wrapping a long black coat around her body. She'd pulled on her knee-high boots, and after a quick glance in the mirror to check her appearance, she'd picked up the little parcel that was sitting on top of her vanity and left her room.

She'd found him immediately. She didn't bother searching the rest of the manor, she knew exactly where he'd be: in the Malfoy family cemetery, cigarette in hand and staring at a blank headstone.

She knew she'd find him there, because it was where he always seemed to gravitate whenever he had something on his mind.

"Are you alright?"

He didn't answer her. She watched him place the end of a cigarette in his mouth, and as he inhaled and pulled a deep drag of nicotine into his lungs, the end of the

He was sat on a fold-out wooden chair, wearing a long black coat that made the silver of his hair all the more striking. He was facing away from her, unmoving and still as stone.

At the sound of her voice, Malfoy turned slightly in his chair, the marble statue coming back to life. He watched her out the corner of his eye for a moment, and after a brief pause, he turned away.

Despite his coldness, Hermione wasn't discouraged. She picked a small stone up from the floor and transfigured it into a chair like his. She placed her chair close beside his - the wooden legs practically touching - and sat down beside him.

She hadn't seen him all day. Hadn't really seen anyone. Despite the festive period, everyone was in low spirits. She could feel it around the Manor. The elves seemed glum, Astoria had been unusually quiet, even Theo hadn't seemed in the mood for cruel jokes, and Hermione knew the reason why.

They were all missing Daphne.

The anniversary of a loved one's death always affected those left behind, Hermione knew that herself. She always felt the loss of her parent's death as it approached each year, but the festive period? That was different. That felt like splitting open an old wound, loss bleeding out from the cut and leaving her empty afterwards.

Last year, she'd been cooped up in her room so she hadn't noticed, but this year, the loss of Daphne seemed to be everywhere in the manor, her ghost like smoke that had clung to the walls and curtains and every inch of the estate. No one could see it, but they could feel it, taste the loss like bitter charcoal in the air.

It was after midnight and very dark outside, and despite being sat right beside him, she couldn't get a clear look at his face.

The clouds were thick and heavy, and even though the wind roared and howled around them with strength, they wouldn't part, wouldn't allow even a scrap of moonlight to sneak through the gaps, wouldn't allow even the tiniest crack in the clouds so no one could possibly be comforted by the stars above.

It seemed even the sky was mourning Daphne.

Hermione hadn't wanted to seek Malfoy out. She'd wanted to give him space, let him work through whatever he needed to on his own and find her when he was ready, but with Theo, Blaise and Astoria at the gala, and Romy and Quinzel at the

Help me.  
Help me.

It only lasted a moment. Astoria didn't know what Angel had been like before, if she was loud or funny, had no idea if she'd been an anxious girl before Crouch had taken her or if she'd been full of life, but she was incredibly meek now.

Angel was demure and skittish. She squeezed her eyes closed as Crouch licked the side of her face, but she didn't try and fight him off. She just froze, and when the ordeal was over, she relaxed and went back to staring at her shoes.

"I call her Angel," Crouch said, "because she's as pretty as an angel, and just as sweet as one. Aren't you, my dear?" He pulled the girl closer and buried his nose in her hair, and when he inhaled deeply, a grotesque sort of whistle echoing from his nostrils, Angel and the brunette flinched and looked away.

The girl with red hair, however, narrowed her eyes and scowled at the back of Barty's head, but when he turned around to grab her too, she was all smiles and sweetness.

"I call this one Chester," Crouch continued as he motioned her forward. "Found her after a raid in Chester. She was in a bar we'd destroyed, hiding under some tables with a crowbar in her hands, and I knew right then and there that I had to have her."

Chester reacted very differently around Crouch than Angel did. She pushed her way towards him, quite literally unhooked his claws from Angel's arms and shoved her backwards so she could nestle against him in Angel's place.

She looked up at Crouch affectionately. She kissed his cheek without him telling her to, and wrapped her arms around him of her own accord. In fact, whenever Crouch was looking at her, she looked the picture of happiness and loyalty, but the moment he looked away, the smile dropped and her true feelings showed. Her affection was all an act.

The persona of loving devotion was fake, like a character she'd created to keep herself safe. Chester clearly hated Crouch just as much as the others did - but whether Crouch was aware of that or not, were two entirely different things.

"And the last one?" Astoria pressed, jutting her chin out towards the last girl.

"What do you call her?"

The brunette flinched and stared at the floor.

"I call her Kitten," Crouch said. "She's ... new." That was the only introduction he gave Kitten. Didn't say anything more about her or try and pull her forward. Chester was keeping him too distracted to give Kitten the time of day.

Astoria tilted her head slightly and tried to catch Kitten's attention, to see if the same cry for help was reflected in her soft brows eyes as it had been in Angels, but she carried on looking at the floor, folding her arms around her body like she was trying to hide.

"Enough," Crouch smiled as he pried Chester's hands off of him. "There's plenty of time for that later. Take the other girls and wait outside for me. I want a moment alone with Mrs Greengrass."

"*Zabini!*" Astoria corrected in a snarl.

Chester shook her head and stomped her heel on the floor. She pouted when Grouch took her face in his hands.

"It's alright," he soothed. "It'll just be for a few minutes. Take the girls and stand outside. I'll knock when you can come back in."

Astoria's stomach dropped in terror. She slipped her hand into her purse, and very slowly started reaching for the panic button -

But when Grouch turned his back to her, Astoria's eyes flickered up and that's when she noticed.

Angel was trying - very subtly - to catch her attention. Her dull blue eyes locked on the two glasses briefly, and then she looked at Astoria again and gently shook her head.

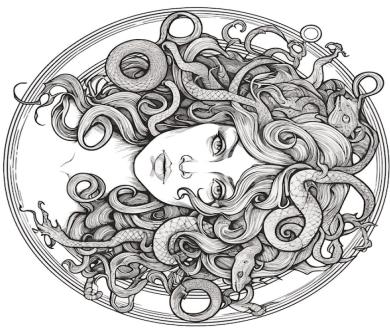
Astoria furrowed her brow in response and dipped her head slightly, jutting her chin towards the glasses.

Angel shook her head again and mourned - very clearly, *Don't Drink*.

Had Grouch slipped something in Astoria's drink? The more she thought about it, the more possible it seemed. She'd heard him make the drinks, but she hadn't seen him make them. He'd made them at the bar and he'd had his back to her, keeping the concoction completely out of her line of sight.

He could have easily put something in her drink, but he knew Theo and Blaise's reputations. He knew how protective they were of her and how much pain they'd put him through if he did actually hurt her. That alone should have been enough to keep Astoria - and her drink - safe.

## CHAPTER 47



### ALWAYS MANAGE TO SURPRISE ME

**25th December**

"I thought I'd find you out here."

Despite the pitch black outside, she knew it was Malfoy that she was looking at. She'd recognise him anywhere, his broad shoulders and strong arms were so distinctive to her now, even if his hair wasn't so striking, she'd know it was him or a stranger.

kissed the cold stone goodbye and dragged himself to his feet. "I love you. Merry Christmas, I promise, it won't be much longer now."

But Grouch wasn't just a slimy, power hungry, dog of a man, he was clever and crafty. "*Always keep an eye on that one,*" Daphne used to say about him, "*He's always up to something even when you think he isn't.*" And Astoria wasn't about to take chances with someone like him.

After Crouch had ushered his dolls outside - and locked the door behind him - he sat back down on the sofa beside Astoria.

"Now, that's much better." He smirked down at her as he rested his hand on her knee again. "Don't you think?"

Astoria smiled sarcastically as she grabbed Grouch's hand and sharply tore it off her leg.

Grouch scoffed and licked his bottom lip again. "Relax, it's only a hand on your knee. It's quite innocent - for now. What's a few lingering touches between old friends?"

"Barty," Astoria started, voice soft and gentle as a bird. "You can touch me with whatever you wish to, it's not like I could stop you, but you know that the three men I live with have quite the tempers, and if I ask them to, I'm sure they'd take great pleasure in removing any appendages that touch me without my consent."

Grouch's eyes widened slightly as he sunk back into the velvet sofa, giving her a little space, and with the first danger seemingly quelled for a moment, she moved on to the second.

"Would you mind closing that window?" she asked demurely, frowning and looking up at Grouch through her lashes. "I'm quite cold."

After all these years of espionage and slipping things into men's drinks that she shouldn't have, sleight of hand was second nature for Astoria. She just needed to distract him with something else while she worked her magic.

Grouch grinned enthusiastically and nodded. "Of course." And as he turned his back to her to close them with his wand, Astoria quickly - and silently - swapped his tumbler for hers.

Whatever he'd put in her drink, it took effect almost instantly. After a mere two sips of the drink intended for Astoria, Grouch started to slur, and a few minutes after the liquid had touched his lips, his body went limp, like all his bones had been liquified and there was nothing else left to hold himself up with anymore.

Given her illness, she didn't want to think about the effect it might have had on her. The results would have been horrifying.

As she scowled down at Crouch's face, years of anger and resentment boiled in Astoria's blood. All she could see when she looked down at him was the way he'd smiled at Daphne's execution. The way he'd licked his lips as her sister had been tied to the podiums and the way he'd cheered with thunderous applause when the axe had been brought down on her spine and her ribs had been torn open.

He'd already spat on the Greengrass name once, and that wasn't enough for him. Now, he wanted to spit on it a second time by doing -

No. She didn't want to think about why Crouch had spiked her drink. It made her feel sicker than she already felt. He may have been helpless now, but he was far from innocent.

"You just can't help yourself, can you?" Astoria snarled as she stood up. She

kicked his shin as hard as she could and watched him flop onto his side. "You have all those beautiful girls out there, and it still isn't enough for you. Is it? You still want more, you monster!" She shook her head and started ruffling through her clutch for the panic button. She wasn't in danger anymore, she just wanted to go home. She'd had enough, couldn't bear to look at Crouch's face for even another moment, and her fatigue was starting to get the better of her.

"So beautiful ... Greengrass," Crouch slurred under his breath, head rolling against the back of the sofa. "Look so much... like your sister ... but Daphne ... is so beautiful... even more beautiful... than you."

"*Was'* more beautiful," Astoria corrected with a hiss, not bothering to hide her resentment for the filth below her anymore. "Or have you forgotten the part you played in her execution?"

A horrid, drunken grin stretched across Crouch's thin lips. "So beautiful. So ... fiery."

"Is that why you had her killed?" Astoria couldn't stop herself. "Because she was fiery?"

Crouch tried to sit up, but his head flopped to the side.

Astoria scoffed and glared down at him.

He was pathetic, helpless, mouth hanging open and saliva starting to dribble down the side of his chin. She wondered how many times he'd done this to his dolls, and she had half a mind to leave the dagger on the coffee table for one of the girls to find. From the hate in Chester's eyes, she probably wouldn't have hesitated for a moment to slit his throat open.

When Theo was sure he was alone, he dropped his face into his hands, and after a deep breath through his nose, slid them into hair.

"Hi, baby," he said to her headstone as he crouched down in front of it. "I brought you something."

He pulled a knife from his waistcoat, and after he'd trimmed the stems and banished yesterday's bouquet, he started arranging the new flowers he'd brought.

He cleaned the teddy bear he'd brought her last week, replaced the expired orange candle with a fresh one, picked the silver bracelet that had fallen on the grass and draped it over the tight arch at the top of her headstone, then laid the flowers across the base, right where her date of birth should have been carved, and the date she'd died.

It took him all but a few minutes. He did this every day; it was so routine that he could have arranged her grave with his eyes closed.

"Look," he smiled. "I finally found you one."

He reached into his robes again and pulled out a plastic square; a child's toy made up of small squares of all different colours. Something that was cheap and tacky. Something she would have absolutely fucking loved.

A Rubix Cube.

"Taaaadaaa," he whispered hoarsely as he set the little thing down in front of her. "Hope you're happy. You have no idea how difficult that was to find."

He laughed humourlessly, taking in the smooth, cold lines of the stone. One day she'd have a real grave, he'd make sure of it. She'd have a beautiful headstone - no, no he'd find her a whole mausoleum and fill it with her favourite flowers and 80's records and plaster posters of her favourite bands and musicians along the walls.

He'd give her a resting place fit for a fucking queen, and then he'd lay right alongside her.

But for now, this was all he could give her.

He closed his eyes and pressed his forehead against the cold stone, inhaling deeply, always disappointed that he could never replicate the way she smelled by the candles he laid out for her.

"Fucking hell, I miss you, baby. You have no fucking idea how much I miss you."

He inhaled through his nose a final time, his way of steadyng himself, before he

He walked towards her, and after he'd put the flowers on top of Daphne's headstone, he pulled his wand out from his suit jacket and very gently cradled the back of Astoria's head with his free hand.

Astoria couldn't help but smile as he muttered the Glamour charm she'd taught him years ago. Because as marvellous and ferocious as he was, Theodore Nott was the only wizard Astoria knew who needed to use more concentration into a simple charm to fix her smudged make-up than he did any torture or killing curse.

"There you go," he said when he was finished. "You look beautiful, Tori."

He let go of her head and put his wand back in his pocket. She noticed there was a dagger tucked away in his suit jacket too. He never did like to go anywhere without a few extra toys to play with.

"Thank you." She smiled. "I'll give you two a moment alone. We need to leave in about fifteen minutes. Will that be enough time for you?"

"I'll be ready."

Astoria hesitated for a moment. She shifted her weight, rocking back on her gold platform heels as she wrestled with the indecision, but after another look at the sadness in Theo's eyes, there really wasn't much of a choice.

She stretched her arms as high as she could and wrapped them around Theo's shoulders. She nestled her cheek against his chest, used all her strength and pulled him into the tightest hug she could manage. She put all her affection into that hug, hoping that if she just squeezed hard enough, Theo might be able to feel the way he was loved by her, the way he would always be loved by her, loved by another piece of Daphne that'd been left behind.

She hoped he could feel it, but his arms remained at his sides, almost like he didn't quite know what to do with them, like he didn't know how to reciprocate that kind of love or warmth anymore.

"She'd be so proud of you, you know that, don't you?"

Astoria didn't wait for his answer. She kissed him on the cheek and left him alone, gave him a moment with his grief like she'd had with hers, before they'd have to slap on their fake smiles and sip champagne with people they wanted dead.

Her fingers brushed against the cold metal of the dagger, and her eyes snapped up to Crouch.

Because he was helpless, practically comatose by his own hand. They were alone, and Astoria had just the tool in her hand that could end his life.

Malfoy and Blaise would be furious at her for deviating from the plan, but when an opportunity presented itself so beautifully, well, she'd have been a fool not to take it.

Theo would understand. After it was done, she'd call him here and he'd figure out a way around this.

Perhaps they could get Amycus's body in here and stage it to look like they'd had a fight? Stage it to look like Amycus was the spy, Crouch found out, and they'd fought and both of them had ended up dying.

It wouldn't be hard to plant evidence on Amycus, they had plenty of fake letters, Deluminators, and countless incriminating objects stored at the manor. Of course, they'd have to kill Amycus too, and erase the memory of Astoria ever having a drink with Grouch from all the doll's memories, but it could work. It'd certainly be difficult, given the party that was going on outside, but Theo could make it work. He'd be disappointed that he hadn't been able to kill Crouch himself, but he wanted the vile bastard dead just as much as she did. Probably more.

Astoria knelt down on the sofa and hovered over Crouch. She touched the blade against his throat, but just before she could slit it open, he spoke again.

"Should be ... flattered ... I've taken interest in you ... you know."

Astoria paused and stared at Crouch's face. He looked like he was asleep. "What?" "Should be flattered ... I find you ... appealing. The Dark Lord ... trusts me... You'd be lucky to be ... mine."

"Really? And why's that then?"

"He's ... going to make me a Demon Mask."

"Is that so?" she asked. That was news to her, Draco hadn't mentioned it, but she supposed Crouch might just have been saying it to impress her. She had no idea what was in the liquid he'd spiked her drink with. Even severely drugged, he still felt he had something to prove. He really was pathetic.

"Yes," Crouch slurred. "Told me ... to hide ... Horcrux for him. Big job ... doesn't trust anyone else with it. Only I know ... where it is."

Now, that was interesting.

Astoria's eyes widened in shock. She pulled the blade away from his throat. "I thought only Bellatrix knew where Nagini was being kept?"

"You alright sis?"  
Despite the noise being slurred and gargled, Crouch scoffed. "She does ... but I know ... where the medallion ... is."

Even Malfoy didn't know where the medallion was being kept anymore, no one did. Voldemort used to move it around his ranks, give it to a random member of the inner circle to keep safe for a few months, and then move it on to another, and then another. He used to think that was the safest way to keep it hidden because only the Death Eater who currently guarded it would know its location, but as more and more of his trusted friends had started to 'betray' him, he'd decided to change tactics.

If Astoria could get the location out of Crouch, they would be one step closer to winning the war.

"Where is it?" Astoria asked. "Where are you keeping the medallion!?"

Crouch smiled drunkenly, but he didn't answer her.

She grabbed her clutch in a frenzy and started rummaging through it. "Come on, please be some left. Please, please be some left."

There was only a drop of Veritaserum left in the bottle. She'd already used most of it on Amycus, but there might just be enough to force a confession out of Crouch.

She sighed loudly and shook her head, and after taking a moment to compose herself - and magically drawing all the curtains to ensure she wouldn't be seen - Astoria leaned over Crouch and grabbed his face. Her hands shook terribly as she tried to pry his mouth apart, and a violent pain rippled through her stomach as she shakily poured the few drops of Veritaserum down his throat. She knew she was overdoing it. She couldn't use much magic anymore, her blood curse simply didn't let her, and all these spells were exhausting her, but they were necessary.

As she coughed into her hand, flecks of light red were dististed across her palm. She didn't have much time left before her illness took her again. She needed to get this over with quickly and get home.

"Where is the medallion?" Astoria asked.

No answer.

She took his face in her hands and tried to shake him awake. "Crouch! Where is the medallion?"

"I wish you could see it all ... I-I don't wish you could see Theo though. He's lost without you. He's so lonely and no matter what I say or do, he's just broken. You took a piece of him with you, and I wish, Merlin, I wish you'd left it here..."

"You alright sis?"

Astoria gasped and sharply turned to face the voice.

Theo was in the graveyard with her, standing a few feet away from her and Daphne's headstone. His hair was combed back - just as Astoria had instructed - and he was wearing the grey suit that she'd picked out for him - but he was holding something else, something she hadn't told him to wear or do.

A fresh bouquet of pink and white Peonies. Daphne's favourite flowers.

"Those are lovely," she said, forcing a smile as she wiped the tears from her eyes.  
"She'll love them."

Before Daphne had gone, Theo had been so happy, so full of life that he'd made everyone else around him look as though they were dead. His smiles used to be one of Astoria's favourite things in the world. They were the warmest, most genuine things in the world, like little bottles of captured sunlight, even when things were dark and miserable, they always had a way of lighting up a room.

But these days, he was cold. These days, he was the one who looked like he was dead.

She didn't like the smiles he wore anymore. Hated them, in fact. They were cold and empty. The mischievous one he wore around the house sometimes, when he was acting out made her stomach drop, and the one she'd never seen - the one Blaise told her about - that he wore when he was butchering people or playing with their disfigured body parts - made her want to wretch.

She hated them all because they weren't his smiles. Weren't the smiles of her kind and gentle brother-in-law. They were someone else's, a strangers smile.

But the one he wore when Astoria was upset, missing her sister, and he was trying to cheer her up? The one he had to force onto his face, like the contours of his mouth had fish hooks going through them and were pulling his skin tight to force him to smile?

She hated that one the most because it reminded her of what he'd become in Daphne's absence, and it broke her heart a little every time she saw it.

She took another sip, and then chased it down with a larger gulp, feeling that familiar numbness in her fingers and the buzz behind her eyes start to form, the one she wanted to feel all the time, every fucking waking moment of the day.

"The boys think I'm going to run myself into an early grave, but you know how they've always been like that." Astoria laughed humourlessly and shook her head. "They still worry too much about everything. It's only gotten worse since you've been gone, Daphne."

Astoria sniffed as she stared down at the empty headstone in front of her. Tears pricked her eyes and she shook her head to banish them, plastering on that fake, bright smile that she was known for instead.

"I can't cry," she said to no one. "We need to leave soon and I can't ruin my make-up - I just wanted to talk to you for a moment before we left. I miss you. I miss you so much and I ... I feel like you're missing out on everything. There's so much I wish you could have seen before ... "

No one answered her; no one ever did anymore. No one told her they missed her too. No one wiped away her tears. No one wound their arms around her and told her it was going to be alright and that she didn't need to be upset.

A few stubborn tears found freedom, and as Astoria wiped underneath her eyes with her index fingers - careful not to smudge her makeup - she went on. Talking to her sisters grave as though she was there. As though the ground below wasn't just empty space and soil and worms, but that she was down there. That her family was there. That she'd found peace and could hear her younger sister talk and talk and tell her all the things she was missing, all the things she would have been a part of, if the world had been kinder.

"I wish you could see how Voldemort is coming apart because of you, because of what we're doing for you. I wish you could see how strong the boys have become and how good Romy has gotten at making roast potatoes. And I wish - oh Daph, I wish you could see the way Draco is with Hermione. How protective he is of her. How much he's changed since she's been in his life. Daph, it would just melt your heart if you could see the way he looks at her. He won't say it out loud, but he's so taken with her."

Astoria squeezed her eyes tightly closed, trying to trap the tears inside. She could cry later, she could let it all out later when she was alone, but for now, she needed to keep it together.

"It's ... safe," he murmured, half asleep.  
"But where?"  
"... safe..."

"Where ..." she jolted his face, making him smack the back of his head against the sofa, "-is-" she repeated the motion again, "-the-" and again, feeling her strength leave her with every violent shake, "-medallion?!"

"Newstead Abbey?"

Astoria gasped and let go of his face. "Newstead Abbey? In Nottinghamshire?" He nodded sluggishly.

"I thought ... isn't that place derelict? Even before the war?"

"Yes ... but lots of ... secret places ... good for hiding things."

"Where - exactly - in Newstead Abbey did you hide it?"

"Secret place ... under waterfall ... "

Suddenly, a wave of nausea washed over Astoria and her chest and neck felt tight, like something was forcing its way up her throat. She curled over the side of the sofa, pressed a hand to her stomach and coughed violently into her hand. There was more blood this time. Thick red clumps of it.

"Waterfall?" Astoria asked, gasping for breath and wiping the blood from her chin. She could hardly speak, but she was so close to finding out the truth, she couldn't stop now. "There's a waterfall at Newstead Abbey?"

Again, Grouch nodded. "Little one ... next to the lake."

"And how many traps did you set up around it?"

"Lots ... nearly impossible ... to get out... The Dark Lord ... very ... pleased with me..."

"Have you ..." Astoria coughed into her hand again. Her nostrils burned as her body started to reject her own blood, the liquid trying to force its way out through her nose instead of her mouth. "Have you set traps up around the waterfall?"

"Yes," Grouch smiled. "No one ... can get into the water ... if they try ... they will die."

She wanted to ask more questions, was dying to spend a few hours dissecting Grouch's vile brain and learning everything he knew, but her body simply wouldn't

allow her to. She started dry heaving. Her entire body started to shake, and she had to hold onto the sofa for support. She'd pushed herself too far, and she needed to get out of the Gala. Quickly.

Astoria gave herself a moment or two to get her coughing under control, and with what little energy she had left, she banished the blood from her hand and mouth, tidied her appearance and cast a quick *obliviate* on Crouch. She guessed that whatever he'd tried to spike her drink with probably erased memories too, but she thought it best not to chance it.

She nodded goodbye to the dolls as she left the room - and a 'thank you' to Angel - and made her escape. She made her way through the crowd quickly but elegantly, as not to raise suspicions. Even though they'd left her to the dogs, she smiled and waved goodnight to the guests as she passed them, clutching her stomach the entire time and praying that she didn't vomit crimson right there on the dancefloor. And the instant she was outside, she let the cold air wash over her face and grabbed the panic button.

Fifteen seconds later, Theo was outside.

"Are you alright?" he asked. His hair looked a little dishevelled and his knuckles were red and dusted with blood. "Blaise doesn't know you called yet. I was going to fetch him, but I wanted to make sure you were safe first."

"Take me home," Astoria hushed, clutching her stomach. "Please."

Theo's eyes grew wide and full of worry. "Tori, what happened? You look like -"

"Just take me home! Now!"

He wrapped his hand around her waist and gently pulled her towards the back of the building, careful to make sure they were out of sight so no one would question why they were leaving in such a hurry and didn't have time to wait for a carriage.

And the second Theo had Apparated them back to Malfoy Manor, Astoria dropped to the floor, her knees crushing the beautiful silk of her dress into the mud, and violently threw up thick clumps of blood.

Astoria parted the thick black robes she was wearing to reveal the dark green ballgown underneath, the strapless one that went perfect with her emerald earrings and nipped her in at the waist just the way she liked.

She did a little twirl - but then another gust of cold December air whirled around her, forcing her to close the robe and clutch it tightly around her body. A shiver wracked its way up her spine, her lungs suddenly ached, felt full and tender at the same time, and she took a moment to cough into her hand.

She checked her palm, instead of red blotches, pale skin greeted her. She sighed in relief and clutched the robes tighter around her body. At least it didn't look like she was going to be taking ill again tonight, but she really hoped her illness would fuck off and leave her alone until boxing day. She missed Christmas with her family last year. She didn't want to miss another one.

"Don't start." Astoria paused and rolled her eyes. "I told Hermione that I was coming out here to see you and she cast a warming charm on my cloak, so you don't need to worry about me being cold. She's lovely, by the way, you would absolutely adore her."

As she spoke, Astoria reached inside the magically warmed robes and pulled out her trusty silver flask. She unscrewed the lid and took the first sip, savouring the way the bitter gin warmed and soothed her throat as she sipped, like finally scratching an itch that'd been bothering her all day.

"I already know what you're thinking. I know I don't need to do this," Astoria hushed. "I don't need to keep going to these Gala's and checking that the ones we're going to frame actually know what they're supposed to know. The boys could do that easily with Legitimency - or the old-fashioned way, I suppose, Salazar knows Theodore isn't opposed to slicing off fingers and toes to get confessions - but I want to do this. I need to do this. It's the only way I feel like I can contribute."

She paused to down more of the flask, greedily drinking from it now she was alone and away from prying eyes. Blaise wouldn't have liked to see her like this. He'd be worried sick if he knew, and he had so much on his mind already, she didn't want to burden him anymore.

"Draco is strong and tactical. Blaise is intelligent and cunning. Theo is ruthless. Hermione is brave and strong, you were strong, and I just - I don't want to get left behind. I don't want to sit back and watch them make sacrifices while I'm bound to a bed all day. I need to do something to help ... I need to -"

binding him to the chair, and two chains coiled around his elbows and wrists, pinning his arms to either armrest.

Blaise had initially suggested that they get started, that Theo had bit the hand that'd fed him with his tardiness and that he didn't deserve to torture Amycus as a result. Blaise wanted to make quick work of their hostage, let Malfoy slice his head from his shoulders and be done with it so he could get back to his wife, but Malfoy had dug in his heels and insisted that they wait for Theo.

Although, the way Blaise was ranting, practically climbing off the fucking walls with anxiety was making Malfoy want to reconsider.

"There were nine flowers, Draco - *nine of them!*"

Malfoy kept his eyes closed and leaned his head back against the bricks behind him, focusing on the blissful taste of the cigarette in his mouth instead of Zabini's unusually panicked voice.

"And five of them flourished whilst the other four wilted and died - but they didn't wilt in the normal sense. It wasn't slow. They faded quickly, as instant as a light from a candle being blown out."

Malfoy opened his mouth just a crack and exhaled. His eyes slid open as he let the smoke escape, feeling its warmth as it rose past his cheeks and ascended to the ceiling and started to evaporate.

Funny, he'd never been envious of a smoke cloud before, never realised how blissfully appealing it was to just rise and rise, leave everything behind, float upwards through the air and just - vanish, without a fucking care in the world. Some days, he wished he could do just that. Some days, the thought of just fading into nothingness was bliss, absolute heaven personified. The thought of taking those he cared about and disappearing

He'd thought about it a lot in the early days of the war. Thought about grabbing his family - what was left of them - climbing on his dragon's back and disappearing into the clouds, never to be found again. After Daphne, he'd pushed that thought to the back of his mind, forgotten about that old fantasy and focused not on the life he wished he could've had, but on the people he refused to lose - under any fucking circumstance.

But recently, those old fantasies had started to plague him again.

In another life, maybe he could have. But not in this one. Never in this one, he had too many responsibilities. Too many promises had been made. Too many people were counting on him.

So, as he released another smoke-filled breath, he watched the grey steam rise and rise, and eventually, evaporate into nothing, just like his little fantasy. "That was no coincidence, the way they wilted quickly. It meant something. There's a reason that happened."

Poor Blaise had been insufferable all morning. Pratting on and obsessing over the dream he'd had from the moment he'd barged into Malfoy's bedroom in the early hours.

"Do you think it means they're going to die quickly? Instantly?!"

He'd had to listen to Blaise's musing over his morning coffee. "I saw the hallway light up with green. Perhaps that means that whoever is going to die is going to be hit with an Avada?"

As they walked out of the grounds.

"But that doesn't account for the blood I saw - the blood coming out of mine and Astoria's bedroom."

He'd had a moment's reprieve when the pair of them had walked into Voldemort's cathedral to receive their orders - Blaise wouldn't have dared to mention the visions then - but as soon as they'd descended the steps into the dungeons, as soon as they'd closed the door and Malfoy had cast a privacy charm - meaning they could speak freely without fear of being overheard - Blaise had started again.

At least Malfoy had his trusted cigarettes to keep him calm while Blaise worked through his thoughts.

"And then there's the scream that I heard."

But if Blaise carried on fussing, Malfoy was going to need something stronger.

"It was feminine, certainly came from a woman, and - "

Much, much fucking stronger.

"Are you listening to me, Malfoy?"

"Yes, Zabini," Malfoy responded coldly, envying the smoke just a little bit more as it disappeared through the cracks in the brick. "I'm listening. I'm always fucking listening."

"So do you think it means something? The blood? The flowers?"  
"Again," Malfoy sighed, tone just as blank as the expression on his face, "no. I don't."

"But the flowers I saw were in Malfoy Manor, in your family cemetery! Don't you think that means something?!"

"Well, considering that you *live* in Malfoy Manor, and you have done since you were seventeen, no, actually, I don't think it does."

Blaise snarled in irritation and clawed his nails down the front of his face. His eyes were red and bloodshot through lack of sleep, and there were deep lines forming under his eyes.

If Malfoy were being honest, yes, Blaise's dream had bothered him. Of course it fucking had. How could it not have? He'd already lost his mother, his father, and his best friend. The thought of losing anyone else was - no, he didn't want to think about it, even for a second, but he wouldn't let it show, just nursed his cigarette and kept his icy walls as high and strong as he could. They were easier to maintain when Granger wasn't nearby.

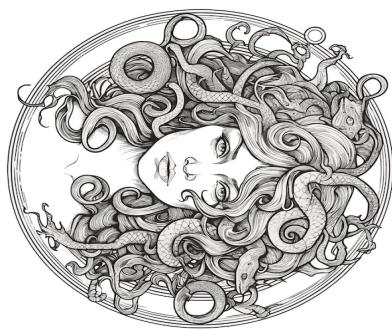
Blaise's visions were becoming a cause for concern. Malfoy had never believed that Blaise had the gift of foresight, just dismissed his 'visions' as vivid dreams.

But the accuracies of some of these dreams were starting to unsettle Malfoy.

However, he was choosing to keep that little bit of information to himself, because out of the three of them, Blaise was supposed to be the calm one. Whilst Malfoy was the leader and Theo acted out every murderous impulse he felt, Blaise was supposed to be the one who was quiet and composed. The one who didn't fucking need to Occlude and hide behind walls because he was naturally so calm. The one who wasn't emotional or unpredictable, like Theodore.

Blaise's temperament had always been as solid and impenetrable as a ball of string, tucked in tight, organised to perfection with no possible way for something or someone to pull his strings, and yet, with each new vision, that calm exterior was starting to unravel.

## CHAPTER 50



### THIS LITTLE PIGGY

#### 14th January

As fucking usual, Blaise and Malfoy were waiting for Theo.

The cell they were in was small, the walls solid brick and covered in moss and overgrowth. It was very dark inside, there were no windows, the only light came from the two candles that were hanging from lanterns on the East and West walls. The bricks stunk of blood and piss and the ground was sticky, cumulating years of evidence of torture and brutality.

Amycus - although he'd struggled to begin with - was sat as still as the dead in his chair in the corner of the room, head lolling to the side and a single stream of blood dripping down the side of his face from the spell Malfoy had used to knock him unconscious. Thick, unbreakable ropes wrapped around his chest and stomach,

"I'm fine~"

"Do not tell me that you are fine when you very clearly are not," she snapped, expression stern and strong despite the tiredness in her eyes and cheeks. "What's the matter?"

"I just had a nightmare~"

"We've shared a bed every night since I was sixteen years old, I know when you've had a nightmare and when it's something more." She stepped in front of him and wedged herself between his body and the sink. She leaned onto the very tips of her toes, caught his face between her hands and tugged his face down towards hers. "It was more than a nightmare. Wasn't it?"

She already had so much on her mind and she was still weak, still recovering from his failure to protect her. He didn't want to worry her, he didn't want to burden her, but he knew that sometimes, even those with the smallest shoulders could bare the heaviest loads. And Astoria had proven that a hundred times over since they'd been married.

He sighed and dropped his head into the crook of her neck. The instant he surrendered, his wife's arms were around him, his frail wife comforting him when he was the one who was supposed to be the protector of the two of them. "I think ... I think I just had another vision."

"I know," she hummed into his cheek. "What did you see?"

"I saw the manor. I saw blood, and I saw~"

"Yes?"

"I saw a cluster of nine roses. I saw five of them blossom and thrive."

"And the others? What happened to the other four?"

"They wilted and died."

She trailed her fingers lightly up his spine and the back of his neck, soothing him as she worked through what he'd just told her and its possible implications. "What do you think that means?"

"I think it means that by the end of this war, five of us are going to thrive and lead full lives, and the other four are going to die."

If undoubtedly seemed cruel, the way Malfoy dismissed Blaise so coldly when he was clearly in distress about his wife's future - or possible lack of - but Blaise had always leaned on Malfoy. He took his word for everything and seemed to absorb Malfoy's calm. Malfoy was the one Blaise went to whenever he had a problem because he always had a solution. Always had a way to keep the family safe and together.

But if Blaise knew Malfoy was worrying about his visions too, it would only make him unravel that much faster.

So, Malfoy didn't tell him.

He didn't tell him that he'd started to research prophecies and their symbolism late into the night, chose to keep to himself that he'd been whittling about Blaise's visions too, about what they meant and the likelihood of them coming true, or that he finally believed that he did have the gift.

No, he didn't tell him that. He didn't tell anyone. As always, he kept those concerns to himself because his role had always been to protect the family.

He didn't know how to protect them from this, and he needed to stall until he found one.

"How can you be so calm?"

"Because it wasn't a vision. You're worrying about this too much," Malfoy lied, cigarette bobbing in his mouth as he tilted his head towards the ceiling of the grimy, rotten dungeon. "It was just a dream."

"No, it wasn't a dream," Blaise hissed. "It was more than that. I know a vision when I see one."

"Really?" Malfoy scoffed, shaking his head slightly and taking another long drag. "You're positive that this one was real?"

"Yes."

"You're sure of it?"

"Yes!"

"How? You've never been sure before, in fact, you've always rejected the idea that you have the gift of foresight. Why is this one any different?"

"Because it was!" Blaise hissed, and the venom in his voice was enough to make Malfoy's brow crease. "I felt it. It wasn't a dream. I know it wasn't!" He gave Malfoy a long, furious look before he started walking circles around the room again,

furiously raking at his cufflinks and adjusting his robes while he drove himself crazy with his own theories.

Malfoy started tracing patterns in the brick ceiling again, following a particularly interesting moth growth that started on the floor and watching the way it spread out like blood vessels.

As Blaise was on his fourth circle of the room and chuntering under his breath about wilting flowers, the doors suddenly burst open.

Theo paused, and when he saw what was waiting for him, the sick bastard's face lit up like it was his fucking birthday. "Oh, my—" he whistled. "I'm really going to fucking enjoy this."

"Please! I'm being set up!" Amycus wailed, thrashing wildly in his chair as Theo used a rather intriguing muggle tool to peel the skin off the back of Amycus's hand. The process was painfully slow, he took paper-thin slices of skin at a time, and if he carried on at the pace he was going, the curly-haired psycho was going to have hours of fun.

"I didn't do - It wasn't me - I would never betray the Dark Lord - I would never - *arghhhhhh!* No! Please! *Aghhhhhhhh!*"

Theo whistled a soft, sort of happy tune as he knelt in front of the Death Eater, bobbing his head from side to side as he flayed Amycus's skin layer by layer, as though the gruesome task was as mundane as pruning weeds from a garden. Which - Malfoy supposed - it was. In a sick, twisted sort of way.

After three hours of torture, it was a miracle Amycus was able to speak at all. He looked deathly pale, yes, he was covered in his own blood and he'd blacked out several times when the pain had become too much, but Theo continued to keep him awake and force blood replenishing potions down his neck whenever he was close to running dry. He was missing patches of skin from all over his body, his collar bone and some of his ribs were broken, and he was missing approximately three teeth - that Theo had delighted in pulling himself. His throat was raw from the constant screaming and begging for his life.

But whilst Theo revelled in the screams, Blaise wasn't in the mood for them today.

He could see the infamous cherry blossom tree in the distance and the bench beneath it. He could see the clusters of wisteria plants that Quinzel always tended to and the roses that his wife admired.

They were all things he knew and were familiar to him. All things he recognised as being at home at Malfoy Manor.

And then he saw something else, something he knew shouldn't have been there.

He felt himself being dragged towards the Malfoy family cemetery, and as the graveyard swirled into focus around him, on an empty patch of earth, in a place he knew there weren't any bones or witches buried, he saw a family of nine flowers roses, all clustered close together and in the early stages of blooming.

The air started to shift again, whizzing around him like he was trapped in a wind tunnel - then time started to move quickly like he was watching the world in fast forward. He imagined it was what it felt like to use a time turner, but to go forward in time rather than backwards.

He saw the nine flowers below him start to quickly change. Five of them bloomed beautifully, their petals opening and stretching into wonderful colours and shapes, a life well lived, but the other four -

Blaise bolted upright with a scream. He recognised the room he was in to be his bedroom, and as his chest heaved and sweat dripped down his chest, dainty hands wrapped around his shoulder and started to rub his back.

"Blaise?" his wife whispered. "What happened?"

Astoria was watching him with a scared expression on her lovely face. Her eyes were wide with horror and her arms looked like they were shaking, struggling to hold her weight, despite her incredibly petite and light frame.

"Darling please lie back down," he urged as he got out of bed and walked towards their bathroom. "You need your strength."

But his lovely wife wasn't in the mood to be told what to do. She threw the covers off her legs, stood from the bed and followed him into the bathroom.

Blaise stopped in front of the sink and frantically ran the cold tap, and when the sink was full. Astoria let him splash the freezing water on his face and the back of his neck before she pressed him any further.

"What's wrong?" she asked as she wrapped her hands around his waist and rested her head against his shoulder, watching his reflection in the mirror.

struck another victim off Theo and Astoria's little revenge list. All that was left were Crouch, Greyback, and Voldemort himself. Then, in their eyes, Daphne would be fully avenged.

Blaise watched Theo leave before he entered his own room. He was greeted by total darkness and his favourite sound in the world, his wife's gentle little inhales and exhales as she slept soundly. He washed off the evidence of his duties as quickly and quietly as he could, before he crawled into bed beside her and wrapped his arms around her waist. He pulled her gently against his chest, careful not to wake her, and he had just enough time to bury his nose in her soft hair before sleep found him.

But dreams didn't greet him that night. Something else did.

As Blaise stood in Malfoy Manor, he could sense that something was off.

The walls were the same and the portraits looked just as miserable as they had when he'd passed them on his way to bed, but something didn't feel right. Something was wrong. Twisted.

Despite the windows being sealed tightly closed, he felt a cold breeze whirl around him and sink into his very bones. And then he felt another cold breeze. And then another. Like pockets of air were shooting past him like they'd been fired from a gun or a cannon.

He heard a scream. A feminine, blood curdling scream. His feet felt wet, and when he looked down, he saw thick blood oozing out of his and Astoria's bedroom and a blood-soaked broken whiskey bottle on the floor.

The hallway lit up a hauntingly familiar shade of green, but just as suddenly as it had started, the scene started to twist and morph into something else. Suddenly, the walls of Malfoy manor fell away, and the ground vanished beneath him.

He fell through the air with a force, and the air was siphoned from his lungs as he tried to scream for help.

He only fell for a moment before he landed sharply on the ground with a thud. His knees hurt and his wrists burned as he pulled himself to his feet and looked around.

He was outside, on the grounds of Malfoy Manor on what looked like an early morning.

"For Salazar's sake," Blaise hissed quietly from the corner, finally uncurling his hands from their position on his face to glare at Theo. "Isn't that enough? I can't think straight with that constant wailing."

"Nope- not even close," Theo said, pausing his little tune mid-beat to speak, even though his eyes stayed focused on his work. "Dark Lord wants him to suffer."

"The Dark Lord might want him to suffer, but he can't hear his screams because of the privacy charms Malfoy has cast," Blaise retorted. "So what is the point? Surely it would be better to kill him now and save ourselves the headaches?"

"He might not be able to hear him scream, but he could come down those stairs at any moment," Malfoy said, "and how do you think he's going to react if he sees that Amycus is in fact, not being brutally tortured for hours on end as he instructed?"

Blaise narrowed his eyes. His lip started to curl upwards in defeat.

"Precisely," Malfoy hushed. "If our betrayal is going to continue to be successful, we still have to play our parts."

"Can we at least cast a silencing charm on him then?" Blaise asked, voice as thick with venom as the was red blood on the floor. "If I hear him scream one more time, I'm likely to grab a muggle gun and shoot myself with it."

"Why don't you ask Granger to do it?" Theo asked. "She's quite the marksman, although the last time she shot a Death Eater, she ended up fucking him." He threw Malfoy a sly look and then diverted his eyes back to his subject. "So probably best to keep away. Unless you want blonde over there to rip your arms off."

Malfoy looked at Amycus to see if he'd absorbed what Theo had just said, but their hostage seemed to be in too much pain to be listening, and his screams reached new levels when Theo ran the once silver tool over the already raw and fresh skin on Amycus's bleeding wrist.

"Funny, I never pegged Granger to have a gun kink." Theo grinned wickedly as he ran the tool over Amycus's forearm, beginning to slice off the skin around his Dark Mark. "Or a blood kink?" He must have hit something sensitive, because when Theo sliced over the crease of his elbow, Amycus's entire body shook violently. Theo liked the results, so he did it again. "Or a Malfoy kink," and again. "But I suppose they do say it's always the ones you least expect that end up being the filthiest whores," and again.

"Do you have to speak about Hermione that way?" Blaise snapped. "Astoria would have died if she hadn't saved her last year. She helped us even when we were cruel and unkind to her, and she's done nothing but try and help us every since. Even if you don't like her, she at least deserves your respect."

Theo looked up from Amycus and tilted his head to the side. "You say that like I hate her."

"Don't you?" Blaise asked, cocking a disapproving brow.

Theo rolled his eyes. "No, I don't hate her - I spent bloody years meeting her in secret and exchanging information. Contrary to what you might think, I adore the little Gryffindor. She saved my sister-in-law and I think she's a ball of fun. Especially when she gets her hands on a gun or wand."

"Then why do you insist on making crude remarks about her?"

Theo shrugged. "Because it's funny to wind her up. Every time I insult you, either you or Astoria bite, and since Malfoy has started fucking her, whenever she gets mad, so does he." He smiled as he moved on and began to peel back the skin on Amycus's knuckles, but when the Death Eater in question passed out, again, a frown formed between his brows. "Bored of this now," he said as he stared at the blood-soaked tool, as though it were its fault that it no longer held the psycho's amusement. He threw the tool over his shoulder and slapped Amycus around the face to try and wake him. "Oi, Amy, I'm not done with you yet." Another slap across his left cheek, making his head lull grotesquely to the side. "*Helllloooo?*"

It took a few more slaps - and an adrenaline potion being poured down his throat - but after a few minutes, Amycus woke again.

"Please..." he breathed, eyes rolling back in his head and tears starting to clean the blood as they streaked down his face. "No more... I can't... please - just kill me."

"Hmmmmmm," Theo purred. "What are we going to do with you now?" He leaned back and stared up at the Death Eater, thoughtfully rolling his tongue on the inside of his cheek - and then, inspiration struck. "Oh, I know!" He clicked his fingers together before he conjured his favourite blade.

Amycus cringed away and began to quietly weep when Theo placed the knife against his hand.

"*This little piggy went to market,*" he started, tauntingly tapping the sharp edge of the dagger against Amycus's pinkie finger and then moved onto the next finger. "*And this little piggy stayed home.*"

"Where did Malfoy go?" Blaise asked as he and Theo rounded another corner of the manor. He'd been right behind the pair of them a few moments ago.

Theo rolled his eyes and shook his head slightly, causing the blood that was still dripping from his curls - Alecto's blood - to spray up the walls and make some of the portraits cringe away in disgust. "We passed the hallway that leads to Granger's room a few minutes ago. Where do you bloody think he went?"

Blaise and Theo stopped outside of his and Astoria's bedroom, but just before Theo could retreat to his own room, Blaise caught his shoulder and forced him to a stop.

Theo spun on his heels and glared up at Blaise. "Fuck is up with you?"

"You didn't have to look so pleased with yourself tonight," Blaise sneered. "You do know that, don't you?"

Theo snorted and folded his arms across his chest. "Whatever do you mean?" he asked as he leaned against the doorframe, the grin of a trickster peeling its way onto his face.

"Oh give up the act!" Blaise hissed under his breath, careful not to wake his wife who was surely sleeping on the other side of the door. "I saw your face when you cut Alecto's head off. You were enjoying yourself."

"What can I say? I'm a man of simple pleasures, and there's nothing more pleasurable than slicing off the head of the woman who voted for your wife's execution, and then watching it roll across the floor like an unwanted Quaffle," Theo grinned, flashing his teeth and beaming with nothing but happiness and pride. "Just be thankful I had the restraint not to kick it afterwards."

To say Theo had enjoyed himself at the execution was an understatement. He'd practically skipped onto the wooden stage Voldemort had conjured and clicked his heels in glee when their leader had ordered the punishment. The only thing that could have made his happiness more obvious would have been wearing a shirt that said *'I hate the Carrows'* written on it.

Malfoy had made sure that Theo would be the one to 'catch' Alecto in her betrayal. He felt like he deserved it, and Blaise could hardly disagree. This execution

She could feel his eyes on her face, but she didn't open hers. Instead, she lay completely still and let the silence swallow them, and after a while, his hand started to pull away. He must have thought that she'd fallen back asleep, because when her eyes snapped open she saw that he was sitting upright, about to leave.

"Do you want me to go?" he whispered.

No, she almost told him. Stay here. Sleep here. With me.

She wanted to ask him to stay, the words were bubbling in her throat, but instead of letting them slip out, she grabbed his face and dragged his lips down to hers.

His hands came to rest on the pillow on either side of her head, and he hovered over her as his tongue swirled with hers. She made quick work of his belt buckle, and once she'd thrown it across the room, she slipped her hand into his trousers. She nipped across his neck, delighting in the groan he made when she wrapped her fingers around his cock. Just like the rest of his skin, he was cold and already hard as a rock in her hand.

Because even if it was just in these moments, when she started to pump him slowly, firmly, she knew that she meant something to him. That she was important to him, even if it was only temporary.

She knew it when they ripped and tore at each others clothes.

She saw it in his eyes when he grabbed her thigh and hiked it around his waist. And she felt it when he wrapped his hand around her throat and sunk into her, burying himself to the hilt.

She'd kick him out of her room afterwards, the way she always did. She needed to keep some barriers between them, needed to keep herself protected, but for now, she just wanted to pretend. Pretend that there wasn't a war going on around them and ignore the thing that she knew in her heart was true. That if Blaise's vision was true, and the day came when she was tied to a post, if Voldemort ordered her execution and the lives of his family were on the line, he wouldn't save her.

He might have felt something for her. The thing she sometimes saw in his eyes when he looked at her might have actually been real, but it didn't really matter.

Because as much as he was starting to mean to her, and as important as he was starting to become in her world, in her life, she would never - ever - be more important to him than his family.

And her heart wasn't quite ready to deal with that just yet.

"Please... please, don't!"

He grinned as he tapped Amycus's middle finger. "*And this little piggy had mast beef?*"

"No more..."

"And this little piggy had none," and the index finger.

Malfoy rolled his eyes and shook his head.

Theodore really was the only person alive who would think to turn a fucking children's nursery rhyme into a tool for torture. The man had a very scary imagination.

When Nott reached his hostage's thumb, Amycus flinched and his entire body went rigid, waiting for the pain that he knew was inevitable.

"*And this little piggy went - wait,*" Theo paused. "I forgot, how does the rest go?" he asked, turning to Malfoy and Blaise.

Amycus relaxed and wept with relief as Theo stood up, but it was all a ploy, part of the act, the moment Amycus thought he was safe, Theo whirled around, lowered the dagger with frightening speed, and sliced Amycus's thumb off in one sharp motion.

Fucking theatrical little bastard.

Amycus was silent for a heartbeat, staring in shock as Theo picked the severed thumb up from the floor. Amycus almost looked like he didn't believe what had just happened to him. He didn't move, looked as though he weren't in any pain at all really, but when Theo started to wave his severed thumb at him, his eyes darted to the blood that was spurting furiously from the wound, in the place where his thumb used to be, and then the pain must have caught up with him.

Because he started to scream and thrash in agony.

Theo was almost covered in as much of Amycus's blood as Amycus was, and the way it covered his face and hair as he smiled wickedly at his subject made him look all the more deranged. By all accounts, he seemed to be having a ball, but suddenly, his smile dropped and he frowned.

"Hold on a second, mate," Theo told Amycus before his blood-covered face turned to grab Malfoy's attention. "I've just thought, we're a member short today. Where is my favourite, curly-haired Gryffindor?" he asked, having to speak very loudly to be heard over Amycus's screams.

Malfoy rolled his tongue on the inside of his cheek and glared at Theo. "She's not here!" he shouted back.

"Yeah, I got that cheers," Theo snapped. "I have eyes, but why haven't you brought her with you? You usually don't let her leave your side."

"Because we can take care of this without her."

Theo narrowed his eyes in suspicion.

"If you have something you want to fucking say," Malfoy hissed, "then please, by all means, be my guest!"

Theo shrugged and stood up straight, flipping his favourite blood-soaked dagger over in his hand as he spoke. "Well, you spend every waking second with her, '*driving* *revenue*' and 'brewing potions'" he said, and the way he crooked his fingers showed that he knew exactly what he and Granger were really doing with the majority of the time they spent together. "You take her on the church missions and meetings with the Order like their little dates, but bringing her to a torture session is a hard no?"

When Malfoy didn't answer, Theo shrugged and crouched down in front of Amycus again.

Although Amycus's screams had started to die down, he was struggling for every raspy breath he took, and he cringed away from Theo when he placed the blade against his pinkie finger again. "Please" he panted. "No more ... no more."

"I didn't bring her here because she's done enough already," Malfoy snarled. "She's killing her friends for us so Voldemort doesn't suspect that we've switched sides, despite what it costs her. She's got enough blood on her hands because of me, she's killed enough people because of me, so if I can keep her from getting them any bloodier than is absolutely necessary, then I will."

Theo looked up from where Amycus was panting to stare at him.

"What?" Malfoy snapped.

"You wanna be careful, Malfoy," Theo grinned. "Carry on thinking like that and soon enough, you'll be giving her one of those rings you wear around your neck."

"Wait ... wait ..." Amycus panted, voice raspy and breathless but somewhat intelligible. From the way his body shook uncontrollably, it was difficult to tell if he was actually aware of what he was saying, or if he was going into shock. "You just said ... switched sides ... are you the ones ... who have betrayed ... the Dark Lord?"

Hermione opened her mouth, but Malfoy cut her off before she could ask her question.

"And don't worry, I volunteered myself, Blaise and Theodore for the task, so there's no possible way he could protest his innocence. Tomorrow, he's dead."

"So I take it the '*videlicet*' Theo handed over to Voldemort was enough to convince him that both the twins were conspiring with the Order?"

Hermione and Malfoy had been meticulous and thorough with the evidence they'd chosen to use to frame the Carrow's. They'd planted letters, left evidence showing leaked battle plans, Deluminators, everything. Malfoy had even given up a small fortune and hid it in the cellar of the Carrow's mansions to plant the illusion that they'd been paid and spoiled for their betrayal. With the lengths they'd gone to, there would be no room for doubt in Voldemort's mind, or room for either of the twins to protest their innocence, but still, Hermione wouldn't be able to believe it'd worked until she'd heard it from Malfoy himself.

Another nod. "The Dark Lord was so pleased with Theodore for sniffing them both out that he let him execute Alecto as a reward right then and there."

"I bet he was thrilled with that, considering the part she played in Daphne's execution."

Malfoy snorted quietly under his breath, and again, dimples started to crack the side of his face. "Bloody psychopath was like a child on Christmas morning." He opened his eyes, and when he saw that she'd moved, that she was facing him, he smirked down at her and shifted so that he mirrored her, sliding one hand under his pillow and twisting his body so that he faced her too.

A concerned but guarded look flashed across his face. He reached out and cupped her face in his hand, and her eyes fluttered closed as she nestled her cheek gently against his palm.

His icy fingers felt nice as he ran them gently over her cheek and bottom lip. "Was it the same nightmare?" he asked after a few moments. "The one where I -"

"Burned me to death with your dragon?" she laughed softly, sarcastically. "Yes, it was that one. It's always that one."

"That's not going to happen, Granger. I won't let it."

"Don't," she said. "Don't do that. Don't make promises to me that you might not be able to keep."

to leave her in peace, he flopped down on the bed beside her, rested his head on her pillow, and closed his eyes.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

"Taking Narcissa out for a walk," he said, eyes still closed. "I'm tired. Just resting my eyes for a moment."

"And you're doing it in my bed because?"

"Do you want to hear about what happened tonight at the meeting? Or would you rather I just bend you over the bed, have my fun, and then tell you about it tomorrow?"

She kicked him gently in the leg and although he didn't open his eyes, his lips twitched into a smirk and dimples cracked the side of his cheeks.

She had no intention of letting him stay the night in her bed, but even she couldn't deny that having him there was ... nice. A little comforting, and she was desperate to hear how tonight's plan had unfolded. Despite her skin feeling unbearably hot and clammy, she scooted down the bed and closer to him. She rested her head on her pillow, wrapped one arm underneath it, and rolled onto her side so that her entire body was turned towards him.

"What time is it?" she asked.

"About three in the morning."

"Have you just got back?"

"Yes," he answered simply. "I was on the way back to my room when I heard you tossing and turning and muttering to yourself like a nutter. Forgive me for wanting to check that you weren't possessed or starting to go off your rocker before I went to bed. Although, one look at your bloody hair would have told me that you were. Seriously Granger, how does one's hair get so messy overnight? Is it really just through sleep and bad dreams? Because it looks like you've got a family of birds nesting in there. Possibly a few families, come to think of it. And their mates."

"Were you at Amycus and Alecto's executions?" Hermione asked, doing her best to ignore his subtle little digs.

He nodded softly, but his eyes remained closed. "Alecto was tonight. Voldemort wants us to interrogate Amycus tomorrow before we kill him, just to see what he knows."

Theo glared down at Amycus. "Yes, yes, we're the traitors. We betrayed boldie a long time ago, and we've been framing you lot to whittle down his army and give the Order can do their job, and Malfoy is shagging the Golden Girl. That's old news, do try and keep up Amy!"

"How ... dare you when the Dark Lord finds out-"

Amycus jerked away from his bloodied finger and wretched. "Why? Why would you betray him?"

"Oh, I don't know," Theo taunted. "Maybe it's because the Dark Lord is an evil tyrant and makes us kill? *No, no that doesn't sound right.* Maybe it's because we're all a little tired of fighting his war and we know it's never going to end? *No.* But maybe - fucking maybe - the reason we betrayed the Dark Lord, maybe the reason I want to see him fall and lose everything, is because he murdered my wife."

Amycus's eyes widened, a mixture of fear and realisation. "All this is .. you've all betrayed the Dark Lord because of Daphne..."

"Don't you fucking dare say her name," Theo snarled, digging the knife into Amycus's pinkie finger. As he bore down, Amycus started to scream again.

"Can you cast a silencing charm on him now?" Blaise asked. "I'm sick to death of the sound of his voice."

Theo looked at Malfoy and he nodded once, fully in agreement and authorising the command. Theo sighed heavily and backed away, grumbling something that sounded like a death threat under his breath as he released Amycus's pinkie from his knives path. He pressed his wand against Amycus's throat, opened his mouth to recite the incantation-

"I wish ... I wish I could be alive to ..." Amycus panted heavily. "... See what the Dark Lord is going ... to do when ... he finds out. You all betray him and then, to make matters worse ... Malfoy sullies himself and his bloodline ... with a filthy fucking Mudblood!"

Malfoy held up his hand and Theo pulled his wand back. "What the fuck did you just say about Granger?" he asked, and something in his voice made Theo stand and back away from Amycus.

"I ... said- " despite the blood loss and unimaginable pain he must have been in, Amycus found the strength to glare at Malfoy as he stalked forward, "-I wish that ...

I could be alive ... to see what the Dark Lord ... going to do ... to you when he finds out ... what you've done."

As Malfoy passed Theo, he snatched the knife from his hand and dug it under Amycus's chin. Malfoy twisted his wrist and used the very edge of the blade to pull Amycus's face up so he had to stare at him.

"He's going to kill you all you know ... The Dark Lord ... he's going to make you all suffer. Hopefully, he'll blame the Mudblood ... and he'll kill her first."

Malfoy's hands tightened around the hilt of the blade. He felt his lip start to curl. Felt a wave of anger like nothing he'd ever felt before sweep across his veins.

"I can see it now, in your eyes," Amycus laughed humourlessly as he stared up at Malfoy. "I can see what she's done to you ... you're not the same ... how could I not see it before ... She's changed you ... her filth ... the Dark Lord was right, their filth ... it infects like a cancer ... it's made you weak ... All this all this betrayal ... all this because of a filthy, fucking mudblood ... your father would be so disappointed."

The blade shook in Malfoy's hand. He pressed it harder into Amycus's throat, delighting when he punctured the skin and a stream of red slid down his already crimson neck. "These are quite possibly going to be your last words, Amycus, so if I were you, I would choose them very - very - fucking carefully."

"My last words?" Amycus scoffed weakly. "Alright then ... how about these for last words ... I hope the Dark Lord finds out ... what you're doing ... and I hope you get everything that comes to you, Malfoy," Amycus snarled, panting through every vile word but voice growing stronger, more sure of himself. "I hope the Dark Lord keeps you alive when he rips your spine out of your body ... I hope he ties you to a post and lets the others stab you over and over again for what you've done. I hope he takes everything from you piece by piece but I hope, more than anything, Salazar, I hope he kills the Mudblood first. I hope he peels your eyelids off so you're forced to watch when he kills that fucking bitch-"

And just like that, Amycus was silenced forever.

Because Malfoy had pried his jaw apart, pressed the blade inside, and cut the malicious words right out of his mouth.

Along with his fucking tongue.

There was a moment of stunned silence before she heard the intruder speak again. "Easy there, little lion," he said, voice deep and teasing, practically a purr. Sly bastard. "No need to get so excited, it's only me."

For a split second, she was relieved to hear his voice. It sounded warm, full of emotion and nothing like the one in her nightmares, and then she remembered the fight he'd given her from barging into her room, and her cheeks flushed with anger. "What the fuck were you thinking, Malfoy?!" Hermione snapped, palm pressed against her sternum as she fought to regain control of her breathing ... and her fucking heartbeat. "Have you lost your fucking mind?! I could have killed you and then we'd both be dead!"

"My, that mouth of yours is feisty in the early hours, isn't it?" she heard him chuckle softly in the darkness. "Shame that you won't let me spend the night in here, I could think of a thousand different ways I could put it to use."

With a flick of her wrist, she lit the candle that stood on her bedside table, and she watched Malfoy walk towards her bed. She narrowed her eyes and squinted at him, trying to figure out if she was awake or if she was still dreaming.

But as he got closer, she realised that his eyes were nothing like they were in her nightmare. They were light now, the mixture of blue and grey that she knew, the blue starting to overtake the grey.

His face looked tired and there were flecks of red dusting in the silver of his hair, but he looked unharmed, and in relatively good spirits. He crossed her room with a lazy smirk on his face, but when he got closer, when he got a really good look at her, he froze.

She could see on his face that she must have looked a mess. She already knew that her body was drenched in sweat, her chest was heaving with every sharp pant she took, and God only knew what type of monstrosity her hair must have resembled, but Malfoy obviously saw something else. Something she couldn't see, and it bothered him.

"What happened?" he asked, something close to fear colouring his voice.

"I'm fine," she breathed. "I just had a nightmare."

He narrowed his eyes at her, even took a moment to roll his tongue across the inside of his cheek, seemingly deciding how to respond, before he closed the distance between them. He gave her back her wand, but just when she thought he was about

nothing, like he didn't know her at all and the last eight months between them hadn't happened.

With his cold expression and his dragon standing defensively behind him, she saw no glimpse of Draco, the man who'd kissed her and held her and made her feel safe - even in the middle of a war. She only saw a Death Eater, the ruthless Demon Mask that terrorised the Order and left a trail of corpses behind him.

When she'd started having this nightmare, that first night after Voldemort had entered her mind, she'd tried to reason with him. Tried to beg and plead for her life, as though she might be able to appeal to his version of Malfoy and make him take pity on her.

But that was months ago, and she knew better now than to try and reason with this cruel copy of him.

So instead of fighting, instead of pleading, she leaned back against the post, took a deep breath and stared her executioner in his eyes, accepting her fate and the flames that accompanied him.

Not real, she chanted again, willing herself to be calm. It'd all be over soon.

"But I think we both always knew how this was going to end for us."

Not real.

"Didn't we, Granger?"

Not real. Not real. Not real.

She gave herself one last glance at the cold stranger that stood in front of her, and as Narcissa reared her head back and opened her mouth, Hermione closed her eyes.

Thankfully, the war had made her a light sleeper, and the spell of her nightmare was broken by the sound of her bedroom door creaking open. Instinctually, she bolted upright and reached for the wand under her pillow, and just as the door drifted open and the intruder stepped inside, she aimed for the door and her wand sparked with violent green magic -

"Expelliarmus!" a voice hissed through the darkness, and a second later, her wand soared through the air.

She didn't see where it landed, her room was too dark.

### **15th January**

It was the early hours of the morning before Malfoy finally decided that Amycus had had enough and cut his head off. By the time they were done, Theo and Malfoy had collectively flayed all the skin off his left arm - right up to the shoulder joint - broken six of his ribs and cut off all of his fingers and toes.

And, of course, his tongue.

When they were finished, Theo had presented Amycus's decapitated head to Voldemort for him to display outside the cathedral as a warning to others. He left Greycrack's pack to dispose of the rest of his body.

After listening to Amycus scream all day, Malfoy's skull throbbed like there were a dozen nails rattling around inside it. So when Voldemort dismissed the three of them and they were able to Apparate home, all Malfoy wanted to do was drown in whiskey and bathwater. He hardly said a word to Blaise and Theo as they trudged through the Manor together, and he'd been so tired when he'd walked into his room that he almost didn't notice that the door to his bathroom was cracked open, soft light and steam peeking through the gap.

A part of him thought that his exhaustion was making him hallucinate.

He walked towards the bathroom in a sort of daze, and when he gently pushed the door open, he found the room filled with lit candles, the air full of steam and his bath already run and filled with bubbles. With Granger laying happily inside it.

Her hair was wet and sticking to the back of her neck. Her cheeks were flushed from the hot water. There was a stack of books beside the bath, and there was one levitating beside her whilst a charmed quill scribbled furiously notes into the pages. There was also a book in her hand. Her eyes were cast down, and she toyed with her wand in her other hand, tapping it rhythmically against his copper bath.

"Draco," she greeted softly without looking up at him.

"Granger," he answered, walking into the room slowly. He stopped when he was standing at the bath, right beside her head. "To what do I owe this pleasure?"

"Couldn't sleep."

"And so you thought you'd break into my room and run yourself a bath?"

A crease formed between her brows, she flicked her wand, and the quill started writing faster. "There was a book in here that I wanted to read, and I knew you'd

come to my room when you were back anyway. Thought I'd save you the trouble and come to you for a change.”

She still hadn't looked at him, so she missed the way his lip twitched when he fought a smirk.

“But if you don't want me in here?” She shrugged innocently. “Then put better locks on your door.”

“Presumptuous little thing, aren't you?” he whispered as he knelt down next to the bath and wove his hand into her wet hair. “Assuming all that.”

Again, she shrugged, but she still didn't look at him. She tried to act indifferent, but when he wrapped her long, soaking hair around his wrist and gave it a sharp tug, forcing her head back so she had to look at him, he saw the way her fingers tightened around her */his* - book in her hand.

He tugged again, harder this time, with enough force to pull her out of the bath slightly. He swore his icy heart beat faster when her nipples broke the surface of the water.

The quill stopped scribbling.  
“What's to stop me from dragging you out of this bath right now?”

He watched her take a slow, shaky breath, and again, his heart thumped to life when a sly smile appeared on her face. “Try it,” she challenged, twisting her wand so it aimed perfectly at his throat. “*I dare you.*”

They stared at each other for a few moments, both thrilling at the challenge, the danger of it, the tension between them as thick and tangible as the steam from the bathwater.

Eventually, Malfoy huffed a laugh and let go of her hair. “Wouldn't dream of it.”

He felt her eyes on him as he pulled his robes over his head and started to undress. Once he'd rid himself of his clothes, he sat on the opposite side of the bath, spine resting against the opposite wall so he was facing her and his legs running along the outside of hers.

Her eyes drifted over the scars on his chest, the blood on his hands and face - and probably in his hair, though he hadn't cared to check. After a moment, she set her book down and the water lapped against the sides of the bath as she moved. She shifted so that she was on her knees in front of him. Her body dripped with water and bubbles clung to life on her small waist and chest.

Out the corner of her eye, she saw the glitter of black scales in front of her. Heard the sound of reptilian wings and a scaled tail scrape across the floor, walking in circles, getting tighter every time.

She heard it, but she didn't look up. Wouldn't let herself be distracted by it and focused on the ropes. She pulled and pushed her wrists against the pole at her back in a sawing motion, trying to fray them enough so she could break them apart and get free -

The ground below her feet started to shake as Narcissa drew closer. The wooden pole that she was bound to vibrated against her back as the dragon's colossal weight shook the very earth.

It's not real, she told herself, chanting it over and over again like a prayer. Glowing red eyes peered at her through the dark. The growling got louder.

She could feel the dragon's hot breath on her skin as she drew closer.

Not real, she told herself again. Not real.

Sweat trickled down the side of her temple and gathered on her exposed collarbone, the evidence of her struggles against the ropes sliding down her chest.

She worked her wrists faster, trying to escape, but she was running out of time. It would only be a few more seconds before -

“I would say that I'm sorry -”

And just like that, it was too late.

Hermione's eyes snapped up at the sound of his voice.

“-that I didn't see this coming-”

It wasn't real. It wasn't really him.

He stepped out of the darkness and closer to her, just like he had done every time she'd relived this vision. Narcissa hovered protectively to his left, her eyes glistening blood red and her mouth hanging open in a silent threat. He didn't look at her the way he did when she was awake, when his eyes were blue and gentle, when he looked at her as though she meant something. Something important to him.

She'd spent so much time with him when she was awake, it made this version of him seem like a stranger. His eyes were always cold in this dream. Dead and unfeeling. His face was always expressionless and he looked at her like she was

**13th January**

The air was hot, uncomfortably hot and growing hotter by the second.

Hermione could hardly breathe. There were ropes cutting into her chest, crushing her ribs into her lungs and squeezing what little air she had left.

She couldn't see anything, in front of her was just an endless sea of black, waves and waves of nothing but darkness.

The isolation was almost as unsettling as the darkness itself. She felt like she could go mad just staring at it, scanning every inch of the blackness in search of a threat that might be lurking there, waiting for the perfect moment to strike-

She tried to raise her hand, intending to blindly try and feel her way through the darkness, but her hands were bound tightly behind her back, those same coarse ropes that were wrapped around her body cutting into her wrists and binding her to the tall wooden pole behind her back.

She could feel herself start to panic -

Could feel that sting of adrenaline spike through her veins, encouraging her to fight, to survive.

She knew what was coming next. She'd had this particular nightmare more times than she cared to count, but it never got any easier. Never felt any less real.

Even though she knew it wouldn't do any good, she couldn't help but fight against her restraints. She pulled and tugged them at every angle, testing for weaknesses that she already knew weren't there. The ropes wouldn't break. They never did.

The temperature continued to rise and rise, and with each degree that the air got hotter, Hermione's panic clawed higher too-

There was no way out.

She couldn't see anything -

And then she heard it. Again.

That deep rumbling in the darkness. That growl that sounded like rolls of rumbling thunder, like mountains crashing together.

She knew what she was going to see, so she didn't even bother to look up, chose to spend the last few precious seconds fighting against the ropes, looking for a way to escape, even though she'd never been able to before.

Lucky bastards.

She flicked her wand and summoned the same bath salts he'd used for her before, and after she'd added them to the bath and he felt them start to sink into his skin, she summoned a shampoo bottle and emptied some into her hands.

She watched him with a sort of rapt attention as she shuffled forward even further, her eyes curious and reserved, even though her hands were steady, and when he nodded, she threaded her fingers either side of his scalp and started massaging the shampoo into his hair. Her hands felt, for lack of a better word, heavenly. He swore he felt her magic in the very tips of her fingers as she kneaded the back of his head. It was almost impossible not to lean into her hands, close his eyes, and get lost in her touch. Almost impossible. He resisted. Just about.

As she worked, he watched her face. Watched the way she pursed her lips as she worked the lather into his hair, and the little crease that had appeared between her brows. Clearly, her mind was on something else.

His eyes drifted down to the book she'd been reading. It was his, one from his bedside collection. *Prophecyes, Visions, and their meanings*, by Malcolm Fitzgerald.

"Why are you reading that?" he asked.

"Because of Blaise's vision," she answered simply, as though it were completely obvious.

"Why? It's bullshit, he doesn't have the gift of foresight."

Her eyes flickered down to his and her hands stilled in his hair. "If you really think that, then why are *you* reading it?"

Malfoy frowned and her fingers started moving again, working their way towards the back of his head in a way that made his toes curl under the surface of the water. "So," she said, tone all business despite the tender way she kneaded his scalp. "Can I ask whose blood I'm washing out of your hair? Or do I not want to know?"

"Amycus's."

Her fingers stilled of their magic. She leaned back so she could look at his face.

"I thought Theo was going to torture him?"

"He did."

"Then why are you covered in his blood?"

Even though he knew it was going to earn him a smack, he smirked at her.  
“Couldn’t let Theodore have all the fun, could I?”

He was right. The moment he’d said it, her face scrunched up and she smacked him across the shoulder, making a flurry of frothy bubbles float through the air in the aftermath.

“That wasn’t part of the plan!” She leaned back against her side of the bath and glared at him.

Malfoy rolled his eyes before he slid down the bath and submerged himself fully into the scalding water. He stayed underwater for a breath or two, letting the suds fully wash off his hair, before he broke the surface again and resumed his earlier position. “Relax, Granger,” he said as he rubbed the water from his eyes with the thumb and index finger. “I placed privacy charms on the room so no one overheard, and Theodore took full credit when he presented Amycus’s head to Voldemort. As far as he’s concerned, I was nothing more than a witness - just as he’d ordered.”

“What did you do?”

“Well, to begin with, I cut out his tongue.”

“Why?”

“Because he said something I didn’t like.”  
She bit the inside of her cheek and glared at him.

“Oh, don’t be mad,” Malfoy purred as he gripped both sides of the bath and used it to pull himself up. He stalked forward, almost crawling across the bath to her. He settled between her legs, wrapped a hand around her throat and used his thumb to twist her neck to the side so he could nip her flushed cheek. “Or, on second thought, *do*,” he whispered as he crushed his body against the length of hers, trapping her against the bath and him. “Salazar knows it’s always more fun to fuck you when you’re angry with me.”

He kissed down her throat and she moaned quietly when he bit her collarbone, but she seemed off. A little ... indifferent. His suspicion was confirmed when he palmed her breast under the water and her back didn’t arch.

“Something on your mind?” he asked as he peppered kisses into her neck.

She didn’t answer him.

“Granger? You know I’m not a patient man.”

While her illness bound her to her bed, Blaise never left her side, and with Astoria so ill, no one was in the mood to celebrate Christmas, so they spent the usually happy day separated. Instead of showering his wife with gifts, like he did each year, Blaise spent the day at her bedside, holding back tears and trying to nurse her back to health. Instead of spending the day getting drunk with his sister-in-law, like he usually did, Theo drowned in whiskey and kept to himself, sitting cross-legged in front of Daphne’s grave and laying his gifts to her at the empty rocks feet like an altar.

And instead of locking herself in her bedroom and spending the day in isolation, like she had the previous year, Hermione spent it with Malfoy.

They spent hours dissecting every ounce of the information Astoria had gathered from Crouch Jr, huddled over a table in Malfoy’s family library with books scattered below them. They went over maps of Nottinghamshire to try and find a way into Newstead Abbey, and they poured over defensive spells and possible enchantments Crouch could have used to booby trap the area well into the early hours of the morning, and when they were finished, Malfoy knocked all the books off the table with one sharp swipe of his arm, laid Hermione on top of it, and fucked her until she saw stars.

And then they repeated the same thing on Boxing day. And the day after that.

On the 28th of December, they had another meeting with the Order, and whilst Fleur and Ginny - and surprisingly, even Ron - agreed that it wasn’t safe to take the medallion yet, they were overjoyed with the news that it had finally been found.

Luckily everyone seemed to agree that whilst stealing that Horcrux and handing it over to the Order was vital, it was highly likely that they wouldn’t be able to get it without revealing Malfoy, Theo and Blaise to be the traitors, and they couldn’t afford to do that yet, not until they’d whittled Voldemort’s army down right to the bare fucking bones.

By the time the new year rolled around, Astoria was starting to feel - and look - much better, and everyone around the manor was able to breathe a little easier when she finally had the strength to get out of bed. But there wasn’t a person in the Manor who hadn’t noticed that her recovery was taking longer each time she fell ill, and although no one said it out loud, everyone was worried about how much longer she had left.

Crouch in the first place, but mostly, he was distraught that he hadn't been there to protect her when she'd really needed him to.

Over the days that followed, Hermione helped Blaise care for Astoria where she could. She brought him blood replenishing potions and extra strong Pepperup potions, and brewed dozens more to store away for emergencies, but Blaise hardly needed the help.

It was incredibly sweet, to see the way Blaise cared for Astoria. Every time she fell ill, it was always the same thing. Although Blaise was a lot more tactful than Theo and Malfoy were - shunning away the use of grotesque spells that decapitated his enemies, choosing more sophisticated methods of torture - Hermione knew he could be just as ruthless as his friends, and yet, whenever Astoria was taken ill, that ruthlessness in him was stripped away.

Every time her blood curse flared up, it was as though their life had jumped forward sixty years. Blaise was no longer a Gold Mask and Astoria was no longer the glamorous witch that strutted about the manor in heels. They became an elderly couple, Astoria lying in bed, not a single glamour charm insight, while her husband sat on a stool beside her bed and spoon-fed her potions and broths, hoping it would give her strength to see another day. In those moments, they were like old souls trapped in the bodies of their younger selves, and it was an incredible thing to see, the way someone so fragile could make even the most ruthless death eater into someone soft and tender.

Romy took Astoria's illness almost as hard as Blaise did. He barely left her bedside, bless his little heart. He brought her every potato based dish he could think of, fluffed her pillows and insisted - absolutely insisted - on brushing Astoria's hair each morning and evening, even though she was asleep.

"Miss would not like us to see her like this, with her hair all messy," the tiny elf would chirp as he ran the brush oh so softly through Astoria's silky blonde hair. "She would still want to look nice, even whens she is sleeping. Miss always has to look her best, and Romy does not mind making Miss look her best. If Miss looks nice, then she will get better. Romy knows it."

By the end of the third day, Blaise had managed to get her coughing fits under control through potions and enchantments, and although she wasn't vomiting blood every time she dry heaved anymore, she was still exhausted and struggling to lift her head off the pillow.

"Blaise has had visions for a long time, hasn't he?"  
"He *thinks* he has," he kissed into her skin. "Why?"

"You told me a long time ago ... that he ..." "

"Yes?"

"Had a vision that Astoria died."

The blood that was previously rushing to his cock stilled.

Fuck sake! That was one way to ruin his arousal!

He groaned against her neck. He caught the edges of the bath again, but this time, he used them to pry himself off Granger and take him back to his side of the bath.

"I did," he huffed, rings clinking against the copper as he drummed his fingers in irritation. "Why?"

"What happened in that vision? What did he see?"

"He didn't see her die, per se," Malfoy started. "He saw her on her hands and knees, covered in blood and screaming like she was in pain, and then he saw himself and Theodore digging a grave. Doesn't take a genius to put those two things together."

The little lion nodded thoughtfully and stared at the bubbles. "I thought so. And the vision Blaise had the other night," she said, "you said he saw nine flowers in the Malfoy family cemetery?"

"Yes."

"Five of them flourished."

"And the other four wilted, yes," he snapped, the irritation clear in his voice. "You have a theory about that, I take it?"

She nodded and swirled some of the bubbles next to her with her hand. "I think I've figured out what the four wilted flowers mean. I don't think it's necessarily means who lives here now is going to die, I think it relates more to who *has* lived here, past and present."

"Makes sense- and your theory is...?"

"I think that the four who are going to be dead at the end of the war are your father, your mother, Daphne, and me."

Despite the scalding water, Malfoy's blood ran cold. His stomach felt frozen, like someone had cut him open and rammed a handful of icicles inside. He opened his mouth to speak, to argue, to say that the idea was fucking ludicrous and he wouldn't hear another second of it, but she just kept speaking, cutting him off and not giving him time to poke holes in her theory.

"It would make sense," she carried on, eyes still on her hand as she traced patterns in the bubbles. "It's probably the reason why his vision showed your family's cemetery, because all of them have headstones there, even if their bodies aren't. And it would tie in nicely with the other vision Blaise had. The one where you and Narcissa burned me at the stake."

With every new word, Malfoy could see the pieces of her theory coming together. She was right, it did make sense. The graves would add up to four and it would link in perfectly with Blaise's other vision. So much had already come true from that particular vision. Zacharias Smith burning. The bell tower falling. So much had already come true, so everything else in that vision ...

"The only thing I can't quite figure out is the five who will remain," she said. "At first I thought it was going to be Blaise, Astoria, Theo, you and Narcissa, but then I realised that the elves wouldn't be included in that count, and that just didn't make sense, because if they aren't included, then it doesn't make sense for Narcissa to be."

Usually, it was a fucking joy to watch Granger work through a problem, to see the way her beautiful mind would put the pieces together, how she could connect dots that others were often oblivious to.

But not this time.

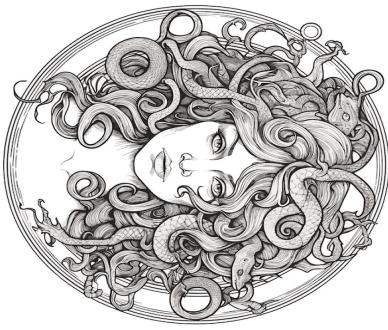
This didn't feel like a pleasure. It felt like a punishment. A punishment specifically tailored to him. Blaise's vision the platform and her theory the noose that would hang him.

"I suppose it would make sense for Theo to want to find someone after the war, but I didn't think he'd want to be with someone else after Daphne..."

He had to shut her up. He had to get her to stop fucking talking about this - but if he pushed her, if he argued back, she'd just retaliate twice as hard, force her theories down his throat and make him see how - how realistic it was. How after the war, they would likely not see each other again.

Blaise was furious with her for taking such a risk. He was angry that she hadn't called Theo to pull her out sooner and he was seething that she'd been alone with

## CHAPTER 49



### NIGHTMARE? OR VISION?

*1st January*

Although no one could deny that the information Astoria had gotten from Grouch Jr was invaluable, it came at a high cost, one which Astoria had been forced to pay herself. The spells she'd cast to erase their interaction from Grouch's mind - and the few she'd used to wipe Amycus's memory and banish the blood she'd vomited - had taken a toll on her, and for the three days that followed the Gala, she did nothing but sleep and vomit blood.

Blaise was furious with her for taking such a risk. He was angry that she hadn't called Theo to pull her out sooner and he was seething that she'd been alone with

"You do realise that getting the Medallion is going to be very dangerous for us?" Malfoy snarled.

Harry hesitated before he answered. "Yes,"

"And that it's very likely that someone is going to see us get the medallion, and if they do, the ruse is up and my entire family is going to be in danger?"

"I'm really sorry, I voted against it, but Kingsley is insistent," Harry said. "You're doing an amazing job of whittling down Voldemort's army - and we're so grateful to you and your family for that - but we're losing people too. We don't have many soldiers left, the muggle armies are almost completely depleted. The Order can't last much longer. We need to destroy another Horcrux, and we need to do it now."

Whilst Harry had no problem putting his own life on the line, he hated gambling with other people's lives, so for him to be asking this of Malfoy, The Order must have been in a worse state than Hermione realised.

But Malfoy had heard enough. Without another word, he clicked his fingers and Narcissa lowered her body to the ground for him to mount her. The dragon hissed and kept her eyes on Harry as Malfoy climbed on her back.

"What are you doing?" Hermione asked. "Aren't we staying to meet with Ginny?"

"What's the fucking point?" Malfoy snapped as he settled on Narcissa's back. "Scarhead has told us everything we need to know, and we're going to need every fucking second we have left to plan this shit show." He ran his fingers through his hair before he held out his hand to her. "Come. We need to go home."

He was right. They had an impossible task on their hands and an even more impossible deadline.

She sighed and nodded goodbye at Harry. She turned around, about to take Malfoy's hand and get on Narcissa's back-

"Hermione," Harry said. "One more thing."

Hermione looked back at him and watched Harry reach into his pocket and pull out a small, folded piece of paper. He smiled warmly at her as he handed it over.

Her heart swelled when she unfolded it.

It was a painting of a forest, a child's painting. She knew who'd made it before she saw the messy signature. She recognised the technique because it was a chaotic, unpracticed version of her own, recognised the clustered and light brush strokes because she'd taught her pupils that very technique herself.

"Rose and Fred painted that for you," Harry added, the promise of a smile in his voice. "They miss their auntie Mione."

This time, Harry's brow's knitted together.

## CHAPTER 52

"I know that from an outsider's perspective, what Malfoy has done since the war started looks horrific, I'm not blind, I know he's done awful things, but believe me when I say everything he's done, he's done out of love for his family." Hermione chose every word she said very carefully. She knew Harry, knew his values and what was important to him, and she knew that if there was one thing he could understand - probably the only thing he and Malfoy could ever, ever agree on - was the strength of love and the hold it could have over someone.

Harry's quizzical green eyes flickered between Hermione, Malfoy, to her hand on his chest, and then back again. After a minute, he smiled. "I see Ginny was right about that too."

"Right about *what*?" Malfoy snapped.

"Nothing," Harry said, chuckling under his breath and shaking his head slightly. He pushed up the sleeves of his jacket and checked his watch briefly before he looked up again. "Ginny can only cover for me for a few more minutes, and I wanted to tell you this myself in person. Kingsley wants us to move up the plan."

Hermione felt Malfoy's body tense under her hand. "By how much?" he asked gruffly.

Harry looked nervously between the two of them before he answered, "He wants the medallion by the end of March."

Although Hermione seemed to have lost her voice, Malfoy had no trouble finding his. "Of course he fucking does!" He laughed bitterly, resentfully. "It's about fucking time, I wondered when he was going to have the balls to make his move."

Hermione's brow furrowed. She dropped her hand and stared up at him. "You say that like you aren't surprised?"

"*Surprised*? What's there to be surprised about? That Kingsley doesn't give a shit about my family? Or that getting him that medallion is likely to expose us as the spy? No, of course he fucking doesn't. He thinks we're expendable, the wasted Death Eater scum who chose the wrong side and deserve everything that's coming to us."

"It doesn't have anything to do with your family," Harry argued. "You know that one of our seers had the same vision that Blaise had, and, well - too many things from that vision have come true. It's making Kingsley nervous, and quite frankly, it's making me nervous too. We need to destroy another Horcrux. We can't wait any longer."

The flight back to the manor was exceptionally tense. Malfoy didn't say a word. Nothing. Not a fucking sentence. The only sound Hermione could hear the entire journey home was the cold air howling around her ears and the occasional flap of Narcissa's wings.

And Malfoy's mood didn't improve when they got home. As soon as Narcissa touched the ground and she let them climb off her back, Malfoy was off, storming towards the manor like he intended to murder anyone and anything who crossed his path.

Narcissa whined after him and dropped her head, visibly anxious and worried.

"He has a name, you know," Malfoy called. "Bloody hell, raised in barns, the lot of them," he added, although, from the quieter tone of his voice, Hermione guessed that he was talking to Narcissa rather than her or Harry. "No manners at all."

"I never thought I'd see you at one of these meetings," Hermione said quickly, trying to brush over Malfoy's snarky comment. "I didn't think Kingsley would want you to leave the base just to come and meet ... us. Me especially, after everything I've done."

"He doesn't," Harry answered. "But he doesn't know I'm here."

Hermione's brows knitted together.

"Ginny is keeping him busy so I could sneak off for a few minutes. She'll be here soon with Fleur. I just - I wanted to see you."

"Why?"

"Ginny said how well you were doing. She said you looked..." His eyes drifted over her shoulder to look at Malfoy for a moment before they landed back on hers. "Happy, given the circumstances. I wanted to see it for myself."

"You sound surprised by that, Potter," Malfoy said.

Harry's eyes drifted over Hermione's shoulder again to glare at Malfoy. "Yeah, you're right, I was surprised that she could be happy living in *your* manor, after everything *you've* put her through, Malfoy."

From the way the ground started to shudder violently under her feet, Hermione knew Malfoy and Narcissa were stalking them. Hermione turned around and braced her hands on Malfoy's chest, she didn't want him to stand too close to Harry, she didn't trust him not to swing for him, and people who said something Malfoy didn't like had a nasty habit of ending up in a coffin lately.

"*Don't*," she urged, meeting his icy stare. "Let him have that one."

Malfoy's nostrils flared as he stared down at her. Eventually, he rolled his jaw and released a long, ragged sigh. "Fine."

Narcissa growled menacingly behind Malfoy, not sure how she felt about Harry yet. When the dragon's jaw fell open, Harry took a sensible step away from Hermione and Malfoy.

Hermione took a deep breath to steady herself before she turned back to Harry. "I appreciate that the two of you are never going to get along, but Harry, if you make another comment like that, I'll leave."

Hermione soothingly stroked her snout before she went after Malfoy.

"Malfoy?" she called when they were halfway through the gardens. "Are you alright?"

He didn't answer her.

She struggled to keep up with his long, furious strides, practically had to break into a small run to match his pace. She tried to call him again as they approached the house, and again, he ignored her, didn't even pause to look over his shoulder.

When he got to the back door that led into the kitchen, he still hadn't spoken, and he swung the door open so angrily it was a miracle he didn't pull the bloody thing off its hinges.

Romy was already inside the kitchen, standing on a tall wooden stool and hovering over the island, covered in flour and happily chopping potatoes which he would probably be serving for dinner.

The kitchen was Romy's happy place, so Hermione wasn't surprised to find him there, but she was surprised to find Astoria standing beside him, a glass of red wine in hand and wearing a pink apron (that matched her dress perfectly) and equally as covered in flour as Romy's was.

Astoria's illness came over her in waves, one day she was completely depleted and too exhausted to get out of bed, and the next, she seemed a lot better and would waltz around in heels. Today - judging from her perfect hair and makeup - must have been a good day. She got so few of them lately, so it was nice to see her up and about.

Romy stopped chopping and Astoria's perfect brows furrowed as Malfoy storm passed them.

"Malfoy?" Hermione called to him again.

Still, she didn't get a response.

He charged across the kitchen, completely ignoring everyone. He was so angry that his magic started to lash out. The lights started to flicker overhead. The pans and cooking equipment that were laid across the kitchen island started to rattle and vibrate.

Astoria gave Hermione a concerned look when an empty glass popped open and shattered without being touched.

Malfoy got to the door on the opposite end of the kitchen and curled his hand around the handle, ready to go crashing into the hallway and probably destroy the portraits -

"*Draco!*?" He paused. The pans and cutlery stopped shaking.

"I'm fine." He still had his back to the room, but she heard him release a slow breath before he looked over his shoulder at her. "I just need to get started on how we're going to get the medallion."

"Why, what's happening with the medallion?" Astoria asked, fingers tightening around the stem of the wine glass in her hand. "What the bloody hell happened at the meeting? I thought everything was going well!"

Malfoy clenched his jaw, so Hermione answered for him. "The Order wants to move up the plan. They want the medallion by the end of March."

Astoria's eyes widened and her breath hitched slightly. "That's... rather soon. Is it possible? To get it to them that early?"

"Yes," Malfoy said. "It's risky, and it's not ideal, but it's doable. But I need to get started now, at least that way we have a chance of everyone making it through this alive." He turned his head back towards the door. Hermione couldn't see his face, but his shoulders were rigid, tense with the weight that he felt was his to bear and his to bear alone. She could see the veins protruding on the back of his hand as he twisted the door handle.

Everything about his body language was sharp and angry, but the defeat in his voice would be enough to break anyone's heart.

He started to open the door -

"Do you want me to help?" Hermione asked.

He watched her out the corner of his eye for a moment, the stormy grey had already started to recede. "Yes," he whispered after a moment. "Please."

She nodded, and as they left the room together, Hermione could see Astoria watching them, and smiling brightly.

"I'm so glad that Draco has her," Astoria said as Hermione closed the door behind her. "He puts far too much pressure on himself. He's making himself miserable with it, but he's so much happier when Hermione is with him. Don't you think?"

His eyes were grey and guarded. The tension in his jaw was deadly. "Go on," he said, jutting his chin once towards Harry. "Go to him."

When Hermione took the first step, she felt the ground shudder as Narcissa followed.

Harry's expression tensed up and his fingers flexed around the wand in his hand.

Hermione turned around. "It's alright," she whispered to the dragon. "We can trust him."

Narcissa's red eyes watched her for a moment, and although the dragon didn't back away, when Hermione took another step, she didn't follow either.

The walk toward Harry was slow and painful. She took her time and was very cautious. She knew he wouldn't hurt her, but the last time they'd seen each other she'd almost killed him, and she didn't want to take any chances.

Although one look in Harry's eyes told her that she had nothing to be afraid of. There was no fear in his eyes - which she probably deserved - and there was no resentment or disgust - which she knew she'd most definitely earned - there was just warmth. Just the feeling of family, of belonging.

Narcissa hissed quietly when Harry reached for Hermione. Hermione held up her hand to the dragon, showing that it was alright.

As soon as Hermione turned back around, Harry's arms enveloped her. He squeezed her like he was trying to pack a year's worth of missed embraces into one hug, and Hermione couldn't help but wrap her arms around his shoulders and do the same. She'd forgotten how much she missed him until that moment. She didn't want to let him go, but she knew she had to, she could hear Narcissa huffing, and the dragon's warning growls seemed to be getting louder the longer Harry held onto her.

When he eventually released her, he didn't let her go, not fully, anyway. His hands stayed gently clasped onto her forearms, but that seemed to be enough to quiet Narcissa for a moment.

"You look... good," Harry said, stepping back so he could get a better look at her. "Healthy."

"I am."

Harry nodded once. "He's looking after you then?"

healing charm known to wizardkind and nothing's had an effect. We can't get rid of her blood curse."

Hermione chewed on the inside of her cheek as she mulled over his words. There had to be something. Some obscure potion or exotic artefact somewhere that they didn't know about. Astoria didn't deserve to whither -

Suddenly, Narcissa lifted her huge head off the ground and stared at the terminal the Order usually apparated into. She started growling menacingly towards the vacant space, and seconds later, Hermione heard a quiet popping sound.

They were here.

Hermione and Malfoy stood up, but after a good thirty seconds, no one had walked around the corner to greet them.

"Come on Weaseltits!" Malfoy called towards the terminal. "While we're young thank you very much."

Hermione elbowed Malfoy and squinted towards the terminal.

Something was wrong. Fleur and Ginny never dawdled. They were always prompt and efficient. They knew these exchanges were important, vital to the Order's victory and it was incredibly dangerous if they were discovered by any other Death Eaters. They wouldn't waste time like this.

"Hello?" Hermione called, doing a wonderful job and hiding the rising panic she felt from her voice. "Ginny, is that you?"

"No."

Hermione's heart stilled.

No, no that wasn't Ginny's voice at all. It was Harry's.

The moment he stepped around the corner, it was as though the last year hadn't happened, as though the last few years hadn't happened. Their relationship had been strained before she'd been captured, throughout the war, throughout all the death and all the battles, they'd almost become strangers to one another, unfamiliar, but looking at him now, none of that mattered.

She didn't see the war hero, the man with the weight of the wizarding world on his shoulders, she just saw her friend.

Hermione looked at Malfoy, unsure of what to do.

"Yes, Miss," Romy answered, nodding in agreement as he copped potatoes on the kitchen worktop. "Sir does always seem to be in a better mood when Miss Granger is around. He was always so miserable before she lived with us. Always angry and quiet, and apart from today, he has seemed much happier, and this makes Romy happy, too."

"I know he promised Daphne he'd keep us safe, but she wouldn't have wanted him to waste his own life doing it." Astoria sighed and took a sip of her wine. "She would have wanted him to be happy and live his life, and I think he's been doing that - a little bit - since Hermione has been with us." She took her head and took another sip. "I've told him for years that he needs to relax and enjoy the little things, and he always ignored me, but as soon as Hermione comes into the picture, he does exactly that."

When the potatoes were chopped to his liking, Romy scooped them into a bowl and handed them to Astoria to season.

"Perhaps," Romy agreed as he started to prepare the sauce for their leak and potato pie. "But then perhaps - no Miss, that is too much salt! No more!"

Astoria dropped the salt as though it had burned her and pushed the bowl of precious potatoes back to Romy before he hit her. He really was the sweetest creature, quite literally wouldn't hurt a fly, but if ruined potatoes were on the line... Well, everyone had limits to their patience.

"Perhaps Miss is right," Romy sighed, waving his hand over the bowl to try and undo the mess she'd made. "Romy agrees that Mr Malfoy should listen when she tells him not to worry as much, but perhaps Miss shouldn't judge because Miss is not very good at listening to others either."

Astoria paused - wine glass hovering next to her lips - to glare at Romy. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Romy shrugged innocently. "Miss is angry because Master Malfoy is not listening to her, but Miss ought not to be out of bed. Everyone told her not to be, and yet here she is," Romy smiled knowingly as he waved his hand in front of Astoria, "out of bed, looking lovely and making dinner with Romy when she should be resting."

"Yes, well, thank you for casting the Glamour charms on me. I ... don't think I have the strength to cast them yet"

"Miss ought not to worry," he said, smiling, as he went back to fixing the potatoes. "Romy will always cast those charms on Miss because he knows how important it is

to Miss that she looks her best. That she looks like her sister. And as long as Miss is happy - and Romy gets potatoes - then Romy is happy, too."

Astoria cocked a brow. "And if Romy doesn't get potatoes?"

"Then Romy will, I think the muggle expression is - raise hell?"

Astoria couldn't help but laugh. "You're getting very sassy in your old age. Did you know that?"

"Yes, Miss. Quinzel says it is a learned habit. She says that because Romy spends so much time with Mrs Zabini, that '*she says*' is going to be picked up from you."

Astoria's mouth dropped open in shock.

"Quinzel says that if Romy spends more time with Mrs Zabini, he will likely pick up her other habits too. Like her drinking."

"I do not have a drinking problem!"

"No, of course not Miss," Romy grinned. "And Mr Nott does not kill people for fun, either."

"Yes." "And?" Hermione urged.  
"What do you think?"

They hadn't worked, course they hadn't. If they had, Malfoy, Blaise and Theo would have hunted down every last Phoenix and tortured the poor birds around the clock to get their tears. "It had no effect at all?"

"No."

"Concentrated healing charms?"

"They did nothing."

"What about more unorthodox methods?"

"Like?"

"*It's all here,*" Blaise had whispered to an elderly wizard at the bar. "*They've been there for months.*"

"A friend of mine saw them," Malfoy had told another. "Nothing left, any of them. No weapons. No equipment, barely any food left at all."

"Hiding and licking their wounds in an old Brewery in Ashfield, near Sherwood Forest, that's what I heard," Theo had whispered into the ear of a large chested blonde barmaid. "If I were the Dark Lord, I'd go and slaughter the lot of them before they could recover."

and stared down at her. Against her hip, she could feel his fingers fidgeting, his thumb twisting the ring he wore on his pinkie finger. "Let's talk about something else."

"Alright," Hermione agreed. She let him guide her back to the bench and sat down beside him.

Narcissa lifted her head off the ground when they sat down, but once she was reassured that Hermione and Malfoy were safe and within her reach, she settled back on the floor and closed her red eyes.

"What are we going to do about Astoria? Her condition is only getting worse."

Malfoy looked at her out the corner of his eye. "Very observant. Ten points to there's no need to hit me, Granger. I was just making an observation."

"I'm serious," Hermione said. "What are we going to do? Have you tried Phoenix tears?"

"Yes."

"And?" Hermione urged.

"What do you think?"

They hadn't worked, course they hadn't. If they had, Malfoy, Blaise and Theo would have hunted down every last Phoenix and tortured the poor birds around the clock to get their tears. "It had no effect at all?"

"No."

"Concentrated healing charms?"

"They did nothing."

"What about more unorthodox methods?"

"Like?"

"I know it's not exactly pleasant, but what about unicorn blood? You wouldn't have to kill it, just take a little bit of its blood and heal it afterwards."

Malfoy lifted a snarky eyebrow. "You honestly believe Astoria would willingly drink unicorn blood? The brat doesn't even eat meat, she's hardly going to knowingly drink the blood of the animal she used to listen to bedtime stories about," Malfoy scoffed. "And the legends say that anyone who drinks unicorn blood will have a half-life, and her life is already cut short, I want to do anything that could make it any shorter. We've done everything we can think of, tried every potion and

Hermione carried on walking, but she threw Malfoy a one-fingered gesture on her way passed him.

She heard him chuckle quietly. "Granger, come and sit with me," he said, just before she heard his rings clink against the metal bench he was sitting on, presumably patting the space beside him.

Hermione ignored him and carried on pacing.

Four ...

Four ...

Four ... years till the war ended? No, the Order didn't have the resources to keep the war going on for that much longer.

Four ... more Horcruxes? Fuck, she hoped not. Four more Demon Masks? Near-death experiences? Bases to be burned to the ground? *What?* What the fuck did it mean?

She reached Terminal Two and was just about to make another U-turn when she felt a cold hand close around her wrist. A rough tug pulled her back against his chest, and as his other hand started to run slowly up and down the side of her ribcage in a way that made her want to shiver, Malfoy dipped his head and his lips ghosted against the shell of her ear.

"Granger," he repeated, softer this time. "Come and sit with me."

"And if I don't want to?"

"Hmmm," she felt him smile against her cheek, "I could always throw you over my shoulder and make you sit with me."

She elbowed him just hard enough to make him loosen his hold on her. She twisted in his arms so that she faced him, and although she scowled up at him, her hands somehow found themselves resting on his chest. "This isn't the time for jokes."

Malfoy's expression grew irritated. "You're not still worried about Blaise's vision are you?"

Hermione cocked a brow. "Aren't you?"

Although he tried to hide it, Hermione could see that he was worried. His walls were up high today, eyes almost completely grey, like thick storm clouds with only a few streaks of blue to break them up. He rolled his tongue on the inside of his cheek

The barmaid had gasped and nodded in agreement when she'd heard the tale, and then, when Theo took his drink and went back to his corner, the barmaid told one of her customers, and then another, and then another.

Malfoy said it was like watching wildfire spread. Seeing the way the lie caught and metastasized through the pub, watch it take over, consume every conversation and corner until it reached the ears of a couple of off duty Black Masks.

As predicted, it didn't take long for the information to reach Voldemort. The Black Masks were nothing if not unpredictable, and as soon as they'd heard the rumours, they'd downed their drinks and apparated back to Voldemort, eager to share what they'd learned, showing what good little doggies they were.

And the moment Voldemort had heard, he ordered that the place be turned over until there was absolutely nothing left inside - not even a single beating heart.

Of course, it was all a lie. A trick of Hermione and Malfoy's creation.

There was an Order base in Nottingham, that part was true, but when Voldemort's soldiers got there, when they kicked the doors down and descended upon it like a pack of vultures, they wouldn't find it defenceless. They wouldn't find injured witches and wizards inside seeking refuge. They wouldn't find the bare bones of the Order; they'd find a fucking ambush. A team of soldiers - magical and muggle - weapons drawn and a mountain of traps waiting for them.

And while his army tried to claw themselves out of the trap they'd found themselves in, Malfoy and Hermione were going to sneak off and get the medallion.

Malfoy and Hermione had thought of everything, obsessed over every map of Newstead Abbey and planned everything right down to the last microscopic detail. They were as prepared as they could ever hope to be, and yet, it still didn't feel enough. Not nearly fucking enough.

The ropes cut into her skin.  
She could hear the dragon growl in the darkness.

Her ribs and muscles in her chest were bruised as she tried to push forward and break the ropes that bound her to the post.  
It's not real, she chanted. Not real.

The sound of her ragged breathing was loud in her ears, it almost drowned out the sound of her escape efforts. She could hardly hear the skin around her wrists tearing as she sawed them against the ropes in an attempt to break them. Could hardly hear the ropes fraying or the hiss in her breath as the pain spiked, but it didn't drown everything out.

Didn't drown out the sound of reptilian scales and wings being dragged across the floor.

Didn't drown the sound of colossal footsteps, or the way the earth shuddered under Hermione's feet.

Not real. Not real.

The air was getting hotter and hotter, increasing the longer she was trapped in this nightmare.

The dragon was getting closer - Hermione didn't have much time left.

She worked her wrists harder, gritting her teeth against the stinging pain that was throbbing in her wrists. Her skin was raw, the ropes around her wrists must have been weaker now, frayed and covered in her blood.

She jerked forward -

"I would say that I'm sorry, that I didn't see this coming."

Hermione's head snapped up.

Fuck, fuck, she was out of time.

"But I think we both always knew how this was going to end for us."

Sweat gathered around her temple and ran down her neck.

Narcissa drew closer, crawling out of the shadows to stand beside her master as that ominous growling got louder and louder, making the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end.

"Didn't we, Granger?"

There wasn't a pause before the flames came barrelling towards her. As soon as Narcissa opened her mouth, a wave of searing heat charged toward Hermione, fighting off the darkness and illuminating the space in front of her.

She caught Malfoy's eyes for a split second before the flames engulfed her. Saw the cold, lifeless grey for just a moment, and even as she was set aflame, there was

There were too many possibilities, so many variants and missing pieces of information that she couldn't-

"Granger," she heard Malfoy grumble somewhere to her left. She couldn't tell exactly where, he wasn't in her line of sight, hadn't been for at least a few seconds. "You need to stop with your bloody pacing. You're making Cissa nervous."

As if she were backing him up, Narcissa made a sad clicking sound and nudged a little closer to Hermione. Hermione paused for a moment to stroke the dragon's snout, the palm of her hand feeling as though it was vibrating as the beast purred in contentment. She glided her hand softly over her warm scales, just long enough to soothe the dragon before she dropped her hand and started pacing again.

There wasn't much to see around East Midlands Airport. It was still abandoned. Some of the runway was still frozen over with ice and Hermione could see each breath she took in front of her.

Hermione, Malfoy and Narcissa always got to the meetings before the Order did. Malfoy always insisted. Thought it gave him an advantage if anything did go wrong, gave him time to scout out possible exits and make an escape plan whilst they waited for Ginny and Fleur and whoever else would accompany them that day.

It had the opposite effect on Hermione. Her busy mind always took the reins while they waited, thoughts and possibilities whirling around and around in her head until she was a ball of nervous energy. All the waiting around made her anxious and so fucking irritable she needed to be on her feet just to expel some of that nervous energy.

"I'm pacing because it helps me think," she snapped as she walked to Terminal One, did a U-turn, and then retraced her steps back to Terminal Two for the - what? Fourteenth time? Fifteenth? Who the fuck counted something like that.

"Yes," Malfoy sighed, "I know it does."

As she turned around, Hermione envied how relaxed he looked, perched on an old metal bench with one leg crossed over his knee, arms casually resting along the top while his dragon lay on the floor behind him.

Smug prick, she was half tempted to smack him as she walked past.

"You and Blaise have that in common, and you know what else the two of you have in common?" his husky voice drawled. "You're both driving me fucking insane with it. Always pacing about, walking in circles, makes me dizzy just watching you, so how the fuck either of you don't topple over I will never know."

Yes, her days were numbered, but she couldn't dwell on that. She wouldn't. Every time her mind tried to spiral down that particular path, she rerouted it. Quite literally dragged her thoughts towards another path and forced herself to stay on it.

Instead of worrying if the flames would hurt when she burned to death, Hermione picked up her paintbrush and painted frozen lakes and running rivers on the walls of the manor. Instead of wondering if the afterlife was going to be a lonely place, she would seek Malfoy out and spend hours underneath him, on top of him, his arms around her and his lips on her skin and bathing herself in his company while she still had the chance.

And instead of focusing on her own mortality, she focused on Astoria's. The men couldn't lose her, they'd crumble if anything happened to her. They'd all gone through enough pain and heartbreak to last a lifetime, and after everything Astoria had done for the Order, she deserved to live, and Hermione was determined to find a way to save her, spending every minute she could spare in Malfoy's library searching for a cure or spell that could help, something the others might have missed by mistake.

But as much as she tried to run from it, before too long, the vision always came bleeding back into her mind.

Four.

Four.

Four.

Four.

Four.

What the fuck was four supposed to mean? Blaise's vision had seen it everywhere. It'd flashed repeatedly between each aspect of his vision that'd already come true, but Hermione couldn't work out what it meant.

She wasn't sure what woke her, whether it was the sound of her bedroom door suddenly swinging open or if it was her own screaming. She liked to think it was the former, but logically, she knew that whoever was coming into her room uninvited had probably been woken by her screams.

On instinct - and the flames still fresh on her skin - she snatched her wand under her pillow and bolted upright in bed. She couldn't see who was in the doorway, but her voice was horrid and frightening as she screamed a Bombarda curse blindly into the darkness.

She missed the intruder, but only by an inch. As her eyes adjusted, she saw a head of silvery-white hair duck to the left just in time to miss her curse, and then she heard the wooden doorframe shatter as it bore the brunt of her attack.

Malfoy stepped into her room and muttered a Luminos charm. The candles on her bedside table lit up immediately and she knew she was really awake when she saw his eyes. They weren't lifeless, the way they'd been in her dream. They weren't cold. They weren't even angry - which she supposed wouldn't have been the most unrealistic thing in the world, seeing as she'd almost just taken his head off. No, instead, they were almost completely blue and full of concern.

no emotion there, not even a hint of sadness or regard for her life. As always, he stared at her like he didn't know her, like he didn't care for her at all.

And in some ways, that hurt more than the fire ever could.

She tried to squint and concentrate on something else, tried to use the light from the flames that licked up her skin to try and see what was around her, see if she could gather any clues as to when this vision might come true, where it was going to happen. Where she was going to die.

But the flames hurt. They always did. No matter how many times she chanted that it wasn't real, that it was just a dream, the flames always hurt, and the pain distracted her from everything else.

She couldn't concentrate on where she was, because all she could think about was the way her blood was boiling inside her body. Not boiling with anger, in the metaphorical sense like she sometimes felt it did, no, burning in the literal sense.

She couldn't look around and try to see something, a clue, a discarded newspaper on the floor or a watch, anything to help her work out when this was going to happen to her, because all she could hear was her own screams and that God-awful sizzling and popping sound that she was sure was coming from her -

"Granger," he whispered, voice just as careful as the slow footsteps he took into her room. "I heard you screaming. What happened? Was it..." He took a deep breath and his throat bobbed as he swallowed. "Was it the nightmare again?"

Hermione pressed the palm of her hand against her chest and tried to quiet her breathing. "What are you doing?" she hissed, grateful that the venomous edge seemed to hide what she was feeling. "Why are you in here? *I could've killed you!* Again!"

She wasn't angry with him. She wasn't really angry at all, but she'd rather him think that she was than know the truth. Know that she was absolutely fucking terrified of that nightmare and what it meant. She didn't think she was scared of dying, thought that when her time came, she'd accept her fate and go peacefully. At least then she'd get some rest from the war.

But as more and more of Blaise's visions were starting to come, and her own death seemed to be growing ever closer, she realised that she wasn't ready to go yet. Not fucking ready at all.

It took her far too long to calm down. Too many deep breaths and too many seconds staring at him before her breathing was somewhat under control. "What do you want?"

He scoffed quietly and stared at her from across the room. "Get ready," he said. "I'm taking you somewhere."

Hermione's brows knitted together. "What? Right now?"

Malfoy nodded.

"But," she shuffled out of bed and grabbed the clock on her bedside table, "it's almost four o'clock in the morning."

"Which means we only have a few hours until sunrise, so we need to get going. Now."

He gave her fifteen minutes to shower and change. He told her to wrap up warm, and once she was dressed - and wearing a thick, almost knee-length black coat - she let him guide her outside to the gardens where Narcissa slept. The dragon was already awake and waiting for them, and after Malfoy helped Hermione climb onto her back, he settled himself behind her and they took off.

Voldemort simply couldn't afford to lose her. Not yet, anyway.

But Hermione was nothing more than a tool to him. A weapon, and even the most deadly weapons were cast aside and upgraded eventually.

She knew it was coming. Her usefulness to Voldemort wasn't nearly what it once was. Although she was being utilised at every opportunity, although she killed ruthlessly and mercilessly when she was under the Demon Hex, she was breaking out of it. A lot. During almost every battle she seemed to somehow claw back control after an hour or two, always when she was cornered by Order members or held at wand point.

A few months ago, she'd have rejoiced if she were able to break out of the Demon Hex so frequently, but what would have been a blessing nine months ago was a fucking curse in their current circumstances.

When it started to happen more frequently, Hermione and Malfoy made a plan. Hermione would always cover her tracks when she broke through, make it look as though she were still under it's influence, attack whoever was around her with brutal - but non-lethal - spells and then she'd take cover, hide until Malfoy could get to her and put her back under it. They were very discreet about it. None of the other Death Eaters seemed to notice, but Bellatrix had.

Twice, the very moment the Hex had receded, the very heartbeat Hermione's eyes weren't black anymore and her cheeks flushed with colour, Bellatrix had noticed, and before Hermione had even had the opportunity to flex her fingers, Bellatrix had conjured chains around her body and knocked her unconscious.

Twice, Bellatrix had noticed that Hermione had broken through the Hex, and twice, Malfoy had had to take the blame. He'd had to convince Voldemort that it was his fault Hermione had broken through the Hex, that his mind had been elsewhere when he'd put her under it, that he'd been distracted, worrying about his master's future and that Hermione was still useful to him and they should keep her. Both times, Voldemort seemed to believe the lie Malfoy fed him and punished him 'appropriately' with a Crucio or two, but Bellatrix didn't seem convinced.

If Voldemort's army weren't as cut down and struggling as they were, he probably would have killed Hermione already. Her saving grace was that he barely had any talented soldiers left, and Hermione was one of the most ruthless killers he'd ever seen. When she was under the Demon Hex, she was more unpredictable than Bellatrix, better at killing curses than Theo and equally as brutal as Malfoy.

Because for each battle the Order had won, another prediction from Blaise's vision had come true.

Whilst on a mission in Luton at the end of January, Hermione saw a green curse hit Angelina Johnson in the chest - just like it had in Blaise's vision.

A few weeks later she saw the same thing happen to Sarah Chamberlain. Saw that awful shade of green fly from the end of a Black Masks wand and hit Sarah from across the battlefield - just like it had in Blaise's vision.

And after an unexpected snowfall in the last week of February, Hermione had seen an Order soldier take shelter under a bridge in Bakewell and hide from the onslaught. She'd watched the way he'd limped across the frozen lake and slumped under the bridge. She'd watched the way he'd tried to hide in the shadows for protection and watched the blood ooze from the bullet hole in his leg. And then she'd watched Bellatrix spot him, wave her wand, and bring the metal bridge right down on top of him, killing the soldier and causing the icy lake to burst open - just like Blaise had fucking seen.

Malfoy didn't want to talk about Blaise's visions. Blaise couldn't stop talking about them, and neither could Hermione -because it was all coming true.

Zacharias Smith, burned to death by dragon fire just as Blaise had predicted.

The bell tower, collapsed because Malfoy had brought it down when he thought Hermione was hurt, just like in the vision.

Sarah Chamberlain, dead, killed by an Avada. Another correct prediction by Blaise.

Angelina Johnson, dead, killed by an Avada. Another prediction he'd gotten right.

The bridge, destroyed and collapsed into the icy lake. And another.

It was all coming true. Every little detail Blaise had foreseen was all coming true. There were only a handful of things left from that vision that hadn't come true yet.

The burning church.

The handgun, which she recognised could have easily been the one Malfoy had given her.

Blue lightning against a dark sky, which, she supposed, could happen anywhere.

The mystery of the number four.

And then, her death.

Although it was freezing outside, it was a relatively mild night. The wind was as gentle as a caress on her cheeks and her thighs were warm from the scales on Narcissa's back.

The sky was almost completely pitch black. Hermione wondered how the dragon - or Malfoy - had any idea which direction they were going in. Her vision got worse as Narcissa ascended and started to fly through the clouds, but when they broke the surface, the view took Hermione's breath away.

It was beautiful, that was the only way she could describe it. There were thousands of stars plastered along the night's sky, more than she'd ever seen in her lifetime, and the moon, it was full and bright and the most striking silver colour she'd ever seen. It cast a silvery light all across the sky and seemed to illuminate the thick grey clouds in a way that she hadn't been able to see when she'd been standing on the ground.

They seemed to be flying forever, but for the first time, Hermione hardly minded it. She was relatively warm and the view of the stars around her was like something out of a storybook. She could hardly wait to get back to the Manor and paint a version of it on a wall somewhere.

Eventually, Malfoy gave the signal and Narcissa started her descent. They circled a few mountains that looked vaguely familiar before Narcissa landed next to a large lake, and once the dragon let them climb off her back, Malfoy sat down on the tall grass, right by the water's edge.

"Where are we?" Hermione asked as she landed softly beside him.  
"Give it a minute. I'm sure you'll recognise it in a minute. Sit with me."

"Not until you tell me where we are."

"Always so bloody suspicious, aren't you?" Malfoy chuckled quietly and shook his head. "We're in Scotland, Granger. That" he pointed to the river in front of him, "is the waters of Loch Shiel. And if you squint really hard and look that way - " he used his thumb to point behind him, "you'll be able to see Glenfinnan Viaduct, the bridge and train tracks that we used to go over each time we rode the Hogwarts express."

She looked behind her and sure enough, after a moment or two to let her eyes adjust, she saw the bridge. When she looked back at him, he caught her wrist and urged her to sit on the glass beside him.

Given the time of year and the indecently early hour, it would have been freezing, but as Hermione sat down, Narcissa laid on the ground behind them and curled her body loosely around them, not enough to feel claustrophobic or closed in, but just enough that Hermione could feel the heat from her body.

Malfoy leaned his back against the dragon for support and Hermione did the same, the feel of her warm scales seeping through her thick jacket like leaning against a muggle radiator.

“Why did you bring me here?”

“You’ll see,” he said. “Just give it a little longer and keep your eyes on the lake.”

She stared at the lake and frowned. She couldn’t really see anything. It was still very dark, and the moon was still hidden behind the thick grey clouds. She could only make out the outline of the lake and surrounding mountains. They sat like that for about half an hour, neither one saying a word, but eventually, just as Hermione’s eyes had started to drift closed, the clouds finally parted and the lake was illuminated.

She’d thought that the skyline and the stars she’d seen on the way to Scotland were beautiful, but that was nothing in comparison to the way they looked reflected in the water.

She felt like she was looking at two worlds colliding. The stars in the sky were a mirror image of those reflected in the water, only they weren’t exactly the same. The way the water rippled softly in the gentle wind distorted the reflection, made shapes that weren’t there, opened the doorway to a new world and showed constellations that could never be seen in the sky.

It was the most beautiful thing she’d ever seen. She’d never seen anything like it

And then she looked at Malfoy and a warmth washed over her chest.

Because she hadn’t. In the twenty-eight years that she’d been alive, she’d never seen anything like it. All of her youth, she’d had her nose stuck in books and parchment, and since she’d left Hogwarts, all she’d seen was death and fighting and war. She’d never seen anything so beautiful. She’d never had the opportunity to do more, to see more, and she wanted to. Didn’t realise how much she did until that moment.

“Is this what it could’ve been like?” Hermione asked. “In this other life that we could’ve had together? Finding new places like this and fucking in them?”

No, it wasn’t a smart tactic at all. It was a desperate one. Voldemort barely had any Gold Masks left, and even his Black Masks had become somewhat precious to him, finally worth the weight of their iron masks for the first time.

As the weeks dragged on, he became relentless with his need to squash the Order quickly. Painfully. Every time he heard a whisper of a new Order safe house or rumour of an abandoned port being used to smuggle in new weapons, he retaliated full force. Used every magical weapon. Called on every dark and depraved creature that was still loyal to him and attacked.

But it was a losing battle. He might as well have had hands covering his eyes, blindly stumbling and swinging his sword in the darkness in the hopes that he’d wound his enemy in some way or another, not knowing that Malfoy - one of the only people he trusted - was the one covering his eyes.

Every time Voldemort planned a new attack, Malfoy altered the Order. He gave them time to evacuate their wounded and get their supplies out long before Voldemort could launch his assault - but it didn’t stop there. The tables had started to turn. Now, under Malfoy and Hermione’s guidance, the Order was starting to gain back their foothold. Each time Voldemort sent his troops into bases, The Order left traps, some magical, others not, but the results were always the same. Cleverly placed explosives or trick floors that vanished beneath their feet to drop them into a pit of spikes or poisons snakes that tore them apart.

According to Malfoy, Voldemort wasn’t even listening to his advisors anymore. He didn’t listen to Grouch Jr when he’d suggested that the raid at an Order base in Kent seemed suspicious and that it might be a trap - which it was, one that Malfoy and Blaise had helped set - and he’d executed a new Black Mask right on the spot when they’d said that another attack Voldemort had ordered was ‘pointless’.

The eerie calm and chilling superiority that used to shroud Voldemort had been stripped away, and now, the mad-man that’d been there all along was exposed for all to see. He often flew into fits of rage when his generals said something he didn’t like, and disagreeing with him had become a death sentence itself, his fragile mental state making him believe anyone who didn’t share his opinion must be a traitor as well.

Yes, the tables had truly turned, and although Hermione was overjoyed that the future of the Order seemed bright, it didn’t mean that Hermione was any less worried about her own future.

His eyes stayed on the lake, but his lips twitched into a subtle, beautiful sort of smile. “Yes, I think it could’ve been exactly like this.”

“Why did you bring me here tonight?”

“This is technically your Christmas present,” he answered. “I wanted to bring you here sooner, but with everything going on, we haven’t had the time. Or a clear enough night.”

“So what makes tonight so special?”

“Because this is the calm before the storm.” He took a deep breath through his nose and then looked at her out the corner of his eye. “I don’t know how tomorrow is going to go, but whatever happens, I felt like we needed a night to enjoy the little things, because after tomorrow –”

“Everything is probably going to go to hell?” Hermione interrupted, smiling.

“Yes,” he smirked back at her. “Because everything is probably going to go to hell.”



## FOUR. FOUR. FOUR. FOUR

**11th March**

Even though Voldemort was executing his generals faster than he could replace them, even though his army was struggling, stripped right down and at its most vulnerable, every time an opportunity presented itself to spill blood - the Order’s blood - he answered the call.

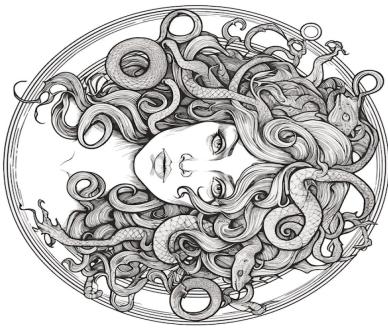
It wasn’t a smart tactic. His attacks didn’t seem to be calculated anymore like his old ones used to be, they weren’t coordinated or premeditated anymore, their only purpose was to kill. Kill and kill and kill and spill as much blood as possible. Hermione guessed it was a power move. A way to cling onto the control that he was so hopelessly losing, make himself feel as though he were doing as much damage to the Order’s ranks as they were doing to his.

As he buried his face in her curls and inhaled her, he remembered how easily the smoke had vanished and how much he'd envied it for being able to just disappear.

His arms tightened around Granger.

If only it were that fucking easy.

## CHAPTER 53



### GOOD LITTLE BOY

**31st March**

The problem with making plans is that something always goes wrong.

In the end, it didn't matter how much Hermione and Malfoy had gone over their plan to get the medallion, how thoroughly they'd obsessed over the details, or how many contingency plans they'd made to make sure that everyone got through the day alive, because something was always going to go wrong, and it was always going to be the *one thing* that they hadn't prepared for.

They had a plan for if Hermione broke out of the Hex too early, if either of them was injured in battle, and even a strategy to follow if Theo got a little too 'trigger' happy and killed too many Order soldiers.

of the bath and carried her across his room. He threw her onto the bed, not caring that her wet body dampened his bedsheets, only that he wasn't inside her.

"Where else would you have wanted me to take you?"

"Prague?"

"Then where?" he hissed between gritted teeth when he sunk into her.

"Gr - ... Greece?"

"Yes," he kissed her throat as he started to move. Long, deep thrusts. The kind of thrusts that moved her up the bed, the kind of thrusts that meant she had no choice but to cling to him. "Then where?"

"Sweden?"

"Then?"

"Spain?"

As he fucked her, he could see it all clearly in his mind. Could see every last fucking detail as waves and waves of pleasure crashed over him, *through him*, from the top of his head right down to his fucking toes.

He could see it all. Travelling the world with her. See her face light up in awe whenever he took her somewhere new. The way she'd smile when he would lead her through the world's biggest libraries and museums.

He felt her start to tremble underneath him.

Sat on a balcony in Paris, coffee cup in her hand and wearing nothing but one of his shirts.

Swimming in the hot springs in Iceland together.

She dragged her nails down his back and he heard her breath hitch loudly.

Clinging to his body for warmth when he would fuck her under the northern lights -

When her cunt started to spasm, it was over. He didn't even manage an extra thrust before his cock jerked and he collapsed on top of her.

As he snaked his arms underneath her spine and pulled her close, his mind went back to the smoke cloud.

What they didn't have a backup plan for, however, was Astoria, so of course - of fucking course - that was the thing that went wrong.

Three days before the attack, Astoria took very ill. Although her blood curse getting the better of her wasn't unusual, the timing couldn't have been worse.

The group knew the risks that were involved in securing the medallion. They could be spotted stealing it, get caught in traps that Crouch Jr had laid in Newstead Abbey, or they could die securing it. The chances of them getting the medallion without being detected were slim, so naturally, they prepared for the worst-case scenario.

If the plan went to hell; drop everything and meet at the safehouse.

The farmhouse had been completely stocked to capacity, and was thoroughly protected with wards. The enchantments they'd used made the house completely undetectable to outsiders - any person who didn't know its location wouldn't even be able to see the house, just an empty spot of land where the farm should be - and the wards prevented anyone Apparating into its vicinity.

The only way into the farmhouse was by the Portkeys they'd made; three silver pocket watches that were given to Quinzell, Malfoy and Blaise.

The plan had been for Astoria to go to the safehouse two days before the raid to ensure that she was out of harms way - just in case - but the night before she was supposed to leave, she grew ill.

The safehouse was ready and waiting; an impenetrable fortress with everything she could ever need, but with Astoria so ill, they couldn't get her there.

Apparating her near the grounds was dangerous in her current condition. Even with assistance, the chances of her getting Splinched were grotesquely high. There weren't any Floo connections at the safehouse, and after vomiting that much blood, using a Portkey was out of the question.

Theo had suggested that they 'borrow' one of the Dark Lord's carriages to transport Astoria in - or even strap her down on Narcissa's back and have the dragon fly her there - but, as Malfoy pointed out, even if they warned the Order that they'd be transporting Astoria that way, muggle helicopters had a reputation of shooting Voldemort's carriages - and Narcissa - on sight, and the group agreed that it wasn't worth the gamble.

They were completely out of comfortable options. The only one they had left was for the elves to stay with her and try to get as many Blood Replenishing and

Pepperup potions down her neck to get her strength back up, and if they were discovered, Malfoy would signal for them to get out, and they'd have to hope that Astoria's strength had returned enough for her to escape.

Although it was risky, it was the only option they had, but it was making Blaise nervous.

"I should stay with Astoria," Blaise said as he stared out the kitchen window. Voice tight, hands balled into even tighter fists at his sides. "If something goes wrong..."

Malfoy sighed towards the ceiling, arms folded across his chest and leaning against one of the cupboards. "Nothing is going to go wrong, Zabini."

"But if it does, she'll need me." Hermione watched Blaise's throat bob as he swallowed nervously; saw his eyes squeeze closed as though he were in pain. "If we get discovered, the Dark Lord will send his troops here, perhaps straight away. The elves won't be able to protect her and she'll—" He cut himself off and shook his head, unable to even say the horrific words.

"She'll be at an even greater risk if you don't go today," Hermione said. "Voldemort wants everyone there, and your absence will just raise suspicions. It's better if you go and play your part, and if anything happens, I promise, I'll be the first one to Apparate back here and get Astoria out."

"But what if she can't Apparate? What if..."

Hermione cut him off before he could spiral further. "I'll figure something out. I do my best work under pressure. Always have."

"And if something happens to her before you can get to her?"

"Astoria, Romy and Quinzel are all wearing the bracelets that have the panic button charms on them. If anything happens, we'll know."

Although it was the truth, Blaise didn't look the slightest bit relaxed.

He'd been clawing at the walls all night, he'd probably not had even a wink of sleep, but Hermione and Malfoy were both in agreement that Blaise had to attend the raid. It was too risky for him not to, but he couldn't go like this, nor in this state. Blaise was usually so collected and composed. They needed everything to go perfectly today, and if any of the other Death Eaters sensed Blaise's nerves, well, it didn't bear well to think about.

Slowly, carefully, he pushed himself away from his side of the bath. She stopped mid-sentence when he slammed his hands down - rather forcefully - either side of her head, and then leaned over her.

"What are you doing?" she snapped, scrunching her nose up in that way she always did when she was angry. "You can't just cut me off when I'm trying to..."

He leaned down and kissed her. "I've been thinking," he whispered, his voice muffled as he kissed the words into her mouth. "In this other life," he carried on kissing her. His left hand released the bath and crept into the water. "You remember? The one with rainbows and fairy tales," he paused and moved to lightly bite the pulse point on her neck, delighting in the way she jerked underneath him, "the one where we win the war, everyone gets a pardon, and we go travelling together?"

Her hands slid onto the part of his lower back that was underwater. She sunk her nails into his spine and yanked him closer. "Yes..." she moaned. "Where would you have wanted me to take you?"

"I... I don't know."

"Think."

"I've... I've always..." She yelped when he palmed her breast and *squeezed*. He smiled into her skin, finally getting the reaction he wanted. "I've always... wanted to see Mexico."

"Mexico?" He nodded in agreement. "Alright, we can go there." He kissed her shoulder. His hand left her breast and travelled slowly down her body. "After the northern lights. That's where we would go first."

She nodded, and he felt her start to tremble under his hand. She parted her legs further and he slipped his hand between them.

"Then where?" he asked as he started to draw circles over her.

She moaned and her head rolled back against the lip of the bath. "France?"

"France, alright. Italy?"

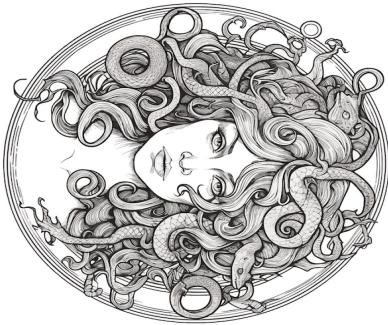
"Okay."

"Where else?"

Suddenly, she grabbed his face between her hands and kissed him.

He hooked his hands underneath the backs of her legs, and as he picked her up, Granger wrapped her hands around his neck and she clung to him. He stepped out

# CHAPTER 54



And when it was Hermione's turn to go on the offensive, Malfoy did the same. He took a step back, gave her the room she needed to throw curses and use the spiders' own weight against them, but was always close enough to protect her if she needed support.

He knew where she needed him to be without her telling him, almost like it was instinctual. He took over when something in Hermione's plan went wrong and let her step back, coveting her while she worked something else out.

They were perfectly in sync, that was the only way Hermione could describe it. Wands in the same hand, steps perfectly matched, like the threat in front of them fused them together until even the rhythm of their hearts matched.

The most important part of Hermione's plan was not letting the spiders get around them. Yes, it was overwhelming to have two great big bloody spiders stalking towards them and forcing them further into the tunnels, but it felt safer than having the spiders surround them.

If both spiders stood at the same end of the tunnel, they could combine their magic and work together, but if the spiders divided, they'd be forced to do the same, and Hermione didn't like those odds.

The main problem they had, however, wasn't the spiders themselves. It was the walls. It was like the bricks were their own separate entity. Hermione didn't know what type of enchantment Crouch Jr had used on them, but whatever it was, it meant that they moved on their own and protected the spiders.

As Malfoy threw another Avada, the walls shifted to give the huge spiders enough room to dodge the curse.

"Fuck sake!" Malfoy snarled. "Every *fucking* time!" He threw another Avada, this one stronger, but the results were the same. The walls widened, allowing the spiders to curl up the sides and out of the way of Malfoy's attack. One stayed on the left wall while the other perched on the ceiling and made a horrid screeching noise.

Hermione tried not to let the way the spiders moved towards them distract her, or the third green curse that Malfoy threw - which missed, again. Instead, she twisted her wand against the bricks and concentrated.

She didn't want to use the spell that made the walls close in on themselves. Every time she thought about using it, it made her stomach twist and her throat tighten.

Hermione and Malfoy were an incredible team.

Over the last sixteen months, they'd done nothing but fight each other. She'd slapped him and he'd hexed her. She'd fought him more times than she would ever be able to count, but she'd never fought *with* him, never on the same side, not of her own free will, so it'd never occurred to her just how well they could work together when they weren't trying to kill each other.

When Malfoy went on the attack, Hermione was his shield, blocking every advance and gnash of the spiders' fangs before they could make their mark.

She didn't want to use it, but the tunnels were their biggest enemy - and the spiders' biggest advantage - and they didn't have a lot of options left.

After almost an hour of being forced further and further into the tunnels by the spiders, they had no idea where the exits or the medallion were. If she used the spell now, they'd likely be crushed to death right alongside the spiders.

When she'd used the spell before, she used it on one long stretch of corridor. The advantage they had this time, was that there were so many of these tunnels, dozens that wove around sharp corners and connected to other passageways, and if she manipulated the bricks just right, she could isolate one stretch of tunnel and close those walls in while she and Malfoy were safe on the other side.

She just had to hope Malfoy could keep the spiders occupied long enough for her to figure out how to do it.

"How are we doing Granger?" Malfoy called over his shoulder, moments before another of his curses lit up the tunnel.

Hermione stayed in her crouch behind him, wand pressed against the brick and eyes on her work. "I still need a little more time."

She saw a flash of red out of the corner of her eye. Heard the spiders shriek and the walls of the tunnel move to let them get out of the way of whatever Malfoy had thrown this time.

"How much longer?" he asked, sounding a little breathless as another red light lit up the tunnel.

"A few more minutes."

Another flash of red light. Another cry from the spiders.

"I'm going to struggle for minutes, Granger!"

Another curse, this one blue.

She turned her head just in time to see the spider on the ceiling raise the back half of its body, but as fast as its thick webbing came towards them, Malfoy was quicker.

"Incendia!"

When Malfoy's spell touched the spider's webbing, the entire tunnel was lit up. The fire travelled up the silky web at an alarming speed and when it connected with the spider's body, fuck - Hermione had never heard a sound quite like it.

This was bad. This was - fuck, what where they going to do?

She could maybe charm the walls, enchant them to close in and squish the spiders? A sickening lurch crept into her stomach when she thought of the last time she'd used that spell. They way she'd held Colin in her arms.

No. She shook her head and tried to think of something else.

As the spiders advanced, both Hermione and Malfoy started to retreat.

The spiders started to walk faster, lowering their bodies to floor in a hunting pose, ready to strike.

"While we're young and still breathing would be nice Granger!"

"I have ... one - maybe, I don't know."

When the spider on the left clicked its fangs together, green lightning spatated at the edge of Malfoy's wand. "Gonna need a more definitive answer than '*maybe*', Granger."

She took a deep breath to calm herself and her wand tingled against her palm with gathering magic.

She could do this. *They could do this*; they just needed to trust one another and work together. Once upon a time she'd have scoffed at the irony of it all. A Death Eater and the Golden Girl, fighting side by side, relying on each other to save the others life while two grotesquely large beasts looked at them with hunger in their eyes. It was all so horribly poetic it was almost funny.

"Just do what I tell you and follow my lead." Hermione looked at Malfoy out the corner of her eye. "Do you have my back?"

Blue-grey eyes met hers for a moment before he smirked. "Do you even have to ask, little lion?"

It would certainly be able to use the tunnels, but she could hear footsteps. They were faint and hurried, but she could hear them. Like dozens of little legs all scurrying across the stone floor at once.

One thing that was clear, however, was that there was more than one beast, there were more than one set of footsteps.

They were being hunted by a pack.

But a pack of what was yet to be determined.

The scurrying came from overhead-

And then it was gone again -

And then it was coming from the right side of the tunnel -

And then the left -

And then above them -

There must have been a lot of them. Possibly too many to fight off at once. What if they overwhelmed Malfoy and Hermione?

Quickly, she started running through strategies in her mind, rolling through possible plans and ways to use their numbers - whatever they were - against them -

"Granger," Malfoy's voice said, only, he didn't quite sound like himself. "Right side of the tunnel."

Of all the things Crouch could have chosen to guard the medallion, an Acromantula wasn't what Hermione had expected. Hadn't even made the top three in her list.

And she'd certainly never expected to see fucking two of them.

They weren't as old as Aarogog had been. The spiders weren't nearly as big, but they were big enough. Bodies at least the size of Mini-Coopers and black fangs as long as Hermione's forearm. They shouldn't have been able to fit in the tunnel at all. They were too big, but as the spiders began to stalk towards them, the bricks of the tunnel started to move, turning over and out of the spider's path to accommodate their size.

"If you have any ideas on how we're going to survive this," Malfoy whispered, wand arm strong and aiming for the spider on the left, "now would be a bloody marvellous time to share them."

Hermione aimed for the one on the right.

As the spider's body was set afire, it released an ear-piercing shriek that felt like it shook the walls of the tunnel and made both her and Malfoy cover their ears. Although the second spider managed to avoid the flames, it didn't abandon the smaller one.

It hovered over the other and spun a web of its own, one that was a slightly lighter colour than the others. It must have possessed some magical properties, because when the second spider wrapped its web around the first's body, it extinguished the flames. Perhaps the spiders were mates. It was hard to tell in the darkness.

What wasn't hard to tell, however, was that although the fire didn't kill either of the spiders, it made them angry. Very, very fucking angry.

When they started to scurry down the tunnel, Hermione knew they were out of time. It was now or never.

She closed her eyes and poured her magic into her wand. At first, she didn't think her spell had worked because nothing happened. It wasn't until she stood up and took a step back, wasn't until she moved to stand at Malfoy's side and raised her wand, ready to attack the spiders, that the bricks moved at all.

But this time, they didn't move to accommodate the spiders, no, this time they moved in the direction she'd moved her wand.

Hermione's breath hitched.

The spiders froze.

When Hermione moved her wand to the left, the bricks folded over themselves to the left. When she waved it to the right, the bricks followed her movement.

The spiders were still on the other side of the tunnel, at least fifty feet away from her and Malfoy, and as she manipulated the bricks between them, all of the spider's eyes followed the bricks, like they were strangely mesmerised by the way they moved slowly along one another.

With the spiders distracted, Hermione delicately curled her wrist and the bricks in front of her started to move. The walls in front of her and Malfoy started to slowly close in on themselves. It would take a while, but when they did eventually meet, they'd crush the spiders into dust and Hermione and Malfoy would be safe on the other side.

It took the creatures a moment to realise what Hermione was doing, but the instant they did, they attacked. They scurried toward Hermione and Malfoy quicker

than they ever had before, screeching and snapping their pincers as they charged for quick. The medallion was gone, and Malfoy's fingers curled against the wall where their prey used to be.

And the bricks were moving too slowly.

Malfoy caught her wrist and took a step back. "It's not going to work. The walls are moving too slow," he said urgently. "We need to go."

"Not yet," she breathed softly. "Not yet – just give it a minute."

Despite the spiders starting to get uncomfortably close, Hermione stayed where she was. They weren't where she wanted them yet, weren't quite as deep in the trap as she wanted them to be -

She could feel Malfoy staring down at her face, but she didn't look at him, stayed watching the spiders charge towards them and willed her feet not to move.

And despite the threat, Malfoy didn't leave her side.

"Granger?"

The walls were getting tighter, the spiders were crawling over one another, fighting each other to get through.

Just a little bit more.

The spiders had to go single file, the larger of the two hurtling towards them and opening its pincers, ready to feast on its well-deserved meal -

They were almost there.

Almost there.

"Granger?"

Close enough.

When Hermione cut her wand sharply to the left, a section of bricks slammed together with a force that echoed through the rest of the tunnel and crushed the spiders instantly. It'd happened so quickly, she doubted they felt a thing.

There was a beat of stunned silence before Malfoy spoke. "It ... worked." He turned to Hermione. "It worked! You fucking genius!" His mouth was hanging open in disbelief but the edges of his lips started to turn upwards into a smile, and when Hermione turned to him, her smile perfectly mirrored his.

"No!" Malfoy lurched forward, but he was too late. The bricks had been too quick. The medallion was gone, and Malfoy's fingers curled against the wall where their prize used to be.

"Fuck! Fuck!" he hissed, accentuating every curse by punching the new wall. "Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!" He turned and faced Hermione again, and when he angrily dragged both hands through his hair, his knuckles were bruised and bleeding. "What do we do now!?"

This couldn't be it. They'd made it this far, there had to be another way. Hermione refused to believe otherwise.

But just as she started to look around, the tunnel suddenly grew much colder. It must have dropped several degrees in a second or two. It turned so cold that Hermione could see her breath in front of her.

And then a loud, shuffling noise to the left startled her.

Hermione turned towards the sound but there was nothing there. Her fingers tightened around her dagger. "Did you hear that?"

"Yes," Malfoy's voice was cold, strained. "Be ready for anything, cub."

Another noise echoed down the walls of the tunnel. Hermione turned her wand towards it, illuminating the dark corridor, but she couldn't see anything, just an empty hallway that stretched on far beyond what she could see.

She heard it again, this time from behind her.

She spun on her heels, the light from her wand swiping through the air and lighting up the opposite tunnel, but again, there was nothing there.

"What is it!?" Hermione's heart rate doubled. Her heart seemed to beat louder, harsher, like someone was slapping their palm across her chest again and again. "Where is it coming from!?"

Whatever creature was making the noise, it was using the tunnels. There must have been another set of corridors underneath the one Hermione and Malfoy were standing in, or maybe below them, it was hard to tell, the narrow tunnel carried the sound in all different directions, it was impossible to tell where it was coming from.

At first, Hermione considered that it might be a Basilisk. It wasn't the most outlandish idea. Voldemort had used one before, it stood to reason that he might have another one and possibly loaned the beast to Crouch to guard the medallion for him.

The cavern on the other side of the waterfall was small, a tiny cupboard space, a pantry made of black bricks. Barely enough room for the both of them.

Hermione cast a Lumos charm, just bright enough to let them see but not enough to draw unwanted attention should anyone be on patrol. With her free hand, she ran her hands over the cold bricks, looking for a clue, a trap door or nick in the stone that would reveal where the medallion was hiding. Malfoy followed her lead and did the same.

It didn't take them long to find it. Couldn't have been more than five minutes before she found a particularly rough patch of stone, pressed it, and the bricks around it started to vibrate.

As the south wall started to move, Hermione backed away. The bricks turned themselves over, and then over again, clawing themselves backwards again and again until a door-sized entrance was revealed.

Malfoy went first, and as they started to walk through, Hermione pulled a spare dagger out of her pocket and held it in her free hand - just in case.

It was frighteningly quiet. The heels of her Death Eater uniform sounded so much louder than they usually were as she stepped through, feeling more like a beacon, a bloody dinner bell to whatever creature might be waiting inside.

Once on the other side of the doorway, she cast a silencing charm on her shoes and increased the strength of her Lumos charm. The light from her wand illuminated everything, exposing the single, underground tunnel that stretched out in front of them, and when Hermione's breath hitched, the sound was carried by the narrow brick corridor.

Because it couldn't be that easy, could it?

No, it couldn't be. It shouldn't be. And yet, there it was. The medallion. On the other side of the tunnel, past the damp, black bricks. Perched on top of a stone stand like a prize.

But when Malfoy took another step closer, the bricks started moving again.

It all happened very quickly. The bricks that made up the west and east wall started to turn over, dragging across the tunnel from either side, beginning to form a wall in front of them -

Yes, Hermione's spell had worked flawlessly. But she hadn't manipulated all of the bricks, and just as hope had started to swell in her chest, the bricks moved again and formed another wall, right between her and Malfoy.

"Granger?" Even though his voice was muffled from the other side of the brick, Hermione could hear the panic in it. "Granger?!"

"I'm here!" she shouted back. "I'm alright! Can you see the medallion on your side?"

"No. Can you?"

Hermione cast another Lumos and looked around, seeing nothing but tunnels on either side of her. "No." She placed her wand against the bricks and tried the incantation again, but nothing happened. She tried again, twisting her wand and willing the bricks to move so she could get to -

Something sharp pierced her left calf, like a butcher's knife had torn straight through her skin and muscle and slammed into the bone.

And just as she started to scream, she was forced to the floor and dragged across it.

"GRANGER?!" She could hardly hear Malfoy's voice over her own screams, and she didn't think she'd ever heard him sound so frightened.

She clawed at the floor with her nails, struggling and failing to hold onto anything as she was dragged backwards on her stomach. She twisted around enough to see what had attacked her -

It seemed her trick with the bricks had only managed to kill one of the Acromantula's, but not both, and she couldn't be sure if it was hate or hunger that was fueling the one that had her.

She was relieved to see that the thing that'd gone through her calf and was dragging her across the floor like a doll wasn't the spider's fangs, it hadn't bitten her - thank fucking God - but instead pierced her muscle with the razor-like claws of one of its front legs.

At least she didn't have to worry about Acromantula venom. Not yet, anyway.

Hermione tried not to struggle while the spider dragged her through the halls. She wouldn't be able to escape, and she'd probably only cause more damage to her leg than what was already done.

Instead, she stayed very still, and when the creature had finally dragged her into its nest, she flipped onto her back and cast the strongest slicing curse she could think of, aiming for the leg that was speared into her own.

When the spider screamed in pain and backed away, Hermione gritted her teeth and pulled the severed spider's leg out of her calf. She did it quickly, one sharp wave of her wand like ripping a plaster off. The pain was excruciating, but it only lasted a moment. Once it was out, she quickly cast a charm to rid herself of any infection the spider might've caused, cast another to seal the wound, and then dragged herself to her feet.

It shouldn't have been surprising that Crouch would put the medallion in the spider's nest. It was probably the safest place for it, but as Hermione stared at the gold coin, barely more than a foot away from her, for a heartbeat - just a fucking heartbeat - she forgot about the spider.

And a heartbeat was all the creature needed.

It swiped one of its remaining legs across the floor and tripped her. She dropped her wand as she fell, heard it clatter against the brick and roll across the floor as she struggled to get back to her feet.

But the spider moved before she could get back up.

Like every other sound, her scream carried and echoed off the walls of the tunnel as one of the spider legs crushed her rib cage.

She tried to reach for her wand, but just before her fingers could curl around the handle, the spider made a vile shrieking sound and dragged her underneath its body, until she had nowhere to go and her face was in line with its huge, black fangs.

The spider's snapped its fangs in her face and its leg bore down. She was trapped. She had no weapon. The air was being pushed out of her lungs. She heard something crack. A searing pain roared across her chest -

Suddenly, the spider stilled.

Hermione stared up at the beast. She couldn't have petrified it; she didn't know wandless magic for that. But sure enough, the pressure on her chest lifted enough to allow her to breathe.

She felt something wet splash onto her chest.

Hermione had been prepared to go first, but Malfoy glared down at her in a way that said she was mad to think he'd let her test the shield's effectiveness.

"Sure this will work?" he asked, looking over his shoulder, making sure she was close to him and well underneath the protection of the shield.

"Pretty sure."

"How sure?"

"90%."

He looked at her from over his shoulder again. "90% sure the shield will hold? Or 90% we'll die horribly?"

"90% sure the shield will hold."

Although he turned back to the waterfall, she could hear the sarcasm in his voice. "Oh great, bloody fantastic, that makes me feel so much better."

To give herself credit, the shield held up exceptionally well. It wasn't a complete success. Although it didn't disintegrate, it did nothing to stop the odd bit of backsplash, and those few drops that did make it through stung like a bitch. A searing, cold sort of burn that made Hermione grind her teeth together and Malfoy hiss under his breath.

Once they were on the other side, he tossed the shield aside, letting it clatter loudly against the stone floor, and reached for Hermione.

She couldn't see him, she had her eyes squeezed tightly closed, trying to will herself through the pain, but she felt his cold hands on either side of her face.

"Granger," he hushed, voice urgent and hands tight on her jaw. "Are you alright? Talk to me - are you in pain?"

"I'm fine. I'm fine," she hissed. "Just stings more than I expected."

The skin on her neck and collarbone was raised and burned, there was a little damage to back of her left hand, but other than the cold that felt like it'd seeped into her bones, she was relatively unscathed.

Malfoy had took the worst of the damage. The ice burns on the exposed parts of his neck were much bigger and looked much more painful. The material of his uniform looked almost completely frozen on his left shoulder, and there was an angry burn that clawed up the left side of his jaw to his ear. He quickly healed all her injuries before they carried on. He didn't bother with his own - and he didn't let Hermione heal them for him - said they didn't have the time.

Thankfully Ron didn't linger. The moment Malfoy stopped at Hermione's side, Ron took off, and as Voldemort's soldiers tried to backpedal, and with Bellatrix and Crouch thoroughly distracted by the muggle tanks that were barrelling towards them, Hermione and Malfoy made their escape.

When they landed at Newstead Abbey, Malfoy let go of Hermione's hand and looked at his wand. He stared at it for a moment, waiting for the alert from Theo.

Fifteen seconds passed and nothing happened. Then a minute. Then another. It took three minutes before Malfoy was convinced that they hadn't been seen and they could get started.

Hermione cast a detection charm, and once it was clear that they were alone, they sprinted towards the waterfall. It took mere minutes to get across the grounds.

They didn't pause to admire the beautiful lake to their right, or even the ruins of the Abbey to their left. They had no intention of site seeing.

They found the small waterfall instantly, hours pouring over maps and books of the area engraving its location in their minds. Once they were in front of it, Hermione cast another detection charm. It came up with nothing, but neither Malfoy nor Hermione were convinced.

Wordlessly, Malfoy sunk into a crouch and picked a rock up off the floor. He eyed Hermione cautiously, and when she nodded, he threw the rock into the falling water.

The moment it made contact, a chemical reaction started. There was a loud sizzling noise, a thick mist exploded from the stream where the rock had disappeared, there was a loud pop, and then a wall of cold air swept over Hermione's face.

The experiment didn't seem to trip any alarms, the rock didn't disintegrate or burst into flames. They could see its outline on the other side of the water, it was completely frozen. Although the waterfall looked normal, Crouch had charmed it to be deadly.

Fortunately, they'd prepared.

Malfoy took a handkerchief out of his pocket, unfolded it, and lay it flat across his palm. He pressed his wand into the centre, muttered a charm, and then the simple cloth transformed into a large, cast-iron shield, a huge, thick, bulking piece of metal that Malfoy had to use both hands to hold above his head.

The spider's head slid off its shoulders, and then its body fell to the ground to reveal Malfoy standing behind it, shoulders and chest heaving frantically, wand aimed and smoking with magic.

"Are you ... " he started, throat bobbing and eyes fixated on the blood and bare skin on her calf. "Did it-"

"Bite me? No."

Malfoy swallowed hard and nodded. He didn't look at her when he helped her to her feet, felt like he was doing his best to hide his face from her, and she could practically hear him willing his occlumency walls back into place as they walked towards the medallion.

Hermione hadn't known what she'd been expecting, but as she stared down at the simple gold coin, she was almost ... disappointed? It was just mere gold. It didn't have any threatening engravings on it. Wasn't lined with spikes or on fire like she expected.

There was nothing special about it. If it weren't for the cold, repugnant feel of Voldemort's magic radiating from it, Hermione wouldn't have thought there was anything unordinary about it at all. She almost couldn't believe it. How could something so small be so dangerous?

It was a shame the Order still didn't trust her and Malfoy completely. She would've loved nothing more than to plunge a basilisk fang straight through it and crush another shattered piece of Voldemort's black soul right then and there.

After Hermione picked up the medallion, they sprinted back towards the waterfall. Thankfully, it didn't take them long to find it, the walls didn't move again, almost like they'd died when the spiders did.

They used the shield again to make it through the water - after casting another several charms to make sure they wouldn't be burned again - and as soon as they were outside, Malfoy apparated them back to the raid.

They materialised in a small pub barely half a mile away from the battle. It'd obviously been abandoned years ago, floor and bar covered in thick cobwebs and windows so dusty that no one on the outside looking in could ever hope to see who or what was on the other side of the glass.

Hermione cast a Patronus and sent it out the pub window, signalling to Ginny that she was ready for her to come and collect the medallion.

"Ginny will be here in a minute," Hermione said. "You should go back out there. We don't want them to notice you're missing."

Even though it was the truth, Malfoy didn't move, not right away. He lingered for a moment, watching Hermione with cautious eyes before he slipped his Demon Mask back on and disappeared with a loud pop of Apparation.

"Come on, Gin," Hermione muttered under her breath, tapping her foot on the floor and her wand against the old bar. "Come on. Come on. Come on."

Forty-eight seconds later, the door creaked open, and Ginny stepped inside. She was limping and her right shoulder and torso were drenched in blood, but thankfully it didn't look as though it was hers.

"Are you alright?"

"Been better," Ginny smiled weakly. "You?" she added, eyes drifting to the blood on Hermione's calf.

Hermione smiled back at her. "Been better?"

They both laughed quietly and smiled at each other. They watched each other for a moment from across the bar, neither one really sure what to do. It was the first time Hermione had been alone with Ginny, she had so much she wanted to say, but she didn't know where to begin.

A loud bang echoed from outside, one that made the floor of the bar shake and the wine glasses that were left clink together. It sounded like a bomb, or another helicopter falling to the ground.

They didn't have much time. No matter how much Hermione just wanted to take a second and talk to her friend, the war wouldn't stop, not for them, not for anyone.

"I have the medallion," Hermione said, all business, reaching into her pocket and pulling out the gold coin. "Take it. Quickly."

There was another loud bang. The earth shook again. The windows of the pub rattled, sounding like they might pop open with the force of it.

Ginny nodded and crossed the bar. She held out her hand and Hermione dropped the medallion into her palm.

"I can't believe this is it," Ginny whispered, eyes widening as she stared at the medallion. "All this fuss, all this death for something as silly as a little gold coin. It doesn't seem right, does it?"

There was a beat of silence before Ron screamed. "You're not under the Hex and you still almost killed me as well!?"

Her eyes snapped back to Ron to find him glaring at her.

"Yeah, I saw what you were about to do! Why do you think I got you out of the way?!" he snarled as he got to his feet and dusted off his ash-soaked trousers. "Not enough for you to try and murder my sister, you had to have a go at me as well!?"

Although he was right, although Hermione was completely in the wrong and her stomach felt like it'd turned to ice at the thought of what she'd almost fucking done - again - she couldn't shake the angry edge from her voice. "I didn't want to go for Ginny but you know I don't have any control when I'm under the Hex!"

Ron snorted angrily. "And what's your excuse for almost killing me?!"

"I couldn't see you!" Hermione's eyes flickered to the end of the alleyway again, making sure they were still alone. "I hit my head and was disorientated, you caught me off guard, that's all!" When her eyes landed back on Ron, his brows were knitted together in a deep scowl. "What?"

"I didn't want to put my wand on you," he said. "I thought you were still under the Hex."

"So you were expecting me to kill you once I came to?"

"I was expecting that you'd try and attack me, yes."

"That was stupid, you shouldn't have done that," she snapped, glancing at the end of the alleyway again, checking that they were still alone. "If I were still under the Hex, I'd have killed you, Ron. Easily."

"And I'd have fucking let her - with the biggest smile on my face."

Hermione didn't need to turn to see who'd spoken, even if she hadn't been so familiar with his voice, the way Ron's face scrunches in disgust when he stared at the end of the alley told her it was Malfoy.

He started to walk towards them, shoulders broad and confident and Demon Mask still on his face. Ron flinched away as though the sound of each ominous footprint that echoed down the alleyway were a separate threat.

"Weasel."

"Malfoy," Ron greeted back, voice equally as cold but not nearly as menacing without the voice-altering charm.

Her fingers tightened around the wand in her hand.

"They weren't looking. They didn't know. Fuck, why, why the fuck weren't they looking?"

Her palm tingled as she started to pour her magic into the wand.

They needed to look. Just one of them. Either of them would do.

She was in such close range to them. There was no way she would miss.

Green magic crackled at the tip of her wand -

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

She pulled her wand arm back -

Something hit her from the left and sent her flying through the air and away from her target - and thank fucking God that it did.

She landed on her back in an alleyway a few feet away from the battle, the force of the spell that sent her there knocking the air from her lungs and spending a terrible ache in her back. She was so distracted by the pain that swam up and down her spine like a pack of angry bees that she almost didn't feel the Hex receding to begin with.

Someone dragged her to her feet and slammed her into the wall. Although her head was practically rolling off her shoulders and although her vision was blurred, the moment she felt the tip of a wand at her throat, she reacted instinctually.

She used the side of her foot to kick her attacker's left leg out from under them, and as they lost their balance, she used one of her hands to push them down, and the other to press her wand at their temple.

"Hermione it's me!" her attacker shrieked; voice frighteningly familiar as blurry orange hair came into view. "It's me! It's me!"

She lowered her wand and let go of his shoulder. "Ron?" She took a step away, a part of her not trusting that the Hex had fully receded and given her back control.

When her vision finally cleared, Ron was staring at her with wide blue eyes. "Mione? Are you ... *you*, right now?"

She put as much space between them as the alley allowed and kept Malfoy's wand in her hand, ready to attack if needed. She kept her eyes on the end of the alleyway as she spoke, watching green curses and bullets zip past in all directions. "I'm me," she said. "The Hex is gone."

"No," Hermione scoffed. "I thought the same thing."

"I thought it'd at least look?"

"More threatening?" Hermione asked, cocking a brow.

Ginny's eyes flickered up to hers and she laughed softly. "Yes, actually. Thought it'd at least be scary to look at. Have fangs on it or something."

"And horns?"

"Yes, and a snake."

"I thought fire."

"Exactly!" Ginny laughed. "No one is going to look at this thing and be frightened! For an all-knowing, all-powerful Dark Lord, he's not very creative, is he? I could have picked a more threatening coin than this!"

For a moment, as Hermione and Ginny joked back and forth, it felt like it used to be. For a moment, she couldn't really hear the war going on, the sound of guns firing and hexes being cast was drowned out by Ginny's laugh. For a moment, the awful feeling of dread that'd been weighing her down for years wasn't there, it was replaced with something else, a lovely, weightless feeling of hope.

For years, Hermione felt like she'd been weighed down by the war. Weighed down by her responsibilities, by the awful things she'd done and the people she'd killed. Each horrific reality wrapping around her body like a rope and chaining her to the floor, crushing her into the earth, making it difficult to breathe.

But for the last few months, she'd started to feel ... less weighed down. Each time something in Malfoy's plan went right, it was like another of those strings had been clipped.

When the Order found and destroyed the diadem, that cut the first string and allowed her to breathe.

When Malfoy chose to side with the Order, that clipped another, gave her enough slack to push herself off the floor.

And it'd just continued to get better, she'd continued to get lighter and lighter.

Every wound to Voldemort's pride and army was another clip, another string tethered, and handing over the medallion to Ginny felt like she'd cut the biggest rope of all. She felt weightless. She felt hopeful.

They could do this. The Order could win. There was just one Horcrux left -

“YOU!?”

And with just one little word, that blissful spell was broken, and Hermione came crashing back down to earth.

As that awful voice screeched behind her, that fucking high pitched voice that sounded like nails being dragged down a chalkboard, Hermione’s blood ran cold. She’d been seen. Bellatrix had seen her.

Bellatrix had seen her give the medallion to Ginny. The ruse was up, and it was all Hermione’s fucking fault.

Bellatrix was standing in the doorway of the pub, Hermione kicked herself for not hearing it open. She had one Black Mask at her side, her hair was just as wild as it’d ever been, lips curled back in a snarl and shoulders heaving with untameable rage.

“It’s been you all along! You’re the one who betrayed us!” Bellatrix snapped. “You’re the one whose been giving information to the Order! You filthy Mudblood! He’s going to have your head for this! I’ll kill you myself!”

Bellatrix gave no other warning before she threw her arm and a green curse came hurtling towards the pair. Hermione deflected it, sent the dark curse crashing into the other poor, unsuspecting Black Mass before she retaliated with her own curse and screamed at Ginny.

“Go! Now!”

Ginny hesitated for a moment and stared at Hermione. She was grateful for the Horcrux, that was clear in her soft blue eyes. She was determined to save the Order, but she didn’t want to leave Hermione.

But Hermione’s life wasn’t worth damning the Order, wasn’t as important as the lives of every single remaining member of the Order, so with a simple nod, Ginny lifted the Anti - Apparation wards and disappeared, and took the medallion with her. “You stupid girl!” Bellatrix screamed. “What have you done?!” With the medallion gone, Bellatrix flew into a vicious rage. She began throwing curses at Hermione in quick succession, and Hermione did the only thing she could think of. She Apparated outside of the pub.

The battle was still raging on outside.

Bodies were scattered up and down the street and it seemed every car was either turned upside down or on fire. She could hear tank fire in the distance, although it

And then the trap was complete. Voldemort’s army had no where to run, and they didn’t stand a fucking chance.

All at once, everyone lurched into action.

Hermione started to throw Avada’s.

Malfoy cast a slicing curse that tore two muggle soldiers in half.

Blaise stalked behind a muggle and pressed his wand to the soldier’s temple. He whispered something in their ear, and then the muggle’s eyes went white and he emptied the barrel of his gun under his own chin.

Theo got to work flipping over the abandoned muggle cars that were left up and down the street, crushing Order soldiers underneath their weight when they fell back on the ground.

Bellatrix threw violent curses at the tanks in quick succession while Grouch tried to break the Anti-Apparition wards.

Shop windows exploded up and down the street from the force of spells. Bricks were pulled out of building and sent hurtling across the battlefield. It was hard to distinguish magical words through the screams of the injured and blood rained from the above like spring powers.

Hermione heard a rumbling noise in the distance. As the battle drew on, it kept getting louder and louder, and as the tell tale sign of helicopters grew more distinctive, she heard Narcissa’s deafening roar before the clouds lit up with fire, and then moments later, the sky began to rain with shards of metal that were set ablaze. All the helicopters and tanks were unmanned. Hermione had told the Order to operate them remotely so that they could attack them freely without fear of injuring anyone, and the way the machinery crashed onto the floor sold the lie perfectly.

Hermione lost count of how many people she killed in the first few minutes. She tried not to think about it. When the time was right, Malfoy would discreetly drag her aside and break her out of the Hex, and he couldn’t do that yet. Not with Bellatrix so close. Not with Grouch Jr watched her.

As Hermione decapitated another soldier, she saw Ginny and Fleur. They were both covered in debris and smoke, both so focused on their own duels that they were completely oblivious to her. They were vulnerable. Easy to pick off.

The Hex pulled the strings and made Hermione stalk her prey.

Fuck - they had no idea she was coming for them.

Hermione needed to be under the Hex at the beginning of this mission, and that meant that her instincts were screaming at her to attack Order members, to kill, the urge to draw another person's blood hammering in her veins like a second pulse.

For the pincer movement to work, the Order must have been scattered around the Death Eaters, gathering on rooftops and hidden in the shadows of alleys.

Hermione knew they were out there somewhere, waiting for their moment to attack.

As soon as she saw an Order member, any Order member, she would go on the attack, and their invisibility was the only thing saving them from her.

With the Death Eaters in position, Malfoy gave the signal.

The Black Mask that was located at the front of Malfoy and Hermione's group raised his wand. He cast a strong Bombarda, and as soon as the doors flew open, chaos ensued.

A wave of thick hot tar started to explode out of the newly opened door like a tidal wave. The few Black Masks at the front of the doors got it the worst. The poor sods didn't have time to react, just stared blankly as the wave of molten heat came barrelling toward them and burned them alive where they stood.

And it was the same at the other three exits.

As screams of pain started to fill the air, the other Death Eaters started to retreat, trying to back away from the trap, unaware that that wasn't the trap at all, unaware that they were already inside it.

Order and muggle soldiers began to spring up from behind them at every angle, popping up on rooftops and jumping out from underneath cars and just attacking. Green and red curses shot through the air. Bullets exploded from guns and rifles.

A handful of terrified Black Masks tried to flee, knowing they were outnumbered. They looked towards the sky and their bodies vibrated for a moment as they tried to Apparate, but then nothing happened.

Hermione wished they weren't wearing their masks, wished she could have seen their faces when they realised that The Order had set up Anti-Apparation wards shortly after she and Malfoy had arrived.

Finally, the air crackled in five different locations, and a moment later, five muggle tanks materialised out of nowhere, sealing off the circle around the Death Eaters.

looked like most of them had already been destroyed by the Death Eaters before she'd gotten there.

Hermione looked around frantically.

She could tell Blaise apart from the masses from the way he used the Imperius curse to make two Order wizards turn on one another.

Theo was easily distinguishable, the only Death Eater dancing and spinning on his heels as he Avada'd any Order member he could see.

But she couldn't see Malfoy -

There was a loud crack of Apparation from behind her. Hermione turned just in time to see Bellatrix raise her wand and scream "Expelliarmus!"

Malfoy's wand burned in her palm before it flew into the air and landed in Bellatrix's palm.

"Oh dear," Bellatrix grinned, twirling the new wand between her fingers. "Whatever are you going to do now sweetheart?"

Hermione willed herself to be calm as the other Demon Mask advanced.

She could do this. She could get out. She could save the others, she just needed to get to Malfoy first and warn him what'd happened.

"Poor little Mudblood," Bellatrix swooned, taking another step.

Hermione backed away slowly. Her eyes darted from left to right, looking for a way out, an aid she could use to her advantage.

"All alone."

She passed the body of a wizard, but there was no wand she could steal.

"Wandless."

She stepped over broken glass and considered picking it up, but she was too far away from her attacker to be able to use it as a weapon. Bellatrix would kill her before she even got close.

"Defenseless."

Something caught Hermione's eye and she stopped her retreat. She held her chin up high and stared Bellatrix in the eye.

Because Bellatrix may have disarmed her magically, but Hermione was an expert in more than one weapon, and the corpse of the muggle soldier just to her left had a gun sitting in the holster on his hip.

Hermione prayed the chamber wasn't empty.

"Oh, would you look at that," Bellatrix cackled, loud enough to draw the attention of some of the other Death Eaters that still remained on the field. "Little Mudblood thinks she's brave."

Out of the corner of her eye, Hermione saw Theo stop what he was doing and stare in her direction. He Apparated to Blaise's side, tapped him on the shoulder and pointed at Hermione, or Bellatrix, she couldn't be sure due to the distance.

"It doesn't matter how brave you think you are, little Mudblood," Bellatrix smiled. "You'll die screaming, just like the rest of your kind."

As Bellatrix threw her arm back, ready to go in for the kill, Hermione dived. Bellatrix's attack missed her by a mere inch, but she managed to roll onto the floor, grab the gun, and take aim before Bellatrix could throw another curse.

And whilst still on her back, Hermione fired - and thank fuck there was still a full round in the chamber.

Her attack caught Bellatrix off guard. She deflected the bullet, and although she certainly wasn't a stranger to muggles and their guns, she obviously hadn't expected Hermione to react so quickly, so Hermione fired again.

Bellatrix was an excellent duellist, but Hermione was an even better marksman. The second bullet nicked Bellatrix's right shoulder, and as she hissed in pain and palmed the injury, Hermione got to her feet and continued her assault.

She had Bellatrix on the backfoot. Each new bullet she fired knocked the witch more and more off-balance, took her more by surprise, and if it'd been just the two of them, Hermione was sure that she'd have killed her opponent.

But she wasn't alone, and just as Hermione was about to free the last bullet from the chamber and let it pierce Bellatrix's black heart, a Gold Masks Apparated to her side, roared an incantation, and a set of ropes exploded from their wand.

They hit Hermione with such a force that she dropped the gun and was sent careening several steps backwards. She hissed in pain when her spine connected with something thin and solid, and before she could gather her wits back, the ropes had

"I have found the base," Grouch Jr chirped in. "They're hiding in a pub to the North, less than two minutes from here."

"How many exit points?" Malfoy asked, playing his part beautifully.

"Four," Crouch answered. "Front entrance, back door, and two fire exits on the East and West side."

"And they're all on opposite walls?"

"Yes. If we cover all four, we'll have them surrounded. They'll have nowhere to go."

"Good," Malfoy nodded. "Any sign of tanks or heavy muggle machinery?"

"None," Bellatrix hissed, "but shouldn't you be more concerned about those flying guns of theirs?" she added, jutting her chin sharply towards the clouds.

"The sky is Narcisa's territory," Malfoy said coldly. "And I feel very sorry for any soldier foolish enough to infringe on that. It doesn't matter if it's a muggle in a helicopter or a blood traitor on a broom stick, if the Order tries to send in air support, they're dead."

After Malfoy briefly ran over the plan with the Death Eaters, he divided them into four groups and gave each a different exit to cover, making sure the little Brewery which was supposed to be the Orders base was surrounded at all angles. Bellatrix led her group to one exit, Crouch Jr to another, Theo and Blaise the third group and Malfoy and Hermione's covered the entrance.

This type of 'circular pincer movement' was common practice in warfare. A pincer move usually involved two separate troops attacking the enemy from two opposite sides.

A circular one involved luring the enemy into a trap - a circle - and then diverging from all angles. This type of attack always yielded gruesome results, and this one would be no different, only, the Death Eaters had no idea that they were the ones on the inside of the pincer.

As everyone got into position, Malfoy and Hermione stood at the back of their group, and because they were standing at the back, no one could see the way her eyes were starting to wander.

It had been a tactical move to keep the location of the hiding Order soldiers from her, and another to get them to hide under layers of magic that made them invisible.

When they met Theo and Blaise at the rendezvous point, Hermione felt nothing like herself. The first few minutes under the Hex were always strange, like walking around in someone else's skin.

The rest of the Death Eaters assigned to this mission was already there, huddled in a small group at the top of the high street with their masks on and their wands in their hands.

The effect Malfoy had on the Death Eaters was astounding. They'd been muttering and grumbling under their breaths beforehand, but as soon as the male Demon Masks apparated in, the whispering stopped.

As Hermione looked out the window, she could see the outline of Narcissa soaring high above the clouds, silent and out of sight, but ready to descend upon the group like death at a heartbeat's notice.

Bellatrix and Grouch Jr stood side by side behind the counter. Bellatrix's wand twitched irritably at her side when she noticed Malfoy. Or perhaps when she noticed Hermione. Honestly, it was hard to tell.

Grouch Jr didn't wear a mask, and Hermione was sure that even if she wasn't under the Demon Hex, she would have felt her skin start to crawl from the way he was looking at her.

As the rest of the Death Eaters parted to allow Malfoy through, Hermione walked obediently at his side.

"Is this everyone?" Malfoy asked when they got to the front of the group, his voice altered to a deep bravado through the voice-altering charms they all cast.

"Yes," Bellatrix answered, her own voice slightly distilled and off through her own charms, although Hermione wondered why she even bothered, she was easily recognisable by her long nails and wild hair that wrapped around her horns. "The Dark Lord wanted to keep some Gold Masks to one side as reinforcements."

"Rightfully so," Malfoy nodded. "Have you located the Orders base yet?"

Bellatrix scoffed erratically, sounding an awful lot like the deranged witches Hermione used to watch in television shows as a child. "And you're speaking to me as though you are my superior *beauve*?"

"*Arvy' l?*" Malfoy cocked his head to the side, the Demon Mask on his face warping the simple movement from playful to menacing, a show of dominance that made even Bellatrix back away slightly.

coiled around her body like pythons and secured her to whatever structure she'd crashed into.

Hermione tried to fight against them but the more she pushed, the more the ropes tightened. She fought, and they pulled and pulled until her arms were secured behind her back, bound at her wrists.

She was weaponless. She was defenceless. She was in pain. Her wrists hurt and her shoulders ached from hitting whatever she was tied to, but she hadn't felt even a sliver of panic.

In fact, she hadn't panicked at all, until she saw Malfoy's face.

But when he Apparated to Bellatrix's side and tore his Demon Mask off his face, her heart sank when she saw the horror in his eyes.

Because she realised what she must have been tied to.

It was a telephone pole. She was tied to a telephone pole.

A fucking wooden pole - just like in Blaise's vision.

GINNY LEAVING WAS THE SIGNAL FOR THE REST OF THE ORDER SOLDIERS TO LEAVE, AND AS THEY STARTED TO EVACUATE, WHAT WAS LEFT OF THE DEATH EATERS STARTED TO GATHER LIKE AN ANGRY MOB. THEY SWARMED THE POST HERMIONE WAS TIED TO IN AN UNBREAKING LINK, EVEN IF SHE WASN'T WEAPONLESS AND BOUND, SHE DOUBTED SHE WOULD HAVE BEEN ABLE TO ESCAPE.

THE WIND PICKED UP CONSIDERABLY AND MOMENTS LATER THE GROUND SHUDDERED AS NARCISSA LANDED ON THE STREET. WHAT WAS LEFT OF THE DEATH EATERS BACKED AWAY AS SHE ROARED AND BARED HER FANGS TO THEM.

"SHE'S THE TRAITOR!" BELLATRIX SCREAMED, ADDRESSING THE CROWD AND POINTING A LONG ROTTEN FINGERNAIL AT HERMIONE. "SHE'S THE ONE WHOSE BEEN GIVING INFORMATION TO THE ORDER!"

"HOW CAN YOU BE SURE?" ASKED THE GOLD MASK WHO'D BOUND HERMIONE TO THE POST. AS HE ASKED THE QUESTION, HE REMOVED HIS MASK TO REVEAL THE FACE OF BARTY GROUCH JR.

"I SAW HER GIVE THAT WEASLEY GIRL THE MEDALLION! SHE'S NOT WITH US! SHE'S BEEN THE SPY ALL ALONG!"

"ARE YOU SURE?" CROUCH EYED HERMIONE SCPTICALLY AND LICKED HIS LIPS. "SHE WAS CAPTURED SIXTEEN MONTHS AGO - THE SPY HAS BEEN LEAKING SECRETS FOR YEARS."

"She must have been working with one of the others that we've already executed!" Bellatrix charged toward Hermione and jabbed her wand into her throat. "That's it, isn't it? And when we killed them, when they left you all alone, you carried on their work by yourself! Who was it you were working with? Was it Alecto? Karkaroff? I bet it was Scabior, wasn't it? Those snatchers speak to everyone! Who knows what he could've told you?"

A sharp jolt of electricity shot out of Bellatrix's wand and into her neck. Hermione yelped in pain but kept her chin high in defiance and didn't say a word.

"How could she be the spy?" one of the Black Masks in the crowd shouted.

"Each time she's been out with us, she's been under the Demon Hex!" snarled another. "She couldn't be working with the Order! She's killed more of them than I have!"

"But she's been breaking out of the Hex!" Bellatrix answered, jabbing her wand into Hermione's neck again. "I've seen it! She's been breaking out of it and giving out secrets to the Order! She has! She has! I know it—" Bellatrix's eyes suddenly widened and her expression fell. Moving ever so slowly, she turned on her heels and stared straight at Malfoy. "Unless ..." the witch breathed. Her voice suddenly dropped, became so uncharacteristically calm and quiet that it sent a chill up Hermione's spine. "Unless she's had help," and then, still moving slowly, still moving deliberately, she raised her wand and pointed the tip towards Malfoy. "From *you.*"

"What on earth are you insinuating?" Malfoy scoffed cruelly, face twisting in disgust. "You think I'd help that?" he snarled, nodding towards Hermione. "Did you hit your head during your duel with the Mudblood?"

Despite Malfoy's objections, murmurs started among the crowd of Death Eaters. They were quiet little whispers of "*That can't be true,*" and "*He would never,*" all tumbling together, background noise, easy to ignore.

"Oh, on the contrary, dear nephew, I think you know exactly what I'm talking about," Bellatrix purred. "You know what I think? I think that she's been walking your hallways and sleeping in your beds, and I think everything she's learned and everything she's leaked to the Order, she's learned from you."

"Oh my - you've lost the plot," Malfoy laughed coldly, doing a fantastic job of hiding the unease Hermione could see gathering in his eyes. "I swore myself to Voldemort years ago," even though he continued to stare at Bellatrix, he raised his

the cupboard, held one hand in front of him, palm facing the group, and used his other to draw a pretend cross over his heart with the chocolate bar. "Cross my heart and hope to die *blah blah blah, can we pleaseeee go now?*"

They did a complete run-through of the plan a final time before they left. Blaise added a few more potions and small weapons to his pockets - Hermione did the same - and Theo gave Malfoy an over the top salute, adding, "Sir, yes Sir!" before he grabbed another chocolate bar and followed Blaise onto the grounds.

Hermione watched them leave before she turned to Malfoy. He'd been occluding heavily all morning, preparing himself for the day ahead, and although stormy grey eyes stared down at her, flecks of blue were still clinging to the edges. He was having trouble fully closing himself off.

She closed her eyes and tried to relax, ready to be put under the Demon Hex for what she supposed could be - if the plan went horribly wrong - the very last time.

She waited, expecting to feel his lips at her ear, but after almost half a minute, she hadn't, and her eyes fluttered open when one of his large, cold hands caught the side of her face.

"I hate putting you under this curse," he snarled, the gentle way he held her face a stark comparison to the venom his words were wrapped in.

"I know. I hate it too, but we don't have a choice," she answered. "It's for the best."

There was a storm gathering in his eyes, blue cracks, lightning hidden behind the thick clouds. He scoffed quietly, gently, barely a noise at all, and stared down at her. "Always so brave. Never look like you're scared of anything. You'll have to show me how you do that."

She'd wanted to question him, but then he leaned forward and her eyes fluttered closed again. He kissed her forehead, and then a shiver ran up her spine when his lips found her ear and delivered another kiss, a kiss of death that was articulated in two little words.

"Deamonium, ortus."

Rudely and whilst Hermione was speaking - Theo walked over to the cupboards, swung the doors open and loudly started rummaging through its contents.

"Yeah and while the two of you are off on your little danger mission/ strange and highly dysfunctional method of foreplay," Theo paused when he found something that interested him, and he made everyone wait until he'd torn off the foil wrapping of the chocolate bar he'd found before he carried on, "me, Blaise, the Order and your overgrown fire breathing scale murder puppy will keep Bellatrix and the others distracted so that they don't notice your absence." He took a large bite out of the chocolate bar and smiled. "Easy peasy," he added with his mouth full.

"And?" Malfoy asked.

Theo shrugged. "And once you pair have the medallion, Granger will signal Weaselfits for her to come and pick it up and destroy it."

"And?"

"And ... oh I also have a panic button," he said, holding up his wrist to flash his own silver bracelet. "Which I am to press like the good little boy I am if anyone notices that you're missing so that you can get back to the battle."

"And?"

Theo dropped his arm and looked at Malfoy in bewilderment. "Aaaaaand I really, really, really don't like what you've done to your hair today mate."

"And?" Malfoy asked again, growing irritated.

Theo sighed dramatically and rolled his eyes. "And I am not," he drawled in a bored tone, "under any fucking circumstance whatsoever, to kill Death Eaters, specifically, the scum of the earth that is Bart'ly Crouch Jr, unless we have been exposed and it is absolutely necessary."

"I mean it, Theodore," Malfoy said sternly. "That is a fucking order, probably the most important one for you today."

Theo nodded like he understood, but he looked at the ceiling and continued to eat his chocolate bar like a naughty child that had no intention of listening to their parents' instructions.

Malfoy seemed to make the same comparison. "Do I make myself clear, Nott?"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, I get it. Grouch is untouchable and I have to control the urge to kill him and Bellatrix, even though the slimy fuckers deserve it," Theo answered, chewing with his mouth open. He straightened from his slouch against

voice, his words clearly meant for the others in the crowd, "he's given me everything. Given me wealth and power beyond anything I could have ever dreamt of, why on earth would I betray him when victory is almost within our grasp? It's ridiculous and insulting to think that I would throw in my lot for the Order!"

"Oh, is it now?" Bellatrix grinned. "Let's examine the facts, shall we?" She rocked back on her heels and turned to address the bystanders. "What information in the last sixteen months has been leaked to the Order?"

There was stunned silence in the crowd. No one dared to speak, all torn between which of their superiors to obey.

"The location of the Diadem," Grouch offered, although he did flinch away along with several others - when Narcissa roared menacingly in his direction.

"Correct! Excellent Party!" When Bellatrix applauded, Narcissa's growls redirected, although Bellatrix was anything but deterred. "And who knew the location of the Diadem?"

Another long, painful silence before one of the Black Masks in the crowd said, "Malfoy did..."

"And a handful of others," Malfoy interrupted with a snarl vicious enough to make the Black Mask who'd spoken cringe away. "Honestly Bellatrix, is this supposed to be damning evidence? You knew the location of the Diadem as well, does that make you a suspect too?"

"I did know its location, you're right," she said, smiling confidently. "But I don't have contact with the Mudblood, you do."

The whispers in the crowd started again, only they didn't sound so unsure anymore.

"You know all his secrets, who better to be a spy for the Order?" Bellatrix added calmly, approaching Malfoy. "You know all his battle plans." She started to circle Malfoy slowly, twirling her wand innocently in her hand like a loaded gun, although she didn't need to, every word she said was more damaging than a bullet could ever be. "Battle plans that have conveniently been leaked hours before raids took place. You know where the Horcruxes are, and you've killed enough Order members to convince everyone else that you're loyal. What better place to hide is there than in plain sight?"

This was bad. This was very, very bad.

The whispers were growing louder. Nods of agreement, hums of “*If could be true,*” and “*It all makes sense,*” echoing over and over again.

Hermione could see the idea taking hold, the whispers like a swarm of locusts eating its way through the crowd, eating away at Malfoy’s innocence, at his reputation, at the image that he was the most loyal of all Voldemort’s followers.

The idea that he was the spy, that he’d been working with the Order all along, it was believable. The Death Eaters were starting to believe it. Hermione could see it on all their faces.

“We had nothing to do with this!” Blaise interrupted, pushing a few Black Masks out of the way and ripping his mask from his face. “I can assure you, whatever secrets this mudblood has spilt, she did so without our knowledge!”

Bellatrix stopped her pacing and glared down at Blaise.

Theo followed his friend’s lead, tearing his own gold skull mask from his face and standing beside Blaise. There was no humour on Theo’s face, no jokes on his lips, just a furious expression as his knuckles strained from the grip he had on his wand. If Malfoy gave the order, Nott would kill.

But who he would kill was the question Hermione didn’t have the answer to.

“This is a lovely little tale you’ve spun auntie, but I can assure you it’s all bollocks.”

Malfoy asked and shook his head. “Shame, sounded like you put an awful lot of effort into concocting that story.” He smiled and looked down at his aunt, the picture of ease and dominance. “But I dare you to find another as loyal to the Dark Lord as I am.”

A wicked grin cracked Bellatrix’s face. She looked her nephew up and down, licked her lips, and then leaned in and said, “You want to prove your loyalty to the Dark Lord? Then kill the Mudblood.”

And just like that, Hermione’s world tipped on its axis. No, that probably wasn’t the right way to describe it. The world didn’t tip, it stopped turning altogether.

She felt as though her blood stilled in her veins, like those four little words from Bellatrix’s mouth were a spell, an enchantment that she’d never heard of that froze the blood in her veins, froze her heart mid-beat and a horrified expression on her face.

Everyone in the crowd stilled.

A solution already formulated, Hermione went over to the freshly stocked medicine cupboard and grabbed a clear bottle with a shimmering purple liquid inside.

She could feel both the Death Eaters’ eyes on her back as she pulled the cap off the bottle of Calming Draught.

“You need to take this,” Hermione said, turning around. “It won’t affect your magic or slow you down, but it’ll calm your nerves and help you focus, and then you’ll be much better able to protect Astoria if anything does goes wrong - which it won’t.”

Although she offered the bottle to Blaise, he was hesitant to take it. He looked at Malfoy for reassurance.

Malfoy nodded, clearly on the same wavelength as Hermione.

Blaise extended his hand but didn’t quite touch the bottle. He stared at Hermione intently, all the features on his face tense. “Do you promise that if anything does happen, you’ll help me get her out of here?”

Hermione nodded. “I’ll protect Astoria with my life.”

Her promise seemed to do the trick. After a pause to mull over her words, Blaise nodded and downed the potion in one. He took a moment to compose himself. He took a few deep breaths, and on the third, he relaxed, finally managing to unclench his fists.

A few minutes later, Theo swung open the kitchen doors and half-danced, half-electric slid into the kitchen, Death Eater robes on, and a devious smile on his face.

“Mornin’ all!” he chirped in a fake cockney accent. “How we all feelin’ this morning? Ready to bash some Black Masks brains in when this all goes tits up?” Hermione hit Theo around the back of the head with an open palm. “Will you pack that in? It isn’t going to go tits up!”

Theo stuck his tongue out and then ducked out of the way when another open palm flew in his direction.

“Is everyone clear on the plan today?” Malfoy snapped, trying to control the little chaotic atmosphere that Theo had brought with him into the kitchen.

“Yes,” Hermione said. “You put me under the Hex, we go to the raid as normal, and once the Death Eaters have fallen into the trap and are distracted, we,” she nodded towards Malfoy, “are going to sneak off and secure the medallion.”

As Hermione pulled herself weakly from the wreckage of the bureau, she watched in horror as Yaxley caught Astoria's forearm and began to drag her away.

Hermione tried to stand up, but Yaxley threw another curse in her direction, and the next thing she knew, she was back on the floor. The spell Yaxley had used must have done something to the gravity, manipulated it, turned it up tenfold until Hermione felt like she was not only pinned to the floor, but being pulled down into it.

Hermione tried to fight it, but she couldn't move, couldn't do anything but watch as Yaxley dragged Astoria around the room like she was nothing more than a little rag doll.

And Astoria could do nothing either.

She pounded her fists against Yaxley and screamed for him to release her. She dug her heels into the ground and tried to yank herself out of his grip, but it was no use. Yaxley was much too strong and Astoria was much too weak.

But she still had the bottle in her hands.

If Astoria's blood curse hadn't made her so weak, Yaxley might've been knocked unconscious when she whacked him around the back of his head with the whiskey bottle, but in her current condition, all it did was jerk his head slightly to the left and make him angry.

"How dare you!" he bellowed, whining around to scream in Astoria's face.

Although Astoria did flinch when he spat in her face, she still tried to fight him. She tried to hit him again with the bottle, but Yaxley caught her wrist before her assault could connect.

In his rage he threw Astoria into the wall, making the vintage bottle slip from her fingers and shatter when it collided with the ground. Broken glass decorated the floorboards. The smell of whiskey burned Hermione's nostrils.

When Astoria slid down the wall and fell to the ground, Yaxley dived on top of her. He straddled her, the inside of his thighs bracketing her hips, and then wrapped both his hands around her throat.

"How dare you! The Dark Lord gave you everything!" Yaxley started to squeeze. Astoria's arms and legs flailed in every direction as she fought to get him off her.

"He forgave you when your sister betrayed us! He's given you everything! Everything your heart desires, and you still betrayed him!"

He used the hold on Astoria's neck to pull her off the ground an inch or two before he slammed her back onto the cold floor. Astoria's head bounced grotesquely off the floorboards, and Hermione still couldn't do anything.

"If it were up to me, I wouldn't kill you. You don't deserve death! It's too good for you!" Yaxley screamed. "If it were up to me, you'd be living in Grouch's Dolhouse!"

Hermione could hear Astoria choking and gasping for breath. She could see the veins protruding on the back of Yaxley's forearms as he tightened his hold on Astoria's neck.

"If it were up to me, you'd be one of Crouch's Dolls, and he'd let me do whatever the fuck I wanted to do to you!"

Yaxley's face was turning red with the effort he was exerting, it was a miracle Astoria was still moving at all. But she was. She was still moving. Still fighting with every ounce of strength she had.

Maybe it was an adrenaline rush, or perhaps just blind luck, but in a moment that Hermione wouldn't have believed if she hadn't seen it for herself, she watched Astoria drag her perfectly manicured nails down Yaxley's face, rake them from his forehead to his chin with such force that Yaxley howled in pain and released her.

He clutched his face as blood started to trickle from the wounds she'd created, and Astoria wasted no time in using his distraction to her advantage. She reached behind her head and started patting the floor blindly. She fumbled for a moment, but her trembling hand soon found what she was looking for.

She snatched the neck of the broken whiskey bottle off the floor, and then plunged the jagged ends straight into Yaxley's neck.

He jerked for a moment, causing the bottle to free itself from his neck and a fountain of blood to pour from the wound. Astoria must have punctured something vital.

She pulled the glass all of the way out of his neck and then plunged it right back in.

And then she did it for a third time.

And then a fourth.

And then a fifth. Each stab coming quicker than the last, more forceful, plunging deeper.

Yaxley jerked and shook each time Astoria stabbed him. His eyes grew wider and wider each time, but he was looking at Astoria like he couldn't really see her, like he didn't know who she was at all.

Maybe it was true, maybe your life really did flash before your eyes when you died. Maybe that was what Yaxley was seeing as Astoria shoved the broken glass into his neck, maybe each new stab brought a new memory, like clicking different reels of an old piece of film.

Maybe he saw his youth to begin with.

Stab.

Then perhaps he saw his time at Hogwarts.

Stab.

Then the early years of his servitude to Voldemort.

Stab.

Then the years following Voldemort's death, when he didn't know his place in the world anymore.

Stab.

Then Voldemort's rise back to power.

Stab.

Then the war.

And then with the final stab, was he brought back to the present? Did that final plunge of the broken glass make Astoria come back into view? Was the last thing he saw her lovely face, covered in his blood?

Yaxley gagged and choked and tried to cover the gash with his hand, but the blood was flowing faster than he could stop it. Blood spilt down his neck and drenched the woman below him. It covered her dress, her hair, covered every inch of her face until all Hermione could see of her friend was the deep brown and white of her eyes.

Yaxley only lasted a moment or two longer before his eyes closed and he went limp. When Yaxley's heart stopped, so did his magic. The stronger gravity vanished, and as soon as Hermione could move, she pushed herself to her feet and ran to Astoria.

She pulled the blonde to stand and steadied her with a hand on either shoulder.

She was wearing pink slippers and a matching silk nightdress and robe, and although her features were still gaunt and pale and she didn't have any glamours on her face or hair, she was up; she was out of bed.

Hermione just prayed that meant she'd have the strength to Apparate and not get splinched.

Although a little wobbly and needing to use the wall to keep herself steady, Astoria crossed the room - a bottle of whiskey in her hand - and pulled Hermione into a hug. "How long do we have?"

"They're already on their way," Hermione hushed, squeezing the blonde just as tightly. "We need to go now."

Astoria forced down two more Pepperup potions that Hermione had brought from the kitchen - and a Blood Replenishing one, just to be safe - and when the bottles were empty, Hermione held out her hand for Astoria to take.

"You ready?"

Astoria nodded confidently, but when she took Hermione's hand, she squeezed her eyes closed like she was bracing herself for the worst.

Hermione closed her own eyes and clenched her wand. She tried to Apparate, but nothing happened. She tried again, and still, nothing. She could feel her magic flowing through her, but there was resistance, like her magic couldn't obey what she was telling it. When she opened her eyes, Astoria was looking at her with a confused expression.

Anti-Apparation wards. That was the only explanation.

But that meant -

Hermione was hit with a knockback jinx in the back, the spell strong enough to tear her hand from Astoria's. It sent her hurtling across the room and crashing into the oak bureau.

"Hermione!" Astoria screamed.

Although she could hardly feel her own body, Hermione somehow found her voice through sheer willpower alone. "G-get...get to Theo!" Her head was spinning and she was sure her hip had been cracked with her fall. Her back felt numb and wet at the same time. "Go!" She screamed. "Leave!"

"Oh," purred a male voice, "I don't think so, beautiful."

The fact that he was on the field at all was strange in itself. He never seemed to leave his ivory tower, much preferred to stay behind the walls of York Cathedral and let his pedigree dogs do all the work for him.

But his sudden appearance on the field wasn't the thing that Hermione found strange.

The thing that was strange, the thing that made her blood run cold, was that when Voldemort's furious eyes landed on her, it was as though he was seeing into her soul.

Voldemort had never looked at her that way. The few times his eyes had landed on her, he'd always looked at her with nothing more than disgust, as though she were nothing more than a dirty stray dog in his way.

But it that fleeting second before she took Theo's hand and they disappeared, Voldemort's eyes were filled with shock, then denial, and then finally anger.

And then his face disappeared altogether and was replaced by Malfoy Manor.

Hermione and Theo wasted no time, as soon as they felt earth beneath their feet again, they broke into a sprint towards the estate. Romy and Quinzel were already in the kitchen, both with fabric sacks in their hands that they were filling with even more supplies.

Terror swarmed across Hermione's chest when she saw that Astoria wasn't with them.

"Where is she?!" Hermione asked.

Romy blinked and paused with a bottle of Pepper up potion in his hand. "Miss is in one of the parlour rooms, she wanted to get something for master Malfoy."

Hermione didn't need any more information, she knew exactly which room Astoria would be in. Malfoy's father's whiskey. Apart from the rings he wore around his neck, those bottles of whiskey were the only connection Malfoy had left to his father. If Astoria was getting something for Malfoy, that would be it.

Hermione grabbed three potions off the kitchen island before she took off again. "Pack as much as you can!" she called over her shoulder as she charged through the kitchen. "We're leaving in sixty seconds!"

Theo stayed with the elves and helped them pour everything into their little sacks.

Hermione was breathless when she burst open the doors to the parlour room, but she could've wept with happiness when she saw Astoria. Because although she still looked ill, she looked much better than she had for the last few days.

"Tori?" Hermione whispered carefully. "Are you alright?"  
Astoria was breathing heavily. She was clearly in a state of shock. She was shaking and her eyes were wide and staring down at Yaxley's corpse, at what she'd done, but physically, she was fine.

Hermione cupped Astoria's face between her hands and shook her gently. "It's alright," she hushed. "You're safe."

Astoria's terrified eyes drifted to Hermione and she nodded weakly.  
"Everything is going to be fine," Hermione added. "We're going to get out of here. You believe me, don't you?"

Again, all Astoria could do was nod.

Hermione had never seen Astoria speechless before. Even when her illness got the better of her, she always had something to say, always had a twinkle in her eye and a bit of gossip ready to share when someone came to visit her.

But seeing her like this... Hermione recognised it. She'd seen that same look in her eye when she'd stared at her reflection once before, right after the first time she'd taken a life.

Astoria had never killed anyone before. Yes, she'd played a hand in dozens of people's executions, but she'd never been the axeman herself. She'd never seen the light go out in someone's eyes because she'd snuffed it out by her own hand. And although Yaxley certainly fucking deserved what she'd done, it was clear that Astoria didn't quite know how to process it.

"It's alright," Hermione whispered. "You did what you had to do. It's alright."

There was a loud bang from the other side of the door. Hermione heard a man scream. She heard footsteps. Then another loud bang. Then another blood-curdling scream.

Hermione spun towards the door and raised her wand. She used her free hand to catch the dip of Astoria's waist and guide her to stand behind Hermione.

Another bang. Another scream.

Hermione felt Astoria move behind her. She tilted her face enough to watch Astoria bend down and pick up the blood-soaked bottle off the floor. She gripped its neck tightly and nodded to Hermione.

Hermione turned back to the door.

Another bang, this one from just on the other side of the hallway.

More footsteps. A few sets of them, running quickly, getting louder.

Hermione braced herself. The end of her wand sparked that deadly shade of green. She opened her mouth, the word on the tip of her tongue-

When the doors burst open, there were three stood on the other side.

Romy charged in first. His pillowcase was dusted with blood and one of his eyes was bruised and swelling to the point it was closing.

Quinzel was a little bruised too, but the most startled of the three was Theo. Although he himself looked relatively unharmed, he was drenched in blood, like he'd taken a bath in it, quite literally slit the throats of his enemies, let their blood fill the bath and then submerged his entire body into it. His hair was drenched. His clothes were saturated. There was so much of it covering him that Hermione couldn't make out if he were bruised or not. All she could see was blood.

Upon seeing Astoria, Romy charged into the room, tears already in his eyes.

"Is Miss alright?" the tiny elf screamed as he wrapped his arms around Astoria's legs and sobbed into her dressing gown. "Romy was so worried! He did not know where Miss was but he could hear her screaming!" The more Romy spoke, the more frantic he became, stuttering and sobbing over his words until they were almost incoherent. "He could hear her, but then other Death Eaters broke into the kitchen, and Romy could not get to Miss! H - he - he wanted to help! He w-wanted t-to help ... but he c-couldn't get g-get to Miss!"

Astoria bent down and wrapped her arms around Romy's shoulders. "Shhhh, it's alright," she hushed, the distress on his face clearly the thing she needed to find her voice again. "There, there, it's alright. I'm fine. I'm fine."

Theo's expression dropped as he stared at Astoria. "Toot," he started, horrified. "Are you-"

"I'm fine," she answered quickly, looking up at Theo from over the top of Romy's head. "I'm fine. It's not my blood."

Theo nodded softly, but when his eyes drifted to the left and saw Yaxley's body, a deep scowl twisted its way onto his face.

"A-and then, Death Eaters w-were everywhere!" Romy carried on, sobbing into Astoria's neck. "M-M-Mr Nott killed l-lots of them, b-blood everywhere... the - the kitchen is a mess, but m-more kept c-coming, and we c-could hear Miss

Suddenly, his cold hand curled around her wrist, and he dragged her close to his side. When she stared up at him, she found his eyes completely blue.

"Granger, I-." He cut himself off and rolled his tongue on the inside of his cheek, like he didn't know how to say the words.

She recognised that look, she'd seen it on him before. And without even saying it, Hermione knew what he was trying to ask.

"Don't worry, I'll come back," Hermione finished for him. "I'll come back to you."

He scoffed quietly and his lips twitched into a small smirk. "Make sure that you do."

And then, despite the battle going on around them, Malfoy grabbed the back of her head and kissed her. It only lasted a second, they couldn't afford to take their eyes off the battle any longer, but that kiss spoke a thousand words.

The way he held the back of her head told her that he never wanted to let her go, that he didn't want to let her go now, even though it was for the best.

The way he chased her mouth when she started to pull away, the way he dragged her lips back to hers just so he could steal that second more told her that he wished they had more time, that he wasn't ready to let her go yet, just like she wasn't ready either.

And the way he kissed her, so passionately and so publicly, in front of generations of Death Eaters who'd looked up to him for leadership and who wanted her dead, it told her that she was his. His for all to see. His for as long as they had.

He told her everything she needed to know without ever uttering a single syllable. After they broke apart, Hermione and Theo shielded Malfoy while he levitated Blaise onto Narcissa's back. He gave Hermione one last lingering look as he settled himself between the dragon's shoulders, and Theo and Hermione covered him as Narcissa took flight. They stayed on the ground long enough to see him disappear into the clouds, and when they were sure he wasn't followed, they prepared their own escape.

But just before they apparated to Malfoy Manor, a strange thing happened. Voldemort appeared.

He materialised onto the cobble street in a flurry of black smoke, robes dark, skin pale and gaunt, looking so like the grim reaper himself it was startling to see.

There weren't many Black Masks left. Sixteen, possibly fifteen, well - thirteen, after Theo flipped a car that took out a further two when it landed back on the ground.

Hermione looked up at Malfoy. "Press the panic button," she said, eyes drifting back to Blaise's arm as she cast another charm over his shoulder, just to make sure everything was set properly and he wouldn't bleed out. "Let the elves know we're coming."

Malfoy nodded and did as Hermione asked.

With Blaise seemingly stable for the moment, Hermione and began duelling at Malfoy's side again. "You and Narcissa take Blaise to the safehouse. Theo and I will get Astoria, Romy and Quinzel and meet you there."

She could feel him staring at the side of her face when she decapitated another Black Mask.

Only twelve left.

Theo brought a shop front down and crushed another.

Eleven.

"You know it's the best option," Hermione said. "We can't Apparate Blaise in his condition. Narcissa is the only way we can get him out, and she'll need you with her." She threw an Avada to the left. "She can fly and you can pick off anyone who might try and follow you to the safe house."

Ten.

"Why don't you go with her?" Malfoy asked, voice rough as he threw a green curse of his own. "You're more than capable of killing anyone who tries to follow."

Nine.

"No, it has to be you," Hermione answered. "I'm not as good with flying as you are. It makes me sick and I can barely keep my eyes open. I might miss someone and then they'll know where the safe house is. It has to be you. You have to go with Narcissa and Blaise and I have to go with Theo to get Astoria and the elves. It's the best option. You know it is."

She was right. The Manor was going to be more dangerous than getting Blaise to safety, but Hermione was the better option. She had to go, even if Malfoy didn't like it, she had to.

screaming! Romy would do anything to keep Miss safe! He just -he just wants Miss to be s-safe! He thought he'd failed her - he thought she'd'

"Shhhhhh," Astoria soothed. "It's alright. I'm safe. You don't need to worry."

There was a creaking sound coming from the hallway. Theo spun around, and the dark doorway was lit up with just enough green light that Hermione saw the Death Eater who Theo had just murdered, and the other bodies lying in the hallway.

"Whilst this is all lovely and we know how much you love Astoria, Romy," Theo said, crossing the room and roughly peeing the sobbing elf away from his sister-in-law. "Others are on the way. We need to get out of here."

Romy nodded in agreement, but he didn't stop sobbing. He didn't let go of Astoria entirely either; one of his little hands kept a firm grip on the bottom of Astoria's pink dressing gown.

"Alright then Granger," Theo said, turning back to Hermione as he said her name. "You're supposed to be the brainbox of this operation. What's our plan?"

Hermione looked at Astoria. "If we can get you past the anti-Apparation wards. Do you think you'll be strong enough to Apparate?"

Astoria gave a breathless laugh. "Is there really any other option?"

No, there wasn't.

And so, without wasting any more time, they took off in a sprint. Quinzel and Hermione went first, then Astoria, then Romy, then Theo. There was a theory behind their formation. They put the most vulnerable in the middle so that those on either side could protect her when needed.

And it was certainly needed.

In the time that they'd regrouped, the manor had become crawling with Death Eaters. The house was invested with them. They were fucking everywhere. If Quinzel weren't so familiar with the Manor, there was no way they would have been able to get out.

They passed dozens of bodies of Death Eaters as Quinzel guided them through the estate, and Hermione suddenly understood why Theo was saturated in so much blood. It was easy to tell his handiwork, most of the corpses they passed either didn't have heads or had huge gaping holes in the centre of their chests.

It was like running through a haunted house. The walls were completely covered in blood. The halls stank of death and organs and torn flesh were scattered up and down the floors, tripping them on occasion.

As they sprinted through the hallways, curses of every colour shot over their heads. Debris from explosions flew in every direction. Countless portraits were destroyed through the chaos, generation upon generation of Malfoy family history just gone, obliterated in a few short minutes.

And it didn't improve when they got outside.

Even though Hermione could see where the anti-Apparation wards ended, could see the air ripple and shine slightly where the edge of the magic met the cold air, it looked so far away.

Astoria's breath was harsh behind Hermione. She could see the blonde falling more and more behind as they sprinted across the grounds, struggling to keep up, struggling to catch her breath.

When they were halfway across the gardens, Astoria tripped.

Theo whirled around and started to throw curses, slaughtering the Death Eaters that were closing in.

Romy stood by his side, and when he snapped his fingers, the earth cracked and giant roots with thorns exploded from the ground. The roots moved violently through the air like they had a life of their own, and they wrapped around the legs of some of the Death Eaters and piled them towards the floor. Some lost their legs, some were cut in half from the huge thorns, but most just screamed as they were pulled into the ground, gasping and clawing at the earth like they were being dragged right down to hell.

Theo and Romy managed to take out another ten Black Masks, but more were still there. More were still coming after them, and the Apparation point still felt so far away.

Hermione grabbed Astoria's wrist and pulled her to her feet. When she started to sprint again, she didn't let go of her wrist. She couldn't let Astoria fall behind. She had to get her out. She had to save her. She'd promised Malfoy she would. She'd fucking carry Astoria on her back if she had to.

The Apparation point was getting closer.

"Then we need to get back to the Manor," Malfoy said urgently. "If Bellatrix is with Voldemort, it won't be long before he sends others to the Manor. We need to get Astoria out."

At the mention of her name, Blaise looked in Malfoy's direction, but it couldn't have been worse timing. He'd been distracted just as Crouch had thrown a powerful slicing curse - a Sectumsempra - and although the curse didn't hit Blaise head-on, it caught his shoulder with such a force that he spun in the air and landed on the ground with a harsh thud.

When Blaise didn't get up, Theo and Malfoy went on the attack. They threw curse after curse at Crouch Jr. They were unrelenting. They were angry. They were deadly, but Crouch was a coward and Apparated away before anything could hit him.

Hermione ran to Blaise and knelt down beside him. He still had a pulse, and as she checked his injury, Narcissa hovered over her and obliterated anyone who tried to come close.

There were deep, jagged lines across Blaise's left shoulder and neck, stretching up and covering almost the entire left side of his face. Even with the strongest healing potions, he'd be scarred for the rest of his life, but he'd survive. Hermione was sure of it.

With Crouch gone and only a handful of Black Masks left, Malfoy and Theo ran to Hermione and Blaise's side.

"Is he alright?" Malfoy asked.

"Is he-?" Theo couldn't even say the word. He sounded like he was going to throw up. "How's he doing, Granger?"

Hermione cast a numbing charm over the worst of his injuries and then another to slow the bleeding. "He needs medical attention." She paused to cast a healing charm over the deepest cut. "I can slow the bleeding with magic, but all the supplies we need are at the safehouse. We can't waste time, we need to get him there, quickly."

Malfoy nodded in agreement. "I'll go to the Manor."

"No," Hermione interrupted. "Blaise's injuries are too severe. He'll make it, but if we try to Apparate him like this he's likely to get splinched."

Malfoy threw an Avada to the left and killed a Black Mask that'd been trying to sneak up on them. "So what are you suggesting then?" he growled, roughly dragging a frustrated hand through his hair.

him and his family more time to escape, but he hadn't done it, even though it was the most sensible option.

She would have screamed at him that it was reckless of him to save her, and then kissed him for doing it anyway.

She wanted to drag her nails down his back for being so stupid and then have him fuck her, wanted to hear him growl in her ear that it was worth it, that she was worth it as she flew over the edge and clung onto him.

She wanted him to make her feel alive at a time when she should've been dead.

Yes, there were a lot of things she would have done if they weren't in their current ... predicament. A lot of things.

"Soooooo," Theo said as he materialised between the two of them. "Now that Malfoy has outed the lot of us just so he doesn't have to lose his booty call." He paused to cast a strong Bombarda that blew a hole in someone's chest. "What's the plan?"

A Black Mask appeared to their left, and after Malfoy had cut his head off, he glared at Theo. "Don't pretend like you aren't fucking ecstatic at this turn of events."

"Oh, don't get me wrong mate, I'm buzzing that things have turned out this way, I just didn't realise Granger's cunt was that magical it was worth selling us all down the river for - but hey ho, you learn something new every day, don't ya?" He laughed and grinned wickedly, but when he looked at the floor, his eyes widened. "Ooooooh, this looks pretty. And *explosive*." He used a levitating charm to pick up an unused muggle grenade. "Tell me, Granger, if I pull this pin thingy..."

Hermione looked at him briefly before she redirected her eyes back to her own duel. "It will explode - yes! So when you pull it out, throw it QUICKLY!"

Theo did just that. No sooner than the words had left Hermione's lips, he pulled the pin out of the grenade and threw it over his shoulder, and when the explosion killed three Black Masks, he cheered like an excitable child.

"We have the strength to kill everyone here," Hermione said, pausing briefly to cut a Death Eater in half. "But I think Bellatrix went to Voldemort. He's probably already sending reinforcements."

The temperature rose significantly again as Narcissa breathed another wall of fire. Hermione almost couldn't hear her own voice over the screams of the unlucky few that were caught in the flames.

Hermione felt some resistance from Astoria. She was still running, but she was slowing down a little, almost pulling Hermione to a stop.

"Theo! Romy! Come on!" Astoria called. "Leave them! We're almost there!"

When the resistance vanished, Hermione knew Theo and Romy had started running with them again.

The curses started to zip past their heads faster.

Hermione's lungs burned. Her legs ached, begging her to stop -

They were almost there. Just a little further.

They were almost -

Quinzel disappeared first, her body twisting in on itself before she vanished with a loud pop.

And as soon as both Hermione and Astoria were through the wards, Hermione tightened her grip on Astoria's wrist and did the same.

When they landed with a dull thud on the damp grass outside the farmhouse, Hermione turned to her left. Astoria was there, in one piece, no signs of splinching or pain of any kind.

They'd done it. They'd made it through, against all fucking odds, they'd done it.

The witches reached for each other at the same time, both so overjoyed, so fucking relieved that they'd made it out the other side that they needed to hug one another, squeeze each other to make sure it was real, that it was really happening.

Astoria was panting heavily, but she was breathing, she was laughing, chuckling breathlessly, and Hermione couldn't help but do the same.

Hermione pulled back and cradled Astoria's blood-covered face gently in her hands. "Are you alright?"

Astoria nodded. Tears of joy streamed down her face and cleared some of Yaxley's blood. "I can't believe ... I can't believe we made it. Oh my - Hermione, we made it! The Order can really do this, can't they? They're going to kill Voldemort... it's all ... it's all coming together."

As Astoria spoke her thoughts aloud - always the opposite of Malfoy - Hermione started to look around. She listened carefully as she checked the wards around the farmhouse, making sure they were still in tact -

"What happened at the raid?" Astoria asked "You must tell me everything."

A small shape a few meters behind them caught Hermione's attention. It was only small, barely bigger than a rugby ball -

"I bet Bellatrix was furious when she found out we were the traitors."

For a moment, Hermione couldn't make out what it was. It wasn't a stone, it looked too soft, too pink. It looked like -

"Oh and Crouch! You must tell me what he looked like when he heard the news! I would have loved to have seen his face!"

"Astoria," Hermione interrupted quietly, voice soft, cracking, breaking as she stared at the thing that was laying on the grass.

"I would have paid good money to see Crouch's expression! It's time like this I wish I was a Legilimens."

"Astoria."

"Oh, I do hope Voldemort finds a way to blame Crouch. Do you think he will? I really, really hope he does. I hope he strings him up and hacks away at him. I hope he breaks his ribs, just like what happened to Daphne. It'd be fitting, don't you think?"

"Astoria?"

"What?" she asked, brows high, lip curled. "What is it?"

Astoria almost looked angry. She was irritated that Hermione was sounding her good mood, but she couldn't see what Hermione was looking at. She had her back to it.

Hermione curled a hand around Astoria's shoulder, and very softly, very gently, she turned the blonde around, knowing that when she saw what Hermione could see, it was going to break her heart.

Hermione prayed that Astoria's heart wasn't as frail and breakable as her body.

Because a few feet away from where the witches stood, Romy's head was laying on the grass, but his body wasn't there.

From the clean cut, it was obvious that he'd been hit with a slicing curse. It must've hit him just before they made it past the Anti-Apparation wards, and it'd cut his head right off his little body.

Astoria ran to what was left of Romy and dropped to her hands and knees beside him. And then she screamed. She screamed and she cried. She cried as though her

range. Blaise went after Crouch. And Narcissa mauld and burned everyone within reach.

Quick as a flash, Theo spun on his heels and cast a slicing curse down the foot of ropes that bound Hermione to the post. "*Taaaaaaau!*" he grinned as the ropes slid onto the floor, taking a moment to do a little bow. "And now, for my next trick." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a spare wand. Hermione's wand. "For you, Madame."

"Thank you," Hermione said, breathing harshly as she accepted her wand. "You're in a good mood - given the circumstances."

"A good mo - *a good fucking mood?* Are you having a laugh?" Theo asked as he threw a curse over Hermione's shoulder to decapitate the poor Black Mask who'd been trying to stalk them. "Please, Malfoy just gave me permission to kill every Death Eater on this street. It's like Christmas day came early for me sweetheart."

When Hermione Apparated to Malfoy's left and started to fight alongside him, he didn't stop fighting, didn't stop throwing curses or killing Black Masks with much more finesse and grace than anyone she'd ever seen, but he did look down at her out the corner of his eye and smirk.

They were perfectly in sync with one another, fighting side by side, back-to-back, each equally defending the other whilst throwing their own deadly curses.

Every so often, the back of their non-wand holding hands would brush against one another, and each time it did, Hermione felt a jolt of electricity, felt an overwhelming urge to just... take his hand.

They were already a team, everything about the way they moved around one another and the way they fought said as much, but actually taking his hand, it would have solidified that. Showed him that she appreciated what he'd done for her, what he'd risked for her, and that she'd be there with him until the very end, no matter what happened.

They had no time to talk about what'd almost happened earlier, there was too much going on around them. If they weren't surrounded by people trying to kill them, there were a lot of things she'd have done.

She would have asked him why he'd saved her, why he'd chosen to spare her life even though it meant risking his family.

She would have slapped him across the face and told him that he should've just killed her. It certainly would have been easier to just kill her, it would have brought

And she only watched the group of Black Masks writhe in what should have been her pain for a moment before everything changed. Everyone sprang into action so fast; it was hard to register everything all at once.

When Crouch Jr screamed a command, the Black Masks that were left drew their wands.

When the Black Masks tried to take aim, Malfoy sharply swiped his arm through the air, and as he pointed in the Black Mask's direction, Narcissa followed, mouth already open and gathering fresh flames.

Everything that happened in those first few beats of Hermione's heart were all practical responses. All predictable, given the circumstances.

But when Bellatrix looked at Hermione with unimaginable fury and raised her wand, something else happened, something Hermione couldn't have predicted. As a curse left Bellatrix's wand, as a deep green light came barreling towards her, someone Apparated in front of Hermione and deflected the curse.

But the person who protected her wasn't who she expected.

It wasn't Malfoy who blocked the unforgivable curse.

Wasn't even Blaise.

It was Theo. He'd apparated in front of her just before the curse had hit and deflected it, redirected it so it took a Black Masks life rather than her own.

And although that simple action had saved Hermione's life, it might as well have been a death warrant for the rest of the group.

When Hermione looked up, she could see it in Bellatrix's expression. "*They're all in on it. They're all traitors.*" The words were so clear they might as well have been written on her face. "*They're all in on it. All of them.*" Bellatrix knew that now, every Death Eater standing there did.

And if Malfoy's action hadn't proved it, then Theo's certainly fucking did.

"Kill them all!" Bellatrix screeched. "Kill every last one of them! Show no mercy! I want their all heads!" Her words were a battle cry, might as well have been the horn that called all men to war, because as soon as she said them, all fucking hell broke loose.

As Bellatrix disappeared in a black cloud of Apparation, the Black Masks that were left went on the attack. Malfoy started decapitating every Black Mask within

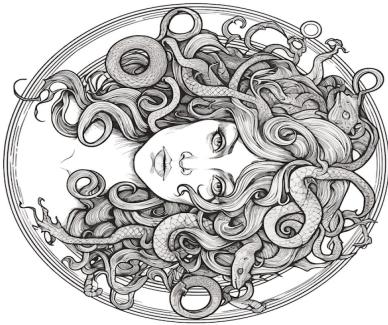
soul had been torn in two. She screamed as though someone had plunged a dagger through her heart.

And Hermione didn't know what to do. She didn't know how to comfort Astoria because there was no cure for heartbreak like this, no magic spell, no wave of her wand that could fix this pain.

Because Romy was dead, and Theo ...

Theo hadn't made it to the Apparation point.

# CHAPTER 56



## DAMSEL IN DISTRESS

Shock could make it appear that way - dissociation was a common response to trauma. Hermione supposed that she could have left her body, that her mind might've detached itself when the flames hit as a way to process what was happening to her. Or maybe her nerve endings had been completely disintegrated in the blast and her body simply couldn't register the pain anymore?

But if that were true, she would have at least felt the flames first, wouldn't she? There would have been a moment, at least a second of unimaginable agony before she went numb to it all. She was sure of it.

Something wasn't right. Something wasn't making sense.

Only a moment had passed when Hermione opened her eyes. She saw several things, each more confusing than the last.

The first thing her eyes chose to focus on was Bellatrix. She'd expected to find her laughing or smiling wickedly as she watched Hermione's skin slide off her bones – but she wasn't smiling. Wasn't looking at Hermione at all. She was staring off to the left with an equally horrified and furious expression on her face.

She noticed Bart' Crouch Jr next, shouting just as angrily, also at something to Hermione's left.

Then she saw Theo and Blaise, standing side by side. Blaise wore the same expression as Bellatrix while Theo was – for lack of a better word – cheering, smiling from ear to ear with his hands in the air as though he was watching a Quidditch match and his favourite team had just scored. Both of them were also looking to the left.

Hermione had never really been the centre of attention, nor had she wanted to be, but she thought at least all eyes would have been on her at her own execution? It wasn't until her eyes landed on Malfoy that she understood.

Because when he'd dropped his hand and given Narcissa her command, the dragon had obeyed. She *had* breathed a wall of fire that had disintegrated everyone and everything in its path.

But the target hadn't been Hermione; she doubted it ever had been.

Instead of burning her, Narcissa had twisted her jaw at the last second and obliterated the Death Eaters that were stood to the left of Malfoy.

He was out looking for Theo.

She'd asked Harry about it once - about what happened that time in the forest and if he saw anything before the resurrection stone had brought him back to life. He'd just laughed and said, "*You'd never believe me if I told you.*"

She'd wanted to know more after that - how could she *not*? Harry's answer had been so vague that it raised more questions than it answered. But she never found time to ask about it again, always let herself get distracted by something else in the war.

She was kicking herself for it now.

She supposed it was funny, if she really thought about it, that her life would end like this.

Even though her mother and father had known nothing about wizards and magic at the time, they'd been so proud when she'd received her acceptance letter to Hogwarts. A part of her smiled remembering how they'd taken her to the local library the next day and checked out every book that referenced witches or magic or spells, and spent the whole weekend reading together, preparing as best they could for her new life.

Almost everything they read turned out to be bullshit, most of it tales made up by old religious fools and muggles who knew nothing of the world they were writing about. The only thing that turned out to have a sliver of truth in it were the witch trials.

Hermione wondered what her parents would think if they could see her now; tied to a post, hands bound behind her back and about to be burned to death like one of the witches in those old textbooks.

The flames didn't hurt the way they always did in her nightmares. In fact, there wasn't any pain at all.

How ... odd. Had her dreams been lying to her all this time? Or was the pain perhaps so severe that she'd gone numb to it?

No, no that couldn't be true. She knew the fire was there. She'd felt the temperature rise. She'd heard the embers leave Narcissa's mouth and then ...

There *was* screaming. Lots of screaming, high, agonized wails that all melted together to form a tidal wave of pain - but they didn't sound hers. Didn't sound like her voice at all.

She'd only been at the farmhouse herself for half an hour when Malfoy, Narcissa and Blaise had arrived. Hermione had been waiting for them outside then too, and the look on Malfoy's face when he'd landed, Hermione doubted she'd ever forget it.

He'd looked so ... relieved, when he'd seen her waiting for him. The relief had been clear as day on his face, it was probably the first time Hermione had looked at him and thought he was genuinely happy.

He still thought that everything was going to be alright. Despite the hiccups in their plan, he still thought that today was a victory for them. He was still in the same bubble Hermione and Astoria had been in when they'd Apparated to the farmhouse, a false reality where everything was fine and everyone was safe. A reality where just once - just fucking once - they'd won and it hadn't cost the life of one of their friends to do it.

Hermione hated that she had to be the one to bring him back down to Earth, especially when all she really wanted to do was bury herself in the bubble with him.

The heart-breaking way Malfoy's expression had fallen when Hermione had started to relay what'd happened - fuck, that was probably going to be engraved in her memory forever too.

He'd been silent while she'd told him what had almost happened to Astoria and how she defended herself. Stayed deathly quiet when she'd told him how Romy and Theo had fought to keep the Death Eaters at bay when they'd run across the grounds, and how ... how brave Romy had fought, how all the little elf had wanted to do was protect Astoria.

Malfoy seemed to be calm at first, collecting all the information, silently turning it all over in his head. He was still as a marble statue, but there was a fire gathering in his eyes, each word Hermione said like a separate match being lit, each new story another coal thrown onto the fire and adding to his anger.

And there was only so much he would be able to take before he exploded.

When she'd told him what'd happened to Romy, he'd flinched. And when she'd told him that Theo ... still wasn't there, that he'd never Apparated to the safe house and she had no fucking idea where she was, he'd closed his eyes.

He'd taken a deep breath through his nose, and when he'd opened his eyes, the blue was gone, the fire was gone, and only cold grey remained. She'd half expected him to disappear right then and there - but he didn't, not straight away at least. He stayed with Hermione - completely mute - and helped her

levitate Blaise off Narcissa's back and get him inside the safehouse. He stayed until Blaise was in his new bed, and the moment Quinzel had started to work on him, he'd taken off again. Charged through the house without saying a word and disappeared in a loud crack of Apparation, and Hermione was left with nothing to do but pray that he'd make it back.

To begin with, she'd stayed with Astoria in what was supposed to be Theo's room and watched her sleep peacefully.

Hermione hadn't wanted to give her so many sedatives, but seeing Romy like that ... not knowing what'd happened to Theo ... well, Astoria had become so hysterical Quinzel didn't really have a choice.

She'd already lost her sister, she'd seen the decapitated head of her best friend lying on the grass, and the realisation that her brother-in-law might've already shared the same fate, it'd been too much for her.

And that was without knowing that Blaise had been seriously injured.

Astoria had cried and screamed so hard, and when her panic attack had become so severe that she'd struggled to breathe, Hermione agreed with Quinzel that it was safer for Astoria to be sedated, just for a few hours, at least until they were sure Blaise had made it through the worst.

Astoria wouldn't have been able to cope with the heartbreak of that, too. It was better if she didn't know what'd happened to him.

Hermione had only managed to watch Astoria for an hour before she couldn't sit still anymore. She'd tried to keep herself busy, occupied herself as much as possible and did everything she could to just not think.

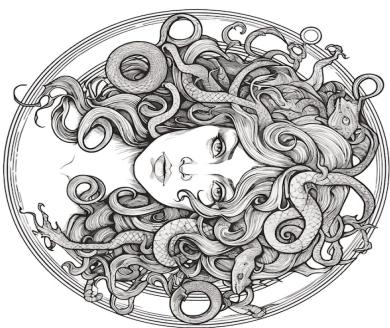
She'd checked all the wards around the farmhouse - three times - and she'd made a detailed list of every potion and supply they'd brought with them. She'd organised the potions in the storage cupboard, and then reorganised them half an hour later.

She'd thought about making herself and Quinzel a sandwich to pass the time. She wasn't hungry at all, doubted Quinzel was either, but at least it would've given her something to do.

She'd walked to the kitchen, trying to remember which cupboard Quinzel said she'd left the bread in, but when she'd gotten to the threshold, she'd frozen up and hadn't been able to make herself take that last step.

Because Romy was in there.

## CHAPTER 55



### HELL ON EARTH

#### **31st March**

*"When you die, your whole life flashes before your eyes."* That was what a lot of people said was supposed to happen. You take your last breath, your heart stops beating and then - what? A light? A tunnel? And when you come out the other side you see your whole life flash by before the screen fades to black forever?

Hermione guessed it was meant to be a comfort; a throw away sentence one generation passes onto the other to make a loved ones passing a little less painful - but after everything she'd seen and done during the war, it felt more like a punishment than a kindness.

As Malfoy raised his arm, Narcissa stood on her hind legs and reared her head back.

Hermione wouldn't watch him Occulde. She didn't want her last memory of him to be cold eyes and face like a dead marble statue. She wanted to remember him alive, not the fake version of himself that he showed the rest of the world.

So she closed her eyes for the last time, and felt a wave of searing heat come barrelling towards her.

If was probably wrong of Hermione to wrap his ... head ... up in a cloth and put it on the kitchen table, but the thought of him outside in the cold, in the dark and all alone, Hermione couldn't put words to it.

She couldn't leave Romy outside. She just couldn't. She wouldn't.

When Theo and Malfoy were back and the group was feeling ready, they'd discuss what they were going to do with Romy. They'd give him a proper burial and build him a beautiful grave. They'd say lovely things about him and cover his headstone with gifts that he'd like, but first, Hermione had needed to get him out of the cold, and seeing as the kitchen was his favourite place in the world ...

She shook the thought from her head and closed her eyes. She leaned back, took a deep breath, and tried to lose herself in the nicotine as it filled her lungs.

Although it was the dead of the night and the wind was howling around her, although the grass was damp underneath her legs and the rain had seeped into her clothes, Hermione didn't feel a chill. Didn't feel cold at all really.

She was numb, yes, tired, yes, on edge - fuck yes - but she wasn't cold, she might've been, if it weren't for the dragon at her back.

When Hermione had sank onto the damp grass outside the farmhouse while she waited for Malfoy to come home, Narcissa had joined her. She'd curled herself into a ball around Hermione, using her enormous body to shield her from the wind and ward off the cold.

Hermione had leaned against Narcissa's shoulder as a courtesy really, a way to return the affectionate gesture, but the feel of the dragon's warm scales against her shoulders and spine soon made her sink into the beast, and before too long, she was practically huddling against her.

It was oddly comforting, listening to the gentle - albeit, very loud - sound of Narcissa breathing behind her. Every time Narcissa exhaled, Hermione fell backwards slightly, and when the dragon inhaled and her lungs expanded, she was gently pushed forward. It felt like being rocked to sleep, and although her body was certainly tempted by that idea, Hermione refused to rest.

She had to stay awake. Malfoy might come back at any moment. He was going to need her help.

God only knew where Theo was. Voldemort was going to want to make him suffer immensely for his betrayal. He'd shown time and time again how he felt about

traitors, and after today's revelation, Daphne's execution was probably going to be child's play in comparison to the horrors Voldemort would have planned for Theo.

The events of the day had undoubtedly caused a ripple effect. They'd exposed themselves as the spies, but they'd also made Voldemort look a fool in front of his own army.

By now, there wouldn't have been a witch or wizard in the country who didn't know that Malfoy, Blaise and Theo had betrayed Voldemort. Gossip always did travel faster than real news, and the juicier the gossip, the faster it travelled.

The Dark Lord's favourite Demon Masks, and two of his most ruthless Gold Masks, were the spies. God, there probably hadn't been a scandal like it for years.

Hermione could almost hear the whispers. "What? The most powerful Dark Wizard of all time? And he couldn't even spot the spies in his ranks? Even though they were among the people closest to him? How is that possible?"

Even if no one had the balls to say it to Voldemort, everyone was laughing at him behind his back. They'd made him look weak. They'd made him look like an idiot.

In other circumstances, Hermione would have been fucking delighted. But not today, couldn't force herself to smile even if she'd wanted to.

Because Voldemort was, and always had been, a spiteful bastard who hungered for revenge, and now, he had just the target to take his bloodlust out on. Theo.

He would feel that he needed to restore that balance of power. He wasn't to let Theo go. There'd be no room for errors this time. No mistakes. Voldemort was going to want to make an example out of him, and use him to show all that no one betrayed the Dark Lord and lived to tell the tale.

That was, if he hadn't done so already.

Yes, wherever Voldemort was keeping Theo, he was going to be heavily guarded, and Malfoy would need her to help him fight his way through it all.

She needed to stay awake. He couldn't do this alone. She needed to be ready when he found out where Theo was being kept and came back to get her.

But he'd been gone for so long. If he was safe, if he knew where Theo was, he would have come back by now, wouldn't he?

No, no she couldn't think like that. Malfoy was still alive, that much was certain. If he weren't, then she'd be dead as well. Her heart would have stopped beating

Malfoy rolled his jaw and stared at her. He clenched his hands into fists, tight enough for Hermione to see the veins on the back of his hands while Bellatrix smiled triumphantly at her from over his shoulder.

Looking at him and his aunt, Hermione realised they looked the exact image of how she and Malfoy used to look when he put her under the Demon Hex, hovering close behind him, lips at his ear and ordering him to kill.

And when she met Draco's eyes again, a part of her wished there was a way Bellatrix would put him under the Demon Hex. It would make it easier, at least then he'd know that it wasn't his fault, at least then it might take away some of the pain.

"But I think we both knew how this was going to end for us ... Didn't we, Granger?"

And then, as though someone had poured a Calming Draught down her throat, all her hysteria vanished. She took a deep breath and relaxed against the post, accepting her fate.

Voldemort's regime was coming apart at the seams, because of her.

His army was almost completely destroyed, because of the work she'd done.

The Order were going to destroy another Horcrux, because she'd secured it for them.

She'd done her part. Harry and the rest of the Order could finish the job.

She could rest knowing that she'd done her part. That she'd done enough and she'd leave the world a better place.

And Malfoy had done enough too, and he shouldn't have had to suffer.

"It's okay," she mouthed to him. "Put them up."

He blinked at her, and his mouth fell open. He didn't understand.  
"Occlude," she mouthed. "Put up your walls."

"You don't need to feel bad about this," she wanted to tell him. "I don't want you to feel bad about this. You're doing the right thing. You're keeping them safe."

She watched his nostrils flare. Practically watched the last of his Occlumency walls fall and crumble to the ground and leave him completely open. His eyes .. Blue and clear enough that she felt as though she could see into his very fucking soul.

And she considered herself lucky that the last thing she'd ever see was so beautiful.

Hermione knew it.

And so did he.

"Go on, Draco," Bellatrix whispered, words as soft as silk despite the threat on her tongue. "Kill her. If you're not with her, it should be easy."

With a snap of his fingers, Malfoy summoned his dragon.

The crowd of Death Eaters parted as Narcissa stalked to her master's side. They formed two separate groups and stood behind Bellatrix and Malfoy. Hermione supposed they were doing it to get out of the range of Narcissa's fiery breath, but more likely just wanted a better seat to watch her execution.

Narcissa didn't wince when she saw Hermione tied to the post. The dragon didn't whimper, didn't show any signs of affection or familiarity that Hermione had grown accustomed to. No, no when she stood at Malfoy's side, she was a predator.

She growled menacingly and her mouth dropped open. Her fangs glowed in the reflective streetlights above, practically glittering like the edges of an executioner's axe.

It was just like in Blaise's vision.

When Narcissa moved closer, the temperature started to rise.

Sweat gathered on Hermione's temples and trickled down her neck. She could hear her heartbeat in her ears.

Her wrists stung as she tried to free them. Her skin burned. Her shoulders ached

"I'd say that I'm sorry Granger, that I didn't see this coming."

If anyone asked her, Hermione would have told them that her heart broke right then and there.

Everything was like it was in Blaise's vision. The dragon. The heat. The post. The ropes around her wrist, even the words, everything was the same, except Malfoy's voice.

That wasn't cold like it was in her nightmares. It wasn't emotionless, it wasn't dead, it was alive. But not alive in the way she wanted it to be, his voice was hoarse and rough, crackling. He sounded distraught.

He sounded ... just like he did when he'd held his dying mother in his arms.

when his had, and so, she found herself focusing on it. Didn't think she'd ever been so fucking invested in her own heartbeat as she was in those hours.

Each beat was a reminder that Draco was still alive, still out there somewhere. *Still alive*, she could practically hear the words echo in her head with each pump.

Ba-bump. Still alive.

Ba-bump. Still alive.

Still alive.

Still alive.

"He's alright," Hermione whispered, the almost expired cigarette bobbing in her mouth as she spoke.

She'd ran a hand across the base of Narcissa's neck each time she'd said those words, and each time, the dragon had whined and looked at Hermione, her huge red eyes filled with nothing but dread and anxiousness.

"He's alright," Hermione repeated. "He's alright."

Narcissa grumbled low in her throat, making the scales that were against Hermione's back vibrate like leaning against a large speaker.

When her cigarette was finished, Hermione threw it onto the pile she'd already made and pulled out a fresh one. Although Narcissa's wings were excellent windbreakers, she still used one hand to shield the bud while she used the tip of her wand to light it.

Cigarettes were usually just the thing to calm her nerves, but today they did nothing. She'd smoked so many, at least a dozen in quick succession, her throat felt fuzzy and sore and her voice sounded gruff, but she felt no better. They'd done nothing to calm her fucking nerves.

When the wind picked up, Hermione huddled closer to the dragon, and Narcissa cutted her body into a tighter ball around her, making the temperature rise just a few degrees more.

Hermione took a deep breath and pulled a strong drag of nicotine into her lungs. Over the top of Narcissa's tal spikes, she could see a little patch of grass with a few daisies poking up through the mud.

That would be a lovely place to bury Romy. Perhaps they could plant some potatoes in his grave. He'd like that. Love it, in fact.

She could just see him clapping his hands together excitedly, eyes wide and that innocent, child-like smile on his face. Could just hear his little voice, "Oh yes Miss, Romy would like that very much!" he would have probably said. "*The perfect place for Romy to rest. Thank you, Miss, but Miss should not have come to so much trouble for Romy. There are more important things to worry about, yes, much more important things.*"

She took another drag and held it in her lungs, trying to remember if Romy had had a favourite poem that she could carve into his headstone -

When Narcissa moved, and Hermione knew Malfoy must've been close. The dragon raised her gigantic head off the ground and stared toward the fields in front of her.

Hermione got to her feet and dropped her cigarette, and just as she crushed it under her boot, he appeared.

He looked angry. His Death Eater robes swarmed around him as he walked quickly towards her. Her eyes raked him over as he approached. No blood. No injuries that she could see.

"Did you find?" She didn't finish her sentence before he kissed her. Hands tight on either side of her face. Crushing his body against hers as tightly as he could and siphoning the words she'd meant to say into his lungs.

He was greedy in the way he kissed her. Forceful. His hands slid roughly down her back and squeezed her hips hard enough to make her gasp into his mouth. He swallowed that too. Took every part of her that he could take. Hands-on every inch of her that was within his reach.

"Malfoy."

"Shhh," he hissed against her mouth. "Just for a minute." He kissed her harder, forcing her mouth open with his tongue. "*Just a minute.*"

"What are you-"

She'd intended to pry herself away from him. They didn't have time for this. Theo was missing. Theo was missing and they needed to find him. She knew that, but her arms didn't seem to get the message. They didn't want to push him away. Instead, they only pulled him closer. Only snaked around his neck and dragged his face to hers.

Crouch's head snapped to the left to stare at Bellatrix, like he couldn't believe what he'd just heard.

Blaise's eyes flickered between both the Demon Masks.

Theo stared at Malfoy and gripped his wand tighter, waiting for instructions.

If Malfoy was affected by what Bellatrix had said, it didn't show on his face. He hardly reacted at all. He didn't even glance at Hermione, just scoffed coldly and shook his head.

"Oh you'd love that, wouldn't you?" he hissed. "She's the Dark Lord's favourite weapon and you want me to kill her? I know it tears you apart that he favours me over you, but Salazar, I didn't think you'd sink so low as to try and manipulate me into killing his favourite weapon?"

"That may have been true once, but she's useless to us now. She's breaking out of the Demon Hex all the time, I've seen it myself!" Bellatrix flashed her teeth. "You said that you could keep her under control, but look what's happened today. She's broken out of the Demon Hex, right under your nose, and she's got the medallion and given it to the Order."

Malfoy's nostrils flared. He clenched his jaw. The façade was falling, Hermione could see it. He knew Bellatrix had him. Could see the other Death Eaters nodding, could hear them mumbling their agreements under their breath.

"She's useless to us now," Bellatrix repeated, voice dropping to a purr. "A weapon is only useful when it's under control, and she's not under your control, Dracc. Not anymore."

Bellatrix knew what she was doing. She stalked behind Malfoy and stood on the very tips of her toes to whisper in his ear. She said something Hermione couldn't hear, and when Bellatrix looked at Hermione from over his shoulder, Malfoy's eyes followed.

Blue. His eyes were almost completely blue. His Occlumency was crumbling, and Hermione felt each new fissure in his walls as if it were a fresh break in her own heart.

This was it. There would be no coming back from this. He had to kill her, it was the only way. If he didn't, he would expose himself and then his entire family would be murdered in the most public and inhumane ways possible.

He had to kill her.

"Is there another joke you want to make, Nott?" Crouch kept the one blade engraved in Theo's thigh and pressed the other against his throat. "Or have your balls dropped off?"

It might have seemed stupid of Theo to continue to get under Crouch's skin.

Idiotic. Certainly wasn't something that Malfoy or Granger would have done. They would've kept their mouths shut and waited this out.

But the way Theo saw it, one of two things was going to happen.

Option one: Malfoy or Granger - although it was more likely to be both, considering that they were joined at the hip most of the time, soppy bastards - were going to come and save him.

Or option two: Crouch was going to get into his head, steal his memories, and then run straight to Voldemort and tell him where all the safe houses were. And then Malfoy break Theo out, and if he had to put her life on the line to save Theo ...

Theo wouldn't have saved himself either. He wasn't worth it, already living on borrowed time.

It seemed much more likely than option one was his future. If it was, he needed to stall Crouch for as long as possible, but he might as well have a little fun doing it, because was he fuck going out without at least having a laugh first.

"Another ... knife?" Theo taunted, wiggling his brows towards the blade at his throat. "And it's sterling silver? ... Ooooooooh, I hear they're expensive... Has - eughhhh - has someone had a pay rise? Don't be shy ... you can tell me... just ... exactly how much do you get paid?"

Another sharp pain twisted through Theo when Crouch roughly pulled the dagger out of his leg. He'd done it to show he was the one in control - and to hurt Theo, obviously - but Theo just laughed.

"Crouch! No! What are ... you doing? I was .. just starting to ... get wet."

With a loud huff, Crouch whirled around and stormed back into the shadows. Theo could hear him rustling about furiously, picking things up and then slamming them back down on whatever was hidden.

"*Crouchy* ..." Theo sang, although it didn't sound nearly as musical as he wanted it to because, well, he was bleeding heavily and in a lot of pain. "*Come on ... getting bored over hereee. I'm losing my torture hard on.*"

The rustling got louder. Crouch dropped something and muttered a string of curses through gritted teeth.

Theo smiled to himself in the darkness. He was starting to feel all tingly. Not surprising considering the amount of blood he'd already lost. His head felt nice and heavy.

"Girls!" Crouch screamed. "Get in here now!"

"Oh dear ... are we having some performance issues?" Theo's voice was weak. Every breath he took was slow and laboured. It was really ruining the delivery of his jokes. "Having to ask ... the ginks for help now? Tsk tsk tsk, what will ... the Voldemortie the boldie think?"

"Shut up you insolate..."

"Can't even torture ... without the help of his little dollies."

"I will gut you."

"What are they going to do? ... Hold your hair back while you slap me about a bit?"

"...pull your teeth out one by one..."

"Dab your clothes when they get covered in my blood? Oh dear, is Crouchy afraid of a little blood? Oh deary me. *Oh poor, pampered little Crouchy*..."

"ENOUGH!" Just as Crouch's voice boomed through the silence, a red curse lit

up the dark wine cellar.

The hex hurt like a bitch. Felt quite literally like someone had dropped a muggle car on his chest. It made his teeth feel like they were rattling inside his jaw. Felt like it at least broke a few ribs.

The took a deep breath, testing his theory - Yep. Definitely broke a rib. Maybe two. Three.

"You always were a little swine, Nott." Crouch's voice was a sneer even though he was smiling. He stepped back into the light of the cellar, wand in one hand, and a small axe in the other. "But you were never as annoying as that little wife of yours. I wonder ..." he held the axe up to the light and examined it, "- if you'll scream as loudly as she did when we executed her?"

Theo straightened in his chair. The pain in his body started to bubble over in anger.

Oh, that was how Crouch wanted to play, was it?

“She always thought she was better than me.”

“Because she was,” Theo said. He didn’t know if Crouch heard, he spoke over him like he didn’t.

“She always had a plan that was better than mine at the meetings. She always fought harder. Killed more. Slaughtered more elegantly. The Dark Lord fawned over her. Thought she was the future. The best soldier he ever had, despite me being the one who brought him back into power,” Crouch scoffed bitterly and shook his head. “He adored Daphne. But not me. I hated her. She always went out of her way to belittle me in front of the others.”

Crouch wasn’t lying. Daph could be a nasty cow when she didn’t like someone, and she really, *really* didn’t like Crouch. She hated everything about him. Always had. Daph didn’t pull her punches when it came to Crouch. She told him that she disapproved of his dolls and how slimy she thought he was. She went out of her way in meetings to make him look small and show just how flawed his plans were.

Daph wasn’t as clever as Crouch was, but she had a way with people. Her plans might not have strategically been the best, but the way she delivered them to the rest of the group, the way she spoke, she just pulled people in. Enthralled them in her vision. It was the Greengrass charm, and it meant that Crouch was always left in the dust.

“I volunteered for her execution you know. When she was captured,” Crouch said, talking as though he was only speaking to himself, “I wanted to be the one who butchered her. I wanted to be the one who cracked her petite ribcage and pulled her lovely skin away from the bones.”

Oh if only Theo had his wand. If he had his fucking wand the things he would do to Crouch.

“I wanted so badly to kill her.” Crouch smiled and closed the distance between him and Theo. “But plans change, but I smile each night knowing that she got what was coming to her.” Crouch hovered the blade over Theo’s stomach. It glittered in the candlelight. “just like you will get what’s coming to you.”

It shouldn’t really have bothered him. Wasn’t like he had a plan. He was tied to a chair, shirtless, wandless, and at the mercy of the man he’d done nothing but wind up for years.

Aaaaand who was walking back towards him with even bigger knives in his hands. Oh goodie. Now they were getting somewhere.

“Ooooooh, dose are *hiiiiing* knives. Compensating for something, are we?”

Crouch’s face lit up with fury when Theo wiggled his eyebrows and looked - rather suggestively - at Crouch’s crotch.

Hah. Crouch’s crotch. That was funny. Had a nice little ring to it. “You know what they say about men who use big knives? Oh dear, didn’t realise you were a little ... you know .. lacking in that particular department. Don’t worry though mate, I’m sure you make up for it in ... other ... areas?” Theo sighed, relaxing against his chair. “No? Oh dear. It’s why I’ve always liked to stick to the little itty-bitty daggers myself. All secure, me. Never had any complaints.”

Crouch stepped forward and let the blade rest against Theo’s throat. “Silence, boy! You’d be wise not to test me-”

“Eughhhhh ‘ere we fuckin’ go again!” Theo groaned and dropped his head back so he could stare at the ceiling again. “Can you hear yourself! Do you know what you sound like? If I were you I would - aghhhhhhhh!”

Only sneaky bastards stabbed men while they were in the middle of giving advice. The blade cut through Theo’s left thigh like it was nothing. He felt a sharp pain. He felt his muscles tear as they were shredded by the silver and felt his blood warm his thigh.

Theo stared up at Crouch as his breath left him in quick, sharp little pants. “Oh come on ... Crouchy boy ... where did you ... go to torture school?” Though the pain was almost blinding, he managed a smile. “You can’t just ... go right in for it ... where’s the ... suspense? Where’s ... where’s the art? You can do ... better than that ... surely?”

Crouch’s lip quivered in anger. His eyes were wide and seething. He looked like an angry bull in the ring with a matador.

Crouch rotated his wrist and the blade followed, slowly turning, severing more muscles -

Theo jerked in his chair but managed to keep his scream of pain to a low hiss.

Yep, he was definitely putting on a voice.

“-insignificant worm-”

Who even talked like that?

“- swine of a man-”

The bloke sounded like he was reading from a bad script.

“You call yourself a Death Eater? You aren’t even worthy to lick the boots of my master!”

A fucking awful script at that.

“- vermin! Would cut you like a fish! Would throttle-”

Even PORN had better dialogue than Crouch.

“Are you even listening to me?!”

“Hm?” Theo hummed, tilting his head to the side and staring up at Crouch innocently. “Whatcha say, Crouchy baby?!”

*Aaaaaand* there he went again. Off on another rant. Screaming and shouting. Foaming at the mouth like a rabid dog.

It was quite funny to watch the way his eyes bulged out of his head like a cartoon character, or the way the vein in his forehead looked like it might pop out and smack Theo in the face.

He wished Daph could see it. She’d piss herself laughing. She used to like getting under Crouch’s skin even more than Theo did.

How - in the actual fuckety fuck fuck - had he managed to find himself here? The whole thing was a shit show. A great big, ballsing fucking shit show all cramped into a piss poor wine cellar/ makeshift torture chamber dungeon thingymajig.

And Crouch was walking back into the shadows and ... bloody Nora, was he *still* talking? Did this man ever shut up?!

Theo’s head rolled against the back of the chair he was tied to. He stared at the ceiling, quietly humming the Muggle Christmas song he’d soiled with Crouch’s name. He tried to tap his foot to the beat, but the clever cunt had secured ropes around his ankles too, preventing him from moving an inch.

That one had warned Astoria that Crouch had slipped something in her drink when they were alone together, and Theo couldn’t help but smile warmly at her.

“The fun is just getting started. Chester,” Crouch instructed. “Go into the spare room in the left-wing. In there, you’ll find a large wooden box with an axe engraved on it. It has all the tools we’ll need for afternoon. Bring it to me.”

Fuck it - Theo didn’t even need his wand. One good punch. That was all he needed. One good right hook right across Crouch’s face. Reckoned he could at least break his nose. Or knock a tooth out.

Although it fucking hurt his ribs to do it, Theo forced himself/laughed in Crouch’s face. “What else do you think you can do to me?” he huffed, struggling to get the words out through the pain. “There’s nothing you can do ... that hasn’t already been done ... you already took the only thing that ever mattered to me. So do what you need to do .. Hack away at me, carve my chest open and have a look inside if you want ... but you’ll find nothing there ... I’ve not had a heart for a long time, not since you killed it.”

“Oh, believe me, Theodore. If there’s one thing I know how to do, it’s how to take a person’s worst fear, and make them live it.” There was a dangerous glint in Crouch’s eyes. “I’ve done it to you once before, when I suggested that you be made to watch your lovely wife’s execution. What makes you think I can’t do it again?”

Crouch looked like he was about to say something else - but a loud creaking sound caught his attention.

Both men turned towards the doorway - three girls stood there.

The Dolls were there, the same ones that Crouch had taken to the last few Galas, his current favourites, the flavours of the month, as it were.

“Girls,” Crouch purred. “My assistants for the afternoon. How lovely that you’ve joined us this afternoon.”

Tori had told Theo their names - the names Crouch had given them, anyway.

Chester - the red-haired one who was dressed in gold - smiled sweetly, like Crouch was her favourite person in the world.

The brunette who wore black - looked at the floor and seemed to be shaking.

And then there was the blonde. The one who wore a white dress and gold jewellery. The one who stared at Crouch with hatred in her eyes. The one who’d helped his sister-in-law.

The girl smiled and then disappeared back up the stairs.

"Kitten - go and get me a bottle of wine. I feel I'll be in the mood to celebrate rather soon," Grouch said, giving Theo a slimy, sadistic sort of smile.

Theo struggled, but moved his wrist enough with his limited movement to give Grouch the middle finger.

Kitten nodded - eyes still on the floor - and followed Chester upstairs.

"And Angel, my darling." Grouch smiled. "My beautiful, perfect Angel."

Angel's eyes narrowed slightly.

"Be a dear and wheel this table over to him," Grouch said, pointing to something in the shadows, "and then check his restraints. We don't want him running off before the fun starts now, do we?"

Unlike the other two, Angel didn't move. She stayed firmly in the spot and glared at Grouch like she wished he'd burst into flames. In fairness, she probably did. Theo wondered if she'd been a witch before she became a Doll.

The girl clearly had balls. Theo liked her.

"Angel," Grouch's voice started to twist into a growl. "Don't be silly now. You know I don't like it when you play games."

Angel's fingers twitched. She exhaled slowly through her nose, but still, she didn't move.

Theo liked her even more.

Grouch tilted his head to the side, clearly annoyed, but it wasn't until he started to raise his wand that Angel followed his instructions. Her arm disappeared into the shadows to pull out a silver trolley that held dozens of knives and weapons, and after a brief glare at Grouch, she wheeled it to Theo's side.

"Well, it's all very tense in here, isn't it?" Theo asked, casual, relaxed. "How's about a little joke to lighten the mood?"

Angel kelt down in front of Theo and checked the ropes that bound his ankles to the legs of the chair. Her eyes were fixed on her work, not looking at him at all.

"What did the late tomato say to the other tomatoes?"

Grouch didn't acknowledge that Theo had spoken. Angel gave the rope on his left ankle a sharp tug.

Bastard ropes and bastard chair.

Bastard ropes tying him to the bastard chair.

Could be worse, he supposed. At Least Grouch hadn't cast a silencing charm on him. Or gagged him. If he couldn't sing, how else was he supposed to enjoy himself in this shit hole?

"Crouchy baby, a seven-inch knife would do, or six, I'll wait up for you mate, so hurry up and gut me tonight!"

The sound of metal rubbing together filled the small space. Two knives, or maybe machete's - if he was lucky - were being scraped against another, each being used as a tool to sharpen the other.

"Ooooooh, the Dark Lord is gonna be pissed, but think of all the fun you'd have if the Dementors gave me the kiss!"

Barry Crouch Jr came out of the shadows and walked slowly towards Theo, a sharp, glittering knife in each of his hands. He stopped when he was standing in front of Theo and smiled down at him.

And all Theo could think as he watched Grouch twirl the knives in his hand like they were bloody batons, was that he hoped to God or Merlin or whatever made-up deity was in the clouds - that he never, ever, ever, EVER, looked that fucking stupid when he tortured someone.

"Now," Jr said slowly.

Wait, was he putting on a voice? Theo was sure Grouch's voice wasn't usually that deep and brassy.

"Let's begin, shall we?"

Theo burst into a fit of laughter. He didn't try to keep it in. His body wanted to curl forward as loud cackles bubbled in his chest and throat, but the ropes around his torso prevented him from moving much.

"I'm - I'm sorry - " he managed to joke out between fits of laughter. "I tried to keep it in - I really tried - but mate - *mate!* Do you have any idea how fucking ridiculous you look right now?! Oh my ... " His cheeks started to hurt, he could hardly breathe from laughing, but just when he started to calm down, one look at Grouch's face set him off again. "What's ... happened to your voice? Did you ... smoke a whole pack of ciggy's before -"

"Enough!" Grouch bellowed. "I've heard enough of this! You pathetic -"

“Don’t worry, I’ll ketchup”

Again, Theo didn’t hear any laughter when he delivered the punchline to his favourite joke, but it wasn’t a total failure. Angel was laughing, or rather, she would have been if Crouch hadn’t taken her voice away with magic.

Her head was down and she was looking away from him, but her shoulders were shaking with silent laughter. He’d finally found someone who liked his tomato joke.

Praise Salazar!

“You like that one, sweetheart?”

Angel’s face flickered up and her blue eyes met his. She gave a small smile and nodded.

Theo grinned back at her mischievously. “Give me a minute. Let me think of another one ..”



## CLICK, CLICK, CLICK

He’d probably only get one more joke in before Crouch silenced him again, so he better make it a cracker. He watched Angel as he started to wrack his brain for a good punchline.

She was still smiling when she tugged the rope around his right wrist, but when she went to check his left - her smile dropped and she froze. A confused look flashed across her face. Her brows knitted together and her mouth twisted at the sides, and when Theo followed the direction of her eyes, he found her staring at the tattoo on the back of his hand. His and Daph’s tattoo.

Chester and Kitten returned to the wine cellar having completed their tasks. Kitten kept her eyes on the floor and held the bottle of wine out in front of her. Crouch removed the cork with a flick of his wrist and instructed her to pour him a glass.

Angel still stared at Theo’s tattoo.

After Crouch took the first sip of the red wine Kitten had poured him, he waved his hand and instructed Chester to put the large box she’d brought on the floor next to Theo - and he was too busy groping Kitten to see that Angel hadn’t moved in almost a minute.

“Been an awful bad boy, Crouchy baby, so hurry up and gut me tonight!”  
Theo didn’t bother to look around, it wouldn’t have done much good. He couldn’t see, and it wasn’t like he could fucking run away from whatever it was anyway.

*31st March*

“Ooooooooooh, Crouchy baby, just slip a knife under my ribs, for me!”

There was a movement to his left, a stirring in the shadows of the dimly lit basement he was being kept in.

“Been an awful bad boy, Crouchy baby, so hurry up and gut me tonight!”  
Theo didn’t bother to look around, it wouldn’t have done much good. He couldn’t see, and it wasn’t like he could fucking run away from whatever it was anyway.

Bastard ropes.

What the fuck had made her react that way? She'd seen tattoos before. The Dark Mark was branded on Crouch's forearm just like it was everyone else's. So what was it about his tattoo that made her react that way?

Maybe she was in an anti-tattoo cult or something back in the day?

Chester flipped open the wooden box and started to pull out torture devices and lay them on the table.

Angel stood up and her eyes went back to Theo's hand. She reached to her right - still staring at his tattoo - and blinding tapped the air until she caught Chester's shoulder. She tapped her repeatedly, getting a little rougher each time until she was almost smacking Chester.

Chester looked up from the table with an irritated expression. She jerked out of Angel's hold - looked like she was just about to clock her for being so rough - but when she saw that Angel wasn't looking at her. Her scowl softened. She followed Angel's line of sight ...

And just like the other girls had, Chester's eyes widened when she saw the back of Theo's hand.

What was wrong with his tattoo? Were they seeing something that he wasn't? He was dying to ask, but when the girls turned around to look briefly at Crouch, he got the impression that he should keep his mouth shut and see how this played out.

A few things happened when the girls faced each other again. They shared a look. They glanced at Theo, then back at each other. Chester nodded once, replaced her grimace with a fake smile, and then made her way to Crouch.

The redhead tore Crouch away from Kitten and pushed herself into his arms. She wrapped her pale arms around Crouch's waist and hugged him against her, nuzzling her face into his neck.

Kitten, on the other hand, sobbed silently and backed away until she was pressed against the wall.

"Oh hello Pumpkin," Crouch smiled, completely at Chester's mercy, completely believing the part she was playing. "What's the matter? Jealous that I'm not giving you all my attention?"

"See that?" she asked, quirking a brow. "I could have just killed you then." As she spoke, sparks started to crackle at her wand, not enough to hurt him, but enough for him to feel it, enough to know that the threat was real.

He hissed quietly when she repeated the spell and little blue embers licked across his throat.

"And again, dead. Dead because I killed you. Dead because I'm just as lethal as you are. If you go in there alone, you'll die, but if we go in there together - if we have each other's backs, then everyone on Crouch's side will die. We'll kill them together - all of them."

He didn't say a word, just stared up at her and watched her through hooded eyes.

"You need me," she said. "You can't save Theo without me."

Although his jaw was tight, although there was a furious expression on his face, he didn't try and throw her off. Instead, moving just as slowly as she had, his hands snaked up her leg and came to rest on her hips.

"Don't you?" Hermione repeated, digging the tip of her wand a little harder into his skin.

"Yes," he said, muttered it through gritted teeth. "I need you."

"You can't save Theo without me, can you?" she repeated the spell, and his words were almost lost in the sharp intake of breath he took.

"No." He swallowed. "I can't."

Although they were in a rush, she couldn't help but take a few extra seconds for herself. It was, and always had been, thrilling to get the upper hand on him. Triumph buzzed in her veins, and as she smirked down at him, she couldn't help herself.

"Good boy," she whispered.

He closed his eyes and shook his head. A sly little smile peeled across his lips as he made a noise in the back of his throat. "You're such a stubborn little cunt."

"I thought you liked that about me?"

His eyes opened when she started to slowly drag her wand down his neck. His throat bobbed as she pressed her wand against it. He watched the movement, looked almost fascinated by it, and when she stopped at his collarbone, his eyes met hers again. "Not as much as I like the way you look when you're threatening me."

Sensing she wasn't getting anywhere, she changed tactic. "Werent you the one who said that the Black Masks feared me?" she asked, cutting him off. "That I was so powerful and ruthless on the battlefield that they were afraid of me?"

Again, he scoffed and rolled his tongue on the inside of his cheek. "That's hardly relevant."

"I'd say it's highly relevant! What makes you think that you can do this without me? I'm just as strong a witch as you are a wizard!"

He clenched his hands into fists, but he didn't argue with her.

"I'm just as ruthless as you are when I need to be. I'm just as good at killing as you are. Going in there without support is stupid and reckless. You know spells that I don't, and I know battle techniques that you don't. I know it's dangerous and I know you don't want me to die, but don't risk Theo's life for mine. If we do this together, we can save him. If we do this together, no one else has to die today."

Well, apart from Grouch, and whoever was unlucky enough to help him, but she didn't say that part aloud.

He couldn't do this without her. They were both formidable alone, but together? They'd already proven twice how lethal they would be when they worked as a team.

Hope started to swell in her chest. She thought she was getting through to him - but then she saw the way his eyes discreetly darted to her wrists, and her anger spiked all the more. Because although he was listening to her, he wasn't really *listening to her*. He was assessing, trying to figure out which spells would be best to bind her with so he could make her stay here and away from the fight.

And if he wasn't going to listen her, then she'd fucking make him.

Acting on instinct - or maybe Gryffindor impulse would be a better description - she took out her wand. Hermione whirled it sharply in front of her in a crescent moon motion, and all at once, Malfoy fell to the floor with a loud thud as though someone had swept his legs out from under him.

Whilst on his back, he reached for his wand, but Hermione disarmed him before he had the opportunity to even think of a jinx.

He stared up at her, stunned and silent, brooding fury hanging at the edges of his eyes. He watched as she stood over him, glaring down at him like he'd done to her so many times, and then very slowly, she sank down so she was straddling over him, legs on either side of his rib cage and the tip of her wand right under his pale chin.

Chester nodded and started peppering kisses up his neck, and with Grouch fully distracted, Angel sipped out of the cellar and closed the door behind her without being detected.

Astoria had told Theo that the redhead was a good actress, and she hadn't been fucking lying. Chester was very believable. When she kissed Grouch, even Theo couldn't see an ounce of hate in her eyes. She loved like a loved up teenager, not someone who was up to something.

A few minutes passed by like, Kitten sobbing against the wall and Chester showering Grouch with affection, and then Theo heard it.

Click. Click. Click.

High heels against cobbled floor.

Click. Click. Click.

High heels that were definitely coming down the cellar steps.

Click. Click. Click.

Was Angel coming back already? She sounded like she was in a rush. She hadn't been gone very long.

Click. Click.

The door sprang open but it wasn't Angel who walked into the wine cellar. It was Mustang.

Theo felt guilty every time he saw her. Ashamed. He shouldn't feel like that about another woman. He was already taken. His heart, although it'd stopped beating years ago, already belonged to someone else. It shouldn't skip a beat for someone else, and yet every time he saw her, it did.

She looked beautiful. She always did. Her wavy black hair trailed all the way down her back and the one-shoulder silk dress she wore matched her red lipstick perfectly.

She found him as soon as she walked into the room. Her piercing green eyes pinned him in place the moment they landed on him. She looked furious. Her lip quivered in anger. The gold earrings she was wearing seemed to be shaking with rage.

Grouch may not have heard Angel leave, but he heard Mustang arrive.

"Why hello, beautiful," Grouch said, pushing Chester out of his arms. "I wondered how long it would take for you to find us."

Angel walked sheepishly into the room behind Mustang. She must have gone to get her, but why, Theo hadn't a clue.

Mustang stormed towards Crouch. Her gold stilettos clicked loudly off the walls with each step. She picked something up from the table and lunged at Crouch.

Theo heard Crouch hiss -

He thought she'd gutted him -  
He thought she'd saved him -

But then Crouch threw the girl into the wall and pinned her there by her throat. The knife she'd tried to stab him with fell to the floor.

Theo fought his restraints as he watched Mustang try and fight Crouch off. Her mouth was open in a silent scream, blind fury raged in her eyes. Her legs thrashed and she tried to claw at him with her nails, but Crouch just pinned her more tightly against the wall.

Angel and Chester both backed away, hovering protectively in front of Kitten.

"Almost got me again, darling," Crouch purred, ignoring the girl as she fought him with everything she had. "My, my, my, I've not seen you this worked up in ages. If I'd known this would light a fire in you," he leaned in and growled loudly in her ear, "I'd of gone after the boy years ago."

Kitten grabbed Chester and sobbed silently into her neck.

Angel eyed the table of weapons next to Theo and took a step towards it.

"Let her go!" Theo found himself shouting, didn't know why. He didn't know this girl. He didn't owe her anything. He shouldn't put his neck out to help her, and yet, for some fucking reason, that ache was back in his chest. That weird feeling he only ever felt when she was near. "Crouch!"

Mustang might have been on the thin side, but she was certainly scrappy. Crouch didn't seem to feel most of her kicks and punches, but when she got him with a right hook on the nose, he fucking lost it.

Crouch jabbed his wand against Mustang's shoulder and yellow sparks shot out the end of it.

Theo didn't know what was worse; the look on the Mustang's face as she screamed in pain or that when she did, no sound came out.

doesn't change my mind. Listen to me very carefully Granger, because I'm only going to say this one more time." He leaned in closer, towering over her, his breath warming her face. "You're. Not. Fucking. Coming."

"No, you listen to me, Draco Malfoy!" She slapped his hands away from her face and glared up at him. "I'm not some damsel in distress that you need to save every two minutes! I can help you! Crouch is going to have that place so heavily guarded it'll be like a fortress! We have a much better chance of rescuing Theo if we work together!"

"I don't give a fuck what Crouch has got hiding in those dusty old walls of his! He could have a Basilisk, an angry Phoenix, he could have a whole bloody herd of Acromantula's scuttling away in there, it doesn't change the fact that you are staying here where you're safe."

"I don't need your permission to go!" Hermione hissed, glaring up at him. "If you leave, I'll just follow you."

"You don't where Crouch's manor is?"

"Then I'll find it!"

He laughed loudly, completely fake, completely over the top. Her blood boiled at the sound of it. "What are you going to do?! Pull a Black Mask aside and ask for directions?!"

"Narcissa knows where it is! She'll show me the way!"

The dragon lifted her head off the ground and hummed softly in what sounded an awful lot like agreement.

"No, she will not!" Malfoy spat. "She won't show you anything if I tell her not to!"

Narcissa huffed and turned away from the bickering pair. The way she plopped her head back on the grass and huffed a second time reminded Hermione an awful lot of a toddler having a stroop.

"I don't care what you say, I'm coming with you! I'm a soldier, this is what I'm good at!"

"Really?" he scoffed coldly. "I thought soldiers were meant to be great at following orders? Did you miss the training on that day? Is that why you're such a stubborn cunt?!"

the elves, they are the family I chose. They were the only family I had left after my parents died.”

The ache in Hermione's chest only grew. She knew the feeling well. She didn't have any blood relations left either. She didn't have cousins or brothers or sisters. Her only blood had been her mother and father and they were both dead.

She'd been all alone, just like him, and she too, had sought the comfort of family in others. Harry, Ginny, the war might've put a strain on her relationship with them, but they were her family. Their children were her family, her nieces and nephews despite not sharing a single drop of familiar blood between them.

Just like Malfoy had with his. Astoria and Daphne were his sisters. Blaise and Theo were his brothers. It didn't matter that they didn't share blood. What purpose did blood serve anyway? Hermione had seen enough of it spilt on the floor throughout the war to know that blood didn't make a family. You couldn't pick out your brother's blood from a strangers when it was running down a cobbled street. No, blood didn't make a family. Something else did.

“And then Daphne died and I lost a sister. And now Rony, and possibly Theo. I refuse to lose anyone else. I fucking refuse.”

Hermione let out a shallow breath and looked to Narcissa, simply because she didn't know where else to look. The dragon was watching them intently, lying on the grass with her wings tucked at her sides. “You're going to lose Theo too if you don't let me help you.”

Suddenly, his hands were back on either side of her face. He gripped her tightly and tipped her head back so she had to look into his eyes. “That isn't an option. Theo is too important to me to lose,” he said, voice a snarl, teeth bared. “Blaise is too important to me. Astoria is too important to me. *But you,*” his grip tightened, he shook her face slightly, making sure he had her full attention, “*you* are too important to me to lose. That is why you can't come. That is why you need to fucking stay here.”

“Draco,” she hushed, and his eyes softened a little at the sound of his name. “I understand that you're hurt, I understand that you don't want to lose anyone else, but you can't do this without me. And it's not your decision to make. We're in this together, it's the only way everyone survives. *‘It'll Death do us part’*, remember?”

The softness in his eyes vanished as quickly as it had appeared, along with the velvety tone of his voice. “You can make it sound as poetic as you want, but it

Her mouth twisted open and her eyes squeezed shut, and when Grouch let her go, she slid down the wall and onto a heap on the floor. She was having trouble breathing. She was screaming in pain, but all Theo could hear was Grouch's cruel laughter and the roaring of blood in his own ears.

Whatever spell Grouch had used on her must have weakened the bones in her arm, because when Mustang lunged for the knife again, her arm gave out and folded in on itself like something out of a nightmare.

Mustang screamed silently into the cellar floor. She curled into the foetal position and clutched her disfigured arm, and Crouch just smiled at her. When he kicked her in the ribs, Angel and Chester exchanged terrified looks, and when he kicked her a second time, Kitten started to shake violently.

“You almost got me that time,” Grouch kicked her again, her broken arm flailing grotesquely as she tried to shield herself. “You thought you were onto something there, didn't you!” Another kick. “But when will you learn?!” And another, “No matter how many times you try.” And another. “You'll never be able to outsmart me!” Fuck, how many more could the girl take? “You'll never be able to overpower me! You're stuck here! You're stuck here until I decide to end your miserable life!”

“Crouch, pack it in!” Theo hissed, straining in his chair. “She's had enough.” Angel started to walk towards the table of weapons. She outstretched her hand and picked up a small dagger -

Grouch whirled around and aimed his wand at her. A threatening green light sparked at the end. “Drop it.”

Angel did as she told, and as the weapon fell to the floor, Kitten grabbed her elbow and pulled her back into the fold.

Crouch eyed the Dolls, but he didn't seem angry with Angel - just more ... surprised, like he hadn't expected her to be so bold. Whether Angel would have actually attacked him was up for debate, but at least it'd been distraction enough to make Grouch stop kicking Mustang.

But he hadn't forgotten about her completely.

After a moment, he lowered his wand but then beat down and picked the knife up off the floor.

“You went for the one with the crooked edges, I see.” Grouch's voice was soft and velvety smooth. He was tormenting her, and she didn't even have a voice to go back at him with. “I should have guessed you'd go for this one. Wanted to make

“sure you could carve out my heart this time, didn’t you? I know, I have an idea.”

Crouch grabbed a fistful of Mustang’s hair and yanked her head off the ground. Blood was dripping from her mouth. “Let’s play a game. How’s about, for each time you’ve stabbed me over the years, I stab him.”

Well, that certainly took a fucking turn.

Mustang’s emerald green eyes widened with fear. ‘No,’ she mouthed silently, shaking her head. ‘No.’

“I’ll tell you what, I’ll do one better,” Crouch said. “I’ll even stab him in the same places. That’ll make things more interesting.”

When he stood up, Mustang lunged for him again, but Crouch wasn’t having it this time. Swift as a cat, he turned and plunged the knife straight into her stomach. The girl spluttered silently. She clutched her stomach and wailed, but again, not a fucking sound escaped her lips.

As she clutched her abdomen and tried to keep from bleeding out, Crouch roughly propped her up against the wall and angled her to face Theo. And once he was sure the Mustang had a good seat for the show, he walked back over to Theo and stood behind him.

Mustang was looking at Crouch like he was holding a loaded gun to her head. Her chest heaved and she looked like she was having trouble sitting up straight.

“The first night I brought you here, you got me in the shoulder? Didn’t you?” Crouch said, watching the Mustang from over the top of Theo’s head. “Let’s see . . .” He placed the tip of the knife against Theo’s right shoulder. “It was the right shoulder, was it?”

He plunged the knife into Theo’s skin slowly. Inch by painful fucking inch. It made the whole thing more excruciating. Dragged out every fucking atom of pain it possibly could. He hissed through clenched teeth. He tried to jerk away, but there was nowhere to go. His spine smacked against the back of the chair. He couldn’t escape -

And just as the blade touched bone - Crouch sharply pulled the knife out. The pain didn’t dull any though.

“Oops, my mistake,” Crouch sneered. “It was the left shoulder.”

“Why, Malfoy?”

His breath started to come out shorter. His nostrils flared. Rage was burning in his eyes. “I said leave it alone!”

“Not until you tell me why you would rather die than let me help you.”

“Because everyone around me dies!”

It was like someone had poured a bucket of ice water over her. In an instant, all the anger, all the resentment that she’d built up just ... vanished.

And his confession, it seemed to lift something in him, took a weight off his shoulders, because as soon as he’d said the words, all the malice in him seemed to die too.

“Growing up,” he started, voice barely just above a whisper, a stark contrast to the rageful tone he’d just been speaking to her in, “my relationship with my father was always rather ... strained, but it still hurt when he died, when I had to watch Voldemort torture him.”

Hermione felt a sickening sort of lurch creep into his stomach. Even knowing Malfoy’s turbulent relationship with his father, no one should have had to watch that, especially someone so young.

“He put a silencing charm on my father so he wouldn’t hear him scream. He killed him quite quickly, but it wasn’t painless. He still made him suffer. Cut a finger off here, a leg there, took hours before Voldemort eventually thought my father had had enough and sliced his head off.” He closed his eyes and shivered silently at the memory. “Then my mother ...” his voice shook at the mention of her. “Voldemort knew I was a lot closer to my mother; he knew it would hurt me so much more, so he ... he made sure I watched. Made sure I heard her scream when he ...”

She knew the memory well, she’d seen it herself when she’d accidentally barged into his head. She’d seen the blood that’d soaked through the wooden floor. She’d seen the scattered body parts of the once proud Lucius Malfoy’s thrown carelessly around the room as though they were nothing more than decoration.

And then she’d seen his mother, dying in his arms.

“To me, blood isn’t thicker than water. I haven’t thought that since I lost my mother and father. Yes, Bellatrix is one of my only blood relations left, but she means nothing to me. I wouldn’t piss on her even if she was on fire. To me, blood doesn’t make a family, it hasn’t for a long time. Blaise, Astoria, Theo, Daphne, Cissa, even

"I'm not arguing with you about this. You are going to listen to me, and you are going to stay here."

"*Hell*!" Hermione snorted angrily.

"And when have I ever listened to you? I have never taken orders from you and I don't intend to start now!" She narrowed her eyes and her voice dropped into a vicious whisper. "Or are you planning on altering to Demon Hex to make me listen to you?"

Malfoy inhaled sharply like he'd been punched in the stomach. His eyes flashed dangerously. "Don't," he hissed. "Don't you fucking dare throw that in my face."

"Why not?" she challenged, unable to stop the way her words were dripping in venom. She didn't mean to be so cruel to him but she couldn't help it. She wouldn't let him bench her like this. She was just as ruthless as him, she didn't need protection, but he needed hers, even if he was too fucking stubborn and proud to admit it. "It's the only way I would ever listen to you."

"Granger," Malfoy hissed, gritting his teeth together. "Don't make this any more difficult for me than it already is. You need to stay here."

"I'm coming with you! You can't take Crouch's house alone! He'll have reinforcements there! He'll have laid traps! You need me there! You can't do this without me!"

"I will not put you in any more danger today. If something happens to you because of me..."

"It won't!"

"But if it does, I would never..." Again, he cut himself off and looked away from her. He took a deep breath and clenched his jaw. The muscles in his neck were thick with tension. "You're not going, end of discussion. I only came back because I wanted to make sure you were safe before I went to Grouch's."

"Well you're in luck!" she shouted sarcastically, thrusting her arms wide on either side of her. "You checked, I'm safe. Astoria is safe. Blaise is safe. Quinzell and Narcissa are safe! Now, let's go and save Theo *together*!"

Malfoy looked as though he were about to combust. "For once in your fucking life, just listen to me! I am trying to do the right thing! I am trying to keep you safe, and as fucking usual, you're making my life difficult!"

"Why won't you let me help you?"

"Drop it!"

The sick bastard repeated the process on the other side. He stabbed Theo just as slowly, just as painfully, eyes on Mustang the entire time rather than his victim. Fucking rude.

"Where next ... where next ... oh yes, I remember." Crouch didn't waste time when he stabbed him again. That one was quick. The blade sliced through the muscles above his right hip bone easily and quickly. The speed of it took Theo off guard and he screamed and jerked in his chair before he could help it.

Mustang watched on in horror. Tears started to gather in her eyes. Her blood coloured lips shook. But she didn't cry.

"I'm sorry," she mouted to Theo, as though this whole thing were somehow her fault. "I'm so sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

"Alright, we've done the shoulder," Crouch said, the teasing litl in his voice about as subtle as a nun in a brothel. "We've done the hip ... then where did you get me the next time ..."

Theo tried to keep it in. Tried to pretend it didn't hurt. He kept his lips pressed tightly together and his brown eyes on Mustang's green ones. He tried not to think about the knife as Crouch stuck it in between his third and fourth rib. But Salazar - fucking Salazar - it hurt, Crouch might as well have carved him in half from the way the pain seared through his chest, and he gave a blood-curdling wail of agony before he could help it.

That was when the Mustang broke.

Whatever she'd been trying to keep in, whatever she'd been fighting to hold back, it all came flooding out. She sobbed silently as she stared at him. Tears streamed down her face.

And Crouch was smiling like the cat who'd got the fucking cream.

When Crouch hooked the curved blade under Theo's rib and started to pull, Theo thought he was going to pass out. His scream of pain filled the room.

Mustang sobbed harder. Her blood-soaked hands flew to cover her ears. It might've been the pain making him delirious - or possibly the blood loss - but she looked like she started rocking back and forth like a nutter in Azkaban.

Grouch pulled and pulled. Each yank sent fresh waves of indescribable pain through Theo's body.

And then his rib finally cracked and gave out. *Thank fuck.*

Crouch tossed his bloodied rip across the room so it landed at Mustang's feet.

Blood poured from the exit wound on Theo's chest. Warm and thick. He was faintly aware of the throbbing pain in his chest, but a numbness had started to wash over him.

He felt tired. His body felt heavy, and he was suddenly struggling to support the weight of his head. It felt like he'd taken a mouthful of Calming Draught, but of course, they hadn't. No one was that kind. He'd simply lost too much blood and was beginning to lose consciousness.

Despite the cloudiness in Theo's vision, he could see the Mustang. He could see her crawl awkwardly across the floor until she fell at Crouch's feet. He could see her mouth moving. Could see her silently begging for something.

'Please.' Fountains of tears streamed down her face, but she didn't seem to care. 'Please' she just kept grovelling. 'Please, don't. No more.'

Crouch leaned down and said something to her, but Theo couldn't hear what it was.

He didn't have a fucking clue what was going on, but one thing he did know, one thought that flickered through his mind just before he lost consciousness, was that he was in for a very long night.

A very, very fucking long night.

It was right there. A life line. A second chance. It was right fucking there, and she didn't want it. He felt fucking sick just looking at it.

Because although neither of them had said it, although neither of them would fucking admit it, there was another thing linking them together, something else, something stronger and a thousand times more potent than any piece of magic.

It was there, even if neither of them would say it out loud.

Hermione shook her head. She struggled to speak through the tightness in her throat. "No."

"No?" Malfoy's brows twitched into a frown. "Granger, don't be a fool. Take this phial, take what's left of my family and *leave*."

"No," she repeated, more firmly this time. "You're not doing this without me. You can't do this without me. You don't know what you're walking into with Crouch. His manor will be heavily guarded, you've seen what he did in those tombs under Newstead Abbey. If you go in there alone, you won't come out."

"If I don't come out and Theo does, I'd say that's a fair trade."

"Don't say things like that!" Anger flared in her stomach, and she expelled some of it by smacking him across the chest. "If we go together-"

"You're not coming-"

"You don't need to sacrifice yourself to save Theo! You don't need to sacrifice yourself to save anyone, I can help you! We can save Theo together!"

"You don't have to die when I do."

She could probably do it. Given enough time, enough resources, she could probably do it. Was sure of it, in fact. It might take her months, she might lose sleep and tear chunks of her hair out in the process, but she could do it. She'd solved harder puzzles before when her life was on the line.

"In another life, we could've ..." he laughed quietly and trailed off. "I suppose that doesn't really matter now. What does matter is that you survive. After everything you've done for the Order to win this war, you deserve to live in the world you saved."

Months ago, she'd have given anything to have a chance like that. She'd dreamed

about finding a way to unlink their lives. Spent countless hours at the beginning of her capture, lying in her bed and thinking about how wonderful it would be to be rid of him.

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"I was the Dark Lord's favourite Demon Mask; do you really think Bart' Grouch Jr is a threat to me?" He tried to smirk as he said the words, but it was a lie. He wasn't nearly as good an actor as Theo was.

"What if there are others there?"

"Then I'll kill them too."

"You won't make it."

"Yes, I will."

"If you really think that, then why did you come to say goodbye to me?"

He eyes flickered with some emotion she couldn't quite register. He didn't believe what he was saying. He thought he was going to die trying to save Theo, but he was going to try anyway.

"What does it matter if I come with you or not?" Hermione went on. "If Grouch captures you, Voldemort will kill you, and then I'll die as well. If I go with you, we'll have more of a chance of..."

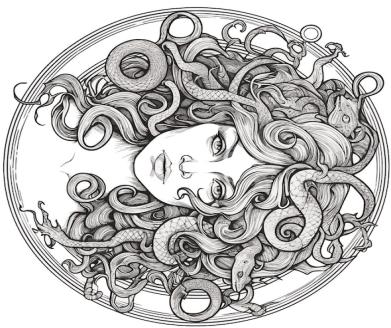
"Voldemort won't kill me," Malfoy argued. "He's angry at Theo for betraying him, he's furious with Blaise, but he's fucking livid with me. He wants my blood, he wants me to pay, but he'll think that death is too good for me. He'll think that death isn't punishment enough for what I've done to him. If I'm captured, he'll keep me alive. Even if this war carries on, it'll be years before he gets bored and finally executes me." Slowly, he brought one of his hands up to cup the side of her face. "And that's more than enough time for the brightest witch of our age to find a way to unlink her life from mine." For the first time that evening, a genuine smile broke across his face. "Don't you agree?"

A sledgehammer to the chest would probably have hurt less. Hermione stared at him, blinking. His neck was red and scratched where she'd grabbed him. She could see little red crescent moon dents on both sides of his neck from her nails.

While she stood there, dumbfounded, lost for words, he reached into his robes and pulled out a small glass phial. "See this?" he asked, shaking the thing gently in front of her and swirling the red liquid inside. "This is filled with my blood. You'll have plenty of time, and you can use this to figure out a way to unlink us before Voldemort kills me."

She didn't know what to say. He'd thought this through. He was giving her an out, a way to live a life without him after the war.

## CHAPTER 58



### HI, BABY

**1st April**

How long does it take for a raving, power-hungry lunatic to get bored?

Theo probably should have had an answer to that question. He tried to think back to all the times he'd been on the other side of the knife and how long it'd taken him to get bored ... and he came up empty. Turned out it was hard to string a coherent thought together when you were being tortured around the clock. Ha. Who would've guessed?

Crouchy boy wasn't exactly the most imaginative when it came to torture, but fuckin' 'ell, was the chap consistent.

It seemed like he stabbed Theo everywhere. Nicked every vital muscle and artery he could find along the way. He'd leave Theo to bleed out on the filthy cellar floor, and each time, just before death could find him, Crouch would seal the wound, force a blood replenishing potion down his throat and the lovely process would start again.

He'd fractured and broken Theo's bones in the most painful ways and then he'd repaired them, just to break the fuckers again -

Oh, and he'd pulled two of Theo's teeth out from the back of his mouth. Yeah. That'd been fun. And the cheeky git hadn't repaired them. Maybe, if he did live through this, he could get himself a pair of gold teeth to replace them ...

Hours blended together after a while. The pain seemed to be just one endless cycle. It was all very tedious and predictable. Theo liked to think he put on a bit more of a show when he tortured someone.

Stab. Bleed. Heal. Repeat.

Break. Heal. Repeat.

Stab. Bleed. Heal. Repeat.

Break. Heal. Repeat.

It wasn't nearly as fun to be on this side of the torture chair.

Theo's only saving grace was that Crouch had the fucking stamina of an old man, and eventually, he'd retired upstairs with his Dolls, but not before he'd broken every bone in Theo's body, oh no, Crouch had been quite insistent on that. Prick.

He had guests coming, that was his excuse. Guests. Guests who wanted Theo dead as much as Crouch did. They'd probably torture him tomorrow, too. They were going to get into his head soon, Theo just hoped he could stall them long enough for Malfoy to set up another safe house. Somewhere really, reeeeeally fucking far out of the way.

Crouch was going to burst through those cellar doors again before long, Theo was sure of that much. Voldemort wanted to interrogate Theo tomorrow afternoon, and if Theo knew Crouch - and unfortunately, he did - he'd want to get a few more stabby stabs in before old Boldie had his fun.

He weakly leaned his head back and stared at the ceiling with his one good eye. He couldn't see a fucking thing out of the other. Crouch hadn't healed him properly before he'd gone upstairs. Left him to stew overnight with a black eye, Salazar knew how many broken ribs, and an open stab wound in his left thigh that was juuuuust

have told him to the brink. Theo to bring of death, and then heal him and start the process all over again.

But he would have ordered Crouch to keep him alive - because he knew where Malfoy and Blaise were. Not only would Voldemort want to keep Theo alive for longer to extend the suffering, but he was also a link to finding the rest of the traitors.

Voldemort would have told Crouch to find out where Malfoy and Blaise and Hermione were by any means necessary. He wanted them all dead, and Theo was now the key to opening that door.

"Malfoy, if Crouch uses's Legilimency?"

"Theo is trained in memory blocking," he interrupted. "The bloke is a fucking awful Legilimens, and he's not the best at memory blocking, but he'll be able to keep Crouch out of his head for a while. We probably only have a day - maybe two - before he gets in, but Crouch will be doing everything in his power to speed up the process. He'll torture him physically to try and break him mentally."

Hermione's stomach started to churn. "Ok," she said, stepping away from him and reaching for her wand. "We need to move quickly if we're going to get Theo before—"

Malfoy's cold hand closed around her wrist before she could reach her wand. She snapped her head up and stared at him. "Granger," he whispered. "You're not coming with me."

"Yes," she said sternly, a statement, leaving no room for him to argue. "*I am.*"

Malfoy shook his head and his mouth twisted down into a tight expression. "You're not. Your job is to get Astoria, Blaise and Quinzel the fuck out of here while I go and try to break Theo out."

Hermione scrunched her nose up furiously. She opened her mouth -

"It's the best option," he said, interrupting her again, this time before she could speak. "Someone needs to stay behind to look after the others and secure a new safehouse, one that even Theo and I don't know the location of, just in case ..."

"Blaise is more than capable of protecting Astoria and Quinzel!"

"Not in his current condition he isn't."

"You can't break Theo out alone."

Malfoy was still for a moment, then sighed heavily. He pulled his hand out of her robes but didn't let her go completely. Kept one hand tight around her waist.

He didn't say a word, he didn't have to. The way he stared down at her, the look in his eyes, they told her for him. It was bad. Wherever Theo was, it was bad. Really fucking bad. So bad that he didn't think he was going to make it out alive.

"Where is he?"

Malfoy rolled his jaw. His nostrils flared before he answered. "Crouch," he said. "Crouch Jr has him."

From about thirty feet away, Narcissa hissed menacingly. Funny, Hermione couldn't remember seeing or hearing her move to the other side of the field?

"Are you sure?" she asked, eyes drifting from the dragon back to Malfoy.

"Yes?"

"How?"

His lip twitched a little. "Let's just say a few Black Masks already had loose tongues before I cut them out."

"Why Crouch? Why not give him to Bellatrix? She's his other - only - Demon Mask. Surely she should be the one to torture him?"

"Because he wants Nott to suffer first, and given their history, who better to torture Theo than the man who ripped his heart out to begin with?"

Daphne. It all came back to Daphne. She was dead because of Crouch. Crouch had broken Theo's heart when he'd turned her in, and now, Crouch was going to be the one who stopped it beating forever.

Hermione would have thought a Dementor was running its rotting fingers up her spine from the way a cold, terrified chill ran through her.

It was worse than she'd imagined. It'd been almost seven hours since Theo had vanished. If Bartly Crouch Jr had had Theo all this time, there was no telling what state he was going to be in.

Crouch would've kept Theo alive. No matter how much he would have wanted him dead, Voldemort would have ordered Crouch to keep him alive.

He would have ordered him to torture Theo. He would have told Crouch to cut pieces of him off. Hurt and brutalise him in the worst ways imaginable. He would

deep enough to bleed out and leave him weak and dizzy, but not quite deep enough to let him die.

Ah, old Crouch. What a brilliantly clever, yet deathly boring old geezer. Would it have killed him to be just a teeny bit more creative? He could have done so much more with the space. The ceiling looked strong and weight-bearing. Crouch could've easily put some hooks through there and chained Theo up by his toes.

*Dark Lord's cleverest Death Eater my aye*, Theo thought bitterly. He wouldn't know a decent torture tool if it hit him in the face with -

Drip.

Was he completely off his rocker, or did he just hear a dripping noise coming from the other side of the door? He lifted his head lazily off the back of the chair and stared at the entrance. He could have sworn he heard ...

Oh, for the love of Helga Hufflepuff. Crouch hadn't broken his mind that easily, had he? A few hours of being cut open and dissected by a madman, and his mind had gone to pieces? Surely not? He was made of stronger stuff than that, wasn't he? Oh, how would he ever live this down? Oh, the shame. Oh, the -

Drip.

*AHA!* He'd not imagined it! Something was definitely dripping.

Had Crouch changed his mind? Was he going to ignore Boldie's instructions and kill Theo right then and there? Fuckin' hell, he hoped so. If Crouch broke his mind in front of an audience of Death Eaters, the shame would probably follow Theo into the afterlife.

But kill him with something that made a dripping noise? How the fuckety was he going to manage that? Poor water from a boiling cauldron over him?

Theo tilted his head to the side. That might be fun. He might use that himself in the future - if he ever got out of the cellar.

Drip.

"C- Come on ... Crouchy boy," he tried to call, but his throat was raw. His voice was quiet, didn't neatly convey the amount of sarcasm he'd intended it to. "While we're ... still young, yeah?"

Drip ... Drip ...

The door creaked open slowly, but the shape he saw slipping through the gap was much less broad than Crouch Jr was. Even with one eye, he could tell that it was a

woman. A tall woman. All long arms and long legs. He could see her silhouette and the small dip of her waist, but he couldn't make out exactly who it was.

She walked towards him slowly, but something looked ... wrong? She was walking strangely. Almost hobbling along. Her left arm looked to be at an odd angle, and she was unsteady on her feet.

Drip. Drip. That sound, it was getting louder. Was it coming from her?

It wasn't until she was standing right in front of him that he could see it was Mustang.

Even without glamour charms and make-up, she was still beautiful. The dark bruises around her right eye made her green pupils all the more striking. Her lip was cut open and swollen and her bare arms were covered in bruises and cuts, some old, some ... not so old.

She was wearing a short, blue nightdress. It was silk and looked very expensive, well, if you looked past the blood. There was a lot of blood. *A lot*, a lot.

And the dripping sound, it wasn't a loose tap or a leak in the roof, it was blood, and it was coming from her hand, or rather, what was left of it. Fuck - how did a person's hand get that mangled up? He didn't put the pieces together until he saw the handcuff around her other wrist. There was a chain swinging below it that was attached to an open, blood-covered cuff.

She'd been handcuffed to something and then - fuck knew how she'd done it - but she'd cut off the top layers of skin on the back of her hand, and then slid out of the handcuff.

Theo could see the raw, exposed muscles of her hand through the blood and the white bone of two of her knuckles. It was no fucking wonder she was shaking so much. He was surprised she was conscious at all.

Mustang knelt on the floor in front of him. Well, not knelt exactly, she practically collapsed, and then, very shakily, she began to tug the ropes that tied his ankles to the legs of the chair, setting him free.

She'd not ...

No, surely ...

She'd not done that to her hand to escape Grouch, just so she could save Theo, had she?

She kissed him just as furiously, held onto him just as tightly, but – as it fucking always did – her mind refused to shut off completely.

"We need—" she started, but she lost track of what she'd wanted to say when his lips moved to attack her throat. "Malfoy—" she tried again, her voice no stronger, resolve to push him away even weaker. "Did - did you find ... Theo?"

"Shut up," he hissed against her collar bone, fingers tightening on her hip bones and pressing her more firmly against him. "Just shut the fuck up." She gasped when he bit down on her pulse point. "*Nam*."

"We don't ... oh god." She thought her eyes were going to roll into the back of her head when he tore the front of her uniform and slipped one of his hands inside. "... we don't - we don't have," words failed her when he palmed her breast, running his thumb slowly over her nipple. "... time ... we need to..."

"Shut up," he hissed against her throat. His hand left her hip and started to wind up her spine and into her hair, and a sharp jerk of his wrist yanked her head back just enough so that she had to look at him. "*Suck the fuck up and kiss me.*"

His eyes might have been cold when he'd left the safehouse, but they were burning now.

He kissed her again before she could argue. Kissing her breathless. Kissing her until she was mindless, and all the while, he just kept growing in her ear, muttering little whispers that she was sure she probably wasn't supposed to hear.

"Fucking hell," he groaned, "So much more I wanted to do to you. Wanted to eat your cunt again until your head was spinning."

Her head was *already* spinning. Her heart was pounding in her chest.

"Wanted to bury my cock inside you again and again and again."

He wasn't making sense. Why was he talking to her like that?

"Wanted to see that pretty face you make when you come." His voice was hoarse and rough. "Haven't seen it enough yet. Don't think I'll ever see it enough."

What was he doing? Why was he talking like they didn't have any time left together? Like this was the last time they were going to see each other?

... like this was the last time they were going to see each other ...

"Oh my God." The realisation was sharp and sudden, like a wrecking ball obliterating its way through thick concrete. "You came back to say goodbye, didn't you?"

"All the books say that it can only last an hour," as Crouch spoke, he grasped a strand of Mustang's hair and twirled it around idly between his fingers, "but you see,

the thing is, if you practice with it enough, and if you brew it just right, you can make it last longer. Can get a good few hours out of a single drop. Can get almost half an entire day out of a full hip flask if you really experiment with it." He chuckled darkly and nipped the air next to Mustang's face. "Isn't that right?"

Mustang kept her eyes closed and her shoulders were shaking. A single tear slipped down her right cheek. She jerked against Crouch, but his arms weren't going anywhere, they were locked around her like a straitjacket.

"You can make Polyjuice Potion last so much longer if you have the right ingredients. The right ... motivation." Crouch looked at Mustang as he said the last word, his voice dripping with double meaning. "Torture's all well and good, but you know what hurts more? Heartbreak. That's where the pain really is. You know the sort. The one that needs time to brew. The one that no one sees coming and is so severe, so painful, that the victim never recovers. That's my favourite, and I've been working on this one for what?" He nuzzled his nose against Mustang's neck and inhaled deeply. She shivered and cringed away from him. "Six years? Or is it seven?"

When Granger sucked in a sharp, panicked breath, Theo looked at her out the corner of his eye. She was stringing the riddle that Crouch was feeding them together much faster than he or Malfoy could.

And then Granger's panicked eyes flickered to Theo's ... the look on her face, why did it make his stomach flip? Had she worked it out? And if she had, why was she looking at him like that?

"We don't have time for this," Malfoy tried to raise his wand again, but Granger kept a firm grip of it, knowing he wouldn't cast a curse while she still held it.

"Don't," Granger whispered. What was wrong with her voice? Why did she sound so upset? "Just ... don't."

When Crouch's pocket watch chimed again, he chuckled and hugged Mustang tighter against him. "It's almost time darling, oh this is so exciting. I can't wait to see the look on their faces."

Mustang opened her eyes and pleaded with Theo. 'Go.'

He shook his head.

She started to sob in Crouch's arms.

The watch sang another warning.

"Thirty more seconds," Crouch hissed in Mustang's ear. "Thirty more seconds and the game is over, oh wait, but where are my manners? You're going to want to speak to him, aren't you?" He brushed the tip of his wand against her larynx, and all it took was one charm to lull the spell he'd used to silence her.

Mustang's eyes blew wide open and she took a deep lungful of air. That first breath she took - she sounded like she'd been trapped underwater for far too long and she'd finally broken the surface. She clutched her throat and bent forward as she tried to catch her breath, her long black hair shielding her face like a curtain called to close.

Mustang's frantic breathing had just about calmed down when the watch chimed a final time, and once it'd finished, her appearance started to change.

Her skin grew slightly paler. Her arms and legs stayed the same length, but the most noticeable change was her hair. Although it stayed impossibly long, it started to get lighter and lighter, shifting from black to dark brown, through the colour palette until it eventually settled on a dark blonde.

When the transformation stopped, she stayed hunched over. Theo still couldn't see her face through her new dark blonde hair.

"Go on, say something," Crouch said, smiling. "After all these years of being mute, I bet you've got so much you need to get off your chest. Don't let me stop you. Speak, girl."

Mustang kept her head down. Her dark blonde hair moved when she shook her head. Theo could hear her breathing heavily.

"Speak."

Mustang didn't move.

But this was apparently Crouch's big moment, the big finale he'd been working on for years, and he wasn't going to let her ruin it for him. With one hand still secure around her waist to prevent her from escaping, Crouch's other hand grabbed a fistful of her hair. He yanked her head up so everyone could see her, and when they saw her face -

Malfoy's furious expression slipped.

Granger's hand flew to her mouth to cover her gasp.

And Theo ... Theo's entire world stopped turning.

Because just for a second, when he stared into those familiar, warm brown eyes, every dream he'd had for the last six years, every fantasy he'd had, every wish he'd made, they all came true.

Daphne.

She was there. His Daph was there, standing right in front of him.

Yes, for all of a second, time stood still, and he felt whole for the first time since he'd watched her die, and then the reality dawned on him, and his very fucking soul was ripped straight down the middle.

Lilacs and oranges.

How could he have been so fucking stupid?

Lilacs and fucking oranges. Mustang smelled like lilacs and oranges, sweet and exotic, floral but sensual, and throughout his entire life, Theo had never, ever, met another woman who smelled like that intoxicating mix. Except for Daphne.

Lilacs and oranges. He clutched his stomach like he was going to be sick.

Lilacs and oranges ...

Lilacs and oranges ...

And there were other signs. Other signs that in his rage-filled revenge to destroy Voldemort and Crouch, he'd completely missed, and they all came rushing back to him at a blinding speed.

The way the bottle had slipped out of her hand when she'd first seen him at Crouch's manor.

The way he'd felt drawn to her from the very first moment he'd laid eyes on her, the way he'd felt connected to her ... the way he'd instinctually rubbed the back of his tattooed hand when he'd been in Crouch's stable looking for her ...

And he hadn't been the only one. Astoria had felt it too. Felt a pull towards Mustang despite her being a complete stranger.

"There's something strange about her, but I can't quite put my finger on what it is," Astoria had said after meeting her. "I've never met her before, but when she looked at me, I felt like I could trust her."

No .. no .. no. This couldn't be happening ... it couldn't ...

"I felt like I could trust her..."

Before Theo realised what he was doing, he grabbed the middle of Malfoy's wand and forced him to lower it. "Don't!" he shouted. "You kill Crouch, you kill the dolls too!"

Malfoy jerked his wand out of Theo's hold and opened his mouth, but Crouch spoke first. Well, laughed first, technically.

"Quite the predicament, isn't it?" Crouch chuckled. "Kill me, and the spells break and you can walk out of here in one piece. But taking my life will take, ooooh let's see, twelve others?" He looked down at Mustang in his arms. "Or is it thirteen? There are so many of you that I lose track sometimes. But I would make a decision rather quickly if I were you. I've signalled the Dark Lord, you have maybe ten minutes before the others get here."

"Right, that settles it." Malfoy raised his wand, but it was Granger who caught it the second time.

"Wait," she urged. She wasn't looking at Malfoy, she was staring at Crouch and Mustang, the gears in her head turning over themselves quickly.

"Granger, you cannot be fucking serious! You and your bleeding Gryffindor heart!"

"Wait!" she hissed, throwing him a fierce look. "Just give me a minute to work through this."

"I'm not risking your life for some strangers who--"

Malfoy stopped when an odd sound filled the room. It sounded like a mixture of a small grandfather clock and the chimes of a bell. Theo had heard it before. It was Crouch's pocket watch.

Crouch looked at the girl in his arms, and when the bell reached its fifth and final chime, the sharp edges of his face twisted up into a horrid smile.

"You know what that means," he said very loudly, although it was clear that he was only talking to Mustang. "I think it's about time our little game ends, don't you, beautiful?"

"What game?" Theo snapped. "What are you on about?!"

Crouch's eyes met Theo's and he smiled at him from over Mustang's shoulder. "Funny thing. Polyjuice potion. Don't you think?"

Theo saw Granger's brows knit together.

Crouch didn't answer, instead, he eyed the three wands that were aimed at him, and then whispered something in Mustang's ear.

Mustang closed her eyes and trembled.

"What did you say to her?" Theo snapped, letting the end of his wand illuminate with the threatening red light of a cutting curse. "Answer me!"

Malfoy and Granger took their eyes off Crouch to glance briefly at Theo.

"Oh, nothing at all," Bartie sneered. "I was just asking her if she'd have been as stupid as the three of you have been, if the situation be reversed?"

"I wouldn't be making threats like that if I were you," Malfoy threatened. "I have a very large, very hungry dragon waiting for us outside."

Course Malfoy had brought the bloody dragon. Always had been one to show off.

Crouch smiled wickedly as he waved his wand behind the trio. Theo heard a click and the air hummed with magic.

"That, my dear friends," Crouch started, "was a locking charm. You can't leave here unless I take them off, or you kill me."

"We've got past your locking charms before," Granger snapped.

"Yes, you did," Crouch answered. "Because I wanted you to."

"What?" Theo hissed. "You .. you wanted Malfoy to come and save me?"

"Of course I did. You didn't think all this was just for you, did you, Nott?" Suddenly, Crouch burst into cruel laughter. "Oh dear, Theodore, the Dark Lord couldn't give two shits about you. He says I can do whatever I want with you, it's Malfoy and the Mudblood he wants, and you just happened to be the bait. It's just a bonus for me that it turned out to be you, it could just as easily as been Zabini's pretty wife."

The end of Granger's wand sparked. Well, she had said she felt like something was off.

"Make no mistake Nott, as soon as the Dark Lord has the mudblood and Malfoy, our fun will continue. Oh, how pleased the Dark Lord will be with me when I deliver not one, but three of the traitors to him."

Malfoy's lip twitched in anger, the end of his wand started to burn with a killing curse -

That strange feeling he fel in his chest every time he saw her ...  
"I felt like ... like I knew her."

The signs were there. They'd always been there. The signs were there and he didn't ... he hadn't ...

The way she'd tried to plead with him in the bathroom at the Gala. She'd been trying to tell him something and he hadn't heard her ... no .. no, no .. please - please says she hadn't been trying to tell him who she was ... who she ... no .. no .. no ...

The way she'd just kissed him ... Her hands had slid to cradle the back of his head ... She'd played with the curls at the base of his skull as she'd kissed him, just like ...  
... just like Daph used to ...

Angel and Chester had looked at the tattoo in horror like they'd seen it before ...

Angel had gone to get Mustang straight after she'd seen it ...

No ... No ...

Bile rose in his throat. The pain in his chest felt like he was being sawed open, a thousand times worse than anything Crouch had done to him ...

He'd felt connected to Mustang from the beginning because he already was connected to her ...

He felt like he knew her because he did ...

She'd kissed him like she'd done it a thousand times before because she already had ...

Oh Salazar no, no, no ... Daphne had been there. She'd been there the entire time, with ... with Crouch ... Crouch, and Theo never ... he didn't know ... he didn't ...

She'd been one of Crouch's Dolls ... she'd been right under his nose, one quick Apparition away from him the entire time, and he hadn't even looked for her ... he'd not tried to save her ... not once ... not ever ...

He left her there ... he'd abandoned her, he'd left her there with a man who had a reputation of ... of ...

She was one of Crouch's Dolls .. she was his favourite .. Crouch had touched her in front of Theo .. Crouch had groped her and licked her and she'd tried to get away from him, and Theo had done nothing to help her .. He'd just watched .. he'd just

She'd been... Crouch had been... for years... Merlin only knew how many times ... No... no... no...

He thought she was dead... he thought she'd found peace and... no, it couldn't be her. It couldn't be...

This girl wasn't his wife. This girl who'd been Crouch's hostage for years, who Crouch had... he suddenly couldn't even think the word... she wasn't her. She wasn't Daphne.

But then the girl who used to be Mustang looked at Theo and any doubt he had vanished.

Because when she spoke, it was Daphne's voice, soft and clear and gentle as a dove's wings.

It was her, and she brought his entire world crashing down on him with just two little words. Two little words that used to be his favourite when she whispered them in his ear. Two little words that now made him feel sick.

"Hi, baby."

"Kitchen," Malfoy answered. "Which reminds me, you might want to send an elf to go and clean up in there before the blood stains those lovely white tiles you have in there."

"How do you feel?" Granger asked. "Is the potion working yet?"

"Starting to," Theo answered. "Don't suppose you brought a spare wand with you? Otherwise I won't be much good."

He felt Granger shove something thin and smooth into his hand. It wasn't his wand, it didn't feel right, but a stranger's wand was better than no wand at all.

Crouch chuckled darkly, making Mustang jolt in his arms. "Good to know. And which way did the Mudblood break-in?"

All the blood in Theo's body went cold. Oh fuck.

Malfoy scoffed and cocked a brow in a very Slytherin sort of way. "Have you gone mad? You think I need her help to kill you? Crouch, I could have one hand tied behind my back and still end you without breaking a sweat and you know it."

"Really?" Crouch asked, and the smile on his face made Theo uneasy. "So you're all alone?"

Theo heard a shuffling noise to his left. He prayed it was Granger getting ready to make her move.

"Completely."

"You're sure? So it doesn't matter if I do this?" Quicker than Theo had ever seen Crouch move, the hand that was holding his wand jerked forward and cast a powerful red curse - right in the spot Granger had been.

She deflected it, but she had to drop the disillusion charm to do it, and as soon as she was revealed, the real fun began.

Theo had just about enough strength to join in.

The seven Death Eaters started firing green curses, but they were slow and inexperienced. Malfoy, Granger and Theo picked them off easily.

And then there was just Crouch.

But although he was outnumbered in every sense of the word, he didn't look worried. He still had his wand at Mustang's throat and he looked... snug.

"The fuck are you smiling at?" Theo snarled.

cloak, so she must have used some sort of disillusion or invisibility charm, which he knew himself didn't hold long.

"Is there anymore for..."

"We don't have time," Granger hissed under her breath. "just take the fucking potion, we need to get out of here. Something doesn't feel right."

"What do you mean?"

"Drink and I'll tell you."

For once, Theo did as he was told. He pretended to cough, and when he covered his mouth, he discreetly downed the potion's bitter contents.

The effects weren't immediate, but as the seconds ticked by, he could feel his strength steadily returning. His head didn't feel as fuzzy anymore. The wound on his leg had healed and every breath he took seemed to get easier.

"So?" Theo whispered. "What doesn't feel right?"

"The whole thing has felt too easy."

Although he wanted to make a face, Theo kept his expression blank. "What do you mean?"

"There's hardly anyone here. Only twenty guards. There were a few traps we needed to disable when we snuck in, but they were so easy to disarm."

"That's a good thing, isn't it?"

"I don't know." Granger let out a quiet, frustrated little sigh. "You didn't see the traps he set up in Newstead Abbey. He's capable of so much more than this. It all just feels too easy. I don't like it. The sooner we get you out, the better."

Well, Theo could hardly fucking argue with that. He wanted out, but his eyes went back to Crouch and Mustang.

He shouldn't leave her here. He wouldn't have even been there if it wasn't for her. He wondered if there was a way to get her out too.

They were outnumbered but Crouch's guards were new and untrained. They'd be easy to pick off. If Theo could knock Crouch out and restrain him, they could take him and the Dolls to the safehouse. Malfoy wouldn't like it, but Granger wouldn't leave innocent girls here. Surely she'd be able to figure out a way to unlink them?

"I'm curious, Draco," Crouch started. "Which way did you sneak into my Manor? Was it through the kitchen? Or through the servant's route?"

## CHAPTER 59

### TWO WORDS



*Crucio; the torture curse. One word.*

*Sectumsempra; the most deadly cutting curse. One word.*  
*Bombarda Maxima; a spell that could cause a person's chest to explode from the inside out in excruciating and unimaginable agony. Two words.*

*Avada Kedavra, the killing curse, the spell that was so powerful it pushed a person's soul right out of their body and ended their life instantly. It was the most powerful dark curse in existence, and it only took two words to use it.*

Hermione had heard and used those spells a hundred times. She'd seen what they could do. She'd seen the absolute devastation that could be caused to another human

being with *just the right* combination of words, and yet, in over ten years of war, she'd never seen a man be so utterly undone by two simple words as what Theodore Nott had been.

*Hi, baby!*" That was all it had taken to break Theo. No gruesome hex followed

those two words. It didn't take any magic at all. Just one small greeting. Just two words, just three syllables, and Theo had fallen to his knees.

In those first few moments after Daphne had spoken, everyone just stared at her.

No one moved. No one breathed. And through the eerie quiet that eclipsed the entrance hall, Hermione swore she could hear Theo's broken heart fixing itself. Could hear the needle pierce the torn edges of his heart and pull them back together, just for him to fall apart all over again when she spoke.

*"Hi, baby!"* That was it. That was all it had taken for one of the most feared and blood-thirsty Death Eaters of all time to break body and soul.

From the moment she'd looked at him, Theo hadn't been able to take his eyes off Daphne. He stared at her the same way men stared at the light when they died, like he couldn't believe that she was real, like she might vanish if he just blinked once. He'd fallen to his knees and the wand Hermione had given him had slipped from his hand and clattered against the floor at his feet.

And Daphne was just as entranced by Theo as he was with her. She just stared and stared at him. Her lips trembled and she hardly seemed aware of the tears that ran down her cheeks. Hardly seemed to be aware of anything other than Theo in front of her.

It was equally the most beautiful, yet soul-crushing thing Hermione had ever seen.

"How?" Malfoy asked. His voice was just as unsteady as Theo's knees had been. "This can't be right. Daphne's dead. We all watched her die..."

Hermione chanced a glance at Malfoy. She couldn't even begin to imagine how he must have felt. His eyes flickered with emotion as he stared at the sister he thought had died years ago. His wand was still in his hand but he'd lowered it.

Crouch grinned wickedly over the top of Mustang- Daphne's - head. "Did you watch her die? Are you absolutely sure of that?"

"Yes," Malfoy swallowed thickly. "It's ... not something any of us could ever forget," he said, pain in every syllable.

Grouch's eyes narrowed into a glare. "You know I have more guards stationed upstairs?"

"Yes, you did," Malfoy looked at his wand and twirled it casually between his fingers as he spoke, "and they lasted all of five minutes. Shouldn't be surprised though really, I mean, I did do away with all the Dark Lord's best generals. Do you remember? When I was Medusa. Right under your nose. *For months!*" He clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth and smirked at Grouch. "I've been wondering just how did our Lord and master take the news yesterday? I imagine he was awfully angry."

What the fuck was going on? Malfoy had broken into Grouch's manor to save Theo, he'd been sneaky and done away with fuck knew how many Death Eaters were upstairs, just to make himself known and wind Grouch up right in the open?

It was funny to watch. It was probably what Theo would've done, but not Malfoy. He was sneaky. He did everything in the shadows and was -

Theo jumped when a warm hand closed gently around his wrist. He looked down, he could feel someone touching him but there was no one there.

"Don't react," he heard a voice whisper, a voice that sounded very much like Grangers. "Just keep looking at Crouch, pretend I'm not here."

It wasn't exactly the easiest thing he'd ever done, but Theo managed to keep his expression blank and his eyes on Crouch - who wasn't even looking at Theo anyway, he was still chatting away with Malfoy.

Theo heard a little rustling sound to his left before something very small and very cold was discreetly pushed into his hand. His eyes flickered down to find a small glass phial filled with black liquid in his palm.

"What is it?" he whispered, looking like a very bad ventriloquist as he tried to move his mouth as little as possible.

"Blood replenishing potion mixed with Pepperup potion," Granger whispered. He could feel her breath on the left side of his face. She didn't have an invisibility

"Oh, you mean this bloke?" Malfoy asked, and then he kicked the decapitated head with the toe of his boot so that it rolled to Grouch's feet. "He was quite good with an Avada. Almost got me."

One of the Death Eaters looked like he was going to vomit. The others stared on in horror.

"I'm sorry," said the voice. "I... I had to."

It was a woman's voice. A girl's voice. Light and young and quivering, and it'd come from Kitten.

"I'm sorry," she repeated, eyes still on the floor. Five, six, seven Death Eaters that Theo didn't recognise flanked her sides. "But the only way you could escape was to kill master, and if you did..." Her delicate little voice trailed off, but she didn't need to elaborate, it was clear as day what'd happened.

After they'd left Kitten, she'd gone straight to Crouch. She'd woken him up, he'd lifted the charms he'd placed on her voice box, and then she'd told him everything. "Don't be sorry," Couch purred. "You did the right thing. You sweet, beautiful little girl!"

Suddenly, the ground underneath Theo's knees started to vibrate. It was subtle, he thought he was imagining it until he saw Mustang staring at the floorboards too.

Everyone looked to the dark hallway. Kitten had just appeared out of as loud, chunky footsteps started speeding towards them. There was a loud bang. A scream. More banging noises. Several raised voices. A wet noise - like paint being splashed up a wall. A loud thud. More footsteps.

The Death Eaters that surrounded Kitten moved to the centre of the room and drew their wands.

"CROUCH!" called a terrified male voice. "CROUCH! HE'S HERE - HE'S -"

The voice was choked out by a sickening gurgling sound, and seconds later, a decapitated head rolled out of the shadows and into the hall.

Silence fell through Crouch's manor - and then they heard footsteps, different to the ones before. These were light and unhurried, completely at ease.

"Barty!" Malfoy greeted, smiling casually as he entered the hall. There wasn't a scratch on him. The blood in his hair and on his face must have been someone else's. "just the man I was looking for."

At the sight of Malfoy, the Death Eaters looked nervously at one another. One's knees looked like they were knocking together through fear.

Malfoy may have been stripped of his title as Demon Mask, but his ruthless reputation remained very much intact.

"Bold of you to just waltz into my manor all alone." Crouch's grip tightened on Mustang. "How did you get past my guards?"

Crouch's awful smile only stretched higher. "You've been mourning a stranger all these years, Keira, I think her name was. Keiraa..." Crouch's voice trailed off and he looked down at Daphne.

"Barker," although Daphne finished Crouch's sentence for him, her eyes still didn't leave Theo. "Keira Barker."

"That was it," Crouch chuckled. "Lovely Keira Barker. A soldier. A high-ranking general in the muggle army. She was very clever, an excellent leader too, until that one mission in Bristol, where she led her squadron into a trap that a particularly spiteful blonde Death Eater had set - "

"He's trying to stall you," Daphne cut Crouch off. Her voice was scratchy, evidence of years of disuse, and the terror in her eyes as she looked at Theo was frightening. "He's trying to keep you here until the reinforcements come. Don't let him get what he wants! You need to kill him and escape!"

"No," Theo whispered, so softly. Hermione would have missed it if she weren't standing so close to him. "I won't leave you here... I won't let you die again..."

"You've already mourned me once." If Daphne's voice had sounded hoarse before, it sounded utterly broken when she added, "You can do it again, baby..."

Theo whimpered quietly, still on his knees, still shirtless, still desperate and with tears gathering in his eyes.

"Draco can do it," Daphne urged. "You don't have to watch again..."

Crouch pressed the tip of his wand against Daphne's collar bone and buried his nose into her hair, a taunt. "They won't do it. They don't have the stomach to kill you..."

Daphne's panicked eyes flickered to Malfoy. "Don't be an idiot, Draco," she pleaded, ignoring Crouch when he dug his wand into her throat. "Kill him and get out!"

Hermione could see the veins and tendons on the back of Malfoy's hand protruding as he clenched his wand.

Words seemed to have failed Theo. He couldn't seem to be able to speak, but he started to shake his head.

"You promised me," Daphne said, struggling to get the words out when Crouch dug his wand into her larynx. "You promised that you would do whatever it took to

look after the others. We said we would be the ones that would make the difficult decisions together -”

The entire thing was hard to watch. The way Theo was crumpling. The indecision in Malfoy's eyes. Crouch's smile. Daphne's pleads for them to kill Crouch even though it would end her life.

“ well I've already decided this one for us. Kill him. If you don't, you'll all be captured! Kill him!”

Crouch's wand left Daphne's throat when he pulled his pocket watch out and glanced at the face. “Ooooh better hurry up.” He grinned, throwing the open watch onto the floor so he could keep an eye on it. “Eight minutes until reinforcements get here. Tick tock. Tick tock.”

“DO IT!” Daphne begged. “KILL HIM!”

“No,” Theo shook his head faster. “No.”

“Tick tock, tick tock.”

“PLEASE! KILL HIM!”

“NO!”

“Tick tock, tick tock.”

Crouch was right. They were running out of time and no one was moving. Hermione had to do something.

Slowly, she stepped to the side until her shoulder brushed Malfoy's. She placed her non-wand hand over his own and squeezed it reassuringly. “What are we going to do?” she whispered, choosing her words deliberately.

When Malfoy looked down at her, she could see the war dancing in his eyes. The anguish in him was painful to look at, all because of the devastating decision he had to make.

“I... don't know.”

It would be easy for him to kill Crouch. He would end him with a flick of his wrist, they could grab Theo and escape, but if he did, his sister would die, again. He'd probably lose Theo forever, and when Astoria found out ... She'd probably never recover.

Hermione was good in a crisis. She was impulsive sometimes, yes, but she was always able to think logically and quickly. She weighed up the possible pros and cons

She went to push him a third time, but the front door suddenly swung closed. The air went cold, and a second later something hit Theo's chest and sent him careening into the wall on the opposite side of the hall.

The ringing in Theo's ears made his head feel ten times heavier. His arms shook as he struggled to sit up.

Angel and Chester had been hit with the same hex, and both the girls were laying on the other side of the hall. Angel had blood dripping down her temple and Chester was holding her ribs like they were broken. And Mustang -

Crouch had Mustang. He had Mustang in his arms and his wand against her throat.

“Now, now, now,” Crouch sneered. “Let's not do anything that we'll all regret, shall we?”

“Let her go!” Theo tried to lurch to his feet, but his muscles were too sore, the ringing in his ears was too loud, and he barely had the strength to get onto his hands and knees.

“Oh, you're in no position to bargain with me, and even if you were, there's no way I'd let this one go.” He opened his mouth and gave the side of Mustang's face a long, broad lick.

Mustang stared at Theo as she cringed away from Crouch. It was enough to make Theo's blood boil.

He tried to stand again but his leg gave out from underneath him and he fell back to the floor. He felt so useless.

“Such a bad girl,” Crouch tutted, dragging his wand up her throat and using it to stroke away the hair that'd fallen onto her face. “And look, you've even dragged your friends down with you.” When his beady eyes flickered up, Chester and Angel flinched as though he'd struck them both. “You always were so beautiful. Beautiful, but poisonous. I told the Dark Lord before he said I could have you. You've poisoned others against me, again, but luckily, one of you had the common sense not to be dragged in.”

Like he'd summoned her, Kitten stepped out of the shadows. Her arms were wrapped around herself and her eyes were cast down sheepishly on the floor.

Chester got to her feet and looked like she was going to swing for Kitten, but when a quiet little voice rang through the halls of Crouch's estate, Chester stopped dead in her tracks.

If Grouch were still asleep, they might just be able to manage it. They'd have to sneak through his manor without being heard or seen - which was a task in its fucking self - but they could do it. And if Theo didn't have the strength to kill old Party himself, he was bloody sure Angel and her new prized possession would be more than capable.

But just as he started to feel hopeful, all the three of the girls shook their heads, and Mustang pointed to her scar.

Theo sighed in defeat and leaned against the open doorframe. "Let me guess, he's linked your lives to his already, hasn't he? If he dies, you all die sorta' deal?"

Chester answered with a curt nod.

He wished Granger were here, she was so much better at solving puzzles than he was. She'd have this whole thing sorted in no time -

Theo's brows knitted together as an odd thought struck him.

"But you tried to kill Crouch earlier?" Theo asked Mustang. "When you first came into the wine cellar. You tried to stab him. Why would you do that if it meant you'd all die?"

Apparently Mustang was no longer in the mood to explain herself, and when she didn't offer any explanation, Theo turned to Angel and Chester.

"Why wouldn't you pair try and stop her from killing Crouch if it meant you were going to die too?"

*Because we'd rather be dead than live here with Crouch any longer.* The girls didn't need their voices to tell Theo that. The way Chester and Angel stared longingly at the door told him everything. They wanted out, they wanted to be free of Crouch, and if the only freedom they could get was death, well, they might not have been brave enough to go after him themselves, but if someone else did, they weren't going to stop them.

"Do you know where my wand is?"

Mustang shook her head and tried to push him out the door again. She already knew the direction his thoughts had taken.

"If I get my wand, I can try and unlink you." It might not work, but he had to at least try-

Mustang pushed him as hard as she could with her good hand. 'NO!' she mouthed. 'GET OUT!'

of her actions and went with what she thought was right, the option that would cause the least amount of grief and pain for the least amount of people.

Hermione was good at making decisions, but she couldn't be the one to make this one. She couldn't do it for Malfoy. He had to be the one to decide, and all she could do was let him know that she'd be there for him, no matter what he chose.

When Hermione looked back at Crouch, Daphne wasn't staring at Theo anymore. She was watching the two of them intently, her warm eyes fixed on their joined hands.

"Oh Theodore, what a shame," Grouch said coldly. "I expected more of a show from you. I expected a little more ... carnage. No bother, I can fix that myself."

Hermione thought Crouch was going to curse Daphne as a way to goad Theo into action, but he didn't need to use magic, the way he jabbed the end of his wand sharply against the raw bones of Daphne's mutilated hand was enough to make her scream and almost collapse against him.

"DONT!" Theo cried. He lurched to his feet but didn't go for his wand, almost like he'd forgotten that it existed at all. He didn't try and lash out like Hermione expected him to either, just reached in front of him - towards Daphne - as though that might somehow make Crouch stop. "Please, don't ... please don't hurt her. I'll do anything you want. Just don't do anything else to her."

Fucking hell - the way Theo's voice broke, the tears on his face, it was enough to make Hermione's eyes sting.

Crouch pulled his wand away from Daphne's hand. He stared at Theo and quirked a brow. "No?" he mocked. "Surely not 'anything'?"

Theo nodded a 'yes', but he wasn't looking at Crouch, he was staring at Daphne as she clutched her hand and panted heavily.

Crouch looked Theo up and down for a moment, then he sickeningly licked his lips - like Theo had done exactly what he wanted him to - and said, "Alright then, let's put your love to the test. The Dark Lord wants to punish Malfoy, and he specifically asked that I bring the Mudblood to him alive." The way Crouch's grin stretched from ear to ear made the hairs on the back of Hermione's arms stand on end. "So capture them for me."

Everyone looked up at Crouch in horror.

"What?" Theo asked.

"You want me to leave your wife alone?" Crouched tauntingly angled his wand over Daphne's injured hand again. "Then attack Malfoy and the Mudblood. If you capture them for me, I won't hurt another hair on her head."

Like the snap of fingers, the atmosphere in the hall completely changed. The air was suddenly heavier, almost like it was weighed down by the tension. Hermione could feel her pulse in the tips of her fingers. Her mouth ran dry and her veins spiked with adrenaline.

She noticed Malfoy look at Theo out of the corner of his eye.

Surely he wasn't... Was he already bracing himself for an attack from Theo?

Crouch smiled down at his pocket watch. "Six minutes until reinforcements get here. Better make a decision Theodore, tick tock, tick tock."

"No, Theo!" Daphne screamed. "Don't..."

"Unless you want me to take your voice away again," Crouch leaned down and kissed in Daphne's ear, "then I suggest you be quiet!"

Daphne flinched and was silent for a second, but it was obvious she valued Theo's life more than her own. "DON'T!" she started to cry, but Crouch jabbed his wand into her hand again, causing her to double over and howl in agony.

Theo sprinted a few feet to his left and snatched his wand up off the floor. He whirled around and aimed it viciously at Crouch, but then he paused, hand on the trigger but unable to pull it.

"Why the hesitation, Theodore? It should be an easy decision to make. Isn't this what you've always wanted? Your lovely, beautiful wife back?" Crouch asked, grinning at Theo as his hand crawled up from Daphne's waist to glide over her breasts. He was taunting Theo, groping Daphne in front of him and hoping to get a reaction. "Isn't this what you've been *dreaming* about since she died?"

Theo took a sharp breath. His wand arm shook with rage.

"Haven't you dreamed endlessly about having her back in your arms?" Crouch asked. "Your lips on her neck?" When Crouch's mouth shifted to the side of Daphne's face, she cringed away from him, and when he planted a soft kiss against her cheek, she looked at Theo and shook her head. "Haven't you spent every night since she died thinking about this exact moment? Haven't you spent years thinking of all the things you would do to get her back?"

It was gentle really. Sweet. No tongue. No forcefulness. Just a slight pressure against his lips before she slipped her hands out of his and pushed him towards the open door.

'*Glo*', she mouthed very slowly, very clearly, didn't leave any room for him to misinterpret. Again, she was blinking back tears, but she was smiling. '*Glo*'

"Come with me."

She placed her good hand on his chest and pushed him again.

Angel and Chester looked around nervously. He was wasting time, he knew he was, but something was making him stay. A small voice in the back of his head was telling him not to leave her here. Not to leave any of them there.

"Come with me."

Mustang shook her head and pushed him again. Her smile left her face and she started blinking faster, her tears getting harder to keep at bay.

"Why not?"

'*Can't*', she mouthed, still shaking her head. She pulled the strap of her nightdress down over her shoulder and as the fabric slipped down her chest an inch or two, Theo saw an angry, red scar over her heart. '*Watch*', she kept her eyes on his as she stepped into the doorway.

The moment her toe crossed the threshold, the scar started to open. The pieces of skin started to rip away from one another like invisible hands were tearing them apart. A trickle of blood started to escape -

The bleeding stopped instantly.

"You can't leave the Manor unless Crouch is with you, can you?"

Mustang shook her head.

"If you try to leave without him, the scar rips open and you die?"

Another nod.

Theo glanced at the other two. "Do you all have them?"

Angel and Chester nodded.

"What about if we kill Crouch?"

Kitten didn't follow.

Luckily, the walls were deserted the rest of the way, and they managed to make it to Grouch's front door a lot quicker than Theo could've done on his own.

This was it. He was getting out. He was going to -

But as they reached the front doors, the girls stopped. Chester dipped out of his arms and Theo stared at Mustang as she did the same.

"What is it?"

Mustang's emerald green eyes were glistening with tears, but she was smiling at him. Her hands closed around the brass handle of the front door and she opened it for him, but she didn't try and step through it.

"You're not coming with me?"

Mustang's smile wavered and she shook her head gently.

The tightness returned to his chest. This entire escape effort hadn't been about them both escaping, she'd just wanted to get him free of Grouch.

"Why not?" he asked. "We could make a break for it. There's a whole bloody forest around the edges of this estate. If we can make it through the grounds, we can lose ourselves in the woods. Crouch will never find us." He didn't know why he was telling her all of this. He should just make a break for it. He'd never get another chance like this again. If Grouch caught him, it'd be all over, but yet, he couldn't leave Mustang. Didn't know why. Didn't have the energy to question it either. "I'll take a few days for me to have the strength to Apparate, but when I do, we can go anywhere." He took her one good hand in both of his and squeezed it gently. It seemed like an odd thing to do - especially for him - but his hands moved without him thinking about it. "You'll never have to see Grouch again, or me, all you need to do is come with me. I can... I can take you somewhere safe. All of you."

Fuckin' hell, what was wrong with him? He'd never spoken like this a day in his life? Was heroism a weird, unexplained side effect of blood loss? Did he have brain damage? Was that why he was talking like that? Fuck Stockholm Syndrome. Delusional Heroism Syndrome was so much worse.

Mustang gave Angel a proud look, which Angel returned with a sweet smile, and then she looked back to Theo. She glanced down at their hands for a moment, before she raised herself onto the tips of her toes and kissed him.

"Don't fall for it, Theo," Daphne whispered, gritting her teeth as Grouch kissed the side of her face again. "Don't be stupid."

Grouch pulled back slightly and flicked his wand over Daphne's head. From the way the wound on the back of her hand quickly knitted back together, Hermione assumed he'd cast a healing charm, but the magic didn't stop. All the bruises faded from her skin and her cuts sealed themselves, but the spell kept going. It smoothed her distressed hair until it was perfect and styled like Astoria's usually was, it added a flush to her cheeks, and even fixed her nightdress until it looked clean and new.

Hermione knew what Grouch was doing. It was another manipulation, another way to get inside Theo's head. Grouch was making Daphne look how Theo remembered her, beautiful and perfect, and not someone who'd spent years being abused by Grouch. He was trying to make Theo remember what they used to have, and what they could have again if Theo just did this one little thing for him.

"I'll even let you take her," Grouch hissed, the poisonous, persuasive serpent in Theo's ear. "The Dark Lord will never have to know. I'll tell him you both died, blown to pieces in one of my traps when you tried to escape. If you help me, you can have your wife back. You can disappear with her. Just the two of you. Isn't that what you want? Or would you rather she stays here? With me?"

Another simple wave of Grouch's wand and the abuse returned. Daphne was once again covered in bruises and blood, and the bones and muscles of her hand were sticking out at odd angles even worse than they had before.

Theo's throat bobbed as he swallowed. He was torn, he was confused, but he was considering it, and Grouch fucking knew it.

"You can take her. You can be together again. All you need to do is help me capture the Mudblood and Malfoy. Tell you what, you can take the lot of them."

With another flick of his wand, Daphne hissed quietly.

Angel and Chester clutch their chests and looked at one another in confusion. "I've removed one of the charms I put on the Dolls," Grouch explained. "Their lives are still linked to mine, but they aren't bound to me geographically anymore. They can leave the estate without me now. They can go anywhere they want."

Angel and Chester exchanged hopeful looks. The other Doll - Kitten - stared at the other two girls with wide, panicked eyes and started to retreat into the shadows.

"You can disappear with all of them, or just take Daphne and go. I don't care. After what I've done for the Dark Lord, he'll give me so many Dolls I'll be drowning

"in them," Crouch said. "All you need to do is capture Malfoy and the Mudblood for me, and everything you've been dreaming of for the last few years will be yours. Shouldn't be any trouble for a man with your talents, but if I were you," Crouch's voice dropped to a quiet hiss, "*I'd start with the fucking Mudblood.*"

When Theo looked at Hermione, terror washed over her. She might not have known Theo anywhere near as well as she knew Malfoy, but she knew an enemy when she saw one.

She took a strategic step back and gripped her wand tightly between her fingers, ready to retaliate, ready to attack if he did - when he did.

But when Theo turned his wand on Hermione, Malfoy stepped in front of her, his broad frame completely shielding her from view.

"Don't," Malfoy hissed, shoulders rigid and voice more menacing than Hermione had ever heard it. "Don't you fucking dare."

Outside of the house, Hermione could hear Narcissa's low growl. The dragon sounded like she was stalking the house. She could probably sense Malfoy's unease, and she'd started to circle the house like the predator she was, her growls and huffs reminding the enemy inside that she was there, ready to protect, ready to attack if needed.

But Grouch didn't seem to fret at all. "Don't tell me you're going to let him stand in your way, Theodore," he taunted. "Hex him. Make him move."

When Daphne started to struggle, Theo hesitated. He started to lower his arm, but when Grouch jabbed his wand into Daphne's injured hand again and she started to scream, he took aim.

"Tick tock, Theodore," Grouch called, his voice gleeful over the sound of Daphne's screams. "Four more minutes until the cavalry get here, but one, maybe two until I start cutting parts of your wife off. Maybe I'll start with her fingers."

From the way Daphne's screams grew louder, Grouch could have already been cutting them off.

"Or maybe I'll start by cracking her ribs and skinning her back."

Theo winced. His top lip started to shake.

"Everyone already thinks she was executed by the Blood Eagle," Grouch chuckled. "Maybe it's about time the lie became the truth. What do you say, *Mustang?*"

Peters licked his lips. "Even better, nothin' gets me harder than when they struggle." He took a step forward, but Morrison's hand curled around his shoulder and stopped his advance.

"Wait a second ..." Morrison started. "Ain't that the Mustang girl? The one Crouch never lets us play with?"

Peters looked at Mustang again and his eyes darkened. Once he'd taken her in, his brows shot up and he let out a low whistle. "Well colour me pink, it is. Not like Crouch to let you wander the halls alone. Normally doesn't let you out of his sight, does he? And look what you've got behind you. How's being an Order cock sucker treating you, Nott?" Peters chuckled.

"Oh it's just fabulous mate," Theo breathed, wincing through the pain in his leg. "How's being a psycho's little bitch treating you?"

Theo's joke didn't go over anywhere near as well as he wanted it to. Even Morrison didn't laugh.

Peters drew his wand, but then his head jerked horribly to the left and he fell to the floor with a loud thud, and Angel stood behind him, holding a large marble bust in her hands that was covered with Peter's blood.

Morrison went for his wand, but Angel clocked him around the head with the bust as well. He fell to the floor just as hard as Peters had, but Angel kept going. She brought the bust down on top of his head again and again until his skull cracked open like a watermelon and his blood and brains splattered up the wall.

What a woman. Theo liked Angel more and more each time he saw her. Chester was standing in the hallway behind Morrison's corpse. She wasn't holding any weapon, but she did have a quivering Kitten wrapped around her.

Mustang gave Angel and Chester a pleading, desperate sort of look. Please, she mouthed to the other girls.

The girls exchanged a glance at one another and then Chester peeled Kitten out of her arms. The redhead walked towards them, knelt on Theo's left, and then hooked his left arm around her shoulder and wrapped her hand around his waist. Mustang did the same thing on Theo's right, and then, working together, the girls lifted Theo to his feet and started to walk him through the manor.

Angel walked ahead of them, holding the bloodied bust in her hands and ready to swing it at a moment's notice.

If he closed his eyes, he could pretend, couldn't he? He was dying anyway, who would it hurt? Couldn't he just be selfish and pretend he was dying in her arms instead of a strangers?

If he closed his eyes, she could be her. He could pretend. He could.

It wouldn't be hard to pretend. She smelled like Daph. Fuckin' 'ell, she even played with the hair at the nape of his neck the way Daph always did.

But he didn't have to lean forward. Didn't have to wonder if she'd refuse a dying man his last wish when he tried to kiss her, because she kissed him first. And when her lips met his, it didn't matter anymore. He didn't care where he was or that he was dying. The embarrassment of dying of something as boring as blood loss stopped being a worry at all. And he'd been right; it wasn't hard to pretend. She held him the way Daph used to, kissed him the way Daph used to. Softly. Slowly.

Dominating. Holding onto his face like she never wanted to let go ...

With his eyes closed, he could pretend he was back with Daph. They were together and he could die happy and content and not the empty shell of a man he'd been since she'd taken her last breath.

And judging from the way Mustang kissed him, she seemed to need him at that moment as much as he needed her.

"Oh my, whatever do we have here?"

The coldness in the voice shot through Theo. It broke the trance. He went from feeling weightless and lucid to alert in a heartbeat, as instant as being woke up from a dream by having icy cold water poured over his head.

Death Eaters stood in the hallway. Two of them. The scar on Morrison's face looked even uglier in the dark light of the hallway, and Peters, well, Peters had always been ugly.

Mustang and Theo jerked apart and she jumped to her feet. She put her bloodied hand to her left, trying to shield Theo from view.

"Oh, how cute," Morrison said. He elbowed Peters beside him and laughed. "Are you seeing this? She's trying to protect him."

"I know, it's just adorable," Peters hushed in a soft, yet deadly sort of voice. "Fiery as well, look at her face. Looks like she'd eat me alive. Reckon she'd be just as fiery between the sheets?"

"Definitely. Looks like she'd put up a good fight as well."

Hermione peeked around Malfoy's arm so she could get a better look at Theo. His chest was rising and falling heavily and some of his dark curls hung low and casting menacing shadows on his face.

Daphne's wails of agony reached new levels and Theo choked back a sob. He slowly twisted his wand. The end sparked with red magic -

"Go for me all you want, mate," Malfoy warned. "But the fucking second you throw a curse at Granger, I'll break your arms."

Hermione's heart started to beat wildly in her chest.

Malfoy wasn't even trying to talk Theo out of attacking him. Did Malfoy think that it was a done deal? Did he believe that his best friend would turn on him just like that?

Hermione opened her mouth to ask, but the way Theo was looking at Daphne answered that question for her.

"Yes, yes he would turn on them. He didn't want to do it, he might have tried to go back and save them later, but he'd give Malfoy and Hermione over to Crouch if it meant saving Daphne's life, and judging from the look in his eyes, he wasn't going to be stopped.

"I don't want to do this, mate," Theo said, and even though he was holding them at wand point, he sounded completely sincere. "But I don't have a choice."

When Theo took a step to the left, Malfoy's free hand curled protectively around the small of Hermione's waist. He pulled her behind him until she was completely hidden behind him.

When Theo took another step to the left, Malfoy matched it. But it wasn't until red sparks started to dance at the end of Malfoy's wand, that Hermione started to panic.

They were going to do this. They were going to fight one another. Right there. In Crouch's Manor.

Hermione couldn't let it happen. If Malfoy and Theo duelled, it would be a fucking bloodbath. They were both equally as dangerous as one another.

Theo was known for his monstrous antics on the battlefield, but so was Malfoy. Malfoy's reputation was savage and ruthless, but so was Theo's.

Nothing would stop Theo from saving Daphne, and Malfoy had already proven how far he'd go to protect Hermione.

No, if Theo and Malfoy duelled, one of them would end up dead. They'd already lost Romy, they'd already almost lost Astoria, losing someone else wasn't an option.

Hermione's eyes darted from one corner of the room to the other. There had to be something she could do - but she could hardly hear her own thoughts over the sound of Daphne's screams.

Hermione stepped out from behind Malfoy, wand in her hand, ready to go for Grouch -

“SECTIURUMSEMPPRA!”

The curse hurtled towards her in an almost blinding scarlet light. Malfoy sharply jerked his wand to the left and the curse careened into the wall next to the front door.

The curse was charged with unbelievable rage. Upon its impact with the wall, a deafening crack echoed through the air before a thick wall of smoke and debris soared through the room like a bomb had been detonated in the walls.

As Hermione looked at the devastating mess that the curse had left in the wall, adrenaline spiked in her veins. If the curse had hit her, Merlin only knew what condition she'd have been left in.

Theo wasn't holding back. He was treating this duel as though his life depended on it.

Her body suddenly felt hot, like someone had replaced her veins with acid, but when she looked at Malfoy, she instantly went cold.

Because she'd never seen him look so fucking angry, and it frightened her.

The curse Malfoy retaliated with only had one word, and as he hissed it through gritted teeth, Hermione knew he meant every syllable of it. “CRUCIO!”

She'd never seen a duel quick like it. It was obvious that they used to train together. Malfoy knew that Theo sometimes threw his right arm back before he cast a slicing curse to give it more power, and Theo knew that Malfoy tended to throw Bombarda's one after the other to try and overwhelm his opponent.

They'd probably taught each other most of the curses they were throwing at one another. Hermione imagined that back in the early days of the war, they probably used to run training drills similar to this together. She imagined that they used to treat it like a game, test less powerful curses on each other, see who could trip the

She got on the floor with him and ducked down so her face clouded his vision. Tears were streaming down Mustang's cheeks. She kept shaking her head. Kept looking at him like he was the most important person in the world to her.

He didn't know why, but it made tears prick in his eyes. The hollowness in his chest felt like it was going to suffocate him.

“Get up!” she mouthed desperately, expression nothing but determined despite the tears that slipped from her eyes. She got to her feet and tried to pull him to stand, but he couldn't do it. He didn't have the strength. ‘Get up! Get up! Get up!’

“... I can't...” He didn't think he'd ever heard his voice sound so pathetic. “I'm sorry... I can't...”

She knelt in front of him again and leaned her forehead against his. Lilacs and oranges. It was everywhere. In her hair. On her skin. Her breath.

This wasn't fair. Why did Mustang smell like her? Why did that sweet, brave girl have to smell like her?

His resolve was almost as weak as his body. Grouch had put him through it. His bones might've been broken, but it was nothing compared to the state of his heart.

Her nose nuzzled his and she released a shaky breath against his face.

Lilac and oranges.

It wasn't fair. Death was going to come for him any moment, he knew it, he felt it, so why did the last thing he have to smell be ... Daph?

Lilacs and oranges.

He could smell her, but she wasn't there. The smell was another reminder that he'd never see her again. Everything Grouch had done to him was child's play in comparison. Hours of torture didn't hurt as much as that did.

Her lips brushed his.

His hands slid to the small of her waist.

She released another shaky breath.

Lilacs and oranges...

Her hand snaked up his neck and cradled the back of his head.

Lilacs and oranges...

shoulders under his arm to support his weight, and then somehow managed to drag him to stand. It was awkward. He was dead weight and she was so skinny, but she managed it. Fuck knew how.

She helped him walk - limp, nobble, whatever the fuck it was that he was doing - through the door and out of the wine cellar. They struggled when they got to the stairs, but Mustang made sure he fucking got up them.

When they were in the hallway, the boards above their head creaked. They could hear laughter and glasses clinking together in a toast. The other Death Eaters were already here, and apparently having a little nightcap.

They hobbled through Crouch's dark manor together. Once or twice Mustang pushed him into the wall and pressed her body close to his, and seconds later, an unmasked Death Eater would walk by without noticing them.

She was very sneaky, that Mustang, and very light on her feet. She knew how to go on undetected and seemed to have every shadowy corner of Crouch's manor memorised. She must have been a spy before. Muggle or magical, he hadn't a clue.

They had to move quickly though, every step they took through the house left a trail of blood behind them. They couldn't do anything about it, they were both bleeding heavily and didn't exactly have time to clean up as they made their escape, but the dark hallways seemed to do the job of covering them.

None of the Death Eaters seemed to notice the blood when they walked through the halls. Theo just hoped none of the fuckers slipped on it. As funny as that would be to watch, it would definitely blow their cover.

And despite the amount of blood they'd both lost, Mustang just dragged him right alongside her. He'd never seen anything like it. Her determination to save him was fierce. Powerful.

It was just a shame he didn't have the strength to match her.

He collapsed when they got to the landing. He tried to stand again, but even sitting up felt as big a task as climbing a mountain. He was just too weak. He'd lost too much blood. He felt impossibly dizzy and he could hardly breathe.

Severe blood loss, he had to admit, wasn't the way he thought he was going to go out. He always thought it would be something a little more .. theatrical, dramatic, something with flair that he'd be remembered for, not fucking passing out on Crouch's dirty floor like a limp noodle and never waking up again.

other up first, let them fall flat on their face and then laugh about it later like naughty school boys playing pranks.

Now, they were trying to kill each other.

Curses zipped from one end of the room to the other almost quicker than Hermione could register them.

Crucio.

Bombarda.

Incarcerous.

Another Bombarda.

Another Crucio.

Sectumsempra.

Another Crucio.

Another Incarcerous.

Both Theo and Malfoy's magic was devastating. Bright colours of red and white streaked from one end of the entrance hall to the other like fireworks. Dusty mirrors that hung on the walls smashed. Walls exploded when curses were deflected onto them. They picked up chests of drawers and bureaus with their magic and threw them at each other.

There was so much dark magic in the room that the air grew hot and repugnant with it, so heavy it made Angel and Chester wretch silently as they took cover from the onslaught.

Crouch was playing Malfoy and Theo like fiddles. He'd put them against each other perfectly. It didn't matter how many times Hermione screamed or what she shouted to Malfoy to make him stop, he didn't seem to hear any of it, like all his other senses had been switched off except for his bloodlust.

And every time one of Theo's curses missed, Crouch would take it out on Daphne. He'd twist his wand further into her injured hand. He'd crack her bones or pull the already exposed tendons out even further until Theo could see them and Daphne would scream even louder.

Hermione tried to disarm Crouch. Tried to just get Daphne away from Crouch any way she could, but he was a better duellist than Hermione had realised. Even

with Daphne in his arms, he managed to deflect every curse she threw at him. It didn't help that Hermione was at a disadvantage herself. She couldn't use lethal hexes and she couldn't risk hitting Daphne.

The seconds were ticking on and Hermione didn't know what to do.

There were only three minutes left until the other Death Eaters got there.

Then there were three and a half minutes.

Then two and Hermione was still no closer to coming up with a way they could all walk away from this.

"TM SORRY!" Theo sneered seconds before something in the room behind Hermione cracked and exploded. "I DON'T WANT TO DO THIS!"

"THEN YOU SHOULD HAVE FUCKING THOUGHT ABOUT THAT BEFORE YOU TRIED TO KILL GRANGER!" Malfoy roared back. "YOU KNOW WHAT THAT CURSE DOES! YOU SAW WHAT IT DID TO ME AND YOU TRIED TO USE IT ON HER!"

"WHAT WOULD YOU DO IF IT WAS THE OTHER WAY AROUND?!"

she heard Theo scream as something else exploded and she saw splinters of wood fly across the room. "YOU KILLED CORMAC WHEN HE HURT GRANGER!"

Malfoy hissed something under his breath. Hermione didn't hear what it was, but she heard the sound of shattering glass. A whistle as something shot through the air and then Theo grunted in pain before he started shouting again.

"YOU BUTCHERED HALF A DOZEN DEATH EATERS AFTER THEY'D BARELY TOUCHED HER!" Theo ducked low to avoid a red curse Malfoy had thrown at him, then he straightened and threw a slicing curse. "AND WHEN YOU THOUGHT YOU WERE GOING TO HAVE TO KILL HER YOURSELF, YOU REFUSED AND RATTED THE WHOLE FAMILY OUT! YOU EXPOSED ALL OF US AS THE SPIES BECAUSE YOU COULDN'T BE WITHOUT HER! YOU RISKED THE WHOLE FAMILY BECAUSE OF HER!"

No matter what Theo threw at Malfoy, nothing seemed to connect. Malfoy was too quick. Theo was too angry. And Crouch was starting to lose his patience because of it.

Careful to make sure Theo could see what he was doing, Crouch slid his wand between the tendons in Daphne's hand and started to pull.

She managed to free his ankles without difficulty, and then she rose herself up onto her knees and worked on the knots around his wrists.

Her heavy, laboured breath fanned across his face as she worked. She smelled like lilacs and oranges. He hadn't smelled that combination for a long, long time ...

He swallowed thickly. His chest suddenly felt tight.

She looked up at him before she tugged the final rope and it fell away. Without the ropes holding him to the chair - or the strength to hold himself up - he fell forward and into Mustang's open arms.

He was free ... because of her.

She helped him off the chair and they sat on the floor together. It was a good thing she kept her good hand splayed across his chest, he'd of toppled over if she weren't propping him upright.

"Why ... " he asked, unable to take his eyes off the mess of blood and raw muscle of her mutilated hand. "Why have you ... done that ... for me?"

Mustang smiled at him for a moment, just a small smile, but it was warm and sweet and genuine. His heart skipped a beat because of it. She looked down and smile lines appeared around her eyes as she stared his tattoo.

He opened his mouth to ask what she was doing, but then she dipped her head and kissed the ink on the back of his hand.

"I don't ... " Theo whispered, the walls of his throat almost as thick and tight as those around his heart. That odd feeling was back, the one he always felt when Mustang was around. His stomach twisted to the point he wanted to be sick. The hollowness in his chest became painful. "I don't understand why ... why ..." *'Not now'*, she mouthed, shaking her head. *'No time'*? She caught his wrists and tried to pull him to his feet, but he just didn't have the strength to stand on his own. Crouch had done a better job than Theo thought.

He hissed in pain and collapsed onto the floor, but to his surprise, Mustang didn't give up on him. She walked over to the metal table and started riffling through the bottles of Blood Replenishing potion Crouch had used on him earlier. She didn't find anything. They were all empty.

After a minute of frantic searching, she slammed her hands down on the table and sighed silently. She looked at him with a desperate expression before she came back and knelt on the floor beside him. She gripped his waist, dipped her head and

And she'd been prepared to hide her smile and let him.

Waking up without him now felt ... odd. The sofa felt empty. The air around her waist suddenly felt naked and exposed, lacking his weight, the protectiveness that she felt when his arms were around her.

She thought about just going to him herself. Thought about slipping off her sofa, walking over to his and just lifting his blanket and slipping in beside him. She would probably fit. There was a little room for her ...

But he looked so peaceful and she just didn't have the heart to wake him yet. He needed the rest, and with the horrible task they all needed to do today, he needed as much of it as possible.

So, moving very quietly, Hermione got off the sofa, grabbed the little duffle bag of belongings that she'd brought to the safehouse weeks ago, and tiptoed to the bathroom.

She washed as quickly and silently as she could, letting magic do most of the hard work for her - because only fucking magic could tackle the absolute jungle that was her wild mess of curls. Once she'd changed into a pair of black jeans, a black vest, and a coffee-coloured cardigan, she exited the bathroom and made her way to the kitchen.

She quietly searched the cupboards for the mugs, and once she'd discovered where Quinzel had hidden them, she grabbed the red one and started to look for the kettle.

It was an ancient kitchen appliance, the same type that her Grandma and Grandad used to have that needed to be boiled over a fire. She started running through warming charms in her head, but when she touched the thin iron handle, she found that it was hot. Not piping hot. It didn't hurt her to touch it, but it was warm. Warm enough to mean that someone must have used it recently.

Hermione let go of the handle and looked towards the bottom of the stairs. Everyone else's bedrooms were on the second floor. She'd been up for a while and she was sure she'd have heard someone come down the stairs and make themselves a brew, but then again, she'd been dead to the world not an hour ago and almost everyone in the house could use magic. Whoever it was could have easily cast a silencing charm on their feet or staircase to avoid waking her and Malfoy.

She supposed she should just be thankful there was still enough water left in it for her to use. She shook her head as she prepared herself a tea, and after peeking

her head into the living room again and seeing that Malfoy was still soundly asleep, she padded her way to the front door.

For a split second, Hermione thought it was Astoria sitting on the yellow picnic blanket. She had the same tiny waist and slender arms. Same dainty, bony fingers. Same beautifully styled blonde hair.

The Glamour charms on her face were almost identical to Astoria's. So were the huge chandelier earrings and the black tea-cut dress she was wearing. Even the way she was sitting reminded Hermione of Astoria, back straight, shoulders square and head held high, perfect posture, the picture of elegance.

She had a cup of coffee in her right hand, and it was the snake tattoo that was etched there that gave her away.

When Daphne turned around and saw Hermione hovering in the doorway, she smiled sweetly, dimples and all. She looked much more like the Daphne in Draco's memories.

"Hello Hermione." The potions Quinzel had given her for her voice the night before had worked wonders. The gruffness was gone. Her voice was soft and gentle again. Almost dove-like.

"Hello," Hermione greeted, suddenly a little uncomfortable. She didn't want to intrude on Daphne's peace. "I'm sorry. I didn't realise you were out here. I can go back inside and -"

"Don't be daft," Daphne said softly. "It's a lovely morning. Come and sit with me," she added, gesturing with her free hand to the space beside her.

Hermione smiled back and was about to sit on the grass -

"I don't have Black Cat Flu," Daphne said, watching Hermione closely. "You can sit on the blanket with me."

Hermione nodded and accepted her invitation. She sat on the very edge, giving Daphne as much space as she could manage.

The blonde studied Hermione from over the top of her cup as she took a sip of her coffee. "You can relax. I'm not going to crumble into a million pieces if your leg accidentally brushes against mine."

"I understand. It's just .. when we were at Crouch's manor and I grabbed your shoulder -"

"That's because I thought you were him, that's all," Daphne cut her off, her voice somehow managing to keep the dove-like weightlessness despite the authority it carried. "I wouldn't have reacted that way if I'd known it was you."

"I know. I wouldn't blame you if you did though, after everything you've been through."

Daphne's brows twitched and she looked back towards the field.

"If you want to talk about it - "

"I don't."

Hermione dropped the subject immediately. If Daphne didn't want to talk about what'd happened to her, then that was her choice to make. So instead of pressing her further, Hermione followed her lead and looked out onto the fields with her.

The sun was starting to set over the hills and a gentle breeze was sweeping in from the West, making the fields of corn and grain that hid the farmhouse cbb and sway gently, almost made it look like they were dancing. To the left, Hermione could see the tip of Narcissa's snout poking out of the bunker she was sleeping in, her nostrils flaring and relaxing every few seconds as she snored quietly.

"Quinzel says there's a soil patch over there that's perfect for planting potatoes," Daphne said after a long time, pointing to the field on the right.

Hermione couldn't force herself to smile. "Then that's where we should bury him."

Neither of them said his name. They didn't need to. They both knew they were talking about Romy. Today was going to be his funeral, and as much as everyone was thrilled to have Daphne back and safe and alive, everyone felt the sadness that hung over the farmhouse because of his absence.

'The safe house... it didn't feel like a home without him.'

They fell into silence again after that. It was quiet outside. Serene. Hermione could even hear the gentle rustle of the wheat in the field as they danced against each other in the wind.

It was a peaceful little oasis. She wondered if Malfoy had realised that when he'd picked it as the safehouse ...

A little while later, Narcissa half-yawned, half-growled and rose from the bunker. She shook the sleep off her scales and stretched her wings, and when her red eyes

They were so close to victory. Voldemort was so weak now. It would only be a matter of time.

The group probably should have discussed the next phase of their plan the night before, but by the time they got back to the safe house they were running on nothing but adrenaline. Bringing Daphne back home brought a fresh wave of energy into the house, everyone was so happy and buzzed the air felt electric, but it couldn't sustain them for long, and eventually, everyone had been forced to retire for the night.

After Hermione and Malfoy had dragged Grouch into the basement - and placed half a dozen strong wards to keep him there - exhaustion won out and a weird musical chairs-like game began in regards to sleeping arrangements.

They laid Theo down to rest in what he'd already declared as his bedroom. Quinzel took visual in the rocking chair in the corner. The elf reassured everyone that Theo just needed rest, but she wanted to be close, just in case he needed anything.

Angel and Chester showered and slept in Malfoy's room.

Astoria and Daphne spent the night in her and Blaise's bedroom.

Blaise elected himself to take the first guard watching Crouch, insisting that despite his injuries - he was the best person for the job as he had been '*resting all day while everyone else had been nsgfhl*'

Hermione had opted for the ancient sofa in the living room. She told the others it was because she wanted to be next to the basement door in case Crouch got through her wards, but secretly she just wanted to be next to the fireplace. Wanted to watch the fire crackle and pop because she knew it would send her right off to sleep.

When she'd gotten settled on the sofa and wrapped herself up in a thick blanket, Malfoy had nodded goodnight to her and disappeared into the basement with Blaise. Hermione had no idea what time he'd finally come back upstairs and gone to sleep.

She wouldn't admit it out loud, but when she'd woken up and seen him on a different sofa to her, she was a little surprised. And a little hurt.

When she'd closed her eyes, she hadn't really expected it to be goodnight. She'd expected to drift off alone, but then feel her blanket lift some hours later. She'd expected to feel the sofa dip behind her and feel him slip under the blanket. She'd expected to feel his arms snake around her waist and his lips on her neck, and then she'd expected him to fuck her.

She'd never anyone look so completely different when they were sleeping from what they did when they were awake. It was like he was a different person. A younger, less angry version of himself. Sleep took years off him. It took the war off him. He looked free. Peaceful, and she couldn't help but be a little mesmerised by it.

She watched him sleep for a long time. Watched the gentle rise and fall of his chest as he slept and the way it made the *Sectumsempra* scars on his neck and chest glisten in the light of the fire.

Every so often his brow or lip would twitch, reacting to whatever he was dreaming about, and Hermione would smile and wonder what he was doing in his dreams.

In truth, she should probably have been asleep herself. Despite being out cold for over sixteen hours, her eyes and body still begged for more sleep. It probably shouldn't have been surprising really. It felt like she'd been to hell and back in the last two days. So much had happened in such a short space of time. She struggled to recount it all.

In less than forty-eight hours, she'd fought on Voldemort's side of the war, she'd almost been eaten by Acromantula's, stole another Horcrux and handed it over to Ginny, almost been executed, been chased out of Malfoy Manor, helped rescue Theo and bring Daphne back home. There was no fucking wonder her body felt like it'd been trampled over by a herd of angry centaurs.

Just two days ago, Malfoy had been Voldemort's favourite Demon Mask, and now he wanted him dead. Maybe even more than he wanted Harry dead.

Voldemort knew Malfoy, Theo, Blaise and Astoria were the spies. Even though Hermione knew it was true, it still didn't feel real. In all the chaos that'd ensued, she hadn't really had time to process it or what it meant, for their little group or for the Order.

Yes, The Order had lost their spies, but they'd gotten another Horcrux. Harry had probably destroyed it by now, which meant that there was only one more left. The snake. Nagini. That was it. Once she was dead Voldemort would be vulnerable and this would all be over.

All the sneaking around Hermione and Malfoy had done, all the information Astoria had extracted from the Death Eaters, all the evidence Theo and Blaise had planted, it hadn't been for nothing.

caught the two witches sitting together, she made a little chirping noise and started to approach them.

Daphne backed away very quickly, shuffling back and back until she was almost probably best if the blonde gave her plenty of room.

When she was in front of Hermione, Narcissa settled down on the ground and nudged Hermione's leg with the tip of her snout.

"And hello to you too," Hermione murmured as she raised her hand and ran it over the dragon's warm scales.

Narcissa started to purr loudly.

Knowing the dragon, Hermione could see that she was trying to be as gentle as she could. The problem was that she didn't really have any knowledge of her strength - or her size - so when she nestled her snout against Hermione's chest in what was clearly supposed to be an affectionate way, she ended up almost knocking her over.

"Gently, Cissa. *Gently*," Hermione chuckled, lightly pushing the dragon back so she could comfortably scratch the scales underneath her chin. "There we go. That's better, isn't it?"

If Narcissa's purrs weren't confirmation enough, then the way she raised her chin even more so Hermione could *really* get underneath her scales did.

Slowly - but still making sure she stayed well clear of Cissa, and her teeth - Daphne shuffled back to her original place. "I've never seen her be like that with anyone except Draco."

Hermione felt herself smile. She was secretly proud of that fact. Yes, she was proud because - according to Malfoy - Scandinavian Firehorn's were drawn to strength in people, they were drawn to warriors, and so by his definition, that meant that Hermione was strong, but it was more than that.

She liked that there was something else connecting her and Malfoy other than his blood or their matched skills at killing, something only shared between the two of them that wasn't related to the war. Something that was just theirs and theirs alone. She wouldn't admit it, but she was.

There was a beat of silence before Daphne scoffed lightly and said, "So Astoria wasn't exaggerating then."

When the back door creaked open, Malfoy stepped through it. He had looked a little dazed and sleepy at first, but he smiled a little when he saw the three of them together. "Evening, ladies," he greeted huskily.

"Blondie," Daphne smiled.

Malfoy stroked the top of Narcissa's head before he leaned against the wall and pulled out a packet of cigarettes. He put one in his mouth, and once he'd lit it with the tip of his wand, he took it out, flipped it over, and held it out to Hermione.

He brushed the end of the bud against her closed lips, and the way he was looking at her, that lazy, half-asleep smile, it made her want to clench her thighs together.

Hermione didn't say a word. She stared up at him and opened her mouth. His eyes lingered on hers as he slipped the cigarette between her lips -

When Daphne suddenly cleared her throat, Hermione felt as though she was back in Hogwarts. Felt that gut-wrenching, stomach dropping sort of embarrassment that she only ever felt when she was caught doing something she shouldn't have been.

Her head snapped back forward to look at Narcissa and she felt a horrible burn flush her neck and face. She took a deep drag of the cigarette Malfoy had given her. And then another.

She couldn't even look at him when she passed it back to him.

Malfoy didn't seem to mind. He just chuckled quietly in the back of his throat and shook his head.

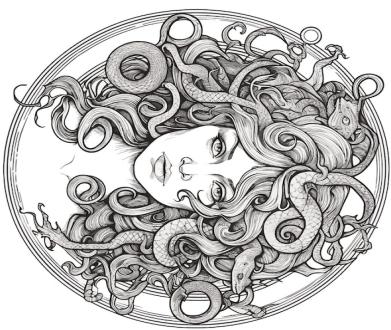
"I think I might know a way to take the wards off Angel and Chester's voice boxes without Grouch," Hermione said, needing to do something to fill the silence before it swallowed her. "It might take me a day or two to sort through it, but I think I can do it."

Malfoy rolled his eyes, but his lazy smile remained. "Of course you have." He closed his eyes and took his first drag of the cigarette, his face caught in that bliss Hermione always felt when the first wave of nicotine slipped down her throat, but when he opened his eyes, his brow's creased.

"What is it?" Hermione asked.

Decided to bury her nose in the blanket she was lying under, listen to the crackling fire next to her and just look at him. Take in all the things that she never really had time to.

## CHAPTER 60



### THEIRS

**2nd April**

When Hermione woke, the first thing she saw was a head of silvery-white hair.

Malfoy was on the opposite side of the living room, fast asleep on the other sofa with a few stray hairs falling onto his face. He was shirtless and had a thick woolen blanket draped across his stomach and legs. His robes and boots were on the floor next to the sofa and his wand - it was still in his hand.

He looked so peaceful, and just for a moment, Hermione decided to watch him.

Decided to bury her nose in the blanket she was lying under, listen to the crackling fire next to her and just look at him. Take in all the things that she never really had time to.

When Daphne finally let Malfoy go, she turned back to Astoria. They really were the mirror image of each other. Same sweet smiles as they looked at each other. Same tears on their faces. Same brown eyes filled with nothing but love.

“You look so beautiful,” Daphne said, cupping Astoria’s face so she could look at her properly. She beamed, practically glowed with pride as she looked at her sister, taking in all the way she’d changed since the last time she saw her, but then -

A deep frown formed between Daphne’s brows as she caught a piece of Astoria’s blonde hair between her fingers.

“What is it?” Astoria fretted.

“Nothing.” Daphne shook her head. “It can wait. What’s important right now is that you’re safe and we’re back together.”

“No, what is it? Tell me.”

“It’s just ... *What the fuck did you do to your hair?*” Daphne asked, words dripping equally in both sarcasm and love, in a way only a sisters could be.

Astoria’s smile remained, even when she started to sob again.

“Why are you crying? It suits you.” Daphne laughed as she pulled Astoria back into her arms. “But tell me you at least had a funeral for me *before* you stole my hairstyle?”

When Malfoy pulled his hand away and showed it to her, there was blood on his thumb.

Hermione frowned and wiped the same area Malfoy had with her hand, and sure enough, when she examined her own fingers, they were the same as Malfoy’s - smeared with her blood.

How strange. She hadn’t even realised that her nose was bleeding. She felt fine. A little cold. Could have done with a few more hours of sleep, but she didn’t feel hurt, and she certainly couldn’t understand why she’d had a nosebleed.

“I feel fine,” Hermione blurted out. “Don’t look at me like that. *I’m fine.*”

The back door creaked open for a second time, and it was Astoria that poked her head through the gap. “The three of you need to start getting ready. We were going to get started soon.”

After a lingering look at Hermione, Malfoy followed Astoria back into the kitchen.

Hermione got up and started to follow him -

“Wait,” Daphne said suddenly, but Malfoy didn’t turn around.

“Hold on,” Hermione said. “He hasn’t heard you. Let me go and get him.”

“Actually, it was you I wanted to talk to.”

Hermione stopped dead in her tracks. “Oh.”

She turned around and watched Daphne drain what was left in her mug before she put her cup on the grass and stood up. She pulled Astoria’s wand from the waist belt of her dress, and after waving it once, the blanket vanished.

"Don't look so frightened," Daphne smiled. "I just wanted to say thank you."

"What for?"

"For saving my brother's life."

Hermione's confusion must have shown on her face because after a few seconds, Daphne added, "After everyone else went to bed last night, Astoria and I stayed up. We stayed up for ages, tucked up in bed and talking just like we used to do when we were little." Daphne smiled fondly and stared up at Astoria's bedroom window. "She told me everything that's happened since I left. I thought she was exaggerating, but she wasn't, you truly saved Draco's life."

Hermione started running through everything that'd happened since she'd been captured, trying to work out what Astoria must have told her sister. She thought about how she'd been captured, she thought about how she'd tried to escape, how he'd reacted when Narcissa had been hurt, how she'd saved his life when -

Oh.

"That was so long ago," Hermione answered. She'd almost forgotten the time she'd plucked bullets out of Malfoy's chest. It seemed like another lifetime. "It was partially my fault. He'd gone out on a mission and he'd been shot with bullets that I'd helped to create before he captured me -"

"I don't mean saved him *physically*, Hermione."

Then what -

"Daph?!" Astoria called. "Hermione! Are you coming?"

"We're coming in now."

Hermione wanted to find out exactly what Daphne meant, but it wasn't fair on Romy. Everyone was already dreading his funeral. It was going to be hard enough as it was, they didn't need Hermione dragging it out anymore for them.

Her fingers curled around the door handle and she went to pull it open -

"Hermione?" came Daphne's voice again.

"Yes?"

When Hermione turned around a final time, Daphne looked nervous. She watched Daphne smooth out the skirt of her already pristine black dress, and then run a hand through her glossy blonde waves before she pulled a section over her shoulder so it ran down the front of her body rather than the back.

"He died yesterday," Blaise answered. "When the Death Eaters attacked the manor, Romy and Theo stayed behind to fight them off so Hermione could save Astoria. He didn't make it out."

Daphne closed her eyes and fresh tears slipped down her face. "I always said he was brave, didn't I? That silly, sweet, potato-loving elf." She held onto her Astoria tighter and kissed the top of her head. "We'll give him the best funeral an elf ever had."

Malfoy nodded but he didn't move, stayed with his back against the wall. Hermione swore she saw his eyes glisten over slightly as he watched the Greengrass sisters, finally reunited, crying and hugging each other as though they'd never been apart.

After a few moments, the sisters broke apart and Daphne reached for Blaise. Hermione had only ever seen Blaise on the cusp of tears once. She'd seen his eyes glisten over when she'd saved Astoria, but when Daphne pulled him into a tight hug and kissed his cheek, Blaise started to sob quietly.

Hermione started to feel tears sting her own eyes for the second time that evening. She wasn't sad, far from it. She saw death and grief daily, she was so used to it that it was almost normal, but this, to see happiness, to see a family filled with so much love finally reunited, it was just so fucking rare that she couldn't help but feel overwhelmed by it.

She was doing a good job of holding back her tears, until Daphne let Blaise go and grabbed Malfoy.

Daphne pried him off the wall and wrapped her arms around his neck. She kissed his cheek just like she had Blaise's, and she whispered something in his ear. Malfoy hugged her just as tightly and whispered something back to her, and when they pulled apart, Hermione couldn't hold back her tears.

Both Draco and Daphne were grinning like idiots. Tears slid down Daphne's face even though she was laughing softly. Malfoy looked like he was on the verge of tears, but he looked happier than Hermione had ever seen him.

He'd gotten his sister back, and the happiness it stirred in him ... Hermione struggled to find words for it, couldn't think of a way to describe the way it made her heart swell to see him smile like that

Quinzel sighed loudly, obviously losing her patience. "Because he said he is going crazy if he is staying in bed whilst others is fighting and he is not. He said he needed to distract his mind and making himself and Quinzel tea would -"

"Darling," Blaise called in a shaky voice, eyes blown wide and locked on Daphne.

"NO!" Quinzel shouted. "MISS IS NOT SUPPOSED TO BE OUT OF BED! MISS IS SUPPOSED TO BE RESTING! BOTH OF YOUS IS SUPPOSED TO BE RESTING!"

Astoria didn't listen.

Everyone looked at the ceiling as they heard her quickly pad her way out of the room above the kitchen. She hurried down the stairs, and when she reached the bottom step and saw Daphne, she looked like she was going to faint.

Quinzel hurried down the stairs after her. She let out a loud squeak and dropped the potion in her hand when she saw Daphne. Both of her little hands flew to her mouth.

"Is it ... " Astoria started to ask, having to place a hand on the wall for support. "Is it really you?"

Daphne smiled and nodded. Tears gathered in her eyes. "Yes."

"I don't ... I don't understand," Astoria whispered. "I don't ... how are you ... how did..." She looked at Daphne in disbelief and shook her head. Her eyes swept to the side, but when she noticed Chester and Angel, the disbelief in her eyes turned to understanding, and when she looked at Daphne, understanding turned to heartbreak.

Just as Astoria started to break down, Daphne crossed the room and scooped her up in her arms. While Astoria sobbed and sobbed in her arms, Daphne looked at Draco with tears in her eyes.

"Thank you," Daphne said, smiling at him from over the top of Astoria's head. "You did it. You kept your promise to me. You kept our family safe."

Malfoy looked at the floor. "Not everyone."

Daphne's brow furrowed and she looked around the room, visibly doing a head count. "Where's Romy?"

"Do I look alright?" Daphne asked, fidgeting with her nails.

"You look beautiful." It wasn't a lie. She did look stunning, like something out of a black and white Hollywood film, but Hermione was a little taken aback by the question.

"Do you think Theo will think so?"

"Of course he will."

Daphne nodded but she didn't look any more at ease. She looked at her warped reflection in the kitchen window and pulled more hair over her shoulder and angled it in front of her waist.

"Why do you ask?"

"Because he hasn't spoken to me since we escaped."

"Malfoy did hit him very hard yesterday. He's been knocked out since..."

"He's been awake for hours," Daphne interrupted. "He came out here a little while before you did."

"And?" Hermione asked. "What did he say?"

Daphne went quiet. She bit the inside of her cheek and her perfect brows dipped in frustration. "Nothing. He took one look at me and went straight back inside."

Hermione blinked, at a loss for words. She knew Daphne wasn't lying, but it seemed so unlike Theo. He'd have done anything to get Daphne back. He almost killed Hermione to save her, so why would he suddenly not want to be around her?

Daphne looked incredibly uncomfortable. She started to absentmindedly run her thumb over her tattoo as she stared at her reflection. "You don't think ... after what Grouch did to me ... you don't think it ... you don't think it's made Theo ..." She took a deep breath and looked at Hermione again. "You don't think it's made Theo change his mind about me, do you?"

Now, that was one question Hermione did know the answer to.

"Not at all," she said immediately. "Theo loves you more than anything in the world, and that sort of love doesn't die. It doesn't change and it doesn't go away. Medusa and this whole betrayal was born out of his love for you. He used to spend hours sitting at your grave even though he knew you weren't buried there. He used to sit out there all night, no matter the weather, just so he could be close to you in whatever way he could have you. He's never stopped loving you. Ever. And nothing Crouch or anyone else did to you could change that."

"I hope you're right. I don't know what I'd do if he didn't want me anymore."

undoubtedly done a superb job with her healing, the left side of Blaise's face was almost unrecognisable.

There were deep, pinkish scars that looked like hairline fractures in his skin. They stretched up from his collarbone, the left side of his lips, his cheekbone, through his eyebrow, right through his hairline and to the top of his skull. Luckily, the curse had missed his eye, but the damage was still there. The scars were permanent and irreversible, just like Malfoy's were.

Blaise stared as they all entered the safehouse one by one. He looked understandably angry when he saw Crouch, he looked shocked when he saw Theo and confused when he saw Angel and Chester.

"What in the world -" Blaise started to scold, but when Daphne stepped into the kitchen, he was lost for words.

"Evenin' Zabini," Daphne smiled.

Blaise's brows furrowed and he opened his mouth, but no sound came out. After a few seconds, he swallowed and released a very slow, very shaky breath.

"What's the matter?" Daphne asked, a smile in her voice. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

Hermione almost chuckled. Malfoy had told her once before that Daphne had the same dry - and sometimes cruel - sense of humour as Theo.

Blaise blinked and his eyes looked wet.

When a feminine voice stirred from upstairs, and Daphne's face lit up.

"Blaise?" called Astoria. She sounded very groggy and quiet, like she'd just woken up herself. "Where ... where is he?"

"You need to get back in bed," came Quinzel's stern voice from above their heads. "You need to rest."

"WHERE IS BLAISE?!"

"He is alright, Miss," Quinzel shushed, obviously trying to calm Astoria down. "He woke up a little while ago and said he is wanting to make a cup of tea."

"TEA? HE'S MAKING TEA? HE WAS ALMOST KILLED! ROMY WAS WHY IS HE MAKING TEA?!"

Even though Astoria's voice was high and frantic, upon hearing it, Daphne's grin stretched so wide dimples appeared on her face.

But the seconds ticked on and she didn't hear it.  
This couldn't be happening.

Not again

"Come on, Malfoy," she repeated. "Come on. Make it through. Make it through.  
Please, please make -"

Crack.

She was in his arms in an instant, had no recollection of if she reached for him first or if he dragged her there. It didn't matter. All that mattered was that his strong arms were wrapped protectively around her. All that mattered was that he was there. That she hadn't left him behind.

It took everything in her to not just sob with relief.

Daphne, Angel and Chester must have felt the same because when Malfoy and Hermione broke apart, she saw the three girls locked in a similar embrace. Their three heads all pressed together. A tangle of limbs and embraces and tears in what must have been a shared and unimaginable joy as they contemplated their freedom.

This time everyone had made it through. This time everyone was safe, and Hermione could breathe a little easier because of it.

With both Theo and Crouch still unconscious, Malfoy carefully levitated their bodies behind him as he led everyone towards the farmhouse.

Hermione stepped in front of him so she could open the kitchen door, and she held it wide open so Malfoy could levitate their newest houseguest inside with ease.

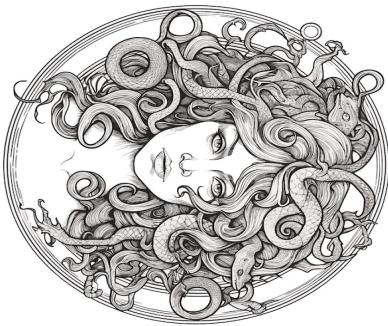
"You're back."

The kitchen was still very dark given the early hours, but there were enough candles for Hermione to see Blaise standing over the ancient kitchen table, preparing what looked like two mugs of tea.

Blaise's eyes were a little glassy and his voice a little monotone and slow - Quinzel had probably shoved every pain potion they had in stock down his throat. He looked a little wobbly, but he was a lot better than he had the last time Hermione had seen him.

His silk, black shirt was open just enough to see the surgical bandages on his shoulder where the Sectumsempra curse had hit him. And although Quinzel had

## IT'S CALLED THERAPY, DARLING. LOOK IT UP



**2nd April**

True to their words, they gave Romy the best funeral they could.

It was sweet, but heartfelt. Short, but emotional. Small, but filled with his closest friends and the people who cared for him.

Just before 9 o'clock in the evening, they gathered around the soil patch that Quinzel had already picked out, all dressed in black, and they buried him together. They used magic to lower his body into the ground, they laid seeds and trinkets beside him, they laid soil around him and flowers on top of him, and afterwards,

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they all raised their wands, and beautiful, luscious green vines started to sprout from the ground.

Quinzel had been right, it was a perfect place to plant potatoes. Romy would have loved it.

Hermione had promised Angel and Chester that she'd start work on taking the charms off their voice boxes in the morning, so after Romy's burial, the two girls decided to retreat to bed and get their rest and leave the people who knew Romy best to grieve over him together.

Quinzel didn't attend the wake either. She had a shot of whiskey with the group to honour Romy - which was twice as large as anyone else's - and then hiccupped her way up the stairs and took herself to bed. She said she was too upset and she didn't want to ruin Romy's funeral with her sadness. Said she'd rather be on her own, and although Astoria had tried to persuade her otherwise, she wasn't having any of it.

Once they'd laid the tiny elf to rest, those who remained sat around the kitchen table, opened a bottle of whiskey - or two - and told as many stories about Romy as they could remember.

Astoria kicked off the laughs when she retold how Romy had walked in on her and Blaise once when they were having sex. "*The poor little sod didn't know what to do or where to look!*" Astoria had cried with laughter. "*He just apologised and then ran away!* *He was mortified, bless him!* *He was so concerned that he'd embarrassed me that he covered his eyes straight away, but then he couldn't see where he was going and ran straight into the wall!!*"

Whiskey had almost spit out of Blaise's nose when Daphne told the story of how Romy had almost given Nagini poison instead of feed once. "*It wouldn't have actually killed her though, would it?*" Blaise had asked. "*She's a Horcrux. Surely she'd have been fine?*" "Who knows?" Daphne had shrugged. "All I know is that for weeks afterwards, he was twiddling his thumbs and every time the front door burst open he'd shriek and hide!"

"Can you imagine if it'd worked and she'd died?!" Astoria had laughed. "The darkest wizard of all time, brought down by a teeny tiny house elf?!"

Those stories were wonderful but there were other stories shared too, ones that spoke of Romy's bravery and his enormous heart.

Astoria teared up when Blaise told everyone how Romy had helped him pick out Astoria's engagement ring.

More and more Death Eaters arrived at the border, but with Voldemort's armies whittled down to the bare bones, they were just Black Masks, inexperienced and scared.

Hermione and Malfoy were able to pick them off quickly.

Angel and Chester struggled as they ran across the grounds but they managed to keep up. Just about.

When they were about twenty feet away from the border, dozens more Black Masks Apparated on the field. Narcissa roared when they started to form a circle around her, but they should have known better than to try and ambush a dragon. As they started to close in, Narcissa reared on her back legs and stretched her wings, and when they started to attack, she opened her mouth and a wall of blazing fire was born.

The Death Eaters that were standing in front of her died instantly. Narcissa twisted her head from side to side like a snake to capture as many Death Eaters in the fire as she could. And any survivors, she ate.

Daphne managed to pick off one or two, but she hadn't used magic in years so understandably most of her attacks missed.

There were only ten Death Eaters left when they reached the end of the Anti-Apparation wards. Once everyone was safe across it, Hermione waved her wand and Narcissa disappeared, as instantly as if someone had thrown a huge invisibility cloak over her.

They couldn't see the dragon and they couldn't hear her enormous wings crack against the air as she took flight. If the air didn't reek of burning flesh and there weren't flaming corpses scattered up and down the grounds, Hermione wouldn't have believed that there had been a dragon there at all.

Hermione made sure Theo's sleeping form was still behind her, and then she grabbed Daphne and Angel, thought of the farmhouse, and Apparated. She closed her eyes as the ground vanished from beneath her boots and the air felt like it had been sucked out of her lungs.

The first thing she did when she landed on the other side was do a headcount.

Angel. Daphne. Theo - but no Malfoy. No Chester. No Crouch.

"Come on," she whispered under her breath, staring at the empty patch of grass beside her, waiting for the crack, that wonderful sound that meant she wasn't alone, that Malfoy hadn't gotten lost behind her.

Daphne didn't look entirely confident, but she nodded and gripped the wand tightly. "What's the plan? There are probably too many for us to fight off now."

"If we move now, we should have a chance," Malfoy said. "The Death Eaters can only Apparate onto the very edge of the property line because of the Anti-Apparation wards Crouch set up, so it means we need to make it through the grounds and past that point to escape."

Daphne nodded and watched as Hermione did a similar thing to Theo, casting a charm to levitate his body and make sure it followed her.

"Narcissa is waiting for us outside and she can disintegrate most of the Death Eaters that are already there. We can pick off others as we make our way through the grounds," Malfoy continued. "Once we make it past the Anti-Apparation wards, grab either myself or Granger, and we can Apparate everyone to the safe house."

"And then we just leave the dragon here to fend for herself?" Daphne asked.

Hermione looked at Malfoy. "I can cast another Disillusionment charm on her?"

He nodded curtly and told Angel and Chester to be ready to make a run for it.

Daphne made a face that looked the spitting image of Astoria's when she disapproved of something. "Would a Disillusionment charm work on Gissa?"

"It's how we were able to sneak into Crouch's estate in the first place," Hermione answered. "Given her size, they only last three minutes or so, but it's long enough for her to lose herself in the clouds and escape."

There really wasn't anything else left to say after that. No tender embraces or reunions or kind words. They simply didn't have the time.

Hermione flicked her wand towards the front doors, they swung open, and the group broke out into a sprint.

They saw Narcissa as soon as they were out of the house. She was maybe fifty feet away, bordering on the edge of the Anti-Apparation ward with her jaws wide open and a fountain of molten fire exploding from her mouth.

The Death Eaters that surrounded her didn't stand a chance.

Their curses bounced off her thick black scales and wings like they were nothing, and if they weren't set ablaze by her fiery breath, then she tore them to pieces with her teeth and claws.

Hermione told everyone how sweet and kind Romy had been to her when she'd first been captured. How, even though she was supposed to be his enemy, he'd done everything within his power to try and make her feel safe and at home.

And there wasn't a dry eye in the room when Malfoy told everyone how much Romy had helped him after Voldemort had killed his parents, even though it meant putting himself at great risk.

"After he killed them, he sent Greyback to come and collect their bodies," Malfoy said, eyes on the almost drained whiskey glass on the table. "They tore my mother's body out of my arms. I was so out of it, I don't remember what happened very clearly. I just remember that I hadn't taken their wedding rings off yet and Greyback was trying to take their bodies away." He lightly wrapped his fingers around the glass and started to rotate it slightly, swirling the liquid inside. "I tried to tell them that I just wanted their wedding rings but they just laughed and mocked me. I remember feeling desperate and just wanting to get their rings off their fingers and then Romy ... he did the most selfless, bravest thing I'd ever seen. He attacked Greyback. Sent a bloody book soaring across the room so that it hit the back of Greyback's head, and I was able to slip both their rings off while he was distracted." He scoffed lightly under his breath. "I thought Greyback was going to skin him alive but Romy managed to convince him it was Nargles that did it."

"I didn't know that!" Astoria gasped. "He never said!"

"It was one of the days your blood curse had flared up," Malfoy said. "You were in bed and dead to the world and Romy didn't want anyone to know."

Astoria leaned back in her chair and stared out the window. It looked like she was looking out towards Romy's grave.

"After they took their bodies, Voldemort said I wasn't allowed to clean up. He wanted their blood to rot and soak into the walls for at least a week so I would be reminded of what would happen if I failed or disappointed him again. Romy ordered me to go upstairs and get myself cleaned up. I was so out of it that I just did as he said, didn't even bother to question why I was taking orders from a house-elf." Malfoy frowned down at this glass for a moment before he brought it to his lips and drained what was left. "When I came back downstairs, the blood was gone and the parlour room was just as it'd been before."

"I can't believe he did that." Blaise took a swig of his whiskey. He shook his head in astonishment as he put the empty glass back on the table. "Voldemort would have had his ... he'd have killed him if he'd have caught him doing that."

*'Voldemort would have had his head if he'd have found out'.* That was what Blaise had almost said. Hermione was glad he didn't say it, but she was more surprised that Theo hadn't. It was definitely something he would normally do, make a very dark joke at a very tense moment as a way to lighten the mood. But he hadn't. The punchline was right there and he didn't take it. He hadn't said anything, just like he hadn't said anything all day.

Hermione wasn't sure if it was what Daphne had said, or the sad look in her eyes when she'd said it, but after their conversation outside, Hermione found herself watching Theo.

She'd started with just sly little glances here and there out the corner of her eyes but before too long, she found herself practically gawking at him for minutes at a time - because Daphne had been right. Theo was avoiding her.

He'd stared distantly out the window when the group had met in the kitchen before Romy's funeral.

He'd looked at the ground throughout the ceremony - despite Daphne's subtle attempts to catch his eye - and by the time the group had met in the kitchen for Romy's wake, he still hadn't glanced in her direction. Not once.

Even then at the wake, he'd sat as far away from Daphne as the kitchen table allowed. He sat on the other side with his hand curled around his glass and his eyes on the floor while Daphne just stared right at him. She'd given up on trying to be subtle a while ago.

Malfoy seemed to notice it too. A few times throughout the day, Hermione had seen him look at Theo, then at Daphne, then back to Theo before he'd shake his head and bring his attention back to whatever he was doing.

Another woman might have been upset about being ignored by their significant other, especially after being separated for so long. Daphne certainly was at first, but after being ignored all day, she looked ready for a fight.

The phrase *'If looks could kill'* had been whirling around Hermione's head since they'd sat down.

"Did Romy say anything to you about it afterwards?" Astoria asked.

"He said that Voldemort had ordered me not to clean up their blood, but he'd never said anything about Romy not cleaning it."

"Absolutely," Hermione agreed.

"And he's to be heavily sedated."

"I agree."

More cracks of Apparation could be heard outside.

"And under constant guard."

"Yes!" Hermione nodded frantically. "Yes, of course. He won't be able to get anywhere near you, I promise!"

There was an almost deafening growl outside, then the windows started to light up with fire. Several Death Eaters could be heard screaming over the flames. Narcissa must have been on the attack.

Hermione looked at Chester and Angel. "Are either of you witches?"

Both girls shook their heads.

"How many more girls are there upstairs?"

"None," Daphne answered. "Only the four of us were left tonight. Crouch lent all the others out to the remaining Black Masks. He used them as party favours to ensure they'd come when he called them."

"Where's the girl with the brown-"

When Daphne nodded to the hallway, Hermione followed her gaze. Kitten was on the floor, lying on her back with her eyes wide open and her torso about five feet away from her.

She'd been hit with one of the curses either Malfoy or Theo had deflected.

Hermione sighed and turned back to Daphne. She reached into her robes and pulled out another wand. Astoria's wand.

Daphne's expression softened as Hermione handed her the slender wooden tool. Her eyes lingered briefly on the elegant handle that was made entirely of Rose Quartz crystal, something that so obviously belonged to her sister.

"Are you going to be ok?" Hermione asked.

In the time the girls had been plotting, Malfoy had knocked Grouch out, levitated his unconscious body into the air, and charmed it so that it followed him when he walked.

But Malfoy wasn't done with him.

He pushed his boot harder into Crouch's neck and he didn't stop until an audible crunching sound echoed through the room. "Now unlink your life from Daphne's."

Crouch choked under Malfoy's boot. His eyes started to bulge, and his face began to turn red.

"I won't ask again!" Malfoy pressed down harder. The sparks at the end of his wand grew brighter. "Remove whatever fucking spell you used to link your life from Daphne's!"

"I-I!" Crouch choked.

"What was that, Crouch?! Can't hear you! Try again!"

It took a few more tries, but Crouch managed to sputter out one word that was audible enough to understand. "Can't!"

Malfoy lifted his boot and grabbed Crouch by the collar. He dragged the man up until they were nose to nose and Crouch's toes were dangling limply in the air. "What do you mean 'can't'?"

Hermione heard Narcissa roar loudly from outside. She glanced down at Crouch's pocket watch.

"G-can't be ... removed ... once put in place ... all their lives ... linked to mine."

"Draco, we need to go!" Hermione shouted. "We'll just have to take him with us!"

Daphne was on her feet in an instant. "Absolutely not!"

"We'll make sure he's securely bound and locked away," Hermione said softly, trying to ease the panic that was etched all over Daphne's face. "He won't be able to hurt you again, but if it's true and his life really can't be unlinked to yours, we can't leave him here. If he's at the safehouse with us, we can keep an eye on him and make sure he stays alive."

Narcissa roared again. They heard several loud popping sounds coming from outside.

The Death Eaters were starting to arrive.

"I want him chained up," Daphne answered quickly, voice stern and eyes turning cold. "And locked away somewhere secure."

Daphne started to drum her nails against the wooden table. Again, she wasn't subtle about it. She was trying to get Theo's attention in any way she could. Everyone looked at her briefly and then turned their attention back towards Malfoy.

Theo was the only one who didn't look.

Astoria smiled over the top of her glass. "That's not what Voldemort meant and Romy knew it."

Hermione discreetly took another look at Daphne. She looked like she was ready to combust. Her lips were pressed into a tight line and her eyes were almost narrowed to slits.

"Of course he did," Blaise said, his eyes drifting over to Astoria. "He wasn't nearly as daft as he let everyone think that he was."

Astoria cocked her head to the side and smiled playfully at her husband. "Why did you look at me when you said that?"

"Because, my dear wife," Blaise smiled, making the scars on the left side of his face pull taunt, "if you traded in your love of shoes and diamonds for potatoes, then you and Romy would have been the same person."

"Theo," Daphne's voice came out of nowhere. Everyone around the table turned to see her still staring at Theo. "Look at me."

Five pairs of eyes swept to the other side of the dining table to look at Theo. He hadn't moved. He'd gone very still and was staring at the old, tiled floor as though it held the age of secret of immortality.

"Theo," Daphne repeated, her voice starting to get louder, a little more irritated. "Look at me."

Theo didn't move.

"Theo."

Nothing. Daphne might as well have still had the silencing charms on her voice.

"Theo!"

Again, nothing. Not even the twitch of the muscles in his hand.

"THEO!" Daphne lurched to her feet. She slammed her open palms down on the table with enough force to shake the wood and finally, finally, Theo looked at her. His jaw was tight and his eyes were hard, but he was looking at her.

"What's going on?" Astoria had been completely oblivious all day and her brown eyes burned with concern as she looked between the two of them.

"What's going on," Daphne snarled, lip curling back to expose her teeth, "is that since we've escaped, my husband can barely look at me!"

Astoria inhaled sharply and looked at Theo. "That's not true, is it?"

Theo didn't answer. He didn't look away from Daphne but he didn't answer the question, and it only seemed to rile Daphne up even more.

As Hermione looked between the two of them, she couldn't decide which was worse; the pain in Daphne's eyes or the sadness in Theo's.

"It's Crouch, isn't it?" As if someone had charmed it away, all of the anger slid off her face and her voice lost all of its venom. "Is that ... is that all you see when you look at me now?"

Theo looked away from her again. His tattooed hand curled into a tight fist against the table. "No, that's not it. That's not ..."

The way Daphne's lips started to quiver was covered by her half of the snake tattoo when she put her hand over her mouth. "You're lying. Every time you look at me, you just see what Crouch did to me, don't you? That's why you won't look at me anymore. That's why you won't touch me ..."

Theo fell silent again. He clenched his jaw tightly and stared down at his whiskey glass.

"Crouch said that this would happen ..." Daphne's voice shook terribly. Her words started to come out in quick, panicked little pants like she was struggling to breathe. Black mascara-filled tears started to escape her eyes. "He said that you wouldn't want me after he'd had me ... He used to tell me that all the time ... every time he ... he said that if you ever found me or if I ever escaped that you wouldn't want me ... he said that I ... that I was better off with him."

Hermione started to get up, but Malfoy's hand locked around her wrist like an iron bar keeping her in place. He pulled her back into her chair and discreetly shook his head at her. He thought they needed to work this out between the two of them.

"That's not the reason, Daph."

"Then what is?"

Daphne's brow creased. She looked down at Theo and pushed away the hair that had fallen onto his face.

"Drink these and let me heal your hand," Hermione said softly. "If you let me help you, then we can both help him," she added, nodding towards Theo.

Immediately, Daphne took the potion, drank it, and allowed Hermione to heal her. And while Daphne fussed over Theo's unconscious body - and Hermione fussed over Daphne and did her best to heal her hand - Malfoy stormed over to Crouch and stamped his boot right down on Crouch's neck.

"UNLOCK THE FUCKING DOORS!" Malfoy roared.

When Crouch laughed manically, blood spilt from the edges of his mouth. "Already told you," he grinned, flashing his blood-covered, rotting gums. "If you want out, you're going to have to kill me."

Hermione glanced at Crouch's watch. They only had seconds before the other Death Eaters would start to arrive.

Malfoy twisted around slightly so that he was looking down at Crouch's legs, and then cast a strong and extremely vicious slicing curse against Crouch's hips.

The sound that came out of Crouch's mouth was inhuman. He wailed like a wounded animal. He tried to sit up and protect himself, but Malfoy crushed his boot harder into his windpipe and crushed him to the floor.

Thick blood pooled on the floor around Crouch's hips. He was bleeding a lot. A lot more than what Hermione considered safe - given that his life was linked to the girls'. Before she could remind Malfoy of that, he cast a charm to slow the bleeding to a slow trickle.

But judging from the way Crouch continued to scream, it did nothing to dull the pain he was in.

That thought alone made Hermione smile a little inside. He deserved so much worse.

"That's one of your balls gone mate," Malfoy hissed. "Next slicing curse takes your cock off." His wand sparked with magic as he aimed at Crouch's pelvis. "NOW TAKE THE FUCKING CHARMS OFF THE DOOR!"

Even though he was on the very edge of consciousness, Malfoy's threat seemed to reach Crouch. It took a great deal of effort, he managed to wave his wand and remove the locking charms he'd put on his manor.

Moving on instinct, Hermione raised her wand towards Daphne and cast the strongest Mufflato she could.

The abrupt way Daphne's screams cut off startled everyone in the room.

Theo looked at Daphne in a blind panic - his initial fear probably that she was dead.

Crouch did the same thing, and then, in perfect sync with one another - almost like they were sharing the same magic and the same wand - Hermione and Malfoy both cast an Expelliarmus.

Malfoy's caught Theo in the centre of his chest and was strong enough to sweep him off his feet and send him flying into the air. The fall was enough to knock him out cold.

Hermione's curse managed to catch Crouch on the shoulder. It made him hiss in pain. He let go of Daphne and as she fell to the floor, Hermione conjured thick ropes that wrapped around Crouch's body and legs until he could no longer stand.

When Crouch fell backwards and onto the floor with a loud thud, Daphne awkwardly crawled across the room until she was hovering over Theo. She started to stroke his face and hair with her good hand, and Hermione removed the Mufflato she'd cast to hear her sob.

"*Baby?* Baby are you alright? Oh Salazar he's not... he's not..."

"No, he's fine," Hermione answered as she knelt beside Daphne. She kept her eyes down and fumbled with the potions in her bag. She pulled out two Blood Replenishing potions and pulled the corks off with her teeth. "I promise you, he's fine, but you need to drink these."

Daphne ignored her entirely. She kept sobbing quietly and running her good hand over Theo, looking for a pulse.

After everything Crouch had done to Daphne, it was no wonder she flinched and jumped when Hermione placed a hand on her shoulder.

Hermione held her palm up to show that she meant no harm. She was just trying to help, but they didn't have time to take things slow.

"Daphne please, the other Death Eaters will be here any moment," Hermione persisted, eying the mess that was Daphne's hand. "I promise, Theo is alive. Malfoy and I can get you both out of here, but we can't do that if you're struggling to stand."

Theo suddenly looked at Daphne again and when he did, his expression was just as furious as hers had been, even if his eyes were still sad. "Because you're acting as though it never happened!"

No one around the table spoke.

"Look at you," Theo said, raising his tattooed hand and waving it over her. "Your hair, your face, your clothes! It's like it never happened, but you can't glamour over everything! You can't glamour over what he did to you!"

"Well can you blame her for trying?" Hermione couldn't stop herself. She'd heard enough.

"No, I don't blame her," Theo snapped. "But that doesn't change the fact that what happened, happened. Putting some glamours on and a pretty frock doesn't change anything!"

"Well, what would you have me do then Theo?" Daphne shouted, tears still sliding down her cheeks. "Would you prefer I just sit here and cry and get it all out?"

Something flashed dangerously behind Theo's eyes. "Yes! Yes, I fucking would, because that's what you do Daph! You don't hide from your problems! You talk about them and you face them head-on! That's what you and Draco used to do all the time! When things got too much and you needed to get them out, you went into a room together, locked the door, and talked until you got it all off your chest because it always made you feel better! It always made you feel like you weren't alone! You're not going to heal from this if you don't talk..."

The way Daphne's eyes flickered to Theo stopped him dead in his tracks. "Not on the table and making everyone flinch. "This happened to *me!* Not to you, or Draco or Hermione or anyone else sitting around this table! It happened to *me!* Me! It is my pain! And I will deal with my pain my way!"

"But you're not fucking dealing with it in your way! You're doing this for me! You're putting on your pretty dresses and doing your hair because you're doing what you always fucking do and you're protecting me!"

Daphne blinked back tears. "What?"

Theo sighed heavily and stared at her from across the table. "I know what you're trying to do," he said. "This isn't just about Crouch and you, it's about me, too. The reason you're trying to pretend like it never happened is because you don't want me to see how much I failed you. You were caught because I wouldn't attack that

hospital. Grouch took you because of me. I failed you as a partner on the battlefield, and I failed you as a husband.”

Daphne started to shake her head, but Theo carried on speaking.

“If you’re going to heal from this, you need to talk about it Daph, because that’s who you are,” he added softly. “You need to let it out and do what’s best for you, no matter what it costs me.” His voice started to break and quiver. “All you’ve ever done since the war started is protect me, no matter what it meant for you, but this ... this thing that Grouch did to you ... it’s going to eat you from the inside out if you don’t let it out.”

Astoria looked between the two of them with glistening eyes, and judging from the look on her face, she agreed with Theo.

“No one is going to force you to do anything you’re not comfortable with,” Theo said. “If you honestly don’t want to talk about it then you don’t have to. I’ll drop this whole thing and I won’t mention it ever again, but if you do, don’t keep it inside because you think it will break my heart. It’s ... it’s been broken since the day I watched you die.”

After a long while, Daphne sighed loudly and dropped her head. She slowly sank into her chair again and wiped away the tears that’d fallen onto her face. “I’ll talk about it. Just this once.”

“You don’t have to do that—” Astoria started to protest, but Daphne spoke over her in a very authoritative, very *‘do not fucking argue with me’* type of tone.

“No, he’s right, I do. I owe it to myself,” Daphne said. “But I will only talk about it this once. I need to get it off my chest but if I dwell on it, I’m going to fall apart and then I’ll be no good to anyone. There’s still a war going on and I need to be able to fight when the time comes. I will sit at this table and tell you all anything you want to know, but once I leave this room, I will not speak about it again. I am going to put it all in a box, lock it up tight, and I won’t open it again until the war is over. Once Voldemort is dead and the danger has passed, I will deal with it in my own way. I’ll go to mind healers and therapists and whatever the fuck else is required to help me get through this, but I am not going to do that until my family isn’t in danger anymore. Do I make myself clear?”

There was a long pause as Daphne regarded everyone around the table. Her eyes lingered on Theo.

“So whatever you want to ask,” Daphne said, “ask it now.”

Hermione had no idea how Daphne was still standing, never mind still able to scream as loud as she was.

“I’VE SEEN WHAT YOU’VE DONE TO PROTECT GRANGER! I’VE SEEN THE BODIES YOU’VE LEFT IN THE STREET BECAUSE THOSE PEOPLE HAD EVEN THOUGHT ABOUT HURTING HER!” Theo’s curses started to come faster. He was getting desperate. He threw several slicing curses, one after the other, each more powerful than the last, each more lethal as he started to lose his grip on himself. “I’VE SEEN THE LENGTHS YOU’VE GONE TO JUST SO YOU WOULDN’T HAVE TO LOSE HER!”

Malfoy waved his wand in a large circular motion and all of Theo’s attacks halted mid-flight. The bright lights stilled, turned around, and then whizzed back towards their original caster at a startling speed.

“DON’T PRETEND YOU WOULD ACT ANY DIFFERENTLY THAN ME RIGHT NOW IF IT WAS GRANGER’S LIFE ON THE LINE!” Theo’s sounded slightly ... wet? Gurgled. Hermione looked out the corner of her eye to see he had a small amount of blood trickling from the right side of his mouth and nose. “IF YOU THOUGHT GRANGER WAS DEAD BUT YOU HAD ANOTHER CHANCE TO SAVE HER, WOULDN’T YOU RIP THE WORLD APART TO GET HER BACK?!”

Malfoy’s expression flickered with anger. He pulled his shoulder back and then threw a powerful red curse.

Theo managed to avoid most of the curse, but there were cuts scattered across the lower half of his torso like someone had dragged dozens of pairs of scissors across his ribcage. The cuts were deep and if Malfoy carried on like that, Theo would bleed out before too long.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

The curses they were throwing at each other were getting more and more lethal. Time was closing in on them. The Death Eaters would be there any moment and Hermione didn’t know what to do.

Crouch was using Daphne’s screams to motivate Theo. Her wails of agony were the siren song luring Theo to do Grouch’s bidding -

Daphne’s screams. Crouch was using Daphne’s screams to motivate Theo, and if he couldn’t hear them anymore ...

Although it was clear that Daphne thought a lot of Megan and Sarah, it felt as though she relaxed after they'd left. The three of them had bonded over something so horrific that no one else could ever really understand. Daphne cared for the girls, but seeing Megan and Sarah daily ... it must have been a constant reminder for her. And she didn't want to remember. She wanted to move on with her life and act as though those horrific years had never happened to her, and the presence of other girls who'd been through the same thing didn't allow her to do that.

Hermione couldn't blame her. She'd have probably reacted the same way.

In some ways, it was like Daphne had never been gone. She slipped back into their family perfectly, and why shouldn't she? She still belonged there. It was still her family and nothing was ever going to change that.

Daphne split her time between her family and training outside. She used Astoria's wand to practice duelling. She was a little rusty and wasn't used to using her sister's wand, but she was regaining her confidence and skill quickly. When Daphne duelled, she almost looked like she was dancing. She was very quick and light on her feet and the way she twirled when she threw a curse, the way her body bent and the way she often raised herself onto the tips of her toes when she attacked, it reminded Hermione of a Ballet dancer.

She didn't talk about Crouch or anything related to him. Just as she'd promised, she'd taken what he'd done to her, put it in a box, locked it up and was refusing to open it until the war was over. If she was secretly hurting inside, then she was a better actress than Theo was. No one would have been able to tell just by looking at her.

She always looked beautiful and immaculately dressed. She always wore a genuine, wide smile that showed her dimples and Theo ... Theo was whole again. That empty and vacant look that Hermione saw in him was gone. He laughed again. He smiled again. Every second he spent with Daphne and that sadness that used to hang over him all the time like a ghost, it was gone.

Theo and Daphne were inseparable. They did everything together. Trained. Cleaned. Cooked. They were glued at the hip and their tattooed hands were always joined - even when they slept.

Hermione caught them dancing in the kitchen one morning while they made breakfast together. She'd woken up alone one morning to the sound of Somebody to Love by Queen blasting from the kitchen.

Daphne had been weaving one of Theo's jumpers like it was a dress and they'd both been singing into spatula's like they were microphones. Hermione had stood in the doorway with a smile on her face and watched Daphne steal Theo's pretend microphone and hold it hostage, only for Theo to then grab her wrist, spin her around and lure her into dancing with him again.

When Daphne was in and around the farmhouse, she tried her best to be normal, but when she went into the basement with Theo ... Neither of them ever really went into detail about what happened when they were in there, but when they emerged afterwards, both of them were always smiling, curled in each-others arms, whispering and giggling in each-others ears.

Hermione even managed to get back to painting. She found some old brushes and pots of paint in one of the many many old sheds that were darted around the farm. She only had four colours and the brushes were old and matted but it was nothing a few well-placed charms couldn't rectify.

So, when Hermione's free time wasn't taken up doing supply runs with Malfoy or doing chores around the house, she painted. It felt so good to have a brush back in her hand. It was a nice bit of normalcy that made her feel like the war was finally coming to an end. And while she painted, her mind would start to wonder, like it always did. While she painted the small mural of daisies in the kitchen to try and brighten up the dark room, she thought about her parents and wondered if she should make a fake grave for them after the war. They wouldn't be buried there, but at least she would have somewhere to visit them - and a place to lay flowers in their memory...

When she'd started to paint a beach and waterfalls in the bathroom, she'd thought about Malfoy and all the beaches and places they'd talked about travelling to in their imaginary 'other life', and when she'd started painting a poppy field in the hallway, she'd started to contemplate her own future.

Because what was she actually going to do with her life when all this was over?

Astoria and Blaise had talked about finding a house in the centre of London and possibly starting a family. Theo and Daphne had talked about finding a flat around the corner, but Hermione ... Every time she thought about her future, she could never settle on what she wanted to do.

She couldn't go back to Hampstead Garden, the thought alone made her shiver. There was nothing left for her there anymore, she'd have to find herself a new home.

Harry and Ginny had once told her that there'd always be a place for her in their home after the war, but after everything she'd done, would they really want her around their children?

No, she couldn't stay with them either but the thought of living alone or staying in one place for a long time ... that didn't sit right with her either.

She supposed she could always take Malfoy up on his offer to travel with him. She might actually like it. A different country every week ... Spending her days exploring with him and her nights ...

Hermione hissed when the running water unexpectedly turned scalding. She turned the cold tap until the water was more comfortable and after she'd washed the red paint off her hands, she gripped either side of the sink and looked at her reflection in the mirror.

Just like she had done every day for the past nine days, she leaned her head back so she could see into her nostrils more clearly, and just as they had been every time she'd checked, there was no blood.

It'd been a week since Hermione had had her nosebleed. She hadn't had another once since then, and she didn't know if that was a comfort or a curse.

She sighed heavily and her hands tightened against the edge of the sink. She stared at her reflection again in the bathroom mirror. She didn't feel any different. She didn't look any different. She knew she shouldn't dwell on it and yet, she couldn't stop her mind from going back to it.

Spontaneous nosebleeds weren't something she'd ever suffered with, not even as a child. She remembered one girl she used to play with when she was young, Jessica Righter or Lighter - she couldn't remember which. She used to suffer from them all the time. Hermione remembered how they'd played together in the park once, all laughter and smiles and then all of a sudden, Jessica's nose had started to bleed.

It'd frightened Hermione the first happened - she'd thought the girl was dying. She'd run into her parent's house screaming and crying but once her father had explained that it was normal, she relaxed and whenever it would happen again, Hermione would just smile reassuringly and offer Jessica a tissue. It was normal, just one of those things for Jessica and lots of other people - but Hermione had never suffered with them, so she couldn't understand why she was now -

There were three light knocks on the bathroom door.

"Granger," she heard Malfoy say from the other side. "Are you ready to go?"

orders from their superiors. A bloody lovely week where none of them really thought about the war and they could just get on with things that used to be important to them.

In those first few days, even the most mundane tasks became like a breath of fresh air.

Quinzel was so overcome with grief for her friend, that she didn't want to do anything, and no one minded picking up her chores. While Quinzel locked herself in her room, the others pitched in, and Hermione swore she even heard Malfoy humming one afternoon while he and Astoria cooked.

Malfoy set very clear and very stern instructions that no one was to go outside of the protective wards he'd set up unless they were doing an essential supply run or it was absolutely necessary.

Theo broke the rule on the second day. He'd sneaked out during the night - and Merlin only knew where he'd gone or how he'd gotten his hands on it - but he returned the next morning with a vintage cassette player perched on his shoulder and a stack of 80's cassettes under his arm.

Malfoy had been fucking livid with him, but his little mission had pleased the right person. Daphne had been thrilled with her present, and the farmhouse was never quiet again.

From that moment on, there always seemed to be a string of happy, upbeat music playing in the background. Smiles seemed to be infectious, laughter even more so.

Almost every day afterwards, they gathered around the kitchen island and drank whiskey and listened to the cassettes that Theo had stolen. They danced - well, Theo, Daphne, Astoria and Hermione danced. Malfoy and Blaise stayed in their chairs with their whiskey and watched.

However, on the fourth night, after many whiskeys and lots of persuasions - and Daphne and Theo chanting '*Weeee like to dance with Drax,*' - Blaise and Malfoy did get up and dance. They had to be physically pulled out of their chairs, but they did dance/awkwardly sway to Karma Chameleon when Daphne forced them to.

Hermione had been surprised that they all knew the lyrics to so many 80's songs considering most of them were written by muggle artists, but nothing - absolutely fucking nothing - surprised her more to discover that Malfoy - Draco bloody Malfoy - knew every single word to Stayin' Alive by the Bee Gees, and the memory of him drunkenly singing and dancing to it at 3 am was her new favourite memory. Ever.

Sarah was one on her own. She had a personality as fiery as her red hair and a low, throaty voice that sounded like she smoked a packet of cigarettes a day. Sarah had a lot to say - most of which were profanities aimed at Crouch and Yaxley and other Death Eaters she didn't know the names of - and every other word she said seemed to be a curse.

Quinzel was appalled by her language. Daphne and Theo thought it was hilarious.

Megan, on the other hand, was very quiet. She spoke enough for Hermione to discover that she was twenty-two years old and had been hiding in a muggle refuge in London when Grouch had found her. She didn't really say much at all and the little that she did speak was in a thick accent that could only come from the East End of London. Theo was convinced that she was the daughter of a mafia boss. Megan just smiled and although she didn't confirm Theo's theory, she didn't exactly deny it either.

Although the group had offered to let them stay at the farmhouse - or let them use one of the other safe houses Malfoy had set up - after a few days of deliberation, they chose to live at one of the Order's bases.

Hermione could understand why. There were a lot of muggle refugees living at the Order's bases and that ultimately was what swayed their decision. When they'd been captured, both of the girls had had families, brothers and sisters and mothers and fathers that'd still been very much alive, and they both thought that they had a better chance of reuniting with them if they stayed with the Order.

No one in the farmhouse seemed too surprised by the girl's decision, but no one told them the likelihood of their families still being alive was impossibly low.

Malfoy and Hermione had taken the girls to East Midlands airport and Ginny and Fleur had come to pick them up. Ginny had smiled and told Hermione that Kingsley would be in touch to arrange a meeting. She'd told Hermione to keep an eye on the postal point they used to use to drop off messages between the two sides, and then shed Apparated away.

With both Sarah and Megan gone, bedroom musical chairs ensued again. Blaise and Astoria stayed in their room. Theo and Daphne shared Theo's room. Quinzel took what Hermione had assumed was going to be Malfoy's, and Hermione and Malfoy slept on the sofas in the living room.

It was a week before Kingsley wanted Malfoy and Hermione to go to the Order's base. A peaceful week where none of them had to think about battles or attacks or

"Yes, I'll be out in a minute."

Malfoy hovered for a moment before she heard his footsteps from the other side of the door, getting quieter and quieter as he walked away.

She gave herself one last glance in the mirror before she opened the door and went to find him.

Malfoy was waiting for her in the kitchen. He was leaning against the dining table with his arms folded across his chest and a slight frown on his face.

Daphne was sat on the kitchen counter, her long legs dangling over the side with Theo standing in front of her. They were both facing Malfoy, Theo's hips were nestled in between her open thighs and although they were both listening to whatever Malfoy was saying, the pair of them couldn't have looked more invested in each other.

Daphne had her arms folded and resting on the back of Theo's shoulders and her chin was resting on the top of his head.

Both of Theo's hands were laid gently atop Daphne's thighs and as he spoke to Malfoy, his thumbs stroked little patterns into her legs.

"You're so full of shit," Theo scoffed. "How can you possibly think that Konrad Weiss was a better seeker than Victor Krum?! We saw Krum play at the Quidditch world cup and he was phenomenal! Even your mum thought so and she knew fuck all about Quidditch!"

Malfoy sighed and rolled his eyes towards the ceiling. "Krum wasn't that good." Theo burst into a very loud - very fake - laugh. "Oh really? Is that why you and your dad put twenty galleons on him being the best individual scorer of the entire Quidditch world cup?"

"No, I didn't."

"Yes," Theo grinned. "You did."

"I didn't!"

"You did blonde," Daphne chimed in. "I was there when you put the bet on. You said you'd buy me and Tori a present if you won."

"Aha!" Theo shouted, pointing one of his fingers and thrusting it into the air. "There it is! The lady has spoken! We have a witness, your honour, the case is closed! We win! You lose!"

Daphne chuckled softly and then she leaned down and whispered something in Theo's ear.

Theo laughed and then whispered something back to her.

"Oh, here we fucking go," Malfoy snapped. "She's been back home five minutes and the bloody whisper twins are back. Didn't take you long to find your feet again, did it?"

Daphne smiled and very elegantly displayed her middle finger to Malfoy, and when she lowered said offensive finger she slid her hand into Theo's curls and started to gently massage the back of his head.

Theo closed his eyes and leaned into Daphne's hand. He had a small smile on his face and looked the picture of contentment.

"Sorry, Draco," Daphne said, grinning. "I suppose we shouldn't be so hard on you, you know ... given the circumstances."

Malfoy frowned. "What circumstances?"

"You know," Daphne's voice dropped to a sarcastic whisper, "*the circumstances.*"

"What fucking circumstances are you on about?!"

"Oh my, have you heard this? He's pretending he doesn't know."

"I know. He's in denial." Theo tutted and shook his head, speaking to Daphne as though it was just the two of them in the kitchen.

"Do you think?"

"Definitely."

"Poor bloke."

"Shame, isn't it?"

Although Daphne and Theo seemed to be having a fabulous time winding Malfoy up, Malfoy looked like he was about to explode. "What the fuck are you two on about?!"

"Nothin' at all." Theo shrugged. "Just stating the obvious."

"What's obvious?!"

Theo tilted his head back so he could look up at Daphne. "Shall we tell him?"

"Tell me what?!"

## CHAPTER 62



# END OF THE FUCKING WORLD

**11th April**

It took Hermione two days of experimenting before she finally managed to rid Chester and Angel of the charms Grouch had placed on their voice boxes. It turned out to be an incredibly tedious and fiddly task. There was lots of trial and error. It was nowhere near as easy as she'd thought it would be, but seeing the looks on Angel and Chester's faces when they were gone, seeing the joy in their eyes when they finally heard their own voices after so long, it made it worth it.

Sarah and Megan, those were their names. Their *real* names.

Theo couldn't hear Crouch scream as Daphne twisted the knife and that was the whole point.

She wanted to hurt him but she wanted him silent. She wanted to make him feel every ounce of pain that he'd made her feel and not be able to beg or scream for it to stop, just like he'd done to her.

Theo stood back and watched her stab Crouch in the stomach, then his leg, then his shoulder, and when she was done, there were blotches of Crouch's blood all over her arms and clothes but the sadness in her, it was finally starting to go away ...

When she turned to Theo her chest was heaving and her face was wet with tears and blood, but she was smiling. "Thank you," she sighed. The relief in her voice was unmistakable. "Thank you, Theo ..."

Theo walked closer and stood in front of her. He felt the heat radiating from her body. He smelled lilacs and oranges. She was back. She was really there, with him, and even though he knew that, he needed to check, just to be sure. He leaned forward and - with the gentlest of pressures - kissed her cheek.

"Don't stop there," he murmured, lips still on her skin. He kissed away a tear as it slipped down her cheek. It might've meant nothing to her, but in Theo's own little way, he felt like he was kissing away her pain as it left her body. "He's all yours. Make him pay for what he did to you."

"And to you." Daphne tilted her chin so she could look in Theo's eyes. "He's hurt you too." She smiled a little, not enough to make her dimples appear, and took his hand, joining their tattoos, making the snake whole again for the first time in years. "This is for you as much as it is for me."

"Alright then," Theo smiled. "For you and for me."

Daphne smiled sweetly back at him. "For us."

"That your sudden aversion to who used to be your favourite Quidditch player -"

"He was never my favourite Quidditch player!"  
"- is because he slept with our curly-haired Gryffindor?"

Malfoy scoffed loudly and rolled his eyes again. Even Hermione thought it looked a bit over the top, almost like he was putting it on. "Do you honestly think I would be jealous of Krum because he slept with Granger once, years ago?"

"Yes," Daphne and Theo said in unison.

When Malfoy made an angry sort of noise and shook his head, Daphne whispered something in Theo's ear again.

Theo grinned up at his wife and whispered something back to her.

"Would you two pack it in with all the whispering?"

Daphne and Theo playfully glared at Malfoy for a moment, and then Theo whispered something else to her, making sure to cover his mouth with his hand so Malfoy couldn't read his lips.

Just when it looked like Malfoy was about to strangle Theo, Hermione entered the kitchen. "Draco," she greeted, fighting a smile. "Are you ready to go?"

Theo chuckled under his breath when Daphne whispered something in his ear.

Malfoy glared at Theo and Daphne as he walked towards the kitchen door. He unlocked it and held it open for Hermione to walk out in front of him, and just before she made it over the threshold, she saw Theo and Daphne making whipping motions behind Malfoy's back and chuckling under their breath. When they were outside, they walked side by side. Hermione's hand brushed the back of his, it would have been so easy to just take it. Her fingers were itching to reach out and intertwine with his.

Narcissa sat outside bathing in the late afternoon sun. Her wings were curled around her and her head was down. She was very busy pulling the little muscle that remained off the horse corpse that was in her talons, but just as Malfoy and Hermione were about to Apparate, she caught sight of the pair of them and raised her head.

"You're not coming with us," Malfoy told her when she started to get up. "Sorry girl."

The dragon huffed irritably and looked at Hermione. It almost made her laugh, it was like she was trying to get a second opinion.

"He's right," Hermione answered, biting her lip to try and hide her smile. "You need to stay here this time. I'm sorry."

Hermione reached out to pet her but Narcissa huffed irritably and turned her back on the pair. For a beast so large and deadly, it turned out she was quite sensitive. Hermione made a mental note to ask Hagrid if he had any more Grindylow neck joints. That might cheer her up - which reminded her ...

"Can you promise to be on your best behaviour today?"

Malfoy quirked a brow and smirked down at her. "Whatever are you implying?"

"You know what I'm implying. This is a big step for the Order. Kingsley invited us personally. They're inviting us into their base."

"As they should after we stole and hand-delivered them a bloody Horcrux. You'd think after all that they'd at least send a gold carriage to pick us up and we wouldn't have to make our own way there."

Hermione swatted him on the shoulder.

"What? It's the least they could do. You'd think they'd butter us up a bit first before they tell us about a stupid loophole in our contract."

"What kind of loophole?"

"One that means we don't get pardons after the war."

Hermione went to swat him again but he swerved out of the way. "Don't say things like that. Why would you think he's not going to give you pardons?"

"Oh come on, he's not invited us all the way to their base to have a cup of tea and congratulate us. There's something else in it."

"No," Hermione hissed. "He's invited us there to discuss the next phase of the plan. They destroyed another Horcrux because of you, there's no way he could go back on his word now."

"And you think Kingsley's word means anything?" Malfoy's laugh was light and whimsical, almost boyish.

"Of course it does"

"Oh, I'm sorry. Did he make an unbreakable vow that I missed?"

"Is all this supposed to frighten me?" Crouch spat. "You expect me to believe that you could hurt me? You can't kill me without killing yourself. You're mine, Mustang. Your body is mine. Your voice is mine. Your life is mine. *You are mine.*"

Daphne didn't even twitch. She didn't flinch and she didn't cower at his words, she just stared down at him. Theo couldn't tell what she was thinking.

"You can do whatever you want to me, but it will do you no good. No matter where you go or what you do, you'll never be able to get rid of me. You'll never be able to stop thinking about me. It'll always be there, in the back of your mind. I'll always be there. The monster in your dreams. The thing you can't get rid of no matter how hard you try. I'm a scar that will never go away."

"You're wrong," she whispered. "You're not a monster, you're nothing."

Crouch swallowed thickly. It looked like he was trying to lean away from her in his chair.

"You're insignificant, Bartv. You're nothing. Even the Dark Lord doesn't respect you and you helped bring him back to life," Daphne said. "You're not a God or a Demon or a great warrior that people will remember. You're just a man. A selfish, spoilt little man who could only feel powerful when he made someone else feel weak. But that makes *you* weak Crouch, not me."

Crouch's nostrils flared. Terror started to creep back into his eyes.

"And you won't be with me forever. I'll make sure of it. I'm not saying it will be easy. It might take me a year, it might take me a decade, but eventually, they'll come a day when I don't think about you and what you did to me at all. I'll forget all about you, just for a day, but that'll be enough. Because then one day will become two. Two days will become a week and so on until eventually, even I'll forget you, and you will be no one. It'll be like you never existed at all, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't pay now."

Daphne didn't say anything else. She glided towards Crouch and speared the knife into the back of his hand.

When Crouch howled in pain, Daphne took a step back. She stared down at him and inhaled sharply. There was a fire in her eyes, even if they had started to glisten with tears.

She felt better. Making Crouch hurt was doing the trick. She pulled the knife out of his hand and hovered it over his bicep, and when she surged it forward, her free hand flew to his mouth.

Crouch thought he was being clever when he'd linked his life to Daphne's. He thought it was a life raft, a failsafe, a way to make sure he survived and he'd waved it in front of Theo like a trophy.

But it turned out it wasn't a life raft, it was the stupidest thing he could have ever done.

Now, Theo had no reason to kill him. Now, Theo would make sure he lived a long and healthy life, just so he and Daph could have their fun with him and make him pay ...

It was going to be a hell of a life for Crouch. Theo couldn't wait.

"And what is that supposed to achieve?" It sounded like Grouch was having trouble breathing. Good, that meant he was starting to understand the grave he'd dug for himself.

"It's called therapy, darling. Torture therapy. Look it up." Theo smirked. "You hurt her, so she hurts you back."

Daphne's eyes flickered to the tray Theo had wheeled in. She waltzed straight over to it and picked up a silver dagger with a black handle. She held the knife up to her face so she could examine it, and when she looked at Grouch, he flinched.

"You mean it?" Daphne asked. "This can go on for as long as I want?"

Theo nodded. "If that's what you need, sweetheart, then yes. We can make it a date night if you want. I'll even bring some wine down. Light a few candles. Play some music ..."

Daphne almost smiled. "I can really do whatever I want to him?"

"Yes. As long as you don't puncture anything that would kill him instantly, like his brain or his heart - he threw Grouch a very sinister, very sarcastic kind of look, "not that he has one - then you can do whatever the fuck you want to him."

"I don't know where to start. There's so much ... I have so much anger ... I don't know where to put it."

Theo smirked and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "Let me help you then." He didn't let go of her face, he held it in his hand and brushed his thumb slowly over the soft skin of her cheek. This was something he was good at. This was something he could help her with. Something they could do ... together, after all these years apart.

"Let's retrace your steps," he said. "Where was the last place he hurt you?"

"Well, no ... but that doesn't mean that he wouldn't honour - " "Kingsley wants to stay in control of the Order, and he'll only do that as long as people trust his judgment and believe in him. Yes?"

"Yes."

"And those people in the bases with him - the ones whose vote is the only thing keeping him in power - they've lost family members, yes? Had their loved ones slaughtered by Death Eaters and such? So how do you think they're going to feel when they see he's pardoned two of the most ruthless Death Eaters that ever lived?"

"Three of the most ruthless Death Eaters that ever lived," Hermione interrupted. "I meant it when I said that I was going to get you a pardon as well. And Daphne. I'll get all of you pardons. I'll make Kingsley's word for it."

"Granger, Kingsley's word doesn't mean shit."

"No," she snapped. "He promised that he would pardon you all if you got him a Horcrux. You did that. You delivered your half of the bargain -"

"And then I blew our cover and now we're useless to him."

"You blew your cover to protect me!"

Malfoy gave her one of those lopsided smirks that made her heart flutter. "That won't matter to the Order. I've blown our cover. We can't leak any more secrets and we can't tear Voldemort's army down any more than we already have. So unless Kingsley wants to send us on a murder mission to get the last Horcrux, then we're useless to him now. He can't get anything else out of us, and if he thinks we're useless to the Order, he's got no reason to protect us."

Hermione didn't want to admit that she knew he was right. Kingsley was practical. He put the Order's survival first. He was an incredible leader, but he hadn't gotten there by being fair.

Malfoy had outed his entire family by helping the Order. They were all fugitives now. If any of Voldemort's followers found them, they'd be slaughtered. They'd given up so much to help the Order, sacrificed everything to change sides, but Hermione hadn't even considered what would happen if the other side didn't want them.

What if Kingsley didn't honour the pardons he'd promised? Then what? What if Kingsley honoured everyone else's but refused to grant Malfoy one? What would

happen then? Would he try and put him in Azkaban? Or worse. Would he ... would he try and execute him?

Hermione had to look away from Malfoy. She twisted her neck slightly and watched the scales on Narcissa's back move as she ate.

She couldn't let that happen. The thought of Malfoy dying was excruciatingly painful. The thought of watching him die ... The thought of holding him in her arms and watching the light leave his eyes ... standing over his grave God, she didn't think she'd ever felt pain like it. Without even realising she was doing it, she pressed the heel of her hand into her chest and tried to relieve some of the pressure building there.

No, she wouldn't let him die. Even if she had to fight Kingsley off herself, she'd make sure he lived. She'd make sure he was happy and alive, even if it meant they both had to disappear together.

"How long do you think it would take her to fly to Rome?"

"What?" Malfoy asked. She didn't need to look at him to know he was frowning. "Narcissa," Hermione clarified. "How long do you think it would take her to fly to Rome?"

"Eight hours, maybe nine. Why?"

"And she could do that? If you asked her to?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Because I've changed my mind. I think we should start in Rome." She felt Malfoy watching the side of her face.

"After the war," Hermione said, filling in the gaps, "when we go travelling together, I think we should start in Rome. I've always wanted to see the Colosseum."

"In this other life?"

"Yes. Unless you weren't being serious?"

His brows knitted together, and he wet his lips with his tongue. "What's brought this on?"

Hermione shrugged, trying to act indifferent. "The end of the war seems more likely now, doesn't it? Nagini is the only Horcrux left. It's possible that we might get

Intrigue danced all over Grouch's face. "Anything?" Theo's eyes burned. He felt something wet slide down his cheek. "Anything you want. I'll let you go. I'll kill everyone upstairs if that's what it takes. Just please tell me, is there a way to unlink the two of you?"

Grouch's tongue darted out to wet his lips in that horrible way he always tended to do, and then he leaned forward and said; "No. I linked our lives with the same spell the Dark Lord used to link Malfoy's life to the Mudblood's. There's nothing you can do. The spell can't be broken."

There it was.

Theo dropped his head to hide his face. His shoulders were shaking, jerking up and down. "Thank you." His voice cracked. He lifted his head and grinned up at Grouch. "That was all I needed to know." And quick as a flash, Theo sprang back to his feet and stood up tall.

"You ... you were lying?" Grouch snarled.

"Course I was," Theo grinned, wiping away the crocodile tears with the back of his head. "I've been playing the role of a loyal servant to Voldemort for years. That was the performance of a lifetime, whipping up a few crocodile tears to fool you is nothing."

Grouch started to thrash in his chair. The wood creaked and it almost looked like he was going to break free but seeing Grouch's expression, watching him wobble about like he was, Theo couldn't help but laugh.

"Take it, easy Grouchy boy. Don't hurt yourself before the big surprise."

"What surprise?"

The door to the basement creaked open. Theo heard light footsteps behind him. His smile grew bigger when he smelled lilacs and oranges.

"She's running this show mate, I'm just here to observe." Theo took a step back and stood behind his wife. "She can cut you up. Carve you up. Do whatever she wants to you for as long as she wants and when you're on death's door, I'll heal you, make you all shiny and new again, and then she'll get to hurt you all over again. Every day. Every night. Whenever she wants, for as long as she wants."

Grouch's expression flickered in horror.

*Bingo.* There it fucking was. The money shot. The thing that Theo had been dying to see.

"Nah, that's water under the bridge." Theo grinned, his head still cocked to the side, playing with his food. "Truth is, I don't give a fuck about what you did to me. When it comes to torture Salazar knows I've done a lot worse and to a lot more people. I was bound to get my comeuppance one day or another. What I do care about, however, was what you did to Daph."

Crouch suddenly went very still. The triumph fell from his face like Theo had slapped it off. His throat bobbed as he attempted to swallow his fear. It made Theo smile watching it. He'd cut his throat open and drag his fear back up if he needed to. Could be fun, actually. He'd never done that before ...

"Do you have any idea what it's like to lose the person most important to you?" Theo asked in a low, quiet voice. "Do you have any idea what it's like to have the other person who makes you whole be ripped out of your arms, be made to watch them die, just to find out that they've been alive all along? Being tortured and raped, right under your fucking nose?"

Although he tried to hide it, Crouch started to tremble.

"There's nothing that could make up for what you did to my wife. Nothing." Theo shook his head. "I could torture you for a thousand years and it wouldn't be enough. I could flay every inch of your skin, rip out your organs and gauge your eyes out and it would never be enough to make up for the things you did to her."

Theo dragged his wand up Crouch's neck and not so gently jabbed it into the fresh wound he'd created in Crouch's cheek.

Crouch hissed in pain and tried to cringe away.

Theo just dug his wand in harder and twisted it around until he felt the side of Crouch's teeth.

"I'd love nothing more than to kill you, but, as you so cleverly pointed out, you linked your life to hers." Theo sharply pulled his wand out of Crouch's face, and one quick healing charm repaired the damage he'd done, "so I can't."

Crouch started to smile. Some of his fear ebbed away. "Exactly. See, you do listen."

"Yeah," Theo said. "I do listen sometimes. When it's important. When it involves her. That's why I've come here to ask, beg really." Theo dropped to his knees. "You're a lot older than she is which means that no matter what happens you'll die before she's ready, so I need to know. Please, please, is there any way to unlink your life from hers? I'll do anything?"

this other life we've been talking about, so I just thought ... maybe it was time we start planning it."

His blue-grey eyes started to flicker. There was hardly any grey left in them. He took his time to mull over her words. When he was finished, he held out his hand to her, and when he smiled, it took her breath away. "It's a date then."

His hand was more than an invitation to Apparate together, it was a promise. A deal. When all this was over, they were going to travel together. They were going to see the world and actually live for once, all she needed to do was take his hand. And in that moment, slipping her hand into his felt like the most natural thing in the world.

When they Apparated to East Midlands Airport, Ginny and Fleur were already waiting for them.

"Is this really necessary?" Malfoy asked. Hermione could tell he was doing his best to keep his voice polite, but he still sounded irritated. "We could have just Apparated there ourselves. We don't need babysitters."

"Sorry," Ginny sighed. "Kingsley's orders."

Malfoy looked like he was biting his tongue, not metaphorically, he looked like he was physically biting his tongue to restrain himself from coming back with a nasty retort.

Ginny took a firm hold of Hermione's elbow. Fleur did the same with Malfoy, and seconds later, the ground vanished from underneath Hermione's feet.

"A run-down hospital?" Malfoy sneered when they landed on the other side. "That's really where you chose to have your next central base? How can you get anything done in here? It's a fucking state."

That was putting it lightly. Hermione didn't think she'd ever seen such a sorry state of a building. It was a large but it was derelict. All the windows were smashed, the West side wall was completely missing - possibly caught up in an explosion - and it looked like it'd been abandoned for years.

Yes, it was very inconspicuous and it blended in very, very well, but no matter which way Hermione looked at it, she didn't see how it could be considered safe. It looked like it might crumble with the strong breeze.

"Actually," Ginny said, the snarl as clear in her voice as it was in her eyes, "we've found that it's the best place for us. It has plenty of room and lots of beds and medical supplies, meaning we can treat and save the injured a lot faster. And it only looks that way because of the Disillusion charms we've placed on it. When you're on the other side - you know what, I'm not even going to bother explaining. Just walk and see for yourself."

It was a hell of a Disillusion charm, even Malfoy had to give the Order that. When they crossed the threshold, the hospital was completely transformed. The walls rematerialized, the broken windows suddenly repaired themselves and the traces of the war vanished. In an instant, the hospital was normal.

"I'm needed in the infirmary," Fleur said when they got to what used to be the main reception. "It was great to see you again, Hermione. Malfoy."

"Kingsley's office is this way," Ginny said, gesturing with her head to the hallway on the left-hand side. When she started to walk, Malfoy and Hermione fell into step behind them.

They didn't pass anyone as Ginny led them through the halls. Hermione thought that they would have at least passed someone and yet, by the time they were walking up a staircase, they hadn't seen a single person. It was odd. All of it was odd. Judging from the massive size of the building, it could have hosted hundreds of soldiers and refugees, so why hadn't they seen anyone?

"Which hospital is this?" Hermione asked as they started on the second set of stairs.

Ginny was quiet and for a brief moment, Hermione thought she hadn't heard her. She'd just been about to repeat her question when Ginny said, "Kingsley's told me not to tell you."

Ab. So that was that then. These levels had been cleared because they didn't want any other Order members to come into close contact with Malfoy or Hermione. Kingsley still didn't trust them, just as Malfoy had predicted.

Ginny was clearly uncomfortable saying it and although she obviously didn't agree, Hermione's blood still boiled all the same. Because how fucking dare he still not trust them?! Malfoy had sacrificed everything for them. He'd risked everything, he'd gotten them another Horcrux, and Kingsley still didn't trust him?! What more would he have to sacrifice to make them see that there was good in him? What more

"Again, if you asked my dad, then the answer would have been..."

"You can't kill me! I've already won! You can't kill me without killing your wife! If you could even still call her that. I bet you see it, don't you?"

Theo pulled out his wand and twirled it idly between his fingers, letting the threat be known, but Grouch wasn't deterred by the threat of a wand. If anything, it seemed to spur him on.

"She's a fucking beauty, isn't she? And she has such a lovely neck. So soft and warm. Tell me, when you look at her neck, do you see me? Do you see where I used to bite her all the time - *ugghhh!*"

"Whoopsies," Theo said softly blowing the tip of his smoking wand. "Still not quite used to this wand. Temperamental, ain't it? Goes off with little blasting curses all the time."

Grouch panted heavily in his chair and hissed in pain. The clothes that covered his right shoulder were singed and melting from Theo's accidental hex, revealing burnt flesh underneath.

"You were saying?" Theo asked. "About my wife?"

"You sadistic prick! Do you honestly think you can hold me here? Do you have any idea how valuable I am to the Dark Lord? He's probably got dozens of scouts out looking for me right now! And when he finds me, anything you do to me, he will return to you tenfold! Mark my words!"

Theo sighed heavily and stood up. "Bloody 'ell, think a lot of yourself, don't ya?" He banished the chair and smiled down at Grouch. "Even if the Dark Lord did give a shit about you - which he doesn't, by the way - clever clogs upstairs has cast every fucking protective ward known to wizarding kind on this room. You're not getting out of here." Theo walked forward until he was almost sat on Grouch's knee. He placed his free hand on the backrest of the chair beside Grouch's head and then leaned down so that their noses were almost touching. "No one is looking for you and no one is coming to save you. No one fucking cares about you. So it doesn't matter if I do this..." Grinning the entire time, Theo dragged the tip of his wand across Grouch's cheek and sliced a deep cut from his ear to the corner of his mouth. Grouch tried to get away but he had nowhere to go. All he could do was sit there and scream and thrash as Theo had his fun. "What's this?" Grouch panted, struggling for breath when Theo finally stopped the slicing curse. "Revenge for hurting you?"

Daphne pulled back a little and stared blankly at him.

“What if I could help you do that?”

did Kingsley want Malfoy to do to prove his loyalty?! Kill Voldemort himself?! It was fucking ridiculous!

Hermione didn’t say another word as they walked through A&E and went up the stairs to Orthopaedics. When they got to Cardiology, Ginny stopped.

“If you want to wait here, Kingsley will come and get you when he’s ready.”

The sound of the basement door swinging open was like a curtain call, the open to the show.

Grouch jolted upright. He was the sole audience member of the show, but he didn’t look very pleased with the privilege. He didn’t look very pleased to be there at all. He fought against his chains even though it was futile, Granger had cast them which meant that they were pretty much unbreakable.

Good. There’d be no escaping.

Theo whistled quietly as he wheeled the trolley into the basement. He glided over to where Grouch was bound like he didn’t have a care in the world. He stopped when he was standing in front of his little houseguest, letting the trolley rest at his side, and then he conjured a wooden pop-up chair. He spun it around and sat on it back to front, folding his arms and resting his elbows on the back of the chair.

“Grouchy babyyy.” Theo grinned. “How’re you finding your stay with us? What would you rate your stay at Dungeon a la Farmhouse so far? Five stars?”

Grouch leveled him with a disgusted look. He leaned back in his chair and his nose crinkled in disgust.

“Well?” Theo prodded Grouch’s leg with the tip of his shoe. “Four stars? Three?”

When Grouch didn’t answer, Theo gasped in fake horror and covered his mouth. “No? Surely not two stars? Oh deary me that won’t do. Well never get any more business with those types of reviews –”

“Whatever game you’re trying to play here,” Crouch drawled, “it won’t work.”

Theo’s grin stretched wider and he cocked his head to the side. “Why’s that then mate?”

“Are you an idiot?”

“If you asked my dad that question, then the answer would have been yes.”

“Haven’t you heard a single word I’ve said? Are you a fucking imbecile?”

Hermione nodded and sat down on one of the plastic pink chairs in the waiting area. She didn’t look at Ginny. She was too angry and she didn’t want to take that anger out on one of her oldest friends. It wasn’t her fault Kingsley was such a prick. When Ginny left, Malfoy sat down on the chair beside her. They were only in the waiting room for a few minutes before she felt Malfoy’s cold lips at her ear.

“You alright?”

Hermione just nodded. Didn’t trust herself with words, not with her temper sparking the way it was.

Malfoy didn’t say anything else, but when she started to tap her foot irritably on the floor, he placed his hand on her thigh and squeezed it reassuringly. It did help. A little.

A few minutes later, Malfoy looked towards the entrance. “Can you hear that?”

“Hear what?”

It was a sort of pitter-patter. Like heavy rain falling on a caravan roof. Like ...

Children’s footsteps.

Hermione smiled and got to her feet.

“AUNTIE MIONE!”

As soon as that little bundle of red hair rounded the corner, Hermione scooped her up into her arms.

“AUNTIE MIONE YOUR HERE!” Rose squealed happily, wrapping her little arms around the back of Hermione’s neck and hugging her with all her might. “YOU'RE BACK! WE MISSED YOU SO MUCH AUNTIE MIONE! SO MUCH!”

“I missed you too!” Hermione’s words came out muffled against Rose’s brittle red hair. “I’ve missed you and your brothers so much! I’m so sorry I haven’t been around!”

"Iz okay," Rose chirped. "But me and Fwed gib'd daddy a painting we mad you. Did he gib it you?"

"Yes he gidd - gave - he gave it to me. He did and I loved it. Thank you so much." Hermione put Rose down and knelt in front of her so that they were eye to eye. "Look at you! Look how much you've grown! You're so big now."

"I know," Rose said proudly, raising her chin in the air. "I'm bigger than Fwed now!"

"No, you not!"

"Granger?" Malfoy asked. It sounded like he was backing away. "Why is there another red-haired child here and why is it staring at me?"

The look on little Fred Potter's face as he stared up at Malfoy was funny, but Malfoy's expression was hilarious. While Fred looked mischievous and intrigued, Malfoy looked frightened and disgusted.

"Dat's Fwed," Rose said. "He's my brava."

"Twin brava," Fred corrected. "We're twins."

"Twins?" Malfoy asked. "As in Potter and Weaselti's offspring?"

"Yes," Hermione answered. "Why do you ask?"

"You're telling me that there's another batch of red-haired twins with Weasley DNA and have the ability to appear out of nowhere?" Malfoy gasped. "Well that's ... what's the point in continuing to fight in this war? The world is already bloody over." When Rose and Fred started giggling, Malfoy glared down at them. "What are you two laughing at?"

"You're funny," Rose grinned.

"That wasn't supposed to be funny."

"You're dead funny," Fred grinned. "And you have funny hair."

"What does my hair have to do with?"

"It's so shiny."

"It is," Fred agreed. "It looks like unicorn hair."

"Does Auntie Mione like your hair?" Rose asked.

"I fink he likes Auntie Mione's legs," Fred said.

songs with you. Thinking about all those little things was what kept me alive. You were my life raft, Theo. You were the thing that kept me hanging on."

Hermione had never seen anyone look so torn as Theo was in those moments. He looked relieved and heartbroken at the same time. His fingers and hands twitched. He wanted to hold her. He wanted to reach out and comfort his crying wife but he was afraid to touch her, and Daphne had noticed.

She caught his wrists, but when she pulled his arms up so that they wrapped around her waist - Theo pulled them away.

"Please don't pull away from me," Daphne sobbed quietly. "You're not going to hurt me. I love you. I need this. I need you. Grouch has taken so much from us. He's taken years away from us, years which we could have been together and happy and ... He's already taken so much from us, don't let him take our future, too."

Daphne taking control and putting Theo's arms around her tipped him over the edge, and whatever resolve he'd been clinging to came crashing down. His arms became like veins. He wrapped them around her and crushed her against his chest as he sobbed and peppered kisses up and down the side of her face.

"I love you so much," Theo sobbed into her cheek. "Nothing could ever change that. Nothing. I never stopped loving you, not for a minute, not for a second. I thought about you every day, I loved you every day."

"I love you too," Daphne sobbed. She caught Theo's face in her hands again and kissed him again and again. "I don't... I don't know if I'll ever be the same as I was. I can't promise we will ever get back to where we were. After Grouch... there might be things that I can't... that I don't know if I'll be able to..."

"I don't care about that," Theo answered instantly. "I don't care if we never share a bed again. Just having you here... I feel like I'm dreaming." He reached up and held the side of Daphne's face.

She closed her eyes and leaned into his touch. A tear ran down her face as her lips started to tremble.

Theo leaned forward and kissed her again. "I wish I could kill him for you."

"You have no idea how much I wish we could," Daphne laughed shakily. "But he's even taken that away from me too."

"Would it help?" Theo asked. "If you could hurt him, would it make you feel better?"

"No, no, no, no," Daphne soothed, running her thumbs across his cheeks and catching his tears. "Don't blame yourself. Crouch made it impossible for you to save me. He made sure you'd think I was dead so you wouldn't even look for me."

"But I should have ... I should have known something was wrong! I should have ... it's my fault that you were ..."

"You didn't ask me to cover for you. I made that decision myself," Daphne said. "I knew the risks when I killed Jones. I knew what might happen and if I was given the same choice today I'd do the same thing. I would do anything to protect you ..."

"Yes, to protect me because I wasn't strong enough to ..."

"Theo, you saved me as much as I saved you. The only thing that got me through all those awful years with Grouch was you."

When Theo started to pull away again, Daphne's grip on him tightened. She stood up and took a deep breath, and then she sat down on Theo's knee and her hands slid to the back of his neck.

Daphne leaned her forehead against Theo's and closed her eyes. "Don't ever think that you failed me because you haven't. I would have killed myself years ago if it wasn't for you. Thinking about you is what got me through all of it. Thinking about our wedding, what we would have done for our vow renewal." She started to play with the curls at the nape of Theo's neck, wrapping and unwrapping the strands around her fingers. "You remember, don't you? How we were planning on renewing our vows?"

For the first time that evening, Theo smiled a little. Just a little upturn of his lips. "Of course I remember. November. We were going to do it under the cherry blossom tree and have our first dance to..."

"*Somebody to love*, by Queen," Daphne smiled. "One of my favourites."

Hermione had already guessed that Theo's love of Queen songs was because of Daphne, but hearing it from him, seeing them together...

Theo's eyes darted to Daphne's lips. He raised his hand like he wanted to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear, but he stopped himself. "What else did you think about?"

"Lots of things. The lazy Sundays we used to spend in bed together. Those stupid jokes you'd whisper in my ear at inappropriate times. Singing and dancing to 80's

Rose cocked her head to the side and grinned mischievously up at Malfoy. "Is dat why you was squeezin' dem?"

Malfoy looked to Hermione for help. He didn't find any. She was too busy laughing.

Rose put both her hands above her head and started to walk towards Malfoy. Hermione - having been around the twins since they were born, knew that this meant Rose wanted Malfoy to pick her up - Malfoy, however, looked at her like she was a wild dog with rabies.

"Granger, what's it doing?"

"*She*," Hermione corrected, "wants you to pick her up ..."

"Pick up," Rose said, flexing her little fingers, making it a little easier for him to understand.

"No."

"Me too," Fred said, joining his sister and advancing on Malfoy and putting his hands above his head.

"Pick up. Pick up."

"Nope. Not happening."

"Pick up. Pick up."

"Pick up. Pick up!"

In the exact millisecond that Malfoy drew his wand, a blue curse came hurtling towards him. He deflected it with ease. The twins started screaming as the deflected spell crashed into the wall.

When Hermione turned around, she saw both Ginny and Ron hurtling down the corridor. Ron looked like a raging bull, his wand was smoking in his hand, and Ginny was doing everything in her power to try and slow him.

"GET AWAY FROM THEM!"

The twins must've never seen their uncle quite so angry. Both of their tiny faces were alight with fear. Fred jumped into Hermione's arms but when Hermione searched for Rose, she found her hiding behind Malfoy, her trembling hands clutching the back of his trousers and her face hiding behind his leg.

And Malfoy ... He had one hand hovering over her face, almost like he was trying to shield her. He was protecting her.

"I SAID GET THE FUCK AWAY FROM MY NIECE AND NEPHEW!"

"Ron lower your voice!" Ginny hissed under her breath. "The twins are safe!"

"SAFE? THEY'RE WITH A DEATH EATER?" Ron pulled out his wand and

aimed it at Malfoy.

"Put that away, Ronald!" Hermione clutched Fred to her chest and tried to tilt him in a way to block his view of his uncle. He didn't need to be any more frightened than he already was.

Ginny tried to snatch Ron's wand out of his hand but he was a lot taller and stronger than her. Another blue light started to gather at the end of it.

Fred whimpered and hid in Hermione's arms.

Rose started to cry behind Malfoy.

"Get away from Rose!"

"You're the one scaring her, Weasel, not me," Malfoy said calmly. He nodded towards Ron's wand and his hand tightened around his own. "Best put that away before I break it."

"DON'T YOU DARE TELL ME!"

"If you're all finished," said another voice. Hermione recognised it instantly. It was about fucking time Kingsley showed up. "Harry is waiting for all three of you in my office."

Calming Ron down turned out to be a very tiresome task, and calming down Fred and Rose was just as difficult. The poor twins were in hysterics by the time Ginny scooped them up and left the others to their meeting, and it was almost impossible to pry Rose away from Malfoy.

Kingsley led the three of them into his office - Malfoy and Ron glared murderously at one another the entire time - and once they were inside, Kingsley cast a silencing charm on the room, then a locking charm on the doors, then sat down on a large cushioned chair behind his desk.

Harry had been sitting on a leather chair in front of Kingsley's desk but when Hermione arrived, he rose from his chair and enveloped her in a warm hug.

"Missed you," he whispered in her ear.

Hermione and Malfoy sat in the chairs that lined the left wall.

"You already know."

"When I came to Crouch's manor, that night after the first dinner ... You were there, weren't you?"

Daphne nodded softly.

"You were in the stables?"

She nodded again.

"I knew it," Theo said, his voice thick and raspy. "I *felt* it. I knew something was wrong, but I couldn't see you."

Astoria started to sob.

Blaise pulled her into his side so she could muffle her cries against his shoulder.

"I know." Daphne forced a smile. "I was chained in the corner. Grouch had cast a strong Disillusion charm around me. I think he knew you were going to come back for me. It was like being trapped in an invisible box." Daphne got up from the table and started to walk over to Theo, more and more tears gathering in her eyes with every step she took. "I saw you and I knew you'd come back for me, even though you didn't know it was me. I knew you felt something. I couldn't believe it when I saw you walk into the stables. Then I saw you rub the back of your hand." She knelt by his side and took his tattooed hand in hers. "I knew you felt something. I was so happy, I thought you were going to get me out. I got up and started calling out to you but you couldn't hear me. I started screaming and banging my fists against the wall, you looked in my direction once. I was screaming '*I'm here! I'm right here!*', but you just couldn't hear me, baby."

That was when Theo started to crack. He started to sob quietly. He tried to hide behind his hands, but Daphne wouldn't allow it.

"I'm sorry," Theo choked. "I'm so sorry. This is all my fault. I failed you."

"This wasn't your fault." Daphne cupped her hands on either side of his face but when she tilted his head so she could look at him, Theo closed his eyes and tried to move away.

"Please don't do that." Tears started to slide down Daphne's cheeks. "Don't pull away from me like you're ashamed to look at me."

"But I am ashamed!" Theo said hoarsely. "I'm not ashamed of you. I could never be ashamed of you. I'm ashamed of myself. You were there the entire time. I could have saved you so many times and I- I-"

that transformed her into me. She was executed in my place, and I was made to live her fate and become a Doll.” Daphne shook her head and scoffed lightly. A tear escaped the corner of her eye and she wiped it away and chased it down with whiskey. “You’ve got to hand it to Crouch, it was a brilliant plan. He made sure there was no doubt. He made sure everyone who loved me thought I was dead so no one would come looking for me. He’s as clever as he is sick in the head.”

“Did anyone else know?” came Malfoy’s voice, cold and seething with anger.

“No. Only Crouch and Voldemort knew who I was. Crouch only ever made me drink Polyjuice potion when he had guests coming over and he wanted to show off. The Dolls knew what I really looked like but he’d taken their voices away so it didn’t matter that they knew. They couldn’t tell anyone and he had enough of Kira’s DNA to make decades’ worth of Polyjuice potion so no one would ever find out.”

“So whenever you were around Crouch’s manor...?” Blaise started to ask.

“I looked like myself, but when he had guests over or needed someone on his arm, I looked like Kira. The first few months were ... the worst thing I’d ever experienced. He came to my room every night and he ...” Daphne’s voice shook. She couldn’t say the word. She swallowed thickly and tried again, knowing they didn’t need her to elaborate. They knew what Crouch had done to her. She didn’t need to say it out loud. “After a few years, he got bored of me. He gets bored of all the Dolls after a while, they only ever have a shelf-life of two years or so, but he never got rid of me. He hasn’t ... touched me like that for a long time but he wouldn’t kill me either. He got bored of my body but he didn’t get bored of making me suffer. He used to like to torture me in other ways. He used to tell me you were dead all the time, Theo. He used to decapitate people, cast Disillusion charms on their heads so that they looked like you and then throw them at me. All I’d see is your head. Decapitated and bleeding on my lap. I picked up a bread knife once and tried to stab him. I didn’t care if it killed me too, I just wanted it to end but I fucking missed.”

Blaise and Malfoy looked at one another for a moment.

“I never stopped trying to get out though. Even though we could barely communicate with one another, I always tried to rally the other girls and see if we could find a way to get out together. Crouch figured it out after a while.” Daphne finished her whiskey and held her glass up to her sister for her to refill before she carried on. “He kept me separate from the other girls after that.”

“Where did he keep you?” It was Theo who asked the question, and Daphne’s eyes grew very sad when she answered him.

Harry went back to his and Ron leaned against the wall with a scowl on his face.

“So then?” Ron asked.

“So what?”

“Have you managed to get anything out of Crouch about where Nagini is being kept?”

Malfoy’s eyes hardened. He rolled his tongue on the inside of his cheeks, a tell-tale sign that he was losing his patience. “What makes you think that we know where Crouch is?”

“That’s what Sarah and Megan said.” Ron shrugged. “Said you’ve got him chained up in the farmhouse and are torturing him for information.”

When Malfoy cocked one of his brows and stared down his nose at Ron, he looked just like his father. All arrogance and icy anger. “Did they now?”

Ron pushed himself off the wall -

“Look,” Harry said, cutting in between the two of them. “Whether you have Crouch or what you do with him isn’t our top priority right now. What is our top priority is finding the snake and killing it.”

“Have you destroyed the medallion?” Hermione asked.

“Yeah,” Harry nodded. He looked rather pleased with himself. He almost smiled. “We destroyed it on the 2nd April with the sword of Gryffindor.”

Good. That meant they were one step closer. That meant that all that was left now really was the snake.

“So?” Harry looked nervously at Malfoy. “Has Crouch said anything?”

“No.”

“No?” Ron snarled. “Why not? I thought you guys were supposed to be the experts in torture!”

“We’re not torturing him for information.” Malfoy said coldly.

Ron’s hands balled into fists. “Then why?”

“Call it retribution,” Malfoy answered. “But that doesn’t mean that torturing him is completely useless.”

“Oh?” Kingsley sat up a little taller in his chair, his interest suddenly peaked. He laid his elbows on his desk and folded his hands in front of him. “How so?”

"Only Bellatrix knows exactly where Nagini is being kept but after my betrayal, I doubt Voldemort will trust anyone with her other than himself."

Everyone in the room nodded, they'd all come to a similar conclusion themselves. "Grouch has been Voldemort's biggest supporter for over twenty years. The mans obsessed. He devoted a year to resurrecting Voldemort and he never made him a Demon Mask."

"And the point to this story is?"

If Ron made another rude comment like that, Hermione was sure Malfoy was going to hit him. She was a little surprised he hadn't done so already.

"My point," Malfoy's thinning patience was evident in the way his eyes flashed in anger, "is that Grouch is like a fan girl to the Dark Lord. He's dedicated his life to him and he knows his mind better than anyone else. He knows how Voldemort thinks, even better than I do."

Kingsley began drumming his fingers against the back of his hand, something he always did when he was deep in thought. "I see. You think he'll be able to work out where the snake is being kept?"

"Yes, or a way to draw her out."

As the four of them started to discuss the next phase of their plan, Hermione started to zone out. She tried to chirp in when she could but her attention kept drifting. There was a quiet little noise pulling her focus. A soft of... humming? Buzzing?

"Can you hear that?" Hermione asked, making a face as her eyes scanned the room.

Malfoy's brow creased. "You mean that very quiet but very annoying buzzing?" he whispered, only to her. "Yes. It's doing my bastard head in."

Kingsley said something about sending a muggle sniper team into York cathedral.

Malfoy said it was a bad idea.

Hermione tried to pay attention but that horrible noise was getting louder. Hermione swore it was coming from Kingsley's desk.

What the fuck was making that noise? It sounded like he had a hundred bugs scurrying about in his drawer.

"Did you know Kiera before?" It was the first question that popped into Hermione's head, and it seemed like a good starting point to get Daphne going.

"No," Daphne shook her head. "Not before the day she was executed. Kiera was a muggle soldier and I was the one who captured her at the mission in Bristol. I killed the rest of her squadron and I kept her alive so we could interrogate her later. After I'd finished tying her up, we were called to the roof and that was when Theodore was ordered to destroy the children's hospital."

Hermione's mind went back to the memory Malfoy had once shown her. When he'd visited Daphne in her cell before her execution there'd been a girl in the next cell. A girl with black hair and green eyes ...

"After I was captured Malfoy came to see me and then so did Theo. I didn't regret my decision then and I still don't now. I made my peace with what'd happened and I was happy to die to protect my family. Knowing what I know now, if I had to make the decision again and spend the rest of my life as Mustang, I'd do it in a heartbeat if it meant Theo went free."

Hermione knew Daphne was strong and selfless, Malfoy had told her so, but this was something else. She meant every word she said. Although she spoke about murder and war, every word she said was dripping in love and devotion. She loved Theo more than anything else - even more than Astoria loved Blaise or Blaise loved Astoria - which is why she couldn't even imagine how much it must have been hurting her that Theo was avoiding her.

"Just before I was supposed to be executed, Grouch came to our cells and ordered all the guards there to leave us. It was just the three of us in the room. Grouch unlocked the door to Kiera's cell and grabbed her. She was so beautiful, I'd already assumed that he was going to take her as one of his dolls, but then he turned to me and he said that I stole Kiera's life when I captured her, so I might as well get a good look at what I'd stolen from her, and then he raped her, right in front of me."

Astoria shivered and downed the rest of her glass. She got up, grabbed a fresh bottle and poured everyone another round of liquid courage before Daphne continued.

"Afterwards, he took out his wand and started to shave all of her hair off. He left her cell and then walked over to mine and unlocked it. I remember thinking that he was going to do the same to me. I was ready to fight him, but then all he did was cut off a lock of my hair and drop it into his hipflask. I didn't understand his plan until he went back into Kiera's cell and made her drink it. He gave her Polyjuice potion

"Nagini isn't the only Horcrux left," Hermione said, and she had to take a deep breath before she could add the next sentence. "Voldemort made me one, too."

The rosy blush was drained out of Daphne's face.

"No!" Astoria gasped and her hands flew to her mouth.

Blaise looked at Hermione in horror.

A few seconds ticked by, and no one said anything. Theo just stared at Malfoy. Eyes wide and mouth was hanging open slightly. Even he didn't seem to be able to find a joke. None of them what to say. None of them knew what to do, except Daphne. She turned around and walked back into the living room, her high heels clicking softly against the floor as she went. She gently took hold of her sister's wrists and pulled her off the sofa.

"Come on," she said, all elegance and grace as she gathered up one of the blankets and bundled it around her sister. "Out we go. All of us."

"Go where?" Blaise asked.

"We're going to take these," Daphne said, grabbing some of the pillows off the sofa and gently throwing them to Blaise and her husband, "transfigure them into a tent and sleeping bags and sleep outside."

"But we need to -" Astoria started to protest.

"No, we don't," her older sister cut her off. "The only thing we need to do right now is get out of the way. Draco and Hermione need to be alone."

No one argued with Daphne. They all did as they were told and gathered a few pillows and blankets - but made sure to leave a few for Hermione and Malfoy - and then disappeared out of the kitchen door.

The look Astoria gave Hermione while Blaise helped her outside made her chest ache.

Theo gave Malfoy the same look.

When they were alone, Malfoy and Hermione stared at one another for the longest time. She didn't know what to say, didn't know where to even begin to say goodbye to him ...

"I want to be buried" She thought it was a good place to start, get the practical stuff out of the way first.

Malfoy clenched his jaw. She watched him swallow. "What?"

"After ... if ... happens, I want you to bury my body," Hermione whispered, and the way Malfoy flinched made her heart twist painfully. "The Order has always burnt the bodies of their dead but I don't want that. I want you to bury me somewhere and charm the grass so loads of flowers grow over my grave and you have somewhere to visit me ... If you wanted to, that is."

"I can't listen to this."

"I'd like it if you could bury me under the cherry blossom tree at your manor. Maybe move the bench so it faces my grave? You don't have to if you don't want to, but it's the only place that's felt like home to me in years."

"Stop it, Granger."

"And I want you to have a funeral for me. I want you all to get so drunk that Astoria ends up passed out somewhere and Theo throws up. I don't want it to be a sad thing. I want you to celebrate that the war is over and you're all free and -"

"I SAID STOP IT!"

He was hurting. His Occlumency walls were hanging on by a thread but they needed to talk about this. She didn't know how much time they had left together and she didn't want anything to be left unsaid between them.

Hermione maybe had a few more weeks before they found and killed Nagini - possibly two months, if they really stretched it out - but the longer she was alive, the longer Voldemort lived and the more people he would kill, and as much as she wanted to be selfish, as much as she wanted to stretch out her time with Malfoy, the thought of innocent people dying because she refused to give Malfoy up ... It made her feel queasy.

But where was she supposed to begin?

Her throat felt thick. She struggled to force her words out. "We don't have any other options. For the sake of everyone else, this needs to happen -"

"What about what I need?" Malfoy bellowed. "Just for fucking once, will you forget about saving everyone else and think about what I need?"

"And what do you need?"

"I need *you*, Granger!" he exhaled in an angry rush. "You said that we were going to travel the world together. What was that? Just an empty promise?!"

"No, of course not!"

"Well how are we supposed to do that if you aren't here?!"

Hermione's heart felt like it was breaking. "I'd love nothing more than to travel the world with you, but if Voldemort is going to die, the Order needs me to—"

"Fuck what the Order needs! Fuck what the world needs! I need you! I need you by my side! I need you to live!"

"It's alright. I'm ready to —"

"Don't you fucking dare say that you're ready to die!" Malfoy's chest heaved and he looked like he was having trouble breathing. His eyes were wide and crazed and his hands were balled into fists at his side. He looked like he was holding onto his sanity by the very tips of his fingers. One little push would send him spiraling. "After everything we've been through it can't end like this!" He roughly ran his hands through his hair and turned away from her. "I've not done all this just for you to die! No! NO! There has to be something! How did Potter survive when Voldemort killed him?!"

He already knew the answer to that, he'd seen it in Hermione's memories. "Harry was holding the Resurrection Stone when he died. It brought him back to life."

He turned back towards her with something sparkling in his eyes. Hope was there, burning around his irises even though he already knew it was a false hope. "Great, where is it now?!"

"It doesn't matter."

"Why not?!"

"Because it doesn't work anymore. It cracked after it brought Harry back and it hasn't worked since."

Malfoy growled towards the ceiling and dragged his hands through his hair again. "What if we tried to put it back together?!"

"If there was any way to fix the Resurrection Stone, don't you think I would have done it while I was still with the Order? It's useless to us, Draco."

When he looked at her again his eyes were blue, bright and blue and growing more desperate by the second. "Well then put the Horcrux in me!"

Those words might as well have been a stab in her heart for the way they hurt. He was willing to sacrifice himself to save her, just like that. No questions asked. Not a slither of regret or doubt on his face.

"You know it doesn't work like that," she said softly. "And even if it did, I'd still die. My life is linked to yours. If you die, I die —"

Astoria and Blaise watched from the sofa. Astoria looked like she wanted to get up but she was gaunt and pale, much paler than what she had been when Hermione had left. Her illness must have flared up while they'd been with the Order.

Hermione promised herself that she'd find a way to save Astoria's life before she died.

"What happened at the meeting?" Daphne asked.

When Malfoy looked up and saw that Hermione hadn't moved, his eyes flashed dangerously. "Did you hear me? Pack. A. Fucking. Bag. NOW!"

"Why does she need —" Astoria started but was interrupted by a dry cough.

Blaise watched her with a worried expression and ran his hand up and down her back. "Why does Hermione need to pack a bag?" he said, asking Astoria's question when she couldn't.

"Because I'm taking her to another safe house, one the Order can't find." Malfoy waved his wand and phials of healing potions and blood replenishing potions started to fly out of the cupboards and into the bag he'd charmed.

"Why?" Theo looked between the two of them anxiously. "The meeting couldn't have gone that bad, surely?"

Malfoy didn't answer. He stormed over to the pantry and cast another charm, one that made pieces of food and canteens of water float into the bag.

"I'm not going," Hermione whispered.

Malfoy whirled around and his nostrils flared angrily. He looked so bottled up with anger - like he was going to explode any moment. "This isn't up for discussion!"

"You're right, it's not," Hermione said. "I'm not going. Running away and hiding won't change anything."

"It's not running away! It's called self-preservation! It's called putting yourself first for once in your fucking life!"

"I'm not going!"

"Yes, you are! You can either go quietly or kicking and screaming over my shoulder, I don't give a fuck which. But *you are going!*"

"No, I'm not!"

"Would someone please tell me what the fuck is going on?!" Theo asked.

He didn't seem at all phased by what he'd done. Just turned his wand on Kingsley and pulled Hermione until she was completely hidden behind him. "If anyone tries to stop us," he said, "this is what you're going to be left with. I won't be stopped and I won't be gentle. You'll be cleaning bodies up from your hallways for weeks, and it'll be all your fault Kingsley, so choose your next words very fucking wisely."

Malfoy dragged Hermione through the hospital like her life depended on it, which, in some ways, she supposed it did. Thankfully they didn't pass anyone on their way out - Kingsley must have changed his mind. He dragged her through the halls and once they were outside and clear of any protective wards, he Apparated them back to the safehouse.

He didn't let go of her hand when they were home. He kicked the kitchen door open and pulled her inside, and Hermione felt four pairs of eyes watching through the large open archway that led into the living room.

Astoria was cuddled up with Blaise on the sofa Hermione usually slept on, Daphne and Theo on Malfoy's. The sun had set hours ago so the room was dark, but the crackling fire from the fireplace gave enough light for Hermione to see all their expressions. They looked worried and confused, every last one of them.

Once they were in the kitchen, Malfoy went on the warpath. He released her wrist and snatched one of Astoria's clutch bags that was lying on the kitchen table.

"You have five minutes to pack a bag," he hissed, eyes down as he cast what Hermione assumed was an extension charm on the clutch in his hand.

Hermione didn't respond, just watched the way his rage changed the angles of his face and made him look even more like a marble statue. Or a Renaissance painting. That fit him too.

She wondered if she'd be able to miss his face after she died or if she'd just ... cease to exist entirely? She really should have asked Harry more questions about what'd happened to him.

Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Daphne and Theo look at one another, then Theo got up from the sofa and walked wearily into the kitchen. "Everything alright mate?"

"I'm getting Granger out of here."

Daphne stood and followed Theo into the kitchen.

"And if you die, I'm stuck here without you. What fucking prize is that supposed to be? There has to be something we can do!"

"There isn't."

"Where's my little lion gone!?" Malfoy screamed, all hurt, all pain. "She wouldn't just roll over and accept defeat like this! Where's the girl that spat in the face of Death Eaters? Where's the girl that smiled every time she tried to kill me!?"

"You think I want to die!?" she shouted, feeling her anger start to bubble to the surface. "I don't! I've spent weeks thinking about how amazing it would be - despite everything I've done - to actually survive this and have a life! With you!"

"So then do it!"

"How can I when that means thousands more will die!?" She took a deep breath, trying to reign in her anger and when she spoke again, she managed to quieten her voice into a dull whisper. "Draco, I'm sorry, but I can't live if it means everyone else has to die."

"You're not dying Granger! It's not a fucking option, and if you think that I'm going to sit here and watch you run into battle like a lamb to slaughter then you're very fucking mistaken! I won't do it! I refuse!"

"It's not up to you."

"No, no, no Granger! You don't get to barge into my life and then die!" Suddenly he was charging towards her. He roughly grabbed either side of her face and yanked her forward until they were impossibly close, lips almost touching. "You don't get to make me feel things and then disappear! You don't get to bring me back to life and then just take away my only reason for living because it's what the Order needs!"

Hermione inhaled a sharp breath and looked up at him. "What?"

His eyes widened and she realised he hadn't meant to blurt those words out. He hesitated for a second, almost like he was debating taking them back - then he exhaled loudly - his decision made.

Because whether he wanted to believe it or not, they didn't have much time left together, so what was the point in holding back now?

"Before you came into my life Granger, I was dead, alright? A fucking walking corpse," he said softly, almost whispered it. "I did what I was told and killed when Voldemort told me to but I was dead on the inside. I didn't have a life. I couldn't feel any of what I was doing. I didn't want to. I didn't care. I was so numb to

“I didn’t have a single emotion or feeling, I might as well have been a corpse and then you came into my life and you -” He squeezed her head between his hands and Hermione couldn’t decide if it was because he wanted to hurt her or if he just never wanted to let her go. “Voldemort used to say that Muggles and Muggleborn’s were like cancer. It wasn’t until I met you that I realised he wasn’t entirely off the mark. You’re not cancer, Granger, you were an antidote. My heart was dead, it’d been drowning in darkness and hatred and revenge for years and then you gave my life meaning, you made me laugh and smile and showed me what it meant to be alive. You brought me back to life and you made me want live. I don’t know what I would have become if you hadn’t of pulled me back.”

Hermione’s eyes burned. She blinked back tears and felt her bottom lip start to shake.

“*Thank you for saving my brother’s life.*” That was what Daphne had said to her. “I don’t mean physically.” She’d been back in their lives for five minutes and already she’d picked up on something Hermione had missed.

Malfoy loved her. He might not have said it outright, but he did, in his own, twisted, dark, Demon Mask sort of way. He loved her. He’d just told her without telling her. Someone else would’ve been overcome with joy at such a declaration, if he’d have told her the same thing this morning - even an hour ago -she probably would have been, but now, knowing what she knew ... It warmed her heart and broke it at the same time.

He loved her - he loved her and she was going to die.

He loved her - she was his reason for living, and she was going to leave him. He’d fallen in love with her and in a few months, he was going to have to bury her.

In all the years since the war had started, it was the cruellest, most disgusting thing she’d ever done.

“Say something,” he said, his hands tightening on either side of her face. “What are you thinking about right now?”

“I’m sorry.” She really was. Didn’t know how to put into words how sorry she was for what she’d done to him. “I know ... I know ‘in another life’ started out as a joke.”

“It was never a joke,” he said sternly, warmly. “Never to me.”

“I’m afraid that won’t be possible. She needs to stay here with us.”

The room suddenly fell very quiet and very cold. If Hermione didn’t know any better, she would have sworn that a Dementor had sneaked into Kingsley’s office.

“It’s pointless to try and fight this,” Kingsley carried on, reading the atmosphere in the room but ignoring it. “I’ve alerted some of the other members. Soldiers are on their way to escort you off the premises Malfoy and to take Ms Granger -

Malfoy’s back suddenly went very rigid. “Let me be very fucking clear.” He slowly turned around to face Kingsley and when he did, green sparks started to gather at the end of his wand. “Anyone who touches her will leave this room in several pieces.”

Harry visibly shuddered.

Ron looked at the floor.

“Don’t do this.” Hermione squeezed his hand and tugged him gently towards the door. He didn’t budge. He was a predator on the hunt. “Maybe it’s best if I stay -”

The rage in his eyes when they flickered down to hers shut her up. He was unpredictable when he was like this. It was best not to argue with him - for Kingsley’s sake.

“What are you going to do?” Kingsley asked. “Kill every person in this building just to stop us from potentially harming Hermione? You’d kill us all? Even though you risked everything to switch sides?”

Malfoy laughed cruelly. He smirked at Kingsley and rolled his tongue on the inside of his cheek. “Do you have any idea who I fucking am? I was Voldemort’s right hand. I was his Demon Mask. I’ve slaughtered more people than I could ever count. I’ve burned cities and army bases to the ground and I’ve beheaded people just because they pissed me off a little bit. And if I could do all that for a man I despised, what do you think I would do to protect *her*? ”

Kingsley’s eyes hardened but he didn’t have an answer. He removed the locking charms he’d put on his office doors and they sprung open, but the moment three muggle soldiers stepped through it - all dressed in black padded jackets and holding guns in their hands - Malfoy made good on his promise. A sharp jerk of his wand later, the soldiers were cut in half.

There was a second of stunned silence. Hermione’s breath caught when the top halves of their torsos started to slide off their bodies, and when they hit the floor and their legs folded over, everyone looked at Malfoy.

"No." Hermione shook her head. "I'm a Muggleborn. I'm everything he hates. Putting a piece of his soul into me would have been horrendous to him. It must have been an accident."

Harry nodded in agreement. "Do you think he knows?"

"I don't think he did at the time but he does now."

Hermione's mind went back to the moment she'd locked eyes with him during the raid in Nottingham. It'd only been for a moment, just a split second before she and Theo had Apparated away, but he'd known it. When he'd seen her, he'd realised what he'd done, must've felt a part of himself looking back at him.

"Well if that's the case then it's not safe for you out there anymore," Kingsley interrupted. "You'll need to stay here."

"You're a nutter if you think I'm letting her stay here with you!" Malfoy's tone was sharp enough to cut. He snarled each word, nostrils flaring and teeth bared. "You'll be slit ting her throat open with the sword of Gryffindor before I've set foot off the premises!"

"You can't take her." Kingsley started to argue.

"No?" Suddenly Malfoy was charging toward Kingsley. He flicked his wand and Kingsley's desk violently flipped over, soared across the room and crashed into the west wall. The desk splintered into several large pieces and there was a huge divot left in the plaster where it'd connected.

Kingsley backed away but Malfoy had a hold of his collar.

He dragged Kingsley forward until they were nose to nose and then dug his wand underneath his chin. "Try and fucking stop me," he snarled. "I'll do to your skull what I just did to that desk."

Second stage of grief, anger. Check.

"Enough, Draco," Hermione said softly. "Put him down."

Malfoy released a slow, angry breath before he let go of Kingsley. He glared down at him for a few seconds, then he turned around and walked back to Hermione.

"I want to go," she told him. "Take me home."

Malfoy nodded and took her hand. He started to walk them out, but even though Kingsley was clearly shaken, he managed to say the one thing that could stop Malfoy in his tracks.

Hermione nodded and the burning in her eyes grew more intense. She could feel a sob trying to claw its way up her throat. "We said we would be together in this life or the next," she whispered as she stared up at him. Her vision started to blur as tears gathered in her eyes. "I just thought we'd have more time together in this one."

The longer he stared back at her, the more his furious expression dropped. For a moment, he looked lost and broken and vulnerable and a hundred other things. For a single heartbeat, he looked just as he had when he'd held his dying mother in his arms.

And then whatever rage he'd been trying to bottle up became unleashed. He let go of her and self-destructed. He kicked cupboard doors and left gaping holes in them. He smashed windows and upturned the dining table. Splinters of wood soared through the air. Broken glass lay scattered on the floor. Nothing was safe from him. He destroyed everything. He broke everything and screamed with every bit of destruction he caused.

Tears streamed down Hermione's face as she watched him.

"IT'S NOT FUCKING FAIR! WHAT MORE DO I HAVE TO DO?!" Malfoy screamed, jutting his arm out and firing a curse that made the kitchen sink explode. "I'VE DONE EVERYTHING FOR THE ORDER! I'VE KILLED DEATH EATERS FOR THEM! I'VE GIVEN THEM HORCRUXES AND I'VE PUT MY FAMILY ON THE LINE! WHY DOES SOMETHING ALWAYS HAVE TO HAPPEN?!" He kicked the back of one of the dining chairs like he imagined it was Voldemort's spine. It crashed into the wall and cracked down the middle. "EVERY FUCKING TIME I THINK I'M GOING TO GET WHAT I WANT, I LOSE! I KEEP FUCKING LOSING AND I CAN'T DO IT ANYMORE!" He cast another curse that split the old dining table down the middle. "VOLDEMORT SPARED ME BUT HE KILLED MY PARENTS! I STARTED TO CLIMB THE RANKS BUT THEN WE LOST DAPH! VOLDEMORT IS DYING, THE ORDER IS GETTING STRONGER! WE GOT DAPH BACK! HAD YOU! WE WERE - WE WERE GOING TO RUN AWAY TOGETHER AND HAVE A FUCKING LIFE! THINGS WERE JUST FUCKING STARTING TO LOOK UP, I WAS SO CLOSE TO GETTING EVERYTHING I EVER FUCKING WANTED AND NOW THIS!"

He threw his wand across the room and started to punch the wall. He pulled his arm back and smashed his fist into the brick again. The wall cracked. The skin on his knuckles split open and he started to bleed but he didn't stop. Just kept pounding

his fist into the wall again and again and again as though that might somehow take the pain he was feeling away.

"IT'S NOT FUCKING FAIR! THERE WAS SO MUCH I WANTED TO - WE HAVEN'T HAD ENOUGH TIME!"

Hermione's hand flew to cover her mouth as tears started to slide down her cheeks faster. He looked like a man who'd lost everything, and she couldn't find anyone else to blame but herself.

Eventually, when the wall was in pieces and his blood had run up to his wrists, he stopped. His loud exhale turned into a sob as he slid down to his knees on the floor and covered his face in his hands.

Hermione went to him on instinct, second nature. She dropped onto her knees beside him and took his wrists in her hands. His blood soaked her fingers as she pried his hands off his face.

"This is all my fault," he sobbed quietly. "If I hadn't captured you in Dover, none of this would have happened - I'm so sorry - I - I've condemned you to death..."

"No, you didn't," Hermione hushed. She shuffled as close to him as she could and kissed the top of his head. "This isn't your fault. You didn't do this."

"You don't deserve to suffer like this."

The walls of her throat thickened until it was almost impossible to speak. "Neither do you."

His hands slid desperately up her arms. His trembling fingers locked around her wrists, preventing her from pulling away from him. "You can't leave me, Granger," he whispered, eyes still glistening, cheeks still wet. "I won't allow it."

"Whether Voldemort intended to or not, he made me a Horcrux. As long as I'm alive, Voldemort can't be killed. I won't let myself be the reason so many more people lose their lives. He needs to die..."

"And I need you to live!" he sighed heavily and leaned into her hands. "Granger, if you die, I won't survive! You have no idea what you've come to mean to me. You have no idea of the things I would do for you." His hands tightened around her wrists like a handcuff and he clung to her desperately. "You can't leave me now, not when we're this close to having everything!"

"You survived when you thought Daphne had died, you can survive this."

"That's in the past now," Kingsley cleared his throat, probably did it to demand authority. It didn't work. Malfoy's murderous glare just focused on him instead. "Now that we know that Miss Granger is a Horcrux..."

"It's not fucking true!" Malfoy's words were wrapped in a snarl, but Hermione knew him well enough to hear the lie in his tone. He knew it was true, he'd realised it before Hermione even had. He knew it was true, but he was refusing to accept it.

What was the first stage of grief again? Denial? *Check*.

"How could it even have happened?! When could it have happened?!" Malfoy hissed. "I've been with her every day and she's never been left alone with Voldemort. Never. I wouldn't have let him be alone with her!"

"May last year."

Everyone turned to look at her. Despite Hermione's voice being impossibly quiet, they'd all heard it. It was the first word she'd spoken in quite a long time.

"It happened in May after Cormac attacked me," Hermione said, telling everyone in the room, even though she was only really looking at Malfoy. "After that raid, we went to York Cathedral. Voldemort was there. He was angry because the Diadem had been stolen and he took it out on Goyle. He killed him in cold blood and then he entered my mind straight afterwards to show me that vision of the future. His wand... it must have been dripping with residual magic, it must still have had remnants of the killing curse on it when he went into my mind. I bet that was when it happened. He probably didn't even realise he'd done it."

Hermione was sure that was the moment he'd made her a Horcrux. To create a Horcrux, you needed to kill. The only way to enact magic that dark was to take another life. Voldemort had just mercilessly killed Goyle, slaughtered him like he was nothing, and then he'd entered Hermione's mind, used a very strong, very personal brand of magic. For a brief moment, Hermione and Voldemort were connected, they were one, and he must have left a piece of himself inside of her afterwards.

She'd felt different ever since. She'd felt his magic crawling under her skin ever since.

There was no doubt. That was the moment. That was the moment he'd done it. He'd intended to just show her her own death, but he'd ended up killing her himself. "Do you think he meant to do it?" Harry asked.

"You can ask me as many fucking times as you like, it won't make a difference! The compass is wrong! It has to be!"

"The compass isn't wrong," Kingsley sighed heavily. Hermione got the impression he and Malfoy had been going around in circles like this for quite some time. "I'm sorry, but it isn't."

"Oh, what do you bloody know?!"

"The compass is correct. Harry and Ron used it to navigate the tunnels to locate the Diadem when Medusa gave us its location."

Malfoy's venomous eyes turned on Harry.

"It's true," Harry answered quietly. "It led us right to it."

"Well then why didn't you use it sooner?! Or use it to locate the bloody medallion? Or the snake? What the fuck have you been doing with it for the past year?!"

"We have been using it," Harry answered. "We've been taking it to churches up and down the country because we thought a Horcrux might have been located there because of the visions both sides have had."

Ah. At least that answered one question Hermione hadn't quite got round to answering yet. She didn't want to die with loads of things left unchecked on her list. "But the problem is that the compass only works when a Horcrux is nearby. We need to know the general whereabouts of the Horcrux before it activates, and then it leads us there."

Malfoy snorted angrily. "Oh fan-fucking-tastic! So you're telling me you just kept this tool all to yourselves and let me and Granger almost get eaten by gigantic spiders rather than give us this?! Cheers for that!"

Hermione didn't look at Kingsley to see his reaction. She didn't take her eyes off Malfoy, didn't want to waste a second of the time she had left with him. Kingsley wasn't going to let her leave here, she could feel it. He'd make her stay here without Malfoy.

"It was too valuable a tool to give to you in case..."

"In case we betrayed you. Yeah, I get it. We were a valuable enough to get Horcruxes for you, we were useful enough to whittle down Voldemort's army for you, but not trustworthy enough to give us something that could make our lives easier."

"That was different!"

"How?!"

"Because I wasn't in love with Daphne!"

And there it was. Those words that'd been hanging over them for months. The thing that they'd both almost said to each other but always held in.

"I would do anything you ask of me," he said the words slowly, as though he were trying to engrave them into her like carving words into stone. "I would butcher the entire world for you, all you need to do is ask. I would become the Horcrux instead of you if I could. I would give up every treasure I have or ever will have. I would carve open my chest, pull out my heart and give it to you if you only asked me to. I would give you anything in the world that you want. But do not ask me to sit back and watch you die."

She kissed the top of his head again and ran her thumbs across his wet cheeks. She didn't know what to say, had no words anymore.

"We'll find another way," he said. "I won't stop searching until I find a way to save you."

"I don't want to argue anymore," Hermione hushed, leaning forward and pressing her forehead against his. "I don't want to spend what could be our last days together screaming at one another." She leaned forward and kissed him softly. "I love you."

She did love him. She knew that she loved him just as she knew she needed oxygen to breathe. She had for a long time, but she'd never wanted to say it out loud. She'd wanted to save it. Imagined herself whispering it in his ear while they were flying on Narcissa's back. She'd wanted to tell him eventually at some point in the future, but seeing as she didn't have one anymore, it seemed pointless to hold it in. Malfoy inhaled as though in pain. Exhaled shakily like she'd just stabbed him.

His lips crashed against hers. His arms snaked around her waist, and he pulled up the back of his neck so she could fist his hair. "We wasted so much time trying to kill each other. If I'd have known how little time we would have together..."

His lips crashed against hers. His arms snaked around her waist, and he pulled her into his lap. His kisses were overpowering and hungry and frantic. He kissed her like it was going to be the last time.

She tangled her fingers in his hair and kissed him back just as fiercely.

His hands slid to the back of her legs and when he got to his feet and picked her up, she wrapped them around his waist. Her lips never left his as he walked them into the living room, but they never made it to the sofas. He laid her down on the floor in front of the fire and attacked her clothes.

His were gone in seconds.

"I love you," the words they'd both kept so tightly hidden from each other were suddenly used so frequently, so openly, like they should've been doing all along.

"I love you," she told him when surged into her.

"I love you," he groaned when he chased her over the edge for the first time.

"I love you," she said when she felt him start to quiver under her fingertips.

"Don't leave me," he told her after he'd collapsed on top of her, spent - for the time being.

They spent hours on the floor afterwards, Hermione didn't bother to try and count them. She wished she could bottle up the way she felt in those moments.

Curled in Draco's arms, lying on the floor with him in front of the fire, a tangle of limbs with no idea where he ended and she began. No hidden weapons or secret agendas.

Just Hermione and Draco. Just a pureblood and a Mudblood.

If this was how she could spend her last days on earth, then she could die happy.

"Promise me you'll try and find a way around this." With his lips still pressed against her temples, she felt every word. "Promise me you won't leave me."

"I'll try not to. I promise."

"You do?" His arms tightened around her, and she watched the way the muscles in his bicep rippled under the light from the fire.

She shifted her shoulders so that she could look up at him. "I do." She smiled, hoping he'd catch on.

He took her left hand and gently brought it up to his lips. He watched her closely as he placed a lingering kiss on her ring finger. "I do."

"Whatever time I have left," Hermione said, "I want to spend it with you. But after that, you need to live and grow old. Till death do us part, remember? Well when I die, that vow is fulfilled and you need to move on."

She'd started to picture herself surviving. She'd let herself fantasize about travelling the world with Malfoy, riding on his dragon's back going from one city to another. She'd pictured exploring jungles and ruins with him in the day. She'd fantasised about her nights with him, curled in a bed, one bed, together, smoking expensive cigarettes and drinking whiskey from every country they visited. She'd started to want a life after the war, she'd started to want a life with him and now ... It was gone, just like that, and there wasn't a spell on earth strong enough to undo it.

Hermione was a Horcrux. Voldemort had made her a Horcrux. Whether he'd done it intentionally or if it was an accident like Harry had been, it didn't really matter. It didn't change anything. If Voldemort was going to die, then Hermione needed to as well.

She thought about a lot of things in those first few minutes. She thought about her parents and if she'd see them again when she died. She thought about how the world would change after the war. She thought about Harry going into the forbidden forest alone and it made her realise that she didn't want that. She didn't want to die alone, and then, she thought about Malfoy.

When she looked up at him, a tidal wave of sadness like nothing she'd ever felt washed over her. Because how could anyone look so angry but so lost at the same time?

She couldn't really focus on what he was saying but he looked murderous. He was screaming and arguing with Kingsley, he wasn't even aware that she was studying him.

He was so handsome. She didn't think she'd ever told him before. She'd have to make sure she did before she ... didn't have the chance to again.

Everything about his body language was protective. He stood slightly in front of her with one of his broad shoulders shielding her. He was holding his wand and his knuckles were straining around it. He looked like a snake about to pounce, fangs bared, muscles coiled and ready to explode in a burst of power.

She'd seen him angry a hundred times but never like this before. Hermione didn't want to think about what he'd do to Kingsley or Harry or anyone else that got in his way. It was a good thing they were standing on the other side of the room.

"You're being ridiculous!" Kingsley sneered. He was the only one arguing with Malfoy, both Harry and Ron were frozen and staring at Hermione with horrified expressions. "I'm going to ask you again to calm down -"

him and how much she wished she could save him. She remembered how tightly they'd hugged each other because they thought it was going to be the last time.

She didn't remember everything that clearly. She couldn't recall what she'd been wearing or what his parting words to her had been, but his expression? That she did remember because, at the time, it hadn't made sense to her.

He'd just found out that he was a Horcrux, and he'd looked calm. He knew what it meant and what was going to happen to him, but he hadn't looked scared or like he wanted to run away. He hadn't looked upset or angry, instead, he'd looked at peace. Like he'd already accepted that it was going to happen and there was nothing he or anyone else could do about it.

She didn't understand it at the time, but she did now.

Because what was the point in getting upset? Screaming that it wasn't fair and punching the wall wasn't going to change the fact that for Voldemort to truly die, Hermione had to die too. Curling up into a ball and crying wasn't going to change the fact that if everyone else was going to live, she couldn't.

In that first moment, she'd been terrified but after that, a sort of eerie calm washed over her. That was that. There was nothing anyone could do.

And now that she knew, so many mysterious were suddenly solved. The way she'd felt Voldemort's magic crawling and festering under her skin for months. The way Voldemort had looked at her when she and Theo had Apparated back to Malfoy Manor. Both of those things she hadn't understood at the time, but now she did. They'd happened because she was a Horcrux.

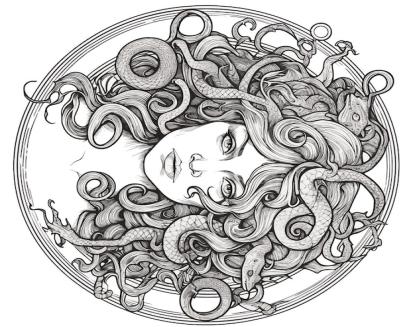
The nose bleed she'd had the week before, she must have had it at the exact moment Harry had destroyed the medallion. A signal that Voldemort's magic was growing weaker. A warning that her time was running out ...

What a strange thing it was, to have to contemplate her own mortality in her late twenties. She always knew death was going to come for her eventually; it was inevitable, but whether it be on the battlefield or on the executioner's block, a large part of her had always thought the war would claim her life in one way or another.

Once upon a time she'd been happy to die for the Order, and she still was, but the problem was that she'd started to want to live again. For the first time in a decade, she could see the war was ending and she'd dared to imagine what her life might be like on the other side of it.

"Granger," he said, and he smirked at her in that way that made her heart flutter. "Do you think my love for you is so fragile that something as simple as death could keep me from you?"

# CHAPTER 64



## DON'T MAKE PROMISES THAT YOU CAN'T KEEP

## UNDER THE CHERRY BLOSSOM TREE

*12th April*

They could have been doing this for months - that was Hermione's first thought when she woke up the following morning.

She felt him before she opened her eyes. Felt his thick arms cocooned around her, his chest gently rising and falling against her back and his chin resting protectively on top of her head.

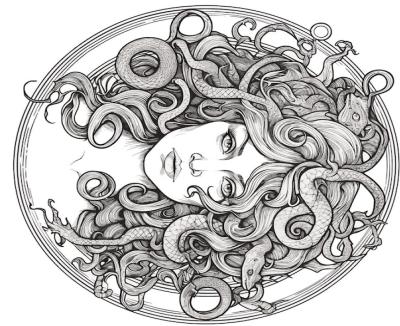
*11th April*

Hermione wondered if Harry had felt like this when he'd discovered that he was a Horcrux.

That'd been such a long time ago. It almost felt like it hadn't happened, like it was just a horrible, awful story that'd happened to someone else and Hermione had just read about.

She remembered being in the ruins of the great hall with him when he'd realised. She remembered feeling like her chest had been hollowed out as she stared up at

# CHAPTER 63



It was pointing at Hermione ...  
It was precious to Voldemort ...  
Turn the tides of the war ...

Dark Magic ... Precious to ... Turn the tide ...  
Oh god, no ...

The pieces fit together in her head -

She realised it a split second before Harry said the words.

The blindfold was suddenly ripped off of her face but she was still in the dark.  
Her hands weren't tied anymore but she was still trapped, only it wasn't a dark forest  
she was trapped in. It was a grave.

"Hermione this compass, it points to Horcruxes."

Her grave.

The sofa wasn't big enough for one person and yet, somehow, they'd made it work. Somehow, they'd managed to get into a dozen different positions and angles and managed to lose themselves in each other all night, and then, when they were spent, managed to find the space to drift off together, naked and curled in each other's arms - all from one little old sofa.

She heard the fire crackling and hissing gently as it burned in the fireplace beside them, and listening to it while she was tucked up in his arms ... she could have died right in that moment and been content with it.

She kicked herself for not letting him sleep in the same bed as her sooner. Tried not to think about all the times they could have done this if she'd not wasted so much of it, if she hadn't been so stubborn.

Falling asleep in a Death Eaters' arms, Merlin, what her younger self would have thought. The sofa wasn't the same as sharing a bed - no, it oddly felt like more than that. Sort of proved that they could be happy anywhere. Could be content and make themselves comfortable, nothing else mattered, as long as they were together... .

A dreadful pain twisted through her heart.

If only they'd had more time ...

Moving very slowly, she untucked her head from underneath his chin and swivelled around until she was facing him.

She wondered how his face would change over the years.

Would he grow his hair out as he aged like this father? She hoped not, she liked it when pieces fell into his eyes, but she couldn't imagine him with long hair. His hair was already almost completely white, it couldn't possibly change colour when he grew into an old man? No, no maybe not, but she could imagine him with wrinkles. Not a lot, just a few, little cracks at the corner of his eyes like someone had cracked marble. What did her mum used to call them? Was it Laughter lines? Yes, she could imagine him with those. She thought they'd suit Malfoy - *Draco*, she corrected herself internally. She'd just confessed that she loved the murderous demon, it was about time she used his given name.

She looked down at his hands. The skin there was so perfect and smooth, she couldn't imagine it with age lines or -

"Go back to sleep, Granger." Draco didn't open his eyes and his voice was low and husky enough to make her toes curl.

"Are you ever going to call me Hermione?"

He sucked his teeth and thought about it for half a second. "No."

She looked up at him and even though she smiled, she couldn't help but think about what his life was going to look like after the war.

She wondered if he'd go back to live at Malfoy Manor or if he'd travel. He'd said he wanted to travel with her, but after she died, would he still want that? Or would the thought of exploring one city after the other be tainted for him like it would've been for her? Would it have been like opening an old wound? A reminder of what could've been and the life they could've had together? She hoped not - she wouldn't want to ruin that for him.

She wondered what he'd do for work or if he'd even work at all. He didn't need the money, even if the Order seized every asset and galley он'd been awarded during his service for Voldemort, his family's wealth had always been enormous. He'd be fine - Astoria, maybe not so much, she'd probably have to cut back on the amount of Ruby and Diamond necklaces she brought herself - but Draco would be fine.

She couldn't imagine him just sitting indoors all day. He'd want to keep himself busy... He'd make an exceptional dragon tamer - although Narcissa might get jealous

- And then her thoughts went to something else and her throat constricted.

Her eyes slid down to the metal chain he wore around his neck and the rings that glittered there.

He'd marry someone else. He'd start a family with someone else.

Marriage. Children. Both of those things hadn't mattered to her the day before. She hadn't cared about them, hadn't thought about them enough to want them, but now... knowing that she couldn't... knowing that he'd have them with someone else ...

A cold hand cupped her cheek. "Are you alright, cub?"

They weren't going to talk about *'it'* - that was what they'd agreed. Hermione had promised Malfoy that they were going to do everything they could to try and find a way to save her but they weren't going to talk her death - and how likely it was.

"*I can't listen to you talk about dying*" Draco had groaned into her ear in the early hours, his cock buried inside of her and her ear between his teeth. "*Don't make me listen to it.*"

"Yes, I can see that thank you very much! Are you going to explain why?"

She hated this. She hated everything about it. She wasn't the one who asked questions, she was the one people went to for answers.

She usually had all the answers, and this, being helpless like this.. it felt like being trapped in the dark with a blindfold covering her eyes. It felt like stumbling around a dark forest with her hands tied behind her back.

She couldn't feel her way out -

She couldn't see -

She didn't know what was happening -

Harry swallowed thickly. His throat bobbed, and then he looked up at Hermione. "The artefact," he said. "It points to dark magic..." "

"I use dark magic and killing curses all the time." Hermione gripped Malfoy's hand as tightly as she could, hoping to warm some life back into him. It didn't work. "It shouldn't be surprising that some after-effects are lingering around me. It's only natural."

"Hermione ..." Harry trailed off. "You don't understand -"

"Then explain it to me!"

"You remember how heavily Voldemort had wanted this thing guarded?"

"Yes."

"You remember how he didn't want anyone else to have it because it was so important to him?"

"Yes!"

Harry couldn't finish. He looked at the floor and his eyes filled with tears. She looked to Ron and Kingsley and then Malfoy, they didn't seem to be able to speak either, so Hermione tried to string it together herself.

*"If you can get it, it'll turn the tide of the war."* That was what Kingsley had said when he'd sent her to steal it.

The artefact turned out to be a compass. A compass that pointed to dark magic. It was precious to Voldemort. He didn't want anyone else to have it because it could be used to hurt him.

The compass pointed to dark magic ...

Her heart was beating so loudly it felt like it was going to crack her ribs open and break out of her chest.

Malfoy looked like he was going to be sick. He paled, eyes widening, clenching his jaw so tightly together it was astounding he hadn't cracked it.

When Hermione was next to Malfoy again, she took his hand in hers and stood as close to his side as she could. "Draco," she could hear the panic in her voice, "you're scaring me. What's going on?"

"Hermione... I... I'm so sorry... I..." Harry stammered. "I didn't realise... I thought I would have..."

"What?" Hermione snapped, panicked. "What is it?!"

"That compass," Kingsley said. "It's the artefact that you managed to intercept on the mission before you were captured. Do you remember it?"

What kind of question was that? How could she fucking forget a mission like that? She'd almost died. Seamus had almost died. Neville had almost died. Collin had died - in her fucking arms.

She hadn't seen the artefact for herself, just the worn wooden box that it'd been stored in. A wooden box for Colin's life. She hated it then and she hated it now. She remembered thinking bitterly that the wooden box wasn't worth the price they'd had to pay for it.

"Of course I remember it! Why?"

"You remember me saying that this artefact could change the tide of the war?" Kingsley asked. "That it would finally give us a fighting chance?"

"Yes, that's why I risked my life to get it, but that doesn't explain why everyone is looking at me like I have a brain tumour! What's going on?!"

Draco remained silent. Apart from his trembling hands, he hadn't moved for almost a minute.

Hermione reached for his hand and squeezed it -

He was ice cold and when she looked up at his face, it looked like his soul had died. His eyes were empty. He looked like a shell of a man. He looked the same way Theo used to ...

"The compass," Harry whispered. "Hermione, it's pointing at you. It moves wherever you go..."

From Malfoy's point of view, Hermione was going to be safe. She was going to survive this one way or another and he didn't give a fuck what he had to do to make that happen. He'd agreed to let her find a way to get Nagini for the time being so Voldemort would be as weak as possible, but he'd made it very clear that he wasn't going to let her die.

She blinked and looked up at him. She nodded and forced her lips into a weak smile. She tried to keep eye contact with him but she couldn't. Her eyes just kept going back to his mother's ring, her mind clawing itself back to who might one day wear it.

Without really thinking about it, she reached out and wrapped the chain around her fingers. She gently tugged at it and Malfoy sat up slightly so she could get a closer look.

Narcissa Malfoy's ring was probably the most beautiful piece of jewellery she'd ever seen. She'd caught glimpses of it before but in the gentle light of the fire, it looked otherworldly, the type of diamond that evil villains in bedtime stories would start wars over.

"It didn't always look like that," Draco said after a while.

"Like what?"

"It didn't always have the band of diamonds around the diamond." He ran the tip of his index finger gently over the stones in question. "My father added those before he proposed to my mother."

"It's beautiful."

"And my grandfather, he changed the colour of the diamond. It used to be yellow but he cast a charm to make it clear instead. And my great grandfather changed it into the teardrop shape it is now - it used to be square before."

"Is that something your family does a lot?"

"What?"

She looked up and met his eyes. "Do the men in your family often add a little something to the ring before they propose?"

"Yes, I suppose it was their way of making the ring a little more personal. Make it something a little more suited for the woman they were giving it to."

"What would you do?"

He thought about it for a moment before he answered her. "I'd engrave it." One side of his mouth twisted upwards, and he brushed the band of his mother's ring. "Both rings. My mothers and my fathers. I'd have something engraved on the inside so only we knew it was there."

He didn't stop her when she started to fiddle with his mother's ring. He didn't stop her when she held it against the very tip of her fourth finger on her left hand and watched how the sparkles changed - or even when she slipped it halfway down her finger - the chain still attached. If she pushed it down another inch or two it would've been sitting perfectly on her finger. She didn't think he'd stop her if she did.

"Wear it."

Hermione looked up at him. He wasn't joking. His Occlumency walls were almost completely down. She could read him clearer than she ever had before - he was being sincere.

"Wear it."

Hermione shook her head and let go of the ring, letting the chain fall and dangle around his neck again. "No." *Sure it for someone else*, she almost said. "I can only imagine the horror your ancestors would feel if they knew their precious family heirloom was being worn by a mudblood."

He made a face, made his nose scrunch up and venom bleed into his eyes. "I don't give a fuck what they think. I love you, I want you to wear it."

"I'm the first person you've ever loved Draco, save it for the last."

She didn't mean it. What she really wanted to do was reach out, snatch the piece of jewellery off the chain and slide it onto her finger. She didn't mean it but it needed to be said.

He would have a life after the war and she wouldn't, and that alone was enough to stop her from taking it. She could take as much of him as she wanted with the time she had left but she couldn't be selfish, when the time came, she had to let him go, and that wedding ring, that promise, it was too permanent.

She didn't want to make promises to him, not ones that she couldn't keep.

"What's your favourite colour?" he asked suddenly, derailing her train of thought. "What?"

It stopped when it was pointing at the door Hermione was hovering in front of. She looked up, about to ask what they should do, but when she did, everyone was just staring at her and their expressions .. they were all the same, all identical to one another and warped in horror.

Hermione's stomach flipped. She felt herself grow very cold all at once. "What?" "Granger," Malfoy's voice was strained and quiet, like someone had their hands wrapped around his throat. His eyes were bright blue and clear as he held out his hand to her. "Come and stand with me for a moment."

"What is it?"

"Please, just do it," he said. "Don't argue. Not now."

Hermione did as she was told. When she started to walk towards him, Malfoy's eyes went back to the compass. Everyone else's did too, and Hermione couldn't help but look.

That ... that couldn't be right. Could it?

As she was walking towards Malfoy, the needle followed her, slowly turning on the dial so that the arrow was pointing at her dead and centre and when she stopped at Malfoy's side, it stopped too.

"What's going on?" Hermione asked, feeling panic start to bubble in her chest like a brewing kettle. She'd burst if someone didn't explain what was happening, why everyone looked so horrified. "Why is the compass doing that?"

Malfoy's nostrils flared. He swallowed thickly. "Go and stand beside Potter."

"But what..."

"Please Granger. For me."

Hermione walked back to Harry and the needle followed her. She didn't pause at Harry's side the way she had Malfoy's. She didn't feel safe there. As soon as it was obvious that the needle had followed her across the room, she turned around and walked back to Malfoy. The sickening feeling in her stomach was getting worse and worse as she watched the dial on the compass following her again.

Her footsteps seemed a thousand times louder in the tense quiet. Loud. Impossibly loud. But not nearly as loud as the low scratching sound the compass made as it followed her around the room, the arrow always pointing at her chest.

There was no denying it. The compass was pointing at her. It was following her every move, but why?

And while Hermione was vaguely fascinated with the simple tools bizarre actions, everyone else in Kingsley's office stared at it in horror.

"Has it ever done that before?" Kingsley asked.

"just once," was Harry's answer. "The last time we used it. When it was really close to..."

"What does it do?" Hermione asked, watching as the dial started to spin faster, making the thin metal hands whine in protest. "What is it supposed to be pointing to?"

"Why is it doing that now?" Ron asked, asking another question as though Hermione's wasn't important enough to answer right now. "Surely there can't be..."

"Surely there can't be what?" Hermione snapped.

"I've never seen it move like this before," Harry said.

"Neither have I." Kingsley looked up at Ron sternly. "Weasley, go and gather a team. We need to be prepared if..."

"I'm not going now!"

"That wasn't a request, it was an order!" Kingsley stood from behind his desk and glared at Ron. "If the compass has activated then we may not have much time! We need to prepare for the eventuality that..."

"What eventuality?" Hermione asked, her patience dwindling by the second. "Will someone *please tell me what is going on?*"

Ron huffed loudly and puffed out his chest. "I'm not going anywhere until that thing stops spinning and we know which direction the threat is coming from!"

Threat? Did the compass point to danger? An oncoming threat? Maybe Voldemort and his army were close. Maybe that was what the compass was pointing to. It would certainly explain why Kingsley was so panicked and angry.

"SHUT UP!" Malfoy hissed maliciously. "EVERYONE JUST SHUT THE FUCK UP AND LOOK!"

Everyone fell into stunned silence and went back to looking at the compass. In the time that everyone had been arguing, it had started to slow down. The gold dial just kept spinning, getting gradually slower with each turn. It went around and around and around and around until eventually... it stopped.

"What's your favourite colour?" he asked, voice silky smooth as he moved his fingers down her body, running along the scar near her belly button. "I just realised, I don't know it."

"Hmmm. Should have known. Such a Gryffindor." His hands curled under the backs of her legs and suddenly she was underneath him with his hips nestled between her thighs. He held himself up by holding onto the armrest behind her head and hovered over her for a moment, smirking down at her in a way that took her breath away, and then he leaned forward and started peppering kisses down her neck and chest.

Her fingers kneaded into his hair, and she arched into him as he kissed down her stomach. She opened her legs a little further -

"Wish I could kill the fucker who gave you this," he said as he kissed the scar on her hip. It was only a bullet wound but she'd always thought looked like a badly wrapped scar.

It shouldn't have scarred that badly but the bullet had got stuck in her bone and because the infirmary was already overrun - she'd tried to get it out herself and ended up leaving her with the horribly deformed scar.

"Well you can't, they're already dead."

Even though her eyes were closed, she could feel him smirking. "I wonder where they're buried. I bet I could make them dead-*er*."

She went to smack him but he started kissing her again.

"Favourite flower?" he asked.

"Sunflowers."

"If you could be anywhere in the world right now, where would you be?"

"Here," she sighed when he kissed the top of her pelvis. "With you. Right now."

Malfoy's lips left her skin and when she opened her eyes, she found him watching her closely. When he smiled like that, showing his dimples and teeth, when he smiled without his Occlumency walls, he was so beautiful -

Knock, knock, knock.

Hermione had never felt fear like it.

Where, where the fuck were her clothes? Where were Malfoy's clothes? She sat up and her eyes darted frantically from one corner of the living room to the other but she couldn't see them, couldn't even remember tearing them off -

She was naked in the living room and the others were about to walk in -

The kitchen door clicked -

Completely unfazed and not nearly as panicked as Hermione thought he ought to be, Malfoy grabbed one of the thick wool blankets off the sofa and draped it over the pair of them.

Daphne came in first, then Quinzel, then Blaise, and even though Hermione pulled the blanket under her chin and was completely covered, she still blushed when Astoria grinned at her state of undress.

"*Is it safe?*!" Theo called from outside, his voice almost as fake and dramatic as the way he covered his face with his hands. "Can I look? Or will my eyes explode?!" There was a massive gap between his fingers - he already knew full well that it was 'safe'.

Blaise - ever the perfect gentleman - kept his eyes fixed on a spot on the ceiling, doing his best to protect what little remained of Hermione's modesty.

None of them looked like they'd slept much. They all looked a little worse for wear and had dark circles under their eyes. Astoria and Daphne's hair was both bushy and unkept and even some of Theo's curls were untidy as her own. They all looked like they'd had a difficult night but Blaise, he looked like he hadn't slept a wink.

Quinzel didn't make eye contact with anyone. Her little eyes were distraught and puffy as she padded through the kitchen and up the stairs. She hadn't been the same since Romy had died.

Daphne knelt on the floor by the sofa. "How are you both feeling?"

Her question was laced with concern. Her tone was low and serious, her sisters, however, couldn't have been more different.

"Oh, they look fine to me," Astoria said, gaunt and pale but grinning from ear to

ear. She looked over her shoulder and saw the state of the kitchen. "Although I must know, did you destroy the kitchen before or after you fucked each other into oblivion?" She looked back at them and then gasped loudly. "Or was it during?"

"Definitely during," Theo grinned, wiggling his brows suggestively. "Granger looks like the type that likes to be thrown about a bit. Don't you, sweetieart?"

"Miss Granger?" Kingsley asked in an irritated tone.  
Hermione sharply looked up to find him glaring at her. "Sorry. Could you repeat that?"

Kingsley made no effort to hide his annoyance. "Your mind elsewhere, is it?"  
Hermione straightened in her chair and tried to look as attentive as she could, but then the buzzing in the desk got louder - turned into more of a rattle - and Hermione's eyes snapped back down before she could stop them.

As the minutes ticked on and the noise got louder, even Harry seemed to be having trouble drowning it out.

"Kingsley," he said. "About that noise -"

"What noise?"

"The one coming from your desk. Is it coming from -"

"We'll discuss it later." Hermione didn't miss the way Kingsley's eyes slid to her and Malfoy when he spoke. Whatever was making that noise, Hermione got the impression that Kingsley didn't want them to know about it.

"But it's really distracting -"

"It's fine. "

"But if it's making that much of a noise -"

"I said it's fine!"

"Then maybe we should -"

"Oh for Merlin's sake!" Huffing and puffing, Kingsley pulled whatever was making that atrocious noise out of his desk and slammed it down on the table.

Everyone lurched to their feet and hovered around the desk to get a better look.

It was a compass. A simple compass with rusting gold hands and a smooth oak body. Funny, Hermione wouldn't have thought a compass rattling around in a draw could make that kind of racket.

But why had it been doing that in the first place? And why was it still thrashing around now like it was possessed?

The entire body of the compass was shaking violently and the dial was spinning around so quickly it looked like it might take flight at any moment.

"When - arghhhhh!" Crouch screamed and tried to jerk away from Theo but he couldn't. He looked like a hide in a butchers shop, he was completely at their mercy. "When is this going to end?!"

Suddenly, Theo stepped back and looked towards the record player. "Wait."

"Oh, O, O, O, yes."

"What?" Crouch panted. His eyes were squeezed closed with pain. "What is it?!"

"Wait," Theo said again, a little more impatient this time.

"We're going to have a party!"

"Wait," he repeated, holding one of his hands up and staring at the record player.

"Any second now. Waaaaait."

And then Lionel Ritchie gave the answer to Crouch's question. How long was the torture going to last?

"All night long, all night, all night, all night."

"Pair of psychos, the both of you," Blaise muttered from the entrance. He walked slowly into the room until he was stood beside Theo. "I swear you two were made for each other. For God's sake."

Theo straightened and slapped a blood covered hand over his mouth. "Ye take the Lord's name in vein? BLASPHEMY!"

Blaise quirked his brows and glared down at Theo.

"What?" Theo shrugged. "We spent months searching those bastard churches and looking at those Biblybob things for clues, you don't think I would have picked up a few things along the way?"

"Bibles, Theodore," Blaise corrected, rolling his eyes. "They're called Bibles."

Usually Daphne didn't mind sitting back and letting Blaise have most of the fun. He had a good reason to hate Crouch. The vile bastard had tried to slip something in Astoria's drink so he could take advantage of her, Blaise should want to make Crouch pay.

What he'd tried to do to Astoria, it should've angered Daphne more than it did. She should have wanted to hurt him for it, it should have filled her heart with rage but it didn't - she wouldn't let it.

So much of her soul was already taken up with hate and disgust and loathing for Crouch - she refused to give him any more of her.

No, no he'd still pay for having the nerve to try and victimise her little sister like that, but she'd let Blaise punish him for that crime -but not tonight, after seeing what Theo had already done to Crouch, it'd gotten her all riled up in the worst of ways.

When Daphne rose from her chair, Crouch looked at her. His eyes were void of anything but fear.

"Where is he keeping the snake?" she asked.

"I don't know."

"I think that you do."

Crouch flinched when she raised her wand - he'd grown to do that whenever she got close to him. It was a good start but she wanted more. Flinching whenever he saw her wand wasn't enough. She wanted him to be terrified of her. She wanted to train it into him. She wanted to beat him and hurt him and break him until even the mention of her name made him piss himself.

She probably wouldn't even stop there.

"I... I don't."

Daphne pressed her wand against one of the few fingers Crouch had left. "Let me ask you again." The end of her wand sparked - Crouch hissed in pain. "Where is the snake?"

"I don't know."

"Where is the snake?"

"I don't know!"

Crouch wailed as Daphne started to pull. The skin around his knuckle started to split open. Thick blood sprayed onto the back of his hand and hers - it made Daphne smile to look at it.

"WHERE IS THE SNAKE?!"

"I don't know, you stupid bitch- eughhhh!"

Theo hurt Crouch before Daphne could. He dug his wand into the base of Crouch's skull and gave him a little electric shock before Daphne had the chance to.

"O!" Theo snapped, jabbing his wand into Crouch's neck in warning. "We'll have less of that language directed at my wife, *thank you very much.*"

It was obvious what Crouch was doing. He was trying to goad them. He was testing their limits, trying to poke and prod. He wanted them to lose their temper

for a moment, he wanted them to snap and forget themselves and kill him. He really thought he was so much cleverer than everyone else.

Daphne walked over to their table of supplies and picked up the bottle she wanted, a special concoction of Blood Replenishing potion and Healing Draught, and it sounded like she cracked one of Crouch's teeth as she shoved the bottle into his mouth and tilted his head back. He tried to resist, but after Daphne plugged his nose with her other hand he really didn't have a choice.

He tried to fight, Daphne just smiled down at him

Taking Crouch's choices away... she liked that too.

Once the bottle was drained, Daphne waited the appropriate amount of time for Crouch's wounds to heal and once he was good to go again, Daphne went in for round two -

But Theo stopped her before she could. "Wait."

She blinked up at him and her brows furrowed together. She didn't understand. She thought the whole point of this was to -

"Don't worry," Theo told her. "We have another surprise for you."

Daphne tried to follow what happened over the next few minutes, but anyone would have struggled. One moment she was standing in the wine cellar and Blaise asked her to take his hand and the next, she was standing in a white room with fluorescent lights, Blaise and Theo beside her and Crouch tied to a chair in front of her.

"Happy birthday baby."

Daphne's brows knitted together. "Today isn't my birthday."

"We know." Theo rolled his eyes. "But we missed so many of them, consider this all the birthdays we missed, all rolled into one."

Daphne looked at the room around her - if she could even call it a room. There weren't any walls or doors or window. It was just endless white and bright lights that made her want to squint. She looked at the boys in turn and then she looked down at Crouch, she didn't get it at all, but then Blaise made it make sense.

"We're in Crouch's mind right now."

Daphne looked up at him. "What? Why?"

"Because you can kill him in here."

"Come join the fun, it's a merr-y-go-round," he sang, bobbing his head gently from side to side, in time with the music as he cut Crouch's nose off. "Everyone's dancing their *muffles away*."

Draco hadn't been exaggerating - Theo really did know how to put on a show, even the way he held up the mangled mess of skin and bone that used to be Crouch's nose was theatrical and over the top.

Daphne grinned and clapped from her chair in the audience.

After dangling the severed nose in front of it's screaming owner, Theo tossed it onto the pile of fingers and stood up. "Where's the snake, Barry?" he whispered, circling Crouch and smiling down at him. "Tik tock, tik tock.."

Daphne wished she could take a picture of Crouch's face. He was the image of panic. Terror splashed onto a canvas. Actually, maybe she should bring a camera next time...

"I don't know! He could have stashed her away anywhere!"

"Think Barry. Think."

"I don't... there could be a hundred different ... I don't know ... I..."

"Tik tock," Theo taunted, making another circle, dragging his knife along Crouch's ribs as he went.

"I don't know..."

"Tik tock, tik tock."

"I don't know! I can't think!"

"Tik tock, tik tock, tik tock."

"I DON'T FUCKING..."

"BEEEEEEEP!" I'm sorry, but we're out of time," Theo said, holding the knife like it was a microphone and lowering his voice. "We do have extra time coming up, but bonus rounds don't come cheap. We'll need payment now... a rib should do..." Theo tapped the blade against Crouch's exposed ribcage. "Or maybe your spleen... He can live without that? Right?"

When Theo looked over his shoulder at her, Daphne nodded. "Defiantly doesn't need it. Cut it out."

“Oh don’t be so harsh on yourself mate. You’re clever, remember? Cleverest of all the Death Eaters? Isn’t that what you always used to say at the meetings?”

“I ...”

“You were like a groupie of the Dark Lord’s, weren’t you? Stalking him? Studying him so you could bring him back to life? You spent so much time trying to impress him, practically licked his arse every day, didn’t you?”

“I don’t know what -”

“So you’re telling me that in aaaaall that time you spent wanting to be our lord and saviours favourite bitch, you never learned how he thinks? Not even a little bit?”

Crouch swallowed. He looked like he was going to pass out - although, that could very easily have been from blood loss or hanging upside down for as long as he had been.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.” Theo knelt down until he was eye level with Crouch. He flipped the knife in his hand once, and then he hovered it threateningly over the bridge of Crouch’s pointy nose. “You know, if you love him so much, I could give you a little make over? Cut off your nose, shave it down, make you look just like him.”

The chains that were wrapped around Crouch started to rattle and clink as his body started to tremble.

Theo placed the tip of his knife against Crouch’s nose and very slowly, dragged it upwards until it rested between his brows. “What do you think, Daph? Think he’d like that?”

“I don’t know about Voldemort, but I know *I* would love to see it.”

Crouch turned very pale - again, if it was through fear or blood loss or suspension, Daphne wasn’t sure.

Theo sucked air through his teeth and tapped the knife against Crouch’s nose. “Sorry pal, the lady gets what the lady wants.”

Then he started to cut into Crouch’s skin -

Crouch screamed. Bones started to crunch.

Daphne rose slightly from her seat so she could get a better view.

Lionel Ritchie still sang in the background, Theo’s voice accompanying him.

Although for completely different reasons, both Crouch and Daphne’s eyes widened.

“*Tuaduuuu,*” Theo beamed for the second time. “Told ya the second surprise was a good one.”

“How is that possible?”

Blaise was all too eager to explain. “The spell I used to get us into his mind, it’s very similar to Legilimency. Draco gave me the idea. He told me that when he used to search Hermione’s memories, she could feel pain in there. While they were in her mind, she used to feel all sorts of pain, and aside from the toll frequent Legilimency takes on the body, her physical body remained fine. Of course it doesn’t mean that you should be reckless, Daphne. If you use the spell excessively, it could cause irrevocable damage to the tissues in his brain which causes -”

“English please, mate,” Theo cut in.

Blaise sighed but managed to refrain from slapping Theo. “Whatever you do to him in here, he’ll feel it, but it’ll stay in here. Do you understand?”

She did, but she needed Blaise to say it out loud to make sure she wasn’t dreaming it.

“You can kill him in here Daphne,” Blaise explained, and although he was clearly taking to Daphne, he was smirking down at Crouch. He was going to have as much fun with this as Daphne was.

Theo gently placed his index finger under Daphne’s chin and tilted her head up so he could stare into her eyes. “Do you get it? You can actually kill him and nothing will happen to him on the outside.” He leaned forward to kiss the tip of her nose and when he pulled back, he was grinning at her like he’d just won the Quidditch world cup. “You said that every time Crouch touched you, you felt like you died inside. We thought it was about time you did the same to him.”

“Are ...” She could hardly speak. If this was true, if this worked, there wouldn’t be enough words in the world to express her gratitude. “You’re sure this will work?”

“Yes,” Blaise nodded. “I’m sure.”

“Are you absolutely positive?”

“Yes -”

Daphne didn’t wait for him to finish. She was too excited. She swiped her wand sharply in a vertical motion and just like that, Crouch’s head left his shoulders. Blood

spurted out from the stump that used to be his skinny neck. His decapitated head rolled across the floor.

All three of them held their breath.

One.

Two.

Three

Theo took Daphne's hand.

Four.

Five.

Six.

Daphne squeezed Theo's hand tightly in her own. Maybe she'd been too rash.

Seven.

Eight.

Nine.

Ten.

Fuck. She should have waited -

Eleven.

Twelve seconds later, the lights above their heads flickered. They were temporarily left in total darkness but when the light came back on, Crouch's head was back on his neck and he was screaming. Absolutely wailing and crying like Daphne would have done every time he'd forced himself on her - if she'd only been able to.

She'd killed him. She'd shown him what it felt like to die - truly die - only for him to realise that it wasn't over, not even a little bit. For a brief moment, he'd been in unimaginable agony. For a brief moment, his soul had left his body and he'd died inside. For a brief moment, he'd just experienced what he'd put her through for seven long fucking years.

And that was only a taste.

Best Fucking Birthday, *Ever*.

Watching Grouch be tortured felt almost as good as doing it herself. Every time he screamed, Daphne smiled. Every time he waited and begged and cried for it to stop, Daphne felt better. Lighter, like another of the pieces he'd left behind had been clipped away.

This, it was the best present Theo had ever given her.

She sat back in her chair and watched with a smile as her husband very slowly and very painfully, extracted Grouch's finger, tossed it across the room, and then started to work on the next one.

*"Lose yourself in wild romance,"* as Theo danced, he leaned onto the tips of his toes and spun around, and as he did, he dragged the knife he was holding all the way down Grouch's arm, severing flesh and causing a new wail of agony to spill from his mouth, *"we're going to party, karumu, fiesta, forever."*

"EUGHHHH! NO! NO! EUGHHHH!"

*"Come on and sing along"* Theo sang happily as he dragged the knife down the opposite arm, letting the blood spill. *"We're going to party."* Theo flicked his wrist in a way that sliced a piece of skin off Grouch's elbow. *"Karumu."* Another flick, this one taking a chunk out of his forearm. *"Ticuu."* Another slash, Daphne was surprised it didn't take his finger off. *"Forever."*

"You ... you can't keep doing this..." Crouch whined, blood dripping down his temples and adding to the crimson puddle on the floor. "I'll die soon ... lost, too much blood -EUGHHH!"

*"Shhhhhh!"* Daphne hissed menacingly, twirling her wand and making Crouch flinch. "Stop screaming! I can't hear Theo's lovely singing voice!"

Theo grinned wickedly before he blew her a kiss and continued with his work. He'd changed so much while she'd been away. He was stronger now, more ruthless, more confident. He used to shy away from hurting people but now he seemed to love it.

She'd have been lying if she said that she didn't like this new, more confident Theo.

*"Come on Grouchy boy,"* Theo grinned, hovering over their victim. "If you were old Boldy Voldy, where would you keep your little scaly mate?"

*"What -"* Grouch started to splutter. "What makes you think I know where he's taken her? I'm just a servant! I'm just a Gold Mask -"

"Well my friends, the time has come."  
"Please, make it stop..."

"To raise the roof and have some fun."

".. You're going to push it too far..."

"Throw away the work to be done."

"You're going ... to ... kill me..."

Theo placed the tip of his wand against Grouch's thumb.

Grouch hissed and tried to flinch away, but when Theo whispered an incantation and the skin around Grouch's thumb started to slide off the bone, he writhed and jerked in agony.

Daphne had never been much of a fan of torture. She'd done it, yes, but she'd never really enjoyed it. It was just part of her service to the Dark Lord, just another part of her job. She never wanted to hurt anyone but given the choice between her family and everyone else, it wasn't really a choice. Kill first, ask questions later. She'd worry about her guilt later. Her family came first. Always had. Always would.

But watching Grouch be tortured? Watching her husband break and crack his bones? Watching Grouch snivel and cry and scream and beg for it to stop? She did like that – fucking loved it.

"Please ... Please No! No! Eughhhhh!"

"Let the music play on, play on, play on, play on..."

"NO, NOO! EUGHHHH!"

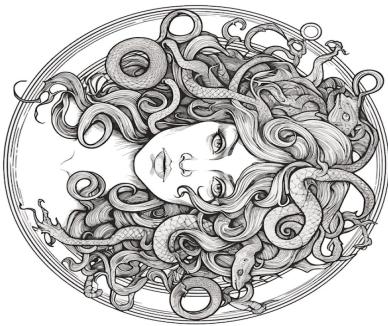
Daphne almost couldn't hear Grouch's pleas over the music that was coming from the vintage record player Theo had brought down from the kitchen.

"Everybody sing, everybody dance."

Metin, Daphne loved this song. She was surprised that Theo had managed to find this Lionel Ritchie song on vinyl. Even she'd struggled to get her hands on a copy years ago, and that'd been before the world had gone to shit.

Watching her husband dance about and torture the man who'd abused her for years, all while listening to 80's classics - Daphne felt like she was in heaven.

## CHAPTER 66



### YOUR FAULT

**1st May**

How the fuck had he let this happen?

As Draco stared down at the girl who was sleeping soundly in his arms, it was all he could think about. The same questions had been repeating over and over again in his head like the beat of a drum for weeks.

How had he let this happen? How could he have let Voldemort infect her with his magic? How could he not have fucking *realized it*?! She'd been a Horcrux for almost a year and Draco, he hadn't had a clue.

The signs had been there. The nose bleeds. The nightmares she kept having. Telling him she felt Voldemort's magic still crawling in her skin, even months after

he'd been in her mind. All the signs were there and he'd been so busy fighting his feelings for her that he hadn't put the pieces together – not until it was too late.

That compass, Draco had known what it was the moment Kingsley had slammed it down on the table. He hadn't seen it for over eighteen months but he'd recognise it anywhere. It'd been his idea to move the bloody thing and store it somewhere safe so the enemy didn't get their hands on it. The fucking irony of it all.

The move under the tunnels, that'd been Malfoy's idea. He remembered the plan he'd made down to the last detail, and he remembered the pain Voldemort had bestowed upon him as punishment when the mission had gone tits up and the compass had been stolen.

Six hours of constant Cruciatius curse - how could anyone ever forget that?

His failure with the compass, it'd also been the reason he'd been on standby a few weeks later when the Dover incident happened. He knew he needed to do something to get back in the Dark Lord's good books and waiting in the wings with a hungry dragon while some Gold Masks moved a carriage of girls seemed like a good way to do that.

The only reason Granger had been captured in Dover was because he'd been there, and the only reason he was there, was because of that fucking compass.

The compass, no matter which way he looked at it, that'd been the thing that brought Granger into his life, and ultimately, that was the thing that was going to take her from him too.

He'd never forget the feeling that'd swarmed over him when its dial had landed on her.

That feeling, the way his heart had stopped mid-beat and it felt like his chest was collapsing in on itself, it'd been worse than the six hours of Cruciatius curse. It'd hurt more than anything else he'd ever experienced because he knew the pain wouldn't pass, it wasn't going to get better in the future because the future that he wanted? That future that he'd been growing attached to? The one with Granger? It didn't exist anymore, had snapped out of fucking existence the moment that dial pointed at her chest.

It was as though that dial on the compass had cut the strings that held up his future and ever since then, he'd felt like he was free falling. Free falling into a great big black hole and he had no idea how he was going to crawl out of it.

When they were standing in front of the cellar door again, Theo grabbed her face and kissed her for a moment, just a little kiss - more of a peck, really - and then he let go, walked in front of her and opened the door.

Daphne couldn't see whatever he was showing for a moment, his frame blocked it from view, but when he stepped aside, when she could see, she smiled so widely that it hurt her cheeks.

There were a lot of things Daphne thought about doing to Bart' Crouch Jr during her years of imprisonment.

Every time he'd touched her she'd thought about slicing his fingers off. Every time he'd bit her she'd imagined herself ripping all of his teeth out one by one and then shoving them down his throat.

She'd thought about chopping parts of him off and she'd thought about drowning him. She'd thought about snapping and twisting every bone in his body until they splintered in two and she'd thought about flaying each and every layer of his skin off one by one until she hit bone.

She'd thought about it all, imagined herself hurting him in every fucking way possible, it would never have been enough to make up for things he'd done to her - or the time he'd stolen - but she still liked to think about it.

After all those years, she'd thought she'd come up with every torture method imaginable.

But looking at Crouch, watching as he hung upside down, suspended from the ceiling by chains and metal hooks that'd been shoved through his ankle bones ... watching blood drip from the wounds and down the chains that were secured around his body ... seeing the way his eyes widened when he saw her ... the unimaginable terror in his expression ... Daphne had never felt satisfaction like it.

Her husband had truly outdone himself this time. This, this was a fucking masterpiece.

Theo walked behind her and wrapped both his arms around her stomach. "You like it?" he asked, whispering the question against her cheek.

Daphne nodded, grinning from ear to ear. "You've outdone yourself."

"Come on then," he kissed her cheek again and then took her hand, "Zabini is joining us in an hour, we'll see how much damage we can do in that time but when Zabini gets here? That's when the real fun begins."

She felt him kiss the side of her neck, then her jaw, and after he pressed a lingering one on the shell of her ear, he added. "You're safe with me. You trust me, don't you?"

*With my life*, she didn't need to say it.

When she nodded, Theo started to lead her down a set of stairs. She already knew that they led down to the wine cellar under the safehouse but as they slowly took one step at a time, her heart started to beat quicker and quicker and by the time they reached the cellar door, it felt uncomfortable in her chest.

"You ready for your present?"

"I'm ready for you to take your hands off of my eyes!" She didn't mean for the words to come out in a snarl but they did.

When Theo removed his hands, she was standing in front of the cellar doors. The door was as it had always been, wooden with a rusting handle and chips in the dull blue paint. There was nothing different about the door, and Crouch, he was just on the other side of it.

"Taaaadaaaaaa!" Theo sang stepping back and flashing her that same beaming smile he'd worn when she'd agreed to go on a date with him for the first time.

She loved that smile, but the door? She wasn't impressed.

"So? What do you think?"

"You put me through all that just to show me a door that I've already seen a dozen times?"

"Well, yes, but that's not – Oi! Where do you think you're going?!"

"Back upstairs!" Daphne called over her shoulder as she started to walk back up the steps. "Astoria said she would paint my nails. She had a lovely pale pink –"

Before the heel of her stilettos could ascend the fourth step, Theo ducked under her arm and blocked her path. "Trust me, you're gonna want to see this."

"Why? What makes that door so special?"

"It's not the door itself, it's what's behind it."

"I know what's behind it. It's Crouch, tied to a chair, same as he always is."

Theo grimmed and looked at her through his dark lashes. "Not tonight, love." He leaned forward until their chests were pressed together and then he started to walk forward, gently pushing her back down the stairs.

And if he was being honest with himself, he didn't even know if he wanted to crawl out of it.

How the fuck could he have let this happen?

Draco was supposed to be clever and cunning. He was supposed to always have a plan and protect the ones he loved so how, how the fuck had he not had a clue that the woman who'd come to infect every dream and thought he had, had also been infected herself - right under his fucking nose.

He'd fucking failed Granger.

How the fuck could he have failed her like that?!

*If it's your fault, Draco*, the words were so loud and clear in his head, he could have sworn that Voldemort was standing behind him, hissing them in his ear.

You failed her.

You should have done more.

*If it's your fault*, Voldemort's voice was all he could hear some nights, rattling around inside his skull, gut-wrenching to hear, impossible to ignore.

You should have protected her.

*She's going to die because of you* he could picture Voldemort's face while he said it. Could see the spiteful triumph glowing in his red eyes.

She's going to die because you couldn't protect her.

It's your fault.

It's all your fault.

Draco had hated Voldemort for a long time. It'd started after he'd drove his father to the brink of insanity and it'd only grown from that day on, festering like an open wound. The rage had magnified when he'd killed his parents, multiplied tenfold when he'd ordered Daphne's execution. He didn't think it was possible to hate him any more than he already did - and then he'd made Granger a Horcrux, and Draco was proven wrong. There weren't words in any language that could describe the hatred he felt towards his former master.

It's all your fault.

He wanted to burn Voldemort to the ground. He wanted to rip his organs out and flay his pale skin and kill him over and over again. What Daphne was doing to Crouch wouldn't even begin to satisfy the bloodlust he felt growing for Voldemort.

Your fault.

She's going to die because you couldn't protect her.

Your fault.

She's going to die because of you.

Your fault.

He didn't just want to kill Voldemort. He wanted to crush him from the inside out. He wanted to terrify him. He wanted to take away everything he cared about, he wanted to make him feel weak and helpless. He wanted the Dark Lord to beg for death. He wanted to make him suffer.

Your fault.

She's going to die -

Your fault.

- couldn't protect her.

Your fault.

She's going to die -

Your fault.

- because of you -

Granger stirred in his arms. She jolted like she'd been kicked and gasped quietly.

Malfoy held his breath and watched her closely.

Her eyes remained closed but her hands balled into fists against his chest. Her lashes fluttered but she didn't wake and after a few seconds, her breathing settled back into a gentle rhythm.

Call him pathetic, but the sound of her breathing while she slept in his arms, it'd become Draco's favourite thing to listen to. He'd become so attuned to it, felt like if he was stood in a dark room with a dozen others, he'd have been able to pick her out easily just by sound of her breathing. He'd been paying much more attention to it lately probably because she was so convinced that she didn't have many more of them left.

The soft light from the crackling fire made her skin glow and gave a soft little flush to her cheeks. He ran the backs of his knuckles back and forth over her cheekbone as he watched her sleep.

what it took. She'd dissect and autopsy herself without medication to be sure that every last part of him was gone and she could feel like herself again.

She'd do whatever she had to get herself back.

It might take years for her to get back what he'd taken from her but she was working on it, that was the main thing. She was working on it one thing at a time, piece by piece, she was erasing what he'd done to her and Theo ... He was helping her every step of the way.

*Baby steps.* They'd take one day at a time, chip away at each thing she felt was a problem together until eventually, they'd conquer them all.

She just hadn't gotten the memo that today they were working on her fear of the dark.

If she hadn't been able to smell his aftershave behind her or feel his chest gently pressing against her spine, she would have already panicked and called the whole thing off.

"I don't like being in the dark anymore."

"I know you don't but I've got you. Baby steps, remember?"

Daphne swallowed the uncomfortable feeling in her throat. She rested one of her palms on her chest and took a deep breath. "Baby steps."

"You're safe, ok?" Theo whispered in her ear. His voice sounded so much silkier because it was all she could really focus on.

Merlin, she missed him whispering in her ear, it used to be one of her favourite things he did when they had sex -

Sex ... Sex with Theo ... She used to love it. It always made her feel connected to him in a way that words never could but now -

A sickly feeling bubbled in her stomach. The thought of it made her start to panic. Her chest felt like it was going to collapse in on itself - *but she still missed it!* She missed the sounds he used to make and the way he felt. She missed being that close to him. She wanted that intimacy back - but the thought of having sex with him terrified her as much as the thought of never having sex with him again did.

*Baby steps,* she reminded herself. Baby steps. They'd get there. They just needed time.

It'd gone on like that for years, developed and developed until eventually, every time she was left in a dark room - every time she couldn't see - her adrenaline spiked

and her heart leapt into her throat, waiting for him to find her, to catch her, to ...

This new fear of the dark was just another thing Crouch had left behind that she needed to undo.

She'd read scrolls on trauma and it was always described in one of two ways; the subject either felt like there was a monster stalking them, making it impossible for them to forget what'd happened to them, or they felt like there was a great big hole in their body that'd been carved out by whatever experience had traumatised them.

Most people sent their recovery either fighting the monster or trying to rebuild their life and fill the hole, but Daphne, she didn't feel either of those things.

After what'd happened to her, she felt... full, not empty. She felt like herself, but *not* herself.

There had been a hole once, dozens of them, years and years ago, but Crouch had filled them. He'd taken pieces of her, cut out the things that were important to her, carved away the things that made her *her* and then patched them up with him. Filled those gaps with pieces of himself so she couldn't not think about him.

He'd taken her fight and left her with a fear of the dark.

He'd taken her spirit and her passion and replaced them with a fear of being left alone.

He'd stolen years of her future and replaced them with years of memories of him torturing her.

He'd her love, taken something she used to fucking adore - *something that made her feel connected to her husband* - and he'd twisted it into a fear.

She was refusing to let him take everything.

It was silly to be obsessed with glamour charms and dresses and artificial things after everything she'd been through. Expensive dresses and pretty nails had no place in war, but those things were important to her before, so they should still be important to her after. There were so many fucking things she used to love before, what Crouch had done, it shouldn't take away her love of nice things too.

He'd left so much behind, he'd left so many pieces of himself with her but Daphne refused to let them stay. She'd cut him out a bit at a time, she didn't care

If's all your fault.

She's going to die because you couldn't protect her.

All they'd done the past week was fight and scream at one another - it was nice to see her quiet for a change. The one time he ever saw her this peaceful was when she was sleeping.

She'd promised him that she was going to try and find a way to save herself and she had done, to begin with. She'd started to read books on dark magic and learned what she could, but her heart wasn't in it, not until he motivated her.

Granger wasn't selfish like he was. She was good and pure. She didn't want to die but she was willing to sacrifice her life if it meant everyone else could live. Her and her bloody Utilitarian bullshit.

She'd done awful things during the war but she was still a good person, and the thing about good people? They were easy to manipulate. There was always something that could be used as leverage. Always something that tugged on their heartstrings that could be used to wrap around their necks and hang them with, and Malfoy, he had just the thing.

He told her that if she died, he'd follow her.

It wasn't empty words, he'd been ready to copy whatever blood ritual the Dark Lord had used and bind his life to hers to prove to her how serious he was but he didn't need to. The threat alone had been enough.

He shouldn't have been so proud of it but he was. He'd done far worse in the past to get what he wanted. Blackmail, manipulation, gaslighting, he didn't care what it was called, he would have done anything to get her to try and save herself.

She'd been ready to die but when Draco's life was suddenly hanging in the balance? That changed things. The thought of him dying lit the match and burned the fight back into her. Suddenly, she was staying up all hours to try and figure a way out of this. Suddenly, she was fighting again, and it was a good fucking job that she was, because conquering death? Not fucking easy.

For all the might and power of the wizarding world, Malfoy thought that surely someone somewhere would have thought of a fucking spell to beat or trick death by now? All these great scholars and wizards, and none of them - not a single fucking one - had gotten anywhere near figuring it out but no, there was nothing.

Draco searched and searched. He snuck into Hogwarts Library and stole books and scrolls from the graveyard that was once his school. He sacrificed sleep and he

read until his eyes felt like they were bleeding, but despite his desperate attempts, he couldn't find anything on bringing someone back from the dead.

The resurrection stone was gone and unicorn blood was ineffective. He thought he was finally onto a breakthrough when he'd dreamt about phoenix tears. Phoenix tears could heal anything, so he'd thought - fucking prayed to Gods and Deity's that he didn't believe in - that those tears they had stored away in the cupboard could somehow - fucking somehow - might be able to heal that awful thing that'd attached itself and was poisoning the woman he loved but no, even they failed.

Creating a Horcrux meant tearing a person's soul into several pieces, and with each failed attempt to save her, Draco felt like his own soul was being torn apart.

The only other thing he could think of was possibly siphoning the Horcrux out of her and putting it into something else. That could work - he was sure of, was fucking clinging to like a dying man clings to a lifeline in a storm.

A Horcrux was dark magic but it was still magic. Granger had managed to siphon Draco's magic without even realising that she was doing it, there had to be a way to siphon the Horcrux out of her and put it into something else so that they could destroy it.

Granger wasn't convinced that it would work but she'd agreed to let him try. Agree might've been too strong of a word, he hadn't given her the option to refuse.

So that was how they'd spent their days over the last few weeks. Practising and practising. Placing their wands at different pressure points around her body and trying to pull the dark magic that made up the Horcrux out of her.

It felt like an impossible task *because it was!*

Draco didn't know what he was aiming for, it was like trying to catch bubbles in a dark lake, no matter how much he tried, no matter how much he willed it to be so, it kept slipping away.

He noticed a small, purplish bruise forming on her chest, right over her heart.

*"If the Horrx that mas inside Harry was destroyed when his heart stopped, then that must be where it's stored."* Those were Granger's words. It'd been her suggestion to focus on her heart when trying siphon the Horcrux out of her. She'd said that he hadn't hurt her when they'd been but she must have lied.

He pushed some of her curls away from her face and that was when he noticed another bruise on the side of her temple.

"How am I supposed to do that when I can't fucking see where I'm going?" Irritably, there was a brief pause, and then Theo added. "Unless you don't fix your attitude, then you're on your own woman."

Daphne knew he wasn't being serious but her heart sank nonetheless. Her thick, artificial flashes fluttered behind Theo's palms. She hated this. Being in the dark not being able to see what was in front of her ... it reminded her of ...

If anyone other than Theo had asked her to do this, she'd have told them to fuck off. She hated being in the dark these days, even the thought of it made her feel a little sickly. She needed to be able to see everything around her at all times, needed to be able to see every corner so she was sure no one could sneak up on her.

Blaise said there was no shame in sleeping with a candle burning on her bedside table but still, she felt more than a little foolish.

Daphne hadn't been scared of anything before. Apart from losing her family, she had no real phobias or fears. She wasn't scared of spiders or heights or things that went bump in the night.

In the old days, she used to be able to slaughter a room full of people and not even smudge her make-up. In the old days an army of muggle soldiers could've been aiming their rifles at her and her heart wouldn't have even skipped a beat, but now? She'd had her husbands hands covering her eyes for a mere thirty seconds and sweat was gathering on her temples and her knees were trembling together with fear.

Daphne Nott, the most deadly female Death Eater that ever lived, was scared of the fucking dark. Oh, Bellatrix would've loved that.

She hated herself for allowing this irrational fear to develop. It made her feel pathetic. It made her feel small and helpless and everything that she wasn't and didn't want to be, but more importantly, it reminded her of Grouch.

That was the real problem. This fear of the dark, it'd come from *him*. What had been a game for him had developed into a crippling trauma for her.

He used to do it all the time. Wait until the dead of night, blow out all the candles in his manor and wait for her to walk past. Hide behind dark corners and attack her. Barricade himself in a room with her and then stalk her. Grab her. Hex her. Stab her. Leave her panicking and terrified and unable to see where or when the next attack was coming from.

# CHAPTER 65

Draco thought that because Voldemort had entered Granger's mind when he'd planted the Horcrux that it would be there. Moving very careful so that he didn't wake her, he picked his wand up off the floor and healed both of the bruises he'd made that day.

This plan of theirs, it had to fucking work. Draco wouldn't be without her. He simply wouldn't. They'd figure out a way out of this eventually, but they were fighting against the clock.

The mystery of where Nagini was being kept, it wasn't going to be a mystery for much longer.

One brush with 'death' had been enough to crack Crouch open like an egg and after that, suggestions on where Voldemort might have hidden Nagini were pouring out of him like they'd tapped a vein.

Most of his ideas were shit but it was the Order's shit to deal with. Malfoy and his family had done enough and as far as he was concerned, if the Order wanted the snake dead, then they'd have to kill it themselves. Draco had other, more important priorities.

## ALL NIGHT LONG



Crouch's first suggestion had been the old docks in Hull. For the life of him, Draco couldn't understand the connection but he passed the information on nonetheless, figured it would buy him more time with Granger and make it look like he was still cooperating.

After Daphne had executed Crouch by hanging him a few nights later, he'd suggested Hogwarts. That was too obvious a hiding place but Malfoy had still been nervous to pass the information on. He couldn't hide his relief when the lead turned out to be dry.

Crouch's next suggestion was some caves in Derbyshire. Then the remains of a castle in Whiby. Then an old seaside town in Devon. He even suggested the old Riddle house at one point - Malfoy had held his breath when Crouch had suggested that one. He didn't think Voldemort would have hidden Nagini there but it seemed much more likely than all of the other suggestions. He'd felt sick when Granger had passed the information to Potter, and hadn't been able to rest until they'd gotten the signal from the Order that they'd searched the entire property from top to bottom and found nothing.

They were getting closer to the snake, Malfoy could feel it. And each time either he or Granger passed another one of Crouch's suggestions onto the Order, Draco prayed that it'd be another false lead.

Because sooner or later, one of Crouch's suggestions was going to be right.

Because sooner or later, the snake would be dead and then Granger ... She'd be the only Horcrux left.

When the snake was gone, the Order would come. Draco knew that. When the snake was gone they'd want her dead. Potter might've been conflicted about it but Kingsley wouldn't. He'd want Granger's heart to stop beating the moment the snakes did.

When the snake was gone, they'd try and take her from him.

Draco pulled Granger more tightly against his chest. He buried his nose into her hair and kissed the top of her head.

He'd like to see them fucking try.

Theo shrugged and grinned wickedly. "I'll have to ask the Mrs mate, she's the boss, but I don't see why not. More the merrier, I suppose."

Hermione had just started to get up and leave the men in peace when Blaise stopped her.

"Hermione," he hushed. "Can I speak to you honestly about something?"

She nodded and sat back down.

Blaise cleared his throat and straightened his posture slightly before he spoke. He sat upright, rested his elbows on the table and gently joined his hands in front of him. "I know that I was incredibly rude and awful to you when you first came to us, and I can only apologize for that. I was ignorant and narrowminded and I'm disgusted that I ever treated you so terribly, but I think I speak for all of us when I say that you've become one of the family."

Hermione looked at Theo, he nodded in agreement.

"I know you are an incredibly brave woman, and I cannot thank you enough for what you did for Astoria. I understand and I respect you wanting to do what is right and what is necessary to protect everyone else, but you're one of us now, and we would do anything to protect you."

Hermione didn't know what to say, just stared back at him and blinked back tears. God, she was so fucking sick of crying.

"You have done so much for us, but for Draco, you've done so much more. It's just as Daphne said, you brought him back to life, so please, for the sake of my brother and this family, I am asking you," Blaise leaned across the table, caught Hermione's hand and squeezed it, "is there any way you could be around to see him live the new life that you've given him?"

Hermione's eyes flickered and she watched Draco through the window. She watched him run his hands over Narcissa's scaled cheek and say something to her. Watched the dragon huff and nudge her snout into Draco's chest. She watched him walk along the side of her body and climb onto her back. And as she watched Narcissa take flight and the pair of them disappear through the clouds, she felt like she was watching her future disappear too.

When Blaise was upstairs, Daphne and Theo started to follow. Theo led the way, but when he was about three steps up, he turned around and smiled down at Daphne. He put a hand on either side of the wall so she couldn't get passed him and then he leaned down and kissed her.

"No," she whispered. "Not in this life, but maybe we'll get luckier in the next one."

Daphne's lips lifted into a smile. "We haven't tried that yet. Could be fun."

"*Could b7?*" Theo gasped, clutching his heart. "Woman, when have I ever promised you a good time and not delivered?"

Astoria's coughing fit never got under control, and a few minutes later, Daphne got up from her chair.

Theo and Blaise put their palms against the table like they were going to get up and help -

"It's alright," Daphne smiled at both of them. "I've got her." She let Astoria get out of her chair herself, and then she wrapped a hand around her shoulders and guided her to the bottom of the stairs.

Astoria looked over her shoulder as they reached the bottom step. "Hermione?"

"Yes?"

"Will you ... come up and finish that painting in my room later?"

Hermione smiled softly back at her. "Of course."

Astoria's answering smile looked sad. It didn't meet her eyes.

Blaise leaned back in his chair and watched Daphne help Astoria up the stairs. He made a fist - looked like he was on the verge of getting up off his chair and helping her himself, and once the girls had disappeared, he looked at Theo. "Can I join you and Daphne tonight?"

Theo narrowed his eyes and studied Blaise for a moment. He opened his mouth and closed it several times before he finally formed words. "Look mate, I think you're a very, very attractive man, and if I did happen to swing that way -"

"Oh for Salazar's sake..."

"... yours would probably be the first sausage I'd be willing to munch on, but I'm a taken man - "

"Please stop," Blaise sighed, closing his eyes and rubbing his temples. "I do not want to join you and Daphne in the bedroom, Theodore."

"OH THANK FUCK FOR THAT!" Theo pretended to wipe imaginary sweat from his forehead. "Then what do you want to join us with?"

"Torturing Crouch."

When he whispered something to her, Daphne giggled and kissed him back, threading her fingers through his curls and tilting his head to the angle she wanted.

"Fuck - I missed you," Theo grinned, not breaking contact as he kissed his wife again.

"How much?"

"So much. Felt like I'd been split in two while you were gone. Felt like half a person."

"And now?"

Even from the distance, Draco could see Theo's smile. "Feels like I'm whole again."

Draco loved both of them dearly. He was so happy for them. They were made for each other and after everything they'd been through, they deserved their happy ending but Merlin - it fucking hurt to see them like that. It was the first time in his life that he'd been jealous of them. He was jealous because they were *together*. All smiles because they had years left together, had all the fucking time in the world to be together.

His chest ached and he hugged Granger more tightly against him.

He couldn't lose her. He wouldn't.

Theo whispered something that Draco couldn't hear, and if Daphne's next words were anything to go by, he was fucking glad that he didn't.

"You're filthy," she giggled against Theo's mouth. "Go and have a bath."

"Only if you join me."

Daph suddenly froze and when she started to pull away - she took Theo's smile with her.

"I'm sorry!" he said quickly, panic as evident on his face as it was in his eyes. He started to reach for her again. "I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to - "

Daphne closed the little space she'd put between them and took hold of Theo's face. "It's ok. Baby steps, remember?"

"I know, I know. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to pressure you -"

"It's fine and you didn't." She kissed his nose and smiled sweetly at him. "We'll get there just ... Baby steps, yeah?"

Theo nodded but he still looked incredibly glum. He started to walk up the stairs but then Daphne stopped him.

“Oh, and baby?”

Theo turned around and stared at her expectantly like the love-sick puppy that he was.

“Don’t start without me, ok?”

“But... I thought you said that ...”

“Just because I’m not quite ready to join you yet, it doesn’t mean that I don’t want to watch.”

Poor lad. Draco had never seen Theo look more confused. He stared at Daphne for the longest time, then he smiled and practically sprinted upstairs.

Daphne waited until she heard the door to the upstairs bathroom open and the faucet start to run. Then she sighed quietly and leaned against the wall. She bent down and took her ridiculously high heels off and once she was back to her normal height, she looked up and caught Draco’s eye. He watched her walk into the kitchen, filled two glasses with water from the tap, and then she quietly came into the living room and handed him one of the glasses.

“How are you doing?” Draco asked as he accepted the drink, whispering it so he didn’t wake Granger.

Daphne shrugged. She picked up one of the pillows from the opposite sofa, placed it on the floor in front of the sofa that Malfoy and Hermione were on, and sat crossed-legged on top of it. “Alright, I suppose.”

“But?”

“I feel like there’s a wall between us. Theo and me. I’m trying to break it down but it’s hard.”

Malfoy didn’t respond. He watched her as he took a sip of his water and then put the glass on the floor. He knew if he was quiet for long enough, Daphne would say whatever it was that was bothering her. She never needed much prodding. Neither did her sister.

“I don’t want it to be like that,” Daphne whispered after a while. “I want him to kiss me. I want him to touch me and hold me the way he used to. It’s literally all I thought about while I was - ” She cut herself off and took a deep breath.

could do it, it was those two but neither of them nodded. Neither seemed like they were up to the task.

“But are you sure that you want that, Hermione?” Blaise asked, his voice low but his eyes hard. “If we kill the snake, then there’s only you left. Don’t you want us to delay it for a little longer while we try and find a way to save you?”

She did. She really fucking did, but delaying the inevitable would only be a good thing for Voldemort. They’d whittled down his army to the bare bones and they’d destroyed another of his Horcruxes. He was vulnerable, the most vulnerable he’d been in over a decade and if they delayed things, it gave him chance to rebuild what they’d already torn down.

No, no they had to move quickly, as much as Hermione didn’t want them to.

“Yes - it is. It’s the only way.”

Blaise didn’t need time to ponder this. Hermione realised he must have been thinking about it for a while, maybe all night, and she wondered if that was the reason he looked so tired. “But by the time the Order kills Nagini, all of Voldemort’s strength and vitality will be depleted. If the Order could capture him, maybe they could keep him weak and detain him and you wouldn’t have to die - ”

“It’s not worth the risk.” Hermione didn’t want to be rude, she appreciated Blaise wanting to find a way around the predicament she’d found herself in, but it was too late. Hermione had already made up her mind. “If he ever broke out or if any of his followers remained, the war could start again. The only way to end this for good is to kill him. Properly - by whatever means necessary.”

Astoria looked like she was on the verge of tears. “No! This isn’t fair!” the frail blonde shouted. “This isn’t fair. It can’t happen like this! You and Draco, you’re so happy! You’re so good together, it’s not-” She started to suddenly cough into her hands.

Blaise leaned over and gently rubbed her back.

Hermione looked back to Theo and Daphne. “Do you think you could get some information out of Crouch about where Nagini might be?”

Daphne and Theo looked at one another.

“What d’ya say beautiful?” Theo asked, cocking his head to the side and running his hand up and down his wife’s arm. “Me, you, Crouch, a pair of pliers and a bottle of Skelegrow? Could pull his fingers off one by one and then regrow them?”

"Liquid Luck doesn't work against death, Voldemort had me test it out on a Black Mask a few years ago to see if it'd bring them back to life. It didn't."

"What if we slowed Hermione's heart rate down to the point of death with magic," Astoria offered. "We could do it gradually, stop it - only for a moment - just long enough to let Voldemort die, and then wake her up? I've read lots of books where that's happened."

"What, you mean there's an actual plot in those filthy books you read, Ton?"  
Theo cocked a brow. "It's not just wizard porn?"

Astoria blobbed her tongue rather inelegantly out at Theo at the same time Daphne stepped on his foot with the heel of her stiletto.

"What about if we made Hermione her own Horcrux?" Blaise asked. "That way there would still be a piece of her soul left. Voldemort would die, but she wouldn't."

Daphne clicked her fingers together and pointed at Blaise. "That could work!"

Even though it was all fruitless, Hermione was touched. The people at the table around her were a family in every sense of the world. They weren't tied together by blood, but they loved each other equally and they cared for each other fiercely. And every one of them - even Daphne, who she'd only known for a few weeks - thought of Hermione as her family too.

"I appreciate you trying to help," Hermione said, "but there's nothing that can be done. If Voldemort's really going to die, then I need to as well."

The sound of Malfoy's chair scraping across the floor was like long nails on a chalkboard. Hermione hadn't known why she'd expected him to stay when she started talking about this. He'd already made it clear that he wouldn't listen to her talk about her death.

Hermione didn't watch him leave - Daphne and Blaise did. She waited until he'd stormed outside and slammed the kitchen door behind him before she continued.

"The next thing we need to do is get to the snake. I know Voldemort hadn't told anyone where she was, but Grouch knows him better than anyone." Hermione looked at Theo and Daphne. "Do you think you could get a few suggestions out of him of where she might be?"

The possibility of torture usually lit a fire in Theo's eyes, the thought of torturing the man who'd abused her usually made Daphne smile - but not that day. If anyone

Draco understood why. "It's going to take time to get back to how you used to be. Theo knows that. He wouldn't give a shit if the two of you never had sex again. All he's ever wanted was you Daph. That's all he's ever needed to be happy."

Daphne nodded but she didn't look convinced.

Draco tried again. "You have all the time in the world."

"You can't know that for sure."

"Why can't I?"

"Because look at what's happened to you and Hermione."

Although he tried to hide the way her words cut, his Occlumency wasn't nearly what it used to be. The hurt must have shown on his face because Daphne started to go on a rant.

"It's heart-breaking, what the two of you are having to go through. None of it is right. When we were young, we were told stories about how no matter what darkness and adversity are thrown at us, everything will be alright in the end. We're told that there will always be a happy ending, but then look at the two of you!" she hissed, her voice getting slightly louder with each word. "You've been through so much, both of you have! You're so perfect together and then this happens? It's not fucking fair!"

Daphne had been so angry by end of her speech that she almost shouted the last part. She abruptly stopped when Granger stirred, and when she spoke again, she lowered her voice to a quiet whisper.

"What I'm trying to say is that after seeing what's happened to the two of you, it feels wrong not to be with Theo the way that I want to. It feels selfish. We've been given a second chance and it feels like we're wasting it, especially when the two of you don't know how much longer you have to be together."

"You'll get there eventually."

"I know, but sex and killing, they're about the only things that I used to be good at - well, that and making a good cuppa."

When Draco made a face, Daphne's brows knitted together. "What?"

"You seem to be in a good mood mate, let's not ruin it."

"Well, now you have to tell me!"

"I'd rather not."

"Wasn't giving you a choice blonde."

"Remember when we were young, and my mother had that little Venomous Tantacula plant cutting?"

"The one she kept in a little gold plant pot in the kitchen window?"

"Yes," Draco nodded. "Do you remember how it mysteriously died when we were about fifteen and no one could work out why?"

Daphne narrowed her eyes. She clearly hadn't gotten there yet. "Yes? Why?"

"I used to feed it the pots of tea you made."

Daphne smiled. She looked like she wanted to hit him, but her eyes darted to the witch in his arms and she stopped herself.

"Don't rush things with Theo." Malfoy changed the subject - thought it best before Daph punched him. There was only so long he could use Granger as a human shield. "You know he's happy to wait for you as long as it takes."

Daphne seemed distracted enough by the change in topic. "I know he will. It's not that I don't want to be intimate with him because I do. I miss it so much. I miss being with him and I miss having his cock."

"La, la, la, la, la!" Malfoy scrunched his nose up. "I don't need to hear the details, Daph."

"Sorry." She wasn't really sorry; her smile told him that. "But you know what I mean? He's terrified to touch me because he thinks I think he's going to hurt me like Grouch did and that's not the case. He's always been gentle with me and I trust him with my life but ... I just, can't seem to move past ... Grouch, yet."

"As I said, you'll get there eventually, and even if you don't, so what? Sex doesn't make a relationship."

Daphne snorted and rolled her eyes. "You sound like a Hufflepuff - she's making you soft that one," she added, smiling and tilting her chin towards Granger.

"Says the woman who once bawled like a baby because her lovesick fool of a boyfriend made her cookies in the shape of hearts."

She chuckled under her breath and looked wistfully up at the ceiling, staring up at the room that was her and Theo's bedroom. "Don't joke about that. Those cookies were fucking adorable."

"Those cookies were fucking disgusting."

Daphne smiled but rolled her eyes.

Hermione blushed so hard she was surprised the veins in her cheeks didn't explode. She pulled the blanket up until it covered the bottom of her chin.

"Well?" Tori prodded. "Which was it? Did you break everything before? Or was it during?"

Draco's chest rattled behind her when he started laughing. "I destroyed the kitchen before. Why?"

Upon Draco's answer, Theo ad Astoria had very different reactions.

Theo groaned. Astoria hissed what sounded like a 'ye' and balled her hands into little fists. They were both very invested in whether or not Hermione and Draco had played a part in the horrendous state of the kitchen, but when Theo pulled a gold coin out of his pocket and threw it to Astoria, it became obvious why - the fuckers had placed a bet.

It took a while to wrangle everyone together for a meeting, but two hours later - and once the kitchen was livable again, thank God for magic - they were all gathered around the dining table, freshly showered, glamoured and ready to hear what'd happened with the Order.

Hermione didn't want to go into too much detail, she didn't feel the need to and she didn't feel like she or Draco needed to relive it again. She told them that Harry had destroyed the medallion, how the compass had been hiding in Kingsley's desk, how it'd pointed to her and how Draco had brought her home.

They all listened very quietly - the only interruption was Astoria's quiet coughing now and again - and once she was finished, Hermione saw one expression lingering in all of their eyes. Determination. A fierce, strong sort of determination that she hadn't expected, not from any of them.

"So," Theo was the first to speak. He put one hand on the table and draped the other over the back of Daphne's chair. "What's the plan then? How are we going to get out of this one?"

Daphne fiddled with the end of her smoothly curled ponytail and stared at the table. "What if we got our hands on Liquid Luck? Maybe if Granger downed a bottle and then died, it'd bring her back to life?"

"There isn't a way around this." Hermione started to say but Blaise cut her off.

"Didn't want them to know where the safe house was'. Ha. That was putting it mildly.

Due to Daphne, Theo and Blaise's flawless interrogation techniques, Crouch was suggesting a different hiding spot for Nagini almost daily, which meant a lot more meetings with the Order to pass that information on.

All the meetings had been a disaster. All of them.

They'd carried on meeting at East Midlands airport, but they always combusted in one way or another.

Draco always held Hermione's hand throughout the entire meetings. He'd refused to let go because he was convinced that Kingsley had given instructions to whoever was attending to snatch Hermione, take her back to their base - so they could kill her - at the earliest opportunity. Hermione chose to keep to herself that the same thought had crossed her mind on more than one occasion.

Of course, Draco constantly having a hold on Hermione would wind Ron up to no end and before too long, a fight would ensue. Sometimes verbal, most of the time physical.

Everyone had been resigned to just grit their teeth and get on with the meetings but then Draco had noticed a raven. It was a small bird. It looked quite young and didn't exactly bother them but it just sat there, perched on top of one of the terminal and ... watched. Hermione had ignored it. Told Draco he was being paranoid but then the raven had been there at the next meeting.

And then the next.

It probably wasn't an Animagus. It probably wasn't one of Voldemort's spies disguising himself as a bird but no one wanted to take that risk, so instead of meeting out in the open where they could potentially be spied on - or captured - they opted to pass owl between the sides instead.

But that meant that the Order had to know the location of the farmhouse, which Draco didn't like. *Not one Fucking Bit.*

"Their owl getting mauled to death carrying messages to us doesn't count as trouble! It's easily avoidable if you just call her off!"

Draco laughed again, sending little smoke clouds out of his mouth. "Have you ever tried to call off a hungry dragon? It's easier said than done, cub."

"No! Don't you fucking *'uh!* me right now! Call Narcissa off!"

The owl squealed again. Hermione had never wanted to hit Draco more in her life.

"Oh for Christ's sake - it's Ron's owl! Now stop her before she eats him please!"

Behind the cloud of smoke he'd just exhaled, Draco smirked. "Oh, well then she absolutely deserves a treat. Tuck in girl. Don't let any go to waste."

Narcissa purred hungrily. The ground started to rumble under Hermione's feet.

"DRACO!"

"What? She's hungry."

The owl's squeals reached new levels -

"MAKE HER PUT THE OWL DOWN!"

"Fine." He rolled his eyes and the moment he clicked his fingers, Narcissa - very reluctantly - lifted her front claws and let her lunch go. "Spoilsport."

Narcissa growled as she watched the owl fly away and when she looked at Hermione again, Hermione swore that she gave her a dirty look.

"I'm sorry." Hermione walked towards the sulking dragon and placed a hand on the warm scales near her cheek. "I appreciate you doing all those extra patrols to keep us safe, I really do, but that was Ron's owl."

Narcissa huffed. Her red eyes watched Hermione closely. She started to pull away but Hermione stepped forward and pressed both her hands against the dragon's scaled cheek to try and keep her from retreating. If Narcissa had wanted to go, Hermione wouldn't have been able to stop her, but she wanted the dragon to know how sorry she was.

"I know that you're hungry but we need to do everything within our power to keep good faith with the Order." Hermione raised onto the tips of her toes to try and keep in Narcissa's line of sight. "I'm sorry. I couldn't let you eat him, no matter how much you deserve it."

Narcissa huffed angrily again but she leaned into Hermione's open palms and closed her eyes. Hermione had won her over.

Narcissa twisted her head and pressed her snout into Hermione's torso. When the dragon huffed, Hermione laughed, and when she nudged her playfully, Hermione had to grab onto the scales above her mouth to keep from falling over.

Draco said nothing but Hermione could feel his eyes on her back.

Hermione wondered how much longer she and Draco could stall...

Not long. That much was already clear.

Hermione ran her hand over the dragon's warm, coal-like scales as she walked down the length of her body, and although Narcissa had ignored Hermione a few minutes earlier, the two of them were once again in sync. The thought had only briefly popped into Hermione's head and without her having to say anything, Narcissa lowered her shoulder to the ground to let Hermione climb onto her back.

"What are you doing?" Draco asked as Hermione settled between Narcissa's shoulders.

"You're right. She's been doing so many more patrols lately, she deserves a treat."

Narcissa hummed. It made Hermione's entire body feel like it was vibrating.

"So you're going hunting?" Draco asked. "With her?"

"Well obviously. I'm not sitting on her back to get a better view of the farm now, am I?"

"But you hate flying."

Hermione shrugged. "It's not so bad with her. I trust her and I know she won't drop me." As she spoke, she absentmindedly stroked the back of Narcissa's neck.

Narcissa started to purr.

"We don't have time for this Granger. We need to practice siphoning the Horcrux out of you. Narcissa can go hunting by herself."

At the mention of being separated, Narcissa's purring stopped, then her giant head spun towards Malfoy and she hissed and gnashed her teeth in front of him. She'd only done it in warning, she wouldn't have actually bitten him, but the look on Malfoy's face was fucking priceless.

"Come on," Hermione said, holding her arm out for Draco to take. "We need a break and Narcissa needs to feed."

"But we need to..."

"Draco, we've been trying to siphon the Horcrux out of me all day. I'm tired. You're tired. I'm so stressed that I can hardly think straight. We're not getting anywhere and we're not going to if we're exhausted and stressed. We need to enjoy the little things while we can, Draco, wasn't that what you said a few months ago?"

He thought it over for a few moments. His eyes flickered between Hermione and his dragon, and for the first time since they'd discovered that she was a Horcrux, he smiled.

Hermione flapped his wings and started to take flight, but he'd barely made it a few feet before a wall of claws and scales pinned him to the ground.

"No!" Hermione shouted, staring in horror as a flurry of feathers flew into the air like someone had popped a pillowcase. "Narcissa! No! Bad girl! Let Henry go!"

Narcissa did nothing of the sort. She laid on her stomach with her head high in the air and tossed the ball of squeaking fathers between the claws on the bend of her wings.

Draco laughed huskily, completely carefree and thoroughly amused, as though it were no more unusual than a cat playing with a ball of string.

"Narcissa!" Hermione snapped. The dragon showed no signs that she'd even heard her. "NO! DROP! DROP HENRY RIGHT NOW!"

For a moment Hermione thought the dragon was going to listen to her. She raised her claws just enough to let the bird stand up, but then she immediately slammed them back down again, caging Henry in, toying with her food.

"No! No! He's not food! Don't—" Hermione turned around and glared at Draco. "Tell her to let Henry go!"

He looked up from his cigarette and cocked a brow. "Whose owl is that?" he asked, the cigarette bobbing in his mouth.

"How is that relevant right now?!"

"She's been doing lots of extra patrols for us the last few weeks. Poor thing is exhausted, she deserves a treat."

"But that's the Order's owl!"

"So?" he shrugged. "I told you from the beginning that I didn't want them to know where the safe house was. I told you, *If they know where we are hiding then it'll only bring trouble*. Well," he paused again to take another deep drag, "here you have it. Trouble."

Hermione petted the top of the owl's head and smiled down at the bird as she pulled the letter from its beak. It purred quietly and nestled into Hermione's open palm for a moment, but as soon as Narcissa stalked around the corner, the bird went very still.

Hermione gave the dragon a warning look as she opened the damp, rain covered letter. "We've been over this, Cissa. He's with the Order. His name is Henry and *he is not food.*"

Narcissa hummed in the back of her throat. She took a step closer and flashed her teeth.

The owl squeaked and hid behind Hermione's arm.

"What's Kingsley complaining about this time?" Draco asked as he followed her outside. He leaned against the brick wall of the farmhouse, put a cigarette in his mouth and lit it.

Hermione quickly scanned the pages. She wished she could say she was disheartened by what she read but she wasn't. "Crouch was wrong again. The snake wasn't in the theme park."

Draco scoffed loudly behind her. "Of course she wasn't fucking there. I can't believe that Crouch even suggested that Voldemort would hide her there. Fucking muggle theme park. What did the Order expect? That they'd find her slithering around in between the teacup rides? It was a shit suggestion from the start."

Hermione turned slightly and met his eyes. "Well if you thought that it was such a shit suggestion then why did you pass it onto the Order in the first place?"

Draco's eyes stayed locked on hers as he took a deep drag of the cigarette in his mouth. He held the smoke in his lungs and didn't answer her until he'd exhaled. "For the same reason you passed on the muggle church in Kent when Crouch suggested it."

Selfishness. That was the reason. That was the thing he was saying without actually saying it. Neither of them had said it out loud but they'd both been on the same page for a while now.

Selfishness. They'd both passed on those shitty suggestions because they were being selfish and wanted more time together. They'd been lucky so far. None of their stalling had gotten anyone hurt. No one had heard a whisper of Voldemort or his army and he hadn't launched any attacks but it wouldn't stay like that forever.

"What?" Hermione asked.

"Nothing. I just remember the days when you were terrified of her."

Hermione couldn't help but smile down at him. "Are you coming or what?" "Oh?" Draco cocked one of his brows. "Am I allowed to come? Or is this a girl's only thing?"

Narcissa lowered her shoulder and allowed Draco to climb onto her back, and once he was settled behind Hermione and had wrapped his arms around her waist, Narcissa reared onto her hind legs and stretched her wings.

"So," Draco started, resting his chin on top of Hermione's head "Where to?"

"Well, it's supposed to be a clear night tonight. How about that lake you took me to a few months ago? There might be Grindelow's in the lake for Narcissa to eat?"

"It's a date."

## 22nd May

Hermione had always believed that her best ideas came to her in her dreams.

A nightmare about wolves and facial scars was what'd made her realise Professor Lupin had been a werewolf in her third year at Hogwarts. A dream about burning ants under a microscope had given her inspiration to trap Rita Skeeter in a glass jar in her fourth, and even the name for S.P.E.W had come to her in her dreams.

When she dreamed freely, her imagination ran wild and sometimes, a problem that she'd been stuck on for weeks would fix itself. Lately, though, her dreams had been stuck. Trapped on a single trail that she just could not fucking step off no matter how hard she tried.

The Horcrux. That vile, horrid part of Voldemort's soul that'd attached itself to her and she couldn't get rid of. Horcrux. Horcrux. Bloody Horcrux. She was consumed with it. It was all she could think about when she was awake. It was all she could dream about when she went to sleep.

Cancer. That was what Draco had likened the Horcrux to. Every time they talked about it, that was what he compared it to. In fairness, Hermione didn't think it was too much of a stretch. Cancer was vile and unwanted, and so was the part of Voldemort's soul that was living inside of Hermione. Cancer attached itself to cells

in the body and poisoned them, just like the Horcrux had attached itself to her, and cancer, it was a killer, and so was ...

Hermione didn't see the Horcrux that way though, not really.

Astoria's blood curse, that was the cancer of the wizarding world. That was the thing that'd come out of nowhere and was killing her slowly. That was the thing that was stealing the life from the glowing witch right in front of their eyes and transforming her into a shell of the girl she used to be.

It wasn't fair, what was happening to her. Yes, Hermione didn't want to die, but at least if she did, she had comfort in knowing that her life had meant something. She would die so that Voldemort would be vulnerable and everyone else could live

But what would Astoria's death equate to? Nothing, that was what. A great, big, fat, nothing. A life wasted. A life stolen.

She wouldn't be dying to save anything. She wouldn't be dying to protect someone she loved. She'd be dying just to die. Just because she didn't have a choice. It was senseless and cruel. She didn't deserve that.

Astoria had once told Hermione that she wouldn't make it to fifty years old, but with the speed at which she was wasting away, Hermione wasn't convinced she'd survive the few years to make it to thirty.

God, Hermione wished there was something she could do! They were so close to figuring out how to take the Horcrux out of her, Hermione could feel it. If they could just figure out how to manipulate it, if they could just figure out where in Hermione's body it was, they could pull it out and destroy it.

She wished it could be like that for Astoria. She wished that she could cut out Astoria's blood curse like the cancer that it was. She wished that she could siphon the blood that was poisoning Astoria out of her frail body and ....

Hermione bolted upright. The back of her head smashed into something and she heard a crunch.

"MOTHER FUCKER!" Draco hissed out of nowhere. From the dim light from the fireplace, she saw him squeeze his eyes close and clutch his nose. Oh, that was what she'd hit. "What the fuck -"

When Draco started to pull away, Hermione grabbed his elbows. She held him there, ensuring that his wand was pressing painfully into her skin. "I'm fine. I promise. I can do this."

Worry. Doubt. Fear. All three of those emotions were swimming so clearly in his bright blue eyes that they might as well have been written against his pupils. They were all written on his face. She could see them all in the tight line of his jaw and the muscles straining in his neck.

He didn't want to do this. He knew he was hurting her and he didn't want to do this but he knew - just like she did - that they didn't have much of a choice.

Time was running out, and if Draco was being true to his word, it wasn't just running out for Hermione.

The thought of him dying, Hermione wouldn't think about it. Couldn't think about it. Couldn't even let her mind go near it, even for a second.

His life, his happiness after the war ... It was the only thing that made her want to fight anymore.

She knew Draco's thoughts must have gone down the same path when one of his cold hands curled around her left wrist. She looked up and watched his eyes as he brought her hand to his lips and kissed her ring finger.

"Ready to go again?"

Hermione nodded and took a deep breath. She tried not to flinch when he pressed his wand against her bruised chest.

*Time*, she reminded herself. They'd figure this out together. They just needed more time.

Four hours later, their session was interrupted by the sound of frantic tapping against the kitchen window.

When Hermione turned around, she found a small, brown barn owl pecking the outside of the glass. She quickly got to her feet and went outside.

It was an unexpected interruption but it certainly wasn't an unwelcome one. Hermione's chest ached and her temples throbbed painfully. She felt as though even the bones of her sternum were fractured. It wasn't Draco's fault. She'd been the one wanting to push through and experiment as much as possible but still, it didn't mean she wasn't fucking exhausted.

magic itself but Draco was convinced it was that he could make it work. The way he talked about the Horcrux, he likened it to a cancer or a tumour, and he was fucking determined to cut it out of her.

It was a joint effect, that was something they did actually agree on. As Draco focused on pulling the dark magic out of her, Hermione focused on gathering it.

The way Harry described it, when he'd destroyed a Horcrux in the past he said it as black smoke so that was what Hermione pictured.

Each time they experimented, Hermione would close her eyes and picture the Horcrux in her mind's eye. She imagined a black smoke cloud in her own body, like black ink in a bowl of water. She imagined the smoke running through the blood in her veins, and then she imagined pulling it back. Pictured it receding and receding until it was focused in and around her heart. She had no idea if it was working but she had to at least try. Malfoy wouldn't forgive her if she didn't.

And after two weeks of experimenting, they were close to something. Hermione didn't want to say it out loud, didn't want to get Draco's hopes up when there might not be any but it was true. They were onto something. She could feel it -

"Your minds wandering, Granger."

"Sorry." Hermione shook her head slightly and tried to focus again.

Black smoke.

She tried to visualise it in her veins. She thought about all the times the Demon Hex had had control over her and how she'd felt when it'd started to recede and then she tried to replicate that feeling.

Black smoke.

She pictured the black smoke in the tips of her fingers and toes, and then she imagined it pulling backwards. Pictures it travelling up her hand, up the veins in her arms, past her elbows and up, up, up into her chest -

Hermione hissed when a sharp pain sliced across the inside of her sternum. She tried to hide it but she flinched before she could stop herself.

The pressure of his wand lessened.

Hermione's eyes flew open. "No, don't!" She forced the words out through gritted teeth. The pain got worse each time they experimented. She tried to tell herself it was because they were getting closer. "Keep going."

Under any other circumstance, Hermione would have felt awful but not in that moment. All she could think about was Astoria and her blood curse. There wasn't room for anything else.

She leapt off of the sofa and pulled her clothes on as quickly as she could. She struggled to find her wand but as soon as she did, she sprinted up the creaking farmhouse stairs and charged towards Blaise and Astoria's bedroom.

Blaise woke with a start the second Hermione swung their door open. He flicked on the lights with his wand and then aimed at the intruder he hadn't gotten a good look at yet. "Granger?" Blaise's startled expression dropped. He lowered his wand. "What are you?"

Astoria groaned as her frizzy, sleep-matted blonde hair appeared from the duvet. "Hermione..." she asked, sleep still thick in her voice. "What's going on?"

Draco appeared in the doorway looking just as confused and sleep-deprived.

"The fuck is all this noise about?" Theo asked, yawning and stretching as he and Daphne walked into the room. "I swear, if my beauty sleep has been interrupted for anything other than a torture session, I am going to be very, very pissed off."

"I think I've figured it out!"

"Figured what out?" Astoria glanced at the clock on her bedside table and groaned. "It's three in the morning! It's too early for..."

"I think I know how to cure your blood curse!"

Hermione's words were the alarm clock everyone needed. All of a sudden, everyone in the house was wide awake.

Astoria looked like she was on the verge of tears. "Do you mean it?"

"Yes, I just need a few things first."

"Like what?" Daphne asked, her eyes blazing as she stepped into the room.

"I need a piece of jewellery."

Blaise's brows knitted together. "What?"

"Get me a piece of jewellery!" Hermione said. "Something solid! It can be any material, it doesn't matter! I just need something small that won't be missed."

As Hermione sat on the edge of Astoria and Blaise's bed, Daphne started to search her sister's drawers. She picked up the first thing she saw and threw it to Hermione.

Astoria's tired brown eyes hovered over the thin silver bracelet Hermione was holding. She stared at it longingly for a moment and then looked up at Hermione. It was the first time Hermione had ever seen Astoria be happy to part with one of her beloved pieces of jewellery.

"Draco," Hermione said, "I need your knife. That silver one that you always have on you."

Draco didn't say a word, just silently and obediently crossed the bedroom and gave Hermione what she asked for.

Once Hermione had the knife, she took Astoria's hand in hers and pressed the blade against the blondes palm. "I'll try and be as gentle as I possibly can, but this ... It's going to hurt, alright?"

Astoria's throat bobbed. Her bottom lip started to quiver.

"Are you ready?"

Astoria nodded weakly but her eyes burned just like her older sisters. "Do it"

Although Hermione did her best to be gentle, Astoria still yelped when she made the first cut.

Blaise hovered protectively behind her. He placed his hands on his wife's shoulders and pressed his bare chest against her back to hold her steady. He watched Hermione's every movement. She wouldn't have put it past him to break every bone in her hand if she pushed Astoria too far.

As blood began to dampen Astoria's palm, Hermione pressed her wand against the wound. "Alright, now, take a deep breath."

Astoria nodded and followed Hermione's instructions.

Hermione could feel everyone's eyes on her as she began to concentrate. She focused her magic on Astoria's blood. She focused on the sickness there. She focused on the curse that'd been passed down from one Greengrass to another through blood.

Astoria started to scream but managed to stop herself after a second.

Blaise looked away and closed his eyes as though he were the one in pain.

When Astoria screamed again, Blaise could take no more. "I think that's enough." "Almost," Hermione whispered, her eyes on her work. "Just a little more."

When Astoria stormed around the corner, her angry little face was gaunt. She'd been taking ill more and more often in the last few weeks. She looked thinner than Hermione had ever seen her. The sharp bones of her shoulders looked like they were about to break out of her skin, but despite that - and in true Greengrass style - she was still wearing a beautiful jewelled gown and six-inch heels.

Although if Blaise didn't have his arm linked with hers, Hermione wouldn't have been surprised if she'd toppled over.

Although Draco had his back to her, Hermione could see his reflection in the kitchen window, and she watched as the anger slid off his face. Astoria's appearance, it'd caught him off guard.

"You look like shit," Draco said, lip curling angrily even if his eyes showed the worry he was trying to keep hidden. "You should be in bed. Why the fuck are you-"

Astoria's blood curse might've zapped everything out of her, but her temper? Not in the slightest. "I AM FINE! I've been in bloody bed all week - I need fresh air!"

"If you need fresh air then open a fucking window! You don't go waltzing about in your condition-"

#### I AM GOING FOR A WALK! END OF DISCUSSION!"

Blaise looked just as worried but he didn't argue. He kept his arm linked with Astoria's and escorted her outside at a steady pace. Anyone could see that the way he smiled down at her was fake. Forced. Heartbroken.

By the time Astoria and Blaise walked through the kitchen door and onto the back garden, Malfoy had calmed down enough to continue. He sat back down on the floor with her.

Hermione shuffled closer until her knees touched his, and after she nodded, Malfoy picked his wand up off the floor and placed the end against her sternum.

At first, Hermione hadn't thought that there was much weight in his theory about siphoning the Horcrux out of her because how could it? In everything she'd read, a Horcrux wasn't described as a bone or a muscle. It wasn't something that could be located and dissected. A Horcrux was magic and magic wasn't exactly a tangible force. It wasn't something that could be solidified. It wasn't something that you could hold in your hand.

Yes, you could see the effects of magic. Could feel the pain of a Cruciatus curse and hold a transfigured cup in your palm but those were the results of magic, not

Draco got to his feet again. It seemed he still had more anger to exorcise. "I think we have more pressing matters to attend to right now than a couple of broken fucking glasses!"

"Darling, is it really worth wasting your energy on this?" Hermione heard Blaise hush in a worried tone. He must have followed Astoria down the stairs. Or helped her down them. It depended on if she was having a good day or bad with her blood curse.

"It's not just a couple of broken glasses though, is it?" Astoria snapped, still hidden from Hermione's view. "*It's all of them!* It's every crystal glass that I brought from home~"

"I told you to only pack the essentials when we fled the manor so why did you fucking bring them in the first place?!"

Hermione sighed heavily and leaned against the sofa, knowing that this argument wasn't going to be brushed over anytime soon. She wondered if she had time to make a cup of tea ...

"You're not my father, Draco, I don't have to listen to everything you tell me to do!?"

Draco laughed sarcastically. "You're good at many things, Tori, but listening? Not one of them! You have the attention span of a child!"

A cup of tea might've been nice actually... Plenty of milk, one sugar -

"Me a child! Says the one who throws a tantrum like a literal toddler and smashes things up! Expensive things!"

Oh, fuck. No. Hermione couldn't make a cuppa. Draco had destroyed the kettle in an earlier bout of rage...

"You shouldn't have fucking brought the glasses in the first place if they were so expensive! What did you think you were going to do with them anyway?! Pop a bottle of Champagne and toast to the Dark Lord's defeat when he eventually died!?"

"I was a spy for the Order long before you were! I risked my life for years getting those secrets and I deserve to have nice things! Do you know how much those wine glasses were worth? A lot of galleons! As in - *could feed a small town for a week* - lot of galleons!?"

"Oh, of course, I fucking forgot who I was talking to! Trust the lush of the family to know the value of a bloody glass!?"

Astoria tried to keep it in, but she whimpered and hissed under her breath. She started to pull her hand back, but Hermione caught her wrist and kept her in place. "Hermione, that's enough," Blaise said, his voice growing sharper.

"just a few more seconds."

Daphne's knuckles turned white as she gripped the bedside table, but she stayed where she was. She didn't move and she didn't interfere.

Astoria's shoulders started to shake as she fought to keep herself from screaming

"GRANGER, THAT'S ENOUGH!"

The spell worked just before Blaise could break Hermione's wrist. She stood up and took her wand with her but the moment the wood was pulled away from Astoria's chest, everyone in the small bedroom gasped.

Because, there, at the end of Hermione's wand, was Astoria's blood curse. Well, a piece of it, anyway. It was thick and black and moving. It was no wonder Astoria was so drained. Her blood curse, it looked like tar. Like thick, oozing tar that could clog arteries and wrap around veins and crush them.

Hermione waved her wand over the bracelet Daphne had given her and just like she thought it would, the dark magic that made up Astoria's blood curse latched on the jewellery, looking for another host, looking for another thing to poison and taint, and as it slowly worked its way into another victim, Hermione threw it onto the floor and aimed her wand right at it. "INCENDIO!"

A heavy silence lapsed over the room as the bracelet went up in flames. Everyone looked at Astoria and searched for signs that her curse was gone. She still looked pale and too thin. Her cheekbones still looked hollow and her skin still looked grey. Hermione hadn't expected the spell to work right away but she'd expected something, some sign that'd worked.

"Darling," Blaise asked after a few seconds. "How do you feel?"

Astoria was dazed. She didn't know where to look. She looked at her palms. Then at her husband. Then at her sister and everyone else in the room. Then her palms again.

"I don't know," Astoria whispered. "I don't ... feel different..."

Blaise released a low, pained breath. He dropped his head onto Astoria's shoulder.

"It didn't work..."

The way defeat swarmed over Hermione's body was like having a cloak draped over her. She felt sick. She felt cold. She clutched her stomach as an emptiness formed there.

It hadn't worked. She couldn't fucking believe it.

She'd been so sure ...

And then everyone saw it. No one in the room could deny it.

A rosy flush. That was what had returned to Astoria's cheeks. A healthy, pale pink tint that brightened her features only this one, it wasn't artificial, wasn't a glamour or makeup or one of the tricks she always used to hide her illness no, this one was real.

It'd worked. Whatever Hermione had done, it'd worked.

Seeing it there, it gave Hermione hope, and when she looked up and met Draco's eyes across the room, she knew he felt it too.

Because Astoria's blood curse was supposed to be incurable. There wasn't supposed to be anything that could be done about it and yet, they'd found a way.

And if they could find a way around Astoria's blood curse then maybe, *just fucking maybe*, they could find a way to get the Horcrux out of Hermione.

Yesterday the kitchen sink bore the brunt of his anger. Today, the cupboards were his punch bag. "IT SHOULD BE FUCKING WORKING!"

"I know."

"SO THEN WHY ISN'T IT FUCKING WORKING! IT SHOULD—" Draco screamed as he spun around and threw yet another crystal glass against the wall. "SHITTING - FUCK!"

Astoria was going to be livid when she found out about the glass. That was her last one. Draco had broken all of the others and unfortunately, no matter how hard Hermione tried to fix them with magic, she could never get them quite right. They always ended up in the bin.

"IT SHOULD FUCKING WORK!"

"I know."

No matter how many times he went off like this, it never got any easier to watch. For a long time, Hermione had wanted nothing more than to have his Occlumency walls crumble so she could know exactly what he was thinking. For a long time, she'd wanted to see whatever emotions he was hiding behind those big icy walls.

She just never considered that what was hiding behind them might break her heart.

It wasn't until he'd broken one of the dining chairs that he calmed down. Wasn't until he'd put a boot-shaped hole in the wall that he took a deep breath, pushed back the hair that'd fallen into his eyes and sat back down on the floor in front of the fire with her.

"Feel better now?" Hermione asked, taking a stab at humour to try and dampen his temper.

It didn't work, just caused Draco to glare at her for a moment. Sometimes her teasing was just the thing he needed to snap him out of his little bouts of rage. Today, apparently, wasn't one of those days.

"Are you fucking or fighting?" asked a feminine voice as high heels began clicking down the stairs. "I'm coming down! Is it safe to -" The clicking stopped as they reached the bottom step. "Is that the last of the crystal glasses?"

# CHAPTER 67



## SELFISHNESS

# CHAPTER 68



## WISHLFUL THINKING

**17th May**

There were a lot of arguments over the next few weeks. There were a lot of whiskey glasses thrown into walls and a lot of books launched across rooms because they had the audacity not to hold the answers Draco wanted.

Hermione never said anything when he flew off the handle. She always just stayed where she was. She'd watch, patiently with her hands clasped in her lap, and wait for him to calm down and sit with her so they could try again.

His anger will pass, she would tell herself. It always does.

She wasn't wrong. His anger always did pass, but with each failed attempt to save her life, with each dead end they reached, it took Draco longer to calm down.

**2nd July**

Juno came and went in the blink of an eye.

Hermione's spell had worked perfectly on Astoria. The morning after Hermione had performed it, Astoria had looked much, much better. She'd looked healthier, there had been a spring in her step and even more colour in her cheeks, and she'd only gotten stronger in the days that followed.

The spell's success had sent Blaise into a research spiral. He was thrilled that his wife was on the mend but he needed answers. He needed to know what had worked and why everything else he'd done in the past had failed.

It was down to Astoria's blood, that was what he eventually summarised.

In the years that Blaise had spent trying to cure her, he'd tried to learn from her ancestor's mistakes. He'd tried to fight the curse by giving Astoria potions that would keep her heart beating and her lungs strong, but he'd never thought about her blood being the actual source of the problem.

Heart failure, lung collapse, extreme fatigue, they were the causes of death for all the Greengrass women that'd been afflicted with the family curse, so they'd been what Blaise had focused on. Because Astoria coughed up sickening amounts of blood, he'd given her potions to replace it. Because she was always tired, he'd given her Pepperup Potions. Because her lungs and heart may give out at any moment, he'd made her special drinks that he brewed himself - but he'd never considered that *her blood* was what'd been attacking her.

Hermione had assured Blaise that it wasn't his fault. The idea had come to her out of nowhere and if she and Draco hadn't have been trying the same thing to get the Horcrux out of her, she never would have thought of it. It was pure dumb luck that it'd worked the very first time but still, he beat himself up over it for a few days.

The more they understood Astoria's blood curse, the more Hermione realised that she'd been right, it was the cancer of the Wizarding World. It festered in veins just like cancer festered in the body. The blood curse multiplied and multiplied inside the veins until the host's body couldn't cope with the levels of toxicity in the blood, and then it expelled the poisonous blood the only way it knew how; by vomiting it up. That was why Astoria had always coughed up blood whenever she was ill; it was her body's way of trying to expel the dark magic by itself. That was why a few days a week, she coughed up pints and pints of blood. Blood replenishing potions would replaced what she'd lost and give her some energy, but as soon as it entered her system, the curse would latch onto it.

Hermione's spell worked because it pulled the dark magic out of her blood. Sort of, cleaned her blood, in a strange way. The dark magic of her blood curse would regenerate again over time, there was no getting rid of it completely but when it did, they could perform the spell again.

Siphoning the dark magic out of Astoria wasn't a cure. It was treatment.

The curse was attached to Astoria's blood. They couldn't cut it out of her but they could weaken the curse, dilute the amount of it in her blood so that it wasn't poisoning her any longer.

There had to be a way out of this. If Potter had found a way to stay alive all those years ago and have a life and children and all the rest of it, then Draco would make sure that Granger did.

He was going to make sure that she survived this and if she didn't, well, then Theo would have to make sure the grave he dug for Granger was big enough for Draco, too.

Daphne sighed heavily but she nodded. "I understand. I don't like it, but I understand."

"So you'll do it then?"

"Yes. If Hermione dies, then I promise, I'll make sure she isn't alone for long."

"And I need you to promise me something else—"

"You're already asking me the impossible, what else is there?!"

"One grave," he said. "I want you to bury us together."

Draco didn't know what happened to a person after they died, he didn't know if he believed in the afterlife or if there was a heaven or a hell, but one thing he did know was that if there was such a thing as an afterlife, he had to try to meet her there, and if there wasn't, then he would try and be with her again in whatever fucking way he could.

If being in the same grave as her was the only way he could still have her, then he had to take it.

Granger had come into his world like a candle in the dark. She'd chased away everything bad in his life and given him hope. His antidote to the poison he didn't realise he'd ingested. His life raft. His - Whichever way he romanticised it, the point was still the same.

He had no life without her.

If she died, one way or another, he'd follow her.

The rest of his family would still be alive but that was the whole point. If Granger did die, then that would mean that Voldemort would be dead, too. If Granger died, then that would mean that the war was over and his family would finally be safe. It'd mean that he'd fulfilled his promise to keep them safe. He'd have done his part, and he could rest peacefully knowing they were together and alive and happy.

Daphne would be able to take care of their family without him.

It wasn't going to come to that, Draco was praying that it wouldn't. He was still praying for that life that he'd become so attached to. The one where he travelled the world with her. Wine and cigarettes in every country. Fucking until their bones were old and then eventually, maybe, a brown eyed child or two. He wouldn't have even minded if they had her wild hair. He'd prefer it.

Three weeks after Hermione had performed the spell, Astoria had started coughing again, and a further three days later, she'd had to spend the afternoon in bed.

Once a month, that was Hermione's theory. If someone could siphon Astoria's curse out of her blood once a month, they could keep the dark magic in her veins down to a manageable level and she could lead a relatively normal life. It was just like any other medical procedure. Some people had chemotherapy to keep cancer cells in their body from multiplying, others had dialysis to clean their blood so that their bodies could function normally and Astoria, she had to have dark magic siphoned out of her blood once a month.

The one hiccup they did find, however, was that the levels of dark magic in Astoria's body tended to regenerate more quickly if she used magic herself. Hermione didn't know the reason - didn't really have the time to study it either.

The solution was simple enough, Astoria couldn't use magic. At all. It'd been a bittersweet moment for her. For a long time, even the simplest spells had exhausted her and now she finally had the strength to do magic again, it made her ill.

But after a brief pause to mourn the loss, Astoria announced that she didn't care. Said that she was getting a second chance at life so giving up magic? It was a small price to pay in comparison, and it opened up a whole new world for her.

Astoria learned how to style her hair by herself and after Daphne and Theo snuck off on a supply run and took a very unnecessary detour, Astoria was introduced to the wonders of muggle make-up. Given the state most of the country was still in, it wasn't surprising that the makeup they'd stolen was out of date and in the wrong colours, but it wasn't anything they couldn't fix.

Daphne had said that she'd perform whatever Glamour charm Astoria wanted each day but Astoria remained firm that she wanted to learn to do it for herself. Even though Daphne was back, it was obvious the wounds Astoria had gained in her absence still remained.

Yes, it seemed that after years of failed attempts and heartbreak, the nightmare was finally over. Astoria wasn't going to die. She was going to live a long, happy, fulfilled life. Hermione just wished it was that easy to cure herself.

Since their success with Astoria, Hermione and Draco had been working around the clock to try and replicate the spell, because if Hermione had been able to siphon the dark magic out of Astoria, then surely it was possible to do the same thing with the Horcrux that lived inside of her?

It'd been wishful fucking thinking.

No matter how hard they tried, no matter how many hours they sat there and practised and practised and practised, they couldn't make it work.

About two weeks after her success with Astoria, Draco thought he had it. He'd tried something different and although Hermione had felt unbearable pain, she'd felt something different. A coldness, a sensation of something that she'd never felt before weighing on her chest, and then she'd felt it start to leave her body.

But then a second later, the feeling was gone. Of course, this had caused yet another vicious fit of rage to consume Draco. He'd been so frustrated with himself that he'd blown a hole in the shelter that Narcissa slept under.

Hermione had found it hard to hide her disappointment but she'd managed to comfort him all the same.

A Horcrux was different to a blood curse, that was the problem. Astoria's curse was in her blood so it'd been an easy fix in comparison. Hermione had known what she was aiming for, but with the Horcrux? They knew nothing. It felt like it was everywhere in Hermione's body and yet nowhere at the same time. Draco didn't know what he was trying to target, it was no wonder he couldn't pull it out.

But they couldn't fail for much longer. They had to figure this out and they had to do it quickly.

Hermione took a deep breath through her nose and tried to concentrate again.

It'd been a lovely summer day earlier. The sun had been shining, there wasn't a cloud in the sky and daisies and daffodils had started to bloom in the gardens outside. The promise of spring, the beauty of it, it'd made Hermione think about second chances and rebirth, and it'd made her suggest that they take their session outside.

Draco had looked at her like she'd lost the plot but when she'd gone outside, he'd followed her, and when she'd sat cross-legged on the grass, he'd done the same.

The spell still hurt and yes, Draco's temper was still as volatile as ever, but Hermione was much more relaxed with the sun beaming down on her face and the smell of fresh flowers in the air.

And then the clouds came, and the temperature had abruptly dropped.

Hermione and Draco had just been about to go inside and seek warmth by the fire, but then Narcissa had come back from one of her patrols, and after she'd dropped to the ground and curled her body around the pair, they'd decided to

fly. You're the only one who could do it and you're the only one who understands why it'd need to be done. We promised that we would be the ones who made the difficult decisions and did the things the others couldn't."

"But you're not asking me to make a difficult decision!" Daphne cut him off. Her tone was sharp enough to make Narcissa growl at her. "You're asking me to make an impossible one!"

"Alright then," Draco started, deciding to change tactics. "If it were the other way around, if Theo had died that day in Nottingham instead of you, would you have been able to go on without him?"

When Daphne looked down and started to pick at her nail polish, Draco knew he'd won the argument. If there was one thing he knew about the Greengrass sisters, they never ruined a fresh manicure unless they were really, really anxious about something.

"You already know the answer to that."

"I do," he said. "But I need you to say it anyway."

"No," she whispered. "If Theo had died instead of me, I wouldn't have survived it. He's always been stronger than me. He says I took his place to save his life because I was selfless but that's not the case."

"So why did you do it?"

"I did it because I'm selfish. It's cruel, but I've always wanted to die before him. I knew that if I died that day in Nottingham, he would have been able to carry on without me. I knew that he'd be there for Astoria and I knew you would take care of the family. Theo is a lot more resilient than he gives himself credit for. I knew he'd be in pain, but he'd survive. But if I hadn't taken the fall for him... if he'd died that day?" She exhaled loudly and looked back at the farmhouse. "I would have found the tallest building I could and thrown myself off the side of it."

Again, Draco already knew the answer to his next question but he needed to ask it, needed the answer to hang between them and know that they were on the same page. "And why would you do that?"

"Because I simply couldn't be in a world where Theodore Nott wasn't alive and breathing."

"See, you understand. You're the only one that understands Daph, that's why it has to be you."

"I'm going to siphon the Horcrux out of her and destroy it if it's the last fucking thing I do!" An awful pain rippled against his chest. The cigarette he was holding started to tremble in the same motion as his hands. Bits of ash fell from the end and floated onto the floor. "Nothing is going to happen to her!"

"And what if it doesn't work?" Daphne asked, always having to think ten steps ahead, always having to have a plan B, and C, and D. "What if she dies? Then what?"

He took another deep drag. Held the smoke in until his lungs burned and chest like he thought it might cleanse that horrible ache he felt in his chest. It didn't. "I don't know."

"Yes, you do." Daphne, she'd always been able to see right through him. So did her sister; it was a talent of the Greengrass sisters. "I think you've known it from the moment you realised that she was a Horcrux."

He did know. He hadn't let himself dwell on that idea because the reality was too painful to think about. He didn't want to think about her dying but he had. Daphne was right; he'd known from the moment he saw that gold hand of the compass land on Granger.

"If I ask you to promise to do me a favour, would you?"

"Always," Daphne answered, no time to think it over, no hesitation. "You know that. What do you need?"

"If Granger dies, I need you to promise to let me die with her."

Daphne's fierce expression faltered. She inhaled sharply. Her mouth fell open slightly. "That's not fair. You can't ask me to promise something like that."

Narcissa whined and nudged her snout against Malfoy. He ran his hand over her scales in a comforting way, but he wasn't changing his mind. "It doesn't have to be a big spectacle. It can just be a quick Avada- you don't even have to look at me while you do it."

"Oh, it gets worse?" Daph snarled. "It's not just about letting you die; you want me to actually kill you?!"

"Well it's not like I can Avada myself, is it? The spell doesn't work like that."

"No." Daphne's voice was strong, firm, just like the sister he used to know. "I'm not doing it. Ask someone else."

"Daph, it has to be you. Blaise would refuse. Theo, as much as a psycho as he is, he wouldn't have the bottle to do it when the time came and Astoria couldn't hurt a

continue their session outside. Narcissa couldn't help, but she wanted to be involved as she could.

And as the hours ticked on - and the temperature dropped just as quickly as Draco's patience thinned - Hermione huddled against the dragon's warm scales to fight off the chill.

"Try twisting your wand clockwise - "

"Do you not think I've already tried that?! Because I have!"

"Alright," Hermione tried not to bite back at the anger in Draco's tone. It wasn't her that he was frustrated with, it was himself. She kept quiet for the next few minutes and let Draco concentrate in peace, but when she flinched involuntarily, his blue eyes flickered up to hers.

"Do you want to take a break?" he asked, starting to pull his wand away from her chest.

"No, I'm fine."

He nodded and went back to his work. Hermione looked down and watched little sparks start to gather at the end of his wand and disappear against her skin.

The sparks didn't exactly hurt on their own, not right away, and to begin with, Hermione was more focused on the different colours they turned as Draco's magic adjusted, testing and then retesting their ability to grab the dark magic inside of her. First, she saw blue sparks.

Then green.

Then red.

Then blue again.

Each colour had a slightly different effect on her body, one grabbed, one parted, one pulled, each doing its own job to get the Horcrux out of her.

Green.

Red.

Blue.

Green.

Red.

Blue.

Green again.

Although Hermione wouldn't say it out loud, the pain got worse every time the colours changed. When it started to get uncomfortable again, Hermione closed her eyes, rested one of her hands on the side of Narcissa's neck, and tried to focus on the warm scales under her palm rather than the pain she was feeling. She ran her hand back and forth over them while she focused on gathering the smoke. She pictured it travelling up her shoulders -

Fuck – the pain was getting worse. It was starting to really, really fucking hurt. She pictured the smoke sliding down her collar bone, edging towards her heart -

More pain. She bit her tongue and thought about how lovely the warmth felt under her hand -

Smoke. Smoke. Smoke. Smoke.

Fuck, it was really starting to hurt but if she told Draco then he'd stop. They had to keep going. She had to keep quiet. She focused on gathering the smoke in her chest, pictured it swirling in and out of her heart -

Fuck.

Fuck.

Smoke. Smoke -

And then the pain became so intense that Hermione couldn't think about anything else. She felt like she was being dissected. The pain in her chest, it was piercing and sharp, quite literally felt like Draco had cast a cutting curse and had split her chest in two, bones and all. She balled her hand into a fist against Narcissa's scales as she tried desperately to keep quiet.

The dragon noticed. Narcissa lifted her head off the grass and started to make a deep growling sound that reminded Hermione of a crocodile.

"I'm sorry -"

"I know," Hermione whispered, keeping her eyes closed. "I'm alright. Keep going."

After a few seconds' pause, Draco sighed and started to perform the spell again.

Their small break had done nothing to dull the pain. Hermione hissed again and flinched back.

pulled on his trousers and then his coat. He wrapped the blanket tightly around Granger and kissed her cheek before he walked away.

He pulled a packet of cigarettes out of his pocket as he made his way to the kitchen door, and after he'd stepped outside, he lit it with the end of his wand.

Narcissa was waiting for him outside. She seemed just as tired as Draco felt. She'd been spending her days over the last few weeks patrolling the area and looking for threats, and she was just as nervous about Granger's future as he was, and that was even evident in where she'd been sleeping. She'd completely abandoned the bunker that she usually slept under and had taken to resting in the back garden, as close to the kitchen door as her huge, bulking frame would allow.

Draco knew the reason. Narcissa had always been attuned to him but now her connection to Granger was just as strong. She could sense the tension between them and she wanted to be as close to them as possible in case they needed her.

Narcissa sat up expectantly as Draco was outside, but when a certain someone didn't immediately follow, she whined and moved a little closer to the door.

"No," Draco commanded her in a low voice. "Granger is still asleep. You can see her tomorrow."

When Daphne followed, she kept her back pressed against the brick wall, keeping as much space between her and Narcissa as she could.

Draco knew that he wasn't going to like this conversation when Daphne pulled out her wand and cast a privacy charm.

"What is it?" he asked, eyes on the cigarette in his mouth as he took the first drag. He thought nicotine might help him get through this conversation, fucking hoped it would, anyway.

"What are you going to do if Granger dies?"

"She isn't going to die. Once the snake is dead, I'm going after Voldemort. He'll be so weak by then, weak enough that I should be able to knock him out and keep him that way until we figure out a way -"

"What if the Order get to Granger first and kill her?"

"They won't!" He was thankful for the privacy charm, if Daphne hadn't have cast it, he'd have woken the whole house up with his screaming. "She's not going to die!"

"I know. She's one of us. We're not going to let anything happen to her, but what if it does, then what?"

Daphne nodded like she agreed with him. "But what do *you* want to do, Draco?"

He didn't even have to think about it. "I want to get on Narcissa's back, take Granger and hide her somewhere she'll be safe and no one can take her away from me."

Voldemort would never stop hunting them and eventually, after they'd killed the snake, neither would the Order. Each side would want to hunt them down so they could take Granger. Malfoy didn't care if they'd spent their entire life on the run if it meant that she'd have a life - with him.

"I just keep thinking, fuck the rest of the world," he told Daphne. "She's what I want. She's what I need to make me happy. Fuck everyone else. The Order wouldn't sacrifice one of their own to spare us so why should we for them?"

"I could do it if you want?" Daphne whispered. "I could knock her out and kidnap her. Take her to another safehouse somewhere and keep her there until we figure out how to take the Horcrux out of her. She'll hate me for it but I don't mind being the villain if it means she lives and you're happy. It doesn't matter to me if she hates me, it just matters that she lives."

Draco looked at Granger again. Daphne's suggestion, he'd already thought about it. Weighed the pros and the cons up against each other again and again but he always came to the same conclusion.

Granger was the strongest and most intelligent woman he'd ever met and if he forced her into that plan, she'd push back. She was smarter than he was and if he kidnapped her, if he did take her somewhere hidden and hide her away, she'd outmanoeuvre him and get herself out somehow. And if she escaped, she wouldn't risk him kidnapping her again, not if innocent peoples lives were on the line.

If he pushed her, she'd push back. If he tried to hide her away to save her life, she'd escape, storm into the Order's base, grab the sword of Gryffindor and slit her own throat to prevent him from putting everyone else's lives in danger again.

If he tried to force her hand, she'd cut it off.

If he forced her in any way, he'd essentially be pushing her into being a martyr and he couldn't let that happen. He needed to tread carefully. Take each step as it came and look for opportunities as they came to him. If Granger was going to survive this, he needed to be clever and cunning and bide his time.

"Can I talk to you outside about something?" Daphne didn't wait for his response. She turned around and looked away while Malfoy got up from the sofa,

Narcissa growled and bared her fangs, and Hermione's eyes flew open when she felt Draco start to pull his wand away.

"Would you pack it in fucking growling at me? I'm not trying to hurt her!"

Narcissa wasn't swayed. She opened her mouth slightly and leaned in, her threat clear in the way her fangs glittered.

"Whose dragon are you supposed to fucking be? Hers or mine?"

The answer was clear when Narcissa put her head back on the ground and dragged one of her wings forward, creating a physical barrier between him and Hermione.

Hermione couldn't help but laugh. She got to her knees and turned around so she could look the dragon in the eye. "Don't be like that. He doesn't mean to hurt me."

Narcissa huffed but made no effort to lift her wing and let Hermione out of the warm, wing-made cocoon that she'd formed to keep Hermione safe and out of pain.

After several more minutes of persuasion - and the promise of a Gridyflow neck joint - Narcissa allowed the practice session to continue, and they managed another hour before Draco stopped it again.

"What is it?" Hermione tried to sound disappointed but she couldn't muster it. She was in too much pain. Everything in her body felt like it was aching.

"I hate this," he said, eyes on the bruises already forming on her chest.

"It doesn't hurt."

His eyes flickered back up to hers. "Don't insult me by lying, Granger. I know that it does. I can see what I'm doing to you."

"You're not doing anything wrong. We need to do this Draco, it doesn't matter if it hurts."

"But it fucking does matter *if I'm the one hurting you!*" He wrapped one of his hands around the back of her neck and pulled her forward until her forehead rested against his. Her eyes fluttered closed at the same time his did. "I'm so fucking sick of failing you all the time."

"Why would you say that? You're not failing."

"Because I am failing you. All of this is my fault. I should have realised what Voldemort had done to you months ago. I should have stopped it..." The way his voice started to break, Hermione felt it in her heart.

"You couldn't stop what you didn't know was there."

"But it's my fault that it's there! And even now, I'm having to hurt you to try and fix my mistake and I can't even do that properly!"

"Don't talk like that! You're doing everything you can and we're going to figure this out! I know we are, Draco, *we're so close*, we just need to keep practising -"

"And in the meantime, I need to keep hurting you." His fingers tightened around the back of her neck. "I'm so sick of being the reason you're in pain Granger. Every time we do this, I feel like it's building a wall between us."

"It isn't..."

He wasn't listening to her. He spoke over her. He wasn't allowing her to talk him down and see how wrong he was. "Every time I hurt you, I feel like it's pulling us further and further apart and I don't want to do it anymore."

She shut him up by kissing him. She caught him by surprise. His lips were slow against hers at first but then he pulled her into his lap and his kisses grew fierce, desperate, and when they pulled apart, he was more out of breath than she was.

"Try again."

"What?"

Still keeping her forehead pressed against his, Hermione reached down and grabbed his wand. She guided it back to her chest and then she kissed him again. "You said that you felt like it was pulling us apart? So try again, while we're like this," she whispered. "And you'll see that it's not."

Draco tried the spell again. It stung, even more than it had before, but after a while, instead of dwelling on the pain, Hermione found herself thinking about Draco. She thought about his hand still wrapped around the back of her neck and holding her there. She thought about the feel of his legs underneath hers. His breath on her face. His magic in her chest -

'Then she felt something else -

Draco's breath hitched suddenly.

Hermione's eyes flew open, and she found Draco staring at her chest with wide, blue eyes.

"Did it..."

"Yes," he whispered, voice full of astonishment. "It was working. I saw -"

"They were adorable. He even carved the chocolate chips into the shape of little hearts."

Draco put one of his fingers in his mouth and made a fake retching noise.

"Stop it. I liked them. He made them all by hand too. No magic. Said he wanted to do it the hard way to prove how much he loved me."

"Oh, I fucking remember," Draco laughed. "I had to hear him moan all bastard morning about how dangerous muggle baking was. He burnt his fingers making them for you, you know that, don't you?"

Daphne's smile only grew. "Yes. He didn't have fingerprints on three of his fingers for weeks. Singed them off, the soft git."

"All that for fucking awful, cringy, heart-shaped cookies."

"They weren't cringy, weren't they?"

"Yes."

"I suppose, but that's the thing about being in love, isn't it?" Daphne asked. "All those things, all those little acts and declarations of love, they seem so stupid when you're on the outside looking in. They seem pathetic. But when you're in them? Those little gestures are the most wonderful thing in the world. I still think about those cookies now, even years later."

This. This was what Draco had missed. Easy, light conversations like this with his sister.

"So what are we going to do anyway? About her?" Daphne nodded at the sleeping witch in Draco's arms. "She's determined to die so the rest of us can live."

"She's not going to die, he cut her off. I won't let that happen."

"I know, but how are we going to make sure she says alive? Do you want us to stop torturing Crouch for information?"

He did. If anyone was able to think like Voldemort and figure out where he might be keeping Nagini, it was Crouch, and if Theo and Daphne and now Blaise kept torturing him the way they were, it would only be a matter of time before Crouch chummed out the right answer.

"No, the Order have the compass. If we're going to get the pardon's Kingsley has promised us then we need to look like we're still cooperating. They'll figure out where Nagini is hiding eventually and Granger is right. The longer we leave it, the more time Voldemort has to rebuild his army. The snake needs to go."

It'd been easy enough to get a message to Voldemort. An owl was sent to York Cathedral with a simple note attached to its leg;

'Dark Lord,

We made a mistake. We should never have betrayed you. We have seen that for some time, but your display at the hospital has proved it to us.

We have captured the Horcrux for you and are willing to hand it over as a gift to show our repentance. In exchange for handing it over, we beg for a pardon and our safety in your new world.

If you accept these terms, meet us at Nottingham City Centre, Townhouse, at four pm to make the exchange.

T & D. Nott.'

Theo had ripped a page from a book on magical artefacts and written the letter in the top corner of it. The note itself was unthreatening but the printed text and artistic sketch of the Sword of Gryffindor beneath it? That conveyed the hidden threat perfectly.

Meet us, or we destroy the Horcrux.

The plan was as simple as their note.

They were going to do to Voldemort exactly what he'd done to Harry over a decade ago. They were going to lure him out into the open, then they were going to kill the snake.

Voldemort wasn't a fool. He wasn't going to take the bait unless he thought it was real - the keys to that were Daphne and Theo.

He already knew that Theo had changed sides once because of Daphne. He knew that they thought the world of each other, and if they both thought that the only way to protect one another was to strike a bargain and switch sides? Again? He might just believe it. It was the best hope they had.

They didn't have much time to prepare but because there was only a handful of them left, it wasn't too hard to fill everyone in. Luna, Neville, Fleur and a few others had managed to escape from the hospital and Kingsley had managed to get a message to what little remained of the muggle army.

Altogether, what was left of the Order of the Phoenix was forty witches and wizards, a handful of reformed Death Eaters, a dragon, four metal tanks, a

helicopter, and maybe a hundred muggle soldiers. It wasn't a lot, but it was all they had, and everyone prayed that it would be enough.

While they carried out the plan, Astoria and Quinzel were going to stay behind. Neither of them was prepared for a battle - not that Blaise would've let his wife anywhere near the fight even if she were - and someone needed to stay in the safe house to look after Rose, Fred, Severus and Cordelia. And seeing as all four had taken a shine to Astoria and followed her around as though she were the sun itself, it was an obvious choice for her to stay with them.

While Harry, Ginny and Ron said goodbye to their children, Hermione and Draco waited outside and said their goodbyes to Narcissa. She was vital to their plan but because she was too large to Apparate, she needed to leave first and get a head start.

The bond between Draco and Narcissa had always been strong, but as Hermione stood back and watched them say goodbye to one another, it was like they were one and the same.

Draco had one hand pressed against the underside of her scaled jaw as he ran his other hand along her cheek. He stared into her red eye intently and although Hermione could see his mouth moving, she couldn't hear what he was saying.

Narcissa huffed something unintelligible and leaned into his hands.

Draco said something else to her. Narcissa closed her eyes and made a low growling noise, and after he dropped his hands and took a step away from her, she rocked onto her back legs and started to flap her wings.

As Hermione's hair flew in every direction from the wind tunnel the dragon had created, she stood by Draco's side and slipped her hand into his. They watched the dragon take flight together, and a few minutes after she disappeared behind the clouds, the rest of the group came outside.

Fleur, Neville and Luna were making their own arrangements. Kingsley had already left. He'd gone to meet with the leader of the muggle army to finalise the plan with them and he wasn't going to come back beforehand.

Although almost everyone was dressed in black, they were the most mismatched army Hermione had ever seen. Theo and Daphne wore their Death Eater robes as a way to keep up the ruse that they were still loyal to Voldemort. Harry and Ginny wore black robes that they'd borrowed from Daphne and Theo. Blaise was in a black shirt and matching overcoat. Draco wore his black riding clothes and Hermione wore her old mission uniform.

It was only Ron who stood out. He wore blue jeans and a red jumper - the same clothes as what he'd come to them in. He'd refused to wear anything the group had tried to give him, although Astoria had managed to persuade him to at least let Quinzel clean them.

"Harry," Hermione said, beginning their final preparations. "Did you manage to get your hands on the -?"

"Yeah, I've got them right here." Harry pulled a cardboard box out of his bag and flipped it open. Inside, there were several even smaller boxes, no bigger or more decorative than a carton of matches, and he handed one to everyone in turn.

"What are these supposed to be?" Blaise asked, making a disgusted face as he peered down at what Harry had just given him.

"They're the muggle communicators I told you about last night." Hermione opened her box and pulled out the two wireless earbuds. "You turn them on like this," she flicked the switches on the side of each earpiece and made sure all the bewildered wizards around her could see very clearly as she placed each of them in her ears. "And this way, no matter where we are, we can all hear each other on the battlefield."

Harry followed suit and put his earpieces in. Ginny did the same, and one by one, the magical and muggle world was united in one of the simplest, yet strangest ways.

"So," Hermione said, testing the connection, "everyone should be able to hear me now?"

"*Oooohh*, I like these." Theo grinned mischievously, then he leaned over and whispered in Daphne's ear. "*Imagine all the fun we could have if we played with these*—"

Blaise's lip curled and he pulled the earpieces out of his ears so quickly it was a wonder he didn't hurt himself. "Please, no. If I'm fighting for my life and I hear the two of you talking dirty to one another in my ear, I may just walk head first into an Avada."

Theo and Daphne looked at one another and chuckled, but they made no promises.

"There's also a pair here for Astoria," Ginny put the last box on one of the wooden picnic benches that were darted around the front of the pub. "I know she wanted to stay in the loop while we're out there."

"But we can't put off killing the snake any longer; too many people have already died to protect me -"

His lips twitched. He almost smiled. "Oh I don't know about that - I'd quite happily let another thousand or two die if it bought us another week together."

"That's not funny."

"It wasn't a joke."

She should have slapped him for saying something so cruel. Should have at least swatted him on the shoulder but she didn't have the fight left in her. Instead, she sighed and rested her palms against his chest. Her finger skimmed his mother's ring.

Again, she was plagued with the thought of wearing it, pausing over how easy it would be to just slip it onto her finger and pretend that they had all the time in the world left together...

"Don't look so sad," Draco whispered as his hands came to rest on her hips. "You're going to be wearing this by tomorrow night."

Hermione blinked up at him. "Come again?"

"I mean exactly what I said. You're going to be wearing this by tomorrow night," he repeated. "When the snake is dead, I'm going to find you and take you somewhere safe. I'm going to pull the Horcrux out of you and it's going to work -"

"But what if it doesn't?"

"It will work. *I will make it work*." She'd never heard him sound so sure of anything. "When the snake is dead, Voldemort will be incredibly weak and so will the part of his soul that's inside of you. And then, this horrible fucking thing here?" As he spoke, one of his hands skated up her spine and came to rest on her sternum, right over the point they'd been trying to pull the Horcrux out of her. "I'm going to rip it out of you and destroy it, and then me you are finally going to get started on this other life that we keep talking about."

They didn't get much, but they managed to scrape together a few hours of sleep before it was time to set the plan in motion.

Deception was the only way they were ever going to truly lure Voldemort out in the open, so deception was what they were going to run with.

"*Family ward*," Harry had had to finish Ginny's sentence for her. She hadn't been able to say it and everyone in the room felt sick hearing it. Acromantula's, Voldemort had sent hundreds and hundreds of aggressive, ruthless, ravenous spiders into the family ward where infants were kept, and no one had made it out of that room.

Ginny had tried to go back for them but she couldn't see any survivors, just swarms and swarms of spiders, infesting beds and swarming over occupied cribs.

Voldemort's desperation had made him even more dangerous than ever, more soulless. He had to be stopped. Now. He couldn't be allowed any more time to rebuild, no matter what it cost...

As Draco stared down at her, his eyes flickered to her chest. After they'd gotten to the safe house, they'd tried for hours to pull the Horcrux out of her but it hadn't worked. Hadn't even gotten close to the results they'd had back at the farm.

Hermione had really tried to make it work, she really, really fucking had. When Draco had performed the spell, she'd tried to think about nothing but him but she couldn't. All she could think about was the consequences of her own selfishness.

Every time she thought about his hands on her, she'd been blinded with images of wizards getting theirs cut off as they'd tried to fight off the ambush in the hospital. Each time she concentrated on his voice, it was drowned out by the screaming of children that'd been devoured by the Acromantula's.

All those people ... they'd died because she'd wanted more time with Draco ...

"When the snake is dead," Draco said after a while, "I'm getting you out of there."

"Oh for God's sake," Hermione groaned and looked at the floor. She was so fucking sick of arguing with him about this. "I've told you a hundred times, I'm not running away!"

"I mean it. I won't lose you." When Hermione refused to look at him, he cupped her chin in his hand and tilted her head up until she met his eyes. "Are you listening to me? When the snake is dead, I'm getting you out of there. I'm not putting you in a position where Kingsley can kill you."

"Kingsley isn't going to kill me."

"Granger, you're not stupid. Once the snake is dead, you're going to be the only Horcrux left. You'll be the only thing stopping Potter from being able to truly kill Voldemort, and if you think Kingsley is going to let you live for a second longer than he absolutely has to, then you're not as clever as I thought you were."

They went over the plan two more times to make sure everyone was fully equipped, and when everyone was ready, they started to part. Ron Apparated away first. Ginny followed, then Harry, but just before Blaise could leave, Astoria came running out of the pub.

"Wait! Wait!" the youngest Greengrass called. "Don't go yet! I can't believe you were going to leave without saying goodbye to me first!"

"What?" Draco asked, a hint of sarcasm in his voice. "You mean that you tore your eyes away from those precious little Order babies long enough to notice that we'd left the pub? Oh my - *I am honoured*!"

Astoria stuck her tongue out at Draco as she passed him, and then she made a beeline for her sister. She pulled Daphne into a tight hug and whispered something in her ear before they pulled apart. Then she moved on to Theo and Hermione. Her eyes were glistening by the time she hugged Draco, and when she finally released him, she was struggling to hold back tears. "Merlin, look at the state of you," she said, trying to smile as she fixed Draco's already perfectly straight collar. "Can't have you running into battle looking such a mess. What would the enemy think?"

Draco rolled his eyes but didn't stop her fussing over him. She did the same thing with Theo's collar and even went as far as fixing the stray hairs that'd escaped Daphne's ponytail. She was the same with Blaise and Hermione. She found something to fix on each of them. It was all unnecessary, everyone knew it - even Astoria probably did, deep down - but it was all she could do, so she was helping them in the only way she could.

When she was happy with all of their appearances, Astoria stepped back until the six of them were standing in a circle. She looked at each of them briefly and then a tear escaped the corner of her eye. "Oh for Salazar's sake, I don't know what's wrong with me," she laughed, shaking her head as she wiped the black tear away. "It's not like this is goodbye, I'm going to see all of you again really soon."

Hermione and Daphne offered Astoria small, reassuring smiles. No one knew what was going to happen. For all they knew, this might be the last time they were all together like this, and no one really had it in them to say it out loud.

As Astoria said her final goodbyes, Hermione slowly looked at those that stood around her. A few years ago, she'd hated each and every one of them. A few years ago, she would've felt sick at being this close to so many Death Eaters and yet, little by little, they'd become her family.

Blaise, he'd threatened her life when she'd learned of Astoria's blood curse, he used to remind her daily that he thought she was filth and now, now he made her cups of tea and squeezed her hand and told her she was family.

Theo, the psychotic, legendary king of torture. He used to go out of his way to make Hermione feel uncomfortable, he'd even tried to kill her once, and now he was putting himself in harms way to save her life.

Astoria had always welcomed Hermione with open arms. Despite being the enemy, despite years of lectures telling her that people like Hermione were lesser than her, Astoria had never treated her like that. She'd always made Hermione feel welcome and loved, she'd made those first months at the manor bearable. After she'd killed Seamus, Astoria's compassion and acts of kindness had been what kept Hermione going.

She hadn't known Daphne for anywhere near as long as she had the others, but in the short space of time that she'd been in Hermione's life, she'd made her feel like shed always been her sister.

And then there was Draco. He was unaware, but as she looked at his face and his bright blue eyes, the same eyes that used to be grey and cold, she felt tears gather in her own. She used to want him dead. She'd probably lost days of her life thinking of all the ways she wanted to kill him. She used to think the world would have been a much better place if he'd not been in it but now, she realised how dark and cold her world would become without him. He meant so much to her. She hadn't thought it was possible to care so deeply about another person until she'd fallen in love with him.

Blood doesn't make a family, Hermione had never realised how true that statement was until she looked at the five Slytherins around her.

These people, she couldn't have been more different from them and yet, they were her family, and after today, she didn't know if she'd ever see them again.

After Blaise kissed Astoria goodbye and she returned to the pub, the group started to Apparate one by one, and when only Draco and Hermione remained, he stood in front of her and took both of her hands in his.

"Whatever happens today Granger, don't be a hero."

"What?"

She should have expected that he wouldn't be able to sleep either. They'd all been through so much in the last few hours. Everyone was exhausted, but she doubted anyone upstairs would truly be able to find sleep, not with what was on the horizon.

"Is everything ready for tomorrow?"

Like her words had been a spell, Draco's lips froze against her neck. "Yes."

"Are all the weapons prepared?"

"Yes."

"And the potions?"

"Yes."

"And everyone is aware of the..."

"Yes, Granger. Everyone is well versed in the plan you've concocted."

The iciness in his tone prompted her to turn around. She made sure she stayed within the blanket's warmth and stared up at him.

Malfoy's expression was angry. His mouth was twisted into a bitter frown, but his eyes ... they were sad. Anxious energy was bleeding into his blue irises like cracks in glass.

He didn't like her plan, she didn't have to look into his eyes to know that. She hated it too but it was necessary. They'd been selfish for too long. They couldn't put it off any longer, not after what Voldemort had done.

Once everyone was safe in their new lodgings and the children were asleep, once they'd washed all the death and blood from their skin and hair, Ginny and Harry had been calm enough to explain what'd happened at the hospital.

Monsters. They were the only things Voldemort had left, and they were what he'd used to attack the hospital. Trolls, Dementors, Giants, Acromantula's. Any dark and bloodthirsty creature that still supported him, he took them, and he attacked with them.

Anti-Apparation wards had been set up around the perimeter so no one could escape magically. He'd ordered the handful of witches and wizards he had left to storm the hospital and slit the throats of anyone that crossed their paths. The trolls had been sent to block the physical exits while the giants went on to slaughter everyone healing in the infirmary. The Dementors had made everyone freeze with fear as they tried to flee, and a whole colony of Acromantula's had been sent into the ...

Hermione could understand why Draco had chosen it. It was perfect for a safehouse - probably even more so than the farm.

The pub was practical and safe - *but she hated it*. It lacked the warmth and character of the farmhouse. That old, rusting, '*had seen better days*' charm that she'd grown accustomed to. She missed the unorganised chaos of the bookcase, and the way the dining table used to creak whenever someone put anything on it. She missed the small, cosy living room, and listening to the crackling fireplace.

But most of all, she missed the sofa.

There were enough rooms in the pub for Hermione and Draco to have a bedroom together. Even the smallest one came with a double bed, but it felt too big to sleep in. Too cold. It put too much space between them, and Hermione just hadn't been able to fall asleep in it.

That was how she'd ended up downstairs, leaning against the doorframe and staring out at the heavy rain at 3 o'clock in the morning. She watched puddles form on the cobble path that led up to the entrance, and the electric lantern that hung over the pub sign flicker, bringing the words *The Golden Lion* in and out of focus.

That was the name of the pub that'd become their second home. *The Golden fucking Lion*. Hermione was sure Draco had done it on purpose.

She couldn't have been standing there for more than half an hour before he found her. She didn't hear him approach. One minute she was standing there alone and the next, cold arms wrapped around her waist from behind. Apart from the blanket that he had wrapped around his shoulders, he was shirtless, and when he pulled her back against his chest, she was swaddled in the blanket's warmth.

"Come back to bed, little lion," Draco whispered in her ear, his voice that husky purr that made her toes curl.

"No."

"Why not?"

"Can't sleep," Hermione whispered back. Her breath left her in a soft exhale when Draco started to pepper kisses along the base of her throat.

She couldn't see his smile, but she felt it. "Who said anything about sleeping?"

Hermione laughed quietly, and rested her head against his shoulder. She leaned back against him and closed her eyes, relishing in the soft little kisses he pressed into her skin.

"You heard me." Draco's nostrils flared as he stared down at her. "If things... Don't go the way we've planned today, I don't want you trying to be the hero. If it looks like we're losing, you are to put yourself first and get out of there."

"Draco I..."

"No, no, I need you to listen to me." He squeezed her hands and stepped closer to her until their chests touched and they breathed the same air. He stared down at her as though she were the most important thing in his life. "Even the thought of losing you..." He released a shaky breath and brought her hands up so he could kiss her knuckles. "I don't care how loudly that Gryffindor bleeding heart of yours starts to scream at you to do the right thing. I don't care how much you want to save everyone else - if it looks like we're going to lose, *you get out of there*."

Something suddenly clicked in Hermione's mind. "Is that what you've told Narcissa to do? Fly me away if things look bad?"

"I've told Narcissa to do whatever she has to do to protect you." He wasn't confirming her suspicions, but he wasn't exactly denying them either.

Hermione tried her best to smile. She didn't think it was convincing, her nerves were starting to get the better of her.

"You'll be safe with Narcissa," Draco said. Hermione wondered if he was saying it out loud as a way to reassure himself rather than her. "But don't hesitate. As soon as she's done what she needs to do, you get onto her back and you let her protect you. Do you understand?"

"I know. I will." Hermione knew that it was the truth. If she had to be on the battlefield to ensure Voldemort didn't leave, being on the back of the largest and most ferocious dragon left in existence was the safest place for her, but still, she couldn't help but feel nervous. "But..."

"But what?"

"What if she can't hear me when we're up there? Battles are always loud, and with the wind around us... what if she can't hear me?"

"Don't worry, she'll know."

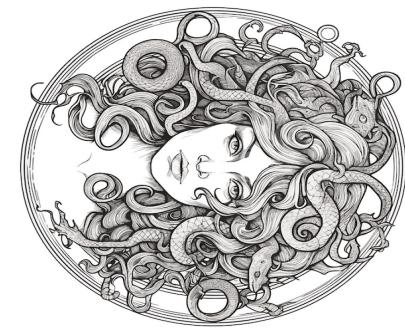
Hermione took a deep breath and nodded. As soon as she Apparated, she and Draco were going to be separated. After this, she didn't know when she was going to see him again...

She leaned up onto the tips of her toes and kissed him. It was only supposed to be a small kiss, but as she started to pull away, Draco threaded his fingers through her hair and held her there, snatching just a few extra seconds together, just an extra moment to be selfish...

Hermione didn't know how she found the strength to pry herself away from him but she did. She managed to pull her lips from his, she managed to step away from him even though every nerve in her body was screaming at her stay, but before she left him, before she went off to war, she chanced one last selfish look at him. "Don't worry. I'll come back to you."

And the last thing she saw before she Apparated was his smirk. "Make sure that you do."

## CHAPTER 69



When Hermione made it to the rendezvous point, Theo and Daphne were waiting for her. They'd chosen to meet on the outskirts of Nottingham - about two miles away from the city centre and the townhouse. They'd chosen it because their plan relied on the element of surprise, and they needed to be sure that no one would see them coming.

"Have you checked - "

Theo cut her off in a bored tone, one that made him sound like a teacher who was having to explain the same thing to his student for the fifteenth time. "Yes, we've already checked the perimeter and *no* there aren't any of old Boldie Voldie's spy's out here." He sighed heavily for dramatic effect and shook his head. "Honestly Granger, your lack of faith in us is astounding. This isn't our first time being filthy traitors, you know?"

Hermione didn't say it out loud, but the second safe house wasn't nearly as nice as the first.

For an old pub somewhere in Derbyshire, it had everything they needed. It was sturdy and well-hidden, had lots of extra space to store their weapons and medicines, have to make it look convincing"

Hermione nodded and took a deep breath.

"Don't worry," Daphne smiled. "You can do me next."

Voldemort knew what Hermione was capable of. He'd heard stories about her ruthlessness on the battlefield. He knew that she wasn't the type of witch who could

### **3rd July**

## HOW LONG HAS IT BEEN?

There were lots of windows to use for lookouts, and because it used to be an Inn, it had plenty of bedrooms upstairs - enough for everyone, even with the new additions.

The three of them sprinted down the basement steps, they didn't have a second to waste, every heartbeat counted, but as the door to the cellar swung open, Hermione realised they couldn't have walked through it at a worse time.

"THE GIRL!" Crouch screamed. "USE THE GIRL!"

Daphne and Theo - who both had a knife in each hand and were dripping up to their elbows in Crouch's blood – stopped what they were doing and stared down at their victim.

"What did you say?" Theo asked.

"IF YOU WANT THE SNAKE, THEN USE THE GIRL!"

Daphne cocked her head to the side. "What girl?"

"THE MUDBLOOD! SHE'S A HORCRUX, ISN'T SHE!?" Even though Crouch was shaking so violently that his teeth rattled as he spoke, Hermione heard every word very clearly. "USE HER AS BAIT! HE'LL COME FOR HER! THE DARK LORD WON'T LET THE SNAKE OUT OF HIS SIGHT! HE WON'T TRUST ANYONE WITH HER, HE WON'T WANT TO BE AWAY FROM HER AND IF YOU USE THE MUDBLOOD, HE'LL COME FOR HER! HE'LL COME FOR THE MUDBLOOD AND HE'LL HAVE THE SNAKE WITH HIM AND THAT'S WHEN YOU CAN KILL IT!"

Kingsley smiled. Just like that Order had a plan, and Voldemort's demise looked more likely than it had been in over a decade.

The war was finally drawing to a close, and Hermione and Draco ... were out of time.

Hermione took it as a sign that she understood.

Once the cloak was dropped and Narcissa disappeared completely, Daphne conjured chains and wove them around Hermione's wrists. As planned, as soon as Hermione was bound, Theo placed a hand on her shoulder, spun her around, and he and his wife started to march her into the city centre.

Theo had wanted to be a little gentler but Hermione had insisted that as soon as they started walking, he and Daphne handle and treat her as though she really was their prisoner and she was glad that she did. When they were one mile away from the meeting point, she started to notice things, movements out the corner of her eye, stirrings on top of buildings and in shop windows.

They were being watched already.

About half an hour later, when Hermione, Theo and Daphne all had more bruises and cuts than what they'd started the day with, Narcissa arrived and they moved on to the next phase of their plan.

As soon as the dragon's claws touched the floor, Hermione cast a Silencing charm on her - followed by a Disillusion charm. "Ok, that should do," she said, taking a step back. "Let's test it out. Narcissa, come to me."

Usually, when Narcissa walked, each step she took sounded like giant rocks being smashed together and the ground shook but now, due to Hermione's incantations, nothing happened. There wasn't a sound. The ground didn't shake at all. Even though they could see Narcissa, it was like she wasn't there.

With phase two complete, Daphne pulled Harry's Cloak of Invisibility out of her bag and laid it out flat on the ground. She cast several extension charms on it, and once it was plenty big enough, she levitated it into the air and hovered it over Narcissa's body.

"Remember girl," Hermione put her hand on the dragon's snout and stared into one of her red eyes. "Move as slowly as you can and don't attack until I give you the signal. We can't have Voldemort knowing that you're there until the snake is right in front of you."

Narcissa didn't make any noise, but she pushed Hermione gently with her snout.

When the three of them were standing outside of the Townhouse, Hermione felt sick with nerves. What was left of Voldemort's own army was already lined up and waiting for them. There were giants holding spiked clubs with bits of severed flesh dangling from the ends. Clusters of spiders had their flanks, at least a dozen Black Masks were scattered among the group, and that was just what Hermione could see.

She didn't want to think about what was waiting and lurking in the buildings that surrounded them.

One problem at a time.

It was so quiet while they waited for Voldemort to arrive. Hermione could hear her own heart beating.

'There was at least a hundred feet between the two groups, and they just stared at one another from across the gravel. Silent. Waiting. Sizing each other up.

When one of the giants banged the blood-covered club it held onto the gravel, Theo's hand flinched against Hermione's shoulder.

Any moment now. Any moment now Voldemort would be there. The three of them just needed to keep it together. They just needed to hold their nerve -

Another giant banged its club against the floor.

Daphne shuffled her weight nervously from one foot to the other.

The others would be arriving at any moment. Draco would be sneaking onto one of the surrounding rooftops ... Blaise too. And Harry and Ginny. The muggle soldiers and their tanks would be getting into position any moment...

It took everything in Hermione not to glance at the rooftop to her left, the one she knew Draco had chosen to perch on. She couldn't risk looking around and giving away his position, but she wanted him there with her, standing by her side -

One of the larger Acromantula's snapped its pincers in their direction.

Hermione flinched, then took a deep breath to calm herself. The air to her left hummed with magic. Hermione couldn't see what Narcissa was doing, but she got the impression that she felt just as restless as Hermione did.

"Shhhhhh," Hermione hushed under her breath, making sure to keep quiet and move her mouth as little as possible. "Not yet. Not yet."

When nothing else happened, Hermione assumed Narcissa had somewhat calmed herself.

His nostrils flared angrily. He backed into the kitchen counter and when the baby started to wail, Ron looked down at her and made a strangled noise like he was in pain.

"Ron, it's alright," Hermione whispered. "You can trust her."

Ron looked up at her, his blue eyes swimming with tears.

"Astoria was Medusa. She's been on the Order's side for years. She wouldn't hurt your child, I promise. She would never hurt anyone."

When Ron looked back at Astoria, she nodded and smiled sweetly, and whether it was the gut-wrenching way his daughter started to wail, whether it was because he was in agony or if it was that signature Greengrass warmth that won him over, it wasn't clear, but after a brief pause, he nodded his head and started to sob quietly.

Just as Ron's knees started to give out, Astoria gently took the baby out of his arms and started to soothe her. "It's alright, little one. Shhhhhh. *Sshhhh.* It's alright. You're safe. Nothing bad is going to happen to you here." Astoria looked up and tried to catch Ron's eye. "What's her name?"

"Cord..." Ron's throat bobbed as he swallowed thickly. "Cordelia."

Astoria nodded and bounced the child softly in her arms. "And who is Cordelia's mother?"

"Romilda." Hermione had already put the pieces together, but after Astoria had wiped the blood off the child's face, the answer was clear as day. Cordelia was the spitting image of her mother.

Astoria nodded again and smiled down at Cordelia. Astoria had once told Hermione that she'd never really spent much time around children or babies but to look at her, no one would have been able to tell. She was a natural. She'd only been holding the baby a few minutes and she'd already managed to settle her. "And where is Romilda?"

Ron broke down and dropped his head into his hands. She was dead. He didn't need to say it out loud. The mother of his child was dead and if they didn't get a move on, then everyone in the farmhouse might be next.

The only thing left to do was tell Theo and Daphne about their move. It wasn't necessary for Kingsley to follow Draco and Hermione down to the cellar but he still did, and they didn't have the time to argue with him, they needed to get out of the farmhouse as quickly as fucking possible.

Hermione and Draco can heal their injuries, and I'll go upstairs and get the children cleaned up-”

“You...” Ginny started to say. “You don't need to do that.”

Astoria poked her head around the cupboard door and smiled sweetly. “It's alright, I don't mind. It's nice to feel useful again.”

Draco clutched his wand tightly in his hand and looked out the window. “Tori, as touching as this is, we don't have time for you to play nurse. If Voldemort has captured anyone who knows where this safehouse is, then we're not safe here anymore. We need to go to one of the others.”

Harry nodded. So did Ginny and Ron. It was probably the only thing everyone in the room agreed upon.

“But-” Astoria started to protest.

“He's right,” Blaise agreed. “We don't have time to waste. Everyone, grab as many bottles of potion as you can, we need to leave. Now.”

Hermione summoned a bag from upstairs and cast an *Undetectable Extension* charm on it. Quinzel stood at the cupboard and threw phials of potions into the bag, Hermione did the same with food, Blaise with supplies and blankets, Draco with weapons, and while the rest of her family worked, Astoria looked at each of their guests in turn, and then turned to Ron and held her arms out. “Give her to me,” she said softly, looking at the child he held. “I can take care of her while Blaise treats your wounds.”

It was easy to see why Astoria had picked on him. He was the most injured by far. His legs shook terribly - which wasn't surprising, given the huge, gaping hole in his left thigh. It was impressive that he was still able to walk. He was probably keeping himself standing through sheer adrenaline and willpower alone. And his daughter - she was screaming bloody murder and Ron, bless his heart, he looked like he didn't have any idea how to soothe her.

Ron shook his head. He clutched the baby closer to his chest, but everyone could see the effort the simple act cost him.

“It's alright,” Astoria whispered. “I won't hurt her. I'm good with children, I promise.” She took a tentative step closer. Ron continued to retreat.

She knew when Voldemort was close. She felt it in her gut. Knew it by the twisting sensation she felt gathering in the pit of her stomach, like something was biting and scratching and trying to gnaw its way out of her. Whether it was because of the Horcrux inside of her or not, Hermione didn't know.

A minute after the feeling had started, he was there. Voldemort had come, just as Crouch had said he would, and just as Crouch had predicted. Nagini was with him.

Bellatrix flanked Voldemort's left, Rodolphus, his right.

Hermione couldn't take her eyes off Nagini. The snake slithered in and around Voldemort's ankles as he slowly walked toward them, but when she finally looked up at him, her adrenaline went into overdrive.

He looked so different than the last time she'd seen him. The loss of yet another Horcrux had taken its toll on his physical appearance. He was thinner, clinging to life as frailly as the skin clung to his weakened bones. Cold, dark, evil energy just radiated around him. It was putrid, the type of dark magic that made flowers wilt and die from just being nearby.

““Ello Boldie,” Theo chimped. He was always happiest when putting on a show. “How are ya mate? Still struggling to find a decent hair growth tonic I see.”

If looks could kill, then Theo would've died on the spot from the one Bellatrix threw him. “Watch your mouth! I should relieve your head from your shoulders for what you've done -”

“Pffff! As if woman! You wouldn't be able to chop my head off if I gave you an axe and knelt down in front of you!”

Despite the bickering, Voldemort hadn't taken his eyes off Hermione. His eyes were the most unsettling thing she'd ever seen. They were glowing. Hateful red orbs that were glued on her. He was looking at her not quite in amazement, but more disbelief. Like he couldn't believe that someone like her, someone of her kind, could be strong enough to house the part of his soul that he hadn't meant to trap inside her.

It was only when Daphne spoke that Voldemort's eyes released Hermione.

“My Lord,” Daphne said softly, gracefully, gentle as a caress. “It is good to see you. How long has it been?”

Daphne used to be Voldemort's favourite, Draco had told Hermione that once. She was once his favourite Death Eater, she'd have become one of his Demons if she hadn't betrayed him, and that much was clear to see when he looked at her. He

looked pleased to see her. An expression akin to affection actually flashed across his cold, gaunt features.

“Daphne,” he whispered. “It has been too long, hasn’t it? Are you still angry with me for what I did to you, or rather,” Hermione swore she swore Voldemort start to smile, “what I ordered Grouch to do to you?”

“Well, that depends really,” Daphne did smile. “Doesn’t it?”

“On what, my dear?”

“On you giving me and my husband a pardon.”

Bellatrix snarled like a beast and took an angry step forward. “How dare you ask for a pardon after everything you’ve done! You do not deserve the breath in your lungs—”

“Enough, Bellatrix,” Voldemort hushed. “Let her speak. Is that really all you want in exchange for the girl? A pardon?”

“Yes,” Daphne nodded. “We’ll give you the Horcrux and you’ll never have to see either of us ever again, we just want a promise that after you win this war, you will let us live out our lives in peace.”

Voldemort narrowed his eyes thoughtfully. “And what of your sister? What of the rest of your family? Surely you wouldn’t abandon them so ... easily.”

Daphne swallowed before she answered. “The rest of my family are already dead. You always said that Muggles were savages, my Lord, and you were right. They turned on my family. After you attacked the hospital, they blamed us. They attacked us and took us captive. They killed Blaise and they made me watch as they killed ...”

Daphne’s voice broke off. She took a moment to compose herself before she started again. “After they killed Astoria, I realised how wrong I was to turn on you. I am so sorry my Lord. If I’d have known what I know now ... After Theo and I escaped, I knew we had to do something to make it right, so we made sure we brought the Horcrux with us. She had no idea, of course, she thought that we’d come back to save her. She put up a hell of a fight when she realised our true intentions, but we made sure we brought her here, my Lord, for you, to make up for our awful lapse in judgement. I hope that you can forgive us, truly, I do.”

Every word Daphne said ... The way her voice quivered; it conveyed the story perfectly. If Hermione didn’t know the truth, she’d have believed every word, and if the look on Voldemort’s face told her anything, then so did he.

Kingsley was the first to move. Harry, Ron and Ginny started to walk towards the farmhouse after him, but Draco blocked their path before they could make it to the back door. “Wands. Now.” His voice was curt as he held out his hand.

Kingsley’s eyes narrowed. “*Excuse me?*”

Narcissa hovered over Draco’s shoulder. One false move, and Kingsley would be her next meal.

“If you think I’m letting you near Granger with a tool that could be used to kill her then you’re fucking mistaken. If you want to get into that house, you will give me your wands.”

Ron’s lip curled. “And you’re fucking bonkers if you think we’re going into a house full of Death Eaters without—”

It was Ginny’s turn to scream. “JUST SHUT UP AND GIVE HIM YOUR WAND!”

Ron looked back at his sister with wide eyes. “What?”

“Look at us! Look at our children! They’ve been through enough and they need treatment! Now isn’t the time to pick a fight so just give him your fucking wand!”

Once Draco had collected the wands - and cast a detection charm on each of them to make sure they weren’t concealing any weapons - he let them inside.

“QUINZEL!” Astoria called when everyone was gathered rather awkwardly in the kitchen. “I NEED YOU!”

Even from outside, Narcissa could be heard huffing and circling the farmhouse. She didn’t like this either.

No one had seen much of Quinzell at all since Romy’s passing. She’d been depressed and miserable for months. Even Daphne’s return hadn’t cheered her up much. She still came when called upon, but her main priority in Malfoy Manor had been to keep Romy out of trouble and with him gone, she felt like she’d lost her place in the world.

“What is all this?” she asked, her glum and lifeless pink eyes flickering between all the faces she didn’t recognise. “Who is all these peoples? And these screaming babies? Quinzell does not know them, and Quinzell does not like screaming babies!”

Astoria walked over to the cupboard where they stored their medicine. After she’d pulled the door open, her blonde hair disappeared behind it. “Can you fetch me some healing balm and then run upstairs and get a lukewarm bath ready? Blaise,

so he's not as vulnerable. He won't want to leave anything to chance, so neither can we. When the time comes, we need to be prepared which means - ”

But Draco wasn't like most wizards. Instead of being calmed by Kingsley's words, he was infuriated by them. He threw a green curse, it skimmed Kingsley's left leg and destroyed the grass behind him. “Think very, *very* fucking carefully about how you're going to end that sentence.” When Kingsley took a step closer, Draco aimed at his chest again. “And if you don't stop looking at Granger like that I will rip out your fucking spine!”

Kingsley wasn't deterred. He took another step closer and every time he did, Draco's blue eyes darted to his legs like he was considering cutting them off to stop him. Hermione wouldn't have been surprised if he did.

Narcissa's growl bordered on a roar. The temperature rose significantly as flames sparked in her open mouth.

All of the children started to wail and scream. No one could hear each other over the top of them -

The back door creaked open and Astoria and Blaise stepped out onto the garden. “What's going on?” Astoria demanded. “Kingsley? Potter? What on earth are you lot - ” She stopped dead in her tracks when she saw the children. “What happened?”

“Voldemort ...” It was all Ginny said but that one word was enough.

Astoria touched her mouth with her palm. Her soft brown eyes looked at the wizards, then Ginny, then at the children, then the blood. “You better come inside then.”

Blaise's jaw was tight. He hadn't taken his eyes off of Kingsley. “I don't think that is such a good idea.” He placed a hand on his wife's elbow and started to guide her back inside the house. “We don't know their intentions and if Voldemort has tracked them - ”

“I don't care.” Astoria jerked out of his grasp and glared up at him. “They're wounded and they have children and we are going to treat them, understood?” Blaise's eyes were hard as he looked back up at Kingsley. For whatever reason, he didn't trust him any more than Draco did, but after a moment, he nodded.

For a while, no one moved. Everyone just stared at one another. The children continued to scream. Narcissa continued to growl.

“I see,” Voldemort's tongue darted out to wet his lips.  
“And we have another gift for you,” Theo added.

“Oh?” When Voldemort's eyes flickered to Theo, his voice was sharp and biting. Nothing like the soft and delicate whisper he'd been speaking to Daphne in. “And what would that be?”

“Draco Malfoy. We have him chained up with Grouch.”

Voldemort's expression grew furious, murderous, almost unhinged. “You have him?”

Theo smiled and nodded. “We had to keep him alive too. Because his life is linked to the Mudblood's, we didn't know if killing him would kill her too.”

“But we thought,” Daphne added in a purr, “given the part he's played in your ... downfall, that you might enjoy torturing him. I hear it's a wonderful way to relieve tension. Just ask Barry Crouch Jr. I'm more relaxed than I have been in years.”

Voldemort thought it over for a moment. His lips pressed into a tight line and his fingers curled around his wand - and then he looked up and gave a wicked smile that made Hermione's skin want to crawl off of her bones. “Excellent. The two of you have served me well - ”

“No my Lord,” Bellatrix started to protest. “We cannot allow them to get away with this!”

“With what?” Bellatrix asked. “They have seen the error of their ways and they mean to make amends - ”

“But what they have done cannot be so easily fixed!” Bellatrix's wand sparked with a killing curse as she aimed at Daphne, then Theo, then back at Daphne. Her eyes blazed with murder, like she couldn't decide which of them she wanted to kill more. “What they have done to you, it cannot be forgiven! They betrayed you! They turned their backs on you and now they think that because they've brought that pathetic creature here, they can be forgiven! No - ”

With the three of them distracted, Hermione went on the move. She lurched forward like she meant to escape, and as Theo's nails dug into her shoulder and he pulled her backwards, Hermione spat at Voldemort's feet.

That was it. That was the signal.

At that moment, Narcissa should have been getting herself into position. She should have been very slowly, very carefully, rearing herself onto her hind legs -

Bellatrix drew her wand. "HOW DARE YOU?"

"ENOUGH, BELLATRIX!" Voldemort snarled as a green curse gathered at the end of Bellatrix's wand. "I will not tell you again! Lower your wand, or have you forgotten what the Mudblood is?!"

Bellatrix's eyes widened in horror. Her wand arm fell to her side as quickly as she bowed her head.

Theo tutted very loudly. "Oh, dear. Bet you've not had a telling-off like that in a while, have ya? Awww, what's the matter, Bella?" His voice changed into a childlike, mocking tone, the kind of voice people used when they spoke to babies. "Is someone not the Dark Lord's favourite anymore?"

That's it, Hermione thought. Keep them talking. Keep them distracted.

"Well, as amusing as this is," Daphne said, "how about it then? Is this trade happening or not?"

Narcissa should have been almost ready -

"Trade?" Rodolphus hissed. "After everything you two have done to the Dark Lord, you honestly believe that you can be forgiven? His army is in ruins because of you!"

She should have had her enormous head high in the air -

"Are you blind as well as ugly?!" Theo laughed and shook his head. "We've stolen a Horcrux for him? Right under the Order's nose, might I add! If that doesn't earn us a pardon, then what the fuck does?!"

She should have been gathering a powerful, flame-filled breath in her lungs -

Rodolphus shook his head. "Nothing is enough to make up for your betrayal! If you think that bringing a Horcrux back will allow you back into the ranks -"

One that was strong and hot as Feinfyre -

Theo snorted sarcastically. "We don't want back in the ranks you raving fucking nutter! We just want to be left alone with the promise that you won't execute us!"

One that could destroy Nagini -

The temperature suddenly rose a few degrees. The air next to Hermione moved like ripples of water in a still lake.

Voldemort's hateful red eyes suddenly looked right where Narcissa was standing.

For that, Harry had no answer. He swallowed thickly and looked down at his sons.

"*Exactly!*" Draco's tone was pure venom. "It's just as I said, fuck us! Fuck the Death Eaters! You've put the lot of us in danger but as long as you're safe, that's all you care about. Doesn't matter to you if he tracks us down here and slaughters us! You'd sacrifice the lot of us if it gave you an extra few minutes to escape!"

"It's not like that!"

Hermione wanted to say a lot of things. She wanted to tell Draco to calm down but she couldn't. She couldn't speak at all. Her throat felt like it was collapsing in on itself. Guilt flooded her chest.

This was all her fault. She should have killed herself the moment she discovered she was a Horcrux. She should have made a break for it, found the Sword of Gryffindor and slit her own throat. If she had, then this wouldn't have happened. If she had - fuck, how many people had died today because of her selfishness? A hundred? Two hundred? She'd been to the hospital herself with Draco, it was massive, easily big enough for a thousand.

A thousand people. A thousand good, innocent people...

They weren't all dead now, were they? Surely Voldemort hadn't managed to kill all of them... Surely others had managed to escape... Surely all one thousand hadn't died because -

Hermione struggled to swallow the lump in her throat.

Surely all one thousand hadn't died because she was still alive?

When Kingsley took a step forward, so did Narcissa. She growled so loudly that it made Hermione's chest vibrate. The claws on the end of her wings dug into the soil on either side of Hermione and Draco. She was ready to protect them, but equally ready to spring forward and attack if she needed to.

"This shouldn't have fucking happened!" Draco hissed, echoing Narcissa's roar. "He's been silent for weeks! He had no supporters left -"

"He must have been using this time to rebuild." Kingsley had always been good at speeches. The calmness in which he spoke, the elegance of his tone, it was usually enough to calm down even the most hysterical wizards - it was why Dumbledore had elected him to take his place as leader of the Order to begin with. "He's weaker than he's ever been, it would make sense that he'd want to flesh out his army again

"HE KILLED EVERYONE THAT TRIED TO FIGHT AGAINST HIM AND HE DIDN'T STOP THERE! HE KILLED THE INJURED, THE ELDERLY! HE KILLED PATIENTS IN THE INFIRMARY WHILE THEY SLEPT AND HE KILLED FAMILIES IN THEIR BEDS! HE DIDN'T FUCKING CARE AND WE WEREN'T PREPARED FOR HIM! HE EVEN KILLED CHILDREN! FUCKING CHILDREN, MALFOY!"

Hermione's eyes flickered down to the screaming baby in Ron's arms. Then she looked at Rose in Ginny's arms, and then the two boys in Harry's.

One.  
Two.  
Three.

They were all there. All the Potters were accounted for. The family was still alive and together, but a horrible feeling crept into Hermione's stomach when she thought about all the families that weren't anymore.

"I'm sorry," Harry sounded nothing like himself. His voice shook terribly. His eyes hadn't left the sons that clung desperately to his shirt. "We didn't know where else to go. We didn't know if he'd be able to track us to one of our other bases—"

"So you thought you'd bring him here instead?" Draco still hadn't lowered his wand. Murder was blazing in the blue of his eyes. "Fuck all of us, yeah? Is that it? Can't risk losing more of your precious bases but fuck it if anything happens to me and my family?"

"But you said we can't be tracked here," Harry started to plead. "You said that you'd placed wards on this safehouse so only people who knew its exact location could Apparate here."

"Yes but if Voldemort captures someone that you've told—"

"But we haven't told anyone else about this place." Harry threw Hermione a desperate look and when she didn't answer, he looked back at Draco. "The four of us are the only ones who know where this safehouse is, that's why we were able to Apparate here—"

"Oh, you haven't told anyone else, have you?!"

"No," Harry shook his head, "I swear."

Draco jutted his chin towards Kingsley. "Can you swear that *he* hasn't?"

Fuck.

He might not have been able to see Narcissa but he sensed something was off, Hermione was sure of it. He lowered his arm slightly to allow Nagini to wrap around it -

It was now or never -

Hermione pulled her wrists apart and broke the fake chains. She whirled to her left and dragged her wand in a backwards motion. The cloak of Invisibility was pulled off of Narcissa's body, and Hermione got the satisfaction of seeing the panic in Voldemort's eyes as the dragon released a wall of punishing fire in his direction. But just as the fire was about to destroy Nagini, Voldemort fucking disappeared. He managed to Apparate. He, Nagini, Bellatrix and Rodolphus managed to disappear just in time, and once they reappeared a few hundred yards back, once they were safe behind the line of giants and monsters and dark creatures, Bellatrix screamed a war cry that might as well have opened the gates of hell.

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heads. They were burnt and bruised and looked like they'd been to hell and back. All three of them were covered in the remains of death, and only two of them had little bundles of new life clinging to their chests.

Harry and Ron were there but Ginny ... Hermione couldn't see her.

Another loud crack of Apparition rang through the grounds of the farmhouse and the prayer Hermione had started to chant was answered. Ginny was there. She was just as bloody and bruised as the boys were but she was there. She was alive.

She scratched one of the screaming children out of Harry's arms and started to sol into its matted hair. It took Hermione a moment to realise that the girl was her daughter, Rose. There was too much blood on the toddler, Hermione hadn't been able to recognise her at first.

Kingsley's eyes blazed as he looked at Hermione. In the same moment his blood-drenched hand curled around his wand, Draco stood protectively in front of her.

Narcissa hovered to Hermione's left, her mouth hanging open in a warning and a deep growl forming in the back of her throat.

"Where is he?!" Kingsley sneered, making the already petrified children jump in Harry and Ron's arms. "Where is Crouch! We cannot waste any more time! We need to know where the snake is now so we can kill it once and for all!"

"Theo and Daphne are torturing him as we speak," Draco's arm didn't waver. He kept his wand hovering perfectly over Kingsley's heart. Ready. *Waiting*. "Why are you suddenly so interested in Crouch? Why are you here? And why the fuck are you all covered in blood?!"

"BECAUSE HE ATTACKED US!" Ron screamed. "THAT'S WHY WE'RE HERE! VOLDEMORT FOUND US! AND HE ATTACKED!"

Oh God. Hermione felt sick. This was exactly what she'd been afraid of ...

"How?!" Draco snarled. "He should have nothing left to attack with! We whittled down his army to nothing!"

"WELL YOU DIDN'T WHITTLE IT DOWN ENOUGH! HE KILLED EVERYONE!" Hermione had never heard Ron sound so petrified. The baby in his arms that she didn't recognise started to scream.

Narcissa stepped forward and flashed her teeth but Ron didn't stop, didn't lower his tone in the slightest.

## *4th July*

Battles always started the same way.

There was always a scream, a call to order, a signal to indicate that the time for civilised conversation was over and the bloodshed was about to begin. Narcissa's attack had been just that. That wave of fire that'd come hurtling out of her mouth had been the call to arms, the signal that everyone could drop the pretences of human niceties, they could take off their masks and reveal their true intentions. They could channel all the pain and anger they felt for the opposition, that rage that they



## THE MUDBLOOD AND THE DRAGON

It was probably the first time Hermione had actually believed the words. It was the first time since her breakthrough with Astoria that she actually believed there was hope for her.

"What did it look like?" she asked between kisses. "The Horcrux, I mean."

"It was black."

"And?"

He kissed the side of her mouth and then his lips moved down her neck.

"Smokey."

"And?"

"And it was coming out of your chest."

"And then what happened?"

"I don't know."

She jumped when he nipped her collarbone playfully. "Well what about texture? How big was it? Did it -"

"Granger," he pulled away just enough to look at her. Despite the seriousness in his tone, he was smiling. "Do we have to go into great detail and analyse it right this fucking second? Can we not have a fucking minute to just sit and -"

"Appreciate the little things?"

"Yeah," he whispered, raising one of his hands and brushing back the hair that'd fallen onto her face. "just for a minute?"

Narcissa sensed it before Hermione or Draco did.

All of a sudden, the dragon stood. Hermione and Draco pulled apart, and they both watched as Narcissa's coiled into a tense crouch and she started to hiss at a vacant path of grass a few yards away from where they were sitting.

Hermione got off of Draco's lap and they both held their wands firm as they stood.

The scales on the back of Narcissa's neck and the top of her shoulders raised like a cat on its hunches -

And then the threat the dragon was trying to warn them about appeared.

Three wizards Apparated onto the grass. Kingsley. Harry. Ron. All three of them were covered in blood, like someone had poured a great big bucket of it over their

usually caged. They could release that carnal part that existed inside every person, but was usually held down and buried, and they could wreak havoc on their enemy. When Bellatrix screamed, every monster answered the call. They all started to charge. Full pelt. No fear or mercy in their eyes. They didn't care about the dragon that stood in front of their prize or the flames that still burned on the floor. They just started to attack, they just started to run ... straight for Hermione.

After years of this, Hermione thought she knew everything there was to know about battles. She thought that her tired eyes had seen everything there was to see when it came to war. Thought her weary heart had felt every emotion there was to feel in those types of life or death situations.

She'd seen people beheaded and she'd felt remorse for those she'd killed. She'd watched victory be snatched away in the blink of an eye - even when it felt so certain - and she'd felt the heartbreak that followed it. She'd watched so many of her friends die and she'd felt the unbearable rage that accompanied watching such a thing.

Hermione thought she'd seen it all, thought she'd felt it all, but when those monsters started to charge at her, she'd never felt anything like it. Because she'd never seen a wave of enemies all running towards her - and only her - with the sole intention of capturing her.

Voldemort hadn't come here to win this war, he'd just come here to get her. He wanted Hermione. He wanted her alive and in his possession. Probably wanted to stash her away somewhere no one would ever be able to find her, where she'd be alone and isolated but feeding his immortality for the rest of her days - he probably thought that was a privilege for someone like her.

*Get the girl*, those must've been the only instructions he'd given his monsters, and they were blindly following his command.

Dementors appeared out of nowhere. The Death Eaters that remained drew their wands. The giants ran toward them. Dark, deformed creatures Hermione had never seen before - never even read about - appeared out of the shadows. Hundreds and hundreds of Acromantula's of every size started to scurry out of the buildings and shop windows around them. Their enemy was closing in -

But what little remained of the Order fought back just as fiercely.

Daphne and Theo started to throw killing curses one after the other at their attackers -

Narcissa released another punishing breath of fire that set the first wall of charging spiders afame -

Harry appeared on the right side of the battlefield - Ginny seconds later - and they both immediately went on the attack. So did Ron. And then Fleur. And then Luna and Neville. Even Shacklebolt appeared out of the shadows to take this final stand.

Although there weren't many of them left, no one fled. No one even thought about running. One by one, every single surviving member of the Order of the Phoenix came to fight with fierce determination.

And as soon as Draco Apparated in front of Hermione, he went straight for Voldemort. "GO, GRANGER!" he screamed as he threw a red curse. Thick chains flew out of the end of his wand and straight towards his former master. "NOW!"

Voldemort's red eyes were full of hate as he swept the curse aside and retaliated, throwing his own dark hex at Draco.

As Hermione climbed onto Narcissa's back, the dragon released yet another flaming breath. Narcissa swept her head from side to side like a snake, making sure she killed as many foes as possible while she was still on the ground.

Hermione settled at the base of Narcissa's neck and held onto her spikes, and as they started to take flight, Hermione watched Draco and Voldemort.

She and Draco had devised this plan together. They'd gone over every detail, and although everyone agreed that Draco should be the one to keep Voldemort busy, Hermione didn't like it at all.

Draco and Voldemort, they looked nothing alike and yet, at the same time, the mirror image of each other. They both held their shoulders rigid and their wands tight as they started to circle one another slowly. Both of their expressions were twisted and cold and they both had the same unimaginable hatred burning in their eyes. Dark, crackling, repugnant magic that was filled by hatred radiated around them.

God, there was so much anger between the two of them, it was visible. Their magic started to lash out. The rocks and gravel at their sides started to vibrate and lift off of the ground without them having to do anything. Their rage, it was like toxic fumes in the air, everyone could see it, feel it, taste it. They hated each other beyond all else. Each craved to spill the blood of the other like a dying animal thirsts

"You saw the Horcrux?"

When Draco looked up and smiled at her, his eyes were so blue, so beautiful and so full of hope, that they made Hermione smile too. "Yes, I saw it! The spell was working!" His smile got brighter, he flashed his teeth and dimples cracked the edges of his mouth. "It was fucking working!" he laughed. "It was actually fucking working!"

She believed him - she'd felt it start to work herself. That weight on her chest, she'd felt it start to lift. She'd felt the Horcrux start to leave her.

"What did you do differently?" he asked.

"Me? I didn't do anything differently; you were the one performing the spell."

"You did *something*, Granger. I felt like I was grasping at nothing and then all of a sudden, I could feel ... something, and when I started to pull, it was there! What were you thinking about just then?"

"You."

His smile started to fall. "Don't make jokes. This is serious."

"But I was thinking about you. I was thinking about what you said and your hands on me .. I wasn't thinking about the Horcrux at all really."

His smile fell completely. He looked at his wand and then back at Hermione. "But why would that make a difference? I don't understand..."

"You were the one performing the spell." Hermione stared at Draco's wand. She wasn't really sure where she was going with this, just voicing her thoughts out loud. "It was your magic that was pulling the Horcrux out of me ... maybe ... maybe that has something to do with it?"

It could be it, she certainly didn't know enough about Horcruxes to rule it out but it didn't feel like that was the reason. It felt like it was something more than that ...

"But why would thinking about me make the spell work?"

"Does it really matter? It was working! You were pulling the Horcrux out of me!" Saying it out loud, it made a warmth flood Hermione's veins. Happiness, joy, relief, she didn't have a word for it. She grabbed his face and kissed him again. "I told you!" she breathed, lips brushing against his with every word. "You're going to do this!" She kissed him again. He wrapped his arms around her back and hugged her against his chest as he kissed her back. "You're going to save my life, Draco. I just *know* it!"

what the war took from her, she'd always have a special place in her heart for him but she never got the chance to, because before she could, she suddenly felt dizzy.

Her head felt heavy and she was suddenly struggling to breathe. She instinctually went to lean on the wall beside her but there was no wall there, it'd been destroyed in the same attack that'd almost killed Harry.

"Hermione?" Harry's voice was muffled but frantic. "Hermione?"

If Harry's voice was frantic, then Draco's was terrified. "Granger, what's the matter?"

As she started to fall, Harry caught her arms and tried to keep her up but he wasn't strong enough to keep her standing yet.

"Potter, what's happening to her?" Draco hissed. "Is she alright?"

She felt like she'd been drugged. Her body didn't feel anything like her own. Almost felt like someone had a hold of her and they'd squeezed and squeezed until they'd pushed all of her energy out of her body. She collapsed onto her back, clutching her chest as she struggled to breathe.

"TALK TO ME POTTER!"

"I don't know what's wrong with her!"

She started to panic as she stared up at the grey sky. It was quickly blocked out by Harry's worried green eyes. "Hermione?" Even though he was standing right above her, he sounded very far away, it was almost like she was hearing him from underwater. "Hermione?"

When Draco's voice came through her earpiece again, the panic in it was deafening. "What's happening to Granger? Is she hurt?"

"I... don't know," was Harry's answer. "She just collapsed."

"Well don't just fucking stand there!" Draco hissed. "GET HER OUT OF THERE!"

Harry grabbed Hermione's wrists and pulled her again, and he'd just about gotten her back on her feet when Ginny groaned in their earpieces.

Harry and Hermione looked toward the battlefield in terror. Ginny was alive but she was on the floor and she was bleeding, badly. She was crawling backwards on what looked like a broken arm as she retreated from Rodolphus' advances -

"I feel much better now, I'll be fine," Hermione lied, struggling for breath. She wasn't fine. She wasn't fine at all, but if another person died because of her, she'd never forgive herself. "Go and help Ginny."

Harry stared at her for a moment, clearly conflicted. His panicked green eyes swept to Ginny, then back to Hermione.

"Go," she urged. "I'm alright. I have Draco and Black Shadow protecting me." She forced her lips into a smile. "I'm probably the safest person on this battlefield."

Harry didn't hesitate any longer. He conjured what little strength he had and Apparated to Ginny's side. It was funny, really, how someone could be on the verge of death, how someone could feel like all their energy was spent, but when the life of someone they loved was in danger, they found the strength to carry on.

Was it love that did that? Or the fear of losing them? Hermione hardly had the strength left to really analyse it. She braced her hands on her knees, struggling with everything she had to keep herself standing. What the fuck was wrong with her all of a sudden? Her head felt like it'd been smashed repeatedly against the wall. She closed her eyes and willed the pain to subside enough for her to walk. Her arms shook as they struggled to support her weight -

She felt something wet trickle under her nose. Her eyes flew open and she saw what'd fallen onto the floor.

Blood. Three little droplets of blood coloured the rubble like spilt paint. It was her blood but she wasn't injured -

She wiped the junction between her top lip and her nose and looked at her hand. More blood. She'd had another nose bleed, and the only other time in her life that she'd had one was when -

Voldemort roared and the ground shook with his rage.

Someone had done it. Someone had killed Nagini. Another one of Voldemort's Horcruxes was gone, and that only left -

When she lifted her head again, she saw a group of muggle soldiers watching her, all of different ages, and all standing around one of the only muggle tanks that remained. One gave a hand signal and screamed something she couldn't hear into his communicator - and then the tank's turret started to turn, and so did the turrets of the other two tanks. They all twisted and twisted until -

Oh... God ...

Until they were all pointing at Hermione.

Kingsley, that fucking bastard. He'd given the muggle soldiers orders to kill Hermione as soon as Nagini was dead. Draco had been right about him all along. He didn't give a fuck about Hermione. It didn't matter how hard she'd fought for years to protect everyone else or how many lives she'd saved during the war. As soon as she was the last Horcrux, he turned on her, just like Draco said that he would.

She used to be an asset to the Order, but now, she was just the last obstacle in their way.

When the Medallion was destroyed, she'd felt fine. Yes, she'd had a small nosebleed but she'd felt completely normal. Hadn't even been aware that her nose was bleeding until Draco and Daphne had pointed it out to her. Maybe it was because she was now the last one, but this was entirely different. It was instant this time. This time she felt like she'd been hit by a train and she had no strength, not even the strength to protect herself.

She looked to the left and found Draco immediately. He was on the other side of the battlefield, Voldemort had him by the throat and was crushing him against a brick wall but he was still watching Hermione. Staring at her with wide, terrified blue eyes but it wasn't fear for himself, it was for her.

She looked around but again, there was no one to help. Everyone was too distracted with their own battles to notice that Hermione's was drawing to a close. Everyone was too busy trying to save their own loves to know that she was about to be ripped away from hers forever -

Hermione tried to Apparate but she didn't have the strength to. She tried to flee on foot but her legs gave out and she fell onto her hands and knees. She struggled to breathe. She looked at Draco again -

He headbutted Voldemort and made a frantic dash toward her but Voldemort recovered quickly. While his back was turned, Voldemort threw a slicing curse at the back of Draco's legs with enough force to send him falling to the floor and howl in pain.

The only person ... the only thing that could've possibly saved her was Voldemort, but he wasn't looking at her. He was seething, blinded by revenge. He was too distracted taking his anger out on Draco that he hadn't noticed the tanks that'd taken aim at Hermione. He was so angry at the loss of another Horcrux that he hadn't noticed that the last one was about to be destroyed too.

his wand on the floor. She picked it up and gave it back to him as she helped him back onto the battlefield.

"It should only take a few more minutes for the spells I've used on your leg to fully take effect."

"Okay," Harry nodded. "I'll take your word for it."

"Does it hurt?"

"Yeah, it's getting better though."

Hermione's brows creased as she looked down at his leg. She knew he was lying to her. He was having great difficulty putting even the slightest bit of weight on his injured leg, but sure enough, the more they walked, the easier it became for him. When they were almost out of the wreckage, he was able to - even with a great limp - walk on his own.

"Are you sure that you're going to be able to fight like this?" Hermione asked, reluctantly letting him uncurl his arm from over her shoulder.

Harry tried to shrug. It made him wince. "Not really."

"But you're going to do it anyway?"

"Absolutely," Harry laughed and gave her one of those brave, mischievous smiles that he was known for, one that she hadn't seen in years. "It's not like we really have a choice in any of this, have we?" He'd said it as a joke but then a sombre, serious sort of look flashed across his face. "I'm sorry, Hermione."

She watched him out the corner of her eye. "Sorry for what?"

"When we found out that you were a Horcrux, I should have done something."

"There wasn't anything you could do. The damage was already done."

"No but when we found out, I just ... froze. Kingsley sent those guards to capture you, you're my friend and I just froze. I should have done something." Harry looked at the floor like he was ashamed, then he sighed heavily and shook his head. "I know the war has taken its toll on all of us, I know it's changed all of us in some ways but you're one of my best friends, I should have done something and I'm so sorry that I didn't."

Hermione didn't respond to that. There were a lot of things that she'd have liked to have said back to him. She'd have liked to have told him that she was sorry too and that he had nothing to feel guilty about. She wanted to tell him that no matter

“NO, YOU DON’T! SO HELP ME, GRANGER! YOU AND THAT FUCKING BLEEDING HEART OF YOURS! GET BACK ON THAT DRAGON BEFORE I – EUGH!!”

Hermione stopped running and spun around, searching for Draco. He was still duelling Voldemort. There were only a few feet between the two of them and although they both looked like they’d been through hell, Draco was by far the worst. His lip was split open and his jawline and neck were burnt. There was blood matting in his hair, a thick stream of it dripping down his left temple and he was clutching his left thigh with his free hand. Hermione could see blood pooling between his pale fingers.

“Stop trying to tell me what to do and focus on your own fucking duel!”

When a cold chill swept up Hermione’s spine, she looked up. Narcissa had only been grounded a minute and a handful of Dementors were already trying to reclaim the sky. “Get back up there and kill as many of them as you can! When I’ve got Harry, I’ll call you!”

She didn’t wait for the dragon to respond. She took off running towards the destroyed building, but when she felt a wind tunnel behind her, she knew the dragon had listened to her instructions. When Hermione reached Harry, she used her wand to lift the rocks off of him and then knelt by his side.

“Is he alright?” Ginny asked quietly. It sounded like she had great difficulty asking the question. “He’s not ... dead, is he?”

Hermione held her breath. She didn’t want to answer until she was absolutely sure. His leg was bleeding and twisted at an angle that made her empty stomach lurch, but when she checked for a pulse, she found one. “He’s alive!”

Hermione pulled a Blood Replenishing potion from her bag and gently poured the liquid into his mouth. It revived him enough that when she pulled a Pepperup potion out of her bag, he was able to hold the bottle himself. While Harry drank it down in one long swig, Hermione did her best to fix his leg. She wasn’t able to heal it perfectly, she didn’t know how to, but she could at least get him standing again.

“Thank you,” Harry said, hissing a little as she carefully pulled him onto his feet. “You saved my life.”

Hermione smiled a little as she draped his arm over her shoulder so she could help him walk. “You’d have done the same for me.” She glanced around and spotted

And Draco ... fuck. Draco, he hadn’t taken his eyes off Hermione. He was desperate to get to her but he couldn’t. She saw blood pool on the floor around his legs. He couldn’t stand, he wouldn’t be able to save her and she was too weak to get away -

Voldemort stood over Draco and kicked him hard in the ribs. Draco hissed in pain but still, he tried to get to Hermione. The once ruthless Demon Mask, the pureblood Slytherin who used to think he was above everyone and everything, he started to crawl to Hermione. The sight of him like that, dragging himself toward her as blood seeped from the corner of his mouth, leaving a trail of blood behind him while those blue, terrified eyes watched her ... It ... It ... broke her ... crushed something in her, unravelled some buried thing deep in her chest and made her feel like she’d already died, even without the tanks.

Her eyes darted to the left and she saw the inside of the tanks turret start to glow.

She looked back at Draco. “I love you.”

Even without the earpiece, Hermione would have been able to hear Draco call out to her. A voice that scared didn’t need to be helped, it carried all by itself. “GRANGER!!”

Hermione closed her eyes as the shell left the chamber.

She heard the shots be fired. They were quick. One after the other.

One.

Two.

Three.

Three bullets the size of her arm, all coming at her from different angles.

When she felt the ground shake beneath her feet, she knew that was her body falling to the floor.

She felt a wave of searing heat and knew that she was dead.

She heard her loud, ear-piercing shriek that didn’t sound human but mercifully, she didn’t feel any pain.

She knew she was dead because the noise of the battle that’d been going on around her suddenly stopped. It was instant, like someone had turned a television off in the middle of a war film. One minute, Hermione had heard gunshots and screams and spells being cast and the next, nothing, just eerie silence around her ...

Wait, no there was a sound. Was that ... Breathing? Loud, rattling ... raspy breathing? But it wasn't coming from in front of her or behind her, it was all around her. To her left. Her right. Above her. Behind her. It was everywhere -

Her eyes flew open and then -

Black.

That was all she could see. A wall of black. All she could see was black and she suddenly felt hot, like she was standing inside of a sauna -

No...

The fear she'd felt seconds ago vanished, only to be replaced with an awful, gut-wrenching ache. Hermione felt sick standing there because the tank's bullets, those shells that were supposed to end her life, they hadn't hit their intended targets, they'd hit Narcissa. Every single fucking one of them.

Narcissa ... She'd taken the bullets for Hermione. She'd thrown herself onto the ground at the very last second. She'd used her body as a shield to protect Hermione. She'd...

That shriek of agony hadn't sounded human because it wasn't human.

That loud noise Hermione hadn't been able to place, it was the sound of her breathing. Hermione hadn't been able to recognise it at first because Narcissa had never breathed like that before. Never breathed like she was struggling. Like each breath might've been her last...

Narcissa let out a loud, strangled shriek that sounded like a thousand people screaming all at once. Her usually strong back legs started to wobble and her wings trembled. She shrieked again and then her legs gave out. The mighty beast toppled over but even as she fell to the ground, she did so in a way that ensured her enormous body curled around Hermione. She was still trying to protect her ... even then ... even when she was on the verge of ...

Narcissa whined weakly and laid her head on the ground. She curled her body around Hermione until she was tucked safely between her scaled chin and neck, and as one of her red eyes met Hermione, Hermione felt tears prick in her own.

Every breath Narcissa took was slow, each weaker than the one before it. Her strength was failing fast. It ... it wouldn't be long before she ...

Narcissa had been caught with a tanks bullet before. One had almost killed her, but three ...

As Narcissa dipped low and made another pass over the city centre, Hermione scanned up and down the battlefield, looking for someone who could help but everyone was fighting for their lives.

Ginny kept trying to Apparate to Harry but every time she did, Rodolphus would grab her arm and their duel would continue.

Draco more than had his hands full dueling Voldemort.

Blaise was trying to take down the last giant by himself and Neville was nowhere to be seen.

Kingsley was doing his best to heal an injured muggle soldier and Luna was ... Luna wasn't moving.

Theo was the only one who was free to help but when an Acromantula pinned Daphne to the floor and she screamed, Hermione knew that Harry would get no help from Theo. Fuck the Chosen One, Daphne was always going to be his priority. And as Theo Apparated to her side, Hermione knew there was no one else left to help Harry. She didn't have a choice. As soon as the thought had entered Hermione's mind, Narcissa dived toward the ground.

Bellatrix was about thirty feet away from Harry when she was eclipsed in a demon like black shadow. She stopped dead in her tracks and looked up but it was already too late for her; by the time she'd raised her wand, Narcissa's back claws had already splintered into the ground and her teeth were already around Bellatrix's torso, and on snap of those enormous jaws were enough to turn one of the most feared witches who'd ever lived into nothing more than dragon feed.

Whilst Narcissa feasted, Hermione looked at the rubble. Harry wasn't moving. She couldn't see his chest raising or falling anymore either. "Harry?"

Nothing. No reaction. No answer.  
"Harry?"  
"Harry?"

Harry's chest was as still as the dead. Face expressionless as a corpse.

Hermione swung her legs to the right and slid gracelessly down Narcissa's shoulders.

Draco's voice roared in her ear the second her boots hit the ground. "What the fuck are you doing!?"

"Harry's hurt!" She sprinted towards the rubble, wand in hand, black and gold gun in the holster on her thigh. "I need to help him ..."

When it became clear that Harry hadn't Apparated, Hermione glanced over her shoulder to the collapsed building. There was so much debris and dust surrounding it, she couldn't see Harry, couldn't see anyone.

Narcissa roared. She started to turn around and fly back towards the wreckage.

"Harry?" Hermione tried again. All she could hear was everyone else fighting and the low hum of static. "Harry, please ... Please say something..."

It was an eternity later that she heard his voice. "...Hermione...?"

Harry was alive. She could've wept with happiness.

As Hermione and Narcissa got closer, the dragon glided lower and lower until Hermione could see Harry. He was hurt, that much was obvious. She could see his black hair poking out amongst the pale grey bricks, but the lower half of his body was trapped underneath the wreckage.

"Harry!" Ginny called. "Can you get up?!"

Hermione was too high up to see Harry's expression but she could hear his faint groans of pain through her earpiece. "No... Too many bricks ... my wand..."

"It's alright," Ginny responded. Hermione could see her duelling Rodolphus in front of one of the remaining lion statues. "Just sit tight and we'll get you out of there!"

But they didn't have time for Harry to sit tight. As Hermione looked down, she saw Bellatrix limping towards the wreckage. Harry was trapped under, and no one seemed to be close enough to stop her.

Hermione's heartbeat was in her throat. "Harry, get up!"

"I ... I can't!" Harry groaned in pain. His breath was hard and laboured through her earpiece. "My wand ... I don't know where it is..."

When Hermione started to panic, Narcissa roared. The few remaining Death Eaters flinched. "You need to move! Bellatrix is coming for you! You need to get out of there, Harry!"

She heard Harry grunt and hiss. She assumed he was trying to free himself, then he exhaled and his heavy breathing was all she could hear. "I can't ... they're too heavy... and I think ... I think one of my legs is broken..."

"Oh fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck this was bad. If Harry died, then this was all over..." "Someone get to Harry!" Hermione screamed. "NOW!"

Hermione rested her hand on Narcissa's cheek and stared into her big red eye. Her scale wasn't warm anymore ... they were getting colder and colder ...

Each time Narcissa breathed, the sound got weaker and weaker, and each time she breathed, Hermione felt like there were invisible chords wrapped around her heart and they were pulling tighter and tighter.

Hermione placed her other hand on the dragon's jaw and gently stroked back and forth, soothing her in the only way she could. "I'm sorry," she whispered, her voice cracking, tears spilling down her cheeks. "I'm so sorry."

As Hermione looked into those fading red eyes, she couldn't believe she'd ever been scared of her, couldn't believe she'd ever thought of Narcissa as a beast or an animal or anything other than the intelligent, beautiful creature that she was.

Narcissa gave a low whine and weakly nestled into Hermione's touch.

Guilt swarmed up Hermione's spine until she couldn't hold it back anymore. She started to sob. She leaned forward and rested her forehead against the dragon's scales. They used to feel like warm coals, they felt like the icy slab of a coroner's table now.

When Narcissa whined again, Hermione knew it was time. She continued running her hands back and forth over Narcissa's snout but pulled back enough so she could stare into her red eyes. Hermione had always hoped that when she died, she'd have the luxury of staring into the eyes of someone she loved, and see someone who loved her staring back as she took her last breath. After everything she'd done for her, Narcissa should be allowed the same. It was the least Hermione could do.

On the other side of the dragon, all of the fighting had stopped. Everyone stared, Death Eaters, Order members, everyone had stopped what they were doing and stood in unison, watching the extinction of a species.

And after the light in Narcissa's once fearsome red eyes had gone out, after the very last Scandinavian Firehorn had taken her last breath, Hermione looked up, and she knew a part of Draco had died with his dragon.

She'd have rolled her eyes if he could have seen it. "When are you going to learn that I don't need for you to tell me-"

"BELLATRIX HAS GIVEN ONE OF THE GIANTS-"

## CHAPTER 71

In the same heartbeat that Draco snarled the words, Hermione saw it.

Chains. Bellatrix had conjured chains and given them to the last remaining giant on the field. Thick, heavy, enormous chains. Chains that looked like they held an anchor on the underside of a cruise ship. Chains that were far too large to be thrown by anything other than a giant. Chains that would be big enough to ground even a beast as large as Narcissa.

And Hermione had spotted them too late. They were flying through the air toward them. They were too close, coming too fast. Narcissa wouldn't be able to dodge them -

Narcissa roared. Fire started to gather in her open mouth -

Hermione sat upright and cast the first curse she could think of. She put everything into that Knockback Jinx, screamed the incantation as though her life depended on it and it was strong enough to work. Her spell hit the chains and set them veering off just before they could collide with the dragon's body.

The metal screeched as they flew back through the air. They smashed into the side of one of the high-rise buildings and cut the whole structure in half. The windows of the building popped open and glass rained down. The top half started to crumble, and it was only when the top few floors started to fall that Hermione's heart sank.

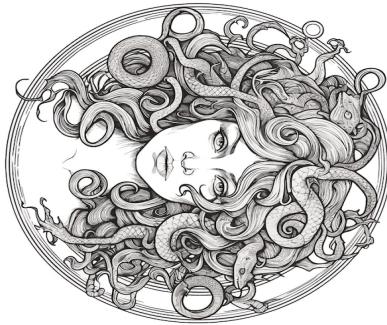
Because it was falling right on top of Harry.

Ginny screamed.

She saw Harry look up too late -  
There was a flash of brilliant white light as the rubble fell on top of him -

"Harry?" Hermione shouted, pressing her palm against the earpiece so she could try and hear him. She frantically looked from one end of the battlefield to the other, praying that he'd Apparated just before the structure had fallen on top of him, praying that he'd gotten out in time or cast a shielding charm. "Are you alright? Harry? Harry?!"

Once, when they'd been laying on their sofa in the farmhouse together, under that thick blanket with the fire crackling beside them, Draco had told Hermione that he'd named Narcissa in his mother's memory not only to honour her, but because she was supposed to be indestructible. He'd told Hermione that the first Narcissa



## NOTHING

*4th July*

Seeing Draco that way ... Looking at him from across the battlefield, still covered in blood, still laying on the ground where he'd tried to crawl to her, Hermione didn't know what to do.

He wasn't even looking at her. He was staring at the corpse beside her, and somehow, fuck knew how, but that made the feeling that was brewing in her chest all the more painful.

Once, when they'd been laying on their sofa in the farmhouse together, under that thick blanket with the fire crackling beside them, Draco had told Hermione that he'd named Narcissa in his mother's memory not only to honour her, but because she was supposed to be indestructible. He'd told Hermione that the first Narcissa

Hermione had never understood how they could be so in sync before, she assumed it was their familiarity. Draco had raised Narcissa since she was a hatchling so it was natural that she'd grown accustomed to him, but Hermione hadn't.

Hermione hadn't been there since the dragon was no bigger than a small cat. Hermione hadn't fed her by hand when she was a baby or taught her how to fly or breathe fire, and yet, when Hermione needed something from her, Narcissa just knew.

Words weren't needed. When Hermione patted Narcissa's right shoulder, the dragon made a right turn. When Hermione leaned forward, Narcissa dropped into a dive and Hermione only had to think about fire and Narcissa just breathed it.

The effect they had on Voldemort's army of monsters was devastating. Every time that ominous black shadow appeared on the battlefield, the Order members knew to Apparate away, and every time the dragon opened her mouth, her bone-chilling roar was drowned out only by her victim's screams as they burned alive.

They made pass after pass over the battlefield without Hermione having to hear a word from the others. They burned almost all of the Acromantula's and the heat from Narcissa's breath was strong enough to frighten all of the Dementors away.

It was incredible. Seeing the way Voldemort's army fled every time she and Narcissa flew towards them, it made her feel unstoppable. Seeing the fear in their eyes every time the flames followed, it made Hermione feel like they could do this. They could win. Maybe if Narcissa could destroy what was left of Voldemort's army, they could do what Draco had suggested. Maybe they could weaken Voldemort, kill the snake, maybe they could get him vulnerable enough to catch him and lock him away somewhere safe and secure. Maybe they could buy themselves enough time to get the Horcrux out of Hermione so they could destroy it.

Maybe, if they kept this up, Hermione didn't have to die...

Nothing could touch them. Nothing. Some of the Death Eaters tried to throw curses at Narcissa but they just bounced right off her thick scales. A few of Voldemort's followers were brave enough to conjure brooms and chase them into the sky but Hermione took them out with a few well-placed Adava's.

It was only when Voldemort's army was almost extinguished, that Hermione switched her earpieces back on.

Draco's voice was the first one she heard. "BELLATRIX! ARE YOU LISTENING, GRANGER? GET BACK IN THE SKY!"

Malfoy had died too young, so he'd wanted to forge another, one that was strong enough to endure, one that could not only survive the war, but thrive in it, and even outlive him.

Holding his dying mother in his arms had been traumatic enough, but having to watch another Narcissa Malfoy die... God, Hermione couldn't even begin to imagine the pain he must have been in.

All around them, everyone had stopped. Narcissa's attack might've been the call to arms that began the fight, but her death had been unexpected enough to unite everyone - even if it was only briefly - in the same frozen, awestruck stare.

Everyone had accepted the temporary truce, everyone, except Voldemort. Hermione didn't know why she thought he might have done in the first place. He'd never shown even a sliver of human decency before, why should he start now, when he was so close to death?

And because Draco just happened to be the closest person to him, he became the target for his new bout of rage. The way hatred burned in the red of his eyes as he stared down at Draco made him look even more snake-like. His lip curled back over his rotting teeth -

Was that... blood in his gums?

Voldemort raised his wand high over his head, the tip aiming perfectly over the bottom of Draco's spine, "CRUCIO!"

Even if Hermione hadn't been so weak, there was no way she'd have been able to get to Draco quicker than Theo did. As the curse left Voldemort's wand, Theo Apparated in front of Draco and blocked it. In the same instant, Daphne popped into existence beside Draco and grabbed his forearm, and a second later, all three of them disappeared and then reappeared next to Hermione.

And just like that, the small little ceasefire was over.

The battle restarted with a vengeance. Voldemort started to scream battle commands to what little remained of his army and he wasn't holding back any longer. *Fear makes him more dangerous*. Harry had always said that, and if the crazed look in his eyes as he started to erratically decapitate muggle soldiers was anything to go by, then he must have been fucking terrified.

Hermione saw Voldemort start to throw killing curses in tandem. Muggle soldiers fell to the floor around him like puppets that had had their strings cut. She heard screams and saw flashes of green every few seconds, but she wasn't really paying

attention to them. Not really. She was too focused on the empty expression on Draco's face.

Her heart ached just looking at him. After Daphne had Apparated him to safety, she'd healed the wounds on the back of his legs and managed to get him standing. And while Theo relayed what'd just happened back to Astoria, Daphne held a bottle of Pepperup Potion up to Draco. He didn't take it. Hardly seemed aware that Daphne was there at all.

"Is Draco alright?" Astoria asked. Her voice was high and shaky. She sounded like she'd been crying but Hermione must have missed it. "What's he doing right now? Did he see what happened to Cissa? Oh please, tell me he didn't see..."

Draco's eyes were hollow. His lips were parted slightly, and his expression was just ... *nothing*. That was the only way Hermione could describe it. Nothing. He looked like he was nothing. Like he had nothing left, like he had nothing else to give anymore.

Daphne held the bottle up to his face but still, Draco didn't move, and as he stared at Narcissa's corpse... Destroyed. That was what he looked like. Utterly fucking destroyed.

His eyes were so fucking blue but Hermione wished that they weren't. She wished he'd put his Occlumency walls back up, just this once. Just for now. He shouldn't have had to feel any of this pain. He should have been allowed to shut it out, just for a little while. He shouldn't have had to see his dragon like this, with dried blood seeping out of her cold jaws, the wings that used to carry him into battle burnt and shredded, her eyes open but blank, lacking that red fire that used to look back at him...

Hermione wanted to shield him from it but how could she? Narcissa's gigantic corpse was all around them. Her head was in front of him, her body was curled protectively around them and her wings were shielding them from the carnage on the other side.

A hand suddenly closed around Hermione's elbow. She jumped and found Daphne holding another bottle of Pepperup Potion out to her. Despite her battle-worn appearance, despite the blood on her chin and the scorch marks in her hair, her expression was gentle and patient. "Will you stay with him?" she asked quietly, almost whispered it. "I don't want to leave him alone right now but Blaise is still out there and he needs us."

three of the horrid beasts started to make their way towards the next tank, one that was charging in the other direction and unaware of the approaching threat.

"Come on, girl!" Hermione said, patting the side of Narcissa's sealed neck. Narcissa roared in agreement and changed her flight path. She glided toward the battlefield again and when she was in position, she tucked her wings into her side and Hermione held on for dear life as they dropped into a deep dive. When they were close enough, Narcissa opened her wings and her mouth, and as they made a pass over the largest group of giants, her fiery breath exploded onto the ground and burned all three of the creatures alive.

Blaise whistled in astonishment as they flew over his head, clearly impressed, but Draco, however, was far from it.

"What the fuck are you two playing at?" Draco roared. "I told you to stay in the air and out of the way!"

"We *are* in the air!" Hermione snapped back. "Technically!"

Theo roared with laughter through the earpiece. "She's got you there mate!"

With the giants dead or screaming in agony, they turned their attention to the next threat. Narcissa glided over one of the high-rise buildings and exhaled fire again, burning the Death Eaters perched there alive before they could Apparate to safety, then they turned their attention to the fresh cluster of spiders the size of cars, and Narcissa flew over them and disintegrated them.

"GRANGER!" Draco hissed in her ear. "I won't tell you again, STAY OUT -"

Hermione turned her carpieces off. It didn't matter what Draco said or how loudly he said it, her mind was made up. She wasn't going to sit there and watch everyone else die, not when the most valuable weapon they had was being wasted protecting her.

Hermione had never understood how Draco and Narcissa always seemed to be in sync. Whenever she'd seen them together on the battlefield, it seemed effortless. Yes, Narcissa had, on occasions, dropped her shoulder to the ground when Hermione had wanted to climb onto her back, and she'd curled her body around Hermione when she was cold, but they were little things. She didn't need to be told because they were instinctual.

Battles, however, were very fucking different. It seemed that the dragon knew where he needed her to be without him telling her, and she breathed fire without being given a verbal command - yet always burned the right people.

She kept an eye on Draco's duel with Voldemort, but it was difficult to watch, and after Voldemort almost caught Draco with a strange fire sort of hex that she'd never seen before, she had to look away.

She saw Daphne and Theo tag team a giant. Daphne distracted it while Theo dragged the club out of its hand using a strong levitation charm, and after a few seconds of playing with his food, Theo brought the club down on top of the giant and smashed it's head in with it's own weapon.

When Theo took a little bow, Daphne clapped, but the encore was interrupted when they were surrounded by Acromantula's once again.

One of the spiders took a swipe at Daphne, Hermione almost Apparated to help them. She looked away, she watched Blaise narrowly miss an Avada by a masked Death Eater. She held onto Narcissa's spikes to stop herself from going to his aid.

Stay with Narcissa, she kept telling herself over and over again. Stay with Narcissa. Fucking stay with Narcissa.

Ginny almost got flatlined by a vampire.

Harry came close to getting squash by one of the giants.

*Stay with Narcissa*, her hands were sore from holding onto the dragons spikes so tightly.

Voldemort picked up one of the fallen stone pillars from the Town house and threw it at Draco. It missed him by inches. *Stay with Narcissa*.

She saw blood trickle down the right side of Draco's temple. Stay with Narcissa.

Blaise snarled in pain. Someone - possibly Bellatrix - cackled in the background. Stay with Narcissa.

A Dementor tried - but luckily failed - to give Theo the Kiss. Stay With. Narcissa.

She held out for another five or so minutes, but when Hermione saw a giant flip a metal tank over and crush two soldiers underneath it, that was the last straw. She couldn't sit idly by. Not anymore.

As the machine exploded and those trapped underneath were engulfed in flames, the giant that'd caused the destruction fell into step beside two others, and then all

Hermione drank the potion, swallowed and then nodded. Still didn't trust her voice to speak.

Daphne cast a worried glance at Draco and worried her bottom lip. Hermione got the impression that there was a lot more Daphne wanted to say, something she wanted to ask, but she was stopping herself.

"Daph?" Theo called. "You coming?"

For a moment Daphne didn't move. She watched Draco the way a zoo tamer watches a wounded animal, waiting for it to strike, to lash out, to rip something else apart as a way to share the pain that they're in, but when the sound of Blaise in pain hissed through all of their earpieces, Daphne had no choice but to leave. She caught Hermione's eye once more, then a loud crack of Apparation later, she and Theo disappeared.

And then it was just Hermione and Draco.

He'd been standing there for a few minutes. He hadn't taken his eyes off of Narcissa's head and he hadn't said a word. He was so still, it didn't even look like he was breathing anymore.

Hermione opened her mouth but then closed it again. Even if she could find the words, what the fuck was she supposed to say to him? *Sorry?* That didn't even begin cur it. Felt like it'd be an insult to him.

Draco very slowly raised one of his hands.

*Oh God*, Hermione thought. Don't do it.

His pale fingers trembled as he reached out in front of him -

"Don't," Hermione finally found her voice. "Draco, you don't have..."

Just like he hadn't looked aware of Daphne, he didn't seem to be able to hear Hermione either. She watched as he splayed his palm and pressed it against the scales that lined Narcissa's cheek, and even though Hermione already knew what was going to happen, when Draco flinched and pulled his hand away, Hermione felt it in her heart.

He released a loud, shuddering breath and then stared down at his palm.

Narcissa's scales, he was so used to feeling them warm his palm, but when he'd touched her, that hadn't happened. Her scales weren't warm anymore, she wasn't warm anymore, and he didn't know what to do with that.

Just standing there with that hollow expression, it wasn't the Draco Malfoy that Hermione knew. He looked so lost. He looked nothing like the man she knew. After everything he'd been through the last twelve years, Hermione worried that this was going to be it. If this, the death of his dragon, was going to be the thing that finally broke him.

"Draco?" she whispered. He didn't answer, so she tried again. "Draco?" She walked toward him and placed one of her hands on his back. His entire body was trembling but he still didn't acknowledge her. "Talk to me. Don't shut me out."

Nothing. It was like she hadn't spoken at all. Even her touch, the way she ran her hand up and down the length of his spine didn't rouse even the tiniest reaction out of him. Maybe her worst fear had come true. Maybe this had broken him ...

Through her earpiece, the battle continued. Hermione heard Daphne and Theo go on the attack. She heard Ginny fight, heard Harry try and protect her, heard Ron try and out-maneuuvre Rodolphus.

And still, Draco didn't move.

Fuck. She wished he'd do something. She'd expected him to lash out, it was what he normally did when he was frustrated. As Narcissa had taken her last breath, she'd expected him to fly off the handle and a part of her fucking wished that he would. A part of her wished that he'd storm out of this barricade that Narcissa had created, that he'd charge toward one of the tanks that'd taken her life and he'd flip it over, crush it, fucking destroy it.

An angry, revenge fuelled rampage would have been better than this. At least then she'd know that his grief hadn't swallowed him up and destroyed him. At least then she'd know that her Draco was still in there, that he'd come back to her ... eventually.

When she couldn't see him like that any longer, she walked to the edge of where Narcissa's body was curled around them and peered out onto the battlefield. There were only a handful of Acromantula's left now and even fewer Death Eaters.

When Voldemort saw Neville hobble onto the field, he ignored Harry altogether and went for Neville instead. That in itself would've been extremely bizarre, but then the thing that Neville was dragging behind him came into Hermione's line of sight. Neville was carrying the Sword of Gryffindor and it was dripping in thick, almost tar looking blood. A thin sheen of pale black smoke was rising from the tip of the blade.

"A giant just threw a club at Gissa and Hermione," Daphne answered, clearly no longer in the mood for her husband's bad jokes.

Even through the muggle device, Astoria's confusion was palpable. "Why would they do that? That wouldn't ... kill Narcissa, would it?"

"No," Blaise answered. "But it would hurt her. Her scales are thick, but not impenetrable. If they - hold on a moment - Avada Kedavra!"

"Blaise?" Astoria asked.

Hermione tried to peer onto the ground to see if she could confirm Astoria's fears but from their height - and the smoke - she couldn't see a fucking thing.

"Pardon me. Spider," he said after a moment. "Anyway, if they got enough momentum, I'd say that they could injure Narcissa enough to ground her."

"They're trying to get Hermione on the ground so Voldemort can take her!" Daphne said, sounding a little breathless.

"Hear that, Granger?" Draco asked. "Stay high up in the air! Don't give him the opportunity to ground the both of you!"

Narcissa roared loudly and flew higher, and the pair of them stayed safely out of harm's way for about thirty minutes.

Half an hour was all Hermione could take. Half an hour of listening to their battle cries, listening to screams and having to wait to hear who had died and who hadn't. Her resolve almost broke when Blaise announced that Fleur had been killed, and she almost ignored every fucking instruction and Apparated on the field herself when she heard Ginny scream.

Hermione wasn't a spectator; she was a soldier.

When she was fighting, she had control. If she was fighting, then she'd have been able to see what was happening and she wouldn't have been just blindly flying around and waiting for updates. Her nerves were shattered. She couldn't just sit up there, safe and out of the way, and listen to everyone else fight and put their lives on the line.

And Narcissa was just as restless. Every time they made a pass over the city centre, Narcissa flew a little closer to the battle until eventually, they were low enough for Hermione to see what was happening.

Fires had started to break out on the ground - some were caused by Narcissa's flames, some by spells and others by the tanks. The fires caused thick smoke to rise high into the air, making it harder for Hermione to see what was going on. One thing that was still clear though - even from the great height - was that no matter how many spiders and giants they killed, more always seemed to be lurking in the shadows.

Narcissa growled when the sound of spinning propellers came up behind them. "It's alright," Hermione hushed, patting her scaled neck. "They're not going to attack us. They're on our side."

Hermione looked over her shoulder. She couldn't see who was manning them, but she saw the ends of large machine guns sticking out either side of the helicopter.

If Narcissa had to be taken out of the equation entirely, at least the muggle army could still offer a little air support.

When the helicopter had almost caught up with them, Narcissa roared and suddenly dropped into a dive. Hermione gasped and held onto her spikes to keep from falling off. She was surprised by the dragon's actions, she couldn't understand why she'd just veered off like that all of a sudden, but then Hermione saw something through the smoke and it made sense.

It was one of the huge, spiked clubs that the giants had brought into battle, and it was coming straight toward them.

Narcissa had dived just in time and gotten out of the way of the projectile, but the helicopter hadn't been so lucky. The club collided with the machine in mid-air, and the mess of wood and metal crashed into the battlefield and exploded onto the ground like a fallen comet.

"Well, so much for the air support they'd been counting on.

"Granger?!" Draco called frantically. "What happened?!"

"We're fine!" Hermione responded, hoping that her voice wasn't as shaky as she felt. "We're okay! Narcissa got us out of the way in time!"

She heard Draco's sigh of relief through her earpiece.

"Would someone please talk to me?!" Astoria demanded. "If someone doesn't start explaining what's happening right this second, I swear to Salazar I am going to-

"What?" Theo asked. "Throw a glittery stiletto at them?!"

Ah, so Neville had been the one to destroy Nagini. Good for him. The corners of Hermione's mouth lifted into the tiniest of smiles.

Voldemort suddenly stopped what he was doing. He froze for a moment and then lowered his wand -

Hermione stepped to the right, further out of Narcissa's protection so she could get a better look - then Voldemort's head whipped to the right and when his hateful red eyes landed on Hermione, she swore her soul left her body. She gasped and stepped back but it was too late. She'd already caught Voldemort's attention.

For someone so weak, he moved impossibly quick. As soon as his wand was turned on Hermione, the tip ignited in a flash of yellow light. The light flew towards her -

Hermione raised her wand -

There was pressure around her left elbow. The floor vanished from underneath her feet and her insides felt like they were turning in on themselves. And then she was standing in front of a pub, the words '*The Golden Lion*' flickering at her from old, weather-worn sign.

She immediately tried to Apparate back to the battle but she was caught off guard when Draco knocked her wand out of her hand.

"That won't stop me! You know I can Apparate without a wand!"

Draco took a step closer to her and suddenly they were pressed up against each other, nose to nose, sharing the same breath. "Fucking try it," he sneered in a low voice. He glared down at her and his eyes weren't as hollow as they had been minutes ago, they were alive and bright blue, a mixture of anger and panic, simmering like an ocean caught in a storm. His fight had returned. Hermione would have been lying if she said that she wasn't glad to see it. "I'll just bring you straight back here kicking and screaming if I have to."

"Where the fuck have you two popped off to?!" Theo asked through their earpieces. They both ignored him. "We're at war here people! Now is not the time for a fucking danger shag!"

"We have to go back, Draco!"

Draco scoffed cruelly and his nostrils flared. With that dark, hateful expression, he looked so much like the Demon Mask. It was like being transported back in time. She'd have thought Mr Hyde was staring down at her, the only difference was his blue eyes. "No, you're not going back there!"

“Fucking watch me-”

Before she could Apparate, his hands closed around her bicep. He held onto her so tightly, tight enough to bruise, tight enough to make her gasp in surprise. “Let go of me! We have to go back!”

Someone grunted in pain through their earpieces. It sounded like a man. It sounded like Harry.

“They need us!”

“I don’t give a fuck what they need!” Draco hissed. “You’re not going back!”

“How many times must we go over this? I am not some Damsel in distress that you need to save all the time! We’re the best killers the Order has left, they can’t win this without us! We need to go back -”

“If you go back there then you’ll die!” The anger in Draco’s voice was enough to make Hermione flinch. “I am not taking you to your grave, Granger, I won’t fucking do it!”

“But this is bigger than both of us! We have to go back while Voldemort is weak! We have to end this now!” She thought she was quick and stealthy enough to Apparate right in front of him.

She was dead fucking wrong.

His hand tightened around her arm and he yanked her forward, snapping her concentration and stopping her from Apparating. “Try that again,” he said, leaning in, eyes half-crazed. “And I’ll knock you out.”

“You wouldn’t dare?”

“There is not a thing I wouldn’t do to keep you safe. Mark my words, you are not going back there. I will not lose you, too.”

She struggled and tried to fight him off but he was much too strong for her. “You won’t lose me! We can do what you said! We can overpower Voldemort and trap him until we figure out how to take the Horcrux out of me! He’s weak now-“

“I don’t care if he’s got the strength of a fucking baby Bowtruckle, you’re not going back there!”

She jabbed him in the ribs with all her strength. He didn’t even flinch. “Let me go!”

“No.” His voice was hard as stone.

“Draco, what’s going on?” Hermione repeated. It was the first word she’d heard him say through the earpiece that wasn’t an offensive spell. “I can’t see from up here! What’s happening?”

“Would someone please keep me in the loop?” Astoria hissed. “What has happened to Theo? Why isn’t he answering?”

“Baby?” Daphne’s next words were quick and panicked. “Baby, talk to me! Where are you?”

There was a wet, squelching sound -

A male voice gasped for breath -

“THEO?!” Daphne screamed -

Finally, Theo responded. “I’m still here! I’m alright! Almost got eaten by a spider but I’m still in one piece!”

There was a beat of silence in which everyone breathed a sigh of relief, and then Theo got the telling off of a lifetime by his wife. “IF YOU’RE ALIVE THEN FUCKING COMMUNICATE YOU FWAT! I THOUGHT YOU WERE DEAD! YOU GAVE ME A FUCKING HEART ATTACK YOU USELESS -”

“Alright, alright!” Theo said, breathless. “Calm down sweetheart.”

“INCONSIDERATE, ARSEHOLE! I’LL WRING YOUR FUCKING NECK IF YOU DO THAT TO ME AGAIN!”

Hermione and Narcisa started to make another pass high over the city centre. The muggle tanks had finally started to arrive and they were starting to help Daphne and Theo pick off the spiders.

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry!” Theo said. “Sorry - Oi! There is no need for the dirty looks! I said that I was sorry!”

Green spells lit up the ground below. The sound of screams and gunfire was carried up to Hermione by the wind.

“Spider on your right, Draco!” Blaise said through the earpiece.

Hermione’s heart didn’t restart until she heard Draco answer.

“Avada Kedavral. Cheers, mate!”

Nottingham city centre lay in ruins. The lion statues that guarded the steps to the townhouse were destroyed. The decorative stone pillars that used to stand proud and hold the structure up were crumbling and falling to the floor.

“Avada Kedavra!”

“Troll! Duck!”

“On your right!”

“Avada Kedavra!”

“Behind you!”

“Avada Kedavra!”

“Spider on your left!”

“Giant straight ahead!”

“Take cover!”

“Avada Kedavra!”

“Look out!”

“Watch your back!”

Hermione heard it all and it made her feel utterly fucking useless.

She should have been doing more. She could have been doing more but she needed to stay out of the way. It was better for her to be away from the fight but it fucking killed her to have to listen to it and not be able to help.

Everything she heard was ordinary for a battle that ruthless and bloodthirsty, but it was when she heard one of the men hiss in pain, that Hermione's heart stopped. She heard a wet, squelching sound. She heard a howl of great pain but she couldn't tell who it made the noise.

“What's happening?” Hermione shouted. Felt like she wouldn't be able to breathe again until she knew who it was. “Is someone hurt?”

“Not!” Blaise called. “Not!”

“What?” came Astoria's panicked voice in Hermione's ear. “What's happened to Theo? Is he alright?”

As they flew over the Town House again, Hermione squinted at the ground but she couldn't see clearly. Couldn't tell who was who from this height.

She heard a masculine grunt through her earpiece. Heard a high-pitched wail. Heard the sound of something crashing, what sounded like bones breaking –

“Nott!” Draco hissed. “Can anyone see Nott?”

“Let me go!” she repeated, trying and failing to fight her way out of his grasp.

“No!”

She'd had enough. She needed to get back to the fight, with or without him. She reached for the black and gold gun sitting in the holster on her thigh. She didn't want to do it, but if she shot him in the shoulder, it'd hurt him enough to release her without causing any lasting damage.

Quick as a flash, she pulled the gun out and aimed it at his shoulder - but she forgot how well he knew her. He'd already anticipated what she was going to do. In the same instant, she heard a faint whistle as he whipped his wand through the air and dug it painfully under her chin.

They stared at one another for a few moments. Draco's wand dug into her chin. She pressed the barrel of her gun into his shoulder. They were both panting heavily, their breaths mingling in the tiny space between them.

“Go on then,” Draco whispered, scoffing lightly, breathlessly, as though this were all a game. “Your move.”

“I wouldn't have to do it if you'd just see reason. We can't run away from this now - not when Voldemort is as weak as he is.”

“I don't care. Your life might not mean anything to you,” he said softly, “but it's too precious to me to risk it.”

Hermione sighed and closed her eyes for a moment. Such beautiful words, such a wonderful promise lingering between them, but just like everything else, the war tainted them. She took a deep breath to calm herself and when she opened her eyes, she tried to keep her voice calm. “We've been risking our lives every day for the last twelve years. Your mother risked hers the day she lied to Voldemort about Harry still being alive, and Theo and Astoria risked theirs when they created Medusa. I risked mine every time I left the Order's base for a mission and you risked yours every time you put on your Demon Mask. All any of us have done since this war started was risk our lives, and we did that to protect the people we love, and if there was ever a moment to do it again, it's now Draco. It's never been more important.”

Draco's nostrils flared. His mouth was pressed into a tight line. The blood running down the side of his face made his eyes look even bluer.

“Voldemort is so weak now, Draco. If we don't go back, he'll escape and he'll rebuild and this whole thing will start all over again and everyone and everyone that we've lost ... it'll all be for nothing.”

She thought she was getting through to him, but then a loud pop of Apparation cracked behind her and that spell was broken.

The next few seconds happened very quickly.

Draco looked up over her shoulder -

He let go of her arm and the most vicious expression warped his features.

The pressure of his hand suddenly left her throat.

“AVADA KEDAVRA!”

“NO!” Hermione pushed Draco’s arm down before the spell had left his wand. The dark hex destroyed the ground near Kingsley’s feet and Hermione managed to snatch Draco’s wand out of his hand before he could attempt the murder again.

The loss of his wand didn’t stop him though.

Draco pushed Hermione aside and charged toward Kingsley. “Come to finish the job, have you?”

Kingsley - despite having a wand in his hand and being one of the most accomplished Wizards who’d ever lived - looked like a deer caught in headlights, and Draco was on him before he had the opportunity to react.

He punched Kingsley across the face so hard that he fell to the floor but he didn’t stop there. He followed Kingsley onto the ground. He straddled his waist and brought his fists down on Kingsley’s face again and again and again. “I’ll fucking kill you!” he hissed between punches, pouring all that anger, all that rage that he’d stored up into his fists. “How fucking dare you?” Another punch. “After everything she’s done for your fucking Order,” another punch, “this is how you repay her?!” and another. “By fucking executing her the moment she isn’t of use to you anymore?!” and another.

As he pulled his arm up again, Hermione caught his elbow and stopped him. “That’s enough.” She probably should have stopped him sooner but she hadn’t, she’d stopped herself, she’d thought Kingsley deserved it, and Merlin knew Draco did.

“How is that enough?!” Draco asked, his arm still held captive by Hermione. “He tried to have you killed!”

“I know.” Her calm answer was the result of looking at Kingsley’s face. Draco had made a right mess of it. His nose was broken. One of his eyes was already

Over the next twenty minutes or so, Hermione stayed safe in the air and heard bits and pieces of the fight.

From the little Hermione could see and hear, the Acromantula’s and the giants were the biggest problems. A lot of curses seemed to bounce off the giants and the sheer number of Acromantula’s was frighteningly overwhelming, and Draco wouldn’t let Narcissa help.

He was being fucking ridiculous. One exhale from Narcissa would’ve obliterated the spiders, her breath was hot enough to melt the skin off of the giants’ bones, but Draco wanted her high in the air to keep Hermione safe.

Each time the pair of them started to glide lower, itching to help, Draco’s irritated voice would hiss through Hermione’s ear piece for them to ‘Stay in the fucking air’, and then Narcissa would roar and climb back up to the designated ‘safe zone’.

Each time, Hermione wanted to argue with him, but she always bit her tongue. It was hard enough having to listen to his duel with Voldemort, she didn’t want to distract him from it any further. She heard some of their duel but she had to try and tune it out. It was too hard to listen to. Every time Draco hissed in pain it made her want to claw her ears out, so she tried to focus on the other voices instead.

Blaise took authority of trying to down the giants, so she listened to him for a while instead. She listened to him try one of his usual tricks and Imperius the giant to off itself and when that didn’t work, he wrangled a group of muggle soldiers to help him. However, after said giant went on a vicious rampage and almost took Blaise’s head off with its club - and stomped four muggle soldier’s to death - Hermione tried to find something else to listen to.

She heard Harry searching for the snake. She heard Theo sing a celebratory song when he killed Rabastan Lestrange, and she heard Rodolphus’ angry roar as he fought to avenge his brother. She heard the sound of bullets leaving the barrels of guns and heard Daphne scream “Avada Kedavra” what felt like every thirty seconds. She heard each of the Slytherins protect each other, she heard them fight for one another, and she could do nothing to help.

Every time Hermione heard one of them yell “Duck” or “Look out” she felt sick. Every time she heard an enemy scream “Avada Kedavra” in the background, she held her breath and prayed that it didn’t land.

She started to count the number of voices, the number of breaths, checking for someone who might be missing ...

"We're alright," Harry answered almost immediately. He must have been waiting for her to ask. "Does anyone have eyes on the snake? I can't see her."

"... Pappa...?" Theo's astonished - and slightly out of breath - voice whispered in Hermione's ear a second later. "... Is that you? Oh, it's been so long!" The battle apparently hadn't taken Theo's sense of humour - not yet, anyway.

"Oh my... These things are amazing," Astoria gasped. "I can hear everything so clearly. It's like I'm standing right there with you all."

"Eugh," Theo responded, retching rather dramatically. "No, actually. Changed my mind, I don't like it. I feel like I've got Iori inside my head."

There was a beat of silence before Astoria spoke again. "And what is so terrible about that?"

"Can we save the bickering for when we get home?!" Blaise hissed. "We're in the middle of a battle here!?"

"Are we really?!" Daphne asked sarcastically. "Well colour me pink, I hadn't noticed."

"Daph?!" Theo asked, "Seeing as I might die right here on this battlefield, I have a very important - AVADAKEDAWRA! *Riddle!* I'm trying to ask my wife a question, you ignorant fucking prick!?"

"What is it?!" Daphne sounded as out of breath as she was irritated.

"Is it important, Theodore?!" Blaise snarled.

Theo didn't hesitate. "Yep."

Blaise didn't sound convinced. "Is it '*matter of life or death*', important?"

"Absolutely."

Blaise snarled a killing curse and then clicked his tongue irritably. "Well go on then, while we're young!"

"Daph," despite the situation he was in, Theo still paused for dramatic effect. "What colour knickers have you got on right now?"

"NOT THE TIME, THEO!" Astoria, Blaise and Draco all responded in unison.

"What?!" Theo sighed and then put on a very Shakespearean sounding accent. "This bit of muggle-made gravel might very well be my deathbed! Why are you all so hell-bent on denying a dying man his last wish?!! What did I ever do to you lot?!"

swelling shut and he was covered in blood. Hermione felt no sympathy for him. She had to stop herself from smiling.

"He told those muggles to execute you as soon as the snake was dead!"

"I know."

"He's the reason Narcissa is dead! Why does he get to live when she doesn't?!"

"Because we need the numbers." It was the truth. As much as Hermione would've liked Kingsley to pay *just that little bit more* for betraying her, the Order was still outnumbered. They still needed him. Even though she didn't trust Kingsley anymore, ten wizards fighting against Voldemort was still better than nine.

Draco didn't release Kingsley softly. When he let go of his collar, he shoved Kingsley down so hard that he cracked the back of his head against the cobbled floor. "You're fucking dead when all this is over," he snarled, and it sounded all the more menacing because he whispered it. "Do you hear me? As soon as we've captured Voldemort, you better fucking run, because I'm coming for you."

*As soon as we've captured Voldemort.* Did that mean that she'd finally gotten through to him? Did that mean that he'd finally seen that she was right?

Draco gave Hermione her wand back, then he held his hand out for her to take. She looked at his open palm, at the invitation he was offering her, then met his eyes again.

"We're going back?" she asked.

Draco watched her carefully out the corner of his eye. He gave one curt nod.

"This isn't a trick is it? We're going back to fight?"

He nodded again. "I'm tired of losing people at Voldemort's hand. We're going back to end this. Once and for all."

Hermione smiled before she could help it. She took her wand and then looked back to Kingsley. He looked up at her like he expected her to heal him. Held his hand up to her like he expected her to help him off the ground.

She did nothing of the sort. She glared down at him and scoffed once under her breath. "Clean yourself up and meet us back on the battlefield."

And then she accepted Draco's hand and the two of them disappeared together.

They didn't waste time planning their assault but they didn't need to. As soon as they reappeared in front of Nottingham Town House, the both of them went straight for Voldemort, perfectly in sync.

They both seemed to be on the same wavelength without ever having to discuss it. They needed to get Voldemort weak enough for them to bind him. They needed him drained, needed him to be so weak and void of magic and strength that he wouldn't be able to break free when they restrained him, and the quickest way to do that was to throw everything they had at him.

Working as a team, they threw curse after curse at Voldemort without giving him a breather. While Hermione picked up pieces of debris from the battle and threw them at him, Draco kept throwing Slicing curses.

Voldemort was able to block all of their efforts at first but in his condition, it was extremely taxing on him and after a while, he started to fumble. He blocked the large shard of helicopter propellers that Hermione threw at him, but that left him open for Draco's cutting curse. Voldemort hissed in pain when it slashed across the top of his shoulder. He clutched the wound and then threw a red curse at Draco, but that left him open for Hermione's knockback jinx.

He skidded back a few feet but then regained himself quickly. He blocked Hermione's next curse but then got caught with Draco's. The battle went on and on in the same way;

Block, block, block, then one of their curses would catch him. Block, block, block, and then another, and on and on it went.

Block. Block - Draco's slicing curse caught the side of Voldemort's face. A deep slash appeared on his cheek just under his right eye.

Block. Block - Hermione set the edges of his robes on fire.

Block. Block - Draco cracked a bone in Voldemort's non-wand hand.

Block. Block - Hermione's slicing curse found a home in Voldemort's thigh.

It was working flawlessly. Each time one of their hexes landed, it took him longer to recover. Each time he blocked one of their attacks, his breathing grew harsher, more laboured. It wouldn't be long before he'd be exhausted enough for them to restrain -

They had him on the back foot. He was off balance and scared -

for a fresh kill and yet, no matter how much they wanted to, they couldn't satiate that need.

Voldemort wanted to kill Draco for betraying him. He wanted to break every bone in Draco's body. He wanted to flay his skin off layer by layer. He wanted to break him, bury him, but he'd linked Draco's life to Hermione's, so if Draco died, then so would Hermione, and so would the part of his soul that he'd unknowingly stored in her body.

And Draco's need to destroy Voldemort was just as insatiable. After everything he'd done to him, it was well deserved. He'd killed his parents and made him and the rest of his family watch as their sister was tortured to death, of course Draco was going to want to torture his former master in ways that'd make even the devil retch, but he couldn't. Draco wouldn't kill Voldemort if there was even the slightest chance that he'd take Hermione with him.

It was wise for Draco to duel Voldemort, because Draco was the only person on that battlefield apart from Hermione - that Voldemort wouldn't kill. It was wise to keep him busy, it protected everyone else, but it just gave them permission to hurt each other in the worst possible ways.

As the dragon started to take flight, Hermione saw Draco pick up debris from the ground with his wand and throw it at Voldemort with all his strength.

Voldemort retaliated by sending a red curse back. Chains flew from the end of his wand and hurtled towards Draco's throat.

Draco reflected the curse and then went back with a strong stinging hex.

Narcissa continued to climb higher and higher until she reached a great height - probably one that Draco had set out beforehand, one he deemed safe - and then she started to circle over the city centre, but they were too high up for Hermione to see who was who.

Hermione took the Silencing and Disillusion charms off Narcissa so she could communicate back, and then she leaned to her right and peered down onto the battlefield. Everything looked so small. She could see curses of every colour light up the ground below but they were so high up, it was hard to see who they were coming from or who they hit.

"Someone talk to me!" Hermione shouted frantically, pressing her hand against one of the earpieces she was wearing so she could hear more clearly. "Tell me what's going on!"

Blaise couldn't stand properly; his injuries had dragged him down into a kneeling position on the floor. There was a steady stream of blood dripping from a wound on his hip, but he didn't seem to have the strength nor the will to heal it. He was saying something into his earpiece and even though his voice was calm and controlled, his expression - the only thing he didn't have to control or hide to protect Astoria - was destroyed.

Daphne had lost a lot of blood too. She could feel her knees start to give out, her body was desperate for rest but just like Blaise, her own pain was no longer important. She started to sob - not from any physical pain, but the one she felt in her heart. She tried to stop herself. Tried to hide it behind her palm because she didn't want to add to Draco's grief but she couldn't hold it in any longer.

Theo hadn't been stood with her for a few minutes. He'd been with her before, but after Hermione had taken her last breath ... when it'd become apparent that she wasn't going to wake up ... Theo had done what Theo had grown to do, and even though Blaise had already killed Kingsley, Theo had decided that the debt wasn't yet paid, and he'd taken it out on his corpse.

But as soon as Daphne had started to cry, he flocked back to her side. He removed his boot from the home it'd found in Kingsley's shattered skull and he came back to her. He put his arms around her waist and pulled her into his chest. He buried his head into the crook of her neck and held onto her - she couldn't decide if it was more to comfort himself or her but she supposed that it didn't really matter, because they were both thinking the same thing as they watched Draco...

All of them were, every single person who stood around Draco, they were all thinking the exact same thing. All realising as they held tightly onto their significant other, how fucking easily that could've been any one of them, and how unbelievably grateful they were that it wasn't.

"This is all my fault," Draco sobbed against Hermione's chest. Daphne's heart broke again hearing it, and as Theo's arms tightened around her waist, she knew it broke his too. "I should have seen Kingsley... I should have stopped him... I should have... This is all my fault... I'm so sorry... I... I..."

"Malfoy, stop," Harry started to say. "You can't blame yourself..."

"Then who the fuck should I blame?" Draco snarled. He looked up with such a hateful expression. His face was smeared with Hermione's blood. "You?!"

The Chosen One flinched. His expression tightened, making the tears on his face glisten against his cheek. "No, I..." Harry tried to backtrack but it was too late, Draco had already zeroed in on him as a target.

"Why not?" he hissed. "You were supposed to be her friend, so where the fuck were you when your leader was driving a sword through her chest? Was this all part of the plan? To let her die so you could have a pop at Voldemort? Is that it? Were you in on it as well, Weasley?!"

"No," Ginny shook her head, visually horrified that Draco would ever think of such a thing. "I didn't know what Kingsley was up to, I promise..."

"You think your broken promises mean anything now? You think they're going to bring her back?!"

Harry looked like he wanted to say something else but Daphne caught his eye. She shook her head, Harry dropped his against Ginny's shoulder.

"And what about you, Longbottom?!" Draco turned on a terrified Neville. "Where were you when she needed you?!"

Neville's eyes flickered up briefly but he didn't say anything. He looked right through Draco and then his eyes were drawn back to Hermione's limp body like she was a magnet.

"How did Kingsley even get the sword in the first place?!" Draco asked roughly, voice hoarse and rough, looking for a bite, for someone to fight back so he'd be able to put his anger somewhere. "You had it last, didn't you, Longbottom? Did you even fight him off for it? Did you even try and give Granger a fucking chance?!"

Neville continued to stare down at Hermione's body with a vacant expression. The phrase 'the lights are on but nobody's home' suddenly popped into Daphne's mind. "I don't know how he got it," he whispered, no emotion in his voice. "I had the sword, and then I saw Luna... I was crouched over her and I put the sword on the floor... He must have grabbed it then."

Potter opened his mouth again, a defence for Neville likely ready, but Daphne shook her head again. Potter listened, and when there was no one else to lash out at, Draco buried his face against Hermione's chest and started to sob again.

What were they supposed to do now? There weren't any Horcruxes left. Now was their chance, Voldemort was weaker than he had ever been, the end of the war was finally on the horizon and yet, it'd never seemed further away.

Victory tasted bitter, now they'd lost another of their own...

It must have been minutes later before Draco looked up again but when he did, when his eyes landed on Kingsley's corpse, he looked unhinged. Looked like a madman sitting there, rocking gently back and forth, drenched in Hermione's blood.

He looked like he'd snapped. Like he'd fucking gone mad with grief.

"Who killed Kingsley?" Draco's nostrils flared and all the muscles in his neck and jaw were tight against his skin. His bright blue eyes were half-crazed as they poked out through the crimson that was drying on his chin and cheekbones. But there were smudges in the red, his tears had cleaned the blood off of his face in streaks.

Her blood, his tears. Her death, his pain.

Blaise stopped speaking into his earpiece. He stared up at Draco cautiously. "I did."

"Did you make him suffer?"

Blaise didn't know what to say. He opened his mouth and then closed it again. He caught Daphne's eye for the briefest of moments. He was thinking the same thing she was. Draco was their brother; he'd never intentionally hurt any of them but they didn't know this version of him. Was he dangerous like this? Was he a danger to them? Neither really knew the answer. He'd always been unpredictable when he was angry but like this? They had no clue what he was going to do next.

"Did you make him suffer?" Draco repeated, and even though he started the words, even though they were drenched in every suffocating emotion he was feeling, the malice in them was taken away by the broken way he rocked back and forth with Hermione in his arms.

Blaise blinked a few times before he answered. "Not nearly as much as he deserved." It was the safest answer but Daphne still held her breath. She had no idea how Draco was going to react or if he was even in there anymore...

Draco didn't speak again for a few moments. He tucked Hermione's head protectively under his chin, he kept one of his arms around her waist, the other massaged the back of her skull. He kept rocking her gently back and forth. Her arms were limp at her sides. Blood trickled down her arm, but her eyes were still closed. She could've been sleeping.

The only sound between any of them was Draco's ragged, angry breaths. Even though he was looking at what was left of Kingsley's body, his eyes were far away. Every now and then a tear would escape his eyes and a half-sob, half-angry hiss

enough to describe the noise that came out of his mouth and yet, at the same time, it could all be summed up perfectly in just four letters.

Pain.

That was the sound he was making. Unbearable, unimaginable fucking pain.

He'd been through too much. He'd lost too many people, and this was the collection of his grief and throughout it all, Hermione looked peaceful. Draco was alive but he was broken. She was dead but she didn't look in any pain. She looked... free... and if death really was that peaceful then why the fuck would anyone else want to be alive?

Draco had yanked his earpieces out long ago so he couldn't hear what Astoria was saying, but Daphne could. She was hysterical. Her screams were so high and frantic that Daphne had trouble making out half of what she was saying, just caught the odd plead for Blaise to get her and bring her there, for him or anyone else to tell her that it wasn't true, that this wasn't really happening.

Oh, Daphne would've loved nothing more than to be able to tell her sister that it would've brought her joy like nothing else if she could just open her mouth and say that this wasn't happening.

But she couldn't do that because this... It had happened, it was happening, and there wasn't a thing anyone could do to undo it.

When Draco screamed again, Daphne flinched. She turned her face away and squeezed her eyes shut, trapping her tears. She couldn't fall apart now. Draco didn't need to take in anyone else's pain, he had enough of his own, but breaking ribs wasn't as painful as listening to him scream like that. Every round of torture she'd put Grouch through didn't even begin to equate to what Draco must've been feeling.

"Come back to me," that was all Draco kept saying. "Come back to me, Granger. Come back to me." He'd sobbed it against her bleeding chest. Kissed it into her pale cheeks. "Come back to me, Granger. Don't leave me."

And it wasn't long before it became too much for everyone else.

Neville sniffed and had to look at the floor.

Ginny clung to Potter and started to sob into his neck. He held onto her just as tightly, his green eyes were swimming as he stared down at Draco from over the top of Ginny's shoulder.

... it hadn't just filled Draco's already overflowing cup, it'd fucking shattered it into a million pieces.

No, Daphne had never thought that a person could go mad with grief, until she saw what it did to Draco. She didn't believe that grief could cause a person to lose their grip on sanity, until she saw how Hermione's death completely fucking broke him beyond repair.

There'd been a moment, just after Hermione had taken her last breath, when Draco hadn't moved at all. His chest had stopped moving like he wasn't breathing either. Hermione had gone still and so had he, like his soul had left his body at the same time hers had.

And then he'd just ... stared down at her. He'd watched her chest like he was waiting for it to rise again. He'd looked at her face like he was waiting for her to open her eyes, like he'd expected her to suddenly take a huge gulp of air because this wasn't going to be the end for them, how could it be, after everything they'd been through?

But when it hadn't happened... when Hermione hadn't opened her eyes ... when she hadn't taken that life-affirming breath ... It'd been too much for Draco. He'd endured too much. He'd lost too much. His mother. His father. His dragon. And now Hermione... If there was a limit on how much heartbreak a person could endure, then Draco was far fucking past his.

Watching him bend over Hermione's body ... watching him start to rock back and forth ... watching him bury his face into her empty chest while he frantically searched for a heart that wasn't beating anymore ... Daphne was totally unprepared for it. He'd never fallen apart like that before. He'd held his mother in his arms while she'd died but that hadn't broken him, not like this. Nothing could compare to it. Daphne would've taken a hundred more years with Grouch if it would've spared Draco the pain he was in.

It wasn't her brother sitting there. It couldn't have been Draco because she didn't recognise him like that, didn't recognise the man sitting on the floor, holding the love of his life's body in his arms ... rocking back and forth ... It had to be someone else. It couldn't have been him...

And then Draco started to scream ... scream ... sob. It was muffled against Granger's chest but even that couldn't hide the anguish in it. The sound was low and deep, the raw emotion in it vibrated through Daphne. There wasn't a word strong

would slip between his clenched teeth. He'd stopped blinking but his blue irises twitched erratically.

It was like he was there but his soul was elsewhere. He was thinking about something... Daphne wished she could find her voice to ask what it was.

He looked lost and empty, but that emptiness wasn't lasting. As the seconds ticked on, something else was starting to fill that void... It started as a flicker, just a crease forming between his brows and a flash in his eyes, but then it started to build.

His expression grew darker with each fresh tick of the clock. His lip started to curl back over his teeth. His breath grew harsher with each exhale. Rage, that was what it was. Volatile, merciless rage. The type of cold rage that could tear down buildings and crack mountains in two. The type of blind rage that left entire villages afame and a trail of corpses behind.

The type of rage that'd consumed Draco.

Suddenly, and with tears still streaming down his face, he let go of Hermione's head, grabbed the chain around his neck, and gave it a sharp yank.

The thin metal snapped, and both of his parents' rings fell into his blood-covered palm. He slipped the simple gold band that used to belong to his father onto the fourth finger on his left hand, and then very gently caught Hermione's left wrist, and slipped his mother's ring onto her unmoving finger...

Her wedding finger...

When he started to get up, several people stepped forward to help him but he wouldn't have it.

He handled Hermione's body with such care. He laid her gently down on the floor - being extra cautious with her head - then he knelt over her.

He cupped Hermione face in his hand as though she were the most delicate thing in the world. He stared down at her as he ran his thumb back and forth over her lips, and when he bowed his head and kissed the back of her hand, when he pressed a kiss into her new ring, his shoulders trembled and his eyes were squeezed shut like he was in the worst agony imaginable.

Again, it was too much for Daphne. She sobbed into her palm. She had no idea how he was going to survive this...

Then all of a sudden, he let Hermione go and stood up.

He was covered in her blood. It was in his hair and on his face. It was on his neck, his hands, it was drying on his clothes but he made no effort to clean it off himself, Daphne wondered if he ever would.

He closed his eyes, tilted his head towards the clouds and drew a deep breath in through his nostrils. Every member of his family knew what he was doing. They all recognised it. Daphne had seen him do it a thousand times before she'd been captured but not since Hermione had been in his life.

When Draco rolled his jaw and opened his eyes again, they all knew what they were going to see. His eyes weren't going to be clear blue, that shade that brought the softness out in his features, that shade of blue that only Hermione could bring out of him like shed mixed it together and painted it onto his soul herself. No, no they weren't going to see blue, Hermione's blue, they were going to see grey. Cold, dull, lifeless, unfeeling grey. Because he was going to shut everything out, and why shouldn't he? He shouldn't have had to feel this kind of pain. He shouldn't have had to fall apart like this.

But when he opened his eyes again, they were still blue but it wasn't Draco Malfoy standing there anymore, wasn't even the Demon Mask. It was something else. A mixture of the two, and somehow, that made him look all the more deadly.

"You're not to leave that lot alone with her." Draco's voice took everyone off guard. It was ... calmer than everyone else expected it to be. The calmness in it.. the cold fury underneath ... It was bone-chilling.

Daphne and Blaise exchanged worried glances with one another.

"What was that?"

Even though it was Blaise who asked the question, when Draco looked around, he looked straight at Daphne. "The Order burn their dead and she didn't want that," he told her. "She wanted to be buried under the cherry blossom tree at the Manor."

Theo and Blaise simply stared at him, completely lost. "What?" Theo asked.

"Why are you telling us this?" Blaise echoed.

Draco ignored both of them, he stared at Daphne instead. "Promise me you'll bury her there?"

"I..." Daphne swallowed, a mixture of fear and damage to her throat and neck from the battle taking hold of her vocal cords. "Of course, I will."

a long time, and he'd never found a way to undo his tap. Rather than finding a way to carry on for his daughters, he'd just filled himself up with pills and Firewhisky until eventually, he burst.

That was the thing about grief. If you didn't find a way to overcome it, to channel it, it would only be a matter of time before it broke you.

Daphne had always known that Theo was going to survive without her because he knew how to channel his. It might've felt all-consuming at first, might've filled his jar until he was ready to burst with it after her execution, but she'd always been confident that he'd find a way to '*urn on his tap*', if she was sticking with that metaphor. It'd take him a long time and he'd probably never truly be rid of it, but she knew he'd be able to turn the tap to a trickle and bit by bit, the grief that felt like it was filling him would slowly dissipate until he felt like he could breathe again.

She'd always known that Blaise would be able to keep it together. Had been confident that the sentimental bastard would likely take handfuls of grief from Astoria's jar into his own, and still find a way to keep it together because he felt like it was his job to look after his wife. The thought had made her smile more than once during her imprisonment.

Astoria was a little more complicated but deep in her heart, Daphne had always known that she was going to be able to carry on without her big sister. She'd known that Astoria was going to do something rash and reckless to begin with - although admittedly, chopping off her lovely brown locks and bleaching them blonde hadn't even occurred to her - but she'd heal eventually. Just like Theo, she'd find a way to gradually turn that tap just a little more each year until eventually, it'd be empty.

And then there was Draco ...

His jar had been steadily overflowing for years. It could've shattered at any moment, but he'd kept it together for a decade simply by pretending that it wasn't there. Instead of dealing with his grief, he'd hid from it. He'd taken what used to be a fragile jar of glass, reinforced it with wall upon wall of ice and numbness, then buried it deep so he'd never have to look or think about it again.

But refusing to acknowledge his grief's existence didn't lessen it. Instead, all he'd done is put it in stasis. It was still ready to burst, no matter how many layers of Occlumency to hid it under.

But Hermione had changed him. She'd thawed that ice around his heart. She'd brought everything to the surface and made him alive and vulnerable and her death

She may not have even been alive for thirty years, but she'd thought about grief a lot. She'd spent weeks thinking about it after her mother had died, and she'd helped Draco through his when his parents had been killed.

And she'd thought about it almost constantly when her name had been Mustang.

Whenever she'd poured Grouch a drink, Daphne had stared at the bubbles in his glass and thought about her sister. She'd wondered if Astoria was going to fall apart after her 'death'? If she was going to follow in their fathers' footsteps, and lose herself in whiskey and wine just like he had after their mother had died.

When Crouch had Death Eaters around for parties, she'd stare into their masks and wonder if Theo was among them. If he'd managed to move on and have somewhat of a normal life, or if his grief had swallowed him whole?

For a long time, she'd been plagued by those thoughts. She'd laid awake in the stables thinking about it until eventually, in her own way, she'd sorted through them.

She'd always been a very visual person. At school, she'd learned by watching what her teachers did then picturing herself in their place, and she hadn't outgrown that in adulthood.

When she'd made battle plans for Voldemort, she'd had to scour the area first so that she had a clear picture in her mind. When she'd forged attack strategies, she'd practiced them with Draco or Theo or Blaise beforehand so she knew exactly what to expect when she faced the real thing.

Visualisation was how Daphne had always sorted through things in her mind and for some reason, whenever she pictured grief, she imagined a big glass mason jar with a little tap attached to the side that - when twisted the right way - would let some of the liquid escape.

Maybe it was because she knew the human body could be as breakable as a thin piece of glass. Or maybe it wasn't as poetic as that. Salazar only knew why that particular image came to her but whenever she thought about grief, that was what she pictured. Grief as red wine and the human body the jar. Imagined it filling up and up with every fresh loss that a person endured.

After Daphne's mother had died, her father's grief had consumed him. His glass - his wine jar - had become completely full of it. He didn't have room for anything else. Not his children or his estate. Not his job at the Ministry or his responsibilities as a father. He hadn't had room for anything else other than his grief, and there'd been so much of it that it'd started to overflow. He'd been bursting at the seams for

"Promise me you'll do as I ask?" Draco said slowly, staring intently into her eyes, the double meaning the secret promise lingering only between the two of them...

Daphne nodded.

Everyone was silent and watched as Draco knelt in front of Hermione and then - again, being so fucking gentle it was like she was made of glass - he pulled the black and gold gun out of the holster on her thigh.

Daphne's stomach was tying itself in a nervous knot. She'd never seen him physically touch a muggle gun before. Yes, he'd turned muggles' own weapons against them before, and yes he'd moved guns before, but he'd always used magic to do so. He'd always levitated them, she'd never seen him hold a gun before.

"Does this thing still work?" Draco asked, holding the weapon out towards Potter.

Potter blinked back tears and stared at Draco in confusion. "W-what?"

"Are you fucking deaf now?" Draco barked. He thrust the gun against Potter's chest and forced him to take it. "I said does this thing still work?!" She fell on it when she collapsed so I need to know, does it still fucking work?!" Although his voice was calm, the anger in it was untameable. It was enough to make Potter flinch. Potter glanced down at the gun. It was dripping with Hermione's blood. He was as dazed as everyone else but after looking at the weapon for a few seconds, after watching the soft drip drip of crimson sliding off the handle, a sad but equally determined expression etched itself onto his face. He checked the barrel. "Yeah," he turned the gun over in his hand, watching the way her blood coated the gold of the handle. "It's all working fine and it's still got a full round."

"Good," Draco nodded sharply. "How many bullets does it have left?"

Potter looked down again. "Nine - I think, but there's a spell that can restock the chamber each time..."

Draco snatched the gun from Potter. "I know the spell to do that and no, I don't want you to perform it. Nine bullets will be enough."

"Why don't you want him to perform the spell?" Ginny asked.

Draco didn't answer her. He looked at the ground briefly until he found his wand and after he'd picked it up, he waved it once over his clothes and they changed into his old Death Eater robes.

But the blood - Hermione's blood - that was starting to dry on his face and in his hair, he didn't banish that. He kept it on. Wore it like it was war paint.

"Where are you going?" Blaise asked, breathless, as he clutched the wound on his hip.

Again, Draco didn't answer. He had his wand in one hand, Hermione's gun in the other -

No magic.

Hermione's gun.

Daphne inhaled sharply as everything fell into place. He wasn't seriously considering -

Draco rolled his jaw and closed his eyes. His fingers tightened around his wand as he prepared to Apparate -

"No, you can't!" Fuck knew how she did it, but somehow, Daphne managed to wriggle out of Theo's arms and snatch Draco's elbow before he disappeared.

His eyes flew open and he watched her through hooded eyes. "Let go, Daph."

His voice was low and rough, more of a snarl.

"No!" she screamed, digging her fingers into his arm. She knew it wouldn't do any good, she was too weak to stop him but she had to try and make him stay. She couldn't let me go alone -

"Let go, Daphne." Draco didn't even look at her, stared at the buildings behind her head so he didn't have to meet her eyes.

"No!"

"What the fuck is going on?!" Theo asked. He sounded weak too, breathless, there was no way he'd be able to go right now -

"*Let. Go,*" he repeated slowly, menacingly. He curled his fingers under her hand and started to pry her off of him -

"No! Don't go yet! Wait for us, we'll come with you!" She knew there was no point in trying to talk him out of it but she couldn't let him go, not now she'd realised what his intentions were. "You can't fight him alone! You're weak! You need us with you but we're out of healing potions!" She tried to pull his wand out of his hand but he might as well have been made out of stone. "Let's go back to the safehouse and

## VOLATILE. MERCILESS. COLD



### 4th July

Can a person go mad with grief?

It's a fucking horrible thing; grief, and it doesn't affect everyone the same way.

It makes some people sob uncontrollably but immobilises others, and hollows some people out until they're an empty shell while it makes others violent, but can it actually make a person go insane? Can it shatter a person so *completely* that it makes them lose their grip on reality?

Daphne. Not had never thought so.

## CHAPTER 72

Thump ... thump...

Granger laughed breathlessly. Her eyes fluttered closed. "And? What ... else?"

"And we're going to argue about anything and everything," he told her. "We're going to be one of those annoying old couples that never stops bickering. We can even get one of those ridiculous little metal houses on wheels that you used to holiday in when you were younger. We will travel the country in one if that's what you want."

"You?" she gasped weakly, "In a caravan? N- ... never."

"I will, I'll do whatever the fuck you want, just stay with me."

The faintest, most beautiful smile ghosted the edges of her lips. "That sounds ... nice. I... can't wait."

... Thump ...

It did sound nice. It sounded fucking wonderful, sounded like every dream he'd had over the past year coming true all at once. "It does, doesn't it? But for any of that to happen, you can't die here. Understand?"

...

"Granger?"

...

"Granger?"

...

"HERMIONE!?"

"I don't need a Tracking Spell," Draco answered. "I know where he is."

"Draco, please don't do this!" Daphne begged, holding onto him with both hands, making one last attempt – one last plea. "You can't kill Voldemort on your own!"

But it was too late, he'd already pried her off him. He placed his palm on her chest and roughly pushed her backwards, and once she wasn't within his reach anymore, once he knew that she wouldn't be able to follow him, there was a loud crack of Apparation that was so violent, so angry, so fucking heartbroken that it sounded like the earth was being cracked into two, and he was gone.

regroup! We can heal there! We can heal and gather potions and then we can come with you!"

But Draco cut her off before she could finish. "No, Her... " He stopped himself and took a deep breath, like her name hurt him to say. "Hermione was right. If Voldemort gets away now, he'll recover and he'll rebuild and I'm not going to let that happen. That bastard doesn't get to have everything he wants, not after he's taken everything away from me."

"You can't kill him! The prophecy says..."

"You think I give a fuck about some prophecy that was made nearly three decades ago?" Draco's cold grey eyes bore into hers. The viciousness in them made the hairs on the back of arms stand on end. "Fuck the prophecy and fuck the Seer who made it! Potter can take all the credit - I don't give a fuck whose gets the glory for it, I just want the satisfaction of killing him myself! *For her!*"

Daphne looked around for allies, for muscle that could restrain him, but she found her battle broken family instead. Blaise tried to get up off the floor but he'd lost too much blood. Theo swayed on his feet, looked like he could pass out at any moment -

"But we don't know where he went!" Daphne said, turning back around and hanging onto him desperately. She was clutching at straws but she had to do something. She couldn't let him go, not now, not when the rest of them were too weak to follow. "He fled after he saw what happened to Hermione. He Apparated and took the rest of his generals with him. There's no way to know where he's gone without a Tracking Spell..."

"I don't need a Tracking Spell," Draco answered. "I know where he is."

"Don't you fucking dare talk to me like you're dying! You're not dying, Granger, you're not!"

"Tha - thump ... Tha - thump ...

"Say it back," she breathed.

"No, not until you promise to stay with me."

Tha - thump ... Tha - thump ...

"I love you, Draco, more than anything..." and there was a finality in her words that made his already breaking heart shatter into a million pieces.

Those words siphoned the last of his strength right out of his body. He pressed his forehead against hers and slumped against her. "I love you," he told her. "Don't go, Granger. Don't leave me."

Tha - thump ... Tha - thump ...

"Please," he whispered against her skin. His fingers tightened in her hair. "Please don't leave me. You are my heart. You are my soul. You are my ... my little lion. I'm nothing without you ..."

Tha - thump ... Tha - thump ...

"You can't die here. I've got plans for us."

"What plans?" she asked, breathless, fighting to keep her eyes open. "Tell me ..."

"After we kill that bastard, we're going to go somewhere, just me and you."

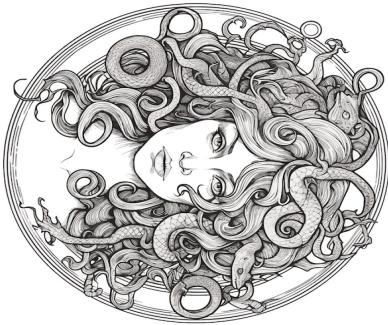
Tha - thump ... Tha - thump ...  
Her soft brown eyes stared up at him. She didn't look frightened or in pain. She looked content - maybe the pain was starting to subside. Maybe Kingsley's spell hadn't worked or Draco's healing magic was starting to take effect. Either way, relief started to flood his veins. "And .. then what?"

"We're going to travel the world together, and have an abundance of feral little lion cubs running around and wreaking havoc on us, and they're going to be as tenacious and brilliant as you are."

Tha - thump ... Tha - thump ...

"They're going to be little know it all's like their mother, and as soon as they gain the ability to talk, they're going to be able to outsmart me in anything and everything, just like their mother."

## THE DEMON WHO EARNED HIS HORNS



## CHAPTER 73

"It's okay," Draco tried to soothe, already knowing that his voice was far too panicked to offer any real comfort. "You're going to be okay. I'm going to fix this, alright?"

He tried the strongest healing charm he could think of ... but nothing happened. The wound didn't seal shut like it was supposed to. His heart started to beat faster and faster as panic seized him by the back of the throat. He tried another, one that he'd used on himself when he'd sustained injuries in battle, one that was supposed to slow the flow of blood - again, nothing happened. Her blood showed no signs of stopping.

"Draco," Blaise rasped quietly from behind him. "It's not going to..."

"NO IT WILL WORK!" He tried spell after spell, but nothing worked. Granger continued to bleed out. Her strength seemed to leave her faster with each beat of her heart. "There has to be something we can do! I'll take her place! Put the Horcrux in me instead!"

"If that was possible," Potter said, "believe me, I would but there's no way..."

"No! No, there has to be something!" Draco shouted. "There has to be some stone somewhere that can heal her! Some long-forgotten spell or recently discovered magical whatever to save her! You lot always have something up your sleeve! It can't end like this!"

Cold hands cupped his damp cheeks. A gentle, dwindling force tried to pull his face downwards. But those hands ... they couldn't be Granger's. Her body was normally like a furnace. These hands... they were cold. Nevertheless, he did as they commanded; let them guide his face until he was looking at her again.

"*Shhhhh,*" Granger whispered, eyes still warm, still impossibly gentle, even as her body grew cold. "It's okay," she breathed, blood spilling from the edges of her mouth. "It's okay. It's my time..."

"No! Don't you fucking dare say goodbye to me!" Draco roared, cried, fucking sobbed. "I c-can fix this! Just hold on..."

He could feel her heart beating beneath his palm. Could feel that each one was weaker than the one before it. Her strength was dwindling with every beat.

Tha - thump ... Tha - thump ...

"I love you," she whispered.

Twice before the Malfoys had betrayed him; he shouldn't have given them the opportunity to do it a third time. He should have followed his instincts and slaughtered all three of them in their manor.

He should have known that family was no good when Lucius had failed to retrieve the prophecy all those years ago, because what greater betrayal was there than to betray your masters trust? He'd trusted Lucius with something so precious - and he'd failed.

After that, Voldemort should have washed his hands with the lot of them. It was what they'd earned and deserved and yet, he'd given them another chance.

Narcissa's betrayal should've been the final nail in their coffin. Magical blood or not, Sacred 28 or no, he should have wiped them all out when she'd lied to him about Harry being alive but again ... He'd digressed. Against the advice of all those around him, he'd given one of them another chance. Thought that if he executed two of the traitors while the third watched, it might make the last remaining Malfoy a little more grateful. A little more ... obedient.

Voldemort thought it had worked.

After his parents had been dealt with, Draco became a force to be reckoned with. Cruel and powerful. He became the most ruthless and skilled killer in the world - because Voldemort had made him that way.

Voldemort had made him.

He'd crushed the weakness out of Draco and made him strong. People shook at the sight of horn-figured shadows because Voldemort had given him the mask. People feared the mention of Draco's name almost as much as they feared Voldemort's - because Voldemort had made it so.

He'd almost immortalised the boy as much as he had himself -

And this was how he'd chosen to repay him? By betraying him? By tearing down the man who'd made him everything he was?

Everything Draco had done for Voldemort during the war, none of it mattered anymore. All those battles that'd been won on the end of his wand, all the Order member's that he'd butchered in Voldemort's name ... none of it mattered.

Draco was nothing to Voldemort now. His slate had been wiped clean. He might as well have been working for the Order all along.

Voldemort's feet dragged against the rough stones as he walked the path to the Cathedral. He felt so weak. Weaker than he'd felt in over a decade. Even breathing was a task for him - and with every ragged breath he struggled to take, one thought burned in his mind.

He should have killed Draco when he was a boy. If he had, none of this would be happening to him now ...

His bones ached with every clumsy step he took towards the cathedral -

He should have gutted him.

Metallic-tasting liquid pooled in his mouth -

He should have ignored Narcissa's sobs to spare her only son and just *killed him*.

The feel of magic in his veins used to give him strength, it used to make him feel weightless and powerful but since the Mudblood girl had taken her last breath, his body didn't feel like his own. He felt like it'd been lined with lead. Fragility, weakness, felt like they were shackled around his bones like chains and were dragging him down to crawl, felt like they wouldn't stop until he was a withering mess...

Should have made her watch as he sawed a blade over the boy's throat until he felt bone.

Pop.

Pop.

Pop.

One by one, the small dregs of what was left of his army Apparated into the dark alleyway behind him. Their boots clicked frantically off the cobble path as they scurried ahead of him. One cloaked figure used their wand to unlock the doors and another two held them open for him.

Voldemort ordered two Death Eaters to stand guard outside, and the rest followed him into the Cathedral before the doors were sealed and barricaded with enchantments.

It was sheer pride alone that kept Voldemort standing. He would not appear weak, even to his followers. He would not appear less than anyone because he *wasn't*. This was not the end for him. It was merely a tactic. A strategic retreat.

This was not the end of Lord Voldemort.

He would rebuild.

Somewhere in the distance, Voldemort screeched something but Draco hardly heard him. He didn't have it in him to see if he'd tried to flee. Didn't have anything in him anymore.

The battle must've stopped because one by one, people gathered around him. Someone Apparated to his left. He heard another stumble to his right. A girl gasped to his left. Draco didn't look up to see who was there, he didn't want to take his eyes off Granger.

Granger pulled in a deep breath. She coughed on the exhale, covering her chin and Draco's chest with blood.

“Somebody do something!” Draco pleaded, head frantically whipping around at each of the horrified faces that hovered around him. “Why are you all just fucking standing there!”

Daphne desperately started to search for something in her bag.

Blaise had one hand pressed against his earpiece and was whispering frantically.

Theo just stared, completely useless and at a loss for what to do.

The Weasley girl jumped forward like she'd received an electric shock. For reasons that didn't matter, she didn't have her wand. She snatched Potter's and muttered a diagnostic charm so quickly that Draco didn't catch half of what she said.

But he didn't need to look at the report to know what they said. Weasley's face told him everything. She paled. Her eyes widened and her mouth dropped open as she started to sob. “I ... I'm sorry, there's nothing ...”

“NO!” Draco cut the distraught girl off. He didn't want to hear what she thought. It didn't matter what she said. It wasn't true. It wasn't happening -

“Kingsley must have ...” Weasley breathed, Draco assumed she was addressing the others but he couldn't be sure, his attention was solely focused on Granger. “He must have enchanted the blade so that wound wouldn't close. There's nothing we can do.”

No! No! No! No!

He refused to accept it. They'd gone through so much together. They were so close to the war being over, he was so close to being able to have a life with her, he wouldn't lose her now.

He pressed the tip of his wand against her open chest.

She gasped and tried to feebly squirm away -

Kingsley was stood behind Granger, the Sword Of Gryffindor in his hand, impaled in her back, and it wasn't until he roughly pulled the sword out of her that reality came crashing back down on them.

No. No this couldn't have been happening. It couldn't ... It wasn't real ...

It was Blaise's voice that screamed the next words, the ones that Draco should have, but didn't have the fight to anymore. "WHAT THE FUCK HAVE YOU JUST DONE!?"

Blaise killed Kingsley before he could answer. His body fell to the ground at the same time Granger collapsed into Draco's arms.

He slumped onto the ground with her and cradled her against his chest. "Granger? Look at me - look at me! It's going to be okay, alright? You're going to be fine!"

She breathed in quick, raspy little pants. So did he.

The panic on her face as she stared up at him made him want to be sick. Blood started to trickle out of the corner of her mouth. He splayed one of his hands firmly against the wound on her chest but her blood was already pooling between his fingers. There was so much of it. It was flowing from her too quickly.

"Granger!?" Draco choked as he held her.

Her breathing grew louder. Her chest moved up and down erratically under his hand. Her eyelids looked like they were fluttering, desperate to close -

"Granger!?" he said, voice almost a growl as he shook her. He wasn't gentle with her, he was too scared to be. "Stay with me," he begged. "Stay with me. Don't you fucking dare leave me!" He felt his cheeks dampen. His vision started to blur at the edges as he stared down at her lovely face.

Her eyes swam in and out of focus as she looked up at him. "Is ... is it bad?" she managed to ask. "It's bad, isn't it?"

"No, no it's not bad." His other hand supported her limp head. His fingers desperately massaged the back of her skull, trying to circulate some warmth back into her already chilling bones. The other hand remained tightly pressed against her chest, palm splayed, covering as much of the gaping wound as possible to prevent any more of her blood from spilling. "You're going to be okay, do you hear me?"

He would reclaim what the Order had taken from him, and he would burn them alive for what they'd done.

This was not the end for him.

He would find a way to survive, just as he always had.

As he walked down the centre of the aisle, he had to hold onto the edge of each row of wooden benches as he walked. His other hand clutched his ribs - a wound Malfoy had inflicted, a wound that'd been small and insignificant half an hour ago, but now the last of his Horcruxes had been destroyed, that little wound felt like it could tear his entire world apart.

Despite the floor-to-ceiling windows that jewelled the walls of the Cathedral, it was incredibly dark inside. The hour was growing late, and heavy clouds had blocked out any light from outside as the storm approached. For the first time since he'd taken it over, it didn't feel like a fortress, it felt more like a tomb.

Rodolphus - noticing the darkness - raised his wands towards the candles - "No!" Voldemort hissed, and that one simple word winded him more than a hundred. "I will do it!"

"But my Lord," Rodolphus lowered his wand a fraction but not completely. Still ready to cast the spell. Still ready to serve if needed. "You are ..." He bit his tongue, wisely rethinking his choice of words. "Please, allow me to assist, it would be my honour..."

Voldemort's long nails sharpened against the backrest of the bench he was holding. "Do you think me weak, Lestrange?"

Rodolphus flinched a little. His wand arm immediately fell to his side. "No, of course not my Lord. Never."

Although the right answer, it did not please Voldemort. It only made him angrier. Only added to that feeling that was hissing in the back of his mind like a bubbling cauldron. Did his generals think that he was weak now? "Then you think me incapable of magic beyond that of a thirteen-year-old? Is that it?!"

"No, of course not, my Lord," Rodolphus bowed his head and took a wise step back. "Forgive me."

Voldemort pushed Rodolphus aside and drew his wand. The bones in his wrist felt like they were grinding together, and every tendon in his arm ached but

nevertheless, as he flicked his wrist, the hundred or so candles that were scattered around the Cathedral all burnt to life at his command.

With a little light to illuminate the hall, Voldemort turned around. Twenty-two generals, that was all he had left. Twenty-two loyal, weak, pathetic souls of what used to be an army of thousands. That was all he had left. His last line of defence.

An alien sensation swept over him. There was tightening in his stomach. A coldness in his chest. He hadn't felt something like that for so long, he'd forgotten the name of that emotion. He clutched his tender ribs more tightly and started to sag against the wooden bench.

It could not end like this ...

He could not end like this and yet, it seemed so likely now -

"My Lord," one of the few remaining soldiers hushed quietly. And was that ... sympathy ... in his voice?

Voldemort looked up to find the boy holding a hand out to him.

"You are weak, let me help -"

The words were cut from the young Death Eaters' tongue in a flash of cold green light. The boy's body collapsed onto the stone floor with a dull thud. The others around him recoiled but Voldemort just looked down expectantly at his palms. He stared and he stared ... but nothing happened.

Where was it? Where was that rush? That infusion of darkness and vitality?!

Whenever he'd created Horcruxes in the past, he'd always felt a flush of power, a moment of dark euphoria seeping into his blood at the knowledge that he'd succeeded, that he'd pushed death another step further away, that he had another layer of darkness protecting his heart, preventing it from slowing but now ... he felt nothing.

He hadn't felt the rush when he'd made the Mudblood a Horcrux - or Potter, for that matter - but he'd thought that they were just anomalies. He assumed that he hadn't felt it because he'd been preoccupied with either his impending death or the war.

By the time he'd made Potter a Horcrux, his soul had been sliced so thinly that it was no wonder he didn't notice another piece of it was missing. And why should he have noticed? Why should he care for that matter, if another piece of his soul went missing? What good did souls do? They were worthless things. Easily forgotten.

He was trying to pull the Horcrux out of her.  
And it was fucking working.

As he kissed her, she could feel it working. Could feel something, something cold and dark being dragged back up her body. Its claws dug into her veins as it tried to hang on but it was no use. Whatever Draco was doing, it was too powerful, too strong for even the darkest of magic to fight against.

The Horcrux was dragged up and up until it gathered in her chest -

It was so painful but she endured. Draco held her steady and kept kissing her. Hermione broke the kiss and looked down to where Draco's wand met her body.

She could see black smoke, wisps of it filtering between the wand and her skin. She looked up at him. Bright, hopeful blue stared back at her.

It was working.

It was -

Something nicked the base of Draco's throat. It was just a sharp little sensation, like pricking his finger on the edge of a needle. It wasn't exactly painful, but it was just biting and sudden enough to pull his eyes away from Granger's and search for the source.

And when Draco looked down, everything froze; the battle, the war, the beating of his heart, the flow of blood in his veins, even time. Everything fucking froze. He didn't care about anything else. The war could've been lost or won around him, and he wouldn't have noticed.

It wasn't the tip of the silver sword that was prodding his neck that'd made everything freeze, wasn't even the blood that covered the weapon, it was the sword itself, because for it to even reach him at all, it had gone straight through Granger. Time stood still. Granger's eyes were blown wide as she stared down at the sword sticking out of her chest. She looked shocked but she didn't look in any pain. Her expression was soft, but dazed, like she couldn't believe what she was looking at. Then she gasped quietly and looked up at him.

Daphne had developed during the battle, and the way Theo was wheezing and clutching his chest with every new curse that he threw.

Draco had already lost so much, that was true, but there was so much more that could still be taken from him.

Somewhere in the distance, Ginny screamed. Harry howled in pain as Voldemort repeated the word *Crucio* over and over again.

They didn't have much time left. Harry would be dead soon ...

When Draco's eyes met hers again, he didn't say anything, just stared down at her, and when she saw that heartbreak in his eyes, the one that mirrored what she felt in her heart, she knew. She was right. He knew she was right. This was the only way.

She ran her thumbs over his cheekbones as tears started to spill from her eyes. She tried to smile up at him. Tried to show him that she wasn't afraid but she couldn't quite make it meet her eyes. "I'm sorry. I was ..." A shaky breath snuck past her lips, her hands shook as they cradled his face. "I was really starting to believe that we had more time together."

His lip started to curl but it wasn't that hateful, snarky way it usually did. It was more of a quiver, not the way of a bully, but that of a boy.

One of Hermione's hands slid down Draco's neck. It fluttered gently over his shoulder and trailed down his arm. She wrapped it around his wrist, and then she guided his hand upwards until his wand was pressing against her throat. "Do it," she whispered. "Please."

Draco shook his head. His eyes had never looked so blue. She could see tears gathering in them. "... I can't. I love you. Don't ask me to do this..."

"You can and you will." One of her hands stayed keeping his wand in place but her other slid into his hair. She pulled his face down to hers and kissed him a final time.

That last kiss broke him. He collapsed against her. He leaned his forehead against hers. His free hand fisted in her hair, and he held onto her tightly as he kissed her. He didn't break away. She felt the very tip of his wand drag down her throat until it rested on her sternum and still, he continued to kiss her.

She gasped against his mouth as something jolted her heart -

But it wasn't the cold chill of an Avada like she'd expected. Wasn't the sharp, biting sting of a slicing curse.

Much more useful if he could tear it apart and forge it into armour to protect himself. Immortalise himself.

He'd felt the rush when he'd created the Medallion but again, he'd been concentrating on it. He'd just lost the locket and the cup and Potter. The Mudblood had been another happy accident. There must have been hardly anything left of his soul when he'd made her, maybe even too little to notice its disappearance but she was gone now ... They all were, and he was defenceless.

He threw another Avada at the boy's corpse to be sure. The spell cost him much but he had to be certain. He looked down at his hands again, but it still wasn't there. He turned them over. His veins weren't buzzing with power. They looked withered and aged.

They looked ... normal... *Maggie*.

It hadn't worked. Maybe there wasn't enough of his soul left anymore... No. No, he could not ... He would not ...

Voldemort hobbled to the end of the aisle. Rodolphus followed. So did the others. He started to rummage through the shelves that once held bibles and scrolls in search of his own supply of -

And there it was. The last, dust-covered phial of silvery liquid, tucked away at the back of the shelf. Unicorn blood. Long forgotten and neglected in his years of strength, but something he clung to desperately in his weakened state.

He snatched the phial from the shelf and drank it down greedily. It wasn't a full cure, but it would do for the time being. It would lend him some strength; strength enough to flee further, to Apparate somewhere thousands of miles away, somewhere he could rebuild and when he was ready again, he would unleash a wrath like nothing this world had ever seen before.

Before too long, the unicorn blood started to take effect. The pain in his ribs started to dull. His breathing grew stronger and firmer and he could stand tall again.

"My Lord?" Rodolphus asked hesitantly from his loyal perch on Voldemort's right. "What are we to do now?"

"Take what you can," Voldemort answered after a moment, staring down at his palm as he clenched and unclenched his hand, feeling his strength steadily return to him. "We will start over again in Argentina - "

His plan for the future was interrupted by a loud cracking sound from outside of the Cathedral.

His remaining generals gasped and flinched -

Voldemort spun around and faced the entrance -

The ground shook with the force of an earthquake and all of a sudden, as though an almighty beast was hovering over the Cathedral and had roared over them, a cold chill travelled down Voldemort's spine and all of the candles in the room extinguished -

Draco had found them.

Rodolphus aimed his wand at the double doors. The twelve remaining Death Eaters did the same.

"When he comes in, do not kill him," Voldemort ordered. He watched the doors intently. Any second they were going to burst open, he knew it, he was waiting for it.

Rodolphus briefly looked at his master from over the top of his shoulder. "My Lord?"

"Do not kill Draco," Voldemort repeated, grasping the Elder wand firmly between his fingers, trying to let the smooth handle rest in his palm even though it never felt quite right there, never felt quite comfortable. "He is mine to kill."

Rodolphus nodded and turned back to watch the doors.

Everyone in the Cathedral fell quiet.

They heard two loud slashing sounds from outside -

There were two wet screams -

They heard two bodies hit the floor -

There was silence...

'There was nothing...'

And then -

The moment the large double doors exploded open, the onslaught began. They were blasted right off their hinges and sent crashing into adjacent walls.

Two Death Eaters immediately threw themselves at their threat. They charged in a silent but coordinated attack -

"NO!" He shut her up by roughly grabbing her jaw. "Don't you fucking dare say that you're ready to die!" He leered down at her and shook his head. His eyes were wide, and his jaw was trembling as much as the hand that held her. He looked shell-shocked. "You're not dying! Not now! Not ever! Let me try and pull the Horcrux out of you again!"

"We don't have time for that -"

"I'm so close to figuring it out -"

Hermione's heart felt like it was breaking. Her eyes burned. She blinked back tears. "Draco, we don't -"

"I can make it work!" he snapped, desperation in his voice, heartbreak in every word. "I can do this! I can save you -"

"Shhhhh," Hermione caught either side of his face in her hands and pulled until he met her eyes again. "I love you. Are you listening to me? I love you for trying to save me. I love you so much for never wanting to give up on me but look around you. Look at what's happening. We don't have any more time left to be selfish. This..." her voice quivered, it took everything in her to force the next words out. "This needs to happen. Now. I need to die but I'm not... brave enough to do it myself, so I'm sorry, I really am, Draco, but you need to be the one to kill me."

She wanted him to wrap his arms around her a final time. She wanted him to snake his hands around the small of her waist and hug her against him like he always did, in that way that always made her feel so safe and secure but he didn't. He just stared down at her with his arms hanging loosely at his sides like a man hanging from the neck at the gallows.

"You can't ask me to do that Granger," he whispered, voice broken, eyes lost. "I can't... I won't..."

"Look around," she said. "Look around and tell me that there's another way out of this."

He did as she asked and looked around briefly, and Hermione knew that he wasn't just looking at what he'd already lost, but what he could still lose if he didn't act quickly.

He looked at the corpse of his dragon again, the last symbol of his mother that was supposed to be strong enough to outlive him, only for her to die in front of him as well, just as her namesake had. He looked at Blaise, taking in the new scar on his face and the fresh blood that was dripping down his arm. He looked at the limp

Ron ... almost everyone was dead, and those who were left, they were exhausted, they were injured and bloody.

They wouldn't last much longer either.

Not unless they turned it around quickly.

Not unless they did something drastic.

Not unless they...

With Voldemort distracted for the moment, Hermione pulled Draco back up the steps of the Council House. There wasn't much cover behind the stone pillars but it would have to do. "I'm sorry Draco but it's time. I need to die."

He stared down at her and the panic in his blue eyes was undeniable. "No." He shook his head. His words were firm, but his throat bobbed anxiously as he swallowed. "Why would you say that? You know it's never been an option—"

"But we're out of options now! The only way Voldemort is going to be weak enough for Harry to kill him is if there aren't any Horcrux's left!"

As Hermione spoke, someone screamed. They both turned towards the source. Some dark curse from Rodolphus had hit Daphne. She was crouched on the floor in agony.

It was just another example of how right Hermione was, but it felt more like a nail in her coffin. "As long as I'm alive," she whispered, "he can't be killed. We're out of options, Draco. I need to die."

Draco turned back to her. "No."

"Please. You can make it quick."

He inhaled sharply. His eyes blazed furiously. "You expect me to kill you?"

"I know it's not an easy thing to ask—"

"Granger, It would be easier for me to slaughter every person on that whole battlefield than it would be to hurt you."

"It doesn't have to hurt. An Avada would do the trick—"

"Nol!"

"I probably won't even feel it. It'll be like falling to sleep . . ."

"I said no!"

"It's okay," Hermione hushed. "I'm ready to—"

But even after everything he'd done, Draco had always been his favourite Demon Mask, and now more than ever, Voldemort was reminded how he'd earned his horns.

His Death Eaters were wholly unprepared for such an assault. No sooner than the first had charged towards his target, Draco jutted his wand in his direction, and the Death Eater screamed as his body turned to molten lava and his skin flaked off into ashy pieces.

The second tried to avenge the first but Draco disposed of him just as easily. The Death Eater charged and Draco grabbed hold of his elbow. He twisted it downwards so that the Avada he'd been trying to cast exploded the tiled floor, and then - without uttering an enchantment or using his wand at all - Draco looked at the Death Eaters' chest, and it exploded from the inside out.

And as the boy's blood and internal organs sprayed up the once-holy walls of the Cathedral, Voldemort did something he hadn't done in an age - he started to retreat. He took a step back, and then another, slowly retreating towards the back of the room so he could study the onslaught from the shadows.

A thunderstorm had started to rage outside. Angry rain pelted against the walls and every few seconds, cracks of lightning would flash outside and light up the dark Cathedral for a second or two.

Voldemort couldn't see everything that Draco was doing. He could only glimpse whatever the storm allowed him to, but what little he did see ... It terrified him.

In the first flash of lightning, he saw Draco decapitate one Death Eater in a single fluid motion, and then he disappeared as darkness swallowed the room again.

In the next flash, he watched in horror as Draco used a levitation spell to throw another into the curved arches on the Cathedral ceiling so powerfully that their body cracked into two pieces -

Then there was only darkness again -

Draco burned another with a wordless Incendio -

Then darkness again -

He cut another in half with a slicing curse -

And then he was hidden in the shadows again -

The wooden benches on either side of the walkway rattled as Draco walked past each row in turn. The stained glass windows cracked and splintered without him

touching them. Darkness clung to him like an old friend. Death wasn't his enemy, but his accomplice.

One by one, his Death Eaters charged to defend their master and one by one, Draco obliterated them.

Such power. Such raw, untameable rage that was radiating off of Draco's aura like a second skin... Voldemort had never seen strength like it. It was darkness and pain. It was cold and cruel. It was a power that few could ever hope to ascertain, the kind that was forged in the deepest bowels of hell, the type of power that was born through the worst of suffering that made it everlasting. Cruel but *glorious*.

It was everything Voldemort had wanted for himself.

The way the darkness and death in the room seemed to wrap themselves around Draco like an embrace, the way blood clung to him and the anger in his eyes, Voldemort felt like he was watching Death himself prey upon him.

No...

No this could not be how it ended for him...

Each flash of blue light brought another terrifying image to Voldemort's eyes. Each flash brought Draco closer, brought death closer.

Nothing could stop Draco's advance. No spell or hex or Death Eater could even come close to him, and despite the way Voldemort's generals launched themselves at Draco, he never flinched and he never broke into a run. He was taking his time with this hunt. He stayed at a slow walk. A slow, vengeful prowl and all the while, even as he slaughtered Death Eater after Death Eater, even as hatred burned in his eyes and tears stained the blood on his face, his eyes never left Voldemort's.

Draco held his gaze as he slaughtered each and every one of them. He'd watched Voldemort from the moment he'd made the first one's chest explode, right until he decapitated Rodolphus.

And as the last of his Death Eaters was butchered in front of his eyes, Voldemort knew that the biggest mistake he'd made in this war, it wasn't failing to hide his Horcruxes better or even letting Potter escape during the battle of Hogwarts, it was not killing Draco Malfoy when he'd had the chance.

But Harry was right. When Voldemort was scared, he was more dangerous than anything else on earth.

In his desperation, he did a bit of magic that Hermione had never seen before. Instead of deflecting Draco's last stunning jinx, he caught it. The blue light of the spell curled around his forearm like a strange sort of bracelet, and then he brought both of his hands close to his chest.

Hermione and Draco looked at each other briefly and then Draco threw a stunning jinx. Hermione nodded and threw another slicing curse. The same thing happened with both those new spells. Voldemort caught them both, they curled around his body and the lights got brighter and brighter, like a ball of energy gathering power. He pulled his arms tighter into his body. He bowed his head. His back arched inward like he was curling himself into a ball -

Then he screamed, snapped back to his full height, spread his arms wide and a wall of dark magic hurtled towards everyone with the force of a bomb.

Hermione and Draco cast protective shields around themselves.

Ginny, Theo and Daphne took cover behind one of the fallen tanks.

But not everyone was so lucky.

And Harry emerged, after he saw Ron's lifeless body on the floor, he charged at Voldemort. Hermione had never seen him so angry. He'd have scared himself if he knew how much he looked like Voldemort in that moment.

Harry threw a wordless, red curse at Voldemort. Voldemort retaliated with a green one. Their wands connected in a powerful ray of light -

The curse bounced back and hit Harry square in the chest. Harry howled in pain and fell to the floor. Voldemort merely clutched his wounded shoulder and advanced on Harry. Despite Draco and Hermione's efforts, he was still standing. He would always remain standing. He would always have strength from somewhere, because Hermione was still alive.

And that was it. As final and indisputable as a book snapping shut at the last chapter. That was it, Hermione knew it was over. She lowered her wand and looked around.

There wasn't anyone left. All of the muggle soldiers were dead. The helicopter was in ruins and the tanks were all on fire. Luna was dead. So was Fleur, and now

"Nope," Daphne answered, her lips popping loudly on the P. "Not a thing."

"Have you completed the homework that I set you after our last session?"

"Yes."

## CHAPTER 74

"And?" the middle-aged healer asked, her eyes on the notepad in her lap as she scribbled away.

"It was ... eye-opening," Daphne answered. Unbothered. Unaffected. *Fake.*

"And did it help?"

"Yes," Daphne lied.

"Good," the healer responded without looking up. "In what way did it help?"

"It helped me sleep better," she lied again, lied through her fucking fake smile and quiet demeancour. Oh, when, *when* would this be over? While the healer's eyes were still down, Daphne sneaked a glance at the grandfather clock near the East window.

14:03, just twenty-seven minutes left. She could get through that, couldn't she?

"And the nightmares?" the healer went on. "How have they been?"

"Fine."

"Describe what you mean by fine?"

"They've been non-existent."

It appeared that was one lie too many. The healer's eye's snapped up and she studied her victim - *patient* - carefully through her finger-smudged glasses.

Court-appointed, compulsory, mind healing therapy - wasn't that the joke of the century.

Astoria told Daphne that she shouldn't be so angry about it because she wasn't going through it alone. She, Blaise and Theo had all had to stand trial after the war, and although their heroics towards the end - and the success of Medusa - had saved them from the Dementors Kiss - they didn't get off entirely.

They'd done too much, that was how it was phrased. They'd committed too many war crimes and all of them were very public figures in Voldemort's army. They couldn't come out the other side smelling of roses, no matter how much they'd helped bring down the Death Eaters regime.

**Three years later**

"How do you think you've been coping since we last saw each other?"

"Fine."

"Has anything happened that you think you ought to mention?"

"No."

"No? Anything negative? No drawbacks or things that have caused you stress that you want to discuss?"



## EPILOGUE ONE

Because she'd been the mastermind behind Medusa and hadn't really committed any crimes, Astoria was spared, rightly so, but the rest of the family did not get off so lightly, and as penance for their crimes, the three of them had been ordered to see a Mind Healer for one hour a month, every month, until the day they died.

"Although we appreciate the pivotal part the three of them played during the final months of the war, nothing is more paramount than the safety of those the war has left behind," the new Minister for Magic had announced to the crowd after their hearing. She was a Muggleborn witch, elected to unite the magical and muggle societies in this new world and bla bla bla bla bla. Daphne had no intention of learning her name, she didn't like her. Could just think about how much better job Hermione would have done if she'd still have been here. "We thank the three of them for their efforts, but I am sure that everyone agrees with me when I say that in order to protect the future, we must not ignore the past, and therefore, the three of them will be observed and monitored closely, for the protection of the public."

For the protection of the public, what a crock of old shit. They weren't wild animals. They weren't a pack of savage, unpredictable beasts who might snap at any moment. They hadn't wanted to do any of the awful things that they'd done during the war but they hadn't had a choice. They'd done what they had to do to survive. They weren't a danger to anyone anymore.

But the Ministry didn't see it that way.

Although Daphne and Blaise had tried to make them see reason, they wouldn't have it. Basically told them that it was what the general population needed to be calm and, in the words of the new Minister, "*Be able to sleep peacefully at night knowing that three extremely dangerous war criminals are free.*"

But it didn't let the public sleep peacefully, it only made them more paranoid. Forcing Daphne, Theo and Blaise into therapy and watching over them, it just perpetuated the idea that they were dangerous. It made it look as though the three of them were rabid dogs and therapy was their muzzle. Made it look like they could be contained for a while, but it would only be a matter of time before they escaped and went on a fucking rampage.

The first year after Voldemort's death was hell. They were on house arrest for the first nine months. No escape. Wands confiscated. The press carried on their fearmongering agenda by publishing a new article about the 'ticking time bombs' that were the reformed Death Eaters, and howlers spewing death threats were delivered hourly.

"What?" Draco's eyes sluggishly wondered up to look at Theo over the top of Daphne's head. Draco hadn't seen Theo panic like that in years. "What the fuck are you saying?!" No. No he can't go -"

Trying and failing to keep her tears at bay, Daphne squeezed Draco's hand gently, reassuringly, in the way only a sister could. "It's okay," she whispered in a raspy, tear-stained voice. "You kept your promise to me. You kept the family safe. I can ... I can look after us from here."

Draco's chest rattled. His eyelids were so very heavy, and it felt like his body was slowly being eclipsed by a dark, dark shadow...

"You've done enough," Daphne breathed, ignoring Theo's protests and screams behind her. "You deserve to rest now."

The shadow started to crawl up his toes. Everything it touched turned numb and disconnected. First he couldn't feel his feet, then his legs. Then his hips.

And it kept crawling higher and higher, eating the pain, swallowing it with the weight of his body...

"I love you," Daphne whispered. "We all love you."

The shadow reached his torso, nibbling away at his fingers and traveling up his forearms. He could no longer feel the lower half of his body...

"I've got this."

The black frame that'd taken hold of the edges of his vision started to broaden. Everything faded away. His body. His breath. The pain he was in and the guilt that he'd carried around for years.

Even Daphne's voice became a distant echo, but one final sentence reached him. Five words that cut through the nothingness. One name that was enough to send him home.

"Go and be with Hermione."

And then in one ...

Two...

Three shallow breaths later, Draco Lucius Malfoy's heart beat for the very last time.

Don't - please. You promised...

She opened her mouth, then closed it again.

Please... Just let me go.

And ultimately, words weren't needed.

Because when Daphne swallowed thickly, Draco knew that she understood, and a moment later, she laid her wand on the floor.

Draco wished he could tell her how thankful he was.

"Daph?!" Theo asked, panicked. "What the fuck are you doing?!"

"Blaise," Daphne whispered softly, gently, dove-like. Her eyes didn't leave Draco's face. "Go and get Astoria."

"What?"

"Go and get Astoria," Daphne repeated as a tear slipped down her cheek. Her eyes flickered down to the blood on Draco's chest, flinching when he coughed. "And be quick about it."

There was a moment's hesitation. Blaise looked up and caught Draco's eye, then disappeared.

"Daph what the fuck?!" Theo shouted, practically screamed. "Don't just sit there! DO SOMETHING!"

Daphne took one of Draco's hands in both of hers. "Can you hang on until Tori gets here?" she asked softly, the complete opposite to her husband in the aisle.

The rattling inside Draco's chest was answer enough.

No, he could not. As much as he would've liked to see his younger sister one last time, they both knew he wouldn't be able to. It was probably for the best. If Astoria did see him like this...

Daphne nodded. A second tear slipped down her cheek, then a third. She clearly didn't want it to be true, but as she looked into his fading blue eyes, Draco knew what she saw - that he was hanging on by the very tips of his fingers, and he needed to be set free.

So with a few words, she did.

"It's okay," she told him, struggling to speak. "Go. Go and be with her."

As well as their mandatory therapy, the family were also issued with a fine: 82% of their combined wealth was to be seized and donated to the restoration effort. None of them really had an issue with it.

Well, that wasn't strictly true. Astoria wasn't *that* selfless, but after an initial tantrum - and making Blaise hide all of her shoes and jewellery with magic so that they couldn't be taken as collateral - she'd accepted it.

They'd guessed that the new Order would want to bestow some type of restorative justice on them - and even with that amount being taken away, they still kept Malfoy Manor and had more than enough money to live comfortably - but the therapy? Yeah, that didn't go down nearly as well.

Blaise, the sophisticated twat that he was, was wholly unbothered by the entire thing. He entered each of his monthly sessions with the utmost dignity. He sat in the leather armchair with perfect posture. He nodded when appropriate, smiled with grace, and got perfect scores on all of the court-ordered assessments they were made to take part in. He even managed to get the healer laughing on occasion.

Daphne and Theo's sessions were an entirely different ball game.

At first, the ministry had allowed them to have their sessions together, but they soon saw an end to that, split them up like naughty children in a classroom who couldn't be put together without causing trouble.

"They're bad influences on each other," their notes had said. "Feed off of each others' chaotic energy. Dangerous together. Must be separate."

Daphne had been so terrified after that that she'd been on her best behaviour ever since. She tried her best to follow Blaise's example but it was so fucking difficult.

Even Theo was able to get through them a lot less painfully than she could.

It was maddening how easily they were both able to get through the sessions. They felt like a trap to Daphne. Felt like they were just an excuse to prove that they weren't reformed, they were still Death Eaters. They weren't 'safe' or 'sorry' for the harm they'd caused during the war, they were just bidding their time, waiting for the right moment to avenge their fallen master. She felt like one slip-up would earn each of them their kiss.

Each session set her teeth on edge. She was always a nervous wreck beforehand. She didn't even bother to do her nails in the days leading up to their sessions because it was pointless. She always ended up chewing and picking at them until her manicure was destroyed and the skin around her nails was bloody.

She was determined not to let these sessions defeat her but the truth was that she was terrified of them. She'd worked hard to put the pieces of her life back together, and it felt like one wrong answer could snatch away everything that she'd built. Every time the healer scribbled something down on her little notepad, Daphne felt as though she were signing her custody papers for Azkaban, and every time she clicked her tongue in annoyance, another string of Daphne's patience was cut.

And it didn't help matters that the mind healer was a right-withered old cunt who seemed to have it in for Daphne.

Each session, although Daphne greeted her politely and offered her a drink, she would turn her nose up like Daphne had offered her a cup of warm piss. And although Daphne was always perfectly put together with a nice, respectable dress and heels and make up, the healer looked at her as though she was a filthy escort standing on a street corner.

"Just think of it like you're acting in a play," Theo would always tell her before her session. "It's just a role you're playing: Go in there, nod, smile, tell her what she wants to hear, and then when the curtain falls, you can go back to normal."

She'd thought her time playing pretend would end when she'd been freed from Grouch. Apparently, she'd been wrong.

Yes, Daphne had done unspeakable, awful things during the war and yes, they kept her up at night. She wasn't proud of the blood she'd spilled but she'd tried to make amends for it. She'd helped overthrow Voldemort, but the way the healer watched her every session, the way she tried to trick her into answering questions wrongly and stared at her as though she'd just slaughtered a room full of children, it made Daphne feel like she might as well have not bothered.

There were many things Daphne wanted to say during their sessions but she kept it all in. What she *wanted* to do, was tell the mind healer that she thought these sessions were about as useful as a fucking chocolate fireguard. What she *wanted* to do was tell the healer that she wasn't welcome in her home, grab her by her hair, and then throw her the fuck out.

That was what she wanted to do - but she couldn't. So instead, she took a page out of Blaise's book, sat up straight, folded her hands delicately in front of her so she wasn't tempted to throttle the woman with them, and responded with very dull, very practised, very *jake* answers that were a thousand miles apart from what she actually felt.

Daphne nodded and pulled out her wand. She placed it against his shoulder and tried to drag it downwards in a diagnostic -

No!

Draco grabbed her wrist, stopping the spell before she could cast it. Daphne's breath caught. She looked up and met his eyes.

The sound of his heavy, laboured breathing reverberated off the walls of the church.

And despite the amount of blood he'd lost, despite his soul slipping from one plane to another, Draco managed to do one thing. Just one tiny, microscopic movement that was insignificant, but momentous enough to end an entire bloodline.

He managed to shake his head.

He didn't want Daphne to heal him. He didn't want her to see what injuries he'd sustained because he didn't want her to even attempt to fix them.

He didn't want to be saved. He just wanted peace.

Daphne's eyes glistened with tears. She stopped moving. Stopped breathing. "Babe what are you doing?" Theo hissed frantically. "Don't just sit there! Do something!"

Daphne looked at her wand and attempted the spell again, but Draco squeezed her wrist until she yelped in pain.

Her nostrils flaring, Daphne stopped what she was doing, and stared into his eyes. *Don't*, he wanted to tell her. He tried to, but couldn't find his voice. Didn't have the strength left to make his mouth move.

He and Daphne had always had a special kind of understanding of one another. They'd always leaned on each other; always made the difficult decisions together, and as he stared into her eyes, he willed with every bit of him that was left for her to understand.

Don't heal me.

Daphne stared back at him like she was seeing right into his soul. Her brown eyes danced between each of his.

Please. Please understand...

Her bottom lip started to quiver.

“Draco?” a voice he thought he recognised asked. It took him a few seconds to realise it was Theo’s. He sounded far away even though he was standing a few feet in front of him. “You alright there, mate?”

A slender figure dropped into his line of sight. Daphne kneeled in front of him while Theo and Blaise hovered in the aisle, all with horrified expressions on their bruised faces.

Daphne’s mouth began moving frantically but he couldn’t hear what she was saying. Her voice was just a dull hum.

They’d come. They were all battered and bloody and bruised, none of them had had time to recover from the earlier fight, but they’d come anyway. He wasn’t going to be alone when he...

He hadn’t realised how much dying alone scared him until he saw the three of them standing around him. He smiled weakly but he wasn’t sure if it showed on his face or not.

Daphne took hold of his face and shook him. Her mouth started moving faster but he still couldn’t hear what she was saying.

Theo’s hands flew to either side of his temples. He fisted his curls, and looked like he was about to rip them out from the roots.

There was a ringing in Draco’s ears, but the longer the others stood there, the more distinguished their voices became.

“What the fuck happened to him?!” The panic in Theo’s voice was one thing, but the terror on his face was another. “Oh fuck, he looks bad - fuck! Fuck! Fuck! He looks *really* bad!”

Draco felt pressure on the right side of his chest when Daphne touched him, but the pain was fading. His head lolled weakly against the stone pillar behind him. Didn’t even have the strength to hold his head up anymore...

“He’s - fuck, he’s bleeding everywhere!” Daphne screamed in a panicked voice. “There’s so much of it! I can’t tell where the source is!”

“Cast a diagnostic, Daph!” Blaise snarled. “Quickly!”

Draco’s lips twitched into a barely-there smile. He still didn’t know if it showed on his face or if he just imagined it. It was the first thing Daphne should have done. She’d always been shit in a crisis.

And that was what’d led Daphne here, sitting in the parlour room of the house that belonged to her dead brother. Sitting on a leather sofa opposite a mind healer who wanted her locked away in Azkaban, with nothing between them to protect her apart from a coffee table and a few candles.

There was a heavy silence in the room for about forty seconds before her guest thought to fill it. “Tell me one positive thing that’s happened since our last session?” the healer asked.

*That the session ended*, was how Daphne wanted to reply, however, “Cordelia painted me a picture,” was her actual answer.

Little Cordelia Weasley-Zabini was Astoria’s pride and joy. With both of her parents dead, biologically, her next of kin was Ginny Weasley, and although she had welcomed taking her only niece in, Cordelia wouldn’t allow it. In the short time Astoria had taken care of her, she’d bonded with her in a way that words simply couldn’t explain, and Astoria had fallen in love with her too. The pair simply couldn’t be parted, if anyone tried, Cordelia screamed bloody murder until she was put back into Astoria’s arms and that was the end of that. Astoria was meant to be Cordelia’s mother, and Cordelia was meant to be Astoria’s daughter.

Astoria was so good with children but she refused to carry any herself. Although Hermione had found treatment for her blood curse, it was painful and Astoria didn’t want to run the risk of passing that misery on to another generation.

A year after she and Blaise legally adopted Cordelia, they adopted a little boy, and then another girl. There were so many children left without parents after the war, Astoria would have filled the whole manor with them if she could have. It didn’t matter that there wasn’t an ounce of shared blood between them or that none of them looked alike, Blaise and Astoria cared for and loved and doted on the three of them equally.

And Theo and Daphne were just as taken with their nieces and nephews. They spoilt them at Christmas and let them eat far too much sugar when they babysat. Theo taught them pranks and Daphne read to them every night until they fell asleep. Blood didn’t make a family. They all already knew that, and the little ones became a part of theirs as soon as they’d stepped through the door of Malfoy Manor.

“I see,” the healer said, bringing Daphne back to the present. “That was very nice of her.”

“It was.”

"How old is she now?"

"Four."

"What was the painting of?"

"A daffodil," Daphne answered, trying her best not to fiddle with the fabric of her pale pink dress that was draped across her lap. "Whenever she paints me a picture, it's always of a daffodil."

"Why is that?"

For the first time during their session, the hint of a smile that played on Daphne's face was genuine. "Because her mother and the boys call me 'Daph', and she thinks it's short for Daffodil. I haven't got the heart yet to tell her that it's not."

"She thinks your name is Daffodil?"

Daphne nodded, the smile on her face still real. "Yes, auntie Daffodil, that's what she calls me."

"I see," the healer said slowly, thoughtfully, watching her very closely. "And does she paint you things often?"

"Yes."

"And where do you keep them?"

Daphne kept her eyes forward and her hands firmly clasped on her lap. The healer was up to something, she could feel it. She was leading to something, setting a trap. It was suddenly harder to keep the smile on her face. "Tucked in the mirror of my vanity. On the walls. All over, really."

"And how would you feel if those pictures were ... Oh I don't know, suddenly taken away from you?"

*Oh, fuck off!* Daphne almost said it out loud. The old cunt was doing it again, she did this every fucking session. Tried to get Daphne to relax, find something she held dear, then ask her to think about how she'd feel if it was suddenly taken away or lost or broken.

The painting from her little niece wasn't a painting at all. It was a test and a metaphor all rolled into one. She was doing it to see if Daphne still had violent tendencies. Because if she'd lash out over something as small as a painting, then what would she do if a member of the public pissed her off?

"I think you already know who this one is for... Fuck - it was so difficult to stand. He felt lightheaded. His body was going to give out any moment. I saved the best for last..."

"No... no, please..." Voldemort begged. Blood was spilling out of his nose, his mouth, his eyes, he was so close to death. Even if Draco didn't use the last bullet, he'd be dead in a few minutes. "I will not die here, like this ... you cannot kill me..."

"Oh, no, no, no you're mistaken, my Lord. It isn't me killing you right now, not really," Draco scoffed softly. He raised his hand and hovered the gun between Voldemort's eyes. "It's Hermione fucking Granger!"

Two things happened after Draco pulled the trigger for the final time. Voldemort's life did indeed end but so did his. It was as though their lives had been connected, as though they were both puppets held up by the same set of strings and when Draco pulled that trigger, both of their life lines were cut.

As he watched the light leave his former master's eyes, all of Draco's strength left him, and all the pain came to claim him. He had nothing left anymore. No strength in his body and no will or fight to keep him standing. He leaned against a stone pillar at the front of the aisle, and slid down it until he was on the floor. He clutched his chest and his lungs squelched loudly each time he inhaled.

As his vision started to darken around the edges, he stared at Voldemort's corpse. What was once the most dangerous dark wizard of all time was now just a mess of blood and flesh. Nothing extraordinary. Nothing magical. He'd died just like a hundred other muggles, just like he'd always been afraid of.

Draco had done it. He'd avenged her. And now ...

He felt blood trickle down his chest. He felt it run down the side of his head and down the length of his arm. He watched his own blood start to gather on the floor around him.

He struggled to take a breath. He listened to his heart, hearing it began to grow slower, more sluggish.

Good. It wouldn't be long now...

The doors at the front of the church swung open again. He heard a feminine gasp. Head boots clicking against the stone floor.

Three figures hurried toward him; Draco tried to squint to see who but his vision was blurred. His body was failing fast.

"Look at you," Draco hushed, breathless, just about clinging on. "If only your followers were still alive to see you now ... fucking pathetic."

Voldemort grunted and groaned but continued to crawl, nonetheless. He reached out; his fingers were centimetres from his wand - but Draco still had some strength left in him.

"*Ab, ab, ab,* there'll be none of that." Draco marched forward and kicked the Elder wand across the Cathedral floor before Voldemort could snatch it up. The sound of it rolling away faded into a dull echo, just as Voldemort's confusion faded.

sound of it rolling away raced into a dull echo, just as Voldemort's salvation raced into nothingness. "There's going to be nothing magical about your death, *my Lord*," Draco said sarcastically. "When they retell the story of your last moments, they aren't

going to say that there was even a flick of magic, nothing extraordinary at all. All they are going to say, is that you died from a gunshot, just like a thousand other muggles. Your death is going to be ordinary and *forgettable*.”

Voldemort kept dragging his body deeper and deeper into the Cathedral, into the shadows, towards the throne that he'd one sat tall upon. He almost got to it, but Draco just followed weakly behind him.

They both left trails of blood behind them. Voldemort's was smudged from dragging his body across the floor, while Draco's was large blotches of crimson like someone had painted a mural on the ceiling and the red paint hadn't yet dried.

Draco's lungs felt heavy and deflated. He felt weak and blood trickled down his chest but he carried on. He needed to do this. He needed to do it not only for her, not only for himself, but for his entire family; past, present and fucking future. He raised the gun and fired another shot at the base of Voldemort's spine.

“That one is for my dragon,” Draco panted. “For filling her short life with nothing but war and battles when she should have spent it soaring the sky where she belonged!” He pulled the trigger again. “And one for me, for destroying me, for breaking me into fucking little pieces; just because you were too afraid to leave your tower and fight your own fucking war?”

And then, there was only one bullet left.

As Voldemort wailed again, Draco finally caught up to him. Draco placed the toe of his boot underneath Voldemort's ribcage and kicked him onto his back.

He wanted to look into his eyes as he killed him. Wanted to see the fear and terror gather in his eyes before he closed them for the last time.

But Daphne wasn't fucking stupid. "I love my niece dearly and I love the paintings that she makes me," she answered in a quiet, gentle, practised voice. "I'd be upset if anything happened to one of them, of course, but I'm sure she'd paint me another one."

Although Daphne plastered on a demure smile, although her eyes were honest and her voice was soft and light as honey, the mind healer narrowed her eyes.

When the healer clicked her tongue on the roof of her mouth, Daphne wanted to flinch.

And when she went back to furiously scribbling in her notepad, Daphne wanted to scream.

Scribble, scribble, scribble. That was all she ever did during their sessions. No matter how many times Daphne asked, she was never allowed to see what she'd written down. It took everything in her not to snatch the fucking thing out of her

You're doing fine, she told herself. Remember to breathe. Remember to smile. hand and make a run for it.

It'll all be over soon.

But the scolding didn't stop, not for thirty seconds, not even one and two whole minutes, and Daphne had to clasp her hands tightly in front of her to keep from snatching the fucking quill out of her ink-smudged fingers and snapping it in half.

What was she scribbling down? Was she making recommendations on how long she should be locked in Azkaban? Twenty years for looking at the healer with murder in her eyes? Another five for being an insufferable, ice-cold bitch?

Was she writing down that Theo should be taken into custody with her? If he was, would they separate the two of them?

Daphne squinted and leaned forward, trying to sneak a glance at the healer's notes, but she was sitting too far away and her handwriting wasn't much more intelligible than Cordelia's.

"But these pictures are obviously very dear to you," the healer eventually said, eyes still on her notes, still scribbling away. "If someone took away something that I cared about, I would feel very upset, and angry."

“Would you?” Daphne asked, keeping her voice gentle as she leaned forward a little more..

*Dre... dre... dre... dre...!* Is that what her notes said? Or was it defensive? Trust Daphne to get assigned the healer with the most awful handwriting known to wizarding kind.

"Oh dear," Daphne responded, not really thinking, more focused on trying to decipher the jumble on the paper. "Well, perhaps you should speak to someone else."

“Have you ever thought about going to therapy?”

When the healers' eyes snapped up, Daphne immediately slouched back onto the sofa and smiled, trying her best to brush off the fact that she'd just been caught in the act.

"Were you just trying to read my notes?"

Shit

Daphne's smile dropped. "No. Of course not."

The healer clicked her tongue. Her wide, flat nose crinkled with disapproval. "Miss Greengrass," the old woman scolded coldly, her tongue curling around the

words. It made Daphne feel like she was back in Professor Snape's classroom. "As I have told you repeatedly, this therapy is all about honesty."

"And I have told you *honestly*, that I find these sessions tedious and redundant." Daphne hadn't meant to snarl the words, but that was the way they came out. "And

Daphne hadn't meant to swear the words, but that was the way they came out. And it's Mrs Nott, as I have told you *repeatedly*."

And the last of Daphne's patience was diminished when the healer clicked her tongue again in annoyance -

“And if you click your tongue at me again I will nail it to this coffee table!”

As soon as the words had left her mouth, she regretted them.  
Oh, fucking fuck. She should not have done that. She really, really should not  
have done that

Daphne tried not to panic. She told herself that one snarky comment here or there wasn't going to earn her a cell in Azkaban, but the way the healer was looking at her ... she wasn't so sure.

His vision was beginning to blur around the edges and his legs wanted to give out, but he managed to stay standing. He had to leave his wand on the floor, and he needed to hold onto the backrests of the benches for support, but he managed it, managed to walk the small distance down the aisle to Voldemort.

The once proud Dark Lord was cowering on the floor. He was whimpering and clutching what was left of his hand. Three of his fingers were missing, and blood was spurting from the messy stump -

"Let's see ..." Draco panted, twisting the gun so that he could check the barrel, just as Potter had shown him. "We have eight bullets left ... and I'd say I have a few more minutes before I bite it... so we better not waste any time, shall we?" He aimed Hermione's gun over Voldemort's right leg and pulled the trigger.

Voldemort screamed in pain and collapsed onto the floor. He curled over and clutched his leg as blood started to pool between his fingers.

"That one was for my father," Draco sneered weakly, stalking a little closer to his victim. He'd killed a thousand times before, but he'd never gotten this kind of satisfaction. Never felt anything close to it. "For turning him into someone I didn't recognise towards the end."

Another flash of lightning cracked outside. It illuminated the Cathedral enough for Draco to see Voldemort's face contorted in agony.

It made him smile.

He aimed at Voldemort's left shoulder and fired again. "And then one for my mother," Draco said, his voice barely audible over Voldemort's wails. "For making her beg for her life and mine... even though you'd already decided to kill her."

Draco's body felt heavier and heavier with each step he took. He was bleeding out quickly, but he forced himself to carry on. He aimed the gun at Voldemort's shoulder and pulled the trigger three more times.

Voldemort fell onto his back. His spine arched off of the stone floor. His screams just went on and on, never-ending, each echo catching onto the end of the next in the most beautiful symphony of death and pain.

"Those were for my family. One for Daphne ... One for Theo... and one for the Zabini's ... for putting them through this war... for robbing years of their lives..."

"No..." Voldemort rolled onto his front, and started to crawl down the aisle, away from Draco. "No. No. No... It will not end ... like this... No..."

Draco glared right back at Voldemort. His nostrils flared with each loud, pain-filled exhale. He stretched his fingers a little further to the left ... He prayed it was there ... That he was getting closer to it ...

"It was because I knew you'd remember the sound of it," Voldemort continued. "I knew you'd remember her last words, I knew those pleas for her life would stick with you. I knew that they'd cut themselves into you like a scar and you'd use them; you'd think about them every time you cast a killing curse, and they'd make you *strong*," Voldemort scoffed lightly. "You see Draco, true power can only be ascertained through sacrifice -"

Draco felt something cold touch the very tips of his fingers-

"And believe me, if I'd have known the strength killing the Mudblood would have elicited in you, I'd have done it myself a long time ago."

Voldemort smiled a little and aimed the Elder Wand over Draco's heart. This was it. This was end. Any moment, he was going to kill him.

Green smoke started to gather at the tip of the elder wand -

But Draco was quicker.

He grabbed Hermione's gun by the handle, aimed at Voldemort's wand hand, and pulled the trigger.

The Elder Wand hit the floor at the same moment Voldemort's knees did.

In the hundreds of times that Draco had stood in York Cathedral, he'd never appreciated the acoustics before. But he did then. Thought they were fucking phenomenal. As Voldemort wailed in pain and nursed the hole in his hand, the sound carried, magnified into one of the most beautiful pieces of music that Draco had ever heard.

And the symphony was only just beginning.

Voldemort thought that hearing his mother beg for her life in his teens had given Draco strength. He'd thought it'd made him strong and it had, in a way, but that was nothing in comparison to what he felt while he listened to Voldemort scream. It was sick and sadistic but that was the truth of it. Hearing Voldemort's wails were like a call to war. He'd come here for a purpose. He'd come here to avenge her, and that was exactly what he was going to fucking do and somehow, as he listened to his former master scream in agony, Draco found the strength to do it. Managed to summon something he didn't know he had left, and got to his feet.

The healers' nasty mud-coloured eyes narrowed for a second. She looked Daphne over once, twice, taking everything in, then she smiled and started to scribble something down onto her notepad.

Shit.

Panic started to build in the pit of Daphne's stomach and before she could help herself, she started to bite her nails.

Why had she said that? She should have bit her tongue. She wished that she'd headed her own threat and nailed her tongue to the coffee table, at least then it would have just shut the fuck up and not made such a catastrophic mistake.

Shit. Shit. Shit. -

But wait the healer was smiling? And it wasn't a nasty smile either. It was more of a ... proud smile? No snugness. No anger. Just warm and happy and oddly, Daphne couldn't find even a flicker of deceit in it.

"Let's move on, shall we?" suggested the healer once she'd finally looked up from her notes.

Daphne hadn't really gotten away with that one? Had she?

"Yes," Daphne nodded. The movement was so fake and unenthusiased, she might as well have been on strings. "I think that'd be for the best."

The healer nodded in agreement. She studied Daphne for a moment. She took a good look at her face, then added another quick note to her pad, then looked up and said, "I hear the Aurors still haven't caught him."

Oh, now the healer was just playing dirty. Daphne might've threatened to nail her tongue to the table but if they hadn't been split up, Theo definitely would have for bringing that up. Well, if she was looking to draw some type of reaction out of Daphne, she was looking in the wrong place.

"I'm sorry," Daphne replied. "I don't know who you mean?"

"Don't play dumb. You know exactly whom I am speaking about."

Daphne merely shrugged. She looked down at her oval-shaped nails and pretended to be mesmerised by the chipped, pearly pink polish she was wearing.

"How does that make you feel?" the healer prodded. "To know that Bart Crouch Jr is still missing?"

Daphne fought to keep her face impassive. Calm. Doll like. On the inside, however, she was smirking, but on the outside, she wore the perfect poker face that her older brother had taught her. "It doesn't make me feel anything."

The healer started to click her tongue like she didn't believe her, but when Daphne looked up from her nails and quirked a brow, the healer thought better of it. She took a moment to rethink whatever she'd been about to say, then said, "I don't mean to cause you any distress, Mrs Nott, but after everything he did to you, it would be natural to feel resentment toward Party."

"I don't feel anything towards him." It wasn't a lie. It was probably the first time during their session that she'd told the truth - well, aside from her threat about the tongue ... No, it wasn't a lie at all. She didn't feel anything toward him. That name hadn't held anything for her for a long, long time.

"Why do you think that is?" the healer asked, clearly not convinced.

"Why should I still feel anything towards him? It's been a very long time."

The healer narrowed her eyes again. "That's what Megan and Sarah said too."

Ah, of course the nosey, pig-faced healer would want to talk to the other girls about Grouch. Megan and Sarah, Chester and Angel. Daphne saw them quite often. They came to visit the wine cellar in Malfoy Manor weekly sometimes, if the mood ever took them, and Daphne always welcomed them with open arms and offered them a glass of wine and a knife when they arrived.

"You all seem to be ... managing, with what you all went through rather well."

Now, Daphne really had to fight to keep the smirk off her face. Oh, if only the silly old bat knew. "You say that like it's a problem."

"It's not a problem..." the healer started. "It's just peculiar, how well you've all adjusted back into the world, and none of you seem to care that no one has seen him since the end of the war -"

Daphne's salvation usually came in the form of a petite five foot two witch - seven, when she was in heels - but today it came in the form of heavy, slow thuds. "Times is up," Quinzel said the moment she walked through the doors. She was wearing a cooking apron today. It was covered in swatches of different coloured paints. She even had a blue one that looked suspiciously like a toddler's hand print across her right cheek. "Miss mind healer is to go now."

Draco's eyelids felt like were being dragged down. The floor underneath his back grew warm and wet with his blood.

"After the Battle of Hogwarts, you were nothing," Voldemort continued. "You were a snivelling mess. Worthless. I could have killed you right there and your family would have been just another ink stain in the history books. The others saw a weak boy but only I saw the potential in you. Only I saw the hunger for power in your eyes! Only I saw the potential for great things in you, all you needed was a push."

"Is that ..." Draco's assumption that his lungs had been punctured was confirmed when he tried to talk... He struggled to speak through the blood that was beginning to flood his windpipe but he managed it, just about. "Is that ... what you call it? A ... little push?"

Voldemort laughed wickedly from Draco's left. He must have only been a few feet away from him. "Do you think power is so easily achieved? No. True power requires sacrifice. To be all-powerful, to summon the darkest forms of magic, you need to feel hatred. You need to reach down into the depths of your soul, summon every bit of darkness and use it to your advantage. You need to channel that pain into every curse you cast and only then can you be powerful."

Draco tried to get up, but as soon as his spine lifted off the stones, a sharp sensation twisted through his chest and he screamed in pain and dropped back onto the floor.

Voldemort was steadily drawing closer.

He needed to get up. He needed to do something -

He reached blindly to his left, searching, trying to grasp -

Voldemort suddenly stood over him. He glared down at Draco with nothing but hatred and disgust in his eyes. "I had such high hopes for you," he tutted once and shook his head. "When I killed your father, I knew that pain would make you strong. I knew you would take the anger you felt towards me, and it would make you vengeful. Do you know why I made your mother beg for her life before I killed her?"

He did. That was the honest truth. He fucking did want to make them pay. He hadn't realised how much he did until Voldemort said it.

Yes, Voldemort had made her a Horcrux, he'd tied her life to his, he'd marched her to the gallows and he'd put a rope around her neck, but he hadn't been the one to kill her, the Order had. Kingsley, in spite of everything she'd done for them, he'd been the one to kick the trap door open. He'd been the one to break her neck, and Draco wanted to hang the lot of them for it.

Draco didn't mean to hesitate but he did - just for a fucking fraction of a second - and Voldemort saw it, and it was all he needed. He wordlessly summoned his wand, and before Draco could retaliate, Voldemort dug the end of his wand against Draco's chest and screamed, "SECTUMSEMPE!"

The first time Draco had been caught with that hex, he'd thought he was going to die. The pain had been the worst thing he'd ever felt. He'd likened it to having dozens of razor blades pushed into his skin and dragging back and forth again and again until eventually, he'd passed out.

The first time he'd been caught with that hex, it'd been from across a room and the caster had been young and inexperienced.

This time, it was fucking catastrophically different.

The spell was so powerful that it sent him flying through the Cathedral. He must have shot twelve feet into the air. He landed on his back halfway up the aisle and the pain - it was nothing like last time. There weren't dozens of razor blades this time, there were hundreds, and they weren't just pushing into his skin, they were *inside* of him. Felt like they were sawing him open. He felt them everywhere; felt like there wasn't an organ or a bone or patch of flesh that the spell didn't tear to ribbons.

The worst of it was in his lungs. He was sure he felt something burst open. He stared up at the Cathedral ceiling, paralyzed by the pain. Fuck knew where his wand or the gun were. He'd dropped them but he had no idea where. Couldn't even look. Couldn't focus on anything else other than the dark curse that was slicing and slicing and *shrieking*.

He struggled breathe. He felt liquid start to fill his lungs, and a warmth start to trickle down his chest -

"You say that I took from you," Voldemort started to say, he was on the other side of the Cathedral but through Draco's desperate gulps for air, his voice grew steadily louder. He must have been walking towards him. "But I made you what you

A crease appeared between the healer's thick brows and she blinked several times. "No, surely not already -"

"Clock does not lie, Miss," the old elf interrupted. No nonsense. Taking no prisoners. "Quinzel has gotten the Floo ready. She is to give you this so you can go." The pink-eyed elf trudged toward the healer and plonked a small beige-coloured sack of powder into her hand. "Quinzel is to walk you out now."

"Actually," the healer interrupted as she and Daphne got to their feet, "I'd prefer it if Daphne would walk me to the Floo. If that's alright with you?"

Daphne was suspicious, but nodded to Quinzel that it was alright. As the elf trudged back into the corridor she'd come down, Daphne and the healer walked down the hall to the fireplace that acted as the main Floo network.

They didn't say a word to each other the entire journey, but just as Daphne had nodded the healer goodbye and turned to leave, a hand curled around the top of her arm. "Daphne, before you go, could I have a word?"

Daphne spun around. She stared at where the healer was touching her, and it wasn't until she'd let go that she answered. "Yes, if you must."

"You did well today."

Daphne recoiled slightly. She blinked and stared at the healer like she'd grown a second head. Surely she hadn't heard that right. "How so?"

"You were yourself."

Daphne couldn't help but quirk a brow. Had her healer lost the plot? Had Daphne made her lose it? If her crimes during the war hadn't been enough to earn her a cell in Azkaban, then that surely would. "I threatened to nail your tongue to the table."

"Yes, you did," the healer smiled, even let out a little throaty laugh. "But don't you see? That's good. Since we started these sessions, you've been guarded and putting on an act but today, I got the first glimpse of who you really are."

Daphne swallowed. She narrowed her eyes and worried the inside of her cheek to stop herself from biting back. This was another trick, she was sure of it.

The healer must have been able to tell what she was thinking. "These sessions aren't a test. You've been through a terrible ordeal, and they're designed to help you." The healer took a step forward, and she looked like she was about to place her hand on Daphne's shoulder, but then she stopped. "I know you think that the Ministry is against you and are looking for excuses to throw you and your family into

Azkaban, but I am not. I want to help you, Daphne, truly, but I can only do that if you're honest with me. I know you're not evil, you were just forced to do evil things for the sake of surviving and I understand that. I'll keep you out of Azkaban, I promise, but you need to work *with* me, not against me."

"How can I be so sure that this isn't a trick?"

"Because my nephew would be dead if wasn't for Medusa."

Daphne was unsure of what to say.

"He was captured a few years into the war, and it was on Medusa's intelligence that he was rescued. He's alive now because of you and your family." This time the healer was a little braver. This time, when she raised her hand, she squeezed Daphne's shoulder gently and smiled at her. "Just something to think about before our next session." And then she stepped into the Floo and she was gone.

Daphne relaxed against the wall but her mind was reeling. Could she trust the old bat? Or was it a trick to get her to drop her guard? She was leaning more toward the latter, but she knew more than anyone how love for a family member can make you do unspeakable things. When she'd collected herself, she followed the sound of chaos and screams into the kitchen, and judging from the carnage she discovered there, it was clear the tiny terrors had gotten into the sugar.

"That's *enough!*" Blaise snarled, eyes burning, lip curled back over his teeth. Daphne didn't know what was funnier; the pink blotches of paint on his crisp white shirt, or the fact that he had a yellow flower sticker on the side of his face that he clearly didn't know was there.

Even though Blaise was using his Dad's voice - a lower, deeper, more authoritative version of his usual voice - it did nothing to subdue the little sleep terrorists.

All three of the children looked positively feral.

The dimming table was littered with artwork and paint pots and Cordelia, Maximus and Eva were gathered around it. They presented a united front in every sense of the word. They were united in their unkempt hair, their messy paint-covered faces and clothes, and even the wildness in their eyes that looked a little too suspicious to be accidental.

Those were crazy, sugar-overload eyes if Daphne had ever seen them. But how had they gotten to the sugar quills? They were always kept on the very top shelf in the pantry, far out of the children's reach...

"Yeah, that's hers too," Draco sneered menacingly, gleefully, as he lined the barrel against Voldemort's stomach. "It's all coming together now, isn't it? You remember Zabin's vision; the one you showed her when you accidentally made her a Horcrux? You showed it to her because you thought Zabin had foreseen her death. You thought it was a vision of the end of the war - and I suppose that's true, but it wasn't just foretelling her death, it was yours too, and you know the best part about that? You're going to die here, *and her gun is going to be the thing that kills you.*"

The gun clicked loudly as Draco readied it to take the first shot. He curled his finger around the trigger -

"Wait!" Voldemort hissed breathlessly, his voice barely audible as he fought for gulps of air. "Wait! Please! Do not - do this - We can avenge - her death - together! Please!"

Draco scoffed. He'd never heard Voldemort beg before - Granger would have loved the sound of it. "What do you think I'm doing right now?"

"No, no this ... this is not revenge! I did .. not .. want this!"

Draco hesitated. He loosened his grip just a fraction. "She's dead because of you!"

"No, she is dead because .. Kingsley .. drove the sword through her heart -" "Because you made her a Horcrux! She was killed because you were so fucking afraid of dying -"

"But I did not want her dead! Think about it, Draco.." Voldemort pleaded. Draco lowered his arm just a little and Voldemort could breathe a little easier when his feet touched the floor again. "She was the last Horcrux... Why would I want her to die? I would have protected her.. It's not really me who killed her. All this anger you feel, your directing it at the wrong person. You know it's not me who you blame for her death. It's the Order."

Draco's nostrils flared. He dragged Voldemort's face closer to his own and pressed the barrel of the gun under Voldemort's chin. "These could be your last fucking words, so I'd make them count if I were you."

"We could make them all pay, all of them! All of the Order!" Voldemort tried again. His voice was paniced but there was something right about it. "They tried to kill her with a tank, they killed your dragon and Kingsley drove a sword through her heart, don't you want to make them pay for all of it? Don't you want to burn them all down for what they did to her?"

"And then, when that wasn't enough, you fucking took Granger from me as well!"

A crack appeared in the almost translucent shield-

"She was the only thing that made me feel like a human being again! She was the only person that made me feel like I had a soul left, and you couldn't even let me have that, could you?!" Draco's curses came faster as he started to lose himself in his grief, more aggressive as pain squeezed around his heart. "You just had to fucking take her from me too, didn't you?!"

The crack in the shield started to spread -

"YOU DIDN'T JUST TAKE HER LIFE, YOU TOOK MINE TOO! YOU TOOK OUR FUTURE!"

The single crack started to multiply. Dozens started to zig-zag across the diameter of Voldemort's defence -

"YOU TOOK THE LIFE THAT I HAD PLANNED FOR US TOO!"

The moment the shield shattered, Draco reached out and grabbed Voldemort by the throat. He clawed at Draco's forearms to try and force his release but Draco didn't budge. With his wand balancing between his middle and index finger, he held on tightly, lifted him off the ground and started to squeeze.

He could have killed him right there; all it would have taken was a sharp squeeze, just the tensing of a few muscles but he resisted. That was too easy. Voldemort hadn't suffered. Not nearly enough.

He watched Voldemort's beady red eyes flicker erratically. He could see fear rising within them. They kept darting between Draco's eyes, then the blood on his face, then his eyes again, then the blood in his hair, all the while his arms flailed and he kicked his legs out uselessly.

"It's hers you know," Draco whispered, feeling something wet slip out the corner of his eye, even though his lip was trembling with anger. "Her blood, I mean. You were too scared to stay and watch, but I held her in my arms as she died. This is all hers." He motioned with his free hand. "And you see this?!" Draco held Granger's gun up so Voldemort could see it clearly. "You recognise it, don't you?!"

His red eyes landed on the firearm, and a satisfaction like no other slithered up Draco's spine when he saw the realisation and panic in them.

He recognised the gun. He was starting to put the pieces of Draco's plan together.

Good.

Blaise was covered in paint but Astoria had come off far worse. She looked like she'd been to war with a paint factory. There were flecks of it all over her, and her beautiful emerald dress had blotches of blue that certainly hadn't been there at breakfast.

"Theo!" Astoria snapped, and when she flipped her long, chocolate-coloured hair over her shoulder, Daphne saw that the ends had been dipped in bright pink paint. That was going to take weeks to come out, no wonder she looked like a kettle that was ready to explode. "Why - for the love of Salazar - did you think that letting the children paint in the kitchen would be a good idea? There's mess EVERYWHERE!"

Ah, of course Theo was behind this. Daphne should have known better. She hadn't even noticed that he was in the dining room, she'd been too distracted with the mess, but now that she had, it was obvious that he was the mastermind behind this chaos.

"Oi, oi, we'll have less of that!" Theo snapped, shaking his head very dramatically and making the yellow paint in his curls splatter around the room. When some hit Astoria's dress, she looked ready to murder him. The children squealed with laughter and started slapping the table, completely enthralled with the show their uncle was putting on for them. "I'm the teacher for the day! My classroom, my rules, and if the babies wanted to paint," he stood up suddenly and put on a deep, theatrical voice that was fit for the stage, "*then paint, the babies shall!*"

The toddlers in question looked up from their artwork and grinned mischievously. Max held his painting up for his aunt Daffodil to admire, but she didn't get a chance to praise him, Astoria was too loud.

"ON THE NEW WOODEN TABLE! OH, YOU'VE PULLED SOME CRAP OVER THE YEARS THEODORE, BUT THIS IS BEYOND..."

"Alright bossy pants," Theo cut her off. "Name one other thing that I've done?" Astoria folded her arms across her chest and glared at him. "How about the time you wanted to use a real human skeleton to teach them biology?"

"What's wrong with that?" Theo challenged. "They have skeletons, don't they? They should know how their bodies work..."

"THEY'RE CHILDREN! TINY LITTLE CHILDREN THAT SHOULD NOT BE ANYWHERE NEAR A REAL HUMAN SKELETON!"

Theo shrugged at his sister-in-law. "Never too early to learn."

Astoria started to go off on another rant but Theo suddenly stood up. What'd been a lovely silk black shirt this morning was now decorated with tiny handprints of every colour. "Come on, Tori, don't be like that," he grinned, opening his arms wide and walking towards her. "Let's make up? Give me a hug."

Astoria's eyes widened with panic when she realised his intentions. "No!" She tried to back away, but she didn't realise that there was a wall behind her and she was suddenly trapped. "Don't you dare, Theodore! Get away from me!"

"Awwww Tori, you'll hurt my feelings," Theo whined, getting closer, his arms still out wide, his shirt dripping with paint. "Come here."

"No!" she hissed, waving her hands like she was trying to shoo a stray kitten away. "Don't you dare!"

Theo closed in on her.

Astoria screamed and tried to bat him away, but Theo already had hold of her. He wrapped his arms around her, lifted her off of the ground, squeezed her in the biggest bear hug he could, and when he set her back down, all of the paint on his shirt had transferred onto her dress.

When Astoria initially saw the mess, she gasped loudly, but when she looked up at Theo, she just burst out laughing, and then the room was filled with little squeals of laughter as the children joined in.

"Mummy!" Cordelia giggled. "Your dress is so messy!"

"And there's paint in your hair!" Max added, wiping at his tears with his hands and leaving a smear of purple paint under his eyes.

"And on your face!" Eva chuckled. "You're so messy!"

"I know," Astoria sighed loudly, then she grinned and held out her arms. "I'm so upset. Who wants to give mummy a hug to make her feel better?"

As the children screamed and tried to escape - and Astoria and Theo chased them around the dining room - Daphne smiled and looked at the door to the wine cellar.

"Megan and Sarah left," Blaise said, answering her unspoken question. He crossed the length of the room, folded his arms across his chest and leaned against the wall by Daphne's side.

"Already?"

Blaise nodded.

"Is this really how it ends for you? Siding with them? After everything I've done for you?!"

"Everything you've done for me?!" Draco echoed as he picked up another bench and threw it just as viciously as he had the first one. "What have you ever done to me but fucking take?!"

Voldemort cast a slicing curse to split the bench in two, but it forced him to take another few steps back. He was on the back foot and Draco just wouldn't stop advancing, kept forcing him back with one powerful hex after another, marching forward like there wasn't a force in the world that was strong enough to stop him.

Because there wasn't. He was too angry to stop. Too hurt. Too broken. Too full of this rage that felt like carbon fucking monoxide, poisoning him slowly, killing him silently.

Draco brandished his wand in a circle over his head, and when he brought it down, a powerful stream of yellow light exploded from it like a whip.

Voldemort cast a translucent shield, but Draco just kept going. He kept bringing his wand down and casting curse after curse against Voldemort's shield like he was banging a sword against it.

"You've taken everything from me!"

From underneath the glowing light of the shield, Voldemort's lip curled back. He looked like he was struggling to hold his defence in place.

"My father! My mother!"

Every time Draco brought his wand down, Voldemort was forced a little closer to the ground.

"You chipped away at me bit by fucking bit until you made me into a killer!"

Voldemort had to place one of his hands on the floor to keep himself balanced. He was almost crouched down on the floor from the force of Draco's relentless attacks.

"You held what was left of my family over my head like a threat, and made me do things that made me feel sick! You made me torture! You made me assassinate people I used to admire!"

He saw that Voldemort was struggling to keep the shield in place so he kept going. Kept throwing curse, curse, curse, fucking curse -

Revenge.

Fucking revenge.

He'd never felt fucking rage like this. He'd never felt so broken and hurt and fucking angry. He wanted to burn everything and everyone to the ground.

The grief he felt... The rage... The mixture of the two, it was as painful as it was suffocating. He didn't know what to do with either of them. It was maddening. He felt mad. Felt like his brain and his body weren't his own anymore.

He wanted to collapse onto the ground and never get up again, but he also wanted to stamp on Voldemort's skull until he broke it.

He wanted to claw his own heart out so he couldn't feel it breaking anymore, but he wanted to live so he could rip Voldemort's out and crush it with his bare hands.

He wanted to close his eyes and never wake up again.

He wanted to destroy Voldemort so entirely that even the memory of him disappeared forever.

Fucking hell, when he got his hands on him... He didn't know where he was going to start. Dissection. Cutting his toes off. Gouging his eyes out. He wanted to do it all. He wanted to snap off each of Voldemort's bones and then shove them down his throat so that his insides would be as cut up as Draco's were.

Nothing felt like it was enough.

There wasn't a spell or torture method written in any language on earth that could detail the pain he wanted to inflict on Voldemort.

Voldemort's hand jutted sharply to the left, and Draco wasn't fast enough to dodge the hex. He felt the right side of his rib cage fracture - the pain of it was sharp enough to knock the wind out of his lungs but he kept going. Forced himself to stay standing and willed his arm to throw a slicing curse.

He had to stay standing - he *would* stay standing, for her. He'd avenge her even if it was the last thing he ever did.

Draco used a levitation spell. He picked up one of the benches and launched it across the room -

Voldemort managed to deflect the projectile but it knocked him off balance. He fell back a few steps and a furious scowl etched itself upon his withering old face.

"They didn't stay long"

"They didn't, but they still did a lot of damage." Blaise's eyes were suddenly hard as he looked at his children. "Megan was covered in blood. I had to tell Cordelia that it was red paint, and that Megan and Sarah are just painting a mural in the wine cellar but now she really wants to go down there."

Daphne sighted and copied Blaise's stance. She folded her arms across her chest and leaned against the wall beside him, her voice dropping to a hushed whisper. "I'm sorry. I'll tell them both that they need to be more careful when they visit again."

Blaise watched as Theo grabbed Cordelia by the ankles and held her upside down, allowing Astoria to tickle her daughter's ribs without mercy.

"I understand why you need to keep him down there Daphne, but I'm terrified that one of my children are going to find him one day."

"He's safe down there," Daphne replied. "He's bound in chains, he's been stripped of his magic and there are more enchantments in that wine cellar than what they used to have at Hogwarts. Barty Crouch Jr is not getting out of there, Blaise. He can't hurt your children."

"But what if he does?"

The thought alone made Daphne shudder.

It was true what the Healer had said. To the rest of the world, no one had seen Crouch Jr since just before Voldemort's downfall. No one had a clue where he was. They'd checked high and low, from one end of the country to the next, but they hadn't thought to check the wine cellar in Malfoy Manor.

He was still in the same state, still bound to the same rickety old chair with the same rusting chains, but he just had a new home, and as much as he'd have liked to be, he was never alone. In the beginning, Daphne had gone down there almost nightly. She had a lot of pent-up anger for what he'd done to her, and with the way the Ministry was demonizing her and her family in the papers, well, she needed something to take her aggression out on.

And the best thing was, when the Ministry had come to do their initial inspections of the Manor after the war - to make sure they weren't harbouring anything dangerous - Theo had placed that many enchantments on Barty that the Ministry officials had walked right by him and not even noticed.

He'd screamed for them to help him but they hadn't been able to hear him, just like Theo hadn't been able to hear Daphne when he'd searched Crouch's stables. Daphne had barely been able to hide her smile.

It was excellent therapy. Torture, heal, repeat. Torture, heal, repeat. It was fabulous. Much better than anything that Ministry ordered mind healer could deliver but after a while, Daphne found herself going down there less and less. She'd thought that she could torture him forever but eventually, she was bored with it. It didn't bring her the satisfaction that it used to because she didn't really hate Grouch anymore.

Megan and Sarah still took advantage weekly but Daph ... she hadn't been down there in months. She went down if the mood struck her on occasion, but these days, it hardly ever did.

She'd been telling the healer the truth. The name Bart'ly Crouch Jr didn't hold anything over her anymore. She felt nothing for him. He was nothing to her. The only reason she kept him alive at all was because his life was still linked to hers and the others dolls', if it wasn't for that, she'd have probably let him starve to death a year ago.

"My children are the most important thing to me and it's my job to keep them safe. I can't have them asking questions and getting curious about what we keep in the cellar. If they snuck down there by themselves..." Blaise's voice trailed off and he shuddered.

Daphne did too. The thought of little Cordelia going into that room alone, even if she couldn't see Grouch, he'd be able to see her, and that thought alone was terrifying.

"Consider it taken care of," Daphne whispered softly. "We'll move him to the farmhouse tomorrow."

Blaise looked at her out of the corner of his eye. "You're sure?"

"Yes, I'll connect the Floo so Sarah and Megan can still visit, and we'll set charm alerts so we'll know if he tries to escape. We'll still have to go every few days to make sure he's fed and healthy enough, but we can't keep him here anymore, not if the children are getting curious."

Eventually - but not until Theo and Astoria had had (and won) a paint fight with the children - Blaise conjured a set of robes and asked his wife to take a walk with him outside. With mum and dad absent, Quinzel decided that it was time for the Revenge.

Draco wasn't glad for a lot of things in his life, but that evening, he was glad for the thunderstorm.

He'd never believed in Gods, but he was glad that whatever deity dwelled above had the courtesy to hold back the violent storm until he was inside the Cathedral walls, because it meant that the rain hadn't had the chance to wash away the blood. He was glad because he wanted Voldemort to see it. He wanted his former master to see what he'd done. He wanted him to see the blood - *her* blood - dripping from Draco's hair and chin and know - know with every fibre in his dark soul - that he fucking deserved what was coming to him. Deserved every ounce of pain and suffering and hell that Draco was going to bring his way.

He was glad for the lightning because when it illuminated the dark Cathedral, it meant that Voldemort could see how close Draco was to him, and how quickly his death was approaching.

The storm couldn't have come at a more perfect time.

Thick, warm, sticky blood clung to the underside of Draco's boots as he stepped over the bodies and made his way to Voldemort. There was no one else left. All the other Death Eaters were dead. It was just him and Voldemort.

There was no small talk. Draco didn't leave any opportunity for it. Before the sound of Rodolphus' body falling to the floor had even finished echoing off the walls of the Cathedral, Draco had attacked.

He threw a slicing curse at Voldemort's legs but he deflected it.

Voldemort swept his wand-wielding arm to the right; the bright slash of silvery light changed course, and cut the King statues that lined the East wall clean in two.

"You're a fool if you think you can kill me, Dracol!" Voldemort sneered as he jutted his hand sharply to the left, causing a handful of candles in the room to ignite and forge together. The flames made a giant snake, one of Voldemort's favourite curses, but as the beast bowed its body and charged towards him, going for the kill, Draco threw his own curse and the snake's body shattered into dozens of embers.

Voldemort threw another curse but Draco swept it aside. He threw another and then another, but Draco just kept deflecting them, just kept sending them off in every direction and marching towards his prey without saying a word.

Nothing Voldemort did slowed him down. He had one thing on his mind, and no words or Hex of any kind were strong enough to stall him.

"What? Father's ring?"

"No." She met his eyes again and her smile only grew. "Devotion. Being in love. She brings out the best in you. I can't wait to thank her personally when she gets back."

His mother could have told him the cure to mortality and he wouldn't have heard her. All he could think about was one thing. All he knew was one word, one name. At the mere mention of her, he was on his feet. "She's here?" He looked towards the grounds, the Manor, the fields - If she was here, then why hadn't she come to find him?

His heart suddenly felt like it'd turned to led.

She blamed him, that must've been it. She blamed Draco for what'd happened to her - and rightly so. This was all his fault. It was his job to protect her and he'd failed. He should have ignored everything she'd said, knocked her out, and escaped on Narcissa's back where no one would ever find them.

"Oh yes, she's here, *your little lion*." Although his mother was smiling, her voice was very sombre and a sadness crept into her eyes. "It broke my heart, seeing what happened to her. She was so brave in the end, I was so looking forward to meeting her properly but I haven't had the pleasure yet."

"Why not?" he asked, still scanning the grounds, trying to figure out where she might've been hiding.

His mother chuckled and shook her head. "Because I wasn't able to get anywhere near her. As soon as she got here, that bloody dragon of yours monopolised her."

His heart leapt in his throat. They were both here. A small bubble of hope swelled in the pit of his stomach. "Where are they?"

"They're together, of course," she told him, smiling like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Draco started to search the sky. He squinted into the clouds but he couldn't see anything, the sun was too bright.

His mother caught hold of his wrist and pulled him back down onto the bench. "Relax, sweetheart. I'm sure they'll be back soon."

Draco nodded. He tried his best to settle but all of a sudden it felt like his nerves were on fire. He started to bounce his knee nervously and every few seconds, his eyes would dart back to the sky in search of a winged silhouette.

"I was watching from the window when Hermione got here," his mother said softly. "I think she understood what this place was the moment she opened her eyes here but your dragon, bless her heart, she didn't. Poor thing was very disorientated when she woke up here. Started screeching and clawing at everything in her path. I think she was looking for you and when she couldn't find you, she started to panic."

Romy returned with a silver tray and a pot of tea. He whistled happily as he conjured three tea cups and bussed himself with pouring drinks. He handed one to Narcissa, then Draco, then hopped up on the bench beside Narcissa with his own cup in his hands.

"Romy likes this very much. He is very glad to have you here sir, very glad indeed," Romy chirped. "He is going to make a great big feast for dinner to welcome Mr Malfoy and Miss Granger here."

"That sounds lovely," Narcissa responded before sipping her mug. "Would you like some help?"

Draco nearly choked on his tea. "Since when do you cook?" Since when did his mother help a house elf with anything? She'd never been cruel to the elves that'd worked in the manor - unlike his father - but she'd never, in Draco's entire life, offered to help one.

Maybe he was wrong. Maybe this place wasn't real.

"Miss Narcisa helps Romy cook a lot," Romy answered. "She helps him make dinner most nights. She is good cook, although Romy does not let her make roast potatoes." Romy blobbed his tongue out like he'd tasted something disgusting and made a retching noise. "She is not being very good at those."

Draco looked at his mother as he brought his cup to his lips. "You? Make dinner?" he asked as he took the first sip. Tea. Warm and sweet. It tasted real, exactly how it'd been in life. "With a house elf?"

"I make dinner *for* him sometimes, too. I saw how much fun Astoria always seemed to have when she cooked with Romy so when he arrived here, I thought I'd give it a go," she laughed. "I've told Romy he is no longer bound to our house and he is free to go wherever he wants -"

"NO!" the little elf interrupted, horrified, distraught at the very thought. "No! Romy is staying here! Romy likes it here..."

"I know, don't worry," Narcissa said, cutting him off. "I was only explaining to my son that you are not being forced to be here, you could go at any time, should you wish to, but you like it here so you remain."

"Oh yes, Romy would never leave here, Miss. Romy loves it here." He nodded so enthusiastically that it looked like his floppy ears might fly off. "And it is going to be so much better now that Master Draco and Miss Hermione is here, too."

"Ah, yes, that's what I was saying." His mother elegantly took a small sip of her tea and then set it down on the saucer in her lap. "Your dragon was very distressed when she arrived here -"

"So Romy went out to calm her, he did," the elf nodded, smiling and happily swinging his legs off the side of the bench.

When his mother was alive, she might have been put out by getting cut off mid-sentence but now, she just smiled down at Romy and nodded. Draco got the impression that the two of them had formed quite a bond while they'd been here together. Draco could hardly blame her, Romy's happiness and warmth was probably a welcome breath of fresh air compared to his father's coldness.

"I know your dragon was never the fondest of Romy, but we thought she might calm down a little when she saw him," his mother continued. "You know, familiarity and all that, but she didn't. She didn't seem to like Romy being there one bit."

"*Noooooo,*" Romy added, shaking his head and dropping into a low voice like he was in a pantomime. "Nope. Nope. Nope, she did not like it. Not one bits."

"I went outside too but that didn't do any good either. I'd watched you calm her a thousand times by running your hand over her snout so I thought .. Well, that didn't work either." She flexed her left hand, shook her head and gave a throaty laugh as if she was shaking off the memory. "She almost bit my hand off."

"What would've happened if she'd of bit it off, I mean you're already..."

"Dead?" his mother asked sarcastically, sounding an awful lot like Theo. "Well, I don't know if anything would have really happened, but I didn't want to chance having to walk around with a stump for a hand for the rest of eternity, so I thought it best to just let her be."

Draco's lips tugged into a barely-there smile. He'd forgotten how dry his mother's sense of humour was. If anything, death seemed to have made her freer. She was more relaxed now.

Draco nodded once. He wanted to look at her to see if it was genuine but he couldn't, wasn't brave enough to yet. Instead, he stared at the house, would've stared at a fucking single blade of grass all day if it meant that he didn't have to meet his mother's eyes yet. He looked at the bricks just above the kitchen window, just in time to see a head of white hair disappear behind a curtain in a second-story window. Oh, so he was here too.

"Don't worry about your father." Out of the corner of his eye, he saw his mother shake her head and scoff lightly. "He's still having trouble adjusting. I dare say that he'll never truly get used to the idea but that matters not to me. Let him lock himself away and sulk about it alone for all I care. He can waste his afterlife being a bitter old man, but he's not going to waste mine, too."

Draco's brows met in the middle. His father had never claimed to be the most adaptable man on the planet but he'd been dead for years. Surely there had to come a time when even he had to accept what'd happened to him and move on?

"How can he still not be used to this? He's been here for what? Twelve years? You'd think that he'd be over it by now."

What an incredibly naïve thing to say. He'd been here for two minutes and he already thought he knew how this place worked. Could he ever really get used to ... this, whatever it was?

His mother gave him a knowing smile. Given her age, her eyes should have crinkled but they didn't. No wonder she didn't seem to mind it here. "I'm not talking about him not being used to being *her*, darling, he's not used to you and Hermione being together."

Draco scoffed before he could help it. That was so typical of his father. He could get passed the afterlife and the notion that some form of life does go on after death, he could get passed himself and his wife being brutally murdered and their son going on to commit the most atrocious war crimes known to man, but his son falling for a Mudblood? Oh no, that was just too much.

What a fucking twat his father was, even in death.

"So you've seen that too, then?" Draco asked, just about managing to keep the anger out of his voice. "Me and her?"

"Not everything. Just bits and pieces, but I've seen enough." Her eyes flickered down, and she smiled affectionately as she ran her thumb back and forth over the new ring on his left hand. "It suits you."

The anxiety started to settle a little. He'd completely forgotten about that. Before his dragon had been big enough to mount, he'd got his broom and took to the skies beside her. It'd been a welcome distraction for Draco. He told Voldemort that it was a necessary training exercise, but in reality, he just wanted an escape from it all. They used to spend hours and hours in the air together, soaring above the clouds. It was so many years ago, it felt like another life.

"It felt like another life. *Haha*, that was fucking ironic."

"But after a while, I couldn't continue to watch you."

"Why?" Draco asked, voice hoarse, throat closing, anxiety roaring back to life. "Because I couldn't continue to watch the way you were changing. I could see that the war was draining the life out of you. Every time I visited, I could see it carving out my son and taking pieces of him away. The more it went on, the colder you became. The less you smiled. The less you laughed and after a while, I just couldn't see you like that, especially when there was nothing that I could do to take away your pain."

"So what else did you see?" He didn't want to know the answer, feared it would stain their reunion but he had to ask it. Couldn't stop himself.

His mother watched him very closely when she answered him. "Not everything, dear, but..."

*Enough.* She'd seen enough.

Fucking hell, he'd been afraid of that. The dread that'd been gathering in his chest got so bad that he had to look away. He stared at the grass near his feet. His hand gripped the edge of the bench.

She'd seen it all then. She'd seen all the horrid, repulsive things that he'd done during the war. She'd seen the utter monster that he'd become since she'd died.

What must she have thought of him?!

He hadn't realised that his Occlumency walls weren't up until he felt his mother take his hand and squeeze it reassuringly.

"Try not to fret about it too much, sweetheart," she told him. She squeezed his hand again but he still couldn't look at her. "In the end, you were the one who killed Voldemort. It might not undo the things that you did, but he can't hurt anyone else now because of you. Killing him, that saved so many lives, so try and focus on that instead."

"Well, your dragon..." she said, falling back into her story. "Nothing could calm her down. She was roaring and screeching and trying to burn everything in sight, I was worried the Manor wouldn't last, but as soon as Hermione got here, she calmed. I swear that dragon is more in sync with that girl than she ever was with you."

"Was Granger alright? Did you see her?"

"Yes I saw her and yes, *she looked fine*." His mother caught his hand again and gave it a squeeze. "The pain doesn't follow you here. She woke up in the gardens, same as you, and I think she must have heard your dragon screeching because she came running in, full pelt, no regard for her own safety. She ran straight towards that dragon, not caring that her fangs were gnashing blindly or that fire was blazing everywhere. She put her hand out and ran it across her scales and just like that- the beast was calm," his mother said, snapping her fingers for emphasis. "Your dragon nuzzled into Hermione's hands like she was trying to hug her. Hermione smiled and whispered something to her, then she got on her back and the two of them flew off somewhere. I don't know what she said, but I got the impression that Hermione was taking her out of the way somewhere."

Draco smiled. That was so fucking Hermione Granger of her, of course she'd spend her first few minutes of whatever the fuck this was looking after something else. That bleeding Gryffindor heart of hers.

"And I must say," his mother said, "although you named that dragon after me - she doesn't seem to like me very much. She doesn't seem to like anyone apart from you and -"

He briefly saw his mother's lips move as she tried to finish her thought but he couldn't hear what she said. Her words were drowned out by a noise. A noise that'd made even the bravest men quake in fear during the war, a noise that'd given men night terrors but sounded like the sweetest of music in Draco's ears now.

A roar.

A loud, thunderous roar and the sound of leathery wings flapping high in the air. Draco was on his feet before the black shadow eclipsed the bench. He looked towards the sky but he couldn't see the sun anymore, it was being blocked out by a huge, reptilian figure that was slowly gliding down from the clouds.

As his dragon neared the ground, she swung the lower half of her body forward and started to flap her wings to steady her descent, and it created a massive wind tunnel.

His mother got to her feet and held onto the bottom of her skirt to keep it from riding up, and Romy was almost knocked over by the strength of it. His mother turtled under her breath as his dragon's back legs unearthed the perfectly laid grass. Trust her to be concerned about the state of her lawn, even in the afterlife.

When Narcissa's winged front claws touched the ground, she reared her head back and gave out an ear-piercing, threatening roar that was loud enough to make the earth shake and blood run cold.

His mother and Romy took a wise step back but Draco moved forward.

Because Narcissa was there and she was whole again. Her chest wasn't caved in like it'd been when she'd died. Her eyes were bright and alive and even from the distance, heat radiated from her body, just as it had when she'd been alive.

His mother hadn't been exaggerating. Narcissa was very disorientated. She landed in the gardens about fifty feet away from where he was standing and she didn't even see him at first.

When he started to approach her, she reared her head high in the air and bared her fangs. She was on high alert and ready to kill. She was acting on instinct, protecting something, some precious to her, something she thought was hers. When the dragon stalked closer, Romy and his mother continued their retreat but Draco walked toward her.

"Draco, please be careful," his mother warned. He felt her fingers ghost on the back of his arm like she was trying to grab him but he was already too far in front of her. "She might not be all there yet."

He continued to walk forward slowly -

His dragon started to growl. A soft light gathered in the back of her throat - But then she recognised him. Draco saw it flash in her scarlet red eyes the moment she realised it was him. Her jaws snapped shut and she tilted her enormous head to the side. She watched him for a few moments, then she started to make that low chirping noise that made her sound like a hatchling again. She was confused that he was there but she was happy to see him. She moved to step forward, a low rumbling sound tumbling from behind her closed jaw, then she lowered her neck to the ground and right there, sitting at the base of her neck -

Hermione.

Dread twisted through his chest - even that felt real too. "You mean you can see what happens on the..." "The other side? The real world? The land of the living? What exactly was he supposed to call it?"

"Oh yes," she answered, still smiling softly. "We can see everything that happens in the world of the living if we want to, and if we don't, well, then we don't have to either. It's completely up to you. I find it best not to watch too often, it can be quite painful at first, watching how the world goes on without you, but after a while, a visit here and there, it's not too bad. I find it helps the adjustment period."

"You can see everything that goes on?"

"Not everything." She shook her head. "It takes a great deal of practice, and it's quite exhausting so you can't do it all the time but yes, we can check in on the living if we really want to."

"And you've been watching me? All this time?"

"Of course I have, I'm your mother," she said it slowly, firmly, as though the very idea that she wouldn't have kept an eye on her only son all these years was outrageous. "I needed to make sure that you were safe, even if there was nothing I could do to help you."

"How often did you..." come and see me? Was that the right way to phrase it? Fuck knew.

"At the beginning, I tried to check in daily - I would have done if the process wasn't so bloody complicated and tiring. Your father tried to talk me out of it. He said that as long as you didn't appear here, that meant that you were fine enough and I should be content with that but I couldn't help myself. I needed to know if you were alright."

Her words of comfort did the opposite. Paranoia, dread, anxiety, all three of them started to blossom in his chest. He watched her closely as she continued, fiddling with the rings that'd followed him into this new life. He immediately found that the new one was his favourite.

"I loved watching you with that dragon," she continued. "It gave you a purpose and a distraction outside of the war. I loved watching you teach her how to breathe fire and learn her about the world. And I loved, oh Salazar, Draco, it made me so happy to watch the two of you flying together when she was too little to have you on her back. It was one of the last times I saw you genuinely smile."

Draco had even been tempted to carve his mother's name into the bench after she'd died. The only reason he hadn't was because he didn't want Voldemort to find out that this bench had meant something to him and rip it out.

So many secrets had been laid bare here over the years. Theo had sat here once and told Draco how scared he was to take the Dark Mark, and Blaise had revealed that he didn't think he had the strength to survive the coming carnage, right on these few scraps of wood. It was a place where a person could bear their soul without fear of judgement. A place where you could reveal your deepest and darkest secrets, but over time, it became so much more than that.

It wasn't just secrets that were shared on the bench, it was a place where a person could be completely honest, let their guard down, drop the pretences and let whatever monsters had been plaguing them run wild.

He remembered sitting on this bench with Hermione. She'd just saved his life and they sat on this bench together, smoked cigarettes, and he'd told her his dragon's name. That'd been the first time he'd ever let his guard down with her, and it'd been on this exact bench. He hadn't realised it until that moment, and it made a small smile peel onto his face.

"I've missed that smile."

Draco's eyes snapped up to meet his mother's. She was watching him closely, a twinkle in her eyes.

"You've been wearing it a lot recently, I smile every time she brings it out of you."

She. She'd said '*she*', as in Granger. Did his mother somehow know about the two of them? He wasn't ready to know. Didn't dare chance it and possibly ruin their reunion ...

"What exactly is this place?" he asked. The words just slipped out. It wasn't the most important question, didn't have anything to do with what his mother had just said but it came out of his mouth, nonetheless.

She didn't seem phased by his abrupt change in topic. "None of us are really sure of the name of it," she answered. "Heaven sounds like such a ridiculous thing - but I suppose ... the Afterlife would be a rather fitting name for it." She gave him a moment to let that sink in before she carried on. "You see, we're hidden from those who are still alive. I'm not exactly sure myself how it all works, but what I do know is that those who're still alive can't see us, but we can see them, if we want to, that is."

Even though he'd felt his heart stop a few minutes ago, even though he knew it was dead in his chest, he fucking swore that he felt it beat again the moment he saw her.

There she was, sitting happily between his dragon's shoulders, the most real and beautiful and fierce thing he'd ever seen.

She was there but just like his mother and his dragon, she didn't look anything like the last time he'd seen her. There was no blood. She was unhurt and perfect in every sense of the word. She was wearing that red summer dress that she used to wear around the manor and her hair shone like spun caramel as the light bounced off of it.

Hermione squinted across the gardens and when she saw him, time stood still. Her lashes fluttered and she froze. She opened her mouth but didn't speak, couldn't speak, like seeing him there had knocked the words from her lungs just like it had for him.

She was there.

He was there.

His dragon lowered her right shoulder to the ground. Hermione slipped off her back and landed on the grass with a soft thud.

Time still didn't restart, but Draco's heart felt like it was beating ten-fold.

He stared at Hermione, and she stared right back at him like she couldn't decide if he was real or not. Neither of them moved. He didn't breathe. He wondered if she did.

He'd never wanted something to be real more than he did in those moments. She looked real. She looked like a fucking dream that he never wanted to wake up from...

But what if she wasn't ... What if he'd been right? What if this was all part of his punishment and any moment, she was going to be taken from him.

Suddenly he couldn't breathe. Suddenly, he felt his heart again for what it was. Cold in his chest. Unbeating. Dead.

If she wasn't real ... then it was the highest form of cruelty. If this wasn't real ...

And then he sprinted towards her. Ran for her like a bat out of hell. He had to know. Had to touch her and smell her and taste her before this whole thing evaporated.

She started to run towards him but she didn't get far. Must've only taken about ten steps before he slammed into her. He scooped her up into his arms. His lips crashed against hers and he kissed her like he wanted to leave her as breathless as she made him feel.

She was warm and soft, and tasted bitter and sweet. He fisted his hands in her curls and pulled her body tightly against his. He couldn't get enough of her. He kissed her like she was all he needed to feel alive again.

Hermione kissed him back just as fiercely. She fisted her hands against his scalp and pulled him down into her mouth. She'd never held onto him so tightly. She'd never kissed him so desperately ...

"No." Despite the happiness in her voice, Hermione shook her head. "No, no, no," she said between kisses. Her fingers held onto his face so tightly that her nails bit into his skin, but it didn't matter to him. He welcomed it. It meant that she was there. It meant that he was with her again. "No. Why are you here?" Another kiss. "It's not your time." Another kiss. "You're not supposed to be here yet."

For the first time since he'd stopped breathing, Draco laughed. She'd done it again. Even in death, she'd breathed life back into him. His hands tightened around her waist. He wouldn't be parted from her. Never again. If the devil was coming to drag him down to hell, he'd have the fight of his life on his hands. "Did you honestly think that I was going to let you get away from me that easily?" he whispered, his lips brushing against hers with every word. "*'Til death do us part'*" was utter bullshit. Death was never going to part us, I decided that a long time ago."

"How are you here?" she asked, hands still threaded in his hair, still kissing him.

Everything felt real. Her waist. Her curls in his hand and her lips on his tongue. It all felt real and if it wasn't.. if this was the price he had to pay then he'd fucking welcome it. An eternity of torture didn't sound so bad if he could keep hold of these memories.

"Didn't you see what happened?"

"No, I haven't seen anything." She kissed him again once, twice, three times, and then she suddenly stiffened in his arms. She pulled back and looked into his eyes. "Oh God, please, please tell me that you didn't do anything stupid!"

He leaned his forehead against hers. Her lashes fluttered against his cheeks. "You're a clever girl," he whispered, right before he leaned in and stole another kiss.

Was that a good thing or a bad thing? Draco wished he could find his voice to ask.

"I know this place is a lot to take in at first sweetheart but you'll adjust. I'll help you get through it." When he didn't answer, she cupped the left side of his face in her hand, and gently ran her thumb back and forth over his cheek. "You have no idea how much I've missed you."

*I think I do*, was what he wanted to say but again, words failed him.

His mother released him and took another step back. She held her arm up and smiled gently at him. "I'm sure you have a thousand questions," she said. "Come and sit with me. I'll explain everything."

His mouth might not have been working but his legs did just fine. With no hesitation at all, he linked his arm through hers and the two of them started to walk, together, arm in arm, retracing steps that they hadn't walked together in over a decade.

Romy and Narcissa chatted idly as they made their way through the grounds but Draco remained silent. He had so many questions, he didn't know where to start, each one felt just as important as the one before it; they were swarming inside of his head like a colony of angry bees, fighting to get out first.

His mother guided him to the bench under the Cherry Blossom tree. As they sat down, she motioned for him to sit beside her and asked Romy if he'd mind bringing them something to drink. The elf nodded happily and disappeared with a gentle pop.

When his mother had still been alive, this bench had been their spot. It used to be a bit of a safe haven for both of them. It was far away enough from the main house that his mother felt like they could speak freely without fear of being overheard. When she'd been alive, they used to go on walks to this bench all the time.

"*The secret benth*", that was their name for it. It was a safe space, and it had been for Draco ever since he was a child. Whatever was said on that bench was sacred. Whatever was said on that bench wasn't to be repeated when they left it, and after she'd died, the rest of his family had continued with the silly tradition. He and Daphne used to meet at it to talk about the war. He and Astoria used to go on walks to it to spill secrets to one another.

in its usual spot. It looked just like Malfoy Manor but how could it have been? His family home was in ruins. It'd been burned to the ground by Voldemort's followers weeks ago, so why did it look perfect now? Why did this whole thing feel real? Why could he feel the sunlight warming his cheeks and a breeze on his neck?

His mind was buzzing with questions as he walked through the gardens. He took a left as he neared the family cemetery -

“Draco.”

He didn't need to see her. He'd recognise her voice anywhere, and hearing it after all these years, it made him go cold.

His mother.

She was standing right there with Rony at her side. She looked exactly the same as she had the last time he saw her and yet, nothing at all like the image that'd haunted his memory for years. She was perfectly preened and there wasn't a drop of blood or a scratch on her. She was glowing and youthful. Her face wasn't pale and contorted with pain anymore, she was smiling at him with tears in her eyes.

It was strange to see her that way. Twelve years had passed and yet time hadn't touched her. She looked like she was only about ten years older than him now.

The moment his mother saw him, she started to walk toward him.

“MASTER!” Rony squeaked as he sprinted ahead of Narcissa. He wrapped his little arms around Draco's leg and sobbed into his trousers. “Oh, it is so good to see you sir it is! We has been missing you a lot!”

His mother wasted no time. The moment he was within her reach, she seized his shoulders, pulled him into her arms and squeezed him as hard as she could. “Oh sweetheart,” she whispered in his ear, sobbing a little. “I'm so sorry that you're here already but I'm so happy to see you!”

Draco didn't know what to say. Or what to do. His arms stayed limp at his sides and his voice was trapped in his throat. Was any of this real? She felt real but he didn't know what to think. He could feel her arms around him. He could feel her tears wetting the side of his face, but it felt too good to be true.

After all the people that he'd hurt, he didn't deserve this. He deserved to burn.

His mother placed her hands on his shoulders, and took a step back so that she could look at him properly. “Oh look at you,” she half-laughed, half-sobbed, nothing but pride and love beaming out of her soft blue eyes. “You've changed so much.”

He had a feeling it might be the last one for a minute. She was going to be very cross with him when she found out what he'd done. “Figure it out.”

The seconds ticked by. Her hands slid down to cup his face and she stared at him with tears fresh in her eyes. “After I died...” she murmured, already putting the pieces together. “You went after him, didn't you? Voldemort?”

“Ding, ding, ding, five points to Gryffindor,” he grinned. He peppered kisses along the edge of her mouth, across her cheek, and made a path to her ear so that he could whisper in it. “It was a Sectumsempra that got me in the end. Potter will be chuffed.”

She smacked him hard across the shoulder and he laughed again.

He shouldn't have been smiling but he was. Smiling like a fucking fool without a care in the world because he didn't. He was dead but he was with her. The world would go on without him and that was completely fine, because his world had stopped the moment her heart had stopped beating.

“Did you even wait for the others to come and help you?” Hermione hissed, fire in her eyes and fury in her voice. She looked fucking incredible.

“No.”

“You fucking idiot!” she hissed, smacking his arm again. “You shouldn't have done that! You should have waited -” She tried to smack him again, but he caught her arm and yanked her forward. His mouth silenced hers.

“I told you in this life or the next, remember?” he asked against her lips. “I was coming after you one way or another, I just wanted to take him out first before I did.”

She tried to smack him again, clearly not done arguing yet, but Draco kissed her into submission. When something large and solid as a brick wall nudged into Draco's side, Hermione started laughing.

He chuckled against her lips but kept kissing her. Narcissa huffed and pressed her snout underneath Draco's elbow and tried to force herself into a non-existent space in, her red eye watched him closely.

But even that couldn't force them apart.

Keeping a hand wrapped firmly around Hermione's waist, Draco leaned forward and pressed his palm against the scales that lined Narcissa's cheek, and as he leaned in, her red eye watched him closely.

Warm. Like hot coals recently pulled from a fireplace, and when she purred in contentment, the sound vibrated through his body, right to the tips of his toes, just like it had done when she was alive.

They were here. They both were, and even though all of them were dead, it felt real, and that was more than enough for Draco.

Narcissa purred and curled her body around the pair of them. Uniting them. Protecting what was hers. *Theirs*. It was all the same now.

"Look," Hermione's smile was as gentle as candlelight as she looked down at his forearm. "It's gone."

Draco followed her eyes and looked down -

As always, she was right. The Dark Mark was gone. Where there was once a tattoo, there was now only clean skin.

He shivered as Hermione ran her palm gently over his forearm. She smiled when her eyes landed on the new ring on her finger.

"Told you you'd be wearing it eventually," Draco leaned down to kiss her again, but when his mother suddenly cleared her throat, Hermione pulled herself out of his arms. Well, she tried to. Draco wasn't going to let her go. Never again.

"Mrs Malfoy," Hermione started, suddenly nervous. "I..."

"Please dear, call me Narcissa." His mother smiled. "You are wearing my ring after all."

Hermione stiffened but Draco just pulled her tighter into his side and chuckled into her hair. She looked down at her hand briefly -

"Don't you dare think about giving it back," his mother scolded softly. "It's yours now," she added, holding her arms out.

Although his mother had moved forward with nothing but good intentions, his dragon didn't.

Narcissa lurched forward and snapped her teeth in her namesakes direction, and when his mother raised her hand, his dragon hissed and curled her body around Draco and Hermione like she was protecting a clutch of eggs.

"Cissa it's fine," Draco hushed, running his hand back and forth over her warm scales. "She would never hurt -"

the more agonising because it was so unexpected, because he'd *dared* to hope that their might be better for him.

For a long time, he didn't move. He waited for the fire. Waited for the legendary pain to find him and when nothing happened, he opened his eyes just a crack.

A gorgeous, clear blue sky was all he could see above him. There were even a few clouds. Since when did hell have clouds?!

Even though there was no fire or smoke or discomfort of any kind, Draco was still cautious. He stayed completely still and stared up ahead in silence, watching as one cloud rolled into the next. He watched and watched, and it was only when a gentle breeze drafted across his face that he moved at all, because he recognised the smell it carried.

Wisteria flowers but not the usual kind. No, no these were floral with a hint of something extra - just like the ones his mother used to grow especially.

No. No, he couldn't be home. That was impossible, but for a split second, he dared to hope that he could be.

Draco bolted upright into a sitting position and looked behind him -

Fucking hell, he *was*. He was home. Right there behind him, standing tall and proud as it ever had been, was Malfoy Manor. It even had the huge trellis of white roses that he used to climb down to sneak out of the house when he was young.

When Draco stood up, he found that his body no longer ached, and when he looked down, he noticed that he was wearing a black shirt and trousers. His collar was open and the sleeves were rolled up to his elbows -

And his father's wedding ring. He held his hand up to the light to examine it. It was still there, on the fourth finger of his right hand and glittering softly in the sun. It'd followed him to wherever the fuck this was. His hands weren't soaking with blood anymore either. Not his own. Not Voldemort's or even Hermione's. His hands and clothes were clean.

He looked back up at the house again and for a moment, he thought about going inside but he didn't. Instead - and Merlin only knew why he did it - he decided to explore the grounds. He walked through the gardens of his home in a dreamlike daze, taking everything in as though this path that he'd walked a thousand times was suddenly brand new to him.

Every detail was just as he remembered it to be. The wisteria plants were flourishing right where they'd always been. The Venomous Tentaculat was thriving

He'd spent the last twelve years committing the most atrocious acts. He was a war criminal and a murderer, wasn't he supposed to pay for all of that upon his death?

Wasn't he supposed to be screaming and writhing in burning agony for the rest of eternity? Wasn't he supposed to pay for all the hearts that he'd stopped from beating the moment his own stilled?

It's what he'd been preparing himself for. He hadn't expected... this. This nothingness. This lack of pain or sensation of any kind.

But then again, maybe being conscious but nothing at the same time was a punishment in itself. To feel nothing, taste nothing, see nothing, just be a ball of nothingness but completely aware and know that there was no end, that sounded horrible. Sounded enough to make anyone go mad.

And it sounded frighteningly real.

The thought made him panic. He gasped at the horror of what might likely be his new reality - and it was then that he realised he felt it. He felt the breath that he'd just taken. Felt his lungs expand and when he exhaled... he felt them deflated.

So maybe he wasn't just nothing. Maybe there was more to him than that. He kept his eyes closed and started to do a mental checklist in his head.

His toes were there. So were his shoulders. And his legs.

And when he tried to make a fist -

Damp.

Was that... grass that he could feel? Yes, he was sure of it. He could feel blades of grass between his fingers. Soft and thin and damp, freshly mowed, the way they felt in the spring, when all the dark and dreary nights had come to an end and everything was starting to grow afresh.

Hell wasn't supposed to feel like that, was it? All the books and scrolls described hell as hot. A burning hellfire. An awful, torture chamber with moats made of fire and the air so hot it boils the skin right off the bone. This place wasn't that, so what the fuck was it?

It was a trick. It had to be. After everything he'd done, there had to be more to it than this ...

Yes, there was more to come, he was sure of it. This was probably part of it. Lure him into a false sense of security, get him to let his guard down, lower his defences, make him feel hopeful, only for the pain and torment to start afterwards, made all

But his mother had taken a step closer, and his dragon wasn't taking any changes. She opened her mouth and fire started to gather in the back of her throat -

"I think it's best if you two take her out of the way," his mother told him, taking a wise step back. "*Before* she burns our afterlife to the ground."

The moment the first Narcissa Malfoy backed away, the second calmed.

"Are you sure?" Draco asked. Their reunion had been so short.

"Yes. The two of you should go and be together for a little while," his mother said, tears in her eyes as she looked back and forth between him and Hermione and the rings they both now wore. "We have all the time in the world. I'll still be here when you get back."

Draco nodded. Yes, she was right. This place wasn't going anywhere. This wasn't goodbye, he'd never have to say goodbye to either of them again. This place, whatever the fuck it was, it wasn't a place for heartbreak or sadness, it was a place for family's to be reunited. He'd see her again very soon. That, he was very certain of.

His mother waved her temporary goodbyes, Romy did the same, and as soon as they were back in the house, Narcissa relaxed and uncoiled her body. She laid her shoulder against the ground again and Hermione climbed onto her back, and once she'd settled between the dragons shoulders, Hermione leaned forward and held out her hand for Draco to take. "So, Rome or Iceland?"

Draco's eyes snapped up to hers. "What?"

"Where do you want to start?" she asked, grinning down at him from atop his dragon's back. "Personally, I like the thought of seeing the Northern lights first, but it's up to you." "

He blinked. Lost for a moment.

"We said that we'd travel the world together in this life or the next, didn't we?" Hermione clarified. "Well, we're here now, aren't we? We have this other life, so where do you want to start?"

He scoffed and shook his head. He took Hermione's hand, and she pulled him up onto Narcissa's back. He settled comfortably behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist, and just as his dragon opened her wings, he leaned down, rested his chin on her shoulder, and whispered into her ear huskily, "You decide. I followed you in death, I'll follow you fucking anywhere, *my little lion*."

No sooner than the words had left his lips, Narcissa started to take flight. She carried all three of them into the air, and as Malfoy Manor disappeared below them, as they lost themselves in the clouds - free and together, at last - Draco could think about only one thing. He had a fresh start. He had another life - *with Hermione fucking Granger*. Who would've thought that he'd get to be so lucky.

## CHAPTER 75



## EPILOGUE TWO

Silence.

Nothing.

There wasn't a fucking sound.

Draco felt nothing. He could hear nothing. Smell nothing. Might as well have been floating on a cloud of nothingness for all the good his senses were. He had no idea where he was. He couldn't even feel his own body anymore, which - if he really thought about it - wasn't the worst thing in the world considering the pain he'd been in a few moments ago...

He was grateful that it hadn't, but he'd expected the pain to follow him when he'd died. After everything he'd done, it was what he deserved. Wasn't it?

Emerald\_Slytherin

to take something a little more complicated than death to keep the two of them apart.”

"Yes. They always looked terrified. Every single one of them."

She'd obviously answered the way he'd wanted her to because a gentle smile spread across his face. "And how did Draco look when he died?" he asked. "Did he look terrified?"

"No."

"So what did he look like then?"

She thought about his face the last time she'd seen him. Even after all these years, it was impossible to forget. She saw it every day. "He looked relieved that it was all finally over. He looked... like he knew his suffering was coming to an end."

*"Exactly."* Theo tucked a piece of hair behind her ear. "That's why I know we did the right thing. After Hermione died, a life without her would have been torture for Draco, and after everything he'd done for us, for this entire family - even the ones that he never got to meet," he said, tapping gently on her stomach, "he didn't deserve that. He deserved to be at peace."

She liked the thought of that. He was in so much pain at the end, both physically and emotionally. The thought that it'd all gone away after he'd died, the thought that he wasn't suffering anymore, it comforted her - a little bit.

"Are you sure?" Daphne asked.

"I've never been so sure of anything in my life. I know that it's not the ending that any of us wanted for them. I know we all wanted them to be alive and happy, growing old hearing stories of how feral their children were, and listening to them argue with each other for all eternity, but that's life. Sometimes, it doesn't turn out the way we want it to, but believe me, they're at peace now and they're together, and that in itself, is a happy ending."

Daphne nodded and turned back to the graves. Draco had been very clear that he wanted to be buried with her. He wanted them to be together in every possible way in this life, just in case he couldn't follow her into the next, but what if he hadn't? "Do you think he found Hermione in the afterlife?"

"Absolutely."

"How can you be so sure?"

"You didn't see them together for as long as I did. Trust me, baby," Theo said, right before he kissed the bridge of her nose. "I saw them move mountains for each other. I saw them literally travel through the gates of hell for each other - it's going

"The house feels so empty without them," Daphne whispered. "Every time I look across the dining table, it feels empty. No matter how many children Astoria takes in, the table is always going to feel empty because Draco and Hermione aren't there." Her bottom lip started to quiver and she bit onto it to keep hold of herself. Apart from her time with the healer, she'd had such a lovely day. She felt so stupid ruining it now by crying. "I keep seeing his face all bloody like that... I should have saved him!"

"No, you shouldn't have. You did the right thing in letting him go!"

"You didn't think that at the time," Daphne cut him off. Even though it'd been years, the way her husband had begged for her to heal Draco was always fresh in her mind.

"Yeah, well, admittedly I didn't handle it the best..." Theo scoffed in her hair. His breath tickled her neck and made goosebumps raise on the back of her arms. "But I didn't know about the promise that you'd made him."

"But..."

"If you'd have healed him, he'd have just found another way to be with her and that wouldn't have been fair. This way was better; he got to go out on his own terms. *You did the right thing in letting him go Daph!* It's what he wanted!"

"How can you know that?"

Theo's arms tightened around them both and he nuzzled his nose into the side of her neck. "Well, have you seen either of them since they died? As ghosts, I mean?"

Daphne shifted in his arms slightly so she could look at him out of the corner of her eye. She shook her head once.

"You see? That means that neither of them had any unfinished business when they died. It means that they're at peace now."

"You can't know that. What if they aren't at peace? How can we be sure that we did the right thing?"

"Put it this way, during our service for the Dark Lord, we killed a lot of people, right? Hundreds? Thousands?"

Daphne nodded once, at a loss for words.

"And when we killed people, do you remember how their faces had looked? Right before they died?"

Theo's body went rigid. She felt his eyes watching her face. "I know," was all he said.

"This should be them," Daphne hushed, nodding her chin toward the path Blaise and Astoria had taken, the one that led back to the house. "They should be here with us. It's not fair."

"I know."

"They should have had this," Daphne laid her hand atop her husband's and intertwined their fingers. "They would have been such good parents." Tears started to well in her eyes at the same moment her throat burned. She'd done such a good job of keeping it together since she'd found out she was expecting, but thinking about their child, looking down at the graves, it all hit her at once. Fucking hormones.

Theo took a deep breath, she felt it against her cheek, sharp and exhausted and relieved all at the same time. "Is this why you're not excited about the baby yet?" He pressed down gently on the small, barely there swell of her stomach. The gesture was small, but it was the most protective thing she'd ever seen him do, and it brought fresh tears to her eyes.

She really had to endure six more months of this? How did pregnant women not collapse from dehydration?

Daphne sniffed and tried to steady herself. She used the back of her free hand to rid her face of tears. "I am excited. It's just, every time I think about our baby, I think about the aunt and uncle that they'll never get to meet."

"You feel guilty?"

"Don't you? Hermione should be teaching them to paint and Draco should be showing them how to care for a dragon. They should be there, Theo. They should have had their happy ending, and I feel so guilty that we get to live this fucking wonderful life, together, with our baby, and the two of them don't."

Theo's curls ghosted the side of her face as he shook his head. "They're gone. It's time to let go of the guilt."

"How can I do that when I know that I could have saved him?"

"Daph I was there. I saw the state Draco was in. There wasn't anything any of us could've done. He was already pretty much gone by the time we got to the Cathedral."

When Daphne was finished, she stood up and stared down at the graves below, at the four names that were missing from their family.

Romy.

Narcissa.

Draco.

Hermione.

The four that were memorialised under the cherry blossom tree.

The four who'd had to die so that the other five could live.

She heard Theo approach sometime later but she didn't turn around. He stood behind her, wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her against his chest. "Hi baby," he whispered. He kissed her cheek and then pressed his hand ever so gently against the bottom of her stomach. "How are my girls doing?"

Daphne smiled and leaned back against him, stealing his warmth. "What makes you so convinced that it's a girl?"

She felt him grin against her cheek, peppering it with kisses before he answered. "just a feeling"

"If it's a boy, can we call him Draco?"

Theo tutted in her ear. "I thought we'd settled on Freddie?"

"Freddie can be a middle name."

"Hmmm, Draco Freddie Nott." Theo thought it over for a few seconds and then laughed. "Ooooh, he'd fucking hate that," he added, nodding towards one of the middle headstone. "We have to do it."

Daphne fell quiet. Although she was nestled in her husbands arms, although she was hopeful for what their future promised, she didn't feel whole. She should have done, but she didn't. Doubted that she would ever again.

"You okay, baby?" Theo asked after a little while. "You seem a little... off today."

"Do I?"

"Yeah," he whispered, pressing another kiss against her cheek. "What are you thinking about?"

"That it's not fair."

children to go to bed. The old elf hadn't been the same since Ronny died, but with the children around, a little life returned to her.

Daphne and Theo helped her where they could. Once Quinzel had bathed the three terrors, Daphne and Theo wrangled them to bed. It took a while to entice them to actually get in their beds - and Theo had to sing and enact two full Queen songs before they actually started to settle, but by the time their uncle sang the second chorus of "*We are the Champions*," all three of them were finally in the land of nod.

While Theo made sure everyone was tucked in - and not pretending to be asleep, like they occasionally did - Daphne went downstairs. As she made her way through the dinning room, she waved her hand and the mess started to magically take care of itself. Paint pots levitated to the sink in the kitchen, and scrubbers started to work on the colourful swatches on the table.

Daphne didn't linger. She pushed the back door open and walked straight outside. She walked through the gardens and past the Malfoy family cemetery, and she kept walking until she found the cherry blossom tree.

Blaise and Astoria were still there. Daphne stayed back and watched them for a while, a small smile on her face as she watched Astoria talk happily and make gestures to the elegant, ornate-shaped marble headstones. Just before the pair left, Astoria kissed the tips of her index and middle finger and gently pressed them against the middle headstone.

When Daphne was alone, she gathered up the edges of her dress and knelt on the floor. She laid her wand on the ground beside her and started to rearrange the flowers that were darted around the grave. She'd always preferred to do this by hand.

"Hey you two," she whispered quietly, readjusting the already perfect roses. "We missed you both today." She grabbed the cutters that were always laid to the right of the headstone and started to cut the leaves off of the older roses. "Don't judge me too much for this," she said, nodding towards the state of her dress. "The little ones got into the paint again. You would have loved them; they're turning into quite the artists."

Daphne. Theo. Astoria. Blaise. Quinzel. The five of them had spent days making sure their graves were perfect. It never needed much pruning but once a day - sometimes more - Daphne or one of the others would come out and make it perfect. They needed to for their own sanity. Felt like they owed them that at the very least.