Hermione stood in the kitchen of the Burrow, nervously shifting from foot to foot. Her fingers twitched around the beaded bag in her hands.

Pigwidgeon had flown into her room and Hermione fed him a bit of toast to keep him busy while she opened up the letter he dropped on her desk. She had expected it to be from Ron, but it was Ginny's handwriting filling up the page instead.

Hermione,

When are you going to come and stay? Phlegm is driving me bonkers and now Mum has joined her crusade of wedding planning so I am hiding out in Dad's shed writing this so they don't make me roll anymore silverware in preparation for 'the big day'. I'm dying. Please help.

Ron keeps asking if I've heard from you. Are you two not talking again? I honestly can't keep up anymore and when I asked him about it he stomped off to his room and slammed the door in my face. I need your advice on which hex is best to use on him so if you're not talking to him at least write me back with a good one.

Whatever is going on with you he's certainly sorry for it. He keeps moping around and at first I thought it might be because of Phlegm and the wedding, but he hasn't looked twice at her since we've been home. I even caught him reading the other day. Yeah, crazy, I know. I think he misses you.

Just owl back and let me know when you're getting here. I'm not taking no for an answer because I'm ***not*** *facing this wedding on my own.*

Do you know if Harry is coming? Have you heard from him? I've wanted to write, but… I haven't. What would I even say? 'After you're done saving the world, do you want to make out?'

Just get here, Hermione.

Ginny

Hermione smiled down at the letter. She could barely imagine Ginny sitting with Mrs. Weasley and Fleur discussing table linens and place settings. As much as Hermione did not want to get roped into this, she also didn't want to leave Ginny to fend on her own. Especially when she was still healing from her break up with Harry. They had so little time together, only a couple weeks before the world forced them apart.

Hermione felt a pang ring through her. It wasn't fair that Harry and Ginny had to give up on something good, something great, so that they could fight a war.

At least they're fighting on the same side.

Hermione shoved the thought away and picked up her quill, scratching a quick note back to Ginny telling her she would take a train to Devon tomorrow morning and be there by the afternoon.

She knew it was going to be uncomfortable seeing Ron again, but she had no idea it was going to be *this* bad.

"How's your summer going?"

"Good," Hermione squeaked. "I mean, it's been nice. A bit… stressful."

"I bet so."

Hermione glanced up at him nervously. Ginny might have thought Ron was acting glum, but Hermione knew he could hold onto a grudge longer than was good for him.

Ron flushed. "I just meant with everything going on, not…" He rubbed his hand over the back of his neck. "Shit."

Hermione bit her lip and looked around the, for once, empty kitchen. A rag was drying a copper pot, a black kettle hissed over the fireplace, and dry herbs swung gently from the ceiling.

"Tea?"

Hermione nodded and Ron summoned two cups from a creaking cabinet. As they landed on the table in front of them, he reached out and switched them, taking the chipped cup for his own and giving her the one in better shape. She gave him a nervous, but genuine smile as the kettle began pouring its contents, spilling a little over onto the table.

"It's good," Hermione said as she took another sip. Drinking the tea gave her something to do besides sit here and try to decide whether or not to look at him or ask him how he was doing or if he actually did hate her for sleeping with his worst enemy and lying about it to his face for months.

"I'll tell Mum you liked it."

She could hear people shouting outside, something about gnomes getting into the cabbages again and Ron drummed his fingers against his cup a few times before glancing up at her and stopping. She used to fuss at him for always doing that, but over the years the noise of his fingers hitting his cups had almost become calming to her.

"Do you know when Harry is getting here?" She didn't mean to be this stiff or awkward around him, but honestly, she just didn't know what to say and was second guessing everything she considered saying, trying to puzzle out if it might lead to something they didn't want to talk about and that made her think about *him* and that only made her feel *more* awkward about this whole situation in general because she shouldn't be sitting here in Ron's house, in the Weasley's house, thinking about Draco—

"The Order is keeping it all quiet. There's going to be a meeting here in a couple of days and they will be making the final plans then, I think." Ron gulped down a large

amount of tea and ran his finger over the chipped part of the cup. "I asked Dad and he said we can help, if we want."

"Of course!" Hermione jumped forward to the edge of her seat. "Absolutely. We're in this together. All of us."

Then, as a peace offering, Hermione reached across and placed her hand on Ron's, giving it a small squeeze. He had said he didn't hate her and she needed to remember that.

If Ron was willing to move past everything then she needed to be right there with him. Her and him and Harry. That's how it should be, the three of them, working together, getting through this together. They'd always had each other and that wasn't going to change now.

Not ever.

Ron's ears turned scarlet and he smiled back at her, blue eyes light.

"Thanks Hermione, that means a lot to—"

"Hermione!" Ginny came tumbling into the kitchen wearing dirty coveralls and threw her arms around Hermione. "I never got your owl saying you were coming!"

"I did," Ron admitted and the two girls stopped embracing long enough to look over at him. Ron sheepishly took another drink. "He's my owl, he brought the letter to me."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Ginny huffed. "Oh forget it, it doesn't matter." She waved her hand in front of her face and shook her head, long coppery hair falling back over her shoulders. "You're here now. But we need to get out of this kitchen before Mum catches us and orders us to help with the centerpieces."

"Yes, please," Hermione nodded her head eagerly.

Ginny looked around. "Where are your bags? Where's Crookshanks?"

A pit opened up somewhere inside her and Hermione barely caught herself on the edge before falling down into its depths. "It's, uhm, just this." She held up the beaded bag. "I had to leave Crookshanks with—"

She stopped talking when her breath caught in her throat. She had picked up her orange cat and held him close, whispering that he would be okay and Mum and Dad would take good care of him while she was gone.

"They won't remember me so try not to be too sad because they won't know why, okay?" She held him close to her chest and buried her face in his thick fur. Crookshanks purred loudly. "You'll like Australia. There will be lots of sunbeams to sleep in and toads to catch." He meowed loudly and Hermione sat him down on her bed. "Be a good boy, Crooks."

She would write to Ron, tell him she was coming. Harry would be there soon too and they'd all need to be in the same place anyways. And it would be nice to be able to see the Weasleys one more time and get to say goodbye to Ginny.

Hermione tapped her foot on the floor, gaze glued to the book.

She could go downstairs and start the coffee maker. Her parents would be up soon for work and her Dad always brewed a pot while her Mum scolded him, saying he would stain his teeth with it. He'd joke back that he knew a dentist who could help him out. He had repeated it a million times, but it always made her Mum smile.

Hermione *glared* at the book.

Then she reached for it, pulled it swiftly from the shelf and pushed it hard down into the beaded back with the others she was taking with her.

Grey shadows stretched across her room, lifting the darkness. She let out a deep breath and her chest felt the smallest bit lighter knowing the book, and its creamy parchment smell, was safely tucked away right where she could reach it if she needed to.

Hermione raised her chin and pulled her hair up on top of her head before heading for the door and then down the stairs.

Coffee. Letter. Packing.

Today was going to be productive. Today was not going to be one of the days she waited by the window for the newest issue of the Daily Prophet and when there was no mention of him, climbed the stairs back to her bedroom to lay there and try to breathe without her chest falling in on itself.

Today she was *not* going to cry over him. Not today, not tomorrow, not ever again.

Today she was going to smile along with her Mum when her Dad made bad jokes. Today she was going to play Scrabble with them after dinner instead of claiming to need to research. Today she was going to hug her parents a little tighter when they told her goodnight.

Because tomorrow she was leaving.

"Hey."

"Hi."

His absence almost made it easy not to think about him. Almost. But he was always there, slumped over in the back of her mind normally sneering at her when she dared approach the thoughts of him. But sometimes he was grinning, grey eyes lighting up under a fallen lock of pale blond hair.

Sometimes that was worse.

Who was she kidding? It was like getting hit by a bus that backed up and then ran her over again.

Hermione closed the book and set it aside. She could try all she wanted, but she wouldn't be able to read it. Not when it smelled like the smooth silk of his hair. Not when her heart was beating painfully in her chest at the mere memory of him.

But his memory wasn't the only thing she still had of his.

Hermione pushed the blanket down and pulled the leg of her shorts up. She had charmed it. It was wrong and bad and honestly probably a little sick, but she had charmed the bite mark on her thigh to remain. She wanted to keep it. This little something he had left her with. After all, it had been the best night of her life until…

Until it was the worst.

The same fingers she had run over the pages of the book now caressed the bruised mark on her upper thigh.

He had bit her. He had bruised her. He had hurt her. But he had also kissed her. He had held her. He had *loved* her.

Then he left her.

With no clue or notice or hint as to where he had gone. Hermione bit her lip and chewed it a little as she traced the line left from his mouth.

" *I will come for you, Hermione. I promise."*

But he had broken every promise he had ever made to her.

She roughly pulled down the leg of her shorts again and threw herself up out of the bed. Moving with decisive actions, Hermione placed *Charming Charms* back on her shelf with a sharp thud. That book wasn't essential and she hadn't packed it with the others.

Standing up she surveyed the shelves in front of her. She had already pulled the most important ones and tucked them away in her bag. She needed to finish sorting through the leftover supplies from her Hogwarts trunk and pack a few sets of clothes, maybe a winter coat, but she had time. Not much, but some still left.

Rosy rays of dawn seeped from her window.

Hermione stared at the parchment smelling book.

Ron was beside her. She hadn't even noticed him moving around the table but here he was.

"Ginny's right. Let's get you settled in and then we can head out before she sets us cleaning the whole house. Hopefully now that you're here Mum will go a little easier on us."

Hermione smiled up at him, her chest relaxing a little so that a small breath was able to leave her.

Ginny snorted. "Fat chance."

Hermione thought having Harry at the Burrow would make things easier, but once he arrived she seemed to only grow more and more anxious. It was as if his arrival set in motion everything she had been dreading ever since she found out about the horcruxes. Deep down she thought she always knew it was coming, but she did not expect it to come so soon.

And she hadn't expected to be trying to keep herself from falling into a bottomless pit of despair while they were supposed to be hunting down pieces of soul belonging to the darkest wizard alive who just happened to be the Master of the man she was in love with.

It was just a lot.

But Hermione had never backed down from a challenge before and she was not about to abandon her friends in their time of need, no matter how much she wanted to curl up under her covers and stay there until he came looking for her.

Hermione gasped. No. She couldn't think like that. Not even in the safety of Ginny's darkened bedroom, alone inside her head. She had half been expecting Draco to show up, hovering on his broom outside her window the night she returned back home, but he had never come. Did she even want him to?

Thinking about that night made her chest hurt and remembering the way he had dug his heel into her, glowering down with such venom made it even worse. What had been real and what had been lies? She *thought* she knew, she thought… but she had been wrong about him before. She had argued with Harry that there was no way Draco could have a Death Eater and all the while he had hidden the mark away from her. What else was he hiding?

Where was he hiding? She had plucked up her courage and asked Mr. Weasley, making sure Ron was busy tying ribbons around bundles of flowers, if the Ministry had any news on the Malfoys.

"They don't tell me much these days," he grimaced. "Can't trust anyone anymore. But from what I understand they are either very well protected or…" Hermione bit her lip until it hurt. "Or they don't need protection anymore. You never know with Death Eaters—it's a dog eat dog world of theirs."

She hated this waiting. This not knowing. This uncertainty. The Ministry was certainly ramping up for a fight, but the Death Eaters had been quiet. They were biding their time, but for what? When would they attack? Where would they attack? Hermione knew the answer to that one; Draco had told her.

"Once Dumbledore's dead we're going after the Ministry."

They had already broken out the remaining Death Eaters from Azkaban, Lucius Malfoy included. It had happened the day after the funeral, as if they waited until the headmaster was sealed away to make their move. Now there were even more Death Eaters at Voldemort's side and it was all because of Draco. He might not have killed Dumbledore, but he had let the Death Eaters in. He had orchestrated the whole event.

He had said he would fix it.

He had lied.

Maybe he had lied about coming for her too.

Hermione turned over, curling up under the patchwork quilt and pulling it up over her shoulders.

She couldn't wait for him. He had made his choice that night and he had taken her's from her when he cast the *imperius* curse on her. How could she ever trust someone who could do something like that? How could she ever love—but she did. What she had told him that night was true, no matter what he did, she couldn't stop loving him. The Draco in the back of her mind lifted his head and smirked at her.

Hermione closed her eyes tightly and willed herself to fall back asleep. It was too late to be thinking about these things now. Much too late.

And she needed to be up early to help set up and decorate for the wedding tomorrow. At least it would be a distraction from the shadowy figure in her head. Hopefully.

of the year? He had said he wasn't, but Ron hadn't gone back to his normal, joking self before they departed from the Hogwarts Express. Maybe she was over thinking things and maybe he was just stunned by Dumbledore's death and what that meant for them, but Hermione couldn't help but notice the strange look in his eye or the tingling down her spine when she had caught him looking at her on the train ride home.

The sun would be up soon so there was no point in trying to get back to sleep. There was also no point in dwelling on Ron's letter again. She had done enough of that over the past two days.

Hermione sighed. She needed to answer him.

But not right now. Right now she wanted to lose herself in the binding of a book and let her own problems drift away with the soft crinkle of turning pages. She reached for a thick paperback and stopped. No. She should use this time to research. She would need to know as many helpful charms as possible if she was going to have to look after Harry and Ron. All signs pointed to the fact that it would happen sooner rather than later.

She moved over to the next set of shelves and pulled out an old book on charms she had picked up at Flourish and Blotts. It had been stuck on the top of a shelf far in the back and she had flipped through it seeing that there were helpful household enchantments, cleaning charms, and simple spells. She had brushed dust off the cover thinking it was a bit funny for a book on cleaning to be so dirty and then bought it because growing up in a Muggle household she had never seen many of these spells and honestly it was a little fascinating to read about all the ways wizards and witches used their magic to take care of small problems that really did not require some magical solution.

But, she supposed, it was all they knew.

She took the book back to her bed and went to light a candle when she remembered that she used a lamp here, not a candle to read by. Setting down her wand, Hermione turned the small switch on the base of the lamp and warm, yellow light flooded across her floral bedspread. She pulled the blanket up around her and settled back against her pillows.

Cracking open the old book, Hermione took a deep breath then froze. The creamy smell of parchment wafted up towards her and her heart lurched inside her chest.

Draco.

Staring down at the pages, not reading them all, Hermione ran the pads of her fingers lightly over the faded black ink.

her chest. The lights from the street permeated through the thin curtains around her window, lighting the room that was barely hers anymore.

Short white shelves lined the walls crammed with books. Children's books, educational books, novels, classics, history books, and spell books all carefully organized and perfectly straight. Hermione bit her lip and glanced at the door. Sometimes she woke up her parents, but they seemed to have slept through her disturbance. Maybe because tonight, she only screamed his name once.

Softly getting out of bed and walking on the balls of her feet, Hermione crouched down in front of a shelf. She ran her fingers over the creased backs of the books there. Paperbacks. Books she had read years ago. Devoured more than read really; Hermione used to burn through the pages, eagerly drinking down the ink of each word.

She hadn't read a novel in years. Ever since the end of her fourth year, Hermione had devoted all her readings to either school work or strictly research. She left no time to enjoy the stories. She had a purpose, a drive, a job.

Hermione glanced at the small white desk pushed far back into the corner where a stack of newspapers lay. Copies of the Daily Prophet that she had scoured through for any hint or mention of… of him.

She could say it was research, keeping up with what was waiting for her in the magical world and it was. She read them for that reason too, but… it was his name that she searched the papers for first. Any mention of a sighting or… *anything* . But the only time he ever appeared was in her dreams.

Next to the newspapers were letters. Most of them were short, scrawled notes from Harry letting her know he was alright, but that was only because she made him check in with her every three days. She always breathed a deep sigh of relief when Hedwig tapped on her window and she got a quick but kind letter from her best friend.

But underneath those was a crumpled piece of parchment that she had tried to flatten out somewhat unsuccessfully. It still showed signs that it was balled and then unballed several times before it was sent.

Hermione,

Bill and Fleur are getting married at the end of this month. Do you think you can make it?

The next part was scratched out and re-written underneath

I'd like to see you.

Ron

Hermione hadn't written him back but only because she was unsure of what to say. Did he actually want to see her or was he still upset over what had happened at the end

She had never been to a wizarding wedding before and Hermione picked out a spot close to the side of the large white tent and watched as the guests filed in, finding their seats and chatting happily to each other.

They all seemed so happy and she felt a little jealous of the fact they seemed to be able to throw their cares aside so easily. She had spent most of her time helping Mrs. Weasley and Fleur prepare for the wedding, clean the house, gather eggs, and pick flowers from the garden. In her downtime she set about reading the copy of *Tales of Beedle the Bard* that Dumbledore had left her. She was surprised that she had been included in his will at all and cherished the small book, a reminder of the great man now gone.

She didn't let herself think about Draco.

Instead she found solace in her friends, Harry, Ron, and Ginny. When Ginny wasn't around they discussed the horcruxes. Hermione unpacked and repacked her bag to include Ron and Harry's items and narrowed down her selection of books to bring with her while including a few defensive books that Harry had.

Ron had been particularly embarrassed when she went searching through his shelves and found *Twelve Fail-Safe Ways to Charm Witches* .

"Think you're going to be doing a lot of charming on the hunt?" She laughed and threw it back onto his bed.

Ron turned beet red. "You never know."

Their initial awkwardness has evaporated in the warmth of the hustle and bustle of the Burrow. Maybe it was because she had spent so many summers here or maybe it was the feeling of excitement in the air with the approaching wedding, but her spirits had begun to lift a little being back in a familiar place with people she didn't have to worry about upsetting over the slightest thing.

It was refreshing. Simple. Uncomplicated.

And she found herself missing the challenge.

Hermione and Ginny had gone up to her room after a quick lunch to change and get ready for the ceremony. Ginny was a bridesmaid and Hermione helped her into a stunning gold dress to which she begged Hermione to alter, just a little for her, until she gave in.

"Just around the neckline," she explained and Hermione ran her wand against the fabric. "Little more," Ginny prompted.

"Any more and you'll fall out."

"He'd be sure to remember *that,"* she muttered.

Hermione paused. "Are you talking about Harry?"

Ginny blushed a little, a gleam in her light brown eyes. "I know we're not… together, but that doesn't mean that I feel any differently. Just… don't let him date anyone else okay? Hex him if he tries."

Hermione wanted to tell her that she knew exactly how she was feeling, that she understood completely the longing for someone you couldn't have. She wanted to tell her everything. Everything that was piling up inside her and that she wouldn't dare touch even to neatly organize it in her mind because it was too painful.

"Merlin, Hermione, I was joking!" Ginny laughed a little and brushed her hair out. "Sort of." She grinned back at Hermione in the mirror and this time Hermione joined in on the laughter.

Ginny helped her apply some potion to her hair to make her curls behave and Hermione once again refused to think about how Draco had always said he loved the tumbled look of them, running his fingers through her hair, pulling on a curl and watching it bounce with that handsome smirk on his face. She threw those thoughts to the growing pile in the back of her mind.

"Do you need any help with your dress?" Ginny asked before leaving to join the wedding party downstairs.

"No, I'll be done in just a moment. You go ahead."

Hermione pulled her shirt over her head, folded it and placed it on the foot of the bed. She kicked off her shoes and unbuttoned her jeans. She paused while pulling them off. The bite mark was still there on her inner thigh, just as fresh as it had been the night he had left it.

She should remove the stasis charm. She should take her wand and heal it and be done with it. What was the point of keeping it? It's not like he'd ever see it.

Something cold slid down inside her. He would never see it. He would never touch it. He would never hold her face in his hands, hunch his shoulders and lean in close. He would never brush his lips against her ear and whisper, "Did my pretty little whore miss me?"

A rush of heat replaced the cold and she nearly toppled over as she pulled her jeans off and slid her dress on as quickly as she could. Hermione turned towards the mirror and saw a red flush in her cheeks.

Gryffindor red.

Chapter One

Her chest rose and fell heavily and her body was tense against the mattress beneath her. She was out of breath despite lying still, or at least mostly still. The blanket of her bed was wrapped tightly around her, somehow twisted in the throws of her dream.

Her dream… it had changed. Where it had once been dark tiled halls and spinning doors it was now wide open grounds; a star-bright night sky overhead and wet grass underfoot. Trees loomed in the distance, silent and strong. She would run to them, pushing herself onwards, lungs burning and legs aching. She slowed as she made it into the clutches of the forest. Everywhere she turned looked the same; tall skinny trees, nettles strewn over the ground, downed branches in the distance.

Then she would see him.

Stepping out from behind one of the shadowed trees, trying to hide behind a cold metal mask, but she knew it was him.

It had always been him.

Only him.

But not anymore. Now Hermione was alone and shivering in her childhood bedroom and he… he was gone. She untangled her legs from the sheets and pulled them up against

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

She tugged on her shoes and marched out, head high, but heart was somewhere below her stomach. She had made it all the way through the garden and into the tent before her breathing returned to normal.

Hiding off to the side just in case the blush hadn't faded from her cheeks, she waved a little to a few friendly faces. Harry, Ron, Fred, and George were helping guests find their seats and she found a little bit of her tension easing seeing them smile and shove each other slightly.

Harry didn't look like Harry, instead he had curly red hair and had gained about twenty pounds, but his gentle slouch and creased brows were the same as they always were. Fred and George tore off after a set of beautiful blonde girls who giggled as they simultaneously hooked the girls arms through theirs.

She expected to find Harry and Ron staring after the blonde girls as well, but when she looked back Harry was craning his neck as if he was looking for someone and Ron was fiddling with the tie on his dress robes. Thankfully he had outgrown the ones he wore to the Yule Ball. Or maybe Fleur had refused to let Mrs. Weasley tailor them; she'd seen him that night after all.

Goodness, all that seemed like a lifetime ago.

"I thought about you… After the Yule Ball… I kept thinking about you, in that little blue dress. I… I couldn't help it."

But she could.

Hermione gripped her bag tightly in her hands and hurriedly crossed the tent, heading for Harry and Ron.

Harry stopped searching the crowd and grinned at her. It was strange seeing him without seeing *him,* but it would have been too dangerous for Harry to walk around looking like himself and there were enough Weasleys to hide the whole Order if needed. Ron's blue eyes widened and Hermione gave him a small smile.

"Hello Harry, Ron," she said, balancing carefully in her heels.

"Hermi—"

"You look vunderful."

Hermione had been so focused on making her way to Harry and Ron she hadn't even noticed the large, dark, and still smoothly handsome Viktor Krum coming up behind her.

"Viktor!" Her voice was much higher and louder than she would have liked and she backed into Ron as she tried to turn a little too quickly to face him. "I didn't know you were coming!"

This Bitter Earth

Viktor's dark eyes glittered even in the shade of the tent and his mouth pulled in a smile. His hair was shorter, but just as thick and rich as she remembered and although she had never been a fan of facial hair, the clean lines of his dark beard made the square line of his jaw even more defined.

"You vould have to return my letters to know that I vas coming." His accent was strong and rumbled the words around in his mouth before he spoke them as if they were coming from somewhere deep inside.

Hermione blushed furiously. She hadn't written to Viktor in months. In fact, the last thing she sent him had been a Christmas card. Once she had gotten back to school she had... "I—I was so busy with school—" Hermione stammered and felt Ron shift from behind her to beside her.

"Vell, we are both here now." Viktor took her hand and placed a soft kiss on her fingers.

Hermione quickly pulled her hand back and grasped her bag tightly. She couldn't stop herself. He wasn't even here, but still… Hermione bit her lip. She hadn't pulled away because Draco wouldn't have wanted someone else kissing her hand, she had pulled away because *she* didn't want someone else kissing her hand.

She wanted *him*.

"You can sit over there," Ron said with a jerk of his head to the other side of the tent.

Viktor's eyes moved under his heavy brow between Hermione and Ron. "It's good to see you, Her-mion-ee." She gave him a smile as he moved off, walking in his heavy gait. He never had said her name right, but at least she never had to beg him to call her by it.

"Come on," Ron said, sounding a little more put out than he had been before. "Let's find our seats. Har—Barney? You coming?"

"Huh? Yeah!" Harry, going by the name of Barney, moved almost as awkwardly as Viktor in his disguised body, following Ron and Hermione to three empty seats. Hermione looked around and saw that they were about as far as they could be from Viktor and wondered if Ron had chosen these seats on purpose or because they just happened to be unoccupied.

She felt a little guilty that she didn't pay attention to the ceremony, but she was busy trying to keep the gnawing ache of loneliness at bay and before she knew it Bill was kissing Fleur and everyone was standing and clapping. Ron's hands slammed together loudly and his face broke into a wide grin, making the freckles on his face dance while Harry clapped hard, staring down the aisle at Ginny.

She leaned over to Harry and whispered, "You should ask her to dance."

You're all of me. You're Mine

This Bitter Earth

First published in 2021
Based on Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling
Relationship is Hermione Granger/Draco Malfoy
Rating: Explicit
Words: 410,698
Hits: 547,079
Kudos: 6,350

Control isn't the only thing Draco Malfoy has lost. But he will get it back. He will get everything back.

TYPESET BY SENNA SLYTHERIN 2025

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Harry merely shook his head, curly red hair shaking. “No, Ron’s right. I shouldn’t lead her on. And... she’s having a good time with Luna.”

Hermione wanted to shake him sometimes. “It’s just a dance, Harry.”

Harry met her eye and even with the Polyjuice potion, the mischievous gleam in his eye was the one she knew well.

They grabbed drinks and headed for a table near the back. Hermione sipped on her butterbeer and watched as Luna pulled Ginny onto the dance floor. Although Luna was waving her arms in what looked like a rather convincing impression of the giant squid, Ginny moved flawlessly, her long legs swaying gracefully to the music as it flowed through the large tent.

“Just this once,” Ron grumbled and Hermione looked over to see Harry clutching his butterbeer like his life depended on it. “Go. Before I change my mind.”

Harry started up and tripped over his feet, only catching himself on the back of Hermione’s chair. “Shit! I swear, this boy has two different length legs.”

Hermione laughed as Harry made his way onto the dance floor and tapped Ginny on the shoulder. Her eyes lit up instantly, as if he wasn’t even wearing someone else’s face and Ginny’s hands landed on his shoulders.

Ron swallowed the rest of his butterbeer and turned around. Hermione felt for him; she knew that he wanted both Harry and Ginny to be happy and Ginny had been hurt when Harry called things off even though she understood why. Ron might have been Harry’s best friend, but Ginny was his little sister; he was sure to have complicated feelings about the situation.

“That was kind of you,” Hermione said softly, turning in her chair to face the table again.

“Well, if we’re all dead in a week it won’t matter anyways.”

Hermione frowned. “You shouldn’t—”

“I know,” Ron sighed and lifted his clear blue eyes to meet hers. “But I’m not wrong. We all need to take what we can get because you never know when it will be your last chance.”

If she had known that night would have been her last time with Draco, would she have done anything differently? Would he?

“Let me get one of those,” Ron waved over a waiter carrying a tray of drinks and plucked a tumbler of fire whisky and took a sip of it.

Hermione watched as he pulled his lips over his teeth, sucking in a sharp breath against the harshness of the liquor.

"You drink fire whisky now?"

Ron shrugged. "It's not as bad as I thought. Certainly gave me the kick I needed after Mad Eye."

Bill had made a toast to Mad Eye after he had fallen, giving them all a generous glass of fire whisky to send him off. Hermione had tried to drink it; she had brought the glass to her lips, but as soon as the taste of the fire whisky had touched her tongue it was like someone had knocked her legs out from under her.

Draco Draco Draco.

It tasted like Draco.

On her tongue, in her mouth, desperate, moaning her name—" *Granger…"*

She hadn't been able to swallow and set the glass down as soon as she could.

Ron took another drink and Hermione placed her bag on the table. She checked the pocket of her dress, making sure her wand was in place and then started picking at her fingers. It was a nervous habit she had never really broken, but recently she had picked her nails down to nubs. Fleur had suggested a charm to make them grow, but Hermione declined.

"No one is going to be looking at my hands anyways."

"'Oou never know," Fleur said with a wink.

"Can I have this dance?"

She turned to see Viktor holding out his hand, hovering next to her.

Hermione looked up at him blinking a few times. "Oh," she mumbled, "y-yes." She stood up and slipped her hand into his. What had she told Harry? It was just a dance…

"Hermione, your butterbeer—" Ron interrupted.

"You can finish it if you want," she offered, seeing that he was already halfway through his fire whisky.

Ron frowned darkly and Viktor led her over to the dance floor.

"Do you remember the valtz?" he asked, a smile beginning to form on his face.

"Yes, but I've tried to forget," she gave a small laugh. "I'd never danced before and I know I was awful."

"You vere beautiful," he said smoothly. "Just like tonight."

Hermione blushed a little and bit her lip. "Thank you, Viktor."

They had exchanged letters over the years, but just friendly ones. She was interested in learning about wizarding society in Bulgaria and Viktor would ask her about her classes

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and what she planned on doing once she left school. They had been pen pals at best, but being here with him again Hermione remembered the few chaste kisses they had shared.

They were nothing like Draco's. In fact she didn't even think her lips had parted, only lightly pressed against Viktor's for a few awkward seconds. Draco had been controlling, as he always was, tilting her head back, snaking his tongue in between her lips, tasting her, claiming her.

Then he had swallowed her whole.

"It's good to see you again," Hermione offered when she realized that she hadn't said anything in quite some time. "I'm sorry I didn't write, this whole year sort of, got away from me."

Viktor shrugged. His shoulders were barely broader than Draco's, but he wasn't near as tall. "I know school is important to you."

"How's, erm, Quidditch?" She tried not to cringe. Had she really just asked him about Quidditch? Like she didn't hear about it enough? And when had they ever discussed Quidditch before? To be honest, she could barely remember what team colors he wore. The image of Draco streaking across the pitch in mossy green and shining silver stripes flashed in her mind.

Hermione missed a step.

"Vots of practice. Vots of trovies."

"Can I cut in?"

Hermione could have hugged Ron from saving her from her failure to be able to hold even a simple conversation. She had never been a social butterfly, but now she was hardly able to talk about anything without finding a way to relate it back to Draco.

Viktor frowned and looked down at Hermione who gave him a quick smile.

"Thank you, Viktor. Let's catch up soon."

He nodded a little glumly as Ron pulled her away, placing a firm hand on her waist and leading her away from him. Hermione tried to focus on where she was putting her feet, looking down at them as they moved through the couples around them. Ron's hand gripped hers; his palm was hot and a little damp.

"I saved your butterbeer for you."

Hermione looked up at him. Ron's jaw was tight and he was watching her carefully.

"Oh, thank you."

Why did this feel just as awkward as dancing with Viktor?

"Wait, did you leave my bag at the—"

"Here," Ron pressed her hand to the front of his robes and she felt the outline of her bag against his chest.

"Oh." Would she *ever* stop blushing? "Thank you."

"I know how important it is to you. I mean, the books alone," he chuckled.

Hermione gave a little laugh, happy that she finally wasn't feeling so awkward.

"I just wish I knew if I was important too."

The blood stilled in her arms. "What?"

"I mean, am I always going to be pulling you away from dark wizards?"

"Viktor's not a dark wizard."

"But Malfoy is."

There it was. The unspoken name that had been hanging over their heads for weeks now.

Malfoy.

Draco.

Hermione looked away from Ron.

"You don't know—"

"I know what I saw."

Her eyes cut back to his, wide with shock. Her heart beat irregularly, fluttering in her chest. "What… What did you—"

Ron dropped his head. "Not much. Enough."

She waited, barely breathing, for him to go on. She wasn't sure she wanted to hear this, but at the same time, she needed to know.

"He told you to tell him you loved him and that you were leaving with him."

Were they still moving? Was the world still spinning or was it just her head?

"But you didn't. You were confused and he…" Ron's red brows pulled together, blue eyes cast in shadow. "He was all over you. Like he was taking you over."

Oh God. She could feel her mouth opening in horror.

Ron shook his head. "I tried not to look. Believe me, Malfoy's bare ass is the last thing I ever wanted to see."

"I—" she stammered. "I'm so sorry—"

"I forgive you," Ron said quickly. Almost too quickly. Like he had been waiting on it.

Hermione had been about to say " *I'm so sorry you had to see that,"* but before she could tell him a large silvery shape sunk down from the top of the tent and landed on the middle of the dance floor. It was a shining lynx, taking a single heavy step on large, strong paws before the deep, heavy voice of Kingsley Shacklebolt filled the tent.

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"The Ministry has fallen. Scrimgeour is dead. They are coming."

Hermione's heart seized in her chest. Guests started to talk in loud voices, moving about quickly and Hermione pulled her wand from the pocket in her dress and held it tightly in her hand. She saw Tonks out of the corner of her eye, wand held out in front of her, turning quickly back and forth.

Then the dark shapes were upon them. Screams and whooshes as people apperated and disapperated wildly. Spells began to fly and Hermione watched as people started running, screaming, panicking as Death Eaters flooded into the tent.

She saw Harry on the other side of the tent, still disguised as Barney Weasley, grab Ginny around her waist and press his lips onto hers, kissing her, before breaking away and making sure that Fred and George were on either side of Ginny before turning and searching the throng for Ron and her.

She should be running towards him. She should be firing off defensive spells. But all Hermione was doing was watching. Watching the black robed Death Eaters, looking for one who towered above the rest, one with shining silver eyes.

Ron's hand clamped down on hers. "Hermione!"

She gave one last glance and met a pair of eyes behind a metal mask. They were dark, almost black.

What was she doing?! Looking for him? Waiting for him? For him to what? Come and *imperius* her again? No.

Hermione sent a bolt of red light and the Death Eater who threw up a ward, but stumbled against the strength of her spell.

"Harry!" Ron shouted next to her and hauled her forward. Ron's outburst made the Death Eaters turn in their direction and Hermione knew they had seconds, maybe less than that, before the enemy descended upon them.

Harry reached out a freckled, thick fingered hand and latched onto hers tightly.

They need to get out. They need to go. Hermione glanced back at the Death Eaters one last night.

He wasn't here.

Draco hadn't come.

Just another lie.

She squeezed Harry and Ron's hands and the tent disappeared with a swirl of color before everything turned black.

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The floor was hard under Draco's knee and the pain was radiating up his leg, causing the muscles to cramp and the bent joints to grind. One. Two. Three. Every three breaths he let a small tremor pass through him, too small for the circle of Death Eaters around him to notice, but enough to release just a little of the tension coiling in him so he did not tremble. Other than that Draco kept as still as possible, crouched and head bent low before his Master.

He wasn't sure how long the Dark Lord kept him there, but if he was hurting he could only imagine the agony his father must have been in. Long, lanky hair fell down in front of his drawn face so Draco was not able to catch even a glimpse of it out of the corner of his eye. Every now and then he would emit a grunt or pained whimper, but Lucius did not fall or falter. It must have been killing him.

Wouldn't take much.

Draco gritted his teeth. This was humiliating. The Dark Lord had them groveling in front of rows of Death Eaters who had gathered for their sentencing. He could feel their sick glee at seeing the Malfoys brought so low from their once high placement in Pureblood society. His chest burned with the indignation of it and Draco let the anger fill him up. He focused on the hate pulsing in his fingertips, the rage beating in his heart.

Anything but her.

Travers was finishing up some report on the status of goblin negotiations, but Draco ignored most of it, instead focusing his energy on creating a false bottom in his mind where he could hide her. Tucked away underneath.

Travers trailed off and awkwardly stepped back into line. Draco wanted to lift his head and look around for some sort of clue as to what would come next, but kept it bent, baring the back of his neck to the Dark Lord. He could hear his father's labored breathing beside him.

This was it. Draco's body turned to stone.

"And now," The Dark Lord's high voice echoed around the hall. "We come to the Malfoys."

Draco heard a low hiss from somewhere behind him and his leg tensed, wanting to run, but it was near the point of numbness and he wouldn't get far even if he tried.

"Lucius—" he hissed and Draco felt his father tremble beside him.

"My Lord," he muttered to the hard floor, not daring to lift his head until commanded to do so.

"How many times have you failed me?"

Draco's throat was closing.

"Twice, My Lord," his father croaked.

"You're wrong."

Lucius swayed a little, almost falling. Draco thought he heard the faint whimper of his mother somewhere in the crowd of people.

The Dark Lord took a step. "Your third failure is kneeling next to you."

The Death Eaters laughed. Some low and dark, others loud and boisterous. Draco's blood turned cold in his veins and his jaw clenched tightly.

"Raising a son who can't even kill an old man?" The Dark Lord said lightly. "I expected better from you."

His father was breathing heavily, but said nothing. Draco hadn't expected him to. The Dark Lord paced in front of them again and this time Draco heard the scraping of scales on the floor. His snake had joined him.

"I beg your forgiveness!" Lucius threw himself at his Master's feet. "I serve you, My Lord. Please… let me prove it to you."

Draco hated the thought of having to beg for his life. A life he would spend on his knees. His father had always stood so tall and proud, never letting anything touch him, tarnish him. Draco had practically worshiped him growing up, did everything he could to emulate his idol, who was now clinging to the hem of his Master's robes like a child.

"Prove what? The only thing left of you that's worth anything is your name," the Dark Lord said in his high, hissing voice. "And I only need one Malfoy."

Draco stopped breathing and he lost the feeling in his fingers. Cold cold cold. It pumped through him, sliding down his spine, slithering into his limbs, and then coiling around his chest, squeezing tighter with each half second.

He could hear the sharp intake of breath from his father. Only one. He only needed one of them. Draco's mind went blank. His father was not likely to fall on his sword and even less likely to fall in front of the Dark Lord's wand. Even for his son.

"M-my Lord—" Lucius gasped.

Draco kept his head bent. Was this what it was all for? He worked for months fixing the Cabinet to free his father just to be killed for it? Or if he was lucky, to have his father killed in front of him? All that work just for another body. Had it all been for nothing?

Yes.

But now it was for *her*.

"Master—" Draco lifted his head and looked up into the blood red slits of Lord Voldemort. He fought the revulsion churning in him at the sight of those eyes, like two open wounds, bleeding down onto him.

"He speaks!" The Dark Lord raised what would have been eyebrows if there was hair left on them. "Well, at least you taught him that, Lucius."

The Death Eaters laughed again. Draco ignored them, throwing up hard walls to block it out.

"He also taught me to hunt."

Lucius turned his head sharply around at his son. Draco did not look at his father, instead kept his gaze steady on the two bloody pits of his Lord.

"Hunt?"

"Yes, My Lord. I can hunt. Track. Kill."

"Was Albus Dumbledore too quick for you?"

More laughter. More walls. His fist dug into the floor.

"I lost my prey because I was too busy playing with my food." Draco forced his lips to curl. His breath passed quickly through his now open mouth. "My Father wasn't the only one who taught me."

No more laughter. Only his heart beating faster and faster in his chest.

"Bellatrix?"

"She trained me. Taught me that not all deaths have to be… clean. I was eager, My Lord. I got carried away."

Draco held his gaze and felt a pressure inside his skull. The Dark Lord wanted to see.

He pulled down a wall.

Dumbledore on the tower. Wand flying from his fingertips. Granger's wand pointed at the old man's chest.

Walls, taller than the astronomy tower blocked it out as Draco narrowed it in. The Dark Lord didn't even pay attention to the light vinewood wand in his hand, only on the brief look of shock in the bright blue eyes of Albus Dumbledore.

Hate hate hate. It pumped through him. He hated the man in front of him. Hated the sympathetic smile on his wrinkled fucking mouth. Hated the curled, black hand he

Pansy glared at him. "Fine."

He tilted his head and leaned a little heavier on the bar. "Don't lie, Pans. You don't have to with me."

She rolled her eyes heavily and took a gulping drink, hissing as she set the tumbler back down. "Stayed for a week then told him I was going to Daph's and fucked off to Theo's."

Pansy's relationship with her father was fucking shit, at best. Draco hadn't known the worst of it until a month into their fifth year when Pansy broke down and told him the things her father did. Sadly, being a Death Eater was the least of Titus Parkinson's crimes. It had made Draco sick, and even more so when he realized that Pansy only let him do the things he had done to her because of... that.

He hadn't stopped. Not until he was distracted with Granger and Pansy busied herself with Theo.

"So it's serious?"

Pansy shrugged. "It's not forever, but… it's good." She smiled a little and Draco couldn't remember the last time he had actually seen Pansy smile. It faded as quickly as it had come. "Plus the Nott Estate has a pool, remember? And no Daddy around to tell me not to swim this time."

Draco nodded and took another sip. "Want me to botch a mission and let an Order member have a go him?"

Pansy let out another barking laugh, ending in a deep breath before looking back at him. "You've done enough, Draco. I'm not your problem anymore."

He smirked. "I won't miss the teeth."

Pansy smiled at him. "Theo quite likes it."

"Pervert." Draco snorted.

Her smile slid into a smirk. "He goes down on me too."

Draco paused with his lips on the lip of his glass. The feel of Granger's thighs around his ears was almost unbearable. He wanted his mouth on her. *Now.* Wanted to hear her soft little moans as he slid his tongue into her slit, claiming her with nothing more than a few licks. One. Two. Three. Four. He still had a record to beat.

Draco licked his lips. "Oh?"

Pansy leaned forward until her tits were sitting on the bar. "You missed out, Draco."

He grabbed the bottle. "I guess I'll just have to drown my sorrows."

Draco fell back into his chair and Pansy snuggled herself up next to Theo. He grinned down at her and she pushed a thick lock of his hair out of his face.

It hit him.

The whisky, the loneliness, the everything. It crashed into his chest and shook the foundation he had built his walls up from. He didn't want to be here. Didn't want to sit here and listen to Blaise talk about his internship at St Mungo's this year; didn't want to watch Theo and Pansy be happy with each other. He wanted to be happy. He wanted a future. With her. With Granger.

Hermione.

Draco chugged his drink, ice clinking as he gulped it down.

"Damn, Draco! Now that's what I'm talking about!" Theo slapped his knee and followed suit. Pansy giggled and Blaise rolled his eyes.

Draco's hands were shaking as he filled his tumbler up to the rim.

Blaise grabbed the bottle from him roughly, glaring at him as he summoned his own glass from the bar.

"Oi," Theo shook his empty tumbler at Blaise.

Draco stared at ice bobbing in the liquor. Shrouded by his fist around the crystal tumbler it had turned a richer, deeper shade. Brown. Brown like her doe eyes as she looked up at him, big and so fucking innocent.

Salazar fucking Slytherin he'd give anything just to look into them again. To be able to wrap his arms around her, pull her against him, feel the warmth of her skin and brush his fingers through her twisting curls. To be able to lean down and take her sweet, soft lip in between his teeth and bite down on it until she whimpered with want then lick it, comforting her until she was whimpering again.

He wanted to stare into her beautiful eyes and watch them light up as he told her he loved her.

But without his hounds he was further away from finding her than he'd ever been. He was losing *everything* and had no idea how to get any of it back. An overwhelming sense of hopelessness sunk over him, following the whisky as it pumped in his blood. His throat felt tight but he figured he could still force the tumbler full of whisky down it to try and stop the dark thoughts creeping past the thin mental walls he was having trouble keeping in place.

He had let himself think about her and everytime he did it made his foundations shake.

"I can't believe you'd go to something like that." Blaise wrinkled his nose. "What could possibly be entertaining about watching two animals tear each other to pieces?"

"It's fucking brutal," Theo laughed into his tumbler. "Blood *everywhere."*

"What's that?" Draco's head snapped in his direction.

"There's this club, yeah?" Theo pulled his arm from around Pansy and leaned forward. "On full moons they stage these fights."

"Fights? What kind of fights?"

Theo smiled. "Werewolves."

Draco's face turned blank as a piece of marble as his mind carved out the first plan he'd had in weeks.

He didn't need hounds, not if he had wolves.

The windows were large square panes, held together with thick black metal. Vines of ivy crawled up them, slowly creeping along the eaves with twisting tendrils. Everything was cast in a green hue as light reflected off of the waxy triangular leaves. Draco's footfalls were heavy and echoed down the hall, black cloak trailing behind him.

He pushed open the door and the heat hit him even stronger; thick, humid, and choking. Draco wiped his brow as moisture dotted his skin. The late summer sun streamed strongly in through the panes of glass and he rolled his shoulders, feeling a single drop of sweat drip down the indentation of his spine.

The Conservatory's walls and ceilings were all made out of large panes of glass, carefully cut into designs so that the light fell in scattered rays. Leaves, flowers, stalks, and petals covered almost every surface in the large room. Tables upon tables of flowers of every color, leaves of every shape and plants too strange to imagine.

His Mother was on the other side of the large room, pruning some leaves off of a heavily flowered plant with a pair of sharply gleaming clippers. She did not look away from her work when she spoke to him.

"You'll need to go to London next week."

"Why?" Draco picked his way through the jungle his Mother had grown in here. She loved living things, spending hours in here tending to her plants and filling the house with fresh flowers every day. He loved coming home for the summers and seeing the strange blooms and blossoms his Mother had curated while he was away.

Since they had returned from the island the vases had remained empty.

Blaise smirked at him. "It's what makes us such good friends."

Draco shook his head and grinned at him. "Then you won't mind if I get another drink."

He pushed Blaise back playfully and walked over to the bar, picking up the silver tongs to place a few cubes of ice in his crystal tumbler.

"Who do I have to fuck around here to get a drink?"

Pansy was leaning on the bar next to him. Her hair was a few inches longer, brushing the tops of her shoulders. Her eyes were dark and playful and she picked at her bangs, making them fall perfectly over her forehead. Pansy had always loved to flirt.

Draco raised a brow. "Probably your boyfriend."

Pansy's laugh was a sharp bark-like sound; Draco knew it well. But it was Granger's light ringing laugh that echoed in his head. He loved being able to make her laugh, make her smile. Make her eyes shine like melted chocolate as her lips opened and that sweet little giggle slipped out.

"He's probably still recovering," Pansy winked at Draco. "I fucked him in the carriage on the way here. Those bumps… Ooh!" She gave an exaggerated shiver.

Something moved in the corner of Draco's eye and he glanced over to see Blaise watching him carefully, his dark eyes collecting hidden bits of information he had no business in. Draco gripped his glass as Blaise's brows lowered in disapproval.

He knew. About Granger. One of the reasons Draco had come here this evening was because Blaise was the only one he could talk to about this. Not that he really *wanted* to talk about this. But… it was better than sitting in his room and losing another staring contest with that orange fur ball again.

He turned away and grabbed another tumbler and filled it with ice. "So you haven't bitten it off yet?"

Pansy took the drink he offered her. "Not yet. Theo's a good boy. A *very* good boy."

Draco sipped his whisky and felt the pleasant burn slide down his throat. It was cold by the time it hit his stomach. He glanced at the bottle, wanting to grab it and suck it down until he couldn't feel the heat or the cold or anything anymore. Especially not *her.*

Because he could. He could feel Granger in every second of every day, pounding her fists against his walls, clawing at the floorboards he was trapping her under. If she didn't stop it, he'd get her a cage. See if she could leave him then.

Shit, Theo was right, this whisky was *strong.*

Pansy sipped hers quietly, staring at the bottle looking like she'd like to drink it all too.

"How are things at home?" Draco asked in a low voice.

The Zabini Mansion was the opposite of Malfoy Manor. Everything was clean lines, sparking glass, and tastefully designed blank spaces. Blaise said his Mother remodeled every time she remarried and judging by the modern touches Draco assumed Blaise was not exaggerating. The bar held an impressive amount of crystal glasses of every shape and size along with shelves of liquor, wine, and beer along the wall.

"Hey, that was a present from the Minister!" Blaise glared as Theo popped the cork out of a bottle with a foreign label on it.

"Yeah? Which one?" Theo laughed. "Well, whichever one it was, the bugger had good taste." Theo sniffed it and made an appreciative noise. "This is some strong stuff. Draco?" He held up the bottle and shook it a little. The amber liquid sloshed inside and Draco's mouth watered. He had done his best to hold back, but every day was harder than the last and a glass or two of wine at supper really wasn't fucking cutting it anymore.

He looked from the bottle to Theo who was grinning wickedly, just like he used to back when they were friends. Or at least as close to friends as they ever had been. Hell, maybe they actually would have been friends if Draco hadn't spent the most of the last year locked up working on the Vanishing Cabinet and spending any moment of spare time fucking himself into Granger's cunt.

Fuck, he missed her.

A ray of light caught the bottle, making the whisky shine.

She'd be mad at him for getting drunk. She'd put her hands on her hips and narrow her eyes and open her cute little mouth to say, " *Do you think that's a good idea? Really, Draco?"*

But she wasn't here to tell him she was right.

"A chance to drink someone else's store dry? Like I'm going to pass that up."

Theo threw his head back with a laugh then poured Draco a generous drink, handing it to him before plopping down next to Pansy and throwing his arm around the back of the couch.

Draco downed it at once.

"He only gave us one bottle," Blaise protested.

"Then I better hurry before Theo drinks it all." Draco ignored Theo as he pawed at Pansy and leaned over towards Blaise. "Why didn't you tell me they were coming?"

Blaise lifted his eyes in boredom. "You wouldn't have come and I've no one else to play chess with. Theo's terrible and Pansy steals the pieces."

Draco pursed his lips and clasped Blaise on the back of his neck, pulling him close. "You're an asshole."

"Your Father has work to be done at the Ministry and you are going to accompany him." Her tone was clipped and she snapped a stem off of the stalk, tossing it into a rubbish pile by her feet.

"Why can't you go?"

Narcissa turned to him, her blue eyes icy enough to cool the air in the sweltering room. "Do you have any idea what your little display in front of the Dark Lord did? It made him look weak. It made him a target. If his own son doesn't respect him, why should anyone else?"

"It saved his fucking life." Draco raised his brows. "You think the Dark Lord would have chosen him over me? I'm the only reason he's even breathing right now."

"Language!" she hissed and waved the clippers at his face, but Draco could see the shard of fear in her eyes. He felt a pang of empathy for her ring in his chest. If he had shown weakness for his Father, the Dark Lord would have struck, using it as a blow against them. It was only his dismissal that saved Lucius from the fate he had rightfully earned. Still, it couldn't have been easy for his Mother to watch her son turn on his Father. What would she think of him if she knew what he had tried to do?

Narcissa set the clippers down on the table and exhaled. "Yes, you did. You saved him. I… I don't think I've told you what that—" she stopped talking and Draco felt uncomfortable as he watched her hand leave the handle of the clippers and latch onto his. "Thank you, Draco."

He didn't want to be thanked for what he had done. It wasn't something to be proud of. He wanted her to let go. He wanted her to hug him.

"I didn't do it for him." He pulled his hand from hers and stood up straighter. He could remember pulling on her skirts when he was frightened as a boy, watching her lean down to pick him up with a bright smile on her face. She had taught him how to be strong, how to control himself. Now he stood over her, a full head and a half taller and it was her looking to him for reassurance. "I did it for you."

Her lips tightened into what was trying to be a smile. "Thank you."

He twisted the Malfoy ring around on his finger. It should have gone back to his Father once he was released from Azkaban, but Draco had not offered it and Lucius had not asked. Maybe he should, to try and smooth things over and show that he was not usurping his Father's place, but… Draco closed his hand into a fist.

"What is he doing at the Ministry?"

His Mother lightly cleared her throat. "Accepting an award. For loyal service."

Draco wanted to laugh.

"It's an important event for him. For us. If you are there at his side it will show that the Malfoys are standing together."

"He can barely *stand* at all, Mother."

"He's gotten better."

"No," Draco said darkly, "he hasn't."

When he had gone to raid the liquor cabinet Draco had found almost a whole shelf of empty bottles.

"That's another reason why you need to go."

This time he did laugh. It was a bitter sound and Draco barely recognized it as his own.

"You want *me* to keep *him* sober?"

Narcissa reached for his hand again, but stopped. She looked up at him, eyes darting between his and Draco watched as her pride and her concern tossed in her ocean blue eyes. They had once been the still waters, but now they were always churning waves. "I want you to keep him safe."

Another name to add to the list.

Another body if he failed.

More death. He was drowning in it. Choking on blood. Screaming in pain.

And he'd done it all to himself.

Draco barely breathed on his way back to his rooms. By the time he closed the door behind him his chest was shaking with everything he was trying to contain. He could barely stay still, his blood was racing in his veins, hot and cold all at the same time. His throat was closing, tightening and his lungs seized up, holding in the meager amount of oxygen that they could pull down.

Down down down.

No way out.

Draco was sweating; hair darkened by moisture and sticking to his forehead. He felt like his clothes were choking him. Heavy cloak, weighing on his shoulders. He pulled at the clasp, fingers sliding sloppily over it as he ripped it from him. The collar of his shirt was strangling him. No time to unbutton it, Draco tore it open, long fingers clutching at his chest where his heart raged from the inside out.

The sickly soft skin of his scars pulled as he heaved in gasping breath after gasping breath. He tried to count to three. He tried to calm back down. He tried… God he had tried *so hard*.

His shirt tore as he forced it off of his shoulders, ripping it over his hands.

Eyes sweeping the upstairs hall, looking for any sign of movement; Draco pulled his wand from his robes before latching his hand back onto the cat, wood disappearing into the thick orange fur.

He slammed the door behind him and dropped Crookshanks unceremoniously onto his bed.

"You are not to leave my rooms, understand?"

The cat flicked its tail.

He was not in the mood right now. He couldn't shake the image of the empty kennels from his head.

He'd fucking kill that snake if it tried to eat her cat.

He'd fucking *kill* it.

"Answer me," he growled.

Crookshanks hissed at him.

Draco hissed back.

"Shit, Blaise, you didn't say—"

"Draco? OH MY GOD!"

"Well fuck me!" Theo let out a single loud laugh. "I thought you were off taking over the world!"

Draco glanced at Blaise who gave him a bored shrug. With no other option, Draco stood up to clasp hands with Theo. He couldn't help but notice the way Theo's eyes darted down to his arm for just a moment and a strange expression crossed his face. Draco's fingers twitched uncomfortably.

"Hey, Pans," Draco said as he let go of Theo's hand and gave Pansy a quick hug. She threw one arm around him and kept her other hand inside of Theo's. He watched Theo's hand tighten and pull on hers a little. Draco looked away quickly. "Yeah, you know, I had the day off."

Blaise chuckled from behind him and Draco smirked as he sat back down across from him. Pansy got comfortable on the sofa, dramatically crossing her legs, while Theo walked over to pour himself a drink from the long bar on the other side of the room.

The sudden horrible image of those jaws unhinging, scaly skin of the throat expanding into a grotesque bulge and the muscles slithering down the length of the snake, *swallowing…*

The professor. His hounds. *Her cat?*

No. Draco wouldn't let that happen. He couldn't leave, not when he had something here worth staying for. And goddamn it she was worth everything. Anything.

No more thoughts of running, no more feeling sorry for himself. He couldn't change *anything* that had happened. Dumbledore was dead. His hounds were gone. Granger was gone. He couldn't do anything for the dead, but he could do something about Granger. She was still alive, still out there and she needed him. Needed his protection and the mark on his arm allowed him to give it to her.

Cruel irony, but true nonetheless.

Draco took three deep breaths before walking carefully up the stone steps onto the veranda and the large doors to the Manor opened for him. His boots thudded dully against the richly designed rug that lay over the black marble floor. Tall paned windows allowed light to permeate through, reflecting off of the dark floor before being swallowed by the intricate design of the carpet.

Topping the stairs, Draco almost lost his footing when he heard the meowing wail from behind him. His head spun around so fast his neck gave an unhappy crack. The squashed face of her cat was standing at the foot; bandy legs perched on the bottom stair and bottlebrush tail flicking absently behind him.

Draco's blood ran cold.

He tore down the stairs, grabbing the cat by the back of its neck and hauling it up, bunching its thick fur in his fist.

It yowled angrily.

"What the fuck are you doing down here?" Draco snarled, holding it up to glare into it's burnt yellow eyes. "I told you to stay in my room! How did you even get out?"

The cat twisted in his grip, trying to get free.

He looked around anxiously; expecting to see the snake sliding towards them, slit eyes wide with hunger.

An angry paw took a swipe at him.

Draco ignored it and carefully tucked the furball under his arm, holding it up to his chest and jumped back up the stairs, letting his long legs stretch and taking them three at a time.

His scars stood out like slithering snakes across his body. He wanted to pull them back open. Release whatever it was that was inside him right now. Get it out. Out. *Out.*

But there was no safeword that could stop this.

The cat meowed loudly and Draco snarled a silencing charm in its direction, stopping the awful noise from coming out of its flat face.

Draco was wheezing when he held out his arm, the muscles clenched, popping out blueish green veins along the inside of his forearm. The mark ached down to his bones. Burning, searing, scorching.

But not half as much as she did.

He grunted as the tip of his wand dug deep into the white skin right above the skull. Sweat glistened over him and his blunt nails dug into his palm and he could feel the heavy weight of the Malfoy ring on his finger. He was struggling to keep the walls in his head in place. Keep the pain contained, controlled. Keep *her* controlled. The Granger in his head was screaming his name, pleading with him.

And all he wanted to do was give in and let her *out.*

He couldn't face her, not after what he'd done. Not after what he was going to have to do. He pulled his walls closer, creating a small, safe space where she couldn't get him.

Where he was alone. Just him and the wand and the pain.

Draco screwed his eyes shut, chest rising and falling as he tried to summon the strength to do it. He'd done it to Rowle. He'd done it to that Muggle. His hand shook, the wand almost slipped on his sweat soaked skin. He'd failed at everything else, this was the only thing he was good at and now he couldn't even do that.

Useless.

Draco's eyes opened and the color faded from his vision, leaving the world in murky grey, stark white, and pitch black. A sudden numbness ran through him and Draco felt it hollow him out. The walls closed in on each other, crushing him under their weight.

Draco's face fell into an impassive mask and his chest stilled, devoid of air.

Breathing in just enough to utter the word, Draco stared down at the dark wood pressed into his pale flesh and murmured, " *Crucio.*"

Hermione tapped the faucet with her wand and dirty water spouted out, splashing against the white porcelain of the tub. She jumped back and the pipes groaned and shook against the wall before spitting out clear water, rinsing the dirty brown from the smooth white surface. The lamps on the wall flickered dully and Hermione wrapped her arms around herself as she watched the tub begin to fill.

Grimmauld Place did not feel like it had before. The large house had once been full of friends and Order members, rushing in and out. Mrs. Weasley arguing with Kreacher in the kitchen, Fred and George scurrying off to their room with arms full of chirping, clicking boxes, Tonks always bumping into things and making more of a mess than what was already there…

But now it was empty, shuttered and dark. So different but so familiar at the same time.

It was strange to think that this was Harry's house now. She still expected to see Sirius coming down the stairs, giving her an encouraging wink. They had gotten along well, despite Sirius being a bit too reckless for her taste and catching him rolling his eyes when she darted back upstairs for a book, but Hermione often thought that helping him escape from Ministry custody had given them what should have been the start to a lifelong friendship.

If Bellatrix Lestrange had not killed him two years ago.

She could hear Bellatrix's mad laugh as Draco slammed his boot into her chest. The memory of it stilled the breath in her lungs. Sirius's cousin, Draco's aunt… The one he had pushed her down in front of, the one he had protected her from.

Hermione sighed. She had tried to ignore the slumped figure in the recesses of her brain, but she was alone, overwhelmed, and *so* tired of fighting the feelings still beating in her heart.

She flicked her wand, turning the faucet off and then swished it towards the door. The lock clicked into place.

Her shirt slipped over her head, curls twirling back down around her shoulders. She slipped her jeans down over her legs, carefully stepping out of them and folding them twice before placing them on the counter with her shirt. Her fingers unclasped her bra easily and she slid it down her arms, the cool air hitting her chest as it expanded with a deep breath.

Hermione paused for a moment and stared at herself in the mirror. How could she look the same when everything had changed? The sulking figure behind the growing pile

The jaws opened wide, the throat expanded as it slowly swallowed her down. It had taken over an hour. How long had the pups taken?

Draco bent down and picked up the collar, running his thumb over the frayed threads.

He tossed it back down.

"Clean this place up."

Draco didn't look back as he made his way out of the kennels and onto the grounds. He couldn't go back in yet, not when he was this upset. He needed to cool down, needed to walk this off. Needed to stop fucking picturing that god-awful snake swallowing his dogs whole.

How was he supposed to hunt without his hounds? They tracked his prey and ran it down for him. Kept it at bay until he arrived to deal the killing blow. He had mortgaged his future, his life, on hunting down Potter all because he wanted to find her. Needed to. Had to. There wasn't another option for him anymore.

He didn't really give a shit about Potter. The idiot would get himself killed whether there was a Dark Lord or not, but Draco was *not* going to let the fucker take Granger down with him. If that meant handing the Chosen One over to the Dark Lord to keep her safe, so be it. It's not like Scarhead stood a chance against anyways.

Granger would mourn, but… Draco would be there to comfort her. And she'd be here with him. It would all be okay once he got her back. It always was. Every time she had tried to leave, he'd gotten her back. This would be no different.

Draco let all the air out of his lungs and stayed like that until the count of three, feeling the weight of his chest pushing in on him before turning back to the Manor, steps heavy but determined as his black boots crushed the thick green grass underneath. The back of the Manor came into view, looming over him, stretching higher the closer he got to it.

Turning back for a moment Draco looked out over the expansive grounds; long sloping fields almost as far as he could see, but in the distance was the smudge of dark woods surrounding them. He had an overwhelming urge to run into them and disappear. Flee. Leave it all behind. Just turn and run. Take off. Make it to the trees and disappear inside of them.

Run. Away from here. Away from his Master, from the war, from his whole life.

Run to her.

He'd never make it. The Dark Lord would send his wolves to hunt him down and he'd be dead before he ever got to Granger. Or maybe they'd drag him back here and his Master would feed him to the snake as well.

"Pudge!"

The elf was so old that his eyes were almost forced shut by the weight of the wrinkles bearing down on them. He had a heavy limp, some accident from before Draco was born, and was missing two fingers on his right hand.

Draco *did* remember what caused that disfiguration.

Pudge's ears pricked in Draco's direction and his long nose twitched. Draco gritted his teeth and held his wand stiffly at his side.

"Sir?" the elf croaked in a voice that had a deep rumbling to it.

"Where are my hounds?"

Pudge looked around as if he expected to see the kennels full of jumping, barking dogs.

His hunting pack had been decimated during his practices with Bellatrix, but he still had pups in training. They would have to be drilled, put through the paces, and required to have complete obedience, but he was fastidious in his breeding and they had all come from decent stock. He could remake the pack.

If they were fucking *here*.

"Gone." Pudge spat on the ground.

"Yes, Pudge," Draco snarled. "I am aware they are gone."

Pudge nodded slowly in agreement, squinting as he looked around the empty kennels. Draco's eye twitched.

"Where did they go?"

Pudge sniffed the air with his snout like nose, the end of it jumping slightly.

"Barked."

His patience was wearing thin. No, not thin, it was damn near pellucid and he made no attempt to hide his ire. Draco opened his mouth to start threatening the old elf with unspeakable torture when it spoke again.

"Snake did not like barks."

Black spots played in his vision. He could feel the blood, his actual blood, drain from his head and there was a rising, loud ringing in his ears.

The snake. The snake ate his dogs.

Just like it ate that woman. The professor.

Draco hadn't really known her, only saw her in the Great Hall or sometimes in a corridor between classes. He hadn't even known her name until the Dark Lord had introduced her to the assembled Death Eaters.

Then murdered her and fed her to his snake.

of messy thoughts raised his head. She took a sharp breath and slipped her knickers down before sticking her foot in the bath, sinking into the hot water as fast as she could.

It had been her idea to camp in the sitting room together, but she had hardly had a moment away from either Harry or Ron since arriving at Grimmauld Place. It felt nice to be on her own for just a moment, to not have to keep up the pretense in front of them. Especially Ron, however she sometimes noticed Harry looking at her out of the corner of his eye as if he was trying to figure something out. She sunk down further into the water, leaving only her head above and leaned back.

Hermione closed her eyes.

"H*ello, Sweetheart."* Silver eyes gleamed at her from the crouched figure.

Her heart weighed heavily in her chest, dragging her further into the water.

"P*oor kitten,"* he cooed. " *And poor little pussy… no one is there to pet it."*

She took a deep breath. She could hear his deep, condescending chuckle.

"No *one but you."*

Hermione gripped the edges of the tub. Hard.

He leaned forward, coming into focus. Godric, she had missed his smug face.

"To*uch it for me."*

She screwed her eyes shut tighter; hoping the lights flashing behind them would blot him out.

The shadows deepened.

"To*uch…"* Draco was smirking, " ***it."***

Hermione's hands fell into the water.

"Go*od girl."*

Her breath came a little faster and the water lapped at her chest as she moved her hands under it.

"Ea*sy, pet,"* his deep voice guided her. " *Just feel yourself first."*

Hermione slid her hand between her legs, lightly rubbing her hand over herself a few times. The anticipation built up in her and Draco's face became clearer in her head.

"Th*at feels good, doesn't it? Mmm, I know it does. I know you've been missing this. Go ahead, Sweetheart. You're allowed."*

Hermione bit her lip and spread her legs a little wider.

"To*uch your clit for me."* A shiver passed through her at the sound of his commanding tone. " *Touch it. Tease it. Do it just like me, pet."*

Oh God, it didn't take much. He was right, it had been so long and she had missed him *so* much. His little smirks, his gleaming eyes, his way of making everything feel like it was going to be okay.

His love.

"I know, kitten. I know you miss me. Keep rubbing; don't stop until I tell you. You're a good little whore, aren't you? And you're going to do exactly what I tell you."

"Yes," she whispered and her head fell to the side, warm cheek pressed into the cool porcelain.

Draco was kneeling beside the tub. His sleeve was rolled up and his hand was in the water, tracing lazy circles in it. Hermione let out the smallest, weakest moan.

"That's my girl."

She was. She was still his girl.

His girl. His girl. His good little girl.

"Softer now." His voice was hoarse. *" I said to tease it."*

Hermione nodded, wet curls shaking by her flushed cheeks.

" Yes, that's it. I want you needy. I want you begging for it." Hermione's teeth were digging into her lip painfully. Just like his. " You desperate little *whore… Look at you—hand between your legs, playing with yourself… just to please me."*

"Yes," she gasped.

"Stop. Take your hand away, slut."

Her body protested, wanting more, needing more, but Hermione obeyed.

"Stick them in your mouth. You've messed your fingers. I want you to lick them clean. That is what a bath is for, all after."

Hermione swallowed and lifted her hand up out of the water.

"Let go of that lip and—Oh kitten…"

Hermione rubbed her finger over her swollen lip. She could feel the indentations from her own teeth on it before she opened her mouth and slipped her fingers inside, tasting herself. Her hips gave a small jerk and she heard Draco chuckle again.

He was still watching her, fingers playing in her bath water. His sly smile was set in place and his mist grey eyes were latched onto hers.

"Now that deserves a reward." Hermione smiled up at him and watched his eyes shine like silver for her.

"Back between your legs now, pet."

Hermione's lip hurt as it pulled into a wide smile and she sighed as her hand returned to soothe her ache. For him.

"You think you can hunt for me? The answers I want are somewhere in Rowle's head. Bring them to me."

Draco's hawthorn wand was trained on Rowle's blood streaked face. For half a second, he remembered how it looked in Granger's hand. How she had held it; fingers curling around, warm palm pressed flat against the handle. Gripping it firm and tight. How it had never looked longer than it did in her small fist.

If Rowle had in fact encountered Potter tonight then he might have seen Granger. Where else would she be but at her precious Saint Potter's side? Probably squeezed somewhere in between him and Weasley because she had *left* with them instead of waiting on *him* like he fucking told her to.

And if Rowle was Obliviated then he obviously had confronted someone in the Order tonight and subtly wasn't exactly his style. Rowle was a giant and would see someone as small as Granger as easy pickings. He might have turned his wand on her, just like this. He might have looked into her big doe eyes and… hurt her. Made her cry. Looked down at her laying at his feet as she stared back up at him—

*"Draco, don't **do** this."*

His blood beat heavy in his veins.

He would do his Lord's bidding to survive, but this, *this,* he wanted to do.

Rowle tried to blink the blood from his eyes, somewhat successfully, but could not erase the look of terror that was widening them to such a size Draco wondered if they might fall out all together.

If he had hurt her, Draco would make sure of it.

"Crucio."

"WHAT THE FUCK?!"

Draco was upset.

He stared at the empty kennels; moldy blankets, overturned bowls, and a frayed collar were scattered across the darkly stained floor.

"Pudge!"

Draco tapped his wand against his leg, *fuming.*

Instead he let his vision slip out of focus. He wasn't here. He wasn't here. He was in the large white bed with Granger. Her hands ran through his hair, her leg slid over his waist, her pink little lips opened up…

Rowle was choking on his own blood.

Right in front of him. Granger's expression changed from desire to disgust as she looked up at him from the big white bed. Draco blinked and pushed the thought of her so far from himself it was like she had never been there at all.

The Dark Lord turned away from Rowle who collapsed onto the floor, shaking and holding his head in his large hands. Draco glanced at his Master; fury, rage, and wrath layered over him, interlocking like scales. "Modified," he murmured to himself, "Obliviated."

Someone had broken the taboo tonight; moments after the attack on the Ministry, minutes really and Draco knew, *he* knew it was Potter. Only the Order used the Dark Lord's name and who else would be spouting off about him right then *but* Potter? Stupid fucking… *dick*. Maybe one day the fucking *Chosen One* would *choose* to use his brain for once. Honestly, how was he not dead already?

"You lost something important to me, Rowle."

Rowle swallowed hard, drinking down his own blood and flicked his crimson filled eyes up to the Dark Lord.

"Would you like to get it back?"

"Yes! Yes, my Lord!" Rowle pushed himself up to his knees. He tried to wipe the blood from his face, but only succeeded in smearing it across his wide cheeks. "I'll give you anything you ask—Potter, Shackelbolt—"

The Dark Lord smiled, but it was… *wrong*.

"I need your memories, Rowle."

Rowle made a choking noise. "But I… I don't—"

"Draco."

The sound of his name snapped Draco to attention. He stepped forward, wand at his side. Ready. Willing.

"You wanted to prove yourself to me."

Even though the Dark Lord had accepted his offer to hunt, he had not sent Draco out yet and his detour to Granger's house had been the only chance he'd had to look for her. He needed to do better. Be better. For her. He would not fail again.

He did not hesitate to answer. "Yes Master."

He leaned forward and plucked one of her curls from the water. Hermione watched as he brought it to his mouth and sucked the water from it. It slipped through his lips before he wrapped it around his finger and gave it a quick tug.

"Fu*ck yourself.*"

"Yes sir."

She bit back a moan as she thought about how Draco's hand felt. His fingers, and just slightly calloused and surprisingly strong from Quidditch. His hand was larger than hers and no effort was needed to slide his long fingers all the way in her while reaching up to twirl his thumb over her bud. She wanted to grab his wrist and thrust herself against his hand. She wanted to hear him chuckle a little and tell her what a good slut she was for him. She was so close she just needed… needed…

"Y*ou know what you need. Do it. Make that pussy come for me.*"

Hermione slid her other hand over her thigh and pinched the bruised bite there. Pain flared to life in it and Draco growled deeply in her ear. A frisson shot through her and her body stiffened as it tried to contain the pulses of pleasure pounding through her.

She arched her back and almost silently gasped, "Draco!"

"Th*ere's my girl,*" Draco purred. "*There she is.*"

Hermione pressed her fingers in just a little bit more and everything fell away as the pain and pleasure reacted to each other, mixing to combust inside her. No more horcruxes, no more war, no more world crashing around her. He was doing it again. He wasn't even here, but he was giving her the unbelievable bliss that he always had.

"Co*me,*" Draco ordered. "*Yeah, that's it. Come. Come for me.*"

She was shaking, water splashed around her. She couldn't stop, didn't want to stop. She wanted this, him. It didn't matter that she shouldn't or what he was or anything else, all that mattered was how he made her feel…

"An*d I'll come for you, Hermione. I promise.*"

She caught herself before she sank completely under the water. Hermione took a deep, startled breath through her nose and pushed herself up against the back of the tub, ears ringing and eyes wide.

She was out of breath. Her heart pounded in her chest and her legs were numb in the now tepid water.

Random muscles still twitched every few seconds and Hermione clung to the sides of the tub as she stared down into her floating reflection in the bathwater, wide eyes, red cheeks, and messy, wet curls. It didn't matter that she had run, he still had a hold on her

that she couldn't shake off. And only with her pride flayed from her was she able to admit maybe she didn't want to.

Draco made his way back to his dark corner behind her messy thoughts and threw himself down, smirking back at her.

"*Where* ***is*** *he?!*"

The Dark Lord's rage was a palpable thing, filling the dimly lit room and making it darker than it already was.

"You were summoned by the taboo and then…?" he trailed off; disdain in his voice and disgust on his face.

Rowle was a large man, but he was shrinking by the second, cowed by the fury coming off the Dark Lord in waves.

"I…" Rowle's voice failed him. Sweat poured down his red face, drenching the collar the blue Muggle uniform he still wore. "I can't remember."

For a moment, Draco thought the Dark Lord might spontaneously combust. He'd read about it some; it happened to wizards when their magic became too volatile and violent. It turned on them, engulfing them in flames that burned too hot, too quickly to be put out.

But the Dark Lord's presence made the light from the fireplace weaker, thinner, and on second inspection, Draco didn't think there was a single shred of anything warm in the man he called Master.

"You… can't… remember." His thin lips curled back and the slits of his eyes narrowed until they were barely visible. Rowle took a single shaking breath and looked too terrified to do much else and left his mouth hanging open.

Then he screamed.

It wasn't a scream of terror, high and loud or a roar of a man trying to contain it; this was an animalistic noise, one of pure agony. Pulled from somewhere deep inside him, yanked up, and forced out by something stronger than the man emitting it. Draco suppressed a shiver as bloody tears began to stream from Rowle's inner eyes, running down his nose and into his gaping, screeching mouth.

Draco knew enough about Legilimency to recognize what the Dark Lord was doing. He was tearing, ripping, into Rowle's mind. Causing his body to have a physical reaction to the mental anguish he was enduring. It was almost impossible to watch, but Draco did not let his gaze waiver for even a moment.

were a surprising number of bare shelves in this room. He doubted Granger had an empty shelf since she was six so this was only further proof that she *wasn't fucking here.*

He had known something was wrong as soon as he unlocked the door. He knew as he walked through the Granger's living room. And he knew it now, sitting here alone on her bed. He sat his wand down next to him and took a deep breath, trying to suck up the last bits of her delicious smell that was still lingering.

There had only been a chance that she would be here, but he had taken it all the same. The spark of hope she had kindled in his chest burned and would not be extinguished no matter what reason told him. He told her he would come for her, all she had to do was be here, *wait for him,* and they could be together.

But she wasn't. She had left. She had left *him.*

The weight of it all crashed down over him and Draco leaned over, resting his elbows on his knees and running his fingers up into his hair. She was wandering around somewhere out there, probably with Potter and Weasley doing Merlin knows what when she should be safe and here with him.

Granger should be *with him.*

Something brushed against his leg and Draco looked down to see the ginger ball of fur that would sometimes follow Granger out onto the grounds. The cat turned his squashed face up at Draco and meowed insistently at him. It was an awful fucking sound. Draco blinked and looked down into his yellow eyes.

"She left you too, huh?" he said softly and reached down to scratch the cat's ugly face before he even thought about what he was doing.

Granger had told him her cat's name once, long ago… what had it been? He ran his fingers down to the cat's collar and pulled it around until he read ' *Crookshanks'* embossed on a small gold circle.

"Crookshanks?" Draco wrinkled his nose and the cat meowed again. He stared down at it for a while more. "Well, she'll want to see you once I get her back." Draco sighed and picked up the hairy creature, tucking him under his arm and against his black robes before walking out of the empty room, the Muggle house, and into the dark street.

He cast one last look at the red brick house and then glanced down at the ginger cat in his arms. "You ready?" Crookshanks slowly blinked his yellow eyes back at him. They disappeared with a swirl and a swish of black, leaving the street just as silent and empty as it had been before.

Chapter Three

Draco had been to the Ministry dozens of times with his father, but he had never seen it quite like this. The entire Atrium was empty. Curtains were closed over every office window. Hardly any of the floo fires were lit, and there was a gaping hole in the middle of the room where the fountain and surrounding statues had once sat.

On the far end a member of Magical Law Enforcement was guiding a frail old man who was mumbling incoherently, but Draco thought he picked out the phrases, *"Where are you taking me?"* and *"Please let me go home"* from out of the mumbles.

Draco took heavy steps across the dark wood, letting the echo of his boots drown out the old man's voice.

He did not want to linger and look around, not that there was much to see anyways. Lucius was already winded once they reached the lifts and Draco saw his hand shake as he reached up and pressed the button with the silver snake head of his walking stick. After the Dark Lord had taken Lucius' wand, Narcissa had done her best to repair it for use again. But it was no longer a weapon, only a crutch now.

Draco didn't wait for his Father when the doors slid open and took a long, heavy step inside the lift.

"Level one. The Minister's office." Lucius' voice was raspy and low. He cleared his throat loudly and smoothed out his coat with a thin hand, making sure his sleeve was pulled down far enough to cover the tattoos on his forearm.

Draco rolled his eyes. "I know where the Minister's office is."

Lucius' eyes cut to Draco's outstretched hand and the Malfoy signet ring on his finger as Draco lifted it to mash in one of the buttons on the panel.

Draco stuck it back in his pocket and gripped the handle of his wand.

The doors opened and Lucius stuck his cane out, blocking Draco from exiting first. "Traditions must be respected, Draco," Lucius muttered as he moved past his son.

Draco let his face fall into its practiced position of indifference. "I'll be sure to remember that at your funeral."

Lucius stopped and spun around so quickly that Draco almost ran into him. Before his father had been taken to Azkaban, Draco had been just about the same height as him. He had hit growth spurts several times in his life, shooting up inches overnight and over the past year, Draco had hit another. Lucius now had to tilt his chin up to look into his son's eyes.

His father's eyes were a paler shade of grey than his own and Draco was reminded of the dead, grey glaze of Ghostie's gaze, but he did not flinch. He stared back down, unblinking.

Lucius sucked his teeth and curled his lip; his scowl fell into the creases that now lined his face. And just because he could, Draco smiled.

"Don't worry Father. I'll make sure you get all the honors you deserve."

Lucius looked livid and just for a moment, Draco saw the glimmer of the man who had raised him return. Then his father narrowed his pale eyes and turned stiffly, walking out of the lift and into the reception area of the Minister's office leaving Draco to follow in his footsteps.

Draco wasn't surprised to see people here. Witches and wizards buzzed around, summoning files from cabinets that burst into quick flickers of flame before the ash fell down on the discarded desks. It was a purge, a cleansing. A return to purity.

He brushed a piece of ash from his shoulder and moved towards the large double doors at the other end of the room. Draco watched his father straighten out his spine, lift his chin, and walk as confidently as he could past the workers destroying documents to make room for the new regime.

Draco moved carefully down the hall, peering around with eyes that shone like mercury in the dark. He pushed one door open with his boot. A bathroom. Also clean and white and… *nice*. He had thought a Muggle house would have been more… Draco frowned. He wasn't sure what he thought anymore. He backed out, heading down the hall.

Passing another room with a closed door Draco paused and heard a low snore inside. Her parents. It was strange to think that the Muggles she came from were just on the other side of the door. Their Muggle blood had held just enough residual magic to make her a witch. Who *were* they? He'd ask her about it later, try and find out what line she came from. He couldn't match any of her features with the families he knew.

Shit, he hoped she wasn't related to the Notts.

He pushed the strange thoughts from his mind and continued down the hallway, trying his best to stay quiet but his breath seemed louder than normal and his heart was pushing adrenaline laced blood streaming into his fingertips and legs. He was so close. So close to her. There was only one door left in the hallway now and she had to be behind it.

His Granger. His girl.

Draco stopped in front of the door. It wasn't closed like the others, but cracked open. His eyes felt dry and he didn't think he had blinked since he topped the stairs.

She was going to be laying there, asleep in her bed. He was going to open the door and see her messy curls splayed out on her pillows, maybe her hand curled up by her face. Her blanket was probably resting on her stomach, she always seemed to be warm so she wouldn't have them pulled up to her chin in the heat of summer. Would she be wearing those thin cotton pajamas? Draco swallowed. Would she be wearing *anything?*

His hand was shaking as he placed it against the door and pushed it open.

Draco stared into the room.

Empty. It was… empty.

He stepped in, looking around in disbelief.

Draco sank onto the bed. She had gone. Granger was gone.

Tonight was the first time he had been able to leave the Manor. The Dark Lord had left once Yaxley sent word the Ministry had fallen. The few remaining Death Eaters crowded into the large foyer of Malfoy Manor had been directed to search for Potter.

He could find Potter later; he needed to find Granger first so instead, Draco had come here.

He could faintly smell vanilla and cinnamon left on her bedding and he ran his hand over the blanket, balling it up in his fist as he quickly looked around the room. There

"Clever little witch," Draco smirked. He pushed the door open and placed a heavy black boot inside her Muggle home.

It was… nice enough, he supposed. Clean, at least, but it was nothing like his own Manor. There was nothing *wrong* with it, it was just… Muggle. Switches on the wall and wires lining the floorboards. A picture hung on the wall of a flock of birds flying out of a tree, but their wings didn't flap and the flock did not swarm. They hung there, mid flight—unmoving. It was… unsettling.

Granger didn't belong in a place like this.

He moved deeper in and illuminated the tip of his wand with a sharp flick. There was a large box-like thing with a plate of glass over it. Draco thought he heard people at school say it was called a 'tell-vision', a way for Muggles to get information and entertainment. He prodded it with his wand and nothing happened. Draco glared at it and turned away.

There were pictures lining the mantle, a smiling man and a pretty woman. Draco let the light from his wand linger over them, looking for her, but she did not appear in a single one. He paused at a blank frame wondering if it was common for Muggles to leave pictures out of their frames or if this one was missing.

Missing… Granger.

Draco turned at a sound from upstairs and swiveled his wand around, ready to throw a curse if needed, but the house remained silent.

There was an accent table behind him next to the stairs. Keys, a wallet, and a hat sat on top of a stack of mail. A folded piece of paper caught his eye and he opened it. Printed were tickets to… Australia?

He knew there was talk of some Muggleborns leaving the country or going into hiding and the departure date was set for tomorrow.

"Good thing I'm here tonight then," he muttered to himself and tossed the papers back down on the table. Granger wasn't going to Australia. Granger wasn't going *anywhere,* but back with him. Where he could keep her *safe*.

He had taken too long already, he needed to find her and fast.

Draco placed one boot on the stairs and the thud of it made him cringe. He pointed his wand down at his feet and cast a nonverbal silencing spell then quickly made his way up the stairs, glancing at the pictures on the wall where she was once again mysteriously absent.

He needed to find her. *Now*.

Lucius' walking stick struck the dark wooden floor sharply, but Draco could still hear the hollow echo in it. His father paused only to open the door before striding in like he was the Minister himself.

The sound of the cane was muffled by thick, rich carpet and Draco felt himself sink almost an inch into it as he took his place at his father's side in front of the Minister's desk.

Pius Thicknesse was a slim man with grey streaks in his dark hair that ran down into the thin beard hanging off of his chin. He got to his feet and stuck out his hand warmly to greet Lucius. Draco watched Pius glance down at their clasped hands as he registered the weakness in Lucius' grip.

"Lucius! Good to see you. And you've brought your son; I don't think I've had the pleasure—"

Draco looked down at the hand extended to him. Thick black hairs curled over the fingers and the skin was tanned and creased. Draco pulled his hand from his pocket and held it out, the silver of his ring gleaming for a moment.

"Draco," he said in the same affected tone as his father. "Draco Malfoy."

It was a bold move, showing off the ring and claiming the family name for himself. His Mother had told him to go to show solidarity. She had also told him to keep his father safe and no amount of support was going to win his father any respect back. But there was nothing stopping Draco from snatching it up for himself.

He made sure to apply a little more effort than was needed in gripping Pius' hand and when the Minister went to pull back, Draco held on. Leaning in, he lowered his voice. "This is a real treat for me, Minister. I've always wanted to sit behind that desk. Maybe one day I will."

Draco kept his grip and his gaze unyielding until the Minister looked down at the desk between them.

Pius licked his lips nervously as Draco released his hand. "Ah, yes, well—" He gave Draco a flat smile, not exactly meeting his eyes. "High ambitions, this one, eh Lucius?"

Draco's father glanced over at him. "He's a Malfoy. Now where's my medal?"

Pius' mouth pulled thin into a wry smile. "In the conference room. They are almost ready for us."

Lucius gripped the head of his walking stick and pulled himself up to his full height, towering over the desk while Draco shifted his weight, leaning heavier on one leg and slouching to show his indifference.

The Minister looked between the two Malfoys quickly trying to size them up. Draco could feel the frustration rolling off Lucius at being made to wait and turned his own expression cold in comparison to his father's barely controlled rage.

Lucius might have gotten better under Narcissa's care, but his mood swings had only declined with the addition of the added stress of their precarious situation and excessive drinking.

For a moment, Draco felt a kinship with his father.

Lucius pulled a watch on a long silver chain and clicked it open, sighing dramatically.

The feeling passed.

"I've got the new officials gathered for the ceremony and the Prophet will be taking some photographs and quotes. There will be some refreshments afterwards if… if you're interested in staying." Pius sounded like the last thing he wanted to do was have either Malfoy in his presence any longer than necessary.

Buttoning his coat and walking over to a set of double doors, the new Minister of Magic opened one and waved his hand out. "Shall we?"

Draco let his Father walk in first, resisting the temptation to kick his cane out from under him.

"Draco!" A high cheery voice called his name. "Well this is a *treat!"*

Fuck him with a broomstick. Draco did his best to hide the revulsion as he turned and saw Dolores Umbridge's sickly sweet smile waiting for him.

Great.

As if he didn't want to kill himself enough already.

He honestly hadn't given her a single thought since the end of his fifth year and the removal of her from Hogwarts, but it made sense that she returned to the Ministry. She had obviously held onto her position even through the last two Ministers and judging by her presence here, she must have gotten a promotion under the new regime.

"Professor." He greeted her with all the civility his Mother had drilled into him as a child. "What a lovely surprise."

She gave that little giggle and Draco thought he might retch.

Chapter Two

Draco appeared in the middle of the street with a small pop. His hood was pulled up around his face to hide his telltale white blond hair. He didn't think anyone had followed him, but he wasn't taking any chances, not tonight.

He stared at the house in front of him; strong red bricks, wide white windows, and a door shrouded in midnight shadows. Draco glanced around him one last time, making sure he had not drawn any attention before taking long strides right up to it.

He stood on the stoop for a moment and tried to soften his breathing. This was her house. Granger's house. This was where she played as a child, where she learned to read. Where she received her letter from Hogwarts and left this world behind to come into his.

Now he was going into hers.

" *Alohomora,"* he whispered and was surprised when the lock turned and opened. Certainly Granger would have placed a special protection charms on her own home in order to keep out unwanted guests… Unless...

She knew cloaking her house in magic would leave a trace, even if they were protective enchantments. If anyone was looking for Muggleborns in hiding and came sniffing around, her magical wards would call to them like a fucking beacon.

"Cissy, no!" Bellatrix snarled and he heard his aunt trying to hold his mother back. Lord Voldemort grinned and Draco was reminded of a snake baring its fangs.

"Master," Draco said quickly as his father shook with the telltale signs of an oncoming fit. "Let him be your Malfoy. And let me hunt."

Her. Let me hunt her down.

"I have werewolves to hunt for me."

"They don't know Potter. I do." Draco's mouth was impossibly dry. He spoke carefully, making sure his tongue did not stick to the roof of his mouth. "We never… *associated* , but I spent the last six years in classrooms with him. I played against him in Quidditch. I know his habits, his traits, his *friends."* He threw his weight down on the floorboards, keeping her trapped there. Even an imaginary version of Granger didn't need to see him like this. "I know what kind of man he is."

Lord Voldemort stopped walking and trained his slitted eyes down at Draco. His voice was little more than a hiss when he spoke. "And that is?"

He had said anything. He had said everything.

Draco's lip curled over his teeth. "Once I find him? A dead one."

"My my, you've certainly grown up." A wide smile stretched over her toad-like face. "Am I correct that you've left school already?"

He watched her beady eyes dart down to his left arm and then back up. It was covered by a carefully tailored jacket, but what was underneath it wasn't exactly a secret anymore. After last June everyone knew where Draco's loyalties lay. Or at least, where they were supposed to.

"My services are no longer required there."

Her mouth popped open and he could see a smudge of pink lipstick on her small teeth. Then the simpering smile was back and she tilted her head to the side, making her bubblegum pink bow wobble. "You always did have potential. I saw it even then. That's why I made you Head of my Inquisitorial Squad. I knew you were going places."

Of course he was fucking going places. He was a goddamn Malfoy. She didn't see something special in him, she had seen a meal ticket.

Although being in the Inquisitorial Squad had been great. For a few months he had been able to walk the halls and almost no one could touch him. Even Professors ducked back in the classrooms when he, Crabbe, and Goyle passed by. Anyone could be reported for an infraction. No one was safe. Not from him.

It was when Umbridge had asked the Squad to figure out what Potter and his friends were doing that Draco had started wandering the halls late at night, hoping to catch *her*. His fantasy of finding her after hours had started as a niggling thought and worked itself into a full blown infatuation; so much that he had ducked inside empty classrooms to beat off to it when it got too late and he hadn't been lucky enough to catch her.

And then she had made that fantasy come to life for him. More than that, she had *wanted* to. Because she was his good little slut who wanted to please him and beg him and *love* him—

"Will we be seeing more of you here at the Ministry?"

"Oh I don't think Draco is quite ready to take on that mantle yet." Lucius sidled up next to Draco with a similar expression of affected politeness. "I've tried to talk him into an internship here but he's never shown any interest in anything that doesn't take place on the back of a broom. And with the recent changes, it's no place for a novice."

Draco turned his cold smile on his Father. "I'm a quick study. I'll be here before you know it."

"Yes we're all looking forward to it," Lucius said drolly and turned back to Umbridge giving her a warm smile. "Now is it true that you are heading up our new Muggleborn Registration Committee, Dolores? Quite impressive."

She giggled and dipped her head down a little, clasping her hands in front of her, making the rings on her fingers clack loudly together. Umbridge looked up at Lucius with her bulging eyes and saccharine smile. "Lucius, how kind of you to say so."

Draco had to stop his jaw from dropping when he saw the caked-on pink smear darken even further on Umbridge's face. She was… blushing. Dolores Umbridge was *flirting* with his Father. Oh fucking hell, he was going to be sick. This was too much. This was downright *disgusting*.

"I can't think of anyone better for that position."

Umbridge fell into a fit of giggles and Draco stared at his Father in disbelief. Lucius' lips curled down, frowning a little before sliding back into position as she looked back up at him.

"Why thank you, Lucius." Draco tried not to gag as Umbridge drew out the letters of his Father's name. "The first thing I am starting is using the correct terminology for them. 'Muggleborn' doesn't quite fit, does it? You see, I'm not entirely sure they *are* born this way. They could be obtaining powers through force or..."

Draco let his attention drift around the room. He knew many of the faces here, several from recent meetings in his own drawing room. Corban Yaxley hovered by the refreshments table, Albert Runcorn was talking to a skinny witch Draco didn't know, and Quintus Travers looked like he was slowly trying to make a break for the door.

How could they all stand here so calmly when papers burned, statues crumbled, and people were being hauled in just outside these doors? They looked just like normal Ministry employees, but some of these people Draco had seen in Death Eater robes, killing, maiming, and worst of all, laughing.

Had it always been like this? Within and without? Draco had grown up sheltered, he knew it. There were plenty of locked doors keeping him out of rooms and halls of Malfoy Manor that his Father did not deem him worthy of entering. Now knowing what happened inside of them, he wasn't sure what side he wanted to be on.

Umbridge straightened her bow with a quick tug. "You'll have to stop in and see the new office sometime. I can give you a personal tour."

"Oh I am sure you're much too busy to cater to me, Dolores." Lucius waved a hand in dismissal.

Her face fell. "But—"

"And you are doing such *important* work; rounding up those who pose a threat to our world. I would not want to take a minute of your time. In fact, we ought to let you get back to it now. Draco?"

reached out in an offer. Hated the warm, pleasant blinking of his stupid fucking blue eyes looking at him with… *pride*.

They didn't look proud when Snape was murdering him. Their brightness flickered and went out and the old man tumbled off the back of the parapets. The Dark Mark slithered in the sky above.

" *Yes."* It hissed in his head, high and cold. " *Pathetic. Weak. Dead."*

Draco shivered, but stood his ground on the shaky, hollow floor. The Dark Lord might have been pleased that Dumbledore was dead, but Draco had only shown him, not committed the act himself. His Father might be a failure too, but he also had years of loyal service that Draco did not.

But Draco had potential.

A dozen dead hounds surrounded him. The Muggle, blood leaking from his ears. McLaggen's bones cracking and the scream that followed. Potter barely dodging out of the way of his *cruciatus* curse. Then finally, his boot on her chest, pinning her down into the mud, doe eyes widening in fear and pain.

Sick. He was going to be sick. Showing the Dark Lord this. Using it, using her. He pressed his boot down harder, forcing her back under the rotten floorboards of his mind.

"A promising start," Lord Voldemort's red eyes gleamed. "Bellatrix had done well."

"Thank you, My Lord!" Draco heard his aunt call out from somewhere in the line.

"Let me hunt," Draco said quickly, not wanting to lose his momentum. The Dark Lord was pleased with him, but the tide could quickly turn. "For you, My Lord. Let me hunt for you."

Begging. Just like his father.

The snake was circling Lucius, flicking its tongue out, tasting the fearful scent of his sweat.

"And your father?"

Draco's eyes cut over to his father. Long blond hair stuck to his head, slick with sweat. His hands shook violently and his pale grey eyes were alight with terror. What did he have to offer except more failure? Draco was rising and Lucius was falling.

Draco shrugged. "Let him do what he's always done. Slither around the Ministry. Whispering in ears and pouring poison into them. Let him run Malfoy Enterprises and fund your regime. Let him… rot. He's halfway there already."

The snake around his father hissed and snapped and Lucius recoiled. His mother cried out a heart-wrenching sob.

To be honest, she had been terrified she was going to call out Draco's name during the night.

But Hermione wasn't the only one with nightmares and that's why she had burst into Harry's room with the tip of her wand already lit.

"Harry!"

"Shit! Hermione!" Harry was soaking wet with sweat, out of breath, and had knocked his glasses to the floor in an attempt to get to his wand on the table beside his bed.

Hermione bent down and picked them up, tapping the lamp beside his bed and illuminating the room in a dim, golden light. Harry wiped the sweat from his face with his shirt and shoved his glasses on as Hermione extinguished her wand and sat on the edge of his bed.

"You're still seeing him aren't you?" she asked softly.

"I know you don't approve, but I can't help it. Especially when I'm asleep. It's like he just… drops in. And I can't get him out."

Hermione twisted her hands in her lap and refused to look in the back of her mind. It didn't matter. Draco had gotten bolder.

"*Someone in his head? He sounds* ***mad,*** *pet."*

Hermione ignored him.

Harry leaned back against the headboard. "If you're going to fuss at me, just do it in the morning, Hermione. I can't take it tonight."

She looked over at him. He had caught his breath some, but his black hair still stuck thickly to his forehead, the rest of it spread out in even wilder directions than it normally was. Harry rubbed his scar gingerly.

"I think we need to talk about it."

His green eyes flew open.

"I just meant," Hermione blushed, "it can't be particularly good things you're seeing and… well, you don't have to deal with this on your own. I'd like to help you, if I can."

Harry looked at her strangely and then his eyes softened. "I'll tell you what, if we make it through the Ministry today then tonight we will sit around the fire and tell all our secrets."

" Going to tell him how I had my hand down your pants while he was getting knocked from his broom? Oh I know, how about how you lied to him outside the Room of Requirement after I had you tied up and bent over and begging to fuck my big—"

Hermione shifted awkwardly on the side of Harry's bed and took a large breath, hoping the low light in the room wasn't enough for Harry to see the blush in her cheeks.

"Hey, don't worry," Harry leaned forward a little. "We've planned it all out, we'll never be more prepared than we are now. We can do this, Hermione."

Hermione's eyes fluttered a little and she nodded, smiling thinly at him. "I know. I know we will. I'm sure Ron hates me for asking so many questions about the Ministry, but we've got our layout and notes and I've read over them about fifty times so I think we can answer any questions if it comes to it, so all we have to do is—"

Harry forced out a small laugh. "Break into the Ministry of Magic and steal a horcrux off the neck of a woman who hates us all with a bright pink passion? Yeah."

Hermione felt a wave of affection for Harry. They had been through so much, and him more than any of them, and he was still here, still fighting. If Harry could find the strength to keep going, then so could she. All the messy feelings she had piled up, that he was hiding behind, she could start to sort through them. She had to.

Draco had wrecked her and she had been living in the mess he left behind, scared to touch it because she knew what would happen once she did.

And once Draco had no place to hide, she would face him herself.

Ron tapped her shoulder while Harry was changing into the robes of the wizard he was impersonating. Hermione was already nervous enough about heading into the Ministry as soon as Harry was finished that she didn't have enough left over to worry about how Ron was looking at her right then.

"You don't have to do this," he said in a low voice.

"Ron, I'm perfectly capable of defending myself just as well as you or Harry."

"But Harry and I aren't Muggleborns."

Hermione paused. Ron looked… genuinely concerned. It was almost laughable. "Yes, I'm sure the fact that you're labeled as a Blood Traitor and Harry is Undesirable Number One will mean nothing compared to me, a single Mudblood—"

"Don't call yourself that," Ron said and she watched his expression tighten. He tensed his shoulders as if he wasn't sure what to do with his arms. "You… you don't know what they do to… to Muggleborns. I'm worried about you."

Hermione felt a familiar pang of longing in her chest. Ron's blue eyes cleared from their cloudy darkness and for a moment he looked at her like he used to. Before he had seen her in the Room of Requirement. With Draco. And for a second she felt Draco's body pressing against hers, his arms on either side of her, holding her in as he thrust and filled her—

"Worry about Harry, Ronald, not me," she said and turned as Harry was pulling the man's coat over his shoulders and pushed the door to the street open, taking a purposeful step into the bright morning light.

Draco hung around until dawn, waiting on the wolves to change back and killing time with Theo, talking about the fights and drinking until the bad blood between them swirled sluggishly in the last half inch of liquor in the bottle between them. Theo had prattled on over every blow and bite of the night and made a few choice remarks about Pansy, warning Draco off again, but Draco let them slide, ignoring them in favor of the company.

"I think not having to spend the summer at her house was good for her. She's happier. Hasn't even slapped me in a week." Theo smiled happily. "And she's taking my trunk to the…" he yawned, stretching his jaw out, "to the station for me."

Draco looked over at him confused for a moment before he remembered. "Shit, its—"

"September 1st," Theo nodded and poured the last of the fire whisky into his glass.

Draco hadn't really thought about it, not going back to school, but in that moment his stomach lurched painfully inside of him as memories of Granger surged through his mind. In the Library, in class, in the corridors, in the bleachers, in the Great Hall, in the Room of Requirement, in the mud.

In the Restricted Section.

"I don't want someone like you to love me."

Draco pulled his walls in tighter, creating the small safe place where he was alone in his mind. Where she couldn't find him. Safe.

dented doors. He could hear claws scratching against the metal walls and out of one came a vicious snarl. Draco's shoulders tensed and adrenaline surged through him. After tonight, he wouldn't be sitting in his room getting pissed anymore; he'd finally be able to do what he should have been this whole time.

This was how he would hunt her. Find her. And once he did, he would never, *ever* let her go.

Theo's voice dropped, heavy with excitement and he nodded to the dark pit below. "It's starting."

Hermione stood at the edge of the trees. They stretched up, almost scratching the sky with their thick branches, blocking the light from reaching the ground below.

She stepped inside.

Immediately she felt the change in the atmosphere. It was dense and oppressive, like something… caging her in. And she couldn't help but think of the dark trees as bars.

"Harry?" she called out and walked further in, a twig snapping under her foot.

Then she was running, looking for him or Ron or… No, Hermione knew who she was looking for. She just didn't know if she was running from him or to him.

Branches scratched at her face, but Hermione didn't stop. There was something behind her. She could hear it crashing through the brush.

Panic gripped her throat and she glanced over her shoulder. It was large and dark and—coming for her.

Right behind her.

Almost on her.

A painful roar woke her and Hermione jumped in her sheets. She grabbed her wand and ran to Harry's room. After a misunderstanding about whether her hand had fallen off the couch or not to land beside Ron's, Hermione decided it would be best if they all chose individual rooms. Once Kreacher returned, he was more than happy to tidy them up and replace the moth-eaten blankets with freshly laundered sheets and duvets. Hermione moved right in, happy to have her own space again.

running. "I'm not under anyone's orders now. And you're not under anyone's protection either. *He* told me to stop. *I* would have kept going."

Rowle blanched.

He would have killed her. He would have hauled her back to be tortured. He deserved what he got.

I should do it again.

Rowle's one good eye dropped to the floor and he muttered darkly under his breath as he shuffled his large frame out of the way. Draco gracefully stepped up into the railing, taking the spot Rowle had just vacated.

Theo shoved someone else out of the way as they tried to move into the open space and shoved his shoulder playfully against Draco's.

"That was badass." Theo grinned. "Shit, I can't wait until this year is over and I can take the mark too—"

Draco's head snapped to the side and Theo's words died in his mouth. "What? You want it?"

Theo forced out a breath. "Of course! Who—who wouldn't? That's *power,* mate."

Draco kept his expression impassive. Theo didn't know fucking shit about what it was the bear the mark. There was only one person that the mark made more powerful and that was through the oath and enslavement of his loyal followers.

Draco would never be free. The mark was a lock on his body, trapping him in it. His bones were his cage, his blood binding with every beat of his heart. He'd never get out. Never be able to leave. The power of the mark extended deeper than his skin.

But as much of a cage as it was, at least Granger would be safe inside it with him. And that's why he was here, after all, in this dark, sweltering, smelly place where he was about to watch two werewolves rip into each other.

And then he was going to hire the victor.

There was a large clanking overhead and Draco looked up to see the ceiling split into slats and retract in a circular movement. The bright light of the full moon shone down, illuminating the pit below.

Fresh air. Draco breathed in deeply, trying to dispel some of the stench from his nostrils. The night air smelled sweet and crisp compared to the thick musk and foul rottenness he had been breathing in for the past few minutes. The bright moonlight was pale and cold, but at least turning his face up to it was a small reprieve from the death that seemed to surround him now.

Low, deep, hungry howls sounded from behind the walls of the pit and Draco watched as several evenly placed wizards at the railing drew their wands, pointing them at rusted,

But she wasn't. He looked down at the floorboards and felt his heart give a painful beat.

"I'm moving her into our dorm this year."

Draco looked over at Theo. "Huh?"

Theo wiped a little sweat off his brow. "Pansy."

"Oh. Yeah, I mean, she's there enough already."

Theo's eyes turned a shade darker. "She always slept in my bed though."

Draco smirked and tossed back the last of his drink and set the glass down on the table. "Climbed out of it too."

"Look—" Theo slammed his glass down. "I know you two have a history, I was there for a large amount of it—"

"Not that much," Draco muttered and Theo's eyes narrowed.

"You had your fun. And that's all it ever was to you, Draco. Just like your mystery girl. You went on and on about her and where is she now? Gone. Because you—"

"Don't fucking talk about her."

Theo glanced over at Draco, thrown for a moment and then his rich eyes gleamed. "Who was it? You can tell me, Draco. It's not like it matters, right? It's over and you're not even in school anymore."

Draco ran his finger around the edge of his glass and thought about smashing it against Theo's head.

But then Theo leaned back and his stupid smile slipped back onto his face and said, "It's Blaise's Mum, isn't it?"

Draco fell forward with the force of his snort.

"Shit, mate, I don't fucking blame you," Theo went on, unable to keep a straight face. "If she didn't kill every man she fucked I'd throw my hat in the ring for Blaise's next stepdaddy." Theo finished his drink. "Don't tell him I said that though."

Draco smirked, feeling the camaraderie between them again. "No promises."

"Should have known." Theo held his fist to his chest as he burped. "You always did like him better than me."

Rolling his eyes and pushing himself up from the chair he had spent the last few hours in, Draco said, "I like everyone better than you, Theo. Now, I'm going to take a piss and then go see a man about a wolf."

Draco stumbled on the gravel path up to Malfoy Manor. It was only midmorning, but he was very pleased with what he had accomplished already today. It wouldn't be long now until he found Granger, and as soon as he did, all these horrible, aching feelings would go away because she would look up at him with those big, brown eyes and tell him how much she loved him and missed him and wanted to be with him.

And he'd forgive her for running and tell her everything was okay now because he'd never let her leave him again. Just like she said she wanted. Only him. Only *ever* him.

And even though he was exhausted and almost dragging his heavy black boots, Draco figured he had just enough energy to beat one off before he slept off the fire whisky he had been drinking for… Shit. How long had he been drinking?

He was already buzzed by the time he had met up with Theo and after the fights he had bought another bottle while he waited on the bloodthirsty animals to turn back into gold hungry men. He had his eye on two wolves, but when one of them took a bad bite to a hind leg, Draco counted it out. It would heal, but the werewolf would carry a limp from the crushed bone and Draco didn't fancy supporting another cripple.

The second wolf he had his eye on the previous night had been more than willing to sell his services to Draco and for much less than Draco had been willing to pay.

Donovan was a large man, wide and strong. As a wolf his fur was a rich grey with white running down his throat. Well, it had been white until about thirty seconds into his match and then it was dripping red. There had still been a slight stain down his neck and chest as he sat across from Draco draped in a thick fur coat and nothing else as Draco propositioned him.

"We'll be hunting a very specific prey, but any other… Undesirables we pull in, I'll give you 20% of the take."

"Fifty," he growled. "And I'll bring my sister and a friend."

Draco rolled his jaw, pretending to consider this. He didn't give a shit about the gold he could make selling Mudbloods to Umbridge. If he was able to track down another Order member, Draco wasn't going to just try and follow them; he was going to haul them back to the Manor and *take* the information from them.

His little interaction with Rowle had given him a few ideas for what he would do the next time.

month, he'd have to wait another cycle before the next full moon. His eagle owl had returned the same evening with the address in Theo's near illegible writing. Calix was preening his feathers after his flight when Crookshanks curled his bushy tail around Cal's perch.

Calix blinked his golden eyes angrily at Draco and gave a loud shriek before taking flight again. Crookshanks ran to the window, but Draco grabbed him before he could follow the bird outside and growled, "Cal can come and go as he pleases. *You're* on lock down."

"Come on," Theo urged with all the excitement of a seven year old. "The best place to watch is up here and I know how you love a good view." Draco rolled his eyes at the implied statement and let Theo fight the crowd, following behind him in the easy wake.

Theo shoved a large robed man out of the way and he spun around, wand in his hand and a scowl on his face.

"Watch where you're going!" he snarled.

Theo squared his shoulders and although half the weight of the man in the robe snarled back with just as much venom, "I am. And you're in my way."

The large man ripped back his hood, raised his wand up, and froze. Without his hood limiting his vision, the man had caught sight of Draco's stark blond hair.

"Hello Rowle."

One of his eyes was dead. Caked over with a dusty crust and a glassy blue pupil in the middle, surrounded by a mess of broken blood vessels.

Draco had aimed his curse into the soft flesh of the eyeball. He remembered watching the red light reflected in the wetness of the open, screaming eye.

"Malfoy." Rowle looked a mixture of terrified and furious.

Draco stepped up next to Theo. "This is a good view. It should be occupied by someone who can *fully* appreciate it though."

Theo laughed loudly and Rowle's scowl darkened.

He tried to curse Granger. He tried to curse Granger. Draco repeated it to himself, over and over, forcing it down his own throat to still the revulsion churning in him at the sight of the eye. At what he had done.

"I've known plenty of jumped up little shits like you," Rowle said darkly. "You think you're something just because you can follow someone else's orders?"

Draco stepped up. When he wasn't slouching, he was taller than Rowle and he glared hard down into the dead eye that had given him his last look at Granger, scared and

Hermione rushed forward and picked up the wooden spoon as Ron rubbed his arm generously. Tapping it with her wand to clean it off, Hermione held it back out.

Ron looked down at the spoon then his blue eyes lifted to meet hers and for a moment they each held the opposite end of the wooden spoon.

The grey eyes stormed and flashed like lightning.

Hermione let go. She tucked her curls behind her ears and offered Ron a nervous smile.

"Well, I am very excited to—" she glanced down into the boiling pot, "try your… stew, Ronald."

Ron blinked and a strange expression flitted across his face before he looked away, face falling a little as he started stirring the stew again. "Go help Harry. It will be ready soon."

Draco and Theo walked into a large circular room with a deep pit in the middle. There was no other word for it. Arena was too nice; there was no bright sand or large columns, only a bare dark floor and tall, heavy walls that stretched up fifteen feet to keep the bustling crowd out of danger from the claws. And teeth. In fact, Draco thought he might have seen a few loose ones mixed in with the dirt and sludge on the pit's floor.

Interesting.

Theo was beaming, knocking the back of his hand against Draco's shoulder and urging him on through the crowd. Draco recognized some of the faces around him, but most were hidden behind hoods and hats. He hadn't bothered to hide his face like most of the attendees; Draco was here to be seen. And he had no idea how some of these people were able to stand it, there was little ventilation in the room and plenty of bodies taking up every inch of spare space.

It was loud, hot, and sweaty. Everything smelled. Like blood and dirt and sweat and… wet dog. Not to mention the thick, tangy scent of rotten blood. Maybe meat. It was hard to tell; the floor of the pit was dark.

After he had lost Lupin, Draco owled Theo and asked if he wanted to go to the club he mentioned at Blaise's. Draco couldn't afford to lose another lead and if he missed this

Granger might forgive him for doing what he had to in order to survive, but where would she draw the line? Draco clenched his jaw. *She* didn't draw the lines, he did.

"Done. But I don't want to kick back anything to Greyback."

Donovan made a strange barking noise. "I don't answer to Greyback."

Draco lifted his chin, lifting himself taller than the man across from him. "I thought all you wolves kissed his ass. Or… licked it, I suppose."

Donovan growled. "No. Not all of us. Me, my sister, and Fergus—we are free wolves."

Draco considered this for a moment, then pulled out a heavy bag of gold and plopped it on the table between them. "Now you're *my* wolves."

He had a bit of a strut in his step as he walked through the busy London streets. Pulling his collar up around his face, Draco ran his hand through his messy hair. He briefly thought about stopping in to the Ministry to pay the Muggleborn Registration Office a visit, but didn't think he could stand sobering up with Umbridge yapping at him and those creepy fucking kitten plates meowing at him.

Speaking of cats, Crookshanks was probably hungry.

Draco picked up his pace.

The front door of the Manor opened for him and Draco strode in. The Dark Lord had gone abroad, but had left the snake in the Malfoys' safe keeping. Draco was tempted to accidentally leave out a poisonous slab of dragon meat in revenge for his hounds, but waved it off as a passing fancy. He wasn't doing all of this just to have the Dark Lord murder him for offing his favorite piece of rope.

Immediately Draco was hit with an overwhelming smell that left him dizzy and swaying on his feet. It surrounded him, enveloping him in a soft warmth he had almost made himself forget about. Draco breathed in deep enough that it flooded his nose and he felt it press behind his eyes.

Granger.

He tore into the dining room, blinking against the white sun streaming in from the tall windows. He was heaving in breaths, trying to taste it on his tongue, in his mouth, drink her down as his hands clenched around the handles of the double doors he had just burst through.

"Draco!"

He could hardly see straight. His vision was blurred and he felt drunk off of it. Well, he was drunk, but now he was… *famished*.

"Are you just getting in?" Narcissa said in an accusatory tone.

Draco straightened up and tried to make sense of his surroundings. His mother was sitting at the table, her tea cup held halfway to her mouth. Surrounding her were bowls of sliced fruit, fluffy pastries, a delicate looking teapot, and a brightly colored quiche. He took a few more steps in, looking around for Granger. The smell hung thickly in the air. She had to be here, she had to.

But she wasn't.

He felt like he was going mad.

His mother sighed and set her tea down. "Sit down, Draco. You need to put something on your stomach to soak up whatever you drank."

He didn't even think, he just shuffled over to the table and threw himself down. He looked over and half expected to see her just… appear in the chair next to him.

"Muttie?" Narcissa snapped her fingers and a house elf stepped forward wearing a tea towel that still had the faded pattern of some familiar looking flower on it. "Cut my son one of those. A large one," she added, narrowing her eyes at him disapprovingly.

Draco watched dumbly as the house elf placed a swirling ball of dough, smothered in white icing in front of him.

Draco's mouth *watered.*

Rich, spicy cinnamon swirled in the sweet dough while thick, viscous vanilla icing dripped off the top of it, leaving little drops on the china underneath.

Granger. It smelled exactly like Granger. Fuck, it almost *looked* like her. The icing shone brightly in the morning sun and the dark twists of cinnamon curled around the soft dough; like her hair around her pretty little face.

He wanted to swallow it whole.

"Draco, I'm getting worried about you." He looked up to see a troubled expression on his mother's thin face. "I know that—" She paused, and took three breaths in an all too familiar fashion before she went on. "I don't want this to *change* you. You're still my son and I couldn't stand it if you..." She glanced down at his arm. "I don't want you to lose yourself. They will twist you into someone… someone I won't know anymore."

Draco wished he was sober. In his inebriated state he had no comforting words for her. Was he changing? Was he becoming someone… else? Someone his mother didn't know and someone… someone Granger couldn't love? Or wouldn't want to?

"Mum—"

"Where the *fuck* were you?!" Lucius' voice cut through the soft morning light and Draco's hand dropped to his thigh holster on instinct.

"Is Kreacher back?" Harry darted in and looked around quickly. Ron was standing next to the fire, adding a pinch of some powder to the cauldron suspended over the warm flames. Steam rose off of it and another wave of the hearty smell hit Hermione. Harry paused, staring at the stove. "Ron, did you *make* that *?"*

Ron's ears turned red. "Yeah, well… I couldn't stand another day of Hermione's 'bread sandwiches'."

Hermione put her hands on her hips. "What was wrong with my—"

Ron gave her a knowing look. "You can't put one dab of old butter between two slices of moldy bread and call it a sandwich, Hermione. A man's gotta eat."

The rolling hunger in her stomach silenced her protest. Ron wasn't wrong exactly. Hermione's attempts to feed the three of them over the past couple of days had been meager at best and she could not deny that the smell of whatever Ron was stirring was making her mouth water.

"When did you learn to cook?" Hermione asked, nonplussed. She always knew Ron loved to eat and when he started talking about food, she had normally pulled out a book and let him ramble in the background.

Ron brought the large wooden spoon to his lips, tasting the stew. "Mum taught me. You've seen me make food at the Burrow dozens of times; how did you not know I love to cook?" he added at Hermione's shocked expression.

Harry was summoning bowls from the cabinet that clattered as they hit the table. "I'm so hungry you could probably stick Kreacher's bedding in a pot and I'd eat it at this point."

Ron laughed. It was his boisterous, too-loud laugh that she had heard *so many* times before. Hermione wasn't sure when the last time she heard it was and… she missed it.

She wanted her friend back. She wanted it to be like it was when she could take comfort in things like his laugh and his smile and not see the cloudy judgment when she happened to catch his eye. They had never finished the conversation from the wedding and honestly, she wasn't sure she wanted to at this point. Maybe it would be best to just try and move past it.

The stew popped and spat out a drop of boiling liquid that landed on Ron's freckled arm. He jerked back, dropping the wooden spoon and swore loudly.

The slouched figure snorted and it was followed by a low rumbling chuckle. His grey eyes gleamed in the shadows of her messy thoughts.

"Dumbass."

to Dumbledore's murder, not Harry. He had been there after all; stood beside Snape as he raised his wand and killed the man who had convinced her to trust Draco one more time.

Dumbledore had been right to think Draco might not want to be saved. And if she hadn't spoken up for him, maybe Dumbledore would have handled the situation like he originally planned to. Instead, the greatest wizard who ever lived was dead and Draco was walking around like nothing had even happened. Or like it had happened according to plan.

Hot blood pushed under her skin, heating it to an uncomfortable level. He wouldn't even try for her. He wouldn't even consider it. When she begged him, pleaded with him, Draco had told her no. That he wouldn't. That he couldn't.

That this was the only way.

Hermione's hands clenched around the paper, crumpling it in her fists.

She watched him make the same movements over and over, never changing the pattern. She noticed the expansion of his chest, as if he was taking a large breath and the small crease between his brows. What was going on behind that marble mask?

Hermione studied him, every inch of him, for some sign of… of what? What did she even want from him anymore?

"I know what you want. Close the door, Granger, and I'll give it to you."

She wanted him out. Out of her head. Which was *crazy* because she knew he wasn't really there, but… he was. She had felt him, hidden back there, ever since he had put her under the imperius curse. Draco had slithered in, found a warm dark place he liked, and never *ever* left.

Hermione took a deep breath. She couldn't think about that night. He had used an Unforgivable curse on her. She looked at the haughty expression sitting lightly on his carved marble face. How could he have done that? How could he have held her and told her he loved her and then betrayed her like that? To take her over… just like Ron said.

"Hey." Harry was standing in the doorway. "What are you doing in here?"

Hermione pushed herself up, folding the paper and dusting her hands off on her jeans. "Just reading."

Harry eyed the paper. He had never completely forgiven the Prophet for printing all that libel about him in their fifth year. "Come on, we shouldn't leave Ron on his own for too long."

Hermione followed Harry back down into the kitchen where she was surprised by the thick, savory smell wafting into the hall.

His father was limping into the dining room, robe tied loosely around him and the black rune tattoos on his chest visible through the loose cords of his shirt.

He stopped opposite Draco beside Narcissa and clenched the silver snake head of his walking stick in a white fist.

"And don't try to tell me you were hunting Potter."

Draco had seen his father upset more times than he could count, but this was one for the books. His face had an ugly flush in his cheeks, but his lips were white with rage. The pale grey of his eyes were alight with fury and Draco closed his hand around the handle of his wand. His palm was sweaty and he knew he would draw slow due to the fire whisky, but he'd be damned before he let his father strike him again.

"What's happened?" Draco asked seriously. If his father was this upset, something must have set him off. This wasn't just one of his unexplainable mood swings or passing strain on his temper. And he had mentioned Potter…

That meant Granger.

Lucius leaned down over the table. "Potter broke into the fucking Ministry."

The blood rushed out of Draco's head and the liquor followed it, sobering him enough for him to unknowingly find his feet under him. The chair fell back behind him.

"And he got away! *Everyone* is out looking for him. Yaxley was able to follow them to the old Black place in London where they've been hiding, but he slipped away again."

"London..." Draco said, barely breathing. "She was at the Ministry this morning?"

He had walked right by. He had almost gone in. He had almost had her. He had lost her. Again.

"And where were you? Out drinking with your friends and then having fucking *tea* with your Mother?!" Lucius swiped his hand and the tea pot when flying through the air, hitting Muttie in the head and soaking her in the scalding liquid.

Narcissa was the only one who acknowledged the elf's wail.

"Be quiet!"

"Go *find* him," Lucius growled and his lip curled in disgust before he turned and the sharp strike of his cane against the floor echoed with each of his shuffling steps.

Draco stared, unseeing, at one of the large sun filled windows, so bright that only white light filled it.

Narcissa reached across the table for him. "Draco…"

Draco's eyes dropped down to the oversized cinnamon roll in front of him and something bitterly sour rose up in the back of his throat.

He could have fucking *had* her. He had been so close and now he was farther away than ever. They would go to ground now, hide away somewhere, maybe even stay on the move so they were harder to track. She had been in London this entire fucking time and now she was Salazar knows where. And Draco was standing here, letting her get farther away with each stretched second.

No more. He should have stunned Lupin and chained him up like the beast he was until he gave up Granger's location. He should have gone back to Umbridge, offered her funding, a fucking endowment if she got him information on his fucking Mudblood. Because that's what she was. She was a Mudblood, out there, and if anyone else found her first—*No.*

Only him. Only *ever* him.

Narcissa took a deep breath and pushed his plate towards him some. "Please, at least eat something first—"

Draco grabbed the plate and threw it at the window, shattering it into a myriad of serrated pieces of glass that spilled across the length of the large room. He heard his Mother gasp in surprise. His throat closed, his chest turned cold and empty. The muscle in his arm contracted, wanting the curse to sear through it and take some of this agony away.

But as much as he'd like to fuck himself up, there was something he even wanted more.

Draco turned and stormed out of the room, black boots thundering along the long hall, back to the front doors of the Manor which swung open as he stormed out into the bright morning light.

on Dumbledore was coming out soon and Hermione briefly read over the article, frustration growing with each twisted word. Hermione wished she had kept that awful woman in that jar. Maybe thrown it in the ocean and done the world a favor.

"You're cute when you're mad." The figure in the back of her head had one knee bent, resting his elbow on it while the other leg sprawled gracefully in her direction. " *And downright adorable when you're murderous."*

Hermione closed her eyes and took a deep breath, trying to ignore him. She opened them again and started reading to distract herself. There was lots of information to be gathered between the lines of the articles. The Ministry was still operating, but it was obvious that the seat of power had shifted. Hermione blanched when she read a notice that all Muggleborns would need to register themselves with the new Muggleborn Registration Commission by September 1st.

She couldn't bear to finish the article. Hermione flipped the pages quickly, ripping a few in her haste. She reached the society pages and her stomach lurched. It jumped into her throat, along with her heart, and they battled, choking her as she stared down at the picture in front of her.

He was slouching, but his tall frame still made him stand out. He had his left hand in his pocket and was fiddling with the large Malfoy ring on his right in boredom, twisting it and rolling his wrist around. His hair was perfectly set, pushed back and shining brilliant enough that it was even impressive in black and white. But it was his face that she couldn't stop staring at.

The same bored impassive expression that he had always worn and a slight roll of his eyes played over and over. She watched it for… she didn't know how long. Long enough that she started feeling light headed from lack of air, long enough to get out of breath, long enough for her lungs to stop working entirely.

He was… fine. She had been worried *sick* over him; wondering if he was chained up somewhere or lying in a pool of his own blood. Wondering what sort of punishment Lord Voldemort had dolled out on him, or if he was even still…

But here he was, attending Ministry functions and dressed in the finest suit she had ever seen. It was tailored perfectly to him, draping over him in casual elegance. The fabric hung gracefully on him, only tightening to accentuate the features he wanted to show off. He looked like he was *made* for it. Made for *this.*

Maybe he was. Standing next to his father, the Death Eater he had sprung from prison with his betrayal, Draco looked every inch the arrogant aristocrat she had always known he was. This… this was *Malfoy* , not Draco. He should be the one wanted in connection

A weak smile flittered over Remus' face, but there was no joy in it, only bitter resignation.

"Remus," Hermione softly let go of his arm, "Have you..."

She wanted to ask about Draco. Wanted to know if Remus had heard anything, seen anything, maybe in the papers. The copy of the Daily Prophet Remus had brought with him was the first one they had seen since arriving at Grimmauld Place and Hermione had to stop herself from grabbing it and searching for his name like she had done every day this summer.

Was he alright? Was he hiding? Was he hurt?

Was he coming for her?

"Have I what?"

Hermione bit her lip. "Just… be careful."

Remus nodded sharply and departed.

Hermione made her way back into the kitchen. Ron was stirring something in a large cauldron over the fireplace that actually smelled halfway decent. He looked up at her and with the bright fire lighting him up from underneath, the shadow of his furrowed brow wasn't as dark as it had been lately.

Ron stood up and took a step towards her.

"Where's Harry?" Hermione asked quickly.

Ron jerked his head to the stairs. She saw the copy of the Daily Prophet on the table and scooped it up before heading upstairs, leaving Ron to turn back to the fire that lit up his red hair like freshly polished copper.

The door to Sirius' bedroom was closed, but she could hear Harry moving around in there. He had been coming up here quite often lately and Hermione was about to knock on the door when she stopped. Maybe he needed some time alone. That couldn't have been easy for him with Remus and Harry usually needed time to calm down before he discussed things with her and Ron.

She tucked the paper under her arm and wandered down the hall. The room with the Black family tapestry was actually great for reading in since the thick fabric absorbed the creaks and groans of the house, making it one of the quietest, calmest places. If you could ignore the woven gazes of generations of Purebloods and the occasional burn mark. Hermione settled herself under the window, letting the stream of light fall above her head and opened the paper.

Harry's face stared back at her, underneath a caption read that he was wanted for questioning in Dumbledore's death. She scoffed and flipped the page. Rita Skeeter's book

Chapter Four

The reflection looking back at him was disgusting. Grey skin stretching over sharp cheekbones, hollowed by exhaustion and sunken eyes, tinged with red from lack of sleep and too much drink. Ashes laid on his white blond hair and smudges of smoke and dirt smeared over his jaw, mixing with the sharp stubble there. His chapped lips were the same shade as the skin around them and turned down in a frowning scowl as Draco looked himself over.

He hated how he looked now. Just a ruin compared to the monument he had once been. He looked down at his body, unable to meet his own eyes anymore. Draco had already shed his Death Eater robes, pulling them off the second he had shut the door behind him and leaving only his mud splashed trousers and wrinkled, stained white shirt to cover him. He still smelled like smoke and sweat even without it. He pulled the white t-shirt over his head, not even wincing when the tired muscles protested the quick movement.

His body was tired and sore. He hadn't slept in over two days, pushing himself to the physical and magical limit of what he was capable of. He had trained a little since returning home, trying to build back a little of the endurance that his long hours working on the Cabinet had stolen from him. But when he had searched for two days and two nights with not a single fucking clue even his wolves could pick up on, Draco had apparated in

front of her house, not caring that it was the middle of the day and razed the place to the ground.

Fiendfyre worked quickly. Glass popped from the windows, forced out by the rush of the heat of the flames. The frame creaked and groaned as the black smoke billowed out from the bricks before they started to collapse onto one another. He imagined her empty fucking bed, her stupid Muggle books, her picture frames she had taken herself out of, all burning, melting, becoming nothing more than grey flakes and acrid smoke.

The flames rose up, taking the shape of spreading wings, a long neck, and sharp, deadly teeth. A dragon. His magical beast destroying her Muggle home.

Magic *is* Might.

He walked into Umbridge's office, blackened by soot with ashes trailing behind him and told her to write it off as a gas explosion.

That's what Bellatrix always said to claim what happened. And it worked. No one asked any more questions and Draco didn't even have to explain what he had been doing in a Muggle neighborhood, burning down innocent people's houses. His mark was a free pass to basically do whatever the fuck he wanted to, and Draco planned to take full advantage of that fact. Might as well get something in return for selling his soul.

Her parents were long gone and her home was with him now anyways. She didn't need that stupid little Muggle house with its wires and empty picture frames and life that didn't fucking include him. So he got rid of it for her. So she wouldn't be tempted. So she would be good once he brought her back. And she would. He'd teach her if he had to.

If the past two days hunting had shown him anything, it was that he had to be more disciplined than he ever had before. As exhaustion dragged him down, his wand movements had become sluggish and lazy. If he was going to find Granger then he needed to be at the top of his game. Donovan had offered to let him train with the rest of the fighters. Draco didn't exactly like the idea of associating with werewolves any more than he had to, but if it made him strong enough to catch Granger, he'd do it.

Not that he wasn't fit, but there was a difference in being naturally athletic and training himself to use his body as a weapon. His legs were long and had always been muscular from the amount of time he spent on a broom. Strong thighs and calves that could run miles before they burned for a break. His upper arms bulged, connecting to the thick muscles of his shoulders and down to the arched lines of his forearms, blue-green veins running under the pale skin and into his large hands.

He had once been so proud of his chest and stomach and loved the way girl's eyes would be drawn to it when he pulled off his shirt. They always wanted to touch it, run

Then Harry would sigh and rub his eyes behind his glasses, getting up without a word and walking off to some distant part of the house. As soon as Harry was not in the room Ron's face would fall, minisculely, but Hermione still noticed. Even if he barely looked her in the eyes anymore. Ron was never… rude to her, but there always seemed to be something separating them now. She was surprised Harry hadn't said anything about it, but he did seem to have a lot on his mind these days.

They all did. Hermione just wasn't sure if she wanted to know what was on Ron's or not. As far as her own, the pile of messy thoughts was starting to give her anxiety and anytime she looked at it too long he would lift his blond head and say, " *You know I can help you relax."*

And Hermione would press her knees together, pick at her fingers in her lap and find herself biting her lip. As soon as she noticed what she was doing she would release it. Then the temptation would get the better of her and Hermione would bring it back in between her teeth and bite down again while he smirked at her behind her closed lids.

She wanted news from the outside world. The closest they had come was when Remus visited, but that had been cut short when Harry went into another one of his rages causing Remus to storm off.

Hermione chased after him. Before he could yank the door open, she grabbed onto his arm, finger slipping into a hole in his cloak.

"Remus," she pleaded. "Wait—"

"I won't stay where I'm not wanted, Hermione, and I think Harry has made himself very clear on this matter." Remus kept his face turned away from her, but Hermione could see the shadow that hung over it. He told them how he had been running from a Death Eater for three days before he was able to make it here. Surely he had been planning to stay and rest longer than an hour and Hermione was worried that he might not be able to shake another one in his current state.

"He's not been himself lately," she said softly, glancing over her shoulder to make sure neither Harry nor Ron had followed her. "He found a letter Lily had written to Sirius and he… He didn't mean it. You *know* Harry doesn't think you're a coward."

"I am," Remus said in a barely audible whisper. "Nothing but a coward for trying to hide from the truth and marrying her—"

"No, you're not." Hermione squeezed his arm. "Tonks is a strong, smart woman. Do you think she would marry a coward?"

He looked back at her, pain stretched across his scarred face and for a moment, Hermione remembered the white jagged scars that cut into Draco's torso.

dead. And Lupin, being Dumbledore's bitch, wouldn't even give Draco the chance to tell him what actually happened on the tower.

He would do what Draco hadn't been able to and fire the unforgiving green light at him if Draco tried to approach. He'd probably enjoy it too, the fucking animal.

Anyways he shouldn't even entertain ideas like that. They had only gotten him more fucked than ever and gotten Dumbledore killed in the process. And he wouldn't be thinking those things if he hadn't been following Lupin around for going on three days with only winks of sleep and a bottle of whisky to keep him going.

There was no use trying to ask for mercy. There was only one way to stop being a Death Eater.

Draco rubbed his eyes and watched colors move in his vision. He blinked, clearing them and looked back to the doorway.

Lupin was gone.

Draco darted forward, pulling his wand from the holster strapped to his thigh and wildly looked around for any sign of the werewolf.

A loud crack sounded behind him and Draco knew Lupin was gone. He had lost him. Lost his best chance at finding Granger in weeks.

He pulled out the bottle and smashed it on the pavement under his feet, liquor splashing over his boots and glass sparkling in the pale moonlight.

"FUCK!"

Hermione was starting to get anxious. They had been in Grimmauld Place for a week now and between Harry's glum moods and Ron's incessant grumbling, Hermione was having a hard time focusing on studying Dumbledore's copy of *Tales of Beetle the Bard* .

And the shadowy figure in the back of her mind was not helping.

As aggravating as her friends could be sometimes, Hermione made sure she did not spend too much time on her own. Not since the night in the bath.

And she wasn't *really* bothered by them. Sometimes it almost felt like it used to, the three of them spending time together, talking things out and solving the problem in front of them as they had done so many times before.

their fingers over the carved muscles and he would let them. For a little while. Then he'd grab their wrist and shove their hand farther down and they would be more than happy to please him just so they could keep looking.

Draco always made sure to do at least one more sit-up than Theo in the mornings, even when he felt like it might kill him. He never let Theo win on principle. The principle being that he was better; and that included better looking too. It had always been that way and he had no intention of letting one day of slacking change that.

But no amount of training would ever make him attractive again. He ran his hand over his stomach, feeling the muscles lying dormant under his scarred skin.

His scars… He had made fun of Potter countless times for the lightning bolt shaped mark on his forehead and the dick had paid him back in kind, slicing up his body with jagged, rough cuts. He would have these scars for the rest of his life. Cursed wounds could be healed, but not removed.

Just like this fucking mark burned into his arm. The skull seemed to be mocking him, sneering at him as the snake slid down his arm as if he belonged to it. He hated this mark. Hated that it was just another scar on his once pristine skin. Every time he looked at it his stomach churned and he felt… dirty. Filthy.

Impure.

Draco stared down at himself. A mess. A fucking wreck of a human and he was barely passing as that these days. He used to be a Slytherin Prince—damn near untouchable. Until she got her hands on him. Now he was scarred up, marked up, and washed up.

God, he hated everything. Hated this room, this house, and more than anything else, he hated the person looking back at him. Draco saw the grey of his eyes turn dark a second before his fist smashed into the mirror, shattering it. Glass tumbled and tinkled onto the floor, spilling around his feet. His chest was rising and falling quickly, tightening with each heave until it hurt to breathe.

His hand was bleeding. He clenched his fist tighter, ripping open the wounds even farther and watched as the blood ran off his knuckles, dripping big fat drops of his precious pure blood onto the mud caked around his boots.

Fuck, everything hurt. He gasped in air, but his lungs wouldn't hold it. His chest was aching, breaking. He was breaking, all his cracks splitting open—shattering.

Draco wanted to break. He pulled his wand from the leather holster on his thigh and held out his arm. The empty eyes of the skull staring back up at him.

He pressed the tip of his wand as closely as he could to it without calling his Master and screwed his eyes shut.

"Crucio."

Oh God, it was torture. Red hot knives were flaying the skin from him, the points digging in and slicing the veins open. The nerves came alive, singing and screaming as the curse strummed them without relief. His thick muscles convulsed, sending the waves of torment deeper, father, all over him until they reached his head and—*fuck*.

They burned her out. Just for a few moments, but it was a relief. To have just a few glorious moments where she wasn't pounding on the inside of his head because there was nothing else in his skull but the pain as it pushed and threatened to burst through the bone.

He was screaming. He knew it but he couldn't hear anything. He couldn't see anything. Hell, he wasn't even sure if his eyes were open or not, but it didn't matter. All that mattered was keeping the tip of his wand as hard against his arm as he could before—

The glass bit into his skin as he fell forward on his knees. He didn't care that it tore through his trousers; they were ruined already from the last few days. Mud and sweat and blood. They weren't even worth the house elves time to clean them anymore. He dropped his wand, right hand falling by his side into the glass while his left jerked and twitched with the residual power of the curse streaming through it.

He couldn't feel it. The whole damn thing was numb. His shoulder ached and the tips of his fingers felt like they were being stabbed with needles, but other than that—nothing. Like it wasn't there. He couldn't even feel the bruise of his mark.

He looked down at the dark grey liquid splattered around him, it was his blood. His hand must have been shaking as he held his wand down harder and harder onto himself. Along with turning his arm numb, the curse knocked the color out of his vision. For a little while at least. It always came back.

Everything always came back.

Draco sucked in a breath and held it, making his body obey him.

One.

Two.

Three.

He let it go. Again and again, until he could see the red of his blood and his pulse stopped pressing up under his skin.

He looked at his scars.

He looked down at the glass.

He wondered what would happen if it cut them open again.

Granger would die, that's what would happen.

He would get Granger's location one way or another. He had just hoped it wouldn't have included torturing and maiming one of her friends, but… the bitch shouldn't have run.

Draco watched Lupin. Watched him pull his ratty cloak around him and lean his head into the side of the doorway, closing his eyes. Draco recognized the troubled expression on Lupin's face. He knew it well and the only reason they weren't mirror images of each other was Draco hid his behind practiced impassivity. He had heard that werewolves had a harder time controlling their emotions and Lupin's torment was clear even in sleep. He was missing someone. He was hurt. He was torn.

Draco felt a strange pulling sensation in his chest as he narrowed his eyes at Lupin and drowned it out with another drink.

The liquor and constant chase caught up to him and Draco found his chin hitting his chest and his burning eyes drooping as he tried to keep Lupin in his sights.

He woke up every half hour that night, but each time Lupin was still there, passed out. Unconscious. It would be so easy to inch a little closer, aim his wand, and stun the sleeping man. He could tell the werewolf didn't have much left in him. How long had he already been running when Draco had spotted him? How many nights had he spent sleeping against hard bricks and surviving on scraps?

Draco had never missed his bed more. But he had to make it through the night and find out where Lupin was heading and he would be one step closer to filling his wonderful, soft, warm bed with Granger.

And then breaking it with her under him.

When Draco jerked awake from dozing he looked up at the stars to see that dawn was less than an hour away. Lupin hadn't stirred once.

Some Order member he was. Draco could have killed him half a dozen times through the night. So why hadn't he?

Draco watched the werewolf, and for three seconds wondered what would happen if he walked over there, told him everything, and handed over his wand in exchange to be taken to Granger. She'd run into his arms and he'd bury his face in her curls, breathing in her vanilla cinnamon scent. He'd finally get to touch her… and she would feel *so good*.

Draco sat down in his mind and pried up a floorboard. Granger looked up at him. And smiled.

Shit. It was beautiful. She was beautiful. And sweet and good and… he wasn't. He was a Death Eater and no amount of explaining or excuses could absolve him from what he had done. He might not have killed Dumbledore, but he was the reason the old man was

that Lupin was trying to shake him completely before heading off to wherever his original destination was.

Draco stayed on him. *Relentlessly.* Just out of range, keeping to the shadows, and hovering downwind whenever possible. It wasn't that much different than hunting his prey down in the woods, except deer did not bite back and Draco started to get nervous thinking about the full moon approaching. Where would Lupin go when he transformed? And would Draco be led into a trap to be torn apart?

Was this all some wild scheme by the Order to lure Death Eaters in using their wolf as bait? Interesting strategy, Draco mused, a little impressed, before remembering the Order were too *noble* to orchestrate a death that bloody. They probably believed in clean killing blows. And that's why they would lose.

So he stayed on Lupin's tail, so he could save Granger from these dumb fucks, and keep her safe. Maybe if she was around the furball it wouldn't cry at him as much.

Draco rationed his whisky drinking only enough to keep the headache away and his mind clear enough so he wouldn't lose his mark. It was awful and he fought the urge to drink the whole bottle just to numb the beating in his chest as he sat, awake and watching the entire night.

The next day wasn't much better and Draco considered just attacking Lupin, out of boredom more than anything else, but Granger's disapproving face poked up from under the trap door at his feet and Draco rolled his eyes and allowed himself another swallow to make shoving her back down a little less painful.

He was going to get a lock for the trap door. Maybe a large rock to put on top. One big enough that he could bend her over it when he did let her out. Pull on her thick curls until she was curved back into him and he could watch her tits shake as he fucked her. His cock swelled in his trousers.

Lupin started off at a quick pace and Draco stretched his long legs out to follow him, making sure his hand never left the handle of his wand in the holster at his hip. He had to focus. There would be plenty of time for that later once he actually *had* Granger and was able to do all the disgusting things he had concocted over the past few months to her, turning himself raw trying to find an ounce of relief.

When Lupin settled in a dirty doorway for the night, Draco inwardly groaned and leaned up against the side of a brick building, allowing himself a few extra mouthfuls of whisky to get him through the night. He was as exhausted as Lupin looked and Draco knew neither of them could keep this up much longer. If Lupin didn't slip up soon, Draco would have to take him down and haul him in.

Draco pressed his palms into the shards of glass and forced himself back to his feet.

He took his wand into his dominant left hand, holding it carefully since he could not feel the handle and whispered a healing incantation, but… nothing happened.

Draco adjusted his grip and tried again.

Blood rolled down his finger and dropped off the end of it.

Fuck.

Sharp panic stabbed down his spine. Draco stared down at his wand; had he damaged it somehow? Had the curse been too much for it? His hawthorn had never failed him before, could something have…

Draco's chest emptied and stilled. It wasn't the wand. It was *him.* It was… his arm. He flexed his left hand and felt tingling at the tips of his fingers intensify and shoot up into his hand.

He switched his wand back to his right and sliced it through the air. The shattered glass jumped back up, forming the full-length silver mirror once more.

A rush of relief ran through him. He could still do magic. He could still wield his wand. He just couldn't do it when his arm was numb from the curse.

He'd have to remember that.

Draco stared at himself again. At his scars. At his bloody hand. At his mark on his numb useless arm.

He could feel her, trying to open that trap door and escape from under the floorboards. He wanted to let her out. Wanted to let her touch him and tell him that the scars weren't ugly and that he wasn't useless or broken or… damned.

He wanted to shout at her, tell her what a fucking idiot she was for leaving, ask her why, *make her* tell him why—why he wasn't enough for her, why she didn't trust him, why she'd rather run for her life than stay here with him.

And then, once he got all the answers he needed, once she was apologizing and asking him to forgive her, he would run his fingers through her thick curls and bury himself between her legs. Touch every inch of her. Inside and out. And she'd be his again and they'd be happy and together and Granger would love him and nothing would *hurt* anymore…

But she'd fucking have to *be* here to do that and she wasn't even though he had spent the last fucking week scouring the country for her barely sleeping, hardly eating, and fighting every goddamn day.

But Granger didn't care. She was off with Potter and Weasley. Making sure *they* were okay. Making sure *they* didn't get hurt. Making sure *they* weren't alone.

He glared hard at himself in the mirror, red eyes narrowing until they were almost closed as he addressed the bit of curly hair and brown eyes from the trap door.

"Fuck you, Granger. Fuck. You."

The deep brown eyes widened in misery and slowly she tucked herself back down. Where she belonged. Where he'd keep her.

Because even though she was a goddamn fucking Mudblood who didn't deserve *half* of the mercy he'd show her, he'd be damned if he let anyone else touch her.

And he was.

Draco Malfoy was damned.

Hermione pulled the armchair up next to the bottom bunk where Ron was resting and tucked her feet under her as she propped up *Tales of Beedle the Bard* on her legs.

"Do you want me to read to you?"

Ron was doing better, after having rested some, but he was still pale and peaky, and he wasn't moving around much. The terror that had gripped her when she rolled over and saw Ron bleeding into the dead leaves of the forest floor still had not completely dissipated. She had watched his lips turn white, his hand lose its grip on hers, and his eyes roll back in his head. She hadn't been sure he would ever open them again.

Everything between them, all the unresolved issues, the conflicting feelings, the resentment, the friendship, it all shook and fell in that moment. She couldn't lose Ron. She *wouldn't* lose Ron.

She had lost enough already.

"I'd rather you just talk to me," Ron replied in a thick voice. Hermione glanced up at him and stopped flipping through the pages. "Please," he added. "You've barely even looked at me since the wedding and you won't even stay in the room with me unless Harry's there… I know things are… weird, but… I'm not good with… feelings and shit like you are, Hermione."

She almost wanted to laugh. Good with feelings? If she was any good she wouldn't have a pile of cluttered thoughts hiding a spectre with silver eyes in the back of her mind.

When he woke up in the morning he saw the mostly-empty bottle on the floor beside his bed. He'd have to get more. Much more. His father's drink of choice was wine, but that didn't stop Lucius from downing a bottle of fire whisky when his own stores were low.

And that's what led Draco to Ogden's distillery where he planned on setting up a regular shipment to the Manor and spotted a familiar deeply lined and terribly scared face shuffling down the street.

He almost didn't recognize his old Defense Against the Dark Arts professor; the years had not been kind to Lupin. His cloak weighed heavy on his thin frame and his hair was more grey than brown now. Draco watched him move cautiously and grabbed a bottle from the crate he had just purchased and tucked it into his robes, considering his options.

Bringing in an Order member would gain him prestige. There was much that the Dark Lord could do with someone like Remus Lupin, and from Yaxley's intelligence reports from the Auror office, Lupin was one of the Order's most successful duelers and worked as one of the top agents both under Dumbledore and Mad Eye. If Draco captured him, he would win back any of the status he lost when Snape killed Dumbledore instead of doing it himself.

Or he could follow Lupin and see if he led him to Granger. The thought of finding Granger and having her back made any glory the werewolf's capture and death might bring him fade into the back of his mind as images of Granger bent over the chaise, tied and twisting, filled every crevice of his brain.

Draco popped the collar on his coat, not minding the heat, and started after him.

For days.

Once Lupin caught on there was someone tailing him, he was trickier than Draco had given him credit for. It only took one day before Draco realized it was probably the wolf senses helping him out. Draco had hoped to keep his cover, but when a sharp wind blew and Lupin's head jerked up in Draco's direction, he knew he had been made.

But even though Lupin knew he was there, he did not turn and fight, instead he seemed to take pleasure in dragging Draco around to the most random and boring places he could possibly think of.

Draco started to get frustrated. He had hoped Lupin would lead him to some safe house or at least a gathering of Order members where he might be able to glean some information on where Granger was, but all he did was spend his days moping and wandering around. It was the morning of the second day the thought occurred to him

After the Ministry, the last place Draco wanted to be was stuck in the Manor with his Father who wouldn't shut the fuck up whinging about how it should have been *him* in the Minister's seat—not Pius fucking Thicknesse.

Draco had to bite his tongue from asking if Lucius had planned on making Dennis the Dementor his Senior Undersecretary.

He watched his mother fawn over the golden medal, and her husband, until Lucius settled down enough that the threat of another fit passed. He watched Lucius calm as Narcissa took her handkerchief out and rubbed it over his new medal, straightening it out on his chest and said, "I am so *proud* of you, my love."

Draco stormed off to his room; a searing, clawing pain in his chest he couldn't pinpoint the source of, but he was pretty sure it was Granger's fault.

These days, everything felt like her fault.

And at night they felt like his.

It didn't get much better when he locked himself in his room. But he did go a little numb after digging his wand back into his arm and holding the curse until he spasmed so hard his wand flew out of his hand.

But even that lovely dullness didn't last and the color came back into his vision when the goddamn yowling started. He considered throwing the cat out, but even with the Dark Lord abroad there was something that stopped him from letting Crookshanks leave the safety of his bedroom.

At the same time, Draco couldn't stand the ginger terror who would sit and glare at him and fucking meow from that awful piece of furniture Draco refused to look at, but the damn cat had taken a liking to.

He had almost cursed the thing into scraps of fabric, puffs of stuffing, and shards of wood, but standing there with his wand pointed and ready to destroy it, Crookshanks had jumped on it, purring as he settled himself down on the plush velvet.

He fucked hated that chaise now. Hated it, because once again, *she* had made his fantasies come true on it, and seeing it now, without her spread out against the deep green, filled Draco with something so… hollow, he thought he was going to collapse in on himself.

"Fine," Draco grumbled, "at least it will keep you off the bed."

He turned and grabbed the bottle off the top of his bureau. He was negotiating with a cat.

And he had *lost*.

Anyways, she wasn't avoiding him, he had been avoiding her! He was the one with the sulking expression and downcast attitude. He was the one that was making things weird between them, she just wanted to be friends again and he was—

Oh Godric, he *was* trying to be her friend. Hermione stared into his tired eyes, stunned at her realization. Maybe she had been avoiding him. Maybe she had been the one pulling away. And maybe that's what was causing Ron to be so moody. She had been defensive around him, expecting him to turn on her and shout at her or tell Harry or make her feel guilty about what she had done because… because…

Because she already felt so incredibly guilty. She had walked in on Draco with the Vanishing Cabinet *open* and maybe if she hadn't been so distracted by him, she would have seen what he was doing. Would have figured out what the piece of furniture was and been able to warn someone and Dumbledore might still be alive and the Ministry might not have fallen and they might not be running for their lives and Ron might not have gotten splinched and almost died right in front of her—

His blood had been so red… so red…

"Of course," Hermione said breathlessly. "Anything you want. We can—we can talk. What do you want to talk about?" Her mind raced to fill the silence. "You know this is the tent we stayed in when you invited me to the Quidditch World Cup? Do you remember? That was such an exciting game, I mean—"

"Hermione—" Ron stopped her babbling.

Hermione tucked her hair behind her ears and glanced up at him. His freckles stood out darkly against his still pale skin and for the first time in what seemed like weeks, there weren't clouds in the blue skies of his eyes.

Ron took a short breath. "Yeah I remember the game. Fred and George were so mad Mum and Dad let me invite you because you don't even like Quidditch that much," he laughed a little. "They wanted to bring Lee, but Mum said that the last ticket was going to go to you because you're my best friend and Ginny's friend too. She said it was good for me to have a friend like you."

Hermione's heart beat painfully in her chest. The Weasleys had opened their home to her more times than she could count and she suddenly felt very guilty that she had complained about helping with the wedding when Mrs. Weasley had kept them all so busy so they couldn't plan their getaway. Mrs. Weasley hadn't just been worried about Ron running off, but Harry and Hermione as well. Would she have felt the same if she knew what Hermione had done?

"I wish I would have thanked her more now," Hermione mumbled and closed the book in her lap.

"You saved my life today. I think she'll accept that as a proper trade for a World Cup ticket."

Hermione smiled. It was small and only lasted about three seconds but it was enough.

"Are you okay though?" Ron went on, "Yaxley had hold of you; he didn't hurt you, did he?" Ron's eyes moved over her quickly, as if he was expecting to find a terrible wound he had somehow missed and she was touched by his concern.

Hermione shook her head, a few curls falling forward again. "No. When we landed in Grimmauld Place, he lost hold of me for just a second and… and it was at the same time that I grabbed your hand and you kind of... pulled me, just out of reach when he went for me again and I was able to bring us here. So, in a way, I suppose you saved me too."

Ron's mouth pulled in a small smile. "Pulled you away from another dark wizard, eh? Well, then I guess we're… finally even."

Hermione eyed him cautiously, unsure if that was a loaded statement or not. If it had been Draco who said something like that, it most certainly would have been. But Ron didn't normally hide a double meaning behind his words. What he said was what he meant and Hermione was thankful for his honesty, even if it was harsh sometimes.

At least Ron didn't lie to her.

"I never lied to you."

Hermione reached over and touched Ron's bandages lightly. "I think we should change these before we go to bed."

"Don't. I mean…" Ron pulled his arm away from her. "I'll ask Harry to do it."

It was as if Hermione was the one who was splinched and had left everything inside her chest miles away. No. Not 'even' at all. Not even friends. He didn't want her to touch him, to help him. He still saw her as… dirty. Defiled by Draco.

"You are, you know. And you'll never get my stain out of you."

"I'll go get him." Hermione jumped up. "He's been on watch since dinner and I should probably take my turn anyways—"

"No!" Ron lurched forward and nearly fell out of the bed. Hermione turned back, grabbing his good arm and helping him lay back again. Ron looked from her hands on his chest up to her face and his mouth fell open. Hermione quickly pulled back, fighting the tightness in her throat at the fact that her *best friend* couldn't even stand to be touched by her now.

Lucius placed his hand on Draco's shoulder. It gripped him hard, but released quickly. Lucius was still weak. Draco knew that was the real reason his Father was declining the invitation. A new department meant new opportunities to gain influence and collect power. But Draco was interested for more than those reasons.

Umbridge was rounding up Muggleborns? He remembered how she hated Granger back in school, always talking down to her and cutting her off in class. What would she do if she got her fat, ringed fingers on his Mudblood?

Mudblood? Shit. He hadn't called her that in months. It must be the company he had been keeping lately. Although he would have to start calling them that again, have to get used to dropping it casually in conversation as if it was just another word. Because in his new world, it would be. Umbridge was working to make it so and he knew she moved quickly.

Draco glanced down at it and saw the black ink of a tattooed rune peeking out from his Father's sleeve, a mark of the prison that had broken him. Draco felt the tremor pass through Lucius' hand. His father needed to get back home, Draco knew it; this outing had been about as much as he could stand.

He didn't deserve to wear the Malfoy ring anymore. Or the stupid golden metal pinned on his chest. He deserved to go back to fucking Azkaban, not prance around the Ministry like he hadn't attacked Granger just a few levels below their feet.

Useless.

And Lucius thought Draco wasn't ready? He'd show him ready.

"Actually Father," Draco plucked his hand off his shoulder. "I think I'd like to hear more about this Muggleborn Registration Commission."

Lucius' eyes flashed.

"In fact, *Dolores,"* Draco watched Umbridge's eyes slide from his father to him. "I think it's time that I *do* get involved here at the Ministry and there is no greater work than making sure Mudbloods are put *exactly* where they belong."

man's other arm and Draco watched it pop from the socket as Fergus pulled on it like a dog with a rope.

"HELP!" The man looked straight up at Draco, eyes wide with terror. "For the love of GOD, help me!"

Draco hovered above him and watched as Donovan bit into the man's leg, taking a chunk from his thigh and swallowing it. It didn't matter to this man that Draco was a Death Eater, only that he was a human. A human with a wand and a broom and a way to get this man away from the wolves.

Draco didn't move.

"Help me! Help m—" His last cry was cut off as Kenna's teeth sunk into his face and pulled it from his skull.

Draco wanted to look away, wanted to close his eyes and not see the man's arm rip away from his torso. He wanted to look at anything other than Fergus holding it down with his paws and pull the muscle up, jaws snapping as he dove down for more. Donovan was growling, gorging himself on the bloody meat of the man's leg which gave a small kick and then lay still, only moving when Donovan's muzzle dipped into the hole he had created, blood pouring forth from it in ever weakening pumps.

Kenna had torn her way down from his chest with her sharp, white teeth. She clawed at it, digging into the man's chest and breaking through the bone so she could shove her nose in. Draco watched her pull out the heart and crush it between her teeth and swallow the chunks.

She turned her bloodstained snout up to him, her golden eyes peering right into his mask, and howled triumphantly.

The sounds were terrible. The smell was worse. And all he could think about was what if it had been Granger. He couldn't even form the thought. It was as if his brain could not even conceive it. Just white walls. White walls closing in, closer, tighter; he crouched down over the trapdoor, clinging to it, wanting to crawl down there with Granger but he was here, hovering in the air watching a Mudblood, a Muggleborn, a *man* , be eaten by the wolves *he* brought out here.

Draco pulled his mask off just in time to spill the contents of his stomach over the side of his broom.

He blinked, clearing his vision and as he looked down he saw bloodshot eyes, a sagging, unshaven face belonging to a squat man, huddled behind a fallen tree. His robes, which were shabby to begin with, were now covered in Draco's sick.

Draco had his wand out and ropes shot towards the man before he was even able to shift to try and reach his own.

Draco swooped down, landing silently behind the fallen tree next to the short, scruffy man. The wolves were well distracted by their kill and Draco did his best to ignore the juicy, ripping noises coming from the other side of the fallen tree.

At last, a break. A fucking stroke of goddamn luck. And Draco was going to make the *most* of this.

"Well, well, well," he sneered down at the man who thrashed against the ropes and Draco shoved him back against the tree with the toe of his boot. "What are you doing all the way out here—Mundungus Fletcher?"

out. Draco's heart lifted in his chest. He would put her back on his broom, right where she had been before. He'd wrap his arm around her, holding her to him and not fucking let go.

He'd never stop touching her for the rest of his life. Fuck a wand, his hand was never leaving her body. Face, tits, arm, hand, hair, ass, leg, stomach, foot, back, pussy, neck—it didn't matter, he'd have it all. All of her. And she'd never fucking leave him again. She wouldn't want to. She loved him. She would want to be with him. She *wanted* to be with him now.

And Draco *always* gave her what she wanted.

He leaned down on his broom, dropping a few feet to skim under a low branch and heard a high, melodic howl. Draco smirked. He had wondered where Kenna had gotten to.

Donovan and Fergus turned so abruptly that Draco had to whip around a tree to head east to follow them. They were running faster now and he could hear the heavy beat of their paws against the forest floor. The howl came again, keen and craving clear in the crescendo. She had found something.

Draco raced forward, soaring over Donovan and Fergus, following the sound of Kenna's cry on his own.

Granger. Every second brought him closer to her. His heart raced and his breath came faster, echoing behind his mask. He gripped the handle of his broom until his knuckles turned white and then he saw her.

Thick, rich chocolatey brown fur, swishing in a long tail. Kenna was running, yapping and yowling, making just as much noise as a wolf as she did as a human. For the first time Draco was glad she couldn't shut up because the noise of her excited barks had drawn him straight to her.

And to the man running for his life, breaking through the brush, throwing his body ahead of his legs, trying to get even a few inches farther from the wolf snapping at his heels.

Not Granger. Not Potter or Weasley either. Just a man, a Mudblood. No one.

He was calling out for help, wasting his breath. Well, might as well collect some gold for the unlucky fucker.

Draco dipped lower, reached out to grab him when the blood splashed across his mask.

The wolves were on him. Kenna's jaws closed over his shoulder and Draco heard the crack of the man's clavicle before it was drowned out by his wail. Fergus latched onto the

"You're at your most useful to me tonight and I don't want to lose a second of moonlight because you decided to drag your feet."

"Useful?" Fergus asked, his accent weighing down the one word.

"I certainly don't keep you around for the company," Draco rolled his eyes and fit his silver mask over his face. "Get in there, the moon will be up in a few minutes."

"Yes, sir," Kenna said with a cheeky smile and Donovan pushed her towards the trees.

Draco ignored them and mounted his broom, lifting off into the last rays of the dying sun. He leaned forward, feeling the broom cut through the evening air. Rising higher, Draco let the feeling of weightlessness surge through him. He could fly forever. Lifting up up up until the world was small below him disappeared into the darkening of the sky.

He broke through the top of the clouds and sat in the sun's warmth for just a moment. When he had Granger back he'd take her up here. Let her see the top side of the clouds and watch the sunset with her snuggled against him. He'd keep her here until the stars rose and trace the patterns of the constellations on his broom. She wouldn't be scared, no matter how high he took her, because she would be with him. And she loved him and that would make everything okay.

Draco watched the last few lines of red sunlight disappear before dipping back down through the clouds. A low, hungry howl greeted him from somewhere in the trees and Draco dove down to it.

He had seen Donovan transformed before, but it was still a bit of a shock to see a large grey wolf-hybrid running through the forest on legs that stretched out five, no—six feet, carrying the mutated beast fast enough that Draco had to push his Nimbus 2001 to keep up.

Out of the corner of his eye, Draco caught a glimpse of something sleek and black. Fergus. He was just as skinny as a wolf as he was a man and his dark skin was hidden under even darker fur. Draco was surprised he could see him at all. In fact, it was easier to see the ferns and branches *around* Fergus disappear than it was to see the actual wolf.

Draco kept his distance, staying around fifteen feet up in the air so even if one of the wolves turned to swipe at him, he would be flying safely high above them. They ran on, veering off on trails he could not see, but that they could smell. He wove in between the trees, ducked under twisting branches, and pushed himself faster, harder, letting the cool night air whip around him, leaving only silence in his wake.

Draco started to enjoy himself. How long had it been since he had flown? Granger. The last time had been with Granger. And he might have her back by the end of the night. If she was one of the Undesirables hiding in the forest, his wolves would sniff her

Chapter Five

It was a quiet night while Harry was on watch outside, that Ron approached her.

"Hey."

Hermione closed her book and shifted on the trunk she was perched on to turn towards him. Ron looked uneasy and Hermione bit her lip nervously. She had done her best to spend more time with him lately. His arm was healing and they were able to apparate short distances now, which gave them more free time. Still, being stuck in the tent with both Harry and Ron sometimes felt just as stressful as trekking through the countryside trying to dodge Snatchers and Death Eaters.

They had not made any progress with the horcrux, even after spending days trying out different spells, curses, and charms on the locket to try to destroy it, harm it, or even just *open* it. At one point Harry took a large stick to it, beating it into the fallen leaves. Much to their dismay, nothing worked.

So, Hermione went back to her research, scouring the books for a reference to anything that might remove the protective enchantments, but it was almost as if the magic of the horcrux itself strengthened the spells safeguarding it. Not an inch closer to any solution, she had been about to throw her book across the tent in frustration when Ron sat down next to her.

"I don't think Harry knows what he's doing."

For just a second relief flooded through her. It wasn't about her. It wasn't about Draco.

But it was about Harry. Things had been getting strained among the three of them, being cooped up together with little food, constant travel, and ever increasingly cold weather. Harry and Ron had always gotten on well, even with the stress of Quidditch play offs and end of year exams, but now they barely even spoke. When they did, it was because they both happened to be speaking to her at the same time.

Hermione spent any time not researching trying to keep the peace.

She shifted her legs to the side of the trunk. "Do any of us?"

Ron leaned his elbows on his knees. "I just mean… I thought we'd have gotten further by now."

Hermione looked down at her lap. It seemed the farther they ran, the more she felt stuck. "I know."

Ron sat back up. "It took us a month to plan the Ministry and that was fine because we actually *did* something. But it's been weeks. Months. You'd think we would have some sort of lead by now."

Harry had shot down every idea she and Ron had about other potential horcruxes. Not that it mattered. None of the books she had brought with her had given any clues on how to destroy the one they already had. And every time she felt like she started to get somewhere, the shining grey eyes would flash and her heart would beat painfully, pushing the messy thoughts further back with each pulse of blood to her brain.

She knew the only thing keeping Draco from making rude comments about Ron sitting beside her right now was the heavy locket around her neck. He was always there trying to distract her while she read or reorganized her beaded bag. She used to be able to ignore him fairly well, but... Draco was getting better. "I'm trying to figure it out, I really am—"

"No no no, I didn't mean it like that. It's not your fault, Hermione," Ron cut in. "This was all Harry's idea. Him and Dumbledore. This is *their* plan."

Hermione glanced at Ron. They were in this together, the three of them. It was tough, but they had gotten through *everything* else before. And Dumbledore had always been there for them too, for Harry most of all, that is until…

She took a deep breath, feeling the locket weigh heavily on her chest. No matter how long she wore it, the metal back never warmed. Though its coolness was not refreshing like Draco's touch had been. This felt like a block of ice sitting on her heart. "But we agreed to come with him. We knew what this was."

Ron's crystal blue eyes held hers. "Do you… regret it?"

"Well done, Draco," he said with a cruel smile. "How interesting that you were able to focus the curse into one extremity." Lord Voldemort looked Draco over as if he was mildly interested. "Inventive."

"Thank you, My Lord." Draco bowed his head in suppliance. "I've been practicing."

He continued to practice. He continued to drink. He continued to pull Granger from beneath the floorboards and let his mind conjure up the most depraved things he could think of and did them all to her.

And he continued to hunt.

Umbridge was thrilled with the amount of Undesirables he had pulled in for her and Donovan, his sister Kenna, and his friend Fergus were all happy with the gold he dropped into their hands after each haul.

It was a means to an end. He had to do *something* with the Muggleborns—*Mudbloods*—and it wasn't like he could just let them go. They would talk. Hell, they offered him up any bit of information they had trying to convince him to let them go. As soon as they couldn't give him answers to his questions about Potter he cast a silencing charm on them so he didn't have to hear their pathetic pleas anymore.

But he was tired of bringing in Mudbloods. He wanted Granger. And they had finally reached the most likely time to find her.

"You want us to work on the full moon?" Donovan asked, crossing his arms over his hairy chest.

"Is that a problem?" Draco drawled.

Donovan snorted. "Not for us, but it might be for you."

Fergus laughed and Draco silenced him with a glare. "I can hold my own."

Kenna sauntered forward, smiling at him. "I'm sure you can, handsome, but when that moon's out, that pretty face will only look like a tasty treat to me." She winked at him.

Draco smirked at her. "Good thing I'm more than a mouthful." He straightened up and addressed the three of them. "Tonight. You earn your keep, you're not *pets.*"

Donovan's shoulders flexed, Fergus glowered, and Kenna stuck out her bottom lip.

Draco turned and headed home to shower, shave, beat off to Granger sucking him like a goddamn sugar quill, and grab his broom before apparating at the edge of the forest. He leaned against a gnarled old tree and waited for his wolves.

It was sunset when they appeared.

"You're late," Draco snapped.

Donovan shrugged his fur coat from his shoulders. "Sun's still up. I'd say we're right on time."

"I have been pleased with the extent you are able to exact punishment. It seems you have inherited your Aunt's talent for the *cruciatus* curse."

"Thank you, My Lord." Draco bowed his head and felt his arm jump under his robes.

"If only all my followers showed such enthusiasm for… pain."

"Your *true* followers do," Draco looked out from behind his mask into the narrow slits of the Dark Lord's crimson eyes.

The Dark Lord tilted his head to the side in amusement. "You would count yourself as a true follower of mine?"

"There is *no one,"* Draco stressed the words, "who is more devoted than I."

Lord Voldemort smiled coldly and gently waved a hand to Yaxley. "Show me."

It was easy. Draco barely had to think the word *crucio* and the crackling red light was arcing from his wand and pining Yaxley to the floor. Draco focused, pulling his mental walls tight around him leaving only enough room for him and the pain, and focused the curse on Yaxley's hand.

The hand that had touched Granger. The hand that had grabbed onto her. She had probably been terrified, not able to get away and accidentally carrying someone through apparition. Yaxley would have had to hold on tightly to stay with her. Hard enough to bruise. And Granger bruised so easily. Draco remembered well.

He would make sure Yaxley remembered this too.

Yaxley was screaming, howling in pain as Draco concentrated the curse so that the whole of its power, *his power* , was contained in the offending limb. He could feel the dark magic spreading down each of Yaxley's fingers; vibrating in the bones, setting the nerves alight.

Yaxley was holding his arm in terror, in horror, of what was happening. His hand was convulsing, trembling. The fingers were breaking themselves, jumping out of joints and cracking as the bones shattered. The skin started to break open as the shards sliced their way out.

Draco's mind was nothing but white walls and red pain. It was so simple, so clear. Natural. He emptied his pain into Yaxley. And it felt *good.*

"Enough."

Draco drew back his wand and Yaxley fell over, holding a crumpled lump of bleeding flesh that had once been his hand.

"I think he's learned his lesson, don't you agree?"

Draco glared down at Yaxley. "He's pretty stupid."

The Dark Lord's laugh was high and cold.

Hermione's stomach flipped inside her. "Regret what?"

"All of this." Ron waved his hand around the tent. At first, the tent had been cozy and homey, but after weeks of use, it now felt cramped and cluttered. She did her best to straighten up, charming the beds to make themselves and *scourgifying* the kitchen when Ron tried to scrape together some semblance of food for them. In the end it didn't make much of a difference. It felt stuffy and the longer she spent in here, the more the pressure of their unaccomplished mission pressed on her.

"I… I wish we would have been more prepared. I wish we would have had more time and I—I'm disappointed that we haven't gotten farther. I've been through the books so many times I actually think I've started to memorize them."

"Surprised your boyfriend didn't tell you all his dark magic secrets," Ron said sullenly.

Hermione froze. Her heart stopped beating. Ron never talked about Draco. *She* never talked about Draco. She touched the locket around her neck, the thing keeping her from him. A symbol of the war that pushed them apart. Although Draco had done a bit of that himself too. He had spent months hiding the truth from her, keeping them from having something more. Keeping her as his sweet innocent kitten, his good little slut.

His girl.

"He was never my boyfriend."

"He was your ' *someone* '."

"He wasn't even my—" Hermione paused and looked over at Ron, "friend. He was…"

Ron kept his eyes right on her. Even when she dropped her gaze and gripped the book in her lap to keep from picking at her fingers before lifting her eyes back up, he had not moved. "What? What was he?"

"A liar. He was a liar. And the reason we're stuck in this tent in the middle of nowhere. He let those Death Eaters in. He allowed Snape to kill Dumbledore. Allowed You-Know-Who to take over. Allowed people like me to be hunted and your family to be in danger. Bill would never have gotten attacked, George would never have lost an ear. You would never have gotten splinched and—"

Ron placed his hand on top of hers. It was a friendly, comforting gesture and lifted her spirits just a little. It was easy to forget in the midst of running and hiding that there was a reason for all this. For the war and the hardship it brought them. Putting everything else aside, her friendship with Harry and Ron was enough to make this misery worth it.

She wondered if Draco felt the same way about his choices.

Hermione gripped the book tighter as she felt the warmth from Ron's hand over hers.

"I don't know if we will ever find the rest of the horcruxes let alone be able to destroy them, that's Harry's whole issue," Ron said. "Mine is Malfoy. I am going to make him pay for what he's done. All of it. We're wasting our time out here when we should be fighting. What's Malfoy doing while we are wasting away out here? Bet you he's all cozy, posted up in his fancy Manor, eating a fat steak and has a girl warming in his bed for him. Probably chained her to it. He used to brag about that kind of stuff to his gross friends."

Hermione felt like Ron was testing her, waiting to see if she would jump to Draco's defense or not. In all honesty, she didn't want to talk about him. And she especially didn't want to hear what Draco used to tell his friends about girls he had been with. What did Ron think she had done? What did he think Draco had done to her? Had he ever talked about her?

Did Draco really have a girl chained to his bed?

Ron pulled his hand back from hers and ran it over his face. She needed to say something to help him. Hermione knew Ron was struggling. He was worried about his family while still healing from the splinching accident, and that was just on top of the running for their lives with little to no progress in weeks. She wished there was something she could say to make it all better, but there wasn't anything that could make this anything than what it was. Not now.

"We'll just have to try harder. We don't have a choice. We can't go back."

Ron glanced over at her and she thought she saw a little relief in his expression.

Hermione swallowed. "There's nothing back there for me anyways."

"Draco!"

Draco felt himself back in his body again, the solitude of sleep abandoned. There was someone rapping on his door, calling his name. And from the sound of it, they had been doing it for a while.

His head was pounding and his tongue felt three times its size, swollen with thirst. His arm was throbbing. The mark ached and the muscle was cramping all the way up sending spasms into his chest. Or maybe that was his heart beating just a little too hard.

He had been dreaming of Granger.

The last few weeks were very eventful for Draco. The Dark Lord had come to the conclusion that he liked having Draco punish those who had disappointed him and so Draco spent the better part of an afternoon and half the night interrogating the elf from Grimmauld Place that Yaxley had taken, but been unable to pry any information from himself. The Dark Lord was not pleased when he returned from Germany to find that not only had Yaxley let Potter escape, but he hadn't even been able to break an elf.

That's where Draco came in. Elf magic was different than theirs and while curses worked on them, it took more… intent and discipline over the magic to make it *really* hurt. And if there was one thing Draco still had left it was determination.

Draco had paused when the elf said through a mouth full of bloody bubbles that "Girl" had been nice to him.

"What did you just say?" Draco froze, hawthorn wand poised for another curse.

"Kreacher will not betray his Master," the elf croaked and blood dribbled onto its bony chest from where it had bit its tongue to punish itself for letting it slip that Potter had been staying at the house and planning a robbery of the Ministry for the past month.

"What about the girl? You can tell me about her, she's not your Mistress."

The elf turned his rheumy eyes up at Draco.

"Tell me about the girl and I'll stop. I'll even heal you."

The elf gulped, swallowing down his blood as trembled with fear and the after effects of the curse.

Draco crouched down next to the wizened old elf and spoke in a low, gentle voice. "I can be nice too. Just like my… *the* girl. Just tell me where she is."

"Kreacher still serves his Master even if Master did not come back for Kreacher's steak and kidney pie like he promised. But Kreacher did not eat it, no. Even though Girl said Kreacher could have anything from the kitchen he wanted, Kreacher will eat the bugs and mice. Kreacher will not eat Master's steak and kidney pie and Kreacher will not tell the young Malfoy about his Master or Girl because Girl serves Master too—"

"She does *NOT* serve him!" Draco held the curse on the elf until the screams stopped and just the dull thud of his thin limbs against the hard floor were the only sounds in the empty room.

When he wiped the sweat from his brow and walked out to tell the Dark Lord that the elf hadn't held any new useful information, The Dark Lord had instructed Draco to continue on Yaxley.

Ron nodded, the sun glinting off of his hair like polished copper. "As long as there is food, I'm fine camping outside the damn Ministry."

Hermione gave a small laugh. "I know the mushrooms weren't very filling—"

"They weren't even food," Ron said and Hermione's eyes cut to him quickly only to find him holding back a laugh. He was joking. Ron was joking again; he must be feeling better. Maybe once he healed up a bit more, got a few hot meals, and she was finally able to set her mind to working on the problem of how to destroy the horcrux they had, and any they might find in the future—instead of just dealing with the broken heart beating weakly under the locket where Draco was currently hiding, things would be good with them again. All three of them. And that made Hermione feel better too.

For a second. Until the cool metal of the locket stole away the brush of warmth from her chest and she was left feeling more alone than she had been before she remembered what feeling happy felt like.

She wished she could hear Draco's low chuckle, just for a moment. Even if he was laughing at Ron. Hermione took a breath. Four more hours and she could pass off the locket and Draco would come back, staring at her from behind the still messy thoughts. And she would let him because even looking into his eyes the same way she did the second before he cursed her was better than this bitter hollowness.

Maybe she was going crazy. Maybe she didn't care.

Maybe she should try harder with Ron and Harry. They all needed each other and since Hermione had been keeping to herself more, she had noticed Harry and Ron snarling at each other quite often now.

They needed her; to be their friend, to help them, to fight with them against… against…

No . She wasn't going to drift off again. She was here, with Ron. Talking to Ron. And Draco was gone.

Hermione lifted her chin and reached over to straighten Ron's sling.

"Well, if we don't stop near a town, I think I saw an owl overhead. Maybe we could eat that."

Ron sighed happily. "I bet it tastes like chicken."

"Draco! Open this door!"

He groaned and sat up, leaning over the side of the bed and holding onto it for balance. There was still some fire whisky in the bottle on his nightstand. He considered reaching for it but could not stand to force it down even to temper the headache that battered against the inside of his skull. It shook the white walls and rattled the floorboards. He rubbed his eyes and the trapdoor jumped open. Draco stood up and kicked it back shut before she could try to climb out. He didn't have the fucking energy to deal with her right now.

Crookshanks gave a tired little meow as Draco walked past him, glowering, and tapped the door handle with his wand to unlock it.

"Good morning, Mother."

Narcissa was standing in front of him looking *livid.* Her pale blonde hair was pulled back tightly, making her sharp features stand out even more. Some of which he carried on his own face. Everyone always said he looked like his Father, that was until they saw him standing next to his Mother.

Her eyes were glacial; he hadn't seen her this mad since he had a tantrum in the conservatory as a boy and created a storm cloud that rained down so hard it tore the soft petals and tender leaves from her precious plants.

Draco closed one eye tightly, trying to limit the amount of light in his vision and leaned his arm against the door frame for support. He had a potion that would help with the hangover, but it did nothing against the after effects of the curse. Fire whisky hardly even helped with that.

His mother blinked for a moment and Draco saw she was looking at his mark, black and twisting. The bruise around it had flared into a deep angry red which just about matched the dried blood on Draco's hand, hanging over his mother's head.

Draco shifted and pulled it back, crossing his arms over his wrinkled white undershirt shirt. He had taken to wearing it even to bed. Anything to avoid seeing the scars.

Narcissa gathered herself and spoke in a clipped voice. "There is blood on the stairs."

Draco dropped his brows over his eyes. "Have the elves clean it."

She pursed her lips tightly. "They already have, but you cannot leave smears of blood on our front stairs, Draco! What if someone had seen it? How would I possibly be able to explain a trail of blood through the foyer and down into the cellar?"

Draco ran his thumb across his jaw. It was rough and prickly. He needed to shave. He needed to shower. He had cleaned as much of the blood off as he could, but it was caked under his blunt nails and dried into the creases of his knuckles. He had just been so tired

when he came up from the cellar. It was all he could do to stumble into his room, pop open a bottle and drink until the images behind his eyes swayed and faded into nothing.

Into her.

Lately it was hard to tell the difference.

"Honestly, Mother, I don't think many people would bother asking," Draco said tonelessly.

Narcissa huffed then narrowed her eyes into an icy glare. "If you get blood on my Persian carpet again—"

Draco rolled his eyes. "I'll buy you a new one."

"It's 15th century! There are no *new* ones!"

Her high pitched voice was piercing into Draco's head and all he wanted to do was go drown himself in the shower. Wanted to scrub his skin until it was red and tender and fill his lungs with the steam and choke on it. Wanted to let the scalding water take away all the horrors of the other night.

Maybe after that he wouldn't dream of Granger being torn apart under him while he was powerless to stop it.

Draco pushed his hand through his hair, hoping it would help the headache ringing with the howls that had plagued his sleep. And the screams. The screams he had pulled from Fletcher until the short man had passed out. His arm still ached from holding his wand steady under the power of the *cruciatus* curse.

He was tired. He was so goddamn tired.

Maybe that's why Bellatrix liked to play with knives for long sessions. He would have to try that next time.

Draco sighed and dropped his arms to his sides. "I'll mind the rug, Mother."

" *Stay still. Don't fucking move.*"

Hermione did as Draco told her, holding her breath as the man on the other side of her enchantment paused, waiting, smelling the thin air between them.

Draco's eyes shone like sharpened steel and Hermione felt him pacing in the back of her head, his footsteps in line with her wildly beating heart.

But they had to keep moving. Every day they packed up the tent and started off again. Harry led the way, but Hermione was starting to get a little concerned if he had any idea what direction he was taking them in. Mostly they were just trying to stay hidden, spending their afternoons venturing out for the never-ending search for food, and their evenings discussing what other objects Voldemort, or You-Know-Who as they started calling him again at Ron's insistence, might have used as a horcrux and then how to destroy the one they already found.

It was Hermione's turn to wear the locket and she felt its cool weight against her chest. It was awful carrying it, but she never asked to skip a turn or complained when Harry slipped it over his head and passed it to her. During her shift she always felt the empty ache in her chest stronger and had noticed that the Draco in the back of her mind did not speak up while it was around her neck.

She missed him.

It was exhausting, going back and forth between being furious at him, wishing he broke out with a case of spattergroit, and then waking up from one of her dreams disappointed that she had run too far and too fast for him to catch her, hold her down and lean down over her whispering, "Oh Sweetheart, you're going to *pay* for making me chase you."

Hermione placed her hand over where the locket was under her shirt, wishing to take it off for just a moment so she could see him take a step out of the shadows, smoke-colored eyes burning with want, and his lips twitched up in that devilish smirk of his.

She looked up at the sky—a clear, bright blue with only wisps and streaks of clouds, and felt the warmth of the day's sun on her face. Closing her eyes for a second, she let her feet guide her. When she opened them, a large dark bird was flying overhead. Hermione narrowed her eyes, trying to focus in on it.

She had spent enough time in the magical world to be able to recognize an owl when she saw one, but this owl was *huge* and flying during the day… Odd.

Ron fell into step beside her.

"How's your arm? Do you need a break?"

"No, I'm okay," Ron muttered and trained his eyes on Harry's back. "Do you reckon he has any idea where we are going?"

Hermione bit her lip for a moment, then shook her head. "I think he's just trying to find another secluded spot somewhere close enough to find food but far enough away not to attract attention."

His knee jerked up, his head lifted from the pillow, and he made a few weak moans as he made new white lines across his chest and stomach, twitching and leaking and damn near dying with the force of it.

He laid there, out of breath for a couple of minutes, just trying to soak up any last drop of the fantasy he could. His arm felt heavy and loose as he reached for his wand. *"Evanesco,"* he muttered and the mess vanished, leaving only the scars shining with a thin coat of sweat on them.

He wanted to stay here, drift off into sleep he had been denying himself. He sunk down into his bed, letting it take his weight, his body, his burdens from him as he slowly slipped away. Maybe he'd let her back out from under the floorboard and let her sleep next to him. She had been a *very* good girl this evening…

Draco sat up with a pained growl. His arm was burning, acid was eating away at his skin, sinking into his muscle and bone in the sharp shape of a skull and snake. His fingers spread wide and he grasped his arm with his right hand, holding it until the worst had passed. It still throbbed painfully, but lessened enough that he could swing his legs from the bed and pull his trousers back on.

Dressing quickly, Draco grabbed his wand and waved it over himself, to take care of any buttons he might have missed. He shrugged on his black robe and lifted the hood over his blond hair, still messy from the pillow.

The mark began to burn again and Draco took two long steps and was at the chiffonier and picked up the bottle sitting there, drinking down as much as he could stand before hissing at the burn and placing it back to grab the silver mask sitting beside it. His new face. He held it, just for a second, before taking a deep breath and the world darkened as he placed the cold metal over his face, disappearing behind it.

Hermione picked her way through the tall grass, following Harry as they marched across the open expanse of land. Ron was keeping up, despite still healing, but with every glance back he seemed to be growing more and more sullen. She had made a makeshift sling for his arm out of an old sheet, but Hermione knew the constant movement must have been taking a toll on his recovery.

" *Still, Granger,"* Draco growled when Hermione's hands started to shake. " *You've got to relax. Just listen to my voice. Don't be nervous."* His voice was that same deep, commanding one he had always used with her and Hermione felt it sink deep into her.

He was right there, *right there* . If he caught her… Oh God, if he caught her—

She should have never come this close to the barrier alone. Hermione closed her eyes. She was in the dark cool recesses of her mind. With Draco.

His hands landed on her shoulders, running up to cup her face, pulling it close to his as he leaned down to her. " *You're not alone. I'll never let you go."*

Hermione opened her eyes. The man was moving on, talking to one of the others who were up ahead. Three of them. Carrying two others. Muggleborns.

Hermione expelled the air from her lungs and her breath hung in a hazy cloud in front of her face. It bounced back off of her wards and the cool mist brushed over her face.

"*Good girl, Granger. You did* ***so*** *good, Sweetheart."*

"Snatchers."

Harry walked up behind her and Hermione nearly flung herself at him. Her heart was hammering in her chest and her palms were damp despite the coldness of the November night. She suddenly wished Draco was here, not just in her head. Wished his hands were actually holding her face again and that she could lean into him, feeling the strength in his arms as they wrapped around her, pushing into her hair and down her back.

" *I'd smack your ass for wandering so far by yourself,"* he snapped, but his grey eyes sparked and his mouth curled into a smirk.

"He could smell it," Hermione said, trying not to think about how Draco's hand had felt against her. "My perfume."

"Are you alright?" Harry reached out and squeezed her arm, gently guiding her away from the barrier of their protective enchantments.

"Yeah, yes," Hermione said breathlessly. And was surprised to find that even though she was still a little shaky, she actually was okay. Because Draco had been there.

" *Always here, pet. You're the one who ran away."*

Harry nodded while looking in the direction the Snatchers had headed off in. Then he turned back to her slowly. He rubbed her arm a little and gave her a sad smile that she didn't quite understand. He almost looked like he was about to say something, but stopped before the words reached his lips. It wasn't the first time Harry had done something like this.

Sometimes Hermione wondered how much Harry was holding back for her and Ron's sakes. He had *so* much weighing on his shoulders. As much pressure Hermione was

feeling to find out how to destroy the horcruxes, it must have been a dozen times worse for Harry; he was the one who had to face Lord Voldemort in the end.

And she doubted that he had a Ginny sitting around in his head to help him when he got lonely.

"Are you?" Hermione asked.

Harry pushed his glasses up on his nose. "Huh?"

"Are you alright?"

Draco rolled his eyes. " *Who cares about him?"*

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"That's why I'm asking."

Harry blinked his green eyes, still bright even in the darkness. "Hermione, I honestly have no idea what you're on about."

" *Salazar help me, I'm surrounded by Gryffindors."*

Hermione ignored Draco as Harry went on. "Is there- something you wanted to talk about?"

He was looking directly into her eyes with concern, worry, and… sympathy. She wondered how scared she looked right now, how tired, how… utterly worn out. And Harry looked the same. There was a dark stubble over his jaw, his hair was messier than she had *ever* seen it, and his clothes had started to fit him loosely again. It reminded her a little of the boy she first met at Hogwarts who had broken glasses, wore shirts three times too big, and who was so pale that his lightning shaped scar stood out starkly on his forehead, setting him apart from their other classmates.

Harry had been one of the only people who didn't mind her at first. Ron certainly hadn't been, but Harry was always friendly with her, just happy to *have* a friend. And Hermione had been too. She had never fit in much with the kids at her schools before and spent her days flipping pages of books instead of playing with friends.

Harry had been just as awkward, if not more so, than she was. And it *worked* for them. They forged a friendship that deepened the first Halloween when he and Ron saved her from the troll, and she saved them from McGonagall in return. A small mark against her perfect record was worth her first *real* friend. After that day, she had never looked back. Never. Harry and Ron were what she wanted, who she needed.

" *Scarhead and Weaselbee could never give you what you need. Not like I can."*

And they needed her. Needed her to be herself again, not this silently broken girl who had conversations with a Death Eater in her head. They needed her to figure out how to

Draco groaned and changed his pattern back to full length strokes; hard, fast, almost punishing as he fucked himself into her, pinning her on the desk, and pumping his hips at a furious pace.

He'd made it last, he'd had his fun. Now he was going to have her.

Granger was making a noise somewhere between a moan and a scream, knuckles turning red as she held onto the desk tightly. Her ass was hot and soft as he slammed his hips into it, feeling the give of her body against his hard thrusts. Draco placed his forearms on either side of her, trapping her in and under him. He pulled her hair, making her cry out again and bit into the back of her neck, pulling on the skin with his teeth until he felt her body tremble.

Fuck he was close. He was so fucking close.

He just needed a little more to come, to push him over the edge.

Papers, quills, and books fell to the floor as he flipped her over and dove back in. Oh God, she was so warm and tight and soft and everything inside her felt like hot silk and it was closing in around him, pulling on him, trying to keep him there as he drove himself in.

Draco's brows furrowed and he felt sweat build up on his chest, running down the muscles. He looked down to see a puddle of it in the dip of Granger's throat.

He fucking drank it.

He couldn't stop the moan, loud and lengthy, a sound of pure yearning. His balls tightened, heavy and ready to empty themselves. Granger reached up to touch his face and Draco pulled back. He looked down into her eyes, burning like bright cinnamon…

He smacked her hand away and as Granger's beautiful eyes widened he pushed her head to the side and shoved it down, holding it against the wood of his desk under his heavy hand as he drove himself harder, faster, mercilessly into her.

"Feel it. Fucking feel it, Granger. Feel how good we are. Feel how perfect we are. Feel…" he grunted and plunged on. "Feel my cock. Feel how much I want you, how much I miss you, how much I love you. *Feel it."*

Granger shook with her orgasm, calling out his name until he shifted his hand to cover her mouth. Her pussy closed in on him, trapping him. Fuck, he wanted it so bad, he'd do anything to have it again. He'd do whatever it took to have Granger back and coming and squeezing his cock like a good little whore should. Draco screwed his eyes tightly closed, dipped his head into the crook of her neck, tasted her sweat on his lips, bit into her collarbone, and came violently with a low roar.

Granger was whining. Pulling away at the sharper smacks and leaning in at the softer ones. He moved down to her legs, giving her ass a small reprieve and she whimpered everytime he struck the tender skin of her inner thighs. Fuck, he wanted her all red. Wanted the blood to be hot under her skin, wanted to feel it burning when he thrust into her.

Granger made another low whine as he rubbed the crop over her inflamed skin, keeping the sensitive alive with gentle strokes. He held onto the desk and pushed her hips back, asking for more.

"You know why you're getting beat, don't you?" he asked, letting the crop slide over her round ass, petting her. Granger nodded, her curls spilling out over his desk. "Yes…" he murmured and replaced the leather tongue with a single finger, trailing it over the warm skin down to the damp knickers in between her legs.

"Because you only thought about yourself, didn't you? You didn't think how it would make *me* feel. So now—" Draco grabbed her ass roughly, digging his fingers harshly into her tenderized skin. Granger gasped and whimpered, but did not try to get away. Not this Granger. "I'm showing you how it feels."

He let go only to bring his palm down across the warmed skin with a sharp smack. A pitiful little cry escaped her and Draco flicked the crop, turning it back into his hawthorn wand again and slicing it across the lacy black knickers until they really were nothing but a ribbon of loose fabric.

Draco focused his hand on the tip of his cock now, playing with it and letting himself get carried away by the sensation. He could hear his own heavy breathing and felt his heart start to beat faster as his muscles hardened and stiffened.

He dipped his fingers into her wet folds, coating his fingers in her and rubbing them over the head of his cock. He didn't plan on being gentle, so the least he could do was make the first thrust a little easier for her. That would be his only concession; her only mercy.

Draco grabbed her hip and dragged her a few inches back towards him. He leaned down over her, grabbing a fistful of her soft curls and breathed in her cinnamon vanilla scent. Fuck, it was sweet enough for him to get high off of. He pulled her head to the side, looking at her tightly closed eyes, gasping open mouth, and painfully excited expression. Draco pressed his lips to her ear, breathing heavily into it a few times until he felt her shiver back.

"I am going to make you feel *all of it.*"

Oh fuck—oh shit—oh fucking shit her *cunt*…

destroy the locket. They needed her to help hunt the horcruxes and plan how to retrieve them. They needed her to keep the peace between them so they didn't turn on each other.

Maybe Ron was more moody and Harry was strangely silent because *she* was moody, because *she* was silent. Because she was spending her free time wandering back into the dark, messy corner of her mind and letting Draco quiet her fears, her worries, her objections with rough kisses and grasping hands when she should have been researching, reading, and *helping* her friends.

Because they were *more* than her friends; they were her family. She could trust them, she could count on them. And it was high time they could start counting on her again. She would keep working at it, maybe cross reference a few books and see if anything clicked this time.

She knew it wouldn't. But she would do it for them.

"Hermione?"

"No, no…" Hermione shook her head and a tangle of curls fell down over her face. "Come on, let's head back in."

Harry stayed close to her as they made their way back over to the tent. The fire outside had long burned out, just a white pile of ash on the ground in front of the warm glow coming through the canvas. Hermione felt a little bit of relief as they neared. The tent wasn't a home, but… Harry and Ron were.

Even now, even though they were hungry and tired and cold and facing *impossible* odds, this was where she needed to be, where she *wanted* to be.

"*Bullshit.*" Harry's face faded out of focus as Draco's eyes softened to a cloudy rain grey. No smirk, no spark of anger, instead Draco was… pouting. "*You're a fucking bitch you know that? I* ***loved*** *you, Granger.*"

Her heart gave a large, painful thump in her chest.

"Thank you, Harry. For being there for me. And I'm here for you too." Hermione tried to push the image of Draco's face from her mind. She stopped for a moment and turned towards Harry. "Anywhere we need to go, wherever we have to look—I'm not leaving you."

Harry's lids fluttered a little and she saw him smile for the first time in… Goodness, she wasn't even sure. He dropped his gaze down and rubbed his eyes behind his glasses.

Hermione looked up at the clear night and bright stars overhead. There were no clouds in the cold sky and the clearing they had camped in gave a surprisingly wide view. By instinct, her brain started connecting the small white dots into patterns and shapes she had memorized years ago in Astronomy.

Draco.

The Draco constellation was overhead. The great fire serpent, rearing its head arching across the sky, as if it was trying to catch the other stars around it and take them back to its lair to guard like precious jewels.

" *I'm not fucking leaving you either."* He sounded upset, his voice a deep growl. " *You're mine."*

Hermione closed her eyes as an owl hooted loudly from a nearby tree. It seemed to be following them, appearing every few nights then disappearing only to come back, casting a shadow down over her in the midday sun. It never bothered them and never stayed too long. But it always came back.

Harry wrapped his arm around her with a small, comforting shake. "Thanks, Hermione. I mean it." She returned his smile reaching the bottom of the small hill encompassing the clearing they were camped in. "I know what you had to give up," Harry paused, watching his old sneakers kick through the dead leaves on the forest floor. "School. Your parents—for this. For me."

"Harry, I *wanted* to come with you," Hermione protested. "This fight is important to me too."

"I know, I know it is," he went on, keeping his eyes on the tent up ahead. "But I don't want to see you carted off by Snatchers and handed over to Umbridge. So as much as I like your perfume, just don't wear it again."

"*Potter should* ***start*** *wearing the perfume,"* Draco grumbled from his crouched position behind the messy pile. "*When was the last time he* ***bathed****?"*

Hermione fought the smile on her face. Maybe it was the rush of adrenaline and then relief she felt afterwards, or maybe it was just getting to spend some time with Harry again, or maybe the fact that Draco had felt *so close* to her again, but her heart felt a little lighter as a golden ray came out of the open flap of the tent, followed by Ron.

He straightened quickly and his eyes darted between her and Harry. His brow dropped and he rubbed at his still sore shoulder.

"What were you two up to?" Ron asked, his tone the same short one he almost always had these days.

Hermione spied the locket resting on his chest.

"Nothing," Harry muttered and brushed past him into the tent, their shoulders briefly knocking. Harry looked back at Hermione and gave her another one of those small, sad smiles.

Ron blocked her path.

Wanting.

Begging.

Fuck he had missed her ass. And he was sure it had missed him too.

He brought the riding crop down against it.

The small jump and rich jiggle were fucking perfect, just the way he remembered it under his hand. Draco shifted a little, spreading his legs wider as he gripped himself harder. He was taking his time, long deep strokes, working himself up as he worked the crop on her ass.

Again. And the shining skin was flushing red. Fuck, it was hard not to just whip the shit out of her until she was screaming, but he could control himself. He could make this good for both of them. And he wanted this to last. Wanted *her* to last.

So often now, it was quick and rough and she was gone and he was alone again. So he was going to take his time, going to make this worth it. Not just a release, but a revelation.

Granger held onto the edge of the desk and he watched her fidget, but not pull away. She wouldn't pull away. This Granger never ran from him. This Granger was a good girl. But even good girls still needed to be punished.

The crop smacked against her skin again and she made a small noise in response. Draco ran the tongue of the crop in a circle over her ass, dragging it lazily across her skin. She adjusted herself over the desk, straightening her legs and sticking her ass out of him again. Draco trailed the dark brown crop over the curve of her cheek and down her thigh, running it over the black stocking there and back up.

Tapping the inside of her thigh he spoke in a deep, rough voice. "Wider."

And his good little whore obeyed. She placed each heel a few inches farther than they had been and Draco pressed the tongue of the crop in between her legs, feeling the give of the soft skin under the black lace knickers. If you could even call them that. They were more of a scrap of fabric than anything else, but shit, he had never been so hungry for scraps before.

Granger pushed herself against the crop and Draco chuckled.

"Dirty whore." He brought the leather tongue down against her again. Granger jumped and he didn't even let her get back into position before he did it a second time. And then a third. And then went at the other cheek, turning it a glowing red as she lifted and then dipped her curly head back down. He could just barely hear her small gasps, but when they turned into low moans Draco sped up, pumping his hand over himself at a regular speed.

Harry pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. "I'd have thought he'd have *wanted* you to."

Hermione had no defense against the shock that rocked through her.

"Fine, I'll go help Ron so he doesn't have to take his shirt off in front of a *girl*." Harry rolled his eyes. "Wake me at midnight and we'll switch again, okay?"

"You need your rest, Harry; you're already falling asleep out here—"

"You need yours too, Hermione," Harry cut in. "Plus it's cold out here. Here, you want this bloke's coat?"

He held out the black coat they had taken from Runcorn's unconscious body just that morning. Goodness, that seemed like weeks ago.

"No, I'll be fine."

"Are you sure?"

Hermione nodded and sat down against the same tree Harry had been.

"I'll cast a warming charm if I need it."

Harry eyed her and then said, "Alright. But midnight, yeah?" He turned and headed into the tent.

Hermione kept her wand lit and set it against the bark of the tree to cast the pale light over her. She looked out into the darkened trees and tried not to think about how much they reminded her of her new nightmare. Was it a nightmare? She didn't exactly… hate having those dreams. Actually, she almost looked forward to them. Waiting for the one where whoever was chasing her caught her.

She knew she'd look up and see silver eyes behind a metal mask.

"Shut your eyes and I'll show it to you."

Hermione stared, unblinkingly, into the dark forest.

Granger was bent over his desk, tiny little lingerie and black lace stockings stretched up her legs. The heels she was wearing made her at least five inches taller, which meant that her ass was sticking up a little higher than it normally did. Round, golden, and just fucking sitting there for him.

Waiting.

" *Move, motherfucker."*

"Where were you?"

Hermione rubbed her hands together, trying to create some friction between them to feel some warmth. She would grab her gloves from inside and then finish her turn on watch. Probably take a few books out with her too. "I thought I heard something and went out to check. There were Snatchers—"

Ron's eyes went wide.

"I'm okay!" Hermione started again quickly, holding up her hands in deference. "They couldn't get past the enchantments. They didn't even see me, Ronald."

Ron looked out at the dark woods behind her. "I'll go on watch. You don't need to be out there if there are Snatchers wandering about."

"Ron—"

"Just—" he pinched his lips in frustration. "Just do this for me, okay?"

For Ron. If it made Ron feel a little bit better, she'd acquiesce. "Oh alright, but only because I'm freezing. Here—" Hermione pulled the scarf from around her neck and reached up to place it over Ron's. "You'll need this."

His dark expression softened, freckles jumping a little as a small grin pulled at the sides of his mouth.

"Thanks, Hermione. That's sweet of you."

She played it off as she moved past him into the tent, careful to not bump into him like Harry had. After a moment she heard the flap fall closed and pulled off her shoes to see that Harry was already fast asleep in his bunk.

She would start her research again in the morning, once she got a little bit of sleep. It was no use clawing the inside of her brain for information when it was half frozen anyways.

Hermione cast a quick warming charm over Harry and then over herself before crawling under the blankets of the cot on the other side of the room and pulling them tightly up to her neck. She slipped one hand down to her thigh and rested it over Draco's bite mark. Her fingers were cold, but felt nice against the soreness of the bruise still lingering there.

" *Burn the scarf, Granger."*

Hermione rolled over to face the wall, refusing to engage with the shadowy figure, but knowing he would follow her into her dreams of the forest again tonight. Somewhere outside, the owl hooted loudly.

Hermione closed her eyes and saw the quicksilver gleam of Draco staring back at her right before his lip curled over his white teeth and he sneered, " *Or I'll hang him with it."*

"Oh fuck, yes—"

Draco's head was bent back into his pillow, his mouth open and eyes closed.

"Like that, yeah…"

Granger was sucking his balls while she jerked him off over her face. Her tongue moved over the rough skin softly, caressing it while her hand slid up and down over him, firm and tight, squeezing at the head and letting his brush against a few twisting curls.

"You like licking my balls?"

She nodded eagerly.

"You like having my cock over your pretty little face, whore?"

"Yes, sir."

Draco grabbed her hair on the back of her head, ignoring the softness of her thick curls, and ripped her head back from him. Her mouth was still open, pink tongue resting on her plump lower lip and her eyes tightened in pain as he twisted his hand, pulling harder.

"You don't fucking speak anymore. You had the chance to talk to me and ran off instead. But now you're my good little slut who only wants to use her mouth to please me, isn't that right, pet?"

Granger whimpered and nodded.

Draco loosened his grip a little. "Good girl. You may continue."

She dove back in, trying to make up for her transgression with enthusiasm and quickened her movements.

Draco groaned as his cock throbbed, his hand pumping over it indulgently.

"Oh fuck, Granger…"

She was letting small whines out. He allowed those. Everything else hurt too much. He couldn't bear to hear her say his name now. Not when it wasn't it breathy whisper in his ear or a helpless cry of pleasure. Not when it was just in his head.

was too. There was a coldness, an emptiness around her for a moment, but in that chill was also a clarity, a clearness she hadn't felt in months.

And for the first time, the slumped man in the back of her mind did not have a witty comeback for her. She almost missed it.

"Just—go get Harry," Ron grumbled and looked away from her. "If you're just going to sit there and stare you might as well do it on watch."

She had almost forgotten he was there; so wrapped up in her own thoughts, Hermione hadn't realized how long she had been sitting there, not speaking after he just told her—

"I was just thinking—"

"Please, Hermione, just.. go. I don't want you to say anything out of pity that you don't mean." His voice turned harsh. "Or… that you do because, really, I don't even know if I want you—"

She was on her feet and out of the tent before the next word came out of his mouth.

The night air was chilly and Hermione wished she had brought a sweater out with her, but she wasn't about to go back in there to get one.

Lighting the tip of her wand with a small flick, Hermione spied Harry sitting against a tree, his head on his chest.

"Harry," Hermione said his name softly as she approached. He was mumbling, tossing slightly in his sleep. "Harry!"

Harry jerked awake, his glasses askew. He stood up, slipping a little on the loose leaves and righted his glasses. "Must have dozed off, sorry." His hand moved up to his forehead, rubbing his scar again.

"You were dreaming about him again, weren't you? I can tell by the look on your face, Harry!"

Harry's thick brows pulled together. "I didn't mean it to happen! It was a dream! Can *you* control what you dream about, Hermione?"

For a split second she worried that Harry had caught her mumbling in her sleep. Had he heard her call Draco's name? No, that was impossible. If she had done something like that Harry would have said something. Ron certainly would have.

She was about to reply when Draco unwelcomely chimed in, " *You can't, but I can."*

Hermione took a deep breath. "Ron wanted to know if you can help him change his bandages."

"Why me? You're better at it than I am."

Hermione looked down at the curled brown leaves at her feet. "Yes, well, Ronald… doesn't feel comfortable with me doing that."

But they were at war now and war *required* hate. It required acts and thoughts that she would never have put up with in times of peace. It required her to be just as cold and unfeeling as Draco had been when he pushed her back in that mud and held her down under his boot only to leave her instead of staying and fighting with her. *For her*. Together, they could have tried to take down Bellatrix, or at least maybe fend her off in order to escape.

Instead he had lied to her and told her he was coming for her when he clearly had no plans to risk his Pureblood neck even for someone he *claimed* to love. Draco didn't know how to love. He only knew how to hurt. To lie. To leave.

Not to mention what she had heard Umbridge bragging about when Hermione was hidden behind Mafalda Hopkirk's face.

"Do you know Lucius' son? Draco?"

Hermione had almost thought the cords of the lift had been cut because she was falling, just falling into nothing, deeper, farther—

"He's taken an interest in my department. If he was still in school I would offer him an internship, but as you must know," Umbridge glanced over her shoulder, her sweet place perfectly spread over her toady face, "Draco has move on to much bigger things these days."

She turned back around and Hermione watched her stand up straighter, not that it mattered with her squat frame. "His… *involvement* with The Muggleborn Registration Commision is invaluable. He seems utterly committed to our cause and eager to provide support capturing the Mud—I mean Muggleborns that have failed to turn in their proper registration papers for assessment."

Hermione had barely been able to stand, and had no idea how she was able to follow Umbridge from the lift and into the courtroom. Her body was moving, but her mind was not in control of it. It wasn't in control of anything until Harry had whispered in her ear under the invisibility cloak and she had suddenly remembered why they were there in the first place.

Working with Umbridge? Handing over Muggleborns? What was Draco *doing?*

She expected the slouched figure to say something, but he was surprisingly quiet. In fact, he wasn't even looking at her. His blond head was bent down, his expression masked in shadow.

He was doing what his Lord, his Master, had told him to do. He was a Death Eater. And he wasn't even trying to deny it anymore. It was time she stopped denying who he

"I love your mouth," he said weakly. "Your lips, your tongue. Oh *shit,* I love you. Fucking hell, I love you Granger."

Her whines lifted, turning higher with happiness.

He pulled her head back again. "And you love me."

Granger nodded, her eyes looked like burnt cinnamon and he grabbed his cock from her, stroking it a few times and watched as he came over her lips, her chin, her chest.

She was his.

All his.

Always his.

And when he got her back, he'd show her that every single fucking way it could be shown.

Granger stuck her tongue out for him and Draco wiped himself off on it. He leaned down and kissed her forehead. "Back under the trap door, Sweetheart. I've got work to do."

"Let's try this again."

Fletcher's scraggly hair, matted to his head with sweat and blood, was resting against the wall he was chained to. His clothes were torn, buttons ripped off his shirt during the throes of agony from the last time Draco had descended down into the cellar.

"I told ya," Fletcher gasped, hairy chest rose and fell and the gold chain around his neck glinting in the dim light of the torches, "I don' know where Potter is!"

All he had gotten out of Fletcher so far had been what he was doing in the middle of a Welsh forest with an unregistered Mudblood. It seemed, ever the entrepreneur, Mundungus Fletcher was running a smuggling ring out of the country. That was until he spilled all of his contacts, locations, and names to Draco who had plans to sweep them up and hand them over as soon as he got what he really wanted out of this pathetic lump of a man.

"But you know where the other Order members are, don't you?"

Fletcher's mind was a disgusting place to infiltrate and as soon as Draco felt the magic of fidelius charms blurring out locations, he had shoved a vial of Veritaserum down

Fletcher's throat. But the stupid little man had choked on it while Draco had questioned him. It seemed the charm protected the truth from being extracted magically. Which meant Draco had to take a more physical approach.

Sweat beaded on Fletcher's upper lip. "Why would I know 'bout Order members? No, no, you go' me awl wrong!"

Draco lurched forward. "I know you're part of the Order, so stop lying to me." Fletcher's fetid breath was coming out in short pants. His skin hung loosely from him and Draco was vaguely reminded of one of his old hounds with droopy ears and loose jowls. The hound hadn't made it past Bellatrix's training session. "You were there the night they moved Potter. Even if you did run," he snarled, "and only the Order was in on that."

He tried not to think about Granger in the sky that night. She didn't like flying and he hadn't been there to hold onto her as she rose into the sky.

"That… that was a favor to Dumble—"

Fletcher's head bounced off the wall behind him with an odd hollow sound. Draco flexed his hand open and closed, dispelling the energy trapped there from the blow. He didn't want to think about the old man. Or how his eyes had turned to a faded blue the second before he tipped over backwards. At least Dumbledore hadn't shrieked like the man in the woods. How many more people was he going to have to watch die?

"I know where *that* Order member is. Let's try for someone alive, hmm?"

Fletcher gave a small moan and his head fell forward, dropping a piece of tooth onto the floor.

Draco straightened his Malfoy ring, not a scratch on the polished silver.

"What are you hitting him for? Why don't you use your wand?" Fergus was leaning against one of the pillars, picking at his long nails with a short, sharp knife. Kenna was crouched beside him, looking directly up at Draco and running her tongue across her oddly small teeth.

He didn't want to tell the wolves how casting *cruciatus* curse was affecting him these days. How even when he used it on someone else, he could feel it vibrating up his wand and into his arm. How he almost liked the burning tingle it left behind. How he had started to crave it.

Draco held out his hand "Give me that knife."

Fergus stuck the knife out, handle first, but it was too far for Draco to reach. He would have to go over there and get it. Clenching his jaw, Draco snapped his fingers and opened his palm flat.

"I just—" Ron's face actually got some red in it. The flush of lively color was enough to keep Hermione from running out the flap of the tent. "I'll have to take my shirt off and… well… Harry should help me with that."

"Oh." Hermione's voice was very soft and very small. After a few awkward moments she gently sat herself back down in the chair. Maybe he wasn't disgusted by her? Maybe he just felt awkward being half naked in front of her. "I… I did see it earlier. When Harry and I dressed the wound and wrapped it."

"Yeah, I—I figured." Ron was looking at his feet under the blanket.

"But you don't want me to…"

He looked up at her again, the color in his cheeks had faded, but his eyes were brighter than she'd seen them all evening. "No. I do want you to. That's the problem."

Hermione felt her own face warm and blinked a few times in quick succession. "O-*Oh."*

The guilt churned in her. She had only started up with Draco because Ron was dating Lavender. It would have made sense to end things with him when Ron and Lavender were over, but… but she hadn't wanted to end things. She didn't want them to be ended now, but how on earth could they ever get past what had happened?

He had *imperiused* her for goodness sake! He had tried to abduct her. What else would he have done while she was under his curse? What else would she have let him? As disturbed and upset and honestly, *enraged* she was at Draco for doing that to her, she was just as angry at herself for not fighting it. Not even for a second. Not even at all. The worst thing Draco had ever done to her, and she had stood there and *let him.*

She hated him for it. A bitter, resentful hatred, but she hated herself even more. Because she knew, *she knew,* that if he showed up outside the tent right now, she'd forgive him.

"I'd forgive you too, Sweetheart." He smirked. " *After some begging, of course."*

The only begging she'd be doing would be begging him to jump off his broom over a volcano.

Hermione wasn't used to hating people. She was very used to being upset, and angry, and annoyed by them, but she always forgave them in the end. Even all his crude, cruel remarks in their early years at school had not made her *hate* Draco, not really. She had even agreed to let Rita Skeeter out of the jar and even helped set her up with the interview that got her name back in the press the next year. No matter how many times she and Ron fought, nothing had ever stopped her from caring about him and being his friend underneath it all, and she had never once felt hatred towards him.

Hermione looked up at him and felt the cool breath and the crisp mint smell wave over her lips.

"Wake up, Hermione."

It didn't *sound* like him, but it had to be. He was here, his hands on her, his eyes boring down into her, deep enough to see her soul…

"Don't let me go," she murmured, softly, barely speaking.

The mask was gone and it was just Draco, her marble statue of a man, grinning down at her like he had been *waiting* to hear her say it.

Hermione pushed herself closer to him, her lips parted, ready to greet his mouth with eager enthusiasm and show him just how much she had missed him.

Right before they touched Hermione breathed out his name, "Draco…"

Hermione was shoved down hard against the cot. Her eyes flew open and the dim light of the tent was almost blinding compared to the dark woods. Ron was standing over her, pale and livid, a toothbrush gripped tightly in his red fist.

Hermione looked up from it to his face, utter disgust and revulsion painted so clearly on it. The same way he had looked at her after seeing her with—

Hermione felt her chest cleave in two. Draco wasn't here, but Ron was. And now he knew, *he knew,* what she dreamed of. All the times he asked if she was okay in the mornings because she had been tossing and turning and Hermione brushed it off, now Ron knew she had been dreaming of him. Of Draco.

Ron shook his head, copper hair glinting in the yellow light. All Hermione could do was stare at him as he glared at her, blue eyes cold with betrayal.

"Are you fucking *kidding* me, Hermione?!"

Chapter Six

This was the last place in the fucking world Draco wanted to be right now. The large gates were closed and the winged boars stood like sentinels on either side. He swore their tusks had gotten larger since the last time he was here. When he ran past the apparition barrier at the edge of the Hogwarts grounds and left Granger behind. He had almost splinched himself doing that.

Draco had never had any problems apparating before, but that night, when he was squeezed through time and space, a part of him had faltered, had tried to turn back. When he landed his boot was gone. The one he had pressed into Granger's chest. His bare foot hurt as it slammed into the pavement and he tried to balance himself. He had fallen to his knees in a second, gasping for air that would not fill his chest.

His empty, open, fucking chest. The hole Granger had been burning in him had melted through his cold stone and everything in him had fallen out. And for a moment, he wondered if he had left his heart, his actual beating, bleeding heart, back there with Granger and his missing boot.

But when Bellatrix dug her sharpened nails into his arm and shoved him towards Snape, he felt the cold constricting around the bloody muscle inside his ribcage and knew that it was still there. And she wasn't.

Draco glowered up at the boars and heard the creaking of the gates as they began to move. Snape was making his way down the path, black robes billowing behind him. Did he charm them to swell with each step? Draco was sure he had. No one else's robes were that… poofy.

Must be a Halfblood thing, trying to make themselves big and important.

"Professor," Draco drawled in mock respect.

Snape stopped in front of him, black eyes sharp. "Headmaster now actually."

Draco gave him a cruel smile and stepped inside the gates, feeling his heart give an extra thump. "Still have you greeting people at the gates though."

"I was not aware you were arriving this morning," Snape answered in a cool tone.

Draco smirked. "Not in the loop anymore?"

Snape's lip curled and shuddered. "I did not receive your owl with the confirmation."

Cocking a brow up Draco stepped inside the gates. "Were the Dark Lord's orders not enough for you then? I'll have to let him know you need more reassurance."

The truth was Draco had no idea where the fuck his bird had gone off to. Calix was spending more and more time out of his room now that her cat was there. His owl would be gone for days, soaring back in at strange times and hooting until Draco put a silencing charm on the pillow and buried his head underneath it.

Not that he was sleeping well anyways.

Draco did not shorten his stride as they walked up the path towards the castle which meant Snape had to quicken his pace to keep up. Good. He could probably use the exercise after sitting around on his ass all day in the Headmaster's office, counting textbooks or whatever the fuck a Headmaster did.

Easiest fucking job in the world.

Snape wasn't out scouring bogs in the middle of the night or pulling off parts of people's bodies. Snape wasn't listening to people cry and beg as he hauled them into the Ministry for whatever fate Umbridge had in store for them. Snape wasn't breaking into homes and attacking innocent people whose only crime was falling in love with the wrong fucking person.

Snape wasn't suffering under the Dark Lord for not finding Potter yet.

Lord Voldemort had called Draco to him and as soon as his boots hit the ground the red light flashed and Draco's body was encircled with whipping pain.

It gave Hermione just enough energy to push herself up the leaf strew hill. "Up! Get Up!" the person at the top of the hill called, and Hermioned tried to climb, but slipped a little on the thick leaves. The ascent had slowed her and Hermione screamed as a leather gloved hand yanked her backwards.

She had been so close. The Death Eater held her back to him by her hair, wrapping his other long arm around her middle and picking her up. Hermione kicked her legs out, thrashing, fighting. He moved his hand from her hair to her face, covering her mouth to muffle her screams. Already out of breath, Hermione felt exhaustion drape over her at the loss of oxygen.

The Death Eater held on with a bruising strength. His cold, metal mask pressed into her cheek and she could smell the mint on his breath.

" *Stop fucking fighting me,"* he growled and she felt him heave her backwards in a hauntingly familiar fashion. " *You'll only make this worse."*

Steaming cold panic poured through her and Hermione bucked against him harder, trying to wriggle her way out of his arms. She had done this before, *they* had done this before. Everything about it was the same, but different. The Death Eater shoved her behind a tree, pressing her hard against it and holding her there with his body.

His hand was still around her mouth and she took small breaths through her nose, trying to fill her chest. Hermione pressed her hands up against him, where was her wand? She saw her school bag lying on the leaves near them with the light vinewood wand poking out of it. What was that doing here?

" *Granger, calm the fuck down."*

It was the first time he had caught her. The first time she hadn't been able to outrun him. How hard had she really been trying? She knew she wouldn't be able to make it up that hill, but still, she had tried. Was it because of who was waiting at the top? She could still hear him shouting her name.

"Hermione? Hermione… up!"

He was still on the hill. He hadn't come down to look for her. But Draco had.

His eyes were shining behind his mask, playful and bright. Godric, she had missed them. She had only given the locket over right before bed and had spent almost the whole day without Draco. But he was here, he had come. Just like he promised.

" *Can I let you go or do I need to hold you down?"*

His grip loosened and she felt his gloved hands slide over her, gripping her arms and almost shaking her.

"Wake up."

Hermione was running again. She was always running. The dark trees whipped past her, leaves crunching under her feet as she pressed on. There was no need to try to be quiet, he had been chasing her for quite some time now. She didn't know how far she had run or where Harry or Ron was, all she knew was that she couldn't stop.

If she stopped he would catch her. And if he caught her…

An owl shrieked in one of the high trees and Hermione pressed on, chest heaving with each strained breath.

She could hear him behind her, crashing through the underbrush. Her Death Eater. He had followed her. Followed her from the black tiled halls of the Department of Mysteries to this awful, cursed forest she seemed never to find her way out of. No matter how far she ran. No matter how fast.

Hermione glanced over her shoulder and saw the gleam of his metal mask. Every other inch of him was covered in black robes, black breeches, black hood, black gloves. Nothing but the shards of his silver eyes gave any indication as to who it was. Who else would it be other than the one person who haunted her, day and night?

Draco would never let her find peace, never let her get rest. Why couldn't he even give her one night where he wasn't chasing her? One day where he wasn't sitting in the back of her mind? But what was even worse was when she wore the locket and had a few hours of silence where she wrestled with her loneliness and pined for him. Waiting patiently for Ron to take it off her neck so Draco would come back. Because the only thing worse than having Draco live in her head, was living her life without him.

Hermione stumbled and her hands brushed the ground, but she picked herself up and tore on. She was gasping in cold air that burned her lungs and gave no relief to the aching muscles that protested her unyielding usage of them. How long had she been running? She could feel herself slowing, fatigue catching up to her. And he was too.

He did not slow. He did not weary. He just continued on, always after her, always chasing. Hunting.

Draco was hunting her.

No matter what forest she was in, no matter how far she ran, where she hid, or what she did, he was always just behind her, always coming for her.

And Hermione remembered what happened to Draco's last prey.

She could hear something up ahead. Some *one*. In all her dreams she had never gotten this far. Someone was calling her name. Telling her to hurry, urging her on. Just a little more and she'd be safe with them.

Lord Voldemort's cruciatus was different from his own. It felt like his skin was being flayed from his body and the tender muscles underneath were being set on fire. It was torture; it was torment.

It was nothing compared to her.

He took his punishment without complaint, gritting his teeth and letting the pain roll through him. Cleanse him. He was seizing on the floor, but kept his body over the trap door, making sure she stayed down and was glad of it when the Dark Lord lifted the curse and barrelled into his mind, searching through his recent hunts, looking for any indication of disloyalty. He hovered over the torture sessions and crying faces of the victims he threw into the cells beneath the Department of Mysteries.

Draco tried not to think about the fact that he was selling people, but it was impossible to ignore when each face was being displayed in his mind. Dozens of them, months worth of faces. Men, women, and children. Children he recognized from school.

Draco gave them all up.

Because none of them were her.

Umbridge was dropping gold into his hands when the Dark Lord slithered back from his memories.

"Growing rich off of Mudbloods?" He tsked. "I thought you had more ambition than that, Draco."

"Only in my service for you, My Lord," Draco wheezed and pulled himself up to his knees. "The gold is nothing compared to achieving my goal."

"And yet you have collected so much of it," The Dark Lord went on, "and have failed to bring me Potter."

Draco placed a hand tenderly on his ribs. The curse might have cracked one where it hit him. It hurt to breathe, but he had to answer.

"I am close."

The Dark Lord looked down, his eyes like gaping wounds. Draco held himself perfectly still. He was a statue. He was stone, matching the white walls and sitting heavily on top of the floorboards, keeping her locked away and safe.

His Master held him in a deep gaze, the crimson eyes so dark Draco could see the reflection of his pale face staring back at him. He didn't even look like himself anymore.

"You are failing."

A freezing jolt of fear shot down his spine.

Draco felt the cold air in his lungs, tightening them as the school came into view. He couldn't help it when his eyes moved to the Astronomy tower, traveling up the grey stones to the top where everything had fallen apart.

Or maybe it had fallen apart before that, in the Room of Requirement. Or maybe in the Prefects bathroom. Or maybe it had all started falling apart that first night in the Restricted section. Had it ever really been enough of something to fall apart? What more of Granger had he ever had than a warm hole?

He cut his eyes to the edge of the forest, where he had last seen her. Where he had last had her. Because he did fucking have her. He had every single inch of that girl—his girl—and that night, he had been inside her. In more ways than one.

He still was. He was still in her heart. He knew he was, he had to be. And he'd get her back. Maybe not immediately, but indefinitely.

And he'd prove that to her. Mark her inside and out as his alone. She would let him. She might even beg him to.

The thought of that carried him up the steps and into the Entrance Hall, but as soon as Draco was back inside the school, his breath was knocked from him.

Memories. Dozens if not hundreds of memories crashed over him. Years worth of memories. Granger walking, Granger talking, Granger reading, Granger laughing, Granger yelling, Granger wearing the little fucking uniform that made his prick swell just thinking about, Granger saying 'Yes, sir'. Granger walking off with Weasley. Granger under his arm as he pulled her outside, trying to smuggle her out.

"Draco?"

Snape was a few steps ahead, halfway turned back and Draco realized that he had stopped walking three steps into the school. Snape's obsidian eyes were carefully watching, scanning over him to see why he stopped and looking for weaknesses.

Draco took a heavy step forward. "Just take me to the sword, Severus." He surged past his Godfather and up the stairs he had watched Granger climb countless times before he had descended down into the dungeons to fuck someone who wasn't her.

Shit, he needed to get laid.

And running Lord Voldemort's evil errands wasn't getting him any closer to Granger so Draco wanted to get this the fuck done with this so he could get back to hunting her.

And Potter.

And Weasley too because that fuckface was the reason all of this had happened in the first place. If he hadn't shown up in the Room of Hidden Things, Draco would have… would have been able to convince—No.

kill them both and leave their bodies to rot where their precious fucking daughter who they didn't sell out to fucking save themselves would find.

Draco sliced his wand through the air and Rowle fell to the ground.

Ted stumbled forward, almost tripping over the large man sprawled at his feet. Draco waved his wand again and the chains fell off, pooling in front of Andromeda. Her wrists were badly hurt. Draco looked away, kicking her wand back to her.

Ted was at his wife's side in a second, running his hands over her face, her arms, pulling her against him. Draco turned his wand on Rowle, invading his unconscious mind and modifying his memory.

"Go," Draco said in a dead voice.

Andromeda looked up at him, eyes wide with shock.

"It's not safe for you here anymore. Two werewolves heard where your house was too, so your fidelius charm is void. They will sell you out or come for you themselves. You can't stay here. You have to go." Draco looked at the ruined cottage, glass strewn and broken furniture all around. "I would suggest you get out of here before they wake up." He jerked his head to where Rowle was splayed on the ground and Rookwood still lay under the broken cabinet.

Ted glared at him, eyes dark with anger, but Andromeda's brows pulled slightly as if she was trying to peer behind his impassive expression. "Why are you letting us go?"

Draco lowered his wand. They could curse him if they wanted. Turn him over to the Order and let them torture him for a change. Maybe he'd get to see Granger one more time before they killed him.

Draco turned his back on them and walked to the door. Nothing felt real. He couldn't even feel the ground under his feet. His spine was crumbling inside him, leaving nothing to hold him up anymore. There was no heart in his chest, no breath in his lungs. It was gone. All gone.

And he wasn't sure he wanted it back.

"I don't want to do this anymore."

He hated himself. The heat of the whisky burned in him, but did nothing to warm the freezing inside.

He didn't even have to say the word, he just had to give into the agony inside him and the curse jumped out of his wand, streaking towards Andromeda who fell back, twisting on the floor with a blood curdling scream.

Ted was thrashing hard enough that Rowle was losing his hold on him. "Stop it! Stop! Andromeda! Do it to me! To me, not her!"

Draco sucked in a breath of air and the curse died. Andromeda lay on the ground, the chains having bitten into her wrists turning them a nasty shade of dark red.

"You son of a bitch," Ted strained against Rowle's large frame. "You break into our home just to torture us when we won't sell our daughter out?! You're *evil."*

Draco's head snapped in Ted's direction. His family had sold him to the Dark Lord. Bellatrix had suggested it, his Mother had sat there in silence. And even after he freed his Father from prison and their Master was about to kill one of them, his Father had chosen his own life over Draco's.

If the roles were switched, would his parents sell him out?

Would Granger?

He looked back at Andromeda who was pulling herself back up and saw the same livid loathing in her eyes that he was greeted with every morning in the mirror. Were they that different? Both Purebloods who fell in love with a Muggleborn. Only she had left to be with hers. And he couldn't even find his.

Fuck Granger. She was turning him into this. Turning him dark, turning him into someone she could never love.

"Dromeda, baby, are you okay?" Ted pushed against Rowle again. Andromeda nodded and tried to stop her shaking limbs to keep the chains from clanking.

Why wasn't Granger here to ask if he was okay? Why hadn't she waited? Why had he *fucked* everything up so bad that she was running for her life and he was chaining people and torturing them? Doing unspeakable things? *Evil* things?

Because that's what this was. He could say it was in the name of love, but that didn't stop it from being wrong. This was all *so wrong*.

Andromeda pushed herself back up and nodded softly looking up at her husband like… like how Granger used to look at him.

He wanted out of here. He didn't want to spend a minute in this ugly little cottage longer than he had to. It was too hard to be here, to see a Pureblood and Muggleborn together, happy, having a life and a family when he would *never* have that. He wanted to

Maybe.

He would have… He would have fucking shoved her through that cabinet no matter how much she fought and kept her away from all this shit that they were in the fucking middle of. And he'd be hurrying back to her instead of that stupid orange cat who was clawing up his goddamn furniture.

Maybe more treats would make the damn thing happy. He'd stop by the Magical Menagerie after he was done at the Lestrange's. He was really starting to hate his Aunt.

Draco followed Snape up the last set of stairs to the Headmaster's office and paused in front of the statue of the griffin as Snape muttered a stream of latin under his breath too low for Draco to hear. Like he was ever going to come back here and break into Snape's office to steal quills or some shit.

"This way," Snape said slowly as Draco side-stepped as to not trip on Snape's long robes trailing behind him. They didn't billow in his office. Not enough wind.

It was oddly stuffy in here; so different from the clammy dungeon office Snape used to have. Draco felt an oppressive weight as he stopped in front of the desk and looked up to see—

Fucking hell, it was him.

Albus fucking Dumbledore was snoozing in his portrait hanging right above Snape's desk.

Snape waved his wand and a cabinet opened. He reached inside and grasped a shining, silver sword encrusted with rubies.

Draco looked back and forth between his Godfather and his Headmaster. He kept the old man's portrait over his head? The man he had killed? Murdered?

The memory of it still turned Draco's stomach.

He crouched down over the floorboards and let the walls close in until he couldn't see the green light shining in the already dead glaze over Dumbledore's blue eyes.

At least the portrait had them closed.

"You're to take this to Bellatrix—"

"I know what I'm supposed to do with it," Draco snapped, anger flaring inside him. He wasn't sure why he was mad at Snape. He wasn't sure if he actually was mad at Snape, but Snape was the one who was here, so Snape was the one he was going to direct it at. "I'm the one out there serving the Dark Lord, not sitting around babysitting."

Snape inclined his head making his greasy hair fall to frame his drawn face. "Yes, it seems you are doing such... important work." He held out the sword and Draco swiped it from him, gripping it so hard that rubies bit into his hand. He wondered which was

more red, Gryffindor's rubies or Snape's half-blood. If Snape didn't stop looking at him like that he was about to fucking find out.

Granger pushed up on the floorboards and Draco rolled his eyes, easily stepping on top of them again. He should go; being here was making it harder to keep her in place.

"Well I won't keep you from…" Draco looked around the office, filled with musty old books and half used candles. "I honestly don't know what it is you do here and I don't care enough to stay and find out."

He was halfway back down to the Entrance Hall and his sweet fucking freedom from the painful memories this goddamn castle was full of when he heard the bell toll and a door at the other end of the corridor opened.

Oh shit.

Of fucking course. It couldn't have been some first years he had never seen before, no, that would have been much too easy.

Draco kept his face perfectly impassive, not even letting the muscles in his jaw or neck tense as Longbottom shuffled towards him after exiting the classroom. He was limping and a nasty dark bruise lined his jaw. Longbottom had lost weight. He had always been… pudgy, but his fucked up face had lost its baby fat and a hardened expression hung over his drawn features.

Draco made sure he didn't miss a step when Longbottom met his gaze across the corridor. It dropped down to the sword and then back up. Draco watched the loathing and disgust creep across his face.

Students were spilling out into the hall, filling it quickly. There was no mistaking him for a student, not anymore. Draco stood out among his once peers. No longer one of them in a school uniform, instead he wore his traveling cloak over a leather brigandine with the sword in one hand and the other on his wand at the holster strapped to his thigh.

"Fucking Death Eater," Longbottom spat as he neared Draco.

Draco wanted to slit Longbottom's throat with the sword. Wanted to cut his fucking head off and show him what a Death Eater really was. Being back here was getting to him. He kept expecting to see Granger rounding a corner, her curls falling around her face. But she wasn't here. She wasn't anywhere. Even the Granger under the trap door wasn't her.

He just needed to get out of here, drop the sword off, and he could lose himself in a bottle of fire whisky. Or better yet, curse his arm until the whole thing went numb again. The ringing dullness left over was almost better than guzzling as much liquor as he could stand. It hurt and burned and ached. It felt a little like her.

"We offered our house as a safehouse, but they are all in hiding now. We haven't seen *anyone* in weeks."

This was not what Draco wanted to hear. Pulsing anger rose up, tightening the tendons in his neck, pushing blood through his ears and making him break out in a cold sweat. Not another dead end. It couldn't be. He needed to find her. He needed to get her back before… before it was too late. For either of them.

Draco's arm trembled. He had cursed it earlier today and the feeling had only come back right before he headed here. The numbness was lasting longer with each curse. Still, he couldn't stop. Didn't want to stop. Had to do it. Had to have her.

Hermione.

"Andromeda, don't tell them anything!" Ted shouted, fighting against Rowle again. Rowle's wand sparked and Ted's head was flung to the side as if punched.

"TEDDY!" Andromeda lunged forward, falling on her chained hands.

"Stay where you are! Don't fucking move!" Draco pointed his wand at her, his arm shaking heavily now. He was tired. So tired. So… empty.

Draco pulled the white walls in closer, wishing he could push Granger outside of them. Normally she was banging on the floorboards, trying to get out, but now… now she was silent.

"You said the other Order members were in hiding. Where? WHERE?!"

"We don't know! We aren't part of the Order, we don't know anything!"

Draco sneered down at Andromeda. "You don't even know where your daughter is?"

A blank stare met him. If he didn't know already, that enough would be proof that they were related. He knew that emotionless face like his was his own. And parts of it were. They knew where one Order member was. He still had a lead. He hadn't lost her yet.

"TELL ME! TELL ME WHERE SHE IS!"

Andromeda remained silent, staring up at him with reticent eyes.

"FUCKING TELL ME WHERE!"

Ted was fighting harder now and Rowle was wrestling with him to keep him still.

Draco pointed his dark wand at his aunt. "TELL ME WHERE SHE IS! TELL ME, YOU BITCH! TELL ME WHERE THE FUCK GRANGER IS!"

Andromeda blinked. Ted stopped moving. Rowle looked over his shoulder.

Fuck. He always slipped up when he was drunk.

Draco was breathing heavily, cold acid eating that hole Granger had left. Eating at the floorboards. Eating at the walls. Everything felt like poison. He hated it. He hated her.

"Hand him over to me and I'll leave. Call the Order, tell them… whatever you need to in order to get him here and I'll make sure that you are rewarded for your… compliance."

"We aren't part of the Order!" Andromeda protested.

"No, but your daughter is, isn't she?" Draco nodded to the broken picture frame on the floor. The purple haired girl was waving while Andromeda beamed behind her and Ted wrapped his arm around them both. "I can go after her next."

"If you touch Dora I will *kill* you." Draco was surprised by the darkness in Ted's tone. He hadn't expected that. Maybe there was more to this Mudblood than met the eye.

No. He was nothing. An abomination born from carelessness and ill-breeding. The world would be better without them. He wouldn't be in this position if they didn't exist. He wouldn't be a Death Eater if Mudbloods were polluting the world around him.

He wouldn't feel like something had seared a hole into his chest and scorched his soul. He wouldn't wake up in the middle of the night, panicked and sweaty, wondering if she was okay and downing the whisky beside his bed just to get back asleep. He wouldn't be pressing his wand into his arm and cursing it until he lost his ability to do magic.

He wouldn't be kidnapping and torturing people, watching them be eaten alive, mutilating them all to find a girl that didn't even fucking want him anymore.

" *I don't want someone like you to love me."*

Granger had been right. How could anyone want someone like him? Someone scarred up and fucked up—and all for someone he was supposed to *hate*.

If the Dark Lord found out his whole family would be murdered. He was putting them all at risk for this. For her.

And she didn't even love him anymore.

Because if she did, she'd be here. He loved her, after all, and look what he was willing to do for her! Look what he had fucking let himself become just to get back to her.

And she hadn't done a goddamn thing other than run and hide from him.

He should leave her to die.

He should do it himself.

Draco turned to Ted. "She's not the one I'm after, but I'll kill anyone who stands in my way. And that includes your Blood Traitor wife. So tell me—Where. Is. Potter."

"We don't know!" Andromeda yelled, the chains around her wrist rattling a little. "We don't know where he is. We don't know anything about the Order. They stopped using our house after the Ministry fell."

"Andromeda—" Ted warned, but she ignored him.

"That sword belongs to Harry," Longbottom jutted out his chin. "You don't deserve to even touch a relic of Gryffindor."

Draco took a quick step, blocking Longbottom's path, leaned down into his face and fingered the hilt tenderly. "Finders keepers, Longbottom. I'll just be adding this to my collection of other Gryffindor prized possessions I've taken."

Longbottom's brows furrowed and a deep crease parted them. His eyes darted back and forth between Draco's who kept his gaze unwavering and clenched his jaw to keep from telling Longbottom how he had the Gryffindor Princess begging and whining for his cock like the good little slut she so desperately wanted to be for him.

Soon, kitten.

Maybe he'd beat off again before he cursed his arm. It had only been… five hours since he had last taken himself in his hand and lost himself in the memory of Granger's legs over his shoulder and his cock in her tight fucking pussy.

Yes, relieving a little of his tension before he cursed the rest of it away would be a fitting reward for having to come all the way up to cold-ass Scotland for a fucking sword. What did the Dark Lord want with it anyways? Did he plan on slaying a dragon sometime soon? Draco's mark burned and itched at the thought.

Longbottom was in his way.

"Move."

"Or what? Going to hex me?" Longbottom taunted. Apparently his baby face wasn't the only thing he'd lost. Longbottom had never talked back to him like this before.

Draco pulled his wand halfway out of the holster. "Oh I've got a few new tricks up my sleeve."

Longbottom glared at him. "I know exactly what's up your sleeve, Malfoy. You can try and hide it, but you're just like the rest of them. And you'll get what's coming to you."

Draco sneered at him. "Looking forward to it."

"Who's blocking my hallway?"

Draco wanted to groan at the sound of the all too familiar voice, but kept his face in the same expression as if it was carved from stone.

"Oi! Longbottom! Move your fat as—"

Draco closed his eyes.

"Ho-ly shit."

He opened them. And there was Theodore Nott, his arm slung around Pansy's neck and her hand on his chest, flagged on either side by Crabbe and Goyle. For half a second Draco was almost stunned. How many times had he been in Theo's exact position, arm

around the girl, surrounded by followers, and strutting down the hall like it belonged to him?

Draco felt… oddly hollow.

This should have been his last year at school, ruling it with his girl at his side. Instead he just had this stupid sword and a brand of eternal servitude on his arm.

Longbottom grumbled and started limping away.

Draco just couldn't resist and turned his boot to the side and sliding it across the stone floor, stuck it right in front of Longbottom's favored leg to make him tumble down, hands hitting the floor with a sharp smack before he grunted with pain.

Draco smirked, not feeling better, but not feeling quite as empty as he just had.

"Is that the best Voldemort can do?" Longbottom gingerly picked himself back up. "Going to trip the Order to death?"

Draco swung the sword up, letting the weak winter light catch the pale silver and rich rubies.

"That's about all it will take," he drawled, "after the Dark Lord cuts off Potter's head with this."

Theo, Pansy, Crabbe, and Goyle all laughed and Draco felt a little of his old attitude return to him. It would be so easy to fall back into his old life, keep the trap door closed and hope that Granger stopped banging on it eventually. His Pureblood life was just sitting there, waiting on him, and if he put the energy he was using finding Granger into furthering himself, there was no limit as to what he could reach.

He looked down at the cinnamon brown eyes, peering up at him from between the floorboards. She had ruined his life and he was ruined because of her. And worst of all Granger wasn't here to make any of this worth it either.

Longbottom was muttering under his breath as he walked off, meeting the Weasley girl at the end of the corridor. Draco watched him limp up to her and for a moment wondered if she knew where Granger was. She was strong, but… he figured he could get it out of her.

But the blazing hate in her eyes let him know that if she had any clue as to where Granger, Potter, or her dumb fuck of a brother was she would be after them in a heartbeat, not here at school. Draco turned back around, no longer interested in Granger's old friends.

"What are you doing here?" Theo asked, excited but also wary. He eyed the sword and Draco lowered it, sliding it into his belt and pulling his cloak around the hilt.

"Working."

"I take my orders from the Dark Lord. Which is exactly where you are going." Draco cut his chin through the air in the direction of Tonks. "And he will go to the Ministry like the rest of his kind."

A flicker of fear passed over her face and Draco felt a strange jolt inside him. What would he do if it was him on the floor and Granger being threatened? No. He couldn't think about that. He couldn't think about *her* when he was doing *this*.

"I SAID PUT THE FUCKING CHAINS ON!"

Andromeda glanced over at her husband and slowly reached out for them.

"Wand." Draco raised his brows. "Or Rowle gets to redecorate."

Ted pushed against Rowle, but Draco had chosen the large man for his size. That and the fact that he had been in Rowle's mind before so it would be easy to erase tonight's events from it.

Andromeda sneered at him as she tossed her wand over towards him. Draco nodded towards the chains and watched as Andromeda clamped them around her wrists with shaking hands.

"Now," Draco turned his voice smooth and calm. "You're going to answer some questions for me."

Andromeda stuck her chin out. She had a familiar, sharp jaw. "Fuck you, Malfoy."

"You should learn some patience. I was going to say you're going to answer some questions for me and if you answer them correctly, I might consider leaving you and your Mudblood here to rot."

Rowle pressed his arm into Ted's chest and Andromeda tried to stand, but Draco trained his wand on her again. "Ah ah ah! Be good or *he* will pay the price."

Andromeda glared up at him and pressed her lips together, sitting her chained hands in her lap.

Draco glanced around the small cottage. It was plain, neat, and ugly. He hated it here. "So this is a safehouse for the Order, huh?" He kicked at a broken cup on the floor. "Is this really the best they could do?"

"What do you want from us?" Ted shouted from pinned on the wall. Rowle pressed harder into him as Ted shuffled, trying to shift his feet.

"I want to know where Potter is."

Andromeda gave a cold laugh. "Really? That's it? You did all this for one boy?"

Girl. He did all this for one girl. His girl.

He tried not to think about how much she looked like his mother when it landed on her hair, turning it lighter.

"Get him up," Draco snarled at Rowle, staring straight into his dead eye as Rowle struggled with the dead weight of Ted Tonks.

Rowle kicked Ted's wand away and pushed him up against the wall to hold him up as a bright light struck him and Ted groaned as he was pulled from his unconscious state.

Andromeda had her wand back in her hand and Draco felt a burning sting on the side of his face. Hissing, he rounded on her, pulling a set of chains out of his robes and leveling his wand at her.

Andromeda glanced down at the chains swinging from Draco's hand and her eyes went wide.

"NO!" Ted shouted and began to struggle against Rowle again. "Get away from her!"

Draco was almost impressed by the Mudblood. He was giving Rowle a run for his money even without a wand.

Rowle shoved his wand into Tonks' throat, turning his head to look at him with his one good eye. "Give me a reason, Mudblood. Give me a goddamn reason and I'll paint your walls with your dirty blood."

That was all Draco needed, just one of them disarmed. If Andromeda loved her Mudblood enough to betray her family for him, then she wasn't about to risk his life in an attempt to escape. With one at his mercy, he had them both.

Love was funny that way.

Draco tilted his head slightly and bared his teeth at the woman his mother once called sister. "You *love* your Mudblood?"

Andromeda glared at him, heavy lids tightening and Draco saw the shadow of Bellatrix on her face. He didn't like it. He didn't like being reminded who she was. He didn't like *her*.

"You want to save him?" Draco held up the chains and tossed them in front of her. "Drop your wand and put those on."

"Daddy couldn't be bothered to make an appearance so he sent you instead?" Andromeda snarled.

Draco didn't want to be compared to his father. He was nothing like his father; he wasn't sick or broken or useless. He wasn't going to let the people he loved get hurt because he was too weak to protect them.

Pansy stroked Theo's chest a little, pushing a few fingers in between the buttons on his shirt. Draco watched. Theo's chest wasn't fucked up. Theo could have a girl touch him without being disgusted by the disfiguring scars running over his skin.

McGonagall stuck her head out of her classroom and scolded a few students still loitering around, shooing them off to their next class.

Pansy rolled her eyes and Goyle made a low grunting noise that Draco took as annoyance.

"The school is a fucking joke this year," Theo lowered his voice a little. "Although the Carrows make it fun. I think this is the first time Crabbe's ever made anything close to a passing mark, isn't that right, Crabby?"

Crabbe's mouth split into a wide smile and Draco saw part of Crabbe's breakfast still stuck in between his bared teeth.

Since when did Theo call Crabbe 'Crabby'? Draco hadn't thought twice about missing his last year until… until he saw what he was missing. If he hadn't called Bellatrix through the cabinet, he might be here, with Granger. Probably trying to pull her for a quickie before their next lesson. Would he though? Or would his Master have called him back to his side already? Maybe having him fetch a helmet next.

At least he wouldn't have to worry about finding one with a nose guard.

"It's about time." Draco made himself sound as bored as possible so they would not notice that he was actually wishing he could trade places with them. Draco raised his eyes, looking around. "Where's Blaise?"

"At his internship," Pansy answered, stroking Theo's tie. "He's almost always at St. Mungo's now. Really only shows up for exams or when Snape mandates everyone return for an assembly."

How could he have forgotten? Blaise had started his internship at St. Mungo's in September. Shit, he had been in London so many times and never bothered to stop in the hospital to see him.

What was he doing? Draco didn't pop in to see friends. Blaise wasn't even really a… Yes, he was. Out of anyone, Blaise was the closest thing Draco had ever had to a friend. And he had forgotten the one thing Blaise had talked about for years and not even bothered to send him an owl to see if he was free in months. Not that Calix was around much. Where the fuck did he keep flying off to?

Why did everyone keep leaving him?! He'd lock the window the next time Cal landed on his perch. Or stick him back in his old cage until he learned how to behave again.

"Theo, I'm cold," Pansy whined and Theo wrapped his arm around her tighter.

"I know how to warm you up," Theo growled and Pansy giggled.

Draco wanted to cut Theo's arm off with the sword. He wanted to cut his own arm off and be rid of the fucking mark seared into it. He wanted to hold Granger that close, bury his face in her curls, and breathe in her sweet vanilla and cinnamon. Fucking Salazar, he needed to get out of this castle.

"Better hurry along, Theo. Don't want to get a detention for being late to class," Draco said sarcastically and felt a cold sense of pride as Theo's face fell from its stupid little smile into a scowl. Draco pushed away any lingering sense of camaraderie he had for Theo. They had always been more of rivals than friends.

Theo narrowed his eyes. "I'll be out of here soon enough."

Draco rolled his eyes. "Have fun in… Herbology or whatever."

"Oh I don't think we'll make it to our next class, will we, Pans?" Theo spread his hand out over Pansy's cheek and turned her face up to him, grinning down at her.

Draco scoffed. "What, no offer to join this time?" He placed his hand over his heart. "I'm crushed."

He could feel Granger glaring up at him from between his legs. He'd make it up to her later. Just like everything else.

"I can fuck her in your old bed if that makes you feel better." Theo smiled coldly.

Draco took a step down the hall. He wanted to either torture himself by conjuring up Granger in his head again or by cursing his arm until he couldn't feel the burned out hole in his chest anymore. What he didn't want to do was stand here and have a pissing contest with Theo. Especially when he knew he would win. Like he always had.

"Don't bother," Draco's lip curled. "I wore it out with her already."

Theo's eyes went dark and Pansy snapped, "Fuck you, Draco!"

Draco smirked over his shoulder. "Only if you beg."

He was glad that the real Granger wasn't here to hear him. She'd be furious. She'd scream and yell at him and her little cheeks would get that beautiful red blush in them and he'd grab her face and pull her close and tell her that every girl in the world could beg him on their hands and knees, but she was the only one he'd let have his cock. His girl. His only.

Godfuckingdamn it, he needed to get out of this castle.

random directions and curses flying from them as they slammed into a wall, knocking a chair over as they struggled to gain control over the other.

Rookwood was thrown back when a curse from Andromeda hit him in the stomach, doubling him over and slamming him into a glass cabinet that teetered and fell on top of him. Draco didn't bother to check when he didn't get up, instead he took the advantage of Andromeda's slight distraction and sent a stunning spell straight at her.

She blocked it. Draco hesitated, only for a moment, as her eyes landed on his and he saw her face clearly for the first time that night. Heavy lids and full lips like Bellatrix, but the nose and the cheekbones… he knew those. He *had* those.

So it was easy for him to recognize the sharp gleam in her eyes right before the stream of light came at him. Draco pulled his wand up, deflecting it and it seared across the small cottage, hitting a picture of a happy family comprised of a dark blond man, a wavy haired woman, and a young girl with violently violet spikes sticking up from her head.

His family.

No, *not* his family. Andromeda Tonks was a Blood Traitor and gave up any right she had to call him family the day she ran off with a Mudblood.

He did not let himself be distracted by his own thoughts of Granger right now. That was different. *She* was different. She… she had to be. Why else was he doing all of this then? If she was just another Mudblood bitch why was he slaughtering his way across Britain to find her?

Why was he attacking his own blood to spare hers?

Ted let out a pained grunt and Andromeda's head turned a fraction of an inch.

Draco struck.

Andromeda cried out and it sounded like his mother. A cold wave of reality hit him, slamming against his white walls and for a moment they shuddered.

Draco nearly fell over.

He really shouldn't try and duel when he'd been drinking, but, well… that wasn't really an option most days.

"Dromeda!" Ted let go of Rowle and tried to get to his wife, but the loss of the use of his eye hadn't slowed the large Death Eater and he grabbed Ted, hauling him back before sending a stunner straight into his temple.

"TED!" Andromeda was struggling on the floor.

"We need them to talk, Rowle!" Draco growled and sent Andromeda sprawling into the empty fireplace, ash billowing up around her.

She might not be able to find any new information on horcruxes or change her role in any of the events that led to Dumbledore's death, but this was something she could help Harry with at least. And she owed him so much for what she had done.

Draco glowered from behind the pile of messy thoughts.

"Are you sure?" Harry raised his brows.

Hermione bit her lip and nodded. "Yeah. I could use the break."

" *Granger, what are you doing?"*

"Huh?"

Heat rushed into her face. "I mean *you* could use the break. Give it here, Harry."

" *Stop."*

Hermione held out her hand and Harry dropped the locket into it.

Draco's eyes flashed. " *Don't you dare put that thing on."*

She pulled her hair to the side to make it easier to slip over her head. Draco was driving her *crazy* . She didn't have a moment's peace from him anymore. He was always there, always watching. And while it sometimes helped the crack in her chest to hear his voice or see his smirk, it just made it hurt even more when she remembered that she couldn't have him like she wanted again.

Draco leaned against the wall, shoving his hands in his pockets. " *You know what? Go ahead, Granger. You'll miss me more than I'll miss you. You know it's true."*

Hermione caught the last gleam of his quicksilver eyes before the locket fell on top of her heart and Draco was gone.

Draco dodged a curse. This fucking woman was destroying her own house. Shit, she was just as crazy as her sister. Draco grinded his teeth and sent one back.

When Calix had shown up, for the first time in fucking *days,* and Draco had sent him off to Donovan telling him there was job. When the wolf didn't respond, Draco wasn't about to wait around on him and lose his best lead to Granger so he enlisted a little bit of different help for tonight's mission.

Rowle was trying to wrestle a wand away from Ted Tonks, but seemed to be almost evenly matched by him. Both had the other's wrist in their hand, wands pointed in

Draco sat at his desk, a black candle burning next to him and his head in his hand. Where the fuck was their money going? These reports didn't make sense. Gold was moved from one vault to another without any good reason and before he could track it again, it was gone.

This had his father's fucking fingerprints all over it. Probably some wine stains too if he tried to look close enough. Draco rubbed his eyes. He was too tired to care tonight and there was still plenty of gold in the vaults and more going in each week when he took his latest captures to the Ministry.

He'd have to go back again soon. But not to turn in Mudbloods, no, this time he was handing over someone he hoped to fetch him a higher price. Mundungus Fletcher has outlived his usefulness, and although it might have been wiser to dispose of the waste of space, Draco decided to modify his memory behind overlapping charms and wash his hands of the fucker.

He couldn't look at Fletcher without thinking about what he almost made Kenna do.

And he couldn't think of that without thinking about what Granger would say.

And he refused to think about her.

He wasn't going to let her up from the floorboards, wasn't going to hold out his hand and pull her up into his study, sliding his hands from hers and onto her waist, her hips, holding her there in front of him. He wouldn't stretch and flex his fingers, feeling the soft give of her ass against them as he pulled her in between his knees.

"You missed me, Sweetheart?" He looked up into her rich chocolate eyes and Granger bit her lip before nodding. "I know you did," he cooed and gripped her round ass in his hands. "I missed you too."

She opened her mouth to say something and then stopped. Draco watched her carefully as she gave him an innocent little smile instead, running her hands up his arms, not flinching at all as her right hand moved over his dark mark.

"Come here." Draco spoke softly, gently pulling on her until she was in his lap. Hermione—no, fuck—Granger curled up against him and he wrapped his arms around her. When was the last time he had held her like this? When would he get to do it again?

All he wanted to do was have the real Granger here, with him, sitting on his lap, arms around his neck, head resting on his chest. Then blinking and looking up at him with those… fuck, those big doe eyes.

"I want to watch you come," he murmured and saw the spark within their depths.

He kissed her, pushing his hand into her curls and holding the back of her head so he could deepen it, pressing his lips against her soft ones, opening his mouth and softly pushing his tongue against hers until the smallest little noise came up from her throat.

Draco eyed the tumbler of whisky sitting on his desk. He could finish it, finish going over these reports and try and find out what his father was doing with thousands of galleons every week, or he could lean back, kick his legs out and pull down the zipper on his trousers. And watch Granger's eyes burn for him.

Her hands were strapped to the headboard and he had her leg hooked in the crook of his arm, pushing it up against her as he sunk himself down.

"Fuck I love your pussy," he groaned he closed his eyes for a moment, trying to make the image in front of him stay. Her curls were spread out around her, head dipping back into his pillow. Her mouth was open, lids low and brows pulled tight. "Its so good, Granger, its so fucking good."

She moaned for him as he buried himself all the way in her, holding himself for just a second and relishing the tight warmth surrounding him, squeezing him. Draco gripped harder.

He wrapped his lips around her nipple, sucking on it and pulling it up only to dive back down after it, shoving his nose into her soft tit and swirling his tongue around her pink nipple, grazing his teeth over it and making her shiver before he pulled back.

She was holding onto him hard as her body moved under his, surging up as he pushed himself inside her. Draco slid down his chair a little, widening his legs and he slid his hand quickly up and down. Fuck, he wished this was real. Wished she was in his bed, tied down and willing to be used. He leaned his head back against his leather chair, breathing harshly as he worked his fist over his length.

Draco bent over her further, driving himself deep into her core and whispered huskily into her ear, "You can speak, pet, but only to tell me how much you love me."

Granger moaned for him.

"Come on, kitten, tell me." He pushed his hips up, meeting his own hand. "Fucking say it, whore."

"I don't want someone like you to love me."

Draco's eyes shot open, breath choking him as it caught in his throat. The pleasant warm sensation of arousal was gone as he was doused with freezing cold, harsh enough to make it feel like his scars were cracking open.

Draco shoved himself back in his trousers and picked up his wand, stabbing it into his left forearm and let the heat from the curse banish away the ice of her rejection.

" Please, anywhere but another marsh. The smell, Granger… it was worse than Weaselbee and that's saying something."

Ron was resting, leaning against the side of a broken down mobile home with his eyes closed. They would have to start off again soon, but for now Hermione did not bother to rouse him. They could all use the rest. She knew her fitful nights were waking Ron and Harry, but she couldn't help it. Her dreams were becoming more frequent.

"I'll try going out again under the cloak and see what I can find."

"No, Harry," Hermione shook her head back and forth. "It's too risky. I'll go—"

" Steal the cloak and sneak off to me."

"It's the least I can do," she added.

Harry let out a small laugh. It wasn't his normal one, but it was the first one she had heard from him in over a week.

"Hermione, you already do so much."

"I feel like I hardly do anything." She paged through *Tales of Beedle the Bard* . She was sure that there was something in her that she was just missing. However, after the seventh time reading it, she still hadn't found anything useful and was starting to wonder *why* Dumbledore had left her something this…

" Useless?"

Hermione took a breath and looked over at Ron as he dozed in the shade.

Harry placed his hand on her shoulder and gave it a squeeze in solidarity. "You've done enough."

She turned back to Harry, meeting his emerald green eyes. For a moment she saw something deep within them, but couldn't quite put her finger on what it was. Apprehension? Concern? Then Harry blinked and fiddled with the locket around his neck.

" Granger... Please tell me we are not going to be thinking about Potter all afternoon. He's so fucking boring. 'I'm sad because my parents are dead.' Great, it's not like you ever fucking knew them anyways. 'There's an evil man trying to kill me.' He's trying to kill everyone, you're not that special. 'My scar hurts.' Would you like another? I swear Granger, you have the stupidest fucking friends and I hung out with Crabbe and Goyle for six years."

"Why don't I take the locket for a little while?" Hermione offered. Harry turned sharply back towards her, surprised at her suggestion. They all hated wearing the locket and while one of them might offer to cover watch for another, they never took extra locket shifts. "I can at least do that for you."

" *Sit. Stay."* Kenna sat back down on the floor. Draco stretched himself over the open field of her mind. " *Good girl."*

He removed the curse and Kenna braced herself against the floor as she regained control over her own body. Fergus ran to her side, making sure she was okay and helped her back into an upright position.

Draco summoned the finger and held it up between him and Fletcher again. Fletcher looked relieved at least to see it intact. And something about that *angered* Draco. This pathetic excuse for a man had almost made him do something heinous, something horrendous. And for what? Just to give up in the end? Just to roll over?

Why had he spent hours down here torturing him? Why had he had to curse Kenna to almost *eat* human flesh when she wasn't in her wolf form? Why had Fletcher been willing to give up a safe house where Granger might be hiding to a fucking Death Eater?

He could have just signed her death warrant if it had been anyone else. He could have *killed* her.

"Please," Fletcher gasped, "please, give me back me finger…"

Pale green light came out of Draco's wand and hit the stupid, fat finger. It withered and decayed into mottled, wrinkled flesh, the bones sticking out and the nail cleaving in two. Fletcher howled as he watched his own finger decompose in front of him.

Draco tossed it on the floor and it rolled somewhere into the darkness. He pushed these thoughts and feelings onto the other side of his walls. All of this would be worth it if Granger was hiding out at this safe house. Everything he had *ever* done would be worth it if he got her back.

Granger. Here. Safe. In *his* house.

Draco stuck his wand into the loose skin hanging from Fletcher's chin. "A safehouse, hmm? Tell me where it is."

"After this we have about… three days worth of food left." Hermione stuck the apples, bag of crisps, and box of biscuits into her beaded bag. They had stopped for lunch on their way to… well, to wherever they stopped again in a few more hours.

Fuck, it hurt. More than it normally did. Draco did his best to hold it, to keep the curse going, but his heart was already shattering apart in his chest and his eyes were burning and Granger was gone and he might die before he could find her and if he died then—

Draco spasmed and fell out of the chair, hitting the ground with a heavy thud. His whole body was numb. He thought he tasted blood, but wasn't sure. Everything was black and white and grey and all of it was ugly because none of it was her.

Was he dying? Oh shit. Had he pushed himself too far? Was his wand still even in his hand? Was the curse still going? He couldn't feel anything. Nothing but the vast barren wasteland that was his soul without her. Except it wasn't really his anymore.

He tilted his head down and even that small movement felt like razor blades splitting his skin and scraping his bones. He stared into the black eyes of the skill on his mark as his lids slowly closed over his eyes and the world stopped for a little while.

Draco woke up to Crookshanks licking his cheek. He could barely move. His entire body was sore and aching from the curse and he had to pull himself up using his desk. Pushing the cat away, Draco grabbed the bottle of fire whisky and drank, trying to dispel some of the pain in his body.

Fuck.

His entire arm was bruised. Deep violent purple edged with angry red encircled the mark and when he went to flex his hand, the muscles seized up, crying out in protest. Draco pulled open one of the drawers and fumbled around inside, shoving quills and inks bottles to the side as he pulled out three vials.

One for healing. One for pain. One for sleep.

Draco tucked the blue sleeping potion into his pocket. He didn't want to have to hear Fletcher's whining all the way into London. Crookshanks jumped on his desk and meowed loudly at him.

"Fuck off," Draco rasped. "You aren't allowed up here."

He tried to push the cat off, but the stupid thing only pushed himself into Draco's hand, rubbing along his arm. Draco couldn't even feel it.

His throat felt tight and he popped the cork out of the first vial, swallowing it against the harsh tightness as he forced it down. He considered silencing the mangy animal because he would not stop yowling, but instead tossed back the second vial and felt a small tingling in his fingers as the bruises faded into a sickly yellow and pale green. The shadow around the mark remained.

Draco glanced down and saw Crookshanks brushing against his hand again and for the briefest moment he felt the soft fur and Draco pushed his fingers into it, feeling the rumble of the cat's purr as the feeling slowly returned to his arm.

Draco brought his hand up to scratch underneath Crookshanks' chin then quickly pulled it away, balling it into a fist. He tolerated the cat, he didn't… pet it. He glared into its ugly squashed face. "Why are you always in my way? Next time you wake me up, I feed you to the snake."

He'd never really do it, but the cat didn't have to know that. Crookshanks swished his tail and swiped a paw, knocking Draco's fire whisky to the floor.

"Shit!" Draco jumped back as liquor and glass fell around his boots. Glaring at the cat, sitting happily on the edge of his desk Draco snarled, "You're lucky she likes you or I'd skin you for a throw pillow."

Draco grabbed him and Crookshanks squirmed in his arms as Draco shouldered the door to his bedroom open and dropped the cat unceremoniously on the velvet cushion, looking away quickly so he didn't think about how she looked on it. Summoning his cloak from the wardrobe, Draco caught it in midair and slammed the door behind him, locking her cat safely inside.

Draco had just managed to escape from Umbridge's office and make it back to the lifts only to be stuck in there with a group of raggedy Snatchers. Honestly, shouldn't they be using the magical maintenance workers exits? He rolled his eyes and leaned against the wall, trying to ignore their squabbles over the few golden coins they had been handed for their lot.

His own pockets were heavy. Mundungus Fletcher apparently had a bounty on his head for his part in smuggling Muggleborns out of the country and since Donovan and

Kenna's mind felt different than Granger's. Granger had all these small passageways, tiny crevices where thoughts and ideas sparked and burrowed. It had been fascinating. He'd never *seen* anything like it before. She was beautiful. His magic, his curse, had travelled down into each little tunnel until he had touched it all.

But Kenna's was like… a field. Wide, open, hard to hold onto.

And then there was the wolf.

Fucking Salazar, he could feel her *wolf*. It didn't want him there. It was growling and bristling deep inside her, ready to lash out at him and protect its territory.

"No, no, no…" Fletcher cried. "Please… don' make 'er!"

"This is fucked up!" Fergus backed away from the pillar and from Kenna.

Draco pressed himself further into her mind, facing the wolf inside her.

"Last chance, Fletcher," he warned.

Fletcher was shaking his head, long locks of hair falling into his filthy fucking face, catching on the blood on his mouth.

Kenna growled back at Draco, but his curse held her in place. The wolf was snapping its jaws at him, threatening him to get out.

" *Eat.* "

The wolf stilled, interested in the command.

Kenna lifted the finger to her mouth and opened it.

"Tonks!"

Draco's head snapped back to Fletcher. He was sobbing, whole body shaking with it. Draco looked him over and saw the front of his trousers were wet.

"Go on," Draco prompted.

Fletcher carefully lifted his eyes back up to meet Draco's. He could see the abject fear and terror in them and internally recoiled.

Granger. It was all for Granger. If he didn't do this, she could die. She *would* die. He wasn't about to let that happen.

" *Halt.* "

The wolf wasn't happy, but it obeyed as his curse coiled around it like a collar.

Draco leaned in close. "Tell me."

Fletcher heaved in a shaking breath and closed his eyes. "Tonks and 'is wife. They got a safehouse. I… I know where."

" *Drop it.* "

Kenna dropped the finger. The wolf growled unhappily.

"Now, I cut that off with a knife, Fletcher. So it can be reattached. Healed up and good as new. But not if it's destroyed."

Fletcher's head swung towards Kenna who was looking at the finger with revulsion.

"NO! Not me pinkie finger!" Fletcher started screaming again. "Don't let 'er 'urt it!"

Draco smirked coldly and locked his eyes on Kenna's. "Eat it."

"What the fuck…" Fergus said under his breath and looked between Draco and Kenna.

Kenna looked down at the dirty finger and then back up to Draco. She looked appalled. "You want me to eat it?"

Draco kept his face stoic. He ignored the sick feeling deep inside him and the shouts of protest coming from underneath the floorboards in his mind. He pulled the white walls in closer, pushing the revulsion he felt out and trapping himself inside them.

"Please… please! I… I can' tell ya wha' I don' know!" Fletcher was begging, pleading. But Draco didn't want his cries. He wanted Granger.

"Now."

"No, I—" Kenna held it out in front of her. "I'm not going to *eat*—"

"Don't act like you're above it," Draco snapped. "I saw what you really are."

Fletcher was whimpering like his hounds used to. " *Please…* "

Hurt flashed across Kenna's face, but Draco's resolve did not waver. He pulled his walls in closer and placed his boots firmly on top of the floorboards Granger was beating against. He wished she'd shut up and just let him do this. It was for her. She should be fucking grateful.

And so should Kenna. Draco had made her rich; her fancy new fox fur coat was proof of that. And it wasn't like she'd never done it before. "You work for *me*. You do what *I* tell you to."

Kenna stared back at him. "I'm not a monster. But you are for suggesting that—"

" *Imperio.* "

The walls in his head were so tight that there was nothing left but Draco and his wand and the awful, burning hole in his chest that Granger had left. He was just barely held together by soft scar tissue right now and he needed her back. He needed her to make this okay again. Because he had just cut off a man's finger and was about to make someone eat it and nothing about this was fucking okay because she wasn't fucking here and he was alone and scared and hurt and goddamn everything was *cold* without her.

He stepped outside of his walls, leaving Granger under the trapdoor, and into Kenna's head.

his dogs were fucking off and scratching at fleas or whatever they did when they weren't fucking eating people, Draco didn't have to share the spoils.

He was going to celebrate with a drink at Leaky then a trip to Gringotts to deposit his easy earned galleons and talk to whatever goblin had been letting his father take out thousands and put a fucking stop to it.

Draco had a legacy to worry about on top of everything else. And eventually they would run out of Mudbloods and he would have to look elsewhere for his drinking money. His father had tarnished the Malfoy name enough without pissing away their fortune behind his back. There was a fucking reason Draco didn't give back the Malfoy ring and this here was proof that he had done the right thing. He was the future of his family, he was the one holding them all up. Without him, Lucius Malfoy would be dead.

Fucking deserved it too. Piece of shit Death Eater who chose a Dark Lord over his own family and dragged them all into this mess. Draco swore he wouldn't make the same mistakes as his father, but here he was, serving the same Master and failing every task set to him. He had thought it would have taken a couple weeks to track down Granger but, fuck, he couldn't even find a hint of Granger and it had been months.

Maybe she was dead. Maybe all of this was for nothing and he was nothing more than a third generation slave to a tyrant who was the fucking reason Granger wasn't waiting for him in his bed like she fucking should be.

It was his fault too. How was he going to fix this now when the last time he tried, Dumbledore had died because of it? Who was going to die next time he failed?

For the briefest moment he hoped it was himself.

Draco pushed the churning guilt over these thoughts behind his walls and let the white marble of them soothe him. He wanted to crawl down under the floorboards with Granger and feel her hands on him, holding him, but after last night he was scared to let her out, let her back in. If the Granger in his head hated him, what did that mean for the Granger somewhere out there?

"Where we supposed to look now?" One of the Snatcher's voices interrupted Draco's moody brooding.

"We can go back to that spot in the forest, the one I said there were people at."

"There was no one there! We looked! Nothing!"

"There was!" The second Snatcher argued. "I could smell somethin'. Somethin' good. I'm telling you, it was like… cinnamon and… vanilla."

The blood rushed from Draco's head and his ears rang with the words. His heart stopped beating and then burst back to life in a searing jolt.

Granger.

Draco had his wand in the Snatcher's cheek, arm against his thin chest, and slammed him into the wall of the lift so hard it shuddered and stopped its descent. The first Snatcher backed up quickly and the one Draco had pinned struggled as Draco's arm pressed up against his windpipe.

Leaning in as close as he could, Draco unclenched his jaw enough to spit through gritted teeth, *"Where."*

"You don't get to just say you're done and quit. That's not how this works."

Donovan was getting on Draco's last goddamn nerve. Draco had come all the way down here, to the awful, smelly club he had first met Donovan in to find out why the fuck he wasn't returning any letters and this fucking dog had the audacity to try and tell Draco he wanted to quit? Fuck that.

Donovan bristled. "Kenna told me what you did."

Draco dug the heel of his boot down against the trapdoor. Granger wanted out. Too bad. He wasn't going to let her. He wasn't going to let anything happen that he didn't want to. He had come too far, worked too hard, to lose it all now. He finally had a lead on an actual location Granger might be in and he'd be damned if he let that slip away from him.

Well, he already was, but… fuck it. He was going after Granger and Donovan was going to help him.

"I didn't do anything to her. It was just a scare tactic." Draco rolled his eyes. It technically wasn't a lie because that is how it turned out. Draco couldn't help but wonder if Fletcher hadn't given up the Tonks, would he have been able to go through with it? Even though he wouldn't have been the one to do the act, it still felt like a line he didn't want to cross. But would he have for Granger?

Draco remembered watching his Master order the snake to eat that professor right in front of him. He pushed his hands into the cool, white walls of his mind to stay upright.

"You invaded her mind! Who the fuck does that? You're insane, Malfoy, and we're staying away from you and don't think about coming after us because… we have

Fergus shoved himself up from the pillar and walked it over, placing it heavily in Draco's hand with an annoyed expression.

Draco's lip curled over his teeth and he heard Kenna give a small laugh as Fergus made his way back over to the pillar, throwing himself against it again and crossing his arms over his brown leather jacket and dark chest. Even with the cooler weather these wolves never wore proper clothes.

Animals.

Fletcher started to spew off a stuttering strain of "Please's" and "Ya don' have ta do this".

"You're right," Draco said seriously. "I *don't* have to do this. If you tell me where the other Order members are hiding, I don't have to do any of this."

Fletcher looked up at him with his droopy eyes, bloodshot and sagging open.

Draco leaned down, putting his face close to Fletcher's. "You're the one doing this. *You.* Not me."

There was blood dripping out of Fletcher's mouth. Draco pulled the knife along Fletcher's stubble covered chin, ending the thick trail of blood connecting his lip and his chest.

"They—they're awl protected," Fletcher said, a bit of air whistling through his broken tooth. "I don' know where—"

Draco grabbed Fletcher's dirty hand and slid the small knife across the joint at the base of his smallest finger.

It popped off into Draco's hand.

Fletcher's face opened in a horrified shriek. Words failed him as his droopy eyes opened wider than Draco thought him possible of. Dark red liquid streamed down his hand and Draco let it drop back down as he held the loose digit up for inspection. Dirty, calloused, and leaking blood, Draco presented it to its former owner.

"I need names. Each name you give me is another piece of you I won't cut off."

Draco waited until Fletcher's wails quieted down into pathetic whimpers. He twirled the finger in front of Fletcher's pale, sweating face. "I'm waiting."

"I—" he gasped, heaving down breaths he couldn't keep. "I fookin' tol' ya! I don' KNOW—"

Draco tossed the finger over to Kenna who caught it with a quick hand. The Seeker in Draco was impressed. He wondered if her wolf could play fetch.

Fletcher's sagging eyes followed his finger and Kenna held it out, glancing up at Draco with confusion.

Hermione's throat closed and she felt too hot again, like the warming charm had come back only worse this time because there was no cool air to combat it. There was only this stifling, charged energy between them.

"Who he fucking what?"

"And what did you do to thank me for my loyalty to you?" Ron snarled. "You were out there, fucking Malfoy, just like Lavender said you were."

"Ron—"

"You know how many fights we had about you?"

"Who the fuck does he think he is?!"

"I never meant—"

"Do you know you are the reason we broke up?"

"I'm sure it didn't have anything to do with the fact that he's a COMPLETE DICKHEAD!"

"I didn't want you to—"

"And what were you doing while I was defending your bloody honor?!"

"No one asked you—"

"Say it!"

"I swear on Salarzar's watery grave if he doesn't shut the fuck up—"

"Ron—"

"I want you to fucking tell me what you were doing with him!"

"Tell him. Fucking tell him, Granger."

"I am not going to—"

"Why not? You could do it, but you can't own up to it? Is that why you're still lying to Harry about it? Even now that the two of you are so close. Think he'd still want you around if he knew you were fucking Malfoy all last year?"

"Why haven't you told him then? If it means so much to you then why are you keeping it a secret too?!" Hermione shouted, unable to stop the roaring in her chest from coming out. She knew she had hurt Ron by being with Draco, but it didn't mean he got to treat her like this. They were still friends, he needed to start acting like it too.

"Just fucking curse him, Granger. Hurt him."

Ron stood fuming in front of her, trying not to say the words so clearly on the tip of his tongue.

Hermione pushed forward. "You lied to McGonagall about it. You've lied to Harry about it. Why are you protecting me if you obviously hate me for it?"

"It's easy, pet, just lift your want and repeat after me—"

"I don't know," Ron admitted. "I don't know what I'm fucking doing when it comes to you. I don't even know why I'm still here. Harry doesn't need me. You sure as fuck don't want me. You'd rather have a Death Eater than me." He shook his head in harsh disappointment. "I thought… I thought you were different than other girls. I thought there was more to you."

The words fell right through her, landing with a heavy thud somewhere where her stomach was supposed to be. This was it. Ron's real feelings, finally coming to the surface. Maybe if she had tried harder or pushed the Draco in her head farther away or maybe if she would have figured out how to destroy the horcrux by now none of this would be happening. She wouldn't have to hear her best friend saying what she feared the most from him; that she would never be good enough.

*"Oh fuck this! Fuck him and his self righteous bullshit! What the fuck does he even know about you? **I** know you. Don't listen to him. Weasley spent six years ignoring you and only wanted you when he saw you were happy with someone else.* ***With me.*** *I'm the one who saw there was more to you. I'm the one who showed you. You don't need Weasley OR Potter. You only need me. I'm the only one who loves you now."*

The lump in Hermione's throat pressed in painfully, catching the words she was trying to force herself to say. She didn't want to hear this. Not Ron, not Draco, not any of it.

"Stop," she said in a voice so small even she could barely hear it.

"I wish you had stopped before you fucked our friendship to hell in Malfoy's bed."

"I am going to kill him. I am going… to ***kill*** *Weasley!"*

"Just… stop talking!" Hermione shoved her hands into her messy curls, holding her head. And for the first time in weeks, Draco went silent. Hermione gasped and blinked her eyes, trying to make the tent come back into focus around her. She was just so angry and upset and finally—it was enough to overpower Draco's voice.

If only it was that easy with Ron.

"Stop loving Malfoy then," he snapped, crossing his arms over his chest.

"I have been TRYING!" Hermione felt heat rush into her face. "Trying so hard to make things work between you and I again. I do *everything* you want me to, Ron! I never get angry with you even when you damn well deserve it! You said you'd always be there for me, but I have been struggling for months and all you've done is make me feel worse! And… and more than that you aren't even helping Harry and I. You don't research, you complain about going on watch, about moving camp, about the food, about the cold, about wearing the locket—"

"All you do is mope around!" Ron shouted back. "Sticking your nose in a book to avoid having to spend any time with me!"

"WHY WOULD I? When you treat me like this?!"

Ron glared at her. "Isn't asshole your type though? Don't tell me dear Draco was actually sweet to you—"

"More than you've been lately."

Ron's face flushed scarlet and Hermione sharply closed her mouth. She couldn't take her eyes off of Ron's face even when he dropped his gaze down between them. The color turned blotchy under his eyes and Hermione thought she saw a faint shine in them.

"You think this has been easy for me? My family is out there, fighting and losing, Hermione. And I'm stuck in here doing fuck all while you and Harry have your little book clubs and act like I'm not even here half the time. I thought… we'd be okay if I just gave it some time, but, shit…"

Ron glanced up at her, hurt boiling in his crystal eyes and for the smallest moment, Hermione felt for him, for her friend. Even if she didn't particularly like him right now, she hated the fact that it was her who was making him feel this terrible. She knew what it was like to feel alone and scared and have no one to turn to. At least she had the Draco in her head and Ron had always had his friends and family to support him, but not anymore.

"I've tried. I've tried to forgive you, Hermione, I really have but…" Ron pinched his lips together.

Hermione's whole body was shaking and she breathed out, "But what?"

Ron took a moment before answering. "But I can't get that image of him on top of you out of my head! Shit, I wish I never went looking for you that night! I wish—"

Hermione blinked, her lungs empty of air and frozen in her chest.

"I wish we weren't in this shitty tent day in and day out. I wish we weren't looking for horcruxes and finding fuck all. I wish I knew if Ginny was okay, Mum and Dad and—" Ron pulled his hand over his face. "I wish we weren't following Harry on his crazy fucking mission from a man who trusted a Death Eater with his life. I wish…" He looked right at her with tired blue eyes, the anger gone from them and replaced with a deep, soulful hurt. "I wish I didn't feel this way about you."

Hermione's heart clenched painfully. Ron had been her best friend for years. They had fought side by side; he had comforted her after her nightmares, and made her laugh so she could forget them. Now they could barely finish a sentence and when they did it was only because they were screaming at each other. How had they come to this?

"You know what, you're right. You don't want to go back. You don't want to go back to when we were friends or when you weren't dreaming about fucking a Death Eater."

"Ron!" Enough playing nice, she wasn't going to let him speak to her that way.

"Go ahead and tell me you weren't! Hermione, you nearly kissed me thinking I was him!"

Hermione took a sharp breath and held it in her chest as Draco rushed forward from the back of her mind, white faced and furious. *"You WHAT?!"*

Ron took a few steps towards her. His ears were beet red and his freckles looked dark in the dim light.

Draco clenched his jaw. *"Granger, walk out of this tent right fucking now."*

Hermione stood her ground, raising her chin up. She wasn't going to run. Not this time. Ron wasn't Draco.

"You have no right to be upset with me over that."

Ron's red brows shot up his forehead. "Seriously? You think killing Dumbledore might have put you off the guy, but I guess not! Tell me, Hermione—" Ron stormed across the tent. "Was it his his gold that got you off or his—"

She slapped him.

Hermione had never hit Ron before. She had yelled at him, scolded him, sent birds pecking after him, but the only other time she had even hit someone had been… Draco.

Ron's face was a startling red color and he lifted his hand up to touch his cheek softly where her handprint was clearly marking his freckled face. Hermione was fuming, out of breath again even though she was standing still.

Ron's voice was low when he finally spoke again. "You know, I defended you."

"Granger, get the fuck out of this tent. You don't need to hear this. I mean it."

"When you kept disappearing last year, Lavender had this wild idea that you were screwing Malfoy and I told her she was crazy. Even when we weren't even speaking, I stood up for you. It caused a lot of problems between Lavender and me, but I didn't care. I did it for you."

Hermione's heart was slamming against her ribcage. Her hands were shaking uncontrollably as adrenaline coursed through every inch of her. Ron wasn't meeting her eyes. He was staring down at the wand in his hand, a red fist balled around it.

"I didn't believe her. Wouldn't believe her." He lifted his head back up and Hermione was greeted with a sharp spark in his blue eyes and the sight of her small hand across his face. "I told her you would never do something like that. Not you. Not the Hermione Granger who was my best friend. Who I—"

about her wild hair, but Draco's attention to it made her proud of her thick curls for the first time in her life.

She opened the flap of the tent and strode in. Ron was in the kitchenette, steam rising from the stove as he tended to the fish in the pan.

Hermione stopped a few feet in when he turned to look at her over his shoulder, his expression falling at the sight of her.

"Fucking forget him, Granger. You leave that fucker to me because when I turn my wand on him I'll—"

She couldn't stand the idea of Draco and Ron facing off against one another. Maybe if she played nice, Ron would drop his vendetta against Draco. Or…. at least focus back on their current mission. If they could find and destroy all of the horcruxes and somehow help to end the war Draco wouldn't be her enemy anymore and then there wouldn't be a reason for Draco and Ron to go after each other—

"Sweetheart," Draco snorted. *"There's still a fucking reason and its the fact that the ginger prick you are goddamn living with wants to fuck what's mine."*

"It smells really good in here!" Hermione's voice was much too high to be considered normal and she fiddled with the gloves in her hands.

Ron turned back to the small stove and her shoulders fell a little. Great. He still wasn't speaking to her. The fish popped in the pan. He was probably only going to give her the bones.

"Where's your coat?" Ron's tone was accusatory, but at this point, she would take what she could get just to start somewhere with him. They couldn't keep going like this, not if they wanted to work together to find the horcruxes.

"Oh," Hermione glanced down. "I… took it off outside and must have left it…"

She bit her lip and glanced back at the flap. It was dark and late, there was no point in wandering around in the woods looking for her coat now. She hadn't even really paid attention to where she was going earlier, just… not wanting to be… here.

"And you're just going to leave it out there?" Ron turned and leaned against the small counter.

Hermione let go of her lip and opened her mouth, feeling a bit like the fish in the pan before she said, "I just... don't want to go back—"

"Are you sure about that?" Ron snapped. He had his arms crossed and she saw his wand in his hand again.

Hermione let out a long breath and unwrapped the scarf around her neck. "Ronald—"

"Guys—Guys!" Harry threw open the flap to the tent.

"Harry, now's really not a good time," Ron started.

Harry ignored him and pulled on Hermione's arm, spinning her around. "Goblins—" he gasped, out of breath, "in the woods with Dean and Tonks' dad and some other guy. They said—said—"

The shock of this jolted Hermione from the broken depths of her heart and set her mind into overdrive. "What?" she asked, big eyes wide, staring straight into Harry's, brighter than she had seen them in weeks. Good Godric, Harry looked ecstatic.

"The sword of Gryffindor—its goblin made—and it's a fake!"

"What?"

"They moved it from Hogwarts but the one the Death Eaters have isn't real! The real one is Goblin made which means—"

Hermione let out a small scream and grabbed onto Harry's shirt, catching onto his garbled train of thought. "It took on the basilisk venom!"

Hermione's heart jumped into her throat. Harry was grinning ear to ear, his heart pounding in his chest under her hands. "And that means—"

"It can destroy horcruxes!"

She jumped into Harry's arms and he hugged her tightly. Finally! Finally. They just had to get the sword and they would have a way to destroy the locket and any other horcruxes they found. Hermione felt like she could cry with happiness. All the anxiety and stress of the past few months felt lifted from her. They were going to be okay, they had a way to—

"Well that's just fucking great," Ron cut in and Hermione felt Harry's arms slide from around her. "So the sword can destroy horcruxes. Brilliant. Where is it?"

Harry's face fell back into its frustrated scowl. "I don't know."

"Wow. So helpful." Ron scoffed.

"Ron, it is helpful," Hermione protested. "We are one step closer to—"

"No, we are about a thousand steps farther! Now we have to find this sword? And not even the Death Eaters know where it is? How the hell are we supposed to get it then?!"

"What else do you suggest we do?" Harry rounded on him. "Sit around and wait for someone else to defeat You-Know-Who?"

Ron shrugged. "Well it's not like you're really doing that much, wandering around the countryside, hiding out while the real Order members are out there risking their necks!"

"Ron!" Hermione tried to stop them, but the two boys were facing off with each other.

Harry's voice dropped. "You knew what we were coming out here to do; I told you everything Dumbledore told me!"

"Great! Because he knew so much. Leading you to a fake horcrux! Trusting Snape and getting himself killed over it! Yeah, let's follow his lead and all be dead by Christmas!"

Hermione felt too warm again, like she was stuck in a pot of water, slowly coming to a boil.

Harry spoke in a strangely calm voice that sent a strange shiver down Hermione's spine. "We found the real horcrux, in case you've forgotten. It's hanging around your neck."

The locket…

Hermione reached for Ron, trying to pull him back from Harry. "Take it off, Ron," she pleaded. Her fingers fumbled against his shirt as she tried to grab onto the chain. "Take off the locket—"

"Get off me!" Ron grabbed her wrists and pulled her hands back from him, pushing her away.

"Don't fucking start on her." Harry was glowering at Ron and Hermione watched his wand drop from his sleeve into his hand in one smooth movement.

Ron snarled at Harry. "Oh, standing up for her now? You didn't give a shit about her last year at school when I asked to borrow the map to find out where she was going. All you cared about was watching my sister on it so you could see when she was snogging Dean! Did you ask him about that out there in the woods? Or were you too concerned about your bloody sword?"

Hermione looked quickly between Harry and Ron, fear spiking up in her, sending burning hot shots down her arms.

"That's what I thought! No one matters to you anymore, Harry—you don't care about Ginny anymore either! Flirting and dancing with her at Bill's wedding… I fucking told you to leave her alone, but you're Harry Potter, the Chosen One so everyone should just do as you say, huh? Well not me! Not anymore!"

"Then go!" Harry bellowed. "Go! Leave the locket and get the fuck out."

Ron gritted his teeth and glanced at Hermione.

She was frozen in place, unable to move, to talk, to even think. Everything was crashing down around her and there was nothing she could do to stop it. They were breaking, shattering. She could barely breathe, let alone say anything that would calm either of them down. They had come too far.

Ron tore the locket from over his head, throwing it on the ground between them.

"Are you going to choose someone else over me again?" he asked, chest rising and falling.

"And I'm going back to your memory of the chaise. Remember how you begged? How you moaned?"

"Draco—" Hermione sighed.

"A little more breathy than that, kitten. And you held the 'o' out longer too. Potter's gone; stick your hand in between those thighs and I'll teach you how to say my name right."

Hermione shoved her gloves on and marched off in the direction Harry had come from.

"You're right, let's go back to the tent. You can kick Weasley out into the cold and then strip down for me and—"

Hermione started running. The light was fading fast and before she knew it dark trees were speeding past her. The air was so cold it hurt to breathe in and soon she was taking sharp gasps of it, just enough to keep her momentum as her body heat was stolen by the bitter air surrounding her.

"Your tits are bouncing, Granger. And, ah yes… your nipples are hard. Is that from the cold or me?"

Hermione slowed as the tent came back into view. They were camped alongside a small stream and Hermione watched the steam rise off the top of it. She could smell something cooking inside the tent and her heart jumped at the thought of a warm meal. While putting up the tent Harry had mentioned he wanted to try and catch a fish and from the smell of it, he had accomplished at least one goal today. He'd probably be in a decent mood when he came in from his watch.

They could worry about the horcruxes tomorrow, after a hot dinner and a good night's rest. It would be her turn to wear the locket in the morning and without Draco whispering filthy things from the back of her head, maybe she could work on translating the strange rune she found in Dumbledore's book. It was the last clue she had before she admitted defeat and told Harry it was useless.

"You know I took six years of runes too. I could help… if you show me those pretty little tits of yours."

Hermione pushed her tangled curls back as she drew closer to the tent, trying to catch her breath before she went inside. Her hair was getting harder to manage now having grown longer during their months on the run. She could only imagine how bushy it had gotten without proper time or effort put into its care.

A single curl fell back over her face and Hermione sent an angry huff of air up at it, blowing it from her eyes.

Draco had always loved to run his hands through her curls or twist one around his finger, tugging on it playfully. And she did too. Hermione had always felt self conscious

Ron had never looked at her like that before. She wasn't even sure Draco ever had, even back when he thought she was only a dirty little Mudblood.

And Ron hadn't met her eyes since.

Draco's silver eyes shined in triumph from the back of her mind.

"Hermione?"

Hermione shrank back against the tree. If Harry didn't see her she could stay out here for a little while longer in order to pull herself together. Get ready for the night in the tent sitting between the two of them while they all bit their tongues and kept their eyes down trying to avoid the fight they all knew was coming.

And she could spend a little more time with Draco.

"That's my girl."

Because even though he wasn't real, the feelings she still had for him were.

Hermione could hear Harry moving off, calling her name in a different direction and the shuffle of his feet over the frost covered ground. She breathed out, relieved that she still had another few minutes to herself. The warming charm was growing and Hermione pulled her coat off, trying to escape the increasing heat. In her struggle she knocked her gloves and wand to the ground.

"Fiddlesticks," Hermione muttered and brushed the leaves away, trying twice before collecting her wand back up and dropping one of her gloves back down in the process. Hermione looked around, the weak sun was setting and the shadows were deepening quickly, but the warming charm hung over her heavily enough that even with her coat sitting on the roots of the tree, her skin felt overheated. She waved her wand to end the spell and sighed as the rush of cool air rushed over her.

"You're going to get sick like this."

"I'm already sick," Hermione muttered. "I'm talking to a figment of my imagination like he's a real person."

"Miss me?" His smirk lit up in the darkness.

"Like a hole in the head," she grumbled.

Draco smirked. *"Lucky for you I know what to put in it to make the loneliness go away."*

Hermione stood up, face flushed from what she was deciding was the winter wind and nothing else. "I want you to go away."

Draco laughed. *"I'm only here because you want me to be. I'll go away the second you don't want me here anymore. I always told you you'd have an out if you wanted it."*

Hermione tossed her head to the side, pursing her chapped lips. "This is ridiculous. I'm going back to ignoring you."

Hermione looked to Harry whose shoulders tensed and he dropped his gaze to the floor where the locket lay in between the three of them, his eyes turning a dark, glittering green.

"I…" Hermione stammered. She had given up everything to help Harry, to fight this war with him. And she had always assumed Ron would be at his side as well. She couldn't leave now. She had lost her parents for this, and left school for this… She had given up on Draco for this. "I can't," she forced out. Ron's eyes turned as cold as ice. "We said we'd help Harry, and—"

"Fine." Ron brushed past Harry, knocking his shoulder into his roughly and shoving him into Hermione.

"Ron—" Hermione righted herself and surged forward.

"Let him go, Hermione," Harry said darkly, his black hair falling into his emerald eyes.

"No! Ron, please!"

"Oh so now you care?" Ron spat, pausing with the flap of the tent open, letting in a gust of cold wind that whipped quickly around the tent, turning the air frigid. "Don't bother, Hermione. You've made your feelings very clear the other night."

"Ron, that—that wasn't—"

Why was he doing this? Now that they finally had a lead on something to help them? Why wasn't he happy? Her quick mind spun faster than it had in months, no longer conjuring up Draco and his crude comments. It was because Ron had been wearing the locket, that's why he had been so upset, that's why all of this had happened tonight. If Ron could just come back inside and they all calmed down for a moment—

Harry bent down and picked up the locket, slipping it around his neck.

Was this really happening?! Was she having to choose between Ron and Harry? She couldn't. She couldn't lose anyone else. Ron was her best friend, but Harry… Harry needed her to help find the horcruxes. To help end the war. And hopefully, at the end of it, she might be able to find a way to have more than the shadow of Draco in the back of her mind.

Hermione bit her lip and Ron glanced at her one last time as if he was expecting her to change her mind. When she didn't he shook his head darkly, an expression of disgust on his face, and turned towards Harry.

"Oh and by the way Harry," Ron's face turned a deep, angry shade of red as he nodded towards Hermione. "She's *fucking* Draco Malfoy."

Hermione was going to love Draco forever and there was nothing she or him could do to stop the steady beat of 'Draco' that her blood pumped to.

Draco leaned forward, smirk spreading over his curved lips. *"Good. Because I'm never going to stop either. One day I am going to find you and I will do all the dirty little things you think about late at night after your 'friends' fall asleep and you reach down and touch my fucking mark on your leg. And you know what, kitten? You're going to let me."*

It was too much. This was all just too much. Her heart felt like it was bruising with every beat, her chest was caving in, and her head was filling with all the messy thoughts she had been shoving in the back and trying to avoid for the last six months.

"Please," Hermione closed her eyes against the tears, keeping them in. "Please let me stop. I'll do anything. Just let me stop. Let this stop."

The cold winter wind moved through the dead trees, rattling the branches above her. Hermione wrapped her arms around herself, trying to hold her body together because it felt like it was breaking. Everything was breaking and she didn't know what to do anymore and there weren't any books to help you when your best friend hated you and your other best friend might be killed and the person you were in love with was supposed to be someone you hated and your parents didn't even remember you and your cat was on the other side of the world.

"Please—" She pressed the heels of her hands into her eyes. "Just… just stop."

"No."

"Hermione, are you out here?"

Everything halted and Hermione froze in place. Harry was calling for her. How long had she been on her own? It was starting to get dark and she knew she should get back to the tent. It wasn't safe out here alone. It wasn't safe out here at all. It wasn't just Snatchers she had to worry about. Hermione knew Draco was out there, hunting her. Did she want to be found?

She wasn't sure. But she did know she didn't want to sit in the tent and suffer under the stony silence between the boys while pretending to read and just wait for them to start snoring so she felt safe enough to fall asleep. She was so tired; exhaustion wasn't a strong enough word for it anymore. After the other night and saying Draco's name out loud while Ron was trying to wake her, Hermione was terrified that she was going to call out again in her sleep and woke with a sudden jolt at least three times a night.

Goodness, she had nearly pulled Ron on top of her thinking he was Draco! He was never going to forgive her for that, never going to forgive her for loving Draco or sleeping with him, or anything she had ever done now because the look in his eyes that night…

to her as well. But it was just another way to lie so he could get what he wanted from her. Her hands burned in the cold air, remembering the way his skin had felt.

Hermione bit her lip, thinking about his chest against hers, their bodies moving together with nothing separating them. And they had slept like that. But of course he ruined it all the next morning by turning back into the selfish prick he always... Hermione's eyes went wide.

Draco hadn't been upset they had fallen asleep together. He had pulled himself away from her and hurried to get dressed, putting his shirt on first! Goodness, the arm with the mark on it had been around her body! She had rubbed her fingers over the back of it, admiring the muscles under the pale marble skin. Draco had yelled at her not because he was disgusted by her, but because he was terrified that she would see it.

Her chest felt heavy with the weight of this knowledge. If she would have seen it that morning, would things be different now? They would have had more time to talk about things, maybe she could have convinced him not to go through with his mission and to… to be with her instead somehow. To spend every night like they had that night and every day waking up in his arms. She would never forget how his face had looked that morning, shrouded in sleep.

Now he wore a Death Eater's mask over it.

She still thought about it sometimes, how Draco's arms felt around her, his leg on top of her lower body. If she hadn't known better, she would have said she could feel his love in his embrace. Everything that happened on the chaise had been… incredible. Finally having all of Draco against her, on top of her, inside her. It was that night something had changed in her and she knew there was no going back.

There, in the darkness Draco created, Hermione had fallen in love with him.

His silver eyes shone. *"You should have told me and I would have taken you away that night and I'd be holding you like that right now, pet."*

Warm tears pricked in her eyes again. She was still in love with him. Having Draco shout at her or call her terrible names hadn't stopped her feelings. Seeing the mark hadn't stopped it, knowing he had attacked their classmates and was plotting Dumbledore's death hadn't stopped it. Letting the Death Eaters in the school and imperiusing her and trying to kidnap her and pushing her down and hurting her hadn't stopped it. Not even leaving her behind had made them stop.

Nothing would.

Not now, not ever.

Chapter Seven

Harry, please—just listen!"

Hermione spun around, tears already pooling in her eyes. Harry was staring at her, eyes wide behind his glasses and unblinking. Draco was gone. Ron was gone. She couldn't lose Harry too.

No no no no no no!

She held up a shaking hand, hoping that he wouldn't start yelling or curse her or shove her outside the tent and into the dark, cold night. Hermione took a few tentative steps towards him, barely daring to breathe.

Harry blinked once. Twice. And didn't say anything. Her heart clenched in her chest, beating painfully. Would she ever go one day without it splintering?

"It's not—" Hermione started, trying to find a way to explain to Harry now that Ron hadn't left her any choice or even the opportunity to start the conversation in a manageable way. "It wasn't—"

Her lungs failed her, forcing the air out with every word and tightening so she couldn't breathe in.

"Hermione, it's okay," Harry said. Said. Not yelled, not shouted. *Said.* "I know. I already know."

His face swam for a moment as Hermione lost her balance.

"Woah! Hermione!"

She caught herself on one of the poles and leaned heavily against it for a moment before Harry's hands steadied her. He walked her over to one of the chairs, sitting her down carefully.

Hermione's ears were ringing. He… he *knew? Harry knew?*

He knelt down in front of her, keeping his hands on the arms of the chair, probably to make sure she wasn't going to fall out of it. Based on the loose feeling in her arms, the cold rush still running over her, and the high pitched noise that was *very* slowly fading, Hermione thought he might be right about that.

"Hermine, are you alright?" Harry asked, thick brows pulled tight. He was worried about her. Harry knew about Draco and he was worried about *her.*

"H-how?" Hermione gasped. "How long have you…"

Harry looked down sheepishly and shifted his weight a little. "Well," he cleared his throat and pushed his glasses up. "Since the night on the tower."

Oh my goodness. Harry had known for *months!* All this time and… The ringing started to come back.

"Do you want some water?" he asked nervously and Hermione nodded, unable to form words.

Harry walked into the kitchen and pulled a mug out of the small cabinet. Hermione watched him. He was walking around, doing normal things, just like he always did… but he *knew*. He knew and he wasn't freaking out or asking her how or blaming her or wanting to know everything all at once.

Harry knew and he was fetching her water. He was *helping her.*

He handed her the mug and Hermione took it carefully. Her fingers brushed over his and for a moment she thought she should pull back, like she would with Ron, but Harry just gave her one of those small little smiles he had over the past few months and she gently took the mug from him.

"Drink that, I'm going to clean up the mess in the kitchen."

compared to the war she found herself in down here on the ground. How much longer could they run? Sooner or later they would have to fight. At least that was one thing they could still do together.

"Walking off into the woods is helping Potter how? Going to lure in some Snatchers and hope you can overpower them and that they just happen to know the Dark Lord's secrets? Just because you dropped out of school doesn't mean you have to act stupid."

She didn't like that Draco had called him the Dark Lord. Or Master. She remembered hearing him talk about his oath and his Lord in the Restricted Section after he had taken Veritaserum and how disturbing hearing those words were to her. She should have known then that it was a lost cause, that nothing would ever make him change. If he cared at all about her, if he loved her like he claimed, then he would have at least told her about the mark instead of letting her find out on her own in a bathroom in the middle of the night.

"Would you have preferred I showed it to you when you were on your knees for me then?"

Hermione walked further into the clearing and took a deep breath of the cool air, trying to clear her head. Draco had put so much effort into hiding the mark and she felt a little foolish in hindsight that she hadn't figured it out. Maybe it was because she hadn't wanted to.

After all, the signs were all there; his refusal to take off his shirt, his mentioning having to "work" some nights, his frequent use of the Room of Requirement… And she had ignored them all because she was so sure that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named would not use a student to do his bidding, even arguing with Harry late into the night about it. She had been certain that she was right. It wasn't often she was wrong but…

But she had been wrong about him. So why didn't this love feel wrong now?

"It's not. We're perfect together. You know that, Granger. You can feel it when I'm inside you."

Hermione sat down on some exposed roots of a large tree, tilted her ankles out so that her knees rested against each other and slipped off her gloves to pick at her hands. Her warming charm was working too well and was actually making her a little overheated under all the layers she wore these days. She had always run warm, but spending hours outside in December stole away her body's natural heat faster than she thought possible.

Draco had felt so cool against her the night on the chaise that he had bared himself fully for the first time. The Instant Darkness Powder made perfect sense now. At the time she thought it was just another one of the things he liked, just like calling her names and tying her up. And she couldn't say that the idea of complete darkness wasn't enticing

coming down and finding her behind the tree with the Death Eater. And neither awake or asleep did Hermione know what she would do if this ever happened.

"Fucking let him try. He doesn't have a luck potion working for him now and I've had months to sharpen my skills."

Hermione wrapped her coat around herself tighter and waved her wand, sending a warming charm around her. Winter was fully setting in: bland cloudy skies and dark dead trees surrounded her. She wondered how her parents were doing in Australia. Were they enjoying the summer sun? Basking on the beach? Did Crookshanks like it, batting at butterflies and… and…

She wiped her misty eyes before the tears could fall and turn cold on her cheeks. Hermione had refused to cry ever since they left to hunt horcruxes. She knew if she started, she wouldn't be able to stop. She missed her parents and her cat. She missed school and her classes. She missed Ginny and Neville and Luna. She missed going to see Hagrid on weekends and taking the long route to the Library that let her pass by the window with the best view of the Lake. She even missed watching Quidditch matches.

And she missed Draco.

Dear Godric, she missed Draco. Missed his snarky little comments, his crooked smirk across a classroom, his rain grey eyes hovering over her, his cool touch and rough kisses, his breath in her ear as he told her how good she felt, how much he loved fucking her, how much he loved her.

"You don't have to miss me. Walk outside that barrier, you know I'll find you."

The Draco in her head wasn't the same. She knew it wasn't really him. That it was just something her imagination conjured up because thinking about never seeing him again was too hard, too painful. But it was the cold reality she would have to accept at some point: Draco Malfoy was a Death Eater and according to him, there was only one way to stop being a Death Eater. Loving her certainly wasn't enough to stop him, so her love for him shouldn't stand in her way of trying to help Harry and fighting against He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.

She had forced herself to start using his rightful name, Lord Voldemort last year, but at Ronald's request she had reverted back to using the informal title most wizards called him by. She had tried everything to mend their friendship and had only done more damage to it.

Hermione stopped walking. The tent was out of sight and the wind blew around the small clearing she found herself in. Blinking, she turned her face up and looked at the bright but blank sky. It looked so cold up there. But in a strange way, peaceful. Especially

Hermione did nothing but nod and watch as Harry went back over, vanishing the burnt fish with a small stream of swears under his breath that sounded vaguely like, "fucking did all of that and he just goes and burns the shit out of it."

The pan clattered loudly and Harry mumbled a quick, "Sorry" under his breath as he gave up on trying to shove it into the cabinet and waved his wand, expanding the shelf so it would fit. He wiped his hands on a small dish cloth and smacked it down on the counter, reaching up to adjust the locket around his neck.

Hermione looked away, giving Harry a moment to compose himself and took a sip of the water, realizing how thirsty she was from all her screaming at Ron. Oh God, Ron…

The mug nearly fell from her hands.

Harry was back, pulling the other chair across from hers and sitting down awkwardly on the edge of the seat. He pulled his glasses off, cleaning them with the dish towel before shoving them back onto his face, awkwardly looking around the tent and then to her hands holding the mug out in front of her.

Hermione's mouth went dry again. Plucking up her Gryffindor courage, she figured it was better to get this over with than drag it on. She didn't want a repeat of the fiasco like the one she had with Ron another six months down the line.

She peered up at Harry who looked… drained. He had only been wearing the locket for ten minutes and it was already affecting him so strongly. It seemed to be wearing him down more these days. Hermione held out her hand. "Take off the locket. Just—" She stopped when Harry's bright green eyes cut back up to hers. "Just for a little while. Until we both calm down."

Plus, she didn't want to have this conversation while he was wearing it. Harry nodded tiredly and slipped the locket from around his neck, setting it on the table beside them. In seconds, there was a slight rush of color back to his face and his shoulders sank down in relaxation. It made her feel a little better too. Not much, but a little.

Hermione hid behind her mug for a moment longer, then said, "Harry… What happened on the tower?"

Harry sighed and then took a deep breath, looking straight into her eyes and said, "I told you most of what happened. Malfoy came up, disarmed Dumbledore right after he immobilized me and then the other Death Eaters came up and Snape killed Dumbledore."

Hermione watched Harry's face tighten. He never talked about the night on the tower or what it was like to watch Dumbledore die right in front of him. The next day, Harry

had been very quiet and she had always thought it was just him grieving, and she was sure that was why, but… he had also found out about her and Draco that night. She hated the thought that while Harry was trying to grieve over his lost mentor, he was also thinking about how she had been hiding such a big secret from him.

She had been so concerned with Ron's reaction in the aftermath of the attack that she hadn't even really thought too much about Harry's lingering looks while they sat in the hospital wing. How he asked her if she was okay, over and over. She thought it was just because he had found her out on the grounds, covered in dirt and crying about how sorry she was.

Godric, he hadn't even asked her what she was sorry for. Because he didn't have to. He knew what she had done. Oh God… what had Draco *said?!*

"Harry, I—"

"Hermione," Harry interrupted her. "I am not going to pretend like I understand how it happened or what actually went on between you two, but… whatever *did* happen—it stopped Malfoy from killing Dumbledore."

Harry reached out and grabbed the mug as it fell from her hands.

Completely lost in the moment, Hermione whispered, "Good catch."

Harry's lips turned up. "Seeker, remember?"

Hermione didn't say anything. She couldn't. There were no more words in her head, just… nothing. No Draco, no thoughts, just… nothing. All she could do was stare at Harry and hope that sounds would come out soon and that they might be able to be interpreted as words.

Harry took pity on her and, setting the mug down, went on. "Malfoy disarmed Dumbledore, like I said. And he could have killed him, right then and there. But he didn't. He said he wanted to talk."

Hermione's heart suddenly raced back into action, beating hard enough in her chest that the rush of blood into her head drowned out the ringing.

"Talk?" It barely came out as a whisper.

Harry nodded. "Malfoy told him everything. How he let the Death Eaters in through the cabinet, about the poison Ron drank and the necklace Katie touched." A jolt ran through her and down her arms. Hermione could feel her eyes growing wider, knowing what was coming next. Harry paused, then added, "I saw his mark."

His mark. His mark. His mark. Harry had seen Draco's mark. Of course he *knew* Draco was a Death Eater, but there was a difference in knowing and seeing. Hermione was well aware of that.

As soon as she finished helping Harry set the tent up again, Hermione turned and walked off into the frost covered trees. Her shoes crunched over the leaves, but she didn't bother casting a silencing charm. Ron had set up the wards while she and Harry worked on the tent and Hermione had felt the second they locked into place; strong, solid walls surrounding them.

Ron had gotten quite good at protective wards over the last few weeks, practicing them while recovering since he couldn't do much else, and now it was a set routine that wherever they camped, Hermione and Harry set about the meticulous magical spells of raising the tent while Ron cast wide barriers to protect them.

But there was something almost… oppressive about his enchantments. As if the magic was keeping them in the same as keeping others out. Not that it helped their dynamic; the combined stress building up in the tent between the three of them felt like it was enough to break through the protection charms on its own. Hermione knew she shouldn't wander off too far on her own, but sitting around with the awful tension pushing them all apart was the last thing she wanted to do.

She also didn't want to deal with Harry requesting updates on her research or Ron shooting dark looks in her direction. Alone in the woods she only had to worry about the Draco who was living in her head who she was decidedly ignoring. Even if he was the only one she could stand right now.

"And that's why you came all the way out here, to be with me. What a good girl you are."

Hermione stomped on a branch and it cracked loudly, echoing in the lonely woods. At least if a Snatcher came along, she could hex them and not have to deal with their moody grudges or constant questions about horcruxes.

But talking to Harry was the only conversation she had recently. Ron had not spoken to her in days. Not that she exactly wanted to speak with him either, but still, it didn't help the heavy mood hanging over all of them and turning the atmosphere inside the tent just as cold as the winter wind outside. She was used to him turning red and getting angry, but now he was only sulking and snatching the locket from her without looking her in the eyes and marching out of the tent every time he had to go on watch.

Hermione noticed his wand never left his hand now. He even slept with it gripped in his fist.

And more than that, she knew why. Ron had said he wanted Draco to pay for what he had done and finding out that she was still dreaming about him, still in love with him, seemed to be the thing to finally solidify Ron's drive to confront Draco over their mission to find the horcruxes. In her dreams she now worried about the figure from the hill

way that the blood had felt, smooth and warm, flowing over Draco's hand as he punched it into the bloody maw over and over and over.

Fenrir was a monster and deserved what he got.

It was good that Draco had done that.

He had helped.

He had helped.

He had done it for her.

So why did he feel like this? Like his heart had been punched out of his chest and all that was left was the cold empty hole?

Granger climbed out of the trap door and threw her arms around him. Draco buried his face in her neck, in her hair, smelling the sweet vanilla and cinnamon he missed so fucking much. He couldn't smell the blood anymore. He couldn't feel anything. His blood felt hot and cold at the same time, like it was sitting still in his veins, but his heart was thundering in his chest, beating so hard it hurt.

Draco held her tighter, squeezing her, not able to let go even when she tried to push him away.

"Draco, don't do this."

"I'm sorry," he gasped, forcing the words from his tight throat. "I'm so sorry."

He pressed her against the white marble column in his mind and it cracked, crumbling down. Draco and Hermione fell down amongst the rubble. He covered her small body with his own, protecting her from the sharp rocks falling all around them.

Black spots danced in his vision and for a moment he wasn't sure if he was in his head with Granger or here alone on the street.

Granger. He had done all of this for Granger.

But she was gone. The floorboards were gone, the walls were gone. There was nothing but black darkness closing in.

Draco's leg gave a weak throb and he sank down onto the frozen concrete, head falling back and eyes sliding closed.

"I went to Dumbledore," Hermione cut in. "I told him about Draco once I saw it. I tried to tell—"

"I know. I mean," Harry took another breath and Hermione gulped. "They talked about you too."

On the outside, Hermione was frozen solid; unable to move or even blink as she listened to Harry, but on the inside everything was racing and running and tearing through her, pushing blood and heat and thoughts too quickly through her head for her to even focus on one before another took its place.

"What—what did he say?"

She thought about some of the things Draco had shouted at Ron after he had caught them. Did Draco say the same kind of things to Dumbledore too? Her stomach flipped over nervously.

"Malfoy told Dumbledore to run, to get back on the broom and 'fuck right off'. He said he'd get rid of the Death Eaters and destroy the cabinet so they couldn't get back through."

Harry looked down at his clasped hands and some of his messy hair fell over his face. Hermione felt almost sick with anxiety. What? *What?!* Ever since that night she had been trying to harden her heart to Draco, to force herself to see him as the Death Eater he was, not the man she had learned to love in stolen moments.

She believed him when he said he was going to fix it, then had her heart broken with the realization that his way of fixing things was to go through with his original plan. But… it wasn't. Draco *had* tried to fix things. Just like he said.

He hadn't broken his promise at all.

Harry looked back up at her. "Dumbledore wouldn't leave though. He wouldn't leave the school. He said Malfoy was still one of his students, that's when Malfoy pulled up his sleeve and said he wasn't anymore, and then Dumbledore *smiled.* I didn't fucking get it. I was standing there, unable to move or do anything, and I had no fucking clue why Malfoy was trying to *help* Dumbledore escape."

Harry looked back up at her.

"None of it made sense. Then Dumbledore said he could help Malfoy, protect him and his family, even offered to help his Father in prison, but Malfoy didn't give a shit about that. He just said he wanted you and wanted out."

Out. Draco wanted out. Draco wanted her. Wanted to go, to leave, with her.

" *I'll come for you, Hermione. I promise.*"

"But Dumbledore kept trying to convince him to switch sides, saying it wasn't too late for him to be saved. That's when Malfoy started yelling at him and said some weird shit and said Dumbledore was a demented old fool if he thought there was any way any of the Order would survive this war. He said…" Harry's brows pulled together again. "He said every Death Eater could defect and it wouldn't make a difference."

He might have said that, but Draco said lots of things in anger that he didn't always mean. His actions always meant more and he had *tried* to help Dumbledore. That had to *mean* something. Hermione gasped. "Do you think he knows about the horcruxes?"

Harry shook his head. "How could he? Even Lucius Malfoy didn't know what the diary really was and he was one of You-Know-Who's most trusted."

Hermione bit her lip, thoughts racing, but all coming back to Draco. "If he doesn't think the Order can win then why was he trying to help Dumbledore?"

"I was thinking the exact same thing when Dumbledore asked if "Miss Granger had been able to change his views at all" and Malfoy… Hermione, Malfoy went *off*. Shouting that he loved you. He fucking *shouted* it. Said Dumbledore didn't care about you, only that you were smart and that you were going to help me and he said he wasn't going to let anyone use his girl."

His girl. Hermione felt like she was floating out of her body. Was she still sitting in the chair? She couldn't even feel it underneath her.

"Is that…" Harry turned the mug around in his hands. "Is that true? Is that what you were?"

She was unceremoniously shoved back into her body and everything came back into sharp relief in a single beat of her heart. Her lungs were empty, her mouth was dry, and her blood was too warm, sitting still in her veins as Harry waited for her to answer him.

"Yes," Hermione whispered. "I mean, I was. We were… Harry, you have to understand I never planned this. It wasn't like I wanted or expected this to happen, but it *did* and I know it sounds crazy, but Draco isn't—I mean, he is, but he doesn't want to be—"

"Yeah he made that clear on the tower too." Harry blew out a breath. Hermione's hands numb and she was glad she wasn't still holding the mug. Harry was confirming everything she hadn't dared to hope for all these lonely months. "I think his exact words were 'I don't give a shit about that twatless cunt'."

"He said that about—"

"Yeah." Harry shook his head, thick brows raising up into his messy hair. "He was a bit upset at that point."

He barely made it out onto the street before he collapsed. There was blood everywhere. In his eyes, in his mouth, in his hair, on his hands, soaking through the fabric of the shirt he had quickly thrown back on after Donovan and a few other wolves had pulled him off of Fenrir.

The wolf's mouth had been a gaping, bloody hole and Draco's hand shook so much the silver brass knuckles had fallen to the floor with a resounding clank into a puddle of dark red blood. He couldn't stop staring at the mess of a man he had left on the floor.

Donovan shoved his wand back into his hand. "Go," he growled.

Draco looked at him blankly.

"You won," he spat. "We're bound to you now, but if you don't get the fuck out of here one of them is going to jump on you and even with all four of us we won't make it out of here alive. Go, Malfoy. You don't belong here. This is pack business."

Draco tried to wipe the wolf's blood off with his cloak but it was everywhere, smeared over him, thick and sticky.

He couldn't get it off.

Falling into the side of the building, Draco felt the bitter wind cut through his wet clothes, turning the warm blood cold inside and out. His thigh was bleeding badly, his holster shredded and barely hanging onto the torn fabric of his trousers. He didn't even want to look down at the dark wound that was steadily pumping blood out of him.

He tried a healing charm, but the skin was mangled and having trouble trying to knit itself back together. Swearing loudly, Draco abandoned his effort and instead scourgified himself over and over until his skin felt raw and turned pink from the harsh spell instead of red from the spilled blood.

He couldn't see straight. The world was spinning too fast, turning this way and that. He pressed his back into the bricks, trying to balance as sharp, quick breaths of cold air stabbed into his chest again and again but he couldn't keep any of them in and his throat was closing and it tasted like blood and his vision was getting darker and darker and nothing was stopping. Nothing but him.

Draco sank to his knees, ripping the trap door open. He wanted to hide down there. With her. With Granger. Not think about the sound of the crack of Fenrir's jaw or the

They hated him, they had left him. Gone off and joined up with Greyback instead of staying with him even after he had made them rich.

But he only needed them for a little while longer. After that they could fuck off wherever they wanted to. However, if he left them here with Greyback they would never be free again. He couldn't take back what he had done to Kenna, but he could at least offer her an out if she wanted it.

Draco pulled off his shirt.

The air turned colder as a ripple passed around the circle. He could hear them talking about the ugly, jagged lines across his chest and found a small measure of sick satisfaction in the flicker of fear over Fenrir's face.

Draco had survived too.

And even with all of Fenrir's battle scars, he didn't have the dark mark on his arm. He was an animal with tainted blood, not worthy of bearing the Dark Lord's mark. Fenrir was vicious, but Draco was calculated.

Draco kept his own expression impassive, like it was carved onto his face. He couldn't let these wolves know how much he fucking hated the fact that they could all see how ruined he was now. He imagined Granger's hand running over the white lines and was able to breathe again. When he got her back she could run her tongue over them, tracing them down his chest and body and for just a minute he wouldn't feel broken anymore.

Fenrir licked his own blood from the tips of his claw like nails. "I hear you like knives, pretty boy. Just like your aunt. I'll let you use one." He smiled again, teeth long and sharp. "For sport."

Some of the wolves in the circle laughed.

Draco dipped his hand into the pocket of his trousers and felt the cold metal inside. He had commissioned a down-and-out goblin to craft a weapon for him in case one of his wolves ever turned on him. He stretched out his fingers before slipping them through each of the holes, tightening his fist over the silver tipped brass knuckles, letting them flash in the low light.

"I don't mind getting my hands dirty," Draco said in a low voice.

Fenrir eyed the silver gleaming on Draco's hand and growled. "You won't be so pretty when I'm done with you."

Draco smirked and raised his fist.

Hermione made a high pitched noise in the back of her throat.

"Dumbledore just kept trying to get him to lower his wand so he could go get his and Malfoy wouldn't let him move anywhere but back towards the brooms. Dumbledore said he just wanted to help Malfoy fight the Death Eaters and he would take him under the Order's protection, but Malfoy said he didn't need the Order's protection and that Dumbledore didn't know what he was capable of and… I don't think Dumbledore did. I don't think he was expecting Malfoy to have brought in reinforcements."

Harry tightened his hands around the mug and Hermione glanced from his face to his hands and back, trying to take in every little detail of Harry's expression and body language right now.

"Malfoy started to threaten Dumbledore, saying if he didn't leave he was going to throw him off the tower, that they couldn't find him up there. That he would fuck everything up if he didn't leave right then. And Dumbledore told him he wasn't leaving and Malfoy needed to make a choice about his future."

Then Harry paused and Hermione realized she had been holding her breath. The ringing in her ears was starting to come back.

"Malfoy said he'd already made his choice." Harry blinked, looking right at her and Hermione felt her lip trembling between her teeth. "He said he chose you."

Tears spilled over onto her face, running down her cheeks quickly and splashing onto her knees. She thought they should have been warm, she had been holding them in for *so* long, but instead they felt crisp and cool. Like rain.

Months and months of holding them in and even longer of hiding this from Harry and worrying that he would hate her if he found out and here he was… talking to her about it and telling her… telling her that Draco *had* tried to fix this. He had tried to *save* Dumbledore. After everything he had done, everything he had tried to do, she had asked him to be with her and he had tried.

In his own way, which was the way Draco had always done everything.

Yes, he had tried to take her and yes, she was still *really* not happy about that, but if she would have known what he had done on the tower… maybe things would have gone differently that night. Maybe between her and Harry, they could have explained to the rest of the Order what Draco had done and that he wanted… to try.

It wouldn't be easy, but it could be done, right? Snape had done it, at least for a while. And even though Draco said there was only one to stop being a Death Eater he had changed his view on larger issues than that. Goodness, he told her he didn't care that she

was a Muggleborn when he took the Veritaserum and in the Room of Requirement she had asked him to choose to be with her and *he had*.

Maybe he wasn't out there turning Muggleborns into Umbridge because he believed in it, maybe he was fighting in this war the same as her, just trying to survive to make it to another day. She had seen the real Draco that night in the Room of Requirement when his smirk slid into a smile and his eyes faded from their hard granite to a hazy rain grey. He hadn't been a Death Eater then or a Malfoy. He had just been Draco. *Her* Draco.

There was so much she didn't know or understand about him, but at the same time, she felt like she knew him better than anyone. She knew him well enough to know that he hadn't given up, that he was out there, waiting for her. No, not waiting. *Hunting*.

Harry was right, Draco *had* made his choice that night. And now Hermione was making hers.

"Harry, this is going to sound crazy, but—" Hermione paused and bit her lip. *Hard*. "I want to find Draco."

His hearing was the first thing to come back. There was a tick-tick-ticking somewhere and it echoed loudly inside his head. No walls. There were no walls anymore.

Then faint voices, muffled and talking in the distance. But not the distance; they were close, it was Draco who was far, lost inside the darkness in his own mind. The voices swirled into the forefront of his mind and phrases began to come through.

"Keep him restrained. Had to immobilize him for his last dose of blood replenishing potion and even then we barely got it down."

"I know how he can be."

Tick. Tick. Tick.

"I've taken care of him before."

Tick. Tick.

"Good luck. He's a—"

"I know what—*who* he is."

Tick.

Draco opened his eyes.

had to obey the Alpha of the pack. Draco might not have been a wolf, but he knew enough about Greyback to know he liked his meat fresh, young, and supple.

It was his fault too.

So he was going to fix this. He was going to fix everything.

"Donovan, Kenna, and Fergus sold their services to me," Draco snapped. "If you want them, then you'll have to take them. Aren't those your rules?"

Fenrir glanced at the wand at Draco's side. Everyone had seen Rowle's eye and Yaxley's hand and he licked his lips in thought. Draco wanted to add Fenrir's mouth to his list.

"You think you can take me, pretty boy?" Fenrir barked out a laugh and pulled his leather coat off, tossing it to the side.

Draco's hand twitched.

"Fight me like a man. Like a wolf. Take them from me, and by the laws of the pack they're yours." Fenrir ripped off his shirt and let it fall to the ground, tossing his wand with it. His hairy chest expanded as he flexed his muscles and Draco felt the energy tighten in the circle of wolves around him. There were puckered scars and bite marks all over Fenrir's body, but they were all healed. It even looked like something had taken a chunk out of his right side. Still, he was standing. Surviving.

And Draco was barely making it through each day.

The last fucking thing he wanted to do was disarm himself while surrounded by hostile wolves. He glanced at Fergus who was watching him with careful eyes, at Donovan who had stepped back, still staring at the ground, and then Kenna who pulled her coat closed around her throat. He wouldn't get any help from them. He was on his own. Granger pushed up on the floorboards, trying to get out. Almost alone because if he failed, she'd die too.

"Or are you gonna pussy out like you did on the tower?"

Draco turned his storming eyes back on Fenrir. He didn't know shit about what happened on the tower. If he did, he wouldn't be fucking standing here right now. Draco unclasped his cloak and it fell back like a black curtain to pool at his feet. Then he threw his wand down.

Fenrir growled a snarling smile, scratching his claws along his chest and drawing five thin lines of blood. "Shirt too. I want to see your blood."

All Draco could think about were his scars. They were all going to see them. They were all going to know how fucked up he really was. He paused, considering just fucking walking out of here. He didn't have to do this. He didn't owe those wolves anything.

He hated even saying the words. The gold he didn't care about, but the fact that he was having to negotiate now of all times... Fucking hell, he just needed Donovan to get the fuck over it and go back on the job so he could hunt Granger and find her and catch her and hold her and feel the warmth of her because it was so damn cold and empty here without her.

He'd empty the Malfoy vaults, all of them, if it got him Granger back; he didn't fucking care.

"I don't work for you anymore." Donovan's tone had an edge to it and Draco pulled himself up to his full height.

He ground his teeth together. "You don't get to quit. Not until I say so."

The whispers around them fell silent and Draco heard moving and shuffling from behind.

Donovan's gaze slid from Draco to someone else and then down to the floor.

Draco didn't have to turn to know who had joined them, he could smell him before he saw him.

Fuckrir Greyback.

The stench of rotten meat was thick enough to almost make Draco gag.

"You think," Fenrir's scratchy voice grated against Draco's marble walls. "You can come in here and buy one of my wolves?" He gave a long, howling laugh.

"He's not yours." Draco gripped his wand so hard he almost thought it might break.

Fenrir came to a stop beside Donovan who looked just as unhappy to see Fenrir as Draco was. "He is now." Fenrir smiled. His teeth were stained red and brown. "Him and his delicious little sister."

Donovan cast his eyes over to Fenrir, glowering, but said nothing. He had told Draco that although they associated with Fenrir's pack, they had never officially joined. Donovan mentioned something about certain rules he wasn't too keen on and Draco didn't need or bother to ask for more information. He knew Greyback by reputation.

Draco looked over at Kenna, still sitting in the corner trying to make herself small. Like a dog who had been beaten. When Fenrir blew her a kiss she shrank back even farther. Draco pressed his hands hard into the white wall, wanting to throw his fist into it. So it wasn't just Draco who had traumatised her. Not that it really made him feel any better about it.

Donovan wasn't stupid. He had pledged himself to Greyback for protection against Draco. To protect his sister from him. But by bonding themselves to Greyback, they now

White fucking light, too bright to be candles or lamps, flooded in and he quickly shut them again, trying to sink back down into the darkness where it was still and silent. Ow. *Ow.* Shit, why did his face hurt so much?

"Draco, can you hear me?"

Blaise.

He knew him by his voice and when Draco blinked open a single eye, the blurry form of his friend swam in front of him, just as it had so many times before in their dorm after a particularly rough night. Draco quickly closed his eye again.

"I know you're awake."

Shit. Why did Blaise always have to be so bloody observant? It was borderline creepy; the way he just *knew* things. Like how he knew about Granger. Draco still wasn't entirely sure how that happened, but had been grateful that he had someone to yell at when Granger kept pissing him off at the end of term. Blaise had listened. And tried to help.

Not that it mattered now.

Draco groaned, certain that Blaise was going to ask him about Granger and how he was doing and how things were going for him and why the fuck he was here and fighting werewolves and Draco didn't feel like explaining shit.

All he felt was—*shit.*

"Draco."

"Fuck off."

A pause. "I am a junior Healer now so you can't talk to me like—"

"I said," Draco opened his eyes again. No, *eye.* Singular. Why was his other eye not opening? "Fuck. Off. Blaise."

His vision cleared a little and he was able to look around. Pale green walls the color of dog sick surrounded him and the ticking noise was getting louder. Draco looked over to see a strange clock-like device next to the bed he was lying in. In St. Mungo's. With Blaise fucking Zabini looking disapprovingly down at him.

Draco wanted to curse the ticking machine and sat up, reaching for his wand. It wasn't on his thigh. Nothing was on his thigh except thick white gauze with a faint red shadow leaking through.

Draco remembered what had happened to his leg. Fenrir had dug his fucking claws into it when he couldn't get to any other part of him and torn at the muscle there in a desperate attempt to get Draco off of him.

It hadn't worked. And Draco had broken Greyback's jaw for it.

But now his leg was fucked.

"Don't worry, it can be healed, but I need to know what caused it because it's not responding to healing charms and I didn't want to use any potions in case it's cursed or been magically wounded."

Draco pulled his boxer briefs down on his thigh as far as they would go, trying to cover the bandage, but only made them slip dangerously down his torso in response. His shirt was gone too; chest and arm bare, showing the world, and Blaise, exactly how fucked up he really was.

But even the torn up skin and black brand were nothing compared to the ruin of the fallen walls in his head.

Draco tucked his arm closely against himself and stared down at his chest and stomach for a moment. Fuck. Why did people keep taking his clothes off when he was unconscious? He glanced up at Blaise who was watching him with a slightly annoyed expression and arms crossed over his puke-green Healer's robes.

Even in that disgusting attire, Draco figured Blaise looked better than he did right now.

Draco watched as Blaise looked at him appraisingly, calculating eyes practically counting the different lines across his chest before flitting down to Draco's forearm, pressed tightly to his side. They rested there for a moment, dark and wary.

Draco struck out his right arm, Malfoy ring catching the too-bright lights, and pulled the white covers up, slinging it onto his left shoulder like a cape and letting it fall over his body, hiding his mark and his scars. Fucking Salazar, did *everyone* have to see them now?

It was bad enough that he had to show them to the wolves, but now Blaise too? Shit.

"Pomfrey did a good job on you."

"Eat shit."

Blaise ignored him. He walked over to the ticking machine and tapped it a few times with his wand. The ticking slowed and Draco glared at the back of Blaise's head until he turned around and stared patiently down at Draco.

"Are you going to tell me what happened to you?"

"Where's my wand?"

"You'll get it back once you're healed and ready for release."

"Ready for release? You think you can *keep* me here?"

Blaise's eyes blared with a dark fire and Draco could almost hear him grinding his teeth in agitation. Any remaining semblance of the Healer in training vanished and Draco's old

protection now." Donovan snarled and out of the side of his eye, Draco noticed they were starting to attract attention. "You sick fuck."

Draco dropped his hand to the leather holster on his thigh. "I could have had her crawling on all fours if I wanted and fed her something a little more substantial than a finger. And all I'd have to do is pay attention to her for more than five seconds. Trust me, Kenna got off easy."

Donovan growled menacingly and Draco drew his wand. His hand was shaking ever so slightly and he wondered if it was from the curse or the fact that he was too fucking sober for this shit right now.

Draco took a deep breath to calm himself and swore he could catch a faint whiff of her vanilla cinnamon coming up from the floorboards.

Won't be long now, Sweetheart.

The other werewolves had started to gather around, talking low or glaring deeply. Draco heard snippets of their conversations.

"Who does he think he is? Coming in here. This is our lair."

"Fucking Death Eater."

"Kenna won't even eat."

"He can't take all of us."

"I've never tasted Pureblood before."

Draco's entire body contracted. They were right. He couldn't take all of them. Was it a mistake coming here? He had gotten the location out of the Snatcher and came here to get his wolves so he could hunt down his Mud—his girl and didn't even stop to think about the fact that he was underground with a pack of werewolves alone.

Shit.

"You don't come near me or Kenna again. Fergus either. Understood?" Donovan snarled.

Draco glanced over Donovan's shoulder and saw Kenna sitting in the far corner, her long hair flat and falling into her face and her fancy fox fur coat was caked with dirt and mud. Her eyes were empty of everything but a fine line of tears. She looked… Fuck… Had he really done that to her?

Draco spotted Fergus joining the wolves around them and remembered how quick the skinny man could be when he wanted. He had to be smart about this. One false move and they would be on him. He could take a few with him, but he was here for Granger, not himself and getting killed by a pack of rabid dogs wasn't going to help her at all.

"I'll double your pay. In advance. Now let's go, I've got a job for you."

But she had been so sure of that before too and the truth had broken her heart into so many pieces, she had no choice but to pile them up in the back of her mind and try to ignore the shattered, empty feeling losing Draco had left inside her.

And just for a moment tonight, that aching had gone away, when he had been back, even if it was just a dream. But it had felt *so* real. She guessed she had the fever to thank for that. Hermione shivered again, and this time it was *not* from the cold.

She waited at the barrier, rubbing her legs together and tucking her hands further under her arms against the cold before huffing out a breath of white air and boldly stepping through it. Her Gryffindor courage rose up in her and she tossed her head back, shaking her snow-covered curls out of her face as she quickly walked through the trees, glancing around for any sign of where Harry went. She knew it was risky, walking out here, but it was just the two of them now and what was she supposed to do? Stand there and wait when Harry might need her help out there?

He wasn't the kind of person to leave her behind, and neither was she.

Hermione followed his tracks in the snow for a little while, but when thick evergreen trees surrounded her, the faint light from the stars above was blocked. She pushed her way through the snow laden branches, emerging on the other side to crisp, untrodden snow.

She had lost his trail.

"Fiddlesticks!" Hermione hissed and then coughed as the cold air hit her burning throat. She was about to turn and head back into the thicket when she heard something echo in the empty woods. A low, humming growl. Hermione spun around, trying to find where it came from, but she couldn't see far in the dark and after two and a half turns, all the trees around her started to look the same.

A familiar twisting feeling inside her tightened and Hermione tried to keep her cool like she used to in the Restricted Section when the stacks moved and changed, trying to confuse and trap her. She just had to stay calm and think logically and she would be able to find her way back; her way out.

Before she herself was found.

Hermione backed up as slowly as she could, hearing the snow crunch under her shoes much louder than it seemed to just a moment ago. Her whole body tensed with each step. She was out here, alone, and without a wand. But she wasn't too far from the protective wards. If she could just get back to them and behind them, she would be hidden.

What in Godric's name possessed her to come out here on her own?! If Draco was still in her head, he would be snapping at her, *shouting* at her. Then he would tell her in

that deep, commanding voice to get back in the dark trees, away from whoever was out here, and keep her calm as she searched for the trail back to the tent.

But Draco wasn't here and she was on her own.

Hermione cautiously lowered her arms to her sides, getting ready to run if she needed to and carefully turned towards the cluster of dark trees she had emerged from.

Right before she headed back in their direction, she saw someone walking out of them. A large man, with a fur lined coat and shaggy brown hair. He breathed in deeply, running his hands over the branches she had pushed her way through and bringing his fingers up to his nose.

Hermione froze, snow falling softly around her. He hadn't seen her yet. She didn't even dare to breathe in case the movement of the puff of air caused him to look in her direction. But she had to do something. She couldn't just stand here and wait for him to find her. She had no way to defend herself and he was blocking her way back. There was only one option left to her.

Run.

She knew she couldn't outrun him or outflank him in her current state and get back to camp, but she might be able to get to Harry. This person, or *people* more likely, were probably after him too and she and Harry had to stay together if they wanted any chance of getting through this. She needed Harry and Harry needed her. All they had now was each other and she wasn't letting someone else she loved go; Harry was all she had left.

Hermione turned and ran in hopes she could find Harry before they did.

It was as if her dream had come to life in the most horrible, terrifying way. She was running through the forest, branches tearing at her sweater, snow slowing her down, but she didn't let any of this stop her from pushing on. The air was colder than in her dream, freezing and ripping at her tender throat as she choked it down in heaving, gasping gulps.

It was dark, *so* dark, and trees seemed to jump out in front of her. Hermione was barely able to avoid them as she plunged into the blackness. She slipped on an icy patch, and threw out her hands, slamming them into the trunk of a tree, slipping against the snow on it and scraping her cheek. The jolt of her collision rocked up her arms, leaving them weak as she pushed herself back up. Scrambling, Hermione felt her ankle twist and cried out, clamping her hand over her mouth to stop the noise.

It was too late.

Voices drifted through the chilled air and Hermione hurriedly tested out her ankle. It was painful, but not unbearably so. Hermione took a deep breath of chilly air, feeling it

burn in her lungs. She could keep going. Her pride would carry her on; she wasn't the kind to give up this easily.

Hermione knew what would happen if Snatchers caught her. If they brought her to Umbridge, she was sure to be recognized and handed over to the Death Eaters. They would torture her for information on Harry and if Lord Voldemort found out they here hunting horcruxes, everything they had worked for would be for nothing. The months on the run, the failure of her friendship with Ron, taking her parents' memories, and all the heartache she had suffered through… she wasn't going to let everything she had given up be taken from her now.

The trees looked thinner up ahead and appeared to open up into a clearing. Hermione glanced behind her, unable to see anything in the darkness, then turned back, trying to judge the opening ahead. It was a pond, covered in ice. She squinted, seeing that the ice was already broken. There was no way she would be able to get around the whole pond before they caught up to her, and since the ice was broken, she couldn't risk running across. Hermione turned, heading farther into the woods.

The trees were thicker here and Hermione could feel her feet sinking into the snow, hitting the frozen ground underneath with each hurried step. It was hard to breathe and she swallowed down icy breaths, ripping into the her sore throat as she wiped water drops from melted snow off her burning cheeks. Her ankle was starting to shoot pain up her leg and she felt herself unintentionally slowing.

No no no! There was someone on her left, coming towards her so Hermione made a sharp turn, grabbing onto a tree to steady her footing as she gingerly placed weight on her twisted ankle, trying to hurry. Her head spun with the quick movement and Hermione stifled a cough in her chest. It seemed her sudden change in direction had fooled her pursuer, but she knew it wouldn't be long before they caught up to her at her current speed. She was breathing hard; chest burning with the frozen air in her lungs and pain racing up her leg, making her gait uneven.

It was when she put all her weight onto her uninjured leg that she felt herself slip. There was ice under the snow, a hidden puddle among the twisted, knotted roots of the trees. Hermione fell face first down to the forest floor. Her hand sank through the snow, hitting the frozen ground, but not fast enough to keep her head from bouncing off one of the exposed roots.

A deep pain rushed over her head and the little bit of breath she still had was knocked from her chest as the rest of her body came crashing down. Oh God, everything *hurt* . It felt like the roots and rocks on the frozen ground had found every bone in her body and

Where had Harry *gotten* to? Hermione looked further into the forest; it was dark tonight, only lit by pale starlight. They always made sure to camp a little closer to towns on full moons, just in case, but with the new moon she had chosen a place deep into the Forest of Dean where they could hide away for a little while. Tonight the forest made her think of her parents and their camping trip out here years before. Hermione wiped her nose with the sleeve of her sweater and tried not to think about how her mum would make her freshly squeezed orange juice when she was sick and her dad would sneak her ice cream when her mum wasn't looking.

The last time she and Harry had a full meal had been days ago. Maybe when they got out of their hidden camp in the woods they would be able to sneak into another Muggle supermarket. It was getting more dangerous out there though, and after their close encounter in Godric's Hollow, Hermione was glad to be hidden deep in the dark woods where no one in their right mind would think to look for them.

But the blackness of the night had turned against her. How was she supposed to find Harry in darkness like this? And without a wand to light her way?

"Harry," Hermione muttered, exasperated that he was making her trudge through the snow to find him. A large flake fell on her lashes and Hermione blinked quickly, making it fall to her cheek where it melted against the heat, leaving a cool kiss against her skin. She felt a rush to her head and wondered if her fever was rising.

A flurry blew up in front of her and Hermione shivered as white surrounded her, blurring her vision for a moment. Once it cleared, she saw faint footprints in the snow and jumped forward to follow them.

They led directly to the boundary of their protection spells.

And crossed over into the frozen forest.

"Harry!" Hermione called out into the black night in a scratchy, hoarse voice, but no one answered. She didn't expect him to; the wards she had placed around their campsite muffled any noise from within. She could scream at the top of her lungs and even if he was standing on the other side it would sound no louder than if she was talking calmly about her plans for the new year.

Not that they *had* any plans. They still didn't have the sword or any real clue as to where to look next. Finding Draco seemed just as impossible as the sword right now. After Harry had told her about the tower, she had been sure that if she could just *speak* to Draco again they could pick up right where they left off. He had tried to help Dumbledore after all, surely that meant that he had a change of heart?

now and he deserved to get some rest too before he came down with the same cold she had. And they were both still recuperating from the events at Godric's Hollow.

Harry had agreed to help her try to somehow try and find Draco if she agreed to go to Godric's Hollow with him to visit his parents grave.

"We very well might get killed. This is something I want to do—no, *have* to do," Harry had explained and Hermione agreed. She knew Harry had wanted to go to Godric's Hollow since they started their search and she had to admit, it might have some clues as to where the sword was or could be. Besides, it wasn't like they had any other options and so the plan was made, taking every precaution that they could.

It hadn't been enough.

She felt foolish, following Harry into Bathilda Bagshot's house; letting him go upstairs alone with her. Hermione was supposed to be the brightest witch of her age, why hadn't she seen through the ruse that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named had put in place? Of course he would use someone like Bathilda Bagshot. Someone who had been close to both the Dumbledores and the Potters. They should have known… they should have seen it coming.

They had paid dearly for their miscalculation. Hermione's hand felt oddly empty as she walked outside the tent, looking around for Harry's dark hair against the snow covered landscape. They were sharing her wand right now and even though they were sharing well enough, Hermione knew the loss of Harry's wand hit him hard. She could only imagine how helpless she would feel if left wandless and having to rely on the mercy of another person to do magic for her.

With so much snow on the ground, they had decided to move camp less frequently. It was difficult now, with just the two of them and even more so with just the one wand. At least Harry, like herself, had grown up with Muggles and didn't rely as heavily on magic as someone who grew up in a magical household did. She was purposefully not thinking of anyone in particular and *definitely* not saying any specific names in her head.

Hermione tucked her hands under her arms and walked a little farther out, sniffling a little and trying to see where Harry had gotten to. Since they weren't moving camp tomorrow, she thought maybe they could practice with some wandless magic; testing out simple spells and charms. That might cheer him up some and it wouldn't be too physically strenuous on her. Maybe she would try and pull out a few magical theory books and read them tonight after she switched with Harry and went on watch. He would be exhausted by now and although her dream had been pleasant, she wasn't ready to revisit it or the ache in her chest it had left behind.

slammed against them while her tired muscles ached from the inside out. The trees swirled around her and Hermione's head began to throb with each quick beat of her heart.

She pulled herself up using the tree and rested heavily against it. She couldn't run anymore. She couldn't even breathe right or see straight right now. There was no way that she would be able to find Harry like this. And even if she did, she might be leading these Snatchers right to him. If she could hide, maybe they would pass her by. Maybe she'd be able to limp back to the tent and maybe Harry would already be back by then. Good Godric, *why* did she come out here without her *wand?!*

Hermione leaned back against the tree and let it prop her up. At least if she was taken, Harry still had a way to fight. He had the locket too. He could keep going; maybe find someone like Remus and enlist his help. She doubted Ron would be back anytime soon. Ron… were the last words he ever said to her really going to be *those?*

Her throat felt tight and torn from the cold air and she reached up and touched her face, feeling the bump already growing on her dampened forehead. It felt warm and swollen under her cold fingers and Hermione winced before pulling them away. She tried to make herself as small as possible, pressing hard against the bark of the tree and feeling the cold snow against her back.

Hermione couldn't hear anything but the labored sounds of her own breathing and she fought to keep it under control. As she took larger gulps of air, holding back from coughing and her vision seemed to clear a little, not that there was much to see in the darkened woods apart from the ethereal glow of the snow in starlight and the thick clusters of snowflakes falling down from the trees overhead.

Hermione's eyes widened, trying to catch a glimpse of anything in the darkness. Nothing, just empty blackness that seemed to be looming closer with each shiver of her body.

Then something moved. The *snow* moved.

Hermione blinked, the flakes on her lashes falling as she focused on the spot of movement. Was she delirious? Snow didn't move, not like that.

No... it wasn't the snow that was moving, it was the darkness itself.

A sharp gasp escaped her as she recognized a familiar sight. A large black boot landed on the soft snow, sinking down heavily into it. Then another. Again and again, with long strides separating the footfalls. Hermione's heart skipped a few beats her lungs seized. Her entire body turned as still as the tree she was hiding against.

A figure appeared, dressed in black, looking even darker than the forest around him. The only thing that made him stand out was the cold, metal mask covering his face.

She was dreaming. She had to be. This was just a nightmare, a fever dream, she told herself, nothing more. He wasn't… it couldn't be…

The Death Eater moved closer. He was tall and, even under the thick black cloak, she could see the outline of broad shoulders and long arms. Arms she knew held strength and power in them. Hermione's legs began to give out and she pressed her body harder into the tree, hoping it would keep her upright.

He was advancing steadily towards her, but she couldn't move and a deep chill ran down the length of her body, setting off another round of shivers. She was frozen, trapped in the gleaming silver gaze from inside the mask. A thin puff of air escaped from under it and Hermione heard a sharp intake of breath.

"I told you I'd come for you, but…" Oh God, she knew that voice. That deep, *commanding* voice. The Death Eater was only feet in front of her, pulling out his wand from under his robes. "You came to me, didn't you?"

Hermione's heart was beating so hard, she could feel her pulse pushing against the strained skin of her neck. A drop of sweat ran down over it, pooling in the dip of her throat. Her body was shaking, shivering, and she was worried that the movement made it look like she was nodding her head.

He brought his wand up and waved it in front of his face, making the mask slide away into a wisp of thin air and *oh God!* Hermione felt like she was floating or falling or something, *anything* . But not this. This did *not* seem real. Not… *him*. But there was no denying the face she had pictured so many times in the darkness of her mind, now emerging and clearly looking down at her.

She was delirious. She was hallucinating. But she had been imaging him for months and he had never looked this… *real*. Her eyes widened as she did her best to focus on the features that looked like they had been carved from marble.

Hermione watched the lips turn up in a small smirk, watched the brows ease a little as he took another step closer to her, and stared into the silver eyes she could never forget, shining down at her, brighter than any star in the dark sky overhead.

"That's my girl."

She whimpered, unable to form words. Not now, at least. Not when he was here and, oh God, he felt so *good* and it had been *so* long since she felt like this. This wonderful mindless feeling and rush of heat and blood and sparks shooting off that only Draco gave her.

Only ever Draco.

"Tell me," he grunted, sheathing himself completely in her and rocking his hips back and forth. "Tell me it's mine. That you're mine."

Her head fell back, eyes closed and mouth open, gasping in air as Draco pushed himself deeper inside her. He was so far she wasn't sure how they could ever be separate after this.

"Tell me, oh shit, Granger—fucking tell me that you're still mine."

"I am," she breathed out, blinking her eyes open to look up into his soft rain grey ones. "I only ever want you, Draco. Only you."

Draco slammed himself into her and Hermione screamed as he let out a primal roar, weakening as his thrusts strengthened. She took a breath, ready for the wave of pleasure that was about to hit and—

Hermione jerked awake, inhaling sharply and pulling her head up from the book she had fallen asleep reading. The magical charm book, the one she had packed just in case. Just in case she missed him and wanted to smell the creamy parchment scent that had hung to his skin. She had pulled it out tonight, reading over it and relaxing with each deep breath.

She was out of breath and her forehead was damp with sweat. She hadn't actually been running or… *doing that* , but her chest was still heaving and she could feel her flush of heat in her face. And other places. Goodness. She had many dreams over the past few months, but none like *that* .

Maybe it was the fever. The Draco in her head had been right, after she left her coat in the woods and when she woke up the next morning it was to an achy body, chills, and a sore throat. Harry had helped, making her tea and taking extra turns on watch and she was slowly starting to get better. She thought about brewing a Pepperup potion, but their supplies were running low. She had suffered through colds as a child in the Muggle world, she could do it again.

Hermione coughed a little to clear her throat and stood up, slightly annoyed that she had woken up before the dream had finished, but it was late judging by the low level of the candle sitting on the table in front of her. Harry must have been on watch for hours

turning darker, making a corridor with one entrance and one exit. Hermione ran faster, harder, pushing herself to the limit of what she was capable of.

Then she saw him. Up ahead of her, merely standing there with his hands clasped behind his back, legs in a wide stance, and a thick black cloak falling around him. His metal mask shone like silver in the gloom of the woods.

"I told you I'd come for you."

It sounded like he was right next to her even though she could clearly see him in the distance. She should stop running. She should turn around. She should do anything but take another deep, gulping breath of icy air and keep running towards him. Even if the sight of him made her heart jump in a way that had nothing to do with her punishing pace.

Hermione looked right and left; there was a small opening between two trees and, without thinking, she turned, running through it. In a second, she could hear him behind her, heavy footfalls in the snow. She was running as fast as she could but the snow was falling, getting thicker by the second and before she knew it she was slowing down, fighting against the drifts.

" *Mine.*"

His gloved hands closed over her and Hermione went tumbling down, the Death Eater's body weighing heavily on her. He rolled, carrying her with him to dispel the momentum of their fall, cradling her body with his so that she was not crushed against the ground. She could feel the strength in his arms, thick and powerful, holding her carefully while guiding their bodies together until Hermione was pressed into a soft drift of snow with her Death Eater hovering over her, silver eyes gleaming behind his mask.

"Draco…"

The mask was gone. So was the snow. So was *everything,* everything but Draco.

He smirked down at her for just a moment then pushed himself inside her, filling her. Hermione's body came alive under his. Her high pitched moan mixed with his groaning growl as he pulled back to surge into her again.

Everything was just how she remembered it. His hands heavy on her body, grasping at her face, pulling her hair. His breath fanning out across her lips as his head hung down over hers. The weight of his body and the smell of his skin… soft and thick like fresh parchment. Everything she had missed, here, all at once.

"Fuck, Granger, I've missed your tight little pussy," Draco breathed out. "All warm and wet for me. And it is. It is for me, isn't it, kitten?" he asked in a hoarse voice, lids heavy over his mercury ringed eyes.

Chapter Eight

Hermione woke up feeling warm. No, not just warm—*hot.* Sweltering. It never felt this hot in the tent. They often cast warming charms, which wore off by morning and the chill of winter always found a way to seep in, but now the temperature was unbearable. She moaned, pulling at the blanket on her, trying to shed it and dispel some of the heat trapped with her.

Something stopped her. Something *heavy.*

She tried to twist under it and groaned against the weight. Immediately, Hermione could feel the difference in her throat; it was not nearly as tender and sore as it had been and only a little tickle of discomfort was left. At least the heat was good for something even if it did feel like it was suffocating her.

The heavy thing moved, sliding up her body and Hermione wrinkled her nose before blearily opening her eyes, blinking them a few times as blurry images came into focus.

A head, a face, and finally mist grey eyes that were looking down at her with a little crooked smile carved onto a white marble face.

"Hello, Sweetheart."

Maybe she was hallucinating again or still delirious. Hermione could remember bits from last night—boots in the snow, the Death Eater coming for her… She had thought it was just another fever dream!

But it *had* felt real, *too real,* and now his face wasn't coming out of the back of her mind, it was hanging over her, looking down at her and it wasn't just a figment based on a memory anymore. It was actually—

"D-Draco?"

Draco's smile expanded, showing off straight, white teeth. "I'm here. *You're* here."

He lowered his face closer to hers and Hermione felt woozy as she stared up at him, hardly daring to believe her eyes. His jaw seemed sharper, but not like it was when he dropped weight last year, no… now it was firmer. There was more muscle there under the greying skin. Goodness, but the longer she looked at him the worse he looked. The dark bags were under his eyes again and his lids hung heavily over them, like he hadn't slept properly in weeks. Or months.

But the smile was the same one she remembered from their night in the Room of Requirement, lighting up the tired shadows on his face.

He was here. With her. *Really* with her. Hermione's heart beat a little faster, anxious to believe the truth right in front of her face. Each small thump felt like it was beating against a bruise; sending out a twinge of pain that bled away to be replaced by a thick coat of relief, washing over the wounded area, soothing it.

All the pain from the last six months was still there, but now that he was here too, it felt like it could finally start to heal. And so could she. The new knowledge of what he had tried to do, what he had been willing to do, made it possible for them to be together. She had denied the fact that she still loved him, still wanted him, because she couldn't imagine a future with them together while Draco was still a Death Eater. It was impossible.

But this wasn't! It had happened, he had found her and they were here… but, where *was* here? Her cot in the tent certainly didn't feel like *this*.

Hermione didn't remember much from last night and it was all still hazy and distant. But he hadn't been; Draco had been there and she could remember the feel of his arms wrapped tightly around her. She sank into them, not that she had much of a choice, but if she had, she would have made this one. It hadn't mattered that cold air whipping around them as stars sped past because his deep, commanding voice whispered in her ear, "I've got you, kitten. And I'm never letting you go again."

Draco held up his wand, pushing out and trying to find the edge of her barrier. It was faint, barely still there. She had already moved on. A tight knot balled itself deep inside him. He was too late, she had gone. But Draco hadn't come all this way just to let her slip through his fingers again.

But he knew what her wards felt like now, knew how she hid them. His wolves had her scent and would be able to track *her* no matter where she ran. A frost-covered branch snapped under the weight of his black boot. He had found out how she was hiding, he could do it again.

And this time, he would *catch* her.

The snow made it harder to run, sticking to her shoes and making every step a slippery one, but Hermione did not stop. She couldn't. One moment of hesitation; one false step and he would be on her.

He would catch her.

She sucked in a breath of cold air, feeling it freeze in her lungs. Her throat burned with the force of it and she tried her best to take short breaths so the cold did not steal the warmth in her chest. As she ran on it seemed impossible to keep up this pace and refuse her body what it needed at the same time.

Hermione almost crashed into a tree, grabbing onto it to steady herself for only a second before pulling her feet up over the roots barely peeking out from their blanket of snow and starting off again. She had no idea where she was running to or even if she was running away from him anymore. Normally, she could hear him behind her, chasing after her. Sometimes, when she dared to chance a look over her shoulder, she'd catch a glimpse of his metal mask, but tonight he was nowhere to be seen.

She could still feel him though; heavy and covering the whole forest, like the white coating of snow glittering in the dark woods, he was here. Everywhere. Inevitable.

It didn't matter, she wasn't stopping now. The woods were dark and the trees seemed to spring out of nowhere, jumping into her path and blocking her. They were closing in,

daylight shining down on them had sparked inside him, igniting itself into the inferno that had left his soul scorched and charred.

Granger had done this. Granger had made him feel this… *love* that just wouldn't fucking go away. And if it wouldn't, then she didn't get to either. She *wanted* to be with him. She had said it herself, that she never wanted to leave him again. She *loved* him. *She* loved *him* . And he loved her.

Fucking hell, he loved her. He loved her so much it consumed him, it possessed him. He had been willing to do anything to keep her, even turn Blood Traitor and use the *imperius* curse on her. He had tortured people, maimed people, kidnapped and sold people. He had done all of that, so none of it would happen to her.

Granger was counting on him. Granger needed him. And fucking Salazar, he needed her. He needed to kiss her, feel her soft lips open up and taste the sweetness inside. Needed to run his hands through her curls again before sliding over the slender curves of her body and touch every fucking inch of her. Needed to wrap her legs around him, have her hands on him, hear her breathe out his name and tell him every dark thought he had for the past six months was crazy, just *insane* , and that she loved him loved him *still fucking and always would love him.*

Draco turned away from Donovan and Fergus and closed his eyes, feeling the sting of the cold air on his face. It contrasted sharply with the heat and the need and the fucking feelings rising up in him like flames licking at a stone wall. She still loved him. She had to. She just… fucking had to. Granger was a good girl and always did what she was supposed to. She could do this too. Even if she thought she didn't love him anymore, Draco knew she still did. And he would show her, just like before.

It would be just like before.

Better, because now they wouldn't be sneaking behind the stacks of the Restricted Section for a fast fuck. No, now he would have the entirety of his bed to stretch her out on and strap her down to so he could take his fucking time with her. All his time. Fuck, the only reason he'd leave his bed would be to make her crawl on her hands on knees towards him.

Well, that and his duties to his Lord. He would still be bound to his service, but… it would all be to protect her. To end the war so they could move on with their lives. Granger was smart, she would understand. She would realize he was doing *all* of this for her. To keep them together and to keep her safe.

Granger was counting on him and he would *not* fail her.

And she wasn't going to either. She had lost him before, but she had never fully let go. She hadn't been able to. She hadn't wanted to. And now—

Now…

"Fuck, I missed you," Draco breathed out and shifted his body on top of the covers to press fully against hers.

He breathed out forcefully and his hand slid up her neck, under her chin, tilting her face upwards as he leaned down over her. Hermione wanted to pull him on top of her, have him back the way they *had* been. Like they could be now; now that she knew what happened on the tower and that he tried, for her, and now he had come for her, just like he promised.

They were right where they left off, tangled together in a bed and after missing out on six months together she didn't want to lose one more second.

Her chest wasn't cracking this time, it was… breaking open, letting her heart free from the cage it had been trapped in all this time. She was sure that it was going to lift up out of her body and crash right into Draco. It was still his, after all, and so was she.

She would always be his. And Godric, she wanted to be more than anything.

The world was spinning, but for the first time in so long, Hermione wanted to let go and let it take her with it.

She lifted her hand up to touch his face, to bring him closer, parting her lips, needing his on hers when she felt something weighing her arm down followed by a dull clink of metal.

The world ground to a halt, pulled down by the weight of gravity.

Draco's eyes flashed like quicksilver as they darted down to her wrist and then back up to her face. Hermione's gaze followed his to find a cuff around her wrist and heavy metal links hanging from her arm, indenting the soft blanket she was laying under, and finally connecting to the frame of the bed itself.

Draco had chained her to the bed.

His bed.

Like a slave.

Like a *Mudblood.*

Hermione's heart sank back down into her chest, falling straight through her into somewhere dark and lonely, while the lion inside her roared in its place.

She *was* his. Whether she wanted to be or not.

Just like that last night; if he would have *told* her what happened on the tower instead of *imperiusing* her she might have… they might have…

But he took that choice away from her and tried to take her with him. Where? And where was she now?!

Hermione's head snapped back in his direction. Draco's mouth opened to give some excuse or… *lie* . What if it had all been a lie? What if he hadn't meant a *word* of what he said to Dumbledore? She pushed herself up in the bed and away from him. Her head swam, dizzy with thoughts and the last vestiges of fever; she didn't want to be anywhere *near* him right now.

Hermione pulled on the chain, her breathing getting shakier by the second.

"Granger—"

She backed herself into the headboard; the cool, dark wood jolting her to her senses and worked to steady her a little.

Until she realized it was against her *skin*.

Hermione looked down at where the thick blanket had pooled in her lap and saw the only items covering her were a light pink bra and thin white knickers.

He had undressed her. He had undressed her and put her in his bed and then *chained* her to it.

Her vision swam and for a moment she thought she might get sick all over the too-thick blanket.

Head snapping in his direction, Hermione watched Draco's face drop in nervous worry. Good! He should be worried because as soon as she got her wand she was going to—

Her wand.

Harry still had her wand.

Oh God, Harry!

Draco's hand landed on her hip bone and Hermione's body gave an involuntary shiver at the feel of his large palm and strong fingers. Goosebumps rose up on her bare flesh as his cool skin took the heat of her body. "It's not what you think—"

"Not what I think?!" Hermione shouted, the force of it burning her tender throat. She shoved Draco's hand from her, the chain clanking, then grabbed at the fallen blanket, pulling it up and fisting it against her heaving chest.

Feeling herself flush with color and breathing heavily, Hermione watched as Draco's whole body went as still as a statue and his face fell into a practiced impassivity. The crooked smile was long gone and with it any relief she had felt in seeing him again.

She had thought he had come back to her, but no. Draco hadn't come back to her, he had come back *for* her. Hermione's heart stuttered. Just like he promised.

"I found this." Donovan tossed a torn pink scarf over to Draco who caught it easily, clutching it in his gloved hand. "But there are two scents on it."

"Two?" He swung his head back over to Donovan who was adjusting the fur ruff of his coat. At least with the snow on the ground it prompted him to wear a fucking shirt this time.

"Yeah, a bloke and a girl." He shrugged. "What did you get, Fergus?"

The wolves discussed their findings as Draco ran the scarf over his hands. Two scents. Granger and… ugh. He didn't know who it was, but based on the sweaty stench, he had an idea. A fucking awful idea of what he was going to do if he ever came across that ginger prick again. Draco shoved the scarf inside his pocket as well. Hanging Weasley with it might make him feel a little better about the fact that her fucking scarf had Weasley all over it.

Soon enough, Granger would have *him* all over her and he'd leave more than some stink on a scarf to prove that she belonged to him. Fuck, he was going to cover her in bruising kisses until she writhed and mewled and he took pity on his poor kitten and licked her soft skin where he had marked and bit it, soothing her before pushing her to the edge of her sanity and tumbling down after her.

He looked around the white woods and let the winter chill cool his heated blood. Draco pulled out his wand and sent out magical tracers, trying to pick up if any heavy spells had been used in the area and… yes. There had been something. Wards. Barriers. Protection and concealment. They overlapped—concealment charms covering the protection wards and shielding charms guarding the disillusionment spells. Only Granger would be smart enough to weave them together so they interlocked and strengthened one another.

"Clever little witch." Draco smirked.

The sun was setting quickly; it didn't stay up long these days and Draco looked around, grey eyes catching the barest movement of a bird flitting through the trees. A chill wind blew past him, but Draco didn't feel it. He didn't feel anything but the rising heat inside him again. For the first time in so long the burnt out feeling in his chest didn't feel like a wound that wouldn't heal. It felt warm and hot and… alive.

For a moment it felt like he was back in the Forbidden Forest with Granger, lying on the mossy ground, kissing him softly and tracing her nails over the tendons of his neck and up into his hair as she pulled him close to her, pressing her body against his. The

But it *wasn't* because if everything was where it was supposed to be, Granger would be pressed up against the nearest tree and he would be burying himself inside of her, making her moan out his name in a hot breath against his neck.

He was going to fuck her senseless once he got his hands on her. Around her. In her. And he was never going to fucking let go.

She'd be his Christmas present to himself and he was going to play with her until he wore her out then he'd let her sleep in his arms and fuck her the second she opened her eyes back up. That would make tramping around these cold-ass woods on Christmas day fucking worth it.

Goddamn it, he needed to find her. *Now.*

"Over here, boss!" Fergus called and Draco's head snapped in the direction that Fergus' thick accented voice came from. He was picking something up from the ground and shaking the snow off of it.

With a crack Draco was beside him, snatching the item away from Fergus and digging his fingers into it. A coat. Her coat.

Draco held it up to his face and breathed in deeply. Fucking *hell* , it smelled just like her. Vanilla and cinnamon and holy shit it was *her* and it was real and it was here, in his hands. Draco's heart contracted hard in his chest, tight enough that it hurt to beat.

He crouched down and ran his hands over the thick roots. Granger. Granger had sat right here at the base of this tree. What had she been doing out here? Had she been thinking about him? The snow was fresh, but he was sure it had been freezing out here; why had she taken off her coat and left it? Had she gotten too warm? Had someone else made her—

Stop. No.

No one else had touched her.

She wouldn't do that.

She might have run and left him and hidden from him. But she wouldn't have let someone else—

"Is that her? The one we're after?" Fergus sniffed the air between them.

Draco pulled her coat closer to him, holding it against his chest, and sneered at Fergus. "The one *I'm* after."

"Yeah," Fergus said blandly as Donovan joined them. "That's what I said."

Draco curled his lip over his teeth and felt the cold air hit them as he folded Granger's coat and tucked it under his arm.

"What am I supposed to think? You have me naked and tied to your bed!"

Draco's brows dropped over his eyes, casting them in shadow. "You're not naked and it's—"

"Where are my clothes?"

Draco clenched his jaw. His dark eyes stormed, anger and hurt flashing in them and Hermione felt a pang ring through her chest. She had seen those eyes so many times looking back at her from the darkness of her mind. Just yesterday she would have given almost anything to look into them again, but now? Now she wanted nothing more than not to see the pain she was causing in them.

But look at what he had done to her!

Her Gryffindor pride welled up in her broken chest. She was not about to sit here and feel bad that she had hurt his feelings after he had… had… What exactly *had* he done?

"Where are my clothes, Draco? Where…" Hermione looked around the room, hoping to see them somewhere nearby and finally got a chance to take in her surroundings. The room was large—no, it was *gigantic.* Filled with a matching, decoratively carved wardrobe, bureau, and end tables on either side of the framed bed they were currently laying in. Tapestries lined the walls and a thick, plush rug took up most of the floor, but what caught Hermione's attention was the velvet chaise on the far side of the room.

It was the same velvet chaise where she had… that they had… *Oh God…*

" *I've always wanted to fuck on that."*

Their chaise.

The chaise that had meant *so* much to her, was his. It belonged to Draco. He had brought it there for her. No, not for her. To *have* her how *he* wanted. Just like how he had brought her here. Hermione felt dizzy again and watched the room sway in front of her despite not being able to tear her eyes away from the plush piece of furniture.

"Your clothes were disgusting," Draco snapped. "So were you, for that matter."

Hermione turned back to glare at him and then her eyes widened as she took a slow, deep breath, touching her hair and finding it… soft. It had been cleaned; and not just with a quick *scourgify* like she had been doing *;* she could smell shampoo. Someone had washed it.

"You *bathed* me?!"

"You were filthy, Granger!" Draco sat up, making him look even larger than he had lying next to her. His shoulders were broader now and straining against his shirt. Any weight he had lost last year, Draco had packed back on. In muscle. "You were covered in sweat and dirt and mud—"

"Oh, so now you care that I had mud on me? Because you didn't when you pushed me down in it and stood on my chest!"

God, she was angry. No, she was *fuming*. Her pride had fired up fully with the reintroduction of Draco in her life. No one got under her skin like he did. Not even Ron. How could Draco sit there and try and act like *anything* he had done was okay?!

Draco ground his teeth together. "I was saving you!"

"You were kidnapping me!"

"Oh come off it, you fucking wanted to come with me."

"Because you cursed me! You—you *imperiused* me, Draco!"

His lip curled slightly in a cruel sneer. Some things would never change. Hermione took a sharp breath and backed up into the headboard again as Draco leaned in close to her. "And you didn't fight it. Not even for a second. Fuck, Granger," he breathed out and let his eyes travel over her face and down her neck to her chest where she tightened her grip on the blanket before lifting back to hers with a gleam in them. "I *felt* how much you liked it."

Her heart was hammering violently. Swallowing dryly, Hermione tried to ignore the tight twisting feeling of excitement in her stomach, at having Draco look at her like *that* again.

"And you had your fun paying me back. That was quite the chase you put me on." Draco let out a small breath and tilted his head slightly. "But I caught you and now—" He placed his hand over hers, pulling the blanket down her chest.

"Now nothing!" Hermione clawed it back up, swatting his hand away in the process.

Draco's eyes narrowed and Hermione felt a jolt of nerves pass through her at the familiar sight. Grabbing the blanket with a growl, Draco ripped it back from her. Hermione gasped, then refusing to let him take something else from her, reached back out to steal it back and found herself tangled in his arms, fighting him as his hands slid up her arms and down her sides.

Good Godric, it felt good to be touched by him again. It felt *amazing*.

She instinctively wanted to relax under him, soften her body for him. Before she knew it, his hand was on her thigh, trailing inward and Hermione heard a small moan come unbidden out of her open mouth.

Draco pushed his leg in between hers and she pressed her hands into his shirt, feeling that his shoulders were not the only place his muscles had thickened. Her arms were bent and ready to shove him away again, but her fingers dug into the fabric, etching along the hard lines underneath.

he was getting something out of it. He didn't have school anymore. He didn't have Quidditch anymore. He didn't even have friends anymore.

But he would have her. One way or another, he would have Granger again.

Draco pulled on his boots, his foot sliding down into them and landing with a soft thud as he pressed his heel into the floor, staring down at it while sitting quietly in the darkness of his mind, picking up a rough rock and tossing it into the emptiness.

He wouldn't be empty once he had her. He wouldn't be hurt once he had her.

"Here." Blaise held out his wand. At the sight of it, Draco greedily snatched it from him. Running his fingers over it and making sure it was unharmed, Draco glanced up to see a flicker of disappointment on Blaise's face. It was the first time they had seen each other since the summer and who knew when they would see each other again?

Draco pulled his cloak around himself and headed for the door.

"I—I've got something I need to take care of, but maybe," Draco paused. "Maybe you can come over one evening and we can… play chess."

Blaise's lips twitched in a smirk-like smile. "Sure. I'm free on Thursday."

Draco nodded. "See you then."

The white snow crunched under the weight of his black boot and Draco pulled the collar of his coat up around his ears. Fuck, it was cold out here. But he could bear it because it wouldn't be long before he had Granger warming his bed for him and he could sink himself down into her hot cunt, forgetting the bitterness outside and indulge himself in the soft sweetness he had been denied for so long.

The thought alone was enough to make his blood thicken and hot arousal to surge through him in a downward direction.

Easy boy, I know; she's close.

The woods were quiet, the layer of snow muffling any sounds and made the tall trees look even darker under their dusting of white. It seemed as if the world had stopped moving under the blanket of snow, like for just a few moments everything was where it was supposed to be, still, quiet, and cold.

"Draco, you've only just woken up."

"Yeah and I've been wasting time here listening to you bitch. How long have I been here anyways?"

Blaise faltered, mouth opening and closing.

Draco's heart skipped a beat. "How much time, Blaise? How long have I been here?"

Blaise gripped his clipboard. "Your wounds were extensive and without knowing what kind of creature or curse made them we were limited as to how we could treat them until you woke up—"

"GODDAMN IT, BLAISE!"

"It's Christmas Eve."

Christmas Eve. Christmas *fucking* Eve.

Draco had been here for two days.

And Granger was still out there, getting further away with every passing second.

Tick. Tick. Tick. He really fucking hated that noise.

Draco shot to his feet, ignoring the residual pain in his leg and towered over Blaise, glaring down at him. "Give me my wand. And get the *fuck* out of my way."

Blaise met his gaze steadily. "You are hurt, Draco. You need rest; you need to heal."

"I need—"

"You can't keep going on like this. I mean look at yourself!" Blaise's voice rose and Draco wasn't sure if he had ever heard his friend shout like this before. He wasn't exactly *wrong* either; Draco felt like shit. His leg was throbbing under the new skin and even though he had been healed, he was far from a healthy condition. "Like it or not, you are one of my patients now—"

"I am the Dark Lord's servant," Draco snarled. "Not one of your fucking patients."

Blaise's expression fell flat. "So, what? You're going to knock my face in then? Going to curse me? Going to kill me?"

He didn't want to hurt Blaise. The shock of that fact rocked through him. For the first time in weeks, Draco didn't want to see the person in front of him screaming in pain. Fuck, he didn't want any of this. He didn't want to be out there, fighting werewolves or trudging through the cold and turning his wand on anyone who stood in his way.

All he wanted was her. How much longer was he going to have to keep searching? Another week? Month? *Year?*

He'd do it. No matter how much he hated this, he wasn't going to stop. What else did he have to do now? Serve the Dark Lord? It was this same exact shit and at least this way

His body hovered over hers for a moment while Draco stared down at her, desire darkening his eyes until they were only ringed by silver. She could smell the crisp mint of him all around her and after not being able to smell anything for days Hermione took a deep breath in, wanting more of it. All of it.

Draco growled and his lips found hers, colliding and crashing in a crushing kiss. Somehow, in the madness of all of this, Draco still retained his control. His lips moved against hers, tongue darting out to lick at them as he pushed her head back, deepening the kiss. Hermione felt herself kissing him back. And she didn't stop.

Oh God, it was everything. Everything she had wanted, everything she had missed, everything that she had given up and now it was here and Draco was *here.* Her mouth opened to allow his tongue to slither in and Draco gave a visceral groan.

Hermione whimpered, her lower half moving against his body as he pushed her thighs open, pressing her down into the mattress and his leg up in between hers, pinning her hips open.

His teeth caught her bottom lip and pressed down, soft at first, but when she let out a high moan they bit down harder and hot, pleasurable pain flooded through her, washing over her and settling in a warm pool at her center.

Draco shoved his chest against hers, resting his weight on her and holding her down while his other hand dove into her hair, clutching at the soft curls and twisting them in his fingers. Hermione grabbed at him, his sides, his back, his arms. She had the Draco in her head to keep her company, but she had never been able to touch him like she wanted to. Feeling Draco's body again was enough to block out any other thought and the cool calmness seeped into her mind like it always did, cooling the overworked and overheated parts of her brain.

God, it was just like before. The same lightness and bubbles rose up in her like they had never left. Her body sunk back against the bed and she dug her nails into Draco's shirt, feeling the soft fabric like she had so many times before. He groaned from deep within, as he had been holding it in this whole time, just waiting for her to be back under him.

And she had been waiting too.

Draco's hand on her thigh slid to the inside and Hermione shivered, inhaling sharply through her nose as his fingers brushed over the mark she had kept as a reminder of him.

For him. And for herself.

She felt his lips slightly twist into a familiar smirk and his tongue plunged into her mouth again as his touch grazed back over it. Hermione arched her back, pushing her

hips up and Draco squeezed her inner thigh, making the bruise and bite flare to life with pain.

And in that small moment of clarity, everything since the last time he touched it came rushing back. She had been alone, so completely alone, because *he* had left her there. He said he would come for her and she had waited, alone in her room, she had cried and *waited* for him. And he hadn't come. He hadn't even written like Ron or Harry had—

Harry!

Hermione pushed Draco back, her chain clanking loudly with the movement.

"What? What's wrong?" Draco asked, grey eyes searching her face, hands frozen on her too warm body.

"Where's Harry?" The words tumbled out of her mouth before she could phrase them in a slightly less jarring way.

Draco's brows pulled together. "Potter?" His lids lowered over his eyes and his voice dripped with venom as he said, "Why are you asking about *him?*"

"What did you do with him?" Her voice shook slightly. How could she have forgotten? Draco had been turning in Muggleborns to the Ministry in his spare time. As a *hobby*. She didn't want to think about what he would do if he found Harry. "If you found me, you must have seen him too. I was out there looking for him—"

Draco threw himself back off of her with a fluid grace. Hermione slid against the soft sheets and pushed herself up again, but without Draco on top of her, she didn't like only wearing only the undergarments he had put her in. They were familiar, she used to have a bra just like…

Oh goodness. These *were* hers. Draco had kept them.

A swarm of rushed thoughts surged forward, sparking questions that Hermione thought she might know the answer to, but wasn't sure she was ready to admit to herself. Or him.

She pulled her legs up, wrapping her arms around them and tried to cover herself. Her ankle twinged in discomfort. Maybe she had hurt it more than she realized; she had hit her head rather hard after all. She could be imagining it or maybe she was still weak, but the chain around her wrist felt even heavier now.

Hermione watched the muscles in Draco's back ripple and tense under his shirt. Was he about to start yelling at her like he had after the first time they had woken up together? She felt just as exposed as she had then, even if she was slightly more clothed. Was Draco always this grumpy in the mornings? Was it even morning? The curtains were drawn and the only light came from the lamps and sconces on the walls.

"You're the one that broke it, not me," Blaise said noncommittally as the bones in Draco's finger snapped back into place and welded together. The dark bruises over his fingers faded and his skin looked like a parody of a rainbow as it faded from purple to red to green to yellow finally to his normal shade of pale white. Draco flexed his hand and tightened it into a fist. Still worked.

"That fucking hurt," he grumbled, making sure he did not sound thankful at all. He could see the tight expression on Blaise's face as his eyes darted up to Draco's mark again. Blaise's family wasn't like his. He wasn't a legacy, he got to actually pursue the things he wanted.

Draco had never even thought of a career past his daydreams of playing Quidditch professionally. And even those had ended the summer he returned home after his fourth year. He was Malfoy and that meant something. Draco looked down at the ring on his hand. His family's signet sealed his fate almost as much as the mark. Malfoys had a place in society and a name to uphold. If anyone ever found out he was fucking a Mudblood for more than a warm place to come he would be ostrasized, disowned.

Possibly killed.

Still, Andromeda had done it.

He hoped she got out again.

Draco looked down at his arm. He never would.

He'd just have Blaise put him back together again until one day Draco would die in his Master's service. How many times had Blaise already set his hand? How many times had Blaise brewed him potions to sober him up or cure his hangovers? How many times had Blaise just sat with him, in the dark of their dorm, while Draco stared at the black wood wall, slowly building white marble ones in his head?

"We will need to keep applying this over the next couple of days to make sure that it heals internally. Werewolf wounds are cursed so—"

Draco rubbed his hand over his thigh, feeling the line of fresh, hairless skin there. "I know. There's nothing to be done about the scar."

"I'm sorry—"

"Stop," Draco ordered, his voice lowering. "It's done." He swung his legs over the side of the bed and pulled his trousers on before pulling his outer shirt and brigandine on.

"You really should stay—"

"No, I need to go."

"They're *not* staying in line," Blaise countered. "That's the problem."

Cold panic gripped his insides. What was happening to them? He knew the curse was affecting him more strongly now and it took longer and longer for his magic to come back, but it came back. It always came back.

Blaise moved closer to Draco. "Is it your father?"

Draco exhaled sharply. "No."

Blaise shifted the clipboard to his other arm. "Is it… you know…"

Glaring up at his *friend* , Draco curled his lip. " *No*. And don't ask about him."

"Okay," Blaise said quickly. "But, Draco—" Draco sighed heavily. "Whoever it is… *whatever* it is—"

"Shut the fuck up, Blaise, okay?" Draco leaned back against the bed again. "I know. I fucking know."

Blaise stood there for a moment and Draco closed his eye, hoping that Blaise wouldn't push it. He didn't want to fucking hear it. He didn't want to tell Blaise what he was doing. How it was the only thing that helped when the burned out hole in his chest became too much and not even the liquor could fill it up. He didn't want Blaise to feel sorry for him.

He didn't want anything but Granger.

"I need to get some Essence of Dittany for your leg, but now that we know it's not the same curse as whatever affected your arm, I should be able to fix the rest of you fairly easily."

Blaise spent the next few minutes alternating between casting small healing charms and sprinkling drops of dittany over Draco's leg as the skin pulled itself together. He looked down at the deep gouge, all dark blood and red meat. He was looking *inside* himself and fuck, he was disgusting.

The skin closed over; soft, pink, and swollen.

Another scar. Fucking great.

Blaise made quick work of his face and Draco blinked a few times as his eye opened up again, making the room even brighter than before. The walls didn't look any better out of two eyes than they did one and now that his leg could support his weight, he wanted to walk out of here and never look back. Fuck this place and everyone in it.

Except Blaise. He should be nicer to Blaise. But Blaise was being an annoying little shit right now.

No. He wasn't. He was trying to help him and *Draco* was being an annoying little shit. Not even a little one. He was being a gigantic fucking—

"FUCK!"

There was still so much she didn't know. And too much she already did.

Draco stood up, clenching his hands into fists at his side.

It felt like one of them was gripping her heart.

Hermione reached out for the blanket, scrambling across the large bed as Draco turned swiftly back around. His face was pale with rage, making the dark circles stand out even more.

"Why didn't you wait for me?"

Out of everything he could ask, that was the last question Hermione was expecting as she lay huddled under the covers in his bed.

It wasn't fair. It wasn't a fair question to ask her, not when she needed answers herself about what he had been doing all this time as a Death Eater for his *Lord*.

The lion in her chest flexed its claws. "You left me first, remember?"

Lightning flashed in his storm cloud eyes. "I—" Draco clamped his mouth shut for a moment before opening it and roaring, "I saved your fucking life, Granger!"

Hermione's chest heated up from the fire that was flaring inside her, burning brighter with every word Draco *yelled* at her.

"I didn't need you to save me! Not then and certainly not now!"

"Oh because Potter was doing such a good job," he sneered. "You were two days from death when I found you."

"When you kidnapped me, you mean!"

Draco just stared at her, silent and still, so Hermione glared back with as much ferocity as she could manage. Why, after all this time, was it *still* so hard to tell what he was thinking? It would have been easier to get blood from a stone than it was to get the honest truth from Draco Malfoy.

"I didn't *kidnap* you."

"Explain this then!" Hermione held her wrist up, shaking it in his direction. "Sorry, but I don't think *guests* normally wake up in chains!"

He crossed his arms over his chest, blue veins visible on his forearms and Hermione noticed he kept the left one tucked carefully against his torso. It wasn't like she didn't know what was branded there, but as always, Draco tried to hide it from her. Nothing, absolutely nothing, had changed.

And that, she thought, was what hurt the most.

She scoffed and turned her face away from him, not wanting to look at him. Especially since she couldn't keep her eyes from roving over his body.

Draco struck out, grabbing her arm and hauling her across the bed towards him.

"Let *go* of me!" Hermione shouted, struggling. "Let me GO!" She kicked out her legs, trying to make it difficult for him to move her, but Draco seemed to have no problem pulling her around to fit his whims and the sheets were soft enough that she easily slid across them.

He held her arm tightly in his fist and pulled the cuff up to his mouth. For a moment Hermione thought he was going to kiss it, but then she heard a faint shadow of a whisper and the cuff fell off.

Hermione stared at it on the bed in front of her. Guests might not wake up in chains, but prisoners didn't get set free either. So what was she to him then?

Draco threw her back and Hermione landed heavily against the softest pillows she had ever felt in her life. She felt them mold to the shape of her head and neck, supporting her perfectly. Charmed. They must be charmed. Was anything here *not* magical?

Of course not. Draco was as Pureblooded as they came, not like Ron and his family who were more than willing to welcome in Muggle traditions and incorporate non-magical items into their everyday lives. Ron had a hard enough time adjusting to living in the tent and look where that ended up? Draco wouldn't have lasted a day.

Not that Draco would ever have gone with her, Harry, and Ron. He had tried to take her from them before and now, he had finally gotten her. Right where he always wanted her—strapped to his bed and completely alone and no one knew where she was.

Only him.

Hermione glared at him. " *Don't* touch me."

The tendons in Draco's neck tightened and twitched and Hermione was almost sure he was going to pin her down on the bed by the dark look in his eyes. Her lower stomach tightened, but not in fear. What was *wrong* with her? Why did she almost want him to do just that? She shouldn't. She should be screaming and shouting and demanding he let her go. So why was she sitting here on his bed, staring up at him and watching the blacks of his eyes grow as he gazed back down at her?

Hermione blinked and gave a small cough, wincing as the effort of it burned her throat.

Draco was suddenly moving, taking long strides to the door at the far end of the room and pulled it open roughly.

Hermione's jaw dropped open as a familiar ginger fur with bottle brush tail darted inside the room. No… it couldn't be… Crookshanks ran across the rug and jumped up onto the bed, already purring by the time he got to her. She reached out to him without thinking, picking him up and pulling him close to her, burying her face in his thick, orange fur.

"Greyback," Draco rasped and watched Blaise stop moving instantly. Except for his mouth, which fell open in shock.

" *Fenrir Greyback* did this to you?" he asked breathlessly.

Draco smirked. It hurt. He did it anyway. "You should see him. Actually, you probably don't want to. The lower half of his face is gone."

Blaise's clipboard hit the floor.

Draco rolled his eyes—no, *eye.* The other one was still swollen shut. He hoped Blaise would get on with it soon. "Well, not completely."

Looking down at his hand, Draco could make out the exact outline of the silver brass knuckles bruised across his fingers. "He'll be fine."

Blaise said nothing. Draco felt the heavy silence creeping across the vast expanse of his wall-less mind. There was still some rubble left on the ground. He could rebuild the walls. In time. But right now he had something more important to do than stack up shards of broken walls in his head. He had to find Granger.

"Aren't you supposed to heal people in here?" Draco snapped, pulling Blaise out of his thoughts.

Blaise picked up the clipboard from the floor, straightening the papers on it. "Yes, but—"

"Get to it!" Draco snapped his fingers and grit his teeth against the pain that shot up his arm. "I've got a job to do and it doesn't include laying about in a hospital bed."

Blaise pulled his wand out of a pocket of his Healer robes and then he stopped, hesitating.

"What now?" Draco snarled.

Blaise pursed his lips. "When you came in, I ran the diagnostic charm on you—"

"Blaise, now is not the time to tell me to cut back on the drinking. I know, okay? I will. I just—"

"What happened to your arm?"

The muscles in Draco's arm jumped and tightened, betraying his stoic expression. "Nothing."

Blaise's brows fell heavily over his eyes, casting them in shadow. "Just like your leg, if you tell me what happened I have a better chance of treating you correctly."

"I don't need treatment."

"The nerves in your arm disagree."

"Whisky helps them stay in line."

Not that Malfoys didn't have private rooms, but he would *request* Blaise in here so he could admire his handiwork.

Actually, no. He didn't like to see what he'd done. He liked to drink to forget. And he didn't *really* want to hurt Blaise.

Well, only a little.

"None of your fucking business."

"You know I am supposed to notify the Department of Magical Law Enforcement when someone comes in in a state like this, but…" He glanced down at Draco's mark again then quickly tore his eyes away, pretending to read over his clipboard.

"But they can't do shit since I have this, can they?" Draco was surprised at how bitter his own voice sounded. For a moment he was glad that he was here, getting to talk to Blaise. Even if it was about this. He hadn't seen him in months and Blaise had always been the one Draco vented to in school. He had always been his… friend.

Blaise's dark eyes slid back to the mark and his shoulders dropped, adopting a professional air for formality, but Draco could notice the tension rolling through him. Blaise was nervous around the mark. Around *him.*

Maybe they weren't friends anymore.

"Just tell me what happened so I can treat you and you can go back to whatever put you in here."

Draco leaned his head back and stared at the ceiling with its too bright light that did nothing to temper the gross green color painted on it as well. Still, it was better than the cold darkness and broken walls in his head. His Granger was gone and it felt just as empty as his chest did now.

"Werewolf."

Blaise's dark eyes went wide.

Draco rolled his eyes. "It's a waning crescent, closest to the new moon you can get. And he didn't bite me."

He had to say, he was a little impressed. Blaise took the information in stride and checked a few things off on the clipboard before looking over the top of it back at Draco. "Just cla—hands? Nails?"

Draco swallowed and nodded. Fuck, his face hurt. His hand too. As soon as he got out of here he was going to down a bottle of Ogden's because right now the only thing keeping him together was the bloody wrappings on his leg. That, and the fact that Greyback was worse off than he was.

She gasped, tears welling up in her eyes as Hermione held her cat close to her, hugging him tighter than she ever had before. She thought she'd never see him again, but somehow, miraculously, he was here! Crookshanks alternated between meowing and purring, pushing his flatted face into her shoulder which only made Hermione hug him tighter. This shouldn't be possible, but it *was.*

"At least you're happy to see *him."*

Hermione glanced up to see Draco standing in the doorway, hand on the door handle and a scowl on his face. For the smallest moment, Hermione saw pain and longing flash across his expression before it once again returned to an emotionless mask.

Something in her brain snapped into place. Draco had Crookshanks; which meant that he had gone to her house. And it must have been before her parents left for Australia where they were supposed to take Crookshanks with them. Draco *had* come for her. Just one day after she had left.

They had been so close, so why did he feel further away than ever now?

She looked back up at him, wanting to say… something. She wasn't sure what, but she didn't want to leave it like this. She wasn't happy with him, at all, but… the fact that he had brought Crookshanks here meant… well it had to have meant something, didn't it?

He had taken the chain off. Maybe… maybe she was missing something? It certainly felt like she was. None of this made sense and she wanted answers. She could ask him why he had Crookshanks. Why he had brought her here, and why he had chained her up only to remove it as soon as she was awake. Why was he such a puzzle?

Hermione opened her mouth and then gasped, pulling her cat up to her chest as Draco pointed his wand directly at the pair of them. With a quick twist of his wrist large bars shot up from the base of the bed on all four sides, sliding and locking into place with the canopy with a metallic thud.

A cage. He had locked her in a *cage.* Not a guest. Not a prisoner.

An animal.

A *pet.*

"Welcome home," Draco snarled, " *Hermione."*

The door slammed behind him and the room was cast into darkness.

That bitch. That goddamn stuck up motherfucking bitch. That fucking Mud—

Draco turned the bottle back up again, swallowing down another mouthful before slamming it down on his desk again, gasping and wincing against the harsh burn in his chest. It would fade. The more he drank, the easier it got and the whisky moved in filling up all the shattered little cracks inside him that the fucking *cunt* in his bed had opened up again when she shoved him away.

She hadn't even let him explain.

She *never* let him explain. Not after she saw his mark and went fucking running off to Dumbledore; not when Weasley burst in and tried to take her away, and especially not after the tower.

She had pushed him away then too.

That's why he had to *imperius* her in the first place! She wasn't listening and he just had to get her safe and then he could tell her everything. But she thought she was *so* smart and always jumped to conclusions and fucking assumed they were always right because she was so bloody brilliant. Salazar fucking Slytherin, he hated her.

She couldn't just fucking listen to him, just believe him, *trust* him…

"*I could* ***never*** *trust you.*"

Draco snarled and swiped the bottle off his desk again, turning it up and choking down as much as he could before he felt like he was going to be sick.

This was her fault. Her fucking fault all of this had happened. If she would have waited on him, if she would have come with him, if she would have fucking *trusted* him—none of this would have happened! If Granger hadn't left him when he was goddamn calling out her name, he wouldn't have written to Bellatrix and that night would have never happened and he wouldn't have spent weeks on the island when he should have been with her.

Draco cast his eyes over to the door and drank again.

He should be with her right now, making her moan his name out like a dirty whore. He should be sliding into her, telling her how much he missed her, how glad he was that she was here and in return Granger should touch him, running her hands over his body and whispering that she loved him and had never really wanted to go, never actually wanted to leave him. He should have her on her knees thanking him, *profusely,* for spending this whole time looking for her and finding her and bringing her here where he could take care of her and keep her safe from the war outside.

dormmate was back in full force. "I think you need to tell me what the fuck happened to you so I can finish saving your fucking life."

Draco ripped the white blanket back. His skin was almost the same shade, pale and bloodless, but that didn't stop him from shoving his arm up; baring the ugly black brand under Blaise's stupid fucking face.

"I don't have to tell you shit. Now where is my wand?!"

He wanted out of here. He knew where Granger was recently spotted and he had his wolves back. This was the closest he had been to her in months and he wasn't about to let Blaise stand in his way because he wanted to play at Healer and actually got to have a future and all Draco got was this fucking mark on his arm and another scar to add to his collection.

And Granger. He would get Granger too.

As soon as Blaise stopped being a dick and finished fucking fixing him, that was.

Blaise stood calmly beside the bed, but firmly asked, "What happened, Draco?"

"Nothing happened." When Blaise didn't respond, Draco snapped, "Where are my fucking clothes?"

Blaise opened the drawer in the table beside the bed. Draco snatched out his white undershirt first. It was thin, but it covered the pale scars. He was more worried about people seeing them than the mark now. It didn't matter anymore. Everyone knew who and what he was now and, in the months since Dumbledore's death and the fall of the Ministry, being branded by the Dark Lord was an honor and something to be envied.

He had even heard of some people trying to *glamour* the dark mark onto themselves. Fucking idiots. They didn't know the half of what carrying this mark meant.

Grabbing his trousers, Draco hissed in pain when he bent his leg to pull them on. He wasn't sure if he was seeing things or if the red shadow was growing larger under the gauze. Maybe he should let Blaise heal him. His hand fucking hurt too; Draco had thrown it into enough walls to know when it was broken and looked down at it and his last finger was bending in the wrong direction. Fuck.

Draco gave up on the trousers. It was useless and the left leg of them was torn to shreds. He threw them to the ground and gingerly placed his hand over the bandage on his leg. It was warm and when he pulled his bruised hand away there was a thin coat of red over his palm.

"Want to tell me what happened now?" Blaise sounded so fucking smug and if Draco's hand wasn't already broken, he'd put Blaise in a bed right next to him.

you for coming." There was the sound of hands clasping together roughly and then Draco moved to the side and Hermione's lip fell from in between her teeth as Blaise Zabini walked into the room.

He looked just as surprised to see her as she was sure she looked to see him. The whites of his eyes expanded as they popped from his head, staring straight at her in disbelief.

Hermione shifted a little, wanting to pull her legs up close to her, but she didn't want to show any weakness right now. She was a lion in a snake pit and couldn't afford to take a false step. So instead, Hermione shook back her curls from her face and stared right back into Zabini's black eyes.

She was a little thrown to find there was no malice in them. But then again, he had never really been one of the Slytherins who made fun of her, Harry and Ron. That had been Draco, Pansy, and Theo. Blaise Zabini had always just rolled his eyes and went back to his notes. He had never even cared enough to make fun of them.

Hermione watched as he slowly moved into the room, clearly nervous. Draco shoved him further in and slammed the door back, muttering as he locked it with twists of this wrist. This time, however, he did not pocket his wand, but kept it in his hand.

Zabini finally turned away from her and back to Draco. "You said you had something you wanted me to look at."

Draco stayed perfectly still. "Yes."

Scoffing, Zabini waved his hand in Hermione's direction. "That's not a something—that's Hermione Granger!"

Well, at least *he* thought she was human. And if Draco brought Zabini here then he must trust him. Maybe hearing that from a friend would jog something in Draco's clearly muddled mind and he would remember that he couldn't keep her here like a pet.

"I know who she is, Blaise." Draco's voice held a hint of a warning in it.

Zabini looked back over to her and Hermione met his eyes without hesitation. Before she could say or do anything, he turned back to Draco. "Draco, what did you do?" he hissed.

Draco bristled slightly. "Nothing. She was like that when I found her."

Like what? Hermione looked between the two men quickly. Was… was there something wrong with her?

"Why do I find that hard to believe?" Zabini sneered.

Draco gripped his wand tighter. "I didn't hurt her, Blaise. I saved her."

Saved? He thought he *saved* her?! She was about to protest, but they seemed more interested in shouting at each other than listening to what she had to say.

"Yeah, looks like she *really* wants to be here!"

Draco stepped up to Zabini.

"You've got her chained to the bed for Salazar's sake!"

The chain. Hermione felt heat rush into her face at the fact that someone had seen her in this position. As much as she wanted to cover it up and hide her face, she wouldn't cower. Just because she was chained didn't mean she was giving up or giving in to Draco.

Not until he climbed back in the bed again tonight and her weakness got the better of her.

"It's not what you think—"

"It's exactly what you think," Hermione retorted and Draco swung his head in her direction, glaring coldly at her.

She returned it with all the heat and fire of her embarrassment. *She* had nothing to feel ashamed of, this was all *his* doing. Let him feel it then.

Draco clenched his jaw, biting back what she was sure he actually wanted to say to her, but wouldn't in front of Zabini. Or maybe he just didn't want to make this any worse. It was impossible to tell and she felt like everything she had learned about Draco last year was suddenly… wrong. Or maybe he was.

"Shut up, Granger," he growled.

Zabini glared harshly at Draco. "Going to get her a gag to match that chain?"

Hermione stopped the gasp in her throat as Draco's mouth twitched. She remembered him joking about gagging her back in the Restricted Section. Goodness, that seemed like a lifetime ago. Still, the memory made something deep in her tighten in response.

"I brought you here for a reason, Blaise. She's hurt. And sick."

"She's not the only one," Zabini grumbled and Draco narrowed his eyes back at him, the muscles in his arm tightening into hard lines.. Hermione looked quickly between the two friends. There was something there she was missing. This wasn't normal banter; Zabini was… *upset* with Draco. Maybe she would be able to use that to her advantage.

Hermione coughed loudly, making it sound worse than it really was. Her ploy worked. Zabini's head swung in her direction and he started towards her, pulling out his wand. Hermione stiffened and glanced over at Draco who was watching her with storming grey eyes. She expected him to tell her it was okay or explain why he had brought Zabini here, but he didn't give her as much as a small nod to reassure her.

"May I?" Zabini was beside her, motioning with his wand towards her head. Oh. Right. She had almost forgotten hitting her head in the woods. Hermione scooted away from the edge of the bed a little, pulling on the hem of Draco's shirt nervously. "I just want to make sure Draco didn't make anything worse by trying to heal you himself."

W-what?

"Should have called me as soon as he got you here," Zabini shook his head, sighing a little. "Open and say 'Ah'."

Hermione was so shocked that she did as he asked and opened her mouth, giving a small "Ahh."

Draco inhaled quickly and Hermione closed her mouth back, glancing over at him. If possible, his expression seemed to have gotten colder.

"Hmm." Zabini tapped his chin. "Hold still."

Hermione sat up straight and locked eyes with Draco who was still standing at the foot of the bed, unmoving. Zabini was muttering softly and Hermione could feel a small burst of warmth on her forehead, spreading over her scalp making it tingle.

Draco's eyes never left hers. Her lips parted and she took a small breath, feeling the warmth begin to fade and a cool chill passed down her spine, making her quiver. Of course, Draco noticed. The hard expression on his face softened and he blinked slowly, almost in relief.

"How does your head feel now?"

Hermione was jarred by Zabini's question and touched her forehead which no longer felt swollen or sore.

"Much—much better, thank you."

He nodded. "Of course."

Hermione glanced back at Draco. The softness was gone, solidified back into unmoving marble.

"Her ankle too," he added. She was surprised, in a way, that he brought it up. With her ankle healed, he had no excuse to keep her in the bed. Well, no excuse other than he liked seeing her in it. And honestly, that might be enough for him to keep her chained to it indefinitely. Hermione looked back up at him, hoping for another glimpse behind the mask, but Draco was staring down at her leg now.

Hermione moved her ankle so it was closer to Zabini who hmm'd again and waved his wand over it.

"Sprained."

"I was able to run on it though."

Hermione carefully placed her ankle through the boxers, pulling them over her legs and up around her waist then started on the shirt, untucking her curls from the back of it and adjusting it as best as she could.

"Okay," Hermione curled her knees up. "I'm done."

Draco turned back around and took a moment to take in her appearance. He looked drained and despondent as he walked back towards her. She glanced up at his face, watching the fine features shift ever so slightly as his eyes moved up her legs, over her hips and then to her chest and neck before landing on her face again when he stopped at the edge of the bed.

Hermione's head was tilted almost all the way back. Yes. Draco had definitely gotten taller.

His hair was shorter too, cropped closer on the sides now. It looked good on him, but then again, Hermione couldn't imagine what *wouldn't* look good on someone like Draco.

"It suits you." No smile accompanied the words, but Hermione knew him well enough to know the way his eyes drifted back down to her body again meant that it was more than a polite compliment.

She could feel herself blushing as his gaze lingered on her thighs and Hermione pulled at the boxers, scooting them down her legs a little. Draco looked like whatever thought he was enjoying had been stolen from him and let out a low breath.

"Draco—"

He didn't look at her. Instead he grabbed her wrist and locked the cuff of the chain around it again.

"No!" Hermione grabbed at it, knowing it was useless, but not able to stop herself from fighting back. She pulled on it, but the clasp was sealed and there was no getting it off now. "Draco, wait!"

He did not spare another word on her before walking over to the door and running his wand over it.

Steeling herself against whomever was about to walk through the door, Hermione let her Gryffindor courage roar in her. She took a deep breath, held it, and sat up straight. She had faced down Death Eaters, had broken into the Ministry, and survived on the run for months with little more than her wand and wits. And even without her wand, she was still Hermione Granger fully capable of taking care of herself.

Her heart beat in a faint echo of *Draco* in her tense chest.

Hermione bit her lip as the door swung open and Draco's tall frame stopped her from seeing whoever had come to see her. She listened to his deep voice as he said, "Thank

This wasn't Draco.

This was Malfoy.

"I won't fucking tell you again, Granger," he snapped. "Put the fucking clothes on or I'll dress you myself."

Hermione's hands closed into fists around the shirt. What choice did she have? None. Draco had taken every single choice away from her ever since he had placed the *imperius* curse last year. What choice did she have when he left her on the ground? What choice did she have when she was crying every day for weeks in her room? What choice did she have when Death Eaters attacked the wedding and she had to run?

None. None of this had been her choice. None of this had been what she wanted. What she wanted was him. Draco. Even with the mark as long as—

"I swear on Salazar's watery grave—" he growled and took another step towards her.

Hermione swiftly gathered up the shirt and boxers, knowing how quick his Seeker skills made him.

"I'll put them on," she mustered, forcing herself to sound harsh.

Draco's eyes narrowed.

Hermione waited, but Draco just continued to stare at her and she waited for him to look away. It was like being back in fifth year all over again. "Turn around!"

Just because he had seen her before, didn't mean he got to watch her dress.

For the first time since he had walked back into the room, she thought she saw a ghost of a smirk on his face. Maybe her Draco was still somewhere in there, hidden underneath black robes and a Death Eater mask.

"I mean it, Malfoy!"

The playfulness disappeared immediately and Hermione stifled a gasp at what she had done. She hadn't even meant to, it just… slipped out because she had been thinking about it and reading it on the shirt over and over! Before she could correct herself or tell him it was a mistake, Draco turned on his heel. The muscles in his back tightened against his shirt and he faked nonchalance as he leaned against the post of the bed, watching Crookshanks lick his paw on the chaise.

"Hurry up." It barely even sounded like him. The voice was hollow. Empty.

For one moment she thought about trying to run. Get to the door and maybe she could try and break the handle? She didn't think so though. And with her ankle hurt she wasn't even sure she *could* get to the door. At least not without Draco catching her first.

"What?" Zabini sounded upset again.

Hermione cleared her throat, ignoring the tickle in it. "When he was chasing me—"

"You fucking chased her? Ran her down on a sprained ankle?!" Zabini was shouting and Hermione was worried that Draco might curse him or hit him based on the fury in his eyes. He wasn't hiding behind a mask now. Maybe he only reserved that for her now.

" *I* didn't tell her to run."

"And I suppose that justifies it? That she deserves to be hurt because she ran from you?"

Draco sniffed and stared down at the empty spot in the bed next to her.

"Fucking idiot." Zabini focused his attention on her ankle and Hermione felt the same warmth encircling it, moving up her calf. It grew in intensity, almost to a burning and Hermione gasped a little, wincing and closed her eyes.

Suddenly it was gone. The charm was unintentionally pulled quickly, uncurling from around her ankle.

"What the fuck?!"

Draco had Zabini's wrist in his hand and was pushing him back from the side of the bed.

"You're hurting her," he growled.

"I was healing her!" Zabini protested. "She damaged the ligaments—*running* away from you!"

Hermione leaned forward. "Draco—"

"You don't know what the fuck you're talking about."

"Draco—"

"She didn't run once she knew it was me!"

Zabini snorted. "You mean once you took your Death Eater mask off?"

Draco's entire body stiffened and Hermione saw his wand shaking in his hand. Zabini glanced nervously down at it too, twisting his own around in his hand to get a better hold on it. Draco was barely restraining himself and she was worried if Zabini said anything else Draco might lose control.

The thought scared her.

"Draco," Hermione whispered his name. "Please."

He looked back at her, something brightly painful flashing in his eyes. Like a freshly sharpened knife.

It disappeared deep inside him.

Hermione wanted to follow it down, to find what Draco was hiding. Or at least where he was hiding. The metal mask wasn't the only one he wore, there was the marble one too.

Draco let go of Zabini and took a few steps back, running his hand up through his hair and taking a deep breath.

"This is the last time I'm helping you," Zabini snapped.

"Fine." Draco's voice was flat again, emotionless.

Zabini looked Draco up and down shaking his head. "When you get your ass handed to you by another werewolf or worse—"

Werewolf?! What was Draco doing with a werewolf?

"He got the worst of it," Draco snarled, a cold smirk twisting on his face. "Trust me."

Hermione blanched. Draco had fought a werewolf… and won?

"I do," Zabini said in a low voice. "And that's the problem."

"Must be nice if your best friend being an asshole is your biggest problem."

Zabini rolled his eyes and glanced over to Hermione, his gaze lingering on her for a moment. "I'm done here."

She had the distinct impression that Blaise Zabini was saying two things at once. Hermione nodded in understanding.

He tucked his wand into his jacket and carefully moved around Draco who looked like he was using all his energy just to breathe calmly right now.

Hermione's heart ached. Draco had always been rough around the edges, but now he was practically… corroded. She had been holding onto the memory of him for so long, building it up in her mind, letting herself dream of him. Even keeping the mark on her thigh in hopes that… that… she wasn't sure what she had been hoping for all this time, but it hadn't been this.

Maybe just that it had been real, for a few short moments, Draco had been hers. Not his Father's heir, not his Master's servant, not anything but the man who loved her and let her love him back.

But the person in front of her now was not the Draco who had held her in that big white bed. Or the one who had bent her over the chaise. Or the one who had shoved her against the shelves of the Restricted Section and opened up a part of her she hadn't wanted to close back.

Because it had been Draco. It had always been Draco.

But this wasn't. Not anymore.

"Wait!"

Her mind raced, trying to find an answer in the short amount of time it took Draco to finish crossing the room. He stopped at the side of the bed and Hermione pulled back when he reached out. But Draco's hands never touched her. They latched around Crookshanks and picked him up, walking him back over the the velvet chaise she had spent at least an hour staring at before and whispered, "You know you're not allowed on the bed," in a harsh tone before dropping Crookshanks somewhat unceremoniously onto the cushion.

In the few seconds it had taken him to remove Crookshanks, there was only one person who had popped into her head as her potential guest.

"Harry?" Hermione asked hopefully. Maybe Draco had brought him here too. Maybe he was just in another room, recuperating like she was and now Draco was going to let her see him! After spending every day and almost every hour with him over the last few months, Hermione couldn't stand the idea of losing Harry too. Not when Ron was gone and Draco was… whatever he was these days. But if he had saved Harry too then it proved that he was still the same man who had shouted that he loved her on the tower and tried to spare Dumbledore's life. And with Draco on their side, they might be able to figure out where more of the horcruxes were hidden.

Ron hadn't been entirely wrong when he said that Draco knew secrets about dark magic, even if he had only said it to hurt her.

However Draco's reaction to hearing Harry's name again stole the last little shred of hope she had. He looked over his shoulder, lip curling and eyes storming so violently that Hermione bunched the blanket up over herself farther and sunk down in the bed a few inches. Something dark slithered behind his stoic expression and Hermione felt a coil of nerves tighten around her stomach.

He looked more like a Death Eater in that second than she had ever thought possible.

She couldn't make sense of any of this. One moment Draco was brushing his fingers over her cheek and murmuring how much he missed her and the next he was just as cold and distant as he had been for the first six years she had known him. Cruel too. Where was the person who had smiled and told her he loved her in the Room of Requirement? Maybe he had never left that room because this Draco was… different. He looked familiar, but something had happened to the Draco she had fallen in love with.

Oh. Hermione blinked, watching him looking bored as he stared at the chain laying on the ground next to the bed. Hermione looked down at the metal links sitting softly on top of the thick rug. She should have known or recognized who he looked like. She had known him longer, after all.

hear him moving around outside the door anymore, she had pulled back the covers and taken a look at herself.

Even with the weak light she was able to see the dark outline of the bruised bite on her inner thigh. Why had she kept it? Draco might have said exactly what she wanted to hear, but what he had done was the opposite of that. She had been so confused, for so long. Reading about him in the Prophet and then Harry telling her what he said on the tower… It was like there were two people living Draco's life and she didn't know which one was really him.

The right thing to do would have been to move on, focus on the mission and on Harry and the war, but every night she had still traced her fingers over the tender skin, taking comfort in the familiar movement and pretending it was him. She would close her eyes against the tears she refused to cry when the guilt in her rose up, pushing them behind her eyes and let the heavy pump of her heart drown out the thoughts in her head.

He had seen it on her. Of course he had, there was no missing it when she was undressed and Draco had certainly not wasted any time getting her clothes off. But now he was giving her new ones? She spread the shirt out in front of her, reading his name on it again. It had to be too small for him now, especially with his recent… growth spurt.

On closer inspection she saw the faint outline of Slytherin house on it as well, faded over time, but still there. It must have been an old Quidditch shirt of his. And the shorts he tossed her… they weren't shorts at all. They were boxers. Also clearly not able to fit him anymore, but they weren't faded like the shirt was. These looked brand new. It didn't matter; they were still *his*.

"I'm not wearing your clothes."

Draco's expression did not waver.

"I want mine."

"No."

"Draco—"

"I said *no.*" His voice had an edge to it. "Now put those on. Someone is here to see you."

Hermione's heart skipped a beat and for just a moment her insides froze in fear. Who could possibly be *here* to see *her?* Draco wouldn't go to all of this trouble just to turn her over the Lord Voldemort. And how would he explain the fact that she was in his bed to his Master? Who else would be here to see *her* though? Her fingertips tingled, longing for a wand in them.

Zabini turned around at the sound of Hermione's voice.

She swallowed against the burning lump in her throat. "There's one more thing."

Hermione left Draco's eyes on her as she pulled up the boxers on her thigh. He took a quick step towards her as she moved the fabric higher, but stopped when she softly said, "This."

The bruised bite mark was just as clear as the day he had made it and Hermione felt her cheeks redden as she tried to explain, not able to look directly at Zabini's face, but also unable to miss the look of shock on it.

"T-there is a-a stasis charm on it-t, so you'll have to remove that first and then…" she trailed off.

Hermione tried to blink the line of water from her eyes and sucked down a shaking breath.

"Are you sure?" Zabini asked softly, like he knew what this meant to her. For her.

Hermione nodded, a few loose curls falling into her face. She was thankful for the small amount of cover they provided.

"Granger—" Draco's voice was so full of longing it echoed in the open crack in her chest.

She didn't look over at him. She couldn't. Because if she saw the flash of her Draco in those mist grey eyes…

"I'm sure."

She didn't even feel the warmth of this healing charm; she didn't feel anything but the aching emptiness where her heart was breaking all over again. Hermione doubted Zabini could do anything about that though.

"Thank you," she whispered.

Zabini nodded in response. "If—" He pursed his lips. "If *you* need my help, or… need… anything, just tell Draco. He knows where to find me."

Hermione wanted to cry. Why was he offering to help her? Zabini didn't know her, didn't care about her. And his friendship with Draco was obviously in a bad place. Still, he was willing to come back here if she wanted him to.

"We'll be fine." Draco was at her shoulder, fists at his sides. "We're together now and everything is going to be fine."

Zabini looked between them and Hermione was able to pick up on her worry on his face much easier than she was able to read Draco's.

"Thank you, Zabini," she said.

"Blaise. You can call me Blaise."

She wasn't going to be able to hold back the tears much longer.

"Well now that we're all best pals, it's time for you to go before this turns into a sleepover."

Blaise sneered at Draco.

"You're not braiding her hair. Or mine."

"Fuck you."

Draco smirked. "None of that, at least, not while you're still here."

Hermione didn't even get a chance to say goodbye before they were headed towards the door, Draco quickly locking it back as soon as Blaise was on the other side.

He looked back at her for a moment, opened his mouth and then closed it. Waiting a moment before finally speaking.

"Are you feeling better?"

She bit her lip and nodded. Her thigh felt strange without the tender bruise on it. She had gotten so used to the slight pain that now that it was gone, she missed it.

"Good." Draco's voice gave as little away as his face. "I—I'll go get you some more Pepper Up."

"Draco—"

"I'll be back."

"Draco—"

"I promise."

The door closed behind him and Hermione was cast into darkness as the lamps went out and the bars of the bed slid up from the base, locking into place against the canopy.

He shouldn't be here. He knew it. But there wasn't anywhere else he could go. Blaise was done with him, he knew that too. His one friend, his only friend, and Draco had pushed him away like he did everyone else in his life that dared to care about him. Hell, he hadn't spoken to his mother since Christmas morning. And his father… he couldn't even remember the last time they had a conversation. Not that Lucius had anything interesting to say these days, mostly just calling for an elf to bring him another bottle of wine.

Drunken lech.

And being this close to him was a temptation she wasn't sure how long she could stand up to.

Crookshanks stood up, walking out from under the balled up clothes. Hermione picked something green up. A shirt. Finally something she could wear! Briefly she was reminded of house elves and how an item of clothing bought their freedom from their masters. She turned the shirt around to slip it over her head, but stopped when she saw bold print across the back of the shirt spelling out MALFOY. She wasn't an elf and these clothes weren't going to set her free because they weren't really hers. Like everything else in here, they were *his*.

"Where are we going?" Hermione asked, dropping the shirt back to her lap as Crookshanks butted her hand with his head, wanting her attention back on him. If Draco was going to take her somewhere, she wanted to know exactly where and what the plan was. She had made that mistake before, in the Room of Requirement, she wasn't going to make it again. Until she had all her questions answered, she wasn't going to go anywhere or do anything Draco wanted her to.

Draco watched Crookshanks' movement with calculating eyes. "Put it on."

As much as she wanted to wear actual clothes, she wasn't about to be ordered around by him. Not until he told her what was going on. However, he had already shown he had no problem *making* her do what he wanted, but she didn't think he would put her under the *Imperius* curse just to get her to put on a shirt.

Draco had hardly said anything to her this morning and then stormed out like he always had. And this time, Hermione didn't have the luxury of going anywhere herself to cool off. Draco had seen to that as well. She was still upset and now *he* would have to deal with *her*. Hermione shoved the clothes off of her lap, letting Crookshanks jump back into it.

Draco finally met her gaze, glaring at her with eyes as hard as iron.

"Answer my question and I will consider it." Hermione did her best to keep her voice calm. Maybe they were leaving together? Maybe he had only brought her here because she was sick and now that she was doing better they could leave. Maybe the dark, haunted look in his eyes was just her imagination.

His jaw clenched and she watched a muscle in his neck jump. A few of her own contracted as well. At least they were not visible. There wasn't much she could hide from him in her current state.

Draco had the curtains drawn over the windows when he had left earlier and only pale stretches of light had slid in. When she thought enough time had passed and she couldn't

eyes as bright as mercury in the darkness. She didn't remember falling asleep, didn't remember tossing in the sheets or moving across them.

The only thing she remembered was waking up in Draco's arms, then pulling herself out of them before he could tighten them around her again.

"Get dressed." Draco threw clothes onto the bed, hitting Hermione in the face with them before they fell onto the blanket she had wrapped tightly around her, trying to do her best to cover herself up.

When he had wrenched the bedroom door open, the lamps along the wall had jumped to life, casting surprisingly bright light into the darkened room. Hermione had lifted her hand to shield her eyes when the clothes bounced off her face and landed on top of Crookshanks who had planted himself in her lap and not left all day.

She blinked, looking around the room she had been staring at for hours, but now without the bars around the bed. He must have taken them down when he turned on the lamps. Hermione glanced at Draco who was locking the door behind him, his wand moving in complicated patterns over the handle. So much effort just to keep her in here. Even if he didn't chain her back up, and even if he didn't put the bars of the cage back up, how was she ever going to break out of here without a wand?

Did she even want to leave? This room, yes; Draco… no. Hermione bit her lip as she heard the door seal itself with Draco's magic. If he was going to keep her locked away then… maybe? The war was still going on and she still wanted to fight and help Harry. She couldn't stay in Draco's bed forever. But the thought of it sent a shiver down her spine.

Draco stuck his wand in his pocket and turned back to the bed, crossing his arm over his chest. His face was like stone with not a single indication of the thoughts that lay behind it. His lids hung low over his eyes and he took long, languid steps towards the bed. Hermione didn't move, she merely stared up at him, hoping her own thoughts were half as well hidden as his. She had just spent the day laying in his bed, with his smell all around her. That combined with the never ending back and forth thoughts in her head has exhausted her.

Draco walked up the steps and shook his arm, trying to dispel some of the ache under the mark. It was a dull pain, sinking deep into the muscles there, pinching his veins and making the nerves throb.

If it didn't stop soon, he was going to *crucio* himself just to numb it.

He'd have to be careful though; Blaise said there was damage already done and he didn't have a Healer in his pocket anymore.

Bellatrix was intimately familiar with the curse though, maybe he would ask her. She was the one who taught him how to cast it after all.

Draco lifted his hand and pounded his fist on the door. When no one answered he chewed on the inside of his lip.

Merlin, he *hated* waiting.

He couldn't fucking believe he was here, of all places.

But he couldn't stand to be in the room with Granger for another second. He had barely made it into his study before his chest seized up and he pressed his hands hard into his desk, trying to breathe, counting to three, doing everything his fucking mum had taught him and none of it worked.

So why not try the other woman who he had learned from?

The door opened and Draco felt his spine harden in preparation. Shit, he should have gotten drunk before coming here.

"Nephew!" Bellatrix spread her arms wide in a welcoming gesture, tucking her chin down and laughing a little. Draco knew her familial tone and friendly stance was not an invitation to embrace. Bellatrix Lestrange was not a hugger.

And neither was he. Except with Granger. He had woken up with her nuzzling her face into his chest, her cute nose pressing against one of the puckered scars. Draco hissed in surprise. No one had touched them since… since her. The same jolt ran through them like the first time she touched them and Draco felt his blood heat up underneath them, pulsing along the white lines.

Granger let out a small sigh and he very carefully stretched his arm out, curling it around until it was pressed against her back. For just a little while, it felt like she wanted this, wanted him. Draco breathed in easily, allowing the thick smell of cinnamon and vanilla to fill his senses and carry him back to sleep. With his girl in his arms.

No, she wasn't just his girl, she was more than that now.

She was his only.

The only one who could drive him this fucking crazy that he wound up at the Lestranges' hoping to blow off some steam.

"Hello Bellatrix," Draco kept his voice as calm as possible. "We missed you at Christmas dinner."

It was a lie. His father had *refused* to allow his mother to invite the Lestranges and Draco had been all too happy not to have to deal with his mental aunt, her hunkering husband, and his insane brother for another family meal. Narcissa had been livid, but Lucius had been firm and when she looked to Draco for support, he merely poured himself a glass of his father's blood red wine and kept his eyes on the flickering fire. Eventually, she gave in. She always did.

"Such a *sweet* boy to come all this way just because you missed your Auntie Bella." She reached out and patted his cheek.

Draco stiffened and his lip curled in revulsion when her cracked nails raked across his skin. He ignored the unpleasant shiver that followed.

He wasn't a boy. And he wasn't sweet. But most of all, that wasn't why he had come here.

"It was rather quiet this year without you."

"Hmm," Bella sniffed, sticking her nose in the air and shaking her mangled locks of twisted hair. There was no love lost between Lucius and Bellatrix, but she had still been willing to train Draco, by order of the Dark Lord of course. She had shown him how to use his pain to create agony in others. She had taught him to kill.

"But just because you were not able to attend does not mean we have to give up our Christmas tradition."

He was numb. The heart in his chest was beating quickly, but he was barely able to feel it. All he felt was the dull ache in his arm and the empty fucking hole inside him.

Bellatrix's chapped lips broke open in a wicked smile, cracking as they pulled over rotten teeth. Merlin, Azkaban had really done a number on her. The crazed gleam in her eye at his suggestion solidified his opinion. He would rather die than ending up like she had. If they ever tried to take him in, he'd make them kill him first. And shit like what he was about to do would earn him a first class ticket to the prison in the North Sea.

He shouldn't be here. He should be with Granger, pulling on her curls and making her whine as he bent her over the bed, fucking her hard and fast and coming all over her freshly whipped ass. But he was here. Because people like Bellatrix never turned him down or sent him away. The Death Eaters and the Dark Lord would never let him go.

Not like Granger who would leave him in a second if she could. That's why she was safely tucked away in the cage while he was out making sure that no one suspected him

"I don't want to be here."

She could feel Draco's body tense up, holding her tightly and she was pretty sure that if he let go she would break apart into a million pieces.

"I don't want—"

Draco's arms slid from around her, leaving her laying there as he rolled over to the other side of the bed.

She looked over at him as Draco faced away from her. He hadn't even bothered to undress. Even his boots were still on. Because he could get up and get out anytime he wanted. He could just leave if he got mad again.

Well, she wasn't mad; Hermione was *furious*. Draco didn't just get to run away again. He didn't get to lock her out. And he always let things slip when he had been drinking, this might be her only chance to get a straight answer from him. "Draco, we need to talk about this."

"I know what you don't want," his words came slowly, weighed down by the whisky. "You don't want... someone like me—to love you." He looked over his shoulder, glaring at her with bloodshot eyes. "But I do. So you're just going to have to find a way to live with it, Granger, because I'll love you till the day I die. Probably after too."

Oh God, her heart… How could he still make her feel like this after everything?

He turned away from her again. "Not that it will matter."

Hermione stayed there, waiting for him to turn back and… and yell or grab her or something. But he didn't. So eventually she settled herself back down into his bed and pulled the covers up over her. She wasn't used to sleeping in so little clothing and although the blanket was fluffy, it felt strange on her bare skin.

Even lying beside Draco, Hermione felt more alone than she had in months. She missed Harry. She missed Ron. But more than anything, she missed Draco the way he had been. Even if it had only been for one night, it had been enough to make her never forget. She knew the real Draco, knew the man who he could be. Who he *was*. And this wasn't him.

Tears leaked out of the corners of her eyes as she stared up at the high canopy, constellations embroidered on it with shining, silver thread. She wanted to be his, she did. She had just wanted to make that choice herself. Maybe she had and maybe this is what it meant. Hermione sniffed, wiping her eyes, not wanting to keep crying here in silence while Draco passed out next to her.

But Draco was not asleep. She heard him shift in the bed and got the uncanny feeling that he was watching her. Hermione tilted her head against the pillow and was met with

"Burn…"

She opened her eyes. "What?"

Draco pulled his bottom lip into his mouth, sucking on it slightly.

"Burn me. Love me. Fuck me."

The same second his lips hit her, Hermione shoved her hands into his chest, pushing him off of her. His heavy frame bounced on the bed slightly, making him groan and heave dryly for a moment, trying to keep the liquor down.

There was a small jingle and Hermione watched Crookshanks nimbly jump from the bed through the opening in the cage. Open. The cage was open.

Hermione lunged forward.

Draco grabbed her around the middle, strong arm encircling her and pulling her back into his solid chest.

"You're not going anywhere, *Sweetheart,"* he growled heavily into her ear and Hermione watched as he waved his wand with his other hand and the bars jumped into place, locking her back in.

"No!" she cried, unable to stop the despair that rose up from the broken bits of her heart.

"Don't be so sad, kitten," he said in his deep voice, hand spreading out across her lower abdomen. The feel of his flesh against hers sent a shiver down her spine. "I'm in here with you."

His hands moved over her, sliding over her hip bone and down to bruised bite, tracing it with his fingers. His other ran up her chest, in between the cups of her bra, to her neck, turning her chin so that her face was twisted around towards his. Hermione whimpered as he pressed his face against the side of hers, opening his mouth and letting his teeth graze across her cheek.

His other hand came to rest over her thin knickers, pushing her lower body back against his and Hermione felt his hard length pressing against her bum and back.

"Draco—"

"Right here, kitten," he breathed out into her ear, running his tongue along the shell of it. "Right fucking *here."*

Hermione gasped as he thrust his hips against her, tightening his hold on her neck ever so slightly. The pressure was wonderful. She never wanted him to let go.

She just wanted out of the cage.

His cage.

Her cage.

of having a Mudblood in his bed. He had to keep her safe, and being a Death Eater was the only way to do that.

Bellatrix pulled out her crooked wand. "And I thought you didn't like spending time with me anymore, Draco. Like Lucius. Thinks a little fun is below him."

Draco twisted the Malfoy ring around on his finger making the bright silver shine in the light coming from behind Bellatrix. "I'm not my Father."

Her dark eyes held his steadily and the longer Draco looked into them, the less he saw. The Dementors had eaten away at sanity until it was in tatters. Just like her soul.

If she ever had one in the first place, that is.

But of course she did. And she had sold it, just like he had.

"I think," her chapped lips pulled wide in a sick smile, "You might be more of a Black than a Malfoy."

Draco stared back at her, clearing any expression off his face. "What I am, is bored. Are you coming or not?"

His aunt squealed happily, jumping up and down. "I know *exactly* where we should go!"

"Great," Draco drawled. "The sooner we get there, the better."

He couldn't feel any worse than he did right now.

Bellatrix descended down the steps with glee, already cackling and Draco forced all the thoughts of Granger away as he followed her into the black night.

reached his hand in through the bars, trailing it across the sheets right next to her leg. "Harder," his voice was hoarse. "Bite it harder."

"Stop it," Hermione said softly, releasing her lip which throbbed where her teeth had been digging into it. She stared at his hand and the silver Malfoy ring on it. His fingers danced across the soft sheets until they reached hers, rearing up like a snake about to strike. He dropped them heavily back down against the bed.

"I can't." Draco sighed. "I can't, Sweetheart."

"You did before," Hermione said in a small voice. "On the tower. Harry…" She glanced up at him and this time his eyes didn't harden like granite at the mention of Harry. "He told me what you did."

Draco stared down at her for what felt like a short eternity. Hermione had a thousand questions she wanted to ask and twice as many things she wanted to tell him. There was a storm brewing in his eyes and Hermione tried to follow the thoughts as they swirled in the haze of grey. She leaned forward, closer to him. She knew what he tried to do, for her. And now she was here and they were together.

He could do it again, right? He would, for her… wouldn't he?

"Draco," she reached for his hand.

Draco's stayed perfectly still, only the finger with the ring on it jumped slightly. "Didn't fucking matter."

Hermione paused. "Didn't matter? But—"

"You still ran."

Yes, but not *from him.* "I didn't—"

"But I found you, kitten." His easy smirk was back. "I found you and brought you here and you… you think you're going to leave, but you're not."

Hermione's heart jumped into her throat.

Draco pulled his hand back down, letting the back of his fingers brush against her thigh. "Neither of us are. We'll be here forever. Together." Draco dragged his wand over the bars and they disappeared, creating a space just large enough for him to fit through. He leaned over her and Hermione fell back against the bed, Draco following her.

Hermione hated how good he felt on top of her. The familiar smell of sweet whisky, crisp mint, and creamy parchment was so strong she closed her eyes, letting her head sink back into the soft pillow as his firm body settled on top of hers.

Draco's breath rolled down her neck as his hand softly slid over her waist, coming to rest on her ribcage just under her breast. His hands were cool, softly stealing the heat from her skin.

remembered, down to the brass studs lining the edges. Even the grey fur blanket was draped over the back.

The same one that Draco had pulled it over the both of them and Hermione had fallen asleep in his arms under. There hadn't been any nightmares that night. But there hadn't been any dreams either. There had only been Draco, and the love that bloomed inside her and had never died.

Even when she trapped it deep within herself, in the darkest regions of her mind, it had not withered. If anything, it had grown stronger, taking his form and not letting her forget him like she so desperately wished she could, but Draco wouldn't let her forget. Not for one second. He was there, always there, and now, she was here.

Draco was mumbling spells, tapping the door with his wand and leaning against it as Hermione heard it lock and seal.

He turned still leaning back against the door, eyes red and glazed as they landed on her. "Miss me?"

Draco grinned devilishly as Hermione abruptly turned her head to the side. She didn't want to see him like this, drunk and… playful. How many times had their encounters started with Draco grinning at her just like he was now? Hermione didn't like the silent Death Eater, but the flirty, mischievous Draco was someone she had never been able to resist.

He tripped, dropping his wand and almost falling over when he bent down to pick it up. "Stupid…" he breathed out heavily, "fucking…" Draco grabbed onto the bars of the cage, propping himself up. Hermione could smell the fire whisky already.

Draco's eyes landed on her again and she could see him trying to focus. At least when he was drunk he had a harder time hiding his true feelings from her. Although right now, Hermione couldn't help but wish the lust was a little less blatant on his face because it was making her skin heat up to an uncomfortable level.

"You look so *fucking* cute when you do that," he slurred.

Hermione blinked.

"Oh fuck." Draco pressed his face into the bars, holding onto them on either side. He was breathing heavily, chest rising to press against the bars and then falling back, sinking down until it almost looked like it was caving in before he took another ragged breath and filled it again, all the while staring at her with hooded eyes.

"Do what?" she snapped, letting her frustration ring clear in her voice.

It must have jarred him because Draco pulled back a little. Then he gripped the bars tighter and his lids slid closed. "Bite your lip, Granger." He opened them again and

Chapter Nine

Four days.

Four days and Hermione had refused to speak a single *word* to Draco. As far as she was concerned he had his chance to talk to her and he had walked out. He had left. Shutting her up in a cage in his dark bedroom for *hours* . And when he had come back he collapsed into the bed, locking the bars of the cage into place and rolling over without a word. She had to lay there next to him, breathing in the smoke from his robes.

It was acrid and smelled like burning hair.

But in the morning she woke up to his arms around her and her head tucked under his chin, curled up against his chest, holding onto those same black robes and feeling his chest rise and fall gently under them.

When she pulled away her hands were smudged with black and Hermione wiped them all over Draco's fine sheets.

When he finally woke up, he let her out of the cage and walked her to the bathroom. Hermione slammed the door in his face, locking it manually as he shouted her name and beat his fists against the thick wood. She leaned back against it, feeling his blows landing like a beating heart as the door shook in its frame.

Hermione stared at herself in the mirror, eyes wide and fearful and Draco roared on the other side of the door. He could unlock it with magic and storm in, but he didn't. Hermione stayed pinned against the door until she heard a final thud and a low stream of swears fading as he walked away.

She didn't wait another second to pull his shirt off of her, balling it up and throwing it on the floor as she hastily shoved the boxers down and kicked them into the corner. She didn't feel comfortable in just her undergarments, but she felt better than she had with *Malfoy* displayed on her.

Then she felt worse.

Crouching in his dry tub, Hermione hugged her legs to her chest and rocked herself, brushing up against the cold, white porcelain. She wanted to wash the smoke smell from her. She wanted to scrub at her skin until she couldn't feel him touching it anymore. She wanted to sink down into the warm water and let it hold her the way she wouldn't let him.

But the faucet had no knobs. It only responded to magic and she didn't have a wand.

Her heart plummeted and she merely leaned against the side, letting the empty shell of the tub take the heat from her racing blood.

When she finally emerged after running her fingers through the knots in her hair and freshening up with some of the potions by the sink, Hermione looked around to see Draco sprawled out on the chaise, legs spread wide and arms thrown over the back like he didn't have a care in the world.

His eyes traveled down her body and back up again to where she was holding his clothes in a ball in front of her. She threw them at him as hard as she could and they landed messily in his lap.

Draco picked up the shirt with one finger and smirked. "Like you better like this anyways."

Hermione glared at him and marched over to the dresser and pulled open a drawer, ripping out one of the white undershirts in there. She quickly pulled it on. It was much longer than the Quidditch shirt and came to rest halfway down her thighs. Still shorter than she preferred to wear her skirts, at least it didn't have his *name* on it.

Pleased with her victory, Hermione turned around, folding her arms over her chest now that the shirt covered them properly and the action didn't push her breasts even more up and… together.

Draco's eyes never left her and Hermione felt herself beginning to blush under their gaze. She dropped her own down and saw at the foot of the chaise was a tray of food.

Draco gripped the bottle of the neck tightly. She had just spent the last six months with Potter and Weasley and they surely filled her head up with every terrible thing he had ever done.

That was fine. He could fill her up in another way and make her remember how *good* he actually was.

Drumming his fingers on the desk next to the bottle, Draco stared at it, debating whether to finish it off or not. Granger would be pissed if he walked back in drunk.

He glanced back at the door. It wasn't like she was going to be welcoming him back with open arms, or legs, anytime soon.

Fucking bitch.

Draco took another drink, trying to get the taste of her out of his mouth. He felt like he was drowning in it, in her. Maybe he should go back in and try to talk to her. Tell her… shit. He couldn't think straight like this. His thoughts turned into images as the liquor hit his head and all he could see, all he could feel, was her. Granger's lips on his, her hands on his arms, sliding over his body and back, her tits pressed against him and her soft thigh giving under his fingers. And then the whisky burned in his chest and Draco remembered her hands on it, pushing him away in cold rejection.

With a roar of aggravation, Draco picked up the bottle, throwing it across the study to where it shattered against the bedroom door, dripping down the paneled wood in thick drops like the tears he wouldn't cry over that fucking bitch of a Mudblood anymore.

Draco stumbled into the room, hanging on the door handle to help stay upright. The lamps immediately lit, bringing warm light into the dark room. Hermione shielded her eyes. She had been in here for hours, in the bed, in the dark. She had cried calling for anyone to help her, she had shouted raging against the bars of the cage, and then finally she had sat quietly, petting Crookshanks who seemed perfectly at home in Draco's room.

Before the sun went down, Hermione had spent at least an hour staring at the chaise. A single ray of light broke through the curtains and landed on it, illuminating the tufted cushions which soaked the weak light into the thick velvet. It was just like she

pitiful cries of the Mudbloods he had locked in the cells below the Department of Mysteries.

Dark and nervous thoughts swam forward as she turned her head away from him, brows pulling together over her closed eyes.

He should put the chain on. Just in case. In case Granger woke up and was… confused. Yes. She might be a little disoriented from the fever or the head wound and he would need to explain her new life to her. Draco closed the cuff around her wrist. Granger wasn't going anywhere. She was home.

But she hadn't let him get a fucking word in before she once again jumped to conclusions. All because she thought she knew every goddamn thing there was to know. Fuck, she hadn't even asked him anything other than where Potter was! She didn't ask how *he* was feeling, how *he* was doing, no—all she cared about was her precious Chosen One whose great abilities included letting his best friend starve and then get lost in the woods and make her come rescue him when she was burning up with fever.

How the *fuck* did Granger think that fucktard could ever defeat the Dark Lord? Draco could laugh if he wasn't so fucking upset right now.

He wished he would have found Potter in the woods. Shit, he would *gladly* hand him over to his Master right now. Then march back up here and tell Granger exactly where her little friend was and watch those pretty eyes go big for him one way or another.

Maybe the Dark Lord would let Draco bring back the head as proof. There would be no denying that ugly scar.

She would be upset, but he would be there to comfort her, kissing away her tears and holding her until she stopped crying. Of course she'd get over Potter. Because she'd still have *him.*

Draco dragged the back of his hand across his mouth, wiping the whisky from his wet lips. Granger wasn't near as smart as she believed herself to be if she thought her little outburst this morning was enough to make him let her go. Nothing could *ever* make him let her go. Not now that he had her, not after everything he had done for her.

Granger would come around, she always did. Even after she saw his mark, she still came back to him. She had loved him and he knew deep inside she still did, even if she wanted to pretend differently. He had tasted it when he kissed her and felt it when she pushed her hips into his. He was about to make her feel how much he loved her when the burning in her eyes changed from desire to disgust.

She couldn't stop the rumble inside her at the sight of it—fresh fruit, hard boiled eggs, stacks of toast, and a carafe of juice.

She was starving. Beyond starving, Hermione was famished.

Draco smirked again, pushing the edge of the tray in her direction with the toe of his boot. "Hungry?"

She glared at him. Hermione hadn't seen food like that in months and all she wanted to do was swallow it whole. She was tempted to turn it over onto the floor and watch his smug smirk fall from his fine features, but she was *so* hungry and it was *right* there.

Hermione took a step forward.

"Yeah, you are, aren't you?" Draco leaned forward, placing his elbows on his knees. She took another small step. "Come on, kitten, don't torture yourself."

Hermione stopped. Draco's eyes were gleaming bright, his mouth slightly open, and his hands sliding across the velvet cushion towards the tray. Everything about it, about him, screamed predatory to her.

But Hermione was not prey. Not for him, not for *anyone* .

She strode forward, chin held high and stopped in front of the chaise. Draco's smirk widened and he leaned back, patting the seat next him.

How lovely it would be to sit there beside Draco and enjoy the delicious breakfast while he put his arm around her, maybe twisting one of her curls around his finger. She would pop a piece of fruit into her mouth and Draco would run his thumb over her bottom lip to collect a drop of juice there and hold it out for her to take her mouth and suck it clean for him.

Hermione snatched a dry piece of toast, threw Draco a sneer, and marched back to the bed, but before she made it she saw the windows that he had finally pulled the curtains back from to let the weak winter sun in. Thick bars crossed over them, breaking the sunlight into shards that fell brokenly at her feet.

Hermione paused, staring out at the snow covered grounds; crisp, white, and pristine. They were so high up. She couldn't tell how many floors exactly, but far enough to see across the sprawling grounds to a dark forest in the distance. If she had to run, she would have to make it across that wide expanse and try to lose him in the trees.

And then get lost and either freeze to death or have Draco come and hunt her down again.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" he breathed from behind her, ruffling a few wild strands of hair. Hermione took in a shaky breath and closed her eyes in a long blink. When she opened them one of Draco's hands was resting against the glass of the window, his arm stretched

out beside her head. The other lifted to brush against her arm softly. "See, you'll like it here. Just give it a chance, pet."

Pet.

Hermione turned away from him.

The rest of the day passed in a similar fashion, Draco making a comment and Hermione glaring at him before returning to pretending he didn't exist and she wasn't here. He let her walk around the room, look out the windows, and examine the tapestries on the walls. They were all beautifully woven, but all scenes of ancient battles with blood, bodies, and bones.

She wondered if he had grown up seeing these scenes surrounding him. Had his father told him stories about them? She didn't ask him even when his eyes followed her every movement, as if he was worried she would disappear if he looked away. Hermione spent the entire day in silence and spent half the night fighting with herself to stay on her side of the bed.

By morning she was tucked into his arms again.

Draco spent the next day yelling at her. He shouted awful names and laughed cruelly at her, promising her that she would break soon and the longer she held out, the harder he'd be on her. She glanced at the door, worried that someone would hear his rant and find her in here. She knew the Manor must be expansive, but Draco was *bellowing*.

He grabbed her face, turning it away from the door and back onto him.

"Think someone will come for you? Hmm?" There was a faint sheen of sweat on his brow and his fingers dug painfully into her cheeks. "You can put that thought right out of your pretty little head. This is *my* wing of the Manor; no one is getting in here. No one but me."

He shoved her back roughly, making her fall back against the side of the chaise as he took a long drink of amber liquid from a crystal tumbler.

Hermione held back her tears and bit her lip against the pain of her heart breaking with every beat. Later that evening when all she did was pick at her peas, Draco threatened to force the food down her throat. Hermione stared at him blankly and even though her stomach was cramping with hunger, she turned the plate over on the floor.

Draco grabbed her and picked her up, throwing her over his shoulder. Hermione screamed, beating her fists into his back only to find it so hard they bounced back off of it. The air was knocked from her as she hit the bed and Hermione lay stunned for a moment. It was all Draco needed to lock the chain around her wrist and as Hermione

clothes too fucking big, except that one time that Draco still thought about fondly, but she was really committing to the frumpy librarian look wearing this one.

As much as he wanted to slide his hand under it, he didn't want to expose her skin to the freezing air up here so Draco settled for running his hands over her waist until his entire arm was wrapped around her and resting his chin on her shoulder and neck, nibbling on her ear when he caught a current of air and was able to glide seamlessly through the inky sky. But even that comforting gesture could not entirely shake the feeling that Granger was *different.*

It didn't matter how small she felt, he wasn't letting go, not for the world. But when he undressed her he realized exactly why. Granger had always been slender, but now she was practically skin and bones. Her ribs, clavicle, and hips bones all stuck out sharply against her damp skin. He could count every bump of her spine down her back and traced them with his fingers. Had Potter and Weasley been starving her out there? It didn't matter; *he* would feed her and take care of her now. He would have the elves make her anything she wanted and give her everything she needed.

The Malfoy elves were more talented than the ones that worked at Hogwarts and there wasn't anything magic couldn't make. They could lay in bed and he would feed her from his fingers before leaning down and eating his own treat. Granger would be back to her usual self in no time.

They both would.

When Draco placed her in his bed, he hadn't been able to stop smiling. Even as sickly as she looked, he would fix it. He would fix everything and then she would wake up and it would all be okay because they would be together.

Granger would throw her arms around him and kiss him and he'd tell her how much he missed her and she'd say how much she loved him and everything would be a thousand times better than he had imagined it because Granger was actually here in his bed and he had finally done it.

He had found her.

He had saved her.

And now she could save him.

Granger made another soft noise of protest as he put the bra he had taken from the Room of Requirement and the knickers he had kept from their very first night together, all freshly laundered, on her heated body. The noises disturbed him. It was a worried moan, and not at all like the ones she normally made. This one sounded more like the

Draco softly pressed his lips to it, telling her she would be healed soon and was safe here, with him. Only him.

Draco had made many changes to his quarters over the past few months in preparation for Granger's arrival. He used the Manor's own magic, weaving it together with new wards across his door in a similar pattern to the way she had hidden herself away from him. He would tell her about it when she woke up and she would be proud of him for accomplishing such complex and intricate magic. He would tell her that it was all for her and Granger would look up at him with her big doe eyes and tell him how much she loved everything he had done for her.

His bedroom was virtually impossible to break into now, not that anyone ever came into his private rooms these days. He had his study for business and meetings while his bedroom stayed private. Even so, he had made it safe, replacing the locks with goblin wrought iron that was enchanted to keep anyone but himself out. It had cost him of course, but it was worth it for her.

And she didn't fucking care.

What a selfish, ungrateful *bitch*.

Draco swung his desk chair around, leaning back in it to glare at his bedroom door.

No. She didn't get to just run him out of his own room, not after he had done all of this to get her here. He could have left her out there in the forest to freeze. He could have left her out there for some Snatcher to stumble upon. He could have left her out there to die, but *no*. Draco had caught her as her eyes fluttered shut and pulled her tight against him, hugging her and holding her in his arms as she fell into them. He stayed there for a moment, trying to keep the emotions welling up in his chest from spilling out of his eyes; thanking Salazar and all of the stars above that he had finally found her.

Draco took three deep breaths of the cold air, relishing the warm feeling of his girl against his hard-beating heart; then he noticed just how hot she was.

Granger was burning alive.

Draco carefully arranged her on his broom, not wanting to risk apparition with Granger being weak and held her carefully as he flew her back, whispering softly into her sweat soaked curls that she was okay, he would make her well again, and for her not to worry because didn't he always give his sweet little kitten what she needed?

Granger was lighter on his broom this time and Draco couldn't help but let his hands wander a little during the flight back to the Manor. It was more difficult to feel her through her lumpy sweater than it had been the thin shirt she had worn for him the first time, but even so Draco could tell that something was different. She always wore her

clawed at it, screaming like a banshee, Draco stomped through the overturned food and out of the door.

Hermione watched as Crookshanks ate pieces of roast chicken off the floor, purring happily.

On the third day, Draco woke up hungover and growled when she tried to untangle herself from him.

"Don't. Fucking. Move." His eyes weren't even open and he was already ordering her around.

Hermione wiggled until Draco's arms tightened around her so much that she found it a little hard to breathe. She had to admit, she was tired. Even on the run with Harry and Ron she had eaten more than she had since she arrived here and it was starting to wear on her. She felt lightheaded, even laying down, and knew she couldn't keep going on like this.

When he finally did let her up Hermione gasped when she glanced down at his groin and saw what was waiting for her there.

"Don't act like you're *surprised.*" Draco rolled his eyes and pushed himself up to a sitting position, adjusting himself through his black boxer briefs. Hermione flushed with heat and looked away as he continued to rub it and cocked his head to the side. "If you aren't going to speak to me, you could always use your mouth for something else."

Hermione looked back over her shoulder to glare at him before pulling at her chain as loud as she could until Draco groaned loudly, holding his head.

"Okay, fucking hell!" he snarled and grabbed her wrist pulling it to his mouth again. Hermione tried to lean in to hear whatever he whispered to get the shackle to come off and locked eyes with him. She could feel hers widening as she watched the dark grey of his storm quietly. Before she knew it the chain fell to the bed with a low clank and Hermione yanked her arm out of his hand and ran off to the bathroom. Half an hour later the faucet to the tub turned on out of nowhere.

She knew it was him. But when she emerged, clean and washed, she only threw him a dark look and refused to thank him for the basics of human necessities.

He stayed in bed for most of the day while Hermione sat on the floor and pulled at a loose thread in one of the tapestries, trailing it around the floor for Crookshanks to chase. She thought about Harry. And Ron. And Ginny and Neville and Luna. Her parents. The Weasley's. Remus and Tonks. If they knew where she was, what she had done, would they even want her to come back?

That night while lying in bed, Draco pulled her to him again. Hermione moaned and tried to push him away, but he grabbed onto her wrists, hauling her back. She was pressed against the thin white shirt he always wore and Hermione felt like shredding it with her nails. They weren't very long because she had spent all her worried hours picking at them, but if he didn't let go of her soon, she would—

"It's only a matter of time."

Hermione froze, blinked, and then barely lifted her face up to look at Draco. He looked tired, worn out, and grey.

"You'll give in soon. I know you will."

Her breath caught in her throat and Draco ran his hand up her arm and around the side of her neck.

"Don't worry, Granger, I'll make it good for you." He kissed the top of her head and breathed in deeply. "My sweet girl. I could never stay mad at you, could I?" No… and she couldn't stay mad at him either. "Not when you look up at me with those big eyes of yours and tell me how badly you want my big cock in your tight little—"

Hermione shoved herself away from him violently, almost falling off the side of the bed. Draco watched her scramble as she righted herself back onto the bed, laughing in her face. Glaring darkly at him, Hermione picked up one of the pillows and threw it at him. He batted it away easily, laughing harder. But it wasn't the same one from before, this wasn't light or jovial, it was laced with bitterness.

"Throw as many pillows as you want, Sweetheart, you'll be throwing *yourself* at me soon enough."

Hermione resisted the urge to tell him to go throw himself from one of the windows and instead rolled over, tucking her chained arm under her head to try and get comfortable as she heard Draco settle down with a restful sigh.

He was right because when dawn broke and the grey light filtered in, Hermione found herself with her head on his chest and her body pressed against his. There was a throbbing ache between her legs and she tried to squeeze her thighs together when she realized his leg was in between hers.

She should move. Push herself away like she did every morning. She should not let him wake up and see that she had his leg in between hers and that… that… that—*Oh God,* it felt good. Hermione closed her eyes and stayed perfectly still as she felt her heartbeat increase until she thought she might burst, and then... slowly fade.

Only once there was a dense feeling of disappointment in her did Hermione move away; pulling the blanket off of her and letting her body cool down. She slid her hand

For Salazar's sake, he had spent the whole night slowly pouring potions down her throat and wiping the sweat off her skin with silk handkerchiefs embroidered with the Malfoy crest. He had been careful with the bump on her forehead. Draco thought about trying to heal it, but head wounds were tricky and the last thing he wanted to do was alter something inside her head unintentionally.

Softly dabbing the Malfoy crest against the bruised skin, Draco smiled down at her.

"Finally got everything right in there, not going to fuck it up now," he breathed out softly and Granger made a small noise in her throat as his breath fanned over her face.

Once her fever had broken Draco took her into the bath, washing her carefully. She had bruises over what seemed like every part of her and scratches on her hands and face. Her ankle was swollen and Draco carefully ran his hands down her leg, massaging it ever so slightly until the crease between her brows faded. Rubbing the salve Blaise had given him for his leg across her skin, he watched it softly heal itself back together perfectly.

No scars.

Draco kissed every spot of new skin and something deep inside him was pleased at the fact that he was the first to touch it. And from here on out, the only one who ever would.

When he had moved up her legs, he had seen the bruised bite mark on her inner thigh. His stomach had clenched tightly and his heart beat at an unnatural rate. Memories of giving it to her flooded forward and Draco felt his mouth water, wanting to bite down on the tender skin again. The redness of her cheeks had subsided into her usual rosy color, but she still needed her rest so he just caressed it lovingly, thinking of all the ways he would reward her for being such a good girl for him while she was away.

He could hardly believe it; Granger had kept it. All this time. She had kept his last little present to her because she *knew* he liked seeing it on her. Granger *had* wanted him to find her! All the irking doubts that plagued him washed away in the warm bath and Draco pulled her close to him again, pressing her thin frame into his scarred chest in a loving embrace, burying his face in her neck and breathing in her sweet smell of cinnamon and vanilla that was still present under all the dirt and blood.

Still the same. Still his girl.

His good, sweet girl.

He took his time washing her hair, running his fingers across her scalp, rubbing her thick curls between his fingers as he lathered on the expensive shampoo into rich, golden bubbles. She let out a small noise when he got too close to the knot on her forehead and

Either way, you wore oversized sweaters and long skirts for years and that never stopped me from thinking about what was under them."

He picked up the lacy thing from the floor and ran it through his hands thoughtfully before sticking it back in the bag.

That bastard. He had done all of this on purpose. He had rigged the options. It wasn't a choice at all, but just the illusion of one. Wear lingerie for him or wear his clothes. Either way, he won. He got what he wanted. Just like he always did.

But he didn't just get to *have* her. Just because she was here didn't make her… his.

There were a million other things that made her his, but being trapped in his room was not one of them and Hermione gave in to the growling lion in her chest, wanting to rip that self satisfied smile off of his face with her claws.

"I hate you," Hermione's voice wavered, but her gaze stayed dark and heavy on him.

Draco smirked at her again, but this time it was cold. He shoved the bag back into her hands. "Love you too, Sweetheart."

Draco closed " *The Sacred Twenty Eight"* and sat it down on his desk. He had stared at it for hours, but could barely remember a single name he had read. He would try again in the morning, it was useless to keep going tonight. His eyes burned with sleep and when he ran his hand over his face, he felt the prick of stubble along his jaw.

It was late. The black candle sitting on his desk was almost burned down. And he had left Granger on her own all night.

She deserved it though. All she ever did was complain and shoot him angry looks. Her little glaring pout made her narrowed eyes burn as she snapped at him for… something or another. It was always something. So Draco would just look back at her and let her eyes burn into him and remember all the times she had that exact same expression, the same furrowed brow, the same pinched lips…

It never lasted, not when he would pull himself up to his full height, let out a long, low breath and raise one brow up in suggestion. Granger would blush, and *fuck,* Draco would feel a jolt straight to the tip of his cock right before she looked away, pretending that she

wasn't creaming herself at the same fucking thoughts that were running through his head too.

He had half a mind to dive into hers, dredge up every dirty little detail she had tucked in there and make her see them, *feel them* , all again.

Draco thought being away from Granger was the most difficult thing he had ever done, but being this close to her was a thousand times worse. It was maddening. She was everywhere. In everything. Her vanilla cinnamon scent was all over his bed, all over him. She was always there in the corner of his eye, even when he tried to look away which he didn't do often because looking at her was still the one thing he *could* do and even though it was torture… Well, that was Draco's specialty.

He looked down at his arm. Maybe he should do it. Just… just a little. Just enough to make the ache between his lungs fade a little. He hadn't touched his arm since he had gotten to hold her with it again. But tonight… tonight he felt so terribly alone, maybe even more alone than he had before she had gotten here because at least then he had the happy little Granger in his head to tease and please and for a few short moments the world wasn't like this.

It was just Granger and him. The way it fucking should be. Not how she had made it by running and hiding and then treating him like he was some kind of monster when everything he had done, everything he was doing, was all for her. For their future.

Because they'd have one. No matter how short it might be, they would be together until the end. And then…

Draco sighed and flexed his arm, watching the muscles and tendons move under the mark before pulling his sleeve back down. If he *crucio'd* himself and passed out in here he wouldn't be able to hold Granger tonight. It was all he had now.

This is what the last six months had bought him. A girl he had to keep chained up who wouldn't even say she loved him, even once, just so he could hear it. Just so he could know that he had done the right thing. For her.

Having her was the only thing that did still feel right. Going out with Theo, getting pissed and trashing Leaky had been fun but after Draco had felt disgusted at what they had done. The old bartender had begged them to stop, shouting and pleading. Draco had merely laughed and aimed his wand at the bottles stacked behind the bar, shattering them and making glass rain down on the old man who covered his head and scampered away into the back to let Theo and him have their fun.

When Draco got to the booth he had shared with Granger he was out of breath and his grin slowly slipped away. If he knew a year ago that he would be standing here staring

at it and feeling like *this, would* he still have sat here and watched as Granger tested him out, and herself, and found that she liked it? Liked him? Liked what they could be together?

He thought he knew the answer, but Draco thought a lot of things.

Too many things.

He needed to sleep. Draco walked from his desk, scratching at his chin and muttered the incantations to unlock the door. As he stepped in the room was bathed in a low light as the lamps on the wall adjusted themselves to his presence.

Granger was already asleep. He was almost surprised to find her in the bed because he had taken her chain off earlier and left the bars of the cage down so she could have free reign of his room. He half expected her to be waiting by the door with something large and heavy to hit him with and try to escape. It was a nice surprise that Granger was sleeping soundlessly with the duvet draped over her hips so that he could see that she had in fact put on the little lace dress he had bought for her.

Draco ignored the fact that he had taken his shirt back from her and magically locked all the drawers and the wardrobe so she had no other choice. He chose to focus on how it looked on her, how the white lace complimented the natural hues of her skin. How soft it looked on her, how… sweet. Innocent. Pure.

Draco kicked off his boots and shrugged himself out of his shirt, tossing it on the arm of the chaise where Crookshanks raised his head and meowed at the disturbance.

"Hush," Draco whispered harshly. "If you wake her up, you have to deal with her bitching too."

The cat flicked his stupidly fluffy tail and Draco sneered at him, baring his teeth as he stepped out of his trousers.

He stopped at the edge of the bed and felt his heart beat harder as Granger's chest softly fell in breath. How could she still look like that even after doing every single filthy thing he had asked her to? She was perfect. Beautiful. His.

She sighed and turned her face towards him, her caramel curls moving slightly around her as she situated herself in sleep.

If this was all he got, then it was what he would take. He wasn't going to give her up. Not when she looked like this, not when she *was* this. His sweet girl who couldn't help what she was born as anymore than he could help who he was born to. None of this was her fault and she didn't deserve to be hunted and captured and judged on her blood.

He was saving her from that. Better she hate him then him hate himself for letting her die in some cage, alone in the dark.

"You can't be serious."

Hermione opened the bag Draco had thrown at her feet and pulled out almost-sheer, white lace… well it was too small to really be considered a *dress* , but that was the closest thing she could compare it to.

He had to be joking.

"This is not what we agreed on."

"Yes it is," he said calmly.

"I asked for clothes. I would *never* wear—"

"You didn't specify what kind," Draco interrupted, looking down at her smugly. "And never say never, Granger."

Hermione threw the scrap of lace and strangely smooth shopping bag full of similar scraps of fabric to the floor. "I refuse to wear these."

He shrugged. "Wear them or don't. Doesn't matter to me."

Indignation flared up inside her and she fumed at the small gleam in his grey eyes.

"In fact," Draco started towards her, tongue playing on his bottom lip as he let his eyes fall down her form. "I'd be perfectly fine with it if you decided to abandon clothing altogether."

He flashed her a smirk.

Hermione narrowed her eyes. "I am not going to play into your sick fantasy of—"

"Oh Granger, you've already played out my fantasies or don't you remember?"

The heat in her chest rose up into her cheeks, making them burn. She dropped her eyes down in embarrassment and saw that the blush in her cheeks was not the only instinctual response she had to him. Her nipples were hard. She didn't have to look up to know that Draco had noticed, the smart little "heh" he forced from this throat was more than enough.

"You think you can just dress me up for yourself? *Fine,"* Hermione seethed. "Let's see how you like it when I wear your disgusting clothes and you aren't able to touch an inch of me."

A bit of the gleam died in his eyes and Hermione lifted her chin triumphantly. Bet he didn't think about that. She could wear anything, or nothing, but that didn't change their situation. A skimpy little outfit wasn't going to make *her* weak in the knees.

Draco composed himself quickly and adopted his arrogant smirk back. "As much as I'd enjoy watching you trounce around in lingerie, I like seeing you in my clothes too.

He didn't feel like torturing anyone else right now. Well, no one but himself because his arm was still sore from being summoned and the longer he stood here with Theo the more it seemed to ache. Or maybe that was just his chest because he had only been gone for a few hours, but damn did he miss Granger already. He hoped she was asleep when he got back. She was so sweet when she was sleeping.

And such a pain in the ass when she woke up. Maybe she'd be in a better mood once she had her precious toothbrush.

"Can't," Draco answered easily. "Have some errands to run."

Theo snorted. "Seriously? What's more important than this?" He held up his forearm and Draco stared into the black eyes of the skull then slid them over to Theo's. "Come on! I need my friend to stir up some trouble with!"

Draco looked around the room at his fellow Death Eaters. People he had known his whole life, relatives, and now, friends. Sort of. Not really.

He didn't think he'd ever really be friends with Theo, not after what he said about Granger last year. Still, there needed to be some word for someone you had known your whole life.

There was a hunger in Theo's eyes, turning them a darker shade of blue while at the same time lighting them up from within. He wanted to prove himself. And he wanted to do that by besting Draco on his first night.

And Draco couldn't have that.

Granger had been wide awake when he left, staring at him with those innocent eyes that begged him not to go. She was probably sitting awake right now, waiting for him to come back. Why? So she could torment him again and tell him how *wrong* he was for leaving? For playing his part so that the people he loved could stay alive?

Let her wait.

She wasn't going anywhere.

And neither was Theo, not without him. If he thought he could just waltz in here after being some fucking Carrow's favorite student, Draco would show him what proper training in the dark arts actually looked like. Tonight. Theo had a right to know what he was in for and being such a good *friend* Draco was more than willing to show him.

Draco smirked. It looked like he was in the mood to torture someone after all.

She'd never been alone now and neither would he.

Draco pulled his shirt over his head, feeling his heart pound beneath the scarred skin. Even though Granger had seen them before he hadn't bared them to her again. Draco had hid the *Sectumsempra* scars under his white shirt and the clawed scar on his leg under his black boxer briefs. She shouldn't have to see how fucked up he was now. But tonight, her eyes were closed so Draco let the black fabric fall next to the white before climbing into the bed beside her.

He was excited and nervous all in one. Laying on his back, looking straight up as he pulled the same covers she was under over himself. They were warm and knowing that it came from her body's heat was enough to send a rushing pump of blood into his cock, making it harden with nothing more than the thought of her.

His throat felt tight and the lump in it bobbed up and down as he tried to keep his breathing quiet. His heart was beating so loud he was concerned the sound of it might wake her, But Granger slept on; her little hand tucked up around her face and her legs curled under the duvet. He wondered if she was cold and reached out to touch her hand.

Fucking hell, touching her right now was either the best idea or the worst. Draco had to bite back a groan as his cock stood up, straining against the covers.

She was warm and soft and goddamn it—why couldn't this hand stroke him just like she had that night at Leaky? Fuck. He would give almost anything to have her touch him, just once. Draco pulled her hand away from her face just enough to slide his own around it, threading their fingers together while at the same time, reaching down and gripping himself with his opposite, just holding it while it throbbed at the feel of her hand in his.

He couldn't help it. It was wrong and he fucking knew it. Knew that this was crossing some sort of line, but *fuck* it felt so good as he started to move his fist up and down.

Just a little, he told himself. Just enough to alleviate some of the pressure crushing his spine. Just… a little… *fuck*.

Draco was moving faster now, squeezing his eyes shut tightly and trying his best not to crush Granger's hand in his as he stroked himself, up and down his length before feeling the tense curling in his lower stomach and moving up to just rub the head lightly.

He was choking on his own breath; head pushed back into the pillow which softened under him. Draco could feel his palm starting to sweat against hers and thought about letting go, but fuck, touching her while touching himself was the best he had in months and he swore on Salazar's watery grave that he would die before he let go.

Granger made a soft moan and Draco's head turned abruptly towards her. There was a small crease between her brows like she used to get when she was reading something

in the library and he was watching her through the stacks and her mouth opened to let out a soft breath that Draco felt on his fingers and—

Oh shit.

She was moving. She moaned again and Draco's cock jumped at the sound, but then she twisted her body, pulling her hand away from his and turning over.

Draco inhaled, waited for three seconds, and blew it out heavily.

It was a sign. He had said he'd only do this just a little and he had. Draco stretched out his arm across the bed so he could feel the heat she had left behind and with all the fucking control he had left his body, brought his fist back down to the base and was about to let go when Granger shifted again.

He was shaking. Fucking shaking. Because Granger had turned back around and rolled close to him like she did every night and holy fucking shit she was pressing herself up against him and resting her head on his shoulder and oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck.

Her hand slid across his abdomen, over his scars like they weren't even there, and it felt so fucking good—goddamn amazing—to have her touch his body again.

Draco let out a shaky breath and looked down at her curled up against him, around him and…

Fuck it.

If this was all he was going to get, he was *going* to fucking take it.

His hand started moving again and Draco had to grit his teeth together to stop from making noise because if he thought holding her hand while he beat off was good, having her hold him back was… pure ecstasy.

Granger relaxed against him and Draco brought his arms around her to hold her tighter, so that every inch of her that could be touching him, was. If he was going to go to hell then he was going with a first class ticket.

He was a Malfoy after all.

His breathing was becoming erratic, his body tensing with each stroke, each touch. He wanted to touch her. Wanted to sink his fingers into her hot core, feel the wet warmth inside her. Wanted to lick, suck, and bite her tits, pulling on her nipples with his teeth until she was whimpering and crying.

"Draco…"

Oh *fuck-ing hell.*

His eyes flew open to see that she was still asleep. She hadn't even moved, not an inch, nothing more than the gentle brush of her lips against his skin as she said his name. His name. In her soft little sleepy voice she said his goddamn name.

Theo scoffed. "He didn't want to. But who cares about a few more months? What good is finishing school going to do for me? This is the future!" He waved his arm out, motioning to the room and the people in it. "And Carrow's been training me. He said I was the best student he had and who is going to care about Herbology out here? Hell no. I have all I need."

Theo rubbed his forearm gingerly.

"What about Pansy?"

"She really wasn't happy when I said I wasn't going back with her," Theo sighed. "She's gotten awfully… clingy. Fucking all over me. But it's only for a few months and then she'll be done and right here along with me."

Draco wasn't entirely certain what the burning cold feeling in his chest was, all he knew was he didn't like the idea of Theo and Pansy, fighting together, side by side when he had to chain Granger just to keep her around.

When did this change? When did Theo start getting everything *he* wanted? When did Draco start… losing? Failing…

That little Mudblood had fucked everything up for him. And she was a Mudblood. The word still turned his stomach, but there was no denying what Granger was. And the blood that beat in her sweet little heart was the reason he did have to keep her chained and caged. It was for her protection. And his own.

The cracks in his white walls trembled at the thought of something happening to her. It wouldn't. It couldn't. Not now.

Not ever.

"Looks like we'll be working together now." Theo's tone was a challenge and Draco met it easily with a dismissive snort.

Theo was the dumbest fucking fuck alive for coming here tonight. All for the power and glory the mark would bring him before it brought blood and pain and never ending torment. Draco made sure he sounded as dry as possible when he drawled, "Can't wait."

"Come on, let's celebrate!" Theo thumped Draco heavily on the shoulder. " *Really* celebrate." He wagged his eyebrows.

Draco looked around the room, black robes and cloaks pooling down from familiar faces he had known his whole life. He saw Corban Yaxley, pulling on his sleeve to try and cover what was left of his mangled lump of a hand and twisted knots of flesh that were his fingers. Draco felt sick, remembering the way the man had shrieked as the curse curled around each of his digits, breaking them until the bones were shattered and the fingers hung like limp fish.

Theo groaned and struggled back to his knees. Draco watched his shoulders rise and fall with broken breaths and could see how gingerly he held his left arm, even if he was trying to appear unfazed. Theo looked up at their Lord.

"I am your servant."

The Dark Lord's blood red eyes bled down into him. "Arise, Death Eater. For now, you will know power great enough to conquer death."

Draco tasted something bitter in his mouth and wished he had a very full glass of Odgens to wash it down. Or her. She was better.

Lord Voldemort took a step back and the ceremony was ended. No one clapped or cheered, but many started to wave their masks away. The first to break the circle was Theo's own father who rushed forward, pulling his son up and clasping him roughly on the back. Others streamed forward, congratulating him and shaking his hand.

Draco's own initiation had been different. His father had been in prison so there had been no one to help him up from his knees. He remembered pressing his hands into the ground, trying to lift himself and his left arm giving out, making him stumble forward.

Bellatrix had kicked out at him. "Get up!" she hissed. "Have you no respect for your Master?"

Draco gathered himself up, climbing back onto his long legs, still shaking from the force of the magic inked into his flesh. No one shook his hand or told him how proud they were of him.

One day, Granger would be proud of him again. Once she understood that this was the way to keep them together. He couldn't save everyone. He didn't even want to. He just wanted *her*.

"Draco!" Theo called out, his voice was strained, but excited and his eyes were almost glazed as they searched the still masked faces.

Draco pulled his mask off and threw Theo a grin. Theo took a few uneasy steps in his direction so Draco closed to distance with several long strides.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Draco asked as he gripped Theo's hand hard in his own.

Theo shrugged. "You know how it is; can't talk about it until it's done."

Draco's eyes darted down to the fresh brand on Theo's arm. It was burning a deep shade of red, imprinting itself forever in his flesh. Draco knew the pain he was feeling right now would lessen, but never fade entirely. There was only one way to stop being a Death Eater.

"Your old man let you leave school?" Draco asked, not wanting to think about that anymore.

It was enough. All he needed. All he ever needed, right here.

Draco's legs straightened and hardened, still pressed against her hot fucking thighs and his fingers curled, pulling at the sheer lace on her hip until he felt it tearing in between his fingers, but didn't stop, couldn't stop because he was coming and oh… *fuck*…

Draco made sure to catch it in his hand so that none of it landed on the arm she had wrapped around him. Still, he let himself empty, coaxing every drop he had built up out of him before awkwardly grappling with his wand to vanish it while trying not to disturb her.

He dipped his head down, sliding his nose against her curls and breathing her in as he caught his breath.

The guilt began to set in right as his eyes closed. She was going to be furious with him when she woke up in the morning and found him naked. He should put the chain back on or at least charm the bars up.

But this felt *so* good. His girl, in his arms, in his bed. Like he always imagined it would be. He wanted to stay like this all night. Forever. Just him and her. No one else. And for the next few hours, Draco could have everything he wanted.

Hermione shifted a little, getting herself even closer if that was possible. And it was. Because right now, anything felt possible. Even a world where this was how they spent every night. Draco kissed the top of her head.

"Goodnight, Sweetheart."

She waited until the sun was up to move back to her side of the bed. Hermione had only dozed in and out the night before. After Draco had… done *that* , she had lain awake with her eyes closed, hoping it was all a dream, then wishing she had done it herself.

She wasn't entirely sure why she pretended to be asleep or why she even let him do that next to her, other than… she had wanted to.

Dawn came and went without bringing any revelations as to *why* she was okay with what he had done and even less on why the thought of it had made her ache with arousal. She had wanted to tell him, even said his name, but then… then her courage and pride

battled and her pride won out. If she gave in once, just once, she knew she wouldn't be strong enough to claw her way away from him.

And as much as Hermione wanted to hide here away from the war she knew she wasn't able to. Not when there were horcruxes still out there and that Harry was probably alone and fighting on his own. What sort of future could they have if Voldemort was not defeated? What sort of lives could they lead? Draco and her could never be together, not the way she wanted, that she needed and that she hoped Draco, deep down, wanted too.

Hermione fingered the torn lace at her side, pulling at the fine strings until the edges were frayed. She bit her lip until it was bruised. The chain lay still on the floor beside the bed and the bars of the cage were still retracted. Draco was sound asleep beside her. He had held her all night and she swore she felt the love he claimed he had for her in his arms.

Hermione's eyes slid to the table on the other side of the bed where Draco's wand lay. She could do it. She could take the wand, try and break out and in the early morning hours, probably meet little resistance. She had been mapping out the grounds in her head as she stared out the window, making mental notes on the paths the elves took to the stables and kennels and potential hiding places along the way to the forest on the far end of the lawn.

She could take his cloak, his boots, charm them to fit her well enough to just get her *out*.

Hermione looked from the wand to Draco's face, so soft in sleep. No cold, hard marble now, just… just him. How she remembered him. How she wanted him. No mask, just Draco.

Pulling the covers up to her chin Hermione blinked away hot tears that formed in the corners of her eyes.

Draco was right. She was going to give in.

Too fucking boastful when he had nothing to brag about other than always coming in second.

Theo.

Theodore fucking Nott was here and kneeling in front of the Dark Lord.

No. Fuck—*no.* Draco wanted to shout, wanted to stop this. Suddenly the midnight meeting and the celebratory circle all made sense. Draco had stood in the middle of a somewhat smaller circle, but walked forward and knelt just the same. Of course, his initiation had been rushed in the dirty back room of Borgin and Burkes, not proudly displayed in his family's home. Draco had bent his head, baring the back of his neck to a mass murderer and pledged his life, his death, and above all, his soul to him.

And now Theo was about to do the same exact thing.

Draco felt like he might fall to his knees as well. This was impossible. Theo was still in school, he wasn't… he didn't…

Draco had taken the mark because he *had* to, but Theo… wanted to.

His dark blue eyes were bright with fervor and he eagerly pulled the sleeve of his robes up, baring the unblemished skin.

The Dark Lord's eyes glittered a deep, bloody red. He was getting another young soul. Another lifetime of service. Another slave.

Draco closed his eyes when the tip of the pale wand met with Theo's arm, but he could do nothing to block out the scream of agony that echoed around the circle, growing louder and louder until Draco thought his eardrums might burst with the sound of it.

He had heard Theo laugh, shout, talk, cry, and moan, but he had never heard him make a noise like that. What sort of scream had Draco let out? He couldn't remember anything but the pain of the brand, sinking deep into his arm, the magic tying itself into his body, binding it and him to his Master.

And now, Theo was too.

They could all feel it burning their own marks too. Some cried out, others grasped their arms, holding it close to them. He could hear his father wheezing beside him. Draco clenched his fist tight and let the pain sear into him. It hurt, but, he'd had worse. *Crucioing* himself had given him a brand new threshold for pain, and that was before he knew what it was like to have Granger so close yet unable to even fucking kiss her. So this… this was just another Thursday.

Draco watched as Theo fell back when the Dark Lord was done with him. He was gasping, heaving in breaths, unable to move.

One. Two. Three.

On second thought, maybe they should. Go fight somewhere far, *far* away and stop waking him up in the middle of the night to gossip about some place whose only contribution to the world was a halfway decent Quidditch team. Draco's lip curled under his mask as thoughts moved through his sluggish brain. They weren't *that* good. Hadn't even won the World Cup.

What had Granger even seen in that lump?

Didn't matter. She'd never see him again.

And Draco might not see her again if there actually was resistance; he could get sent abroad to fight. The thought stilled the blood in his veins and he blinked heavily a few times behind the mask, taking deep breaths to try and steady himself. No. No one was taking Granger from him or him from Granger.

But if he *did* get sent there, he'd kill that duck-footed motherfucker. Maybe he'd get a medal for loyalty after that too. Although he was certain that Granger would be less impressed with it than his mother had been with his father's. She had been so proud of him…

Draco was so deep into his own thoughts that he was startled when people started moving around him, shifting from lines on either side of the room to form a circle with Lord Voldemort in the center. It was a more formal formation and one that he rarely had them gather in unless there was someone to be tortured or killed.

Draco wasn't in the mood to torture anyone. He was tired and didn't fucking feel like it tonight. All he wanted to do was crawl back into his bed and wait for Granger to move back over to him in her sleep. He had been forcing himself to stay awake, just so he could feel her, hold her, love her. Like he imagined so many times lying in bed alone.

He thought it would be different once he got Granger back.

And it was.

It was worse.

Draco dragged his feet as he moved to his assigned spot in the circle. Next to his father. Merlin, would he ever be free of him? Useless old man.

Draco sighed heavily, but low enough that it did to carry too far. Still, his father had heard and cast him a hard look through his mask. Why were they wearing these stupid things? Merlin, he had no patience for the theatrics. Everyone knew who everyone else was, in fact—

Draco suddenly felt very much awake as he recognized the thick crop of dark hair sitting on top of the thrown back shoulders and puffed out chest. Too pleased, too proud.

Chapter Ten

Draco wasn't surprised to find Hermione at the window. He started leaving the curtains open because she seemed to like looking out over the grounds. Her rich, chocolate eyes would scan over them, watching the snow fall softly past the high window in thick flakes. Today, she lifted her hand up and pressed it against the glass. The window fogged as she leaned in, her breath hitting it before she rested her forehead on one of the panes and let out a long sigh.

He swept across the room towards the window, stopping behind her. Granger hadn't moved. She just stood there, head against the glass with her thick, twisting curls falling around her like a curtain. Draco's hands landed on her shoulders, still so small. She was eating a bit more, but not much.

Did Muggles normally eat different food? He didn't know. She seemed to eat the food at school and liked it well enough. Maybe she just didn't like *his* food.

Maybe she just didn't like *him*.

Draco glanced back at Crookshanks who slowly blinked his piss-yellow eyes at him. He sneered and turned back to Granger.

"Come away from the window," Draco said softly and pulled Granger back, turning her to face him. Her cheeks were wet.

He quickly reached out and yanked the curtains back closed, shutting out the bright snowy landscape before taking her face in his hands. His fingers spread out on either side of her neck, pushing under the soft curls to get at the warm skin and his thumbs lifted to wipe the wetness from her cheeks.

It was so quiet that Draco could hear each one of her small breaths and they moved softly in and out of her, filling and emptying her chest over and over.

Granger looked up at him, straight into his eyes. She was right here, in his hands, and in that moment Draco could not force his marble walls back into place.

In fact, he didn't want to. He wanted her to keep looking at him like that. Shit, he wanted that more than anything. And… maybe she did too.

Without the white walls, Draco's heart was free to beat a little faster and he felt a rush of… something… something he hadn't felt in *so* long pushed through the veins by quickening blood.

Granger lifted her chin, staring defiantly back at him. Then, she tilted her head back and the column of her throat pressed up against her fine skin. Bare. Unblemished. He ran his thumbs down over it, dragging them back up and watching her mouth open as she sucked in a breath. Her lips glistened slightly from the tears he hadn't been quick enough to wipe away and he pulled her face ever so slightly to his as he hunched his shoulders, leaning down towards her.

Her face slid down in his hands and she broke away from his gaze, dropping her eyes to the floor. Draco paused and heard a small, sharp intake of breath from her.

Granger.

He let his lips fall to her hairline, burying his nose into the tawny curls and closed his eyes, holding her there. Taking what he could get.

Her skin was cold from the frosty glass and Draco missed its warmth against his lips. He missed *so much* about her. Her smile, her laugh, her hands, her *fire* . He would fly into the sun if he could feel the warmth of her burn just one more time.

Draco pulled back, taking a deep breath and swallowing heavily. His hands slid down from her face, over her arms, and rested on her wrists, holding them and feeling the fine bones under her delicate skin. He wrapped his fingers around them, squeezing slightly, hoping that she would… react.

Granger stared down at his hands around her wrists and let out another long breath. He didn't want to hurt her, but he could feel her pulse beating quicker the harder he held her.

He tucked the image of it carefully away within the white walls he was slowly building back up and walked towards the door, double checking the locking enchantments before heading out.

His father was in the hall and Draco stopped short. There were silver streaks in Lucius' hair and his robes looked too big on him. His thin hands clutched at the silver snake head of his wandless-walking stick. Why had the Dark Lord even called him? He had Draco now, and he only needed one Malfoy.

"Come," Lucius said. "We're late."

Draco followed his father down the stairs.

This meeting was fucking ridiculous. Why the fuck he was pulled from bed to come here and listen to some asshole talk about a potential growing resistance in some country on the far side of the continent that Draco couldn't fucking remember the name of because the idiot wouldn't stop fucking talking even to the point where Draco was stifling yawns behind his mask.

Traveling all the way to Lancaster in the middle of the night was pretty much the last fucking thing he wanted to do. The Nott's ancestral home wasn't as large as Malfoy Manor and he felt cramped squeezed in the line of other black clad Death Eaters while Dolohov droned on and on and *on*.

He had always been bored when he came to play here as a child because Theo didn't have as many toys as he did. Theo's father had some trouble early on and while the Notts were always more than comfortable, Thaddeus had not been as successful as Lucius over the years. Draco wondered if that was why Theo was always so competitive with him.

Thankfully he wasn't here tonight or Draco would've had to stop slouching and actually pay attention instead of thinking about how Granger's ass had felt grinding against his cock. He probably would have come from that if his mark hadn't burned and he hadn't been summoned for the world's most boring meeting.

What did it matter to him if some backwater wizards were potentially, one day, perhaps going to be a problem for the Dark Lord's eventual regime? What, they couldn't fucking finish the war here before they went marching off somewhere else?

He heard Granger shift on the bed, turning towards him. Her chain moved with her. He would make this up to her. He would make this all right again. When he could. Then he'd give her anything she asked for. Anything. Everything.

The war would be over in a few months, maybe a year at the longest. And Draco would have the rest of his life to make things right with Granger. Even if everything else was wrong, he would make *this* right.

Draco pushed himself up and walked over to his wardrobe, summoning his clothes from it and slipping them over himself. In the mirror he could see Granger laying on his bed, watching him. He shrugged his cloak over his shoulders and tossed the hood up to hide his face in shadow. He picked up his mask, but didn't put it on yet.

Her big eyes stayed on him either way and Draco walked back to the bed to put on his boots. As he pulled them on, he heard her moving behind him again, the chain rustling as she adjusted her arms around her legs. Draco sighed. When he got back he'd take it off for the rest of the day. She'd like that.

He'd like that too.

He heard the chain moving again and he stood up quickly enough to still see her hand outstretched in his direction.

He waited for her to say something, anything. But all she did was look up at him with her innocent doe eyes and Draco could do nothing but stare down at her, sinking deeper and deeper into them. She really was beautiful. Cute little nose and plump pink lips. It almost hurt looking at her, knowing how smooth and soft her skin felt and not being able to fucking touch it.

"Draco—" She was looking straight up at him with big, innocent eyes and a parted mouth. "Don't do this."

For being so brilliant there was so much she didn't know. Or care to know because it didn't fit into her perfect little view of how the world should be.

His scars felt cold, lacing and crossing over his chest like… like chains.

"What do you think I brought you here for?"

He didn't know it was possible, but her eyes grew even larger, so fucking open and inviting. But if he ever wanted a future with her, he had to do this before climbing back into their bed and watching those same cinnamon eyes light up and burn for him.

Draco lifted the metal mask and slid it onto his face. Granger's face fell, lids fluttering and mouth turning small. She was still beautiful though.

Following her line of sight he saw that she was staring directly at the dark mark on his left forearm. Granger gasped and her pulse thumped violently under his fingers.

Draco didn't let go.

Over the next week, Draco gradually started making good on her demands. The toothbrush he brought her was in fact green, but it was a bright neon instead of the deep forest of Slytherin. Small victories…

"Did you actually go into a Muggle shop and buy this?" Hermione asked, almost liking the image of Draco wandering around a drug store and staring at the rows of toothbrushes while his brows pulled together in bewilderment.

He snorted. "No."

"Then how did you get it?"

"I summoned it from outside."

Hermione looked from the toothbrush up to Draco. "You *stole* it?"

How could he look so condescending when he was the one who had done wrong? "Granger, it's a toothbrush."

"It doesn't make it right," she argued.

His expression was carefully controlled, making sure none of his actual thoughts slipped onto it where she might have a *hint* of what was going on in his head.

"It was for you."

She didn't press the matter anymore. There was no arguing with him when he was like this. But for the next two days, that was all they did and her requests stopped coming until the following morning when Draco threw a copy of the Daily Prophet onto the bed.

Hermione rushed forward, grabbing it and clutching it hard enough to rip the edges, but right now she didn't care. She was desperate for any news of Harry or the Order or even the war. It had been hard to get information on the run, trying to catch Muggle headlines and steal old copies of the Prophet out of bins when they could, but it had been two weeks now since she had seen nothing but Draco getting drunk on the chaise and sneering at her.

Hermione bent low over the paper, eyes darting to every article, trying to read them all at once.

" *Thicknesse Address Claims of Abuse in the Ministry"* then in smaller print underneath a quote from the puppet Minister, " *The Ministry of Magic is employing the necessary level of commitment to regulating our magical community for the protection and continuation of…"* She read on, disgusted but not surprised by the Prophet's acceptance of the Ministry's statement until she felt like she couldn't stomach it anymore.

Hermione skipped ahead to an article at the bottom of the page. " *Archibald Edgecombe killed in a Quidditch accident! The 34 year old Chaser for the Falmouth Falcons was killed yesterday in a freak accident during practice when his broom suddenly disappeared from underneath him. Edgecombe had discussed leaving the team recently to accept a position offered to him on the Belgium World Team due allegations about his wife and daughter's blood status."*

More and more of the same kinds of stories, yet Hermione could not stop herself from reading. She read the entire paper, front to back, twice, before setting it down and leaning back against the pillows with a heavy sigh.

"Find what you were looking for?" She had almost forgotten Draco was there. He picked up the paper and folded it back.

He looked tired. His shoulders were sagging today and his hair was not pushed back like it normally was. Instead it fell in locks over his forehead, almost long enough to cover his eyes. He sat the paper down on the bed again, running his fingers over the picture of Pius Thicknesse with Dolores Umbridge at his shoulder. Her heart went out to Draco, wanting to take his hand into her own. This world that she just read about was bleak and void of the whimsical oddities that had always captivated her about the magical world.

But this one was dark and dreary. Cold. Harsh.

No wonder he looked like he did. Of course Draco had hidden himself away behind metal and marble. If this was the world he had to live in, participate in, *survive* in, the soft smile he had given to her when he told her he loved her would have been torn from his face in a heartbeat. She wondered if she would ever get to see it again. Even just once. Once would be enough. Just to know that her Draco was still in there somewhere.

Draco twisted the Malfoy ring around on his finger and Hermione glanced back down at his hands. They looked the same, but so different as well. There were the clean, blunt nails on top of the long fingers that had touched every part of her. She could practically feel them on her skin, gently sliding and digging in. His hand was spread wide over the paper, blue-green veins ran like roads under the pale skin. She wanted to follow them up his arm to his chest and then deep down into his heart. Maybe she could find him in

Oh, *fuck yes*… Her ass pressed up against his cock and she squirmed in that wonderful way she always did. Draco closed his eyes back, letting the feeling slip into his bloodstream and reach every last inch of him.

He opened his mouth wanting, *needing,* to latch it onto her. To sink his teeth into her soft skin and pull just enough to make those breathy moans turn into small screams. Her little wiggling would turn into convulsions and Draco would press his hand hard against the smooth skin between her hips and hold her to him so he could enjoy her rocking hips before sliding his hand down in between her legs and really give her something to shake about.

But as he went to tighten his hold on her, his arm started to burn from the inside out. The blood in his veins felt like poison, eating away at the muscles that contracted painfully and would not release from around the bone, making it feel like it was about to shatter inside him.

He was being summoned.

Draco let out a growling groan and felt Granger's movements still. She was awake. Of course she fucking was. She could sleep through nightmares, but not through one fucking noise of his.

Draco pulled his arm up, looking at the twisting snake slithering from the dead-eyed skull and he had the urge to *crucio* the fuck out of it and hope that even a twinge of discomfort passed through whatever connection was braided into the brand.

Did the Dark Lord not own an owl? Draco would let him borrow Calix if it meant he didn't have to put up with this shit. Actually, no. Because the snake would probably eat it. Anyways, Calix was missing again.

Stupid bird.

He groaned as the pain increased and heard Granger gasp, still wrapped in his arms. She had seen it moving, calling him to his Lord.

Draco had hoped she wouldn't have to witness that. Granger didn't deserve to have to see the skin turn an ugly shade of red before deepening into purple as it bruised from the force of the magic. He kept the rest of his scars covered, even while sleeping, but this one… Well. She already knew.

Didn't mean he *liked* her seeing him being called to his Master's side.

Draco rolled over and pushed himself up to a sitting position on the edge of the bed, waiting for the pain to lessen so he could dress.

He stood there, considering this behind his marble mask for much longer than Hermione felt comfortable with. What did he have to think about? They had already discussed everything. Was keeping her chained up that important to him? Yes. Probably. He probably got off knowing she was chained up next to him every night. And the cage, well… he had said it was for her protection too, but she wouldn't *need* protection if he hadn't brought her here. Or if he gave her a wand at least.

"Draco," Hermione prompted. She couldn't wait any longer.

"What color?"

Her brows pulled together in confusion. "What?"

"What color toothbrush do you want?"

Hermione blinked. Was this… a yes? Was he actually agreeing to her terms?

"Red."

Draco's lips tightened.

"You'll get green."

Draco woke up to pitiful little moans, whimpering and pleading as she tossed her messy curls into his face and buried herself into his arm. It was wrapped around her tonight with her back to his chest. His other was draped across her waist and his hand rested on her lower stomach. He couldn't help but think how close his fingers were to the warmth of her center when he curled them against the soft cotton of her knickers.

Granger moaned again. She was dreaming. Did this girl's brain *ever* turn off? Almost every night he felt her moving around, panting and whining. She would toss and turn and then pull herself against him, settling down once she was tucked close to him.

Where she knew she belonged.

And Draco, the gentleman that he was, would hold her, letting her busy brain wear itself out until she went quietly back into the silence of slumber; happy—inside his embrace.

But tonight was taking longer than usual and hearing her little noises was starting to wake him up. *Really* wake him up.

Goddamn it, if she didn't stop moving she was going to—

there? Under the blood and muscle, locked behind the cage of his ribs; maybe that's where he was hiding away.

Something sparked in her mind as she watched his fingers trace the same pattern over and over the moving picture. She wouldn't have known it if she hadn't spent all her free time reading about the dark arts in the relative safety of the tent. Draco's fingers were moving not in a pattern, but in spellwork.

The *cruciatus* curse. It was the jerky, rough slicing wandwork to cast the torture curse.

Hermione watched his finger trace it over and over; a dozen times, maybe more. The ink smeared and their faces became distorted, not even recognizable as human anymore. Then he stopped.

"Do you still want this?"

Hermione blinked, looking up into his grey eyes and finding… nothing. No misty haze, no swarming storms, not even sharpened steel. Just… nothing.

She shook her head. Draco took it and walked out. He was leaving her alone for longer stretches of time now and she was finding that it bothered her even more than his presence did. She was… worried about him. That's all. She didn't miss him.

She *didn't* miss him.

The next day a new dress was waiting for her when she got out of the bathroom. Hanging on the mahogany door of Draco's wardrobe was another sheer, see-through lace shift that was, if possible, even smaller than the one before. She sighed and pulled it down to change into it when she saw that he hadn't left her any undergarments this time.

Hermione shrieked in frustration. But Draco wasn't even here to hear her. He had left. Again.

That *bastard*.

"This—is Theo," Draco stated drolly. "Theo, these are my dogs."

"We're not dogs," Donovan growled.

Draco rolled his eyes and waved his hand dismissively. "Canine… companions then."

Theo snorted.

"What are you laughing at?" Donovan snapped, his lips pulling back over his teeth.

Theo's eyes darkened. "You, bitch."

Draco pressed one hand into Donovan's chest and the other into Theo's. He really didn't feel like fighting another werewolf and was starting to regret bringing Theo along to meet his wolves. Fergus took a step up to stand at Donovan's shoulder and Kenna snapped her jaws on the other side. Draco was pleased to see that she looked like she was doing better.

Good. They needed to get back to work.

He pushed them apart and then placed himself between them. "No killing the help."

"Fine," Theo and Donovan said together and then glared at each other.

Draco stifled a smirk.

"The fuck are you doing hanging around with the likes of them?" Theo asked out of the corner of his mouth as Draco resumed his original position.

He gave Theo a wry smile. "Werewolves have enhanced hearing."

Theo's face dropped as he looked at each of the three wolves in front of him.

"One of the many reasons why dogs are excellent hunters."

"I told you—"

Draco ignored Donovan and continued on. "They hunt Mudbloods for me."

Theo's interest suddenly sparked. "So that's how you've done it. Gotten so many of them. What's your count these days? The last reports I saw said you were at—"

"88," Donovan answered proudly.

" *87,"* Draco corrected quickly. Donovan glanced at him and Draco glared daggers at him, wanting to pull the tongue from his head for slipping. He'd pay for that. Draco couldn't have him fucking up again.

"Uh, right," Donovan cleared his throat.

Theo looked to Draco who wiped the frosty look from his face then shrugged. "They ate one."

Kenna barked out a laugh when Theo's jaw dropped open.

"Nice teeth." She winked at him.

Theo closed his mouth then smiled, looking Kenna over slowly. "Nice t—"

"I'll knock those teeth she likes so much out of your skull if you say another word about my baby sister." Donovan was suddenly nose to nose with Theo and Draco sighed. He had brought Theo along to try and speed up the process. Now that Granger was safely tucked away, he didn't have to be so careful. Hunting Potter would be easier now. The wolves could find him and Draco would have back up so that way the Boy Who Wouldn't Fucking Die couldn't just slip away again.

"I told you," he looked back up at her, "they were filthy."

Hermione placed her hands on her hips, bunching the fabric of the sheet there. "Then I want new ones."

Draco worked his jaw as he let his eyes slide down the length of her, slowly bringing them back up. Hermione was torturously aware that his undershirt did not cover much and that Draco was indulging himself in the sight of her. She hated herself a little for the tightness she felt deep within at the look on his face. She shouldn't still like that he looked at her like that. Why couldn't she hate him?

"I'll get you clothes, kitten." His voice was soft and deep when he spoke and Hermione ignored the rush of heat down her spine that shot straight into her center.

Or, at least tried to.

Another easy one. Hermione eyed him. What was he playing at? She would have plenty of time to think over it later. There was one more thing she wanted. Well, one more thing she was asking for.

"Lastly, I want a toothbrush."

"There's mouth cleaning potion in the bathroom."

"That's not what I asked for," Hermione stated. "I said I want a toothbrush."

"Why do you want that Muggle shit?" Draco snorted.

As a Pureblood, Draco must have grown up using magical replacements for almost everything that Hermione had grown up using. Mouth cleaning potion worked wonders, but Hermione had always felt comfort in still brushing her teeth. Not to mention having dentists as parents had ingrained the practice in her. The ritual of running it under water, the methodic movement, the taste of the sweet mint—no. Stop.

"I want a toothbrush, Draco Malfoy, and I want it RIGHT NOW!" Hermione stamped her foot on the ground, balling her hands into fists at her sides and not even caring that they were visibly shaking.

Draco looked a little taken aback and then… amused. The faint smirk spread a little wider, carving itself into his fine features.

"I'll see what I can do," he spoke softly, with a hint of humor in his voice.

"Good." Hermione pulled herself back together. "And I want the chains gone."

Draco cocked his brow up again. "I thought you said your toothbrush was your last request."

Hermione sneered at him. "I lied." Draco blinked. "Get used to it." She gave him a wry smile and watched his expression fall into stoicism again. "And no more chains or cage."

what was happening outside these walls and it wasn't like Draco was telling her anything and she was sick with worry over her friends.

He looked back up at her and a faint smirk crossed his features. Hermione glared at him.

"Done."

Done? That was… easier than she expected. She guessed things were worse than she imagined if he didn't even mind her reading the Prophet. Nerves rattled down her spine for Harry. And Ron.

Hermione steeled herself before her next request. This one would certainly not go over as well as the previous one.

"I want to see Blaise."

Draco went cold, eyes turning as hard as iron. "You *what?"*

"I want," she spoke clearly and calmly, "to see Blaise. Every now and then. I want to speak to someone else and, I guess he's the best I can do right now."

Draco seethed and grit his teeth. "Blaise is the *best you can do?"*

She felt like the temperature had dropped a few degrees with Draco's cold anger hanging in the air around them.

"He's the best *you* can do!" Hermione argued back. "He's the only other person who knows I'm here and since you *refuse* to let me out or go or *anything* then yes! I want to talk to him!"

"Why?" Draco took a step forward, the first one he had through their entire negotiation.

Hermione stood her ground. "Because he's not you."

Draco stopped in his tracks, glaring at her. "Damn right he's not me."

Hermione tried to keep her hands from shaking, but it traveled all the way up her arms.

Draco ground his teeth. "You're not seeing another man. Not under my roof, not *ever."*

She knew it was a long shot, but she had taken it anyway. What did she have to lose? At this point, not much. And if she budged on something, he might as well.

"Fine."

Draco watched her warily before slowly, very slowly, he seemed to settle. His shoulders lowered, his jaw unclenched, and his fists released.

"Then I want my clothes."

"I don't have them." Draco became very interested in the binding of the faded red leather book in his hands.

"Where are they?"

"Touch me and you'll answer to *him,"* Theo threatened, tugging up his sleeve to show off his mark. It was barely healed, the flesh around it still mottled with a deep bruise. Donovan growled at the sight of it and Fergus gnashed his teeth.

"Donnie, stop it! I was just having a little fun with the boy," Kenna whined.

Donnie? Merlin, and just when Draco was starting to like the wolf…

Donovan whipped his head over his shoulder. "Not with his kind, alright? You know that." He turned towards Kenna. "He's got the mark. You know what that means."

Draco felt like poison was dripping inside him. Who the fuck did this animal think he was looking down on a goddamn Pureblood wizard who bore the mark of the most powerful man to ever live? What did this flea bitten mongrel fucking know about it? Nothing. Fucking nothing.

So far, Draco had let his wolves do his dirty work for him, but now that he had Theo back, his canine companions were about to see what being a Death Eater actually meant.

"You want to have some fun, Kenna?" Draco asked, letting the words play on his tongue.

She nodded.

"Good. We've have new prey to hunt."

Kenna huffed. "It's always "work work work" with you, isn't it Malfoy?"

"You don't seem to mind it when I hand you your gold."

"You still owe us for the last one." Fergus said under his breath, picking something out from under one of his nails.

"You'll get it," Draco snapped at Fergus and when the wolf didn't lift his eyes Draco slowly turned away from him, letting his lids hang low over his eyes in disdain.

In fact, Draco had gone to Gringotts on his way here and the goblin had told him his expense account had been emptied. He didn't have time for this shit right now, he was supposed to meet Theo and then the wolves. Draco swore at the goblin and then threatened that by the time he got back, his gold better be back in his vault or the goblin was going in there.

He knocked over the brass scales, making sure to cause a scene before he stormed out, boots thudding heavily against the tiled floor.

He would have to speak with his *dear* Father.

But first, he had business to attend to.

"We're not hunting Mudbloods anymore," Draco announced, forcing their attention back on him. Kenna and Fergus followed Donovan's lead and Donovan squared his

broad shoulders, rolling them and cracked his neck. Seeing that he was on board made any objects from Fergus and Kenna die.

Theo on the other hand had gotten bolder the last few months without Draco and eyed him suspiciously. That was fine. He'd remember who was in charge soon enough.

"What are we hunting then?" Theo asked with an edge in his tone.

"The only prey that matters now." Granger was protected in the cage. She was unhappy in the cage, but at least she was with him. So now, it was time to end the war and start their lives together.

Draco smirked. "Potter."

Hermione woke up to the room brighter than she had ever seen it. It was snowing and the swirling white outside the window was bringing a strange glow in with it. She should be cold on a morning like this, but she was tucked snuggly under the covers with a thick arm under her head and another wrapped around her ribs neatly.

Draco.

He was spending more and more time out of the room, but crawled into the bed with her every night and without fail, they woke up tangled together each morning. She would pull herself away, let the coldness of his absence stir her body and think.

Hermione spent almost all of her time thinking these days.

Not that she had much else to do. Draco had taken her list of books, but hadn't brought her any of them back. She wasn't going to ask for them again though, her pride wouldn't allow her. As much as she wanted something to help pass the time, she would not beg Draco.

He would enjoy it too much.

She stared at the tapestry on the wall as she did every morning. Threads woven together to spin a deer, tall and proud, with golden antlers stretching up into sharp tines. The dark eyes seemed to stare back at her. Behind the deer were silver streaked wolves, tongues lolling out of their mouths and white teeth gnashing as they leap forward.

"No thanks," Draco said nonchalantly. "It's the only way I can still make you blush that pretty Gryffindor shade of red."

Hermione took another deep breath and held it before she let it out. She needed to stay on topic; Draco was a master of distraction and if she didn't keep her wits about her, she would accidently agree to something she didn't want. Or even worse, something she did.

"I want to get out of this room."

"Granger," Draco sighed. "Give it up. I'm not going to let you—"

"Please, just for a little while. Just to give me a change of scenery."

He considered this. "I… can allow you into my study."

His study. Okay, that was a start, right?

"Okay."

"Only with me."

"Why?" she exclaimed. That meant she would only be able to go there when he decided and he would drag her back in here once he got bored. She didn't like the idea of having him escort her everywhere, she wanted autonomy. Hermione was about to argue when Draco cut her off.

"Granger, this is my private bedroom. My study is a more… public space. I conduct business there. Meetings. There could be visitors."

A jolt ran into her fingertips and then raced back up into her chest. "Visitors? I thought you said no one came into your wing of the Manor."

"I have… invited certain people in. They sometimes stop by."

"Who? Blaise? He knows I'm here."

Draco did not answer.

"Draco… *who?"*

He clearly did not want to talk about this. Too bad. There were plenty of things Hermione didn't want and she stayed silent until he answered.

"Associates of mine."

Her heart dropped somewhere around her knees. "Death Eaters."

"Some of them aren't."

"Good to know not all your friends are ruthless killers," Hermione snarled.

Draco lowered his eyes and stared at the floor for a while.

"Anything else?"

Hermione continued. "I want copies of the Daily Prophet." It was nothing more than a propaganda machine for Voldemort's regime, but at least it was news. She had no idea

Draco folded his arms, looking vaguely amused and Hermione wanted to punch him in his smug face.

"Do tell."

She took a deep breath. "I can't just sit in this room all day. It's driving me crazy. I need something to keep me occupied."

He fought a smirk.

Hermione glared at him. She knew what was going on in his mind and what he would suggest to keep her busy, but she wasn't going to give him the pleasure of getting under her skin again and she had plenty of time to prepare herself for his conversation.

"I want books."

Draco rolled his eyes. "Of course you do."

"I can give you a list."

"I can give you a library."

She blinked in surprise. A whole library? Just for her?

"I know how much you like to fuck in libraries."

And there it was. Everything with him was a negotiation. It always had been. Tit for tat. Rewards for good behavior. Compromises and concessions until she had gotten so far from her base she had somehow wound up here, locked in Draco's bedroom.

"The list will do," Hermione replied firmly.

Draco shrugged, but she saw the stiffness in his shoulders. "What else?"

"I want to go outside."

"No." He didn't even miss a beat. The misty grey was gone from his eyes and in place was hard, sharp steel.

"I *want* ," Hermione emphasized, "to go outside."

"I said *no.*"

"I need fresh air, space to move! You can't keep me locked up here forever!"

Draco paused, his expression unreadable, but for a moment she almost got a hint of… understanding.

"It's not safe for you out there."

"I'm not a child."

He smirked again. "Trust me, I know."

Hermione straightened the sheet around her. "I want you to stop making comments like that."

"Can't help myself, Sweetheart."

"Try," she sneered.

Sometimes, she imagined the deer flitting away and taking off into the dense woods woven behind it. But most days, Hermione sat and imagined the wolves tearing into it, bringing it down and breaking it's golden antlers.

She missed Harry. She spent hours wondering where he was, hoping he was okay. What he had thought when he got back to the tent and she was gone? Did he think she had abandoned him like Ron had? Had he looked for her? How long had he stayed there in the Forest of Dean, hoping she would come back?

Maybe they should have stayed longer after Ron left. Maybe… maybe he tried to come back. Maybe he didn't mean it. He had been wearing the locket and they had been fighting about Draco when Harry came in with his announcement.

If she hadn't been dreaming of Draco, if she hadn't let him stay in her head for months then maybe they would all still be together. How was Harry going to do this on his own? As much as she wanted her wand back, Hermione was glad that Harry had it. Thinking of him out there defenseless was more than she could stand.

What would Draco have done if he had found Harry instead of her? Hermione looked over her shoulder and saw his marble carved face. His eyes looked sunken, even in sleep, and the bruised circles under his eyes had not faded from the night before. She remembered how soft his face looked in the Room of Requirement when she had woken up next to him, how he had looked calm and serene. Now, this Draco looked just as conflicted as he did awake.

His brows were tense and heavy over his eyes. His lips pressed tightly together and his jaw clenched under the pale skin. She wanted to kiss it, run her lips over the sharp line from his chin up to his ear. She could smell the crisp mint on him and Hermione closed her eyes, trying not to make any noise as she breathed in deeply, wanting to take it all in.

When she opened them again, he was staring back at her. Hermione stilled, not trusting herself to move an inch in his arms. She remembered hearing that predators were triggered by prey running and her instincts told her to stay as still as possible. She didn't think Draco would hurt her by any means, but she was already wrapped up in him with her heart pounding in her chest. She was more scared of what *she* would do than what he could.

Draco blinked and the grey of his eyes turned to a soft and misty. She hurt. She physically *hurt* with him looking at her like that. Draco. Her Draco. Still there. Just like the earth buried under the snow outside right now, he was still deep in there, waiting, huddled in the cold.

But here, tucked away in their bed, it was warm and soft and safe. Maybe she could get him to come out. Because she was sure if she could just… break into wherever Draco was hiding inside himself, she could… could…

With all her thinking she wasn't entirely sure what she could or what she even *would* do. All she knew was that she wanted a chance to make that choice.

Hermione didn't know how long she had sat there, staring into the hazy grey of Draco eyes, but his brow had relaxed and his lips had turned up ever so slightly. He breathed in and then let it out slowly, pulling his arm around her a little tighter. Hermione let him.

The muscle hardened as a sharp cry sounded from outside. Draco lifted his head and Hermione turned to see a large owl soaring towards the window.

Without missing a beat, Draco nimbly pulled himself from around her and out of the bed. He placed a hand on the handle of the drawer beside the bed and whispered a few words making it pop open. Hermione sat up to see Draco pull out his wand and snap it back shut.

He was locking it away. Now that he didn't keep her in a cage at night, he was keeping his wand safely away from her. She had her chance at it once and had now lost it. Hermione sunk back down into the bed.

The great bird flapped his wings silently outside the window, stirring the thick flakes of snow as Draco crossed the room quickly and unlocked it, vanishing the bars to let the owl soar in before locking them back into place and testing them with a quick shake. Satisfied, he closed the window again and Hermione huddled under the covers as the cold air raced into the large expanse of the room.

Draco didn't seem to mind it one bit, dressed in his white t-shirt and black boxer briefs. He stuck his wand into the band of his boxers and followed the owl to a perch in a darkened corner. Crookshanks jumped up on the arm of the chaise and let out a loud yowl as Draco pulled a few treats out and handed them to the owl, brushing snow off of its large wings in a surprisingly gentle gesture.

The owl clicked its beak happily and swiveled its head around to look straight at her. Hermione's eyes enlarged to match the bird's and her mouth fell open. It was the owl from the woods. The one that had followed them for *weeks* and watched her every time she went off on her own. It was Draco's.

"His name is Calix," Draco stated, his back still turned to her. "And he's the world's worst owl."

over her stomach and felt it growl. She'd have to give in sometime, she knew it. And holding out like this was only making her weaker. She might not be able to fight Draco or have a wand to defend herself, but she still had her best weapon—her brain. She could outsmart him.

Or maybe, just maybe, she could somehow convince him to…

But no. That was what a foolish, naive schoolgirl would wish for, not the young woman who was fighting in a war to save her friends, her family. And… whatever Draco was to her too.

Anyways, it was useless to try and talk to him about *that* . Draco was cunning and could figure out a way to twist this around on her. Or he might just rile her up like he used to and once her blood was hot and racing he would reach out and touch her with his cool fingers and she would fall back into his arms, giving into what she wanted more than anything.

Hermione laid there, staring up at the silver threads of the embroidered stars until the beating between her legs faded again.

Thank Godric Draco was not a morning person.

She wondered how much longer he would stay locked up here with her. He had only left to return with another bottle of fire whisky, making sure the door locked completely before opening it and guzzling it down. But at least when he was here, the bars of the cage stayed down and sometimes he would even let her off the chain, watching her as she padded around his room, trying to dispel some of the pent up energy building inside her with each passing day.

But by the fourth day Hermione was too restless to sit still and she had a headache that wouldn't go away. Even the Pepper Up potion wasn't shaking the last remnants of her illness and she knew she would have to make some concessions soon.

But that didn't mean that she was the only one.

Draco was reading his old copy of " *The Sacred Twenty-Eight"* on the chaise when she approached him.

"If I am going to stay here, then I have a few demands."

"Demands?" Draco closed the book and cocked a brow up.

Hermione lifted her chin as he stood up. It was the first time they were standing toe to toe and, goodness, he had definitely grown. She tilted her head back in order to look up at him.

"Yes. Demands."

over the apple of her cheek, "there actually isn't anything holding your face onto your skull other than the skin. And it comes off so easily…"

Tears spilled over onto her cheeks again, but this time Draco did not wipe them away.

"I p-promise…"

"You wouldn't be the first bitch I tracked down and threw into a cage." He tossed her back onto the bed. "So unless you want to end up in one, wait ten minutes and then disapparate to wherever the fuck you sleep at when you aren't sucking a traitor's cock and don't *ever* let me see you again. Understood?"

She nodded so emphatically Draco thought she might actually break her neck. He wanted out of this room. Out of this place. Out of everything and back into Granger. Into her arms, into her heart, into her cage. He would lock himself up in there with her and hold her and feel her and McLaggen's bloodless face would disappear and she would be warm and soft and not cold and stiff like the body sitting right fucking *there*.

Draco made it into the hall before he vomited the contents of his stomach onto the floor. Twice. He should go back and kill the girl. Explain it away to Umbridge or blackmail her with the fact that her niece was in on it with McLaggen.

But… fuck. He couldn't. Just thinking about the green light made him feel like he was going to be sick again.

The night air would help.

Draco forced himself outside and nearly ran into Theo.

"Everything taken care of?" Theo asked, trying to look over Draco's shoulder.

Draco snapped the door shut behind him. "Yeah. Let's go get a drink."

"What about the bod—"

Draco shoved his wand into Theo's throat. "Shut *up,"* he growled.

"I was just ask—"

"You don't ask anymore, understood?" Draco pressed the tip of his wand into Theo's jugular. "You do as your fucking told. You follow orders. That's how this works! You *don't* shoot off killing curses unless I fucking tell you to!"

"Fuck, *fine!"* Theo grumbled and Draco released him. Theo adjusted his robes and pulled his mask off his face. "So, uh, was that your first?"

"First what?"

Theo looked back at the door. "First kill."

Draco went impossibly still. His spine might as well have turned to steel and his face slid easily into a blank expression.

"No."

"Oh. Uh, right."

"Yours?" Draco asked.

Theo looked back at the door. "Yeah," he said, his voice softening and eyes still glued to the door.

Shit. They needed to get the fuck out of here and *fast*. The girl could walk out at any moment and Draco didn't think he would be able to find a way out of it a second time. Theo needed to think he had done it as well. If Theo suspected Draco of not being able to cast the killing curse then… he didn't want to think about that.

"Well," Draco announced, "I think that deserves a drink, don't you say?"

Theo gave a nervous laugh and then his smile was back in place as if it had never been gone. Draco wondered if it was real or not, but before he could study it anymore Theo said, "Fuck yeah, let's go get wasted."

Hermione was running. It had been so long since she had done anything more than pace around Draco's bedroom, but now her heart was pumping, her breath was coming quickly, and she was throwing herself forward with each beating step. She was surprised to find herself not in the woods with leaves underfoot, but running on a long carpet stretching down a dark paneled hallway.

It wasn't the Ministry, she knew those black tiles well, and wherever she was now was lit with tapered candles sitting in ornate silver sconces. They rushed past her, flickering in her wake as she glanced over her shoulder. There was no one chasing her.

She could feel the difference. In her dreams she was always pushed forward by the innate feeling of being followed, but now… The long hallway was empty. Hermione slowed, looking around at the panels of solid wood covering the long walls and reaching up to high ceilings above her. It looked vaguely familiar, as if she might have looked up at them once before.

Her chest rose and fell heavily and her legs pulsed with each thump of her heart, even at a standstill. She could feel it, the mark on her inner thigh. It was there, aching slightly as blood rushed the bruise. She missed it. Over the long months it had become a source

of comfort to her, even if it was painful at the same time. It was hers. It was his. It was theirs.

Then an agonized cry pierced her ears and Hermione's body lurched forward instinctively. Someone was being hurt, tortured probably. She needed to get to them. Needed to help them. They sounded like they were *dying*.

She rushed forward, pushing herself on, making herself run faster down the carpeted hall, past doors with locked handles, past marble busts, and rich tapestries.

The screaming was getting louder, almost deafening. Whoever it was wasn't going to last much longer.

Ahead were a set of stairs leading down into darkness. She couldn't see where they ended and paused for just a moment, wondering if she should descend.

Then she heard her name. In an anguished, ripping voice, he was screaming out her name. " *Hermione!*"

"DRACO!"

Her lungs filled with air as she woke up, her body jutting up from her perfectly shaped pillow under her, but a cool hand wrapped around her neck and pushed her back down. The weight of his chest landed on hers and Hermione was glad she had taken a breath as she came out of sleep because Draco's mouth was on hers before she could speak.

His lips moved against hers with the same barely controlled passion they always had, enveloping hers as his tongue snaked into her mouth bringing with it the crisp taste of mint and… whisky. It was strong enough to make her recoil, but his fingers were stronger, sliding up to her jaw and cheek, holding her in place under him. He moaned into her mouth, his nose pressing into her face as he dove in deeper.

Draco was stone drunk.

Hermione tried to push him off of her, but Draco gathered her wrists quickly, pulling her hands off of his chest and slamming them into hers, making her sink down into the bed. She moaned, but whether it was from want or refusal, Hermione wasn't sure. What she did know was it felt *so good* when she pressed herself back up against him, trying to dislodge him, but couldn't help enjoying the feeling of him against her again.

Goodness, she had missed him.

He lifted her wrists up, breaking the kiss for only a moment to shove them above her head. Hermione took this opportunity to turn her face away from him. His lips landed on the side of her mouth, wet and warm and still kissing her. Draco was trying to push her face back towards him, breathing out heavily and the scent of the fire whisky overwhelmed her again.

"So I know that she would be *very* upset to hear about her lovely niece," he pushed some of her hair back over her shoulder, "was caught in bed with someone protecting Mudbloods."

"W-what?"

Draco gave a deep nod. "That's why we are here. McLaggen has been helping the Order." It was a lie, but so were half the things people were arrested for these days. "Your aunt is very powerful and guards her position carefully. But a close family member associating with someone like that…" He tutted a few times, shaking his head. "He's a criminal. And if anyone were to know you were here, in *bed* with him, especially your aunt—"

"No, no, no!" She inched closer to Draco. "Please don't tell her! She… she—"

"I know," Draco said, softening his voice to comfort the poor girl. She turned white with fear. Good. "I know what she would do. She is a high level Ministry official and can't have anyone in her family casting doubt on her allegiance. I'm sure you know how strict she can be."

The little bit of color that was left drained out of her face.

"But I can tell this was all just a misunderstanding. You would never willingly betray our new Ministry, would you?" She shook her head nervously. "I would hate to have to chase a pretty thing like you down and haul you in for sentencing. Or…" Draco glanced back at McLaggen's still form. "I might have to take you to the Dark Lord himself."

"NO!" she shrieked and reached out to cling onto Draco's black robes. There were layers of clothes between them but he could still feel the pressure of her hands against the scars on his chest. It didn't feel like when Granger touched them. It didn't feel like anything but a dull numbness. "PLEASE! I'll do anything! Anything!"

Draco cocked a brow up. "Anything?"

She swallowed. Then nodded.

"You'll need to be very, *very* good for me."

"I… I will," she breathed out, voice shaking.

Draco smirked. Modified memories could be broken into if tried hard enough and based on the way he had to pry her hands from his robes, Draco safely assumed she was the clingy type. If she didn't remember what happened to her boyfriend, she might ask the wrong person questions and get taken into interrogation herself.

Fear worked as a much better deterrent.

"If I ever find out you breathed a word of this to anyone, I will hunt you down and let my werewolves eat your pretty face off your head. You know," he traced his wand

"You... " she gasped, "you don't have to do this! I… I won't… *please… please!"*

"Theo, go," Draco ordered, his voice low and steady. "Make sure our way out is clear."

Theo gave a sharp nod and the girl cried out, "NO!"

Draco waited until he heard the door shut and then took a heavy step towards her. Anything to be away from the dead body.

"Name and Blood Status."

She kept crying, sitting in the bed and clutching the covers and bawling her fucking eyes out.

"NOW!"

"St-Steph-anie," she hiccuped, "Tow-Towler." Draco waited as she added a few extra syllables to her name in sobs. He raised his brows. "I'm a-a-a Half-blo-od!"

Draco rolled his eyes. If she was a Mudblood he could just take her in, but arresting a Halfblood he would need a reason for and—

"Did you just say Towler?"

The girl nodded, sucking in three quick breaths.

"Fuck."

Halfbloods, yes, but they had connections. No matter she was here with McLaggen then, his family was always at the Ministry too. Fucking social climbers.

"Please, I… I won't tell—"

"I know you won't," Draco moved to the side of the bed and looked down at her. The tears made her eyes look bigger than he knew they normally would be, but at least it wasn't pools of melted chocolate staring up at him. Hers were blue.

Tears spilled out of them.

"Shh," Draco wiped his wand over her cheek, drying it. "Don't cry. Do you know Dolores Umbridge?"

She nodded. "She's… my aunt."

Thank fuck he didn't kill her then. The death of Umbridge's niece would certainly raise questions and attention was the last fucking thing Draco wanted. His absence in the field had already been noted.

"See, I knew you were a good girl." He slid his wand over the other half of her face, vanishing the tears there as well. "I know you're aunt quite well. She is… a close associate of mine. We have tea almost once a week."

The girl went silent.

"No, Draco, stop—"

In all honesty, she expected him to keep kissing her, so she was surprised when Draco growled into her ear instead, grazing his teeth along it and then closing them over her lobe.

Hermione whimpered. With her hands pinned above her head, Draco's body pressed against her own, and his mouth on her skin again she felt the same curl of anticipation, the same rush of heat as she always had with him. She had to suppress the shiver that threatened to run through her as he breathed out heavily across her neck.

"I heard you," he whispered in a low, thick voice. "You want me. I heard you, Granger."

She did. She wanted him more than anything right now and it would be so easy to just let out the breathy '*yes'* that was fighting against her lips. She could open them, let it out, and let Draco back in again.

Hermione closed her eyes tightly. As much as she wanted to, she couldn't do this. Not when the war was still going on, people still dying, her friends still fighting. She couldn't hide away in here with Draco, letting the world spin itself into a spiral while they clung onto each other. Even if that felt like the only thing they had left.

But that was the thing, Draco *wasn't* the only thing she still had. She had her friends, her family and they all needed her too. And while Draco might be what she wanted most, this wasn't the way she wanted him. Not locked away in the darkness, trapped and hidden. She wanted him how they had been that last night together; smiling, laughing, and *happy*.

She couldn't keep refusing him. One of these times she wasn't going to be strong enough and the weaker part of her would finally win. Or lose. She wasn't sure anymore. She wasn't sure of so many things these days. All she knew was this, no matter how good it felt, was *wrong*. This Draco was wrong even if she still loved him with every beat of her heart. And the only way to stop that, stop this, was to break it.

And his too.

"You think I still want you? After what you've done? You're out of your mind."

Draco paused and his eyes hardened into granite. But something was different this time. Hermione narrowed her eyes, looking closer. Cracks. He gradually let go of her wrist and Hermione brought her hands back down.

Draco sat back just a little and Hermione could see him trying to focus through the liquor. "Don't fucking say that."

He scrambled back off the bed, clumsily getting to his feet. Hermione didn't want to stay lying down for this so she threw the covers off of herself and jumped to her feet, exhaling sharply.

"Did you think I would just take you back? Draco you *imperiused* me. You kidnapped me—*twice.* " Hermione began counting on her fingers. "You chained me, caged me. All so you can keep me locked up here like a dirty little secret while you take over the world for your *Dark Lord*—

"Granger—" Draco reached out to lean against one of the posts as if her words were knocking him over.

"And you think I'm just going to sleep with you? That I am going to be okay with this? How *dare* you claim to love me when you treat me like this?!"

Draco swayed a little and Hermione took a step back in case he fell. Or tried to grab her. "You mean when I sacrifice *everything* to get you back? When I torture people to keep you safe? When I let them die so you can live? And you don't think I love you?"

Hermione was shaking from a combination of nerves, and rage. She didn't ask for him to *save* her. All she ever wanted was for him to treat her like a person, like an equal. So they could be together. Because even after everything he had done, everything he planned to do, she couldn't say she didn't still want him.

There was a gnawing guilt deep inside her too. This wasn't just hard for him to hear, it was hard for her to say too. Maybe she wasn't strong enough to keep refusing him, but she was strong enough to do this.

"You really thought I would be okay with this?"

"I thought—"

"That I would be a good little girl and let you do whatever you wanted to me? Who do you think I am, Draco?"

He chewed on the inside of his lip for a moment, pursing his lips together until they were white. " *Mine.*"

Hermione lifted her chin, tilting her face up to look deep into his glazed eyes. "Not anymore."

He stepped towards her, closing the small space between them. Hermione tried to back up, but Draco followed her, matching her step for step. "You're lying."

"You can keep me caged up in your bed, but it doesn't mean that I will sleep with you ever again. Keep dreaming, Draco."

She was so angry it was making her head hurt. There was a pressure behind her eyes and she could feel her heart pounding in her ears. Her brain felt heavy while her body

Someone pulled him up, leaning him back against the bed and the screaming got louder.

Dead. McLaggen was fucking dead and his tongue on was the ground next to his dead eyes.

"Draco! Are you okay?"

Theo's voice was suddenly too loud, the girl's screams were echoing in his head, and McLaggen was still dead.

He looked up at Theo, mouth dry and heart pounding. He had… Theo had… Draco had seen people die in front of him before, but that was by seasoned Death Eaters. Theo was… just like him. And still, he had been able to kill McLaggen like it was nothing.

"SHUT THE FUCK UP!" Theo shouted and waved his wand through the air. The screaming stopped with a thud and was followed by muffling crying.

It made the thundering heartbeat in Draco's ears feel even louder. McLaggen's heart wasn't beating anymore, but there was still blood slowly leaking out of his mouth. Dumbledore had just fallen. He had died and then he was gone, but McLaggen was still here. Draco watched as the blood stopped and then pushed himself up onto shaky legs.

"We have to kill her."

Draco's head snapped in Theo's direction. He had his wand trained on the girl in the bed, curled up and crying.

"She saw your face, she heard your name."

"Because you fucking said it."

"Your mask was already off!" Theo argued. "And everyone knows the Malfoys."

Draco glanced at the girl who looked up nervously at him. Theo came to stand at his side. "Do it. Kill her and let's go."

"Please," she whimpered, face crumpling in fear. "Please… I… I won't tell anyone, I *swear!*"

Draco looked down at McLaggen. She knew. She knew who he was and what they had done here. They, because Draco brought Theo here and then wasn't strong enough when he saw Granger like she should be. Happy and hopeful, not trapped in a room, locked away from the world.

But, if he let her out into the world, he could be looking down at her dead body like he was at McLaggen's. It had happened in a second, in a single moment. She could be gone just as quick and there would be no getting her back after that. Granger would be gone and he would be… here. Draco turned and looked at the girl on the bed.

And lifted his wand.

Graduating from Hogwarts. Climbing back into the boat and feeling it move across the Lake. The far shore coming into view.

Pathetic.

He moved deeper. It wasn't difficult, McLaggen barely had any fight left in him and the memories of Granger weren't buried as far as Draco would have liked. They had been touched recently. Draco coiled his mind around the memories of Slughorn's party and pulled them forward.

Granger in her pretty pink dress with her tits pushed up. Fuck. He could remember how they felt that night. McLaggen did too. Draco twisted his wand, " *Obliviate."*

Granger under the mistletoe, her cinnamon eyes going big right before lips landed on hers. Lips that weren't *his*. She made a small noise and Draco growled deep in his chest. " *Obliviate."*

Granger's small hand, soft and warm. Holding his back. But not Draco's. She looked up. And *smiled*. Her face. Granger's pretty little face, smiling and happy. A little nervous, but hopeful. Innocent. Pure. Nothing like the fallen, soulful eyes that had followed him out of the bedroom before he locked her inside of it again. Fuck. " *OBLIVIATE!"*

A bloody bubble burst out of McLaggen's mouth as Draco slithered back out of his mind.

He could hardly breathe. His chest was heavy, made of lead. He couldn't breathe. He couldn't fucking breathe.

"Shit, did he do something to you?" Theo sounded very far away. The room was getting darker. He couldn't breathe, couldn't breathe in this mask. He needed it off. He needed to get out. Out. Out.

Draco pulled the mask off of him and sucked in a breath. McLaggen's eyes went wide. They were all he could see; everything else was fading to black. It was just those terrible bloodshot eyes and horrible tongueless mouth staring back at him.

Then Draco was blinded by a bright green light coming from the side. " *Avada Kedavra!"*

He stopped breathing. He didn't even try. He just stared right into those unblinking bloody eyes.

Slowly he began to hear screaming.

"Draco!" Theo's voice was still far away. "Fuck—Draco!"

His chest was empty, hollow. The white walls in his mind shook violently, dust rained down on him. Down on him because… because he was on the ground. He was on the floor staring into McLaggen's dead eyes and seeing her face over and over and over.

felt light. For a moment, she wondered if the strong smell of alcohol coming off Draco was starting to affect her.

"You're the one moaning and calling out my name. I think *you're* the one who is dreaming about it, Granger."

She couldn't help but think about her dreams of the woods, letting him catch her, letting him have her. Watching that mask slip away and Draco's smile shine through before catching his lips with her and begging him to fill her. Then suddenly Ron's face swam in front of her eyes and Draco snarled.

"Weasley? Fucking Weasley?!"

He had seen. He had dipped into her head and *seen* .

"You can't do that!" Hermione shouted.

Draco crowded her, looming over her. "You can't do *that!"*

"I didn't *do* anything!" she argued back. "Which is more than I can say for you!"

Draco's brows rose. "You think I fucked some other bitch? Granger, I was out there setting the world on fire! For YOU!"

"I didn't ask you to!" She was so angry she felt like she might *cry*. But she wouldn't. He wasn't going to get her tears.

"Yes, you did," he added darkly. "When you told me you loved me. When you told me you wanted to be with me. Did you think I would just give up? I promised you I would come for you."

"You promised me you'd never hurt me again first."

He clenched his jaw. "I didn't mean to."

"You never do, do you? You don't mean anything you say."

His voice was low and heavy. "I mean it when I say I love you."

"Well, don't!"

Draco let out a mirthless laugh. "Don't? A little late for that now, Granger!"

"Then… move on! That's what I did!"

"Like hell. I *know* you still care about me."

Hermione scoffed. "You don't know anything about me. Not anymore."

"No? Well if you've moved on then why didn't you fuck Weasley? Or Potter? Why am I still the only man you've ever let slither in between your legs?" He reached for her thigh and she smacked his hand away. Draco merely laughed.

She had almost forgotten how cruel he could be when he drank. "I'll never let you in again."

"Why not?" he asked quickly. "If it didn't *mean* anything to you, then why not sleep with me again?"

Hermione opened her mouth to answer then closed it again.

"Unless, of course," he mused, "it *did* mean something to you. Unless you think that fucking me again—"

"You're repulsive."

"—will bring back those feelings you're trying so hard to pretend you don't still have." Why? Why was he able to say the things she was never able to? Draco moved closer to her and ran hand down her arm. "I know you still have them, Granger. Because I can feel them. *Here."* He pulled on her hand and pushed it to his chest, over his heart.

Hermione could feel the strong beating of it under her hand. Before she could stop herself, she grabbed his shirt in her fist. Draco chuckled again. "See, pet? You still want to. Even if that big brain of yours tries to deny it." He leaned in and breathed out heavily against her lips. Hermione felt lightheaded again as she inhaled a rush of mint and whisky. "But I know how to make it shut up."

She pushed against him and pulled her hand from his chest. She didn't want this. Didn't want him to still make her feel like this. She hated the warmth that was spreading through her lower abdomen and dripping down inside her.

"Never again." Her voice was shaking, but she still said the words.

"Why?" Draco retorted, his storm grey eyes searching hers until lightning struck in them. " *Oh*… I know why." He smirked. "It's *because* you want to."

Hermione pursed her lips and breathed in through her nose. She tore her eyes away from him, looking past him at the opposite wall.

"You still want me. You want me so bad it's making you ache. And you know—" He grabbed her face, turning her eyes back to his. "That if you let me in, even one more time, that you won't stop. You won't be able to. You know if your body remembers just how *good* I can make it feel that you won't ever be able to be anything but my willing whore again."

"I hate you." Her eyes burned with the tears she tried to hold back.

"No, you don't. You hate yourself because you know I'm right."

She was trembling. Her arms were pinned to her sides, she didn't trust herself to raise them, even to push him away because they might betray her and pull him down to her.

Draco's lids rested heavily over his eyes as he slid them down the length of her body, focusing on key areas while breathing heavily as if it was a struggle to only let his gaze

"I'm not paying them if I already know where he is. Anyways, this is Death Eater work. They're dogs."

Theo grinned. "Not all of them."

Draco raised a brow up. "You'd fuck a werewolf?"

"Not when she's all 'grr'," Theo shrugged, "but when she's all *girl* … You mean you haven't?"

"Been a bit busy," Draco sniffed.

"Have her blow you then. I'm sure she knows how to *lick."*

Draco sneered at him. "I don't like dog breath."

"You don't seem to like anything these days. You're fucking boring."

"And you're on my last nerve, Theo, so if you don't want me to ask someone else—"

"Merlin, you're touchy! Maybe after we catch Potter, you can take some time to get yourself laid so you can stop being a prick all the time."

"Maybe I'll ask Crabbe or Goyle to come along instead. They might be dumb, but at least they're quiet."

"Still at Hogwarts." Theo smiled broadly. "You're stuck with me until the end of the year."

"Not if I kill you," Draco grumbled. He needed to find Potter and fast. Five months of Theo was too much. Hell, he was barely making it through tonight.

Theo leaned over to inspect the severed tongue on the floor. "Gross."

Draco looked away. He didn't want to see it, lying there, thick and fleshy.

At least now McLaggen wouldn't try to shove it down Granger's throat. Now that it was gone, it was time to take the rest.

"Watch and learn, Theo." Draco crouched down and aimed his wand in between McLaggen's wide eyes. The blood vessel had popped and turned the whites red making them match the bleeding hole of his mouth. It was almost a shame to erase such a well taught lesson.

But it was worse to let this pathetic excuse of a wizard keep the memories of *his* fucking girl.

" *Legilimens,"* Draco whispered and was overwhelmed with images of the brown haired girl's ass shaking as McLaggen fucked her from behind.

Boring.

Open skies, bright white clouds and warm sun, a large Quaffle coming right at him.

Stupid.

He didn't think he'd truly smiled at her once since she removed the mark. Not that she had smiled back either.

And yet here he was, torturing Cormac fucking McLaggen because he kissed her last year and if Draco couldn't kiss her then no one got to, and unfortunately for McLaggen, he was still within Draco's reach. Which meant he got to do *this*.

" *Crucio!*"

McLaggen went stiff, his arms clamping to his side as his whole body jerked violently. He seemed to be bending unnaturally and Draco twisted his wrist, focusing the curse to centralize the pain. McLaggen convulsed and fell on the floor.

"Shit!"

"STOP STOP! YOU'RE KILLING HIM!"

Draco didn't stop. McLaggen had kissed Granger. She had let this nobody, this nothing of a person kiss her and she wouldn't let him. McLaggen would have never done a single thing to keep her. Hell, he had given up on her as soon as Draco put a little pressure on him. He didn't deserve Granger. Draco did. Draco had done everything, anything he had to in order to get her back, get her safe.

And that bitch had made him watch the mark on her thigh fade away into her creamy skin that she didn't let him touch anymore.

She would though. It wasn't over. Couldn't be over. He wouldn't let it. Not after everything he had done. Not now. Not ever.

McLaggen was foaming at the mouth, his jaws locked together and Draco watched with mild interest as the foam turned pink and then red.

Interesting.

Draco lifted the curse and McLaggen's mouth fell open, dropping his severed tongue onto the floor.

McLaggen started to make a moaning screaming sound and covered his bleeding, foaming mouth with his hand.

"Fucking disgusting." Theo wrinkled his nose. "How the hell are we supposed to get information from him now though?"

Draco lifted his eyes from the fleshy nub on the ground to Theo, who was looking a little pale at the sight of fresh blood.

He had forgotten. He had completely forgotten that he had told Theo they were here to question McLaggen about Potter's whereabouts. How, he wasn't sure because they had argued about it for at least half an hour.

"Why don't you send the wolves to track him down?" Theo asked.

touch her. Hermione turned her head to the side. She didn't want to see the dark lust clouding his eyes or the heavy way his chest rose and fell with each excited breath.

"I could make you." His voice was low and hoarse. "I could make you feel that again."

Cold fear shot through Hermione. Someone had grabbed her lungs and was squeezing them inside her. She tried to push herself further into the wall, but there was nowhere else to go. Draco was towering over her, the lump in his throat bobbing as he swallowed. He pulled his wand from inside his robes.

"Draco…" she whispered pleadingly.

"You didn't fight it before," he said and she had the impression that he was talking to himself as well. "Once I'm inside you, you wouldn't stop me. You'd want it too much." He grabbed her hip with one hand and pressed his wand against her temple with the other.

Hermione whimpered. Her eyes filled with tears. Draco lowered his face close to hers and she could smell the alcohol on his breath.

"It's okay, kitten," he murmured. "I'll do this. I'll take the weight of it. You can still pretend that you didn't want to after. Just let me back in, Granger. Let me into your head. Let me into your heart." His forehead pressed against hers, lips less than an inch away. "You don't have to say anything. Just nod. Just nod and I'll do it. I'll make it good for you, I promise. "

She was shaking so much she was afraid he would take that as consent. She hadn't fought his *imperius* curse before, but this was different. Wasn't it? If it was different than why was she tempted by the option he was giving her? He said he was willing to bear the weight of this. He was willing to take over her mind and her body, to give her an out so she didn't have to give up her convictions, but…

It was all *so wrong*.

He twisted his wand, pressing it hard against her temple as he gripped her hip harder, digging his fingers into her. Hermione let out a whimpering sob, torn. Torn when she should be whole, but Draco had a piece of her and she wasn't sure she'd ever get it back. She wasn't sure she wanted it back.

She opened her eyes and saw the ugly Dark Mark branded into the arm holding the wand up to her. The wand that had done so many unforgivable things. He was a Death Eater, holding her against her will.

She had never wanted him more.

"Please," his voice was ragged, "Please, Granger. Let me do this. For you. For us. It can be good again. Let me show you."

Her chest was splitting in half. What would he do if she said no? He very well might just do it anyways. He was right, after all. If she had him again, she wouldn't be able to stop. He could lift the curse half way through and she would be just as willing as he had made her be.

Draco's breath was heavy against her lips and she could practically taste the sickly sweetness of the whisky that had pushed him this far. It had taken a bottle of fire whisky to make him do this, but Hermione was sober and still straining her neck to keep it from bending into a nod.

"Sweetheart…" Draco breathed out.

Hermione shoved him roughly back. In his drunken stupor, Draco was less steady on his feet and tripped over his own boots, crashing back onto the plush rug.

She stood over him, hands shaking with adrenaline and she tried to bury them in the folds of the lacy dress. She wasn't going to let him see how he affected her. Because if he knew how she really felt… what she almost let him do…

Hermione took a shaky breath and raised her chin, looking down her nose at the mass of his body in front of her. "The only thing you can do for me is let me go."

Draco tried to push himself up, but fell back down, grunting with the effort.

"That—that's not going to happen," he panted.

Hermione swallowed. "I know. So if this is where I am going to have to live, there are going to be some new rules. You remember *rules,* don't you, Draco?"

He lifted his eyes up to hers. She couldn't help but notice how bloodshot they were surrounding the cold granite of his glare.

"Since you've broken our first set, here's another." Hermione put all of her aggravation and frustration into her voice, making it sharper than it normally was. "You don't touch me. *Ever."* Something slithered behind his eyes and it sent a chill down her spine. "And since this room is all I have, then fine. It's mine then. Which means you have to find somewhere other than this bed to sleep."

She would miss him and the moments where she woke up pressed against him. Before she remembered how and why she was here.

Draco growled and stumbled to his feet. Hermione took a swift step back, putting a bit of distance between them.

"Don't come in here drunk again. I told you before I won't tolerate you like this."

Draco didn't say anything, just stood there and waited. For the first time in weeks Hermione felt like she actually had a bit of control over her life. But watching him wrestle with his restraint let her know that it still wasn't much.

The girl's mouth snapped shut. Her immediate obedience shocked him for a moment. Maybe McLaggen really did have a type. He had tried for Granger after all. Black spots danced in Draco's vision as he tried not to think about McLaggen's hands on her, kissing her, thinking about what he wanted to do to her.

Fuck. Fuck that.

McLaggen was rubbing his head, leaning on his elbow and trying to sit up. Draco aimed his wand right at McLaggen's perfect, not fucked up at all, chest.

He pulled the pain up from deep in him and it jumped at his command, sliding down the length of his wand easily and streaming a dark red light that made McLaggen's shadow twist and turn in agony.

A cool, calm shiver passed through Draco at the sound of McLaggen crying out in pain. He felt like he could breathe a little easier as the magic moved through him, uncoiling and slithering down his arm as Draco held the curse for one two three seconds more before lifting it and McLaggen's screams died.

The girl was still going though.

"Theo." Draco jerked his head towards her and Theo swatted his wand in her direction and the screams died in her throat. Thank Salazar. At least he was good for something.

McLaggen was gasping, face down on the bed, struggling to gain control of his body again. Draco knew the feeling well. He could handle it whereas McLaggen was twitching like a little bitch.

Why the fuck did Granger agree to go out with him in the first place?

Pussy.

Draco did it again. Adrenaline coursed through him, spreading into his fingertips. His blood quickened in his veins, moving so quickly it almost felt warm. Or maybe that was the heat coming from the energy of the curse. Either way, he liked it.

He would have preferred a different activity to get his heart pumping tonight, but, this would do in the meantime.

By the time he was done, McLaggen was sweating; his curly blond hair sticking to his head, and he was choking on air as he tried to swallow it down while his body forced pathetic little sobs up against it. Draco didn't notice he was laughing until Theo asked him what was so funny.

His face hurt. He hadn't smiled this much in… Draco blinked. Shit.

He should be smiling every day. Hanging over her, having her tell him how much she loved him, running her hands over his chest and pulling her legs up around him. Whispering his name in her breathy voice, " *Draco…"*

Fucking Theo had fucked up the plan in the first fucking minute. Draco glared behind his metal mask, meeting Theo's angry gaze and shoved him back roughly. He would deal with him *after* he dealt with this motherfucker.

McLaggen had it coming.

Draco spun and shot a stunning spell into the doorway. There was a grunt and a thud. Followed by a high pitched scream. Well, shit.

"Who's that?" Theo asked breathlessly.

"I don't know," Draco snarled. "Maybe if you had done some recon while I took down the wards we would fucking know."

"You didn't tell me to do recon!"

"Are you fucking kidding me?! What do you think I brought you here for?"

"OH MY GOD! CORMAC!"

Draco gritted his teeth behind his mask and turned back to see McLaggen starting to wake up. Good. He had sent a weak stunner just wanting to knock him on his ass. Draco wanted him awake for this. He passed out too quickly last time. He got off easy compared to what he should have gotten.

Not this time.

"Get him up and get the lights on," Draco ordered and Theo moved into the room, flicking his wand and McLaggen's limp body lifted up as he groaned unhappily, casting a dark shadow on the wall as he rose higher.

Draco took a heavy step into the bedroom. There was a girl with light brown hair clinging to the sheets with one hand and a wand outstretched with the other. At the sight of their masks she screamed again. Draco looked at Theo and tilted his head smugly. Theo dropped McLaggen on the bed and he moaned again as the bed bounced under him making the girl drop the sheets and scramble to pick them back up.

"Wh-what do you wa-want?" she whimpered, alternating her wand between Theo and Draco before finally deciding to keep it on Draco.

Hmm. Not dumb. Maybe McLaggen had a type.

"Throw your wand down."

The girl was shaking, small sobs escaping her as tears leaked down her face. Draco counted to three then sliced his wand through the air and the girl's went flying, twisting across the dark room and Draco caught it easily before tossing it to Theo. "Hold that for me."

She screamed again. It was shrill and fucking annoying.

"Shut the fuck up."

"You are never to go in my head again, okay? Not so you can bring up memories or to violate my personal thoughts. And if you *ever* use an Unforgivable curse on me, I will make sure you pay for it."

Hermione watched his wand jerk in his hand as if it was trying to respond to her.

Draco closed the distance between them and Hermione found herself backed against the wall once more. He was crowding her, towering over her, and slammed his hands into the paneling on either side of her head. Hermione flinched instinctively. Some Gryffindor she was turning out to be.

But surprisingly Draco kept an inch of space between their bodies. Taunting her with how close he was without touching her. He would bend the rules, but not break them. Thank Godric for small mercies.

"The bed might be yours, but you—" He raised his brows and licked his lips, breathing out heavily as he planted his feet firmly in front of her, iron eyes boring down into hers. "You're still mine."

Hermione blinked her eyes as she stared up at him and her mouth fell slightly open. For some unexplainable reason she felt a tightness in her lower stomach, pushing heat between her legs and making her heart beat hard against the muscles she clenched there.

Draco's lids lowered over his eyes and his tongue darted out across his bottom lip. "My sweet girl." Why was he doing this? Why was he torturing her? "With her pretty little pussy that I *bet* is wet for me, right now. Isn't it, kitten?"

Hermione shoved him back again, but Draco seemed to be a little more in control of himself now and was back in less than a second, slamming his hands into the wall again.

Hermione whimpered, biting her lip and screwing her eyes closed tight.

She heard his hands slide off the wall and felt his breath brush against the shell of her ear, blowing a few of the twisting strands of hair across her cheek.

A weak, lonely part of her wished his fingers would follow. Then his lips. Banishing the thoughts of what she would never get to have, Hermione turned to face him again.

Draco's expression was cold and empty and he stared down at her behind the silver shields of his eyes before finally saying, "Just because you kicked me out of the bed, doesn't mean you can kick me out of your dreams."

She felt her eyes widen. *Oh God.*

"That's okay, Sweetheart. I know you can't help it," Draco cooed and his lips tugged on one side. "Just like you can't help being a desperate little slut."

"You *disgusting*—"

"No worse than you, Granger." Draco's eyes were as sharp and deadly as iron. "Because everything I've done," he took a deep breath, expanding his chest until it was *almost* touching hers, "is all *your* fault."

"What would help is you shutting your fucking mouth. No, I haven't seen any bloody Quidditch matches, Theo. I've been a bit busy the past couple of months. There's a war on, in case you haven't heard."

"It's all I fucking hear about anymore," Theo grumbled. "What, being a Death Eater means you can't have a hobby?"

Draco stopped working. "You're a servant of the Dark Lord now."

"I know," Theo groaned.

"Do you?" Draco asked and Theo rolled his head against the side of the house to look over at him. "Because you do know we are supposed to wear our masks when we are working."

"Piss off," Theo sneered and lifted himself from the wall, walking a few feet away just to turn and come back right back. Draco was about two seconds away from giving up on the wards and turning his wand on Theo when the protective enchantments cracked under his pressure and a quick *Alohomora* had the door swinging open.

Baby boy should have stayed with his parents. Magical homes had layers of protections, flats in Essex did not.

"Theo wait—" Draco slammed his hand into Theo's chest and stopped him from rushing ahead.

"What?" he snarled.

"When we get in there, follow my lead. You're new to this and—"

"I know what to fucking do, Draco!"

"Shut up!" Draco hissed and glanced into the darkened flat. "No. You don't fucking know. You can't run in there wand waving and expect—"

Theo shoved past him, rolling his eyes as he put his mask on.

" *Goddamn* it, Nott!"

Draco surged in after him.

Stupid fucking Theo had his wand lit and was holding it up, casting a bright white light into the darkened room.

Draco smacked his wand against Theo's forcing it to the ground and snapped, " *Nox",* extinguishing the tip of Theo's wand.

"The fuck are you doing?" Theo argued.

"What the fuck are *you* doing?" Draco hissed.

"Who's there?!"

Fuck.

"I'd never forgive myself if I lost you again." Draco headed for the door. To hunt down Harry so he could keep her here forever. Hermione was disgusted by him. How could he want this? Want her like this? Would he sell more Muggleborns on his hunt for Harry? Torture people? Kill people? She had thought she'd seen the real him for a moment this morning in his mist grey eyes, but the hard iron ones staring back at her now were undeniable.

"You're a monster!"

Draco smirked at her and flicked his wand. Hermione jumped back as the bars lifted into place for the first time in over a week. "That's what the cage is for, pet."

If Theo didn't shut the fuck up about fucking Quidditch, he was going to blow their cover.

"Quintley is a fine Seeker, but he's all flash and no follow-through. He loses the snitch more than he catches it because all he does is show off. There's no substance to his technique. Take the match against Puddlemere—he practically *handed* the damn ball to Walsh. Did you see it, Draco? He actually *pushed* it into his hand!"

Draco pinched his lips tight. "Theo," he forced out between gritted teeth. "We're *working."*

Theo leaned against the side of the house. "You're working. I'm waiting."

Narrowing his eyes behind his mask, Draco snarled, "You could help."

With a sigh Theo answered, "You seem to have it covered."

Draco had gotten quite good at ward-work over the last couple months. Studying the Manor's, designing his own, and feeling for Granger's in the woods. He had become quite adept at finding the seals of the spells and picking the locks. It was meticulous and mind numbing work. Almost as bad as fixing the Cabinet.

Draco fucked hated it. Just because he was good at something didn't mean he liked doing it.

"Take the mask off, it might help." Theo leaned his head back and looked up at the dark sky.

Chapter Eleven

You need to stay in the cage tonight."

Hermione's head shot up. "No!"

Draco wasn't looking at her when he said, "Get on the bed."

She closed her book, tucked it under her arm and she folded them across her chest. "Just because I refused to sleep with you doesn't mean you get to lock me up. You promised—"

"I didn't promise you shit," Draco snarled, his eyes flashing dangerously.

Hermione was a little taken aback by his sudden harshness with her. Over the last week Draco has mostly avoided her, and their room. Theirs, because even though she had refused to let him back in the bed, Draco had not vacated. He spent his nights sprawled on the chaise and every time Hermione woke up from one of her nightmares she saw him in a new position.

Draco wasn't the only one with dark circles under his eyes anymore.

"I never agreed to stop using the cage or the chain. And I will strap you down tonight if you don't get your ass on the bed—right NOW!"

Hermione stood her ground. Her legs were shaking and there was no hiding them, but she kept her eyes locked on Draco's steely gaze until he rubbed his hand over his face and groaned in aggravation.

"There are people coming tonight. I don't think they'll come upstairs, let alone be able to get in here, but if they do…" He cast his eyes down to the foot of the bed. "The cage will keep you safe."

"It will keep me trapped."

Draco cut his gaze back to her so quickly Hermione would have missed it if she blinked. "Is it so bad? Being here, with me?"

Her heart gave a heavy thump in her chest. No. Yes. No. It beat again and this time, it hurt.

"I don't like being cooped up."

His expression was unreadable, but it didn't stop Hermione from searching across every feature of his face. Angled cheeks carving their way across skin as white as porcelain and just as smooth. His nose was long and straight, nostrils slightly flared as he took a breath. His brows hung heavily over his eyes, casting them in shadow and making the silver of them gleam even brighter because of it. His lips were pressed together, turned down in a frown. She wished she could see him smile again.

"I'll make this up to you."

"How?" Hermione asked sarcastically. "A new *dress?*"

Draco's eyes fell to her body and ran down the length of it. Without him saying a word or even making a single movement, she felt like she knew exactly what he was thinking of. Or maybe it was just her. She brought her legs a little closer together, her knees knocking against each other, and her movement seemed to break his train of thought.

But not hers. Hermione could feel the blush staining her cheeks with proof that the sordid thoughts were not just in his head, but hers as well.

She lifted the book up and against her chest, hugging it tightly. "Don't worry about it," she snapped. "There isn't anything I want that you could give me."

She had dealt her latest blow in their ongoing battle. It was the most she could do while she was still wandless, but Draco hardly even seemed to react to her harsh words, merely spreading his arm out in an invitation to the bed. Hermione sat the book upon it before climbing in herself, pulling her skirt down as far as it would go.

Draco came to stand beside her and ran his hand up the post of the bed, eyeing the empty spot next to her. For the briefest moment, she was tempted to offer it to him. Maybe he was right, maybe this is all they could have in the new world. She hadn't heard a single scrap of news about Harry or Ron, or any of the Order really, even when she scoured every copy of the Daily Prophet Draco brought her over and over, feeling worried and relieved all in one at the lack of news.

Hermione knew he always resented Harry, maybe even truly hated him, but to bring him in to be killed, murdered? Draco had gone to school with him, shared classes and played him in Quidditch. He *knew* Harry. Knew what kind of person he was. Knew what he meant to her. And he'd still hand Harry over to be slaughtered.

"Don't. Please don't. I won't ever ask you for anything else, just *please* don't hurt Harry."

Harry was the Chosen One, the only hope they had. She had asked for books, so she could keep researching to help him, but none of that mattered if he was… She couldn't even think the word, let alone say it.

The muscles of Draco's jaw clenched and the tendons in his neck tightened until Hermione could see a vein throbbing there.

"Why? So you can run off and leave me for him again? It'll be better once he's gone."

"NO!"

Hermione pushed her hands into his chest, but Draco didn't move. Instead she was the one who fell back, landing on the soft sheets of their unmade bed. Her legs were thrown open and she looked down at the unblemished skin of her inner thigh where Draco's mark had rested for so long. She had gotten so used to it that it didn't even look like her leg anymore without the imprint of his mouth marking her as his.

She pushed the long curls out of her face and looked up to see Draco staring at the exact same spot she had just been. Carefully she pulled the white lace dress back down over it and watched as his expression changed back into… nothing.

"Draco… don't *do* this," she pleaded. "Please. For me."

Draco exhaled slowly. "That's why I have to."

He turned away from her and walked across the room to the wardrobe. She watched the snow falling outside of the window while he dressed. His belt clanked as he latched it and Hermione rubbed her arms to comfort herself as Draco laced up his boots.

The door opened and closed and Hermione waited to hear it lock, but it did not come. She turned around, feeling like she was almost floating out of her body as her eyes locked on the door on the far side of the room. Could it be…

Then it opened again. Draco walked in with his arms full of books. He glared at her and dumped them in a pile onto the bed next to her. It was everything. Every single book she had asked for.

She looked up at him. His eyes were cold. It was a trade; the books she asked for, the things she wanted—for what he wanted.

"I'll never forgive you if you hurt him. Ever."

have told *everyone* that he was a good man, deep down. Harry said Dumbledore had offered him help along with protection for his family. Certainly the Order would have respected its leader's dying wish?

"I'm not the one who left."

Draco's hand dropped from her face.

"What changed? From the tower to the grounds, what *changed* , Draco?"

His eyes hardened into granite. "What do you think happened on the tower?"

"You tried to save Dumbledore—"

"No, Granger," Draco let out a short breath. "I tried to bargain for you. His life for yours."

Her heart faltered.

"But… Harry said—"

"And what would Potter know about it?"

"He was there," Hermione stated. "On the tower that night. He was—under his cloak. He… heard… you."

Draco's expression was completely reticent. She had no idea what he was thinking or feeling or… anything and she would give her green toothbrush if only he would be honest with her.

"You went up on that tower to try and change things and you came down—"

"For you. I went up there for you. I came down for you too. I tried to fix it and it didn't work. I tried to take you away from it and it didn't work. Granger, don't you get it? There is no other way! I tried! And I *failed*. And you—" Draco breathed in through his nose. "The only thing I'm good at, the only way to protect you, is to be a Death Eater."

"So that's it. You aren't even going to—" Hermione's breath caught in her throat.

"There's plenty I'm going to do." Draco trailed his hand up the length of her body, leaving a hot trail of burning skin in his wake until two fingers came to rest under her chin, tilting her head back. "Starting with finding Potter and ending this damned war so we can get on with our lives."

Her blood stilled in her veins and when it started again fear pulsed through her. Draco hadn't been alone that night. There had been people out there, working for him. They could be searching for Harry right now. Her mind raced with anxiety, a million little thoughts that stabbed into her like knives. She couldn't lose Harry. Not after everything they had been through. It sickened her to think that Draco might be the one to throw Harry down at Voldemort's feet.

If Harry was dead, it would be plastered across the front page.

This was the mantra she repeated to herself when her throat felt too tight and her eyes filled with tears she would quickly blink away. She had to be strong. Had to fight, even if she was stuck here. It wasn't over.

There was still hope.

There was still Harry.

Hermione sat her book back on her lap. She would have about another hour before it got too dark to read and she would have no choice but to lay here and wait on Draco to return.

"I will make this up to you," he said softly, almost… kind.

Hermione looked up to see him watching her, his brows taut as if he was trying to say more. She waited. Hopeful that something else might follow.

His dark wand cut in between them and the iron bars of the cage slid up and locked into place with a loud clang that reverberated inside her chest, disrupting the rhythm of her heart. Draco grabbed onto one of the bars and gave it a quick tug.

"I—" Draco stopped, and tightened his mouth. "I have something for you."

Hermione was surprised at the withered, moldy, grey hand outstretched towards her. A Hand of Glory. Harry had told her that he thought Draco had one during one of his rants last year. Godric, why hadn't she listened more closely? But the draw of Draco had already been so strong, even then and she had never been able to stay away. No matter what he did, what he said, she had always come back and let him call her even filthier names and do even dirtier things to her. And she had loved it. Every single time.

How soon would it be before she went back to him this time? A month? Next week?

Tonight?

"I didn't think about the light when I'm not here," Draco said stiffly. "I'll fix them when I get back." Then he added, "I didn't know you were in the dark this whole time."

Hermione reached out and gently took the Hand, doing her best not to touch the waxy skin. "T-thank you."

For the briefest moment their fingers touched and Hermione was tempted to latch onto him instead of the wooden base. To beg him to stay with her instead of going to whatever Death Eater meeting was being held downstairs tonight.

He'd said all of the things he had done were her fault, so maybe… she was the one who could stop him from doing them too. Dumbledore had told her that Draco needed to save himself, but… he if thought he was damned, then how could he ever do that? If

he had done so many terrible things for her, maybe she could try to convince him to do *not* terrible things for her too.

Hermione sat the Hand on top of the book next to her and bit her lip, *hard* , to stop herself from asking him to stay. She knew he wouldn't. He had a Master to serve and she… she had a job to do too. He might promise to make this up to her, to make this all better, but how many times had she trusted him and how many times had he hurt her? There were some things, Hermione thought, that she had to do for herself.

Draco nodded stiffly in response and paused only long enough to unlock the door before shutting it behind him again. Hermione could hear the magical locks sliding into place, the wards weaving themselves over the handle, and the wood sealing itself against intruders. She had watched and listened to it so many times she knew his exact method and pattern.

Hermione took a deep breath and opened the book again, paging through to find where she had left off, reading the thick ink at the top of the page. " *Chapter Eight—Wandless Magic."*

Draco stared at the body. The body in his cellar. The dead body.

His Uncle.

No. Not his Uncle. This was a Muggleborn—fuck, no—a Mudblood. This was not his family. He had only ever met the man once and that was just to break into his house, torture his wife and threaten his daughter. Draco had barely paid attention to Ted Tonks in his pursuit of Granger and now the dead man's body was all he could see.

Cold acid crept up his throat. He really hated dead people.

Really fucking *hated* them.

Draco vaguely heard the pleas of the man the others were chaining to the wall, but it was when the Dark Lord descended the stairs that Draco's attention was finally pulled from the still form of his Uncle splayed on the stone floor and to the man who he called Master.

good little whore? Is this what she was being reduced to? "So you expect me to just be kept and… and *bred* ? Like a *pet?!"*

"No!" Draco countered. "I just… I thought you'd—" He pinched his lips. "It won't always be like this. After the war things will be… different. I'll make them different. For us."

"No—"

"I told you I'd fix this and I will." Draco advanced on her. "It's not exactly what I planned, but that doesn't mean it won't work. Anyways, none of my responsibilities will have to be fulfilled for years. And even after, it won't make a difference. Not to me. It'll be good, I promise. Just like before."

"I don't want—"

"Yes, you do. You want me, you want this. If you didn't, you wouldn't be asking about it. You're trying to find a way to make this work, just like me."

"I'm nothing like you."

"Yes you are, Sweetheart. You're *exactly* like me."

"No…"

Draco brushed the back of his fingers against her cheek and Hermione shuddered at the feeling. She did want a life like that; with a partner, a family one day. And she couldn't imagine herself ever wanting someone else the way she wanted Draco. But… she didn't want it to have it like this. Being a dirty little secret. A Mudblood whore.

"We're supposed to be together. You know we are, kitten." His fingers pushed into her hair and Hermione's lip trembled. Draco's eyes darkened as he watched it. She bit it to try to stop it, but Draco only grabbed her hip, pulling her towards him. The thin dress felt like nothing between them and goosebumps rose on her flesh spreading out in tendrils from the coolness of his touch.

"This is it. This is what we get in this fucked up mess. Nothing about this world is what I want, except for this. For you. So let me have this one thing." His hand slid down over her hip and stomach to where her thigh met her torso. "Let me have you and I'll give you *everything* you've been missing. Because *fuck,* Granger, I've missed you."

And she had missed him. More than she thought possible. Even being here with him, she still missed him. But this wasn't right. It wasn't! Draco was wrong; this wasn't all they had. They could have so much more than this and *be* so much more…

He had tried before. He had wanted that before. He had been willing to leave it behind on the tower, so why was he so set on staying and living in this world now? He could have stayed and fought. At least for her. She would have fought for him too. She would

"I don't hear you denying it."

Hermione glared at him and crossed her arms over her chest. "No, Draco. No, I didn't. I spent every night, alone, thinking about you!"

He blinked. And his lips started to curl up again.

Hermione raised her chin. "Thinking about what you did to me. How you lied to me and let Death Eaters into our school. How you cursed me and tried to kidnap me. How you hurt me and… left me."

She took a deep breath and went on. "I spent months trying to hate you. Sitting around in a tent and listening to my two best friends fight and running from people trying to kill us all while you slept soundly in your giant house and fancy bed so you would be well rested when you went out there to *snatch* Muggleborns and turn them in yourself so don't try to act like you're so much better just because you put me in a cage *here* instead of at the Ministry!"

Draco straightened up. Goodness. "You think you know *anything* about me? You think you know what I was doing? You don't have a fucking clue what I did to get you back!"

"No one asked you to!"

"You didn't have to!" Draco was towering over her. "It's what you do for someone you love!"

Hermione's breath caught in her throat. Along with her heart. She swallowed and took a deep breath.

"You might love me, but you don't respect me. Draco, you've cursed me. You've kidnapped me. You've chained and caged me. What are you going to do next? What is your grand plan? And don't tell me it's living happily ever after because I don't think your *boss* would be too happy if you married a Muggleborn especially one that—"

Draco sighed heavily. He dropped his head. "Granger, I…" She watched his shoulders slump right before he said, "I have no intentions of marrying you."

She hadn't been expecting a proposal, or even really sure she *wanted* one, but it didn't make the swooping feeling of her heart falling somewhere in between her feet any less jarring.

"I'm a Malfoy, there are certain things expected of me. Things I will have to do. But that doesn't mean that I don't…" Draco braced himself. "You'll never want for anything. I'll treat you like a queen, I promise, and… in the future, any child we might have will be well provided for."

"ARE YOU KIDDING ME?!" Hermione scoffed. This was *insane!* Draco expected her to just stay here, with him, and be his… his mistress? To play out his fantasies like a

The prisoner began to tremble so violently that the chains rattled, and Draco cringed at the all-too-familiar sound. What would he be doing now if he hadn't chained Granger to the bed? Would he be upstairs, tangled in her arms and plunging himself inside of her?

No. He'd still be here because his Master had summoned him. Granger might have his heart, but the Dark Lord had long since laid claim to his soul.

"Lucius, I would like you to meet your new houseguest."

Draco watched his father stand up straight, only to have his shoulders lurch forward as he fought the urge to cower. The Dark Lord's lip curled at the sight of his once-favored Death Eater. There was a time when Draco thought his father was second only in power to the Dark Lord himself. Because of that Draco had strived and worked tirelessly to prove himself worthy of bearing the Malfoy name.

He had been competing against a spectre. There wasn't much more life left in his father's body than there was his uncle's beside him.

"I—I am honored, My Lord." Lucius bowed his head and Draco could see silver streaks in his hair even in the dim light of the cellar. Weak.

"Yes, I'm sure you're very pleased to have a wandmaker under your roof. Though I did not bring him here for you." The Dark Lord's tone was harsh and the two hooded Death Eaters who had secured Ollivander to the wall laughed darkly.

Lucius paled and retreated backwards to hover beside a torch on the wall, as if its light would protect him somehow.

Draco looked away. Of course. Bellatrix had said she would tell the Dark Lord of his progress and he had been impressed with Draco's work before. Lord Voldemort might have addressed Lucius first, but Draco knew why he had brought Ollivander here. There was no use waiting, not when it was inevitable. Gripping his wand in his hand, Draco approached the Dark Lord. "Master, how can I serve you?"

Those blood red eyes landed on him and instantly he felt the intrusion in his mind. Draco barely had time to react before Lord Voldemort was glossing over his recent memories. His marble walls cracked and shook as the Dark Lord snaked through his mind and Draco could practically feel him searching for something, like a snake flicking its tongue out.

If the Dark Lord was looking for answers, Draco could give them to him. Meetings with the wolves about hunting Potter, nights searching old farm houses, empty stretches of roads, and frost covered woods. Training with Theo, dueling, fighting, and running. Breaking into McLaggen's house, torturing him and rifling through his mind the same

way Lord Voldemort was his. The green light flashed again and Draco couldn't help but recoil as the image of another dead body faded from his mind.

"You have been busy."

"Yes, My Lord."

"And yet have still failed to bring me Potter." The cold disappointment in his voice was almost tangible and Draco could feel his rage simmering just under the surface.

"You will have him, My Lord. I am close."

"You are *failing* !" he hissed, the slits of his nostrils flaring. "I have spared enough mercy on your family already."

Draco stiffened. If Lord Voldemort brought his wrath down on Malfoy Manor, Granger would be in danger again. Draco had worked so hard to keep her safe, he wasn't about to let some mangy-haired, scarred up piece of shit ruin it all for him.

Even if he didn't really want to have to add Potter to the list of dead faces that haunted him at night. Still, rather him than Granger.

Draco was so distracted by his own thoughts that he had barely noticed the Dark Lord had moved to stand in front of Ollivander. It was the old man's wheezing breath and pitiful cries that pulled him from his catalogue of grey, glazed eyes and bloodless faces.

"I've told you everything I know! *Please* ! I just want to go home."

There was something sickening about watching the ancient man beg for such a simple request. He was skin and bones and from the look of it, several of those bones had been broken. His robes were hanging off thin shoulders, dirtied and unwashed. Draco should have been disgusted by his appearance, swallow skin, shaking hands, and patchy hair on his loose jowls, but instead he felt… pity.

It was cold down here and as pained, panicked breaths left Ollivander's frail chest, they turned into small puffs of fog in front of his face before they slid away into the chilled air. Who knew what kind of conditions the wandmaker had been kept in before, or why the Dark Lord was so displeased with him to bring him here, now?

Because there was only one reason the Dark Lord would bring a prisoner to Malfoy Manor. And that reason was *him* .

"You know Draco Malfoy, don't you, Ollivander?"

Ollivander looked up at him with opalescent eyes. "Yes…" he breathed out in barely more than a whisper and dropped his gaze to the wand at Draco's side and chanted "Hawthorn, ten inches, unicorn hair core."

Draco didn't like someone looking at his wand like that and pressed it flush against his leg. Ollivander's attention drifted up to his face again.

Calix snapped his beak and Draco fed him another treat. Crookshanks meowed loudly again and Draco sighed, throwing a few treats onto the chaise for him. Crookshanks jumped down onto the cushion and went at them, purring as he did so.

"Got some work to do and then you'll have to take some letters to London, alright?" Draco said softly, inspecting Calix's talons. "Get some rest and don't fucking fly off again."

He dusted his hands off and walked back to the window.

"You spied on me?" Hermione said, barely able to force the words from her mouth.

Draco looked over at her. "You weren't actually sleeping."

So he was going to lie to her about it then. She should have expected as much. "Not this morning. Before. With him." She pointed at the owl who was preening his feathers.

Draco's face was blank, white marble. "What are you talking about?" He had gotten very good at feigning ignorance because Hermione almost believed his act.

She almost believed everything because she wanted to so badly. Just a few moments ago she had been happy, lying in his arms and yet the first thing he did as soon as he got up was lie to her again. What was even the point? She was already here. What did he stand to lose by telling her the truth?

Hermione got out of the bed, her thin lace dress not offering much protection against the chill air he had let in, but she didn't want to lie in that bed for a moment longer.

"Why *did* you bring me here?"

Draco turned around, the white snow silhouetted around him.

Hermione took a step towards him, tilting her head up a little. "Well, Draco?"

Draco's jaw tightened for a moment. He looked away from her.

"To keep you safe."

"I was doing fine before—"

Draco took a step forward. "No, you fucking weren't. You were delirious with fever when I found you!"

"I would have been fine!"

"NO!" Draco shouted. "You would have been scooped up by a Snatcher and sold off to the Ministry! Hell, Granger, you didn't even have a *wand!*"

"I had my friends!"

Draco stopped short and she watched something flash in his eyes. "Yeah," he sneered. "Your precious little friends. Tell me, did they keep you warm at night too, Granger? Did you crawl in their beds and—"

"You're disgusting."

Was there anything to go back to though? They were nothing more than… casual for months and as soon as something sparked between them, it was drowned in the baths when she saw his mark. After that, they had one night, a few *blissful* hours, before the whole world crashed around them and… they had gone to war.

Eventually it would end and when it did, would there be anything left of them to hold onto? And if there wasn't, then why didn't she want to let go?

"I didn't want to have to lock you up, but if they would have *somehow* gotten in—"

"I could have gotten out."

Even in the weak starlight, Hermione could see the surprise flash across his face.

"If I would have somehow gotten a wand, you know I would have fought my way or or died trying."

Draco's expression darkened. "You'd rather die than be with me?"

"You aren't giving me much of a choice!" Hermione felt the lion in her chest growling in indignation. "This isn't 'with you', Draco! Even if I agreed to stay and… whatever with you, I wouldn't be *with* you. You said it yourself, there's no future for us—*this* is all we get."

"I have given you *everything!* All I have!"

Hermione ripped off the brooch and slammed it down next to a pot of flowers that were emitting a light, echoing noise. "I don't want jewelry. Or fine gowns!" She pulled at the skirt of the dress, swishing it angrily.

"Then what do you want, Granger?" Draco looked around in exasperation, the dim light of the stars gleaming on the dark green leaves and fragile petals as his face fell into hard marble. "What the fuck do I have to do for you to—to love me again because—*fuck*… Forget it. Fucking forget it."

"Draco—"

"You know I tortured people for you? Yeah, I did. Rowle, because he came after you in the coffee shop. I took his eye. Yaxley, because he grabbed you when you have the bright fucking idea to break into the Minstry. Honestly, Granger, what the *fuck* was that?!"

"You—"

"And Fletcher, so he would give up Order members I could hunt down and torture for information when *months* went by and I still had *no* idea where you were. I questioned dozens of Muggleborns trying to find a fucking scrap of news of you. And still nothing. I nearly killed Greyback for some goddamn wolves just to track and hunt you down!" Draco inhaled sharply, and pinched his lips together as the lock of hair fell down between

his eyes. "Why did you run, Granger? Why? I told you I would come for you—why did you run?"

This was the most open and honest Draco had been with her and it was *terrifying*. What was she supposed to say to this? Hearing what he had done trying to find her, names of the people he had hurt. *Dozens* of…

Muggleborns.

Hermione blinked, the darkness fading as her eyes adjusted. He had called them Muggleborns. It wasn't much, but it was something.

"I didn't run from you," she said in a small voice. Draco's eyes were dark pits, ringed in bright silver. "I did wait. I waited for weeks and you were just *gone*. I had no idea where you were, or if you were okay or even *alive* . It wasn't safe for me at home anymore so I went to Ron's. I had nowhere else. No one else."

Draco clenched his jaw, but he listened to her.

"We were all at the wedding, Bill and Fleur's, when we were attacked. There were so many Death Eaters and… none of them were you. So I ran. But I never ran from *you,* Draco. *You* were the one that left, not me."

Draco was staring at her like she was speaking a language only he could understand.

Hermione took a deep breath of the sweet night air. "If you would have stayed, I would have stayed with you."

His face dropped.

Despair, agony, and regret all raced over it, carving themselves deep into the white marble of features.

She didn't stop herself this time. Hermione reached up and placed her hand against the side of his face, rubbing the pad of her thumb over the arch of his cheek. Draco leaned into it, grasping her hand in his and holding it tightly to him.

"I didn't want to go. Not without you," he said hoarsely and opened his eyes again. "But she would have *killed* you, Granger. I would have lost you and I couldn't let that happen. So I left instead."

She knew it was the truth. She had known it since that night, bruised and covered in cold mud. But it still didn't make it any easier to accept. Even after months of going over it in her mind countless times, she still thought that Draco was wrong.

He should have stayed. With her.

She would have stayed with him.

"What can I do to make that up to you? I thought saving you and bringing you here would be enough. I knew it would take time for you to adjust, but… fuck." Draco gripped

her hand so hard it hurt. "All you want to do is leave, but I can't let you because you're *mine."*

"Then come with me," she whispered so softly that even the singing flowers seemed louder.

Draco pulled her hand from his face.

Hermione put it on his chest. "Come with me, Draco. We can leave. Tonight."

"Granger—" He took a step back.

"Please," she moved towards him again. "Please, Draco. If… if you do, I'll… I'll forgive you. I won't even need to though because… because I don't *care* what you've done. That wasn't you, not really. And other people will see that too if you try to right your wrongs before it's too late."

Draco turned away from her, leaning heavily on the opposite counter and hanging his head heavily. "You don't know what you're asking of me."

"Dumbledore offered you and your family protection. Harry heard him. If Harry—"

"Dumbledore is dead," Draco interrupted icily, chilling her even in the heat of the greenhouse. "And Potter's not far behind him."

Hermione ignored the jibe, knowing he only said to derail her argument. She had waited months to have this conversation and she wasn't letting a little thing like Draco's attitude get in her way now. Not when she was so close. There was a door on the other side of the glass room. They could walk through it and be free. *Together.*

"You can help change that. Don't you want a future where we can *actually* be together? Not some farce behind closed doors? Draco, don't you want *me?"*

He spun around, eyes flaring with cold anger. "You think you can trick me with promises of a happily ever after? Granger, I know exactly who the fuck I am and what the fuck I've done. The Order will *never* protect me. Not now. And running with you? What you're asking me to do is let you die," he snarled. "We are *safe* here. We are *protected* here. We are together *here!* Why isn't that fucking enough for you?!"

Draco swiped his arm and a pot full of bruised red vines crashed to the floor and went slithering in all directions.

Hermione jumped back as one of them snaked over her shoe.

Draco easily picked her up and lifted her out of harm's way. The vines disappeared into the darkness, moving under tables and into other plant's pots.

Here, in his embrace with her arms around his shoulders Hermione leaned in close to his face and smelled the sweet mint of him. "Please, Draco, just… trust me."

and opulence. Hermione counted doors, looked down halls and when they passed by a large room and heard pained noises coming from it, she slowed, trying to peer inside.

"Granger." Draco had noticed the clicks of her heels had softened and reached past her to close the door, stopping the haunting cries coming from the other end of the room. She had barely glimpsed another staircase led down into the bowels of the Manor. What, or *who,* was down there that could be making that terrible sound?

"Don't get lost. Or I'll have to come after you again."

"What was that?"

"Nothing for you to worry about," he said, his voice sliding over her like velvet, and she longed to believe him. And that worried her even more.

"Draco—"

"It's not far now." He turned and headed off again. Hermione glanced back at the closed door for a moment, then did as she was told and followed Draco down a tiled hallway. The beads on her dress swished and rattled against each other as they kept walking, the lights getting more spaced out until they stopped all together.

Hermione started to get nervous. Where was he taking her?

Draco stopped in front of two doors that seemed to be made of glass, but it was too dark on the other side for her to see through. He looked over his shoulder. "Don't be scared, Granger. I think you're going to like this."

The doors opened and they walked inside.

A wall of heat and humidity hit her as soon as she entered and Draco quickly closed the doors behind her. The room was filled with leaves, vines, and flowers and smelled richly from the mix of plants, earth and—Godric, *fresh air.*

Hermione closed her eyes and breathed in deeply. When she opened them again, she was looking up into a glass pane ceiling and the stars were shining down on her. She had seen the grounds and the sky from Draco's bedroom window, but there was something different about being able to see the whole sky opened up above her.

But as she stared up into the vast openness, she couldn't help noticing the glass separating her from the sky. Still inside.

Still trapped.

Draco came to stand next to her. "I told you I would make it up to you."

Her reward for going willingly into her cage—a larger one.

She didn't want to think like this. She didn't want to see everything Draco did as a calculated movement, but they were at war. She didn't know how to get back to… them. Just them again.

He smirked at her. "Well, if you fell back in love with me tonight, I wouldn't kick *you* out of the bed." Hermione blinked. "Wouldn't have to chain you to it anymore either. At least," he added with a devilish grin, "not until you begged me to."

"Don't hold your breath."

"I never do with you, Sweetheart." He gave a little shake of his head and a lock of hair fell down to his brow. "I take as much as I can get."

So this was to be her future.

Taken out to be wined and dined when it was convenient for him and then hidden back upstairs for him to reap the rewards he thought owed to him. Hermione folded her hands in her lap. "I've noticed."

They sat in silence for a few long moments. Hermione looked down at the uneaten sprouts on her plate and Draco ran his finger around the rim of his goblet, making a strange ethereal noise with each swipe. Hermione couldn't help but notice the signet ring missing from his finger. She was about to ask when Draco pulled his hand back out of sight.

"I didn't mean to upset you," he finally said. He sounded almost… apologetic, but Hermione wasn't in the mood for it tonight. Not anymore.

"You don't mind upsetting me every other night," she snapped, her fiery Gryffindor pride burning within her.

Draco stood up and the dishes and plates faded from sight. He looked down at her with storming grey eyes. "Tonight was supposed to be different."

"Why?"

"It's Valentine's day."

February. She knew she had been here for a few weeks now, but she had no idea it was already halfway through February. The war was raging outside Malfoy Manor and Hermione had barely made it out of Draco's bedroom. Not that she was getting anywhere tonight.

Draco had instructed her to come with him and she found herself once more following him through the Manor. This time she didn't let herself get distracted by the immensity

The normally stoic expression shattered as a full range of emotions flashed through his eyes, eyes that never left hers. He was here, her Draco, the real one. Not the one that wore a Death Eater's mask. Not Malfoy. Just Draco.

The hard granite in his eyes cracked and broke, leaving only the misty grey swirling as he took a labored breath.

Hermione wrapped her arms around him, nuzzling her face into the soft fabric of his shirt and jacket. His hands locked around the small of her back and he bent his head, resting it on top of her head. When was the last time he had held her like this? When was the last time she had left him? She wasn't sure. All she knew was that she didn't want to let go.

He said he didn't want to lose her and she didn't want to lose him either. Hermione held Draco tighter, feeling his muscles contract and his breathing quicken. What she didn't notice, was how hers did too. All she could think was how *good* it felt being in his arms again, being with him again. She had almost forgotten it could feel like this, but with the reminder, Hermione remembered how much better it could be.

She looked up at him, heart beating hard as his hands slid to grip her waist.

"Draco," she breathed out. "I want you." His mouth parted slightly and his hands spread out, covering each side of her rib cage. She could feel his muscles tighten as he fought himself for control when slid her hands up to his chest. "But not like this. We can have more, we can *be* more. You… you showed me before. So this time, let me show you."

Draco stared down at her for a long time, so long that Hermione's hope began to outweigh her fear. She started to smile, the bubbles rising up in her again making her feel like if she just held onto him for a little while longer, they could float right through the glass panes and into the star-strewn sky and *away* from all of this.

Draco pushed his fingers into her hair, sliding his palm against the side of her neck as his thumb traced the outline of her lips. She opened them for him, gazing up at his unreadable expression. But she knew, she thought, she was a glimmer of something deep in them. He would do it. He would do it for her.

After *everything* else he said he had done for her, surely Draco would be willing to leave behind the safety of his Manor so they could be together.

Draco tilted her head back. "I love you more than anything, *everything,* Sweetheart." His lips curled ever so slightly and Hermione felt herself relaxing into his hands. "You're my heart, my *whole* heart. And that is why I won't let you go out there to die. Even if you did it at my side."

Numb. Hermione's whole body went numb.

Draco released her, pulling back to put a few inches of space between them again. Rules. He had remembered, and she had forgotten. Forgotten that he had taken the mark before he fell in love with her. Forgotten that he was just as much Malfoy as he was Draco. And had forgotten that as good as he made her feel, he could make her feel equally, if not even more, terrible.

"We should go back," he said, voice as hollow as her chest felt. She was dizzy with disillusionment and although something in her told her to make a break for the door, the heavy feeling of disappointment kept her firmly in place.

Hermione followed Draco back down the tiled hallway, through the Manor, and up the stairs. She didn't say a single word as Draco opened the door to his bedroom. She just walked back in. Back to her cage.

He stopped in the doorway. "I'll give you some time to get undressed. Just… knock when you're done."

He didn't look at her before closing the door.

Hermione stared at the room she knew so well with new eyes. Eyes she refused to blink until they burned. Good. That meant they were dry. That meant she wasn't crying this time.

Not that it hurt any less than the last time Draco had broken her heart.

Hermione pulled the earrings out and unclasped the necklace, placing them carefully on top of the dresser. The brooch was still in the greenhouse, but she didn't care about losing it. What would she have done with a ruby brooch anyway? It didn't go with the sheer white lace dresses he normally put her in.

She hung the gown up and straightened it on the hanger, not wanting to leave any creases on something so fine before picking up the small white slip again. Then a thought occurred to her. Draco had left the wardrobe open while she dressed earlier and reaching for the handle, Hermione found it unlocked. Inside were racks of shirts and folded trousers. She pulled a shirt off the hanger, leaving it swinging as she pulled it around her shoulders.

She wasn't entirely sure why she did it, other than the fact that she just wanted to. And maybe not everything needed a full thought as the reason.

The sleeves were too long and she had to roll them up a few times to have use of her hands again. Once she was done, Hermione walked over to the door and raised her hand to knock on it.

this without expecting something of equal or greater value in return. And she only had one thing he wanted.

"Granger, don't make me charm the silverware to feed you too," Draco said in exasperation.

Hermione took her hands from her lap and picked up her fork. "No, I just—" He looked over at her, expression carefully guarded. "Why are you doing this?"

Draco cut into his food. "We can go back to the room if you're more comfortable there."

"No!" she quickly corrected and wasn't sure if the pull of his mouth was in amusement, annoyance, or… if he just didn't like the salmon.

"Then eat," Draco growled and then added under his breath, "*please.*"

Hermione decided to behave herself and tried a bit of the risotto. It was one of the best things she had ever had in her mouth. Rich and creamy with a hint of citrus and herbs. Normally she picked around at the food Draco gave her, mostly just to bother him, but she was having a hard time not devouring everything in sight tonight.

She ate almost everything on her plate other than the sprouts and was starting on the roll when she noticed Draco watching her.

"Do you not like brussel sprouts?" he asked, a little amused.

Hermione wrinkled her nose. "Just… not my taste."

"Hmm." He took a drink. "I'll remember that."

"Planning on doing this every night?" She heard the levity in her own voice and watched Draco react to it. She couldn't help it. Despite the larger situation, Hermione was enjoying herself. She didn't normally like getting all dressed up, but just being out of the room and doing something —*anything* —different had lifted her spirits.

It was also nice that Draco was behaving himself as well. He was… trying.

"Would you like that?" he purred as he leaned forward a little. "Just you and me? It can be like that, you know. We can have…" He reached across the table, hand hovering above hers. "This."

Hermione looked deep into his silver eyes, so bright and… hopeful. Is that what tonight was? His way of showing her what he could give her, if only she gave in to him?

"Is that why you did this? Gave me the gown and set up this… date?"

Draco pulled his hand back and frowned. "I thought you'd like it."

"So you have no ulterior motives then?"

"Stand up straight! You are a Malfoy, boy!" One shouted and Draco rolled his eyes, hunching his shoulders.

"What sort of gown is that?" A woman sneered from the other side of the hall. Hermione's head turned to see a large woman with a three foot white wig piled high on top of her head glare back at her. "Harlot."

Draco flicked his wand and the portrait went crashing to the ground, cracking the frame.

"Your Father will hear about this!" she shrieked and her wig went tumbling to reveal a patchy, balding head underneath.

"Be careful on the stairs," he warned and Hermione saw they were at the top of a wide staircase, leading down to an open foyer below.

She picked up her dress and carefully chose her steps as she descended, heels clicking and echoing around her.

Draco waited at the bottom for her and she noticed his arm jumped a little, as if he was going to offer it to her but then thought better of it. She said nothing, but knew that if he had, she would have taken it.

Hermione knew Malfoy Manor was large, but she didn't know it was like *this*. She was overwhelmed by the magnitude and sheer enormity of it as Draco continued on, leading her into a brightly lit room lit with cascading crystal chandeliers hovering over a long table already laid out with more dishes than she could count.

Draco pulled out a chair for her and Hermione sat down, too stunned to do anything else. He took his own seat and the table came to life as the dishes began to serve themselves.

The gentle clinking utensils against the dishes filled the otherwise empty air between them. A ginger glazed salmon filet, roast carrots and sprouts with a dark, rich sauce drizzled and topped with chopped nuts, and a thick, creamy risotto all filled her plate as a steaming roll sliced and buttered itself in front of her.

Hermione was almost scared to touch it—any of it . She had almost given up hope that Draco would fulfill his promise of letting her into his study, but he had gone above and beyond anything she could have imagined. The dress, the jewels, the food, the… everything.

What *was* this?

He had warned her for weeks now how dangerous it was for her outside his bedroom, but here he was, parading her around and treating her to a dinner that was worthy of royalty. Hermione knew Draco well enough to know that he didn't give something like

She could hear him on the other side. A deep, agonized groan as if he was in great pain and then a quick intake of breath followed by shallow pants and a weak, " *Fuck…*"

Biting her lip, Hermione pressed her ear to the door.

"FUCK!" Draco shouted and something heavy hit the other side, making her jump back and cover her mouth with her hand to stop any noise from coming out.

Not that he would have heard it. The sounds of crashing, ripping, and shattering were loud enough to scare her even with the heavy wooden door between them. Hermione stood there, shaking and staring at the unlocked door, as Draco roared and tore apart the room on the other side.

Draco gave her a wry smile, working his jaw before letting it drop and Hermione had her answer. No. Draco didn't trust her anymore. The realization of that was heavier than the brooch hanging from her dress. She should have known, should have expected it, but looking into his eyes, she watched the shining silver turn into hard granite before he blinked it away and removed his arm from in front of her. He waved it widely to guide her out of his bedroom.

She had expected a hall or corridor but instead walked right into what must have been Draco's study.

It was just as large as his bedroom and the first thing Hermione took note of were the large double doors on the other side of the room. So, his bedroom led straight into here instead of a hall or corridor. Another barrier she would have to make it through.

The second thing she noticed were all the *books*. Draco wasn't joking when he said he could give her a library; he had the beginnings of one right here. Two of the long walls were covered in shelves of almost pristine looking books mixed in with an assortment of artifacts, sculptures, and something that looked strangely like a miniature dragon's skull. But her eyes went back to the volumes and tomes that lined most of the space and she found herself drifting towards them unconsciously.

"If you see any you want," he said from behind her, "they're yours."

Any other time she would have been thrilled at the prospect of having so many books to peruse and read, but this felt like a bribe. Hermione looked back at Draco who was watching her carefully, expression *almost* perfectly controlled. Except for the small crease between his slightly furrowed brows. Anxious.

Draco was nervous.

He broke their gaze and opened one of the large doors, sweeping it out into the hall. Hermione had to stop herself from running through it. She didn't think the magic in the heels was enough to keep her from breaking her ankle if she fell and she didn't fancy having to lay up in bed again. Although, that might mean Draco would bring Blaise back and she could talk to him about the outside world or maybe even try to convince him to help her get out of here.

But Hermione didn't have any more time to formulate a plan because Draco was already leading her down the hall. She had never been in this part of the house before, but it felt eerily familiar as she walked over the soft rug and watched glass lamps grow brighter as they approached, lighting up panelled walls.

"Ignore the portraits," Draco murmured.

athletic build. She had seen him in his white short sleeve shirts or his black leather breastplate so often that she was almost stunned into silence to see him in anything else. Especially not anything like *this*.

"You look beautiful," Draco murmured, reaching out to fix a curl that had jumped free, but stopped. He balled his hand into a fist and returned it to his side.

Hermione fixed it for him instead, almost wishing he had broken her rule on touching, just this once. There wasn't much she could do with her hair without having any way to tie it back and she thought it almost a shame that the earrings were hidden in the thick mass of curls that surrounded her.

"You could have given me some hair pins."

"You could have tried to stab me with them."

Hermione rolled her eyes and Draco shrugged as if he believed she might have actually tried it.

"The brooch," he said, picking up the ruby pin from the dresser and unclasping it with skilled fingers. Draco looked back at her. "May I?"

Hermione could hardly breathe, let alone talk, and just nodded her head mutely. Draco took in a low breath and reached out to fasten the pin, or the brooch, whatever it was, under her breasts.

Hermione watched him work. He was careful not to let his fingers graze the underside of her breasts and when she took a deeper breath to push her chest forward, Draco snapped it into place and pulled his hands back like he was scared of being burned.

His white blond hair was perfectly coiffed, pushed back on the left without a single strand out of place. He had shaved and the sharp cut of his jaw was even more pronounced; his eyes mere rings of silver around black depths she could never quite peer past.

"Shall we?" he purred and Hermione pulled her hair, twisting it all to lie on one shoulder, and nodded.

Draco turned to walk her out of the room, but stopped her at the doorway, sticking his arm out in front of her and gripping the door frame with strong fingers.

"You're not thinking of doing anything stupid now, are you, Sweetheart?"

Though his tone was patronizing, Draco looked surprisingly nervous. His eyes were searching hers and Hermione felt trapped in his gaze now that he was giving her a small glimpse behind the marble walls he hid behind. It was him, *her* Draco—angry and nervous, but him all the same.

She narrowed her eyes slightly. "Don't you trust me?"

Chapter Twelve

Granger sat on the floor at Draco's side, back against the drawers of his desk and knees pulled up, propping open her book of the evening. She had adjusted, not quite as well as he would have liked, but well enough that they could now enjoy evenings spent in his study where she read and he worked. It was almost the life he had imagined they could have.

Almost the one he wanted.

The chain hung heavily from her wrist as she lifted her hand to turn the page. She didn't even seem to notice its gentle clinking, but Draco felt the tug of it from the handle wrapped around his right wrist.

Draco twisted it tighter.

If he were a better man, he would let her go. Granger was smart, capable, and might even stand a chance on her own, for a little while at least. Longer, if he was with her.

But if he went out there with her, he'd have to share her with Potter. And Weasley.

She belonged with him. To him. *Only* him.

He couldn't let her go.

Even if she begged.

Draco spent plenty of nights, right here behind his desk, gripping himself tightly and thinking about how her eyes would burn like cinnamon as she looked up at him and so

beautifully begged for him to touch her, fuck her. How badly he needed to hear it again as he bent her over his knee and beat her little ass *red* only to have her thank him with sweet tears in her eyes.

He'd wipe them away and let her suck the wetness off his fingers.

Then he'd let her suck his cock, to show her he'd forgiven her. Run his hands through her thick, twisting curls and tell her how good she was doing, how much she was pleasing him.

She'd only stop to softly ask if she was allowed to swallow. Sometimes he let her. Sometimes he came all over her face and tits, watching it drop thickly from her chin as she played with herself for his amusement until he was ready for her again.

But lately, Draco had been doing this instead—leashing her up and bringing her into his study with him.

He would walk behind her, letting her pick out whatever book she wanted to read and then had her settle in behind his desk with him while he worked.

At least this was on the nights his work didn't take him down into the cellar. Draco didn't think the old man could survive another round and he wasn't keen on baring the punishment for him any more than he had to, but Draco had to show some sort of proof of his efforts, so he had gotten creative.

Aguamenti mixed with *Levicorpus* proved to be rather effective against the wand maker and when the Dark Lord returned, he was pleased with the cooperation Draco had instilled in his honored guest.

So pleased that the Dark Lord granted him another ward.

Fucking Looney Lovegood, of all people, was now in his *care*.

Draco didn't have the stomach to torture her. There was dirt smeared on her face, making her opalescent blue eyes stand out even more and even though she was shivering and skinny as fuck, she smiled at him.

"Hello, Draco."

Not Malfoy. Draco.

"Shut the fuck up."

It was all he said to her. Before he left her down in the cellar and pretended like she didn't exist.

It could easily have been Granger locked up and waiting to be tortured. If he hadn't gotten to her first. And it still could be if he blew his cover.

He couldn't save everyone, but he could save her.

"Granger."

another outfit Draco had picked out because it was actual *clothes*. Well, an evening gown, but still more than the slips and lace he had provided her with since her arrival here.

She pulled off the small white dress and tossed it to the floor. Hermione looked in the mirror for a moment and was surprised at the girl looking back at her. Her curls were long, twisting down to cover her breasts. Her eyes were bright and her cheeks were brushed with tints of red from her physical expression of her joy. But there was something missing; she wasn't quite herself. Hermione traced the spot on her inner thigh where Draco's mark had hidden and… missed it.

Maybe she should have kept it, as a reminder. Maybe it would help her to remember that Draco could be the man she wanted him to be. And she wanted him so much. Every night was harder without Draco beside her, and on the days he left her alone for sixteen hours straight she found herself glancing at the door wondering, hoping, wishing, he would come back.

Hermione let the dress fall down around her. There were dark beads sewn into it that shifted, making a little noise as she twisted and turned in front of the full length mirror. It was certainly nothing she would have ever picked out for herself, but she had to admit that it was gorgeous.

Draco had even left her a pair of precariously tall heels, the same deep color as the dress and Hermione gently slid her feet into them. She rarely wore heels, always thinking they were never worth the pain and hassle of trying to balance on stilts, but she found that these molded perfectly to her feet, providing support and comfort as she took a few steps, testing them out.

Magic. Draco had given her *magic shoes*. She wondered how much they had cost as she lifted the skirt of the gown to admire them. All of this, just for her? Not to mention the jewelry he had left her on the dresser.

Her eyes went wide at the sight of them. Dripping diamond earrings and a delicate matching necklace that laid on her collar bones. The light caught the brilliance of the jewels and let her face up from underneath as she fastened it around her neck. The last item was a large ruby pin, surrounded by swirls of silver and heavy enough that Hermione felt like she needed to cradle it with both hands.

A knock came at the door and she nearly dropped it when Draco stuck his head inside.

"Are you—" he froze in the doorway.

Hermione quickly set the pin down and tucked her loose curls behind her ears.

Draco didn't say a word as he made his way over to her. He had changed too and now wore a set of crisp black and white dress robes, perfectly cut and tailored to his slim, but

Other days he was gone for long hours and she would use the opportunity to test out simple spells. She held out her hand until her arm ached trying to levitate a quill and when she finally got it to hover in the air for five seconds Hermione let out a whoop of joy. She jumped off the bed and twirled around, throwing her hands wide and then hugging herself before letting her body sink down to the floor where she laid, trying to catch her breath.

It was then that Draco returned, locking the door behind him; the leather of his boots creaking slightly as he made his way across the room to where Hermione was lying. She tilted her head back, looking up to see his boots level with her eyes. Her chest was rising and falling as she moved her gaze up over the long length of his body to meet his mildly bemused expression.

"Did you fall, Granger?" He looked like he was about to laugh at her.

Even Draco's teasing wasn't enough to sour her good mood and Hermione rolled over onto her stomach and pushed herself up to sit with her legs crossed.

Draco stuck his hands in his pockets and raised a brow.

"No."

He smirked. "Then get your ass up and get dressed."

Hermione eyed him warily. "Why?"

Draco turned and walked towards the wardrobe, opening it up and pulling out a long garment bag. He waved his wand over it to reveal a gown of bruised crimson with a beaded neckline. Hermione wasn't sure she had ever seen a dress so fine that wasn't in one of the magazines her parents kept in the waiting room at their offices. Normal people didn't wear things like that, but… Draco's people did.

"There's a necklace and earrings on the bureau," he said, pointing to the dresser. "I'll give you an hour before I come back."

Hermione scrambled to her feet. "Come back for what?"

Draco smirked at her, his grey eyes dark and playful. "Didn't you say you wanted out of the room?" His hand landed on the handle of the door. "We could always stay in, if you'd prefer."

Out. Out out out. Draco was taking her *out*.

Hermione could hardly believe it and had the sudden urge to run to him and wrap her arms around his neck. She took a step forward and stopped, balancing on the balls of her feet and bit her lip.

Draco's grin widened at her apparent excitement and he left her to get dressed. As soon as he was gone, Hermione rushed to get ready. She didn't even care that it was

She looked up at him with her big doe eyes and for a moment, she forgot to hate him. They looked as soft and warm as melted chocolate.

He had no idea why he had said her name except, well… he wanted to talk to her.

"How's the book?"

The softness in her face changed into wariness. "Fine."

"You like…" He lifted the spine from her knees to read the title. " *Wicked Warlocks of the—"*

Draco's throat closed around the words.

Granger tucked her hair behind her ears and looked back down at the yellowing pages in front of her. She bit her lip, indenting the soft, pink flesh.

He had half a mind to pull on the chain, haul her up into his lap and slam his mouth on hers. Tear the lace covering her chest and grab her tits, shoving them together and pinching her nipples until she gasped and he could snake his tongue into her mouth to swallow her sweet, muffled moans of " *Draco!"*

"Draco!"

He jumped at her sharp tone and his spine stiffened at the sight of her big brown eyes widening in worry.

Fuck, how did she always looks so fucking hot?

"Your arm!"

Draco looked down at his arm. His left arm. The mark there was burning a deep bruised red as the snake writhed over the blue veins running under it.

Shit. He had been so consumed by the thought of Granger grinding on his dick while he bit at her tits that he hadn't even felt it.

He *barely* felt it now. More of a muscle ache than the corrosive, bone-eating agony his Master normally used to call him.

Huh.

Well that wasn't normal.

"Oh my god, doesn't it hurt?" Granger asked, her voice lifting up an octave as she knelt beside him, book discarded on the floor and eyes locked onto the twisting brand on his arm.

Yes. Yes it fucking hurt to have her so close to him and not even be able to touch her. Not being able to tilt her chin up so those eyes were on his, burning into him like he craved so badly it felt like the scorched ruin of his heart was about to ignite again.

"I'll be okay."

She looked up at him and fucking hell, she bit that lip again. Draco's dick twitched in his trousers.

He stood up.

"Have to cut the evening short, kitten."

Hermione, no *Granger,* picked up her book and awkwardly got to her feet, chain trailing in too large space between them.

"You—" she paused. *Please don't bite your lip again, Sweetheart, or I swear on Salazar's watery grave I will fuck you right here.* "Do you have to put me back in the room? You could let me stay in here."

The charred hole in his chest ached. Such a simple request and he still had to deny her.

"Can't. It's not safe out here for you. Not without me."

Granger's cute little cheeks flushed red and Draco tightened his grip on the handle of the chain, letting the cold metal bite into his palm. The pain was a distraction. He had never needed one more, because she was tossing her tawny curls back over her shoulder, letting them fall like ribbons of caramel and now they weren't covering her tits and holy fucking shit—he could see the pink outline of her nipples through this dress.

"Get back in," Draco said, hearing the hoarseness in his own voice as he pulled on the chain, opening his bedroom door for her. He needed to go. The ache in his arm was thudding against the dull numbness of his skin. His Master wanted him.

" *Report to the Ministry."* Draco suppressed a shiver, never having grown used to hearing that high pitched hiss echo in his head.

Granger stopped at the threshold and turned back towards him. "This isn't fair. You said I could read in the study tonight."

"Granger—"

"You *promised."*

He had. He had promised her so much. That he would take care of her, treat her right. That he wouldn't hurt her anymore.

And all he had done since she got here was cause her pain. He could see it in every longing look she gave him, every quiver of her voice. He was torturing her with this life.

He could try to trust her again. Give her a bit more freedom and see if that made her happier.

And if he were a better man, he would.

But Granger was his. His girl. His heart. His whole world. He wasn't letting her end up in anyone else's chains, but his own.

Draco pulled on the links, dragging her further in. "I know, but—"

make his face even more pointed than it had been. Draco watched as his father pursed his wine stained lips, making a fine white line around the deep red.

"That is precisely why," Lucius answered in a cutting tone. "The best way to further my interests was to align myself with the Dark Lord."

"Really paid off for you when he let you rot in Azkaban for a year and nearly died. Tell me, do you think he would have come for you then?"

"Do not speak of the Dark Lord in this manner!" Lucius hissed, quaking with rage. "You are bordering on treason, my boy!"

Draco felt a frigid acid eating away at his spine. He downed another glass, but even the warmth of the liquor did nothing to dispel the coldness taking hold of him. He stood up, glaring down icily at his father below him.

Lucius had never looked so small before.

"And what are you going to do about it, old man?"

His wand was in his hand and he watched his father's eyes dart down to it and then back up to him.

"I will disown you. I will take away your inheritance so there is nothing for you to squander away in your own will!" Lucius bellowed, emboldened by the second bottle of wine. "I will strip the Malfoy name from you if you do not honor it!"

Draco glowered back at him, the poison in his veins corroding away any sense of familial loyalty to the ruined mess sitting behind his father's desk.

"Fuck the Malfoy name."

Draco slammed the silver signet ring of the Malfoy family down on the desk and left without another word.

Hermione woke up to a dark room. Draco hadn't opened the curtains before he left. They hadn't spoken much in the past week, existing in each other's spaces, but not interacting any more than was necessary. Some days he laid on the chaise and barely moved. He would spend hours reading *The Sacred Twenty-Eight* and Hermione would watch as he scrawled notes in it.

"I set up that will for you when you were three years old. It is the same as my own. All Malfoy possessions and properties will pass to your trueborn heir—"

Draco slammed the glass down, whisky sloshing over the side onto the leather topper of his father's desk. "And what if I don't want an heir?"

Lucius' eyes widened, the red lids pulling back. " *Don't want an heir?"*

"What am I to leave him anyway?" Draco threw himself back against the chair. "A house that is actually a prison, a dozen empty vaults, and a crippling addiction to alcohol?"

His father's voice was soft but stern, "Things will be different once the Dark Lord has triumphed. They will be as they should have been all along."

"Things were fine before," Draco murmured into his drink, tossing it back and immediately refilling it much to his father's chagrin. But it wasn't long before Lucius poured out more wine for himself either. It seemed neither one of them could face the other sober.

"Why did you do it?" Draco asked softly. "What did you get us in this mess? What's the point of having an heir? It's not like he needs more Death Eaters."

Lucius frowned. "Draco, by this point I would have hoped you'd learned what being a Malfoy means. You are the product of centuries of elite breeding. You do not get to decide that the lives of every Malfoy who came before you mean nothing by letting our line die."

"Is that what I am to you? A continuation of a bloodline? An obligation your father forced upon you?"

"I long ago accepted what was required of me and I too gave up things I desired to carry on the Malfoy name."

"A great lot you've done with it," Draco snorted. "Fucking sold yourself off to a tyrant who uses our name for his own gain and uses you like a goddamn puppet. Your father must be as proud of you as you are me."

"My father, Abraxas Malfoy, served the Dark Lord with his life and his death!" Lucius shouted. "So when the time came for me to take the mark it wasn't a choice, Draco. It was a gift; an honor to pledge—"

"But you were free!" Draco nearly jumped from his chair. "Your father was dead! You could have done anything—anything you wanted! Why would you sell your soul into slavery when you *had* a life to live?"

Lucius finished off his wine with a shaking hand. Draco hadn't seen him this bad off since they first returned from the island villa. His hair was thinning, receding back to

"I was *good!* I…"

Draco turned. His heart thumping hard in his chest as she pulled back on the chain. He yanked it forward, making her stumble into the side of the bed as he latched it back in place around one of the posts.

"Draco, no!" Hermione cried out, fiery spirit sparking up in her again. "You said I would always have an out if I wanted it."

He stopped, hands hovering over the iron links. Another promise, and one he hadn't *technically* broken. He half thought she would have figured it out by now.

He tossed the chain onto the bed behind her. "You know how to get out."

Granger marched up to him, making it strain. "I am *not* sleeping with you."

"That wasn't what I was talking about, but thanks for the reminder," Draco snarled.

Is that all she thought he wanted from her? Bitch.

She pulled on the chain, shoving the cuff around her wrist up into his face. "Take it off. Or tell me the passphrase."

So bold, so beautiful. Her eyes were burning with hatred, but at least they were burning. Just like him.

Draco smirked coldly down at her. "You're smart, you figure it out."

He picked up his mask from beside her diamonds on the bureau and slipped it over his face, the metal cooling the heated blood under his skin.

The dark panels sped past as Hermione ran down the hall. She now knew it as the one that led to the staircase which would lead her downstairs and then *out* .

She had been going over her mental map of the Manor all night and now she was here, bare feet pounding into the carpet so thick that they barely made a sound as she tore down the long hall. How long had she been running? Surely she should have reached the staircase by now?

The doubt didn't stop her. What was her other option? Going back? She couldn't. She *wouldn't.*

Hermione was still running when she heard the screaming start. It was distant, but growing louder with each footfall.

Finally, when her chest was heaving, she came to the top of the stairs. He was howling, crying out in utter agony and Hermione's heart thundered in her chest. She quickly started down the stairs, letting momentum carry her as feet moved faster and faster.

She was almost at the bottom when she stumbled and fell, hitting the last three steps and ripping the silk slip. Hermione gathered her legs under her, already feeling where she would find bruises in the morning, and pushed her hair out of her face and started forward again.

The screams were echoing through the expansive mansion, bouncing off the long walls and high ceiling. Hermione didn't even stop to think before she took off towards them again, ignoring the large front doors in the other direction.

"Hermione!"

She followed his voice to the set of doors Draco had closed as he took her through the Manor and pushed against the one slightly cracked open. Hermione burst into the room and skipped to a stop, her torn skirt tangled around her thighs.

Draco was lying prostrate on the floor, blood leaking from his mouth as he weakly lifted his head. "H-Her—"

There was a Death Eater standing over him, a dark wand pointed directly at Draco.

She knew that wand. She had held that wand and felt it's magic working for her. It was his hawthorne. Hermione lifted her eyes from Draco's pale face to stare into the metal mask of the Death Eater.

Silver eyes gleamed back at her, shining brighter as he held her gaze and pointed his wand at the Draco on the floor.

" *Crucio.*"

Hermione woke with a start, swallowing large panicked breaths, and wiped a faint sheen of moisture off her forehead.

The moon was shining in from the windows, lighting up the dark room in a pale, haunting glow.

Crookshanks blinked slowly at her from his position curled tight on Draco's back. Draco himself was laying face down, just like he had been in her dream. Except now he was sprawled out on the velvet chaise, the fur blanket draped over his waist and his arm hanging off the side, trailing on the floor.

No wand in his hand, no mask on his face.

Hermione sat, stomach curling with anticipation inside her, as she waited for something, anything, to happen.

It was more a trophy room than an office and Draco wrinkled his nose at the variety of dead animals' jeweled eyes gazing down at him from high on the walls. Drinking the Ogden's quickly to dissuade the eerily chill creeping through him. Wasn't there enough death out there? Did his father really have to bring it into their home too?

At least he hadn't started mounting human heads on the walls. Merlin knows what his father would have done with Ted Tonks' body if Draco hadn't buried it.

Lucius settled himself behind the desk and placed a crystal tumbler in front of Draco. "Do try to uphold the family image instead of looking like a drunk on the streets of Knockturn Alley, will you?"

Draco sneered at him as he poured a generous amount of fire whisky into the glass. "As you wish, *Father.*"

Lucius tented his fingers, narrowing his light grey eyes that were rimmed with red and stood out in his pale face.

Draco stared back over the top of his drink as the fire crackled, spitting a little ember onto the hearth that quickly faded and died.

"I went to Gringotts today," Lucius finally said.

"Emptied another vault?"

"They said you changed your will."

Draco tapped his Malfoy ring against the rim of his glass. Wizarding wills were magically protected, each kept locked in a warded room below Gringotts. They were under strict enchantments not to be opened until the death of the bearer. It was an ordeal to amend the terms on them, especially since most of the Pureblood wills were written in cursed ink with conditions that *couldn't* be changed, but Draco was clever enough to choose wording that did not go against the traditions of his family, yet still ensured the outcome he would need to provide her with.

If Granger knew the contents, she would probably slit his throat in his sleep.

Draco took another drink and pulled his lips back over his teeth. "What of it?"

"As your father, and the head of the Malfoy family," Lucius craned his neck, pale eyes sharply prying into Draco's. "I feel I have the right to know what you are planning on doing with the inheritance I will one day leave you with."

Draco sniffed loudly. Lucius had no need to know about the new vaults Draco had opened, the ones *only* in his name. He wasn't going to watch all his hard earned gold go down his father's gullet. "I have accumulated a few new assets. I merely was putting into place instructions as to what is to be done with them in case of my untimely death. We are at *war* , Father," he drawled sarcastically.

Draco didn't bother knocking on the door to his father's study.

Lucius was pouring a glass of wine and spilled a little over the side at Draco's sudden appearance.

He didn't wait to be invited further in, but strode forward throwing himself down in one of the chairs and propping his leg up over the arm.

"You asked to see me?"

Lucius frowned at his son and dabbed at the spilled wine on the glass before picking it up and taking a large gulp of it. Draco noticed the bottle was empty. He had gotten to the party late.

"I've been waiting almost an hour for you."

Draco shrugged. "I was working."

"Oh yes," his father's words slid easily out of his mouth in a way Draco had heard many times before. "Your little snatching business."

"I'm hunting Potter."

"By getting drunk with Thaddeus Nott's son? Yes, I am sure that will lead you right to the most wanted person in Britain."

Draco glared at his father. "At least I can summon my own drinks." He flicked his wand and a bottle of fire whisky soared over from the collection of bottles along the wall. Popping the cork from it, Draco raised it up in a mock salute before tipping it back.

Shit, it was good to have a drink again.

Lucius turned away and pulled another bottle of dark red wine down off the wall and Draco glanced around at the mounted heads of different animals that lined the walls. Stags, boars, and wolves scattered around in between creatures of more magical origins.

Lucius was a skilled hunter and prized himself on his kills; traveling far in order to have the luxury of hunting rare and dangerous prey. A wampus cat with bared teeth, a re'em with sharpened golden horns, a hodag whose fangs glinted in the firelight, and a griffin with its beak open with a sharp pointed tongue poised midair, all adorned with gems replacing their eyes.

Draco looked away, choosing instead to focus on a set of large feathered wings from one of Lucius' childhood horses spread out over the wall behind his desk.

Nothing did. Crookshanks settled back down, flicking his tail lazily. Draco was asleep. He wasn't being tortured, he wasn't screaming. He was safe; he was here. And that knowledge comforted her.

Hermione quietly got up from the bed. She walked over to the chaise and gazed down at Draco for a moment. So still and quiet in his slumber. How could this be the same person who turned his wand into a weapon of terror? How could this be the same face hiding behind a Death Eater's mask?

She knew what kind of man Draco really was, but… did he?

Hermione was crouching down next to him before she realized what she was doing. She brushed a bit of his white blond hair back from his face, letting her fingers trace his hairline, down to his ear, and then along his jaw.

Draco took a shuddering breath and held it. Hermione pulled back quickly, worried that she had woken him, but Draco just nuzzled his face into the velvet and let the breath out low and slow.

Hermione sat down, leaning back against the chaise and tilted her head to look at Draco again. Although she hadn't actually been running, she still felt worn from her dream. Nightmare. Whatever it was.

Her heart thumped hard in her chest, but this time, it was because of Draco. It was for Draco. And if she was being really honest with herself, it had always been for Draco.

Even when he *imperiused* her. When he left her. When he ran her down in the woods and chained her to his bed and tormented her. None of that had been enough to make her stop loving him. And if that wasn't enough, would anything ever be?

Slowly her lids closed back over her eyes and although Hermione was sitting on the floor, head falling back against his arm, she slept more soundly than she had in weeks.

She woke up to Draco placing her back in the bed.

"W-what's going on?" she asked, sleep still muddling her mind.

"Hush," Draco said softly and tucked the blankets in around her.

"Wait—" Hermione reached out as he turned to go. Her hand closed over his wrist. Draco looked down at it then back up at her, expression wary.

"Granger," he said carefully, "you're touching me."

Hermione didn't let go. "Where are you going?"

"I have work to do."

"Don't."

"Don't what?"

Leave. Go. Stay. Do this.

Hermione blinked, clearing a little of the fog hanging in her head and saw that the Malfoy ring was still missing from his hand.

"Don't hurt anyone," Hermione finished.

Draco pulled her fingers from around his wrist. "I won't hurt *you,* Granger," he said, voice heavy with emotion. "That's the best I can do."

"You're leaving your side open again," Draco said drolly, shooting a jinx at Theo's undefended right side.

"Who cares?" He doubled over as it hit him, grinning widely and breathing heavily. "That's where you'll be anyways."

Draco rolled his eyes.

"We can't afford any mistakes." He aimed another jinx and Theo deflected it. Draco watched the movement, a bit too stiff. A better dueler would be able to dodge it and use that fraction of a second to send a curse back instead of casting a protection charm.

Draco pointed his wand down. "Move your feet, Theo!"

"Stop acting like you're in charge here," Theo grumbled.

"It's my mission, they're my wolves—"

"And when's the last time you even bothered to come hunting with us, huh?" Theo aimed a spell at Draco who twisted, letting it slide past him easily.

Draco turned back and raised a brow. "I've had things to do."

"Yeah, you're a big shot now," Theo mocked and Draco flicked a hex at him, hitting Theo's hand and making him drop his wand. When he bent down to retrieve it, Draco sent it skittering a few feet away.

Theo glared at him and stiffly walked over to it, just for Draco to do it again.

"Quit it!"

Draco laughed as Theo snatched it up, grumbling under his breath as they returned to the white training circle.

"A girl?" Theo asked and Draco fell behind his white walls in surprise. "The last time you got this 'busy' it was because of your mystery girl."

"I don't have a mystery girl."

"Lucius, get that body out of here. I don't want to smell it rotting when I return," the Dark Lord commanded, as he mounted the stairs and quickly ascended them.

Lucius had only just started forward towards the body when Draco found himself speaking in a low commanding voice. "Don't."

He stepped forward and his mother quickly glanced between him and his father, her eyes moving while the rest of her stayed perfect still.

"I'll take care of it."

His father cleared his throat. "The Dark Lord ordered me—"

"I said," Draco moved between his Father and the body. "I will take care of it. Why don't you go have another bottle of wine, *Lucius."*

He watched the rage battle in his father's pale grey eyes, so close to the color of death already and Draco knew, right then, that one day he would look into his father's eyes and see the glaze of decay staring back at him.

Lucius sneered at him and spat on the floor next to the body. Draco didn't move a muscle, he just stood there and glared back at the man he once respected but now could barely stand to look at. He had done this. He had done this to their family. Had failed the Dark Lord and made his son take his place. Had ignored his wife and son in favor of a man who didn't give a shit about any of them. Had taken the mark to gain power and fortune and was pissing it all away out of their vaults as quickly as he could.

Fucking washed up, weak, asshole who couldn't even fucking stay sober, even though he knew his wife hated it. Who had hit his son for asking questions and yelled at his wife when she didn't collect him fast enough. Draco wasn't a little boy anymore, but Lucius… Lucius wasn't *anything* anymore.

Nothing. Useless.

Lucius paused at the base of the stairs and twisted his head over his shoulder. "Narcissa!"

Draco looked at his mother who seemed half-caught in horror. Of course she was. She just saw her beloved son torture an innocent man in front of her. She had said she was worried for him, but there was no need to be anymore.

She knew what he was now.

He couldn't look at her anymore. Couldn't bear to see the pain on her face at what her only child had become. Just a more fucked up version of his father.

She moved to Lucius' side and together they walked upstairs, leaving Draco alone in the dark with the person he just tortured and the dead body of his uncle.

"I—I can't make your wand more powerful!" Ollivander cried, the wrinkles on his face caked with dirt from the floor. "No wand can rival the—"

"Draco."

" *Crucio.*"

He struck again. Draco felt the power slide down his arm and into his wand, and then… he pulled it back. The light still hit Ollivander and he groaned weakly in pain, but Draco kept the level to one of severe muscle cramps. The wandmaker was feeble enough that even the attenuated curse left him crying on the floor. While Draco pulled the rest of the dark magic back up his wand, and into his own arm.

His muscles clenched tightly and Draco ground his teeth together. It wasn't at full force, but he was bearing the weight of the curse so the old man didn't have to. Fucking hell, it *hurt*. It had been weeks since he had last cursed himself and although the pain wasn't something he had forgotten, it wasn't as fresh in his memory as it had been before. He could feel his veins straining under his skin as the blood fought to beat within them.

Fuck. Fuck. *Fuck* . He didn't know how much more he could take; Ollivander either. It was almost too dark to tell in the shadowy cellar, but he was pretty sure the color was fading from his vision. Ollivander's shirt had been blue before, not grey. He couldn't tell. Couldn't remember. Even trying to think hurt and his arm began to shake as a bead of sweat broke out on his brow and slipped down his face.

"I feel this was a proper welcome to your new accommodations."

Draco had never been happier to hear the high, hissing voice of the Dark Lord more than he was in that moment. He broke the curse, doing his best to stay on his feet and not tumble face forward onto the ground next to Ollivander. His arm was twitching, itching like a thousand pincers were trying to claw their way out from the inside.

"Enjoy your stay, Ollivander. I will make sure that the Malfoys, Draco in particular, provide you with everything you *require* while you are here." Lord Voldemort turned away from the broken man on the floor like he was nothing more than an old rag.

Draco glanced back down and saw Ollivander looking up at him with something akin to smile. He was missing teeth and blood coated his lips. Draco's stomach turned over and he had to fight his reflex to gag as Ollivander's mouth widened.

"Hawthorn," he said in a garbled voice. "Hawthorn… backfires."

"Shut up," Draco mumbled and turned back around. The sight that awaited him was not that much better. His mother had moved forward to inspect the body of Ted Tonks and sharply turned towards her husband with a strange expression on her face.

"So, just a whore then?"

Draco gripped the handle of his wand, feeling the curse he wanted to send at Theo beginning to brew inside him.

"Shut your goddamn mouth and get in position, Theo."

"Blaise said he hasn't seen you either," he went on, unaware that Draco was three seconds away from throwing a real curse at him. "Said he didn't want to either. You two break up or something?"

"Blaise can go fuck himself."

Theo chuckled and Draco felt a strange coldness dripping down inside him. Theo and Blaise were hanging out? Without him?

Fuck them both then.

"Maybe you should try it," Theo offered. "Get fucked and you might actually be fun to be around again."

"Like you're a pleasure these days," Draco said, voice dripping in sarcasm.

Theo took up a defensive stance, begrudgingly. Since the night at McLaggen's Theo had been distracted. He was maniacal; wild and uncontrollable. Clearly, he was not handling being a murderer well.

It unsettled Draco so he had started training with Theo, pawning it off as practice for the both of them, but really just trying to get Theo to pay attention to the world around him and not whatever was going on inside his head.

They traded jabs and jinxes for a while, Theo brushing off the hits Draco got in and doing a little better by the end. Still, he seemed to just not care. Like it was a game to him. Like they were only playing at war instead of fighting in one.

But that was always Theo. Nothing ever seemed to stick to him. He was so… full of life. And Draco felt like he was choking on death.

"Fuck!" Draco gasped, feeling like he had just been punched in the gut.

Theo let out a boisterous laugh. Draco's eyes cut up to him, but… Theo was laughing so hard, tears leaking out of the sides of his eyes, that Draco found himself joining in once he got his air back.

He had never really considered Theo much of a friend, but maybe he was. Draco had known him all his life and while they hadn't always gotten along, they were always at least on the same side. He certainly spent more time with Theo than anyone else now. Unless Draco counted Granger and the orange furball.

Draco had a lot in common with Theo—both were sons of wealthy Purebloods, raised together, left school early, and now, both Death Eaters working side by side. They'd

probably be working together for the rest of their lives. Maybe it was time to admit that Theo wasn't as big of a dick as Draco always said he was.

Or maybe, Draco was just a bigger dick.

Theo walked over, clasping Draco on the shoulder and helping him stand up straight again.

Draco looked down at him, the happy expression plastered all over his face. Just like it had been the time Theo had said Granger had a prime pussy.

Draco threw his fist into Theo's stomach, causing him to bend over, gasping, just as Draco had just been.

Theo was coughing violently and Draco pulled him up the collar of his shirt, snarling into his face.

" *Never* give aid to your opponent."

"Fuck you!" Theo wheezed.

Draco released him, standing him back up. "You'll thank me when it saves your life someday. Now get back over there, let's go again."

Hermione focused all her energy on the handle of Draco's bedroom door. She could feel her magic brushing up against his, pressing into the magical wards. They were strong—very strong. Complex and designed to make anyone who didn't know the ornate composition absolutely unable to break through. But Hermione had watched Draco for months now and moved her hand in the same repetitious pattern that Draco twisted his wand in.

It felt like dancing.

On the edge of a knife.

She had no idea if he had cursed it or not. She liked to think he wouldn't do that to her, but… it was hard to imagine there wasn't anything Draco wouldn't do to keep her here.

Hermione wondered what he would do when he got back and found her missing. She shuddered at the thought and pulled the grey jumper he had left on the chaise around her tighter before returning back to the handle.

"Are you going to kill me, Draco Malfoy, hawthorn, ten inches, unicorn hair core?"

Draco's throat closed, stopping the breath in it. Would he? If Lord Voldemort commanded it, would he kill this scrap of a man in front of him? Could he?

"You are too valuable to throw away so quickly, Ollivander," the Dark Lord answered for him and Draco's chest barely moved as air flowed into it again. He pressed his lips together, wondering why his mouth was so dry and tasted slightly of sick. "But you are no use to me if you are not cooperative and Draco can be very… persuasive."

Draco heard his mother gasp from somewhere far behind him. Although she didn't have the mark, she had been called down here as a member of the Malfoy family. He wondered if the Dark Lord liked the idea of making his parents watch their son as he tortured someone. He didn't want his mother to see him do this. She knew, and that was bad enough already. She didn't need to see it.

But Draco could not disobey.

He raised his wand and Ollivander went back to his chant of "Hawthorn, ten inches, unicorn hair core," as he stared at the tip of the wand and waited for the curse to expel from it.

Draco snarled the word he was growing to hate and the red stream of light hit Ollivander in the middle of his chest. Draco heard a rib break. And then another as the old man writhed and wheezed in pain on the cold stone floor.

He shouldn't be doing this. It was sick. Cracking the old man's ribs with a torture curse for no other reason than he was *told* to. Any other time he had used it had been for her, *because* of her. This was… wrong. Draco did not get the slithering sensation of satisfaction he always had as he watched his quarry cry below him.

But he didn't have a choice!

If he stopped now, he would have to explain himself and most likely feel the Dark Lord's own curse in response. And if the Dark Lord broke into his mind again he might not be able to hide the images of Granger in his arms away.

As he pictured her, the curse faltered and failed. Draco was stunned. He had never dropped a *cruciatus* before. Not even in training. Ever since the first time the blood red light shot out of his wand, he had been able to hold it, control it, keep it.

Ollivander was gasping on the floor, doing his best to curl up but hardly able to move due to the aftershocks still rocking across his thin body. Draco wasn't sure how much the old man had left in him. The next curse might finish him off and the Dark Lord had said he wanted him alive.

Draco looked up to see Theo grinning at him. He found himself grinning back and accepted the flask, drinking deeply and relishing the familiar taste on his tongue.

It helped, a little, against the cold in his blood, but did nothing against the bitter frost that had settled around his heart. Every drink made him think of Granger.

What was he doing? Hunting down her best fucking friend so he could turn him over to be murdered? The idea made the liquor curdle inside him. Potter wasn't a problem. He was hiding, probably not doing too well if Granger's state was any indication of their level of competence on the run.

The Dark Lord had promised a return to the old ways and a society where Purebloods would be powerful and protected. How was one person's life standing in the way of that? And if it was, was the Dark Lord as powerful as he claimed to be?

Draco's boots crunched loudly over the broken limbs scattering the forest floor. Did it matter? He already had the mark, already had his life laid out of him. There was only one way to stop being a Death Eater and thoughts like this were of no use to him. Not when he was so close to actually finding Potter and handing him over, therefore securing Draco's place in the new world and making sure that he, and Granger, would be safe and…

He wanted to say happy, but all he could think was 'together'.

Maybe he didn't deserve to be happy. Not after what he'd done. Killing fractured a soul, and even though Draco had never committed the act himself, he had already sold his and there was no getting it back. But he didn't have to be a murderer to know what he was damned for.

At least it would be in one piece when he burned.

"Oh shit," Theo said from beside him and Draco froze.

His plan had worked. Worked almost too well. The wolves had found Potter sooner than he thought and now there were five bodies all running straight towards Draco and Theo at full speed.

Potter. Weasley. And the wolves close on their heels.

Draco's heart dropped to the frozen ground. This was it. This was his chance at… at… at everything he wanted. Wasn't it?

Wasn't Potter's death the key to finally getting him where he wanted, where he *deserved* to be?

Or was it just his one way ticket to hell?

Draco looked directly into the fucker's green eyes as they raced towards him. Granger's wand was in Potter's hand. Draco gripped his own. He had given it back to her before pushing her down in the mud and leaving her and she had given it up for Potter to have a chance to keep fighting. What did Draco have to give up to have a chance to be with her? She'd never forgive him for this. If there was any part of her that still loved him, handing over Potter would kill it.

Every way he turned was just more death.

Draco dropped into a defensive stance, planting himself on the frozen ground.

Weasley was throwing curses over his shoulder at the wolves as Potter raised his wand, aiming it at Draco.

He could feel Theo's arm lifting next to his, they had sparred enough times that Draco could predict Theo's movements easily. Out of the corner of his eye, Draco could see the look of triumph lighting up Theo's face. Potter fired a stunning spell at Draco at the same time Theo sent one back.

Granger's face flashed in his mind, cinnamon eyes burning.

"Oh hell," Draco growled and angled his shield charm so that Potter's stunner bounced off and hit Theo's unprotected side. The one Draco was *supposed* to be covering.

Theo dove face first into the dead leaves as Potter collided into Draco. They tumbled for a moment, struggling against each other. Potter was shorter than him, but he was putting up a hell of a fight.

Draco tried to wrestle Granger's wand from his hand. He didn't like the fact that someone else was touching something that was hers. *His.*

"Potter—" Draco grunted. "Fucking *stop.*"

Potter threw his weight against Draco, pushing him against a tree. "Where's Hermione?!"

Draco snarled up and shoved him back. "She's safe!"

Potter glared at him, his glasses sliding down his nose. "If you fucking hurt her, Malfoy—"

Draco pushed against Potter again, dislodging himself and they quickly scrambled to their feet, wands aimed at each other's heaving chests.

Weasley's annoying fucking voice shouted in the distance and Draco heard one of his wolves yelp in pain. He swore on Salazar's watery grave that if he ever got his hands back on that mangy motherfucker—

Theo groaned loudly, blowing a few dead leaves away from his face.

Draco glanced down at him, sprawled on the ground then back up at Potter. This was the man she had followed. The friend she wanted to get back to. Maybe Draco *should* give him over to the Dark Lord…

"Get out of here."

Potter looked furious. " *What?"*

Theo started to move at his feet. The small bit of time Draco's treachery had bought him was coming to a close. It was now or never.

"Get the fuck out of here."

Potter didn't move or lower his wand.

Draco ground his teeth together. "You want to die? No? Then FUCK OFF!"

Potter took a step back, keeping Granger's wand trained on him. Draco growled; they didn't have time for this shit.

He took three breaths.

One.

Draco had done *so much* because he loved her and for what? Granger didn't even want him, didn't even fucking…

"Who said I stopped?"

Two.

She better not have been lying about still being in love with him.

Three.

Draco lowered his wand and Potter's mouth dropped open.

"Go. GO!"

That asshole had always beaten him to the snitch, so Draco shouldn't have been so surprised when Potter threw his fist into Draco's cheek, snapping his head to the side. He caught himself on a tree, the cold bark digging into his palms as he pushed himself back up.

Potter was carefully moving back from him and towards Weasley who was tangling with Donovan. Draco was filled with a cold fury at the sight of that ginger bastard and for a moment, considered launching himself back in the fray just so he could pay that piece of shit back for last year.

Draco owed him pain.

Lots and *lots* of pain.

That red bastard almost lost him Granger. Then he had run off with her and left Draco to—

Theo moaned and moved again. Draco placed his boot on the middle of Theo's back, holding him down.

Potter was moving away from him quickly now, but turned back and said, "This isn't over, Malfoy! We're not giving up on her!"

fucking world. Well, she wouldn't be going anywhere if there wasn't a Chosen One to get back to.

Draco had been hunting Potter for months now and was closer than ever. She had forgiven him for so much else, *would* she be able to forgive him for this? Would he deserve it?

Draco took a deep breath of the cold air to try and clear his head. He could decide what to do with Potter *after* he caught him.

Draco pulled the collar of his coat up around him and then quickly stuck his hands back in his pockets. This winter was hanging on with every claw it had in the frozen earth. He was tired of being cold, so fucking sick of feeling numb with only the burn of frozen air in his lungs to remind him that he was in fact, still alive.

Unfortunately.

Not that being dead would be much of an improvement on his situation. But at least his early demise would make Granger smile.

Fucking bitch.

He was tramping through the chilly woods with grey skies weighing heavily above him. The snow had mostly melted, leaving only patches of icy sludge gathered at the base of skeleton-like trees. Draco picked his way carefully, stepping over fallen branches and frosted roots that jutted up out of the half decayed leaves like broken bones of some long dead beast.

Theo nudged his arm and Draco glanced over to see him holding out a flask with the Nott family crest emblazoned on it. They had been twelve years old when the two of them stole this flask out of Theo's Father's coat and tried fire whisky for the first time. Hiccuping and laughing as they forced the last of the harsh liquid down, they fell to the floor, laughing over something Draco couldn't even remember now.

Theo was always down for a good time, always there when Draco needed to let loose. They might have spent the majority of their lives competing against each other, but Theo always did find a way to make it entertaining.

"Draco!" Kenna bounded over to him and threw her arms around his neck. His body stiffened, unaccustomed to the affection Kenna was so free with. She was like a dog that was friendly with everyone it met. He was glad that she was doing better, but this felt… odd.

Draco had hounds his whole life, but now, he preferred cats.

He noticed Donovan glowering at him and pulled Kenna's arms from around him, placing them at her sides.

"I missed you! Where have you been?"

"He's too important for us now," Fergus said in his thick accent and glanced as Theo walked in behind Draco. "He's got his own Death Eaters now."

"I work with Draco, not for Draco," Theo snapped and Fergus grinned nastily at him.

Draco ignored them and approached Donovan who was shrugging on his heavy fur coat. "Ready?"

Donovan sucked his teeth loudly. "Where *have* you been, Malfoy? I don't like taking orders from Nott."

"I'm here now," Draco growled, annoyed at the fact that his wolves were questioning him. When did everyone get so goddamn needy? "Do you want to hunt or are you going to hug me too?"

Donovan bared his teeth and Draco waited, impatiently, for him to get over whatever little qualms he had.

"Fergus! Kenna! Stop fucking around, we have work to do!" Donovan barked.

Draco smirked down at the large wolf who had wisely decided to fall in line, moving to stand between Theo and Kenna who were whispering an end to whatever conversation they had just been having.

Draco addressed the small group before him.

"Fergus, Kenna—you're on point. Round them up and push them towards us," Draco said, his voice stern and commanding. "Donovan, left flank, Theo, right. Shape them up and close them in. I want them in the center. And I want them *alive."*

The wolves nodded in understanding and Theo gave him a cheeky salute.

"Let's go."

It could be over. Today. He could end the war *tonight.* Did… did he want to do it like this though? What would Granger say? Draco clenched his jaw. Probably nothing worse than what she'd already said to him. So what did it matter now?

She certainly wasn't going to tell him she loved him. Couldn't even give him that little bit. In fact, she thought she could just *leave* him, get back to Saint Potter and save the

Draco snarled, gripping his wand tightly as Potter turned and ran.

"Neither am I," Draco said under his breath.

Granger was *his* girl. His. No one was taking her from him. Not even the fucking Chosen One.

Draco felt Theo shifting under him, but kept him in place until he saw Potter and Weaselbee overpower Donovan, and take off into the woods again. Draco heard the crack of apparition and lifted his boot from Theo's back as he began to come to his senses on the cold ground.

If Potter got himself caught after this, there was nothing Draco could do about it. He couldn't save everyone, but he didn't have to kill them either.

Draco carefully locked his thoughts away behind the cracked white walls in his mind and pulled them close, focusing on the struggle with Potter and the sting of the hit.

Potter had gotten away from more experienced Death Eaters before, but… Draco knew what happened to them.

He had been the one who carried out the orders, after all.

Draco gripped his wand tight in his hand. Granger better spread her fucking cunt after this. Let him feel her warmth, her heat… at least one more time before the Dark Lord murdered him in cold blood.

The door opened suddenly and Hermione sat up as light streamed in. A dark shadow appeared in the doorway, slouching and holding onto the handle for balance. Thunder rolled outside, deep and low, like the growl of a great scaly beast.

Her face fell. Draco was back. And he was unbelievably drunk. *Of course* he was.

She has sat here, worried sick over what was going on, while Draco had gone on a bender. Lovely.

Draco almost fell as he took a few steps into the bedroom, leaving the stability of the door handle behind him. He dropped his coat to the floor, not bothering to pick it up or even charm it back into the wardrobe. As he got closer she could see his mussed hair and smell the overwhelming scent of alcohol pervading from him.

She glared at him as he stumbled over to the edge of the bed. The sconces on the wall lit as they reacted to his presence and Hermione blinked her eyes trying to adjust to the light. His feet tripped him up and his fingers fumbled on the ties for his dragon-hide vest. It was shining like it was wet but he pulled it from him before she could get a better look at it and threw it to the ground. He swayed as he undressed, tossing the black shirt down and let his trousers fall down his long legs.

Draco made it to the bed and sank down on the side of it. Up close she could see the water running off the longer strands of his hair, falling down onto the white t-shirt he always wore under his clothes.

Hermione bent her legs in front of her as Draco struggled to kick off his boots. What was he doing? Either he was too drunk to remember they didn't sleep together anymore or too drunk to care. Hermione thought about reminding him by shoving him off the bed and onto the floor.

Draco growled as he pulled at his second boot, swearing when it finally slipped off and he chucked it across the room.

"Draco," Hermione said in a firm voice and he threw himself back on the bed next to her. "Draco, get out of the bed."

He ignored her and threw his arm over his eyes.

Hermione was fuming. He showed up here, after *days* , without so much as a 'hey'! Did he think she would take pity on him in his drunken state and let him stay here? The answer was a resounding *no*.

"Get out!" Hermione tried to shove him, but he was much heavier than she expected and she barely moved his shoulder with her effort.

Draco mumbled something that sounded like, "My bed."

She pursed her lips and narrowed her eyes at him; not that it mattered, he couldn't see her anyway. Hermione tried to think of what to do. He was incredibly drunk. It reminded her of the night she had found his mark. She glanced over at him; the dark mark was currently pressed against his eyes as he shielded them from the dim light in the room.

"It is your bed, but you gave it to me, remember? You don't sleep here anymore." She had to do something because soon he was going to fall asleep and she didn't think she had much of a chance of rousing him once he was unconscious. And his damp hair was getting the pillow she had taken to cuddling with all wet.

"My bed…" He stretched out his arm. His face was… ashen. He was a sick shade of pale grey, two patches of flushed pink under his cheekbones were the only hint of color

cold tent, running from Snatchers and fighting Death Eaters only to slowly watch her friends fall one by one…

At least here she would have Draco.

Until he was warped and cold like his mother saw him becoming. She remembered the hard look on Naricssa's face and the beauty underneath it. Had a lifetime of watching her husband serve Lord Voldemort taken the kindness from her as well? She certainly hadn't shown any to Draco that night. What had she seen, all these years, watching her family vow their lives to a Dark Lord that made her judge her own son so harshly?

Hermione thought about Draco's notes in " *The Sacred Twenty-Eight"* . It was one thing reading about it, it was another to have to see it. And have to see someone you *love* do those things. Maybe there *was* an upside to being locked in Draco's room. She was protected here. She just hoped that wherever her friends were, they were protected as well.

Draco too.

She watched the sun rise over the frosted grounds and hoped to see him coming back. When he didn't, Hermione took to summoning random items from ever increasing distances across the room. She *had* to keep practicing. Draco had reconfigured the locking charms and protective wards on the door, but it didn't mean that she was giving up. She just had to stay sharp and watch when Draco locked and unlocked the door, just like she had before. But when she got through the door this time…

Well, she'd worry about that later. Not that her overactive brain listened to her. Her stomach turned over, sick with worry about where Draco was and what she was doing. Her fingers moved over the healed spot on her thigh, stroking it softly like she used to, only this time, there was no heat from the bruise under her fingers. She missed it. She missed *him*.

So Hermione filled the hours as best she could, alternating between melancholy and anxiety with short bursts of fury when her meals magically arrived three times a day, letting her know that wherever he was, Draco at least *was* still alive.

Because each plate was piled high with nothing but foul smelling brussel sprouts.

The combination of the snarky boy she knew from school and the cruel Death Eater she lived with now made her head hurt.

She arrived at the Malfoy chapter, already knowing what she would find there. The Death Eaters in his family went three generations deep. Abraxas Malfoy, Lucius Malfoy, and finally—Hermione turned to the last page of their chapter and read Draco's name.

He had only written one thing next to his name, but the crime he had accused himself of sent a shiver down her spine.

" *Blood Traitor."*

Her heart stopped beating. Out of everything he could have written by his name, Draco had chosen *this* as his most heinous crime. Tears burned hotly in her eyes.

"*Because everything that I've done is all* ***your*** *fault."*

Where was he now? What was he doing in *her* name? Tracking down Harry the same way he had found her? Her chest clenched, tightening around the broken shards of her heart at the thought of Draco facing down Harry somewhere, spells flying as the two men fought. She hated that in these moments, she worried more about Draco's safety than Harry's.

Did that make her a traitor too? Hermione sat the book down and did not pick it back up.

The whole first day, Hermione had stared at the door, waiting for Death Eaters to burst through. Narcissa would have had time to think it over, she might have been able to place Hermione's face. But Draco's wards held and there were no sounds from his study either.

It was empty. Silent.

And she was alone.

She practiced her wandless magic, using it as a way to distract herself from the anxiety that wouldn't let her mind rest, constantly conjuring images of Draco lying in a pool of his own blood and at night, Draco lying in someone else's arms. Is that why he hadn't come back? Is that where he went when he wasn't with her?

It wasn't as if he was planning on marrying her anyways. She'd never be anything more than his good little slut who begged to please him. And she had almost been just that the other night. Would she have gone through with it if his mother hadn't come in? Hermione knew the answer before she even thought of the question.

She laid on his side of the bed, breathing in the faint smell of new parchment and cool mint that just barely lingered on his pillow. Would it be so bad? If Draco *was* right and Voldemort *did* win, what sort of life would she have out there? Back to lonely nights in a

in his face. Draco opened his eyes and she saw the glazed, bloodshot gaze land on her. "My girl."

Draco grabbed her arm roughly and pulled her towards him in a swift movement.

"Draco!" Hermione shouted, but he was stronger than her and before she knew it, he had pushed her back against the mattress and was hovering over her. His gaze was unfocused but didn't leave her face even as his head swayed a little.

A drop of water fell from his hair, landing on her face and trailing down her cheek to her neck.

Hermione tried to push him away from her, but he merely grabbed her other hand, pinned it against her curls beside her head like the first and breathed out a deep sigh. It smelled sickly sweet from the whisky and she turned her head, wrinkling her nose in disgust.

"My girl…" he slurred. "In my bed."

"Get off of me," she tried to sound firm, but really didn't know if he was listening to her at all.

Draco ran his nose along hers softly. She didn't want him to do that. Because when he did that she felt a fluttering deep in her and she had already instinctively fallen still underneath him. The last thing she needed was to feel her blood rush through her when she was in such a compromising position.

"My sweet girl…" his voice was deep and his words heavy with liquor. "So sweet. So good."

Hermione's body contracted and she tried to breathe, but when she did all she could smell was Draco and the fire whisky hanging on him like a vapor.

"And… I'm bad."

She *hated* decoding his drunken rants. He never made any sense anyway and she was always left feeling disappointed. In him and herself. But she couldn't exactly get up and leave right now. She wasn't exactly sure she wanted to. The feel of his body on top of hers was enough to turn her struggles into wiggles.

Draco leaned down over her and Hermione gasped, lips parting. Draco opened his mouth too and for a moment she thought he was going to kiss her, but instead he whispered, "I'm *damned."*

Hermione looked up at him and felt the blood drain from her face. His eyes were large and looked like two silvery moons staring down at her, cold and alone. The last time he got this drunk it was because he thought he was going to kill Dumbledore. He had been

doing better recently, ever since she asked him to. Had something happened tonight that pushed him to drink this much?

"Draco…" Hermione said softly, warily. "What happened?"

He pressed his head against hers and closed his eyes, beginning to breathe quickly. His grip on her wrists tightened a little, but not to the point where it hurt. It was more so like he was holding onto her than holding her down.

"I didn't want to," he murmured, sliding his head down into her neck. "I couldn't—Made me. I didn't…"

Draco fell onto her. His weight landed fully on her and Hermione felt her breath being forced out of her open mouth. Draco shifted slightly, moving some of his body to the side and let go of her wrists, but only to wrap his arms around her, pulling on her and keeping her with him.

She could have probably pushed him away from her, gaining a few more inches of separation, but somehow found herself completely incapable of moving at the moment.

"What…" she breathed out. "What did you do?"

He closed his eyes and breathed in and out a few times. Maybe he wasn't going to answer her and in a way, she was almost glad. Did she really want to know? No. Did she have to though? Yes.

"I… had to," his words slipped over each other. "Granger, I didn't want to, but he…" Draco lifted his head and looked deep into her eyes. His gaze was wild and unfocused. Desperate. Pleading. "I *had* to."

Panic rang alarm bells inside her. "Had to what? Had to what, Draco?"

Draco didn't open his eyes.

"Draco, wake up." Hermione grabbed his face.

His eyes shot open when she touched him. Lightning struck deep in his stormy eyes and his hands dove into her hair, holding her head and pushing it back and up to make her face him. He was raw and rough. Weeks of longing and desire were evident as he breathed in deeply through his nose while his mouth hung open, white teeth bared as it hovered above her own.

Hermione was stunned by his quick reaction and found her hands not pushing him away, but holding onto his thick arms. She stopped herself before when she felt her leg starting to slide up against his thigh. Hermione turned her face away from his, almost choking on the smell of the alcohol he had consumed this evening, but Draco wasn't letting her go.

Only silence. The room darkened and the candles burned down into wax puddles. Hermione had curled up on her side, but lay awake, eyes open and mind churning. She watched the dark night pass through the window.

She heard some movement out there and sat up, expecting the door to open at any moment and Draco to spill in, shouting at her for… anything. Everything. She wouldn't even mind as long as he came back and she could see that he was okay.

But Draco did not wrench the door open and stagger to bed tonight.

Draco didn't come back in at all.

Draco didn't come home for three days. Hermione sat on the bed, biting her lip and picking at her nails while she stared at the door, hoping to hear the slow click of it being unlocked. She barely slept and took to pacing back and forth across the room. Crookshanks ran alongside her and flicked his tail against her legs as she stomped between the dresser and a tapestry of a large ship being dragged under by spiked tentacles coming up from underneath.

She passed some of the hours by reading " *The Sacred Twenty-Eight"* . It was the only book Draco had never let her pull off his shelves and now, Hermione had all the time in the world to read it. But she didn't really want to once she cracked it open.

Draco had filled in the margins and breaks of pages with his own additions to the book, namely the crimes of Death Eaters. Some so atrocious that Hermione felt her stomach turn just reading them.

The lists went on and on, his own snide annotations added into them as well. Crude comments about Daphne in the Greengrass' chapter, including a ranking system that had two other scripts also penned in. She could only assume that Draco had started making these notes long ago and let Blaise and Theodore Nott add in their thoughts on certain girls as well. Further proof that Draco had been working in here before leaving school was his commentary on Marcus Flint's Quidditch skills before he elaborated into the horrific acts Draco's previous Captain had committed.

Under the Lestranges, Draco had almost run out of room listing all of the things they had done, but he had still managed to scrawl " *Crazy Bitch"* next to Bellatrix.

Hermione could hear some shuffling and then a drawer opening and closing. She was a little surprised that he hadn't stormed in to scold her some more, but it made sense that Draco might want some time to himself.

He had just stood there and let his mother berate him for an act he had never done. He might have gotten rough with her, but Draco didn't *make* her do anything. She looked down at her chains. Well, at least not like that. He was holding her here, but he actually believed that doing that was keeping her safe and after tonight she was starting to believe him a little.

She wondered, if their roles were reversed, would she force him to stay as well? Hermione tried to imagine allowing Draco to walk away from her and join the Death Eaters if she had a way to take him from that life.

She sat on the bed and tried to make sense of those feelings for a while. A long while. She wasn't sure how long, but it must have been over an hour if not more. She lifted her head from the top of her knees to look back at the door that Draco still had not come through.

There was a crash of glass and a loud, raw roar. Hermione jumped, chains clattering loudly and then she heard a deep thud. Then another. And another. And another.

Then, silence again.

Hermione had pushed herself against the headboard as far as she could go. The glass must have been a bottle of fire whisky and the thuds must have been his fist. Just like she had seen him do in the Room of Requirement last year. Her heart was pounding in her chest, but also beating for the man, alone, on the other side of the door.

Draco hadn't talked much about his family, but the few things he had said about his mother had been kind and his tone always respectful. It was obvious that he cared deeply for her and for her to say those things to him…

Why had he stood there like that? Why hadn't he told his mother—

Hermione's mouth opened.

Draco had done it to protect her. If Narcissa thought she was just a Mudblood that Draco had dragged up here, Hermione's identity would be safe. His mother had seen her, but there had been no recognition in her eyes, at least, not in that moment. Draco must have realized that too and decided to let his mother think him a monster to keep her from finding out who Hermione really was.

"Draco?" she called out. She wasn't sure if he could hear her or not. When he didn't answer she tried a little louder. "Draco?"

Using his body weight to hold her down, Draco pressed his face into hers, wet hair smearing across her face and teeth grazing her cheek and neck. She moaned in protest, and he replaced them with his tongue, dragging it up her jaw and around her ear, breathing heavily into it as he tried to push her face back towards him.

"Draco," Hermione groaned. "Draco, stop—"

"I'm sorry," he said with a strained voice. "Please, *please* forgive me."

She stopped fighting against him. Draco's body shook on top of hers and he balled her hair into his fists tightly.

"Please," he pressed his head against her cheek and sucked in a large, shaky breath. "I'm so sorry… I didn't want to. I—"

There was a faint ringing in her ears. There were many things Draco did, some more willingly than others, but there was only one thing he had ever said he didn't want to do.

Hermione looked up at him. Her mouth might have been open, she wasn't sure. She wasn't sure of anything but the awful agonizing storm brewing in Draco's bloodshot eyes. She knew what had happened without him even saying it.

Her friends flew through her mind, Order members, all of Ron's family—people she cared about and loved. Had… had Draco killed one of them tonight? Her heart hammered in her chest as the roulette wheel of faces slowly landed on... *Harry.*

"I didn't want to. I didn't want to do it," he repeated, as if he wasn't able to say anything but the few phrases he recanted over and over, It vaguely reminded Hermione of a prayer.

"Who?" Her voice sounded small, even to herself.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Hermione," Draco choked on her name. He couldn't hold her gaze anymore. He tried focusing on parts of her face, but then dropped his eyes away from her. She saw him fading, losing himself in his own mind. "I never wanted any of this."

"Draco," she said his name slowly, taking to bring him back into this moment with her. Her hands were shaking as she turned his face back to hers.

She needed to hear it. She needed to hear directly from him that Harry was… She *needed* to hear the words and she needed to hear them from him.

"Who did you kill?"

Draco looked up at her, storm grey eyes filled with a thick line of water, as if they had been raining inside him all along.

She watched him take a breath that took his whole frame, causing a tear to fall, splashing down into the dip of her throat.

"Theo. I murdered Theo."

The echo of the slap rang into deep silence and Hermione's hands flew up to cover her mouth and the faint sound of her gasp.

She waited with baited breath, staring at the closed doors, but no noise or movement came through.

"I had such high hopes for you," Narcissa eventually went on, her tone was one of disgust. "I knew when you took the mark things would change, but… I *never* thought *my* son would end up like… like the rest of them."

Draco didn't answer for quite some time and when he did, Hermione could barely hear him. "I'm sorry."

"You're sorry…" Narcissa said dismissively. "Yes, I've heard that many times from your Father as well."

"I'm not him." Draco's voice was a little stronger, but more bitter.

"I don't know who you are anymore," Narcissa said icily. "But you are *not* my son."

Something burning and cold passed through Hermione and she could only imagine what Draco must be thinking and feeling right now. She wanted to tell Narcissa that he hadn't touched her; or at least, hadn't hurt her. Draco was controlling and possessive, yes, but… he hadn't forced himself on her.

"Take this," Narcissa hissed. "Pay the girl for her troubles and send her away. Tonight. I won't have you doing this in my home."

Hermione scuttled back as the door opened and Draco walked back in, brows heavy over his eyes and a handprint across his face. She didn't want him to know she had been listening, but he wasn't looking at her anyway.

Hermione couldn't tear her eyes from him. His steps were heavy, shoulders hunched, and in his fist was the ruby brooch she had torn off in the greenhouse. Oh God… She was the reason Narcissa had come here tonight.

It was her fault Narcissa had said those awful things to him. It felt like her heart was falling out of her chest.

She didn't need to be told to go back. Hermione was already walking through his bedroom when she heard the door lock behind her.

Turning and expecting to see Draco looming there, she was greeted with only empty space. He hadn't followed her in.

Hermione waited. Finally resting on the foot of his bed when her legs felt stiff from standing in one place for so long.

She sat there, glancing up at the outline of the door until she realized it must have been almost an hour and he still hadn't come back in.

"Draco, may I speak with you?" Narcissa's tone was clipped and her glacial blue eyes glanced over to Hermione just long enough for Hermione to feel the ice from her glare before they moved back to Draco. "In private?"

It might have been a question, but everything about it told Hermione that Draco didn't have much of a choice in the matter.

He did not look back down at her before he swiftly moved towards the door, his wand still in his hand and followed his Mother into the hall. Hermione watched as the door closed behind them, leaving her alone with a racing heart pumping ice-cold blood through her numb limbs.

She held her breath for two seconds and gathered up her chain, hauling it with her as she took a few nervous steps forward. Hermione strained her ears trying to hear what they were saying through the door.

"I don't even know what to say to you." Narcissa spoke in the same cold, short tone of voice as she had addressed him with a moment ago.

"It's not what it looks like," Draco started.

Narcissa scoffed. "Not what it looks like?! Draco you have some girl in chains! Do not try to lie to me."

"Let me explain—"

"I can't even *look* at you!"

Hermione's heart dropped into her stomach. She could barely hear them at first, but Narcissa's voice was quickly rising, emotion pouring into it. She could only imagine what must be going through Narcissa's head right now, walking into… *that*.

But it was terrifying that now someone knew she was here. What would his Mother do? Would she tell someone Hermione was here? Would they take her in front of Voldemort? Would they torture her for information? She hated being trapped here by Draco, but it had to be better than to be handed over to other Death Eaters.

"You don't understand!" Draco implored.

"I did not raise you like this," Narcissa snapped. "I did not raise you to hold someone against their will and—and *rape* them!"

Hermione froze. Oh God she thought… Hermione's heartbeat thundered in her ears and she could barely hear Draco over the sound of it.

"It's not…" his voice was pleading. "Mum, I… I *love* her."

"I don't want to hear any of your sick excuses, Draco! I saw what you were doing with her—"

"Mother, please!"

Chapter Thirteen

Hermione held Draco all night. His head rested on her chest; his arms wrapped around her, holding tight, as if he was afraid that he would slip away if he let go. She had tried to get more information out of him, but the fire whisky caught up with him quickly and all Draco had been able to manage was "Your friend is safe and mine is…" before he passed out, body heavy on hers, but Hermione didn't even think to move him.

Instead she kept him with her, whispering softly to him that it would be alright when, in her heart, she had no idea what would happen when he woke. But… maybe *some* lies were worth the sin.

Lightly brushing his damp hair, Hermione slowly felt it dry and soften through the night while Draco murmured in his sleep. Most of the time it was incoherent, but sometimes she could make out certain words.

'*Sorry*' and '*Theo*' were most common, but sometimes he also muttered '*Can't*' or '*Burn*' and every now and then she would hear something that sounded strangely like her name, like '*Hermione*'.

He cried, even in his sleep. Hermione didn't know that was possible, but somehow Draco was doing it. She felt the dampness of his tears soaking through the thin white lace

of her nightgown and onto her skin. She merely held him closer, wishing she could do more for the man who had done so much for her.

Draco shook, body wracked with guilt or sorrow or… some emotion she couldn't even fathom. They were at war, yes, and Hermione had accepted the thought that one day she might have to end someone's life to defend her own or someone she cared about.

But it had always been an enemy, never a friend.

Draco had never particularly liked Theo, but… Hermione could remember them shoving each other playfully in the halls during third year, messing around in classes when they sat next to each other, and watching as Theo rushed the pitch when Slytherin would win. Draco normally kept Crabbe and Goyle beside him like a pair of burly bodyguards, but it was obvious that he had some sort of close relationship with Theo and Blaise over the years as well.

And if Hermione had noticed it from afar, she could only imagine what it was really like up close. Draco did have a tendency to push away the people he cared about.

" *Theo's not my friend. He's a prat."*

Had he said that because he meant it or because he didn't want to admit an attachment to someone?

Hermione bent her head down to look at Draco. The thin skin around his eyes was bruised a deep red, his lips were chapped and slightly open as he pulled in quiet breaths. A bruise was growing darker on his cheek and she traced her fingers over it as lightly as she could, wondering who had hurt him like this and feeling a deep anger boil in her.

She could feel his arms shaking every now and then as some dark thought passed through his unconscious mind. Threading her fingers deeper into his white blond hair, she brushed them over the longer locs on top to the short hairs on the back of his neck that felt almost downy soft before gently lifting up her hand and starting again, repeating the motion, hoping it would calm whatever storm was brewing in him.

Hermione couldn't help but wonder what was going on in his head.

Another war, one he was fighting alone and against himself.

One he was… losing. Whatever battle Draco was waging within himself, he wasn't winning.

Hermione thought about the way his mother spoke to him and how Draco just stood there and took it. How his ring had been missing from his finger for weeks now and how he flexed his hand in agitation without it. How he had let Blaise walk out of this very room without a second glance, because his eyes had been locked on her.

In the heat of the moment neither of them had heard the footsteps coming from down the hall or the door slightly opening farther as someone walked in.

"Draco, I wanted to give you—"

Draco's fingers tightened into her cheeks painfully as his head snapped to the side so quickly that Hermione was reminded of a snake striking out at its prey.

His mother was standing in the doorway of the study, staring at them both with wide blue eyes. Hermione tried to turn, but Draco still held her face in his strong hand. She could barely see out of the corner of her eye, but Narcissa Malfoy's expression was clearly cold on her beautiful face.

She was impressive; silver blonde hair pulled back from her face but still fell around her shoulders like fine silk. Her gown was a deep royal blue and fit her slender frame like it was *made* to. Even in her shocked state, everything about her exuded wealth, class, and elegance. It was easy to see where Draco got his natural grace from.

Narcissa stared at the pair of them and terror gripped Hermione's chest just as tight as Draco's hold on her face.

They had been found. *She* had been found.

Draco always said it was dangerous for her out here, only letting her into his study when *he* approved it. Maybe he was telling the truth and it wasn't some sort of game of control? Maybe… maybe he *had* been keeping her safe all this time because faced with the prospect of being taken from him filled her with dread.

Hermione shook so violently the grey jumper slipped from her shoulder, exposing the sheer, white dress underneath.

"What is *this?"* Narcissa hissed.

Draco's large hand squeezed her face painfully and Hermione let out a small whimper before he quickly dropped it, making her messy curls fall over her face as he took a step back from her, folding his hands in front of himself in an effort to cover the evidence of what had just been about to happen.

Hermione's heart was racing as she brought up a hand to rub her cheeks; she could feel the heat of embarrassment in them and was glad for the curtain of her hair hiding most of her away from Narcissa's cold gaze. She shrugged the jumper back onto her shoulder and the chain clattered as she moved.

"Mother—" Draco started and Hermione looked up to see his chest rising and falling rapidly, muscles tensed and wand drawn.

Hermione's lids fluttered. While Draco was talking she had felt him growing hard against her, his cock pressing into her lower stomach as he trailed his thumb back down the front of her neck.

"I can feel you trembling, Sweetheart I know you want it, I know you want it just as much as I do. Let me fuck you. Let me fuck you and I promise," his voice was hoarse, "I'll make you love me again."

Hermione could barely breathe with the pressure that had built up inside her, trying to find some sort of escape. No, a *release.* "Who said I stopped?"

Draco paused, his face dangerously neutral. She could have mistaken him for a marble statue if not for the unintentional movement below his belt.

His hand dropped from her neck. "You still love me?"

Hermione's heart *hurt* watching the subtle change in his expression . The hard exterior was falling away, deep in the darkness of his eyes, she could see him, her Draco. Trapped in those rings of silver, just as locked in as she was. She reached her hand up and the chain moved with her.

His chain. *Their* chain.

She'd never be free. She could run to the other side of the world and Draco would still be with her, in her head and in her heart. He'd never let her go and the weak part of her soul didn't want him to. Or maybe, that was the stronger part of her. She didn't know anymore all she knew was there wasn't anything Draco could do that would stop her from loving him.

And that truth scared her more than anything else.

"Say it." Draco grabbed her face in one hand, squeezing her cheeks hard and turning it up to him. "Say it, Hermione."

Her breath hitched in her throat as she was suddenly looking directly at his chiseled face where a couple locks of his white blond hair had fallen in front of his mercury eyes.

"Draco, please," Hermione whimpered, "You have to let me go."

"No," he growled. "You have to stay. With me. You have to be with me." Hermione closed her eyes, tears leaking down onto his hand. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry I'm like this, but I *can't* stop. I don't have a choice, so you don't get one either."

She opened her eyes, looking up at him. So many times she had wished he wouldn't hide his feelings away from her, but now, faced with the raw emotion on his face, Hermione understood why he did.

"You're *mine."*

He was only fighting in this war because of her; he had said it himself, that everything he had done was her fault. Draco had only gone up on the tower that night to try and fix his mistakes so he could be with her. He had only left with Bellatrix and the Death Eaters to keep her safe. He had hurt people, sold people, all to get to her.

He had said anything, he had said everything, and finally, Hermione understood what that meant.

Draco had killed—for her.

Theodore Nott's death was as much a stain on her soul as it was on his.

Hermione hugged him tighter, his white t-shirt sliding up a little as she pulled him close. She could just make out a few of the scarred lines on his lower stomach, thick and thin, smooth and crooked, wrapping around him like… like chains.

She carefully pulled on the hem of his shirt, lifting it to get a better look at them. Angry, crossing marks that marred the marble skin under them. Some were so deep that the scar tissue was indented inwards, others so fine they could have been made with a surgical blade.

He had said her friend was safe and she knew he was talking about Harry; the same person who had done *this* to him. Hermione had spent a good part of the past few weeks worrying about what would happen when Draco eventually found Harry. She had sat here and stared at the tapestry of the golden stag and bitten her lip, unable to see an outcome where both men survived.

She wasn't sure how Draco had managed it; she had no idea what had actually happened between them or how it led or caused Theo's death, but Hermione felt another wave of guilt wash over her. Draco had somehow traded Harry's life for Theo's. All because she asked him to.

Hermione felt the stain inside her darken.

Is this how Draco felt all the time? All the terrible things he had done—did he feel them shadowing his soul? Did he feel this terrible remorse every day and then get up to do it again? Goodness, Hermione barely felt like she could breath with the weight of this sitting on her heart.

She pulled his shirt back down and wrapped her arm around his middle again as he sucked in a sharp breath. Draco's heart had to be strong, a powerhouse, in order to carry this weight and still beat. Her own gave a hard thump at the thought that he had kept it going, all this time, just for her.

She recalled a different night, one where she thought she had lost him, when she had been trying to say goodbye, to leave him. She had let her courage fail her and didn't say

the words that she knew were in her heart. But so many things had happened since the night Draco was in the hospital wing. So many, and still, they were both right here.

She had said it before, she could say them again.

Hermione bent her face down, placing a light kiss into his now dry hair and whispered, "I… I love you, Draco."

Draco released a sigh, still sleeping, and pressed his face deeper into her chest. She closed her eyes, pushing the tears that had formed in the corners out, and held him.

And for the first time, Hermione understood a small part of the reason Draco kept her here. She couldn't let him go either.

When Draco woke up, the first thing he did was get sick off the side of the bed. Hanging there, coughing and gagging on sour bile, he felt his left arm shudder, the nerves lighting up again after the abuse they endured last night.

Still, it was nothing compared to what he did to Theo.

Theo…

Draco threw up again.

Granger's hand landed on his back, rubbing softly and he flinched at the feeling of warmth. He didn't want to be warm. He didn't want to be comforted.

He didn't deserve it.

"Draco," her voice was so soft, "are you okay? Do you need some water?"

He spat, trying to clear his mouth of the bitter taste of last night's attempt to drown out the screams in his head, and nodded stiffly.

Her hand left his back and the small amount of warmth from it evaporated. Draco pushed himself up and laid back against the pillows. His head was killing him, pounding with every fucking beat of his heart. He tried to lay still, hoping it would slow down and give him an ounce of relief.

Maybe stop entirely.

He could hear Granger running the water in the bathroom.

Not yet.

Not until… Shit. He didn't even know anymore.

He always had been able to make something bad good enough that she ended up whining for it, giving into her darkest desires and letting Draco make them all come true. She could smell the crisp mint of him mixing with the creamy parchment to create the perfect scent of intoxication and instead of trying to wriggle away from him, Hermione found herself pushing her hips back into his.

Draco looked like he was in pain. Lightning flashed in his grey eyes and she heard a deep, primal growl coming from the back of his throat. The heat growing deep within her had nothing to do with the fire roaring beside them.

"Don't tease me, Granger. I've imagined you bent over this desk too many times to be taunted with it." His thumb pressed into the softness of her neck and she watched as his pupils grew. Her pulse, her own blood, had betrayed her. He knew what he was doing to her, he had always known who and what she was.

Draco shivered, as if he was barely in control of himself, the flames flickering in his dark eyes, making the grey look like the shadows of smoke. "Thinking about how it would feel sliding into that tight little pussy you have again while I pin you down to use you for nothing but my own selfish pleasure."

Hermione gazed up at him, unable to do anything else.

"Over," Draco breathed out. "And over."

Hermione's legs shook under her, but not from fear. And it was her Gryffindor courage that mustered up the small voice she breathed out. "How?"

The silver of Draco's eyes shone despite shrinking to a thin ring. She didn't let her eyes leave his, but she could see him swallow hard, waiting until the lump in his throat settled back down to speak.

He took his hand from her wrist and slid it into the open front of the grey jumper and down the white silk covering the curve of her waist. "Dressed you in black. For punishment. Then I beat your cute little ass the brightest, shining fucking red. Gagged you so all you could do was whimper for me when I played with your pussy. When I did let you speak, you offered me your wet cunt in contrition."

Hermione's mouth went dry. Had it been open this whole time? Draco ran his thumb lightly over her bottom lip.

"You'd tell me how sorry you were and how much you loved me. And you know what I did? I forgave you, Granger. Every. Fucking. Time. I forgave you and I fucked you until you cried, begging to be my good little slut again, promising to do anything to please me because that's what pleases you too."

"What the *fuck* do you think you doing out here, kitten?" His lips were almost white with fury.

Hermione clawed at his hand and Draco shook her a little.

"Trying to leave me?"

She pulled on his wrist.

"I think you need to spend some time in your cage," he spat, " *pet.*"

Hermione managed a strangled "NO!" as he loosened his grip enough so that she could breathe again. Pushing on his arms and chest, she tried to dislodge him, but Draco was much larger than she was and he had planted himself firmly in between Hermione and the door.

Draco pushed his body against hers, pinning her to the desk. "Clever little witch," he snarled. "Thought you got out? But this is what you said you wanted, wasn't it? To never leave me again?" Hermione's heart thundered in her chest, matching the storming grey of Draco's eyes. "Now you *never* will."

He flicked his wand and the bedroom door opened, the chains from their room came flying into his hand. He snapped it around her wrist as she tried to beat it against his chest, tangled curls falling in her face, mixing with the tears that were spilling over onto her cheeks.

"You're so stupid." Draco was breathing heavily, as if each rise of his chest was taking all the energy he had. "I know you hate me, but you don't have to get us both *killed* over it."

"I wouldn't have—"

"Yes, you *would!* Look at you—barefoot and barely dressed. You think you could have made it out of here without a wand? And if you did, someone would snap you up and chain you down and not treat you *half* as kindly as I have."

Hermione squirmed against him and Draco pressed himself harder into her.

"Not everyone has my self control, Sweetheart. Most of us wouldn't be able to resist a tasty little thing like you trouncing around in the woods." Panic seared inside of her, mixing with the adrenaline still rushing her in veins as Draco lowered his mouth to her ear. "If you wanted to get fucked, all you had to do was *beg.*"

It was wrong. Oh Godric, it was so, incredibly, unbelievably *wrong* , but Hermione felt her blood heating up with Draco so close to her and having his hands on her again. Arousal soaked through her very skin, drenching like a storm in summer; hot, heavy and oppressive.

Draco had no clue what he was doing now. Any chance, no matter how small it had been, for some sort of escape from this life was now gone.

He was a murderer.

He was a killer.

He was never going to get better; never going to make this up. He had killed Theodore Nott. He had murdered him. Theo might not have been innocent, but he wasn't guilty of the crime Draco accused him of. Theo hadn't been the one to betray the Dark Lord and turn Blood Traitor.

But Draco said he had. And then he had killed him, securing his place—and Granger's, by extension—at Lord Voldemort's side.

He squeezed his eyes until he saw bright white lights.

"Draco." Granger was holding out a small cup of water.

He struggled to sit up, his head aching as he moved and took it from her, swallowing small sips so he wouldn't toss it all up again.

She was just standing there, staring at him. He couldn't look her in the face, not after what he had done. One look into her big innocent eyes would be enough to make his carefully crafted white walls come tumbling down again.

"Go away, Granger."

She stayed where she was.

His chest felt tight and hot. He needed her gone. He needed her to stop looking at him so he could breathe because he couldn't breathe right now no matter how hard he tried. His chest wouldn't fill properly. It just kept emptying and emptying and there was nothing in there, nothing left and his chest hurt and his heart clenched until it was hot and burning and he was sure it was going to burst and bleed out into the nothingness inside him.

Pour his life into the torn out hole in his already damned soul.

"Just go away!"

"I won't leave you."

Draco swung his head up in her direction, lip curling over his teeth so far he might as well have bared venomous fangs at her.

"Do as your fucking told, Granger. Or I might kill you next."

Hermione blinked her big doe eyes calmly back down at him. "No, you won't."

"You think you know me?" he snarled.

"I do," she said as simply as she was answering a question back in Transfiguration. "I know you, Draco. And you won't hurt me."

"I could throw that chain on you and keep you in my bed to do every last nasty thing I could think of to you. I've had a long time to come up with ideas for punishments."

She sat down on the bed next to him. What the *fuck* was she doing?

"You could have done that every night since you brought me here. But I'm not scared of you. I know you wouldn't. I…" She had the decency to look away from him when she softly said, "I trust you."

Draco thought he might be sick again.

His vision swam and he was sure if he hadn't already been lying down, he would have fallen over.

She trusted him. She *trusted* him. And all it took was him murdering his lifelong friend to earn it. What would she require next? His father's life for a chance to get back in her pussy? He let his guilt simmer sickly, deep within him, as he filled his empty chest with cold fury.

"Then you're just a stupid little girl, falling for my lies again. How many times are you going to let me break that brave heart of yours?"

Granger pulled back, blinking in surprise. She turned away from him, bending her knees and resting her chin on them while she stared out across the room.

Draco opened the drawer beside his bed and downed a potion to try and clear his head. He leaned back into his pillow and sighed audibly. The pounding in his skull lessened to a dull thump and he felt sleep tugging at him again. He would love to sink into that black oblivion, but couldn't as long as *she* was still hovering there.

Granger eventually laid back as well, looking over at him as he kept his gaze trained on the ceiling. He didn't want to see the disgust or disappointment or worst of all *pity* he might find in her kind eyes. It was bad enough that everything smelled like her which only made her proximity even more terrible because he knew this was the closest he would ever get to her again.

She was quiet for such a long time that he barely heard her when she whispered, "I know you don't mean that. Just like I know you didn't mean to…"

She couldn't even say it. And he had. Unforgivable curses had to be cast with meaning, with intent, a fact Draco knew all too well now.

He closed his eyes and let himself fall back into the darkness.

Hermione frowned. Was Draco trying to find some way to prove she wasn't just a Muggleborn? Attach her to one of the Pureblood families?

Why did he care this much? She had never cared to know where her magical blood came from. It never mattered to her that she was Muggleborn. In fact, Hermione was proud of it! To come from a different culture, a different world, and to excel in this one was something that she loved about herself. It was only people like Draco who cared about her blood lineage and family history.

She read her parents names and a thrum of sadness passed through her at the sight of them. She missed them so much, but at least they were safe and maybe one day she would be able to go find them again and bring them home. Or maybe she would join them in Australia and leave all this behind.

As tempting as the thought was, there were already so many people she had left since the start of the war. Harry, Ron, Ginny, Neville, and Luna. Hagrid, Professor McGonagall, Tonks, Remus, and Kingsley. Not to mention all the other Weasleys, who were her second family really. Hermione could probably sit here for the next half hour and list names. But there was only one name that made her heart beat painfully in her chest.

Draco.

She was leaving him now too. Hermione tried not to think about what he would look like sitting alone in their empty room. She hated to think that something she had done would cause him pain, but she didn't have any other options. Draco had never given her any. He had stolen her away but now, she was stealing herself back.

She just wished that she was able to take her heart with her too.

Hermione tucked the book into the pocket of the jumper with the dagger and turned back, headed to the door, and reached for the handle when it *turned*.

She had half a second to register what was happening before Draco was there, hand around her throat and walking her back swiftly. His fingers tightened into her skin and his eyes burned like ash covered coals as they bore down on her.

Hermione hit the side of the desk and the Hand of Glory and astrolabe went tumbling from her hands as one lifted to grab at his wrist and the other dove into the pocket of the jumper hoping to find the dagger.

She had just closed her fingers over it when Draco's left hand wrapped around her arm and slammed it down onto the surface of his desk, making her lose her grip on the dagger as she opened her mouth to gasp in pain. He tightened his hold on her throat, cutting off the air supply for just a moment and lowered his face to hers.

No, she would have to take her chances on foot with whatever was laying in wait out there for her.

Hermione glanced back up at the hippogriff. The feathers were a deep, ruddy brown, still, the image of it made her remember the events of her third year. Draco, bleeding on the ground in the middle of the clearing. Ron treating her like scum when Scabbers went missing. And Harry running through the woods with Buckbeak in tow. She had been terrified when he took off after Sirius and had tried to keep up, but lost him in the dark trees. How was she possibly going to find him *now?*

Draco was right about her though, she was smart. She figured out how to get out of his room and she would figure out how to get back to Harry too. Maybe once they were together, they could try and find Ron. If they were all going to die, they might as well do it together. Although she still wished Draco would be at her side as well.

But Draco already had a side, and it wasn't hers.

She moved forward, collecting the items she had spotted on her evenings in here with Draco. The Hand of Glory for light, a goblin wrought dagger for protection, and a golden astrolabe so she could…

The dark red leather book caught her eye, the one Draco was always reading, always writing in—" *The Sacred Twenty-Eight*" .

Hermione bit her lip and glanced at the double doors then back to the book on his desk. Draco would surely be gone for hours more. She could have a quick peek, right? Just to see what he was working on? Hermione justified it to herself as reconnaissance.

She had been in a Death Eater's house for months and barely gathered any information she would be able to use against Voldemort in the future.

Setting the items down, she picked up the book and quickly flipped through it, letting the light of the fire guide her eyes across the page.

Fine, black ink covered the margins and the blank spaces at the end of each family's chapter. She was barely able to read the names she knew so well with her mind racing and adrenaline coursing through her veins, but then something caught her eye as she neared the end of the book.

Hermione saw *her* name. Over and over, Grangers stretching back fifty, a hundred, over two hundred years. Her entire family tree laid out in the extra pages of the back, as if hers was the twenty ninth family. She hungrily read it over, decoding Draco's small script.

He was researching *her.* The last entry was 'Tobias Grainger —1758' then in thick, angry letters beside it- *'**Muggle'*** .

Draco spent the next day and a half laying in the bed, barely speaking. Hermione had gotten used to him being gone for most of the time so having him there, and back in the bed as well, took a little getting used to.

She wasn't able to try out wandless magic again, not with Draco sleeping feet from her so she balanced on the balls of her feet, biting her lip and tried to find something to occupy her time. She took to watching Draco.

When he was awake, he was sullen and silent; lying there with an expressionless face that looked more and more tired, no matter how much he slept. When he was sleeping he looked… There was no other way to say it, but Draco Malfoy looked like an angel.

Pale blond hair messy against the pillow, his white t-shirt, wrinkled from his tossing, and the light sheet draped around his waist made Draco into a vision. His body moved ever so slightly with low breaths, arms stretched out across the bed like he was trying for something just out of reach. Hermione's eyes moved along the long slopes of his muscles, pushing against the blue veins running just underneath the pale skin.

She almost gave into the urge to climb into the bed and lose herself in his embrace. He shifted, rolling over and burying his face against the pillow. Hermione took a moment to steady herself before trying her best to distract herself by playing with Crookshanks with one of the laces from Draco's boot.

It was awful seeing Draco like this, listless in despair. When he was awake he looked… terrible, honestly. She remembered in school last year—the dark circles under his eyes, the grey tinge to his skin, and the overall air of exhaustion, but even back then his eyes would meet hers across the room.

Now, Draco stared at nothing.

When night fell, Hermione walked nervously to her side of the bed. Draco hadn't moved and his long legs were tangled in the blankets. Biting her lip, she glanced over at the chaise, and then back at Draco. He was on his side, facing away from her; breath gently moving his chest. It was just sleeping, it didn't mean anything.

She had done it before, she could do it again.

Hermione crawled into the bed, doing her best not to disturb him and then laid there, in the dark, beside Draco.

She folded her hands over her stomach and took a deep breath, trying to relax.

It didn't work.

No matter what Hermione did, she couldn't get comfortable. With the blanket covering her, she was too hot, without it, she was cold. Even the charmed pillow under her head didn't feel right tonight. Huffing, Hermione turned on her side.

Then, very slowly, she inched closer to Draco until she was almost flush against him. With her Gryffindor courage giving her strength, Hermione wrapped her arm around Draco, pulling herself close to him. He felt solid and strong and… *real* . Hermione tucked her face down against his back, breathing in the thick parchment-like scent of his skin and curled her body to fit against his.

Draco let out a deep sigh, his muscles softening and relaxing against her. She spread her hand out over his chest, the shirt soft under her palm. She felt the deep scars he hid underneath it and, under them, the soft but heavy beat of his heart.

Hermione closed her eyes and let the sound of it lull her to sleep.

He looked down at the mark on his arm, the bruise around it deeper and darker than normal. Or maybe he was just more pale. Either way it was ugly as shit.

Draco hated the branded ink seared into his skin. He hated it. He hated the man who had done this to him, the man who had turned him into a murderer.

It wasn't long after Draco had let Potter go that he and Theo were summoned.

"Shit," Theo winced, his face flushing with blood as their marks burned in unison. He looked up at Draco, navy eyes dark with worry. "How are we going to get out of this one?"

"Follow my lead," Draco growled and disapperated, landing on soft loamy ground followed shortly by the crack of Theo's appearance at his side.

They walked in together. The old building was damp and the first sprigs of grass poked up through the cracked floor.

Draco took in his surroundings, but kept his eyes on his Lord. And the fucking snake curled around his feet. His chest felt tighter the farther he walked in. There was already tension filling the room and Draco felt his palm sweating around the handle of his wand, despite the chill that still hung in the air.

Fiftieth time was the charm, right?

Oh goodness.

It *was.*

Hermione's mouth dropped open as the door clicked and the handle gave under her hand, turning slightly so she could open it.

She could open it. She could. So why was she still standing here?

Draco. That's why.

He had said he would never let her go. There was no convincing him, no explaining to him the error or his ways. He would never see what he was doing as wrong, not as long as she was with him.

And that is exactly why she had to do this. At least, that is what she was telling herself.

Hermione opened the door.

The study seemed larger without him in it and Hermione suddenly felt out of breath at the prospect of being in here alone. And even more so with the idea of being out *there* alone.

She glanced back at the unmade bed, the ever growing stack of books, and… Crookshanks.

He meowed loudly from the chaise.

"I love you." Her throat closed a little around the words. "Be good for him."

Hermione turned away before her eyes filled with tears. Saying goodbye this time wasn't any easier than the last, but she had to.

Crookshanks would be okay here. Draco wouldn't let anything happen to him. Draco growled at him plenty of times, but Hermione also saw him scratching Crookshanks' ears whenever he walked past him. Draco cared about her cat. His cat.

Their cat.

She closed the door before Crookshanks could follow her.

Resting her back against it for a few seconds, Hermione then forced herself forward. The large hippogriff head hanging over the fireplace seemed to be coming out of the wall to attack her with its curved break. Draco had told her it was a gift from his father. She didn't have to ask when he came home to find it mounted over his fireplace.

How easy it would be to just throw floo powder in the flames burning there and be somewhere else in a flash. But Hermione had nowhere to go. Most homes were locked down, no longer accessible by floo and places that were still connected were unsafe for her. She couldn't exactly appear in the middle of the Ministry and hope to get out again.

He couldn't look him in the face and instead trained his eyes on the Malfoy ring sitting on his father's hand, gripping his shoulder. "Yeah, uh, you're welcome."

"You'll get this back one day," Lucius said, drawing back his hand and adjusting the silver ring on it. "When you deserve it."

Draco knew exactly what he deserved. And he had done it to Theo instead. He'd never be good enough for Granger. Never had been, really. She could have been happy with someone else. Someone who wasn't him.

The thought turned his insides to ice that cracked and shattered into sharp, slicing pieces. Ripping into him, or whatever was left of him at this point.

He'd have given the family ring for Granger to love him again.

Given anything, *everything* .

Draco turned away again, lifting his tired legs up the stairs.

Too bad he already given her everything he had. He just never bothered to ask her if she even wanted it anymore.

Hermione read the paper seven times in a row, heart skipping a beat every time their names were mentioned. Harry and Ron, both of them, together. She had been desperate for any mention of them, any *hint* of them for months and now, they were plastered over every page.

Harry and Ron had broken into Borgin and Burkes and burned the store down. Along with half the block.

Now it was nothing more than a dusty pile of rubble and a few charred stacks of bricks, according to the picture on the front of the evening Prophet.

They, of course, were nowhere to be seen, but photographed and printed were several badly burned people in metal masks either running around and waving their hands, or huddled together looking nothing like the elite forces of the *supposed* Dark Lord.

Injuries, damages and fatalities were still being reported.

Harry and Ron had struck a decisive blow against Voldemort's regime and they had done it in his own backyard.

She was sure that whoever took the picture and whoever okayed it to go out would be hunted down and taken in by morning, but the papers would still be out there. People would see what Harry and Ron had done and, as a result, they would see the Death Eaters looking like fools and weaklings. In a regime based on fear and oppressive power, this attack was damning evidence in the Order's favor.

Hermione was proud of her boys. Scared out of her mind at what they had been *thinking* that could have made them *ever* believe it was a good idea to launch an offensive attack in the middle of Knockturn Alley of all places... But she had to admit, they had pulled it off.

She was almost too scared to hope that they had found another horcrux. Maybe hidden somewhere, under the floorboards of the old shop Tom Riddle had worked in. Hermione had to admit, even though it was brash and reckless, it was more of a plan than they had in a long time.

Maybe, just maybe, they had already destroyed the locket somehow. It had been months since she had seen Harry, that was plenty of time to either get the sword or find some other way to destroy the horcruxes. She didn't think they would have gone after another without first being able to get rid of the one they had.

Hermione rubbed her neck, remembering the heavy weight of the locket and the distress she felt just wearing the cursed thing. And the loneliness. It was the only time that she hadn't had Draco making sarcastic comments in the back of her mind. Lately, she had felt a little of that same loneliness again.

She missed him. She missed her friends.

Hermione looked back down at the small picture of Ron they put at the bottom of the page. It was his old school photo. Same freckled face, same uneven smile, same blinking eyes.

What would he look like when she saw him again?

The last time she had seen him, his face had been painted with fiery, red hate.

" *She's fucking Draco Malfoy."*

Did they even want her to come back? Hermione had spent this whole time trying to find a way to get back to them and didn't even stop to consider that maybe they wouldn't take her in again. She *had* spent those months in a Death Eater's bed, after all.

Hermione bit her lip and looked back down at the paper. Harry looked back up at her.

He would. Harry would take her back. And… Ron would too. She wouldn't get upset this time. She would sit him down, *make* him listen, and explain to him… Goodness,

what *would* she say? Maybe just… that she was still her. She was still Hermione, still the same person.

Except, she was and she wasn't. She *was* still herself, but now she was… more herself. More Hermione.

And Draco had done that. He had opened her up, let her explore and find things out about herself that she never even knew to look for. He had challenged her, pushed her. And let her push herself too.

Hermione sat the paper down. Ron would have to understand that, wouldn't he?

And if he didn't… Well, they didn't *have* to be friends to hunt horcruxes together. As long as Harry wanted her there, she would be. Ron could make his own choices.

He had before.

He had left her and… Draco had found her.

And now… now she was stuck here. So she might as well take advantage of it.

Hermione swung her legs over the side of the bed and bounded over to the dresser where Draco had left an unopened bottle of fire whisky sitting next to the diamonds he had left out for her.

She almost put them on. If there was ever a night to dress up, this was it. Tonight she was celebrating a victory.

Hermione pulled at the cork, huffing in frustration before it finally popped from the top of the bottle and spilled a little onto her dress.

"Ugh!"

She held it away from her as if it had done it on purpose and then gingerly sniffed it.

Disgusting. Sickly sweet and strong enough to make her dizzy but it was what she wanted. Summoning her Gryffindor courage, Hermione brought it to her lips and swallowed.

It burned so badly that she thought she might not be able to keep it down.

Coughing, she covered her mouth with the back of her hand. Thank goodness Crookshanks was in Draco's study or he would have thought she was hacking up a furball with the amount of noise she was making.

Good Godric, this stuff worked quickly. No wonder Draco stumbled around while drinking it. Hermione was lightheaded herself as she took another tentative swig. It burned less this time, but not by much.

It was… nice. Strange, but nice. She felt light, loose, and happy. She spun around, letting the feeling guide her and caught a glimpse of the sheer lace dress spinning around her in the mirror in between her twisting curls.

Villains didn't get happy endings. And they certainly didn't get the girl of their dreams.

Not unless they locked them in a tower and even then, the hero came and rescued them.

He thought he had been saving Granger, but maybe…

Fuck. He didn't fucking know what he was saying.

This wasn't a fairytale or a storybook romance.

And if it was, he'd never be her knight in shining armor.

He would be the dragon.

"Draco."

He stopped at the foot of the stairs and groaned.

Fucking Lucius.

Draco stuck his hand into his pocket and gripped his wand. He didn't want to, but if he had to… Draco turned.

"Father."

Lucius straightened his back, trying to stand up taller and Draco took a step back to stand on the bottom stair, throwing him a nasty smirk.

Lucius frowned, the age showing on his face even more as it pulled in distaste before he did his best to change it into a patronizing expression.

"I was informed of your service in eliminating the Blood Traitor Nott boy."

Draco's stomach plummeted. He knew his aunt would tell people, but… he had hoped it wouldn't make it back to his parents. His mother, in particular. She already thought her son was a rapist, she didn't need to know he was a murderer as well.

Not her son anymore.

Draco glanced down at the Malfoy ring situated perfectly on his father's finger, like it had never left.

Not a Malfoy either.

Who was he? Just Draco.

Whoever the fuck that was.

He rolled his eyes.

Lucius lifted his hand and placed it on Draco's shoulder. "I am proud of you, Draco."

How long had he yearned to hear those words? How many times had he imagined standing here and feeling the sense of accomplishment that he had finally done something for his father to be proud of? But now, he didn't care. It didn't matter if it didn't come from Granger.

Draco felt hollow. Empty. Cold.

most fucking annoying habit of looking goddamn beautiful when she was thinking of something and she was *always* thinking of something because she was so bloody brilliant.

She just didn't think of him.

She had been lying to him in his study. She didn't still love him. She was looking for a way out and catching him off guard with some half-hearted insinuation that she maybe, might, possibly, still have feelings for him was just a ploy.

She had been *trying* to leave him.

He never thought he would be *happy* that his mother caught him… doing that to someone, especially Granger, but it had at least scared Granger enough that he was able to lock her back up and keep her safe. His mother hadn't spoken to him since that night which he was glad of as well. He didn't want to hear more of her accusations because even though they were false, there was a truth to what she was saying.

Everyone else hated him, why not his dear old Mum too? Losing someone else's love hurt, but not as much as losing Granger's.

And *if* she hadn't been completely lying, then killing Theo did the trick. Granger was good and pure; she wouldn't want him now that he was a killer.

Images of Theo's face in various states of decay haunted him. Empty, glass eyes, skin sloughing off, and mouth hanging open, a low moan emitted that sounded all too familiar to the death scream that Theo had died choking on.

Draco rubbed his hand over his face, partially to clear his mind and partially to check and make sure that the rot hadn't set in on him too. But just because he could still feel his features didn't mean he stopped seeing Theo's decaying away. He *really* fucking hated dead people.

He should have set Theo on fire; burned him to death so there would be no body left behind. Might give him some measure of peace, but of course, Draco hadn't. He had just stood there as the snake curled around the body, pulling it to her master's feet.

Draco had spent a good part of last year wondering if he had killed that Muggle. He could remember the sickening worry over it, he thought not knowing was terrible, but it was nothing compared to having undeniable evidence replaying over and over in his mind.

It was wrong. It was all *so* wrong. And Draco was the one who had done it. He deserved every little ache in his muscles as he pushed himself harder, farther every day; every stab of pain in his heart when he looked at Granger and saw the girl he loved who would never really be his again. Not the way he wanted.

Not in her heart.

Hermione walked up to it, pulling a little on the skirt. This one… wasn't that bad. In fact—she took another small sip—she almost thought this could be cute. If it was a little thicker and a little longer. Maybe if she told Draco she liked it, he would get her more like this.

Or maybe he would get her something in black, like he had mentioned. An image of herself, dressed in strappy black lingerie, flashed in front of her. Before she could shake the thought, Hermione perfectly pictured Draco's striking grey eyes behind her.

She spun around, half expecting to see him there, but the room was empty. Placing her hand on her chest, She let out a deep breath. Maybe she needed to sit down for a moment.

Hermione found herself in front of the chaise and brushed a hand over the soft velvet cushion. She had flat out *refused* to sit on it since she arrived. Not here where Draco had made her feel so many things. She had almost been afraid that sitting on it again would make them all come back.

But, if she was being honest with herself—the whisky made that a little easier—they had never left. Not really.

So Hermione plopped down on the chaise and stretched her legs out, sliding them over the rich fabric and getting comfortable against the plush cushion behind her. She sat the bottle down on the floor next to her and reached her arms out over her head, closing her eyes and sighing happily, hoping that Harry and Ron were celebrating wherever they were too.

"Granger—" Hermione's eyes flew open. "Are you *drinking?*"

The sheer shock in his voice set her off into a fit of giggles. She couldn't stop. Goodness, she couldn't stop at all. Not when she started losing her breath and not when her cheeks started to hurt from smiling so much. It felt good to laugh again, like she had been holding it back this whole time and finally was letting it out.

"Or, at least trying to."

She looked up and Draco was standing in front of her, holding the bottle up for inspection.

"You do realize this is one of Ogden's special blends? This bottle is a hundred and fifty years old."

"Didn't taste old to me," Hermione giggled and watched Draco's carefully calm face twitch as he tried to keep whatever he was thinking or feeling off of it.

"Well," he shrugged and sank to the floor next to the chaise. "No use in letting it go to waste."

He tipped it back and downed three mouthfuls before Hermione grabbed it back from him.

"Excuse me!" she said loudly. Very loudly. Wow. Did she always talk this loud? "That was mine, thank you very much!"

Draco smirked at her and cocked his head to the side. "You took things from me that were mine. It's only fair, Granger."

Hermione scowled and took the bottle back.

"I was only ever yours because I wanted to be," she snapped and forced another small sip down just to show Draco that… Well… Just because.

Draco let a cold sneer slip onto his face and Hermione was briefly reminded of running into him in dark corridors late at night.

"Wasn't talking about your cunt." He rolled his eyes and looked away from her. "I was talking about my heart. I never *wanted* to fall in love with you."

Oh. *Oh.*

Right.

"Sorry," she mumbled.

"You're forgiven," Draco answered without missing a beat. He plucked the bottle from her hands and tipped it back again.

"It's as easy as that? Just…" She waved a hand in the air. "Poof and forgiven?"

Draco twisted his head to the side to look up at her, eyes the color of misty rain. "Do you *want* to be punished?"

A stream of cold passed down Hermione's arms, quickly followed by a blushing heat that chased the feeling all the way down to her toes and, she was sure, across her face.

Draco drank again. "Can't blame me for trying, especially when I haven't fucked anything but my own hand since June and you…" His eyes moved down her body and back up again. The heat followed them, leaving cool goosebumps in its wake.. "Look good enough to fucking eat."

Hermione's heart was hammering in her chest and pushed the alcohol quickly through her system or maybe out of it. She felt more level headed now, except for the small tremor in her hands.

If he noticed, he didn't say anything. Draco's eyes had turned glazed and glassy for a moment, as if he was barely in control of himself. She didn't need legilimency to know what he was thinking of right then.

Hermione stayed perfectly still, eyes wide and staring down at him.

Birds flew overhead and she watched as elves trudged out to work on the lawn, pruning branches back on bushes, and planting new flowers in the garden.

Hermione watched them bloom outside and told herself that she was just enjoying seeing life return to the grounds and not that she sat at the window every day to watch Draco go through his physical training routine on the back lawn.

"He's been in a better mood since he's been working out. He hasn't yelled once. That's something, right?" she asked Crookshanks as he laid in the sun beside her.

He flicked his tail.

"It is." She turned back to the window. "It's… something."

It was. Really. Draco was… different. She couldn't exactly say he was *happy,* but he wasn't miserable like he had been when he… when she had to call Blaise. The event seemed to have shocked him too because since then, Draco had not taken his wand back to his arm.

In fact, he had barely even touched it. She saw him doing a variety of things outside, but never once caught him practicing his dueling. Hermione vowed to ask him about it. And the missing ring. And… how he was doing.

She wasn't going to let Draco brush her off again. They'd have a conversation about this. Even if she had to push him down and sit on top of him to do it.

Huffing, Hermione sat down to read the copy of the Daily Prophet Draco had tossed at her this morning and her eyes widened in shock at the headline.

Draco trudged through the house, head hanging low and muscles aching from overuse and uncomfortable nights. He was back on the chaise, but that didn't stop Granger from keeping him up half the night, tossing and turning and moaning his name out until he couldn't stand it and his hard length was in his hand, pumping away as she made gentle noises in her sleep that he imagined were moans of ecstasy from her coming on his cock.

He knew they weren't, but he could pretend all the same.

That's what his days consisted of now. Pretending. Acting like he wasn't a murderer, wasn't a Blood Traitor, wasn't in love with the girl sitting up in his room who had the

Overall, Draco was doing… better. Not great, but better. He was still quiet most days, but spoke to Crookshanks sometimes. One day he returned with treats that he hand fed Crookshanks while he purred happily.

"What, nothing for me?" Hermione asked, hoping to jar Draco into talking to her again.

He glanced up at her, eyes as grey as mist. "Did… did you want something?"

His expression was so empty that she lost her train of thought.

"N-no. No, I'm fine. It was a joke."

Draco didn't say anything, but when she looked back over at him, he was still staring at her.

"Sorry."

"Don't apologize," he mumbled and fed Crookshanks another treat.

Hermione's supper that night arrived while Draco was out and she opened the tray to find a large serving of apple charlotte accompanying her meal. The smell of it made her mouth water and Hermione had to hold herself back from digging into it right away.

She tried to save it, wanting to wait until Draco came back and… maybe they could… share it. They rarely ate together and when they did, it was just because Draco picked something random off her tray, not that they actually *dined* with one another.

Except for Valentine's Day.

But Hermione didn't need a large spread and a fancy table. She didn't care to get dressed up and wear a small treasure trove around her neck.

She just wanted to talk with him again. Maybe ask him how he was doing and tell him how she was feeling in return.

But Draco did not join her.

Hermione ate alone, watching the daylight fade from burning orange to dusty blue through the window.

She left the apple charlotte on the china. She didn't want it, not without him.

Days passed and Hermione watched the world come alive again through the barred window. The trees sprouted fresh green buds that were quickly turning into new leaves.

Draco's gaze was almost impossible to hold, but she found herself unable to look away. He took another drink, the apple in his throat moving as he swallowed the liquor greedily, as if it would somehow sate the hunger bright in his eyes.

He looked away first.

"So I guess you saw the paper," he said, voice laced with a hint of bitterness.

Hermione leaned forward slightly. "Do you know anything else about it?" Maybe he would tell her. Or maybe he would tell her to shut the fuck up and not mention Harry ever again.

Draco tapped his finger. "No. I wasn't called. Not that I would have gone anyway."

Another wave of some unidentifiable emotion passed through her, but this one seemed to clear her head instead of muddle it further.

"What do you mean?"

Draco shrugged again. "I just… don't want to do this anymore."

Impossible. It must have been the fire whisky making her think she was hearing him say this. This, the one thing she had stopped even hoping for, and yet…

"Don't want to what?" she pressed.

Draco looked down at his arm where the dark mark was clear against the lightly bruised skin around it.

"Doesn't matter."

He drank again and Hermione swiped for the bottle, not wanting him to drown himself until he was unable to give her the answers she so desperately needed. Draco pulled it away from her.

"It matters to me."

"Potter matters to you," Draco snapped and Hermione pulled back. "Weasley too. Bet you never went drinking when you read about the Muggleborns I brought in."

Hermione's spirits fell. "You don't know what I did when I thought about you."

"Probably just practiced your hexes against some tree since you couldn't use them on me," he answered again, sharp and quick. "I'm sure you would have taken out the whole forest if I hadn't ambushed and abducted you." Draco sniffed and almost took another drink, but then seemed to think better of it.

"I don't support deforestation," Hermione said, shaking a few loose hairs back from her face. "And I know how to hex someone when I want to."

"I know you do, Sweetheart. Cute and dangerous; it's why I never leave my wand where you can get it."

Hermione couldn't help but smile at that.

Draco leaned his head back against the chaise and rolled it towards her, grinning and taking another pull from the bottle. He held it out to her. Hermione focused on his hand, wrapped loosely, but completely around the neck. There were a few blue-green veins standing out on the back of his hand and sunk down into the dips between the long fingers she knew so well, except now they were ringless.

Hermione took the bottle from him, making sure not to graze his hand as she did. Because if she touched him, she wasn't going to stop.

"Did you lose it?" she asked with the rim pressed against her lip, taking a quick drink to keep her courage up.

"Huh?"

She swallowed. It was getting… a little better? "Your ring," Hermione clarified. "You… haven't been wearing it."

Draco spread out his fingers and then closed his hand tightly in a fist. She had pushed too far. He was going to snap at her and hurt her feelings just because he knew he could. Still, Hermione could not help the fact that she was glad that she actually brought it up.

Draco loosened his fist and rested his hand on his leg. "Just didn't feel like it anymore."

Oh.

"Got in the way, you know?"

No. She didn't. Not at all.

Or… maybe she did.

Hermione wasn't very used to drinking and she wasn't sure if the confusion was because of the few sips of alcohol or if Draco just was just giving her the run around again.

"You're not making sense," she said, a smile on her lips.

He looked over at her again and his mouth twitched. "Nothing does these days, Sweetheart. Not since I met you."

Her heart sped up, pushing the fire whisky through her brain. "You've known me for years Draco."

Another twitch. Only, this one made his curled lips stay like that and his eyes brightened like polished silver. "Oh, I am aware."

The warm feeling in her stomach grew. She told herself it was the fire whisky.

She knew it wasn't though.

"I think you've had enough." Draco reached for the bottle and Hermione pulled it back against her chest. His hand stopped in the air before it reached her.

Touch me.

she never got any time to sort it out before she was running for her life and as soon as she had gotten here, Draco had just locked her up and they had waged their own war on each other.

What if instead of spending all her energy fighting against Draco, she fought *for* him? For his soul? Even if it was torn and stained. She loved it. She loved everything about him. The good and the bad. Draco and Malfoy.

She loved him.

"Hermione?" Blaise said her name softly.

Hermione gripped Draco's wand in her hand.

"I'm not leaving him. Not this time."

Their roles had reversed.

Hermione sat on the chaise, watching Draco carefully as he dressed for the day, like she did every morning now. He no longer donned the dragon hide vest and black boots of his Death Eater attire. Now, Draco stayed in his white shirt and slipped on a pair of grey sweat pants.

He took his wand with him, but she never saw him using it as he trained on the grounds.

Hermione watched from the window as Draco ran laps, did push ups, curl ups, and boxed against the chilly spring air. He would return, sweating and breathing heavily, and head straight to the bathroom, closing the door behind him before she could even get a word out.

Over an hour later, he would emerge with a cloud of steam following him and dress, never touching the black robes, and head into his study.

He did not invite her to come with him anymore.

But when he returned in the evenings, he would toss some random book or a copy of the Prophet on the foot of the bed before collapsing on the chaise and pretending to be asleep while she sat up reading.

Blaise shoved out a breath and sank down in one of the large leather chairs, running his hands over his head and holding it like it might fall off.

"He didn't mean to."

"He never does, does he?" Blaise said, emotion harsh in his voice. "But he always finds a way to fuck things up anyways." He stood up, breathing fast.

"He didn't want to!" she tried to explain, but knew little more than this to defend him with. "Draco never wanted to kill anyone."

"Yeah well, Theo's still *dead,* isn't he?"

"I—I'm sorry." Hermione reached out and touched Blaise's arm. She barely knew him, but didn't want him to stand there in pain in front of her. Theo had been Blaise's friend too. And she had made Blaise save the person who killed him. "I'm so sorry."

He rubbed his eyes deeply, pushing them back into his head. "Draco is… He's fucked up, Hermione. He's fucked up bad."

"He'll be okay though, right?" she asked, stomach cleaning tightly inside her.

"Physically? He'll heal well enough. His arm is damaged though. He must have been…" His dark eyes drifted to the half open bedroom door. "But I wasn't talking about that. He… he's dangerous."

She shook her head a little. "Draco won't hurt me."

"You really believe that?"

"I…" Hermione paused.

"Hermione," Blaise placed a hand softly on her shoulder. "I can take you out of here."

Out. Out out out. Blaise could get her *out.*

"I can take you to my house by floo. And you can go anywhere from there."

She could find Harry, maybe even Ron, and they could get back to hunting horcruxes. It was everything she had been working for, everything she wanted.

Almost everything.

Hermione looked back at Draco on his bed. Their bed.

There were many reasons she wanted to fight against Voldemort to stop him from taking over. And Draco was one of those reasons. This whole time she had kept an idea in her head that somehow, if they won the war, she would be able to be with Draco. And that turned into the idea that she *had* to win the war to be with Draco. And since he was a Death Eater that meant fighting against him.

But that wasn't entirely true, was it?

That was what her war torn, terror stricken heart had pumped into her brain and the ideas and emotions had mixed and everything had gotten so muddled and confusing and

He gave her a knowing look. "Your cheeks are red, pet. You don't need any more."

"Yes I do."

I need you to touch me.

"You don't," Draco reached for the bottle again with a playful smile. "Trust me."

"Okay."

Please, Draco. I'm begging you.

His hand was around the neck again and Hermione tightened her grip on the body of the bottle.

He just stared at her. Eyes searching hers and she felt the tiniest hint of pressure in the forefront of her mind before… Draco pulled back. He stopped himself from diving into her mind even though she could tell how badly he wanted to.

Draco's brows lowered. "Don't."

"Don't what?"

"Don't say things you don't mean. Don't lie to me."

"I'm not. I told you the other day I trusted you and I'm telling you now."

"Give me the bottle. You're drunk."

"You drank twi-twice as much as me," Hermione said with a small hiccup.

Draco plucked the Ogden's from her hands. "I'm much larger than you," he said, the mock annoyance back in his tone. "And I have a tolerance. You don't."

Hermione crossed her arms over her chest, fully aware that it made her breasts push together and almost spill out of the lace holding them in. "I could build one up. Maybe we could even drink together. At least you would hang out with me then."

She dropped her eyes to her lap and saw her legs were not as closely pressed as she normally kept them. *Why* was she talking so much? It felt good to say these things. To finally voice the thoughts and feelings she had kept inside for so long.

Draco shoved the cork into the bottle and sat it down. "I doubt you'll make a habit of this. Too bloody smart. But I do have to say, kitten," he leaned towards her a little the liquor adding a roguish touch to his smirk. "I like what it's done for you."

He brushed the back of a finger over her calf and goosebumps blazed across the trail he made on her skin. Draco paused as he reached her ankle and heat rushed into her face. He was watching her. Hermione could feel his gaze on her face and took a deep breath, keeping her focus on his hand, his fingers.

He turned them over, running the pads of his fingers back up her leg and over her knee. Slowly, softly, he placed his palm against her skin and spread out his fingers, inching them up her leg. They reached halfway up her thigh before he even had to move his hand.

It was cool against her warm skin and she was thankful for that because the quick beat of her heart was not doing her any favors in lowering her body temperature. Is this why they called it fire whisky? Because Hermione felt like her blood was near boiling, and her heart was pounding in her chest.

Draco stopped at the hem of the lace and pressed his forehead against his hand on her thigh, letting out a deep groan that felt like it was pushing up into her.

Her heart rushed out to meet him, waiting for him—beating between her thighs.

Her fingers were in his hair. It was silky soft and she pushed them deeper, scratching her nails against his scalp.

"Granger… fuck."

His shoulders tensed and his other hand came to land on her opposite knee. He pressed his fingers into her skin and Hermione closed her eyes.

He was touching her.

He was touching her and she loved it and missed it and wanted it and needed it.

His lips were on her knee, pressing into it with a pained kiss. He lifted them only to place another kiss an inch higher. Then another. And another.

Then his hands were pushing her legs apart and Hermione meant to gasp, but instead she moaned and Draco's head shot up.

He was staring at her, eyes only black depths ringed by shining silver. His hands were on her inner thighs and she felt herself clench at the sight of his mouth hanging slightly open. His tongue rested on his bottom row of teeth and heavy breaths passed over it.

She should say something. Tell him it was okay, that she wanted this.

She should make him stop. She should do *anything* other than look in his eyes as he slowly pried her legs apart.

His tongue slid over his bottom lip and she was reminded of a snake tasting the air for a hint of its prey.

The lump in his throat bobbed and for a moment he looked almost nervous. Then his fingers reached into the dip of her thigh and he asked in a deep, commanding voice, "You trust me?"

Hermione bit her lip.

His eyes moved to it. "Enough not to take advantage of you in your inebriated state?"

She swallowed.

"Enough to let me *this* close, knowing I could have you whimpering my name in *seconds* , if I wanted?"

Her hands curled into fists at her sides.

Hermione pulled at the hem of the sheer dress and tucked her messy curls back behind her ears, feeling herself blush as she wrapped her arms back around herself.

Clearing his throat, Blaise quickly averted his eyes and shook his head a little.

"Don't worry, I've given him a sleeping draught. He will be out a few hours more. Didn't want him waking up halfway through and trying to kill me or something."

Hermione blanched and glanced back over her shoulder. Draco was still asleep, although a small tinge of pink had come back to his lips.

"Thank you," she said, turning back to Blaise. "I don't know what I would have done if you didn't come."

Blaise nodded, his brow furrowing. "I have to say, I am a bit surprised you sent for me."

Hermione blinked. "I'm sorry?"

"If someone was holding me against my will for months and…" he paused, choosing his words. "Well, I don't think I would have called for a Healer. That's all."

"I…" she looked back at Draco again. *Love him.* "Couldn't let him die."

Blaise shrugged. "Yes, you could have."

She could have. She could have taken Draco's wand, taken supplies, and walked right out of the door and been long gone before anyone came looking for him.

"I don't understand you, Hermione."

"Neither do I," she said, sighing. "In fact, I think Draco might be the only one who does."

Blaise's eyes narrowed in curiosity. "And do you understand him?"

It was as if she had known the answer all along and was just waiting for the question. "I think I do."

She was quiet for a moment as the truth of this sunk into her. Whatever, *whoever* , they were inside, was the same. And that is why it hurt so much to be with him now, because she could see that part of him slowly fading. Dying.

War didn't just take the dead. It took the living too. This time, it had almost taken him from her for good and even now, with the stain on his soul, Draco wasn't… he wasn't *not* worth saving. Even if he didn't want to be. Even if it was just for herself. Something to make this whole stupid war worth it.

But even if the Order won, if Draco was taken from her, Hermione would still lose.

"Do you know why he did that to himself?" Blaise asked. "Hermione?" he prompted when all she did was bite her lip.

"He…" Hermione felt goosebumps rise on her arms. "He killed Theo."

A moment of decision and Hermione saw the deep thoughts in Blaise's dark eyes then he said, "Tell me whatever you can."

Hermione explained as best as she could, trying not to let her emotions get the better of her as she watched Blaise work.

Small spells checking him over.

Potions slowly poured between his white lips.

Blaise's hands running over Draco's arm, prodding into the bruised muscle, but carefully avoiding the center where the branded mark could still be seen on top of the mottled flesh.

"I'm sorry I don't know what he—"

"It's the *Cruciatus* curse," Blaise cut her off again. "I've seen it enough times at St. Mungo's now to recognize it. Did he come in like this or was someone here?"

Hermione stared at Blaise, chills running over every inch of her body and turning her just as cold as Draco's hand felt, clasped tight in her own.

"No."

Blaise's brows pulled together. "What? Then how did this—"

"He did it to himself." Hermione didn't even realize she was saying the words until she heard them in the dense air.

Disbelief flashed in Blaise's eyes. "No… that would take… *Merlin."*

He was looking down at Draco with a mix of awe and horror on his face.

"Help him," Hermione begged. "Please."

Blaise nodded and started his work again, jaw set hard and wiping sweat off his forehead with his sleeve. Hermione sat there, the feeling of helplessness almost overwhelming as Blaise worked. Finally he wrapped Draco's arm in bandages and he and Hermione levitated Draco to the bed.

Crookshanks jumped right up, purring and curled up next to Draco on the bed.

Once Hermione got the blankets situated around the two of them, she turned back to Blaise who tossed his head towards the study.

Hermione followed him, rubbing her arms nervously. She started to close the door, but decided to leave it open. Just in case.

Blaise turned. "I had no idea he was this bad."

"Neither did I," Hermione breathed, glancing down at the spot where Draco had laid. Where Draco could have *died.*

When she pulled her gaze away she found Blaise nervously appraising her.

"Do you *really* trust me, Granger?" Draco asked again, a hoarse warning in his voice.

Hermione's eyes felt dry, but they were the only part of her that was.

Draco's hands latched onto her upper thighs and pulled her down to the edge of the chaise, forcing her legs wider and pushing the white skirt up over her hips.

His eyes left her face and focused on her center, brows pulling together in concentration as his tongue hung out of his mouth a little. This time, he did not bring it back in, but rolled it back and forth over his lip.

Hermione's body was angled with her backside carefully balanced on the seat. She felt open and exposed and goodness, *excited* that she was spread open for him.

Just like how it had been before. Draco was still able to make her feel like… like no one else ever had. And now, she thought, like no one else ever would. Because this was it. *He* was it.

He was everything.

Her Draco.

Hermione was sobering up—and quickly—as adrenaline flooded her system. And it was all her when she reached forward and took his face with shaking, excited hands.

"I want this. With you." She felt like she was floating, like this wasn't real, but at the same time it felt more real than the past three months with him. "I want *you,* Draco."

He stared up at her, lust darkening every feature on his face so that he was less of a man and more of a feeling. His reason was gone; all that was left was his need.

For her.

His words came out as a heavy growl, dripping with a promise she knew he wouldn't break.

"I'm going to fucking devour you."

Draco's mouth closed over her, enveloping her. Hermione's head lolled back, mouth falling open. At the same time that a high pitched noise slipped up her throat, a deep, feral groan sounded against her and his tongue broke through her fold.

His arms wrapped underneath her legs, reaching up to hook around her thighs and hold onto her as he buried his face between her legs with no obvious regard for the need to breathe.

Hermione wasn't sure she had ever felt anything quite like *this.*

Draco was ravishing her with his lips and tongue and, oh God, his *teeth.* His nose pressed harshly into her mound as he pulled the soft bud of flesh into his mouth with his teeth. He wrapped his lips around it, sucking hungrily and rolling his tongue against it in the same motion she had watched him play on his lips just moments before.

He kissed *everywhere* . Tongue moving into every fold and crevice, lips massaging the tender skin and sensitive spots. Traveling down, then up again, then back down until she whined and pressed her hips up into him. Draco didn't miss an inch. His mouth covered all of her, licking, kissing, sucking, tasting.

Devouring .

He was gorging himself on her like a starving man. Thrilling jolts shot down Hermione's legs, curling in her toes. Her chest rose and fell with every heavy, gasping breath. She wanted to stretch out, wanted to curl up, wanted this feeling to spread into every part of her, wanted to sink down into it as it lifted her into dizzying heights.

Hermione clawed at the velvet, digging her nails in, in an effort to try and gain some control over her body again, but Draco wasn't having it. He snaked his tongue lower, dipping it into her core and groaning as he lapped at the moisture, pulling it into his mouth.

Draco looked up at Hermione at the same time that she glanced down at him. He was breathing heavily, lips parted and his eyes glazed with lust.

He shifted his body, moving closer, pulling his arms out from under her legs. He balanced his marked forearm on her thigh, spreading his large hand out to stretch between her hip bones and push her back down into the chaise, keeping her in place. The other hand traveled up in between her legs and she felt his fingers trace around her opening. Draco coated them in the wetness there before dipping just the tip of one in and moving it in a small circle, just barely inside her.

Hermione tried to move to take more of his finger, but the hand on her lower stomach weighed down to keep her still. She felt the strength in Draco's arm flex against her and she couldn't move. Couldn't do anything but let him tease her. Torture her.

"Is there something you want, kitten?" It was the deep, commanding voice she knew so well. Asking not in earnest, but in condescension. "There is, isn't there?" Draco widened the circle.

Hermione bit her lip. She had held back from him for so long and now that she was here, she felt like she was about to fall into a chasm, too dark to see the bottom. She wanted to dive head first.

Draco pushed his finger in to the knuckle and Hermione gasped. He pulled it back out again and she whimpered.

"You want me to slide my finger in?" Draco took his time pushing it in once more. Hermione shivered and bit down harder on her lip.

"What about…" Draco pulled it back out, "two of them?"

Calix was beating his wings and clacking his beak angrily. She got a good look at his razor-sharp talons when she brought Draco's wand up and sliced through the silver chain. It gently clinked as it fell away.

Hermione summoned parchment and a quill, hands shaking so bad she could barely write, but at least it was legible.

" *Please help. He's hurt."*

A tear fell onto the thick parchment, blotting out a few of the letters on her small note, but she didn't have time to re-write it.

Hermione turned and Calix snapped it up from her hand. "Blaise, okay?" It was all she could manage at the moment.

Calix gave a muffled hoot and Hermione raced to the fireplace, opened the box on the mantle and grabbed a fistful of floo powder.

"St Mungo's!"

The flames turned a bright emerald green and Calix soared across the room, a heavy beat of his wings caused her curls to tangle in front of her face and then he was gone.

Crookshanks meowed loudly behind her, his tail bushier than normal as he paced up and down next to Draco's body.

Hermione ran back Draco' side, pulling him up again and tracing his wand up and down his arm as she recited every healing spell, charm, and enchantment she knew, terrified sobs interrupting them so that she had to start over every few minutes.

When there was nothing more she could do, Hermione simply held him.

It didn't take Blaise long to arrive. She had no idea how Calix found him so quickly, but when Blaise stepped through the floo, Healer's robes still on, Hermione vowed to kiss the bird whenever he got back.

"What happened?" Blaise was all business, a serious expression set on his face.

"I don't—" Hermione started, realizing that she *didn't* know what Draco had done to himself.

Blaise crouched on Draco's other side and began to take his vitals. "What curse did you use on him?"

"I didn't do this!" Hermione yelped.

His head snapped up. "You said you were hurt."

"I said *he* was hurt."

Blaise's wand stopped moving and Hermione realized that he had come to help her, not Draco.

But when she took his face in her hands, his skin was cool and clammy, but not cold.

Draco was alive.

Just barely, but alive. Still in there, somewhere.

"Draco—" Her voice was tight with panic. "Draco, wake up. Please wake up. Oh God, please…"

She felt foolish, having stood there, banging on the door for him to let her in when she heard the same screams that haunted her dreams. In a desperate attempt to get to him, she turned the handle and the door opened.

He hadn't even locked it.

She hadn't even tried it.

Months of being hidden away in chains and locks had made Hermoine not even consider the most simple solution.

And it might have cost Draco his life.

His lips were bloodless, and his head rolled loosely in her hands, the muscles of his neck soft and… useless. She pushed his hair back from his face, sniffling and trying to keep her mind from spinning into a cyclone of anxiety. He was still here, somewhere. But wherever he had retreated to, was far away, deep down, and Hermione felt fear ring through her chest at the thought that she might not be able to find him in time.

"Draco, you have to wake up, *please!*"

Crookshanks let out a loud yowl and Calix cried from his perch on Draco's desk.

She pulled him into her lap and his wand rolled a little on the carpeted floor.

His wand…

Hermione grabbed it, hand shaking as her fingers wrapped around the base and she brought it up to his head.

" *Rennerverate!*" Her voice trembled and Draco stayed still. " *Rennerverate!*"

She bent down, pressing her ear to his chest, but couldn't hear anything over the sounds of her own gasping breaths. If his heart was still beating, it was faint.

She was losing him.

Calix screeched again and Hermione looked over to see Crookshanks pawing at the perch. "Crooks, stop that!" she scolded, upset at the distraction at a time like this. But Crookshanks ignored her; standing on his back legs, he reached a paw up and swatted at Calix who flapped his wings, lifting a few inches off his perch where Hermione saw a thin silver chain connected to his leg.

Hermione carefully placed Draco's head and upper body back down on the floor and then scrambled to her feet and over to Crookshanks and Calix.

Oh Godric, it felt *so good* to feel him inside her again. She wanted to twist, to grind, to push herself against his hand for more, but Draco held her down firmly.

"No no, Sweetheart," he chided. "Be a good little slut and beg me."

"Draco," she whined his name.

"That's it, kitten," he said encouragingly. Patronizingly. *Why* did that make her want to do it even more?

She placed her hand on his head and tried to push it in between her legs again.

Draco let her, but she felt him push back right before his mouth landed on her again. Hermione tried to tilt her hips up, but he pressed down heavily with his hand and kept her where she was.

He laughed. He laughed at her and she could feel the warmth of his breath cool against the heat of her center.

"Cute." Draco placed a soft kiss in a particularly sensitive area and Hermione cried out at the contact.

She looked down at him, chest heaving so badly that one of the straps had fallen down her shoulder, leaving her chest almost exposed.

Draco's mercury eyes were playful as he looked up at her, pulling his lip into his mouth and sucking on it at little while following a tantalizing trail with his finger.

The messy pile of emotions she had stacked up in the back of her mind teetered dangerously and then… they fell. They spilled all over her well-organized, compartmentalized mind. Every inch of her carefully curated thoughts were covered with dozens of emotions she hadn't let herself feel in so long. She thought she would drown in them, until she realized she could breathe easier than she had since June.

Hermione filled her chest and spoke.

"Kiss me," she said. "Touch me. Do everything, anything. Whatever you want. Do all the things you've ever thought about doing to me. Make me yours again."

He was moaning, eating her out and pumping his fingers into her, quicker with every stroke until Hermione was shaking. She tried to close her legs as the sensation between them built to an impossible level, but Draco shoved them back open, reclaiming what had been his all along.

It was almost too much. She felt like she was going to break apart, shatter and scatter into a million little pieces that Draco would lick up with his tongue. Oh God, his mouth… She could feel him breathing against her, sucking in hurried air through his nose so he didn't have to move his lips from her. His fingers curled and wiggled inside her, causing her muscles to clench and tighten.

Draco threw one of her legs up on his shoulder and pushed his fingers in faster. His tongue was strong and heavy, twisting and twirling in some pattern she didn't have enough attention to concentrate on.

"Fuck, you taste so good. I love it," he murmured against her, mumbling so his lips brushed over her clit with every word. Hermione looked down at him, mouth open and gasping and met his molten silver eyes. "Tell me you missed this. How I make you feel."

"I did," she said without hesitation. "Oh God, I missed it so much." Hermione ran her fingers through his hair and watched his lids lower slightly.

"And me? You missed me?" he asked, pausing just for a moment and then his tongue slithered out and over her again.

Hermione couldn't stop the broken moan that slipped from her and felt a lightness in her as she heard Draco's deep chuckle again. "Tell me, kitten. Tell me how much you missed being my pretty—" *lick* "little—" *kiss* "whore."

He brought her clit back in between his teeth and when she thought she would feel his soft tongue over it, instead she felt the sharp graze of his teeth.

"Draco! Draco, please!" Hermione cried, grabbing onto the hand on her lower stomach and squeezing his index finger with her fist as tortuous pleasure burned through her. It was like walking through cleansing fire, terrible and wonderful all the same time.

Hermione's head fell back.

"Tell me."

It was the same, deep commanding voice he had always used with her and Hermione felt herself falling all over again.

"I missed you. I missed you so much I couldn't breathe. I kept you in my head, the whole time," she said quickly, not caring about the desperation ringing clearly in her voice. "I would think about you, all the time. And I touched myself, thinking about you, but it wasn't like this. Nothing is *ever* like this."

She lifted her head back up to look at him as he blew a cool breath over her and made her shiver.

"Except you. Only you, Draco."

He gazed up at her, something deep and dark moving behind the silver shields of his eyes and for a moment, she thought he might leave her like this—wet and wanton. She had given in, given him what he wanted.

But she wasn't sorry. Not for a minute. Not for a second.

If loving Draco was a sin, then at least she'd have company in hell.

"I'm going to make you mean those words this time."

He heard her banging on the door as he closed it behind him.

He tried to focus on the sound of her fists, hoping it would replace the howls of agony that filled his head.

It didn't. Nothing ever would.

For as long as he lived, Draco would remember the sound of Theo screaming, blood bubbling up out of his throat and into his mouth as Draco tortured him to death.

Because he wasn't strong enough to give him a clean ending.

"Well done, Draco!" his aunt had whispered in his ear, her voice taking on an almost motherly tone.

It made him want to turn his skin inside out.

But even that wouldn't erase the mark or what he had done.

He didn't know if he was breathing or standing or moving or what. All he knew was that his wand was in his right hand and he was pressing the tip of it into his arm so hard that the wood began to bend ever so slightly.

He should snap it. Break it. Like he broke Theo.

He should do it to himself.

" *Crucio.*"

The pain was pure. Undiluted and unfiltered. Fuck, it had never felt like this before. It was always red hot, burning down into him, but this time… it was like white flames, so strong that he could feel it in his head, making his sway and sink. Then… nothing. White. Everything went white.

No color. No sound. No nothing.

No Granger.

Hermione.

" *DRACO!*"

Hermione fell to her knees beside him. Draco wasn't moving. His head had fallen to the side and his arm lay across his stomach; wand dropped at his side. Her eyes filled with tears as she saw the state his arm was in. It was bruised to almost black.

She was scared to touch it, scared that it might… that he might…

Theo's screams tore into Draco's ears. His hand shook, but not as much as Theo's body. He was screaming so much that he was ripping his throat open with it and trails of red smeared across his cheeks. Draco listened as the curse cracked his bones, snapping them and leaving his limbs heavy as they flopped with the dark energy coursing through him.

Theo stopped screaming and merely gurgled. A fountain of bright red blood shot out from his open mouth and splashed back down across his face.

By the time Draco was done, Theo was broken, loose and barely held together by his discolored skin, and bleeding freely from his ears, nose, mouth, and eyes.

Draco didn't let go.

He held the curse until it was jerking Theo's dead body in a sick parody of life.

This was his future.

A body.

A boy.

He dropped his wand, unable to look at anything that wasn't Theo bleeding out onto the early spring grass.

And now Draco was laying here, in Granger's arms, undeserving of her touch. Of her.

There was only one thing he deserved now.

Draco threw her arm from where it was draped across his torso and unlocked the drawer where he kept his wand.

"Draco?" Granger said sleepily; sweetly.

He wished she'd shut the fuck up and never say his name like that again. He wanted her to scream at him, tell him he was a monster, a murderer.

He wanted to give her his wand and let her end it for him.

Being killed by Granger would be a fitting end. There was something poetic about being killed by something so pure.

"Where are you going?" She sat up, rubbing her eyes.

"Go back to sleep."

"No." Oh, *fuck* her. "What are you doing? Where are you going?"

"Nowhere." He walked to the door.

"Draco—" Granger was on her feet. "Don't ignore me!"

She grabbed his shoulder and Draco shrugged her off, unlocking the door.

"No!" How could she sound so cute and so fucking annoying at the same time?

Granger pulled on him again and Draco spun, shoving her roughly back from him. "Don't *fucking* touch me!"

It happened as soon as his tongue hit her again, flicking back and forth quickly, his fingers sliding in and out of her at the same pace and Hermione held onto his hand and head, grounding herself as she felt like breaking open. Breaking free.

Her legs shook, her hips jerked, but Draco held her down, pushing his face against her as her thighs tried to close around him.

"Oh please please please!" she chanted. "Don't stop, oh Draco… please don't stop!"

Her whole body convulsed, almost unable to take what was happening to it.

Hermione lost all control. And Draco was there to take it.

He kept at her, licking and flicking, not letting up for even a *second* as she shook. It wasn't until she was whimpering, almost overcome, did he slow and soften the hard muscle of his tongue against her into gentle strokes, lapping softly to keep her blood buzzing.

She tried to catch her breath, but found even that laborious. Hermione sunk back against the velvet cushion of the chaise, feeling like she had drunk a whole bottle of Ogden's rather than just a couple of mouthfuls.

"Draco." His name was little more than a whisper on her lips and he hummed as he made another swipe with his tongue. " *Oh!"* Hermione pushed lightly on his head as the sensation sent a shock up her spine.

Draco pushed her hand away. " *No."*

Her eyes opened and met his, burning like ash-covered coals.

"You don't just get to just *stop."* There was a dangerous undertone to his voice. "I am going to make you come again, pet. And again, and again. I am going to make you come until you cry for me."

After all, he had said he had forgiven her all those times, but only after he exacted his punishment and now, she knew exactly what that was going to be.

"Until you *beg."*

He wouldn't hurt her, but that didn't mean Draco wouldn't torture her in his own way.

Hermione made a weak noise as he pulled his fingers from her and lowered his tongue to her entrance, flattening it as he forced it inside. Everything started again, but this time, Draco was rougher, digging his hands into her hips and thighs, prying them apart and craning his neck to get at her better, deeper, harder.

Every nerve in her body was alight, surging with the remnants left from her recent orgasm as they sparked up again, practically setting her on fire from the inside. She twisted, trying to take some of the pressure away because it was about to break her right open.

Hermione grabbed onto his hair, trying to pull him away for just a moment, to give herself some measure of relief, but Draco was having none of it. He grabbed her hand, pulled it down and pressed her own fingers against her clit.

"That's it," he breathed out, voice heavy with dark excitement. "That's what you want, isn't it?"

Hermione moaned weakly as he moved her fingers rapidly over herself.

"Is this what it felt like when you touched yourself? Pretending it was me?"

She closed her eyes, losing herself to the feeling again.

"Did you think about me playing with your little clit? Teasing it just the way I know you like?" He moved her fingers in a tight circle.

"Yes," she breathed out. "I thought about you and I… I did what you'd tell me to."

She didn't have to see Draco to know that his stupid smug smirk was plastered all over his face, but she did anyway. And she was right. He was grinning wolfishly up at her, lips shining with moisture.

"That's my girl. Now let me do it for you."

He lowered his head back down and fucked her with his tongue as he forced her to massage her clit until she was screaming and shaking again.

"Draco…" Hermione whimpered, coming down from her second orgasm. "Please…"

"Please what, kitten?" he asked playfully, kissing along her folds.

Her brain felt like it was nothing but a misty haze inside her head. No more busy thoughts. No more racing back and forth. No nothing except for the occasional shiver as Draco brushed his lips against her again.

"Such a sweet little pussy," he said as he parted her open again.

"Draco…"

"That's it, Sweetheart," he said, voice rough with desire. "Whimper my name like the good little slut you are."

He kissed her clit softly. Gently. And Hermione lifted her hips for more.

"Because you can't stop coming, can you?"

She moaned in place of a verbal response.

"That's right," he purred and nibbled on her with his lips. "You want it again, don't you?"

Yes .

No.

Only Draco's old Seeker skills allowed him to move out of the way in time as the green streak of light narrowly missed him.

Theo could do it. He *had* done it. Draco had watched him kill McLaggen right in front of him. And now Theo was going to do it to him too.

Theo raised his wand again, but Draco's was already up and aimed at the one spot Theo always left open.

" *Crucio!*"

It wasn't the killing curse, but it was something.

Theo dropped to the ground with a shriek of pain. Draco didn't dare let the curse up in fear that Theo might be able to cast one of his own. He could feel the power flickering as Theo's screams grew louder, his body jerking and scratching against the broken floor.

Bellatrix was cackling, jumping up and down in the corner of his eye. Draco focused his attention back on Theo, spasming in front of him as the curse rolled through his body. His limbs were cut from flailing and leaked blood onto the fresh grass.

Draco pulled down the marble walls and let his emotions rush forward.

He let every ounce of his hatred, his loathing, his anger, his *pain* flow freely into the curse. It was so strong, so powerful, that he had a hard time keeping his arm straight and his wand pointed at Theo's chest. It wanted to *move* , to spread the curse around the entire room until everyone and everything in it was screaming in a cacophony of agony. For him.

The power of it was intoxicating. Sweat dripped down the side of his face and Draco ground his teeth together. The force of it was searing his hand, making him feel like he was on fire. But it didn't feel half as warm as she did. If Granger was the sun, this was a distant star in the night, burning low. Burning out.

Draco dropped the curse, his body sagging forward.

" *Kill him!*" His Master was commanding it, but… he couldn't. Draco couldn't. "Or are you a Blood Traitor too?"

Yes. He was. He had tried to get Dumbledore off the tower. He had tried to run. He had hunted down Granger instead of Potter and when he did have Scarhead in his grasp, Draco had let him go.

And if his loyalty was being called into question, the Dark Lord would be able to break through those weak walls and find Granger hiding in his mind and then in his room.

He didn't have a choice, not when it came to her. He never had.

Draco's throat was tight, but he forced the word through anyways. " *Crucio!*"

"Theo got himself stunned before he could even raise his wand. He does not deserve to wear your mark." Draco heard the breath leave Theo sharply. "He doesn't deserve to call himself a Death Eater. In fact, I have reason to believe he *let* Potter do it."

"You're fucking crazy!" Theo shouted, voice rising in protest.

"Carrow vouched for him. So he has been trained, but he got himself knocked out and left me to duel alone." Draco lifted his head up, making sure the bruise on his cheek was visible. "Almost as if he *wanted* Potter to get away. Convenient, getting stunned and only waking up *after* Potter was out of range."

"Draco," Theo panted. "You… What are you doing?!"

Draco didn't look at him. He couldn't.

"He's betrayed you, My Lord. He's a filthy Blood Traitor. He practically admitted he'd turn for a girl last year when we were in school. The fact that she's Potter's best mate, well, that can't be a coincidence."

"YOU FUCKING LIAR!"

Draco half expected Theo to attack him, but instead he was backing away, almost tripping over his own feet. The fear on his face was evident. Theo trusted Draco. And Draco was turning on him.

The Dark Lord's thin lips curved back over his teeth. "If he is what you say, then kill him."

Draco's stomach turned to ice and sank somewhere deep inside him. His arms went cold and his legs turned numb. Draco didn't breathe. The only indication that he had not turned to stone was the rushed pounding of his heart in his throat, choking him.

He turned towards Theo and raised his wand.

"Draco—" Theo's tongue was hanging out of his mouth as he sucked in large panicked breaths. "Why?"

For her. It was all for her.

" *Avada Kedavra!*"

Nothing happened. Draco stared down at his wand, stunned. It hadn't worked. It hadn't fucking worked.

" *Avada Kedavra!*"

He couldn't do it. Unforgivable curses could only be cast with intention. He had to *mean* it. And Draco didn't want to kill Theo.

Draco watched Theo's face turn from pale terror to red rage, then he dropped into his dueling formation.

" *Avada Kedavra!*"

She did, but she wasn't sure she could. She was so tired, worn out from the experience so far. It had been a long time since she had a release quite like that. Not to mention a second one.

"Please…"

"Aw, you haven't forgotten your manners." Draco sounded much too pleased with himself, but Hermione wasn't able to summon the will to care. "Good girl."

He returned his lips back to her, enveloping them around her clit as he lazily flicked his tongue over it.

Draco took his time this round. Teasing her gracefully by alternating between soft strokes on her clit and sliding his tongue down to her core to dip it in. He groaned, almost as if he was in pain, but when Hermione would whimper, he would move a little faster, building her up until she was eager and practically rubbing herself on his face.

Draco grabbed her wrists and pinned her hands to her sides.

"Tell me what it feels like," he said huskily, "to be such a helpless whore who can't do anything but come on my tongue?"

Hermione cried, needing him to finish what he started. He had given her enough time to catch her breath and then lose it again during his ministrations.

"Good," she choked. "It feels *so good* , Draco. Please… just…"

His eyes shone. "You want more, don't you?"

She nodded, thick curls bouncing around her face.

"Poor little slut, had no one to lick your pussy for you, did you?"

"No," she breathed out. "No one."

"But now you do." Draco grinned salaciously.

It was too much. All too much. She thought being with Draco meant giving in, giving up. But that wasn't what this was at all. She was taking. She was taking Draco back and she wasn't going to let him go this time.

"You. I have you. Please. Please lick it, Draco."

"Mmm, I love hearing that." He closed his eyes for a moment and when he opened them, they were bright and sharp. "Hearing you beg like a good whore ought to." His lips hovered over her so close that she could feel him breathing. "Is that what you are? Are you my good little whore again?"

She knew what he was really asking.

And she knew exactly what she was doing when she said, "Yes. Yes, Draco. I'm your whore. I'm whatever you want me to be. I'm yours."

He surprised her again by not devouring her as he had earlier tonight. Draco looked up at her from in between her legs. "I really fucking love you, you know that?"

Hermione's heart swelled in her chest. "I know. I know, Draco. I know."

And she did. Because when he put his mouth to her this time, she felt the words he was carving with his tongue. ' *I love you I love you I love you I love you'.*

Hermione came with her heart beating wildly inside her. She came screaming his name.

Draco didn't give her a moment's respite before pushing his fingers back inside her and acting like he had no intentions of stopping.

Her cries continued as well, body reeling as the overwhelming sensations rocked through her again and again as he moved his hand while keeping his fingers fully sheathed in her.

"Fucking *come* , Hermione. Come for me and love me and *be* with me."

Her voice broke against the waves of pleasure he was sending her under, but she managed a breathy, "Yes."

Draco groaned loudly and she felt him hang his head, his hair tickling the skin of her thigh. She felt her body tighten, sending her over the edge quicker than all the times this evening and she glanced down at the same time Draco looked up. Their eyes met, locking onto each other like they would never let go.

His voice was little more than a growl. " *Mine."*

Hermione fell back, a weakened scream rising up out of her throat as Draco bit down on the tender inside of her thigh. She was coming, unable to stop it as he bit down harder. He drove his teeth into her, almost hard enough to break the skin. At the very moment when she felt he would hurt her, Draco's lips closed in, sucking and covering the imprint of his teeth with the same bruised mark he had left on her the first night she told him she loved him.

And as her head fell to the side, and her eyes closed, darkness taking her, the only thought that passed through her mind was that she wanted to tell him again.

And again.

And again.

They stopped half a dozen feet away from Lord Voldemort, several Death Eaters already surrounding him.

"Where is Potter?" he hissed, voice high and cold.

Draco had stood next to Theo while they were reprimanded plenty of times before and could feel the energy around him shift as Theo's nerves began to take over. He always ratted them out, hoping that his honesty would buy them a less severe punishment. In a way, Draco understood. Theo's father was even more vicious than Lucius in his beatings and Theo wasn't as good as Draco at slithering out of situations.

Draco knelt, bowing his head for a moment and saw the snake whip its tail quickly, interested in him once more.

"My Lord, Potter ambushed us. He—"

The pain coiled around him, so tight he couldn't breathe and Draco fell over, crushing the soft blades of grass underneath him.

At least it was over quickly. The Dark Lord wanted answers before he continued. He needed to know how badly to punish them after all.

"Master," Theo's voice broke over the word and Draco forced himself back to his feet, the tips of his fingers brushing over the broken floor as he tried to catch his breath and get upright before Theo had the bright idea to say anything else.

But this time Draco wasn't fast enough.

"He was there! But… he overpowered us and—"

"One boy," the Dark Lord spoke quietly, but not softly. "Escaped the two of you and you still have the audacity to call yourselves my Death Eaters?"

Draco could see the burning rage in the Dark Lord's blood red eyes and it made his blood run cold.

They weren't getting out of here in one piece.

Lord Voldemort was desperate to end the war, to solidify his control and the longer Potter was out there was just more time for rebellion to stir and foreign forces to marshal.

There would be no mercy for them, no second chances. Snakes didn't get nine lives. But Granger wasn't a snake and she didn't deserve to die just because Draco fucked up. Again.

Thinking quickly, he said, "It wasn't the two of us."

Draco felt every eye in the room on him, but none more than the crimson pits of his Master, locked onto his own. Draco pulled his cracked walls close to him, hoping they would hold just long enough to keep the selected memories in place. The snake raised itself up, nosing the air as if it was trying to make out if Draco was lying.

"Fuck, Sweetheart," Draco panted as she moved her hand to cup his balls and slid her lips farther down his length. "You're doing so good, yeah, mmm. *More.*"

Granger did as she was told and held herself down on him. He could feel the back of her throat pressing against the tip of his cock and tightening, trying to keep him out.

None of that, not anymore.

Draco grabbed a fistful of her hair and pulled her up a little, seeing the tears lining her beautiful eyes and then slid her head back down forcefully, breaking through the tight muscles and into her warm throat.

"Oh shit, yes!"

Granger gave a small little moan and Draco held her there for a moment more, just enjoying the slick warmth of her mouth before letting her up.

She pulled back, coughing a little, and tears spilled over onto her red cheeks. Then, she smiled again and Draco's heart might have caught on fire. He didn't have time to check because she lowered her head once more and ran her tongue from the base of his cock to the tip and licked at it a few times like it was her favorite treat.

Which, he decided, it was. She must really love him to worship his dick the way she was right now, kissing it from base to tip, sucking on it and flicking her tongue back and forth.

Draco took a shaking breath, muscles tightening into sharp lines and making his scars stand out even starker than they normally did. But she didn't care. Granger ran her hand up his body, sliding her soft palm up to his chest, and then dragged her nails back down to grab his cock and pump it into her mouth.

Yeah. She loved him.

No one sucked a dick like that without being at least a *little* into the person it was attached to.

And no one sucked a dick like Granger.

"Don't swallow," Draco rasped and she glanced up at him, nonplussed. Poor little smart girl didn't understand. That was okay. He'd tell her what to do. "Hold it in your mouth. I want to see it."

He could tell she was feeling shy about it, so Draco reached down to run his hand over the side of her head, pushing the tips of his fingers into her caramel curls. "You're so beautiful. So I want to see my come sitting in that pretty mouth of yours, okay?"

Granger's cheeks flushed and he was sure that if his cock hadn't still been in her mouth, she would be biting her lip right now. He almost pulled her off just so he could see it, but she felt too good. And he was close.

She nodded and he brushed a few of the tears off her face with his thumb, sticking it in his mouth and savoring the taste of them, of her, as she bent her head back to him again.

Draco let out a deep breath and lowered the timbre of his voice. "Suck it, whore."

Granger obeyed. Draco groaned, his whole body stiffening until the only part of him that didn't feel solid was the rush of blood racing down into his dick. He was close, so close, and Granger was working him to the point of popping.

His balls tightened, heavy and ready, but Draco held on just a little bit longer. How many times had he thought about her with his cock in her mouth and now it was finally happening again. Just like before.

No, better than before.

So much better.

Granger gave a small moan as his come shot into her mouth and that wonderful, sweet little noise made him lose all sense of composure. Grabbing onto the back of her head to hold it in place, Draco bucked his hips up, fucking her mouth until he was gasping and shaking. He fell back against the pillow, spent and spoiled.

Granger was sitting up, wiping at her bottom lip.

He couldn't sit up yet, but he could bring her down to him. His hand closed around her wrist and she gave a muffled cry as Draco pulled her down and against him, wrapping his arm around her frame and twisting on his side to hover over her.

She gave him a cheeky smile, keeping her mouth closed.

Draco grinned down at her, lids heavy, but heart light, and tapped her swollen lips. "Let me see, kitten."

Granger blinked her big doe eyes innocently and Draco almost didn't even care about seeing it as long as he got to keep looking into them, but then, she opened her lips and pushed her tongue up to show him she had done what he had kept his creamy white come sitting in her mouth, ready for his inspection and approval.

Draco ran two fingers along her tongue, rubbing against the soft skin as she stuck her tongue out further. He pulled back, letting a thin trail connect from her mouth to the tip of his finger and Granger eagerly leaned up, licking it off of his fingers and pulling it back into her mouth.

Draco was stunned.

He was pretty sure his own mouth was hanging open as Granger looked up at him, giggling with his come on her tongue.

"You are so fucking sexy," he breathed out. "Now be a good girl and swallow it."

Her lips snapped together and he watched her throat dip, making his heart skip a beat. Granger proudly opened her mouth back up with a small "Aah!" to show him she had done exactly what he told her to.

He damn near asked her to marry him right then. He wanted to. He wanted her, this, forever. It wasn't the first time the thought crossed his mind, but now it lingered a bit longer before reality seeped back in and reminded him that the only legal claim he could ever lay on her would be that of ownership, not matrimony.

At least not in this world, but as far as Draco was concerned, Granger—Hermione—was his whole world. So it would be a new fantasy. Which was fitting, since she was making all his other ones come true.

Draco fondled her tits, rubbing his hands over them gently, careful not to revive the bruises he had left on them earlier today.

Granger sighed, rolling her head on the pillow, tangled curls spread out around her like a halo.

He couldn't give her a ring, but he could still give her what she deserved.

"Are you sore?" he asked.

"Yeah, a… a little," she admitted sheepishly. As if she had anything to be embarrassed about.

She'd taken everything he had given her and begged for more. Draco couldn't have asked for anything—*anyone* —better.

"A warm bath would help with that." He nuzzled his face into her neck and hair, breathing in deeply. *Hermione.* "You've got a long night ahead of you, Sweetheart."

He'd never been much for aftercare, only doing what was required, but Granger was different. He *wanted* to take care of her. Draco wanted to give back what she had given to him.

"Can we have bubbles?"

We . Good little kitten was already including him in the plans. God, she really was perfect.

He palmed her chest. "Can't see your tits if there are bubbles." Draco nibbled on her collarbone.

She whined. He lifted his head at the noise and oh shit. Granger was pouting with her bottom lip poking out, red and still swollen from sucking greedily at him just minutes ago. He had to stop himself from reaching up and biting it.

Actually, no. He didn't.

Fuck, it was that happy little smile he loved so much. The one where her rosy cheeks pressed up into her eyes and her sweet lips spread wide so he could see her pretty pink tongue lying right behind her teeth. Draco slid his hands over her waist, resting them on her hips, squeezing them possessively.

She kept smiling, tucking her hair behind her ears and even letting a small laugh come through. It made her eyes shine even brighter. Brighter than they ever had in any of his fantasies. None of them, not a single fucking one, was as good as this. As good as her.

His girl.

His beautiful, smart, funny, hot, wonderful girl. His sexy little slut.

Draco reached around Granger's back and smacked her ass, making her jump up with a small cry.

She landed on the bed next to him, crashing into the tumbled blankets, still laughing.

Draco grinned at her as she blinked her big doe eyes back up at him. He stretched his arm back, resting his head on it and suggestively stroked his cock with his other hand. Granger glanced down at it and bit her lip, an eager hunger in her eyes.

Raising one brow slightly, Draco lowered his voice just a little. "Come on, pet. You know you want to."

Granger's face flushed with color. And excitement. She got on her hands and knees and—holy fucking shit… She *crawled* down to his dick.

Oh hell. Oh God. Oh *fuck*…

Fuck everything that wasn't his fucking girl in his fucking bed who was just about to suck his cock like she was *made* to.

Draco's lids fluttered as warmth closed around him.

Made for him.

All his. No one else's.

"Oh, Granger," he said, voice almost breaking as she wrapped her hand around him, moving it in time with her mouth. "Yeah, suck it like that."

Her tongue flicked against him as she hollowed her cheeks, pulling herself back only to sink down and let her lips meet her fingers, tightening around him as best as she could.

He watched her tits move, swaying just a little as she moved, using her whole body as momentum to push her mouth farther on his cock. How the fuck was this happening? How the hell did he get this? Get her?

He didn't care. All that mattered was that he had her. And that they would never, *ever,* be separated again.

He'd bring the whole fucking Manor down around them before he let her out.

His smile returned, pulling at the corners of his mouth and he felt as Granger took in a deep breath and then released it. She nuzzled her face into him and curled her leg over his, covering the clawed mess of skin left by Greyback with her soft, warm thigh. Her mark against his scar.

Yeah. He was in heaven. By some mistake, he was sure, but he wasn't about to point it out and correct it.

He never said he *deserved* to be here, just that he was.

And he was never, *ever* leaving.

Draco finally had his girl and as far as he was concerned, they could wait out the rest of the war hidden away here, in their bed.

He'd put the bars of the cage up and throw his wand out, locking them both inside together.

Right where they fucking belonged. *Together.*

His heart sped up a little. Granger had come back to him and it was going to be like this, just like this, from now on.

Oh. He was getting hard again.

Draco lifted his head up from the arm curled behind it. Granger had gotten enough rest to be refreshed enough to give him a blowjob.

Draco pushed his fingers into her hair, massing her scalp, and reached with his other hand to take hers, sliding it a few inches down to where is cock was waiting.

"Wake up, kitten," he purred and Granger gave a sleepy little moan. Draco smiled, his eyes closing for a second at the wonderful sound. The feel of her hand on his cock made it harden some more. He pulled her hair back from around her face and she pushed it against his side again as he lightly caressed her cheek. "Wanna give me head?"

"Mmm, Draco…" She moaned lightly. "I'm tired."

"I know, Sweetheart. What if I promise to come fast? Or you can just open your mouth and I'll fuck it a little."

She breathed out a small laugh and languorously pushed herself up some. Draco did his best not to look at her tits, just sitting there all pink and perky… He wanted them in his mouth. And now, he could do just that.

Draco grabbed her and hauled her body up his, ignoring the small squeal of surprise as he lifted her into the air and sat her down on his stomach, the tip of his cock brushing nicely against her ass cheeks.

"Maybe a lot."

Granger smiled.

Draco growled and latched his teeth onto her lip, pressing them in and pulling on it. Her hands landed on his chest, the scars flaring with heat as she touched them. Draco gave her juicy little lip one final bite and released it.

She pulled it into her mouth, sucking on it.

He would never get tired of seeing her lying underneath him, looking so innocent when she was just as fucking filthy as he was.

"Yes, we can have bubbles." He rolled his eyes.

She smiled. For him. And Draco smiled back.

"Now what do you say, pet?"

She batted her thick lashes. "Thank you, sir."

Holy fucking shit. He didn't care that he had just come. He was going to fuck her in that bath and make her thank him for every thrust.

Draco smacked her thigh. "Go be a good girl and get it running."

He released her and Granger jumped up, bounding off to the bathroom.

Draco sank back against the mattress, hand on his stomach, his dark mark turned down to hide it. Tilting his head back to look above him, Draco saw the chains hanging from the headboard; shackles open, but able to be locked back together in a moment. He would eventually have to return to some semblance of work again. At the very least, he would have to take care of his charges down in the cellar.

He glanced at the bathroom where he could hear water rushing, his rooms and amenities long since charmed to obey Granger's wishes as well, but only through his good graces. She was still a… guest here. She didn't belong. Yet her existence was leaps and bounds more comfortable than the two people Draco was also responsible for. Maybe he should allow them to bathe too.

The Dark Lord surely couldn't punish him for allowing that small mercy. It would be a mercy for them as well not to have to endure the rank smell whenever his Master ordered him back down there again.

What would Granger think if she knew that Lovegood was being held captive a few floors below her? And… what did *he* think about that? He'd never really liked the girl but, then again, he'd never really known her either. Just some weird Ravenclaw that thought the sun shone out of Potter's ass and shopped for jewelry in the greenhouses. She was idealistic and *dumb.* Stupid enough to follow that idiot to the Ministry to risk her neck for no good reason. They could have been killed. Hell, Granger almost was.

Draco sat up and his sexy girl came to stand in the doorway of the bathroom, leading against it a little with a towel wrapped around her and that stupid green toothbrush hanging out of her mouth.

She could never know. And with her locked up in here, she never would. He was safe. They were safe. Here. Nowhere else.

Because in here he could be who she wanted him to be, but out there…

Out there, he was who he had to be.

"Go ahead, Sweetheart. I'll be there in a minute."

She smiled around the toothbrush. Cute, even if it was a Muggle thing.

"Don't take too long." Granger turned and headed back in, throwing the towel out the door and onto the floor.

He wouldn't. He just wanted to get a few candles and… he looked up at the chains hanging above his head.

No. He'd save those for later. Now, he was going to take care of her, just like he had on the first night he had brought her here. Run his hands over her body softly, gently. Relax all her sore muscles he had used earlier. And then fuck her slowly as the bubbles popped around them. Then after he'd pampered her and treated her like the queen she was, he'd chain her up and fuck her like a whore.

The sound of water seemed to grow louder and Draco almost didn't hear the thuds on the other side of the door. But it was enough to jolt him from his bliss-induced haze and throw him back into the survival mindset that had gotten him through everything so far.

Draco stood up and quickly pulled on the first items of clothing he could find, ignoring the fact that they were his hunting gear. He shrugged on a coat over a clean white shirt and shoved his bare feet into his boots, flicking his wand to lace them as he started towards the door.

At the last minute he waved his wand over his shoulder and the door to the bathroom closed softly.

Draco slammed the bedroom door shut.

The loud banging continued, coming from outside the double doors of his study. He knew who it was before he even opened the door. Only the snakehead of his Father's walking stick made that kind of noise. The banging didn't cease until he wrenched the door open.

"Father—"

"You fucking little slut," he growled, working his hand over himself and rubbing the head of his thick cock against her clit. Granger squirmed and he watched sparks shoot off deep in her eyes.

"This pussy is *mine,"* he rasped and came on top of her wet folds. "You like that? Getting your cunt coated in my come? You dirty fucking whore…" Draco released her throat and she gasped down breath once more. " *Come."*

Granger did as she was told. Her body gave itself over to him, surrendered to him as he painted her clit white, coaxing more from himself as he slid his cock against her, emptying himself on her instead of inside where he belonged.

Granger's moans quieted, turning into wanton gasps as Draco lowered himself back against her, covering her body with his own.

And then, he kissed her.

Not a hungry, rough kiss like the ones he had bestowed on her before, but a deep, passionate one. His blood was still pumping, but it flowed with ease now. He was tired, but not too tired to suck her sore lip, massaging it between his. He had always run after their encounters, terrified by the open feeling in his chest, but now… Now he filled it with her.

And Granger let him.

Draco Malfoy had died.

He had died and gone to heaven.

It was the only logical explanation as to why Granger was lightly dozing on top of him, her head on his stomach and her arm thrown over his hips while he lazily played with her hair. Draco picked up a twisted curl and let it drop back down into the tangles before doing it again, running the lock of hair over his fingers and smiling at the feel of it.

He looked down over his chest, his smile wavering a little at the sight of his scars. Still, Granger hadn't minded them. He had to admit, it felt nice to have her tits bouncing against them, making the blood underneath them move quicker every time her nipples brushed across one of them.

Draco ripped her legs open, throwing them wide and shoved her further onto the bed. Then, he dove. He crushed her body with his, remembering his scars were there only when her soft skin pressed against them. He leaned back only far enough to angle himself *just* right and slid into her warmth again.

"Oh God!" Her eyes squeezed shut.

Draco hovered over her. "No Granger, only *me.*"

Her eyes flew open, molten chocolate that he wanted to lick up. "Draco!"

He groaned, snapping his hips against hers and unleashing himself on her. Giving her everything, everything he had held back, everything he had saved—for her. While she merely curled her nails into him, holding on as her body absorbed every one of his deep thrusts.

Granger shattered with a glorious scream. Draco bit down on her neck, sucking and licking and leaving marks all along her skin, one right after another as she came, cried, and weakened under him. His sweet girl. His whole heart. Right here in his arms again.

And never fucking leaving him this time.

"I love you," Draco said in a low voice, breathing in her rich scent of cinnamon and vanilla. "Fuck, Granger, I love you."

Her voice quivered as she said, "I love you too."

His spine stiffened, a heavy pressure of need weighing down on him.

"Shit, I'm going to come. I'm going to come for you, Hermione."

"Don't!"

What… the FUCK. She couldn't possibly be serious right now.

Draco felt her tighten with nervousness and it did *nothing* to help him hold back from spilling everything inside her warm little cunt.

"I stopped taking the potion. You… you can't."

Oh fucking hell. Draco heard a small desperate moan and realized it came from *him.*

"I—" He was still fucking her. He couldn't stop.

"Draco, don't."

It was sheer torture.

Oh, *fuck* this.

He pulled himself from her with a pained hiss. He wrapped one hand around her throat and closed in on it, watching her eyes go wide again in that way he loved. Good. He tightened his hold, knowing she would feel it on all the bruised spots he had marked her with.

Draco stopped short. Lucius looked almost rabid, eyes wide and wild in his head, hands shaking, but not from a tremor of a fit, but from excitement. Anticipation.

He grabbed onto Draco's shirt, balling it in his fist.

"Draco, you must come quickly," he rushed out, his words slipping over one another, and Draco could smell the Madeira wine Lucius was so fond of on his breath. He tried to pull away, but his father leaned in closer. "We have him!" Lucius' voice shook and Draco went still. "We have him—We have Potter!"

Hermione sat on the edge of the tub, her feet dangling in the water. She waited, but Draco did not follow her in. Huffing, she pulled her legs out; rivulets of water running down her calves as she yanked the door open.

The bedroom was empty.

She stepped inside. The bed was still rumpled and unmade, but the wardrobe was open.

And Draco's Death Eater uniform was gone.

Hermione's heart sunk inside her until it hit a strange bubbling concoction of worry and fear.

Her lace dress was still on the floor and she picked it up, slipping it over herself. At some point in the last few months, the small scraps of thin fabric had almost become comforting. In a weird, confusing way. She didn't dwell on it, not when her brain was already rushing ahead with a thousand thoughts about where Draco was or could be.

He wouldn't… he wouldn't have left her here, not after…

But he had. The evidence was indisputable. She didn't like being wrong; she wasn't used to it. And right now Hermione refused to accept that she was. Draco *wouldn't* have left her to go do whatever he did when he wasn't here.

He wouldn't. She trusted him.

Before she could even try to come up with an alternative to the empty room and missing clothes, her attention was stolen by the raised voices coming from the study.

Draco's and… someone else who sounded very much like him. Slurred yet frantic, arguing against Draco's deep and controlled voice.

"It's not."

"But it could be! We need you to confirm the identity."

Hermione grabbed the doorknob and it twisted under her hand as she whispered incantations to break through the wards by force. She didn't have time to dance around it right now. Hermione wasn't going to let Draco just sink back to the depths from which she had dove down to retrieve him.

And if he wanted to throw his life away then he would have to throw hers away with it. Hermione cracked open the door, peering through into the study.

Draco had his arms crossed over his chest, head thrown to the side with a look of bored disdain across his features. Still, she could see the tightness in his jaw. His father stood in front of him, his back to her.

Hermione pulled back, flattening herself against the wall as Draco's cold eyes roved across the room to the slightly ajar door.

"I don't have time for you to drag me around for every specky—"

Thud.

"You will do as you are commanded!"

"Get the fuck off of me," Draco growled.

"Waste of my blood!" There was the sound of a fist hitting flesh and Hermione's heart beat faster, pushing cold fear through her veins.

"If you touch me again," Draco said in a low, dangerous voice, "I'll fucking kill you."

"You dare raise your wand to me? To *me* ? Your *father* ?!" Lucius sounded crazed, deranged and Hermione began to worry what he might do to Draco. Or, what Draco might do to him.

Draco slowly snarled, " *Fuck* you."

There was a heavy, wet thud quickly followed by a groan and the sound of shelves, books, and something much heavier crashing to the ground.

Had… Had Draco just cursed his father? Or had he…

Hermione peered around the edge of the door, unable to stop herself and needing to see what had happened. One way or the other.

The world grew smaller around her and all she seemed to be able to see was Draco crumpled against one of the bookcases along the wall, books and relics tossed around him as thick, red blood leaked from his head onto his white shirt in fat drops.

Lucius stood over him, his walking stick raised to strike again.

"NO!"

"Oh God," she said in a high pitched voice, reaching her hands down her body, "Draco…"

His heart beat unhealthily fast in his chest and his cock jumped, twitching and eager as his name passed between her bruised lips.

But she didn't follow it up with eternal declarations of love or promises to suck his cock everyday as penance. She was holding out on him, not begging him or letting herself come until he… until he *made* her.

Silly girl. She might be brilliant, but he was deviant.

"Is this what my pretty little whore wants?" Draco slipped his hand in between her legs, pushing his fingers back in her and reaching up to thrum her clit. His eyes slid to the purple bruise on the inside of her thigh, the one he had left again last night. He reached out and touched it. Granger cried out in pain and pleasure.

Draco wasn't sure he had ever heard a more beautiful sound.

She looked half wild. Thick, wild curls spread out around her, her hands fisted the duvet under her, clawing into it as she had done him. Granger arched her back, pushing her hips up and fucking his hand, all the while moaning like a filthy fucking whore.

"Draco!"

His whore. His girl. His fucking—

"That's it," Draco panted, watching Granger toss and turn on his bed. "You're close now, aren't you?"

She groaned, biting her lip and wincing as she fought the feeling. Draco laughed darkly. Such a sweet girl, thinking she could hold out on him. But Draco had spent months—*years*—thinking of every way he could make her come. He wasn't going to let her stubborn little ass stop him from getting what he wanted.

And what he wanted was her, shaking and screaming his name.

"You look so hot like this," Draco admitted, needing to gather his thoughts to stop himself from just… attacking her. "I love hearing you beg, Sweetheart. Beg me. Beg me for my cock and I'll give it to you."

Her eyes flew open, full of sparks and flames as she bit down harder on her lip, sending a shiver through her body and making her walls flutter around his fingers. Draco drove them in deeper.

"Please," she gasped. "Please. Please!"

"Please what, kitten?" He smiled, unable to stop it as it spread across his face.

She fell back and gave a few whining pants. " *Please* fuck my pussy. It's yours. *I'm* yours."

Granger barely had time to take a breath before he had pulled her lacy dress over her head and took her tawny curls in his fist, pulling her head back roughly so her spine curved, stretching down to her round little ass. Beautiful. She was so goddamn beautiful.

He smacked his hand across her ass and savored the small yelp she emitted as the creamy skin there flushed red, each of his fingers perfectly splayed out across her in a dark imprint.

His.

He did it again, and again, pulling back on her hair until she was almost sitting up, tits bared and shaking a little every time his hand came down against her. He could have spent the rest of the day and half the night teasing and torturing her body until she was senseless, and he might still do that, but first, he needed to take her, have her, love her again.

"Had enough?" Draco murmured silky, rubbing his palm over her heated skin and down in between her legs to find a wet mess waiting for him.

Shit. She still looked so innocent, so pure, but the fact that Granger got off on him beating her just as much as he did made Draco grab at her hip possessively, digging his fingers in around the bone. She was all he wanted, his only.

"I want…" Granger managed between heavy breaths.

Draco leaned down, stepping on either side of her legs and lowering his face to rest beside hers. Her cheek was warm and Draco trailed his other hand over her ass and in between her legs, lightly grazing over her cunt and feeling the same heat there.

Granger swallowed as best she could with her head pulled back. He watched the skin of her throat move, knowing that her pulse was racing right under the surface. Just like his. "I want you inside me."

Draco played with her tits, rolling her nipple between his fingers and pulling on it, only letting it go when she struggled and whimpered.

"Beg me."

His cock was aching, so fucking hard it hurt, and all he wanted to do was bury it back inside her and never fucking take it out. For some modicum of relief, he rested it against her red ass cheeks, reaching down to spank it against her a few times.

Letting her hair go, Draco allowed Granger to drop back to the bed. She twisted around, turning on her back and looking up at him. Her cheeks were flushed with want, lips open and gasping and her eyes… *goddamn* her eyes were deep, dark pools; thick and wet with lust.

The word was out of her mouth before she could stop it. Her thoughts always had been quicker than her actions, yet somehow she had pulled the door open and taken two steps into the study. Hopefully Godric Gryffindor was proud of her boldness because, right now, Hermione was terrified of it.

Lucius spun around, pale grey eyes sickeningly bright as they flashed at her.

" *You!"*

Hermione froze in place. This was not like when she was caught before; Lucius Malfoy knew *exactly* who she was.

And she knew who he was too—a loyal servant of Lord Voldemort.

Lucius looked her over, flinty eyes as cold as ice as they swept over her, hovering on the marks on her neck before flitting to the room behind her; the bed, the chains…

Hermione hoped Harry wasn't actually downstairs. She *hoped* he had put her wand to good use and stayed hidden because right now, she felt like she would do anything to have it back in her hand because Draco's father looked *murderous.*

"THIS?!" Lucius shouted down at his son. " *This* is what you've been doing, locked up here? A filthy fucking Mudblood? *HER?!"*

Lucius kicked out at his son and Draco grunted as his father's shoe collided with the side of his head.

"Stop!" Hermione cried as Draco slumped over and landed on a pile of fallen books.

She looked down at him, barely conscious. His eyes were rolling in his head as blood seeped into them. Slowly, he blinked and seemed to focus on her.

She couldn't stop staring at him, at the *blood.* There was so much of it, but underneath the mess was still him, still Draco. With no marble mask to be found. It might have been her imagination, but she was pretty sure that Draco was either sneering or… smiling.

He took a few heavy breaths and finally forced out, *"H—Her… Hermione."*

Draco opened his eyes as he hit the floor. He was… in the drawing room. What the hell was he doing in here? Something made a pained noise but… he didn't have the energy to move and see where it was coming from. His head felt too heavy and he let it fall back down.

Draco closed his eyes again, the familiar room fading as darkness closed in around him.

They opened up again when someone screamed. He knew that scream. He knew it well. It took effort; an actual intentional thought to make his lids lift and when they did, it took what he guessed was a couple of seconds to be able to actually focus on something. His mother's heel. She was standing in front of him.

"What did you do to him?!"

"I—I didn't!"

"Liar!" There was no mistaking that screech. Bellatrix.

"I swear," she pleaded. Then, she screamed again.

Granger.

His chest emptied and then filled with stone.

Granger was screaming. Granger was… here? Downstairs? What…?

Everything was muddled and Draco groaned, trying to remember how he got here.

Granger curled on him. Granger with the toothbrush. And then… a thud. And nothing.

He looked up at his mother, for some explanation or… something. She merely glanced back over her shoulder at him, crystal blue eyes wide with shock. She broke their gaze and moved to the side to allow him to see his aunt's back, twisting curls spilling down her black robes.

"Please, please! I didn't do anything to him! I don't even have a wand!"

"Lying slut!"

There was a crack of a slap and he heard Granger's little gasp and then there she was—lying on the ground, tears spilling from her big doe eyes, looking straight at him. The same lip he had been nibbling on this morning was cut open and bleeding. Her body was barely covered by the tiny lace dress and every mark he had made on her stood out darkly on her. Worst of all was that she was bound in the chains from their bed.

"Her…" Draco's voice sounded very far away. Farther than Granger.

Pain bloomed in his abdomen, hot and sick. Draco curled with the force of it. "Shut up," his father hissed viciously down at him, a black shoe raised to kick at him again.

"Lucius!" His mother scolded and knelt beside him, picking Draco's head up and resting it against her legs.

Draco coughed, forcing air into his lungs. As soon as he was able to fill them again, they emptied at the sound of another one of Granger's screams.

Granger pushed one hand up into his hair and Draco's eyes rolled in his head. She wrapped it around the back of his neck and looked up at him through lowered lids, her dark eyes bright with desire.

"Draco," she mewled out his name.

"Granger," Draco gasped, grabbing her face, spreading his fingers into her hair and over the side of her neck.

"You feel…" her mouth was open, small breaths passing through it, " *so good.*"

His cock was pulsing in her, straining as he tried not to lose control. It had been so long since he had felt any relief other than his own stimulation. And fucking hell, that couldn't even begin to compare to this, to her.

"I know, pet," Draco forced out, breathing heavily. "You like having my cock filling up your little pussy?"

"Yes," she whined.

"You want to come on it?" He needed it, needed her. He would spend the rest of the day fucking her soft, hard, with his fingers, tongue, cock, *everything* —he just needed her to come right now because his balls were already aching to empty themselves and her quivering cunt was the perfect place for that.

"Mmm," she moaned, brows pulling together and lids sliding closed.

Draco paused. "No?" The fuck kind of game was this? She'd fuck him, but not let him make her come? Was this some sort of punishment?

Shit, he'd rather her have her flay the skin off his back than let him in *here* just to tease him.

Draco pulled her away from the wall, seating her fully on his thick cock and glared as her big eyes opened wide at the feeling.

Good. *Break.*

"I think you've forgotten how this works." He smirked briefly and then ground his teeth together. She was clenching around him and he was about to fucking lose it.

"Show me," she purred.

Oh, this fucking bitch… She was going to make him *earn* it. Her easy orgasms last night were a gift, a peace offering. Now, Granger was going to make him pay.

Good thing he was filthy rich. And good thing he was just plain filthy.

"You asked for it." Draco turned around and lifted her quickly from himself, throwing her face down on the bed. " *Slut.*"

God, he couldn't wait to get his cock back in here.

"You like coming for me, don't you?"

"Yes," she breathed and he pulled at one of the straps on her lacy dress with his teeth.

Draco wanted her bare.

"You love it." He worked his fingers within her a bit faster, spreading them and stretching her just a little.

"I love it," she repeated, without having to be told to do so.

Fucking perfect, she was. Always had been. Always would be.

She had relaxed a little, ready for him now. Draco lined his dick up in his palm, ready to replace his fingers. "You love me."

Granger opened her big doe eyes. "I love you."

Draco slid into her again and this time made it halfway before she cried out.

"Good girl."

"Yes!"

Within three more thrusts he was sheathed inside her, lost in the sensation; barely able to contain himself as he fucked himself into her mercilessly.

Granger clung onto him. Long ago, he had joked that she had claws, but now it actually felt as if she did. Her nails were digging into his back as her whole body moved with each of his strokes. Draco pressed her harder into the wall, quickening his pace, and felt his blood race with heat and lust and… *her*.

He was starting to pant, to sweat, as he pressed his body harder against her small one. How many times had he longed to feel her body pressed against his chest? And now she was and Draco was crushing her against the wall, threatening to fuck her straight through it. His back was on fire with seared lines and Granger was clinging onto him hard enough to break the skin. He didn't care. He loved it. He would let her make his back match his chest as long as she didn't let *go*.

Draco sucked on her neck, feeling her pulse race under the surface and resting his teeth on the soft skin there as he hissed, brows tightening at the sound of Granger's heavy breaths and high moans as he pumped himself into the absofuckinglutely delicious heat between her legs.

Granger was just as much inside of him as he was her right now. It was her love that was driving him on, her love that was giving him strength, her love that was making him come.

Oh shit.

Draco gritted his teeth and slowed to deep, heavy strokes.

Bellatrix was sitting on top of her; a mad, terrifying smile cracking her face open to reveal those hideous, black crusted teeth.

"You don't need a wand to enchant a man, girlie," Bellatrix said in such a sweet voice that Draco almost gagged. "Not when you're so… *pretty*. " She dragged the flat side of her knife across Granger's face. "We can fix that though."

Icy terror shot through his veins.

Bellatrix.

Bellatrix had Granger. Had Hermione. His girl. His heart. The ice reached it then shattered as it beat hot, strong blood.

"No!"

Draco had only made it to his knees, but Bellatrix's knife paused as her attention turned on him.

Neither of them saw the streak of ginger until it was too late.

"ARGH!" Bellatrix tried to dislodge the cat's claws from her face, neck and chest. Crookshanks spit and hissed, attacking her as viciously as any full sized lion.

Draco swayed, feeling something warm leaking down the side of his face and burning in his eye until he couldn't see out of it. Falling forward onto his hands and knees, his arms trembled in an effort to hold him up. If this even was up. Everything was spinning and swaying.

"Disgusting beast!" Bellatrix threw the cat from her. Crookshanks landed, claws scratching against the floor as he slid backwards.

He hissed, readying another attack on the older witch. Draco saw his aunt whip her wand in his direction, her scratched and torn face twisting in revolt at the sight of Granger's cat.

Their cat.

" *Avada Kedavra!*"

The green light blinded him in the one eye not filled with his red blood before it faded.

Draco's heart stopped beating, but the wail of despair that came from Granger spurred it into motion again.

" *CROOKSHANKS* !"

She was twisting under Bellatrix's weight, fighting to get to the still form of fur lying in between them.

"NO! NO!" she cried, dislodging his aunt enough to get one of her chained arms out from under Bellatrix's knees and using it to try and claw her way across the dark wood floor. "CROOKSHANKS!"

Draco looked down and saw a small puddle of red below where his head hung heavily from his shoulders. The floor was under him. Which meant he could push on it to stand up.

To get to *her*.

Before Bellatrix turned her wand on Granger and ended her just as quickly as she had the little creature that Draco had taken care of all these long months. And had failed to protect.

He wouldn't let that happen to Granger. He'd *kill* before he let that happen to her.

Draco got to his feet, pulling himself up and fighting the sick sense of vertigo as he reached his full height.

He raised his wand and pointed it at Bellatrix.

His aunt had returned her attention back to Granger and pinned the chains to the ground once more. "You might have struck his fancy, but I'll teach you what you really are." She pressed the tip of the knife into the arm that Granger was trying to reach her dead cat with.

Her scream tore through Draco's very soul.

"Don't… touch… her."

Bellatrix looked up at him, licking her lips. It was hard to focus on anything right now and his throat felt tight and hard. Draco blinked some of the blood from his eye, his arm wavering as he stood unsteady on his feet.

"Draco—" His father tried to stop him, grabbing his arm and pulling his wand away from Bellatrix.

Draco couldn't fight against the movement, so he leaned into it, letting his father's forceful momentum add weight behind the hand he balled into a fist and made it collide with the face that looked so much like his own.

"Draco, no!" His mother stepped between them as Draco readied his wand to fire at his father instead. "Please!" She spread out her arms, shielding the bleeding, weakened man behind her. "He's your father," she whimpered.

Draco glared at her, cold fury coursing through him.

"He stopped being my father the day he chose his *Lord* over his own family!" he spat.

His mother's deep blue eyes flickered up to his brow, from where a strange numbness was spreading, and then dropped her eyes to the floor.

"Traitor!" Bellatrix cawed, forgetting the girl trapped under her for just a moment and reaching for her wand again. "For *her?!*"

Granger Granger Granger.

Hermione.

She was all around him. Arms and lips and hair and fucking cunt squeezing him so tight he couldn't get more than a few inches inside her before she clamped down so hard it almost forced him out.

"Oh fuck!"

His face fell into the tangled mess of curls in front of him.

"Oh my God, Draco!"

Her nails dug into his back. One set across the top of his shoulders and the other right in between the blades, both short and sharp from her incessant picking and clinging to him desperately as he pulled his few inches out, trying to shove them in farther.

"Ah!"

Draco brought his lips to her ear, pressing them in, and hissed out, "You feel so good. So fucking tight." He kissed her ear, running his tongue along the edge. "But I can't get in. You've got to let me in, Granger. Let me in."

He felt a tremor pass through her body and she closed in on him again before nodding and tightening her legs around him as she tried to push her hips forward. "Please," she breathed out. "Keep talking to me so I can…" Granger swallowed a breath. "I need you."

Damn right she fucking needed him. And he needed her. Holy fucking hell, he needed her. Needed to be back inside her and *with* her again. Because then everything would be okay again. He needed to make her heart beat and her pussy drip for him. And Granger had always loved his nasty little whispers, the dirty girl.

His sweet, dirty girl who wanted him to fuck her again.

Draco groaned as he gripped himself and pulled out of her. Granger gasped at the feeling.

"Don't worry, Sweetheart." He couldn't help but grin. "Just have to work you up a bit more. You're not used to anything but those little fingers are you? And they're nothing like my big cock." He slid himself against her, letting his head glide over her clit and Granger stuttered out a breath.

"That's what you said last night, when I had *my* fingers inside you. Bet that felt so good, didn't it, kitten?"

She closed her eyes, head falling back to rest on the falling tapestry.

Draco narrowed his tongue and licked a thin line from her collar bone to the back of her ear, sliding two fingers inside her warmth as he did. It felt just as good as it did last night. So fucking soft, closing in on him with a tight pressure.

And forever.

She gave a high pitched whine as he pressed his hips into her, grinding his hard cock against her warm center. With her back firmly against the wall, Draco briefly took his hand away to pull at the towel around his waist and let it fall to the floor as he grabbed at her again, needing his hands on her now more than ever.

Her arm looped around the back of his neck, holding herself up as her other hand landed under his shoulder, pulling him fully against her as her warm fucking legs wrapped around him, locking at his lower back.

He couldn't close his eyes, even as she kissed him; he couldn't stop staring at her face, trying to make sure this was real. It *felt* real. Shit, it felt… like nothing ever had before . Granger's lips moved with his, matching his movements with a ferocious passion. Draco couldn't help himself, he latched onto it with his teeth and bit. *Hard.*

Everything about her was sloping sides and soft curves and *oh fuck* she felt so good. He couldn't touch enough of her. Draco grabbed her tit, squeezing it and shoving it back into her chest, working his fingers against the soft skin before tightening them around her nipple and pulling.

Then he was driving his fingers over her neck, not stopping until they were tangled up in her hair. It was all ribbons of caramel curls and he fisted them into his hand, crushing them and using his grip to control her head. He positioned her so he could assault her mouth with his own, bringing his teeth back to the tender spot on her lip to make her shiver in his arms.

He felt the breath hitch in her chest before she released it in a weak, submissive *moan.* Draco pulled back slightly from her mouth, lapping at her sore lip gently, and watched as the pink swelled into a deep red. Her eyes darkened, widened and locked onto his.

Here she was, his girl, his slut, his Granger.

"I want you, Draco." It was mumbled, tumbled words, tripping over lips and tongues, but said nonetheless. "I want this."

He didn't need anything more than that; than her.

Draco reached in between them and parted her with his fingers, angling his hips forward and slid his cock against her, warm and wet and waiting for him. Granger wiggled on him, her pussy dripping onto his cock as he probed for the hot center of her, finally lining himself up.

Draco pressed her harder into the wall and slammed his lips back on hers. He put a gentle pressure on the spot he had bitten moments ago, waiting until she gave a small shiver, and then thrust himself inside her.

Draco turned away from his family at the sound of Granger's petrified whimper. He had put those chains on her, he had brought her here. This was his fault.

"I said," Draco's voice lowered to a dangerous rumble, "to get the fuck off my girl. *She's mine.* "

" *Crucio!*"

The curse hit Draco's wand hand, his left hand, and spread up his arm in slithering ribbons of agony. Stretching across his chest, it felt like it was ripping into the very lines of his muscles, turning them useless; into meat. He couldn't do anything but try to contain the pain within his skin but, as long as Bellatrix was torturing him, she wasn't hurting Granger.

Draco grit his teeth and bore it.

Granger looked up at him, tears boiling in her eyes and tangled curls spilling across the hard floor. He could see his own anguish written across her face. He could withstand the *cruciatus* curse better than most, but he knew first hand what it could do to a body.

And when Bellatrix was done with him, she'd go back to Granger. She was going to die here. Here, where he brought her to be safe, but instead he had damned her right along himself.

No.

Draco's muscles screamed in protest under the corrosive dark magic.

He took a step forward.

Some of the sick light in Bellatrix's eyes flickered.

"Get—"

" *Crucio!*" She cast it again and the pain whipped around him, making him convulse and tremble.

The scars on Draco's chest stretched and tightened. Each one felt like it was alive with liquid flame. Oh. No, that was just more blood.

Another step, this one longer with his boots dragging across the floor, but he took it all the same.

"Off—"

Bellatrix was breathing heavily, panicked at the fact that her curse was not stopping Draco from making his way across the room towards them. Blood flowed freely from his head, running in a thick river down his neck and soaking the collar of his coat and front of his shirt.

It was red, just like the blood on her arm.

Just like the curse coming at him.

" *Crucio! Crucio! Crucio!*"

His muscles tightened so hard that he felt them rip. His bones shook inside him. The white walls of his mind cracked and splintered.

And she came tumbling through. Everything, anything. Every single memory, thought, idea of her rushed through his mind. Granger Granger Granger.

Hermione.

There was a crash in the stairwell leading to the cellar, but Draco barely registered it, intently focused on the view in front of him.

She was so much more than his girl. His only, and only she mattered right now.

He had to do something to help her. Draco aimed his wand at his aunt's heart. It hadn't worked on Theo, but Bellatrix had trained him herself and Draco was nothing if not persistent.

He felt the curse pulse through him, tangling his veins into knots and burning with an icy freeze. He was wearing down, giving in to the pain that he had kept controlled for so long. He stumbled, barely managing to stay on his feet. The color drained from his vision and he knew what would come next, knew what was happening to him.

He was… falling. *Failing.*

His throat closed, unable to stay open as the muscles in his neck tightened. He couldn't breathe, couldn't… cast.

Useless.

Still, Draco tried. "Her—"

"HERMIONE!"

Draco threw Hermione his wand, and fell to his hands and knees.

Bellatrix's beady obsidian eyes watched it soar through the air.

Granger caught it with her outstretched hand and a burst of light exploded from it.

There was a crack that had nothing to do with magic and Draco landed on the floor again. Pain radiating through his arm and into every single inch of his body. Was this what it felt like to die? It seemed to be taking longer than he thought it would.

He hoped Hermione would find a way out now that she was armed. He hoped it would be soon so she wouldn't have to see…

He knew she would get out, clever little witch that she was. Still, Draco would have liked to watch Granger using his wand to kill that bitch of a cunt though.

People were shouting. Lots of people. He saw his mother firing curses, his father hiding behind a wing-backed chair before pulling her down with him, away from the fray.

Draco couldn't see; the blood was dripping into both of his eyes and blinding him.

He didn't *feel* drunk. He hadn't even cut himself shaving, which was nothing short of a miracle because even with the charmed razor, he hadn't really bothered to try to protect his skin from the sharp blade.

Hermione's hands cupped his face.

Woah. What.

Her eyes were shining brightly, as rich as melted chocolate and he could smell that intoxicating scent of warm vanilla and sweet cinnamon that always clung to her. Draco inhaled deeply, unable to stop himself from taking that small bit of her for himself.

"Draco," she said his name softly, "I never stopped loving you. I—I think I stopped loving myself for a while, but never you." He looked deep into her eyes. She… wasn't lying… "Always you. Only you."

He was falling. He was flying. He was floating in his own body, his own head, unable to stay where he belonged because Granger had just said she *loved* him. No, more than that; that she did and currently does love him. Always. *Him.*

She continued to speak. "I… don't know how we're going to do this, but… I trust you. I love you."

A part of him wanted to stay standing right here and listen to her say those words over and over, but a bigger, *harder* , part of him wanted something else.

Draco grabbed her, wrapping his arms around her middle and lifted her up to him. Granger pressed her mouth to his and kissed him. Oh fucking hell, she kissed him like she never had before. Her lips moved frantically and with a wild pressure so strong that he felt like he could almost taste her need on her tongue as she pressed it into his, slipping a moan into his mouth that echoed the emotion of the words she had just spoken to him.

She loved him. Granger loved him.

And *fuck,* he loved her.

Draco growled, sliding a hand up into her messy curls, and crushed her face against his own, noses digging into each other's cheeks and lips pressed hard against teeth. His other hand spread over her ass, hauling her up higher so she was sitting on his hips, and he felt her wrap her legs around him.

Oh *hell* .

He turned them around, slamming her back against the wall and distantly heard the tear of the tapestry from where it hung. Granger's hands were around the back of his neck, digging into his shoulders and running up into his hair like they had last night.

Even the small memory of that was enough to make his cock twitch and swell almost painfully. He needed her. Now.

Draco tucked the towel tighter around his hips, since it had slipped a little during his morning moping, and decided that now was as good a time as any to have to face what he did and suffer the consequences.

Normally he covered the scars on his chest and thigh with his white shirt and black boxer briefs, but today his shower had leaked onto the tile floor and his clothes lay in a wrinkled, wet mess at his feet.

His armor was gone.

At least it would make it easy for Granger to deal him a crippling blow when he walked out of here with nothing hiding what he truly was: a fucked-up ruin of a human being.

She would probably shout at him; call him the same things his mother had. Maybe even worse. He deserved worse. But after seeing the melted chocolate color of her eyes last night as she came again and again, he wasn't sure he'd be able to take seeing them narrow in hate at him for the same reason.

Draco opened the door.

She was standing right there, waiting on him.

Granger had come to him.

Probably to try and kill him. He thought about the straight razor he had left sitting on the counter behind him.

Her big brown eyes sparked, lighting up like burnt cinnamon. He wished she didn't look like this. Wished she wasn't so beautiful when she was angry. It would be easier to take his punishment of her eternal loathing if she wasn't looking up at him with those big doe eyes and her pretty pink mouth open in a small *o* .

"There's something I need to tell you."

Draco readied himself to hear her say everything he feared. No amount of *crucio-* ing would even begin to compare with the way she was about to break his heart. Forever. For *good*.

Hiding behind his white walls, Draco waited, trembling and terrified.

Granger lifted her chin.

"I love you."

He thought he had gotten all the liquor out of his blood in the steam of the shower, but he supposed not. He must have still been drunk if he thought he just heard Granger say—

"Did you hear me? Draco—I love you."

Wait .

It was happening again. She was saying it again.

"We have to go! NOW!"

"No! I won't leave him!" Granger's hands were on him. They felt nice.

He'd like to die in her arms.

"Are you fucking crazy?!"

"Let go of me!"

Granger's hands left him. Draco frowned.

Why wasn't he dead yet?

"Hermione, he's not worth it!" He knew that voice, but… he couldn't remember.

"I'm not going without him!"

It's okay, Sweetheart. I won't be here much longer.

"We don't have time for this! Take him too!" A different voice, also familiar, but not the one who was yelling at Granger.

"WHAT?!"

"Grab him, Ron!"

Draco roared in pain as scorching agony engulfed his arm.

"You're hurting him!"

"Not yet, I'm not."

"Hurry, Harry Potter!"

Was that a fucking *elf?* What the actual fuck was going on? Where was Granger?

"Grang-er-er…"

"I'm here." Her voice was soft, but loud in his ear. "You're going to be okay. We're going to be okay, just… trust me." She took her hand in his, holding onto it tight as the chains around her wrists clinked.

Draco swallowed, tasting blood.

Trust her.

Could he?

Draco didn't get a choice because the next second he was being squeezed so tightly against her that he couldn't breathe and then…

Then he fell.

Granger fell beside him, her hand still holding his.

She hadn't let go, and neither had he.

slicing off the small white hairs that had grown there. He kept at it until his face was bare and smooth.

Running his hand over his angled jaw, Draco thought about the night before.

If that was the last taste he got of Granger, at least it was a good one. And it had been *so* good. The *best.* Having her at his mercy again and lavishing her with pleasure until she was senseless and weak and, *fuck,* she had been so fucking wet and all he wanted to do was fuck her until he was buried so far deep in her that he never had to come back out. Never had to be without.

Always with her, in her.

He set his silver blade down next to her green toothbrush.

The war would be over soon whether he was a part of it or not. Potter's little escapade yesterday meant one thing—he was getting worried. They couldn't keep holding out and they needed to strike, to force the Dark Lord's hand so they would have a shot, no matter how small, for their stupid fucking Gryffindor spirit to get them killed in the name of unicorns and puffskeins.

He thought about letting Granger out. Maybe doing what she said and running off together. He *might* consider it, if she wouldn't run straight to Scarhead and Weaselbee and try to save the world again. Fucking Gryffindors and their willingness to die for the stupid, noble causes they believed in.

Draco stared at himself in the mirror again, chest all fucked up and eyes as cold as steel.

If only she believed in *him* . If only she loved him again.

He wondered if he would ever regret this trade; her love for her life. He didn't think so. There were a great many things Draco regretted, but keeping Granger alive, and with him, was not one of them.

He wasn't sure he regretted last night either. Maybe that was why he had marked up her thigh again. Proof that there was some part of her, and some part of him, that was the same as it had been before.

That the war hadn't changed them, at least not for good.

But the mark wasn't there for good either. Last time she had put a stasis charm on it to keep it just long enough for him to watch it fade from her skin. This time, he'd have to heal it himself.

He didn't want to, but he didn't think he had it in him to watch it slowly heal and disappear. Not removed by magic, but just by time and nature.

Her bruises would fade, but his marks were here to stay.

Draco sighed.

Granger wasn't the one he hated. It was that prick looking back at him in the silver glass.

He wished Ghostie was here. She'd come floating out of the toilet and he would hold back a retch as she whizzed over to him. She'd make fun of him for running from a girl, and he would tell her to get bent and they would stand—or in her case float—around awkwardly for a moment before he snapped and said that it was just a drunken mistake and didn't mean anything and he shouldn't have to hide because it was his room anyways and…

He looked over to where he imagined Ghostie would be.

There was only steam left over from the scalding shower he had stood under for almost an hour, hoping that some sort of clarity would come to him but all he could think about was *her*.

The way she looked, spread open and all his. The way she sounded, sweetly begging just like she used to. And how she fucking tasted… sweet like honey, but sharp too. A rich tangy taste that he had wanted more of ever since that day in the forest. He would have gorged himself on her all night if she hadn't passed out.

Draco had half a mind to keep going. See if he could wake her up with another orgasm, but she had slept fitfully the night before and laid out on the chaise, Granger looked more at peace than she had since he brought her here.

He'd taken enough from her.

He could at least give her the night to rest before she had to wake up and remember what she had let him do to her.

But, fuck, he couldn't say that he wouldn't do it all over if he opened that door and she had that bottle back in her hand; that sweet smile on her face again. Even knowing it was for someone else. He might not have been the one to make her smile, but he certainly made her come.

What was he *doing?* Stealing away the first time she was actually happy again just so he could get back in between her legs? He didn't think she had been *that* drunk, but after laying awake all of the previous night and sobering up himself, Draco realized that there was no way that an uninebriated Granger would ever have let him do that to her.

Shit. If she *had* trusted him before, she sure as hell didn't now.

Draco picked up the blade on the counter and it gleamed in the light. Without giving it too much thought, he pressed it against his neck and swiped it across his skin quickly,

Chapter Fifteen

Daylight blinded Draco. The earth rushed up underneath him and his chest felt like it was collapsing under its own weight. Even small breaths hurt; everything hurt. Especially the bright, white light searing through his eyelids and straight into his brain, stabbing the soft grey mess inside his skull. At least, he hoped it was still inside his skull. Draco wasn't sure what was left inside him anymore.

The only thing he could feel was pain. At least that was proof his heart was still beating; only living hurt this much.

And Granger had made him do it.

Bitch.

He gripped her hand tighter and felt her squeeze back.

Hermione.

Draco slowly turned his head and was met with a pair of eyes. The color hadn't returned to his vision yet and everything was still blurry, like he was looking at the world through a sheet of rain. But he could see deep grey, ever so slowly turning to… brown. Brown like rich, melted chocolate. Brown like swirls of cinnamon, thick and warm. Brown and big like a doe's eyes. His girl's eyes.

No, he couldn't die yet. Not with her… so close.

"Grang…er…"

She… smiled. And sunlight illuminated the rest of the colors in his limited field of vision. There was a strange ringing in his ears and it grew louder, stronger, turning into shouting and screams.

Then Granger's hand was ripped from his and her eyes went wide.

"—get these off her!"

Draco felt his blood thicken with fury as Weasley pulled her away from him, practically sitting on her and trying everything he could to get the chains off of Granger's wrists. She had his wand clasped tight and Draco's blood surged at the sight of it. He wanted to snatch it and take Weasley's fingers off one at a time.

Fletcher had cried for mercy when Draco took his off.

Maybe the whole hand at once then.

But… Yaxley had screamed until his lungs gave out as his hand crumpled.

He'd figure something out when his head didn't feel like it was going to explode with each pump of blood into it. And… out of it.

Just like Theo's as Draco's curse had kept his heart convulsing, beating blood out of his mouth long after he stopped breathing.

…Shit.

"Ron, Ron stop!" Granger shouted, pushing him back. One of the little straps of her lace dress fell over her shoulder.

Draco snarled and tried to sit up, but the world turned upside down in a wave of nausea. The ringing jumped from ear to ear and when he reached out to her. He couldn't feel the ground under him. Disoriented, he fell back down against the hard earth.

"Draco!"

"What did he *do* to you?" Weasley's sounded horror struck.

Good. He should be fucking terrified because Draco was going to take him apart, freckle by fucking freckle.

Just as soon as he could get off the ground. Which was proving to be a harder task than he originally assumed.

Still, he tried.

"Get OFF!" Granger pushed her chained hands into Weasley's chest and dislodged him, wriggling away and kicking her bare legs. Draco saw a flash of his mark on her inner thigh before she pressed them tightly together.

Weaslebee was back, pulling on the chains, trying to snap them. Fucking idiot.

"Ron, stop! They won't come off!"

Chapter Fourteen

Draco swiped his hand across the mirror and found his own piercing eyes glaring back at him.

What the fuck had he done?

Granger hated him. She hated him for locking her up in here, for lying to her about his mark, for putting her under the *imperius* curse and then leaving her, hurt and covered in mud, and then stealing her away from the people she actually *wanted* to be with.

She didn't want him. She was just drunk.

He knew the feeling well. Waking up in the morning and rolling over to see last night's mistake snoring on your pillow. How many girls had he given some pathetic excuse about an early morning Quidditch practice and watched as the realization, that the night before was nothing like what they thought it was, glimmer in their tear-filled eyes?

He couldn't stand to be in the position he had put so many others in so, as soon as dawn lifted its fucking cursed head, Draco stood up, looked down at Granger still sleeping, and did the only thing he could think of.

He hid in the bathroom.

He had to face her eventually but he would do it when he was good and ready. When he was angry and able to hate her a little again.

She had felt the weight of Theo's death on her conscience, knowing Draco did it to protect her, but now it weighed heavier than ever. Draco had let Harry go, when he could have taken him in and ended the war and had *everything* that he wanted… Instead, he did what she had asked him.

And he had never even told her.

"Hermione?"

"I'm sorry." She stood up.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked, back on alert and following her to his feet.

"I have to go."

"Wait—"

"I'm sorry." She stumbled, tripping over… something. She didn't know. She just knew she had to get to Draco. Now.

"Hermione—"

She was already three steps to the door when the thundering roars started.

" ***YOU CUT MY HAIR?!"***

Ow.

Fucking *ow!*

Draco hissed in pain and anger, mostly anger, as he pushed himself up on the… were they really trying to pass off *this* as a bed?! It was probably stuffed with straw by the feel of it.

Draco had woken up to some blonde bitch prodding at him and things had not gotten better.

" 'Old still!" she grimaced, trying to push him back down and holding a rag that smelled… Fucking hell, what *was* that?

"Are you trying to poison me?"

"I am trying to 'elp 'ou!"

Draco swatted her hand away from his head and felt… felt… Nothing. His arm was covered in splotchy, dark bruises. He was controlling it, but he couldn't *feel* it. Not even the pain of the mark. It was all… gone.

He raised his other hand, his right hand, to his head and what he felt then was even worse.

A rough bandage wrapped around his head and then choppy, uneven…

He started shouting. Loudly.

She was shouting back.

In French.

Where the *fuck* was he?

And where was Granger?!

Frenchie was waving that nasty ass rag in his face again and Draco was just about to choke her with it when the door opened and there she was.

His girl.

Granger had burst through the door like the rising sun. Her tawny curls brushed back over her shoulders and her big, beautiful eyes landed right on him.

And his fucked up hair.

Her lips parted and she sucked in a breath.

Shit, it must be worse than he thought.

"I had to cut it to 'eal ze wound!" Frenchie was making excuses. Lying. His head was… It hurt like fuck, but he was fine. Because Granger was here and okay, so he was too.

Except he couldn't feel his arm. And he had dirty bandages crossing over his torso. And everything *hurt* . He felt nauseous and leaned over the side of the bed.

Frenchie jumped out of the way.

Draco really hoped he didn't hurl in front of Granger.

"Draco!" Granger surged forward and his heart beat a little faster.

Fuck. Fuck fuck *fuck*. Every pump made his head throb.

At least she had come and… Draco smirked. What a good girl she was, bringing his wand back to him.

He tried to reach for it, but Granger stuck it in her back pocket. She helped him sit back up and started checking his bandages. Draco looked over the room and saw Potter standing in the doorway.

So that's where she had been. With *him*.

"The fuck are you looking at, Scarhead?" Draco snapped, falling back on old habits when a new plan failed to form.

Potter crossed his arms over his chest and snorted. "Not much. I don't think you can call me that anymore, Malfoy. Looks like you have more scars than I do."

Draco *seethed.* His chest rose and fell heavily. He could feel his blood curdling under his skin as his rage poisoned him. He only had these scars *because* of Potter and Draco thought carving '*Thank You'* in that fucker's chest was a fitting punishment.

"Draco, calm down," Granger spoke calmly. "You're going to hurt yourself."

"Oh, I am going to hurt *someone,"* he muttered.

Granger threw him a look and Draco rolled his eyes. Fuck, even *that* hurt. He leaned his head back against the bars of the headboard. They felt like the bars of the cage. The cage he had kept Granger in. And now she was out.

Was she about to do the same thing to him?

He wasn't chained down, but he was the only person in this room not armed. It didn't exactly make for a warm welcome.

"Are you going to pay me back in kind?"

Granger blinked. "What?"

"Am I your prisoner now?"

He could see the agitation burning right under her skin. The Gryffindor Princess was still so easy to read. But as he looked closer he saw she was… worried. Granger was nervous.

"No," she answered, but glanced back at Potter as if it was his call. Something dark and scaly stirred inside Draco. He didn't like that. He didn't like that at all.

"Granger." He needed her attention back on him.

She turned. And bit her lip. Better.

He saw her holding his hand. Saw it, because he couldn't feel it. His chest seized, the muscles pulling at the new skin. Granger was right, if he didn't calm down he would tear it. He had to breathe.

One.

Two.

Fucking onetwothree.

Draco glowered at Frenchie. "What the fuck did you do to me?"

"I cut 'our 'air to 'eal 'our 'ead."

His head hurt too much to try and decode her words. His mother had insisted he learn French as a child, but he wasn't exactly operating well enough to try and speak in another language. He was quickly running out of patience.

"THE FUCK," Draco shouted slowly, "DID YOU DO—"

"Draco," Granger sighed.

"TO MY ARM?"

"Do you, uhm, love him?"

She could see Harry cringing as he asked the question.

Hermione decided to put him out of his misery by answering quickly. Plus, this was the first question she easily knew the answer to.

"Yes."

Harry blinked, and nodded. "Yeah, okay."

"I know it sounds strange, and believe me, I didn't plan on this happening. *Any of this.* But… it did."

"Yeah, I know what that feels like." He sat back in his chair.

"Thank you, Harry," Hermione said before she forgot, "for coming for me. For trying to help. I don't know what we would have done if you two hadn't shown up right then."

"You would have done the same for me."

Hermione's lips pulled up a little. She would have and now, she had a chance to. She wasn't locked up in a room anymore and Hermione wasn't going to let her friends face this fight alone. Not when they had risked so much to—

"Harry…" Hermione asked as she quickly went through their conversation in her head, sorting it into categories and filing details away for later use. "How did you know I was with Draco?"

Harry stared at her blankly, as if this was something she should have known. "He told me."

The blood stilled in her veins. "What did you say?"

He leaned forward. "He told me when we fought."

"You… *fought?"* The last word came out as a whisper.

"He didn't… tell you?" Harry asked skeptically and Hermione shook her head with the little bit of control she had left over her body. "We ran into each other. Actually *ran* into each other. And he said he had you and that you were safe and then… he let me go."

All the oxygen had evaporated from the room. Hermione's vision seemed to sway even though she was sitting. None of this made sense. None of it. Why hadn't Draco said anything? Why…

"If he hadn't knocked out Nott I think they would have had us."

Cold realization ran down Hermione's spine, stiffening it.

" *Your friend is safe and mine is…"*

"Oh my God."

"I didn't understand why because he clearly set up that trap to—"

"Oh my God…"

matchbox. We heard a few of them pinned down in the back of the shop and they were screaming. We tried to put out the flames, just so we could get out too and they came at us. Even as burned as they were, they came at us. I don't know how they were standing, walking. I don't…"

Hermione sat, too horrified to move. They had nearly *died* , trying to save her.

Harry continued, "Figured if we couldn't get you out, then we could at least get in. So, we got ourselves caught."

"You *what?"*

"We needed you," Harry went on, "Ron destroyed the locket, but after that… nothing. It was a dead end without you. We can keep fighting, but to win, Hermione, we need you." Harry gave her a small smile. "And we couldn't just leave you there."

Hermione was touched by this. Even though they had been insane to allow themselves to be caught and brought to Malfoy Manor, they had done it because they needed her. Because they wanted her. They were still her friends. Or at least, Harry was. She glanced at the door. She wasn't sure about Ron.

"I was safe." It was the only thing she could think to say.

"You were being tortured by Bellatrix when we found you. I'd hardly call that safe."

"That was…" Hermione sighed. So much had happened in the past two days. How could she explain all of that to him?

Well, she had to try.

"Draco *did* keep me safe. It was just when…" She bit her lip. "His father hit him and I… ran out. That's when…" she looked down at her hands in her lap. Lucius Malfoy had put the chains on her and dragged her downstairs. When Bellatrix had seen her... Hermione scratched at the bandage on her arm. "She was hurting me because… because Draco…"

The events were barely memories and the loss of Crookshanks was still heavy on her. Hermione closed her eyes, but could still see him lying there. Too close, too far. His claws hadn't even had time to retract. Her throat felt tight with emotion, her eyes burning with tears she hadn't had time to shed yet.

She thought she was going to be next until Draco somehow, *miraculously,* stood up. For her.

"He tried to stop her, but he was hurt."

"I saw him give you his wand."

Hermione looked up at Harry who was staring curiously at her. Harry had heard Draco on the tower and now, he had seen Draco give up his wand to save her.

Frenchie curled her lip. "Nothing," she said, accent getting stronger the more annoyed she was getting. "Your 'rm was cursed. There iz only so much that can be done."

Granger gasped. "Does it hurt?"

"No," Draco snapped. "It doesn't… *anything!"*

The truth of that slapped him in the face. He knew the after effects of the *cruciatus* curse well. He went numb sometimes, but the feeling always came back. Or at least, it *had*. Blaise had said there was damage done to it and he knew he went overboard that last time. Maybe Bellatrix finished it off for him. Burned the magic right out of his nerves.

He could still use his right, but his left was his dominant hand. His dueling arm. Without it…

Draco stopped breathing again. If he couldn't protect her, Granger might too. His eyes cut over to her.

She was talking to Frenchie, but he could hardly hear over the ringing in his ears.

"There must be something!"

She was smart, bloody brilliant. Granger must know—

"It will 'eal or…" Frenchie shrugged. "It won't."

"Well thanks for that great diagnosis. No wonder you Order lot are dropping like flies if *this* is your healer."

Granger grabbed Frenchie's arm, keeping her from aiming her wand at Draco's fucked up body.

Let her. He was a dead man anyways. Had been for a while.

Frenchie was muttering in her native tongue under her breath and the few words Draco could pick out were all ones his childhood tutors had certainly *not* taught him. She pushed past Potter who closed the door behind her.

Potter slightly raised his wand from his side.

Draco stiffened then sneered. "You got lucky before. You better curse to kill me this time."

Potter's brows lowered. "I don't have to. You-Know-Who will probably do it if you don't give me a reason to let you stay."

Cold seeped into his blood and made the fresh skin prickle painfully under his bandages. Granger placed her hand on his chest, warming him with her touch and moved in front of him.

"Draco, please, I know this is a lot all at once, but we're safe now. And… we'll figure out a way to heal your arm. And then…"

Draco glanced at Potter over her shoulder and then back at Granger. She sat down on the edge of the bed, carefully balancing there. Ready to jump up if needed. Ready to leave him.

"How do you feel?" she asked in a small voice.

"Like shit," he snarled and Granger cringed.

"I'm sorry, I… I did the best I could."

She had healed him? Draco felt like he'd just swallowed a stone. "It's not your fault." It was the best he could do right now.

Granger made a small noise and then threw her arms around his neck. He winced, but didn't tell her to stop. He didn't know where he was or how he got here, but at least he was with Granger.

For the first time since waking up to Frenchie chopping off his hair, Draco felt like he could breathe. And breathe he did. He filled his lungs with the sweet vanilla and cinnamon scent of Granger until he felt like he was drowning in her.

His heart beat fast against his ribs and Draco had the sick sensation that he had come close to never doing this again.

He tried to remember what had happened, but images jumped and jumbled in his head, swirling together in a hazy mess he couldn't find the start or finish to. Fuck, his head hurt.

He heard Granger give a small sniffle and Draco looped his arm around her. He couldn't feel it and that sent a swooping sensation of disappointment through him. "Hey, it's okay. Don't cry, Sweetheart."

He caught a glimpse of Potter wrinkling his nose before Granger pulled back. She smiled at him and it was enough to make the pain stop for a moment.

"I know, I know." She quickly wiped at her eyes. "I'm just so glad you're awake and…" Granger glanced down at his chest. "Healing." She looked back up at him, doe eyes big. "You were so brave, Draco. What you did for me… I… Thank you."

Draco searched his pounding head and found scattered images among the ruined walls of his mind. Bellatrix and Granger. Blood. Red. Pain and… screaming.

"Yeah well," He shifted on the bed slightly, not exactly wanting to bare his heart with Potter in here. "No one touches my girl."

Granger's eyes burned like cinnamon, bright and strong. The line of water in them reflected the pale sunlight from the window.

"You did it for me, you did *all of it* for me. To protect me. And you did. Draco you… you saved me."

"Is it bad?" She was almost scared to ask, almost too nervous to know what had been happening while she had… been in Draco's bed. Just like Ron had so crudely pointed out.

"It's war." Harry sounded tired, older. As if he had aged years in months.

"I saw… I saw what you did at Borgin and Burkes. Did you find…" she trailed off, not wanting to say the word out loud.

Harry shook his head. "No, that was…" He ran his hand through his messy hair. "That was for you."

Hermione's heart skipped a beat.

Harry briefly explained where he had gone that night in the snow and how he had Ron had destroyed the locket. They had returned to the tent together only to find her missing.

"Hermione, you just disappeared. We searched the woods all night looking for you and stayed for three days hoping that… I had no idea if you had been snatched or killed or what. Ron was furious. He said it was my fault you were gone."

Harry rubbed the bridge of his nose, as if remembering a bruise that had long since healed.

"We looked everywhere for you. Even went back to London to your house. It's gone, Hermione. Someone burned it down."

A wave of cold shot down her arms. Her home… It wasn't the one she had grown up in, her parents had bought it in her second year, but still… it was a place where she had memories of all of them together. Memories they didn't even share with her anymore.

Harry patted her hand. "I'm sorry."

Hermione just shook her head a little, not able to talk around the painful lump in her throat. Her parents were still alive, still safe in Australia. Losing their home didn't mean she had lost them, yet… it felt like they were even farther away now.

Harry, who had always understood grief, continued. "Once I found out Malfoy had you, we started trying to plan on how to get you back."

"Remember how he used the vanishing cabinet? Well it was Ron's idea that maybe since Malfoy had bought it, he had the sister at his house. We went to Knockturn Alley and…"

Harry blew out a breath, making the fringe on his forehead lift for a moment.

"It was bad, Hermione. We opened the cabinet and they started coming through. Inferi. They were everywhere. And it must have signaled something because about two seconds later, Death Eaters started apparating in. Fiendfyre works against inferi, but there was so much of it from us and the Death Eaters and that musty old shop went up like a

"You were in his bed."

Ron's eyes were a dark, flaming blue and Hermione had to look away from their intensity.

"While we were out there, risking our necks to get you back, you were snuggled up with your fucking Death Eater boyfriend—"

"Ron, that's not helping!" Harry said loudly.

Grabbing the arms of his chair, Ron pushed it back, almost knocking it over before stomping out the door and slamming it behind him.

Hermione stared after him. She knew it might be difficult for Ron to have to hear about her being with Draco, but didn't he seem to care about how hard it was for her to have gone through any of that! If he did, he wouldn't be acting like this.

Even so, she didn't want to leave it like this. Not again.

"Ron!" she called after him, about ready to chase him down and make him understand.

"Hermione, don't," Harry said, reaching out and touching her uninjured arm. He shook his head. "Let him cool off."

"But—"

"I know this might seem like a bad time," Harry paused for a moment and Hermione's attention narrowed in on him, "I need to know if there is anything you saw or heard that could help us. Who knows when Draco is going to wake up or what he will tell us when he does. You're our best source of information right now."

Hermione's shoulders slumped. She had tried, she really had, to get any more details on horcruxes, but her research using Draco's books had told her little else that she hadn't already gathered. As far as where any more might be hidden or movements of Death Eaters, she hadn't been privy to any of that information locked inside her cage.

"I don't know much, but I did see a list of crimes certain Death Eaters have committed. It might help us guess who will be sent out on certain missions or what they are capable of."

"Okay, good. What else?" Harry's eyes sparked like cut emeralds.

She opened her mouth. "That's… that's it."

"That's it? You… That's all?"

Hermione winced. "I wasn't exactly in a favorable position to get much information."

"Right." He rubbed his hand over his face.

"I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault," Harry said, but she could hear this disappointment in his voice. "It's just, shit, Hermione. We could have really used… anything."

He knew she wasn't just talking about what had happened in the drawing room. What the fuck were they doing in there anyway? Her rich eyes were shining with… love and, was that… *pride?*

If he wasn't sliced open, he'd grab her, throw her under him and fuck her long and slow while she looked up at him just like that.

And if Potter wasn't here. Fucking killjoy. This was his damn fault anyway. He's the one who cut Draco up in the first place, the one Granger had wanted to get back to all this time.

The one who started this damn war.

Although, that might be Draco's fault actually.

No. He'd rather blame Potter. That was easier.

" *We have him—We have Potter!*"

"You…" Draco narrowed his eyes and Potter lifted his wand a few inches. He leaned forward. Potter had… done something. He was why they were here, wherever the fuck *here* was.

Draco tried to get up and his head thrummed with pain. Hissing, he brought up a hand to his skull and felt his roughly shorn hair again.

His father was standing over him. Granger was in chains. Weasley was using them to pull her away from him.

"Draco," Granger cooed and inched closer to him. "You're not strong enough to get up yet. Don't strain yourself."

Fuck her for being right. In his current condition, he'd be easy picking on the outside. He needed his arm back in working condition and… Draco glanced at Granger's waist. He needed his wand.

He also needed her. Granger was sitting there in jeans and a jacket, but she looked better than she had in months. He loved the fact that he could see almost everything through the lace dresses he gave her, but it was clothes like these—baggy, conservative, and boring—that he loved her best in.

He could imagine peeling off every layer until he got to her soft skin underneath and running his hands over every inch of her.

Damn, he needed to be able to *feel.*

Granger must have read something on his face, another thing he didn't like, because she flashed a flat smile and said, "Good. I'm glad that's settled."

Once his arm was working again he could throw her over his shoulder and carry her out of here, if need be.

"Where… where are we?" Draco asked under his breath.

"A safe house. Bill and Fleur Weasley's."

Weasley? Oh *fuck* that.

"The Order? We're with the Order?!"

Granger looked at him like it was obvious. "Where else would we be?"

"Fuck, Granger! Do you have any idea—"

"They don't want to hurt you! They just…" She looked at Potter again. "We—"

We. Draco didn't like that. She should only say that when she was talking about him and her. No one else.

"We won't let anything happen to you. And you can help us! You can…" Granger trailed off and Draco was sure it was due to the way his lip quivered as it started to pull up over his teeth.

Were these Gryffindors really that thick? Did they think that he would be so grateful that he would decide to be a good little boy? Did they have any fucking clue who he was? *What* being a Death Eater meant?

"You think I'm just going to join your merry band of idiots and we are all going to hold hands and skip off into the sunset?"

"It's not a band of—"

Potter stepped forward, crossing his arms. "The Order saved you. You owe us."

"The Order." Draco scoffed. "Without Dumbledore, the only *order* you have, is the one you'll die in. And you're at the top of his list."

Potter was unphased, as if death didn't matter to him. Further proof that the scar on his head had done permanent brain damage, just as Draco always assumed. Stupid fucking prick.

"Your name is on that list too. He's not happy with what you did."

Did… did this motherfucker *know* something?

Draco narrowed his eyes, peering into Potter's. Even in his weakened state, it was easy. Potter's head was as open as a Quidditch Pitch. Just as empty too. As if he was… waiting, expecting someone.

Red eyes flashed, cold and bloody. They were staring straight through Potter's and into Draco's, like they could see him lying there in the lumpy bed.

Draco jumped back so fast his head hit the bars behind it with a dull thud.

"What the—"

"Don't try that again," Potter said dangerously. His arms were at his sides now, wand raised into a defensive position. "You won't like what you find."

"Ron," Harry interrupted him, jerking his head in Hermione's direction. "You want to let her talk?"

Hermione threw him a grateful smile, or the closest she could come up with one. "He didn't hurt me though."

Was that the truth? All those weeks, enclosed in that room with him… Draco had done some terrible things. Some of the things he said to her…

Ron made a noise of disgust and Hermione did her best to ignore him. "Really, Harry, he didn't. He was a right prick most of the time, but that's just how he is."

She tried to keep her eyes on Harry's, but they wandered, taking in his messy hair, unshaven chin, and thin face. His eyes seemed darker behind his glasses, weighed down by heavy thoughts. Thoughts he didn't have answers to. Hermione knew the feeling.

"I don't…" Harry started and stopped. She could tell he was trying to temper his words. Oh goodness, what was coming? "I don't know what you two… are and I don't think I want to know any details." His gaze flickered down to her neck and Hermione watched Harry's cheeks pinken a little. The marks were no longer there, but they had seen.

Godric, everyone had seen…

"What *can* you tell me?" he settled on and Hermione was thankful he was giving her a choice in how she answered.

"Mostly he kept me locked away. Hidden." She did her best to curate the truth. "I wasn't… what you're thinking."

"Sure." Ron crossed his arms. They had gotten bigger, thicker in the past few months and there was something more rugged about him than before. "He was a complete gentleman then, was he?"

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him, anger sparking inside her. " *No.* In fact, we fought the whole time. I tried to convince him to leave with me and when he wouldn't I tried to…" She stopped again. She had tried to try to escape. She might have actually done it. If she hadn't sat there and looked at the word ' *Blood Traitor'* written on that page and tried to figure out what Draco had meant by that.

"You weren't in the cellar with the rest of the prisoners," Ron said. "So where did he have the brightest witch of her age that she couldn't find her way out?"

Her skin felt hot under her clothes. It was more than she had worn in a long time and the jeans felt stifling around her legs, the neck of her shirt too high and pressing on her throat.

"Upstairs."

She slept fitfully, dreaming of long hallways and Draco screaming her name. She kept trying to reach him, but everytime Hermione flung open doors, she was only met with a puddle of blood on the floor. She woke up in a cold sweat and heard a soft knock on the door.

A response had come back from the Order. They wanted Draco alive and hopefully some answers from him. A small bed was moved in the already cramped room. They shoved it against the wall with a small table sitting next to it and a short chest of drawers a few feet away. There wasn't much room to move around and not enough for Hermione to sleep on the floor anymore so she followed Bill and Fleur back down the stairs.

They changed the locks on the door, making it fasten from the outside. Hermione couldn't help but remember all the times she had listened to Draco lock the door after he left, but if she could get through his goblin wrought iron lock without a wand, she knew she wouldn't have any trouble getting into this one.

Fleur offered to change his bandages so Hermione could have a break.

" 'Arry is looking for 'ou," Fleur told her and Hermione didn't have to go far to find him. The room he and Ron were staying in was right next to Draco's. Ron watched her as she walked out of Draco's and followed her in.

She sat down on the edge of Harry's bed. This was much more awkward than she thought it would be. Everything felt different now.

She had thought about reuniting with her friends more than anything else when she was locked inside Draco's bedroom, but now that she had, it was nothing like she expected.

Ron was barely looking at her, glaring darkly down at the floor in front of them, but Harry's eyes didn't leave her for a second. Hermione felt a little like she was under interrogation.

"What… what *happened?"*

For the first time in her life, Hermione had no idea how to answer a question.

She watched Harry's dark brows pull together, more out of worry than anything else. Glancing down at her bandaged arm Hermione asked, "When exactly are you refer—"

"When that asshole kidnapped you in the woods." Ron was glaring at her now instead of the floor. "That's what happened, wasn't it?"

She didn't want to answer him, not when he was acting like this already. But they deserved the truth. "Draco did take me—"

"That fucking—"

Draco's chest was tight, fear constricting around him and he fought for control over his breathing. He knew those eyes. The question was, what the **FUCK** were they doing in Potter's head?

"Harry, maybe… Maybe I should talk to Draco. Alone."

Potter placed his hand on Granger's shoulder. It was just a friendly gesture.

Draco hated it.

"Fine, but I need to know more about those lists as soon as you're able."

"Of course," she answered, nodding quickly.

Draco *really* hated that. He'd rather get *crucio'd* again than have to watch her take directions from someone else.

But when Potter glared at Draco before leaving, Draco couldn't meet his eyes. He kept seeing the red ones, no matter how many times he blinked. Slitted pupils as sharp as the daggers Bellatrix favored so much.

Another image flashed before him and Draco grabbed Granger's arm and pushed up the sleeve. It was wrapped with a small red stain on the bandage.

"You're hurt," he said as soon as the door closed.

"I'm okay." She tried to take her hand back, but Draco held fast to her wrist.

"Let me see."

Granger flinched. "Draco, stop. I'm… I'm still healing too."

He loosened his hold, but didn't move his hand from around her wrist. Thinking of Granger twisting and screaming under his aunt made him feel sick. He'd never forgive himself for letting her get hurt.

His girl. His fault.

"Are you okay?"

Granger took a shaky breath. "Yes. I'll have a scar, but I'll be fine. Thanks to you."

He barely even heard her after the word *scar.* The cold sick feeling in him solidified and turned into icy shards of fury. "That fucking bitch. I'll…" More images. Orange fur, green light. Draco's stomach turned inside him. "Crookshanks."

He'd gotten the cat killed. Godfuckingdamnit. Memories bled into his brain, slow and sluggish and interspaced with periods of deep black. But Granger… Granger was in them all. And a memory was all that their cat would be now. Another death he couldn't stop. Another life he was responsible for the loss of.

When he lifted his gaze from her arm to her face, Granger's eyes were filling with tears.

"Sweetheart…" Draco slid his hand down and took hers, squeezing it tightly. "I'm so sorry."

She choked and only a sad little squeak came out.

It was his fault. He had brought them both there and he was supposed to protect them. But the first time they had been in danger, Draco had barely been able to do anything to stop it. Granger had been the one to knock Bellatrix back. Granger had been the one who got them out. He had only made everything worse.

"She'll never touch you again. No one will." He threaded the fingers into her hair. He wished he could feel her. Draco pulled her head down, pressing her forehead against his. Even though it hurt, it meant she was here and safe and his. "Granger, I'm sorry. I'll do better this time. I'll—"

"Will you?" she asked, big eyes full of hope. "You… you kidnapped me and caged me. You did all of these terrible things and you blamed them on loving me. You lied to me. Draco, you…" She bit her lip and Draco watched her teeth indent on the pink flesh. "You hurt me. More than anyone else ever has. Please…" Her rich eyes searched his. "Don't do it again."

She didn't even know everything. He'd told her some, the basics of what he had done, but not it all. Which was better? Keeping them from her to stop her from hurting or telling her and risk breaking both their hearts? He didn't want to hurt her any more than he already had. But he didn't think he could take much more pain either.

Draco gritted his teeth and closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them he was staring down into the empty eyes of the skull branded on his arm. Without the constant ache of the mark, he could *almost* forget that he was a Death Eater.

Not that anyone else would.

The dark mark was all the Order would see on him. They wouldn't look into his eyes, try to find something good in him to hold onto. He knew what the Order would do to someone like him. And worst of all, he knew what they would do to Granger.

They'd say he was evil and turn her against him. She was already looking to Potter and following his orders. How long until she started believing everything they would tell her about him? And then they'd put her in the line of fire. They'd put her in danger and get her fucking killed.

They would take Granger from him, one way or another.

"I did those things to keep you safe. Not so you could run off and die in a war."

Draco had more than enough reasons to tell the Order to go fuck itself. The main one being that anyone who was a part of it were all going to *die*. He wasn't about to let Granger be one of them.

"He hardly ever came down there and when he did, he just ignored me so I mostly talked to Garry. Griphook had only just arrived a couple days ago."

Hermione had the brief thought that these were imaginary friends Luna had dreamed up.

"Mr. Ollivander," Luna explained. "He let me call him Garry."

"Oh." So that must make the goblin Griphook.

"Sometimes Draco Malfoy… Sometimes he hurt him." Luna's voice softened. "But Garry said it wasn't that bad. Like a muscle cramp. Most times Draco Malfoy looked worse off than Garry by the end. He said it was worse when he first got there. Then… not so bad."

" *Hawthorn backfires,"* Hermione whispered, remembering what Mr. Ollivander had been chanting as they helped him inside the cottage.

Her mind spun quickly, putting into motion wheels and mechanisms it hadn't used in a long time. The wand didn't backfire, Draco knew how to control his curses. He had *made* his wand absorb it. He had pulled the curse into himself and… from the sound of it, had only even done that when ordered to.

When he had to perform his duties as a Death Eater to make sure no one questioned his loyalty. To make sure he had a position in the new world.

So he could keep *her* safe.

Luna went on, as if the world wasn't turning upside down. "It was a bit chilly though. He sent warm food down, but not blankets. It could have been worse. He did say that. That he could make it worse. But he never did."

"I…" Hermione's mouth was barely working and her mind wouldn't *stop* spinning. "I'm sorry that happened to you."

Luna shrugged, her long blonde hair moving with her shoulders. "Overall we were taken care of. What were you doing there?"

How was she supposed to explain *how* she came to be Draco's… whatever she had been. Still was. Would always be.

"Draco, he…" Hermione looked down at him and thought about everything he had done. All of it, the good and the bad. She smiled. "He took care of me too."

"I've pretty much done all I can. You don't have to…" Hermione had no idea what Luna had endured in the bowels of the Manor. If Draco had… but he wouldn't. Would he?

She looked down at his face, pale and grey. She knew the answer. Draco would have done anything, if it was for her. Once she had understood that, *fully,* it became the reason she had gone back to him. Had shown him what they could be like, together. So he would do what she had once thought impossible in order to stay with her.

She knew he would never let her go, so Hermione had given him something to hold onto.

Luna nodded and smiled. She still looked peaky, but otherwise fairly unharmed. She had a black eye, but that had been from the rough landing as Dobby's magic started to give out…

Hermione's heart gave another weak beat. Would Dobby have made it if she hadn't insisted on bringing Draco?

She wouldn't have left without him.

The months tucked away in Draco's bed had made her forget some of the horrors everyone else was facing daily in the war. Death was one of those. She had forgotten how quickly it could come. Like it did to Dobby. Like it did to Crookshanks. For a moment it felt as if the curse had hit her as well, splitting her chest in half.

Hermione started chewing on her lip again, the pain a strange comfort to her.

"I don't mind." Luna reached out and took Hermione's hand, turning it over and started wrapping her arm up again. Hermione started down at the *M* before it disappeared under the soft white bandages.

"Anything else?" Luna gazed at her, unblinking.

It might be hard, but there was something that Hermione needed. "I was hoping you could tell me what… Why…" She trailed off, unsure how to phrase her question where it didn't sound rude or intrusive.

"What I was doing in the cellar of Malfoy Manor?" Luna made it sound like she had been taking a stroll through Hagrid's garden and they were talking about the state of pumpkins.

Luna made herself comfortable on the floor next to Hermione. "I was brought there. My father was printing some things that You-Know-Who didn't like. I think Draco Malfoy was supposed to use me as an example. I heard them talking about it. How good he was at the *cruciatus* curse."

A shiver passed down Hermione's spine.

He didn't care about the war or the world, not really. Just her. It was why he had done all of those things in the first place! Without Granger, what was he except another one of Lord Voldemort's Death Eaters?

"You can help us though! You can help us win so that we *don't* die. And then after…" She paused and he looked down to see her holding his numb hand again. "We can be together, Draco."

More fighting. More killing. The Order would burn out his right arm just as sure as being a Death Eater had burned out his left. And then they would condemn him for it. They'd damn him.

"How am I supposed to be with you once the Order has what they want from me? They will either kill me—"

"They won't!"

"Or torture and *then* kill me."

Hermione forced out a sharp breath. "The Order doesn't—"

Draco sat up a little, eyes turning hard as granite. "Yes, Granger, they do. Saint Potter might be able to get away dueling not to kill, but the rest of us aren't as lucky as that."

"But this isn't a duel!" she argued. "You don't know that they will try and hurt you. They might—"

"I know I'm the one with a head wound, but you do remember I'm a Death Eater, right?" He lifted his arm, bearing the mark to her.

Granger stared down at it unflinchingly. Stupid fucking Gryffindor, didn't even know to be scared when it was good for her. Or him. She was a smart girl, why couldn't she see that working with the Order was working against *them?*

Anyway, his fate was sealed. Her's didn't have to be. She could get out of this, get away. And they could have years together, until…

"There's only one way to stop being a Death Eater," he added darkly.

Granger lifted her cinnamon eyes back up to his. Oh shit. He knew that look. He *hated* that look.

"You're right. By choosing not to be one. You don't have to follow that path, if you want…"

Her. If he wanted her. What was he supposed to do, lie to her again? Tell her yes and hope that he could pull her away before either one of them got killed? Potter had been right about one thing, the Dark Lord would be furious that one of his Death Eater's had a link to Potter and hadn't handed it over. He would send people to look for him. Them.

And Draco had an idea of who.

He leaned forward, fighting the pain in his torso. "Can't we just leave? Get out of here? Just the two of us?"

Granger stood up. He hadn't even noticed she had dropped his hand. Merlin, he was so fucked up. He wouldn't last on his own. And he… needed her. As fucked up as this all was, it was still better than the months they had been separated.

"You can," she said, voice shaking a little with emotion. "But I'm staying here. I promised Harry I wouldn't leave him and I won't." She swallowed hard and Draco braced himself for what was coming next. If Granger was nervous about it, he sure as hell should be. "If I really am yours, like you said then… you'll stay too. For me."

She had said she loved him, that she was his again. His whore. Granger *knew* what that meant to him. She had let him fuck her, let him hope, let him *live* again. And this was why. She had known, one day, it would come down to this choice. The clever little *bitch* had known just how to make sure he made the one she wanted.

He didn't even get to make the decision to be a Blood Traitor, she had made his heart make it for him.

If he didn't love her so fucking much, he would *hate* her.

"You know I changed my will?" Draco said, hardening his gaze. Granger's face fell in surprise. "Yeah, you get everything when I die. You get the Manor, the estate, the whole fucking mess. The vaults too. They aren't what they once were, but don't worry, I filled them up with enough blood money to keep you comfortable for a few lifetimes."

She was standing perfectly still, staring at him in disbelief.

"So just make sure the Order offs my father before they kill me and you can use *that* to help your fucking war, Granger." His chest felt tight, the new skin growing under the bandages itched and burned. He was used to it though. He had been burning ever since Granger had clawed her way inside him. He wondered if he would remember how this felt when death took him in its cold clutches.

"Just one favor, Sweetheart," Draco sneered. "Burn my body when I'm dead. It's not like I'll be of any *use* to Order then and you clearly don't give a shit what happens to me as long as you win, right?"

A single tear slipped out of her eye and Draco watched it run down her cheek, a hot blush underneath it. Draco felt something in him twist and coil. It liked seeing her cry.

Because at least *that* was for him.

Granger raised her chin, defiant as ever. He was surprised that the tears in her eyes didn't turn to steam from the heat of her anger behind them.

"Yes, *sir,"* she spat, then turned on her heel and slammed the door behind her.

Hermione worked carefully, knowing how Draco already felt about his scars and did her best not to antagonize them any further.

She had one of her own to match now. Bellatrix had only gotten a few slices in, but her skin would scar in the shape of an *M* on her forearm. M for Mudblood. It was a badge she'd wear proudly. And with any luck, Bellatrix would have a few scars of her own on her face in the shape of a paw.

Hermione alternated between the healing spells she knew and the ones she remembered Blaise using on Draco. The mix seemed to be working. Draco was breathing steadily and Hermione felt a taut line of anxiety release in her. But no matter what she did, his arm remained the same. Dark bruises from blood pooling under the skin, and his hand felt deathly cold.

She held it for a little while, warming it with her own, remembering how she had sat at his bedside last year. Draco had been through so much, they both had. But they were still here. In the strangest way, it made her smile. Her brain was too tired to figure out the exact reason why, but she knew it was because of him.

She brushed her fingers lightly over his cheek. He was going to be okay. They were going to be okay. Together, and like they should have been all along.

She was doing her best to *scourgify* the blood off his coat when there was a knock on the door. Hermione turned, only then noticing how much her back ached from bending over for so long. She had no idea what time it was, but judging by how long ago the sun had set, she must have been in here for hours.

Long blonde hair and two luminescent eyes peered back at her from the open door. Luna Lovegood walked in, a dreamy smile on her face.

"Do you need some help?" Luna offered, crouching down next to her.

Hermione just stared at her for a moment. Luna had come up out of the cellar along with Mr. Ollivander, the goblin, Harry, Ron and Dobby. She had thought she was going crazy when she saw them all in the Malfoy's drawing room. What were they all doing there? She didn't have to be the brightest witch of her age to figure it out.

They had been prisoners. Locked up just a few floors beneath where Hermione had let Draco…

She bit her lip to stop the thought. It was still tender from Draco's assault on it, when he was inside her, fucking her so hard and fast that all she could do was cling onto him—

She hoped Luna didn't notice her blushing.

His blue eyes locked on hers and a variety of emotions passed through them before he said, "We're out of dittany. We used the last bit of yours after Knockturn."

"We're out now too," Bill added.

"We still 'ave some… *comment dire, essence de…*"

"Murtlap," Bill finished for her. "We have murtlap essence."

"Thank you," Hermione said pointedly. She wasn't asking.

Draco would be proud.

Bill said something about sending another message to Kingsley and Fleur left to fetch the murtlap essence and bandages. Hermione piled up a bit of the blankets underneath Draco's head to give him something soft to rest on.

She'd lobby for a bed once she had him on the mend.

The stasis charm had stopped his wounds from bleeding, but had also stopped them from clotting or healing. Hermione started with the small ones, taking the charm off, cleaning them and then trying to knit them back up before covering them with the murtlap soaked bandages.

"Is this what you did for me? When I was splinched?" She had almost forgotten Ron was still there until he spoke.

Hermione didn't turn or let it break her concentration. "Something like this, yes." She charmed the bandages to wrap around Draco so she didn't have to move him. "But I had dittany so it was a little easier."

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Ron nod, evening sun catching his copper hair. "Then he's in good hands. I'm as good as new now."

Hermione looked over her shoulder to see Ron looking down at her nervously, shifting from foot to foot.

"I'm glad to hear it."

Ron looked down at his feet. "I—I'm going to help Harry." He looked up again. "He's burying Dobby on the dunes."

Hermione's heart gave a painful lurch. She wanted to help her friends, be there for them and comfort them. But Draco needed her.

"Tell him I'm sorry."

Ron didn't move. "Is that it?"

Hermione rounded on him. "What do you want me to say?"

He just shook his head and closed the door behind him. There was healing that needed to be done there too, but not as much as in front of her.

Draco leaned his head back against the bars of the headboard. It wasn't just his arm that was numb now, but his entire body. The only thing he could feel was his heart, beating away in his chest. He kept it there, locked up in the cage of his ribs.

Like a fucking traitor should be.

The next two days passed in a similar fashion. Everyone seemed to ignore him except Granger when she delivered his meals and healing potions. They helped, and he could feel his scars reforming as his strength returned. He found out that he could stand up for short periods, but didn't bother going downstairs where everyone seemed to congregate. Draco had no desire to spend any amount of time with anyone else in this… shack. He still heard them though, thundering through the house and waking him up when he finally was able to ignore the pain enough to sleep.

He really didn't like it when he heard Granger's laugh mixed in with the rest of them. That's when he tried flexing his arm. He could use it, he just couldn't feel it. He could certainly feel the tension that hung between the two of them every time Granger was in the room. And just like his arm, that wasn't getting any better either.

She asked him how he was doing and helped him change the bandages. She even borrowed some old clothes from Bill so he could dress. Draco refused to wear them until she threatened to give him one of Ron's and Draco begrudgingly put on the… *brown* shirt. Thankfully he had his own trousers. The shirt was bad enough, he didn't want to think about having to borrow anything else. He purposefully refused to say thank you.

Draco wanted to ask her how she was doing, and talk to her about what had happened. He knew she must be missing the furball. He did. He missed her too. But when they did exchange words during her visits, Draco found it hard not to say something sarcastic and Granger would snap back at him and they ended up fighting until she left again. To go help the Order. To talk with her friends. To go back to the people she actually wanted to be with.

She wanted to be with him too. And she could be if he just fucking… No, if *she* would just open her eyes and see *his* side of things. As long as he was under the same roof as the Order, death would hang over his head.

He didn't want to die. But living without her wasn't really living. He'd already lost the use of his arm, he didn't want to lose her too. But the Order *couldn't* win. And she was so fucking stubborn. She wouldn't give up, not even in a bloody argument.

When she was yelling at him, Draco thought he felt a tremor in his arm, but it quickly died. Still, it shocked him enough that Granger was able to slip out before he got the last word in.

He flexed and tightened the muscles in his arm for as long as he could stand it, anything to try and spark some sort of feeling in it. It stayed numb and useless at his side.

Blaise had said there was nerve damage. But like he always had, Draco had ignored his friend's advice and just done whatever the fuck he wanted.

He wished Blaise was here. Or Crookshanks. Someone to… talk to.

He wished he had a bottle to drown himself in.

But Granger didn't like him drunk and Blaise didn't like him at all and the cat was fucking dead so Draco just laid there and stared at the ceiling.

And waited for her to come back.

She always did.

Then she would leave again.

It was probably his imagination, but it seemed each time took longer and longer.

He wondered how long until she sent someone else in her place.

He wondered if she would give up on him and let the Order take what they needed from him. If he wasn't willing to fight, they didn't need him in good condition. They could open him up, mind and body, and Draco wouldn't be able to do anything to stop them.

Granger was the only thing keeping him alive. And in the late hours of the night, he was honest enough with himself to admit that she had been this whole damn time.

So what was holding him back?

Nothing but his own foolish pride. What did he have to be proud of now anyway? He was a captured Death Eater with an arm that didn't work. If he tried to help and failed, where would that leave him? Where did he *want* to be?

Not here, stuck in this stupid Order safe house. Draco balled his hand into a fist. It should feel heavy and solid . It should be able to hurt. It didn't do any of those things.

So he threw it into the wall beside him. Again and again until the wood cracked and maybe his knuckles too. They were bleeding when he stopped. His pure blood was smeared across the dirty, brown wood. He couldn't do much but at least he could do

She could practically hear Draco purring " *Good girl,"* in the back of her head.

Fleur came up behind her. " *Non.* No fighting in ze houze. Bill, tell zem."

He didn't need to because Ron's face had flushed crimson and Hermione could see him warring with himself over what to do. "You'd curse your best friend," he spat the words at her, "for a git like him?"

The creature roared in Hermione's chest and it came out before she could stop it. "Harry's not here."

The effect was instantaneous. Ron's arms fell to his sides and his baby blue eyes softened, hurt reverberating in them as they darted between hers.

Hermione felt a pang of remorse, but buried it deep down. She raised her chin and held his gaze. No matter how much it hurt. And goodness, it hurt more than she thought it would.

Bill sighed heavily. "Fine, but when we hear back from Kingsley—"

It was good enough for her and Hermione pushed past them into the small room.

He wasn't even on a bed, just a pile of old blankets on the floor. His shirt and coat were removed and his head and leaning to the side, the wound on it pressed against the dirty floor.

Hermione fell to her knees at his side. She knew they were watching her, or Draco more than likely, but she didn't care.

Some of his scars had torn open again to show deep red gashes across his pale skin. Too pale. And his arm… Dear Godric, his *arm.* It was splotched with purple and black bruises, the skin warm to the touch as she grazed the tips of her fingers carefully over it, making sure to avoid the dark mark which remained untouched, unaltered in the center.

"Fleur, can you bring the bandages from downstairs and Ron, do we have any of the essence of dittany left in my bag? I'm sure I can get these to close if…" She stopped talking when she realized no one else was moving. "What are you waiting for?" she asked, starting to panic.

"Hermione," Bill said gently as he stepped forward. "He's a Death Eater. We can't waste supplies on him."

They were going to let him die because of a stupid mark on his arm.

But Hermione wasn't.

She ripped the bandage off of her arm and lifted Draco's head, waving his wand to clean the wound and then winding her own blood soaked wrappings around it.

"Hermione, no!" Ron started forward.

She turned and glared at him. "Then *help."*

Her chest tore open and Hermione was surprised that her heart didn't fall right out of it and bounce back down the stairs. She closed her eyes against the threat of tears. She was back in the war now, she didn't have time to cry.

Not until she was wrapped up in Draco's arms so he could hold her together while she fell apart.

Draco. She couldn't lose him too. She refused to.

Hermione wiped at her eyes and forced her tired body up the rest of the stairs.

It was easy to tell which room was his because it was the one Bill and Ron were standing guard outside, talking in low voices. They stopped as she approached.

Ron crossed his arms over his chest and Hermione noticed they had grown a little in size since she last saw him. Still covered in freckles though. Still Ron. Still… Was he still her friend?

"Hermione, I can't let you in," Bill said, sounding resigned.

She didn't say anything, just narrowed her eyes and waited.

"This is Order business. We have to wait until we hear back to know what we should do with him and—"

"What to do with him?" Her voice was much louder than she intended it to be, but it seemed to work because Bill blinked in shock. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"We have limited resources and Malfoy is not a priority as much as—"

"You aren't healing him?!"

"He's… in stasis."

The blood rushed from Hermione's head. Draco was purposefully being left in pain. It was *torture*. "You can't do that!"

"Why's it a bad thing?" Ron's voice held anger underneath the casual tone. "Should have left him there with his own kind."

Hermione rounded on him. "He is my kind!" Both Weasleys looked taken aback for a moment and while Bill looked at her curiously, Ron's blue eyes merely glared. Hermione felt the newly freed creature in her chest flex its claws. "There is no 'his kind' or 'your kind'. Or have you forgotten what we are fighting for?"

"Have you?!" Ron fired back.

Hermione straightened her back, but still left her inches below Ron. After months of looking up to Draco, he didn't seem as much of a threat anymore. She pulled Draco's dark wand from her pocket.

"I am *done* with locked doors. I am *done* being told where I can and cannot go. So you will either let me through or I'll show you how much I remember about fighting."

that. He thought it would make him feel better to break something of theirs. But it didn't. The only thing that made him better was Granger.

And she was here, just downstairs, talking with her friends. And nothing short of an *imperius* would make her leave. He couldn't fathom why. This place was a shithole and the people inside it were even worse. The whole house could catch on fire and he wouldn't even piss on it to put it out.

He never asked for any of this. Not the mark, not the girl, or the war. He never even asked for the blood he had prized so dearly. Draco looked down at his hand, his arm, his mark. He hadn't made any of these choices himself. And now that he had to, Draco felt numb, stuck. As useless as his unfeeling arm.

Deep down he knew the answer.

It didn't matter where he was. As long as he was with her.

It was already late when Hermione knocked on the door, not that she expected Draco to answer, but because… well, it was what she was supposed to do. Waiting a few seconds she nudged it open, balancing the tray of food on her arm as best she could. The weight made the cut flare to life, but the murtlap essence in the bandage quickly soothed it again.

It was the price she had paid for freedom, but she didn't feel free. In fact, Hermione couldn't remember a time she had ever felt so burdened.

She had thought about everything she wanted to do once she got out of the Manor, but now that she was doing it all, the weight was unbearable. She had asked Harry for time for Draco to get acclimated, but hadn't thought to ask it for herself too. Being thrust back into the middle of the war was difficult, to put it lightly.

Every day there was more information, but little to do with it. So they planned and when those plans started to fall through, they made new plans. Whenever they were able, Hermione, Ron, and Harry snuck off to talk about horcruxes. Not that there was much improvement on that front since their nights in the tent.

Ron had been just as disappointed as Harry when she said she hadn't come up with any new leads while she had been gone. He spent most of his time talking with his brother

Bill going over Order information and doing 'perimeter checks', which Hermione was sure was just his way of avoiding her.

In fact, the only time Hermione felt like she could really breathe was the moments she pulled away and brought Draco his food and healing potions. Even though they didn't talk much, she felt herself lingering longer and longer in his room. She knew she needed to get back to work, but… there was something here she needed too.

Draco didn't look over at her as she walked up to the bed. His moody disposition was starting to get predictable and Hermione knew better than to try and force him out of it. If he wanted to sit here and brood, fine. He'd done that for months in his own room, why should anything change now?

But she had to admit, he did look a little cute when he pouted. Even with his new haircut.

"I brought you some soup," she offered, sitting the tray on the small table and sitting on the edge of the bed. It was tiny compared to the one in his bedroom and she was surprised that he hadn't complained about it.

Maybe because she had made him sleep on the chaise for so long.

He took the potion off the tray and popped the stopper from it. Draco tilted his head back and swallowed it, settling the empty bottle back down and resumed his previous position.

"Are you hungry?" She stirred the soup around a little.

Draco stayed turned to the wall.

"Draco, you need to eat something. You need your strength."

"Why?" The one word cut through her. So it was going to be one of *those* conversations then. Lovely.

"Because you're hurt and you won't heal if—"

He snorted.

Hermione narrowed her eyes at the back of his head. " *If,"* she continued, "you don't want to eat, then I'll leave."

She reached for the tray and a strong hand clasped around her wrist, fingers pressing into the soft underside of it and she knew he could feel her pulse jump at his touch.

"Ask me nicely."

His head turned ever so slightly in her direction, grey eyes glinting mischievously.

Hermione tilted her head in aggravation. But if it got him to eat something… "Please Draco," she said sweetly, but rolled her eyes so he didn't think he'd won her over that easily.

Fleur had done her best, which was honestly very good. Hermione wondered how many times she had bandaged up someone to do it with this ease. Judging by the concentration that had been in Fleur's eyes, Hermione thought maybe there were some things she was better off not knowing.

Ron had thrown his jacket over her on the dunes and given her a heavy hug over the thick fabric. Hermione had still been shaking, staring down at Draco who looked as pale as death as Luna helped Mr. Ollivander, who was muttering something Hermione couldn't quite make out and Harry sat in the shallows, holding something small against his chest. Then Ron and Bill were picking up Draco, hauling him inside as Hermione ran after them, begging them to be careful.

She half expected Draco to open his eyes, throw her a wink and let her know it was all a joke, but he didn't. He just hung there in between them, still and silent. She tried to follow them, but Fleur had sat her down and started fussing over her and shoving her into a bedroom then Ron had shown up and handed her the beaded bag, telling her that her clothes were still in there while trying not to look at what she was currently dressed in.

It was chaotic, but Hermione couldn't help but ask.

"Is Draco okay?"

"The Order is taking care of him."

The door closed again so she could change. Real clothes felt strange after so long without them and Hermione quickly folded the white dress. Maybe she should have thrown it out, it was little more than ruined scraps, but… she shoved it deep inside her bag, behind a pile of books and started towards the door again.

Fleur had healed all the marks on her, except for the one on her thigh. Hermione could feel it, *him,* against the seam of her jeans as she climbed the stairs. He would be alright. He had to be. But cold logic told her that maybe he wouldn't. The beating he had taken escaping the Manor… She didn't think she would ever forget the agony blaring in his eyes or the hard lines digging into his face as he fought against the curse, trying to get to her.

She'd never forget the yowl Crookshanks had given a second before he fell. Hermione missed a step on the stairs, nearly falling, but catching herself on the railing and leaned against it, breathing hard.

Crookshanks…

He held his palm out. "Sweetheart?" Draco was surprised by how slurred the word sounded.

Granger pulled her hands away from Weasley and dropped her wrists into his.

He really, really hoped she wouldn't leave him after this. That she wouldn't take off and run away with Weasley and Potter and leave him here to die. His shirt stuck to him, heavy with blood. He needed to do this fast because he wasn't going to stay upright much longer.

Draco brought her arm close to his face and breathed out over the iron cuff. He watched as goosebumps rose on her skin not covered in blood. His fault. He'd make it better though. Starting now.

" *Lectio Nefastus.*"

The cuffs popped open and dropped to the ground.

Granger gasped and her big doe eyes widened like he loved.

"Thought you would have worked that one out, Sweetheart," Draco murmured before flattening his tongue and running it up the length of her arm, tasting the sweet tang of her blood.

He didn't know exactly why he did it, but it seemed like a good way to remind Weasley that Granger was *his* .

"Fucker."

Something heavy hit the side of his head and he heard Granger scream as he hit the ground once more.

The last thing Draco felt before the world faded from around him was Granger's hand, still clasping his.

Hermione had spent months locked up in a bedroom and she wasn't going to spend a single minute more being told she couldn't leave again. She was *done* waiting for the approval to see Draco. She had done as she was supposed to and sat still while her wounds were treated and dressed. The cut on her arm itched and burned when Fleur poured dittany on it, but at least it stopped bleeding.

Gingerly, he turned from the wall and pushed himself up to a sitting position a little easier than he had this morning when she brought him breakfast. He was still ashen, but the circles under his eyes had lightened to a soft blue. At least Draco was getting some rest.

He'd be up and about soon, and then, she'd have another problem on her hands. She added him to the bottom of her mental list. Pretty soon she was going to need a second head to figure all of this out. Hermione tried to hide her worry by busying herself with the tray again, settling it on his lap and straightening the napkin and spoon.

"Granger."

She turned his glass of water a few degrees and then turned it back.

"Granger." His forceful tone stopped her fussing and Hermione looked up at him.

He raised his brows just a little, dispelling the brooding gloom from his face. "Stay with me?"

Hermione bit her lip. That was the question, wasn't it?

"While I eat," he clarified and she eased slightly, just enough to allow herself to sit on the edge of the bed again. Odd, that she had spent so much of her time in bed with him, but now felt so awkward about it.

"Of course." She placed her hands in her lap and immediately started to pick at them, her old nervous habit coming back in full force.

Draco frowned and Hermione stopped, sitting on her hands to stop herself.

"Spoon, Draco."

His eyes shot up to hers and she blushed at the implication. "I mean your spoon is right there."

"Right." Reaching with his left hand, Draco paused and Hermione watched him frown. He placed it back down on the bed beside him and picked up the spoon with his right hand, wrinkling his nose. "This isn't silver."

"And somehow it still works," Hermione said with a tight voice. "Now eat."

He did. Maybe because he remembered yelling at her to eat all those times. Or… probably not. Draco was probably just hungry. He didn't exactly do things out of the kindness of his heart. Not unless he got something out of it too.

Hermione glanced up and saw him watching her. Oh. So that's what this was.

A trade. His good behavior for her company. Well if all she had to do was sit here, it wasn't so bad. At least he seemed to be enjoying the soup.

And Draco wasn't so terrible to be around when he wasn't making sarcastic comments under his breath.

Hermione looked at his hair. It was strange seeing him with it so short, but… not bad. She wanted to touch it, feel the trimmed strands against her fingers and pull his face close to hers. She missed him. Even though he was acting like a stuck up bastard, he was… different than everyone else.

She knew the war was the most important thing right now and that Harry and Ron should be working towards finding more horcruxes and Bill and Fleur should be organizing safe passage for Luna and Mr. Ollivander and that she should be doing everything she could to help them all, but… when she was with Draco, even when he was being a right ass, he still treated her like she was the most important thing in the world.

The only thing, really. It was nice, being… treated like she mattered and not just a cog in a machine. A machine she wasn't entirely sure where her place was.

"What's in this?" Draco's voice stirred her from her heavy thoughts.

Hermione looked down at the bowl. "I think… beans?" she said thoughtfully as Draco took another bite. "I'm not sure. Ron made it."

Oh no. Why did she say that?

Draco opened his mouth, letting the lumpy soup simply fall out of it and splash back into the bowl.

Hermione sighed as Draco purposefully set the not-silver spoon down.

"I've suddenly lost my appetite."

The lion in her chest growled in frustration. "It's just soup, Draco. It's not—"

Good Godric, he was going to make her pull her hair out!

"Fine!" Hermione grabbed the tray and sloshed some of the soup over the side of the bowl. "If you pass out from hunger at least I won't have to listen to you whine."

Draco's hand closed around her wrist as she turned to leave.

"Don't go."

She felt a pang shot through her heart. He always did this. Pushed and pulled. Made her so dizzy that she couldn't help but fall back into his arms. Hermione pulled her wrist out of his hand.

"Draco, I'm tired. It's been a long day and—"

His brows lowered over his eyes. "Where have you been sleeping?"

She sat the tray down on the bedside table, but remained standing. "Sort of whatever bed is free at the moment. There is always someone on watch so there is normally somewhere available for a few hours."

"There has to be a way," he said through gritted teeth, his stupid face turning red from the effort.

"Get… off…" Draco breathed out heavily, trying again to push himself up. This time, using his other hand and cradling his arm to his chest. He could cast with his right. It wasn't as good as his left, but he reckoned he could still make Weasley scream. He just needed his wand back from—

"Draco!" Granger's attention turned to him, those big doe eyes widening again at the sight of him.

"This is your fault," Weasley snarled at him and Draco sneered back. He could feel the sticky blood starting to dry on his face. "You sick fucking—"

"Ronald!"

"LOOK AT HER!"

Draco glanced at Granger and had to admit, it looked bad. The sheer lace dress was torn, deep red spots speckled her neck and tops of her tits. Her hair was tangled and wild, and worst of all was the blood smeared on her forearm, leaking down to where the cuffs encircled her wrist.

Draco's head was swimming from sitting up and he started to feel nauseous. Fuck. This really hurt. But he wasn't the only one who had been wounded. Draco reached out, trying to see Granger's bleeding arm.

She let out a small whimper as Weasley yanked on the chain, pulling her hand away from his.

Draco spat blood onto the ground and bared his teeth.

"Ron, stop. I mean it." Granger's voice cut in the air between them. He just glared at her and then prodded the chains again with his wand, sending sparks flying as his charms bounced off. "You can't remove them! Only he can!"

Draco did his best to smirk. Only him. That's right, she needed *him*. Wanted *him*. Not that fucking weasel.

"What are you talking about?" Weasley's brows furrowed together.

"It's—" she winced, "a password. He has to…"

Weasley glared darkly at him. "Any tricks and I'll break your face open the rest of the way, Malfoy."

Draco swallowed down something sour that was creeping up his throat and focused on Granger, trying to turn her swaying images into one. Weasley could wait, Granger couldn't.

his forehead. He had obviously agonized over this for a while now, but Hermione was having a hard time telling if he had landed on regret or resentment.

"Thanks for… trying." As much as she knew they needed to talk about things, it didn't make actually doing it any easier.

"I am, Hermione," Ron said seriously. "I am trying *really* hard to figure out a way to be your friend again. I just…" He glanced up and Hermione knew he was thinking about who was sitting in a room two floors above them right now. "It's not like before. We used to fight, but we were still… I don't know. Just… take it easy on me, okay?"

If they weren't in the middle of a war, she might demand more of him. More explanation, more understanding, more… friendship. But they could die tomorrow, or the next day. She didn't want to spend what may be their last days in tense silence.

Hermione had wasted enough time being mad at Draco already, she didn't want to make the same mistake with Ron.

And if they made it through this, if they survived, then they could figure out what sort of friendship they could salvage. Right now, Hermione just wanted to have her friend again. Even if it was at arm's length.

"Okay. I can do that." Hermione stood up and pulled at the hem of her shirt, a habit from wearing short dresses that she hadn't entirely been able to shake.

Ron quickly followed her to his feet. "I missed you, Hermione," he said, the hard look in his eye gone and a bit of the boy she knew was there instead.

"Me too," she replied little and saw him relax a little. "But I'm back now and… I don't think I properly told you thank you for saving me."

Ron's smile widened. "No, you didn't. But you don't have to," he added. "Pulling you away from dark wizards is sort of what I do, in between destroying horcruxes that is."

She felt a strange inkling forming in the back of her mind, but quickly decided to ignore it. They had just mended their shaky friendship, she wasn't going to start second guessing him now. Instead, Hermione smiled back at him. "It's a good thing Draco's not a dark wizard anymore then."

Hermione turned and headed towards the kitchen. Ron stayed there, looking like he wanted to say more. "Come on, Ronald," Hermione beckoned. "You can make me lunch so I don't have to eat a bread sandwich again."

She hoped her quip didn't set him off. She just wanted to make things clear to him, that was all.

Ron rubbed the back of his neck. "Might not be as good as whatever they would cook you up in the Malfoy kitchens, but I'll see what I can do."

Hermione waited for him at the door so they could walk together. "I actually missed your cooking."

"Did you?" he asked, surprised.

She nodded. "All the food there was made by elves and you know how I feel about that."

Ron just laughed, the noise bouncing off the walls of the hall and filling Hermione with a happy lightness. She had her friends back. She had Draco with her. After so long of everything going wrong, *finally* things seemed to be looking up. Right now, Hermione felt like she could face down Voldemort himself and end the war.

But maybe *after* lunch.

Draco stretched and swore. He was sore. He knew the Order was going to torture him, he just had no idea it would be by giving him the world's worst mattress. Even the weeks he spent sleeping on the chaise had been better than this. He normally came downstairs for breakfast after everyone else was already busy with things for the day in an attempt to spend the least amount of time as possible with them. Some stupid little shells hanging on strings clattered next to his head as he made his way in and Draco groaned.

This place was hell.

Granger had woken up before dawn and started pulling his arms off of her. There was nowhere else she needed to be more than she needed to be in bed with him, so he had only held on tighter, snaking his hand in between her legs to cup her warmth.

"Draco!" she whispered harshly.

He merely grinned and tucked his face into her neck, breathing in her sweet vanilla cinnamon scent.

"Let *go,"* she said a bit more forcefully and pulled at his arm again.

"No, I don't think I will," Draco murmured and pressed his fingers in, feeling the soft give of her under the thin knickers.

"There is much too much to do today and I can't spend an hour letting you… rut on top of me."

Draco grinned into Granger's hair and tightened his hold. "How about from behind then? Hmm?" He ground his dick into her ass and relished the small gasp that he got in return. He loved how her body went still in response to his. She was so perfect, so pure.

He couldn't get enough of her.

"Draco…" she said regretfully.

He knew it was a losing battle; she took her work seriously, she always had. Granger put just as much concentration and focus into helping the Order that she had any Ancient Runes essay she'd ever written. It was quite annoying actually, that he had her at his disposal for so long, but not able to touch her and now that he could, she was always rushing off to do something without him.

Still he couldn't help, but push a little. Granger gave a soft moan.

"I can take less than an hour," he breathed out, "or more." Draco pressed the heel of his hand into her making Granger squirm as she tried to fight the pressure.

"I can't. We're talking to Griphook this morning and we need to go over—Ah!"

Draco tightened his arms around her, his left twinging with pain. "You spend too much time with them."

"They're," she wriggled against him again. Not very hard though. "—my best friends and I owe them—"

"And what am I?" he purred. His heart skipped a beat waiting for her response.

He wanted to hear it, from her lips, what they were. What she thought they were. Because she had such beautiful thoughts and maybe he'd be less nervous, if she said it first.

Granger stilled again, then said, " *You're* making me late." She threw off his arm and Draco rolled onto his back as she climbed out of the bed, hitting the ground running. Granger already had one leg of her jeans on before he even finished pulling his hand over his face.

He tried to fall back asleep, but soon after the rest of the house started waking up and so Draco hauled himself up and down the stairs, hoping there was still some food left from breakfast. He had trouble getting dressed on his own, but ever since Granger had produced a black sweatshirt from… somewhere, he had adopted it as his daily wear. Seriously, what was going on with everyone's obsession with wearing as many colors as possible?

Frenchie was taking off her apron as he walked in. Of course, it was bright and looked like someone had puked up a garden full of flowers on it.

Ron stared at her for a few *very* long seconds where Hermione didn't even blink. She meant it. Ron had hurt her by leaving, but even more by the things he said before it. If they really were going to move past this, there were things she needed to hear first.

Ron sighed. "I'm sorry, Hermione. For what I said about you. I was just… angry. Shit, I can't even think about him without—" The flush under his skin grew, blood climbing up from his neck to the tops of his ears. "But I shouldn't have taken it out on you. And I shouldn't have left like that."

Hermione was touched. Normally Ron said the bare minimum to get back in her good graces, but it seemed he had grown up a bit in their months apart. Hermione felt like she had as well. "I'm sorry too. I wish I hadn't hidden what I was doing with Draco from you."

"I wish you would have hidden it a bit better." Ron said softly. "Or at least hidden under the covers."

Hermione felt heat rush over her face and into her hair. Her stomach did an awkward flip inside her, falling flat. She had almost forgotten that he had… seen.

"I…" she stopped talking when it came out as a squeak.

"I thought…" Ron's brows furrowed together. "I didn't think you'd actually… *be* with him. Not after everything he did."

Hermione picked at her hands a little in her lap. "I wasn't," she answered honestly. "Not until…" Hermione glanced up for just a moment and found Ron's sky blue eyes trained on her. "The day before you came actually. The whole time I was there, we weren't… we didn't…"

She stopped talking again and folded her hands before she accidentally made them bleed. She didn't think it was a good idea to tell him that she had celebrated his and Harry's victory in Knockturn alley with Draco's head between her legs.

Ron looked a little sad. "A day too late," he muttered and stared at her hands in her lap. Hermione fought to keep them still. "I tried to come back. After I left, but I couldn't find you."

Hermione looked up at him. "How did you find Harry?"

Ron gave her a sad smile. "The deluminator that Dumbledore left me. It led me back, not to Harry, but to—" His jaws snapped shut and she watched him think for a moment. "I was a day late coming back and a day late finding you again. Too bad I didn't have another swallow of *felix felicis* this time around."

Hermione didn't know what to say and Ron seemed to be half talking to himself. He blew out a low breath and shook his head. His hair was longer and falling heavily over

Hermione gave a shaky sigh and looked to Ron and Bill.

Bill pulled his long hair behind his head, tying it back. "I'll send a message to Kingsley and let him know. See if he has anything in particular we need to ask about too." He stood up and turned to Harry. "I can talk to Griphook as well, see if he is willing to speak with you."

"Yeah," Harry said, standing up as well. "Thanks, Bill. That would be great."

They made their way out of the room, leaving Hermione and Ron alone. She looked nervously over at him and bit her lip.

"Ron?" He had told her in the tent that he wanted to find Draco and make him pay. Hermione knew it wasn't just because of her, but because of the years of ridicule and rude remarks. The fact that from their first day at Hogwarts until their last, Draco had made a habit, a game, out of making Ron as miserable as possible.

She knew it because Draco had done it to her as well. Until she started sleeping with him.

Ron leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "I didn't spend all that time figuring out a way to rescue you just so you could run off with him again."

"I didn't run off."

"I know," he said softly, staring at her hands instead of looking her in the eye. "Believe me, I know, Hermione. I was the one who left. If I hadn't, I could have stopped him. I would have." Ron's blue eyes were as clear as the sky when he finally brought them up to meet hers. "I would have done a lot of things differently."

She knew exactly what he was saying. Or at least, thought she did; she wanted their relationship back the way it used to be too. Before he found out about Draco, before she saw him kiss Lavender. Maybe even before they started to have a few feelings bloom for one another. And if Ron wanted their friendship back, Hermione wasn't going to deny it to him. If she could forgive Draco for everything he had done, she could work on forgiving Ron too.

"So would I," Hermione admitted, then added, "and so would Draco. If you're going to give me a chance, you need to give him one as well."

"A chance to stab us all in the back."

"A chance to make things right. And while we are on that subject," Hermione felt her old pride spark up in her again. "If you want me to be your friend then you need to apologize to me as well."

"There is toast *et café.*" She nodded at the table. The slices of bread were insultingly small and burned black.

Draco adjusted his sling and opened up a few cabinets, looking for a cup. He stopped upon seeing a few bottles of wine on the top shelf.

He hated wine.

But it *was* alcohol.

Frenchie slammed the cabinet in his face, glaring, and sat down a chipped mug hard on the counter.

Draco sneered and swiped it up. The coffee was on the stove and he fumbled, trying to pour it with one hand. He wished that elf wouldn't have died because he could really use a servant right about now.

" 'Ou are spilling it everywhere!"

"Well it's a little hard!" Draco snapped back.

Frenchie started to push him out of the way and Draco's elbow knocked into the mug. It fell, spreading little white shards and inky black liquid across the floor.

"What 'ave 'you done?!"

"It's not my fault!"

Frenchie shoved a rag into his hand and mumbled in French as she pulled the coffee away from him, waving her wand to extinguish the flame on the stove.

Draco glared at her; at her long silvery hair, her proudly raised chin, her wand that she waved so easily. He had none of those things. He had nothing. Nothing, except… Granger. And lately she was too busy with other people to spare any time for him.

Still, Frenchie would tell her about this and she would get upset if he threw the rag at Frenchie's stupid blonde head, so Draco bent down and tried to scoop up the shards of mug and mop up the spilled coffee.

It was *humiliating.*

Frenchie walked into the hall, a closet door creaked as she got something from it. Draco looked over his shoulder at the cabinet that had held the bottles of wine.

He could swipe one, hurry outside and down it before she even knew it was missing. It would make all of this a little easier to swallow if he had some alcohol in his blood. And if he was caught, at least Granger would spend some time with him to yell at him for drinking.

"Shit!" Draco looked down at his hand. One of the white shards had cut into his palm. "Fuck this."

He stood up and the back door opened.

"Hello? I brought some—" Draco froze, bleeding hand forgotten as he stared into a face he knew well. Or at least, parts of it.

She straightened her neck, tensing and her expression hardened into one he had seen on her sister a week ago. The basket on her arm dropped to the floor as Andromeda Tonks' wand raised in an all too familiar movement.

Draco backed into the counter. He was defenseless, wounded, and bleeding.

If he didn't think he was about to die, he might laugh at the irony.

He had fled his aunt torturing him, just to find another.

"I was hoping I'd run into you again." Andromeda's face twisted into a smirk.

Draco's stomach dropped. It was his. That was *his* smirk. And he knew exactly what it meant.

He hit the floor as the stream of light came at him. Something crashed and Draco tried to crawl forward, wincing as he placed weight on his wounded arm.

He could see the bottom on the stairs in front of him, but right before he lunged another jet of light hit the floor right in front of him.

"Shit!" Draco threw himself back.

"What iz going—"

Thank fuck for Frenchie.

"Andromeda!"

"What is *he* doing here?!"

"He is—"

Draco could see Andromeda's legs moving from where he was crouched and quickly backed under the table. Shit shit shit. He needed to get out of here. Right *now*.

"Where are you, you little shit?"

Draco ran into one of the chairs, stopping his retreat.

Shit.

Fuck.

Shit.

Frenchie was trying to explain to Andromeda and Draco twisted around, crawling and limping out of the side of the table, hoping to get outside where at least he had a chance to outrun Andromeda. But… shit. Granger was still upstairs.

Suppressing a growl, Draco clambered out and pulled on the table with his good arm to stand up again.

Hermione didn't bother to tell them she didn't think Draco had any intention of cleaning up after himself. But she had to admit, Bill had a point. Draco was unpredictable at times and never more dangerous than when he felt trapped or hurt.

"I have his wand. Anyway, he needs to heal more before he starts trying to use it. He…" Hermione didn't want to tell them about what he had done to himself, what he might do if he started spiraling again like he had after Theo. "I don't think he will mind as long as I keep it."

"Make sure that you do," Bill warned. "He's already yelled at and insulted my wife. I won't have him doing anything else to upset her."

"I'm pretty sure Fleur can hold her own," Ron laughed a little and the sound somehow made the atmosphere in the sitting room feel lighter. "I saw her take down that Death Eater when we were moving Harry last summer. I don't think you have anything to worry about when it comes to her."

Harry grinned and Bill even cracked a bit of a smile and his scar didn't look so deep when the rest of his face lit up.

"In fact, Hermione, give it back to him. I'd love to see Fleur knock Malfoy on his ass. We can call it the '*Battle of the Blondes*'."

Hermione just rolled her eyes, but her chest felt lighter, less like there was a hippogriff sitting on it as they started to laugh and joke.

"Okay okay, but seriously, what are we going to do with him? Day to day? He might be willing to give information, but Kingsley and Remus are right," Harry said with a glance to Bill. "We have to tread carefully."

This is what she was waiting for, even looking forward to. Hermione felt almost like she had in school when she knew the exact answer to a professor's question. "We let him do what we do. Train with us, talk with us. Draco doesn't know anything about the Order other than what he's been told by people like himself. He doesn't think we can win. I want to show him we can."

"You think he'd actually fight alongside us?" Bill asked, raising his eyebrows. "Against Death Eaters?"

Hermione raised her chin. "Before Harry and Ron rescued us, Draco's father gave him a concussion and Bellatrix hit him with half a dozen *crucios*." She looked around the room again, curious expressions on each of their faces. "I can't imagine he doesn't want a little payback."

Harry shrugged as if accepting this as a reasonable motivation. "I've never been happier about Lucius Malfoy's shitty parenting."

came out of the goblet of fire and they had moved past Harry's outbursts in fifth year. And if Harry and Ron had worked past their differences and all the problems they had in the tent, then certainly she and Ron could move forward as well.

Probably.

Most likely.

Maybe.

She just didn't want to leave things in a bad place and then something happen to one of them. Hermione had spent enough time not saying how she felt. How much sooner might she have been able to be with Draco if she would have just calmed down and spoken rationally to him?

Although it had been a little hard to be level headed when he chained her in a cage. Draco was the only person she had ever met who was more bossy than she was. Although the thought of his stern, deep voice in her ear was enough to send a small shiver down her spine.

"No one thinks that," Harry assured her, throwing a look at Ron before turning back to her. "You're the smartest person I know. If you say you trust him then…" Harry took a deep breath. "Then I trust you."

Relief flooded through her. She hadn't been nervous about Harry, but his support still meant a lot to her. Their friendship worked because there were three of them, each one balancing the other two out in some way. Having Harry on her side made Hermione feel more stable and confident, like she was back… back home.

Hermione smiled at him, warm and friendly. Harry smiled back. She looked to Bill who nodded in support and then to Ron. He dipped his chin, but lifted his eyes to meet hers. The freckles on his nose moved for a moment as he scrunched his face then released it.

"So what do you think we should do with him?"

They discussed what information they would ask him about first and Hermione made it very clear that she needed to be there when they questioned him. She knew Draco would give them a hard time to put it lightly and having her beside him would at least ease the tension.

She asked for a couple more days, just while he healed up a bit more and got used to the idea of being on this side of the war.

"I don't want him armed while he's in my house," Bill said as the conversation moved on. "I don't feel comfortable with it. We will see after he gives up some information, but for now I don't even want him casting simple cleaning charms."

Andromeda looked furious and Draco felt a shot of something run down his spine. He could practically see his mother scolding him for tracking mud in the house. Except… the last time it had been blood, not mud. And this was Andromeda, not his mother.

" 'E is under ze *Ordre's* protection!" Frenchie explained.

"WHAT?!"

"He *est… traître.*"

Draco flinched and Andromeda's eyes hardened. Wow. That was strange, hearing it out loud.

Traitor.

His body felt like stone.

Andromeda stared at him, not daring to believe. Thundering steps sounded from the stairs and Granger, Potter, and Weasley all spilled out into the wrecked kitchen.

Granger looked around, her big innocent eyes jumping from the broken cabinets, to Andromeda, Fleur, and finally to him.

"He *tortured* us!" Andromeda shouted, trying to get back at him while Frenchie half heartedly held her back.

"Blimey, is that Tonks' Mum?" Weaselbee asked, jaw hanging open and sounding even more stupid than he looked.

Frenchie was glaring at Draco who straightened his sling and rolled his shoulder, trying to act like he didn't care that Andromeda had just told everyone—

Fuck.

Granger was looking at him like… Shit. He hadn't told her about that. He hadn't told her a lot of things.

Draco hung his head, unable to meet her eyes any longer.

Andromeda broke away from Frenchie and scooted around Potter who tried to grab her. Wand raised in fury, she started towards Draco again.

"Where is my husband? Where is Ted?!"

Draco's stomach dropped inside him. He hadn't given the body much thought since he buried it. Or maybe he just hadn't wanted to think about it.

Andromeda's wand poked into the underside of his neck. It shook. So did her voice. "Tell me where he is or I'll make what you did to me look like a child's temper tantrum."

Draco felt everyone watching him. Judging him. He wasn't exactly proud of what he had done to Andromeda and her husband months ago and it hadn't even helped him get any closer to Granger. Now, it might end up driving her away.

Fuck this place. He needed to get Granger and get out. The longer they stayed here, the more likely she was to try and leave him.

But there was no getting out of this. Even *if* he somehow was able to disarm Andromeda by force with one arm in a sling and a gut that felt like he had been stepped on by a troll, he still had Frenchie, Weaselbee, and Saint Potter to contend with.

Not to mention Granger. The fact that he couldn't immediately count her as on his side grated on him. He didn't like it. He didn't like feeling helpless and he didn't like that she was standing over there with her fucking friends on either side of her like guard dogs.

He should have let the wolves tear Weasley apart in the woods that day. Stunned Potter and presented him to the Dark Lord. All of this could be over if he—

Andromeda dug her wand in deeper, pressing on the vein in his throat. "I am not a patient woman."

Draco glowered down at her, wanting to hurt something. "Yeah, I know where he is." He felt the tip of the wand heat as she held back whatever curse she was planning on dealing him. He'd know soon enough. He'd probably be bedridden again after she was done with him, but at least that would mean Granger would nurse him back to health.

Draco paused. He remembered how terrifying it had been, not knowing where Granger was or if she was okay and he saw that same worry and fear in Andromeda's eyes.

His voice was soft as spoke. "He's in an unmarked grave right outside of Malfoy property."

"NO!" Andromeda shouted, grabbing onto the collar of his sweatshirt. "You're *lying.*"

Draco tensed, knowing full well what she was capable of. Especially after what he had done to her. If the tables were turned, he knew what he'd do to someone who told him they had buried Granger. Fuck, he didn't even want to think about that.

"I'm telling you the truth." Andromeda's wand sparked and Draco tried to pull his head back, but she held onto the neck of his sweatshirt tight, nails ripping through the fabric. He was dangerously close to having his head blown off. "I—I didn't kill him."

Andromeda's eyes flashed dangerously and she pressed her wand further into his neck. "Did your Father?"

Even wandless Lucius was dangerous. Draco had a constant headache to remind him of that, but Lucius liked trophies and Ted had been in one piece.

Draco shook his head. "I don't know who or… how. I… I just buried him."

"Where." Andromeda's soft and slithering tone was just as dangerous as his shouting had been when he asked her the same question.

Ron had the good sense to blush a little at that.

Harry nodded. "Of course you are, Hermione," he said, smoothing the bumpy road back to friendship. Hopefully.

She knew she'd have to talk to Ron one on one and that conversation would really be the defining factor as to whether they could come back from this or not.

But if she was asking them to work with Draco, the least she could do was make the effort to work with Ron herself. Even if she was still *slightly* furious with him over the way he had left.

And the fact that he had.

"What does the Order say?" Hermione asked Bill, trying to bring the conversation back to its original purpose.

Bill gave her a wry smile, the scar on his face pulling strangely at the side of his mouth and making him look more grim. "They are playing it safe. Snape was a Death Eater and part of the Order… look how that turned out."

Hermione glanced at Harry and saw his brows were casting dark shadows over his eyes. He had more reason than most to hate Snape. But Snape wouldn't have been able to kill Dumbledore if it wasn't for Draco.

She wondered how much Harry blamed him for it and if that was going to be another obstacle they had to overcome.

"Draco's different though," she went on. "He only took the mark to help his family. He never really wanted to be a Death Eater. And look, just a few days away from them and he is willing to change sides and help us."

"And he gets to stay with you," Ron added.

Hermione sighed. "Ronald, this is not the time. We are talking about Draco, not me."

"But you're together, aren't you?"

Hermione just looked at him for a moment. "Yes. And do you think—do *any* of you think—that I would be with someone if I thought he was still a Death Eater in his heart? Tell me now, because if you do, then I think we need to have an entirely different conversation. One where we decide if *I* am helping you, not Draco."

Hermione crossed her arms over her chest, the creature inside her extended its claws.

Ron's shoulders slumped and the fight seemed to fade in him a little. She hated that she had to snap and boss them around for them to listen, but it worked.

It always had.

Harry and Ron had been her friends for years. They had all seen each other at their worst and their best. Harry had forgiven Ron for not supporting him when his name

He'd prefer it if everyone else spontaneously combusted and set the rest of the planet on fire in the panicked attempts to put themselves out. The thought was almost enough to make him smile, but Draco only let a small smirk grace his face instead.

He watched Granger's pink lips begin to turn up, smiling for him.

Hope shone in her eyes and Draco's heart thudded underneath his scarred chest as he looked back at her. Just like it should be; him and her. No one else.

And this was the first step to that.

He took a deep breath. "I've decided to save the world."

"We need to talk about Malfoy."

Hermione knew this was coming, but it didn't make the awkward churning inside her any easier. She had asked Harry for time to talk to Draco, try and get him to see that helping the Order was the right choice and… he had. Draco had walked down the stairs this morning, which was a miracle itself, and then said the words she had only dreamed about.

So why did she feel so nervous about this?

Maybe because Harry, Ron, and Bill were all looking at her and no one had said anything after Harry's statement.

"I think that's a good idea," Hermione offered, trying to ease the tension. She was walking a fine line and if she tripped, she wasn't sure which way she would fall.

"Finally, you sound like yourself again." Ron's bright blue eyes were locked on her.

Bill leaned forward, his long legs taking up a surprising amount of room in the small sitting room they were crammed in. "You know him best, Hermione. Can we believe him?"

She looked around at each of them, trying to remember that they were all on the same side now. "Draco might be a little rough around the edges," Goodness, she really was sugarcoating this wasn't she? "But he will work with us."

"With you, you mean," Ron cut in and Hermione shifted a little, not wanting to admit he was right, but not able to exactly contradict him.

"Well I am one of you, aren't I?"

"Just… under a tree. I wanted…" Draco's eyes flitted from Andromeda to the floor, unable to stay in one place long. He used to stand under that tree. When he was a child and got mad or scared, he had run from the Manor, across the grounds, muddying his shoes, but always stopped at that tree. Just to see what it was like outside his family's property and protection.

Everytime Draco had turned around and gone back home. And after burying Ted, that's exactly what he had done. He went back, because that's where Granger was.

Andromeda searched his face, landing on his cropped hair and the faint bruise still visible underneath it. She wanted answers, but just like the body, Draco has buried them deep inside.

He wasn't sure why it was so hard to talk about this. Maybe because everytime he looked at her, he saw his mother, his aunt, *himself.* But also… what he might be one day. After the Dark Lord killed Potter, who would stop him from going after Granger? Or anyone else for that matter? Would he be standing in front of someone someday, trying to find out what happened to her?

He felt sick. Over that, over her, over the fact that the person in front of him, who he had tortured and threatened, was just as much blood to him as the woman who had tortured him and Granger.

Fuck, all of this was so messed up.

"I… I'm sorry."

"I don't want your apology!" Andromeda snarled, her breathing quickening. "I want my husband. I want *Ted."*

She was shaking, shaking so hard that Draco thought she might fall over. Without thinking, without feeling, he just reached out and placed a hand on her shoulder. Andromeda broke, sucking in breath as terrible and angry tears poured over her face. She… leaned into him, her wand still digging into his throat as she stood there, half in his embrace and cried.

Draco slid his hand to the back of her shoulder, awkwardly letting it sit as lightly as he could while she clung to him, wrinkling and clinging on the neck of the sweatshirt until it pulled his head a little lower. Her wand dug in deep and Draco swallowed hard, feeling the sharp point press into his pulse. She could end it, she could hurt him.

And she wasn't.

Because of Ted. Because he showed mercy, the small amount it had taken to bury a body, but it was saving his life right now.

Fleur—Frenchie—was gathering up some vials that had spilled from the basket Andromeda dropped. Murtlap essence. She had brought more murtlap essence because he had been using all the supplies.

Draco's fingers curled, feeling strange as he… comforted her. Or stood there. He wasn't sure what he was doing other than being something she was holding onto so she didn't collapse.

He met Fleur's eyes over the top of Andromeda's head. She was looking at him like… well, he wasn't really sure. He didn't know how he felt about it either.

Draco cleared his throat. "Do you… want to sit down?"

He guided her into the only chair that wasn't turned over as she gulped down air. As soon as Draco straightened up and Andromeda let go of his collar, Frenchie tore over, dropping the vials onto the table and knelt beside Andromeda, speaking softly to her as she covered her face and cried into her hands.

Draco stepped off to the side, not sure if he should stay here or leave or… what. He had never done this before. He didn't like it; this weird pulling in his chest. The cold creeping up from deep inside. The battling thoughts. Should he have done something different? Something more?

He had told them to get out. He had told them to leave. He had… no fucking right to be here. To witness this. He felt like he was intruding. He wasn't one of them, he never would be. He'd always have this mark and knew what it meant for him.

Draco wanted to leave. To get out. To get as far away from this as he could. Then Granger was at his side, touching his arm gently and tilting her head to the stairs as she took his hand and guided him.

He followed, feeling Potter and Weasley staring holes in his back until they crested the landing.

Granger pulled him into their room. And of course, her lackeys followed.

He was about to snap at them to get out when Granger turned, tawney curls fanning out and falling gracefully around her face. "Did you really do that?"

Draco schooled his face into impassivity, not wanting to give anything away. He had done terrible things to get to her. He didn't want to tell her, but he would do them all again, if he had to. "I was looking for you."

Granger's eyes searched his and Draco saw something simmering deep in them. "No, I meant did you really bury Ted Tonks?"

He had done terrible things for her. Tortured, maimed, imprisoned, and killed for her.

And he'd do it again if it meant keeping Granger at his side.

The black lines seemed to grow larger, rushing up towards him and Draco closed his eyes.

He had crossed every line he ever had for Granger. What was one more?

Draco forced his boots on.

He braced himself in the doorway, gripping the frame tightly before walking stiffly through it. The hall was easy compared to the stairs. Each step down made him grit his teeth, his legs felt heavy after laying in bed for days. As he neared the bottom, Draco did his best to straighten up, easing his features into a mildly disinterested expression as if coming downstairs wasn't making him want to puke out his guts.

The voices stopped when they saw his black boots on the stairs and Draco ducked his head as the shitty kitchen came into view. Potter and Weasley were sitting at the table along with the scarred Weasley, Frenchie, and Looney Lovegood.

He looked down at the floor and took a step across one of the black lines.

Salazar help him for what he was about to do.

His eyes moved across the kitchen, finding her on their own.

Granger turned around, her doe eyes going big at the shock of seeing him here.

Everyone was staring at him and Draco cooled his face so they knew he didn't care about any of them. He kept his focus on Granger; the whole reason he was doing this.

She was frozen in place, the kettle steaming as she held it. She wasn't going anywhere and he supposed that made his choice not really a choice at all.

"You said I could help, if I wanted," Draco said drolly, trying to make it sound more like a comment than a statement. He could feel eyes on him, pressing against the shattered white walls, but Draco kept his solely on hers. So wary, but at the same time, a hint of hope in them.

He had said everything, he had said anything. And it was time Draco did just that. Even if it wasn't exactly the way she had probably envisioned, but nothing about this situation was the way Draco had thought it would turn out either. The world had been going to hell for a while and he had never given a shit about it before.

Still didn't. Except for the small fact that now, it was the one Granger lived in.

He looked around the room at the nervous faces and glaring eyes, then back to Granger. His world. His only.

He couldn't lose her. Not again. Not ever.

Not when he had just *barely* gotten her back. It had almost been a year now since she had seen his mark and left him because of what he was. *Who* he was.

" *I don't want someone like you to love me."* Draco could almost hear the words floating out of the gap below him.

It was awful having to watch her live her life and not be a part of it. Not be able to grab her, hold her, *touch* her.

His fingers twitched on his knee.

But she had come back, she had given him a chance to set it right and he had fucked it up. Failed.

He had lost her again.

Without her it was as if the earth had opened up and swallowed him whole. He had been alone, but pressed in on all sides at the same time. He had freed his father, but trapped himself in the process.

The lines on the floor started to blur and Draco's eyes burned as he stared down at them.

Long and straight, just like the bars of the cage he had trapped her in when he got her back. It felt like torture to watch her cry because he wouldn't let her go, but not as bad as the anguish of not seeing her at all.

What choice did he have? What choice was there when the only time his lungs worked was when he was breathing in her vanilla and cinnamon scent? The more she pushed him away, the harder he held on. Draco knew what was waiting for her outside his walls.

And he knew what it was like inside them without her too.

Empty. Cold. Dark.

Just like the cracks on the floor.

Just like his whole world.

Until her. Granger. Hermione.

Draco stared down at the dark spaces between the worn floorboards, so much like the ones he had built in his mind to keep her down, keep her safe, until he got her back.

That part of him *hadn't* changed at least, that was still what he wanted; Granger safe and happy. With him. Only him.

She was happy here, with her so-called friends. Granger had been happy with him too, before they broke in and fucked everything up.

But Granger hadn't run from him. Even after what he had done to her, even after she knew what he was, *who* he was….

Oh. That's what she cared about. Of course she would be asking about the Muggleborn. Draco gave a single nod, doing his best to ignore Weasley cracking his knuckles behind him.

"Oh Draco!" Granger flung her arms around his neck and Draco ignored the pain in his arm as she bumped into it. The corner of his mouth twitched. The feel of her tits pressing against him made him not care about anything else at the moment.

"You never said you attacked Order members," Potter said darkly.

Granger pulled back, her hands sliding along Draco's arms. Still touching him though. Draco threw Potter a smirk. "You didn't ask."

"The Ted and Andromeda Tonks aren't actually part of the Order," Granger corrected and Draco felt a surge of pride. She was sticking up for him. Sort of.

"They're as good as," Weasley barked, neck turning red under his completely insane amount of freckles. Really, he should get that checked out. "Tonks is part of the Order and that's her family!"

Draco lazily rolled his eyes. Of course the Weasel would be creepily attached to the idea of family; his all probably slept in the same bed.

"Mine too," Draco added, just to make them uncomfortable. Because why not? Just because he was here didn't mean he liked either one of them. And… Andromeda *was* his family. Her blood was just as pure as his, it was just his soul that was tarnished.

Potter blinked in surprise and Granger let out a small, "Oh!" Weasley, however, just glared as if words were too hard for him at the moment.

Potter stepped forward. "What else did you do, while you were playing Death Eater?"

Draco straightened up and Granger's hands slid off of him. "I wasn't *fucking* playing."

"No?" Potter took another step forward and Draco felt his mark twinge on his arm. The last time he had looked this long at Potter, he had seen a glimpse of Lord Voldemort. Draco looked away, scoffing and trying to pretend he wasn't still unsettled by that. "Did you kill people?"

Draco swung his head back and snarled. Granger placed her hand on his arm again.

"Harry, now is not the time—"

"Fine," Potter snapped and Granger jumped a little beside Draco. "But he's going to have to talk soon. When Bill gets back tomorrow evening, we are all going to sit down and *Draco* here is going to tell us everything he knows."

Draco leaned against the side of a broom shed and watched as Granger, Potter, and Weasley discussed how shitty they all were at dueling. He had tried to hide in their room, but Granger pulled him out, fussing that he needed fresh air and sunshine. What he needed was to hold her, bury himself inside her, and forget everything that wasn't her moaning his name.

Instead, he was standing on the side of a field that stretched back into some trees and pretending he didn't care that this might all blow up in his face tomorrow. He didn't think it was a coincidence that the Weasel had suggested physical practice today. Every now and then he glanced at Draco, who glowered back at the three of them.

Potter tried to hand Granger's wand back to her. Interesting. Why had he been using Granger's all this time? Where was his?

"It's okay, Harry. I need to get used to…"

Shit. She pulled out Bellatrix's wand. Draco had seen that wand do unspeakable things. The curved wood looked wrong in Granger's small hand.

Her knuckles whitened as she gripped it.

"Granger." Draco pushed himself off the wall, shifted his arm in the makeshift sling and walked over to them. The feeling had returned to his arm. All of it. Frenchie had to re-break it in order to set it correctly and Draco decided that she was trying to make him look as terrible as possible so she could be the prettiest one in the house.

Stupid. Why bother when Granger was here?

The sun caught her curls and lit them up like warm caramel.

"Use mine."

Granger blushed a little. "It's okay."

He positioned himself just slightly in front of her, close enough that she had to tilt her head back to look at him and cut her off from her *friends,* if only for a moment.

It was long enough for him to lower his voice and say, "Mine works just fine for you, kitten." He tried to lift her spirits by winking at her. "He likes you."

Granger's blush increased and Draco smirked at the sight of it.

She tucked Bellatrix's wand in her back pocket and pulled out his. They didn't let him touch wands yet.

Smart.

Chapter Sixteen

Draco kept his focus on the cracks in the floor as he forced himself up.

Thick, black lines cutting through the worn wood. There was a knot missing and he could vaguely feel air moving up through the hole.

Sitting up hurt. The scars were new and tight, barely covering his sliced flesh. His head was worse. Swirling and thumping enough to make him sick, but Draco bore it. He was no stranger to pain. Under Granger's care he was getting… well, not *better,* but… healed.

He stared at the cracks in the floor. They stretched to the wall in long, straight, unbroken lines. Each one the same as the next.

Was he the same?

No. The answer was easy. Something had changed in him, but he just wasn't sure what.

Draco thought cracks on a different floor, ones that had been sharp and serrated, tearing up Theo's skin as he shook from the torture curse. Draco's curse.

His vision narrowed in on the line in between his feet. It felt like he could just slide down into it. Hide down there. Crouch in the darkness and wait for everything to be over. The war, the pain. Maybe even his whole life.

But he'd miss her.

He didn't want to go into the darkness without her.

"Fucking soft little pussy," he mumbled, sucking on her ear lobe as he traced his fingers light enough to cause her to shiver at his touch. "Mine. Fucking mine."

"Am I?" she breathed.

"Of course you are, Sweetheart," Draco purred.

Hermione had to fight her body for control as Draco traced his fingers over her again.

"Then prove it." She felt him hesitate. "To me and everyone. Show everyone that I belong to you. Fight for me. Fight for *us*. "

Her and him. She was fighting for a future where they could be together how they should be. Like this. She knew Draco wanted it too and it was driving her crazy that she couldn't figure out why he wasn't willing to do this when he had done so many other things for her.

"It won't change anything," he said bitterly. "I'll still be a Death Eater."

Hermione turned towards him, her eyes having adjusted to the low light. The cut on his head was healing and his hair was already growing back, enhanced by the restorative potions. He was getting better. Draco wasn't a lost cause.

And Hermione wasn't losing him. Not to the Order, not to Voldemort, and not to himself. Draco had done terrible things, but he had done them for the people he loved. There was something in him, something *good*. He'd just never been given the option to use it.

She looked at him for a long time before she raised her hand and pressed it to his cheek. At first he flinched, then… waited, eyes wary as he searched her face for a sign that she would start arguing or leave.

Hermione did neither of those things.

She took a deep breath and said, "You're so much more than that, Draco. Let me know if you ever want to find out what that is."

He didn't say anything, just stared at her for a while and then laid back, staring up at the ceiling. Hermione followed him, nestling herself in the small space between him and the wall. She knew better than to push him or say anything else. Instead, she just laid there and listened to him breathe.

It was still the same even controlled pattern he always had. Then, it changed.

Draco emptied his chest of air. "Fuck."

He hadn't let Granger have one once while she was with him. And that was the exact reason why she needed to train and practice.

He trailed his fingers down the dark wood of his wand to the back of her hand. Warm and soft. He wanted her to wrap her hand around his cock and beat him off into her mouth. From the spark in her eyes she just *might* have been thinking about the same thing.

"Get used to wielding again and then we will have a look at the other one, yeah?"

Granger nodded and Draco twisted his lips in a crooked smile. She seemed a little more relaxed. Good. He couldn't do much, yet, but at least he could make her feel a little better. Plus, he was looking forward to watching Granger use his wand and knock Potty and the Weasel on their asses.

"We're wasting daylight here," Weasley snapped. "We can't keep these protective enchantments up forever."

"Right," Granger cringed. "You're right, Ron. I'm sorry. Harry, where do you want me?"

Something rose up in Draco, hissing and spitting, venom dripping from its fangs.

"Over there." Potter pointed with his wand and Granger gave Draco a small smile before walking over to the far side of the field.

"Stay out of the way," Weasley muttered as he shoved his shoulder into Draco's, causing a ring of pain to shoot down his arm.

Draco clenched his jaw and sucked in a breath through his nose. "Easy," he said, sounding more bored than Professor Binns could dream of. "Since you're not even in mine."

Weasley's face splotched with red and Draco thought about all the ways he could spill that blood as he headed back to his spot in the shade by the broom shed.

"Everyone ready?" Potter called from his position overlooking Granger and Weasley.

"Ready!" Weasley shouted much louder than needed. Probably used to that, having to fight for his mother's love and attention all his life. He was standing a few yards away from Draco and he wondered if he was going to have to listen to Weasley's bellowing all afternoon.

"Yes!" Draco heard Granger's voice and his eyes found her quickly. She had tied her hair back, binding up all those messy curls. A single one came loose, tickling the side of her neck. Draco watched it move slightly. He'd leave a love bite *right* there, later tonight.

Granger fell into a defensive stance and rolled her wrist, loosening it up. He would work that out for her too.

"Start off easy you two," Potter said. "Just throw a few jinxes back and forth and warm up."

Draco snorted.

Weasley's turned on him, the angry expression making him even uglier than he normally was. "Have a problem?"

"Yeah," Draco said loud enough that he knew Granger would be able to hear him. "No one is going to be throwing jinxes out there. You're wasting your time."

"It's a warm up exercise."

Draco pretended not to be interested. "But curses are hot."

Weasley wrinkled his nose. "You would think that, wouldn't you?"

"Yeah." Draco stood up, pulling himself to his full height. "I would. Want to see?"

Weasley had gotten the best of him last year in the Room of Requirement, but that had only been because the fucker had taken *felix* . It wouldn't happen again.

It wouldn't, because Weasley was laughing at him. "Sure. Where's your wand? Oh that's right, she doesn't trust you with it."

Draco's blood pulsed with a cold anger. He wanted to hurt Weasley. Bad. But even without a wand, Draco wasn't completely defenseless. He smirked and said in a low voice, "It looks *good* in her hands."

It was almost impossible to distinguish where Weasley's hair started and his skin stopped because they were all about the same color now. Draco wondered how far he could push Weaselbee before he *actually* exploded.

It would be fun to find out. Maybe training wouldn't be as boring as he thought.

"Hermione!" Potter barked. "You need to adjust your right foot. Bend your knee, don't lock it."

She slid her right leg back up into position. "Like this?"

Before Potter could open his stupid mouth, Draco walked forward with long purposeful strides. "I'll show you, Sweetheart."

He crossed the field, feeling Weasley's eyes burning holes into his back the whole way. Draco couldn't help but smirk as he walked up to Granger.

"Here," he said softly as he positioned himself behind her, sliding his good hand along her right arm. Draco felt Granger give a small squirm as he laced his fingers around her wrist and pulled her back against him. He grabbed a curl hanging from her ponytail between his thumb and index finger of his arm in the sling and pulled it a little until her chin lifted and her neck straightened.

"This?" Draco curled his fingers, causing the sensation again.

"Yes, yes, yes," she panted. "That. There. Please."

"Oh *fuck,"* Draco growled and his left arm tensed. She could feel the muscles tighten and harden. "Fuck, shit… *fuck."*

Draco started to move his thumb against her, right against her. As if he could… Hermione opened her eyes. He tightened his hold on her, started pumping his fingers into her faster, harder.

"Draco…"

He groaned in her ear and Hermione felt herself contract around his fingers, the feeling growing to a near explosive pressure.

"Oh fuck, Granger, *yes!"*

Hermione's mouth opened wide, although she was only managing short, gasping breaths. "Draco, can you…"

He lifted his right hand off her chest to grab her face and turn it back towards him, his mouth devouring hers as soon as their lips met. Draco controlled her head, turning her more so he could open his mouth, snaking his tongue into hers like she was a delicacy. Hermione moaned into him, a low quake starting in her as Draco lifted his wrist, angling his hand to push his fingers deeper into her.

"Yes, fuck, I can feel your pussy," he heaved out quickly. "Come for me. I want to feel you coming for me."

It was all too much. Draco could *feel,* and goodness… so could *she.* The bubbles rose up and popped. Hermione cried out as her orgasm shook through her body. Draco had the good sense to cover her mouth with his own, licking the pleasurable moans straight from her as he kept the same quick pace, never letting her trembling body stop him.

When she was just whimpering, a few aftershocks rolling through her otherwise limp body, Draco slowed. He used his thumb to gently pet her stimulated bud, making her tighten on his fingers with each touch.

"Fucking hell, that feels *amazing,"* he said in a low voice. "Keep coming, Granger. Keep fucking coming for me."

She gave a weak cry and let the sparks inside her fire off a second time, rocking her body back against Draco's. He kissed and nipped at her neck, murmuring about how soft and warm she felt, how much he loved her pussy. How much he loved her.

Hermione sank into his arms as Draco slowly withdrew his fingers from her and ran them in between her folds, exploring her like it was the first time he had ever touched her.

Oh God, she needed him. She needed him and he needed her. She knew it just like any other fact. And the way his body tensed behind her was proof. Hermione held onto his hand tighter; she wasn't letting him go.

A low chuckle reverberated in her ear, causing her to whine. Draco pinched her nipple, sending sparks flying back into her chest. "I love how you turn into a whore for me. Barely two minutes in my bed and you're shoving my hand between your legs." He kissed her neck again, tongue darting out to flick against her before his teeth closed in on her skin, pressing down just enough to make her moan before he let go.

"Oh shit."

Draco's hand stopped moving.

Hermione froze, worried that maybe Draco's scars were hurting him. They had finally gotten them closed, properly, but maybe this was too much exertion for him. "What? What is it?" she asked quickly. Her arousal began to evaporate as anxiety started to replace it.

"Nothing," Draco murmured, twitching his fingers against her and then starting to circle again. His mouth fell back to her neck and he licked at the spot he had just bitten. "Put my fingers inside you. I want you to come on them."

Desire flooded through her again, erasing the doubt and worry as Draco massaged her breast in his right hand and pushed his nose against her cheek, breathing heavily into her ear. The smell of mint was overpowering and Hermione gulped it down.

Gently, she guided his hand a little lower down, positioning two of his fingers right at her entrance.

"There," she said breathlessly.

Hermione nearly choked on a moan as Draco delved into her. How he could do this without even actually feeling her was amazing. He seemed to be doing more on his own now and Hermione merely rocked her hips along with his movements.

She reached back and pulled his head closer to her. His short hair tickled her fingers, brushing against her skin softly. Hermione spread her hand over the side of his head, wanting more of him, all of him.

"Tell me what it feels like," he repeated, kneading her breast and squeezing it.

Hermione fought her pleasure-drunk brain for words. "It feels so good," she managed.

Draco pushed his fingers in farther, a low growl in the back of his throat. "More. Tell me more."

Hermione whimpered as he hit a spot inside her, making her body jolt to life. "Oh God, yes, Draco! Do that again!"

"He's taller than you so you need to adjust your aim." Draco lifted her wrist a little, bending it so that his wand pointed directly at Weasley's chest. He could feel her pulse quicken under his fingers. His own blood rushed in a very *downward* direction.

"Now," he lowered his mouth to her ear, "how does that feel?"

"Good," she breathed out.

Draco pulled on the curl again. "Head up, Granger. Stay focused."

"I am."

He pulled his finger across her inner wrist and felt the thumping there. "Are you?"

Granger took a deep breath. "Yes."

"Good girl," he purred.

He felt Granger shudder as she breathed out and Draco slid his hand back down her arm and to her waist, holding her hip and tilting her just ever so slightly forward.

She went completely still in his grasp and then a red stream of light erupted from her wand, hot and fast as it raced across the field to Weasley.

He met it with a small shield charm. Interesting—throwing one only big enough to block Granger's hex so he could return fire faster. Reckless, but not a bad strategy.

Good to know.

Granger didn't do the same thing. Instead she expanded her shield, making it large enough to cover his height along with hers.

Sweet little thing.

But it made her too slow to block the second stream of light coming at her.

Draco snaked his arm around her middle and picked her up, pulling her to the side so the spell soared harmlessly past them.

Draco glared at Weasley. He wasn't dumb. That last spell had been off center.

It was meant for him, not Granger.

"Hey!"

A ghostly white stag cantered across the field, tossing its antlers and fading into mist as Granger and Weasley lowered their wands.

Had Scarhead noticed too?

"You can't do that!" Potter was marching over to them. Granger untangled herself from him. "You can't be out here if you are going to interfere, Malfoy."

No, of course not. Potter just wanted an excuse to pretend like he was important.

Granger turned towards him. "Harry is right, Draco. I need to get used to this again. You can't just swoop in and save me."

He raised one brow. "Not going to let you get hurt either, pet."

She pushed her hand into his chest and shoved him back a step. *What?*

"You'll get me hurt if you don't let me practice!"

"I was trying to help."

"I'll do what you said," she spoke softly and her hand returned to his chest, softer this time. "But you've got to let me do it on my own."

He didn't like it. He wouldn't do it.

Except she had asked him.

"Fine," Draco grumbled, still not liking the idea of Granger preparing for combat. He knew Granger could hold her own, he just liked holding her too. "But if you're going to train, you should do it properly. You need to practice more than jinxes and minor curses. If you use those in the field, you're going to make yourself a target."

"We know how to fight, Malfoy," the precious Chosen One interjected.

"You know how to *not die*. I wouldn't exactly brag about that." Draco turned back to Granger. "If you're going to duel, then you're damn well going to know how to do it properly."

Granger shifted a little on her feet. "Harry is a really good teacher. He taught us how to produce a corporeal Patronus during our D.A. meetings. I don't think you can even do that."

Draco snorted. "You mean your little 'Anti-Umbridge' club?" He hated how close the three of them were and everything they had done together. Granger was his. "All his *teaching* sure helped when we came in and broke it up."

Draco remembered seeing Pansy pinning Granger against the wall. He had fucked her that night, savoring that image in his head as he shoved Pansy into that same bit of wall. While Granger had fucked off with her friends to go and try to save the world again.

"Got out of that too," Potter added. "And then sent your dear old Dad to prison."

Draco felt like he had swallowed a shard of ice. It stuck in his throat, choking him while the cold leaked down his spine.

"You got off easy because the Dark Lord wanted the Prophecy, not because you were keeping them at bay. And Death Eaters don't get sent to prison anymore. Neither will you."

"We know how to defend ourselves," Granger said softly as Weasley came to stand behind Potter. Why was she taking *their* side?

"Great. Now you need to learn to attack."

"Draco," she shook her head.

"We don't practice Unforgivable Curses. We aren't Death Eaters."

"Draco…"

"Feels good, doesn't it? Your little pussy missed me playing with it, didn't it?"

He wasn't as adept as he normally was, but he was also flying blind. It was still enough to make her lean her head back into him and curve her spine and open her legs a little wider so he could slide his hand fully against her.

Draco's other arm bent, closing around her chest and holding her back against him as his teeth traced the shell of her ear. "Tell me how it feels. Tell me where to go."

His voice was soft, barely more than a whisper and Hermione felt as if she was floating on his words.

"It's right…" She placed her hand on his, guiding a single finger to the sensitive bud of nerves. As soon as she started moving his finger around it, Draco jumped to attention, knowing instinctively where he was.

"Oh you dirty girl," his voice was soft, but loud in her ear. "You want your clit rubbed." He placed a soft kiss against her skin. "Such a little slut."

Here, alone with him, Hermione felt like she could finally let go. Her mind had been racing ever since… Oh God, for too long. It might have only been days ago that he last touched her, but she still felt starved of him. The faster his finger moved, the slower her brain went until it was just him. Draco. All over.

Hermione bit back a moan as his right hand dove into her shirt, pulling quickly at her bra and finding her nipple. He could feel it perfectly and she heard him give another small groan as it hardened under his fingers.

"More? Or less?" he asked, slowing his left hand down a little. Hermione pushed his hand lower, soaking his fingers in the wetness he had called forth and then back up to where she had shown him before.

"More, please more," she breathed out.

Draco closed his lips onto her neck, sucking lightly as he applied more pressure. Hermione gave a small moan and started rocking her hips against his hand. She held onto the arm curled across her chest, using it as leverage so she could move faster. For the first time since they landed outside Shell Cottage, Hermione felt… *relaxed.*

She wasn't being asked questions and expected to know the answers. She wasn't being pushed or pulled or prodded at or asked if she was okay or if she could take a look at this or if she felt like herself because she still looked a little shaken.

All she felt was Draco.

Hermione trembled as the bubbles started to fill her, creating the delicious pressure from Draco's fingers working over her.

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him as the button popped open. Just for that, she flicked all the lights out, darkening the room before pulling the jeans off of her legs. Draco's silver eyes shone in the darkness and she watched them travel down her body, trying to make out her form, as she quickly folded the jeans and set them on the dresser, placing Draco's wand on top.

She probably shouldn't, but she really was tired and… after days of non-stop discussions and working, she just wanted… *Draco.*

"I don't want to hurt you," she murmured as she carefully climbed into the bed, wedging herself between Draco's bandaged body and the wall and pulled the covers up over them both.

He mumbled something that sounded a bit like, "Worth it" as he moved into a position she knew well, one they had slept in many times before. His right arm under her head, where she could use his bicep like a pillow while his left slithered across her stomach, pulling her back to him and holding her tight.

Draco hissed as her back hit his chest and Hermione jumped, but he held her still, keeping her in place using muscle memory instead of feeling. She placed her arm on top of his. Even though he couldn't feel it, she still could.

They laid in the darkness, cramped in the bed, but surprisingly Draco didn't say a single negative word.

After several long moments, curiosity got the better of her and Hermione asked, "What… What does it feel like?" She traced her fingers over the lifted veins on the back of his hand.

"Nothing. But I know you're there. That's enough."

Hermione bit her lip. "It feels the same to me. Like it used to."

Draco's breath was cool on the back of her neck and she could smell the vaguest hint of mint.

He spread his hand over her lower stomach, touching skin where her shirt had ridden up. "Does it?"

She nodded and felt him shift a little behind her.

"Tell me what it feels like."

He pressed his hand into her and slid it down, fingers dipping into her knickers.

Her breath hitched in her throat and her body tightened. Draco could feel *that* and he let out a small groan and pressed his lips against the base of her neck.

"Tell me, pet."

He slid his hand in between her legs and Hermione's eyes fluttered in the darkness.

"How else are you planning to win? Just wait for the Dark Lord to grow old and die? Or maybe just retire and then you can come out of hiding." Draco was starting to get angry. Why did Potter get to keep his soul clean when Draco had to stain his every day? "Dumbledore's not here to clean up your mess anymore. You might just have to get your hands dirty, *Saint Potter."*

"Just because we don't practice them, doesn't mean we don't know how to use them." Weasley tucked his fists under his arms, trying to make them look bigger than they were.

Draco curled his lip. "You have to mean it, Weasley. Not just wave your wand around and hope for the best."

"I did," he answered. "Both times."

"Ron…" Granger gasped and even Draco was a little surprised. Weasley had cast the killing curse? Something Draco had failed to do and… Weasley had done it—*twice* . Draco wondered which Death Eaters Weasley had killed. Not that it mattered really. He knew it wasn't his father, and the only other Death Eater Draco had given the smallest shit about, he had killed himself.

Draco pushed the thoughts of Theo from his head. He didn't have a wand to curse them away and even if he did, he had no idea what might happen if he tried. He didn't want to accidentally kill himself. He glanced at Granger, her pretty face exposed with her tousled hair tied back. He wouldn't let her get hurt again. By anyone. Even himself.

"Fiendfyre," Draco said after a heavy silence. "You should at least know how to cast it. Control it."

Granger shook her head, curls swaying. "It's dangerous. And we can't afford to get hurt. We still don't have any dittany and only a few vials murtlap essence that Andromeda brought earlier." Draco had been complaining and Granger had been coating his scars in it nightly. Which only made him complain more the next day so she'd do it again.

"I'll drop the Unforgivables, but you're learning this, Granger. It could save your life someday."

Granger glanced at her friends. "Draco, I don't think—"

"You're *not* thinking! If you were, you'd see that this is something you need to know how to do! Just because it's something Death Eaters use, you think it's wrong? It's *power* , Granger. Once you have it, *you* decide what's right and wrong."

"Spoken like a true Slytherin," Weasley mumbled.

"Because Gryffindors are doing so well these days," Draco snapped.

They stood there, all glancing and glaring at each other. Draco knew he was right. He was wrong about a lot of things, but not this. Granger needed to be prepared for what was coming.

"It's not… the worst idea." Potter was… agreeing with him?

"WHAT?" Weasley bellowed. "Harry, we said we wouldn't after Knockturn!"

"Dumbledore used it!"

"You're not him!"

Potter stood nose to nose with Weasley, tension ringing in between them. "You're right. I'll never be as powerful as Dumbledore, but I'm still going to have to face You-Know-Who in the end and if this is the difference between letting him win or not, I'll take it."

Oh this was wonderful, watching Potter and Weasley argue might be Draco's new favorite hobby. He could barely keep the grin off of his face as they squared off. He hoped Weasley broke Potter's glasses and that Potter bruised up Weasley's red face.

Draco grinned. He couldn't wait to see what happened next.

Granger gave a shaky breath and walked up to them. "We don't have to do anything today," she said calmly. "But, Ron, I think…" she bit her lip. "I think Harry's right." Granger waited and when Weasley didn't erupt—*unfortunately* —she went on. "For right now, we should work our way up to it."

She gave Weasley a small smile. If Potter wasn't going to punch him, Draco might.

"We will keep going like we have been and when we're ready…" Granger looked back at him. "We can have Draco give us some pointers."

Weasley glared at him and Draco smirked smugly back at him.

"Gonna be hard to do that without a wand," Weaselbee muttered.

"Draco has a wand," Granger said, a little of the force coming back into her voice.

Draco cocked his head to the left. "She just likes holding it."

Weasley turned red again and Draco gave a small chuckle as Granger huffed, ignoring him.

That was fine, because he saw the small blush in her cheeks too. Cute.

"Get back to the side, Malfoy," Potter said with finality. He really was taking this Chosen One thing to heart, bossing everyone around like he was in charge. Draco wondered if that was part of the reason the dream team was breaking up. He thought of ways he could test that theory as he made his way back to the broom shed.

She could still feel the ache in her neck that had plagued her ever since she caught a few hours of rest curled up at the base of the stairs early this morning. A nightmare had woken her up. More dark halls, screaming, and pools of blood. No Draco though. She hadn't wanted to fall into another one, so she had forced herself up. There was always something that needed to be done.

Hermione had been exhausted all day and was hoping she'd be able to find somewhere more comfortable before it got too late. She really didn't want to curl up on the stairs a second night in a row.

Draco threw the covers back. "You're sleeping in here."

The bed was already small and that was before Draco's body took up most of it. When he wasn't sitting up his legs extended off of the bottom.

"There's not enough room. And besides, you're hurt. You need—"

"You're not sleeping *anywhere,* but beside me."

Hermione ignored him. "I need to take this back to the kitchen and there's a radio program that—"

Draco grabbed her around her waist. Snaking his fingers into her belt loop and pulling her to the edge of the bed in one swift movement. How he did it with a hand he couldn't even feel, she wasn't sure, but her thoughts stopped as she looked down into his storm grey eyes.

"Get your ass in this bed."

A shiver ran down her spine at the sound of his deep voice. Exhaustion followed it, her bones already bending with the promise of a full night in a bed.

"I… I should check your bandages before…"

Draco glowered at her. " *Now."*

"Oh alright," she huffed and pulled Draco's wand from her back pocket. He eyed it closely as she vanished the tray of soup and then placed her hand over his. It took him a moment to realize she was touching him and Hermione's heart gave another painful thump. "I'm just going to take them off. You can let go."

Draco uncurled his fingers from her belt loop and slowly brought his hand back to lay on the bed. She wondered what it felt like, or more correctly, what it *didn't* feel like. She was thinking about it so much that her fingers fumbled with the button on her jeans too long for Draco's liking.

"Merlin, Granger, I know I kept you in dresses, but I didn't think you'd forget how to take off your pants."

He lightly petted her, giving her just enough to keep her aching for more. Her skin felt tight and hot, her breaths came short and fast, enhancing the burning pleasure spreading up through her. She was right there, sparks about to shoot off with Draco's next stroke.

She waited.

And waited.

It didn't come.

Draco pulled his hand away.

"No!" Hermione tried to move, tried to close her legs and squeeze them together. Tried to pull her hands from the cuffs and just… finish what he started. After that he could have her however he wanted her. She'd let him, she wouldn't fight him just as long as…

Draco's hands pressed on her hips and held her down, open and unfulfilled.

She wanted to cry at the sound of his soft laugh. His breath billowed against her and Hemrione gasped as the heat from it turned cool. It felt like she was being punished, being so close and having it all ripped away.

It was *torture* .

"Please… please," she begged.

"No." His voice was deep and gravely. She could picture his eyes, hard as granite in his denial.

Hermione's mind spun, trying to figure out how to change his mind. What did she need to say? To do? What did Draco need in return?

She came up empty. In more ways than one.

"Why?" she squeaked.

Draco lazily walked his fingers over her thigh. "Because, pet, this is what you do to me. Every day. I would spend the rest of my life buried inside you if I could."

Hermione felt something inside her melt as his words. The rest of their lives. Would they really get to spend them together? Like this?

Goodness, she wanted that more than anything. More than…

Draco trailed his finger down her center, brought another alongside it, and thrust them into her until his hand lay flush against her. She cried out, body tightening and tried to make sense of what was happening. Not being able to see was making her disoriented, but also made everything feel more… intense .

He moved them a little inside her and Hermione gasped.

"You broke the rules."

She clenched around his fingers and felt him press them in deeper.

"You spoke without permission. You moved without permission. You would have come if I didn't stop you..."

Well she had only broken the first two because he *did* stop her, but maybe right now wasn't the best time to point that out, not if she wanted him to keep moving his fingers like that.

"Slut."

Hermione felt a tremor move through her as he sped up a little, sliding his fingers against one another, stroking her on the inside. She always loved hearing dirty words come out of his mouth. Something about it freed her. Made her feel comfortable enough that she could give in to the baser desires she had. Draco, and his silver tongue, made her feel safe in a way that she could bare the most secret parts of herself.

"You are, you know," Draco said as his hand moved quicker. "A dirty slut. Fucking teasing me today, telling me how wet you were for me and then walking off. Did you think that was funny? Making me watch you, your tight little body twist and turn as you pranced around pretending like I wasn't even there?"

Hermione let out a low moan, trying to hold it in, but she only had enough self control to keep her body from moving to meet Draco's hand. The embers of her ruined orgasm were starting to fan into flames again.

"Are you going to pretend now?" Draco's voice was in her ear, rough and raspy. "Pretend my fingers aren't about to make you come?"

Maybe… if she was good enough, laid still enough, he would let her.

Draco gave a harsh laugh and she felt him shift to sit back up. "They're not."

He pulled them from her and Hermione bit the shirt, grinding it between her teeth as the flames sputtered and died, their heat burning her blood. Her whole body shook with the unreleased energy.

"Oh fuck," Draco let out a low breath. "That's so fucking hot. Watching your pussy gape and beg for me. *Fuck…"*

Hermione didn't even realize she was crying, the only thing she could feel was the ruined orgasm falling apart inside of her.

Draco smeared the moisture on his fingers over her chest and smacked her breast again, making the tender skin there flame with pain. It felt good. Almost too good. She couldn't hold back the moan that slipped from deep inside her. She didn't want to. She wanted him to punish her again.

When he didn't, Hermione thought she might burst through her skin. She had to do *something* to get him to touch her again. She *had* to.

"Fuck me." Having her face covered made her feel braver and even though he'd punish her for speaking at least he would *touch* her. And just maybe, he'd do what she begged him for. "I want to feel your big cock and come on it like the good slut I am."

Hermione sat breathless for two seconds before the bed creaked under her.

Her shirt was roughly pulled up over her head and Hermione gulped down the fresh air, staring up into Draco's mercury eyes, storming with lust. His mouth was parted and he was breathing almost as heavily as she was. She had a small measure of satisfaction knowing this experience was affecting him too.

It wasn't enough. She needed more.

Draco took her face in one of his hands, pressed his fingers into her cheeks and held it, making her look up at him.

"Say that again."

Hermione blushed. It was one thing to say that when he couldn't see her, it was another to look into his eyes and repeat it back to him.

"I… I want to feel… *you*… inside m—"

"You want to feel what?"

Hermione gasped as the head of his cock pressed into her opening with just enough pressure to make her heart thump.

"Say it, kitten. Tell me what you want."

Hermione bit her lip again and tasted something metallic. She had been biting it for a while and finally, staring into Draco's eyes, must have made her bite hard enough to bring the blood to the skin.

"You know what I want."

Draco smirked and slid his length against her, rubbing it over her clit and making her mouth open wider while her brows pushed together.

Her lip pulsed with her heartbeat and Draco flicked his tongue against it. "I do. You want me to fuck you stupid with my massive cock."

Hermione stared up at him, the short hair made the angles of his face seem sharper. His cheekbones cut under the skin, sliding down to his mouth which hung less than an inch over hers. So close, but still so far.

"You can speak now, Sweetheart. I want to hear all those dirty thoughts you never want to say."

She didn't want to play games anymore, didn't want to be denied. Anything could happen. Tonight—this night—could be their last. Everything was up in the air, but Hermione was chained down, and Draco could pull back and leave her wanting again.

"Yes, sir."

"That's one of the things I love best about you, how quick you are, Granger." Draco flicked his tongue against her clit and Hermione bit back a moan. "And how wet your pussy gets for me. I love that too."

Her thighs tensed, ready and hoping he would do it again. But Draco didn't. His lips fell to the fading bruise on her inner thigh, kissing it softly. She couldn't stop the heavy sigh from releasing, pushing out all the oxygen from her chest only to fill again and expand. Her breasts, still warm and tender, ached wonderfully. She needed him to touch her, more than just his lips' gentle pressure against her bruise.

She needed him to move inside her, press down on her, make her cry and scream and everything Draco always did.

He seemed content to torture her by kissing her thigh, softly nipping at the sensitive skin while her center lay mere inches away, open and exposed and… ignored.

"You should put a stasis charm back on it." Hermione blinked under her shirt. She had to do *something* to get him to touch her. Even if it was a punishment. She could feel heat coiling deep in her and Draco was doing nothing to give her any relief from it.

He was going to let her lie there and *burn* .

"Put the charm back on it so it will be there for you next time," she offered, hoping that it was enough to make him turn his head and continue kissing in a much more needed place.

Draco swiped his tongue over the warm bruise. "Don't need to. I'll never be gone long enough for it to heal." He sucked on it a little, biting it slightly before pulling back. "I'll keep it here myself."

Draco reached up and roughly squeezed her breast. Hermione sucked in air, pulling her shirt against her lips again.

"Wouldn't you like that, kitten? Spreading you open and marking you up every night? Does that make your pussy wet?"

He let go and Hermione's stomach quivered as his hand moved down in between her legs, fingers sliding into her slit.

"Mmm, it does. Just the idea of it has got you dripping for me." Draco chuckled and Hermione whimpered, biting down hard on her lip. He moved his fingers up, lighting gliding over her swollen bud and Hermione couldn't help but moan at the contact.

Draco spread her lips open and softly ran his middle finger over her. Hermione shook, the chains pulling hard against the bars of the bed.

stayed still. Her muscles were stretched, but she didn't have to use them for anything. Had Draco planned that out? A way to keep her comfortable while he… enjoyed himself?

Because even with her eyes covered by her shirt, she could tell that Draco was having a *great* time with her helpless underneath him. She could feel it in his touch, hear it in his breathing. Hermione closed her eyes and let her body do her feeling for her.

Draco's hands slid down her sides, strumming her ribs and dancing lightly over her stomach, down to the band of her knickers. Hermione's breath stuttered, shaking her slightly as he traced a finger just underneath them. He followed it up with the tip of his wand.

"I don't know why you wear these," he mused. "Like anything could keep me out."

Hermione felt the cotton fade from her skin and the feel of bareness spread over her open legs.

"There you are," Draco whispered and Hermione shuddered. His fingers traced her inner thighs and her hips lifted unconsciously, trying to extend his touch. Draco pulled away and Hermione's mouth opened for a small whine.

"Greedy girl," he chided and Hermione fell back against the bed once more, chest rising and falling as she sucked in air through her shirt. "Don't you know tonight is for me? You had your fun today. Running around with your little *friends*. Now it's my turn to play, pet."

He flattened his hand against her lower stomach, fingers stretching down to part her and hold her open. Hermione's heart was racing, beating so hard she could feel it pumping in between her legs.

Draco's breath graced across her, sending goosebumps over her heated flesh. "This is for me. Do you understand?" Hermione nodded under the shirt, unsure if he was able to see her or not. "This is for me. You are for me. You" Draco paused and she held her breath, "are *all* for me."

Her heart jumped in her throat.

"You will not move unless I say so."

It pounded, pumping blood into her bound arms.

"You will not speak unless I say so."

Her throat closed around it.

"You will not come unless I say so."

Rules. Hermione had always been good at following rules.

"You may say '*yes, sir*'."

Hermione's heart slid back into place, ready.

So Hermione said the words she had never been brave enough to utter out loud before.

"I want… what you want. To spend the rest of our lives… like this," she whispered, barely believing she was saying it out loud. Draco just stared down at her and Hermione recognized the hopeful gleam buried deep in his eyes. He wanted it too. He wanted *her*. They were finally fighting for the same thing, on the same side. "I want you to fuck me forever."

Draco's eyes were molten, the silver shining like she had never seen it before. His hand shifted, no longer gripped her cheeks, but cupped her face instead and rubbed his thumb over the apple of her cheek.

"Tell me you love me."

Hermione found the words coming out before she even summoned them. Like they were there, waiting on him.

"I love you, Draco."

He groaned and lined himself up with her again.

"Say it again."

"I love you."

Draco slammed his lips on hers and thrust himself inside her. Hermione opened for him; her mouth, her legs, her heart… all of her was—His. His. His.

She felt it with each thrust, each movement. She didn't think she would ever stop loving Draco, no matter what he did. Because he made her feel like *this*. He made her feel *everything*. Draco made her feel like they were the only people who mattered in the world. That everything else could burn and blow away into ash, but they would be here.

Their love wouldn't burn out or fade away. It would engulf everything else.

Draco's tongue was in her mouth, sliding against hers as he moaned what might have been her name. He pushed his hips hard into hers, rocking himself inside her as if he was being pulled in by gravity.

"Fuck," Draco growled as he broke their kiss. He reached up, steading himself by grabbing onto the headboard with one hand. "Do you know how many times I thought about fucking you with these chains on?"

Hermione felt his muscles tense as he slowed. She lifted her legs to curl around his waist and Draco responded by pushing himself deeper. She could feel the pressure of him pushing against the underside of her navel, taking up every inch of space inside her. It was… *so much*. It hurt, but… Goodness, she couldn't get enough of it.

"I did too," she admitted. The truth was being pushed out of her as Draco drove himself in again.

His breathing halted and he looked down at her with a strange combination of shock and… *wow*. Draco had always been possessive, but in that moment it seemed to take him over, his control slipping as something primal surfaced from deep within. His hand closed over her left breast, fingers digging in as he squeezed it hard.

Draco kissed her again, sucking on her bruised bottom lip and pulling it up as he lifted his head. Hermione cried out as he let it go and sucked it back into her mouth. It throbbed and bled and tasted like him.

"Oh God, Draco!"

"This is *mine*. " He buried himself fully in her and a small scream slipped up her throat. He was breathing heavily and gripped the chains in his hand, pulling them tight.

"Your pussy is mine. *You* are mine." Draco pushed his full length inside her and she felt her body quake around him. The flames inside her were growing again. They licked up the sides of her body, warming the blood under her skin as it reached higher and higher.

"Is this what you wanted? Your pussy full of my cock?" His lips brushed against hers and Hermione tilted her face up towards him. With no other way to hold onto Draco, she tightened her legs around him, her body moving with each of his thrusts.

"You want to come on it," he breathed in her ear, voice heavy and hot.

Hermione closed her eyes, letting the pleasure surge through her. "Yes. Please."

"But do you know what I want?"

She opened her eyes to see a gleam in his eyes.

"Draco…" she begged.

"I want you to lay here like a good little whore while I fuck you." He grabbed her breast again and pulled on her nipple, pinching it before letting it go. "Can you do that?"

Hermione nodded; she'd let him do just about anything right now as long as he let her—

"But I don't want you to come."

The noise that came out of her mouth was nothing more than pathetic.

"Not yet, Sweetheart."

Her breathing was coming fast and hard.

"Draco," she panted, the pleasure already pumping through her. "Please… I… *Please!*"

He kissed her roughly, stealing the breath from her lips and arched his back, pushing painfully into her. It shot through her, making her muscles tighten and the shock of pleasure that followed made her eyes roll back.

"I know you're close, fuck, I can feel it."

her bottom lip and then the gentle swoop of her top lip. It was tantalizing, feeling the thin layer of fabric between them, making it all feel more… *more*.

"Open your mouth."

She obeyed and Draco dipped his finger in, pushing her shirt against her tongue and into her mouth. "Suck on it."

Hermione closed her mouth around his finger and felt the cotton soak as she pulled it further in, cradling his finger with her tongue.

"Good," he said silkily. "Good girl. Mmm, are you going to be this good for me when I've got this finger in your pussy?"

Hermione nodded, not wanting to open her mouth to answer and risk… Goodness. She almost thought '*risk losing marks*'. Her insides clenched tightly, wondering if Draco would give her a grade if she asked for it.

She wasn't going to now, instead Hermione sucked harder, showing her compliance through action since she couldn't use her words.

Draco gave another one of the deep chuckles she had come to love so much. "Are you going to let it go?"

Hermione paused. Was he asking her to do that now? She stopped sucking, but made sure to keep his finger in her mouth when she nodded.

Draco leaned down, his face inches above hers. She couldn't see through the shirt, but she could feel him hovering here. "Even when you are *so* close, just about to come and your tight little cunt is just begging for a little more? Will you let it go for me?"

Hermione was glad Draco couldn't see the broken expression on her face. So that is what he meant by training. Her mind quickly flashed back to a sunny afternoon in the library where Draco briefly explained to her what edging was and now… she was about to find out first hand.

Hermione whimpered around his finger and Draco slowly withdrew it. She knew he wanted an answer, that was another early lesson he had taught her. She closed her eyes and breathed out a pitiful, "Yes" against the soaked shirt.

"Yes, what?" Draco asked.

"Yes, *sir,"* she corrected.

Draco sat back up and Hermione laid there, waiting.

"Well, I suppose we can begin then."

Begin? Hermione already felt ready for release. Her arms were still sore and her shoulders protested everytime she pulled against the chain. But it wasn't bad when she

Draco grabbed her breasts, squeezing them with strong hands and pushing them together. "Hmm, not quite."

Smack. Smack. One after another. He alternated, hitting, kissing, licking, squeezing, smacking, sucking. Until Hermione cried out as he flicked a flat nail against one of her swollen nipples.

She felt wet and ready. All the heat and sensitivity from her breasts had moved under her skin, down in between her legs and she felt like he didn't start touching her there, she was going to cry.

Draco gave a satisfied grunt and gathered her breasts in his hands again. His fingers felt cool and calming against the tender skin and Hermione breathed in so deeply that her shirt pressed against her mouth.

"Fucking beautiful." He leaned down and sucked a nipple into his mouth, moaning as he felt her squirm under him.

Hermione keened, lifting her lower body up and trying to… just trying to get him to touch her. It wouldn't take much, not now, not after that.

Her skin was humming, rushing to feel every part of him that brushed against her. But Draco was crafty and made sure that his legs kept hers apart so she couldn't even press them together to get a modicum of relief. Normally Draco liked to overwhelm her with sensations, make her fall into a world of nothing but him and bliss and *him,* but this time he was keeping it all from her.

Why?

"I'd say that is a good start to your training," Draco squeezed her breasts hard and then released them.

"Draco," she begged. She needed his hands on her, she didn't think she could stand it if he stopped touching her right now.

"You like that?" Draco pinched one of her nipples. "There are clamps that do this. I would love to see you all strung up, Granger." His voice lowered and Hermione whimpered. "Mmm, I think you'd love it too."

He gave it a final twist and then released her. He clapped his hands together and Hermione jumped at the sound.

"Now that your tits are all red and raw I think we can move on."

Oh God, *yes.* Hermione angled her hips, ready. So *very* ready.

Draco placed a single finger on her lips, the cotton of her shirt soaking in the moisture of her mouth. He traced over them, running his finger softly, slowly over the curve of

Hermione panted, her body closing in on him and she felt the deep pressure building, stronger and faster. Having him deny her twice made the fire in her burn almost white hot. Her mind went blank as her body began to shake, right there… right… there…

"Don't." Draco didn't stop. He pumped himself into her, filling and stretching her. "Don't come, Granger. Not yet."

She… Oh God, how many times was he going to do this to her? Give her everything just to take it all away.

Draco was breathing heavily and she could feel his movements starting to become jerkier as his own need began to drive him on.

"Look at me." It was an order and Hermione obeyed. Draco was staring down at her, fighting himself to try and stay composed. "Keep your eyes on me," he said between heavy breaths. "This is for me." Draco shoved himself all the way in and Hermione cried out.

"You look—" He kissed her hard. "So hot right now." He timed his words with particularly sharp thrusts. "Fucking chained to a bed, my handprint on your tits—"

"Draco, I'm about to—"

"Shh, kitten. Let it go."

Hermione cried, right at the edge and fighting not to fall over it. She didn't know if she could. She didn't think she could stop this.

"Let me have this." She could feel his balls hitting her as he slammed himself into her. "Fuck, you're so tight and warm. I love your pussy. Perfect little hole on the perfect little whore." He dropped his head, groaning and Hermione stared up at him, feeling him throb inside her. "And all mine. This is what we're training for. I want you to hold back. I want you to stay just like this, tight and needy and *fuck,* just like that!"

She watched him as he reached his breaking point. Her hands twisted in the cuffs and Draco gripped the headboard harder, the muscles turning into hard bands along his arm. He wasn't hiding from her, every thought and feeling was etched into his expression of agonizing pleasure.

Hermione tightened her legs, trying to dispel some of the pent up energy by clinging onto him with her thighs. She whimpered, trying to temper the fire inside that was begging to roar free.

"That's it, yes Granger, fucking squeeze me. Oh fuck, it's too good." He closed his eyes tightly and then opened them, the misty grey color hazed over with a glaze of lust. "It feels good for you too, doesn't it? Holding it right there, keeping it pent up." He grinned at her. "I knew you'd love to be edged. Fucking filthy, you are."

Hermione cried out. Something was happening. She wasn't sure what, but her body was fighting her mind for control. She knew it was a losing game. She wouldn't be able to last much longer.

"Draco!" She twisted her arms a little, turning her head back and forth as her blood raced through her, pressing hard against her skin.

He kissed her, short and rough, shoving his tongue in her mouth and pressing his teeth into her lips. She felt her body quake. It was too much. All too much and she couldn't—

Draco pulled himself from her and wrapped his hand around his cock, veins standing out and straining along the length. He hissed as he fucked his own hand above her, all reason absent on his face as he gave in to his desire.

Hermione felt tears slip down the sides of her face, running into her hair as Draco shot himself on her breasts. He was moaning, mixing her name up with expletives and all the while, looking right down at her, his eyes never leaving hers as he emptied everything he had over her pounding heart.

When he was done, his shoulders slumped and his arms relaxed. The scars on his torso softened as the muscles underneath released, still there, but no longer cutting into his skin. Draco panted for a while, just looking down at her. His jaw hung open and his brows slid back into their normal position. The almost feral look in his eyes softened in satisfaction.

He was sated and… happy. Happy with her.

She, on the other hand, felt the exact opposite. Hermione was burning with denial, refusal. It blocked out everything else from her mind. She needed this, she needed him. Somewhere, in the very back of her head, Hermione wondered if this feeling right here was the reason why Draco had done this tonight.

He said this is what she did to him. Was this burning need what he felt all the time? Knowing that right now, she would do anything, *everything* , to get what she so desperately needed?

The answer was yes. Draco wanted to grab her and snatch her away, keeping her all for himself. And he was holding back for her. Training. Learning. *Changing.*

"You're so fucking beautiful." His voice was soft and thick like velvet. Draco sat back in between her legs and cupped one of her breasts, something warm slid down to the valley between them. "Tits all marked up and covered in come." Draco swallowed. " *Fuck."*

He reached down and picked up the shirt he had thrown to the floor. Gently he cleaned it off of her, careful not to agitate the tender skin, still imprinted with the shape

Hermione breathed in, letting her Gryffindor courage push the words out of her mouth. "Then give me some new ones." His eyes darted down to the bruise on her inner thigh and then back to her face. "Anywhere you want, Draco. I'm all yours."

The last shadow of fury bled from his eyes as the pupils expanded, leaving twin rings of silver encapsulating them.

Draco cocked an eyebrow up. "Anywhere I want?"

Hermione felt a shiver as her own anxiety melted, replaced by excitement over whatever dirty thing Draco had fantasized over.

" *Anywhere,"* she whispered.

Draco pushed her shirt up over her face, leaving it there so that she couldn't see. Right when she opened her mouth to protest, Hermione felt Draco's lips close around one of her nipples, tongue swirling and flicking against her and all that came out was a stuttered, moaning gasp.

Her back arched, following him up as he sucked, pulling her nipple into his mouth. Finally he let it pop from his mouth and Hermione had just enough of her brain still working to imagine him grinning down at her. What she didn't imagine was the sharp smack that followed. His hand collided with the side of her breast, stinging the tender flesh he had just so lovingly suckled.

She blinked underneath the shirt, still shrouded in darkness. Draco followed up the slap by cupping and rubbing the sore spot. When she took another breath, he slapped it again, forcing the air sharply out of her lungs.

His hand returned, caressing her in the same way as before and when he squeezed she thought he was going to smack her again, but instead Hermione felt his lips close around her other nipple, licking and hardening it in his mouth.

As his hands moved over her heated breasts, the soreness began to feel… *good.* He grazed his teeth over her nipple with a low noise and kissed it softly. Hermione readied herself for the sting and when his hand swatted her breast she twisted a little and a breathy moan slipped out of her mouth.

"Mmm, you like that?" Draco purred as flicked a tongue against the second nipple. "I've always wanted to see if your tits would get as red as your ass if I smacked them."

Hermione could feel her chest rising and falling quickly with each breath. She wasn't sure what she wanted, his mouth to suck and lick at her or his hand to come back down sharp and hard.

"Are they?" she asked in a soft voice.

He had gotten these because of her. For her. Seeing them made Hermione love him even more. They were proof, physical proof on his body, that he loved her. Would do anything for her and *had*. Draco had done more than she could have ever dreamed of a man doing for her.

Before Draco, guys had hardly shown an interest in her and even then, not much more than a passing fancy. He was so different than them, even before he started to have feelings for her. It was as if that first night in the Restricted Section had made him narrow in on her, that slowly everything else started to fall away as he fell in love.

As *they* fell in love.

Because she was—*so* —in love with him.

There was no one else she would let chain her to a bed and have their way with her. Only him. Only ever Draco.

Her eyes lifted up as the hem of her shirt brushed over her nipples, shooting sparks down into her chest.

Hermione shivered and Draco started to lift her shirt higher, his eyes sliding over her arms until… he stopped.

His gaze narrowed on her forearm.

She had taken the bandage off before her shower and the cut had healed enough that she didn't wrap it up again.

The *M* carved into her skin was red and messy, not yet hardened into a full scar, but instead was just new skin, barely holding back the so-called dirty blood underneath it.

Hermione watched the lump in Draco's throat jump as he swallowed dryly. His shining eyes sharpened, glinting like fresh steel.

"I'll fucking kill her."

"It's fine. I'm fine. Draco, look at me. *Look at me."* Hermione lifted her head from the pillow and Draco's eyes slid down to hers. They were storming, rage barely under control, but surprisingly she wasn't scared. Draco wouldn't hurt her. And he wouldn't let anyone else hurt her either.

"I don't want to think about her or that or anything," Hermione said. "Nothing but you."

Draco closed his eyes for a few seconds. When he opened them the rage and pain was gone, replaced by something deeper, stronger. He wasn't holding back and Hermione could see the hungry need combined with feral love on his face. Draco had chained her up and unleashed himself.

"There shouldn't be any marks on you, but mine," he growled.

of his hand. Hermione watched him. It was… strangely intimate. Draco had cast cleaning or vanishing charms before, but this felt… loving.

She laid her head back on the pillow, focused on breathing, and let Draco take care of her. He mumbled and a bit of warm water dampened the shirt as he ran it down her chest to in between her legs, cleaning her with just as much precision and attention as he had spent on working her up.

When he was done, he threw the shirt back down and leaned over her, kissing her softly.

"You're the best fuck I've ever had and the only one I ever want." He locked his eyes on her. "You're my only."

Hermione's heart swelled. Hearing his declaration mixed with the arousal still swirling in her made for a strange combination. One that she couldn't say she didn't like. Draco had been right, she enjoyed it. Liked having him have that power and control over her. Liked that for even just a little while, she didn't have to do anything but *feel*.

Maybe there was more than one reason he had done this tonight and knowing Draco, there was always a second motive.

Which meant he wouldn't leave her like this, desperate and wanting. She had been worried that he would. He had it in him to work her up and then just let her smolder just to prove a point. He had done it before, not quite to this extent, but it seemed everything was getting more intense these days.

His hand slid in between her thighs again, just holding her. Hermione canted her body up, trying to rub against him. Anything, just to feel a little more. It wouldn't take much now; she was still perched so close to the edge.

"You want to come, don't you, pet?"

Hermione nodded quickly, still moving, trying to create some friction between her center and the large hand covering it.

"Not like this though," Draco smirked and Hermione's heart skipped a beat. He lowered his mouth to her ear one more time. "I'm dying to taste you again."

Bubbles rose up in her, surging and filling her chest until she felt like she might burst.

Draco licked along the shell of her ear and Hermione moaned as a shiver ran down the entire right side of her body, settling directly in between her legs.

"Look at you… you're just aching for it. All worked up and no release. I bet I could make you come in *seconds."*

"Yes, please, oh God, please, Draco!" It was little more than a breathy whisper, but it made him grin mischievously as Draco moved back, sliding his arms under her legs and

positioning himself between her thighs. Her blood was already humming with anticipation and seeing Draco's eyes flash bright and then dark as he looked at her made her strain against the chains.

Draco ran his tongue along each side of her, never letting it leave her skin before taking the tip and circling her clit. More teasing. More torture.

And Godric help her, she *loved* it.

"One," Draco counted.

Hermione lifted her head, trying to watch him over her heaving chest.

He lowered down a little and she felt his tongue pierce her, sliding inside her. Draco tilted his head so that he could curl the tip of his tongue in her, licking inside her entrance.

Hermione's head fell back and she felt the white hot flames flare up inside her, eating her alive.

"Two." Draco smacked his lips, licking them salaciously as she let out small moans with each breath. He was right, this wasn't taking any time at all. Her body was taunt and tense, sweat breaking out over her skin as her legs tried to straighten and her toes curled.

"Three," Draco murmured and dipped his head back down. His mouth covered her clit, dragging his tongue against it. The skin was soft, but the pressure he applied was firm and Hermione felt the flames engulf her, finally raging into the firestorm that had been brewing all night.

Her moan rose, turning into a scream as he closed his teeth softly around her, holding her clit in place as he flicked the tip of his tongue against her.

Hermione's body was wracked with convulsions and Draco held on, never letting go of her. He sucked softly, any harder and it would have been too much. Everything felt magnified and Hermione felt like she was living flame, twisting and turning, burning and searing this feeling into her.

Draco placed a single soft kiss against her, just as he had earlier before sitting up again, running his hands up her sides, cooling the heated skin. He grabbed her breasts, pushing them together and quickly sucked on each nipple before hovering over her face.

"Did you like that?"

Hermione nodded, not able to do much else.

Draco murmured the passphrase for the chains and they clicked open. He pulled them from the headboard and they clanked loudly as they hit the floor. He lifted her arms and rubbed them, bringing blood back into the muscles she was sure would still be sore tomorrow, but right now all she could feel was a gentle heat spreading through her.

His eyes flashed. "That's right, kitten. Mmm, training you is going to be a treat." Draco smirked. "For me, at least."

He wiggled his fingers against her before pulling away and quickly yanking his shirt over his head, tossing it to the floor. His trousers were next, dropping them and then charming them to hang on the back of the door.

Because the pants belonged to him, whereas the shirt was borrowed. Draco took care of what was his and didn't care about the rest.

Hermione fought the roll of her eyes, knowing he would punish her for it. Draco climbed in between her legs, prying them open with his own and settling on his knees which he was using to keep her legs spread wide. Her shorts slid up her thighs, baring more skin to Draco who drank down the sight of her like she was fire whisky.

And maybe she was. She felt hot and dizzy; not all that different from when she had opened the bottle in his room and let her inhibitions go. The memory of his mouth on her, his tongue sliding over and into her was enough to make her pull at the chains a little. Was he going to do that again tonight?

Godric, she hoped so.

Draco was looking down at her like he was thinking the same thing. Then, his eyes snapped up to hers.

"The first rule of training is proper attire. Normally I'd have you in black for this, but…" He lifted the hem of her shirt a few inches. "Bare will do too."

He slowly began to pull her shirt up over her stomach and Hermione took a moment to look at his own body while he undressed hers.

The gouged scar on his thigh, tearing through the flesh down to the muscle pulled tight as he leaned forward. He had gotten that one from Greyback. Draco had never told her how exactly, but Hermione didn't need details to know what sort of danger Draco had been in. She had spent enough time around Bill to know that Greyback could do much more damage than that. Hermione just couldn't help but wonder what Draco had done to stop him.

Draco's fingers grazed over her ribs as he lifted her shirt higher and Hermione's eyes moved up as well to Draco's stomach and chest. Pearly white lines deepened into indented flesh, the scars that had been ripped back open were a dark pink, flushed against the white of his skin. They had grown, deepened.

They looked like… veins in marble. Perfectly imperfect lines crossing and intersecting across his body. For a moment she wished that her hands were not bound. She wanted to touch them, caress them. She wanted to tell him he looked… beautiful.

His expression just barely softened. "Do we? I don't plan on letting you come for a while, kitten."

Oh my. Draco had mentioned to her before how he wanted to spend hours touching her and teasing her. And the last time he had tied his belt around her wrists he certainly had made the most of the experience, drawing it out to make her almost senseless with want. Was that what tonight was going to hold in store for her?

She squeezed her legs together.

"Please."

Draco tutted. "Already begging. Well…" He turned and picked up his wand from the top of the dresser. "Good thing I don't fancy Potter or Weasley wanking themselves dry to the sound of your desperate moans."

Hermione's spine solidified at the sight of the wand in Draco's hands. Her mind rushed through different scenarios, screaming at her for being so foolish. He had her helpless, he could just turn and walk out. He could *imperius* her and make go with him. He could turn on them all and—

" *Silencio."*

The thoughts stopped.

"I guess I've got more work to do than I thought," Draco said in a low voice, looking down at the wand in his hands. It sparked red and Draco gave it a shake, as if he was dispelling excess energy from it.

"Draco, I—" She wanted to explain. Tell him that she didn't really think that, but during those months of being locked away she had prepared herself for the worst possible situation and she couldn't just turn that part of her off. Even if she wanted to.

"It's okay, Sweetheart. You just don't know how good you look right now." Draco brushed his fingers over her thigh, trailing them up. "You don't know how fucking sexy you are, chained to a bed. Because if you did, you'd know that there is nowhere else I would be right now."

Hermione bit her lip, that heady mixture of anticipation and arousal surging through her again.

"Except maybe… *here.* " He cupped in between her legs, pressing the heel of his hand against her mound and probing the soft cotton of her shorts with his long fingers.

Hermione pressed her head back into the pillow, her hips automatically lifting up to press into his hand.

Draco gave a small chuckle. "Whore."

Hermione was emboldened by her heated desire. "For you."

Draco continued massaging her arms until they felt loose and soft. Then he scooped her up and laid down beside her, placing her facing him and ran his cool hand down her heated back.

Hermione could already feel her body slowing down, the exertions of the day coupled with the build up and crash of tonight was weighing on her. She was exhausted, but sated and happy. Draco had worked out the last bit of energy from her, making sure she didn't lay awake overthinking everything she had done today. It had been exactly what she needed, in so many ways. Just like him.

"That was amazing," she whispered and watched his lips turn up in a smirk.

"Well I wanted to beat my record." Draco grinned. Hermione smiled back. "Once we do that a few more times and you learn to control your own denial, we can go at it for hours."

Hours. The thought of it sent a shiver of anticipation through her. And… Hermione's heart warmed at the fact that Draco was thinking of a future with her. It hadn't been long since he declared his new allegiance and she was surprised at how well he was taking all of this in stride.

Like he had planned it all along. She couldn't help but wonder, had he? What exactly *was* Draco's plan?

"Don't worry, we'll get there. I'll make sure of it."

Hermione believed him. Maybe she was naive to, but she trusted him. She loved him and… he loved her. Tonight, that was enough. Hermione curled up closer to Draco as he pulled the blanket over their bodies. Her chest pressed into his stomach and she ducked her head under his chin.

"I love you, Draco," Hermione murmured into his chest.

Draco's arms closed around her and he kissed the top of her head, leaving his face buried in her hair. "I know you do. And you're never going to stop, are you, Sweetheart?"

She shook her head and cuddled in closer to him, pressing as much of her body against his as she could. "Never."

Hermione felt Draco's cock jump against her hip and smiled.

He sighed and held her tighter. "Neither will I."

Draco stood at the top of the stairs and looked down. He didn't want to do this. He wanted to take Granger and run far, *far* away. Maybe somewhere warm where she didn't have to wear so many clothes and do exactly what she said she wanted last night—to be together. *Forever.*

Just the two of them, like it should be. And this? This felt like a step in the wrong direction. But it was the way she was going, so… Draco would too. For her.

Fuck.

So far, Draco had *technically* not done anything that was working against the Dark Lord. If he left now, he could spin it, say he only stayed because he was wounded. It would be a stretch, but he had the location of an Order safe house, two of them really, that he could hand over.

But his aunt was in one of them and his girl… *friend* , his *girlfriend* was in the other. Only, Granger was more than that. More than some stupid little title that told other guys to fuck off. She was his world, his heart, *his only.*

Last night solidified that. Not that he had any hesitations about it before, but now something had changed in *him.*

He… didn't want to be the Dark Lord's anymore. His mark ached and he slipped his arm back in the sling again. He didn't want anything but Granger.

He might lose her after this. Once he told them all the terrible things he had done, she might hate him. " *I don't want someone like you to love me."* She had spent so many months hating him while he loved her. While he *burned* with it, making the dull ache of his mark nothing more than a mere annoyance compared to the sheer agony of being in love with Hermione Granger.

If Granger hated him after he confessed, what would he do? Leave? Stay? *Imperius* her and steal her away again? Or… fight for her?

He could cause hell when he wanted to, and most of what he had done had been to other Death Eaters. Umbridge had told him the Muggleborns he had sold to the Ministry were being held for use as a labor force after the war.

The magical world would have to rebuild to show the might of their magic and what better way than on the backs of the people who would have seen their world taken from them? People like Granger. And if anything happened to him, he knew what would happen to her.

He wouldn't let it come to that. He'd die before he let someone else touch her. He'd rip them apart, he'd enjoy it. He'd fucking revel in it.

Those words moved through her and pushed heat down into her core.

Draco's mouth was partly open, breathing regulated and controlled. Barely.

"I want to use you, tease you. Train you."

Her mouth was dry because every bit of moisture had sunk low and was threatening to drip out of her as the tight muscles in her lower stomach clenched.

"Do you want that, pet?" Draco asked in a sultry voice. He ran a single finger along her jaw, pushing her chin up. "Chained down and finally free to be the little whore we both know you are?"

Hermione felt lightheaded which was strange because there were about a hundred images that were racing through her mind right now. She saw the want on her face, reflected in the deep blacks of his eyes, surrounded by storming grey.

Draco leaned down to whisper in her ear. "I know your pussy does." She felt his lips twitch in a smirk against her skin. "Your legs are already shaking, Granger."

She looked up at him, fearful and… excited. An intoxicating combination that paired so well with the creamy parchment and crisp minty smell of Draco. Her legs were indeed shaking, leftover energy flowing into them from the quivering inside her. Hermione glanced back at the bed.

"I should probably lay down then."

The crooked grin that cracked on Draco's face made her heart jump. He hadn't looked at her like that in… Goodness, it had been so long.

His tongue darted out and ran over his lips, wetting them right before he gave her a quick nod. "Yes. You should."

Hermione felt like she was floating as she turned and climbed onto the bed. This didn't feel real, like it was only happening in her head, but as she laid back and Draco's form loomed over her it was impossible to deny reality. How she had turned him down for months she had no idea because right now, Hermione had no desire to be anywhere else than chained up for him.

Her Draco.

"Hands up."

The sharp order got her attention and Hermione lifted her hands above her head. Draco made quick work of the chains, looping them around the bars of the headboard and snapping them closed over her wrists. His hands stayed on them for a moment and she watched him take a deep breath before he stood back up.

"Wait—" Hermione said quickly and Draco froze. "We need a silencing charm."

The door shut behind her.

Before Hermione could even turn, a strong hand grabbed her long loose curls, wrapping them around his hand a few times before pulling her head back to stare into silver eyes.

"You took your sweet time in the shower. Were you thinking about me in there?" He spoke in a low, deep voice which seemed to match the mischievous glint in his eye.

"No," Hermione breathed out. "I was trying to work out the knots in my shoulders."

Draco's other hand ran lightly down her arm and Hermione felt goosebumps follow his touch. "Your arms are still sore? Well you probably shouldn't use them then."

She heard a familiar clink and then felt the cold clasp of metal around her wrist. The chains from the Manor. Hermione shivered. The last time she had these on, she had been cut into and watched Crookshanks die. Not to mention the days she had spent attached to his bed, not knowing if she was ever going to get free, get out.

"You know how to take them off. We don't have to use them if you don't want to."

Draco's cool fingers traced the skin around the cuffs, cooling her heated blood pounding down her arms.

She knew how to get out. She wasn't trapped. And… Draco was here. He wouldn't let anything happen to her. She trusted him. Hermione didn't want to live in fear, didn't want to let those terrible memories take her over. Draco had always known how to stop her brain from churning.

" *Lectio Nefastus,"* she whispered and the chains fell loudly to the floor.

Draco watched her carefully, his expression unreadable. His grip on her hair loosened slightly, but he didn't let go of her completely.

"I just wanted to try it. Make sure I knew how." Hermione looked deep into his eyes. "You can put them back on."

Her choice this time. Hermione wasn't losing control, she was giving it. And Draco took it.

His lips pulled in a smirk and he bent down to pick up the chains. Hermione felt her blood start to race through her at his langious movements. He was taking his time, letting her get excited for it.

Giving her a chance to say no.

Draco let go of her hair and spun her around. He angled his head, dragging his eyes over her body. She had changed for bed in the bathroom. The t-shirt and shorts were soft and big and Hermione could feel her nipples brushing against the worn fabric.

"I want to chain you to the bed."

He'd done it before, he could do it again. But this time, it would be for her.

She said she'd never stop loving him. She had laid in his arms and promised him.

And he loved her. *Goddamn,* he loved her. Not even the fires of hell could burn it out of him at this point. So, maybe it was time to trust her again.

Hermione balanced on the edge of her seat, pulled her folded hands from the table into her lap, and unconsciously picked at them. She glanced to her left. Draco was leaning back with his legs stretched out languidly. If she didn't know any better, she might even think he was relaxed. He was putting up a fair show of it, but his dark grey eyes darted around just a little too quick and he kept clenching his jaw, making the muscle in the side of his face jut out sharply.

Harry settled in across from her with Ron pulling out the chair parallel to Draco. Hermione saw Draco's hand tighten into a fist. She wasn't the only one. Bill and Fleur took seats at either end of the table and as soon as he sat down, Bill started talking.

"We're not here to attack you, Malfoy."

"No," Draco swung his head towards Bill, "not until after I answer all your questions, right?"

Bill, to his credit, did not rise to the challenge. Hermione was reminded of Mr. Weasley, looking at the calm yet sturdy expression on Bill's face. His scar made his solemn face more distinguished and he seemed less like Ron's cool, older brother and more of a full-fledged member of the Order of the Phoenix. To Draco, he must certainly look like the enemy.

Hermione couldn't help but worry what might happen if Draco *didn't* comply, but… he would. He said he would. She reached out and placed her hand over his fist. Draco glanced down at it and relaxed a little. He didn't take her hand in his, but he didn't pull away either. She gave it a small squeeze.

Harry looked away and pulled his glasses off, cleaning them on the hem of his shirt, but Ron made a face like he had just been told to eat a flobberworm.

"Depends on ze answers, I suppose." Fleur pulled a thin quill and several pages of blank parchment out. She was still upset with Draco over his continual unhelpful attitude

and judging by the glare he shot at her, Draco had not forgiven, or forgotten the haircut either.

Fleur merely tossed her long blonde hair over her shoulder and gave him a cold sneer worthy of any Slytherin. Draco just looked back down at the table and clenched his jaw again.

"So what do you want to know?" he said with absolutely no intonation in his voice. The only movement in his body was his hand tensing ever so slightly under hers.

Bill leaned forward. "He's been quiet for a while. We need to know what he is planning." There was no need to elaborate on who they were talking about. They all knew who *he* was; Draco more than any of them.

She saw him roll his left shoulder, arm hanging in the sling. He wore it outside their room since the ache in his arm hadn't subsided. It still had some healing to do, but Hermione knew what was bothering him would never fully heal; his mark.

"Him." Draco jerked his chin forward, towards Harry. "He's looking for him. He's got the Ministry, he's got Britain. All he needs is—"

"Me." Harry's voice was hollow and… so were his eyes. Hermione saw the wear on his face, the tiredness in the way he held himself. He had been fighting just as much as Ron, but whereas Ron had grown muscular, Harry had become thinner. The weight of the war had changed them both. She wondered what Harry or Ron saw when they looked at her now. Hermione glanced at her hand on top of Draco's. It had changed them all.

"Bet you're not so happy about being the Chosen One now, huh, Potter?"

Harry's eyes narrowed. "I never was."

"Sure," Draco scoffed and rolled his eyes.

"You think I wouldn't rather have my parents? Wouldn't rather have *my* girlfriend sitting beside me to hold my hand? You're the one that wanted glory and fame, Malfoy, not me."

Draco stared hard at Harry. Hermione glanced back and forth between them when she caught Ron looking at her, blue eyes flickering with something deep within. Harry had called her Draco's girlfriend, and neither of them had contradicted him. Her heart gave a small leap, but she ignored it. There were more important things to think about right now.

Like the fact that Voldemort was trying to close in on Harry.

"He wants to end it. He's…" Draco's brows furrowed.

"Weakening," Harry finished for him.

Chapter Seventeen

Hermione rubbed the towel against her hair as drops of water rolled off the ends of her curls. She hated magically drying her hair. Somehow it made it even more frizzy so Hermione did the best she could with the towel and when it was merely damp, she pulled on her clothes and headed out of the bathroom.

The hot shower had helped her sore muscles. Training had taken more out of her than she realized it would and she was already dreaming of tucking herself under Draco's arm in their much-too-little bed.

She could feel her shirt sticking to her skin as she walked down the hall and back to the room she shared with Draco. No one had mentioned anything about the fact that they were sleeping in the same bed, but Hermione had caught a fair share of sideways glances. She met them when she could, daring anyone to speak, but so far no one had.

Her relationship with Draco wasn't a secret and she wasn't keeping it from anyone. They all knew. Still, Hermione treaded softly when she passed the door to Harry and Ron's room before opening the one right next to it and slipping inside.

She stopped at the sight of the empty bed.

Draco looked back up at him, grey eyes calculating and then, he gave a single, sharp nod.

"Something is happening to him."

"Like what?" Fleur whispered.

Harry glanced at Ron and then Hermione, none of them said anything. They knew what was happening to him. The prophecy was coming to a head and… Good Godric… Hermione blinked.

It was happening to Harry too.

" *Neither could live while the other survived."*

The closer they got to… the end, the weaker they were both getting. It was a race to see who could last the longest. Hermione felt a jolt of panic shoot through her arms. Voldemort had horcruxes, Harry didn't.

Her stomach lurched. They were running out of time. Harry looked over at her, green eyes no longer bright, but muted and dark. He knew what this meant. They'd have to leave soon, get back to hunting horcruxes. They had been discussing where to go next, how to get in. They had the sword now, so they needed—

Draco's hand slid out from underneath hers, making her break eye contact with Harry when he turned his storming eyes on her for just a moment, but it was long enough.

Draco knew there was something they weren't telling him and judging by the cold look, he wasn't happy about it.

Hermione shook her curls back. She could worry about that later. Right now they needed answers. They needed something that would give them an edge. Something that could let them win.

So Harry would live.

They needed Draco to help them.

"No clue," Draco answered with a shrug, slinking back behind his indolent facade. She knew Draco wouldn't intentionally do anything to hurt her, but that didn't exactly mean he would do everything he could to help the Order. If she was hiding things from him, were there things he was hiding from her?

"So let's say he succeeded," Bill said with an apologetic glance towards Harry. "What was coming next?"

Draco stared at nothing, brooding and silent. Goodness, they didn't have time for this!

"Draco, you said you would help." Hermione didn't bother trying to hide the aggravation in her tone. He needed to understand that this was something important to her, something she needed him to do. For her. For *them.*

Because… even if Harry… fell, they would still fight on. There were still horcruxes out there and if she and Ron could destroy them, then maybe someone else would have a chance, at some point, to end this.

"Other than world domination?" Draco asked sarcastically. "Sorry to disappoint, but he doesn't call us to chat over tea."

"Then what does he call you for?" Ron interjected. Hermione tensed; she was hoping that they would be able to get through this without much interaction between Draco and Ron, but as Ron placed his forearms on the table, leaning heavily on them, it was clear that he had no plan to stay out of this.

Hermione could feel the energy around Draco change. He had been defensive before, guarded, now he was…

Draco stretched out his arm and placed it around the back of her chair, letting it hang there. "Didn't call me often. I spent most of my time at home, didn't I, Sweetheart?" He played with one of her curls.

Hermione's cheeks burned. She knew what Draco was doing and she didn't care for it. She wasn't a toy for him to play with or show off just to get under Ron's skin. Just because she let him say dirty things in the bedroom didn't mean he got to talk about her like that's what she actually was.

Ron looked like he might start shouting so Hermione took the initiative. "What *can* you tell us, then? If we are asking the wrong questions, then give us the answers we need." Draco's expression was unreadable, then… it cracked. The smallest sliver of something showed and… Draco was scared. Terrified.

Of course he was. He believed these people would torture him, imprison him, kill him as soon as he gave up his secrets. He had seen the horrors of this war, he had even committed some of them. He knew how prisoners of war were treated first hand.

"We already talked to Mr. Ollivander and Luna, they told us about the dungeon."

"Cellar," Draco corrected.

"Either way," she went on, "they said that you were told to get information from Mr. Ollivander?"

"Then I'm sure he already told you what I got out of him," Draco said bitterly.

"Yes," Hermione pressed on quickly, making sure that no one had the time to jump in and say anything about the fact that Draco had indeed tortured someone. Was she… protecting him? Another question to mull over later. Right now she needed to get Draco talking. "But why? Why did… You-Know-Who want to know about wands?"

"Not wands," Harry said. "One wand, right? The Elder wand."

Holy shit. Holy *fucking* shit.

He felt almost light headed by the sudden rush of blood to his cock.

"Hermione, are you ready?" Potter called in the distance.

She smiled over at him and answered, "Ready!"

Granger placed a kiss on Draco's lower jaw and pushed herself up, grabbing his wand as she got to her feet. "At least you'll have something to think about while I train now. You looked like you were going to die of boredom before."

Draco just stared up at her, mouth open and dry as Granger brushed her hands off on her jeans. Where her wet pussy was just underneath. He was staring right at it as if it would magically appear if he concentrated hard enough.

Granger slid his wand through her fingers.

She was cruel to torture him like this.

"Don't work too hard." Draco's eyes snapped up to hers. "I've got my own training for you tonight."

He could see a deep fire burning in her eyes before she turned and headed back onto the field.

Draco stayed there, trying to get his dick to go soft, but everytime Granger used his wand to stun Weasley or knock down Potter it jumped back to attention.

He had a very long and *hard* afternoon.

Draco hung his head. If she hadn't been then, she sure as hell was by now. The Dark Lord would have punished everyone left in the Manor and his parents would have gotten further treatment for his betrayal.

No. She was okay. She had to be. His father, useless as he was, would take care of her. Lucius had always loved Narcissa more than he had Draco. He had let his son be tortured. He hadn't let anything touch his wife.

Not even the Dark Lord's mark.

"Maybe…" Granger stumbled over her words. "Maybe once you're feeling better, you can… have it."

They were using his injury as an excuse to not arm him. Said it might "damage his arm further" if he used magic before he was completely healed.

Fucking bullshit.

"How is it? Your arm?"

Draco lifted it out of the sling and stretched it for a moment. The joint creaked from disuse and he felt a tight pull as the sore muscles stretched.

"Better."

"Good!" Granger said a little too quickly. "I just mean, one of us should have a working wand arm by the end of the day. Much more of this and I'll have to borrow your sling."

Granger rubbed at her shoulder.

"Come here," Draco said softly but firmly and spread his legs out. Granger crawled in between them. Her hair was still up so he didn't even have to move it out of the way as he placed his hands on her shoulders and pressed his thumbs in.

" *Ohhh…* "

Draco chuckled. Granger was melting in his hands. He could feel the tight knots from holding her arm out for so long and worked his hands over the sore muscles, soft enough not to hurt, but hard enough to keep her making that noise.

"God, *Draco.*"

Her head fell forward and he pressed his face into the nape of her neck, the scent of cinnamon and vanilla thick.

"You'll get me hard if you keep moaning my name like that, kitten."

Draco slid his fingers down her spine to make her arch her back and gasp.

She leaned back into him, head on his shoulder as she looked up at him with her big doe eyes.

"Good, because you're getting me wet."

Draco scoffed again and blew a breath up before he remembered his hair didn't fall into his eyes anymore. "I didn't ask questions. I just did what I was told."

It was hard to think of Draco really willingly following anyone else's orders, but then… he had gotten in trouble a few times at school, but for the most part had gotten through unscathed. Harry used to call him crafty and Hermione had to admit that he was right; Draco knew how to operate within a set of bounds.

It was how he had been able to hunt and find her, how he had been able to keep her for months and might have been years if…

No. No use thinking about any other course of action now. She needed to think about Draco. If Draco had been slippery enough to operate his own agenda while serving as a Death Eater, he certainly would be able to slither his way out of this interrogation. It was almost enough to impress her; if her friends' lives didn't hang in the balance.

"First Daddy and then You-Know-Who. Bet you can't even take a shit without someone telling you to," Ron spat out. "You even kissed Umbridge's ass just for a chance to look important. You probably jumped every time You-Know-Who was handing out assignments."

Cold seeped off of Draco's body. Hermione felt him grip the back of her chair harder and she was glad that his wand was tucked safely in her pocket. Who knew what Draco would do if it was in his hand right now?

"Only one job," Draco said through gritted teeth, and slid his eyes from Ron to Harry. "You."

Harry glared from across the table.

"I *offered* to hunt you down, Potter. Captured as many Muggleborns as I could to try and find you. Nearly killed your elf after you slipped through our fingers at the Ministry. Old thing had some fight in him though." Draco smirked nastily. "Still loyal to you even with his brains all scrambled."

Harry's eyes flashed behind his glasses. Hermione knew he still felt guilty about Dobby's death; throwing Kreacher in his face had been a low blow.

"So you tortured for him, you sold people to the Ministry. You think doing that under orders and behind a mask makes you any less responsible?" Harry asked, sounding more like himself than he had all day. "Only a coward can't face his crimes. It doesn't matter who ordered it, *you* still did it."

Draco bared his teeth. "I did. So maybe pissing me off isn't the best idea. Especially since you're too chicken shit to kill anyone."

"And did you?" Harry retorted, aggravation clear in his tone. "What exactly *did* you do for the past year?"

Hermione knew the answer and knew how hard it had been on Draco to kill Theo. It was different for someone like Ron. He killed to stay alive and to fight against evil. She hated that Ron had been forced to do that, to bear that weight because a life was a life, no matter who lived it.

Hermione glanced back at Draco. He had taken a life too. And for a very different reason than Ron. Or… was it?

She looked between them, Ron sitting tall and proud and Draco, slouching and glaring. The difference was clear; Ron didn't consider himself a murderer, and Draco did.

Was Draco thinking about Theo right now? Was he going to tell Harry what he'd done, blame him for it? Hermione readied herself to jump in the middle of them, if need be.

Draco slid his arm from around the back of her chair and placed it heavily on the table, staring down at where his silver ring used to sit.

His knee started bouncing under the table and Hermione reached out to place a hand on it.

Draco jerked it away. Hermione's hand recoiled as if she'd been burnt. She knew he was in pain, but that didn't mean he had to take it out on her. She was on his side, she was here for *him*. Didn't she prove that three times over just last night?

She knew she had. And Draco had woken her up by kissing her eyes and running his hands over her, whispering how he wanted to wake up next to her every morning. It… hurt, to have him close off again.

Draco let out a sharp breath through his nose and looked up at the other people around the table. Not her. His lip curled as he spoke.

"I broke into a man's head and tortured him until his eye ran out of the socket. I turned the bones of another man's hand into putty. I abducted one of your Order members, tortured and cut off his finger to get information on a safe house." He turned to Bill. "Mundungus Fletcher. You should tie up that loose end before someone else gets their hands on him."

Draco didn't wait for him to reply, but went on. "I tore into McLaggen's mind and tortured him too. He's dead by the way."

Good Godric…

Hermione was horror struck. Her throat felt like it had constricted with every word he spoke and now they were all blocking the air from getting in. Draco had said it like it was nothing. Cormac… someone they had gone to school with. Someone she had…

He had pushed enough buttons for one day. Plus, he wanted to get laid tonight since Granger was probably going to be pissed at him after their 'talk' with the Order tomorrow, so Draco waited. And bid his time.

Hours passed and he was bored watching them drill maneuvers. The spring air was warm, even in his patch of shade and for the first time, Draco was a little glad of his shorter hair. At least since he was stuck out here watching them waste their fucking time on knockback and leg-locking jinxes. It had gotten a little interesting again when they practiced casting while running and Draco got to watch Granger's tits bounce a bit as he reclined in the shade.

Potter called for a break and Granger shuffled off the field, making her way over to Draco.

She sat down on the ground next to him.

He watched as she placed his wand in between their thighs. He had barely used it since Theo. Just to lock the door when he went to work out in the mornings and unlock it when he came in to drink in the evenings. He didn't… he didn't really like it anymore. Thinking about everything he had done with it made his head hurt.

A drink would be grand. He wasn't sure if his dull headache was from the crack in his skull or the fact that he hadn't had a drop of alcohol in over a week.

At least his hands weren't shaking.

"It worked well," Granger said. "I think I am getting the hang of it. Unicorn hair cores transfer power quicker than dragon heartstrings so it jumps a bit when I cast." Draco raised his brows. Was there *anything* she didn't know *everything* about? Granger looked away. "Mr. Ollivander told me that the other day."

Ollivander. The man he had tortured. With the wand she was now using.

"Why were you talking to him about wand cores?"

Granger looked back up at him; her mouth open, but no answer.

"I was having him look over the wands we took from…" She was lying to him. He could see it as clear as day on her face.

There were things Granger wasn't tell him.

She shouldn't be keeping anything from him. She was his. Everything in that beautiful brain of hers should be his too. Draco stared at her until she looked away. He could make her. He could dip inside her head and find what she was keeping from him.

"We… We have your mother's wand too."

He had barely been conscious for the scrimmage at the Manor and remembered even less than he had seen. Had his mother been hurt?

At least training gave her an outlet for her anxiety. For a little while. She glanced over at her friends. They only had about a week before the polyjuice was ready, but the question was, were they?

Ron gave her an enthusiastic thumbs up and Draco released an annoyed grunt before snapping his fingers in her face. "Pay attention!"

For a moment it sounded like he was going to add something, but then Draco slammed his jaw closed and turned her back around with a little more effort than needed.

So much for being supportive. His mood swings were back in full force, sometimes playful and other times… Hermione pointed his wand back at the broken base and tried again. Draco took his place behind her, giving instructions.

"Bend your elbow."

She was.

"Straighten out your wrist."

As if she didn't already know.

"Spread your legs."

She rolled her eyes and felt a quick pinch on her backside.

"Draco!" Hermione jumped and so did the fire, quickly she whipped it back around, keeping it contained and then recalled it.

Draco merely chuckled. "You'll have distractions out there. You need to get used to them."

"Think a lot of people are going to try and cop a feel in the middle of battle?"

He smirked. "I will."

Hermione huffed and tried to hide the small smile that rose to her lips, pushed there by rising bubbles.

"Don't worry, kitten. You're not going to be in any battles. Not if I have anything to say about it."

"You don't." She narrowed her eyes and stuck her hands on her hips.

Draco gave her a wolfish grin. "Mmm, I like you all… fiery, Granger."

"Don't change the subject, Draco." She pulled a few strands of damp hair off her forehead and tucked them behind her ears, hoping that having her hair back would cool her down, but Draco's gaze heated her right back up.

"Oh, we can have it out, kitten. Upstairs. In our room." He leaned down, breathing in deeply as he moved his mouth to her ear. "I wonder what I'll turn red this time."

Hermione blushed. It was a peace offering, Draco's weird and… insane way of saying he didn't want to fight with her and she had to say, she agreed. They still didn't see eye

to eye on a lot of things, most of them concerning the war, but they were both trying. The actual being together part of their… relationship was new to them. Both of them.

They would figure it out. Just another thing on her ever growing list of tasks to do. Along with getting used to calling this a *relationship* .

Goodness… The bubbles swelled.

"Put that energy to use, Granger," Draco drawled, trying very hard not to sound too happy. "But if I like what you do out here, I might be tempted to give you a reward tonight."

Hermione lifted her chin, bent her elbow, straightened her wrist, and… spread her legs, lining them up with her shoulders. Draco nodded, happy with her form. Of course he would be, Hermione knew how to ground herself. Draco had taught her a lot of things, but magic wasn't one of them. She had always made higher marks than him in school, even with his father's influence on the board of governors.

Hermione decided not to think about Lucius Malfoy. Or that day in general. Except for maybe that morning…

Her blood warmed in her veins and this time when she sent the fire racing towards the charred stump, it started to take shape and form. A whipping tail and a roaring cry sounded as its mouth… *opened* and Godric…

The fire swallowed the base of the tree and Hermione felt the heat blossom, even from a distance. It was bright, orange and yellow, flickering to white at its center. Hermione squinted against the harsh light.

"Don't take your eyes off of it. You've got to watch." Draco was in her ear, admiration in his voice as he planted his feet on either side of hers and gently touched her hips. "Hold it. Hold it, Granger, I know you can."

His heavy breath blew against the side of her face and a shiver ran down her spine, despite the inferno that she was… she was controlling. She was doing it!

The creature in the flames was consuming the wood, and Hermione *was* holding it. Wow. So this is what it was like to actually conjure fiendfyre. She had to admit, she didn't hate it.

She felt powerful. Strong. And with Draco behind her she felt like… like she could burn just as hot and bright as the sun itself.

Maybe even more.

The creature tossed its head, consuming the last of the broken tree and Hermione turned Draco's wand, watching the flaming creature burn out with a final roar.

She was gasping, sweating, and smiling.

And so was Draco. His lips parted to show straight white teeth and a plume of smoke wafted behind him, matching the grey in his eyes.

"You're incredible." Draco swooped his arm around her waist and pulled her to him, kissing her firmly, all hard pressure and soft lips. Hermione barely had time to kiss him back before he released her, grinning widely down at her. She steadied her feet under her, still in shock over what she had done and *that kiss*… Draco wasn't normally that affectionate in front of others. He was territorial, yes, but… the way he was looking at her now, he only ever did that when they were alone.

So this is what it was like to be Draco Malfoy's girlfriend…

Hermione liked it even more than casting fiendfyre. She liked it a lot.

"Wow, that was amazing!" Harry was jogging up behind her and Hermione quickly wiped any excess moisture off her lips. "There's nothing left of it!"

She looked out at where the stump had sat and all that was there was a smoking pile of grey and white ash.

Oh.

Her smile fell and when she turned to look at Draco she saw the steely resolve on his face.

She had almost forgotten. Forgotten why he was making sure she knew how to cast fiendfyre.

So she could… use it on him. When the time came.

If the time came.

If they weren't too late.

They needed to get back to hunting horcruxes. Hermione glanced at Draco. Would he come with them? Would he want to? Would Harry and Ron let him? And what would she do if they didn't?

Hermione plastered a not completely genuine smile on her face. "Thanks, Harry. How's yours going?"

"Like shit." Draco stepped up next to her and Hermione exhaled deeply. "A second year could do better than that pale attempt you were conjuring."

Harry glared at Draco. The change in his expression made him look more tired, worn. His scar looked… darker, the skin around it leeched of color.

"Don't be so rude!" Hermione snapped. "If you think they need help, then give it. We're all on the same side here."

Harry shuffled his feet and Draco gave a slight roll of his shoulders, but neither one contradicted her. Hermione straightened her back a little.

"Are you alright, pet?" He ran his hand down her back and slipped two fingers under the hem. They were cool compared to her skin and Hermione shivered as he dragged them along the curve of her hips.

"Yes." Hermione wiped her forehead. The rain hadn't cooled anything off, just made it muggy with heavy air and they were far enough from the beach that the breeze from the ocean didn't reach them. Not to mention they were summoning cursed fire.

And the fact that Draco was touching her.

A new heat started to bloom, this one deep inside her.

Hermione turned, and looked up into the rain grey eyes staring down at her. "Why did you stop?" he asked.

"I…" Her mouth felt dry and she licked her lips. "I just needed to."

Draco nodded and watched the last wisps of smoke curl away from the stump. "You're getting better, but you can do more, Granger."

"Excuse me?" She was doing just fine, thank you very much! Great, seeing as she had barely slept last night either, haunted by Draco's screams in her dreams again. She had followed them, like she always did, only instead of the dark halls of the Manor, she was running down stone corridors that looked like Hogwarts. She still expected it to end in the same way, but when she opened what looked like the gate to the Restricted Section she saw…

She didn't even want to think it. She never wanted to see Draco like *that*. Dead and… not at the same time.

It was enough to make her miss the nightmares of her dark Death Eater chasing her through the woods. And of him catching her.

Draco gave her a knowing look. "You mastered every charm, spell, and potion you encountered in school. I know this is advanced, but it's not beyond you." He pointed a finger at the now not-on-fire stump. "You're better than that."

"Good job, Hermione!" Ron called from his and Harry's place down the field. Hermione had suggested they split into pairs to practice for a little while. There was enough tension between the four of them already and fiendfyre was unpredictable.

It wasn't Draco's fault, well, not all of it anyway. Harry had become more reclusive over the last week and several times he and Ron had fought a little when they disagreed while going over their plan for Gringotts. Hermione did her best to calm them back down, but when it started to feel a little too much like it had in the tent she retreated back to her room with Draco, only to worry about a different problem.

it, Draco was on the other end of the pitch, showing off for Pansy, Crabbe, and Goyle who were cheering for him in the stands.

It felt like a lifetime ago.

"You've got to hold onto it. You're not just conjuring, you're *controlling."* Draco was standing behind her and she could smell mint as the breeze blew around them. It had been raining for two days and so Hermione had pulled out some old spell books and read up on fiendfyre.

And inferi.

She told herself she was practicing this in case she needed it against other Death Eaters. Not Draco. She wouldn't… She wouldn't let it come to that. Today was the first day sheets of rain were not coming down and the damp conditions were perfect to test out fiendfyre. Even if she didn't exactly feel ready for it.

Hermione planted her feet. Ready. Resolved.

She had never backed down from a challenge before and she wasn't starting now.

"Go on, Sweetheart." Draco was so encouraging, letting her take time, ease into it. "You can do this."

The only thing was, she didn't really want to.

She could feel her own mental block tightening the muscles in her arm as the fire erupted from the end of Draco's wand, clutched tightly in her hand. The heat blew back against her as the fiery ball burned out in front of them. Hermione flinched, backing up into Draco's chest. His hands landed on her hips and pushed her forward.

"Again."

Other Death Eaters. Not Draco. Not Draco. Not Draco.

This time it seared through the empty space, burning the air around it as it roared towards its target. The flames were powerful and Hermione could feel the weight of it pulling on the wand which jumped to attention, eager and greedy. Hermione had to rein it in, pulling back as the fire tried to spread.

It felt *alive* . It felt… hungry.

"Yes!" Draco sounded excited at her progress. Hermione focused, keeping it low and steady. The fire wanted to jump into the trees and it took mental and physical concentration to keep it in check. Draco's voice was low, but loud in her ear. " *More."*

She ended it. Sweat was rolling down her back and Hermione tried to catch her breath, coughing a little as the stump smoked.

"It's not all that different from a patronus, Harry and I know you've mastered that." She didn't give either of them a chance to argue, but launched into a short lecture on using energy to cast and control conjured magic until she was sure that the uncomfortableness had passed.

"Erm, yeah," Harry mumbled when she asked him if he understood. "Makes sense."

"Let's go back to your target and try it then."

She didn't tell Draco to follow her, but heard his heavy footsteps behind her, black boots crushing the fresh green grass.

Ron was waiting for them and stepped to the side as Harry lined up his wand with a large broken tree limb, fallen during one of the recent storms.

He pushed his glasses up his nose, focusing hard as he easily slid into a perfect casting position.

"Don't burn yourself, Potter," Draco drawled and Hermione shot him a nasty look. "What? I was helping."

Hermione tossed her head a little and caught Ron's eye as she turned away. He took a deep breath and two steps away from her and Draco. Hermione pretended like she didn't notice. Like it didn't bother her that Ron couldn't even stand next to her if Draco was too.

Harry did better that time and Hermione watched as the flames followed the movement of his wand.

"You're getting it!" Hermione cheered as he extinguished them, panting slightly from the effort.

"Finally," Draco muttered and Hermione elbowed him in the ribs. Draco grabbed her hand, twining his fingers in between hers and gave her a cheeky smirk. Hermione, blushing a little, squeezed his hand back.

"If it's so easy, why don't you do it then?" Harry grumbled.

"I'm not the one that needs the practice," Draco snapped back. "I've done it before and well too. I know how to control mine."

"Yeah?" Ron asked, speaking for the first time. "Is that why neither house on either side of Hermione's didn't have as much as a scorch-mark on them?"

What?

Death Eaters had burned down her house not…

She spun around, wanting Draco to deny it. Wishing with all her heart that he would say he had no idea what Ron was talking about and he didn't do it and he'd never do that because he wouldn't want to hurt her and…

Oh God. Oh *God*… He had. Draco had set fire to her house.

"Granger—" He reached for her and Hermione took a step back towards Harry and Ron, her mouth open and head shaking. No no no.

"It was… I didn't…"

"You burned down my home."

"It's not what you think."

"Not what I think? Am I suddenly not smart enough to understand whatever… *insane reasoning* you came up with this time?"

"Granger…" He said her name softly, deeply then let out a short breath and glanced at Harry and Ron on either side of her before opening his lying mouth. "Can we talk about this?"

"We are."

"Alone."

"No."

Draco blinked. "What?"

"I said *no,"* Hermione reiterated. She didn't want to be alone with him where he could smooth her hair and whisper softly to her and make it all sound like it was okay when it wasn't because Draco kept doing things that were not okay!

She was not okay and she… she was trying to come to terms with everything Draco had done, but sometimes… sometimes she forgot that Draco wasn't two people. He was one and she couldn't just write off the things she didn't like about him anymore.

"Why? Why would you do that?"

Draco opened his mouth, paused, closed it, and then spoke. "I was drunk, okay? I was drunk, Granger, that's all."

"That's *all?!"*

He ran his hand over his short hair, grimacing. "I was mad at you and… and you know I do stupid things when I drink."

Hermione scoffed. An old excuse, one he had used too many times with her already.

Draco stepped forward. "It was a long time ago. I would have told you, but…" he exhaled. "I… forgot about it."

"You forgot." Hermione stared at him. "You've done so many heinous things to me that you can't remember them all. Well I do, Draco. I remember everything you've done to me and I'm sick of it!" She stamped her foot against the ground.

Draco threw his hands up. "What do you want me to do about it now?"

Draco pulled his arm from behind his head and threaded his fingers in her hair, cupping the back of her head. He pulled her the few inches down to him, pressing her lips to his and kissed her.

Granger's lips were soft and Draco's brows furrowed as he put his thoughts into action, squeezing her shoulders to hold her closer. It was simple, but pure, and Draco let his heart beat wildly for a moment, enjoying the only taste of heaven he would ever get before releasing her.

"Done." He smirked. Or… that might actually be a smile.

Granger settled back down and snuggled against him again. Draco closed his eyes. Her hand moved back to his chest, fingers lightly tracing the scars there. This time, he didn't stop her.

"We will figure this out, Draco. Don't lose hope."

His heart skipped a beat. If anyone could, it would be Granger. Her fingers warmed his scars, running over them as if she was following marks on a map. They had healed, but they'd never be gone. This was what he was.

"Okay, Sweetheart."

It wasn't a lie.

It *wasn't.*

Draco hugged her a little close for a few painful beats of his heart. How could he lose something he never even had?

Hermione focused on the base of the broken tree near the edge of the woods. She knew how to conjure fire, it was something she had always been good at. Years ago, she had made portable fire in jars to warm her and Ron's hands during Harry's Quidditch practices. She remembered shattering one of the jars during her second year when Gryffindor was leaving the field and Slytherin was coming on.

She had watched Draco take off, a blur of green, black, silver, and blond. Suddenly her fire had burned too hot and the jar exploded, only her thick gloves had saved her hands from the shards of glass, even if they had ended up singed. By the time she had repaired

"Did you know this whole time?"

Draco breathed in, chest expanding and raising her head up with it. "Yeah, kitten. I've known ever since I was branded." He tightened his hold around her just a little.

Her question had been such a simple one. He didn't know why she had even asked. The answer struck him like a bolt of lightning. She already knew when she asked. She was just giving him a chance to talk about it, if he wanted to.

Hell, he didn't deserve someone like Granger.

But they'd have to pry her from his cold dead hands before he let go of her.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Draco bent his free arm behind his head. He thought of half a dozen excuses he could push off on her before deciding to just… tell her the truth. "I didn't want you to know."

He looked up at the shadowed ceiling and saw Theo's dead face staring back down at him. Draco closed his eyes in a long blink, trying to hide from it, but it was there, waiting for him in the darkness of his mind. He had known what he was doing to Theo, what he had been condemning him to as he held that curse. And still, he hadn't stopped.

Because he was scared. Draco wasn't a Gryffindor, full of courage and rash pride; he was a Slytherin and able to slide his way out of every slippery situation he had been in. But not this time. There was no running from this, that black ink was trapped under his skin just as much as he was trapped in this fate.

It was what had prompted him to act on his thoughts, when he found Granger crying in the Restricted Section. He knew he couldn't do it, couldn't kill Dumbledore. And if he failed, he'd be killed in turn and become… some dead thing, cursed to do the Dark Lord's bidding for the rest of time.

So why not do the one thing he always wanted, but never had the courage to? Why not try to fuck the goody-good Granger and dirty up her little Mudblood cunt just *once* before playing puppet as a rotting corpse for his Master?

Funny, how that one decision ended him up *here*.

And how no matter what he did, it still didn't change a fucking thing. There was only one way to stop being a Death Eater, but now that Granger knew... at least he'd have an out.

Granger lifted herself up a little and looked back up at him. Her twisting locks were gathered up on one side of her neck, falling ever so slightly around her face. Draco could just make out her big, doe eyes in the dark.

"No more lies. From here on out, we tell each other everything. I… I need to know, Draco. You can't keep hiding things from me. Promise me, no more lies."

Hermione's chest tightened. "Apologizing would be a good start. Or are you not sorry about this either?"

She knew many of the awful things he had done were to survive, that they were orders and if he disobeyed he would have been punished himself or even killed and knowing what lay for him after death… but he could still feel remorse for doing them. Hermione hadn't forgotten about the people he sold to the Ministry or the ones who suffered under his wand.

Draco's jaw was clenched, biting back whatever scathing words he wanted to throw at her. She had a few choices ones herself! "I didn't even hurt anyone! It was empty! It wasn't really your home anymore, not after… And…"

Hermione stared him down. "And what?"

Draco looked away. "And I didn't want you to have anywhere to go back to."

It hurt. It hurt to hear the truth, that Draco had done this not for her, but *to* her. Sometimes she felt like she didn't know him at all. They were so different, in so many ways. Hermione had been furious with him last summer, yes, but she would have never taken away something so important to him just to upset him.

"I can't believe you." She shook her head, curls bouncing and twisted together. Draco watched them. "You're such a—"

"A what?" Draco said snidely. "Spit it out, you know you can't leave a question unanswered."

"A bad boyfriend!" Hermione yelled and Draco pulled back. "God, sometimes I don't know why I put up with this." It was harsh, cruel even, but… it was true. In a way. Draco didn't say anything for a few moments and Hermione understood why. She was half in shock too, over what she had said.

It was the first time she had called him… that.

And she had used it to hurt him.

Maybe they weren't so different after all.

Draco brows hung heavily over his eyes as he stared at the fallen limb, half burned and half broken. He looked like he was about to speak, but only took a deep breath instead, his face turning cold and indifferent, but Hermione saw the muscle in his neck twitch as he bit back whatever was too… painful for him to say right then.

Hermione felt her own throat tighten, awkwardly aware of Harry and Ron on either side of her, witnessing all of this. Maybe they should have had this conversation alone.

"I'm sorry, Hermione." The words came from the wrong direction; beside her, not in front of her. Ron gave her a sympathetic look. "You know he's never going to change."

Ron had said as much last year, calling Draco a lost cause and Hermione hated that he was seeing this right now.

"Get *FUCKED,* Weasley!" Draco rounded on him, pushing his nose into Ron's face and glaring down at him. "By anyone other than MY girlfriend!" Oh God. Her heart wasn't going to be able to take much more. "Preferably by a mountain troll. Maybe an ogre. You can even bring it home to your mother. I'm sure it would fit right in with the rest of your fam—"

"You need to back the hell up, Malfoy." Harry was pulling on Draco's arm, trying to get him away from Ron. She was used to Draco hovering over her, but it was impossible to miss just how tall he was now. How much of a menace he presented, even without a wand. And Draco knew it too.

"Don't touch me, Potter." He shook Harry off.

"Don't you start on my Mum!" Ron was turning more red by the second. Hermione wouldn't have been surprised if steam started coming out of his ears.

Draco smirked nastily. "If I was you, I'd be more worried about the troll. I hear they fuck boulders. Your mum's not that different from a—"

Harry shoved Draco back roughly. "Shut your mouth."

Hermione pursed her lips angrily. "Draco! That's completely uncalled for!"

Ron raised his wand, knuckles white.

"Ron, no!" Hermione grabbed onto his hand, trying to pull it down while Harry shoved Draco back again, a feral gleam in his silver eyes. He… wanted this. He wanted to fight, even in an unfair one. Draco… wanted to get hurt.

He swung a fist out, but Harry blocked it, raising his own, but before he could throw the punch, Harry went rigid. His joints locked and his body teetered for a moment, before falling against Draco who quickly tried to untangle himself from Harry, sending him crashing to the ground.

"Harry!" Hermione let go of Ron.

He took a step towards Draco, stopping at Harry's prone body. "What the fuck did you do?!"

"Nothing!" Draco held up his hands as Hermione dove down to Harry's side, pushing him over. He wasn't moving. "I… I don't even have a wand!"

She'd worry about that in a moment. First she needed Harry to wake up and make sure he was okay. She was just about to do it magically when his eyes started to flutter. Hermione had never been so happy to see that bright shade of green before.

Chapter Eighteen

Granger's head lay on his chest, Draco's arm looped around her. The room was dark and he could just barely make out the shape of her under the covers. But he could feel it. Granger was there, with him, in this lumpy, cramped and… kind of cozy bed. His feet hung off the bottom and Granger was halfway on top of him for them both to fit, but he wasn't complaining.

She was warm. After a lifetime of velvet pillows and thick, fur blankets trying to hold in the heat, Draco finally didn't wake up shivering. Granger slid her hand up his stomach and Draco grabbed it, holding it in his own so she didn't have to feel his scars. They had gotten worse. Deep, ragged marks. Rough and uneven.

Fucked up.

It's what he was. What he'd always be. And now Granger knew.

He took her hand from his chest and tucked it in between them. It was a shame she didn't get to enjoy him before he was cut, that he had to hide his body from her for so long, but it was useless putting effort into something that would never be. These scars weren't going anywhere and his father had taught him to be pragmatic, to go after what he could get, not foolish dreams.

"Draco?" Granger asked softly.

He didn't say anything, just dipped his chin, looking down at her a little.

"Oh, Harry!" she cried as he coughed and rubbed his scar. When he lifted his hand away, Hermione saw blood on his fingers. His scar was… *bleeding?* "What happened? Are you okay? Was it…?"

Harry nodded, wincing as he sat up. Hermione brushed dirt and grass off his back, fussing over the things she could do for him and freaking out over the things she couldn't. Since when did his scar bleed? How long had this been going on? Were the visions of Lord Voldemort getting… worse?

"I think… I think he knew." Harry wiped the blood off on his jeans. "He knew I was there and…" He closed his eyes, but they moved behind the lids. "Normally I can see when he's feeling something particularly strong, but this time it was like something triggered it. Him. I wasn't seeing him, I think…" Harry opened his eyes. "I think he was seeing me."

Hermione's heart fell down inside her, shortly followed by her spine and maybe her lungs too because she certainly didn't feel like she could use them right now.

"He bridged the connection this time?" she asked worriedly as Ron reached out a hand that Harry took, pulling him to his feet. Hermione did her best to help him and felt how cold and clammy his skin was despite the odd warmth left from the storm.

"Does anyone want to tell me just what the fuck is going on?!" Of course Draco was shouting. Of course he was demanding answers. Of course he wasn't thinking of anyone but *himself* right now.

Harry rubbed his head again, smearing a little blood across his skin. He and Ron, thankfully, ignored Draco. Draco on the other hand was watching Harry warily, still poised to strike. There was no point in avoiding it, after what he'd just seen, they had to tell Draco.

"Harry sometimes gets…" Hermione glanced at Harry, "visions of sorts." Draco raised his brows. "Of You-Know-Who."

"Visions?"

Hermione's mouth pulled flat. "He can see what You-Know-Who is doing or… feeling."

For the smallest moment, she thought Draco was accepting this information well. Processing it even. Then, he started shouting.

"Me?!" Draco pointed to his chest. "He saw *me?!*"

Hermione and Ron shared a look before both turning to Harry, worried what that brief connection might have given away.

"Don't worry," Harry muttered. "He didn't see the cottage or anything. Just Malfoy and a bit of the woods behind him."

"Oh, fuck this!" Draco shook his head and backed up a few steps. "Granger, go inside, get your shit and we're going. I'm not waiting around for him to show up!"

Hermione planted her hands on her hips again. "No, we're not. And we don't have anywhere else to go, *remember?"*

Draco's rain grey eyes stormed, matching the gathering clouds overhead. "That's… not entirely true."

Hermione huffed, ignoring him and whatever he was about to say because she was not in the mood for it. She turned back to Harry. "Are you sure you're okay? Harry, you don't look well."

Now that she thought about it, Harry had been increasingly looking worse day by day. He had stopped shaving and a dark shadow lined his jaw. He just… hadn't been himself lately. Hermione had been so focused on trying to research that she had ignored some of the warning signs that there was something wrong with Harry.

Maybe even more than the visions getting worse.

"Yeah, I think I just need some water."

"I'll come with you!" Hermione offered and heard Draco's heavy boots following her again. Good Godric, he couldn't give her five minutes alone?!

"Draco, stop," she ordered and he looked surprised by her tone. Good. Just because she liked him being in charge when they were in the privacy of their bedroom didn't mean she was just going to do whatever he said all the time.

And it was high time Draco understood that.

"I'm going inside with Harry and you're going… to do something else. I don't really care what it is, as long as it's not burning down another house."

Draco looked a little wounded, but it quickly disappeared as his aristocratic features slid back into cool indifference. "So I am supposed to just wait around until you call? No, Sweetheart, that's not how this works."

"And how would you know how a relationship works?" she said waspishly. "Maybe that's what you can do while you sit out here. Think about how things *should* be between us. And if you can't figure that out, at least try and remember if you've done anything else horrible to me!"

Draco didn't say anything, but she could feel his eyes boring holes into the back of her head as she walked back to the cottage with Harry. She could talk with Draco later, once she had calmed down a little. And once she knew Harry was alright. Just because Draco

Draco swallowed, the tension leaving his face for a moment. He dropped his eyes to the table and Hermione had the distinct impression he was avoiding her gaze. "There's only one way to stop being a Death Eater." It was the same phrase Draco had repeated so many times, so… why now? "And it's not dying."

"What?" Hermione asked, her voice high. Draco closed his eyes and shook his head. His breath shook in his chest. He wasn't answering her. Why wasn't he answering her? "Harry, what is it?"

Harry turned to face her, looking drawn and tired. "He's cursed them. The marks. When they die," he glanced at Draco for a moment, "they are still his."

Hermione felt anxiety pushing hot tears into her eyes. What? What did that mean? Her brain spun into overdrive, picking out pieces and trying to fit them together. Then, it clicked.

The Death Eaters in Borgin and Burkes.

Draco's insistence that she learn to cast fiendfyre.

His mumblings after he killed Theo.

" *Burn my body when I'm dead."*

Hermione's blood turned to ice as her mind stuck, frozen on one single thought.

Death Eaters… didn't *die.* They became inferi.

"Salazar fucking Slytherin!" Draco kicked his legs down. "NO, Weasley. Fuck! And you're the ones who think they are going to kill the Dark Lord?"

Hermione had to admit, Draco had a bit of a point. They had escaped by the skin of their teeth so far, but everyone's luck ran out eventually. Next time, they would need a plan. A good one. They needed… her.

Draco blinked and looked up at the ceiling. "Shit, we are all going to die."

Hermione pursed her lips, but… he said we. Draco said *we.*

Ron slammed his hand on the table. "Your kind has been saying that for almost a year now and we're still here. Maybe *you're* the ones who are going to die."

Hermione knew Ron was taking a personal interest in Draco's fate. He had told her that he wanted Draco to pay for what he had done. More than once. But surely Ron understood that Draco was helping them now. He wouldn't do anything to work *against* them…

Draco rolled his eyes. "Yeah keep killing Death Eaters, won't make a fucking difference."

He was always so defeatist. Why wouldn't he just entertain the idea that maybe there was a way to win? If he did, he might find that he liked it on their side.

"What does that mean?" Harry asked and Hermione saw that Harry had not taken Draco's comment as sarcasm. Surely Draco hadn't… been… serious, had he?

Draco shifted in his chair, suddenly uncomfortable.

"Malfoy," Harry addressed him. "Why won't it make a difference?"

Draco was so quiet she could hear his teeth grinding together in his mouth. It sounded like rocks, like he was made of stone.

He looked up from under hooded eyes at Harry. "When we take our marks," he said, low voice and dark. "We pledge our life, and death, to the Dark Lord."

"So you're willing to die for old snake face, yeah, we know that. Real well," Ron said. "The Death Eaters in Knockturn wouldn't stop coming even when the shop was full of smoke and falling down around them. They only stopped when the flames caught on their robes."

Hermione looked away, trying to dispel the images her brain was conjuring up.

But Draco stayed staring at Harry and Harry… was staring back. Hermione looked between them, her heart jumping into her throat. She was missing something. She never missed anything. What… what hadn't Draco told her?

"It makes you one of them, doesn't it?" Harry said softly.

was her… boyfriend, didn't make Harry any less of her best friend and right now, that's exactly what she needed.

Hermione sat on the beach next to Harry. The breeze ruffled his hair, making it even messier than it normally was, but he didn't bother to try and smooth it down. He just stared straight ahead as the waves rushed up the beach only to retreat back into the churning water.

There were dark clouds forming over the sea and whipping up white capped waves under them. The wind blew them ever closer, but Harry and Hermione sat side by side on the beach, weathering the briney breeze that blew by them.

Harry had been oddly quiet, and not just because of what had happened on the training field yesterday. He had quickly gone upstairs once they got inside and stayed there all evening. When she went into his room today to check on the polyjuice potion, Harry had asked her to take a walk with him. He had asked her about her fight with Draco and somehow, they had ended up… here.

"It's probably for the best," he finally said and Hermione tried to decide whether she should say something or not and in her silence Harry went on. "It wasn't much of a relationship anyway, was it? In reality, it ended last year and this whole time has just been… trying to hold onto something that wasn't really there."

She had dealt with her issues with Draco the way she had dealt with every problem; Hermione read. The more she understood about a subject, the better she could tackle it so Hermione went over all her notes from last fall, cross referencing some new texts that Harry had swiped from Borgin and Burke's.

Not that it did much good, but still, Hermione read on. She read until her eyes started watering because she had forgotten to blink. She read through dinner which Draco, thankfully, did not attend. She read until the candle burned down and then wedged the *lumos* lit wand behind her ear to work a bit like a reading light she used to have as a girl.

Her parents had given it to her for her birthday when she turned nine. A pang rang through her chest at the thought of them. She missed them terribly and maybe… her reaction about what Draco had done to the house had been fueled by the grief of their

removal from her life. She had no idea if she would ever get to see them again and now they felt farther away than ever. She had lost Crookshanks; Hermione didn't blame Draco for that, but her home…

So she didn't go upstairs. Her initial anger with Draco had faded to bruised resentment, for him and herself too. He knew how to push her buttons better than *anyone* and it had always resulted in her losing her temper. It took a lot to rile her up, but once her claws came out she struck to hurt. Just like he did.

How many times had she said something she didn't really mean because she was upset?

" *You didn't have any problem kissing me after Cormac!"*

" *I don't want someone like you to love me."*

" *You're a monster!"*

Maybe she was too. She hadn't wanted to name the creature she saw in the flames, the one she conjured and controlled, but she had got enough glimpses of it to know what it was. A Chimera. A lion, but not. Something different, something… changing. Something she didn't really want to see in herself, but was there all the same.

Hermione had fallen asleep at the table, reading Dumbledore's old copy of " *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* " and woken up to Draco sitting at the bottom of the stairs, eyes red from what she hoped was lack of sleep and staring at her. She sat up and rubbed her face where it was pressed against the pages of her book. When she looked back, he was on his feet, coming towards her. Hermione had jumped up and watched his expression change into something… happy, thinking she was coming back to him.

Hermione hadn't said a word as she brushed past him. Just ran up the stairs, hid in the bathroom until she was sure he wasn't waiting outside anymore and hurried into Harry and Ron's room, hoping to distract herself by going over the Gringotts plan again while she stirred her potion.

Once she was done, she could have gone and talked to him, heard him out and tried to explain how she was feeling, but Harry had asked her to take a walk with him and… honestly she needed a break. She needed a friend.

So Hermione had spent the last few hours sitting on the beach talking about Draco and while Harry listened. And then, he had started talking too. She was a little embarrassed that it had taken her this long to notice there was something other than just his scar bothering him. Luna had told him before she left; Ginny had found someone else.

He said he was happy for her, but Hermione told him it was okay for him to feel sad for himself at the same time. He was a human too.

heirlooms? Goodness… he must have been making good on his promise to dress her like a queen and—

"Gringotts?! You've got to be fucking kidding me!" Ron slumped back in his chair and shared a look with Harry.

Hermione let out a slow sigh. She wasn't sure what she was hoping for, but… Gringotts wasn't it. Would they ever find another horcrux? It almost felt hopeless, but Harry went on.

"What about your aunt? Bellatrix?"

"Why are you so worried about a cup?" Draco asked, his expression carefully controlled, but Hermione could see his eyes tighten just slightly. Draco was clever, cunning. He might be able to guess why they were asking. And if he thought it was important to *her*… Draco would figure it out sooner or later.

"Harry, I think we should—"

"No." He didn't even let her finish before he shot her down. Harry looked right at her and said seriously, "No, Hermione. No."

"Harry's right, Hermione. We promised," Ron added.

"I know," she sighed. "Alright."

"Well this is fun." Draco rolled his eyes. "So glad I've stuck around to hear you lot get all cryptic. Is this how Order meetings normally go?"

"Well no one is getting tortured in the middle of the room so I am sure it's a change of pace for you," Ron said as his ears flushed red again.

Draco placed his black boots on the table and crossed his legs. "We actually kept that in the corner. More of a sideshow attraction than the main event."

"What qualified as your main event then?" Ron's shoulders lifted, but there was nothing casual about the movement. "I'm curious." Hermione could see the anger boiling right under the surface of his face.

Draco balanced on the back legs of his chair. "Sometimes the snake ate people."

People? Goodness! Hermione felt like she might be sick.

"Tell me about the snake," Harry said before Ron could make another smart remark.

"Big." Draco shrugged. "Scaly. Sort of a… greenish brown."

"I know what it looks like!" Harry was getting heated and Hermione really didn't want to see him lash out at everyone again.

"Then why bother asking me? First a cup, now a snake? What's next, the Dark Lord's favorite hat?"

"Does he have a hat?" Ron asked.

Hermione glared back, putting all her anger and resentment in that one look. She watched as he struggled to get to his feet. Ron sniggered and even Harry looked amused as Draco uneasily got to his feet again.

It was good to see Harry smile.

Draco flopped down in the chair, straightened his sling and started to pout.

Hermione lifted her chin and turned back to her friends. "I think we can continue. Unless, Draco has anything else he wants to add?"

Ron looked much too happy and Hermione had to fight to keep the satisfied smile off of her face. Draco pushed her all the time, it felt good to give as good as she got.

"No?" Hermione asked, keeping her voice light. "Good."

No one said anything for a moment and then Draco rolled his shoulder. "What's next, you want to know my favorite color?"

"We're not here to make friends, Malfoy," Harry said harshly. "We have some very specific questions and you're going to answer them."

"The fuck you think I've been doing?" Draco snarled.

"These are different."

Hermione stiffened. Harry was going to ask Draco about horcruxes.

"Have you ever seen a golden cup? One with a badger on it?"

Draco eyed him carefully. "No."

Ron's brows lowered. "How do we know he's not lying?"

"He's not," Hermione answered. She met Draco's eye for a moment. "I know when he's lying and Draco's telling the truth."

Draco clenched his jaw again. It had taken her a while to catch on, but he had only one tell; when he lied, his pupils contracted. It was miniscule, and to anyone else probably insignificant, but to Hermione, nothing about Draco was too small.

"Your father had a diary a few years ago. He probably kept it somewhere safe. Do you know where?"

"My father doesn't keep a diary."

"This wasn't his. It was someone else's. But do you know where he might have hidden it?"

"Please, Draco," Hermione said softly. "Think. Anything will help."

Draco stared at the table then shook his head. "Gringotts? That's where a lot of the heirlooms and jewels are. The ones my mother doesn't use."

She caught Draco's eyes as they darted to hers. Jewels. He must have gotten the ruby brooch and earrings for her from their vault. He had dressed her in Malfoy family

Harry cracked his knuckles, a nervous habit of his he had picked up when there was nothing else he could do to release the tension inside himself. "Ginny's got a whole life ahead of her, why should she wait around on some guy who might die tomorrow?"

"You're not just some guy, Harry," Hermione said gently, but Harry only blew out a sharp breath and tilted his eyes from the water to the storm tossed sky.

"You're right. I'm the Chosen One, which means it's already decided for me, isn't it?" Harry looked at her and Hermione could see the bitterness creased in his dark brows. "It's… foretold or… whatever."

"You know I don't believe in divination."

"Then how do you explain it? What's happened to me, what's *still* happening to me?" There was no denying it. The prophecy was set in motion, both Harry and Voldemort were… dying. Only one would survive it. And whereas Voldemort had tried to master death, his own and others, Harry had always been its victim.

Hermione bit her lip, trying to find an answer that would both suffice and soothe Harry. "You-Know-Who believed it and therefore acted upon it. If he had never heard the prophecy then—"

"Then my parents would be alive. Then I would be at Hogwarts instead of hiding out while I wait to die. Then…" Harry looked back to the white crested waves. "Then Ginny wouldn't have left me for… it doesn't matter," Harry finished and she had the distinct impression that he was leaving something out. If he needed more time to tell her the full story, that was fine. After all, Harry had waited months for Hermione to tell him about Draco.

Hermione couldn't think of a single thing to say that would make this any better and maybe that was because… there was nothing to say. Sometimes bad things happened and no amount of brains or brilliance could make it better. Hermione sighed and took Harry's hand in hers. Maybe there was no way to make it all alright, but it didn't mean Harry had to suffer alone.

She knew the loneliness that came with that and didn't want her best friend to have to go through it. Not while she was still here.

There was no one else for Harry to turn to. He couldn't very well have this conversation with Ron. Harry and Ginny's relationship hadn't been Ronald's favorite subject when they were on good terms and it certainly wouldn't be something he wanted to discuss now that things had devolved. Harry said he hadn't wanted to bother her with it, blaming his silence on the fact that she had her own problems to deal with.

But her issues with Draco would never fully go away. They would never agree on certain topics, they would always butt heads on how things should be between them and… she was glad for it. The challenge that Draco presented was something she needed, wanted. Even if she didn't like it all the time.

Right now things with Draco were strained. It had just been a lot in a small amount of time. His confession at the table, the truth about his mark, and then how badly he had taken the news that Harry had visions or… a connection to Lord Voldemort somehow. His immediate response was to leave and he had *ordered* her to his side like she didn't have a choice.

Is *that* what being Draco Malfoy's girlfriend was like? Is that what he expected from a… partner? That she hand over her autonomy and take directions from him about every aspect of her life? Maybe that is what Draco wanted, but that wasn't what Hermione was going to give him. He wasn't exactly who she had pictured as the person she spent her life with either.

And yet, she couldn't picture it without him now either. Something, somehow, made what she and Draco had fit into whatever had been missing from her. What had been waiting for someone to find and… Draco had. And she had found parts of him that no one else had seen too. His excuse of being drunk and *forgetting* that he burned her house down still hurt her, but it was no worse than anything else he had done.

She hadn't forgotten about the Muggleborns he had captured and sold, where were they now? What happened to them? How many had been caught all because he was out there looking for her? And most importantly, would he do something like that again? Draco *had* changed, no matter what he said. Hermione had seen it, felt it, *knew* it. She might be able to doubt everything else, even her heart, but not her brain.

However he wasn't making any effort to get along with anyone else. It was almost as if Draco *tried* to stand out, to show that he wasn't one of them. She had to force him downstairs to eat with them and when she did he was so unpleasant that she wished she hadn't. It was embarrassing and she was constantly apologizing to everyone for his behavior while he stormed off and shouted her name from the top of the stairs.

She just needed… time. To process.

She just needed to think it all through and sort it and get it right in her head and then… then things would be okay again. It was just hard when every time she turned around Draco was *there* and crowding her, hovering behind her and towering over her. She knew he just wanted her to turn around and say everything was okay and she still loved him, but… she just needed a chance to breathe before she found the air to tell him that.

Draco locked eyes with her. He was doing this on purpose, pushing her away. He always did that when he felt threatened and today had surely shaken him.

It didn't make it okay.

She wanted to say something back, shout at him. Make him feel just as low as he made her. Why… why did he do that? He had nearly died trying to save her, but wouldn't even stop hurting her himself.

She had forgotten how Draco could be around others. When it wasn't just the two of them. Hermione dropped her hands into her face. She didn't even want to *look* at him right now.

"Granger…" Draco placed his hand on her shoulder and she shrugged it off.

"See what you've done?" Ron shouted again.

"Don't be a dick to her, Malfoy," Harry cut in. "She doesn't deserve that."

"Stay out of this," Draco snarled. "You don't know anything about us."

"You're right," Harry said coolly. "But I know what she was like without you. When you broke her heart last summer. You're fucking lucky she took you back and even more lucky she didn't leave you there to die after what you did!"

Hermione pushed her fingers against her eyelids, praying that the lump in her throat and the burning in her eyes would fade. She didn't want to cry. Not anymore. Not over him again.

She didn't want her friends to fight with him. She didn't want them to think less of her either. She didn't want to feel like this. So, Hermione decided she wouldn't.

She lifted up her face to see Draco looking at her, worried. He should be. He shouldn't just assume he could do anything he wanted and get away with it.

She shoved him. Hard. "You ASS!"

"Hey!" Draco was off balance, his left arm waved in the sling as he tried to stay in his chair.

"You complete—" Hermione slammed her hands into his shoulder.

"Ow!"

"*—and total—*"

"Shit, Granger, that hurts!"

"ASS!"

Hermione managed to knock him out of his seat and Draco landed with a growl as the left side of his body hit the floor.

"Fucking quit it!" he snarled, grey eyes flashing up at her.

"I have to ask," Harry started, glancing at Hermione before addressing Draco again. "Why did you let us go in the woods?"

Draco went very still, then slowly, his head tilted towards her and he looked at her from the corner of his eye. It was the only indication he gave that this was not something he wanted to talk about, but it was enough. Hermione opened her mouth to change the subject, but Ron spoke first.

"Answer the fucking question, Malfoy," he snarled, ending the uneasy peace they had forged so far. She should have known better than to hope for it to continue. Draco and Ron had hated each other long before they were on opposite sides of a war.

Draco let out a heavy sigh and cocked his head further, a cool disposition washing over him. Suddenly he wasn't the brooding man who was begrudgingly helping them, he was the cruel Slytherin Prince he had been for six years.

"I wanted to get laid," he said simply. "And Granger wouldn't spread her legs if I killed you so—"

Oh God! Hermione's stomach dropped inside her and she might have fallen out of her chair if she wasn't gripping the side of the table like her life depended on it.

Ron jabbed his finger in the air, the rest curled into a shaking fist. "Don't you fucking talk about her like that!"

Draco leaned across the table and sneered in Ron's face. "You should hear the things I say to her at night," he said in a low voice and Hermione felt like she was going to break out in a sweat. "And the noises she makes for me."

"Draco!" Hermione shouted, the lion in her chest roaring with indignation.

Ron pushed himself up, his finger still pointed at Draco. "You say one more thing about her and I'll make you wish we had left you there for Bellatrix to finish off."

Draco merely smirked and wrapped his arm around her again, pulling her so close to him that she teetered on the edge of her chair. "Jealous, Weasley? You should be. Even after all the times I've had her, she's just as tight as she was the night I fucked through her virginity."

"DRACO!"

Hermione shoved his arm from around her. How *dare* he say something like that?!

Ron was trying to climb over the table with Harry holding him back. Although it looked like one more smart remark would have Harry following after him.

Draco laughed and leaned back in his chair, balancing on the back two legs.

" *This?!"* Ron shouted at Hermione. "This is who you want to be with?"

So she sat with Harry and found that the break from their training and planning to talk like they used to, to just be *friends* again, was what she needed to work through everything else.

"It's over. I've known that for a long time, but I guess…" Harry sighed, his frame bending as he breathed out. "Now I feel it too."

"You never know, things might change." Wars changed things, but wars also ended. If they won, Harry and Ginny might still have a future ahead of them. Just like her and Draco and now… she felt ready to talk to him, tell him.

Harry looked at her from the side of his eye, his grim expression speaking volumes. He kicked a bit of sand with his shoe. It had holes in it and she could see green socks with golden snitches through them.

Dobby had made him those socks.

"Thanks, Hermione, really, but… if you want to go back inside you can. No sense in us both sitting out here and being miserable. At least one of us should be happy," he added, turning back to watch the darkening clouds.

Hermione licked her lips, tasting the salt of the ocean on them and rested her head on Harry's shoulder. "I said I'd stay with you and that's what I'm going to do. As long as you're here, I'm not going anywhere."

Draco pilfered the cabinets, looking for something to drink. He knew there had to be more than some goddamn wine in this house. Bill looked like the type that would need a stiff drink after the full moon, so he just needed to *find* the liquor. It was here, it had to be, but so far all he had come across was the red wine in the high cupboard.

Draco *hated* wine. It was his father's preferred drink and Draco could remember the way it stained his teeth red after he'd finished a bottle. He had drank it before, at dinners and when there was nothing else like last summer at the villa, but it always left him with a headache and didn't have the same numbing effect as fire whisky.

Wine made him sad.

And Draco didn't want to be sad. He didn't want to be anything but drunk.

Because Granger wanted to spend her free time with her precious Potter instead of him. So, Draco was going to drink until he didn't care anymore. Or until he passed out, whichever came first.

"Fleur is going to throw a fit when she sees you in here again."

Weasley.

Fuck Weasley.

Draco opened another cabinet and started pushing tins out of the way.

"Go run and tell then, Weaslebee. Just get the fuck away from me."

Weasley snorted and Draco thought about breaking his nose. No, he didn't want Weasley's gross blood to get on his hand. The Weasel had been outside for the whole afternoon, trying to burn that stupid log again and Draco had hoped he would set his head on fire in the process.

Not that anyone would be able to tell with that revolting hair.

And Draco certainly wouldn't have come to help him.

"I'm surprised you're not off stalking Hermione."

Maybe he'd throw something…

"Your obsession with her is sick."

Draco slammed the door shut and turned around. "And yours is just pathetic. At least she actually *wants* me."

Except for today.

And last night.

"Godric knows why," Weasley muttered and wrinkled his nose making his freckles jumble all together. "She's smart, Malfoy. She'll see through whatever lies you've told her that makes her think you're worth keeping around."

Draco smirked. "Well clearly I provide something she isn't getting elsewhere."

Weasley started to turn red and Draco felt a *little* bit better having taken out some of his inner turmoil on someone else. Weasley always had been an easy target, after all.

"Hermione is my best friend, I've known her for years. She's kind and caring and… sweet. She is the best person I know and you…" Weasley shook his head at Draco. "You treated her like shit for years. You made her *cry,* Malfoy—"

"So did you," Draco said darkly and crossed his arms over his chest. Weasley was starting to get to him. More than Draco wanted to admit.

"How does that make you feel? That the only reason she slept with you was because she wanted me?"

This goddamn motherfucker…

Bill eyed him curiously, as if he was seeing Draco for the first time. "Why would you fight one of your own?"

"Greyback's not one of *mine*. Let's get that clear," Draco snapped, sounding much like the purist he had been in school. "He's a fucking animal, nothing more. The Dark Lord uses plenty of creatures, Greyback is just one that can walk upright. Most of the time," he added with a disinterested drawl.

"I meant, why were you fighting someone on your side?" Bill asked, forgoing the speech Hermione would have given that werewolves were still people and deserved to be treated as such.

Draco laid his arm over the one in the sling and closed his mouth. Any question he had been asked about himself or his own actions had been the hardest to get a straight answer out of him. She didn't expect him to say anything, goodness, he had never even told *her* the real story behind his encounter with Greyback.

"I used wolves when I hunted," Draco said quietly. "Greyback didn't like that."

Draco had just said how little he thought of werewolves and here he was, admitting that he had allied himself with some. Sometimes she didn't know who was more confused over his actions, him or her.

"When you were tracking me," Harry said.

The corner or Draco's mouth twitched. "Something like that."

Hermione felt a bloom of heat in her face.

"Fleur, have you got everything you need?" Bill asked and his wife nodded, swishing her quill over the page with a flourish.

" *Oui.* Headquarters needs to know about zis; the giants and Mundungus too." She straightened the pieces of parchment together. "If we leave now, we can be back by sunset."

Bill stood up. "Remus will be interested to know about Greyback. Thanks for that, by the way."

"I didn't do it for you," Draco answered quickly.

Bill grinned. "Still did it though." He followed Fleur out and Draco looked puzzled for a moment, blinking at the door before schooling his face back into impassivity.

It felt different without them in the room, less… formal. Hermione knew Harry had more questions he wanted to ask Draco on their own, things that might lead them to answers about the horcruxes. He had held back while Bill and Fleur had been here, but now, it was just them.

Oh my.

She was relieved when it did. Even though there were plenty of things Draco hadn't known, what he did was enough for Fleur to fill almost every page she had. Even Hermione had been impressed by how fast she had been able to take notes. It made sense though, Fleur hadn't been picked as a Triwizard Champion without deserving it. It was a little crazy, how they had such strong and powerful people on their side and were *still* not winning.

Why weren't they winning? What did Voldemort have that was giving him an advantage? Death Eaters, yes, but it had to be more than that. Both sides had suffered losses, so why did it only feel like the Order was losing members?

Bill looked tired; she was sure hearing just how prepared and strong the Death Eaters were was taking a toll on him. "We know the giants are ready for deployment, how are they being moved over?"

"The giants are here."

Fleur stopped writing and swore under her breath.

Draco went on, still staring down at the table with absolutely no expression on his face. "They came over last new moon. I don't know how, I didn't work with beasts. That was Dolohov and Greyback."

Bill tensed at the mention of the werewolf who had attacked him. He reached up to touch his scar, hand hovering in front of him for a moment before he ran it through his hair, pushing the long strands away from his face.

Hermione looked back at Draco to see him watching, a calculating look in his eyes.

"He's the one who did that to you?" Draco asked and Bill hesitated before nodding.

"It wasn't a full moon, but he said he didn't wait on them anymore. He was going for my neck when he bit me."

Draco kept his eyes on Bill, tracing his scar.

"My huzband was very brave. 'E attacked Greyback when no one else would." Fleur's bright blue eyes blazed with pride as if she was daring Draco to say something.

Draco sucked his teeth and sat back again. "He gave me one on my leg."

Hermione was shocked. Draco never liked talking about his scars. How many times had she asked him about Greyback and he had shut her down? Now here he was, swapping stories with… Bill Weasley of all people.

"Dug his claws in while I broke the teeth out of his jaw." Draco smirked and if she didn't know any better, she'd think he was enjoying this. "Don't think he will be doing too much biting anymore."

Draco started to see black dots blink into his vision.

"Oh did you forget about that?" Weasley was really fucking ugly when he smiled. "She was upset that I started dating Lavender and *that's* why she took up with you. Because she couldn't have me."

Granger had been crying that first night.

Draco knew she had been fighting with Weasley, but never cared to ask what it was about. Her falling out with Weasley had coincided with Weasley's disgusting relationship with Brown and he knew Granger had a… ugh, *crush* on the fucking ginger, but she hadn't… she didn't *want* to actually fu—

Shit. He felt like he was going to be sick and he hadn't even drank a drop yet.

Granger had wanted to have sex with him. Draco. It was *his* name she had moaned against the shelves, not Weasley's. She had propositioned *him* that night! She had… *asked* him to fuck her. It was weeks after, it wasn't because…

"You really thought she liked you? *You?* She *hated* you, Malfoy. I know I hurt her, leaving like I did and I know she went back to you because…" Weasley looked at Draco in disgust. "But when the war is over, and you get what's coming to you," Draco's back stiffened at Weasley's dark expression, "Hermione will move on. And she will *forget you.*"

He didn't know. There was no possible way that Weasley could know that was *exactly* what Granger had tried to do last year, what she wanted to do after she had seen his mark. She wanted to forget him. She wanted a life without him. And she could have one, if he was gone.

Draco could practically taste the poison on his tongue when he said, "You can play hero of the Order all you want, out there practicing at magic you'll never be good enough to control, but I'm not going anywhere, you phoenix-fucker."

"No?" Weasley laughed a little. "I don't need to control it, *Death Eater.* I just need to conjure it for a little while. Because the only thing better than killing you, is getting to do it *twice.*"

Draco felt the blood rush out of his head and then back into it, deafening him as it pounded in his ears. The Order might be granting him clemency, but it was only for now and only because of Granger. These people were not his friends. They were not his allies. They *would* turn on him.

They would take Granger from him and they would *kill* him.

Well then, he would just have to do it first. Take Granger and then end Weasley's sorry existence. That was one life Draco had no problem taking. He would do it willingly.

Enthusiastically, even. He hadn't forgotten what this prick had tried to do in the Room of Requirement last year.

Weasley got in his face, the smell of singed hair and thick smoke strong enough to choke Draco. "You're scum, Malfoy. You're less than scum actually." He looked at him like… like how Draco used to look at Weasley. "You're scum's *servant* ."

Draco felt that old, strange sense of calm he used to right before he *crucio'd* someone. He wanted to do that to Weasley. He wanted to watch him shriek and writhe as the curse flayed the nerves from his bones. He felt like he didn't even need a wand to cast it, that it would come just as soon as he called it.

Draco's fingers twitched at his side.

Weasley was going to pay for that, but in the window over his shoulder Granger was walking up from the beach with Potter, smiling. Happy. *He* wasn't going to ruin her good mood. Not when it took her so long to get back into one after Weasley had snitched about her house. Draco would make it up to her though. But first, he had to get her back on his side.

And that started… he glanced out the window again—*now.*

"I may not be fit to kiss the ground she walks on, but she lets me put my mouth on other things." He gave Weasley a cold smirk, baring his teeth. "You're right, she is *sweet."*

Weasley shoved him back as Potter opened the door for Granger. Draco fell back against the table, making sure to stretch his arm out to knock over the sugar bowl sitting in the middle so it looked worse than it was.

"You piece of SHIT!" Weasley pulled out his wand.

Draco held up his hands, playing innocent. "Just trying to get to my girl, Weasley, that's all. Didn't mean to bump into you."

Weasley sputtered as Granger threw him a dark look and hurried to Draco's side. He had a hard time keeping the grin off his face as she wrapped her arm around his body and helped him stand up straight. Draco faked a wince, as if his scars were still hurting him. He loved Granger's bleeding heart.

"You should be ashamed of yourself, Ron. You know Draco's still healing!"

"He was saying shit about you!"

"Just saying she was on her way back up here." Draco wrapped his arm around Granger's small shoulders. He had promised not to lie to Granger anymore, but *technically,* he was talking to Weasley.

Weasley pointed his finger at him, face reddening by the second. "You know damn well what you said!"

"And yes, Potter," Draco sneered. "I'm a killer. Is that what you wanted to hear?"

Half of Hermione's heart was stuck, not daring to beat while the other half pumped wildly trying to keep up with her brain's churning and whirling. When had… Did he really do all of… Draco? *Her* Draco?

Ron looked like he was ready to tear Draco's head from his body. Fleur had stopped writing and was just staring at the person beside her who seemed perfectly calm having told them all about crimes that would earn him a lifetime in Azkaban as if he didn't even care.

He *did* care, right?

Hermione hadn't realized she was staring at him until he looked over at her, rain grey eyes turning deeper just for a moment before he pulled them away and sat up, making himself taller than anyone else at the table. "I'm not saying sorry. So ask me more questions or fuck off."

Hermione's heart gave a painful beat before Bill started asking about movements, positions, prisoners, supplies, and a million other things that she listened to while she watched Draco.

She blinked when she noticed how dry her eyes had gotten. All of the things Draco had mentioned, said he did, she knew, deep down, why he had. How could she hate him for that without hating herself too? She had never asked Draco to do those things to get to her and even if that wasn't the case, she knew he had done them to survive.

Draco had joined the Death Eaters to save his father, to help his mother. He… he had a sense of right and wrong, it was just… skewed. *Really* skewed, there was no getting around that, but he would have done these things for anyone he loved. He just happened to love her. And here he was, telling the Order about it, coming clean, and giving them information they could use to save lives!

Didn't that count for something? In her book, yes. Dumbledore had said that Draco had to want to be saved, had to do it himself. And wasn't this what that was? What better way to make up for the hurt and pain than to try and save lives? To try and end the war?

Hermione found the answers to her own questions as Bill continued his, now asking about Muggleborns and routes Death Eaters and Snatchers were patrolling. He waited, making sure Fleur had the answers recorded before moving on to the next.

Draco answered them, sounding more dead than alive as each one went on. Every now and then he would stumble or trip over an answer, as if he didn't want to say, but eventually he gave enough information that Bill's line of interrogation slowed.

Draco was walking out of the cottage. His eyes scanned the open field and then narrowed in on her. It was hard to tell from this distance, but… he looked like he was smiling.

Hermione allowed herself one second to watch his body turn from casually aloof to a pointed, primed hunting machine before she started off again.

The spring wind whipped at her face, catching her hair and blowing it back off her shoulders. Hermione drank it down as she plunged forward. She brushed back low branches until the trees grew wider, older, and the ground opened up a bit more. The roots here were thick and twisted. Hermione sprang over them, feeling an odd sense of deja vu as she ran.

It had been snowing the last time she had run like this and she had been burning up with fever, but now, the heat in her body was from something else entirely. She couldn't stop smiling. The sunlight filtered in through the leaves and Hermione started down a steep ridge, arms waving to help her keep her balance. She stumbled a little as she reached the bottom and paused.

Birds. Wind. And her own heavy breathing.

Hermione's head turned right from left. Which way should she go? To the right was a bit flatter land; she would be able to move quickly over it. But to the left were a pile of large rocks… she could climb those and come out on the other side on higher ground. She might even be able to see Draco from there.

He was faster than her, and knew how to track. Hermione let her mind spin, running through different scenarios as to how this could go. Her heart beat faster, pumping hot blood into her brain as she gulped down another gust of wind. God, it felt good to figure something out again and not have a million contingencies to worry about.

There were dead leaves on the ground. Draco could probably tell which way she had gone and it wouldn't be long before he came upon her. She looked around for… *perfect.*

An old branch laid not far from her and Hermione snatched it up, swishing and scattering the leaves to her right. She threw the branch as hard as she could away from her, hoping that Draco would spy the leaves and head that way.

Hermione turned and started climbing the rocks. At least she wouldn't leave a trail this way. With only one goal in mind, she used both her hands to steady herself as she scrambled up the pile of granite and heaved herself onto the other side, quickly pushing herself back to her feet.

"Where are you, pet?" Draco called out.

She froze at the sound of his voice.

Hermione tried to tell what direction it was coming from, but the woods were confusing her. Sounds seemed to fill the empty spaces between the trees and surround her.

He laughed a little. "I'm going to have to put you on a leash if you keep running away like this."

She could hear the playfulness in his voice and felt her blood thicken. Yes. This. This is what she wanted. It was wrong, but honestly, that had never stopped her before when it came to Draco, why should it now?

Should she let him chase her around the woods and play out some weird, and probably a little unhealthy, fantasy she had concocted in her head while running for her life last fall? Probably not. Certainly not. Was she still going to do it?

Hermione started running again, her arms moving with each step and her legs burning as she rushed through the forest. She listened out for noises of Draco's pursuit and when she thought she heard something, quickly changed directions.

She could understand why her legs were cramping, but couldn't think as to why her face hurt too. Oh. She was smiling. She was smiling so much that her cheeks had started to ache.

Good Godric, when was the last time that happened? Who *cared?!* Hermione wanted to feel it. She wanted Draco to make her ache all over. Inside and out.

Hermione slowed. She had been running for a while and he still hadn't caught her yet. With a swooping feeling Hermione realized why. Both times Draco had chased her before, in the Restricted Section last year and when he caught her in the Forest of Dean, he had herded her, almost tricking her into going where he wanted.

She stopped running and pulled out Draco's wand. Panting and feeling the muscles in her legs twitching, Hermione looked around. She couldn't see Draco anywhere. Maybe… maybe she was wrong? Draco had been hurt, maybe he couldn't run as fast as he used to. He hadn't looked out of shape this morning though…

She heard a thud behind her and instinctively turned only to see a streak of blond on top of black before she crashed into the ground. They rolled for a moment and Hermione felt Draco's body trapping her. Hands on her wrists, knees against her hips until she was being pushed back into the leaves and looked up to see Draco grinning wolfishly down at her.

"You didn't really think I would let you get away, did you, kitten?" His voice was smooth and mischievous. "Not when you promised me such a *sweet* reward."

She squeezed her legs together making a shiver run up her spine. Thank goodness the earth was firmly beneath her or she felt like she'd never stop falling. Draco pressed her into it, leaning over her and running his tongue along the side of her neck.

"Mmm." He smacked his lips together and released her wrist only to pluck the wand from her closed fingers. "You should know that running triggers a predator's instinct." He leaned on his forearm beside her head and pressed his lower body into hers. "Do you know what those instincts are telling me to do now?"

Oh God… Hermione could barely breathe and what she could get all smelled like him. Draco was all over her. Everywhere. His mouth locked onto her neck, kissing and sucking, steadily getting rougher. His hand ran over her body, grabbing and pushing her breast back into her chest, fingers digging in through her shirt.

He rolled his hips and Hermione moaned out a gasp. His cock was hard and pressing into her. God, it was… She was shaking, trembling, with exhilaration. This was incredible. It was like her dream, only somehow better. Draco's teeth bit into her and Hermione turned her head to the side, giving him more skin to mark with his mouth.

Draco growled and took advantage of the new area. He dragged his teeth up behind her ear, lips trailing and kissing the inflamed skin. Her eyes were falling closed, she knew what was coming next; she could feel it in her core.

Draco pulled back, sitting up on his knees and straddled her waist. He pulled the black sweatshirt off over his head, dropping it to the ground next to them before starting on his belt. His eyes ran over her body, darkening as he pulled the leather through the metal buckle. "You're so fucking hot. Just… *fuck…"*

Hermione covered her face with her hands, trying to hide her beam and blush.

Draco grabbed her arms and pulled her hands away. "Oh no you don't. I want to see all of you. Especially *this."* He pulled on her arms until her upper body had left the ground and captured her lips with his. Hermione's eyes flew open wide right before he laid her back down. "You're beautiful, but so are your tits. Get your shirt off. Now."

He was unbuckling his pants and Hermione got an idea. A crazy, insane, incredible idea. She wiggled her legs out from in between his. Draco stopped moving, his trousers hanging open as his eyes followed her. Hermione jumped to her feet and was off running again before he had even gotten off the ground.

"You little—"

She laughed, letting the sound carry on another gust of wind back to Draco as she sprinted through the trees. He would catch her again and this time probably pin her face down and rip her jeans off her ass, smack it and then shove himself inside her.

His body had gone still, muscles tensed, strained, *controlled.* Hermione watched as the heat in his gaze cooled and a small smirk pulled at his lips.

"The woods across the field?" he asked, his voice a little rougher than normal.

She nodded and bit her lip again.

"Let go of that, Granger," Draco ordered. Hermione promptly obeyed. His eyes shone again. "It's going to be sore once I'm done with it. All of you is."

She shivered underneath him, desire already coursing through her. Until… Draco stood up.

Hermione propped herself up on her elbows, disappointed a little that Draco didn't rip her clothes off of her. More than a little. But it disappeared when he leaned down to pull on his black boots.

"I'll give you a head start."

Hermione watched him lace them up. She still had his wand, but it wouldn't be long before he would be asking for it back. She wasn't entirely sure how she felt about that, but… she knew how she felt about him. She loved Draco. She trusted him. And they were together, now. Like they should be.

Draco looked up at her as he started on the second boot. "I'd start running if I were you."

Oh, goodness.

Hermione jumped up, adrenaline and excitement coursing through her. She watched his fingers move for a second longer, but when he pulled the laces tight, she darted out of the room and down the stairs.

Hermione scooted around the kitchen table, bumping into Bill and quickly apologizing as she glanced behind her. Still no Draco. She headed for the door.

Ron appeared in front of her. "Hey! I wanted to ask you—"

"Not now!"

"What's wrong?"

Hermione tried to dive under his arm.

"Hermione?"

She heard something heavy on the stairs.

"Sorry, I have to go!" Hermione pushed past him.

"Go?" Ron called from behind her, but she didn't even look over her shoulder. Hermione ran fast for the field up ahead they used for training. Her blood was moving now and she pressed on hard, trying to get to the other side and into the trees as quickly as she could. Right as she made it to the shade, Hermione stole a glance behind her.

"You look good with short hair," she answered, biting her lip to try to keep from smiling too much.

Draco's brows lowered. "You're making fun of me."

"I'm not." Hermione did her best to adopt a serious expression, but failed and grabbed the pillow to hide her face.

"Come here!" Draco grabbed her ankle and pulled her down the bed. Hermione yelped, trying to hit him with the pillow, but he easily blocked it, letting it fall to the floor. "You think I should just let you get away with that? Huh?" he asked, climbing on top of her.

Hermione was laughing and pressing her hands against his chest. Goodness, he was *solid*. Marble, indeed. Draco rested his weight on top of her; the smell of mint washed over her and she felt her nerves alight.

"Yes." She was still smiling. "You should let me have anything I want."

Draco grinned at her, briefly touching the tip of his nose to hers. "And what do you want, kitten?"

Hermione could feel her body stirring in response to him. She loved how he felt, the weight of him holding her down and the feel of him against her. It could be a day or a year, but as soon as Draco was back on top of her, Hermione's body responded to it like she was trained to do so.

She didn't even have to think.

It was bliss.

And without a dozen dizzying trains of thought running through her mind, Hermione could feel what she actually wanted, really wanted. Deep down. Inside.

She wasn't even scared when she said, "I want you to chase me." Draco's grey eyes were trained on hers. "In the woods, near where we have been practicing." Her heart was hammering in her chest, but she wasn't nervous. Hermione was… excited. "I used to dream about it. You… finding me and chasing me and…"

Draco raised one brow. "And…?"

Hermione felt herself blush a little. Even though there was probably nothing she could say that would make Draco think she was… depraved. He'd probably be into it. He'd probably be really, *really* into it.

She took a breath, tasting mint on her tongue. "And you'd pin me down like this. You'd tell me I was yours." Draco's eyes shone like polished silver as she spoke. "And… I was. In my dreams I was completely and totally—*yours.*"

God, she couldn't wait.

Hermione saw a stream of light shoot past her head and looked back to see Draco chasing her down. She squealed happily and darted behind a tree. Her chest was heaving and she carefully peeked around the side. No Draco. Hermione ran to another tree, flattening herself against it.

Maybe he would find her here instead, push her against the rough bark and haul her up and fuck her hard. Her legs felt weak at the thought of it. Hermione bit her lip and looked around. Where *was* he?

She moved out from around the tree, walking into an area a little partially cleaned by a fallen trunk. Was he hiding from her?

"Draco?" Hermione called out.

No one answered.

"I'm sorry I ran. You can come out now."

She spun around, but only felt another gust of wind blow her curls back from her shoulders. Hermione took a few steps and stopped. She was out here Godric knew how far from the cottage and didn't even have a wand to signal her location.

"Come on, Draco! It's not funny anymore!"

Getting slightly annoyed that he hadn't shown up yet, and hadn't given her what she wanted, Hermione huffed and thinking that back the way she came from was as good of a direction as any, turned.

And then stopped dead in her tracks.

There was a girl. On the other side of the small clearing. She looked to be a little older than Hermione, maybe by a year or two and was dressed in a thick fur coat that looked much too big for her. She lifted her head and sniffed the air with a long, straight nose.

She was very pretty.

Her eyes, a lighter shade of brown than Hermione's, locked onto her.

"Who are you?" she asked, a slight accent to her words. Scottish, perhaps?

Hermione hadn't even thought about moving. She had been so stunned by the arrival of this person that it hadn't even crossed her mind to run.

The girl took a few steps toward the fallen tree between them. "You… Do I know you?"

Fear spiked in Hermione, shooting down her nerves and filling her veins with ice. Hermione had no idea who this girl was, but *she* knew Hermione and soon, she would figure out from where. Hermione needed to be far, *far* away before that happened. Something about this girl unnerved her.

" *You should know that running triggers a predator's instinct."*

Draco was right. If she ran, she would look guilty. Even if this girl didn't recognize her, she could tell someone what she had seen and they might come looking for her. Her picture had been in the Prophet's next to Harry's after they broke into the Ministry. And the Death Eaters needed no explanation who she was.

Hermione watched as the girl took another step forward. Her hair was tangled and there was dirt matted into some of the fur on her coat. She looked tired and must have been out all night, maybe longer. Most importantly, the girl didn't have a wand. At least they were matched in that.

The girl sniffed again and Hermione could see she was working to place her. Hermione had to think fast, throw her off the trail, so to speak. Or just buy enough time until Draco was able to find her.

But before Hermione could say anything the girl's head jerked to the side so violently, Hermione thought she might have hurt herself.

"Draco."

Hermione copied the girl's movement and there he was. Draco was standing at the edge of the clearing, clothes back on and wand in his hand.

"Kenna."

Kenna? Hermione blinked, looking between them. Draco… Draco *knew* this person?

"Draco!" The girl bounded over to him and threw her arms around his shoulders. The icy anxiety in Hermione turned hot and boiling in a second as Draco just stood there. With another woman's arms around him. "I can't believe I found you! Where have you been? Oh, Draco!"

She hugged him tighter and Hermione felt like she was going to be sick.

Smoothly, he pulled her arms from around him, but the girl—*Kenna* —clasped onto his arms, holding onto him.

Draco looked her over and Hermione felt her jaw tighten in displeasure as he reached and touched the collar of Kenna's coat as if he was… familiar with it. "Are you here alone?" he asked.

Kenna nodded, her hair somehow still bouncy even though tangled. Hermione's curls would have twisted themselves into knots by that point.

"Yes, I—" she hesitated. "It's just me."

Draco nodded calmly. How he was calm right now when he flew off the handle at every little thing these days, Hermione had no idea. In fact, she had no idea who this girl

Only to grab the book.

He groaned again as she pulled away, flipping through the pages to find where she left off.

Draco threw himself down on the bed next to her and sighed dramatically.

She didn't even bother to look at him. "You could always play chess with Ron if you're bored. He's actually quite good."

Chess made him think of Blaise. He didn't want to think of Blaise. Or how much he missed playing chess with his… friend.

Weasley was the furthest thing from that.

Draco's lip curled. "I'd rather translate runes."

"Great!" Granger shoved a pad of paper and a heavy book into his chest. "Start on page 567."

Hermione watched Draco pull a white shirt over his head, slipping easily over his scarred chest. He used to never let her see it. Even all the months she had slept in his bed, Draco had kept a shirt over himself almost every night. He didn't anymore. She wasn't exactly sure what caused him to change his mind or if he had just gotten more comfortable with the way he looked now, but she wasn't complaining.

She loved how he felt, scars and all. She actually thought they were a bit… *sexy.* Not that he needed anything else to make him attractive. Draco still looked like a marble statue come to life. Hermione didn't believe in any of the Pureblood breeding rhetoric, but she had to admit, Draco had inherited some *very nice* genetics.

His body was long and lean, but under the scars and pale skin were defined muscles. She caught her last glimpse of them as he tucked the shirt into the back of his trousers and grabbed the black sweatshirt, slipping it over his head in a fluid movement.

He turned his back on her, looked into the mirror and frowned. His hair had grown out a little, but he still ran his hand over it, trying to flatten it out to make it appear longer.

Hermione couldn't help but smile.

"What are you laughing at?" Draco snapped as she watched him from her position on the bed.

His heart ached just as much as his balls.

Maybe more.

Draco snatched the book from her and snapped it shut.

Granger glared at him, holding out her hand and waiting for him to give it back. "I'm working, Draco. You know this."

"Well I'm *bored* . There's nothing to fucking do here when you're reading."

She reached for the book and he held it up higher.

Granger unhappily got to her feet. Not that it mattered much, Draco was a good foot taller than her and his arm didn't hurt as much as it used to. Probably had something to do with the fact he hadn't cursed it in over a month, but it also meant he could hold this book up for a long time.

Although… she could just start reading another one and go back to pretending like he wasn't important like precious fucking Potter was.

"You could help me," Granger suggested. "Some of these books have runes in them. Having to translate is one of the things slowing me down."

Draco groaned.

"Your constant interruptions are another."

She had crossed her arms over her chest and it made her tits push together a little. Granger had gained back the weight she had lost on the run and in his Manor and it resulted in her tits getting a little bigger.

Draco grinned.

She noticed what he was looking at and dropped her arms, scoffing.

"Is that all you ever think about?"

"No, they're not *all* I think about." He grazed his eyes over her body. Slowly—enjoying every inch. He wondered what sort of knickers she had on today. And if she'd let him find out.

Granger swiped for the book again, but Draco's old Seeker reflexes kicked in and he pulled it out of reach.

"Kiss me."

She rolled her eyes. "Draco…"

"Kiss me and you can have your book back, Granger." He held it teasingly in between them.

She bit her lip and Draco grabbed her around the middle, making her gasp and capturing that lip for his own. Biting down on it, he felt Granger slide her arms around him.

was or how she knew Draco or why with everything Draco had said about his time as a Death Eater, *Kenna* had never come up.

And she didn't know how much longer she was going to be able to stand watching someone else slide her hands further up Draco's arms.

He didn't push her back this time.

"Does anyone know you're here?" he asked, his voice low and cool.

The girl shook her head.

"Are you sure?"

She nodded. Hermione found it… odd, that this… *very* pretty girl Draco had failed to mention to her followed his orders *so well*.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" It was Draco's commanding tone, but… it was lacking the smoothness he spoke to Hermione with.

"I… I'm here to save you."

Hermione was sick again. She was sick and feverish and burning up and this wasn't actually happening.

"Save me?" For the first time Draco sounded unsure.

"Orders came down, said you were being held hostage and we were sent out to hunt for you and bring you back."

No. Hermione's anger turned into a stone inside her. Draco wasn't going back, he couldn't. They'd kill him.

Wouldn't they?

"Whose orders?"

Kenna finally looked away from his face and Draco took the opportunity to cut his eyes to Hermione. Something flashed in them, sharp and dangerous, but it was gone and they were back on Kenna before Hermione could get a proper read on him.

"Kenna," Draco said *her* name and Hermione felt her nails dig into the flesh of her palms. "Answer me."

A flush of heat ran through Hermione, fury mixing with something like shame making a noxious combination of jealousy burning under her skin.

Kenna looked up at him. "You smell like…" She sniffed his chest and Hermione didn't realize she had started walking forward until Kenna's head turned back around in her direction. "So *that's* who you are. You're the girl."

Hermione had no idea what possessed her to say it, but her voice didn't shake at all as she stated, " *His* girl."

Kenna released Draco and Hermione felt like it was a little easier to breathe. She filled her chest with air and started forward again.

"Go."

She had no idea who this girl was to Draco, but couldn't say she wasn't glad that he was telling her to leave. Especially after she had her hands all over him.

"Granger, go."

What? Her? But… "No."

"I'm not fucking asking. *Go."*

Hermione stayed put. She wasn't going to leave him out here, not alone and not with Kenna. Who *was* she?! Why did she think it was okay to hug Draco like that? Had they… Oh God… The feverish chills were back, blazing over her skin, tingling where his mouth had latched onto her neck and chilling the blood under the surface.

"I swear on Salazar's watery grave," Draco growled and stalked over to her. For a moment she thought he might *imperius* her again. He looked almost as desperate now as he had that fateful night in the castle. It made her nervous; Draco was never more dangerous than when he was backed into a corner. Except now, he had a way out. He wouldn't have to wait on Harry anymore.

And he could *make her* come with him.

And *Kenna.*

Hermione glanced down at his wand when he stopped in front of her and was surprised that he shoved it roughly into her hand. He forced her fingers closed around it. "If you don't get the fuck out of here—"

"Who is she?"

"Granger—"

"Why do you want me to leave?"

"Fucking hell." He ran his hand over his hair again.

"Draco?" Kenna called from behind them. Draco looked over his shoulder and Hermione took this opportunity to skirt around him.

Draco made a noise deep in his throat, but Hermione was tired of being bossed around by him. Draco hadn't answered any of her questions when he held her captive and she wasn't going to stand for it any longer. If he refused to answer her, then she'd start asking someone else.

"How do you know who I am?" she asked.

"Your smell. He had us… hunt you."

Chapter Nineteen

Granger was ignoring him. She had agreed to the deal for when Potter died, but now she was doubling her efforts to keep him alive.

It was infuriating, how smart she was. How many thoughts she had in her head that she didn't share with him and how she always found a way to think her way out of everything.

Draco would be impressed; if it wasn't *him* she was doing it to. If it wasn't the *only* thing she was doing to him. He thought after the other night, he wouldn't be able to get Granger off his dick, but now he couldn't even get her attention.

Granger kept herself busy with Order bullshit, sitting on the floor with her books open around her and pieces of parchment covered with *tiny* notes. She could probably write her own damn book at this point, but Granger kept on. Like a dog with a bone.

Except it wasn't *his* bone.

Whenever he tried to touch her or pull her away from whatever boring ass book she was sticking her cute nose into, she merely waved him off and gave him some excuse.

"I'm trying to concentrate."

"Let me finish this passage."

"This is important, Draco."

Yeah? So was his cock. And… their… relationship, he supposed.

and that made it not so bad after all. "I… I actually am pretty tired tonight." Her mouth pulled flat in an apologetic expression.

"I know," Draco murmured and started unbuttoning her jeans. A line of pretty lacy knickers was peeking out over the top. Cute. And on her? Downright adorable. Had she worn them for him? Knowing how he felt about her in white lace?

But he knew better than to push her tonight. He had already gotten what he really wanted. "That's alright, kitten." He kissed the tip of her nose and lifted her shirt over her head. "I just want to feel you next to me. All of you."

Granger's cheeks flushed. She nodded and unhooked her bra, peeling it from her arms as Draco undressed and followed her into their bed. He slid his hand between her legs, cupping her softness like he did almost every night now. Just holding it, her. And Granger, like the good fucking girl she was, let him.

Laying there, in the dark, Draco breathed deeply, cinnamon and vanilla smotheringly strong. Granger was asleep in minutes, but Draco lay awake for a while longer, thinking about the future, what it would be like with Granger, wishing it would come sooner rather than later.

The thunder rolled outside, low and long. The storm would hit, but not tonight. And if there was ever a time for foolish dreams, it was here. Draco never dared to hope, he knew what was coming, but at least now he knew he'd have Granger. And maybe… she would have him. Without his family, her friends, without the war or the world, perhaps he *could* change, be the man he wanted to be for her.

Not the drunken wreck she'd started fucking because she was sad, but someone she wanted to stand beside. Someone she could be *proud* of. And he would be, just as soon as he worked through a few… issues.

Draco closed his eyes. Tonight a different dead face floated there in the darkness. Even through the rot and decay, that stupid lightning bolt scar was still recognizable. It wasn't reanimated though, just laying there, something… slithering behind it. He wasn't entirely sure what brought the memory to his mind, but Draco fell asleep replaying the same conversation over and over.

" They don't know Potter. I do… I know his habits, his traits, his ***friends*** *. I know what kind of man he is."*

Lord Voldemort stopped walking and trained his slitted eyes down at Draco. His voice was little more than a hiss when he spoke. "And that is?"

" ...A dead one… A dead one… A dead one…"

"Smell? How can you…" Hermione's mouth popped open in a small o. She wasn't sure how she missed it before; maybe she had just been so surprised to see someone else out here that she didn't connect it with what she already knew.

Draco had employed werewolves to hunt Muggleborns, Harry, and… her.

Draco grabbed her elbow and hauled her back. "Granger, go back. *Go. Back!"*

Hermione tried to jerk her arm away, but Draco held on tight.

"She's a wild one." Kenna winked. "I like her."

Draco's grip tightened until Hermione winced. "Let go of me, Draco."

"Granger—*please."*

Draco looked like he was barely holding it together. The muscles in his neck were strained and his lips were so tightly pressed together they were almost white. Hermione looked at Kenna and then back to him. Draco had done so much to keep her safe, maybe, just *maybe* , he was doing this for the same reason.

He wouldn't leave, not without her. Hermione knew that as a *fact.* So if her going back to the cottage meant he would return too, then… she'd do it.

It didn't mean she had to like it though.

"We're going to talk about this, I hope you know that."

Draco's face was unreadable, but his eyes were troubled. He dipped his chin down in a nod. Hermione glanced at Kenna one last time. She was watching, head tilted to the side a little and looking Hermione up and down.

Hermione lifted her chin and met Kenna's gaze unapologetically. Then, in the spur of the moment, Hermione touched Draco's cheek, lifted herself onto the tips of her toes, and kissed him. Short and sweet, but it made her point.

Draco stared down, then slowly sucked his bottom lip into his mouth, tasting her again.

Hermione held his wand tightly in her hand and started walking back towards the trees.

"Granger."

Hermione turned.

Draco clenched and unclenched his hand.

"Will you tell Bill where we are?"

Whatever hesitation or nervousness she had about leaving Draco fell away. He was asking for Bill. He was asking for the Order. He… was trusting them. And she trusted him. That's what they did now. They were in a… committed, loving, *trusting* relationship.

She just didn't really trust this Kenna girl. Or like her and her overly familiar way of touching Draco.

Hermione nodded. "Be careful."

Draco's lips twitched. "You know me."

She did… Didn't she?

As soon as Granger disappeared, Draco grabbed Kenna by the throat and shoved her against the nearest tree.

Kenna whined, the high sound reminding him of his hounds.

"How the *fuck* did you find me?"

"I… Wind…" Her voice was raspy and Draco loosened his hold on her neck just a little. She coughed and wheezed in air. "Could smell you… on the wind."

Draco clenched his jaw and hissed through his teeth, "And you just happened to be here? In *these* woods?"

Kenna coughed again, her eyes filling with tears. "Quiet here. I've been looking… They said trees…" She struggled to speak and Draco struggled against the ache under his mark. "Wet trees."

He was going to fucking kill Potter, the stupid four-eyed fuck. If Granger got hurt because of him—

Draco pressed his hand harder against Kenna's throat and she went still. Like a dog who had been told to sit.

She wasn't even fighting back. In fact, if he wasn't pinning her against the tree Draco was pretty sure she would just… fall down. She was skinnier now, and trying to hide in her brother's coat, but it was clear the past few weeks had been hard for her.

She smelled like a wet dog.

"Why are you really here? Huh?" He pushed his face close to hers. It was an intimate position, one he had been hoping to have Granger in, not a fucking werewolf.

Kenna was breathing heavily, tongue resting on her bottom teeth. She could do damage with those teeth, even out of her wolf form. Draco had seen Bill's scarred face enough times to think twice about being this close to her, but he didn't have a choice. He had to find out what she knew.

"Did Greyback send you after me?"

"I know." He was smiling.

She was smiling. Although she was trying not to. "If you hurt—"

Draco slid his hand around the side of her neck, tilting her face up with his thumb. Leaning down he whispered, "If hurting Potter hurts you, you know I won't do it."

He leaned in close to her. Granger pushed him back, but stayed in his arms. "You did though. You hurt me when you took my home away. That's where my parents—"

"You mean the Muggles who ran off and left their daughter alone?" He knew the bitterness in his tone wasn't directed at her, but his own bitterness towards his parents. And hers too. He saw the tickets, that they were fleeing to Australia instead of trying to find their only child who had gone to war.

Granger's tawny curls tangled as she tilted her head. "They didn't run off. I… I obliviated them and sent them away."

Fuck.

Shit.

Fuck.

And he had…

"Oh Sweetheart… I… I didn't know."

Maybe he should be sorry then. He was wrong about them… Maybe he was wrong about a lot of things.

Granger took a shaky breath. "It wasn't… right to meddle with their minds, but…" She blinked, looking up at him. "It kept them safe."

He understood. More than she'd ever know.

Draco reached up to tuck her tousled hair behind her ear. She didn't need to hide, not from him.

"You did the right thing," he said softly. "And I… didn't." Her eyes sparked. "But I'll fix it. You know I will. We can go to them. And I'll… set it right."

It was the least he could do, after what he'd done and after what she'd agreed to.

"You mean it?" Granger asked breathlessly.

Draco's mouth twitched. "I mean everything I say to you."

He kissed her, tasting the sweetness of her lips and giving her an idea of what the future held for her. He pushed her back a step, making her legs press into the side of the bed.

"Draco—Draco," Granger repeated as he pulled his shirt off over his head. It slid easily over the short hair. He was… starting to get used to it. Granger seemed to like it

Potter. The ' *Chosen'* One. Chosen for what? To forever be a pain in Draco's ass? At least until the fucker was in the ground.

Draco tilted his head. "And after?" he asked. "Once Potter dies, you'll leave? You'll come with me?"

Her mouth opened and a small, unsure sound came out.

Draco inched forward. "What is left for you here? The resistance will fall after Potter. You know that. But *we* don't have to. We can have a future, Granger, if we just *take it."* His grip tightened on her hands. She was thinking, no… *considering.* Draco's heart leapt in his chest. "What did this world ever give you that it hasn't taken back?"

His eyes searched her face as he resisted the temptation to dip into her mind. He'd give all the gold in his vaults, whatever his father hadn't stolen out of them, to see inside her, to know just what to say to get her to—

"You." She twined her fingers through his.

"That's right, Sweetheart," Draco said in the same tone he had used to encourage her on the training field. "Give us a chance, give *me* a chance. To be with you. To give you what you deserve." He paused, knowing what he was doing and… taking the calculated risk saying it. "Potter would want you to be happy."

Granger's brows creased and he watched her think for a few paralyzing seconds. He counted them, heart pounding and lungs burning. If this worked… it would all be worth it. Betraying his family, leaving them to whatever fate his treason condemned them to would be worth it, worth her.

He was so focused watching her that he hadn't thought about what he looked like, on his knees and asking her to spend her life with him. He glanced down at their laced fingers. If he still had his signet ring, he would have…

"One rule."

"Anything!" Draco lurched forward, almost jumping to his feet.

Granger looked deep into his eyes. "You won't do anything that will cause or bring about Harry's… death."

Potter, not Weasley. Draco could… live with that. Because Potter sure as fuck wasn't.

"Done." He said it easily, simply. Not a moment of hesitation. She looked shocked, blinking those big eyes of hers. Draco leaned in and kissed her, lips locking onto hers passionately. Because, fuck, did he love this girl. His girl. And now he'd get to for the rest of his life. And she'd be there at the end, to stop *that* from happening to him.

"I mean it, Draco," Granger said seriously as he stood back up, pulling her to her feet with him.

She shook her head, hair catching on the bark of the tree. He wanted verbal answers.

Kenna knew this. Draco squeezed her throat a little harder.

"Who."

Her tongue slid out a little farther and she choked out the word, " *Parents."*

His grip went slack.

His parents?

His fucking parents?

"They're your," Kenna gave a small cough, "next of kin."

Fucking werewolves and their weird obsession with packs and families. He didn't understand it.

"*You are **not** my son."*

" *I will strip the Malfoy name from you if you do not honor it!"*

" *Fuck the Malfoy name."*

Some family they were. Except… they were. As much as he didn't want to be Lucius Malfoy's son sometimes, he still was. Giving back the signet ring hadn't stopped him from being a Malfoy.

What if the only reason his father wanted him back was to trade him for his Master's mercy?

But now his mother knew he had been telling her the truth about Granger. Maybe… she didn't hate him anymore. She wouldn't let his father do something like that.

Or maybe she just hated him even more for loving a Mudblood.

The thought hurt more than it should have. He didn't want his mother to hate him. He didn't… hate her. Draco had taken the mark for her, gotten his father out of prison for her. He hadn't felt bad about leaving her behind in the Manor because he knew his father would take care of her but if she was looking for him because she needed him… If she was in danger then…

He needed to know.

Draco pushed Kenna back against the tree, locked his eyes on hers, and forced himself into her mind.

No walls like his and no tall, curving shelves full of organized thoughts and memories like Granger's. Most importantly, no red eyes like Potter's.

Draco pushed deeper.

He could feel the wolf, stronger this time than it had been before. It was snarling, guarding its territory, but it didn't try to force him out. Draco was careful as he moved

through Kenna's mind, making sure not to threaten the animal, but also to get where he needed.

Her memories came bounding at him, rushing pictures of color and sound and above all, smells. Being a werewolf was disgusting.

He wanted to be out of her mind as quickly as he could. He just needed to get what he came for first.

Draco saw Donovan, curled up and whimpering on the floor as Bellatrix shot another *crucio* at his chest.

"Where is he?!" she screeched.

Kenna was crying, trying to get to her brother and struggling against Greyback. Draco saw his face, or, what was left of it. His tongue hung out of a loose jaw, lolling to the side like a dog. His mouth didn't close properly anymore and a set of silver teeth, some elongated into fangs, shone from the black hole of his mouth.

He had done that. Draco had done that. He didn't want to see it.

Not that watching Donovan get tortured was any better. They were questioning him, asking the wolf where Draco was, where he would have hidden… They were asking about Granger.

Draco felt Kenna's wolf snap and he realized he was pressing her too hard into the tree again.

He lifted a bit of the pressure when he saw Donovan die. Then Fergus. Then they were hauling Kenna down in front of the Dark Lord.

"My Lord," Lucius interrupted and Draco was a little surprised to find how much seeing his father's face upset him. "She might be able to… help us."

The three wolves had pledged themselves to him and Draco hadn't given them much thought when he disappeared. But if their loyalty had held, they would have deferred to his father in Draco's absence.

He watched Lucius bend down over Kenna, getting the first glimpse of his mother from behind him. She was crying, silent tears streaming down her face. The sight of it wrenched his heart. He hated seeing his mother cry, but couldn't look away. He was vaguely aware of Lucius ordering Kenna to find him, to bring him home.

"Please," Narcissa took a step forward, clutching a handkerchief, pulling it nervously through… fuck. Through bitten-down nails. Granger might have picked hers, but it left the same short, sharp nails at the end of her fingers. "He's my son. My only son. My… only…"

a single fucking thing. Because if the smallest difference meant that I wasn't right here, right now… You're worth every fucking thing I did."

He couldn't be sorry, couldn't go down that path. He had spent so long wishing he had done things differently, going over every interaction, every decision, descending into the darkest depths of himself trying to fix it all and… it had nearly driven her away. He couldn't risk that now.

He'd almost lost her. So many times. At the Manor, after Crookshanks… He had thought Bellatrix would do the same thing to her. He still felt that fear, that terror. He'd never forget it. Some wounds didn't heal, they just scarred.

Draco's thumb glided over the thin *M* on her arm. A single letter, a single mistake and he could lose her forever. Just because of the blood in her veins. He didn't need a mark or a curse to turn him into a mindless monster, not having Granger in his life already did that. He wasn't going back to that. Not now, not ever.

They were *meant* to be together and Draco didn't get forever with her, he only got this life. He was going to do everything, *anything* in his power to make sure that it was as long as it could be. For both of them.

He raised his eyes back to hers to find them dark and wary, searching every inch of his face looking for some further information. Goddamn, did this girl's brain ever stop spinning? His throat bobbed, his eyes blinked, and his mouth opened to let out a breath he hadn't known he was holding.

She'd figure it out eventually and this honesty thing was sort of… working for them. Now that she was talking to him again. Draco just hoped he wouldn't fuck it up too bad.

"I'll do something stupid to keep you with me."

Granger chocolate eyes darkened. "Like burn down another house?"

Draco felt her hands tense in his. "I'd freeze time if it kept you by my side."

They had reached an impasse. Both wanting the same thing, both unwilling to compromise to get it. Draco knew he couldn't change her mind. She was too fucking stubborn. He couldn't outthink her or trick her really either. But… he had always been good at finding avenues others failed to see.

The lessons with his father hadn't been entirely useless then.

"Draco, I… I know that with each day our chances… dwindle." That was fucking putting it lightly, but Draco held his tongue. He let Granger talk and… he listened. "I know there is a decent chance, more than that really, that we won't… all make it through this. But Harry… He shouldn't face it alone."

His arm ached, a reminder of who his loyalty should belong to and that whatever Granger and her foolhardy friends were doing wasn't going to make a difference. Not when the Dark Lord had an army and another waiting for when that one fell. One that Draco couldn't desert from.

"Harry needs me and I know you don't like it, but I need to help him, Draco. I… I have to. I can't and *I won't* leave him to fight alone. He's my best friend."

Draco's chest felt tight, his rage and love battling in his chest. "And what about me, Sweetheart? What about us?"

Granger's eyes went big. "You're… you're important to me too, Draco."

"Because I'm your boyfriend?" He grinned, sticking the tip of his tongue between his teeth. He just couldn't help himself. He never could with her.

Granger blushed again and dropped her eyes. "Because you're so much more than that."

His heart thumped so hard it hurt. He took her hands in his and held them tight. "Then how can you ask me to stand by and watch you run off into a war you can't win? You're fighting for a lost cause!"

"Funny," Granger snapped. "I thought I was fighting for a future for *us."*

"Getting yourself killed in a war isn't a future I want to live in," Draco snarled, then took a breath as he saw her eyes narrow and burn behind her lashes. He didn't want to fight. Not with her, not in this war, not at all. "Do you think I wanted to do all the things I had to? Do you think I liked it?"

Granger was listening, actually listening to him. So Draco decided to be honest.

"I did all of that for you. For us. Granger… I want it too. But that future you're thinking of… it's not possible." He felt her pulse skip a beat. "Not during the war and not after. Because I *did* do all of those things. And I'm not sorry. I'll never be sorry. Not if it means that I get to have you. And I'll take the future I can get, as long as it's with you."

She was still, perfectly still. Any other time Draco would be pleased, but right now he would give anything, everything for Granger to throw her arms around him and tell him she loved him and she would do anything to have a future with him too.

Why wasn't she saying it? Didn't… didn't she want that too? Of course she did. She… she did. He fucking knew she did.

"You're not sorry?"

Draco looked deep into her doe eyes. He didn't blink. His voice didn't shake as he said, "If I could go back, do it all again; the lies, the… pain, I would. I wouldn't change

His mother covered her face with the handkerchief and Draco saw Lucius wrap his arm around her, comforting her. No, he was… pulling her away from the Dark Lord. Protecting her.

"Draco is loyal, My Lord."

"Is he?" Draco felt his nerves twist at the sound of the Dark Lord's voice. "Where is my loyal servant then?"

Lucius glanced at Narcissa, mouth hanging open. Lucius had the same silver tongue as Draco, but now it lay still and stained with Madeira wine. *Useless.*

It was his mother who spoke for him. "He hunts Potter for you, My Lord. He… followed when we were attacked."

"LIES!" Bellatrix cawed. "He fled from me with his filthy Mudblood whore!"

That bitch was going to *die.*

"Shut your mouth, Bellatrix!" Narcissa pushed against her husband's arms. "You know nothing about my son!"

" *Silence."* The word was hissed. The Dark Lord's lips pulled back, baring his teeth. "You squabble like children." Those blood red eyes were trained on his mother and Draco watched her shrink back, trembling against her coward of a husband's chest. "Your family tree has lost limbs to rot before. If another falls, the infection must be pulled out."

Draco's fingers went numb around Kenna's neck, the coldness started to creep up his arm.

" *From the roots."*

His mark burned and for a moment, it was the only part of his arm he could feel. Draco pulled out of Kenna's mind and shook his arm, moving the blood into it as it slowly warmed again.

Kenna sagged against the trunk of the tree, hands digging into the bark to hold on. He couldn't wipe her memory without his wand and even if he did, memory charms could be broken and Kenna's mind was weak.

"They'll kill me if I come back without you."

He looked at the red mark around her neck. It was a solution. Or…

His parents had sent Kenna to collect him, to bring him home in hope they could twist their lie into truth. And if the Dark Lord had seen him with Potter, he'd expect Draco to return with another prisoner in tow.

He could bring Weasley too. For fun.

Any slight or stumble would be forgotten if Draco handed over the Chosen One to his Master. His eyes were hard as he watched the tears run over Kenna's cheeks and into the ruff of her brother's coat. Donovan was dead. Fergus was dead. Her pack. *His* wolves.

His last hunting wolf was right here. It would be like it was before, his family safe, Granger secure with him. All he had to do was… lie.

And break Granger's heart possibly to the point where it could never love him.

His arm twinged with pain again.

Fuck.

"Malfoy?"

Bill Weasley was crossing the clearing. He stopped halfway across, eyeing the position Draco and Kenna were in. Close. Touching. Alone.

Draco placed a hand on the tree next to Kenna's head. "Listen to me, look at me." He grabbed her face in his other hand and held it still as he bore down on her. "You can't tell them anything about me. Got it? *Nothing."* Kenna tried to nod, but he was holding her still. She gave another small whine as his fingers dug into her cheeks harder. "If you do, I'll fucking kill you myself. And it will be a lot worse than the quick curse that's waiting back there for you so you're going to do exactly as I say. *Do you understand me?"*

"Yes," she breathed out as Bill reached them. "Yes, sir."

Draco dropped his hand to her arm, grabbing her and turning her towards Bill. "She's a werewolf. Knows a bit about Fenrir's pack and might be able to give some information on them."

Bill looked between them quickly, jaw hanging open and scar stretching across his face. Kenna was shaking next to him and Draco didn't dare let go of her. He knew how quick she was. If she got spooked and decided to make a break for it and someone else found her before Draco got his hands back on her…

"The Death Eaters *can't* find her. Can the Order hide her?"

"Yeah," Bill said softly then cleared his throat. "Yes. Yes, we can. We have a—"

Draco shoved Kenna at him and Bill latched onto her, more to help her stay on her feet than anything else. Draco needed to think. *Alone.* And once he sorted himself, he'd sort things with Granger too.

Kenna reached back out to Draco, but he shrugged her off. He moved past them both, heading back into the trees and called without turning, "Get her there before sundown. It's a full moon tonight."

Nothing worth putting her down.

Granger squealed and Draco grinned down at her, carrying her inside their room and placing her carefully on the side of the bed.

"What was that for?" she giggled, kicking off her shoes. Something in him uncoiled at the sound of her laughter and he felt like he could breathe again. Granger leaned back, looking up at him through thick lashes.

Draco placed himself in front of her. "Do I need a reason? Or is being in love with you not enough now, Sweetheart?"

Granger's cheeks pinkened and he grinned.

"It's enough," she answered softly.

He really fucking hoped it was. It needed to be now, while she was happy and before anything else happened. He had thought about this in all the free time she hadn't been speaking to him and tonight had solidified his position. Draco's heart beat and tightened. "Enough to get you to leave?"

Her smile fell away. "Draco," she sighed. "We've talked about this. I can't just leave my friends—"

"You aren't really friends with Weasley, not anymore, and Potter's not making it through this war." Draco dropped all false pretenses. "You know it's true. He'll be lucky to last another three months and that's if the Dark Lord doesn't find him first."

"Harry's strong," Granger countered, but he could hear the concern in her voice. It bothered him, even if it meant he was right. "You don't know him like I do. He's been through more than you can imagine."

Draco wanted Granger to come *with* him. It was Potter that was keeping her here and Potter who would get her killed. Draco knelt down in front of her, knees in between her feet. He still had to dip his head to put her at eye level, so she could see how serious about this he was. How serious about *her* he was.

"And it's coming to an end. You're too fucking smart to pretend otherwise, Granger. In a fair fight do you really think Potter would win?"

Granger paused. Good.

Draco pressed on. "And do you really think the Dark Lord is going to fight fair?"

Granger's mouth opened, but her expression spoke for her. Her brilliant brain agreed with him. Even if her sweet heart didn't.

"I… There's… We are working on a way to… even the field."

Draco wasn't expecting that. Is this what she had been doing these past few weeks? Did they really have a way to weaken the Dark Lord?

teeth to bite it a little. Draco grinned and gave her a wink as the program ended. So that's why they started with the names, so they could finish on a light note.

To give people hope, when in reality, there was none.

The radio spat out static, buzzing harshly as the last of the laughter around the room died.

He wouldn't let that happen to Granger though. He hadn't come this far, done all of that shit, just to let her die.

Draco watched the older Weasley hold out a hand to help Frenchie up and give her a brief kiss before they bid them all goodnight. Weaselbee was fiddling with the radio to turn it off while Potter rubbed his head again and Granger looked on nervously.

Draco's mood soured. Is this what they were surviving on? False hope and a hero that looked like twice shat shit? Potter had been embarrassingly scrawny in their first year, making him easy pickings for someone like Draco, and now he was looking almost as weak. His pale face made his scar stand out and Draco looked away from it quickly, scared of who might be looking back.

He had felt it when the Dark Lord had seen through Potter's eyes and what Draco hadn't told them that it happened right as Potter touched Draco's mark. He might be a Blood Traitor, but he was still a Death Eater and there was only one way to stop being a Death Eater. If Draco didn't want that to be his fate, if he didn't want Granger's name to be read out on a list one day, there was only one way out.

"Granger," Draco snapped. "Let's go."

She let out an annoyed sigh and told Harry he needed to get some rest as she hugged him goodnight. Draco tensed, hating the two seconds that Potter had an arm around her, but then he dropped it and said, "Only if you do too. Don't stay up reading."

Granger smiled at Potter and Draco pulled himself up to his full height. "She won't." He took her elbow, pulling her to his side before she could hug Weasley. Like hell he was going to let that prick touch her and… Granger let him. Either because she wasn't planning on hugging Weasley or because she really was that tired, but either way she was leaving with him.

"Goodnight, Hermione!" The Weasel called as Draco guided her out of the room, letting his hand move from her arm to the small of her back as she started up the stairs.

Granger hovered over a step for a moment, and then pretended like she didn't hear him. Draco smirked, let his gaze fall to her round little ass as she climbed. He scooped her up in his arms as they reached the landing. His arm twitched a little with pain, but nothing he couldn't handle.

It was dark by the time Draco made it back to the cottage. The moon had risen and glittered across the dark waves of the ocean. He could hear people inside; talking, laughing, and really fucked wished he could be just about anywhere else right now. Draco looked up and saw a faint golden light coming from a familiar window and sighed.

He passed by everyone else finishing up supper and found Granger waiting for him in their room. At least she wasn't ignoring him this time, but oddly enough, that fact didn't make him feel better about this. Draco took a deep breath and closed the door behind him.

"Who was she?" Granger's lids were so tightly drawn he could hardly make out the chocolate of her eyes between them.

Draco ran his tongue over his teeth. Granger wanted the truth from him? Fine. She'd get it. "Kenna was one of the wolves who worked for me."

Granger's head tilted slightly. "She helped you hunt Muggleborns?"

"She helped me hunt *you*. If we happened to find… suspected persons while we were out, I had to turn them in. What true Death Eater would let one of yours walk?"

He could probably say what he needed to in a… nicer way. Probably should have too. Granger was clearly upset and once again, he wasn't making it any better.

Her arms slid to her sides. "One of mine?"

"You know what I mean."

"I do," she snipped. "Mudbloods, right?"

Draco's lip curled in distaste. He didn't like hearing that word come from his aunt's mouth and he *really* didn't like it coming from hers. "You asked me to stop calling you that and I did. Now I'm going to ask you to stop calling yourself that."

Granger faltered, just for a moment, but it was enough for Draco to strike again. "I know what I did this last year. And what I did before that. Granger… there is no way I'll ever be able to make it right. There's not. I'm not good. I never will be."

Wandering around the woods, Draco had accepted that about himself. He could have asked the Order for help rescuing his parents, his mother had never taken the mark. They might… but it was pointless. His father would never let his mother go anywhere without him and the Order wouldn't accept him, even as a prisoner.

Lucius belonged to the Dark Lord, not out of loyalty, but out of fear. Minds could be changed, but hearts couldn't. Not that his father had much of one anyway.

Draco's only consolation was that his father would die before he let anything happen to his wife.

Draco didn't blame him.

He'd just made the same choice.

And… he had to admit, he was glad that his father was there to take care of his mother. It made what Draco had done to break him out of Azkaban not feel as… useless.

"Weasley's right. I'll never change. I'll always be… this." He curled his fingers into his palms. "But it doesn't mean I want to be."

Granger's cinnamon eyes widened, listening to him and… finally paying him some fucking attention. Now that he had it, had her, Draco knew exactly what to do.

No more lies. She wanted the truth. And he always gave her what she wanted.

"I know I don't treat you right. I don't treat you… like a person. But that's because you aren't to me. You aren't this person, you're… you're a part of me and I don't—fuck, Hermione… You're all of me. You're mine."

Granger stood in front of him, mouth open and eyes big. She was beautiful. Inside and out. Draco's heart *hurt* as it beat. Things were complicated between them and he wasn't making them any easier, but that was because he didn't want easy. He wanted *her*. Hermione Granger and all her fiery pride, her relentless striving, her good, *pure* nature.

She watched him for a moment and he could see busy thoughts crossing her face, tensing her brows, pursing her lips, narrowing her eyes.

"Draco," she said slowly and he felt his palms dampen. "I *am* a person. You talk about me like I am some… prize that you won, but, that's not true. I *choose* to be with you. Time and time again. I don't know why you think you have to order me around and tell me that I shouldn't fight. I did it plenty of times before you came along. I don't need you for that and… I'm not going to change either."

She bit her lip, tucking her caramel colored curls behind her ears. Gold light from the lamp and silver rays from the moon casting combating shadows across her face.

"This is who I am, *what* I am, and I want to be with you, Draco. I want to be yours. But being yours doesn't stop me from being me. I… I love what you said about me, honestly, I do, but… You can't *make me* yours. You have to let me be me."

No. No no no. If Draco loosened his hold on her, Granger would see that what a fuck up he really was, see all the ugly scars, not the ones on his skin, but the ones on his soul.

It was… surprising how the resistance was still operating even with the strict measures placed upon them. But it wasn't enough. Most of this was geared towards helping people survive, not fight back. Their black market couldn't outfit an army and nothing less would be able to stop them—No. *Him*.

Draco was a Blood Traitor now. He crossed his arms, tucking his mark close to himself.

Granger was sitting with her back perfectly straight, just like she used to in lectures and Draco fell into an old pattern of watching her, hoping she would turn so he could catch her eye. Those quick, heated glances they used to share had become so distracting that he used to have to cheat off Blaise in classes they shared with the Gryffindors.

He hoped Blaise was… okay; he and Theo had always been close. Draco had chosen cronies over friends and kept Crabbe and Goyle as a buffer instead of forging a real connection with anyone. When Blaise joined the Quidditch team in their fifth year, Draco found that he actually liked having Blaise around and they started partnering on Inquisitorial Squad rounds, which annoyed Theo and just made Draco want to do it all the more.

He didn't know why he liked to get on Theo's nerves so much other than their competition was… fun. As much as Theo aggravated him and as much as he knew he irked him right back, they never… *hated* each other. It was just… Draco frowned. It was how they were raised. To compete, obtain, and win. No matter the cost.

Two years later and there was no Quidditch or stupid squads or Theo. Draco had never written to Blaise or told him what happened. The rumor that Theo had turned Blood Traitor was murmured, slithering from person to person. And so was the story of how the Malfoy heir had taken it upon himself to purge the bad blood before it poisoned others.

Blaise would know the truth, what Draco had done and why. He wondered if Blaise knew what happened to Death Eaters after they died. If he knew what Draco had *really* done to Theo, what he had turned him into by killing him.

He was pulled abruptly from his thoughts by the sound of laughter. The voice on the radio was now doing an impression of the Dark Lord with a head cold which everyone was enjoying immensely.

" *I blew my nob-se off!*"

Draco fought a small smile and was shaking his head a little when he caught Granger looking at him. Big doe eyes bright and shining. Merlin, she was beautiful when she smiled. She blinked those eyes, turning them darker and pulled her lip in between her

least the only person she was pressed up against was Frenchie who was married, female, and had never shown any interest in Granger other than a friendly one.

He still didn't like her. But he'd tolerate her sitting by his girl. As long as this radio program didn't last too long.

Granger had spent most of the day cooped up in Potter and Weasley's room and came out smelling like Snape's storage room. Even the hours outside hadn't completely washed it from her.

She was brewing something with them. *Without* him. Draco clenched his jaw.

"I've got it!" Weasley called over his shoulder. "Quiet—it's starting."

Potter and the other Weasley dropped their conversation as everyone focused on the cracking radio. Granger said something about the weather affecting the signal and Draco dismissed it with a well hidden roll of his eyes. Muggle contraptions were faulty, why wizards bothered trying to incorporate them into their lives was beyond him.

Weasley dropped into the chair across from his brother who gave him an approving nod. Weaselbee grinned, proud and happy. Happy because he was here with his family. Draco scowled. He wasn't sure when or if he would see his mother and father again.

He wasn't sure what he'd do if he did. He couldn't hurt Lucius too badly, not if he was the only thing standing in the way of the Dark Lord and his mother. Draco glared up at his shorn hair, remembering the reason it was gone. He had healed from a cracked skull, his father could too.

And if the old man didn't, well… Draco would take care of his mother once his father was gone. She might have said he wasn't her son anymore, but… she was still his mum. Draco might have betrayed his family, his blood, but as long as she didn't stand in the way of him and Granger, he wouldn't leave his mother to the infamous mercy of the Dark Lord. Even if she had done it to him first.

"We are starting tonight's broadcast off with the names of those reported missing or captured…"

Draco watched Granger's shoulders tense with each rise and fall of her breath as names were called out. He didn't know any of them, but with each one, a face of one of the Muggleborns he had sold to Umbridge flashed into his mind. Had their names been called out like this too? He pushed them from his mind and focused on Granger again.

The program went on, reporting new policies the Ministry had instituted on international travel along with a list of stores where supplies now outlawed could still be purchased using codewords.

What would she think if she knew the thoughts he had been tempted by in the woods? He had to keep her, control her.

Or he'd lose her.

"You have to let me be me, Draco. So I *can* be yours."

He blinked.

Huh.

He'd never thought of it that way. And… today when they were running in the woods together, it *had* felt like it did before. Is that because Granger felt more like herself in those moments? She had been smiling when he caught her, smiling as he pinned her down, smiling up until he started ordering and cursing at her to leave him there with… another woman.

He'd have never left Granger alone with some creep in the woods, even if she had screamed until she was blue in the face. Maybe… maybe that wasn't fair.

But none of this was fucking fair! It wasn't fair that Granger had finally said she'd leave with him and then devoted all her time to saving her precious Potter, so she wouldn't have to. It wasn't fair that she got everything she wanted and the only thing he wanted was her and that it seemed like everyone on the face of this goddamn earth was trying to keep them apart.

Including her.

"Are you?"

"Am I what?"

"Mine."

Granger scoffed. "What sort of question is that?"

"You ran from me," he said in a low voice.

Granger looked at him like he was out of his mind. He was starting to feel like he was, having her so fucking close and not actually *having* her. It had been almost a week since he'd fucked her, and their little game in the woods had only made everything… harder. Now, even his own thoughts weren't making sense, like he didn't have enough blood in his fucking head to keep them straight.

He watched her face turn from incredulity to apprehension. "I thought… I thought you wanted… to. I-I'm sorry if I overstepped—"

"Granger, no!" Draco closed the distance between them, grabbing her upper arms and feeling her muscles twitch nervously under his hands. "Kitten, no, that's not what I meant at all. Of course I wanted to!"

She sagged a little in relief, but her mouth flattened as she looked up at him. "Then why did you say that?"

He had to choose his words carefully. "I… You… Granger, you don't know what it's like to be with someone like you." Shit, she wasn't going to like that. "I keep fucking up and I don't know how to stop. And when I do, you get so pissed at me and you storm off and run to your friends and I know the shit they must say about me when I'm not around—"

"Draco, they aren't trying to break us up!"

"They bloody well aren't trying to keep up together either!" he bellowed.

Fuck. *Fuck.* Everyone in the house must have heard them. Just more fuel for their fucking fire to burn him on.

And of course, Granger had read too far into what he was trying to say.

"So you think you have to control me or my friends will. You don't think I can make decisions for myself now?"

"I think you care too much about what other people think."

"And I don't think you care enough."

Right again. It was getting really fucking annoying how she always did that. He didn't care enough about other people. If he did, maybe he'd do something to help his mother instead of leaving it up to his father. Or at least had been a little nicer to Kenna; she'd just watched her brother die for fuck's sake. Maybe then he wouldn't be alone and friendless, clinging to his girlfriend because she was all he had left in this fucking world.

"I care about *you.* That's the best I can do." He had said something similar to her, months ago as he left her chained in his bed. Shit, he was lucky she was still even speaking to him after everything he'd put her through and here he was arguing with her again. "But… I'll *try,* Granger. If that will make you happy, I'll try for you."

And maybe a little for himself too. He had closed himself off to his friends and family and it resulted in him killing one of them and abandoning the rest. If he fixed things with Granger, maybe he could fix them with other people too.

Something softened in her face and Draco was surprised by it. He thought they were going to stand here and fight for the rest of the night until one of them got upset enough to march out. Instead, Granger lifted her hand and placed it against his cheek. He took a deep breath, leaning into it.

"Are you sure it's just me you care about? Kenna looked very… comfortable around you." She didn't sound upset, a little curious maybe, but that was normal for Granger. She had to know fucking everything.

"What?" Draco snapped. "What did I *supposedly* say, Weasley?"

Weasley looked from Draco to Potter for support, but Potter merely shrugged. "What was it?"

Weasley turned back and glared at Granger's hands, clinging to Draco's clothes. "He said…" Draco cocked a brow up, daring him. "He said you were…"

"What, Ron?" Granger asked, irritated by his floundering.

"Sweet!" Weasley shouted. "He said you were…" He blushed. "Sweet."

Draco glanced down at Granger. She smiled up at him, lifted herself onto her toes and placed a soft kiss against his cheek.

He didn't need a drink anymore. And she didn't need her friends either. All they needed was each other and it seemed like Granger had finally remembered that. Thank fuck, because he had started to get nervous.

Frenchie ducked her head in from the sitting room. "It iz almost time. Ron can 'ou 'elp?"

Draco threw him a smug smirk as Weasley turned and stomped out of the room.

Granger turned her pretty face up to him. "Do you… want to listen with us? I'd like for you to."

Draco nodded. "Sure, kitten."

He'd do anything if it kept Granger by his side a little longer.

Maybe Weasley was the reason she was out crying that night, but Draco was the one she wanted now. And then too. She had wanted him just as much as he had wanted her. He knew it, because he could feel it in the way her cunt squeezed him as she came on it for the first time. And every time after.

Draco tightened his arm around her.

Granger was his. His girl. His world. His… only.

And only *his.*

The sitting room was crowded and hot with everyone crammed inside it. Draco was leaning against the doorway, declining to sit lest he touch someone's elbow squeezing onto the couch. Granger had no such qualms. She was on the end of the couch and at

sense of love came from. And as she got to the top of the stairs, the answer finally came to her—it was his mother.

It had been Narcissa's accusations that had wounded him and Narcissa's pleading that stayed his hand when they had escaped the Manor.

She *hoped* that Draco was able to make it out again, back to her.

But if he didn't… If he couldn't come back or… chose not to…

Hermione couldn't bear to think about it. And she couldn't *stop* thinking about it.

She needed something to take her mind off of him.

"Ron?" Hermione had poked her head into the boys' bedroom. Ron was reading a magazine on his bed, feet kicked up and holes in his socks. "I was going to check on the polyjuice potion. Is that alright?"

"Yeah, sure!" Ron sat up and Hermione opened the small closet where she had been brewing the potion.

She crouched in front of it, stirring it smoothly. It was perfect, ready. It would need 24 hours to cool once it was bottled and then they would be able to leave.

She hoped Draco would be back before then.

Hermione glanced behind her. Ron had returned to his magazine again. She shifted just a little, making sure he couldn't see and checked the second cauldron.

It was a smaller pewter one and the potion in it was a deep, rich red. She knew Ron wouldn't recognize it by sight alone, but Hermione still made sure to block his view.

Her chest cracked a little as she folded and stirred the thick liquid. She hadn't told Draco what she was doing, wanting to surprise him with it. Now, she might not get the chance.

"Can you hand me some flasks from my bag?" Hermione asked.

Ron opened the drawer next to Harry's bed. They decided it was safer to keep the beaded bag in here, and next to Harry just in case something happened and they had to leave quickly. He was the one who needed the supplies the most. He was the one who would have to make it out.

Ron rifled through it and Hermione could hear things tumbling and knocking around. She would have to pack it again.

"What…" Ron's face fell.

"They're on the left, in that box with the leather strap around it. Be careful the plates and mugs are in there too."

Ron didn't say anything, but when he handed her the flasks he pulled his hand back from hers quickly.

Hermione ladled the polyjuice into a few vials, but saved one and filled it with the other potion. Part of her wanted to throw it out in anger, but she had spent time and ingredients making it, it would be a shame just to waste it.

Closing the closet she placed the bag on Harry's bed and started sorting through the mess Ron had made so she could put the potions away.

Something soft and cool brushed along her fingertips and Hermione opened the bag wider. It was her dress; the white slip of lace she had been wearing when they rescued her from the Manor. She had cleaned it and stuck it far down enough in the bag that she didn't think anyone would find it, but in Ron's search for the vials he must have stumbled upon it.

At least he had the decency not to mention it.

Hermione tucked the potions away and cinched the bag closed. Sighing she sunk down onto Harry's bed and put her head in her hands. Back to waiting. And worrying.

The bed creaked and moved beside her.

"Are you okay?" Ron asked, sounding sincere.

Hermione reached back to tie her hair up. She hadn't even brushed it this morning and her curls were wild, still tousled from last night. "No."

"I'm sorry."

Without thinking, she let out a harsh laugh. "Are you? I thought you'd be thrilled to see Draco gone."

Ron's voice lowered. "I'm sorry he did all this to you."

Hermione stared at her shoes. She was upset with Draco, definitely, but… she still wanted him to come back. She liked to think that she would intrinsically know if something happened to him, but the truth was Draco could be dead already. Or… worse.

A small part of her heart thudded with the thought that only death could keep him from her and even then it might not be enough.

So why hadn't he come back then?

Did the longer he stayed away mean he was hurt or that… that he wasn't coming back for another reason? Kenna said they wanted him to come home, had she been lying or…

"If you think about it, it's good he left," Ron said and Hermione turned towards him quickly.

"How can you say that?"

"He was never on our side. He was just here to…" Ron waved a freckled hand in front of her.

Hermione exhaled sharply. "Is that what you think of me?"

"That's what I think of *him* ."

She rolled her eyes. "I know what you think of him, you say it every chance you get. Ever since we got here, you have been just as terrible as he is. You've never given Draco a chance."

"Yeah? You've given him too many chances! No matter what shit he does, you don't seem to care as long as he *promises* he won't do it again. Well guess what he did, Hermione? He fucking left you. Again!"

The creature in her chest stirred, growling a little. "He'll come back."

Ron let out a harsh breath. "I'm sure he will. Slimy bastard doesn't have the decency to just… stay away." He glanced at her and Hermione saw something that looked like an accusation in his eyes. "It would make all of this so much easier if he wasn't…"

She knew what he wasn't saying, what he really meant. And maybe now, without Draco here and sulking in a corner watching them, was a good time to clear a few things up.

"I know this has been an adjustment, it has for all of us."

Ron ran a freckled hand over his face.

Hermione went on. "I know you wish things were different, but…" She bit her lip as he looked over at her. "Even if they were, even if Draco wasn't here, we… we wouldn't be *here* either."

She fought herself from cringing. If Draco were here, he would have laughed at her sorry attempt to… reject Ron.

"Hermione," Ron took a large breath. "I don't… want that anymore."

Oh. Oh! Good! That was… good. Except, Ron was flushing a deep red and she wasn't sure if it was from embarrassment or anger. He turned away, looking out the window at the bright, blue sky.

"Sorry," she mumbled. "I… I thought you might still feel—"

"I tried," he cut her off. "I really did. I tried to get past it, but… seeing you with him. Every day. Watching you… I just—can't."

Hermione's brows pulled together a little. This is what she wanted, right? Then why did it… *sting?*

"Well… good." Hermione said with as much steadiness as she could muster. "Good. Then we can just be… friends."

"Are we?" He turned sharply to her. "When was the last time we did anything that friends do? You're only in here with me because *he's* gone."

"We're in the middle of a war, Ronald, in case you've forgotten. I'm a bit preoccupied."

Only a few seconds passed before she scrambled over to it, making sure she hadn't harmed the tome in her fit of… well, she wasn't sure if it was anger or pain or some poisonous mix of the two. Smoothing out the pages, Hermione realized she hadn't actually absorbed any of the information she read and with a sigh, set it on the bed. The unmade bed where she could still see the wrinkles in the sheet from Draco's body.

Hermione moved the book on top of them and closed the door behind her when she left.

She tried walking around outside, but found herself glancing in the direction that Draco had run off in and her heart pulled against the veins holding it inside her, longing to go after him. She took Bellatrix's wand from her pocket, considered it, and then went back inside.

She wasn't going to run out on the people who loved her, needed her.

She wasn't like him.

Even if she wanted to be.

Hermione trudged up the stairs, her heart weighing her down. And just for a moment, she considered giving into the millions of thoughts that wouldn't stop racing through her mind about where Draco might have gone, what he might have done, and who he might be with. He had to know that ring was sent to him on purpose, right?

But the question was, *who* exactly sent it to him. Hermione thought she had an idea. She hoped to high heavens that she was wrong.

" *I have to try. She's my mother."*

She thought about her own parents and what she would do, how she would feel if she heard one of them had died or if one of them was in danger.

Hermione knew Draco's bonds to his family ran deep; deeper than she had imagined because she had heard the hateful things his mother said to him, seen the violence his father enacted upon him, and still, as soon as his family needed him, Draco went to them.

She couldn't help but love him a little more for it. Maybe hate him a little too, because why would he even *want* to go back to that, but… maybe it was the right thing to do. It was his family after all, and Draco did terrible things to protect the people he loved.

Hermione knew that better than most.

Both Harry and Ron were willing to fight and die to protect the people they loved, but it was different with Draco. Even as a Death Eater he had never cared that much about the outcome of the war. He only ever wanted to keep the ones he loved safe.

Something, she was sure, his father had disapproved of and yet it was a pillar of who Draco was as a person. Sometimes Hermione wondered where that unshaking, deathless

of the grounds and could just make out the Manor cutting a striking slice against the white sky.

No sun today, but no storm clouds either; they were just pale and grey. Dead. The sky had been clear when he left this morning, bright and blue and shining. He would go back. He *would.*

Hope was a foolish thing, but if it had kept Granger and her friends alive, maybe… it could do something for him.

His chest tightened, forcing breaths in and out too quickly. Draco did as he was taught. By his mother.

He had to try. Draco closed his eyes.

He hoped she was unharmed.

One.

He hoped she was alive.

Two.

He really hoped she didn't still hate him.

Three.

He tightened his fist and then opened it. The silver Malfoy ring sat in the middle of his palm.

Draco's hands shook as he slipped it on his finger.

Hermione had taken all of thirty seconds to stare at the open door and let the shock of Draco leaving silence everything else in her head. Then the creature in her chest started roaring and the blood rushed back in her brain, blocking out Harry's voice asking if she was okay and if she wanted to sit down.

She didn't. She didn't want to think about the fact that Draco was… *gone.*

She didn't want to think of him at all.

Hermione dove into her books, losing herself in the pages as she had so many times before. It didn't exactly work, but it did take a couple hours of the day from her. As she hid her face behind a particularly old volume, the creamy smell of parchment became unbearable and she slammed it shut, throwing it across the room.

He kicked his feet against the floor. "Find plenty of time to spend with your boyfriend."

Urgh! These boys were going to drive her crazy! Draco thought she spent too much time with her friends, Ron thought she spent too much time with Draco, and Harry thought they had spent too much time at the cottage and wanted to go hunting horcruxes again. Now that the potion was ready, she had one less excuse to stay. Could she leave if Draco didn't come back?

Hermione was fed up with people telling her how she should be spending her time.

"The only time I get with him is a few minutes before bed each night. I'm working when I'm in there with him, not…" she trailed off, not really wanting to say the words.

"You weren't working last night," Ron said darkly and then stood up and walked to the window. "I thought you were smart enough not to forget a fucking silencing charm."

Oh *God!*

Hermione stared at his back with eyes so wide they hurt. "It was muffled to start with and as soon as we realized what was happening Harry cast *muffliato* , but…" Ron shook his head, coppery hair sliding back and forth.

Hermione was horrified. In the heat of the moment she had completely forgotten to silence their room last night. The things Draco has said, that *she* had said… Oh God, oh God, oh God…

"Ron, I'm so sorry—"

"I don't ever want to hear that shit again." He turned back around, ears red and eyes bright as blue flames. Hermione nodded so fast it made her head hurt. "Do you understand me?"

She stopped.

Understand him? She was apologizing and he was… reprimanding her?

"Excuse me?"

"I've tried really hard to get past this, but… I can't. I can't, Hermione. I thought if I gave you enough time last autumn, you'd move on. I thought when I rescued you from the Manor, you'd realize. I thought being back here with your friends, your *family* —you'd come to your fucking senses!"

Hermione stood up.

Ron stepped forward. "But I can't do this. I can't get over the fact that you are with a Death Eater!"

"He's not a Death Eater." Her throat felt tight and hot.

"No?" Ron snorted. "Then why did he run back when You-Know-Who called for him?"

"He left because of his mum, not—"

"We saw the mark moving, Hermione. Me *and* Harry. Don't fucking try and deny it just because—" He stopped talking all of a sudden.

"Because what?" Hermione snapped.

Ron glared down at her. "Because *you* want a boyfriend. I thought you were different from other girls, that you cared about more important things than…" His face reddened until it was hard to see his freckles.

A strange cool cloud of confusion settled over her. This… wasn't happening.

The creature in her chest roared and she wasn't able to contain it any longer. She didn't want to either. "It's not my fault you're jealous!" Hermione exclaimed. It felt good to say the words. Good to *shout them*. Good to let out what she had been holding back for so long.

"Jealous?!" Ron's red brows shot up his freckled forehead. "I can forgive a mistake, but what you've done..." He scrunched his nose as if he was smelling something foul and let out a short, harsh breath.

Hermione was at a loss for words. Shock and surprise rocked through her.

Ron's cheeks splashed with red. "We're on the same side. We're working together to help Harry and to win the war. But we're not friends. Not anymore. You've made your bed, Hermione. And you let Malfoy into it."

So that was it. Ron didn't want to be friends with her anymore. Fine. *Fine!* But she had to admit, those words felt a little sharper than they should have.

Hermione turned and headed for the door.

"Oh sure!" Ron called behind her. "Go and stare out the window some more and mope. Maybe your Death Eater will come kidnap you again, that's what you want isn't it? That's the kind of shit you're into!"

Hermione's hand twitched towards Bellatrix's wand in her pocket. If it had been her own, or Draco's, one she knew she might have hexed him for that. Instead, she turned. Slowly.

"I would be careful if I was you, since we're not friends anymore." Hermione glared at him, her eyes blazing. "You should watch what you say to me."

Ron's eyes flashed with something akin to fear, then his face turned down in revulsion. "You're going to regret this one day."

Chapter Twenty

He had half a mind to march straight down the drive and break the front doors from their hinges. It was his house now, after all; Draco could do as he pleased. But as he neared, he realized that was a stupid, foolish plan. He blamed the idea on spending too much time with Gryffindors.

Draco was here to get his mother away from the Dark Lord, not to start a fight he was sure to lose. He hoped his mother wouldn't argue about leaving. If she did, well… she didn't have a wand to defend herself and the *imperius* curse had *nearly* worked getting Granger out of the castle last year.

And if he saw Bellatrix this time… he thought Crookshanks might like the idea of the *sectumsempra* curse slicing that foul bitch open. He certainly did.

Draco slunk through the woods until he got to a tree he knew all too well and walked over the shallow grave underneath it. He stopped at the edge of the property line.

He knew what lay for him beyond it. Knew who and what were waiting on him.

And he wanted to go back.

He could turn around right now and apparate back to the coast. He could go back to the cottage, back into his girl's arms and hear her tell him how proud of him she was for turning around. Sure, he'd take a tongue lashing from her after, but then he could give her one of his own to make up for how he acted this morning. Draco stood at the edge

Hermione turned on her heel and marched out. If she stayed another second in that room, she might *actually* hurt him, even without complete control of the wand.

Her legs shook as she walked into the kitchen. She couldn't even breathe right and headed outside to get some fresh air. Tears spilled over onto her cheeks. She didn't want to cry, didn't want to feel this… alone or scared. She wished Draco was here so she could lose herself in his arms, let him hold her. Let him make her feel… loved.

But Ron was right, Draco was… gone. She sat on the stoop and looked towards the beach. Her frustration with Draco bled out as the sun dipped low, turning the water red. She just wanted him back. If he came back, if they were together, they could get through whatever happened.

"Hey, are you okay?" Harry took a seat beside her.

Hermione wiped the tears pooled on her bottom lid. She really wanted people to stop asking her that.

"I heard you and Ron fighting."

"He's so obtuse!"

Harry smiled. "Hermione, you can call him a prick. I won't get mad."

"Fine. He's a… *prick,"* she whispered and Harry laughed. The sound comforted her. "And Draco is too," she added before her throat felt too tight to talk.

"Maybe we shouldn't have let him go," Harry said quietly.

"I don't think we could have stopped him," Hermione admitted. "He would have found a way to leave."

Draco always did what he wanted and Hermione always did as she was supposed to. She waited. And hoped he wanted to come back.

Harry rubbed his hands nervously over his thighs. "I wish we could go already. How much longer until the polyjuice is ready?"

Hermione paused for a moment and then her shoulders sagged, knowing what was coming. "We will need to make sure we have everything ready, that Griphook is on board, but… we can use it in 24 hours."

"Really? That's great!"

Hermione had a hard time sharing in Harry's enthusiasm. "We use tomorrow to get everything set, and then leave the next morning. By nightfall, we could have another horcrux destroyed."

It was what they had been working towards, what she *should* want. But all Hermione could think about was what if Draco hadn't returned before they had to leave?

"I'm going to talk to Griphook; why don't you come back in? It's getting late."

Hermione looked down the beach one last time before placing her hand in Harry's and letting him help her up.

They walked back to the cottage, each step a struggle in the sand.

The minutes ticked by, turning into hours and Hermione began to feel exhaustion pulling at her frayed nerves. She barely ate dinner, even though she spent the whole meal staring down at her plate and avoiding looking at the other end of the table where Ron sat. She heard him scarf down his food as quickly as possible then push his chair back and stomp upstairs.

The kitchen emptied, but Hermione didn't leave. She couldn't face their empty room alone. Instead she sat on the stairs, leaning her head against the banister and drifted into a restless half sleeping state. Hermione's eyes gently closed, enveloping her in the darkness of sleep.

She was running again. Stone corridors, ones she had walked down for years sped by her. They were crumbling, falling and crashing to the ground around her. Hermione ran on, headed… somewhere. Or, to someone.

She stopped at the iron gate of the Restricted Section, pulling on the bars, screaming the password, but nothing happened.

The cage stayed locked.

Then, something moved in the darkness.

Hermione pressed her face against the bars. Slowly it came forward, blue candles floating and casting strange shadows on the ground.

She knew the shape that started to appear. Knew the long legs, the strong arms, the white blond hair.

She even knew the details of the mask that was covering his face.

"Please," she begged. "Take it off."

He reached up a single hand and pulled the metal mask off of his face.

His aristocratic features, schooled into the perfect expression of impassivity. At least on one side of his face. On the other…

White bone and black holes.

As he came closer she saw the silver eyes that had once been so bright, now dulled and… *dead.*

"No…"

Draco was gone, but he was still here, coming closer.

Hermione couldn't move. Terror pinned her in place.

The ring seemed to burn in his hand, echoing the sensation deep in his throat.

He opened his hand and her eyes widened as she saw what was sitting there.

"Oh goodness… Draco…" Granger's voice was nothing more than a hushed whisper and he wished more than anything that they were not in the kitchen with Weasley and Potter watching them right now because he was afraid if he kept looking at her big doe eyes, wide with fucking pity, he was going to fall right into them.

"You… You don't have to," she said in that same small voice. "I know you think—"

"I have to try," Draco bit out, not realizing how fucking *tight* his throat was until he tried to speak. "She's my mother."

He turned back to the door, opening it as a gust of wind blew against him.

"Draco!"

Her footsteps stopped short. Someone had stopped her.

"Let him go, Hermione."

Fucking Potter. He'd deal with him *later.*

Draco didn't even bother to close the door behind him.

"Is it true?"

Potter lifted his gaze from the parchment in front of him, green eyes guarded and hard. He was already prepared for an invasion into his mind, to find the evidence, the answer…

Granger landed behind Draco, still tying her hair up. "Draco, what is—"

Potter stood up and Draco could see Weasley falling into a defensive stance out of the corner of his eye, food forgotten on the counter beside him.

Potter met his gaze, holding it with a strange look in his eye. Draco was about to start shouting when he said in an annoyingly calm voice, "Yes."

Draco didn't hear anything else. He barely even felt Granger pulling on his arm, trying to get him to look at her.

All he saw was his wand in her pocket.

Draco snatched it.

"Oi!" *Weasley.*

The plate he was holding broke, scattering sharp pieces and beans on the floor.

Draco gripped the ring so hard it hurt.

Good. This should hurt.

Everything should hurt.

"Draco!" Granger was pulling on him again.

"Get OFF!" He shoved her back. She stumbled into the table and Potter was at her side. Weasley was not far behind him.

Her friends. Her family.

Not his.

His was… dead. Or at least his father was.

And his mother… His mother needed him.

Draco turned to the door.

"No!" She was heading for him again. "Draco, what happened?!"

"Stay here," he snarled over his shoulder. He didn't want to look at her.

"Where are you going?"

"Hermione," Potter was reaching for her. His hand on her shoulder. Touching her.

Draco paused, his heart beating like a war drum in his chest.

"Draco, don't…" Hermione looked so small. Her pink robe falling off her shoulder. Potter's hand sitting there. "Don't leave."

Stay here. With her. With *them.*

He didn't belong here. He was a goddamn Malfoy.

Draco knew where he belonged.

Suddenly his hand struck out, grabbing her neck through the bars. The bones of his fingers dug into her flesh.

" *MINE!*"

Hermione jolted awake at the sound of the door. She pulled out Bellatrix's curved wand, just in case… in case it wasn't him.

She didn't think he would have done anything to put her in danger, but he might not have had a choice.

If Draco came back—no, *when* —when Draco came back. He *would* come back. He had to. She knew it as a stark white truth.

Because she would have gone back to him. For him.

"Draco?" Hermione said his name softly as she placed a foot on the bottom step, peering around into the kitchen.

A dark shape was rifling through the cabinets, knocking things to the floor. Hermione breathed a sigh of relief. She had just seen that frame in her dream, tall and lean, with moonlight lit white hair sitting on top.

But she wanted to see his face. Needed to. She had been so worried, angry, and upset, but all of that was slipping away the closer she got to him. Draco had come back. For her. To her. To *be* with her.

"Draco," she said a bit more forcefully as she took a step inside the poorly lit room.

He didn't turn. Instead she watched him rip a piece of bread off of a loaf and slowly bring it to his mouth, as he really wasn't interested in it at all.

"Are you hungry?" Hermione asked. He had left first thing this morning, he probably hadn't eaten all day. Draco didn't answer, merely tore off another piece and held it in front of his face while he chewed the one in his mouth.

She had spent the *entire day* worried sick over him and he couldn't even answer a simple question? Seeing him here and alive allowed a bit of that anxiety to rest and made room for the anger that had been simmering inside her ever since he walked out on her this morning.

"You could at least say something."

Draco turned, leaning his tall frame against the counter and popped another piece of bread in his mouth.

His face was whole and beautiful. She squinted in the darkness. There was something… different, but… familiar about his expression. About his whole appearance. Then it hit her.

Hermione gripped the back of the chair in front of her. His hair had grown back out to its normal length. It was perfectly trimmed with a single lock falling over his brows. She blinked, taking in his clothes. They were not the ones he left in this morning; instead, Draco was dressed in a new coat covering a fresh, black uniform. The metal mask hung on his belt and his wand was tucked into a holster on his thigh.

He was wearing Death Eater robes.

" *Hermione."* It was more of a mockery than anything else and Hermione recognized the cruel sneer he had slipped on his face.

She took a breath and did not let her voice shake when she asked, "Where did you go?"

Draco bit off a hunk of the bread. "Home."

She had a million and one questions she wanted to ask him, but was a little scared to hear the answers.

He chewed slowly, mercury eyes sliding over her and… sizing her up. "Surprised I came back?"

"No," Hermione said stiffly and watched something slither deep behind his eyes. She added, in a softer tone, "I knew you'd come back."

Draco snorted and tossed the bread on the counter. "I didn't."

Hermione moved around the table. Draco stayed against the counter, but she watched the muscles in his neck twitch as she approached.

"Yes, you did," Hermione said quietly, but firmly, coming to a stop in front of him.

He looked away from her, but not before she caught the slightly glazed look in his eyes. For a moment she thought he was enchanted, but then he blew out a long breath and she smelled the truth on it.

Draco was drunk.

Hermione pursed her lips.

"You think," he breathed out heavily, his words coming slowly, "that you're *so* smart." Draco turned sharply towards her, eyes cold. "It's… simple for you, isn't it?"

He reached out a hand and ran two fingers over a stray curl. Hermione saw the silver Malfoy ring sitting on his finger again and her heart clenched. "Good and bad, right and wrong. You know it all, don't you? All right up—*here."*

Draco tapped a finger in the middle of her forehead and Hermione blinked sharply at the feeling. Leaning closer, he slid his hand around the side of her neck, tilting her chin up with his thumb.

"How did he find you?" Granger asked, scooting to the edge of the bed and pulling on a robe.

Draco didn't care. He didn't have a single thought in his head besides getting the small pouch tied to Calix's leg. Adrenaline pumped through him and as he untied it. There was a small part of him that seemed to already know what was about to land in the center of his shaking hand.

The heavy silver ring embossed with the Malfoy crest tumbled out. For some reason, it felt heavier this time.

Draco stared at it, eyes wide and dry.

The ring. His family's ring.

There was only one reason it had been given to him.

Calix gave a soft hoot in consolation.

"Draco?"

Granger sounded very far away and a light ringing replaced her voice in Draco's ears.

He closed the ring in his fist.

One.

Two.

Three.

He threw the fist through the window, shattering the glass and sprinkling it across the floor.

"Draco!"

He ignored Granger. Sucking in heavy breaths through his nose, Draco pulled the door open and headed down the stairs, taking them two at a time.

"Draco!"

He could hear her running behind him, but Draco didn't stop.

Couldn't stop.

Not until he made it to the kitchen scanning his eyes over the room quickly, looking for the one person who could confirm what Draco already knew to be true.

But he had to hear it. He just… had to.

Weasley was standing, eating… something. Draco didn't even let his gaze linger long enough to find out. At the table in the center of the room was the person he had come to find.

Potter was sitting there, as if he was waiting for Draco to come down to him.

Self-aggrandizing prick.

Draco stopped at the opposite end of the table, barely daring to breathe.

Two.

Fuck, that hurt.

Three.

He took a breath and held it, releasing it slowly and taking control of the muscles in his chest again.

Granger threaded her fingers into his, her small hand pressed against him.

She didn't say anything, just held his hand until he caught his breath. Draco closed his eyes, not wanting to see the stain of ink on his skin.

Those crimson eyes were waiting for him the second his lids closed. He opened them back up, feeling as though they could see right into him if he stayed in that darkness.

"Fuck."

"Are you alright?"

Draco nodded and focused on her. Her crinkled curls, half wild and half flat from the pillow and her big doe eyes, searching his face for a sign. He had to keep his face still because any hint of what he was thinking and she would pick up on it.

Too bloody smart.

Sometimes he wondered how he had gotten away hiding his mark from her for so long. How could she have not known? Not figured it out?

Granger glanced down at his lap and her lips curled into a small smile.

Oh. That was how.

"Good morning," she said in her sexy little voice and Draco started to forget all about the scales and the eyes as her hand began to move up his leg.

"It's about to be." He smirked and slid his hand over her waist, intent on pulling her on top of him so she could—

A sharp cry and the deep sound of wings flapping tore his attention from Granger.

Draco's head turned sharply towards the bright window where… fucking hell—Calix was sitting on the ledge just outside, stretching his wings out to balance on the small slip of wood.

"Is that—" Granger didn't even get to finish her question before Draco had thrown his legs over the side of the bed and shot up, his long stride carrying him to the window in a second.

He nearly broke the latch trying to open it and Calix flew inside. There was no perch for him so he flapped awkwardly on the small table beside the bed, knocking the lamp over as he screeched again. Draco fumbled with his clothes, pulling his trousers up his long legs as Calix folded in his wings.

"Must be nice, to be *right* all the time." She could smell something sweet and rich. Not firewhisky, but wine. What *had* he done when he went… home?

Draco had always struggled to keep his distant demeanor after he had been drinking and tonight was no different. Even in the gloom of the dark kitchen, Hermione could see the strain on his face, the emotions lying just under the surface. She could only imagine the struggle he had gone through today. What it must have been like, going back and what it had cost him to leave again. Had… he had found his mother?

Had it been too late? Is that why he was drinking?

"Draco, what happened?"

He dipped his head, causing another lock to fall across his face. "Father's dead. Mum's gone."

"Gone?" What did that mean?

"I'm the only Malfoy left." Bitterness tinged his voice.

She reached up and touched his cheek gently, finding the skin there cooled by the night air.

Draco jerked back. "What are you doing?" he asked in a rough, guarded voice.

Hermione let her hand fall to his chest, resting on the dark fabric. "I want to help you."

His eyes turned hard as granite, jaw clenched as if he was biting back words he didn't want to say.

"You want to help?" Although she could smell the sweetened wine on his breath, it did nothing to take the edge off of his tone. Hermione looked up at him, biting her lip, and nodded. She'd taken care of him in drunken stupors before and even though she didn't *want* to, maybe tonight she would make an exception.

Or was she giving him another chance that he didn't deserve?

Draco's face turned to stone. No trace of any emotion; pain, fear, or love in his expression at all. Just cool marble, as white and distant as the moon behind him.

"Turn around and spread your legs. I paid the price, now let me get my reward."

Cold rushed down her arms in a single second. Then Draco was grabbing her, turning her around and shoving her down onto the table. His hand reaching around to fumble with the button on her jeans and roughly pushing them over her backside before the zipper was even completely down.

Hermione winced as his heavy boot kicked into her ankles, spreading her legs wider and he pulled his trousers open, metal clinking lightly as his belt moved. He pressed his palm in between her shoulders, keeping her in place.

She wanted to help him, she wanted him to feel better. After the whole day of going over and over the worst scenarios in her head, she was just *relieved* to see him again. Whole and unharmed. Hermione could only imagine what Draco had gone through today, what he had to face going back to the Manor.

If this is what he needed right now, then… then she wanted to give it to him.

Maybe it would make her feel better too.

Hermione looked at the stairs. Everyone had been asleep for hours and hadn't even woken up by Draco's exploration for food. It would be fast, at least, and then maybe Draco would feel better. She could help him sober up and… he could talk to her, tell her what happened.

"Silence the room," she whispered and watched a hazy mist fall over the doorway as the door swung closed. It locked with a deafening click.

Hermione reached down and tried to push her knickers down, but Draco was pressing her so hard against the table that any of her movements were restricted.

He didn't seem to care though and she felt him reach between her legs and pull her knickers roughly to the side, not even bothering to take them off.

"Draco—"

"Fucking Blood Traitor…" His words were slurred. Badly. "Everyone's gone, aren't they, kitten? Everyone but you. You still…" She could feel him moving behind her and Hermione shifted a little. "You still love me."

He gave her no warning before shoving two fingers into her and Hermione stifled a cry at the rough feeling of it. Draco worked them a little, but she wasn't ready for him and they didn't get far. Hermione gasped, pulling in breath and holding it in her throat as he stretched her and she tightened around him with a flinch.

Her breath cracked in the silence as it escaped her and Draco made a noise in displeasure as he pulled his fingers out. She heard him spit into his hand and then he was pressing them into her again.

This wasn't… like it normally was. Hermione closed her eyes, hoping that in a moment, it would start to feel better.

It didn't.

Draco gave up on getting her wet and turned his attention to himself. Hermione could feel his hand moving behind her and braced herself for what was coming.

Draco's hand pressed in between her shoulder blades with more strength than when normally held her down. Her ribs dug into the hard wood and Hermione squirmed a little, trying to alleviate the pressure.

Draco's expression softened a little and he kissed her again. "You need to get some rest."

"So do you."

He shook his head. "You were up at dawn. I slept until lunch."

"Lazy."

"Not when it matters." He smirked and began to move down her body again. "Lay back, kitten." He kissed between her breasts, over her stomach, past her navel. "I'll just lick you for a while. I want to be the last thing you think of before you fall asleep. I want you to dream of me eating your pretty pussy all night."

" *Draco…*"

Draco's left arm twitched, the movement stirring him even in sleep.

He could see scales, twisting and turning. They coiled around him, constricting his movements so he was staring into a pair of grey eyes, paler than his own.

He glared back, the muscles in his arm clenching as he wished for a wand in his hand to send a curse right in between those eyes.

The eyes turned black and he was staring into a skull. The scales around him tightened, cutting off his breath. Unable to move as the black pits turned into deep, bloody holes, a slit of a pupil cutting through them.

" *You pledged yourself in place of your father. Return.*"

Draco jolted awake. Coughing and gasping for breath against a closed throat. His efforts pushed his body up, disrupting Granger who had been curled up next to him, as he struggled to fill his empty chest with air again.

"Draco?" she mumbled quietly, pushing her tangled tawny curls out of her face as she sat up with him. "Are you okay?"

His head was pounding, his heart thundering in it and a low, bruised ache radiated up his arm and sweat broke out over his back, a single chilling bead ran down his spine. Turning his hand up, Draco's eyes landed on the scorched mark. It was moving, the snake twisting just like it had in his dream and the black eyes staring up at him expectantly.

One.

then covered it with his mouth, groaning as he pressed down on her hips to keep her in place.

She did her best to do as he asked and relax, but her body was singing with every touch of his tongue. Draco focused his attention on her clit, calling forth an orgasm without muttering a single word. She pushed her head back into the pillow and felt Draco heft her legs over his wide shoulders.

It didn't take long. She responded to him like she was made to. Hermione was gasping, her muscles tightening, and Draco showed no intention of stopping. As the pressure rose up in her, cresting and crashing, Hermione lifted her head and looked down her body.

Draco's eyes were shining, watching her with such intensity that the sight of them pushed her on, her body quaking and shaking as his tongue flicked over her, extending the riot of pleasure pulsing through her.

He emerged grinning, smiling, and licking his lips. His eyes were as bright, reflecting the light of the full moon from the window behind them when he said, "Now we match."

She couldn't help but laugh as Draco crawled over her. He reached back to pull his shirt off over his head and gently dabbed at her face, wiping off the worst of it before cleaning off the rest with a simple charm.

It was… tender and sweet and Hermione found that she enjoyed being taken care of and cleaned up by Draco. He hadn't done things like that last year, only enough to make sure no one knew what he had done with her and nothing about those actions had been… intimate.

He leaned down and kissed her. "I love you. You." Draco caressed her cheek. "And… I want you to be with you. You're… You're all I have left, Sweetheart."

She thought her heart might burst. She slid her hands up the side of his body, feeling his muscles tighten as she trailed them over his back. It was still smooth, one of the last places on his body that hadn't been touched by violence. Her eyes moved up to his forehead. The wound there had healed, barely even visible now and once his hair grew out it would be hidden again. It hadn't been a cursed wound, but she wondered if it had hurt more than the others because of who had given it to him.

"Your parents—"

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

"Draco…"

"No, Granger." His voice was unusually steely. "That's a hard line. I mean it."

The last thing she wanted to do was fight with him. Again.

A low grunt was his only response and Hermione was surprised when his hand moved up to her head. It spread out over the side of her face and pushed her hard into the wooden table. She could feel the cold metal of his ring pressing into her cheek.

Hermione began to feel a terrible, awful sensation creeping up inside her. This wasn't… this wasn't what it was normally like. It wasn't even like when they first started, with a clashing of hate and shame and bodies. This was… the opposite of that.

It was as if Draco had turned into the cold statue she had always described him as.

"Draco—"

He spread his hand out to cover her face and Hermione let out a little whimper. Draco merely grabbed onto her waist, and pulled her back towards him. She felt his hips press roughly into hers, pushing the table forward and making it scrape against the floor. Hermione closed her eyes tightly, waiting for the feel of him against her, but when it came her eyes flew back open.

Draco wasn't even hard.

He didn't want this anymore than she did.

As soon as the thought struck her, Hermione stiffened. She *didn't* want this. She wanted Draco, but… not like this.

"Draco, stop," she rasped out, her lips scratching against the surface of the table. "Stop!" Hermione cried out a little louder. "Draco—stop."

Did he… still need this? Even if he didn't seem to be enjoying himself, maybe he needed some sort of release. But, *she* didn't want this; not anymore. She wanted to help him, but this wasn't it. Hermione felt a tremor run down his arm.

"This is what I get," he mumbled, leaning heavily on her. "This is what I deserve." His voice shook, full of all the emotion he had held back.

Hermione whimpered, half in pain and half in… sympathy. She had worried all day about whether or not he would come back, she didn't even stop to think what he might be feeling when he did.

His father had died. Draco didn't have the best relationship with Lucius, but… that was still his father. And he had left to go to his mother and she was… gone?

His hand softened against her face, fingers clumsily tripped over her features until he was holding it, turning it back around so she was looking at him.

"Tell me you love me."

"Let me up." Her voice was tinged with fear.

Draco's hand tightened on her waist and she winced. As soon as she did, he pulled back from her.

Hermione felt nervous as she turned, trying to situate her half off jeans and twisted knickers back.

She blinked away hot tears that were trying to spring from her eyes. It wasn't just the bruised feeling between her legs, it was *everything*. The fact that Draco had been so absent during… *that* . Where had he gone? Why wouldn't he stay with her?

Hermione felt her lip tremble as she dared to look up into his face, pale and white and… expressionless.

Like he hadn't come back at all.

He had tucked himself back in, but his trousers still hung open. He wouldn't meet her eyes, staring down at the table he had just tried to fuck her over.

Because that is what it was.

And it never had before. Even that first time, up against the stacks in the Restricted Section, there had always been something… else. More.

"Did I…" He swallowed. "Are you hurt?"

She took a shaky breath and shook her head. She was sore, but not… not hurt. At least not by that.

He reached out with the same hand that had just held her down and touched her face, his thumb grazing along her cheekbone where his ring had dug into her skin.

"Please," Draco breathed, heavy with the smothering smell of wine. "Please tell me you love me, Her-Hermione."

She wanted to. She wanted to throw herself in his arms and tell him how happy she was that he came back and was okay and that she knew he would, but…

But why did he have to come back drunk and treat her… like that? He didn't call her a Mudblood, but he had called himself a Blood Traitor which seemed… almost as bad in a way.

She wanted to talk to him about this, about all of this. What had happened just now and today and what made him drink so much. She wanted to tell him how upset she was he left and how much she worried about him. She wanted him to hold her, kiss her, and make her forget everything that had happened today.

But she couldn't do any of that when he was drunk like this. There wasn't anything she could do for him tonight. Not anymore.

"Come on, let's put you to bed."

"Are you coming with me?"

Hermione sighed and took his hand. "Yes, Draco. I'm coming with you."

"Promise?"

beat, Draco's hands moved to her jeans and he had them unzipped before Hermione really knew what he was doing.

"Sit."

She sat on the bed and Draco pulled them off of her legs.

"I need to clean this—"

"No." It was the deep, commanding voice again. "I want it on you for this." He was pushing her back on the bed, making sure the pillow was supporting her head as he laid down. Draco climbed in between her legs, hands on her thighs, and pulled them apart.

"Oh you dirty girl," he said with a smirk. "You've made quite a mess down here in your knickers."

Hermione felt her face heating up under the warm come covering it.

"I love how sucking me off gets you wet." Draco's voice was a little softer now. "My perfect little slut."

Her knickers were sliding down her legs, past her knees and then off. Hermione felt the bed shift as Draco positioned himself between her legs.

He stroked her slit with a single finger and Hermione shivered under his touch. Draco chuckled and kissed the bruise on her inner thigh.

"Relax, Granger. I'm not done enjoying myself."

"What?" Hermione lifted her head and started to sit up.

Draco's hand was on her chest, pushing her back down.

"I'll clean you up when I'm done, but I want to watch you come with me on your face."

Hermione's whole body was shaking with anticipation. Draco chuckled and kissed the lips in front of him, teasing her as he licked without opening them.

"Just relax now, kitten." She could feel the words against her folds, his breath warm and cool at the same time. "Let me *really* show you that you're mine."

Hermione gave a high pitched gasp as Draco's mouth closed around the bruised mark on her thigh. She expected to feel his teeth bite into her, but this time she was gifted a soft kiss, light licks and sweet sucking until she felt the blood heat and rise underneath the bruised skin.

"Draco…" Hermione reached out and brushed her fingers through his short, silky hair.

"Hermione," he moaned and turned his head to continue the same actions against her slit. His tongue dove into her, lapping and licking. He eased it up to her swollen bud and

She could feel him growing warmer and expanding in her throat. Hermione softened the muscles in there as best she could so he could easily move in and out of her.

"Fuck, Granger, yes," Draco got out. "You're mine. You're mine. You're mine," he chanted with each thrust.

"Say it."

Draco retreated from her mouth, leaving her messed and gasping for breath.

"Say you belong to me. With me."

His cock was dark and swollen, looming over her face like an inevitability.

"I'm yours," Hermione said softly, throat too sore to summon much else. Draco groaned weakly, pumping his fist. "I'm always going to be yours."

If he squeezed her wrists much harder he was going to snap something. But Hermione knew he wouldn't; Draco had control, over himself as much as over her.

A thick drop of come landed on her cheek and Hermione went on, knowing what he needed because it was what she *wanted* to do. "I'm yours. Just yours. All for you, Draco."

Draco came over her face, covering it as she spoke. Some of it fell in her mouth and she let it slide down her tongue to the back of her sore throat, coating it as she stuck her tongue out to swipe up more.

Draco was panting, working his hand and draining himself into her open mouth.

"Tell me you love me."

Hermione's heart fluttered in her chest. "I love you. I love you more than anything. I'll always love you. I'll never stop."

Draco cried out as the final streams shot from him, warm and thick. Hermione hummed happily, keeping her head back so he could stare down at his work on her.

Draco let out a heavy breath. "You are the most gorgeous thing I've ever seen," he said in an awestruck voice. "Fuck, I love you, Hermione."

Hermione. It wasn't often he called her that and even rarer when he said it not in anger, but there were no silver shields over his eyes right now. Draco and Hermione; she could get used to hearing that. And this *was* Draco, her Draco, staring down at her with an expression of pure adoration.

Gently he let go of her wrists. Hermione whimpered and little as he took her numb hands into his and guided her to her feet.

Draco had been sated and the calm composure descended over him again. She was shaky on her legs, but that didn't stop Draco from carefully running his hands down her arms, massaging them slightly while he placed them at her sides again. Without missing a

She paused. What *exactly* was he asking? She searched his face, trying to figure out an answer.

He didn't look like he had been tortured or imprisoned. It looked like they had... cleaned him up. What deal had he struck in order to return to her? And why did he have to come back like this? Do that to her? Old feelings she thought were long gone mixed strangely with new ones she didn't quite know how to name and Hermione's head hurt from the stress of it all. "I'm tired. I want to go to bed."

She turned to go, but Draco stopped her.

"Hermione—"

She was wrapped in his arms, pressed into his chest, surrounded by him. Enveloped in his strong arms. She closed her eyes and breathed in the creamy parchment of his skin, his fine clothes soft against her face.

"I'm sorry." It was muffled, but only because he had his chin resting on her shoulder and his face turned into her hair. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I didn't—I…"

Hermione held him back, lightly placing her hands on his back, tucking them under the coat and resting her forearms against the long muscles of his back.

He pulled her in closer, arms locked strongly around her. Hermione felt everything, everything he had held back from her pouring forth from his embrace. This, *this* is what he wanted. And she did too. He had come back to her for this, because here, wrapped up in each other, was the only place they were truly ever themselves. That hadn't been him. That had been whatever he had to pretend to be today. She knew the difference, she had always known who Draco *really* was.

Hermione held him back, pulling him in close to her body until she felt the buckle of his belt pressing into her leg.

"...didn't mean…" he mumbled into her shoulder, "...won't hurt you."

She couldn't help it. She had spent the whole day fighting against the emotion tightening in her throat and now that he was here, and back, she could finally let it out. "I was so scared when you left. You were gone for so long."

Draco buried his face in the crook of her neck so hard she could feel his brows furrowing. "Me too."

Something cool slipped over her collar bone. Then Draco's large frame shook with a ragged breath. Draco was crying.

His arms wrapped locked around her, holding onto her as if she was the only thing keeping him on his feet. Hermione sagged under his weight, but bore it the best she could.

"It's okay. You're here. You're safe." She dug her fingers into his spine. "Be here, Draco. Be with me."

After a moment the sobs stopped. He stood back up, gulping down breath. His pale cheeks were wet. Draco cupped her face in his hands and bent down, pressing his lips to hers. It was less of a kiss and more of… well she wasn't entirely sure. But Hermione let him.

He needed this and… and so did she. Her emotions were storming inside her and she felt everything she hadn't let herself feel today all at once.

It was too much, all too much and she just wanted it to go away. Draco always quieted her mind when it got too busy, but tonight… tonight he was the reason it wouldn't turn off. Still, she couldn't fight the weak part of her that just wanted to wrap herself in his arms and let them find comfort in each other.

Even if it was just for a few hours.

"Come on," Hermione said softly as he breathed in the air she exhaled. "Let's go to bed. Okay? You'll feel better after you sleep."

Hermione led him by the hand up the stairs and to their room. She pulled his coat off his shoulders and hung it on the back of the door. He laid his mask and wand on top of the dresser, staring at them with unfocused eyes. Draco didn't bother to undress any more than that, just grabbing her hand again and pulling her down on the bed with him.

He tucked her into his chest, wrapping his arms around her and resting his chin on the top of her head. Once she settled in, he slid a large leg over hers and curled it around her, as if he was trying to pull her into his body. Make her a part of him.

She couldn't stop the strange feeling buried deep inside her. Was this wrong? Should she be sleeping next to him tonight? He was soaked in wine and lies and here she was, back in his arms.

Ron *was* a prick, but… it didn't make him wrong when he said she gave him too many chances.

Who else would she let treat her this way?

"I'm sorry," he murmured again as Hermione felt herself sinking into exhaustion. "I'm so sorry."

She uncurled her hands where they were clasped between their bodies and stroked his chest softly as a response, still feeling the sore spot where his ring had pressed into her cheek.

Draco turned his face down into the top of her head. "Please don't hate me."

"Open your eyes." Draco was staring down at her, mouth open and breathing heavily. "You want to get your throat fucked, dirty girl?"

Hermione felt a tightness coil in her and she squeezed her knees together as she moaned again, unable to form words.

"Of course you do," Draco cooed. "Because little sluts always want to get their throats fucked, don't they?"

He pulled out of her mouth and Hermione gulped down a breath. Her lips were sensitive as she licked them, already wet and watched Draco drag his fist up and down the length of himself.

She knew he wanted her to answer, to say it. It wasn't enough to show him, Draco had always needed to hear it too.

Hermione strained forward, feeling him holding her hands pinned above her head against the wall.

"Please," she panted. "Please, Draco."

"Please what?" He cocked an eyebrow up, enjoying himself.

"Show me that I'm yours."

His facial features shifted, ever so slightly, but the effect was instantaneous. Draco looked strong, powerful. Dominant.

Hermione whined as he lifted her hands up and crushed her wrists together in his hand. Her knees were just barely brushing the floor now. She was practically hovering, hanging there, waiting for what they both knew was coming.

Hermione opened her mouth.

Draco drove himself in, pushing past the tightness at the back of her throat and stretching it as he slid himself farther. Hermione did her best to hold her breath as the back of her head collided with the wall. Her arms felt warm and numb and she squirmed a little, knees scuffing the floor as Draco let out a long, grateful stream of expletives.

He was forceful, but not overly so; just enough that the pain mixed with the pleasure and saliva dripped down her chin to pool on the ground in front of her. Tears slipped from her closed eyes, but she made no movement of protest, she was doing this for him, with him. She wanted this as much as he did.

"Fucking take it." Draco's voice was raspy, as if he was barely able to form words. "Take my fucking cock, whore. Choke on it. Swallow it. *Love it.*"

She did it all, finding herself moaning along with him when she got the air to do it.

Draco's hips snapped quicker, losing any sense of rhythm or pattern and just giving into the need surging through him.

He slid smoothly into the controlled demeanor she loved so much. His face turned stoic, but deep in his storm grey eyes she could see something slithering. Only, she wasn't unnerved by it this time, but… comforted. Draco was still in here, her Draco. Hermione peered up at him and tried to fight against a smile.

"No fucking laughing, slut. Your mouth is for sucking my cock, nothing else."

A cool wave of excitement passed through her, making the heat in her lower stomach increase by comparison.

Draco tore at the button on his trousers, pushing and pulling them out of the way. Hermione ran her hands up his legs, stopping at his upper thighs while he grabbed himself and stroked his length quickly a few times. She was about to offer to do it for him when he dropped it against her face.

Hot and heavy, Hermione was overwhelmed by the feel of him from her chin up to her hair. She opened her mouth to run her tongue along it, but gasped instead when Draco gathered her wrists in his hands and pulled them up over her head.

He shoved them hard against the wall, pinning her in place with his growing cock in her face.

His pupils expanded as he looked down his nose at her, pushing her head back against the wall with his free hand until the tip of his cock rested on her lips. She knew he needed this, needed her on her knees for him as proof that she meant what she said. Hermione remembered how Draco always kissed her when he promised her things and placed her lips softly against the underside of his head, looking up at him as innocently as possible.

Draco's eyes glazed. "Suck it like you love it."

Hermione did.

She closed her eyes and leaned into him, knowing that Draco was holding her steadily by her hands, she let everything else fall away. She did exactly what he told her because she needed this just as much as he did. These times when it was just the two of them, indulging in each other, she was able to leave everything else behind. No more worrying about her friends, or making plans, or if they would all die tomorrow.

There was only this. Only him.

"Oh fuck, that's good," Draco groaned, rocking his hips in time with her movements, driving her on—faster, harder. "You do love it. You love being on your knees, having your face filled with my cock don't you, kitten?"

Hermione moaned in response, tilting her head back just a little so he could push deeper. He hit her throat and Hermione felt his hand tighten around her wrists.

Too tired to talk, Hermione merely moved her fingers against his shirt again, holding onto it. Draco sighed and Hermione closed her eyes against the sharp smell of alcohol.

She listened to his heart thumping in his chest. "I'll stop drinking. I'll be good to you. I promise," he murmured. "Forgive me. One more time. Just… one more time."

Hermione didn't answer, pretending to be asleep because… because she'd already made him a promise.

No more lies.

Draco woke up at dawn, staring across the room full of pale grey shadows with unseeing eyes.

Granger was nuzzled against him, where she had stayed all night. He had closed his eyes a few times, finding pockets of fitful sleep until daylight began to slowly filter in.

Draco slowly pulled his arm from around Granger and shook his sleeve back to see the mark of his Master burned into his flesh. He watched the snake writhe on his skin and the skull stare back at him with endless, empty eyes.

He breathed in, mouth dry and swallowed the sour taste of old wine still lingering on his tongue.

Or maybe, that was the taste of lies.

He wrapped his arm back around Granger, holding her tight to him again.

He hadn't been sure if he would ever get to do this again.

He had broken into his home through the conservatory, hoping to find his mother there, but instead ran into a battalion of masked Death Eaters who swarmed him, beat him, and dragged him through the halls of his Manor.

They dropped him at the Dark Lord's feet. In the fucking drawing room of all places. Immediately his eyes cut to where Granger had been on the ground then slid quickly to the spot Crookshanks' body had laid. His heart turned cold and solid, weighing too heavy in his chest and he felt it fall and… crack.

"Draco Malfoy," the Dark Lord spoke so softly it was almost a whisper. "How generous of you to join us."

Draco struggled to his knees, sitting back on them. He was restrained by magic, hands clasped behind his back while his nose bled freely into his mouth. He thought it might be broken. "You called, My Lord."

Those slitted red eyes stared down at him and Draco knew he was supposed to look away, but… couldn't. The Dark Lord had deteriorated since the last time Draco had seen him. He was ashen grey and his skin looked as thin and fragile as parchment. The black robes hung over him, covering most of his body, hiding it. Only his hands, which looked positively skeletal, were visible.

"You waited to be summoned to return? Tell me, was there a reason you stayed and instead of bringing Potter as you promised?"

Draco kept his face as stoic as he could. No one knew he had looked into Kenna's head and saw what his mother had done for him. He had promised Granger no more lies and, surprisingly, the Dark Lord had not included that particular addendum in the oath his Death Eaters swore to him.

Arrogant dick.

"The Order welcomed me in," Draco said plainly. Death Eaters hissed on either side of him. He ignored them as if they were flies. "I thought gaining Potter's trust and leading him straight to you might work since any attempt to… procure him so far as failed."

The Dark Lord watched him carefully and Draco emptied his mind, shoving thoughts and feelings behind white walls. It wouldn't do much if Lord Voldemort decided to enter his mind, but… he had to try.

"Why was the Order so eager to accept one of my Death Eaters into their ranks?"

Draco easily slipped a cruel smirk onto his face. "I beg forgiveness, My Lord." He bent his head. "I wanted it to be done when I presented it to you." He didn't like using Granger in his lies, but they all knew. This was the best way to keep her safe. "I got my hands on one of Potter's closest friends and I was… *training* her. To be used in your service."

A few dark chuckles sounded and Draco wanted to rip their throats out. He wanted to rip his own open for even letting the words slide past.

"Oh?"

"It didn't take long to break her down. They are weak, My Lord, but to build her back up to something I could use… I did not want to give you an unfinished product."

If the Dark Lord didn't kill him, Granger would.

"And what would one Mudblood girl do for me?"

Draco slid his hands down to her hips, grabbing onto them. "I never touched her. Or anyone. You know that."

Granger bit her lip again and Draco felt a familiar pull behind his navel.

Her eyes sparked like burnt cinnamon and he could have sworn a little smirk twisted on her lips. "Really?"

Just like the other night, she knew the answer. Granger just wanted to hear it again, the dirty girl. She always did like to hear all the depraved things he fantasized about in his head. Draco hadn't been able to give her what she wanted this morning, but now he could. "I spent all those nights in that big bed, alone, thinking of you in different positions, different outfits. Many of which didn't cover much." He grinned and glanced down at her body for a moment.

Her cheeks blushed in his hands as her nipples hardened through her shirt.

"But only you, Hermione." He called her by her name again. It felt strange, but… not… bad. Maybe he could do this, maybe he could change for her. "Only *ever* you."

Draco lowered his head, resting his forehead against hers.

Granger placed her hands on his sides and fuck, it felt good when she touched him.

"Let me be Hermione," she said. Said, not asked. "And then when we're alone, I'll let you put me in whatever clothing or position you want."

Oh, *shit*. He wanted to slam his mouth on hers, but she was smiling again and he didn't want to miss a second of the way her pink lips spread or how her cheeks lifted, or how her eyes shone and sparkled—looking at him.

"No more lies, Sweetheart," Draco said with a knowing look. "Don't promise anything you don't plan on delivering."

Grang—*Hermione* —held her hands out, wrists pressed together. The scarred *M* glowing silver in the moonlight. "You can hold me to that." Her big doe eyes went wide. "Sir."

Hermione didn't have to wait to fulfill her promise; Draco was already pushing her down to her knees, trapping her between him and the wall with nowhere else for her to go.

Secrets was down there?!" He was yelling. Again. "What is keeping that school from falling in on itself?"

Hermione opened her mouth and then shut it. What *was* keeping Hogwarts standing?

Ron shrugged. "Magic?"

Draco snarled at him. "I fucking hate you."

Ron pulled out his wand and started forward.

Hermione stepped in between them. "Stop. Stop," she ordered, turning her head so quickly her curls spun around her. "We need everyone in unharmed and all our healing supplies for whatever comes next." She couldn't forget that Draco had his wand back and couldn't take any chances, even if she might enjoy watching Ron get a jinx to the face.

"Hermione's right," Harry said as he came to stand next to her. "We don't have time to think of a new plan. We're doing this. Tomorrow."

A jolt of anxiety stiffened her spine and she saw it flash through Draco's eyes as well.

"It won't work."

Why couldn't he just… Ugh! Why did he always have to be so… so *him?*

"If you don't want to help, then fine. You can stay here," Hermione snapped.

"That's not what I said," Draco quickly corrected. "It won't work how it is *now*. If one tiny thing goes wrong, Gringotts will be swarming with Death Eaters. The Dark Lord himself will come if he thinks Potter will be there."

"What are you saying, Malfoy? Spit it out." Harry gritted his teeth.

Draco smirked, looking like he was *almost* enjoying this. "You need a distraction. Or an army." His eyes gleamed like freshly polished silver. "I can give you both."

Hermione's mouth opened a little. Was… was Draco… *helping?* And could he really do that?

"Well, not exactly an army, but I can give you a bunch of pissed off Muggleborns who probably want to fight back."

Goodness. The Muggleborns in the Department of Mysteries. There had to be… hundreds down there! And if the Death Eaters were busy dealing with a break in at the Ministry, a security issue in Gringotts might not even make it on their radar until they were clear of the bank.

It was… "Brilliant!"

Draco grinned at her and Hermione could not stop herself from beaming back at him.

"Do you two care to explain what the hell is so great?" Ron said sullenly.

Hermione didn't even care. It was perfect! She quickly explained her conclusions to Harry and Ron. Her brain didn't stop working just because she was talking and Hermione caught herself stealing glances to Draco.

He *was* trying. Freeing the Muggleborns wasn't just a distraction, it was also his way of making up for what he had done to them. He… he might not be able to voice the way he felt, but his actions showed it. Draco wanted to be better. No, that wasn't quite right.

He didn't need to be better, he just needed to be… *him.* Without the weight and expectations. Without everything else he had been draped in since birth. Draco was turning into the man he was supposed to be all along. And Hermione was *proud* of him.

So very, very proud of who he was letting himself be. Even if he did still shroud it in the air of arrogant reluctance.

But… if Draco was breaking into the Ministry, then he wouldn't be with them. If something happened, he'd be on his own.

Hermione shook the thought from her head and noticed that Draco was going over a few points with Harry. It was almost enough to shock her into silence. But… not quite. She always did have another opinion to share.

"I'll go with you."

Draco stopped talking and looked at her. She watched his eyes turn molten with possessiveness and goodness… It was enough that she felt a similar sensation of warmth rush through her, seeping into the deepest parts of her.

She felt her face heat and the corners of Draco's mouth pulled up.

"Hermione, no."

"Draco shouldn't go alone. It's not fair. And you can't tell me what to do, Ron," she snapped. "I'll go where I please."

She knew Draco would like that. And… she did too. Just a little bit.

The afternoon sun caught Ron's hair, lighting it up like burnt copper. "I just mean Harry needs you. More than me." She was surprised; this not being friends arrangement they had left her not knowing where she stood with Ron. "I'll go."

"I hate to say it," Harry said, glancing at Ron, "but he's right. You're the key to getting in. I need you as Bellatrix to access the vault."

Fiddlesticks. She couldn't believe she had forgotten about that part of the plan.

"Then it's settled," Ron said quickly, before anyone could protest. "Me and Malfoy will keep them distracted while you and Harry get the cup."

Hermione looked nervously over at Draco who twisted his mouth into a cold, cruel smirk. He opened it, about to say something when Harry cut in.

"A lot of those Muggleborns aren't going to be able to fight. We can't just… leave them there for Snatchers to get again."

He was right. They didn't just have themselves to think about this time and the Order didn't have the resources to hide that many people.

"I have a place."

Hermione stared at Draco who shifted a little uncomfortably.

"I'm not sticking them in another dungeon—"

"What about a private island?"

Draco had… *an island?*

He sighed, as if he didn't really want to share this with them. "It's where I went last summer. After… anyway, its unplottable by anyone other than the head of the Malfoy—"

Draco stopped talking suddenly. He turned pale, paler than normal and his eyes drifted down to the ring on his hand before cutting his gaze right to Hermione.

"My mother. That's where she is!"

Hermione clasped her hands to her mouth.

"Where?" Harry asked.

"Get a map! I can scry for it." Draco said quickly.

Hermione jumped up and ran up the stairs. She brought the whole beaded bag downstairs before summoning an atlas out of it with Bellatrix's wand. It wasn't getting any easier to use, it wasn't *hers,* but she could force it. And she did.

The large book landed heavily on the table. Draco was already tearing through it, finally stopping on a page that showed the whole of the Mediterranean Sea.

He pulled out his wand and sliced his hand open.

"Draco!" Hermione squealed, but he didn't stop.

Draco made a fist and squeezed his blood out over the page. Once it covered a large portion off the western coast of Italy he pressed his ring down hard.

Nothing happened.

Draco tried again. And again. Swearing, he started to move it around, covering more space.

He flipped a page, squeezed a few more drops of blood onto it and pressed his ring in again.

Still no island.

"Where are you?" he muttered angrily, almost punching the book and Hermione winced at the rough treatment of it.

He still hadn't sat back down.

"Just more hate," he added, as if she needed the clarification.

"Draco," Hermione adopted the voice she used to use when Harry and Ron got distracted by Quidditch talk and stopped working on their homework. "We've been over this a million times already and… it's the best plan we've got."

"It's shit."

Harry glared at Draco. Over the last two hours where they filled Draco in on everything they had done and planned to do, Harry's patience had worn thin. She knew he took everything about the horcrux hunt personally and Draco's constant grumbling that only a Gryffindor could think of a plan this insane was not helpful.

"Then you come up with a better one," Harry snapped. Draco sneered back at him.

Good Godric, were they *twelve?!*

"The plan isn't… bad," Hermione interjected and watched Draco's lips turn up into a smirk at her refusal to quote him directly. "It's not an ideal situation, but we've been in worse predicaments and gotten through it."

"Really? What have done that's *more* stupid than breaking into Gringotts polyjuiced as the woman who tried to *kill* you, by the way, and hoping that some fucking goblin doesn't stab you in the back while you search and *entire vault* for one bloody cup?"

When he put it like that, Hermione had to admit, Draco had a bit of a point.

As always, Hermione had a counter argument already bubbling in the back of her brain.

"When we went down the trap door in first year to stop… well we thought it was Snape, but it ended up being Quirrell, with You-Know-Who on the back on his head, but we had no idea what we were going to find when we got down there and we were only eleven at the time."

Draco's grey eyes stormed. "You did fucking WHAT? Salazar fucking Slytherin, they should make you all wear helmets once you're sorted into Gryffindor or something, this is ridiculous!"

"It was actually quite simple when laid out logically," Hermione explained. "Each room under the school had a different challenge and we were able to work together to overcome them."

She stopped talking and looked over at Ron who was staring at something in the sink that he was standing next to. He had sacrificed himself so they could go on. Hermione wondered if he would still do that, or if… things had changed that deeply too.

"You mean to tell me," Draco said slowly, "that there is a trap door under the school? And it leads to some sort of underground system of rooms? I thought the Chamber of

"They're alive?!" Granger exclaimed.

"Well, yeah," Draco said obviously. "You think the Dark Lord only wants to rule over Purebloods? There's only about two hundred of us in total. Not much of a kingdom if you ask me."

Draco watched as the three bestest friends in the whole wide world exchanged looks with one another. No no no. They weren't going to rope Granger in any more of their foolhardy plans. Not while he was still here.

Draco leaned forward.

"Enough reminiscing over the good times though." He glanced at Granger. "I showed you mine, now…"

Granger bit her lip and Draco's eyes darted down to it, focusing on how the pink skin glistened. She bit down, *harder.*

Potter cleared his throat.

Draco let out a low breath and looked away from her. If they were really about to let him into their secret club, then he needed to pay attention. And not think about how Granger's lips looked around his cock.

Fuck, that was a hard image to get out of his head.

"Hermione, why don't you start? You're the best at explaining," Weasley offered. Draco didn't miss the strange look that passed between them. What had happened there? Whatever it was… he liked it.

Granger shifted in her seat and turned towards him.

"Draco," she said in her sweet voice. She looked at Potter and then back at him. "Do you know what a horcrux is?"

Draco leaned his head back against the door and looked up at the ceiling.

"I hate… *every part* of this plan. I hate it. I hate it so much, there are no words to describe it."

Hermione sighed. She had a feeling Draco was not going to react well to this. They had spent most of the day going over everything and about an hour ago Draco had gotten up and almost stormed out.

"Did you lose your vacation home?" Ron laughed.

Draco ignored him, trying again on a different map and cutting his hand deeper.

"Draco," Hermione pushed his wand away from his skin. A large gash ran down the middle of his palm and she felt her stomach churn sickly at the sight of it. Of course the Malfoy's private island would have to be scryed for in blood. "It's… it's not there."

"She has to be. She has to!" he gritted, pressing his ring down again over and over.

"Please," she grabbed a cloth from the counter and wrapped it around his hand. "It's not working. We'll think of something else. Don't hurt yourself."

Draco clenched his jaw and Hermione watched the muscle tighten, running down his neck and hardening his shoulders.

"That bastard," he whispered angrily.

Hermione looked from Draco to the map and back again.

"Who are you talking about?"

"My father." Draco stood up straight, his eyes storming like a hurricane. "That's why he emptied the vaults. He fucking moved it."

Draco slammed the atlas shut, making Hermione jump.

"He moved my goddamn island."

Draco leaned forward. “I am,” he admitted. Granger squeezed his hand. “You want to know my sins, Weasley?” He reached into his pocket and pulled out the faded copy of *The Sacred Twenty Eight* . It thudded on the table and slid to a stop. “Here they are. Look all you want, but Fletcher’s name isn’t in there.”

Granger let out a small gasp.

Potter looked from the book to Draco carefully.

“They’re not going to kill him. Not yet.” Draco felt their fucking judgmental eyes on him. “They want to make an example out of him and anyone else they find like him.”

“What do you mean?” Oh now Potter cared? For the past year it seemed the only thing he was interested in was running and hiding. That, and whatever scheme he had dragged Granger into. Draco had told them everything, and so far, received no information in return.

“He was smuggling Muggleborns out of the country. He was a member of the Order, a shitty one, but funnily enough that doesn’t seem to matter when the Dark Lord is deciding your fate.” Draco swung his head towards the ginger prick. “Don’t think you can weasel your way out of this one by plastering that dumb look on your face.”

“I don’t put a dumb look on my face!”

“No?” Draco drawled. “So that is…” He waved a hand in Weasley’s direction. “ *Natural?”*

Weasley’s skin flushed bright red and Draco caught Granger’s warning glare out of the corner of his eye.

“What did they do with Mundungus?” Potter really had to ruin all of Draco’s fun.

“He smuggled Muggleborns so they handed him over to the head of the Registration Committee.”

“Umbridge,” Potter said, as if they didn’t all know already. She was in the goddamn Prophet at least once a week for the impressive measures her department had taken in such a short amount of time.

Draco was a large part of that.

“He’s in the holding cells with the rest of them down in the Department of Mysteries.” Draco sat back and ran his hand through his hair. He hadn’t gotten used to the length again.

“I’m sorry,” Granger piped up. “The *what?”*

Draco looked around to see them all staring at him like he had just spoken in tongues.

“The holding cells? Where the Muggleborns are being detained?” Did they… did they not *know?*

"What about you then?" Draco jerked his chin forward. "Why are you doing all this?"

Snape's dark eyes glittered. "My reasons are my own."

There was something in his face, a tiredness under his eyes and heavy brow that Draco… understood.

Even if nothing about this made any fucking sense.

He nodded. "Alright, *Professor.* How is this going to go then?"

It took longer than he thought it would to convince Potter that Snape hadn't betrayed Dumbledore. But Draco had been on that tower too. He had seen the pleading in the old man's face and maybe… it wasn't what any of them had believed. Weasley kept interrupting when Draco tried to explain what Snape had told him. Right when Draco was about to snap at Weasley, he noticed Granger looking down and picking at her hands.

He placed his hand over hers. She jumped when the cold Malfoy ring touched her skin, then, she took his hand in hers.

Weasley didn't fucking speak after that and Draco couldn't help but feel a little smug.

"So what else did Snape say?" Potter gritted out.

He didn't really want to tell them, but Granger was holding his hand.

So he did. He told them how when he walked back downstairs, Mundungus Fletcher was tied and gagged on the floor. How his eyes bulged out of his head when he saw Draco. How Draco felt sick when the man flopped around, trying to get away from him. How Draco couldn't tear his eyes away from the bound hand that was missing a finger.

And then he told him what he did next.

He *crucio'd* Mundungus and fuck, if he didn't enjoy it *just* a little. Making someone else hurt, so he didn't. And when Draco realized that… he let a little bit of the curse curl up his arm, heating his own blood until his hand shook too badly to hold his wand anymore.

He looked straight into Potter's eyes, holding that hateful gaze because he couldn't bear to see the fucking pity in Granger's anymore.

"You tortured him."

Draco didn't say anything.

"You fucking piece of shit."

"Harry…"

"He left him there, Hermione! He left one of ours behind to save his own skin!"

"I told the Order to get him out of the field," Draco murmured. Something was coiling around his chest, making it hard to breathe. "I fucking told you—"

"Murderer." Weasley glared at him.

Chapter Twenty One

Hermione said goodnight to Harry and handed him back her beaded bag. Everything they had was packed up and ready for tomorrow, so she had taken it into the bathroom with her when she showered and changed for the night. Hermione took her time, not knowing when she would get another hot shower. It was scary, thinking about going on the run again, but this time they were somewhat prepared.

And Draco was with her.

It wouldn't be as bad as last autumn. At least, that's what she told herself.

Hermione felt the heavy, silent tension at her back when she didn't turn around and tell Ron goodnight too. She wondered if he even cared. Or if he was relieved by her not talking to him. He was the one who didn't want to be friends anymore, the one who wanted to stop trying. It hurt, but she'd survived worse. Ron hadn't broken her heart, just bruised it a little.

Hermione pulled her robe tight around herself as she opened the door to her and Draco's bedroom. He was standing by the window, rubbing two fingers over Calix's head

and whispering something in a low voice. Somehow, she felt like she was intruding and waited until he lifted his arm and the owl soared out through the window to go in any further.

She couldn't help but notice there was a letter tied to the owl's leg. Who was Draco writing to this late? Who did Draco even still… talk to?

Before setting Bellatrix's wand down next to Draco's in his holster, Hermione locked the door and sealed the room with a silencing charm.

Draco sighed and ran his hand over his face. He scratched at the barely there stubble on his chin and Hermione watched his face fall back into stony stoicism.

"How-how are you?" Hermione cringed at her question. What was she doing?! Why was she nervous about this?

Draco glanced at her and the corner of his mouth twitched. "Me? Oh I'm fine. Except the Dark Lord has taken over my home, my mother is lost on some island no one can find, and I'm probably going to die tomorrow and be turned into an undead puppet to serve the man who killed my father for all eternity because he's apparently deathless, as you've all just told me today."

Hermione blinked. "Inferi are only enchanted while the wizard who made them is alive?"

"Fuck, I don't really know how it works." Draco threw his hands up. "There wasn't a q&a portion during my Death Eater initiation."

"Right," Hermione said quickly. "Of course there wasn't."

She looked down at the floor, hoping the heat in her face wasn't too apparent and pulled the neck of her robe closed with her fist so she would have something to do with her hands.

But she couldn't stop her mind from spinning and her feet from taking a very small step forward. "What was it like? When you took your…" Hermione nodded her head at his arm.

Draco was quiet for a moment. "Mine wasn't anything special. Normally we all gather and you swear your undying loyalty and pledge your life to his cause. You know, normal cult shit."

Hermione couldn't tell if he was being serious or making a joke.

"I had mine in the back of Borgin and Burkes." He rolled his eyes. "Just my family was there. My uncle Rodolphus kept sneezing because of the dust and knocked over some weird vase thing that was full of spider eggs. I watched all those baby spiders

Snape adjusted his collar. "What I've always wanted," he said, eyes going dark… *er.* Shit, that was creepy. "To bring down the Dark Lord."

His godfather waved his wand and the broken glass repaired itself, landing on Lucius' desk. The potion, though, had already soaked into the carpet.

"You… *What?"* Draco hissed, glancing at the door. What Snape had just said was treasonous. Traitorous. If Draco told the Dark Lord, Snape would be put to death. But Snape had shit on him now too.

They were at a stalemate.

"Everything I have done, and yes, Draco, that includes killing Dumbledore, was in service for the Order of the Phoenix."

Draco blinked stupidly. He pulled his wand out. "You're lying. You're trying to trick me."

"I assure you I am not. I tried to help you last year so I could guide you away from your mission." Bullshit. Everyone lied to him. Everyone was against him. "There was a time when I thought you might want… a different path in life."

Draco scoffed.

Snape's eyes pierced him. "You said you did not want to fulfill the Dark Lord's command."

In the hospital wing. After Granger left him and Draco… Draco didn't want anything but to get her back. He thought Snape had been trying to slither in and steal his glory, but… could have actually been trying to help him? Give him an out?

What would have happened if Draco hadn't been an asshole and done what he always did and pushed everyone away?

"Why? Why try and help me?"

"Your mother."

Draco's stomach swooped low. "Where is she?"

"When you failed to return after the wolf was sent to you, the Dark Lord thought to use your mother to lure you out. But your father," Snape smiled wryly, "ferried her away. Altered his own memories to the point even I could not retrieve the truth from him."

Draco stood stunned.

"You were not as clever. I saw the reason you returned, and the reason it took you so long to," Snape continued. "I assume you would like to go back to Miss Granger, and for that, you will need my help."

Draco was… unsettled by this. By fucking all of this. Snape? The Dark Lord's closest commander was a member of the fucking Order?

This wasn't his home and it never fucking would be.

Potter stopped in front of him. "Alright, Malfoy," he said, pushing his glasses up his nose. Why hadn't he ever got some that actually fit his face? Maybe he just liked looking like some sort of tragic hero.

Draco rolled his eyes. "Is it 'share time' now?"

He could hear Granger sigh off to the side. Potter pointed to the table, motioning for him to sit down. "That depends on what you tell us."

He'd told them his mind and memories had been searched. He told them the safe house would be compromised and they would need to move. Luckily, they still thought of him as two-faced and assumed that he had lied his way in and out of the Manor.

What he didn't tell them was what had really happened.

He'd woken up to the sight of jewel encrusted eyes staring down at him from the heads of magical beasts mounted on the walls.

He was in his father's study.

Draco sat up, expecting to feel pain bloom across his face, but… he was healed. His head still hurt like a bitch though. Who had…

"Drink this."

Severus fucking Snape shoved a medicinal smelling potion under his nose.

Draco glared at him and pushed himself up off the leather couch. "If you're going to poison me, you'll have to try a lot harder than that."

Snape did not look amused. "If I wanted you dead, I would have told the Dark Lord all about your little… *romance."*

Draco lunged forward, grabbing Snape by the collar and shoving him next to the head of a leucrotta. The potion crashed to the floor, surely staining the rug and for a moment, Draco expected to hear his mother berating him for it.

He shoved his forearm into Snape's throat. "You say one word about Granger and I'll—"

" *Unhand me."*

Draco snarled in his godfather's face.

"Draco," Snape coughed a little. "I have no intention to harm you."

Draco didn't let him up. He searched Snape's pitch black eyes, seeing… nothing. Was this what Granger saw in him when she looked at his eyes?

"Or her," Snape added and slowly, carefully, Draco pulled his arm back.

"What the fuck do you want?"

crawling across the floor while the Dark Lord told me how I was given the coveted task of killing Dumbledore."

"Oh." It was all Hermione could think to say.

Draco stuck his hands in his pockets. "After I made sure I got so drunk they couldn't take me out for what Bellatrix considered a celebration. I didn't want to…" He trailed off and ended his story with a shrug. "Doesn't matter."

But it did. It mattered to her.

Hermione took another step closer. "I saw you that day," she admitted. "We followed you. Harry thought that… that's what had happened, but I didn't believe him."

"You followed me?"

Hermione nodded. "You probably don't remember, but we ran into each other, at Madame Malkin's earlier that day."

"Of course I remember." Draco's voice was… well not soft, but… deep. Hermione looked up into his storm grey eyes. They were closer now. He had moved forward too. "You had your hair up and I remember thinking it would be so easy to grab it and pull you back towards me when you turned to leave."

"Oh," Hermione repeated, feeling her face warm again.

Draco blew out a sharp breath. "I thought I hated you so much." He shook his head, as if he didn't understand.

"You… didn't hate me?"

"Let's just say what I thought I felt for you doubled after you let me fuck you. Then doubled again the next time." Draco was standing in front of her now and Hermione had to tilt her head back to look up at him. "It went on and on, until…"

She could barely breathe, but found enough air to ask, "Until what?"

"Until what I felt wasn't hate at all." Draco smiled wryly at her. "You're the worst thing that's ever happened to me, Hermione Granger." She held her breath as adrenaline pumped into her blood making her nervous for what he was about to say, but desperate to hear it. "I fucking love it."

Bubbles rose up in her the same time heat sunk down, pooling somewhere deep inside her as the bubbles pressed around her racing heart.

"And I wouldn't trade away a single second of it. Not for anything or anyone. Not even to get this mark off my skin."

She looked down as Draco pulled up his sleeve, bearing the skull and snake branded onto him.

"He might have gotten my soul, but trust me," Draco smirked and blew out a low breath. Hermione felt a cool wave of mint brush over her heated face. "That was the shittiest part of me."

He reached his hand out, letting his fingers trail over the tie of her robe.

"Dont," Hermione whispered and Draco's fingers curled back into a fist. A fist, he slowly lowered to his side.

Draco looked away from her. "Right. I suppose I deserve that."

He glanced up at her, but his eyes caught on the spot where she had healed the bruise on her cheek. "It's probably all shit," he said softly, "to be honest with you."

"I meant, don't say things like that about yourself," Hermione clarified. "Draco you make mistakes. You make *a lot* of mistakes." She forced herself to hold his gaze. "But… I was wrong yesterday when I said you didn't try. You do. You have. All this time you've been trying. You've never stopped." Her heart was racing and she wasn't exactly sure why. Maybe because Draco hadn't looked away or even blinked in the last minute, he just stared at her, like a snake charmed by a flute.

"I don't stop." He looked up at the ceiling and Hermione watched his throat bob. "Even when I should, is that what you're saying?"

"You stopped last night."

Draco looked back down, but not at her and Hermione summoned her strength, urging herself to go on because… because she needed to say this.

And Draco needed to hear it.

"You told me that you needed me to tell you if it got too much and… I did. And you stopped. Draco, that's how this works. I… trusted you to do that and that's what you did."

Their relationship wasn't perfect. It wasn't even close to perfect, but it was theirs. She had given him so many chances in the past and each time, Draco had taken them. When he could have easily just walked away, when he could have left her, Draco always came back.

And she didn't want to leave him. A life without Draco would be a life half lived.

No one, *no one,* had ever made her feel like he did. There wasn't a person on earth that had hurt her half as much as Draco had, but at the same time, there wasn't anyone who made near as happy. Who made her feel more like herself. Only him. Only ever him.

Being with Draco was hard, but it was supposed to be. Love didn't come easy, it had to be fought for, bled for.

Begged for.

Granger looked up at him with her big, innocent eyes. Draco felt scared, more scared than he had when he was thrown at his Master's feet. He didn't know if he could do this.

But he would.

"Prove it," she whispered, almost as if she were scared herself. Of what this meant, of where this would send them. Or… maybe of what she was asking of him.

He'd never be the kind of man she'd deserve. The one she'd be proud to stand beside. He'd always be this; a fucked up failure. Someone who only hurt, only caused pain.

It was the only thing he was good at. Good for.

He could be this version of good. For her.

Draco took her hand and placed his wand in it, closing her fingers around the handle.

"For you, Granger. It's all for you."

The older Weasley and Frenchie left in the morning. They took Ollivander with them, who was looking much better than the last time Draco had seen him in the cellar. Draco stayed out of their way. That wasn't his family or friends and he had no desire to wish them well on their way out.

And he didn't want to face Ollivander again.

Still, the old man gave him an airy wave goodbye.

Granger walked them out and said her goodbyes on the beach with Scarhead and Weaselbee while Draco stood in the shaded doorway, waiting for her to come back in.

Yesterday Granger spent most of the afternoon talking to Potter, convincing him to let Draco in on whatever little scheme they had cooked up. Draco had tried to nurse his hangover with coffee and some pepper-up that he was pretty sure was expired, but didn't think things could get much worse than they already were.

That was until she came back to their room and told him that Potter had agreed, to an extent, to let Draco help. He didn't want to help. He wanted Potter to fail and die and Granger to fuck off with him and leave this whole bloody world to burn.

But he owed her. For everything he had put her through, he owed her.

When Granger and her friends came back in, the house felt… odd. Cold in a way he hadn't felt since… Well it didn't matter.

Granger looked him over before meeting his eyes once more and raised her brows a little. "Anything?"

"Everything."

For a few tense moments he didn't know if she was going to start yelling or crying. Draco just stood there, frozen in place. If Granger said she was leaving him, he didn't know what he would do.

That was a lie.

He knew exactly what he would do.

Draco glanced down at his wand, still in the holster by his mask. He quickly looked back up.

Granger was watching him.

Fuck.

Her eyes narrowed.

He picked up the hawthorn wand.

He couldn't—*wouldn't*—hurt her again.

But she was the only one he'd promised that to.

"You wanted me to fight. For you. For us."

She eyed him nervously.

"I'll do it." He took another step forward, stopping in front of her. It didn't matter anymore. He'd lost everything else. All he had was her. "You want me to fight on the front lines? Fine. Call another Order meeting and I'll tell them everything that happened yesterday. If this is what you want, if this will make you happy, then… I'll do it."

Granger sucked in a sharp breath. "Do you really mean that? You'll… fight with us?"

Draco's heart thundered in his chest. He had three days and he'd be damned, *more damned,* if he wasn't going to spend every fucking second of them with her.

He reached up slowly, giving her time to stop him or move away if she didn't want him to touch her. But Granger stayed completely still as his hand cupped her face; his thumb grazing over the small blemish he'd left the night before.

"You'll have to… show me. Tell me what to do," he paused and watched Granger's eyes go big, "but yes. I'll do anything, *everything,* Hermione," Draco breathed, "to keep you with me."

He rested his forehead against hers, breathing in the scent of vanilla and cinnamon and trying to block everything else out. Everything but her.

"Give me a chance to make this right. I want to. Please, I won't… I swear on Salazar's watery grave I won't fail this time."

And Draco, Godric knew, had done all of that. And he had never, *ever,* stopped.

If Draco could fight for them, she wasn't going to give up either.

It just wasn't in her nature.

"That's not all I did," Draco said solemnly and dropped his head. "I fucked up. I always do."

After all the talk about horcruxes and hunting them today on top of dealing with Ron, Draco, and Harry's personalities, all pushing and shoving against each other, Hermione was sick of moody men. She had spent her whole day dealing with them and she was tired of it. *So* tired of making everyone else feel good when she deserved to too.

"We're going back into the war tomorrow. *That's* what *we're* doing," she said, voice firm. "And I don't want to spend the rest of tonight pulling you out of a moping mood."

Draco blinked, obviously taken aback by her change in demeanor.

Hermione pushed on. "I want…" She took a deep breath, plucked up her courage, and pulled her robe from her body, letting it fall to the floor. "I want to forget."

Draco's eyes were scouring over her body, just barely covered by the thin, lace dress she had dug back out of her beaded bag tonight. It was as if his brain stalled at the sight of her, but after a few moments it kicked back into gear and those hazy eyes jumped up to hers.

His brow furrowed. "Forget?"

Hermione stepped forward, towards Draco and the bed behind him. "I want to forget about everything." She placed her hands on his chest, shivering as the cool night air penetrated the sheer fabric. "Everything but you and me."

Draco's eyes darkened and she watched as he tried to keep himself under control. "You don't have to do this. Not if you don't want to."

Hermione stopped in front of him, blinking her eyes as wide as they would go. "Do you need me to beg?"

"Fuck, Sweetheart…" Draco sank onto the bed behind him. "Don't tease me."

Hermione bit her lip to keep from smiling and pulled out the empty vial of the contraceptive potion she had been brewing alongside the polyjuice from in between her breasts.

"I'm not teasing you. In fact… I took this so you could…" She felt herself blush again and placed it on the table beside the bed, just to have something to do that wasn't looking into the molten silver eyes of the man before her.

"So I could what?" he breathed, barely whispering yet somehow his voice was still raw.

"So you wouldn't have to stop tonight," Hermione said in a small voice. "At all."

She had only long enough to watch his pupils expand, leaving his eyes as twin rings of silver before his hands landed on her waist, pulling her onto the bed and on top of him.

Draco's mouth collided with Granger's, his hands running over every inch of her he could get to. Hips, hair, tits, ass, pulling her further onto his lap and pushing that fucking little lace dress up around her waist.

Fuck. Shit. *Fuck.*

She felt *so* goddamn good.

He grabbed the back of her thighs, lifting her higher onto his lap and Granger's hands latched onto him, holding on. Her skin was warm and soft and Draco let his fingers wrap around to the inside of her thigh, to the bruised mark he had left there and pressed his fingers in.

Granger gasped. Her hands trembled on his shoulders.

Draco stopped. He pulled back and looked up at her. "We don't have to. If you're still…" He loosened his grip on her. "This isn't our last night together, Sweetheart. I'll make fucking sure of that."

They'd have at least one more, before his three days were up and… maybe more. Potter might indeed be the Chosen One, but he was still just a man. And men died all the time in wars. And if Potter died, Draco would have Granger in his arms, hauling her away, before the body even hit the ground.

Granger smiled just a little. "I know. And I told you I want to."

He leaned back against the wall, putting a few inches of distance between them. Because he needed it. Granger in that dress was distracting, to say the least, and he needed to think clearly.

He couldn't let anything cloud his judgment. Not again. Not tonight.

"We can go slow," Draco offered, sliding his hands back, resting them on her ribs.

Granger took a shaky breath and nodded.

"Kiss me."

Granger leaned down and pressed her lips against his. Slowly, Draco moved his to kiss her back, holding her in place, preserving the few inches between their chests as only

He glanced up only far enough to see her hands shaking and then looked back down. His hands were trembling too; the Malfoy ring glinting in the pale morning sun.

"I was *so* happy when I saw you in the kitchen. And then you… I know you're hurting, I can only imagine what you went through, but… it's no excuse, Draco. You can't treat me like… like your whore just because… you…"

This time, his guilty gaze made it up to her face. Splotched with red and tears brimming in each of her doe eyes.

"I'm sorry." His voice was hoarse and raspy.

Granger merely shook her head, chestnut curls falling around her face. "The thing is, I don't know if you really are."

Draco took a step forward. "I'm *so fucking sorry*. Sweetheart, please—" Draco reached for her, but Granger—*Hermione*—turned away. A chill ran down his spine.

"You don't try. You don't try to make anything right." Her voice shook and Draco felt his throat closing. "Goodness, Draco," she spun around, chestnut curls fanning out. "You're only sorry for the things that end up hurting you too!"

"I know." The words were as surprising to him as they were to her. "I fucked up. I *keep* fucking up. I… I don't know how to stop. But I want to." Draco's throat tightened. "I don't want to get pissed anymore. I don't want to yell at you or…" His eyes flickered down to the small bruise on her cheek. "I just want.." *You.* No, that wasn't quite right, not anymore. "To be with you."

Granger's eyes softened slightly, but she watched him carefully, trying to figure out if he was telling the truth or not. He didn't like it that she knew when he was lying, but now, he was counting on it.

"Why should I believe this time is any different? I can't keep forgiving you for the same things. I know there are always circumstances and I know that we are in the middle of a war with the world against us, but… I…" She faltered and Draco's blood stilled. "I can't keep wishing and hoping. I need…" She looked around the room and Draco realized he had never seen Granger confused before. "I need you to give me proof."

He rushed forward, but stopped short at her wary expression.

"I'll do anything, Sweetheart. Just…" Draco was having a hard time thinking. Breathing. Living. His heart was beating out of control, blood flooding his veins. He didn't know what to do. He was shattering, breaking apart into a thousand pieces and he wanted to give them all to her. "Tell me how to fix this and I'll do it. I'll do anything, *everything* you say."

"I-I'm sorry."

He snorted. "Why? I'm not. He was half gone ever since I got him out of Azkaban." Draco turned away from her. "Should have let him rot in there and…"

"And what?"

His shoulders tensed. He could feel her watching him. He hated it. But he didn't want her to look away.

"Should have taken you last year when I had the chance and just… fucked off."

"When you *imperius'd* me, you mean? When you took away my free will? Is that really what you want?"

Draco turned, exasperated. "Granger…"

"I think it is. Judging by last night, at least."

Fuck. He knew they would have to hash this out. He just didn't want to.

Because he knew how this argument would end up. He'd already lost it, last night, when he pinned her down against the table.

He just hoped he hadn't lost her doing that too.

"If you ever—*ever* —touch me like that again—"

"Granger, I'm—"

" *Don't interrupt me, Draco."*

He closed his mouth.

Granger took a breath and steadied herself. Whether she was shaking from rage or emotion, he wasn't sure. Draco felt his stomach churn sickly at the sight of it when he glanced at the small purple blemish he'd left on her cheek.

He'd done that. He'd hurt her, after all the times he swore he wouldn't.

Draco swallowed hard against the corrosive bile in his throat.

"You can't treat me like that."

"I know."

"You can't come here, *drunk,* and expect me to… perform for you."

"I know. I'm—"

"I thought I said not to interrupt me." It wasn't a question, but a warning. Draco dipped his head, unable to keep looking at the small, purple spot on her face. "I have put up with more than my fair share of things from you, Draco. I've had enough."

He didn't even breathe. He couldn't. The shame had turned his lungs solid.

"You left, yesterday, Draco. And I didn't know if you were coming back or if you were hurt or dead or…"

their lips moved. He felt Granger's mouth open and tentatively dipped his tongue in, pressing it against hers, giving it a little flick before retreating back again.

He felt her soften in his hands.

"What do you want, pet?" Draco breathed out, barely pulling away to speak. "What would make you feel good?"

Granger shifted on top of him, moving herself to sit right against his dick.

His cock throbbed against the warmth of her and Draco grunted, fighting the urge to grind it against her.

She surprised him by doing it herself. Granger leaned down and kissed him again. "I want to feel you inside of me. All of you," she whispered the last words and Draco's cock jumped in his trousers at the sound of it.

"Fuck, kitten. If you keep talking like that you'll make me come before I even get to fuck you."

Granger's hands dropped to his trousers and she pulled them open. "We can't have that."

He groaned as she pulled him out. "You can have anything you want."

He lifted her up only long enough for Granger to push his trousers over his hips and Draco kicked them off his legs, positioning her carefully on top of him again.

"You. I want you," Granger breathed out against his mouth while sliding her hands under his shirt. He watched as she pushed her hands up, running them over his scars as she lifted it.

His hair ruffled as the white shirt slipped over it and Granger leaned down, kissing his chest and… his scars.

"Oh God, Granger…"

Draco's head fell back. Her soft warm lips pressed tenderly into the dented skin where he had been cut open.

He damn near felt ready to come apart again.

Granger straightened up, reaching down between them to grip him.

"Easy, pet," Draco said in a rough, breathless voice as she slid his cock between her folds. Fuck, she was already dripping for him and he'd barely touched her yet.

"It's okay, Draco, I'm okay," she whispered and he felt the tight resistance of her entrance against his head.

Draco's fingers dug into her hips. "You're perfect," he mumbled against her lips. "But I need it slow too, Sweetheart. Or I'm going to come the second I'm inside you."

She licked her lips, letting a little moan slip out.

"You like that?" he rasped.

Granger's big doe eyes were locked right onto his. Draco stopped breathing.

"I love it." And she sank herself onto his cock.

Draco hissed, every muscle in his body contracting as she slowly pushed herself down another inch, almost making it halfway.

He spread one hand out over her back, steadying her and helping her balance while the other wrapped around the side of her neck, fingers diving into her thick curls and pulling her mouth back onto his.

He focused on kissing her because he couldn't think about what else was happening without losing control. She was soft and warm and her lips sucked and pulled at him. Granger moaned again when he snaked his tongue in her mouth.

"Fuck," Draco whispered weakly as she tightened around him.

"Is something wrong?" Granger stilled, thank fuck, and looked down at where the skirt of the dress pooled in his lap. "Am I doing it wrong?"

He had to stop from laughing. "No, Sweetheart," Draco pushed her hair back over her shoulders, playing with the thin straps holding the dress on her body. "You're… doing *too* good."

She smiled at that, bright and wide, and Draco's cock twitched inside her.

She made a small humming noise, pleased with herself. "I want more."

"Greedy girl," he chuckled, but it was cut short as she lowered herself farther onto his cock, slowly sinking inch by inch until he was fully inside of her. "Fuck yes, take it. Take it all."

Granger did as she was told and slowly started to rock herself back and forth. He moved with her, their bodies in tandem, and only when Granger's breathing started to quicken and she squeezed his legs with her thighs did he move his hands up from her hips, giving her free reign to move as she pleased.

The material of the dress was silky soft and barely there, hazily obscuring her body from him.

His fingers were light and shaking as he slipped the straps from her shoulders, letting them fall onto her arms as she surged forward.

"Draco," Granger gasped out his name.

He was cupping the undersides of her tits, pushing them up and out of the lace.

"That's it, kitten," he gritted as she clenched around him. "Fuck yourself on my cock. Go ahead, I'm going to play with your pretty little tits and when I'm done, I'll rub that aching clit of yours until you're *screaming* my name."

Granger turned towards him, eyes burning like cinnamon. There was a small purple bruise on her cheek and Draco's blood stilled in his veins at the sight of it. He had done that. The image of his hand covering her face flashed in his mind and Draco cringed.

"How about you start by telling me where you went when you left?"

"Home." Draco moved farther into the room, but kept his distance from her. She probably didn't want him anywhere near her after last night. His wand was still sitting in the holster on the dresser. "Do you want me to heal that for you?"

"Right now, I want you to give me more than one word answers."

"Fine."

Granger glared at him.

"Sorry."

"Are you?" she snapped.

Draco's head throbbed. "Fucking hell…"

She gave him a flat, unfeeling smile. "Well, we're up to two words now."

Draco turned back to the dresser and looked down at the metal mask laying there. It was freshly polished and he could see his own reflection staring back at him.

It was warped and wrong.

"I am." His mouth was dry, but he went on. "I'm sorry I left like I did and I'm sorry that I… I'm sorry I came in drunk like that."

"I thought we were past this," Granger said softly. "I was actually hopeful that things were changing."

His spine sagged. "Me too."

"Then…" She looked flustered, upset. Angry. *"What happened?* You ran off without even talking to me. I spent the whole day worried that you were being tortured or de—" Their eyes met and Draco had to look away. He didn't want Granger to think of him like that, rotting and ruined. "Anything could have happened to you."

Draco couldn't meet her eyes. He just… couldn't.

"What *did* happen? Did you… find your—"

"I told you she's gone."

He felt Granger's eyes watching him carefully.

"My… He hid her. Or… something like that. They don't know where she is." It was for nothing. He had done all of that… for *nothing*. "Got himself killed over it too. Useless fuck."

Draco spun the Malfoy ring around his finger as something to do so that his hands wouldn't shake.

Potter looked him over and Draco straightened himself to his full height. He was a little surprised that Potter hadn't attacked him on sight, after all, that's what his side had done.

No. Not his side. Draco didn't have a side anymore. He just had Granger.

He hoped.

It would be easy to knock Potter out, haul him outside and disapparate before anyone else was even awake. All his lies would come true if he handed over Potter.

He'd have everything he ever dreamed of; the glory, the prestige, the place in the world where he meant something.

But he wouldn't have her. He could drag Granger kicking and screaming back to his Manor, but she'd never be *his* again.

If only her precious Chosen One would kick the bucket in the next three days, everything would be solved. Unfortunately, he looked like he had a little fight left in him.

Potter had Granger's wand in his hand. At least he was still casting his own spells.

"What was he like?" Potter didn't have to elaborate. Draco knew exactly who he was talking about.

"Looked like something Granger's furball had choked up." Draco watched Potter's expression change from guarded to almost… Gross—almost fucking friendly.

"We'll talk, but I think you need to make things right with Hermione first."

"Don't tell me what to do with my girlfriend, Potter."

He shrugged, as if Draco's abrasiveness didn't bother him anymore. Or maybe he was just tired. "I'm saying that for her, not for you. She needs to know where you and her stand."

What the fuck was he talking about? Stupid scar probably left him half lobotomized. Yeah, that would explain a lot. So why did Draco feel like he was the one confused?

"Fuck off, Scarhead," Draco snapped and brushed by Potter, but didn't knock into his shoulder. He told himself that it was because his arm still hurt.

It was a legitimate reason. Or maybe… he just didn't care that much anymore.

When he walked back into the bedroom Granger was awake and dressed, perched on the edge of the bed.

She was picking at her hands in her lap, not looking at him. "Is there anything you want to tell me?"

Draco didn't have it in him to fire back a sarcastic remark. "What do you want me to say?"

"Oh God, Draco," Granger started moving a little faster, "Yes. Please, yes."

Draco rubbed his thumbs over the lace covering her nipples, teasing the pink peaks with gentle grazes that turned into soft circles until Granger was repeating the pattern he took around her nipples with her hips.

The muscles of his lower stomach tightened and his hips involuntarily jerked upwards. Granger threw her head back, toffee and caramel colored curls falling down her back. Draco drank in the sight of her, gauzy lace slipping down over creamy skin and tits moving with each roll of her hips, driving his throbbing, thick cock deeper and deeper into her tight little pussy.

He couldn't stand it. He needed more of her. Draco pulled the lace cups down over her tits, freeing them and made a low noise of need as they bounced in front of his face. Granger sucked in a breath, eyes flying open just as he wrapped his strong arms around her and pulled her flush against his mouth, sucking one of her nipples into it and lavishing it with his tongue.

A high squeaking noise escaped her, and Draco waited until she pushed herself back onto him before switching to the other tit, and thrusting his hips up into hers.

"Yes, oh goodness, yes, Draco!"

He moaned against her skin, kissing, sucking and just barely latching his teeth around the pebbled bit of flesh in his mouth. Granger rode out his thrusts, alternating between meeting him and squeezing him as he pushed himself up into her, faster, quicker.

Her hands were in his hair, holding him to her as she tightened until the pressure was almost enough to make him burst.

"Touch me," Granger breathed into his ear. "I'm so close. Please, Draco… touch me and… talk to me. I want to feel every inch of you in me when I come."

Draco's balls tightened and he had to hold himself back from spilling into her warmth as she whispered probably the hottest thing he'd ever heard in her sexy little voice.

"How can I refuse?" he said, voice rough and raw. He wrapped one arm around her, lifting her just a little as the other moved in between her thighs, feeling the heat and moisture already waiting for him. "When my pretty little whore begs me so sweetly?"

Granger's shoulders caved forward, something between a moan and a gasp slipping out of her pink lips as Draco wound the same circles he had on her nipples over her clit, swollen with excitement.

"Is this what you wanted? My cock filling you up and me rubbing your slutty fucking clit?" He flicked his tongue against her nipple.

"Yes! God, Draco, yes I want it. I want this forever."

"I'd keep my cock in you for the rest of my life if I could," he grunted, pushing himself into her so far that Granger raised off his lap a few inches. "I'd only ever take it out so I could lick your sweet pussy and make you come on my tongue like the dirty girl you are."

Granger was whining, face flushed and eyes as dark as melted chocolate. " *Your* dirty girl," she panted. "You're the only one that makes me feel like this. The only one who can touch me—oh GOD!"

Draco had started rubbing her clit faster, putting a heavy pressure right on it and feeling the reward of his actions as her cunt clamped down around his cock.

"That's right, Sweetheart," Draco growled. "Tell me this pussy is mine."

"It's yours," she whimpered.

"Tell me I can have it."

"You can have all of me," Granger looked half wild, the onset of her orgasm rising up in her and making her shake on top of him.

Draco gritted his teeth, swiped his thumb around her clit before returning to the soft nub and pushed himself fully into her, holding her down on him while she shook.

"Tell me you want me to fill it up. Tell me you want me to come in you."

Granger's head fell onto his shoulder, her curls slipping over his face and smothering him in the sweet scent of her. Her body was vibrating, legs squeezing his thighs and hands clawing into his skin as she gasped, mouth open and pressed into one of the scars on his chest as he fucked himself into her, making her orgasm last as long as he could.

"Draco…" she said weakly, when reason began to return to her.

He could feel a thin layer of cool sweat breaking out on his skin. She was so warm, so tight, so fucking…

He felt drunk off her. No, not drunk. Better than drunk, because firewhisky didn't burn half as hot as Granger. *Hermione.*

His girl, his *only.* His arms closed around her, holding her to his chest as he fucked himself up into her.

"Beg me for it, pet," Draco forced out, pressure building in his spine. "Let me hear you beg for my come like a good little slut."

Granger's lips moved, kissing his scar again.

"Fuck, *please."* He wasn't going to last much longer, not this deep inside her. Not knowing what she was going to let him do to her. "Please, Hermione, beg me. Beg me. *Beg me."*

His thrusts were starting to become uneven, the measure of control he kept over himself slipping away.

"He is loyal to you." Snape bowed his head, a curtain of black, oily hair falling into his face.

What the hell was going on?!

Draco looked up and met the same bloody eyes he had seen this morning. Only this time, they were real. This was all very real and… happening.

"Heal him. I do hate to waste pure magical blood. But I will, if I must."

He was going to… live?

"You promised me Potter. You have three days."

Draco had spent the first hour of his first day just laying here with Granger. Part of him wanted to spend the next three days in bed with her, doing nothing but proving to her again and again how much he loved her.

But after last night he wasn't sure she'd let him touch her.

He had been a drunken wreck when he came back last night. He only remembered bits, but… it was enough.

He slowly pulled his arms from around her, making sure she was undisturbed and slipped out of their room to try and clean himself up in the bathroom.

He could smell the stale wine hanging on his uniform and when he splashed water onto his face, it did little for the dull thunder inside his skull, but he supposed he deserved that. He watched a long silver lock of wet hair fall in between his storm grey eyes, a shade darker than his father's. Especially now that they were dull and glazed.

Draco looked away from the mirror as quickly as he could.

Halfway down the hall Draco stopped. Potter was standing outside his door, waiting for him.

"You're back."

Draco bit his tongue against the sarcastic remark he wanted to spit out. Obviously he was back. So glad the leader of the resistance was so keenly aware of his surroundings.

"I left her once. I'm not doing it again."

And once Saint Potter was up in orphan heaven where he belonged, Draco would have Granger all to himself again.

Potter tensed. "If you run again, don't bother coming back. This isn't a vacation spot you get to lounge around in. If you're here, you're with us."

Draco clenched his jaw and said through gritted teeth, "I know whose side I'm on."

"You sure about that, Malfoy?" Potter nodded at Draco's mark.

Cold anger seeped into him. "Do you think I'd be standing here if I wasn't?"

"I tire of excuses. Search his mind. If he's lying, kill him."

Why wouldn't Lord Voldemort do it himself? Draco glanced at him as Snape unsheathed his wand. The Dark Lord was too weak, that's why. He couldn't do it.

Is that why he had Draco kill Theo? How long had he been like that? Shit… he was worse off than Potter.

Draco tensed as Snape stopped in front of him. "This is going to hurt," he sneered.

Draco swallowed back his blood. "Do your worst."

Having someone else in his head made Draco feel like he was going crazy. Snape was thorough, efficient, and above all, quick. It wasn't hard for him to find cracks in Draco's marble walls and from there exploit them. Draco did his best to push back, but Snape struck with a ferocity Draco hadn't planned on.

He could see flashes of Granger behind his eyes. There was no hiding the truth, Snape saw it all. But he turned from the more explicit memories, instead, sorting and sifting through the recent ones of Draco baring his heart to Granger, asking her to run with him, and telling her what she meant to him.

Draco was glad, in a way, that in the last few moments of his life he at least got to see her one last time. Then it hit him. He was going to die and then serve the Dark Lord as an inferius. His Master could make him kill Granger. Kill his mother.

He had failed. Everyone.

Pain blossomed inside his skull as Snape picked his way through rubble, tossing aside things of no interest and focusing on the safehouse, what Draco had told the Order, and… Potter. Snape spent a strangely long time sifting through Draco's memories of Potter.

He tried to think of Granger. Of her big doe eyes and tawny curls. Of how her lips moved when she said she loved him. If he was going to die, he wanted her to be the last thing he saw.

Snape shoved them away. " *Fool.*"

Draco collapsed as Snape retreated. His nose was bleeding more than before and he felt lightheaded. Having Snape invade his mind and pick it apart had left him dizzy and disoriented.

He wondered if it would hurt, turning into an inferius. And if he'd feel anything once he was. Draco didn't think death would be able to make him stop loving Granger.

Draco waited on his knees for the verdict he knew was coming.

"He tells the truth, My Lord."

What the *fuck?*

Granger blinked her big eyes up at him. "Draco," she practically *purred* his goddamn name and Draco groaned at the sound of it. "Please come for me. I've waited so long to feel this, feel you, in me. I want it. I need it."

"Oh shit!" His muscles contracted.

"Come for me. Come in me," she whispered in his ear. "It's yours. Make it yours."

He couldn't even form words, all he could do was gasp and groan and hold her to him as he erupted inside her, sending out steady streams of thick, hot come into the tight, wet heat that surrounded him.

He felt her clench him again and Granger screamed out his name, her body responding to his by gracing him with another one of her beautiful orgasms to squeeze his cock while he gave everything he had to her.

His balls still hadn't loosened completely and a slow mixture of them were leaking out over them when Granger sat up to look at him. Her curls stuck to the side of her face, wet with sweat and her cheeks were flushed and warm. He took her face in his shaking hands, bringing it down to meet his lips again.

His body gave a few more convulsions as he kissed her, using his mouth to tell her everything he couldn't say. What he didn't know how to. Because how could what he felt *ever* be made into words?

Granger smiled down at him "I think… I think I left my body there for a moment."

Draco's thumbs grazing over either side of her beautiful face. "No, you were in there. I know, because I was in there with you." She laughed a little, soft and light. Draco grinned and pushed his hips up again. "Still am."

"Oh!" Granger yelped and grabbed onto him again, tightening around his slowly softening cock and making it pulse for her.

Draco would never get enough of this feeling. Of her.

He relaxed, leaning back against the cool wall and trailed his hands down her arms. "How do you feel?"

He had gotten faster and a bit rougher, towards the end, and wanted to make sure that it hadn't been too much for her. His cock and come were still buried in her and he was loath to let them out, but if she needed him to, he would.

Granger looked at him with her brown doe eyes. "I think this is the best I've ever felt."

They laid on the too small, lumpy bed; Granger comfortable and smiling sleepily in his arms and Draco… Draco had never felt like this. This happy, this… at peace. It almost didn't feel real, but everytime he thought he might have fallen asleep and dreamed this, Granger would let out a sated little sigh and snuggle closer to him, reminding him that she was here and *his*.

Clever little witch had brewed that potion in secret, not even giving him a hint that was what she was working on all that time locked up in Potter and Weasley's room. Well, that and the polyjuice she was going to take in the morning.

Daybreak would be here all too soon and tonight would be over, but still Draco didn't want to close his eyes. Because when he did fall asleep and dream, it wouldn't be this good. He would give anything to have this, forever.

And he was. Tomorrow he was going to wake up and… Salazar help him, he was going to fight alongside Ronald fucking Weasley. For her. It was all for fucking her.

And goddamn it, she was worth it.

Didn't mean he had to be happy about it, or had to be pleasant during it, just that he had to do it. And then tomorrow night, they would do this again.

It was almost enough to make him look forward to tomorrow. If he didn't have to watch her disappear with Potter in the morning. He still wasn't happy about that, but… he had to let her be her, right? That's what she wanted. What she needed.

Draco understood that.

More than she would ever know.

Or… maybe she would. She was brilliant after all, maybe… maybe she had known this whole time. Known what he needed because it was what she needed too.

"Draco?"

"Yes, kitten?"

She smiled a little. And so did he. He couldn't help it when she looked at him like that.

"I want to ask you something, but I don't want you to get upset."

"Pretty sure I can't be anything but satisfied right now," Draco said lazily.

"I mean it."

"I know you do."

She sat up a little, balancing on her arm. Draco watched the way the now loose gauzy material moved over her perfect little tits. Next time he wanted to come on them.

No, in her again.

Draco didn't even flinch. "She would have led us straight to Potter, if my aunt hadn't almost undone all the work I had accomplished. But I was able to… convince them that I was changed. That I cared for the girl. Potter has alway had a weak spot for love."

"LIAR!" Bellatrix screeched from his left.

The Dark Lord frowned, lines in his face growing deeper. "Bellatrix has relayed the events to me many times and allowed me to see them for myself."

" *Traitor! For her?!*"

" *I said to get the fuck off my girl.* ***She's mine."***

Draco straightened his neck, hoping it would come off as confident. "Then you saw what she almost did. How she almost killed my pet project because she could not control her maddened bloodlust."

"He *lies* to you, My Lord!" Bellatrix stepped forward and Draco laid eyes on her for the first time. His countenance almost slipped. Here she was, the one who had marked Granger. The one who had killed Crookshanks. Draco let his rage slither into his lies.

"You nearly lost us Potter, you crazy bitch!" He spat blood in her direction. He turned back to his Master. "I said I would bring him to you, would I not? And I had him, lured him in with the girl. It was Bellatrix's *recklessness* that allowed them to escape!"

Bellatrix's eyes widened until they looked like they might pop out of her head altogether. "He turned Blood Traitor for that girl! You saw what he'd done to her!"

Draco's jaw snapped shut. Granger had been covered in marks from their morning in bed and the lace dress was as exposing of his intentions as it was of her body.

But that was the problem with these Death Eaters and their black and white view of the world. But Draco saw everything through grey eyes.

He smirked again, licking his bloodstained teeth. "Can't blame a man for wanting a taste of something sweet."

More laughter and Draco glanced around, trying to remember the faces of the people he was going to tear apart. The loudest was his uncle Rabastan.

"Ha! You are your father's son!"

"I am *no one's* son," Draco snarled. He swung his head back around to face the Dark Lord. "I assure you, my loyalty has *never* wavered."

The truth.

Draco let it shine in his silver eyes.

"We shall see," was his Master's hissed response. "Severus."

With a wave of his hand, Draco was allowed to get to his feet. He wiped the blood off his face as best as he could as his godfather approached him.

There was a boy about eight or so still crouched in one of the cages. Draco grabbed him, hauling him out and shoved him towards the stairs. " *Get out.*"

"Xavier!" a woman shouted and ran towards the boy, wrapping her arms around him and pulling him away from Draco.

He didn't get the chance to ask if she had a portkey because someone had thrown a punch right into his gut. Even with his dragonhide brigandine, it knocked the air from his lungs and Draco doubled over and sagged against… Dean Thomas.

Thomas pushed him back against the wall.

"That's for sticking us in here," Thomas shouted and Draco saw his palms were badly burned, probably from that asshole guard sparking the bars when he was bored. Draco couldn't help but notice Thomas was wandless.

How many others were still here unarmed?

"Yeah," Draco coughed and straightened up. "Well now I'm letting you out. Let's call it even, shall we?"

Thomas stuck his nose in Draco's face. "Not by a long shot, Malfoy."

But his hands left Draco's robes and he shoved Draco back as he took off into the melee again.

The plan had gone to shit, which wasn't that surprising, seeing as it was a shit plan to begin with.

Another Death Eater raised a Muggleborn man into the air, higher and higher until Draco couldn't even hear him screaming anymore.

He said he would give Granger a distraction and no one could say he hadn't delivered. It wasn't two seconds later when the first group of Muggleborns were pulled away by a portkey. At least something was going right.

But as more Muggleborns disappeared, it was easier for the Ministry guards and Death Eaters to narrow in on the ones still there.

A few broke through and ran up the stairs, Draco was about to follow them, try and get them to the surface when he saw Weasley's disgusting red hair out of the corner of his eye.

Weasley's wand was at his feet and he was getting his freckled ass handed to him by McNair.

McNair had Weasley pushed against the bars and was turning his face into one bloody bruise with hit after hit.

"Draco!" McNair boomed. "Caught this little shit helping them out of the cells. Looks like one of Weasley's brood." McNair hauled Weaslebee up and turned his face so Weasley's bloodshot eye met Draco's. "Bit hard to tell now though!"

McNair was laughing, but Draco couldn't stop staring at Weasley.

How long he had dreamed of this; Weasley weak and defenseless and completely at his mercy, like Draco had been last year in the Room of Requirement.

"M-Malfoy—" It was more of a garble than a word, but it was still his name.

Draco clenched his fist around his wand, feeling the signet ring tighten around his finger.

McNair hit Weasley again and Draco watched blood dribble over his chin. "Mal… Malfoy…" Weasley huffed. "P-p-please."

He thought about what Granger would say. She'd be screaming, begging him to help if she was here.

Draco ground his teeth together.

"McNair."

The large man stopped and turned, fist held in front of Weasley's face.

Draco stepped forward, and picked up Weasley's wand from the ground. He saw the relief in Weasley's bleeding eye.

Yeah, Brown liked the stupid ones all right.

Draco held out Weasley's wand.

To McNair.

"You're a Death Eater," Draco hissed. "Act like it."

The hopelessness sinking over Weasley's fucked up face was… sublime. Draco was smiling, trying to imprint the look of it into his memory so he could play it back again and again.

"You traitor!" Weasley bellowed and fought helplessly against McNair. "She'll never forgive you for this!"

Draco's mouth curved into a cruel smirk. "I'll tell her you died a hero."

"Fuck you!" Weasley shouted as Draco turned, sliding his mask in place. He hated leaving, hated that he couldn't stay and watch as Weasley was beaten and tortured. Hated that he couldn't do it himself. Hell, he could feel the curse heating in his arm already.

He didn't even think he needed his wand to cast it. It felt… like a part of him by now.

Draco wanted to watch Weasley suffer under it.

But there was something even better than that waiting for him topside.

Anyway, *someone* had to help the rest of the Muggleborns get to the surface and since Weasley, the great big hero, was otherwise occupied, Draco had to see the plan through. If Weasley somehow got away from McNair, he'd have to fight for every step to the surface whereas Draco could saunter his way up there without a single person stopping him. Being a Death Eater, *he* could get the Muggleborns out. Weasley was dead weight.

So who was the real hero then? The one who died needlessly for the cause, or the one who actually accomplished what they had come here to do?

And if Granger wanted to thank Draco on her hands and knees for risking his life and tell him that he was *her* hero, well, all the more reason to save as many as he could.

Lake water was still dripping down Hermione's curls when she and Harry appeared in the woods near the small pond. It looked so different now; no snow or frost covering the forest floor and the trees were so full of bright, green leaves, they blocked out much of the sun, leaving only puddles of golden daylight scattered around the clearing.

Harry looked at his watch. "Come on, Ron," he muttered under his breath.

Hermione looked around, hoping to see white blond hair in between the trees. She gripped Hufflepuff's cup tightly in her hand.

They'd done it. They'd gotten the cup. It hadn't *exactly* gone according to plan, but Hermione hadn't really expected it to. But they hadn't seen a single Death Eater as the dragon broke through the floor under Gringotts and carried them out into the cloudy London sky.

That meant they had been busy elsewhere. That meant that Draco and Ron's plan *had* gone as it was supposed to.

Maybe it had worked *too* well.

Oh dear. Oh God.

Draco.

Harry started pacing. "We need to get to Hogwarts."

"I know," Hermione said impatiently, biting her lip as she looked around the empty woods again.

stream forward. "They weren't supposed to know until *after* we got them all out. We have to get them upstairs now! This place will be crawling with Death Eaters soon!"

The door at the other end of the hall opened and three guards stormed in. The Muggleborns started screaming, pushing and shoving as the guards pulled out their wands.

Draco raised his and they stopped for a moment, confused by his Death Eater robes. He used this to his advantage, sending ropes to snake around them, pinning their arms uselessly at their sides.

Some of the Muggleborns had stopped to watch.

"GO!" Draco shouted as harshly as he could and they jumped, running towards the opposite door.

As it turned out, Draco's assumption of "soon" had been an understatement.

Weasley had passed out wands and portkeys as best he could, but there were so many of them, more than they had accounted for.

They didn't have enough portkeys for everyone.

And the Death Eaters had arrived, pushing into the narrow hallway and lighting it up with curses of every color.

It was pandemonium.

Draco felt his chest seize, the chaos of the battle was overwhelming and he wanted to pull on his mask again, just to feel any measure of separation from it. But he'd come here to help, not to hide.

Spells flew in every direction. Draco saw bodies lying on the ground, Muggleborns, Ministry workers, and Death Eaters alike. It was impossible to tell who was winning and maybe that was because no one was.

But the Muggleborns didn't need to win, they needed to escape. He didn't know where Weasley was or if he had any portkeys left on him.

Shit, Weasley had the one that was going to take them back to the forest and to Granger and Potter when they were done.

Fuck. Draco spun around, trying to find the ginger prick in the crowded mess.

He saw a Muggleborn fall. Then another.

Where the *fuck* was Weasley?

Draco couldn't waste anymore time. He knew the place, the same glen where he had found Granger, feverish and shivering in the snow. He had found her once, he could do it again.

"Fucking asshole," Weasley muttered and Draco couldn't help but feel a *little* pleased that he was getting on Weasley's nerves. Even if they were supposed to be working together or whatever.

They weren't on the same side, they never would be because Granger would alway be in between them.

Draco walked over to the bars of the cell and the Muggleborns shrank back from him. Granger could have so easily ended up in a place like this. In another life, he could have been the one to put her here.

He could still remember how it felt to hate her.

To hate them all.

Draco looked up at the faces of the Muggleborns, tight with terror.

"I'm going to get you out of here." He couldn't erase what he had done, but he could do that, at least.

"Go to hell, Death Eater!"

"Murderer!"

"Eat shit and die!"

They yelled at him, taunting him, while Draco tried to work on the main lock to the cells.

"Look! It's Ron Weasley!"

A cheer went up amongst the Mudbloods—fuck, no, *Muggleborns* —and Draco saw that Weasley had discarded his charmed disguise. They were clapping their hands, shouting his name, and crying in happiness at the sight of him.

Like he was some sort of savior, here to rescue them from the evil Death Eaters.

"What's taking so long?" Weasley said hotly, pushing Draco away from the lock.

He was good at this, small delicate charm work. After all, he had enough practice with it, fixing the cabinet last year. "I've almost got it—"

"Move!" Weasley shoved him out of the way and pointed his wand at the lock.

"NO!" Draco shouted, but it was too late. Weasley's spell wrapped blasted through the lock and the Muggleborns cheered again.

A second later, it was drowned out by the sound of an alarm going off.

Weasley's face paled.

Draco grabbed a set of keys from the unconscious guard next to him. "You've just alerted the whole Ministry that we're here. Good job, Weasley!" Draco snarled and sent the keys flying into the sectioned off cells, unlocking them. The Muggleborns started to

"It's Ravenclaw's relic this time. And it's at the *fucking*—" Harry kicked a tree. " *School!*" He kicked it again. "All this TIME!"

"Harry!"

With his final kick, Harry leaned his head against the bark, breathing heavily.

"We'll find it, Harry," she said softly, placing her hand on his shoulder. But the words were empty, they both knew it. They didn't even know what they were looking for and it could be anywhere.

Harry turned and rested against the tree, lifting his face up to look at the canopy overhead. "If Dumbledore couldn't find it, how are we supposed to?"

Hermione's heart clenched. Harry couldn't give up hope. Not now, not yet.

"He was there for… decades. And I'm supposed to find it in one day?" He sighed and sank down to the roots of the tree.

Hermione crouched next to him. " *We* are going to find it." She summoned up her Gryffindor courage and plunged on, ignoring the hollow look on Harry's face. "As-as soon as Draco and Ron get here, we'll go right away. And we'll find it. Whatever it is. Together."

Harry nodded noncommittally and Hermione watched as a dark mood descended over him. He just needed some time, that was all. Harry would be okay. Harry always ended up okay.

She chose to believe this time was no different.

But she couldn't stop her heart from beating hard as she looked around the trees again, hoping against hope that Draco would appear in between them.

"HARRY!"

Hermione spun around.

Ron was rushing towards them, an old ink pen clutched in his freckled hand. Their portkey. His face… oh God, his *face.*

Half of it was swollen, covered in angry red bruises that were beginning to darken. Blood was seeping from the corner or his mouth and under his eye.

But he was alive. Thank Godric. She might not be happy with him, but she wouldn't be happy if he was dead either.

Hermione hoped Draco wasn't hurt too badly. She looked past Ron, trying to see him. He must be close by.

Harry stood up, tense and ready. Ron was panting as he slid to a stop in front of them. Hermione took a few steps forward, Bellatrix's wand in one hand and Hufflepuff's cup in the other.

"Draco? Draco!" There was no answer and no sign of him. She rounded on Ron, shoving him roughly in the shoulder. "Where is he? Where's Draco?"

Ron's bruised face twisted. "Where do you think he is, Hermione? He's with his own kind!"

No…

No no no no.

He wouldn't… Draco wouldn't have… left her.

"You're lying." Her voice shook.

"He betrayed me the first chance he got."

"The Muggleborns—" Harry asked.

Ron nodded, gulping down another large breath. "Got as many as I could out. I distracted McNair with my face to do it, but it was worth it to save them."

Something about Ron's tone sent a strange shiver down Hermione's spine.

He turned towards her, the blue of one eye surrounded by blood and bright with anger. "He watched, Hermione. That son of a bitch stood there and *smiled* while McNair did this to me." Ron pointed at his face. "He gave that fucker my wand and told him to use it on me."

Hermione shook her head, wet curls weighed heavily on her head.

"He's on *their* side. Always has been. He's probably kneeling in front of You-Know-Who right now and telling him everything about the horcruxes." Ron looked at Harry. "I told you we couldn't trust him. I fucking told—"

"I know what you told me, Ron!" Harry yelled back. He let out a harsh breath, his dark hair sticking in different directions as it slowly dried. "And it doesn't matter, okay? It doesn't matter if he tells about the horcruxes because You-Know-Who already knows. I saw it."

Hermione didn't think her legs were working anymore. Draco wouldn't go back, he *wouldn't* . She… she *knew* that.

"That's why we need to get to Hogwarts, *right now!"* There was a manic edge to Harry's voice.

"This must be some misunderstanding…" Hermione squeaked. "We need to wait for Draco."

Ron laughed mirthlessly. "When are you going to realize that he was using you?! God, Hermione, you're supposed to be the smart one!"

He shuffled, his cheap regulation boots scuffing along the floor as if he couldn't decide to stay where he was or head towards the wands. "Erm, 'm not supposed to open it withou' Umbridge's permission."

Draco sneered nastily at him and watched sweat bead on the guard's upper lip. "Do you know who I am?"

The guard paled. "You're… you're D-Draco Mal-Malfoy." Draco lifted one brow. "Sir! Draco Malfoy, sir!"

Draco pulled out his wand and traced the heavy lock on the cell. "That's right. But I don't know who you are. Which means you're a Half Blood," Draco looked the guard over with disdain, " *at best.* And who's to say you don't belong behind these bars with the rest of them?"

The guard was stammering, unable to form words.

Draco advanced. "Me. That's who."

The guard tried to move back, but stumbled over his too large boots. He fell backwards, crashing to the floor in a heap. Some of the Muggleborns laughed and Draco watched the guard's legs kick as he struggled to get back to his feet.

"You're here to guard, *guard.* Not to question *my* orders." The guard almost fell over getting back up. Draco kicked him back down and… wanted to do it again. Instead he grabbed the sweat soaked collar of the guard and hauled him up. "I said, open up the wand case."

The guard did as he was told. And then the fucker had walked back over the the cages and ran his wand over the bars, sending crackling flashes of blue lights across them to scare the Muggleborns who had come forward to watch their jailor get knocked around.

Draco couldn't blame them, he enjoyed a good show too.

But when the guard laughed as the blue light snapped and jumped to an old woman who hadn't gotten out of the way in time, Draco sliced his wand through the air, pinning the guard against the bars and watched as the blue light turned white and his screams were lost in the crackling mess.

"Malfoy!" Fucking Weasley was always ruining his fun. "We need him to open the locks!"

Draco sighed and let the guard, who was thoroughly stunned, fall to the floor. He dragged his gaze lazily back up to Weasley and shrugged.

"Plan B?"

Everything had gone to hell.

It happened even faster than Draco thought it would. They'd gotten down to the cells, the… cages and Draco noticed, not for the first time, how similar the bars down here were to the ones he constructed around his bed to keep Granger in.

"Fuck you, Malfoy!" A voice shouted from deep within and Draco narrowed his eyes to see Dean Thomas, one of the Muggleborns he had brought in a few months ago. And… his old classmate. But Draco didn't think about that. He didn't think about anything but getting them out and then getting back to Granger.

That's all that mattered.

"Shut up in there, ya filthy vermin!" A burly guard tapped his wand on the bars, making them buzz and crackle. The Muggleborns crowded back, pushing and shoving to get away from them until the buzzing stopped.

The guard laughed. "They're rowdy today. Snatchers brought in 'bout seven new ones last nigh' and I think it's got 'em awe jumped up."

Draco didn't say anything, just looked back into the gloomy cells, catching eyes wide and white with bright fear.

Some of them glared at him in hatred and Draco found himself having to look away. Granger wasn't the only Muggleborn he had put behind bars and while she had forgiven him for it, he didn't expect any of the others to. "Have their wands been checked in?"

The guard straightened up and cleared his throat, as if remembering that Draco was not just a seventeen year old kid, he was a Death Eater and loyal servant to the Dark Lord. "Yes. Yes, sir," he added quickly. "All clocked and locked in the case."

Snatchers often kept wands they confiscated, just in case something happened to theirs, but they were paid more if they turned in the Muggleborn with the wand and the Ministry had quite a collection. Once the world was settled and in order, they would be able to dole out wands to those deemed worthy of bearing one.

At a profit, of course. Something had to pay for that disgusting collection of kitten plates.

Draco glanced at Weasley, who was huffing in agitation, and looked back at the guard. "Open it."

"Hermione," Harry grabbed onto her shoulders and turned her to face him. She had been searching the woods again, not believing that Draco wouldn't just… show up. "We need to go."

"But—"

"I know you care about him, but this war isn't going to be decided by whose side Draco fucking Malfoy is on. We need to find the horcruxes. We need to destroy them. If You-Know-Who gets to Ravenclaw's first, we very well may never get our hands on it. I need you to focus."

Hermione bit her lip. She couldn't just… leave him.

"He's going to be at the school and where he is, so is the snake. If we can get Ravenclaw's relic we will have the last horcruxes all in one place. We'll never have a better chance than this."

Hermione glanced at Ron, dabbing at the blood leaking from his mouth with his sleeve. Draco wouldn't have left without a good reason. But for the love of Godric, she couldn't think of what that would be.

Unless something had happened to him. Unless he was…

"I need it to be over," Harry said, a pleading tone to his voice.

Suddenly the golden cup felt very heavy in her hand. Something in Harry's expression sent a chill through her.

"I can't keep going like this. I need to end it."

Did he mean… No. He couldn't.

Hermione nodded. Harry was right, the war wouldn't be won based on whoever had Draco working for them at the moment. And if she really did want that future with him, they needed to win.

Which meant she needed to find that last horcrux and help Harry destroy it, before…

"Hermione?"

She looked up into Harry's emerald green eyes, alight with fervor. And they'd stay that way. Bright, hopeful, and *alive*.

"Okay," Hermione said in a small voice, glancing into the woods one last time. "Let's go."

"Oh boo fucking hoo, Weaselbee," Draco snapped. "So I'm a Death Eater." He looked Weasley dead in the eyes, the part of him that was still him. "And I am glad of it. Who else would be able to get those people out?"

"You don't care about them! You only care about staying on Hermione's good side!"

Draco tilted his head. "Sucks when you're not, doesn't it, Weasley?"

"Whatever. She's not my problem anymore."

Something cold and corrosive worked itself through Draco's veins, spreading in him like a poison. "She was never *yours.*"

"She was *my* best friend before you came along."

"Granger was done with you before she started with me," Draco growled.

"I wanted to stay friends, that's why I chose Lavender over her."

He reminded himself that Granger would be mad at him if he killed Weasley. He repeated it over and over in his head.

"Not surprised," Draco shrugged as if nothing in the world bothered him at this moment. "You always were a dumb fuck."

Weasley didn't say anything, he just watched the numbers grow as they neared the Department of Mysteries.

They would be there soon and Draco would have to fight at Weasley's side.

But they weren't there *yet.*

Draco brushed off his coat, tucked his mask inside and sniffed loudly.

"By the way, Theo fucked your girlfriend."

Weasley's mouth hung open in shock.

"Brown used to come down to the dungeons sometimes. I never took a go, but Theo enjoyed her."

"Not Lavender. She wouldn't have—"

Draco lifted his brows lazily. "Had a tattoo of a flower on her ass. Liked it from behind. Sound familiar?"

Weasley had gone crimson. A vein standing out in the middle of his forehead, throbbing hard enough Draco thought it might burst.

"Crabbe too. I guess the bitch had a thing for the stupid ones."

The doors of the lift opened. They had arrived.

Draco turned to face Weasley one last time. "Try not to make dumb decisions while we're down here. I'm not blowing my cover to save your freckled ass."

good it felt to wield this kind of power. This was the world he had born into, the world he was made for.

And it was the one that would never let him be with Granger the way he wanted to. He'd searched her family tree back as far as he could and couldn't find a single magical ancestor to try and link her to a name that could give her… *some* level of status.

Granger was as common as they came. By all rights, she shouldn't even have magic.

And yet somehow she did. Something or someone had put that spark into her and Granger, being the incredible woman that she was, had taken it and turned it into something brighter than the sun.

Draco had been given a golden, glittering world at birth, but all he wanted was Hermione. Last night hadn't been enough. He wanted more of her, all of her. His. Forever.

The sooner he got done here, the sooner he would have her again. And once he did, he'd never let go of her. Not again.

They stopped in front of the lifts. Weasley, the fucking dunce, came to stand beside him.

"I said—"

"I'm not one of your stupid lackeys. Don't get to tell me what to do, Malfoy," Weasley said through gritted teeth.

"Not much of a hero if you're not willing to put your pride aside for the people you're trying to save." Out of the corner of his eye, Draco saw Weasley grimace and when the doors to the lift opened, he let Draco walk in first.

Draco smirked behind his mask.

Once they were on their way down, he slipped it from his face and ran his fingers through his hair. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes.

Draco was shoved into the side of the lift roughly. It shook and halted for a moment at the sudden movement. His hands were up and pushing back against Weasley before he even fully registered what was happening.

"Don't you ever—" Weasley shoved him harder against the wall and Draco snarled, grabbing onto Weasley's front and pushing him back. " *Ever* fucking tell me what to do again. I don't care if it brings You-Know-Who himself down on our heads, I'd rather fucking *die* than take orders from the likes of you."

"Get the fuck off me," Draco growled, reaching down for his wand.

Weasley shoved him hard one more time and then let him go. "Fucking Death Eater," he grumbled as he straightened out his clothes.

Chapter Twenty Two

Move—your—" Draco grabbed the back of Mundungus Fletcher's coat and shoved him forward. "ASS!"

This was taking too long and wasn't going nearly as well as he would have hoped. Maybe Weaselbee hadn't been so useless after all because most Muggleborns fled at the sight of Draco before he could even tell them he was here to *fucking help them* .

But the ginger prick was probably already dead and there was no use crying over spilt blood. Especially Weasley's. Actually the thought of it made Draco smile a little.

But then glass came raining down on him and Fletcher, who cowered down, trying to protect his balding head.

Draco saw the missing finger on his hairy hand and swallowed down the bile that was prickling in the back of his throat before pushing the little man forward again. "MOVE!"

"Where ya takin' me?" Fletcher panted as Draco pulled him a few yards forward and then crouched behind an overturned desk that had flown out of one of the office windows.

Draco lifted his head over the side to see a group of Muggleborns running for the fireplaces at the other end of the atrium. From his vantage point, he could see what they could not. A Ministry guard had his wand up, heading towards them.

Draco had to fight back the *crucio* curse that was screaming to be let out. He felt it simmering under his mark and forced the first spell that came to his mind out instead.

The snake shot out of the end of his wand and landed in front of the guard. It struck out, attaching itself to the man's neck. He dropped his wand, pulling at it and screaming in terror.

Draco smirked. The snake wasn't venomous.

Well, not *very* venomous.

He'd live.

And so would the Muggleborns. Draco watched them disappear into the green flames. Once they were out, they weren't his concern anymore.

"Get ready to move," Draco growled.

"Oh bleedin' 'ell," Fletcher whispered and wiped sweat from his forehead only for another rivulet to slide down in between his drooping eyes.

"Do you *want* to stay here?" Draco snapped. Fletcher shook his head, jowls quivering with the movement. "Didn't think so. On my command."

He looked over the edge of the desk again and heard Fletcher whisper something that sounded like prayer, but with much more colorful language.

A Muggleborn man was fighting with a masked Death Eater, his hand was around the Death Eater's wrist as they struggled for control of the wand. Draco couldn't do anything, he was as likely to hit the Muggleborn as the Death Eater from this distance. And the man was doing a pretty good—

"Avada Kedavra!"

The muggleborn went stiff, and then loose; his body falling into a heap at the Death Eater's feet. Draco watched as the Death Eater kicked out at the body once, twice, three times. He spat on it. Then moved on as if there wasn't a dead body on the ground because of him.

Draco stared at it. It didn't move. It didn't do anything. Not anymore.

He had cleared the way for as many Muggleborns as he could as they made their way back up through the Ministry. Some workers locked their doors and hid in their offices. Some did as Umbridge's annoying-ass voice told them to over the speakers and picked up their wands to try and recapture the Muggleborns.

Some helped them escape.

As soon as Draco's boots landed on the sidewalk, he let go of Weasley's arm. Side-along apparition had never been his favorite way to travel, but it was the easiest way to make sure that he and Weasley ended up at the same place.

Draco didn't trust the ginger as far as he could spit, but he had agreed to let Weasley make the jump. Mostly because he hadn't wanted to spend the morning with Weasley arguing over it.

And they had arrived alright and with everything attached. Still, it felt like part of him had been left behind.

"When we get inside, let me do all the talking. If anyone asks you a question, just grunt in response." Draco let his voice drip with venom. "That shouldn't be too hard for you."

Weasley glared at him, his dull blue eyes were the only part of his appearance that Granger hadn't charmed away. No one would recognize him unless they were looking closely and with Draco leading the way, precious few people would stop to speak to them.

He just hoped Umbridge was busy today.

"Get a move on, Malfoy. We need to be down there and causing a scene by the time Harry and Hermione reach the vault."

Draco didn't answer, just stepped out of the alleyway and onto the street. They arrived through the visitor's entrance and Draco did his best not to let any part of him touch Weasley as they crammed into the phone booth, but it was damn near impossible. As soon as the grate opened into the Ministry Draco shoved past him to step out first.

"Don't fucking push me," Weasley growled.

"I outrank you," Draco hissed, the sound echoing behind his mask. "Do you want to blow this whole operation before we even make it down there? Hmm? Didn't think so. Now walk three steps behind me."

He took off without checking to see if Weasley was following orders or not. He was a Malfoy and Malfoys didn't concern themselves with their inferiors.

His mask kept most people away and sent a few scurrying into offices or suddenly remembering they had forgotten something important in the opposite direction. As he walked, Draco's shoulders slid back and his spine straightened. He had forgotten how

Draco smirked and placed a kiss on the side of her head.

"Hermione, come on," Harry instructed, waving her over to where he and Griphook were waiting.

She glanced back at Draco, standing next to Ron. He didn't say anything. No goodbyes. Because this wasn't a goodbye.

They would see each other again. *They would.*

She was still holding his hand. She hadn't even noticed taking it, but now… it felt impossible to let go.

Hermione glanced at Ron, silent and sullen. Was this… was this a good idea? Draco and Ron on their own?

"It's time."

She didn't want to let go. She didn't want to leave Draco. Wouldn't they be better off all together? They could break into Gringotts and while the Death Eaters were still trying to figure out what happened, they could hit the Ministry and get the Muggleborns out.

"Hermione." She turned. Harry and Griphook were waiting on her.

Draco squeezed her hand harder, like he didn't want to let go either.

Hermione spun back around.

"Draco, I—"

He pulled her against him, grabbing her face, her head, digging his fingers into her tied hair as he slammed his mouth down on hers. His lips pressed against hers with a barely controlled ferocity. It was harsh, rough, primal. Hermione clung onto his shoulders, clawing at them like she was trying to tear her away past his skin and into his heart.

He softly nipped at her lip, then in a split second, bit down hard on it, claiming it. The smallest, softest whimper escaped from her and was sucked into his mouth.

Draco pulled back, his chest heaving. He kept his hand buried in her hair for a moment longer and then pulled it back, tenderly grazing his fingertips over her cheek and jaw.

"Go, Granger," he ordered in that deep, commanding voice. His grey eyes stormed. "This is the only time I'll ever let you leave me. Go."

Hermione moved back one step. Another. The heel of her boots sank into the sand.

Harry held out his hand and Hermione, slowly, placed hers in it.

Her eyes never left Draco.

"I love you."

The last thing Hermione saw before the beach blurred into a whirlwind was the silver of his eyes, gleaming bright as Draco slipped behind his metal mask.

It was almost impossible to tell who was a friend and who was a foe, but everyone knew what the metal mask meant. The sooner he could chuck this thing off a cliff the better.

Draco sunk back down behind the desk, chest tight against his lungs.

He needed to breathe.

One.

Two.

Three.

Draco thought of Granger. Of how worried she'd be that he was late and how happy she would look when he showed up. Her cinnamon eyes would spark and burn and she would throw herself onto him and he'd wrap his arms around her.

He could get out of here and back to her. For her.

"Let's go."

Draco darted out from behind the desk, hauling Fletcher along with him. When Draco had seen his old prisoner, rifling through the robes of a downed guard and looking for a wand, he had decided to bring Fletcher to the surface with him.

The Order was already going to be overwhelmed with the Muggleborns they had freed and there had been more in the cells than Draco had estimated. Fletcher could get them out. He had been caught smuggling people over the border and now it was the same reason Draco was making sure the little man got to the surface.

That, and the fact that maybe Fletcher might know a way to try and search for the island and help him find his mother.

But one thing at a time. First they needed to get out.

They had almost reached the fireplaces when Draco heard a cry behind him. It was the little boy he had pulled from the cages below and a Death Eater was holding him up by the back of his shirt while he kicked and screamed. One kick landed against the Death Eater's chest.

"Mudblood rat!" The Death Eater threw the boy against the wall. The boy was still, except for the small twitches his legs gave, as if he was still trying to kick.

A woman was screaming as guards pushed a group of Muggleborns back towards the stairs. Draco could count ten, maybe twelve of them.

"Get them down with the rest!"

Draco saw the Death Eater cast a familiar spell; only those with a dark mark would be able to pass through and get to the lower levels now.

Godfuckingdamnit.

Draco cursed himself as he let go of Fletcher. "As soon as you get to the surface, you take these Muggleborns somewhere safe."

Fletcher just stared at him, jowls shaking as his jaw hung open.

"I know you know places to hide people. Do it. Take the kid with you." Draco tossed his head in the direction of the body. *The boy,* Draco corrected himself.

Fletcher started backing up, moving towards the fireplaces. The fear flickering in the reflection of the green flames in his eyes.

Draco grabbed him one more time, hauling him up until Fletcher was lifted off of the ground and they were nose to nose. "If you don't," he growled, "I'll take more than another finger, understand?"

Fletcher nodded vigorously and Draco let him go. The short man was already moving before he even fully got to his feet, but at least he was moving in the direction of the kid.

Draco turned, pulled his mask back on and headed down once more.

"You don't have to come down with me," Ron said and Hermione pulled her gaze up from the dark, musty smelling hole that had opened up in the middle of the bathroom. It had been his idea to descend into the Chamber again to gather basilisk teeth and she was surprised that he had been the one to think of it.

But then again, Ron had taken charge when the Death Eaters had broken into the castle last year and Hermione recognized the same resolution on his face now. She'd never been in the Chamber of Secrets before and had only heard about it from Harry and Ron. Seeing it was different. She knew it was under the school but somehow hadn't pictured it being that… deep.

She bit her lip nervously and glanced around the bathroom. They had spent so much time here in their second year, back when they were still friends. Ron had comforted her, right over there, when Draco had mouthed *Mudblood* at her during one of their lessons. She wondered if he remembered that too and maybe that was why his eyes were darting in between hers, looking for something that… that was no longer there.

"No, no. I'll come," Hermione countered. "You don't have a wand and you shouldn't go down there by yourself. Who knows what's taken up residence in the last five years?"

She used the excuse of lining up the portkeys in front of them in order to turn away from him.

The other portkeys were for her and Harry, and for Draco and Ron. This way, after their mission they would all be together again. And hopefully Hermione and Harry would have destroyed the cup and maybe even figured out a way to keep the sword and they could go after whatever item of Ravenclaw's that had been used and then…

The snake.

And *him.*

Hermione suppressed a shudder. There was no point in getting worked up over that right now; they had miles to go before they got there.

But she knew they would. They had made it through so much already, and even with the odds stacked, and towering, against them, Draco was by her side. The impossible had already happened.

What was one measly Dark Lord compared to that?

Draco whispered something to Calix and watched him take to the sky. He had returned this morning and while she still didn't know who Draco had written to, she had glimpsed a green seal on the letter before Draco tossed it into the fire.

Draco's arm wrapped around her shoulders as they watched the owl soar down the beach, catch a gust of wind and bank towards the ocean.

"Are you ready, Sweetheart?"

Hermione blinked against the bright sun and Draco moved to block the daylight from streaming into her eyes. At first his face was covered in shadow, then slowly her eyes began to adjust and the features of his face came into focus. Sharp angles, hard lines, and… smooth, pale skin, like polished stone.

Draco's lips twitched into something like a grin and Hermione realized she was staring at him, mouth partially open. She could taste the salty air on her tongue.

"You know, I kind of hate you in these clothes," Draco drawled and Hermione looked down at herself.

Before she left, Fleur had helped Hermione piece together something that looked like an outfit Bellatrix Lestrange might wear. They had spent the better part of an afternoon dyeing garments black and stitching metal into the cuffs and collar.

"I'm going to peel them off of you, one by one tonight and then I am going to kiss every fucking inch of you." His lips were at her ear, breathing those words into her.

Hermione stood there, the only part of her still working was her heart which just so happened to be beating twice as hard as it should.

A cough came from the hall and they both turned quickly to see Harry looking uncomfortably at the two of them.

"Are you done?" he asked, brows lifting above his rounded glasses.

"It's all yours, Potter," Draco sighed and rolled his eyes. He pulled his arms from around her, but took her hand, leading her out of the bathroom. "You can go admire your scar now."

Harry glared at Draco, but the smile he sported hadn't been completely wiped away by the interruption and Hermione watched as Harry's expression softened as he saw how happy she looked. He blinked slowly and gave Hermione a small nod as Draco pulled her past him.

Harry walked into the bathroom and Hermione heard an outraged gasp behind her. "Gross! There's toothpaste all over the floor!"

Hermione slapped her hand over her mouth, to stop her laughter. Draco squeezed her hand, grinned, and… laughed as he ducked inside their room, pulling her in quickly.

He was still laughing when his lips met hers again.

They had settled on portkeys. Hermione didn't have time to layer the enchantments so the portkey for the Muggleborns got them out of London and to an area where Order members would be stationed to help transport them somewhere safer, or arm them to fight. Their choice.

Draco had volunteered Calix to carry the letter to Remus, but Harry decided to go with a patronus instead. He claimed it was less likely to be intercepted.

"Fair enough. He's always flying off where he doesn't belong anyway," Draco muttered and Hermione watched the muscle in his jaw tighten. Still, it had warmed Hermione's heart that Draco had even offered.

"That's your owl?" Ron asked, stepping forward. "It looks familiar."

"Yeah, well, we were at school together for six years. I'm sure you've seen him before." Draco pulled Calix away from Ron, but Hermione felt Ron's eyes slide from the owl to her.

Ron kicked a small bit of stone over the edge and watched it fall into the black. "Probably just rats."

Hermione shivered and turned her head away from the looming hole. That was when she saw a wisp of white peeking out from one of the stalls.

"Myrtle!"

She had almost forgotten this was the bathroom Moaning Myrtle haunted. Seeing her again threw Hermione once more into memories of her second year and listening to Myrtle cry while they brewed polyjuice potion. She had done her best to avoid this bathroom, and Myrtle, ever since then.

"What are you two doing in here?!" Myrtle screeched and flew out of the stall. "You're not supposed to be here!"

"Shut up!" Ron yelled.

"Ronald!"

"She'll wake up the whole castle!" Ron lowered his voice, but it was still harsh. "Do you want the Carrows to find us?"

Hermione made a face at him and then turned back to the ghost. "Myrtle, we need your help."

She floated higher in the air. "Why should I help you?"

Hermione's mind spun fast. "Do you remember a boy you went to school with, Tom?" Myrtle's eyes widened behind her glasses. Hermione pushed on. "Do you know who, and what, he became?"

Myrtle's pigtails floated slowly by her head as she nodded.

Hermione took a breath. "We are trying to stop him and you can help by looking out for us, making sure no one comes in here until we're done."

"I still don't see why I should help *you,"* Myrtle said in a whiny tone. "You never came back to see me after you were done brewing your potion."

She had them there. In fact, Hermione had made sure to avoid Myrtle's bathroom after the unpleasant unfortunateness of being turned into a cat and having the ghost laugh at her for half an hour.

But who could blame them for not wanting to spend time with her? Myrtle wasn't exactly pleasant to be around and she made a habit of flooding the place anytime someone or something upset her. It was no wonder she didn't have any friends. No one ever wanted to come in here. No one except…

Hermione stepped forward. "You'd be helping Draco by helping us."

She could hear Ron scoff behind her.

"Draco?" Myrtle's voice was softer, almost… worried. She obviously cared about Draco and Hermione gave her a small smile.

"He told me all about you," Hermione went on. What had Draco called her? Ghostie? "How he would come talk to you, how close you two were."

Myrtle drifted in the air, her hands clasped together in front of her chest.

"He would be here now if he could." Hermione wished he was. Goodness, she was worried about him, but she couldn't give into it right now. She was doing this *for* Draco. And for Harry. And for herself. She wanted this war to be over as well and soon, they would be able to destroy another horcrux—*if* Myrtle didn't sound the alarm.

She was looking at Hermione with a strange gleam in her eyes. Draco was right, it was easy to forget that she was a ghost sometimes. She had been haunting this bathroom for decades and Draco, as far as they knew, was the only student who had ever actually elected to spend any time with her.

"Truly?" Myrtle asked.

Hermione gave another small smile, hoping that her nerves weren't showing. "He told me to tell Ghostie he said hello."

Myrtle squealed.

"Quiet!" Ron yelled in a whisper and Hermione waved her hand dismissively at him. Ron had never been particularly kind to Myrtle and she didn't want him to upset her.

Myrtle's face flushed silver in what Hermione assumed was a ghost's version of a blush as she giggled. "Alright, I'll make sure no one comes in here."

Hermione breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank you!" she whispered as loudly as she dared and ran back to where Ron stood by the entrance to the Chamber.

"Oh, Hermione?"

She glanced back at Myrtle, who was hanging half in and half out of the bathroom door. "Did he… say anything else about me?"

Ron groaned. "We don't have time for this!"

Hermione felt him grab her shoulder and twist her around. She barely had time to register what was happening before he let go and Hermione was sliding down into the darkened tunnel. She barely got a glimpse of Ron's face staring down at her before it twisted and she was plunged into darkness.

"Wat 're 'ou 'oing?" She'd forgotten to take the toothbrush out of her mouth before speaking. He looked at her with mock disdain and Hermione yanked the toothbrush from her mouth and wiped a bit of the white foam from her chin.

Draco had the good sense to remove his before trying to talk, and he even leaned down to spit into the sink. "I don't know, you love brushing your teeth so much, I thought…" He looked down at the red brush. "I don't know. I… I figured… why not?"

Hermione launched herself at him. Her brush fell clattering onto the counter and she wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him down so she could lock her lips on his. The crisp taste of mint doubled and she pushed him back against the wall with enough force to make some of the glass jars on the shelves clink together.

"MMM!" Draco must have been stunned by her aggressive approach because his hands were still at his sides when she dove her fingers into his hair, then down to his face, pressing on his angled cheeks just enough to prompt his mouth to open.

She didn't care that they both had toothpaste running over their chins. She didn't care that when Draco reached around and grabbed her ass that he was still holding the red toothbrush. She didn't care that the door was open and anyone could clearly see them right now.

All she cared about kissing the man who wanted to try brushing his teeth the Muggle way because it was something *she* cared about. She wanted hope that they had a future after the war, and this right here proved it.

Draco didn't need to make some grand courageous gesture, she didn't want a hero.

She wanted him.

"Merlin fuck, Granger," Draco breathed heavily as Hermione retreated, lowering herself back onto her heels. "That's the way to wake a man up in the morning."

She glanced down and saw his black boxer briefs tight and tented. Hermione giggled, wiping the excess toothpaste off the side of Draco's mouth with her thumb. The touch of it made him smile. Straight, white teeth and as bright as snow.

Maybe they would have both toothbrushes *and* mouth cleaning potion in their home.

Their home. Wherever that would be. Whenever they got to go there. But they would, they'd get there.

Draco dipped his head and ran his tongue from the bottom of her chin, up under her nose, licking the toothpaste off her mouth.

Hermione laughed, hands clasped over his strong arms that wrapped around her middle.

Granger curled against him, tucking her face into his scarred chest. "You'll always have me."

"I know. And I'm never letting you go." Draco kissed the top of her head and finally allowed his eyes to shut.

Dawn curled into the dark corners of the room, lighting it with a rosy glow. It didn't seem right, that such an important day would start so softly. Hermione held onto Draco and a small part of her wished they could stay just like this. That they didn't have to leave the cozy isolation of their bed and wage war today. She glanced up at Draco's soft, sleeping face. What if today was the last time she saw him?

She wasn't sure when winning the war started to equate with being with Draco, but the sum of that equation came to this; if she didn't have Draco the war, *her war,* was not won.

So Hermione had work to do.

She untangled herself from Draco and quietly slipped out of the room, giving him one last look before heading down the hall. There wasn't much she had to prepare; she had spent the last two days packing and repacking her beaded bag, going over the plan with Harry and Griphook, and trying to think of anything she missed when mostly she missed… Draco.

She was glad they had last night, glad they had everything they did together. She wasn't sure she would be able to face today without having spent the night with Draco. She just hoped it wouldn't be their last.

Hermione spread a dollop of toothpaste over the bristles of her brush and started on the same cleaning routine she had her whole life. She counted the strokes, finding a sense of calm in the repetitive motion. She closed her eyes and tasted the sweet mint of the toothpaste on her tongue.

Someone turned the sink on beside her and Hermione jumped, eyes flaring, and almost choked when she saw Draco standing next to her. He smirked and… spread toothpaste over a brush she'd never seen before. It was… *red.*

Draco sniffed it cautiously, glanced at her, and then popped it in his mouth.

Flowers bent under Draco's boots as they slammed against the ground. He'd landed in someone's garden. No one came out to scold him, not when there were Death Eaters filling the streets. Draco walked around the corner, looking up the high street of Hogsmeade. It was dark and only a sliver of the silver moon hung in the sky, barely illuminating the groups of black clad witches and wizards congregating in groups, waiting for their Master.

Draco stood on his own.

He had searched the Forest of Dean for longer than he wanted to admit, refusing to believe that Granger had in fact left without him. The small disturbance of leaves strewn around the sets of footprints though had been undeniable evidence. And when Draco counted *three* sets of footprints he had bellowed her name out in rage.

Draco cursed himself for not finishing Weasley off when he had the chance. He had been about to level the trees surrounding him, but his muscles seized, making it hard to breathe as the weight of what had happened crushed him slowly. Pain flashed in his arm and it felt like it was burning in acid. His Master's voice slithered and hissed inside his skull.

"Harry Potter has shown himself at last. Tonight will be his downfall and our long-awaited triumph. When the boy is dead, my followers will be rewarded and all those who stand against us will be punished. Come to the village of Hogsmeade and together, we will march to victory."

As Draco sucked in gasping, pained breaths, he realized what this meant.

There was no fucking reason Potter would have gone to the Hogsmeade. But *beside* the village was Hogwarts. They said the horcruxes were items from the founders and Potter just *might* have been stupid enough to try and search the school and Granger, of fucking course, had run along with him.

Fuck her for leaving, but fuck her even more for letting Potter drag her into this mess. If Draco had gotten to their meeting spot on time, he could have stopped her, and if that failed, he could have at least gone with her. Not having Granger with him made him feel like he was missing a limb or more importantly, an organ. He promised Granger they'd be together again. He had fought his way out of the Ministry to be with her again. How could she have… left without him?

Fuck! That ginger prick still had the portkey when Draco left him with McNair. He must have used the portkey to escape. He would have told them what happened. His version of it, anyway. His fucked up face would have been proof.

Would Granger have believed Weasley? Obviously yes, or she would have been waiting for him like she fucking promised.

Would Granger forgive him? Draco was less sure about that answer.

He just had to hope she would and that she wouldn't be too upset when she saw him again. His chest ached wondering if she would forgive him. Again. She would. She had to. She was good and sweet and… and she loved him. Even if she left him.

Draco had tried to do the right thing and help the Muggleborns and look where it had gotten him, farther than ever from Granger. No more helping other people. From here on out, Draco was in it just for himself.

And his girl.

His arm twitched, jerking his wand so that it pointed towards the school.

"It is time." The Dark Lord appeared, walking out of the gloom. His face was pale with fury and Draco could see rage simmering in his blood red eyes. He addressed his army, promising victory, riches, and power. Draco felt his mark ache as his Master walked among them, the great snake slithering at his feet. He stayed to the side, not in the mood for a pep talk and not wanting to get any closer to that fucking snake than he needed to. He hadn't forgotten what it had done to that professor.

Or his hounds.

As it passed, the snake flicked its tongue in his direction and hissed at him. The snake of his mark rear in acknowledgement. It felt like a betrayal, like his arm wasn't his anymore and Draco clenched his fist around his wand.

Red sparks shot out of it, landing on the flowers next to him and making them twist, their petals curling up before they wilted to the ground.

It wasn't supposed to do that. He should have better control over himself and his wand, but right now Draco felt like he was barely holding himself together.

"When the sun rises it will be on a pure, magical world!" The Dark Lord had turned and looked back on his Death Eaters. "Raise your wands and fight for our noble cause!"

Lord Voldemort led them to Hogwarts. Draco looked up at the school, yellow windows glittering in the dark night. She was in there. Granger was in there. Draco quickened his pace, moving up the column as it marched on the school.

A hand clawed at his arm, stopping him from advancing. "What are you doing here?" Snape hissed.

Draco jerked his arm back. "Don't fucking touch me."

Snape was unimpressed. "You're supposed to be—"

Granger's hand was soft and warm on his cheek as she held it, pulling it up to face her again.

"It's okay to mourn him. He was your father. You're allowed to feel however you feel."

Draco looked deep into her chocolate eyes and pushed the hair back over her shoulder. "Is that how am I supposed to feel? Sad that he's gone?"

Granger bit her lip and his eyes immediately went to it. "It's okay if you don't either," she said softly. "I don't want to speak ill of the dead, but…"

"He hurt you." Draco's voice dropped.

Granger brushed her finger tips over his brow. "He hurt you too."

At least his father had gotten his mother to safety; Lucius' love for Narcissa might have been his one redeeming quality. And… It was something Draco and his father had in common. Maybe he should have been trying to process what he felt about his father's death, but all Draco could think about was the girl, his girl, in his arms.

"I don't want you to go tomorrow."

Granger's lips parted in surprise, still swollen and bruised from his attention tonight. He watched as she pursed them back together. "I told you, I need to do this, I need to be able to still be *me,"* she took a breath, "if *we* are going to work."

"I know," Draco murmured, looking down at the lacy dress she had slipped back into tonight. She had done that for him. He could… do this for her. "I won't stop you. I just wanted to make it clear that I don't like it."

She smiled softly at him.

"And if Potter lets anything happen to you—"

"Nothing is going to happen to me," Granger cut him off. "And you promised not to hurt Harry."

Draco wrapped his arm around her again, needing to feel her. "But Weasley's fair game, yeah?" He smirked.

Granger let out a small laugh. "Just because he and I aren't friends anymore doesn't mean I want him dead."

"Not friends?" Draco sniffed. "And is this, uh, one of those times where you'll be friends again in a week?"

Granger's small smile faded. "No. It's not."

Even though he liked hearing those words, Draco never enjoyed seeing her sad.

He leaned forward, kissing her and pulled her closer to him. "Well, poor boy has lost enough. Not having you? That's a fate worse than death."

He would know, after all.

"He was different. It was him, but… it wasn't. Then again, the person that came out of Azkaban was never the father I grew up with. But at least he… parts of him were still, still Lucius. This one was just… gone."

"He was there? At the Manor?"

Draco nodded, needing a moment more before speaking.

"Out on the grounds just… shambling around. I think he was trying to get to the horses and they just ran away from him. But he…" Draco's brows furrowed together. "He kept going. Kept after them. Dragging that fucking bum leg around with him. He didn't…" Draco's voice caught and his rain grey eyes finally met hers. "He didn't stop."

Granger's eyes were full of the horror he felt, filling with tears he refused to shed.

"Seeing him, like that, I…" Draco's words caught in his throat. "I couldn't kill him. I wasn't allowed. So I did the next best thing. I made him useless. To the Dark Lord, at least."

He could see the question brimming in her eyes. Curious girl, always needing to know more and Draco… Draco found that… he needed to… talk about it.

"Crucio doesn't work on them. They don't feel pain like we do. So, at least I know it didn't hurt him when I hit him with that curse, the one that did this to me," Draco looked down at his scarred chest and heard Granger gasp softly. "I did it enough that he couldn't… couldn't chase the horses anymore."

She was smart, she would know what he meant. What he did.

To his own fucking father.

Draco didn't rightly know how to feel. That was the man who had beat him, cracked his skull open. The man who had put Granger in chains and stood there while she was tortured.

But he was also the one who taught Draco how to fly. Who bought him his first broom. Who Draco had spent his whole life trying to emulate, until he saw the real man his father was last summer in the villa on the island.

Draco had taken the mark to save his father and a small part of him had *enjoyed* taking him apart.

It had been strange, to watch the marks he knew so well appear on someone else. Someone who looked so much like him.

He had never been able to see anything in Trelawney's crystal balls, but staring at his dead father's face as the curse cut into him again and again, Draco had glimpsed his own future.

And he had been happy when it fell and didn't get back up.

"I know where I'm supposed to be," Draco snarled, his mask making the words echo slightly. "And I'll get inside. I'll get Potter."

It was part of their plot. Snape had told him it was essential that Potter face the Dark Lord, that he was in fact, the Chosen One. Draco had begrudgingly agreed to play his part in this, in return for Snape's unrequested help during Draco's interrogation.

It aligned enough with Granger's own goals that Draco didn't feel like he was betraying her and Scarhead was dead set on facing off with No-Nose anyway. All Draco had to do was get them in the same place at the same time. Then, get the fuck out of there with Granger on his arms.

Snape's dark eyes glittered. "You only have until sunrise. The Dark Lord allotted three days for you to bring Potter to him, and Draco, you must not *fail."*

"I won't fail, *Severus,"* Draco spat his name out. "Now go carry the Dark Lord's cape or whatever the fuck it is you do for him these days."

Snape's lip curled, but he did not retort. Draco glared at him as Snape apperated to the Dark Lord's side, robes flapping and Draco watched for a moment, hoping his godfather would trip and fall. Maybe break his overly large nose in the process.

When nothing exciting happened, Draco's attention turned away from his accomplice and to the trail of Death Eaters.

Bellatrix danced ahead, singing off key loud enough that she could be heard down to the village. He scowled, starting to get a headache. Draco imagined what her pained screams would sound like instead.

Somehow it turned into Granger's agonized cries and Draco pushed the memory of Granger on the drawing room floor far, far behind his marble walls. He wouldn't let that happen to her again and narrowed his eyes on his aunt, the one who had done that to her. Who had marked her, who had hurt her.

He didn't want to be here, not with these people. He didn't want to be one of them, but he would have been stupid to give up the opportunity to use the Dark Lord's invasion as his way into the castle. It was the fastest route to Granger and the ache in his arm reminded him that he was running out of time.

This wasn't ideal, but then Draco had never been much of an idealist. He preferred the staunch clarity of undeniable truths.

And the fact of the matter was Granger—Hermione—belonged to, and more importantly *with* , him.

Hermione felt an odd sense of déjà vu as she ran down the aisles of the Room of Requirement. She tried to remember if she had seen anything like Harry described, a bust of an old wizard with a crown on its head, the last time she was in here, but all she could think about was Draco. His grey eyes bore into her as she remembered how he hovered above her, telling her he loved her as he slid inside her.

Hermione was so distracted by her thoughts and looking down at the items surrounding her that she wasn't paying attention to where exactly she was heading and turned a corner, stopping short at what was in front of her.

The white curtains had fallen and were spread out over the bed, but otherwise it looked very much like it had last year. She sucked in a breath and for a moment, Hermione regretted following Harry here tonight.

Her heart fell down, landing somewhere deep inside her. Draco… Had he arrived in the Forest of Dean late? Where was he now? Hermione walked over to the edge of the bed, touching the white sheets tenderly. What would Draco have done once he realized she wasn't there waiting for him?

Or had he not left the Ministry on purpose? Ron said he had joined back with the Death Eaters. Hermione bit her lip and looked down at the passageway in which she had come. Was Draco outside the castle right now? Fighting to get in? To get to… her?

Of course he was. She would be a fool to think otherwise.

"I'd do something stupid to keep you with me."

But she didn't think Draco would have done *that*. Still, Hermione had healed Ron's face in the back of the Hog's Head and she couldn't ignore the proof of the bruises on his face even as they disappeared behind his freckles.

She just hoped they could end this soon, before Draco did anything… else.

Harry must be close to finding the diadem by now and she and Ron had destroyed the cup in Chamber of Secrets. He had let her do the honors this time and once it was over and the golden cup nothing more than a twisted lump of metal, Hermione had been so ecstatic that she had hugged Ron.

For just a second everything had felt normal again as his arms closed around her. This was *Ron*. There were years of love and friendship in that embrace and when she looked up at him, she could see it all right there in his baby blue eyes.

But those tits…

Twice. It was the only solution. He'd have her make him come twice.

She could lick his balls in between rounds, soft tongue lapping at him while he got his strength back to fuck her into oblivion again.

Or maybe he'd eat her out and keep her coming until he was ready to fill her tight little cunt with everything he had.

"Are you listening to me?"

"Hmm? What?" Draco looked at Granger who was pouting, her bottom lip sticking out just a little farther than it should and he was tempted to reach out and grab it with his teeth.

"Do you promise not to get upset?"

Draco rolled his eyes. Then, catching hers, stopped and tucked her hair behind her ear, brushing the back of his fingers over the top of her shoulder.

"Why did you get drunk last night?"

He hadn't been expecting that…

"You were doing so well, you hadn't drank in weeks. Not since…" She blushed a little and he knew she was thinking of *that* night. He was too.

Until he thought of the previous night.

What he could remember of it, that is.

Draco shifted on the bed, trying to take some of the pressure off of his arm. His mark was bothering him again. The dull ache was back.

As if he could fucking forget what was waiting for him.

His arm was lying in between them, the dark mark stark on his pale skin.

"You know what happens to us, when we die." Draco's voice was hollow as he emptied his mind, blocking everything out with white marble walls. Granger nodded, her caramel curls falling back around her neck. "And… you know my father died."

"Oh Godric…" Granger's hand flew to her mouth. "No!"

He didn't look at her. Couldn't.

He was afraid that what he'd find in her sweet, innocent eyes would make those carefully constructed walls come tumbling down.

"I have…" Draco paused. "I have an issue with dead people. I don't like them. I don't like seeing the bodies, I don't like being near them, I don't…" His eyes clouded over. "Ghostie—Myrtle—was okay. She… Well, she creeped me the fuck out, but she talked like a person and acted like a person so it was easy to forget that she was… not… alive."

Granger laid still, watching him, listening to him.

Pansy cocked her head to the side. "I should kill you for what you did, Draco, but maybe… I should go find her instead. Take from you what you've taken from me."

Draco wanted to hurt Pansy, he could feel the curse already heating under his skin. One thought and it would travel down the core of his wand and he'd have Pansy begging for forgiveness.

Like she fucking should.

So why wasn't he?

Because of the swell of her stomach. Because he'd killed that baby's father. He wasn't going to kill it too. It was innocent. It was pure. And pure things should be protected.

"Stay away from Granger," Draco growled. "Get out of here. Get away from this fight."

"I don't have to do what you say anymore," Pansy taunted. "You have your precious Mudblood whore for that."

Draco smirked. She had forgotten how this works. She had forgotten that he wasn't the same person she knew in school. She had forgotten he was a fucking Death Eater.

"One chance, Pans," Draco used the same deep tone of voice he had when he taught her how to suck his cock. "Walk away."

Pansy let out a bark-like laugh and scrunched her nose up. "Make me, Draco."

Draco shrugged. He had given her an out, it was her own fault that she didn't take it.

"Imperio."

Pansy's arm drifted down to her side, pointing her wand harmlessly at the ground. He thought about taking it, but… damn it, he didn't want to leave her defenseless while she was pregnant. Theo's kid was saving her life tonight.

"Pans."

Her expression was calm and soft and when she blinked, the last of the tears pooled in her dark eyes fell. Draco moved forward, but kept distance between them. Her pregnant belly unnerved him. It was impossible, but he felt like the unborn baby knew what he had done.

He wouldn't be able to make up for it, but he hoped this was a start.

"Go to the library," Draco instructed. "Go to the restricted section. Say the words *'Nam purus'*. Lock yourself in. Don't come out until the battle is over."

Pansy nodded slowly. "Yes, sir."

Draco's lip curled. "A simple *'yes'* will suffice."

"Yes," Pansy breathed.

Draco glanced behind him. "Go. Hurry. And Pansy?" She stopped and turned back to him eagerly. He wanted to tell her he didn't mean to, hadn't wanted to, but none really mattered. Theo was still dead and Pansy was still…

Her hand was resting on her stomach again and his mouth went dry. He barely had enough air in his lungs to breathe, much less to talk. Draco shook his head, dismissing her. Pansy hummed as she moved on and Draco squeezed his eyes shut and counted to three, before taking a shallow breath and started his descent again.

Hermione looked around the Great Hall at the wounded and… dead. So many dead. And there were still more being brought in. Madame Pomfrey was hurrying from person to person, laid out on blankets on the floor. The dead were on the dais where the staff table normally sat. Laying there, looking as if they were just resting before the next push.

The thought occurred to her that Voldemort's second army would be rising now. How many Death Eaters had died and were now twitching, starting to rise to continue their Master's war? And could Hogwarts withstand another onslaught after losing so many?

Ron brushed past her, half running over to his family, gathered around Fred. The Weasley's were holding each other, grieving together. Hermione watched as Ron hugged Ginny, his shoulders shaking as Ginny hugged him tightly back.

Hermione took half a step, wanting to go to her friends, to help them and comfort them, but then remembered that Ron wasn't her friend anymore. Tears pricked in her eyes and she blinked hard, trying to get them to disappear. When she opened her eyes again, Mr. Weasley had his arm around Ron and they were looking down at George, crying at his twin's side.

Hermione moved around a few people and tapped Ginny on the shoulder. Her ponytail swung heavily as Ginny turned and Hermione's heart broke a little to see Ginny's face pale and stained with tears.

"Hermione!" Ginny flung herself at Hermione who hugged her back tightly.

Hermione poured all her love for Ginny, and all the Weasleys, into the embrace, whispering, "I'm so sorry, Gin. I'm so sorry," over and over again as the two girls rocked back and forth a little, finding a tiny bit of solace in the storm.

Eventually they broke apart, the comfort almost too much to bear in the face of such loss.

Ginny wiped her eyes. "Have you seen Luna?"

Hermione expected her to ask about Harry, not Luna, but was a little glad she wasn't. Coming back from the Shrieking Shack, Harry had been quiet and then went directly up to Dumbledore's office, telling Hermione and Ron he wanted to be alone. She was worried about him and what he might do on his own, but he was safe in the castle. For one hour at least.

Now didn't seem like a great time for Harry to run into his ex-girlfriend.

Still, Hermione wanted to be helpful so she started looking around for Luna. "I haven't, not since the Room of…" She trailed off when she caught Ron's eye.

She looked away quickly, then some perverse notion made her glance back up. He was still staring at her, his red face making his blue eyes stand out all the more. Suddenly she didn't feel right, standing here with him and his family. She felt like she was intruding in a place she no longer belonged.

Hermione swallowed a breath and let go of Ginny's hand. "I'll… I'll go find her."

Ginny nodded and Hermione started picking her way through the crowds. There were as many faces she knew as there were ones she didn't. But not all of them were sorrowful. Some were smiling, hugging as they reunited with a friend or family member. She heard snippets of conversations, people encouraging each other as they retold their feats in the scrimmages.

Hermione started to feel a little overwhelmed by… everything. It was all so much and she couldn't process it all. She needed to help the hurt, she needed to find Luna. She needed to talk to Harry. She needed…

Goosebumps shot down her arms and legs. The back of her neck tensed. It was as if the air pressure in the Great Hall had just dropped. Hermione looked up at the enchanted ceiling, expecting to see a storm brewing.

"Granger!"

It was sharp and short, a contrast to the long, heavy strides the Death Eater was taking towards her.

Because how he looked right now, there was no mistaking what he was.

Draco Malfoy looked like the angel of death.

"How could you?" Pansy's voice shook, but her wand didn't. "How could you do that to Theo? *To me?!*"

Draco was too shocked to do much of anything other than stammer out the first words he thought of. "I… I didn't know."

"You knew he was loyal!" She lurched forward and Draco didn't even raise his wand to stop her. "Theo wouldn't have turned! He joined because… because…" Pansy slid her hand over her stomach again.

Theo said his father wasn't happy about him leaving school to join the Death Eaters, but had relented. Thaddeus Nott probably beat his son black and blue, but Theo had still taken the mark.

He had to provide for his heir, after all.

Draco couldn't stop staring at the bump on Pansy. It wasn't even born yet and had already lost half its protection in the world, because of him.

"We were going to move in together," Pansy said a little softer now. "I can't go home. You… you know how my father is."

Draco clenched his jaw. Pansy's father made Lucius look tame. He could only imagine how Titus Parkinson took the news that his eldest daughter had been knocked up before she even finished school.

"Theo was going to take care of us." Pansy's eyes filled with tears. "And you *killed* him." Draco simply stared back at her, the guilt crushing him from the inside out. Pansy wiped her tears away and a frantic gleam entered her dark eyes. "All for that Mudblood *bitch!*"

He ground his teeth. That was *enough* .

Pansy was upset and pregnant with a dead man's baby, but that didn't mean she got to say anything about Draco's girl. No one did.

Draco lifted his wand, mirroring Pansy's stance. "Don't speak about her."

Pansy gave a scoffing laugh. "I never thought I'd see the day when *you* defended a girl's honor, let alone someone like *her.*"

Draco took a heavy step forward. "I told you to shut your mouth, Pansy."

"Look what she's done to you." She sneered at him, as if they were kids, back in school together. "Look what you've become."

A murderer. That's what he'd become. Draco didn't want to kill Theo, but he'd do it again, if he had to, even knowing what he knew now. He'd bring this whole fucking castle down as long as he got to stand on the rubble with Granger at his side.

Shame. Guilt. Remorse.

He didn't have time for any of that. He needed to find Granger and get her out of here. If something had already happened to her… Draco pushed on trying not to let his fear take hold of him.

But it wasn't as easy to banish as it normally was. Something had changed and now it coiled around his chest, tightening and making it difficult to breathe. Draco did his best to ignore it, pretend it wasn't there. Once he found Granger everything would be fine. He'd be okay again.

It was a lie he had told himself too many times before, but what else could he do? Let whatever was inside him open up and swallow him whole?

Draco snarled. Let it try. He'd make it choke on him. And then he'd slit its throat from the inside out.

He could hear the sounds of fighting up ahead and Draco pulled his wand from the holster on his thigh. Granger wouldn't run from a fight and so Draco ran towards her. It. The fight.

Whatever.

The corridor was filled with dusty smoke. It billowed in front of him and Draco had to pull his mask off to breathe. Once the dust cleared, he almost wished it hadn't.

He had seen that look on Pansy's face too many times, normally after stumbling into the common room, hung over, and with another girl's lipstick still staining his skin. It was always followed by harpy-level screaming.

"Draco Malfoy!" Pansy's voice pierced his eardrums. "You *fucking* Blood Traitor!"

Draco almost laughed. How true that was.

The dust sank lower and Draco's eyes caught on the unmistakable pronouncement of Pansy's stomach. The hand *not* pointing her wand at him curled protectively around it.

Oh shit…

Pansy was pregnant.

For one terrifying second he thought it was his. Cold shock shot through the marrow of his bones. But it couldn't be. He hadn't touched her since he started up with Granger and Pansy had been fucking Theo—

Oh fuck.

Theo.

The swooping sensation he had just felt ended as his stomach landed hard somewhere inside him.

White blond hair fell in between his eyes, his coat fanned out behind him, silently moving behind him with each step, and his boots landed hard, too heavy, as if he were punishing the distance between them.

Hermione dropped whatever was in her hands, she didn't even care anymore and rushed towards him at full speed.

The only reason she stopped was because her body crashed into his, solid and strong. Her marble statue came to life.

"Draco!" His name was muffled because her face was pressed into his chest, arms flung around his neck, pulling him down, closer to her with every ounce of strength that she had.

His body tensed, but only for a moment. Then his long arms were around her, holding her to him and interlocking around her frame like chains.

"Hermione." This time her name was forced from what sounded like airless lungs. It was whispered, but anything but soft. Still, it wasn't harsh or cruel. It was… *him* . It was really Draco, here, again.

She sunk into his arms.

Draco fingers spread out, slotting between her ribs and almost crushing her with the force of his embrace.

"Draco—" Hermione rasped. "Draco, I can't… breathe."

He buried his face into her neck, inhaling deeply. "Neither can I," he muttered hoarsely.

Hermione held on a moment more before sliding her hands down to his upper arms. Draco took the hint and slowly started to release her. His hands rested on her shoulders, holding her only far enough away so he could look down at her.

"What—" he started and then stopped. Hermione prepared herself for the onslaught of questions. She had quite a few herself. But, she was a bit confused when Draco's brows pulled together, darkening the stormy grey of his eyes. He pulled her off to the side so they were partially hidden by a burned out brazier. "What are you *wearing?"*

It was then that she finally looked down at her clothes. Dirty, stained, torn and burned away in parts, Hermione tried to wipe at a singed spot on her leg only to feel the material of her jeans fall away into ash, leaving her upper thigh exposed. Her shirt was not in much better condition and stuck to her skin, still wet from either the Chamber, or sweat, or from something in the tunnel from under the Shrieking Shack.

She pulled her jumper around her shoulders again.

Goodness, she had a lot to fill him in on.

Before she could even open her mouth, Draco was sliding his coat down his arms and swinging it over her shoulders and she was surrounded by the smell of crisp mint and creamy parchment. The coat swamped her and trailed on the dusty floor, but Draco just pinched the seam of his lips together as he pulled his closed over her.

"Look at the state of you!" He lifted up a soggy curl and twirled it in his fingers. "You're worse than Calix, I swear… Always running off where you don't belong."

Hermione couldn't help but smile at his chiding. It was… cute. In a patronizing, insulting, *caring* sort of way.

Draco brushed her loose curls back and lowered his mouth to her ear.

"You have no idea how much of a punishment you're in for, kitten." Heat bloomed inside her, sinking low and pulling her blood down with it. "Your ass is going to be so sore you can't even sit down, but that's okay, because I'm going to keep you on your knees for at least a week."

A cool shiver of pleasure raced down her spine, mixing strangely with the heat brewing there to make a heady combination.

Hermione felt light headed.

Draco smirked down at her. "Those big fuck-me eyes won't get you out of this one, pet. I'm—"

Draco's head snapped to the side, his body following half a beat later as the force of the blow rocked through him.

Hermione screamed, covering her mouth as the assailant pressed on, following Draco to the ground and pinning him there with their body.

"Neville!" Hermione rushed forward, Draco's coat almost slipping from her shoulders with her quick movement.

Neville latched onto the front of Draco's shirt, pulling him up and Draco reached up, trying to dislodge Neville from on top of him before he was slammed back down against the stone floor.

"Stop! Get off him! Neville, he's not—"

Draco growled as his hand clamped down on his thigh. For a moment Hermione thought he was hurt until she saw that the holster he wore there was empty. Draco's eyes flashed like a lightning storm as they met hers. His wand. Where was his wand?

The sound of Neville's fist impacting upon Draco's cheek distracted her from wondering what had happened to it.

"Neville, he's on our side!"

Neville finally turned to look up at her. *"What?"*

She remembered how good it felt in her hand, how she… missed it. It felt more like hers than either of the ones in front of her. She wished it was in her hand now.

And she wanted Draco, here, with her. Or actually, she wanted to be with him, very far away from all of this. But Harry was right though, they weren't done yet. Once they were, she would have the future she was fighting for now.

The warm feeling in her chest turned to ash as she watched Harry and Ron burn corpses just as they started to move. Their faces were grim and bitter, almost nothing resembling the boys she had grown up with.

Once they were done, all that was left were two smoking scorch marks on the flagged stone as the fire burned out.

Draco was starting to get really fucking annoyed. He ran all the way up here, up seven flights of stairs, and Granger was nowhere to be found.

The castle was large, but it wasn't that fucking big and parts of it were coming down so there were only so many fucking places she could be. So where *was she?!*

Draco pushed open a heavy wooden door and saw an untouched classroom. Odd, that in the middle of a battle, this room had been left untouched. The desks were all in straight rows and none of the chairs were overturned. It… looked just like it used to and for a moment all Draco wanted to do was be back here sitting in a classroom and listening to some boring professor drone on and on about something he didn't give two shits about.

He'd flip through his book and when he finished defacing all the illustrations, he'd look up and catch Granger's eye, holding it until she blushed that beautiful shade of Gryffindor red and look away just to glance back a second later to see if he was still staring.

Draco nearly ripped the door from its hinges as he hurried out, unable to stay in that fucking room one second longer. Seeing it, how it should be, made him feel weird things he wasn't used to.

He normally kept all of those pesky emotions far beyond the marble walls in his mind, but now, there were cracks in them and things kept slithering in.

Harry moved to follow him, but Hermione touched his arm, stopping him.

She bit her lip for a moment before she asked, "When you saw… Voldemort, did you… was Draco…"

Harry shook his head. "He wasn't with him."

Hermione didn't know whether to be relieved or worried. At least Draco wasn't at his Master's side, but… that meant he was out there. Somewhere in the castle.

Her heart beat a little faster.

"Hermione, stay with Harry. I'll take point." Ron didn't bother looking back before he darted out of the door.

They ran down the corridor, dodging bricks and treading on glass as they headed down the first set of stairs.

When they reached the bottom Ron stopped suddenly, causing Harry and Hermione to crash into him.

"There he is! There's Potter!" A masked Death Eater shouted. "Let's get—"

Ron raised Bellatrix's wand. *"Avada Kedavra!"*

The green light silenced the shouting.

Hermione watched as Ron swiveled his arm with shocking efficiency. *"Avada Kedavra!"*

The second Death Eater fell.

Ron let out a low breath he had been holding and raised his brows. "This wand works really well."

Hermione glanced down at Bellatrix's wand. It had worked for her, but… never like that. It wasn't pulling against his grip like it always had her. Hermione had never been able to get Bellatrix's wand to submit to her, maybe because she had never really wanted *that* wand, but the wand seemed happy to be wielded by Ron.

"We're not done yet," Harry muttered and held up… her vinewood wand. She had almost forgotten he still had it.

Something about having both her friends wielding wands she had once used made Hermione feel a little… better. Like a part of her was protecting them. It didn't seem wrong, neither of those wands felt like *hers* . Not anymore.

She looked at the wand she had bought in Diagon Alley seven years ago, it had been the first magical object she'd purchased. Mr. Ollivander had been so kind, helping her count out the strange coins in order to pay him.

Draco had tortured that man, with the wand he had purchased from Ollivander too.

Hermione knew it well; the slick, dark wood, the thick handle, worn with the impression of his fingers.

Draco took the momentary lapse in attention and lunged up, throwing Neville back off him and sending him sprawling.

Oh goodness. How many times was she going to have to explain this? The commotion was causing a crowd to gather around them. Many people had their wands out already.

Hermione plucked up her Gryffindor courage. It was now or never.

"Draco's not… what you think. He's with us." She glanced down at him. Draco rolled his eyes and clenched his jaw. "He's with *me."*

Neville gaped looking back and forth between her and Draco and to further demonstrate her point, Hermione reached her hand out to help Draco up.

"Thank you, Sweetheart." He got to his feet and spat blood on the ground. But he didn't let go of her hand.

Neville looked back and forth between them. "Hermione, are you serious?"

She needed to make this fast and easy enough for everyone to understand. "We've all been through a lot this year. Draco included. Things… are different now."

"That's putting it lightly!" Neville spluttered.

"Is that Hermione Granger?" Someone whispered.

"And Draco Malfoy!" Another voice answered.

The murmurs quickly became heated, getting angrier. Thank Godric Ron was busy with his family. Immediately Hermione felt bad for thinking that. He was only busy because his brother had *died.*

And Ron… had Draco really left for dead in the Ministry? She looked up at him, his face a perfect marble mask with only a faint hint of annoyed arrogance, as if being here was beneath him.

The whispers were getting louder.

Hermione felt Draco's hand tighten around hers.

Neville's brows pulled together, clearly confused by this turn of events. "I'm sorry, but I'm finding this a little hard to believe!"

Hermione had never heard Neville shout so much in his life. She understood she owed him an explanation, but now was not the time or the place. Hermione wished Harry was here, or someone, to take her side and speak up for her.

"Are you trying to say Hermione Granger is *wrong* , Longbottom?"

Hermione turned quickly to see… Blaise Zabini. His sleeves were pushed up past his elbows and one suspender had fallen, hanging right above his knee. His shoes, a soft black leather, had a fine layer of dust on them and splashed spots that Hermione was almost certain was… *blood* .

Blaise pulled out a monogrammed handkerchief and wiped his hands with it.

"Zabini." Neville said stiffly.

Hermione looked between the two, seeing the two men address each other with begrudging respect.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Draco hissed when Blaise came to stand at his side.

Blaise smiled unkindly. "Something you don't deserve." He turned back to Neville. "Draco warned me. He's the reason I am here to help instead of in London."

"He *warned* you? And you didn't think to tell anyone what might be happening?!"

Blaise, to his credit, did not raise his voice to match Neville's. "It wasn't much of a warning, but at least he tried. And if you remember, I attempted to speak with you this morning, but you told me to—"

"Yeah I remember," Neville cut him off.

Neville and Blaise were working together? And… Draco warned him? Is that where he had sent Calix to?

Neville took a heavy breath, then pointed a broken finger at Draco. "This doesn't mean I like you."

"Well, Longbottom," Draco smirked, "I think we've found the first thing we have in common."

Neville scowled and shook his head before addressing the people that had gathered. "Alright! If you're able, we need help moving the wounded! We still have more being brought in! If you have a wand and want to help search for people, McGonagall is setting up teams for search and rescue by the door!"

The people moved off, either heading out to help, or returning to their loved ones. Hermione felt Draco tense at her side.

"I'm sorry."

The words shocked her, coming from Draco who was trying to meet Blaise's eye, but kept glancing away.

Blaise huffed. "Sorry? That's the best you can do?"

Hermione watched Draco pale as he glanced at the far end of the hall where the dead were resting before turning back to Blaise. "Yes."

Hermione didn't breathe for the moment that the two men stood eye to eye.

"I suppose it would be uncouth to refuse a peace offering in a time of war."

Draco grinned and dropped Hermione's hand only long enough to clap his arms around Blaise, who patted Draco's back roughly a few times before their short, but meaningful embrace ended.

"He's in the Shrieking Shack," Harry muttered.

"He's not even fighting in his own war?!" Ron shouted, outraged.

"Where's the snake?" Hermione asked quickly.

"With him. But it's protected."

"We'll see how long that protection lasts," Ron said dangerously and Hermione shot him another worried look. The color still hadn't returned to his face and it was making his blue eyes stand out strangely against the coppery sheen of his hair.

"He's not coming." Harry's eyes moved under his lids and Hermione noticed that his scar was darkening. "He is waiting for me to go to him."

"Why on earth would you do that?"

A single drop of blood dripped down from the tip of Harry's scar and his eyes flew open. "The last horcrux. He knows I'll come for it."

Hermione's stomach dropped inside of her. Harry was going to do it—face death head on. Harry had never been the type to shrink back from fighting and he had said he wanted it over this morning. Hermione could see the same grim look on his face now. He couldn't have meant… but… did he?

"Harry, you can't," Hermione argued, not allowing herself to chase that train of thought.

"She's right," Ron, surprisingly, said. *"You* can't. But *we* can." Harry gave Ron a weak, but honest smile as Ron clasped him on the shoulder. "You're as much of my brother as Fred was. I'm not going to let you face this alone."

Hermione's head spun as she looked between them. "No!"

She wasn't about to let them run off and risk their lives. Not without her.

"Hermione, we only have two wands between us," Harry started.

"I can get one." Hermione lifted her chin and crossed her arms. "I am sure we will have plenty of chances on our way to the Shrieking Shack."

She half expected Ron to offer her Bellatrix's wand back. Maybe if he hadn't just watched his brother die in front of him he would have, but there was something in his body language that told Hermione he wasn't giving up any chance to take down Death Eaters.

"I practiced wandless magic while I was… gone," Hermione continued. "I'm not defenseless."

Noises started filling in the hall outside.

"We need to move," Ron said quietly. He walked over and peaked his head out of the door. "Clear."

"No," Hermione tried to soften her voice, tried to get him to calm down because right now Ron's eyes looked like blue flames. "I'm sorry, I am, but we have to help Harry. It's the only way we will win. It's… what Fred would have wanted. What he died for!"

"Get off me." Ron pulled his head away from her and finally shrugged Harry off. Bellatrix's wand was in his shaking fist.

"Move!" Harry shouted and fired off a curse at an approaching spider. "We need to get out of here!"

A loud roar came from outside and many of the hallway's occupants scattered, thankfully the spiders included. It seemed whatever was outside had scared off the majority of the Death Eaters. Percy, who had been guarding his brother, took off after one of them, shouting "ROOKWOOD, YOU'RE A DEAD MAN!"

Hermione had seen Percy shout many times and for many reasons, but never quite like that.

Watching him chase after a dark robed wizard, Hermione felt something burn in her. Whatever Percy would do to him when he caught him, Rookwood deserved it.

"We can't…" Ron started, face paling as he looked towards Fred. "We can't leave him here! The spiders, they'll be back and Harry you know that they…"

He couldn't finish.

"Okay." Harry nodded and pushed his way to where Ron was trying to drag Fred's body out of the line of fire. Hermione followed them, hating herself a little for wondering when she would be able to ask Ron for the wand back.

Between the three of them, they were able to get Fred's body into a classroom. They did their best to barricade the door and locked it behind them.

"I know what this feels like. After Sirius all I wanted to do was…" Harry shook his head, dark hair falling onto his face. "But Hermione's right. We need to do this. For Fred, for Sirius, for all of them." He glanced at Hermione then back at Ron. "I think you'll have plenty of chances tonight to fight Death Eaters, but right now, we need to find Voldemort and the snake."

Ron turned away, cleared his throat and shook his shoulders some, as if trying to release some trapped energy inside him.

"Fine." When he turned back around he avoided looking at her at all costs. "Can you see where he is?"

Harry closed his eyes and Hermione held her breath.

A few moments of stillness passed and Hermione traded one worried glance with Ron, only for him to break eye contact quickly.

Hermione stood in shock. Draco… had just *hugged* Blaise. She'd never seen him hug anyone, except her.

But neither Draco nor Blaise seemed thrown off by it, so Hermione did her best to quiet her curious thoughts. Draco was still grinning as he put his arm around her and Hermione couldn't help but smile up at him.

"It's good to see you again, Hermione." Blaise smiled at her and took her fingers, twisting her hand and leaning down to kiss it. Right before his lips touched her skin, Blaise stopped. He looked up at Draco from beneath impossibly long lashes and winked, giving her curled hand a small shake before releasing it.

"Fuck you, Blaise."

Blaise smirked, but ignored Draco, focusing instead on her. "So you forgave him too, I take it?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "That remains to be seen."

Blaise tapped his chin with his finger. "Hmm."

"Enough bonding," Draco cut in, turning the friendly conversation back to business and taking Hermione's hand back in his. She couldn't help but feel a small thrill go through her at it. "Blaise, you're helping the Order now?"

He shrugged. "I'm helping people who need it." Draco lifted his brows, prompting Blaise to go on. "My internship at St. Mungo's is three days a week and I'm here the rest of the time. I need as much practice as I can get if I want to be a Healer by the time I'm twenty and… one night I noticed someone passed out in a corridor. It was Ginny Weasley."

Hermione's heart stopped beating. She knew Ginny was fine, but still, hearing about her friend being hurt and alone made her fingers tingle with nerves.

"It was the perfect opportunity to test things out on my own. And Draco, I was *good*. When Weasley came to, there was a great deal of cursing and she gave me a black eye, but after that little tantrum she caught on that I was actually trying to *help* her and… she wasn't the only one who needed medical attention. I started swiping supplies from St Mungo's and brought them back here."

Blaise took a breath and looked around as he went on. "They needed help. A lot of help and…." He waved his hand. "It was mutually beneficial."

Hermione felt a wave of gratitude towards Blaise for what he'd done for her friends. It might have started as practice for his internship, but here he was, helping the Order and Dumbledore's Army instead of offering his services to Lord Voldemort and his

Death Eaters. He was as pragmatic as the next Slytherin, but he'd shown his true colors tonight and as far as Hermione was concerned, Blaise Zabini was dipped in gold.

"Blaise, that's…" she started, having a hard time finding the right words in her spinning mind. "That's incredible. Thank you."

He shrugged again.

"This is awful," Draco said and Hermione looked up at him in disbelief. "Stealing from St. Mungo's? But that's *wrong,* Blaise. I don't know how we're going to get past this. How can I ever forgive you?"

Hermione just stared at Draco for a moment before he and Blaise both started laughing.

It was the strangest thing, seeing Draco standing in the Great Hall, joking with his friend while he had his arm around her, like they were a real couple. Hermione was suddenly taken with the thought that they should have had this. They should have had a year here, together. Learning, socializing, *dating.* And they would have, if not for this war.

Is this what it would be like… after?

If it was… she couldn't wait.

"I'm glad to see you two together," Blaise said after a moment and pulled the fallen suspender strap up onto his shoulder again. "Are you staying? Are you fighting?"

"Yes."

"No."

Hermione narrowed her eyes at Draco who was glaring down at her.

"Granger, Sweetheart," Draco adopted his most patronizing tone. "We can't stay here. We need to be gone by dawn."

Hermione could still hear Voldemort's high voice telling Harry he was waiting on him, but Harry had come back to the castle instead. She wondered what he was seeing in Snape's memories and her stomach flipped over in nervousness. Lord Voldemort would wait forever, and neither would Harry.

They had destroyed another horcrux tonight and the snake was nearby. The war could be over by morning!

Hermione pulled herself from under his arm. "I told you I'm not leaving Harry."

Draco looked at Blaise, without a grin this time. "I'll talk to you later."

"About your—"

"Yes." All of a sudden Draco's face was cold marble. Blaise's eyes darted in her direction and Hermione frowned. So there was more in Draco's letter than just warning

She immediately knew it wasn't Draco's mask, she had seen it so many times being locked in his room, and Hermione rolled out of the way as a spell hit the spot she had just occupied.

Her hands flew to her pockets before she remembered Ron had Bellatrix's wand, not her.

Fiddle—*Fuck!* Hermione adopted Draco's favorite exclamation. If there was ever a time that deserved it, it was now. And it was… strangely comforting.

As was the appearance of friendly faces. Fred and George were here, firing spells and setting off tricks from their shops to break up the Death Eater's advance.

Ron had flung himself into the fighting, trying to reach his family and create some sort of line against the incoming Death Eaters.

Hermione scrambled to her feet just in time to see sickly green light hit a shock of red hair.

Everything slowed.

Ron stopped moving, his arms falling to his sides.

Laughter echoed down the long corridor and Hermione didn't even have the chance to scream or cry or… anything before shouting and curses drowned it out. The last part of Fred Weasley had been swallowed up by the rage of battle. He fell, and Ron surged forward.

Harry grabbed onto Ron's shoulder, trying to keep a hold of him as he struggled to break free. Hermione begged him to stop, but Ron didn't seem to hear anything either of them were saying.

"Kill," he grunted, rolling his arm to try to shake Harry off. "Death Eaters. All of 'em." His voice was dark, darker than she had ever heard it before.

She cast her eyes down the corridor where Percy of all people was protecting Fred's body from being trampled by the influx of Death Eaters streaming into the corridor.

They weren't the only thing breaking in. Spiders, ones like Harry and Ron had told her about, were crawling through broken windows. Strange clicking noises coming from mandibles, dripping with venom.

"Ron, please!" Hermione grabbed his face, making him look at her. "We have to focus! We have to end this!"

"THAT'S MY BROTHER!" he bellowed at her. "You want me to pretend like he's not dead?!"

"That's the password," Lovegood pointed behind him. "To the Restricted Section."

He glanced behind him to see the gate slightly ajar.

When he turned back to the creepy little girl Draco sized her up carefully. She said only the students Snape and the Carrows approved had been allowed in the Restricted Section. So why did this little do-gooder know it?

Maybe he should have made an example out of her when he had her locked up after all.

"How the fuck did you know that?" Draco said in a low voice and raised his wand high again.

Lovegood looked at it curiously. "Ravenclaw, remember?"

Smart ass.

Draco narrowed his eyes at her. He'd wasted enough time with her riddles. He needed to find Granger. Now.

"I'd try the Room of Requirement if I were you," Lovegood added as Draco passed her by. "Ginny's in there and she might know where her brother is. Hermione was with him when I last saw her."

Draco stopped and looked Lovegood over. She was helping him. Why? It made no sense, not after what he'd done. Then again, nothing about her made any sense. It was the reason why he ignored her when she was locked in his cellar.

Maybe… maybe he ought to try being a little nicer to her.

"Thank you," he said, feeling uncomfortable, "for helping me."

Lovegood smiled at him again. "Thank *you* for not torturing me."

If that was her standard for friendship, she needed to raise it. And speaking of raising standards he needed to get to Granger before her friends got her killed. And he would tear apart anyone who tried to stop him; Order member or Death Eater.

Draco headed out of the library. It was time to save the world.

Well, *his* world, at least.

Blaise to stay out of London then. She didn't like that Draco was keeping secrets from her again. She thought they were past this.

Blaise tipped his head again before leaving her alone with Draco, who wasted no time in grabbing her upper arm and pulled her away from everyone and into the entrance hall.

"Let *go* of me."

Draco cocked his head. "Now we both know I'm not going to do that."

Hermione was too tired and too… angry to fall for his charms right now. She had almost forgotten in the rush of finding him again. But Draco was still hiding things. He was bossing her around. He was doing everything she hated and all because—"I'm not leaving."

The smirk fell from Draco's face. "Any minute the Dark Lord is going to march in here and kill everyone in his way to Potter. And then he's going to kill Potter. He's a dead man, Granger."

"Not yet," Hermione argued.

"What difference do a few minutes make?!" Draco shouted.

"They seemed to make the world of a difference this morning when you left Ron in the Department of Mysteries." Goodness, had that really just been this morning?

Draco sneered at her cruelly. "Is that why you ran off before I got back? Scared of the big bad Death Eater?"

"Scared?" Hermione scoffed. "Hardly. You've tricked me before, but in a real duel, you know I'd beat you." Not that they could have one since she didn't have a wand at the moment, a fact she purposefully failed to mention to Draco in case he had his hidden somewhere other than his empty holder.

Draco smirked at her. The ass. "That's why I never fight fair."

"That's not something to be proud of."

"No?" he asked. "Neither is losing."

Hermione lifted her chin. "If you don't want to lose *me,* then you better tell me Ron was lying about what you did."

Draco closed his mouth. "You don't understand."

Hermione folded her arms. "Enlighten me then." Ron's face was proof that something had happened, but she just couldn't believe Draco had betrayed them. She trusted him, and so she was going to give him a chance to explain himself.

He breathed out heavily through his nose, but she stood her ground. She wasn't waiting around for answers anymore, and Draco knew it. "Weasley blew our cover. He

also set off the alarms before we got the Muggleborns out of the cells. It was him, or them."

Oh. Well… that… made sense. Almost *too* much sense. "And what about giving his wand to McNair?"

Draco's expression was cool and complacent as he said, "I was hoping McNair would kill him."

She wasn't sure what she expected but it wasn't that. Why would Draco do something like that? Did he think she was going to be okay with this?!

"I hate Weasley," Draco said simply, as if this all made sense and she should have known this all along.

"So you wanted him to be *murdered?!"*

"He wants me dead! He told me he wants to do it himself!" Draco was back to shouting. Of course he was. Because he was talking to her. "Ask him! Fucking ask him, Granger. The only help that prick would have given me, would be burning me after I turned."

Had… had Ron actually said that?

Ron hated Draco just as much as Draco hated Ron and she didn't think Ron would go out of his way to help Draco. After all, he hadn't wanted Harry to go back for Goyle in the Room of Requirement, but… Ron had pulled her out of the way of a killing curse tonight. But there was a difference between not being friends and being enemies.

She wouldn't be able to stand aside if a fight broke out between Draco and Ron, but would she be able to stop them from killing each other?

Goodness, she didn't want any of this. Hermione turned her face up to the ceiling, just wishing she could have five minutes where this wasn't happening and they weren't at war and her head wasn't hurting trying to keep up with everything that had happened since the sun came up this morning and wondering what else would happen before it rose again.

Taking a shaky breath, Hermione felt her throat tighten uncomfortably.

"Sweetheart…" Draco pulled her into his chest. He wrapped his arms around her again and Hermione leaned into him. Just needing the support and comfort and… love. Today had been more stressful and crazier than she could ever have imagined and it wasn't over yet. In fact, this conversation with Draco was the first thing she had done since leaving the beach this morning where she really felt like herself.

Everyone else wanted Hermione to be smart, be strong, but Draco just wanted *her.* And no matter what, he'd never let her go. That feeling of security, of being *wanted* , it

Draco lunged forward at the mention of her name. *Hermione.*

"Where is she?" Draco growled. "Fucking tell me, Lovegood or I'll—"

She took a few steps. Towards him.

What the fuck was she doing?

Lovegood smiled. It was weird and Draco didn't like it. His wand lowered a little and then raised it back up, keeping it aimed in between her unfocused eyes.

"I see your arm has healed. Hermione did a pretty good job with you."

How… how did she know that fingering Granger was what made the feeling come back in his arm? Granger didn't… tell anyone about that, did she?

Remembering the feeling of warmth spreading up his fingers, the small squeeze and then the jolt when he realized that he could feel, and feel *her,* made Draco's need to find Granger blot out every other thought.

"Murtlap essence is often overlooked in favor of dittany due to the speed in which it can heal superficial—"

"Stop. Stop talking," Draco said shortly. "Tell me where Granger is. Have you seen her? Is she alright?"

Lovegood's eyes drifted up, staring at the dark ceiling. Draco followed her line of sight. Was this girl actually insane or just… fucking weird as shit?

"She was helping decide who would defend what lines when I got here."

Draco felt like something was coiling around his chest, tightening and pushing cold terror up his throat at the thought of Granger fighting. Lovegood slowly lowered her gaze back to his.

"But Harry was going to the Ravenclaw common room. That was about an hour ago. They're probably done with whatever they were doing."

"That doesn't help me at all!" Draco shouted.

He was wasting his goddamn time here. Looney Lovegood probably didn't even know they were at war for Salazar's sake!

"If I were Hermione," she twisted back and forth a little, thinking, "I wouldn't go too far from Harry."

Yeah, that was the fucking problem.

"Do you have anything remotely useful for me?!"

Lovegood stared at him without blinking. Yeah, she was *really* fucking weird. No wonder he avoided her when she was down in his cellar.

She shocked him even more when she said, *"Nam purus."*

For the pure. What the fuck…

Draco slammed his shoulder into a door and was inside Hogwarts once more. It was weird as fuck being in the school again and he fought against memories that cropped up around every corner. He pulled his white walls in tight, keeping everything else out, and sucked air into his burning lungs.

Draco jumped up a flight of stairs in three leaps. If Potter had come back to Hogwarts, it was because he thought a horcrux was here. They said one might have been Ravenclaw's and Potter was simple enough to think that it or a clue to it might be in the Ravenclaw common room. So Draco was headed up.

He dashed up another set of stairs and paused on the landing.

He was on the fifth floor.

The library was on this floor.

Granger wouldn't…

Draco let out a low breath.

Granger absolutely *would* do something stupid like try and protect the books or some shit. Hell, she might be in there researching right now.

Draco ran inside.

"Granger?" He moved quickly through the stacks, looking down each one for a head of thick caramel curls. "Granger!"

There were a few students hiding behind a large shelf and they screamed, running away when they saw him.

Draco pulled off his mask. He'd forgotten he was wearing it. He was about to throw it away when he saw something reflected in the metal, something dark.

The gate to the Restricted Section.

He walked over and pulled on it. Locked.

He whispered the passphrase and tried again. Still locked.

"It changed," an airy voice said behind him and Draco spun around and saw fucking Looney Lovegood standing there as if nothing was wrong. "They changed the password at the beginning of the year. Only those approved by Snape or the Carrows were allowed in."

"What the fuck are you doing here?"

"I heard you shouting."

"And you what? Thought it would be a good idea to sneak up on me?" Draco snarled. "Not very smart for a Ravenclaw."

Lovegood tilted her head. "Being in Ravenclaw doesn't mean one is smart. If that's all it took, then Hermione would have been sorted there, don't you think?"

was something that Hermione needed and Draco had been the only one to see it. The only one to make her feel it.

Like this. Like his.

"I've got you, kitten."

She didn't even realize she had started crying until Draco spoke. He rubbed her back, sliding his hands over his heavy coat that she was still wearing.

"Let it out," he said softly and Hermione felt something inside her crack and everything she had been holding back all day came out in a fearsome cry. He held her against his chest, letting her scream into it. "Good girl."

She loved him. She loved him so much it *hurt*. It would always hurt because no matter what he did, she'd never stop loving him. It was just as true now as it was last year. And even though maybe it was smarter to, she didn't want to stop. Godric help her, she didn't *ever* want to stop loving him.

Draco kissed the top of her head and rocked her back and forth gently. "I'm going to fix this, okay? I'm going to make this better."

Hermione looked up at him and blinked, dispelling her last tears. Her lashes were wet and sticking together. "Really?"

He leaned down and ran his nose along her cheek, tracing the wet trail her tears had left behind. "I promise."

His kiss was soft, just barely pressing their lips together, but it meant more than she could say.

Draco rubbed his thumbs over her cheeks. "At least the tears washed the dirt off."

Hermione let out a sobbing laugh. She was sure she looked a mess right now, but Draco still looked at her like she was the only thing he could see.

His lips pulled up. "I love it when you smile. You should do it more often. And you will. Starting now. We'll start a new life, one without all this shit. Just you and me, like it should be."

Hermione thought she might start crying again. She wanted that *so much* , but she just… *couldn't*. Not yet. Her friends still needed her. Hermione looked back over her shoulder at the people in the Great Hall. The crowd shifted and she saw Luna with her arm around Ginny. Oh good, they had found each other.

Ron was there too, next to his sister, and supporting George who didn't seem to be able to stand on his own. She was glad Ron was there and with his family. He loved them more than anything, and that was a large part of the reason why he could never accept Draco, because of everything Draco had done and said about his family.

But there was still one person who needed her.

"Harry—"

"Is going to die. That was our deal. You stay until the end. Well it's the end, Granger. This is it."

"He's right."

Hermione spun around.

Oh God.

Harry.

Fucking Potter.

Granger pulled away from him and wiped her face with the black sleeves of his coat. Draco tried to reach for her, but she was moving towards Potter.

"Don't say that, Harry, you're still—"

"Alive? Yeah." Potter looked… gross. Sickly. Weak. Draco immediately felt a jolt of anxiety shoot down his spine. Not out of concern, fuck no. Just that Granger said the closer they got to the end, the weaker Potter and the Dark Lord were getting.

And Potter was barely lifting his feet as he walked towards Granger. "You're leaving?"

"No!"

"Like hell," Draco growled and in one stride was at Granger's side again. She wasn't getting away from him. Not this time.

"What deal did you make with him?" Potter jerked his chin in Draco's direction while addressing Granger. "That you'd leave with him if he fought for us?"

"No, no!" Granger waved her hands in front of her. "Draco *chose* to be on our side, it was nothing like that!"

They were both ignoring him. Draco didn't like it so he decided to get her attention again. "Well, it was a little like that." Granger flashed him a warning look. "Would you prefer I lie to him, pet?"

"What's he talking about Hermione?" Potter said with a hint of hardness in his tone and rubbed at his scar. Oh, that was cute; apparently the Chosen One got cranky when he was tired.

Draco pulled his hood up, hiding his face as he flattened himself against the wall. Peering around the corner he tried to find someone, anyone, that would point him in the right direction to Granger. The problem was, anyone who might know where she was, also thought Draco was a Death Eater.

This being on opposite side of the war thing was starting to get on his nerves. Granger wasn't on the other side, she was on *his* side.

And once he got his hands on her, he'd make sure she never, ever left it again.

He'd gotten into the school, but so had two dozen other Death Eaters along with a host of hags, werewolves, giants, and huge fucking spiders that spoke better english than the goddamn giants. He had to get to Granger and get her out before anyone or anything else touched her. He kept seeing the small scarred M on her arm and ground his teeth until his jaw hurt.

Getting in had been the easy part. He'd known the Order wouldn't hand over Potter at midnight and Draco had watched the moon slowly move, reflecting down on the defensives around the school until the Dark Lord tore them out of the sky. Draco did his best to avoid sending any spells out, instead opting to use the cover of darkness to sneak inside.

He'd met some resistance near the Lake, but after deflecting a nasty blueish hex Draco lifted his mask, for just a moment for the caster to see his face.

Frenchie paused, and it was all Draco needed. He sent her flying back into the water. He didn't want to stun or disarm her, not with the giants and spiders around, but he didn't want her in his way either if she changed her mind.

He'd seen her swim in the tournament; she'd be fine.

Granger might not be.

Frenchie broke the surface of the water, gulping down air. Draco started off again, his own lungs burning with want of oxygen. He wasn't the one that had been thrown into the water and still he felt like he was drowning.

He ran past the greenhouses, pushing himself on even when his muscles burned. Burning was fine, he was used to it after being in love with Granger. It was hell. It was… home.

Harry glanced back at Goyle for a moment with an annoyed expression. "Had to *imperius* him to get him to come with me. Should have done the same to you two. I thought I told you to get out?"

"We're in this together, Harry!" Ron dived out of the way of a flaming serpent, striking out at them and Hermione screamed, latching onto him tighter. She could feel his muscles flex at her touch. "I wasn't going to let you die for some purist scum like him!"

Hermione closed her eyes tightly as they flew through a great cloud of smoke. When she opened them, the doorway was looming in front of them.

Harry aimed his wand. "BOMBARDA!"

The doors flew open and they spilled into the hall outside, crashing to the ground as a fiery beast lunged at the entrance, collapsing it in on itself with the destructive force of the flames.

They landed hard, Hermione's head and shoulder hitting a broken piece of stone, making her blink a few times before the corridor righted itself. Ron was pulling at her hands, trying to untangle himself from her. She hadn't even realized she was still holding onto him.

"Where's—" Harry coughed hard, wiping sweat and soot from his face. "Where's the diadem?"

"Here," Hermione said weakly, holding it out.

A thick, black fluid was leaking from it and Hermione looked down to see the sleeve of her jacket was burned away. Her arm felt tight and tender.

"The fiendfyre," she explained, trying to clear her lungs. "It is one of the things that can damage horcruxes."

"I guess Malfoy was onto something then," Harry said grimly and took the broken headpiece from her outstretched hand.

Ron stepped up beside him, holding out one of the basilisk's fangs. "Do it, Harry. Finish it."

Hermione should have felt relief when Harry plunged the tip of the fang into the diadem, when it shook and spluttered, black liquid spitting forth across the floor.

And it was in the pool of darkness that Hermione saw the reflection of a silver mask staring down at her.

The Death Eaters were in the castle.

Granger looked between them quickly, curls matted with dirt and blood swinging heavily around her face. Draco was about to explain to Potter that they were going to start their new life before his body even got cold, but then Granger bit her lip nervously and something inside Draco stopped him from saying something that would upset her.

He thought it might have been his heart.

Fuck.

He really had chosen a side. And it wasn't the Dark Lord's or Potter's.

It was hers.

Theirs.

"I just…" Granger picked at her fingers, barely sticking out of the black sleeves. "Draco wanted to leave after he defected and I told him that we wouldn't have to wait until the war was over to… go… just…"

The lines on Potter's face deepened. "Just me. So you were waiting on me to die—"

"Harry, no!"

"—before you left."

Draco sniffed. "That about sums it up."

Granger glared at him and Draco rolled his eyes, pretending not to care. He didn't want her to be mad at him. He wasn't mad at her anymore, not since she ran and jumped into his arms the second she saw him.

If only she would run with him now, everything would be perfect. They could leave the war behind and Draco could forget everything he had done in it. Seeing Pansy was enough, Draco didn't want to face anything else he had done. All the faces of the people he had hurt, he had sold, he had… killed were pushing on his white walls, making it hard for him to breathe again.

Granger could fix all of that in an instant if she just said yes. Instead, they were still fucking standing here with Potter of all people. The one person who had death circling him like an augury with a fucked up wing.

Potter glared at Draco. "Is that why you left Ron behind? Is his death a part of your deal too?"

Draco felt something in him rise up and hiss. Potter had no fucking right to talk about his relationship with Granger and Draco was about to tell him that, with a few extra words thrown in, when Granger stepped forward, coat trailing on the floor.

"No, of course not!" She looked back at Draco, big doe eyes worried. Fuck. She was upset and he… needed to help. "Harry, it was just if… if you happened to… die, before the end of the war."

"And our mission from Dumbledore, what about that?" Potter said with what looked like the last bit of fight left in him.

"Weasley's still alive," Draco drawled. "Why not let him be the hero no one fucking asked for?"

"I don't want to hear a word you have to say about Ron. Not after what you did to him." Potter glared at him and Draco could have sworn he saw Potter's scar darken. "I warned you once, you're either with us or against us."

"I'm with *her,"* Draco snarled. "And before your body's even cold she'll be with me. Safe and far away from all this shit."

Potter took his broken glasses off and rubbed his eyes. "Maybe that's what you should do," he said softly.

"Harry?" Granger took a small step forward.

Potter pushed his glasses back up his nose. "I… I'm going to meet him."

"No!" Granger gasped, her hands flying up to cover her mouth. "Harry, you can't!" The pain in her voice made Draco's heart skip a beat. Well, this was convenient.

"This was Dumbledore's plan, all along."

Draco's brows slightly rose. That was… surprisingly cold of the old man. Dumbledore alway seemed to favor Potter, granting him points when anyone else would have been expelled. Was it all just to keep Potter on his good side? Even now, he was stupid enough to die for Dumbfuckdore who wasn't even here to see his oh-so-noble sacrifice.

A cool wave of understanding sank over Draco. Potter *wanted* to die. He wanted it to end, like this. And once Potter was dead…

"Please," Granger was crying again, wiping her tears away with the thick sleeve of his coat. "Harry, please don't go."

Potter rubbed his scar again and Draco noticed a small smear of red across his forehead.

Draco wondered if it hurt him, if it felt it all the time how Draco felt his mark. He absentmindedly touched at it as he watched a bead of blood drip down from the end of Potter's scar to run in between his eyes.

Potter ignored it as he pulled Granger's wand out of his pocket and held it out to her.

"I told Neville about the snake, but if you see it…" Potter's eyes flitted over to Draco for a moment. "You can try fiendfyre, but I think a killing curse will do it, since… since this one is in… a body."

Two old broomsticks, one with barely any tail left to it jumped into Harry's hands. He handed one to Ron and climbed on the other himself.

"Hermione, go with Ron and once you're out, destroy the diadem. I'm going to look for Goyle."

"WHAT?!" Ron bellowed.

"He can't have gone far, I put a leg-lock jinx on him. There's no way he will be able to make it out. I can't just leave him in here."

"You've got to be joking!" Ron coughed as the smoke around them thickened.

"Harry, you can't!" For once, Hermione was in agreement with Ronald. Harry couldn't risk his life for someone who had just tried to kill them!

"I'm the best flyer, don't worry about me. Destroy the diadem. That's what's important!" He swung his leg over the broom and kicked off before either Hermione or Ron could stop him.

"Get on," Ron said gruffly and Hermione didn't think twice before sticking her arm through the diadem and then wrapping it around Ron as she climbed on the broom behind him.

Hermione hated flying. The only time she had ever felt truly comfortable on a broom was when she had been flying with Draco. She closed her eyes, trying to think of that day while Ron lifted the broom into the air.

"Hold on," he murmured and Hermione dared to peek through her lashes. They weren't heading towards the exit.

"What are you doing?" Hermione's voice went high.

"I'm not leaving Harry!" Ron shouted back and then leaned down, angling the broom through whips of flame. Hermione flattened herself against his back, feeling his body tense with each turn. She'd seen him play enough to know Ron was a good flyer, but being on the broom with him was terrifying. He moved quickly, darting in and out of the way, just barely keeping them above the flames. Several times Hermione felt the heat singe her clothes.

"There!" Ron called out and Hermione looked around his shoulder to see Harry barreling towards them out of black smoke and Goyle sitting loosely on the back of his broom with a vague expression of interest on his face.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?" Harry's emerald eyes flashed with fury at the sight of them.

"What's wrong with him?" Hermione shouted as Ron banked right and leveled his broom with Harry's.

A teacup shattered against his head.

"Hermione, the diadem!" Harry yelled and Hermione lunged forward. She clutched it so hard the metal bit into her palm but she had it.

Another horcrux. The last hidden one.

Bubbles of hope filled her up. They could do it, they could *win*.

"Get it out of here!" Harry and Ron were holding them off, but just barely. Hermione took off down one of the aisles. It was hard to tell which way was the way out and she just hoped that Crabbe and Goyle were the only people who had followed them in.

That wasn't true.

More than finding the way out, Hermione wished she would find Draco waiting down one of the pathways. It would be like one of her dreams—in fact, it felt like one of them now. Except that she could hear Harry and Ron behind her, throwing curses and knocking over as much as they could to slow Crabbe and Goyle down.

Hermione felt a bloom of heat on her back and chanced a look behind her. Someone had cast fiendfyre and a giant snake, wreathed in flames was bearing down on Harry and Ron. Its body whipped around the towering piles and started catching on broken furniture and rolled up rugs.

Ron's face was lit up by the hot flames and Hermione watched him raise Bellatrix's curved wand, aiming it at Crabbe.

She slowed, just for a moment and watched the determination on Ron's face as he shouted, *"Avada Kedavra!"*

Wicked green light shot into the bright flames, hitting Crabbe's large chest. He fell, toppling a stack of books over which quickly caught fire, the body burning with the flames it had conjured.

Goyle stared down at his friend as the flames rose higher. Then, looking up at Ron with terror on his face, backed away, stumbling clumsily down a different path and away from them.

Ron made to go after him, but Harry grabbed onto his shirt, pulling him back as the flames spread.

"We can't stop the fire!" Harry yelled and Hermione saw that the flames had spread, starting to cut off other avenues.

"What do we do?!" she cried out over the roar of the fire.

Harry looked around, wiping sweat off his forehead from the growing heat. "We have to fly! *Accio brooms!*"

Granger's doe eyes went big. "No, no," she pushed her old wand back into Potter's hand and held onto his fist with both of hers. "It's yours now. It has been for a while. And… you need it. To… to fight, Harry. You *have* to fight."

"Hermione, I think we both knew it would come down to this."

"But… we'll find a way! We always do. And…" She bit her lip and all Draco wanted to do was take Granger back into his arms, but… he didn't want to take this moment away from her. She needed to say goodbye. Dawn was only a couple hours away and as soon as the sun rose, Draco's three days would be up. If Potter was still alive then, Draco would be the one who was dead and he was *not* going to let that happen. Not when he was so damn close to getting everything he had worked for.

Potter sighed. "Hermione…"

"I won't let you do this." She raised her chin, tears dripping off of it. "There's still the snake and then Voldemort himself. We need you. *I* need you. We are all here fighting with you. Maybe Dumbledore was wrong, there has to be another way!"

Potter looked at the mass of people in the Great Hall, but his face was oddly blank.

"Please don't go. Please, Harry. There's people here who love you, you can't leave them, not now. Stay. Please, Harry. I'm here for you. I'm staying with you."

Stay. Draco's lip curled. They weren't *staying*. But Granger and her too good heart wouldn't let go, even of a lost cause. A fact Draco knew better than most.

Potter's eyes moved over Granger's head and met Draco's. He didn't need legilimency to know what Potter was thinking, it was written all over his face.

For the first time, they were on the same side.

"Hermione, Sweetheart," Draco put his arm around Granger's shoulders. "If he's staying he'll need to speak with certain people, Order officials. Isn't that right, Potter? And maybe you can talk to McGonagall, find out if there is anything else we can do."

He avoided Granger's eyes and looked pointedly at Potter.

"Yeah," Potter said quickly. "I… I want to say goodbye to Remus and Tonks too. I know what happened to them."

Granger looked between the two of them. "So… you're not leaving?"

Potter's glasses slipped a little as another drop of blood fell down. He looked at the people gathered in the Great Hall. "They're fighting for me, I have to… to do what's right for them too."

It wasn't an answer and Granger knew it. Potter pocketed her wand again, sticking right next to his invisibility cloak.

"I'll tell you if anything changes."

Granger seemed to accept this, but still waited for Potter to walk into the Great Hall before following after him.

The Chosen One was immediately swarmed with attention and Draco backed up, preferring to keep to side while Potter shook hands, hugged, and talked with people.

Granger hovered by his side, smiling weakly at the people who came up to her. Draco didn't like leaving her side, but the less he interacted with these people the better.

And she was still wearing his coat. It trailed on the floor as when she walked, but at least it created a bit of a barrier between her and others.

He slouched against the wall, kicking one leg up to rest his boot on the lip of a brick while he watched Potter and his girl make the rounds through the Great Hall. They headed up to the bodies, and Draco caught Potter's eye from across the room. Grim determination lined his face and Draco looked away after seeing the forbidden forest flash through Potter's mind.

Draco looked back at him, waited until Granger wasn't watching, then nodded.

He shoved off from the wall and stuck his hands in his pockets, keeping his head down as he moved through the lines of the wounded.

"Lover's spat over already?" Blaise asked as he unbuttoned the top of his shirt and mopped some sweat from his brow. "I take your presence here as her victory then."

Draco rolled his eyes and when they stopped, they landed on Granger who was hugging Frenchie while Potter talked to Bill Weasley. "No one is winning," he said dully.

Draco looked around. There were more wounded than well, even with Blaise helping Madam Pomfrey and a few others. Lots of people had answered the Order's call, but bodies were still being carried in. And these ones didn't rise up again. How many inferi did the Dark Lord have ready to march on the castle?

Draco didn't want to know. In fact what he wanted was a fucking drink. A few of them. There was a cluster of people, crowded around the innkeeper of the Hog's Head and taking shots from chipped glasses. Draco could practically *taste* the firewhisky, feel its burn in his throat, the warmth shooting through his body as the alcohol hit his bloodstream.

His mouth watered.

No one would blame him for taking the edge off a little, no one but Granger. And himself. He didn't… didn't want to drown himself in liquor, not if it meant pulling Granger down with him. Draco took a breath and counted to three in his head, shutting his eyes tightly so he didn't have to see as the group toasted and tossed back another shot.

Then she let go. Hermione gave him a polite smile and took a step back, tucking her hair behind her ears.

All of those feelings of friendship might still be there, tucked away in her heart, but now Draco was too and he wasn't going anywhere.

Even if she had. He would be furious with her, probably tell her she was the stupidest person he'd ever met in his life but then he would grab her and kiss her and he wouldn't care that she had left before he arrived, because they'd be together again.

They *would.*

And as soon as they found the diadem, Hermione was going to go looking for Draco.

Voice sounded a few aisles over and she knew right away they didn't belong to Harry or to Ron.

Hermione started running in their direction.

She could see Harry up ahead, standing right next to… the diadem!

"Harry!" she yelled and Harry turned in her direction just enough that she could see he had his wand held high, pointed right at Crabbe and Goyle.

Hermione looked around for Draco. These were his friends and for years she had always seen them flanking him. The space in between them Draco normally occupied was filled with their raised wands.

"Look! It's the Mudblood!"

Draco wasn't here. And Crabbe and Goyle were the same goons as they had always been. Maybe even worse now.

"Avada Kedavra!"

Hermione's wand was at her side and she would never get a shield charm up in time. She met Harry's eyes, the green light reflected in them as it shot towards her.

Strong arms closed around her and Hermione felt the air move as the killing curse shot right past them. Someone had grabbed her and pulled her away from the curse.

She opened her eyes and saw coppery red hair and a splattering of freckles she knew so well. Ron had saved her.

"T-thanks," she said shakily.

He didn't say anything, just flattened his mouth and nodded.

Harry was returning fire, trying to cast around his own shield. He needed help.

Hermione reached for her dropped wand, but Ron's hand was already closing around it, a stunning spell flying from the dark wood before he even lifted it all the way.

It hit the stack next to Crabbe and he lifted a large arm to stop a cascade of objects falling on him.

He wanted to get this over with. The sooner Potter killed himself, the sooner Draco could move onto the next part of *his* plan, which included him and Granger and no one fucking else.

His mark buzzed and burned under his skin. Normally when the mark was active it was blindingly painful, but now, Draco barely felt it. He was pretty sure that wasn't a good sign, but he wasn't going to worry about that right now. If it wasn't hurting him, then great, one less thing for him to worry about.

He had been following the call of his mark for a while now, guiding him back to his master like a lost dog and once Draco had realized where the Dark Lord had made his camp, he felt sick, his insides coiling up in revulsion and disgust.

It was the clearing across from the Lake, the one Draco had flown Granger to and… Another wave of nausea rolled through him, thinking about Death Eater boots trampling the mossy ground that he had first felt the stuttered, fluttering of his heart when he watched her coming from his tongue and knew, *knew,* that something had changed.

That no amount of fucking Granger would ever get Hermione out of his head.

And the Dark Lord had taken that small, private space over, leaving only the memory of daylight streaming down through the branches and dancing across Granger's face.

The clearing might have been defiled, but Draco would keep the memory safe, locking it up behind white marble walls in his mind where nothing and no one could touch it.

He could hear them through the trees, the Dark Lord and his army. Draco's nerves were humming anxiously. He hated waiting here for whatever Potter was doing to be done.

Maybe he was making his peace. Maybe he had fallen asleep.

Draco could feel the tired pull of his own muscles. He leaned harder against the tree, feeling the rough bark bite into his arm through his shirt. His coat would have been thick enough to stop the uncomfortableness, but Draco was strangely thankful for the sharp prick of pain. It was keeping him alert.

Dawn was just under the horizon.

Draco pushed off from the tree. "Potter."

"I know," he said quietly, eyes still closed. Draco waited, expecting him to do something. Anything. But Potter just stayed there. "You'll stay with me?"

Draco looked around. The way Potter said it, the soft soft, the kind tone, made Draco question if Potter was talking to him. But they were alone here, in the dark wood.

Draco shifted his weight. "Not that you have any reason to trust me but I promised Granger she could stay until you were… gone. I'm not going to fuck it up now."

Potter opened his eyes. He was calm, in a I'm-about-to-die-and-I'm-okay-with-it kind of way. It made Draco uneasy. *He* didn't want to die; he wanted to *live.* Wanted to spend the rest of his life with the one person he cared about making it to morning alive.

"At least I won't have to listen to you talk much longer," Potter sighed. Draco twisted his mouth into a cruel smirk and held out his hand. Potter looked down at it, glasses slipping down his nose a little. "I don't want to hold hands, Malfoy."

Draco snorted. "Your wand, Scarhead." Potter's eyes shot up to his. "How's it going to look if I am wandless and my prisoner is still armed?"

Potter hesitated, then pulled out Granger's wand and handed it to Draco, handle first. "Are you going to give it back?" His distant tone let Draco know Potter wasn't talking about himself.

Draco's hand closed around the grip, feeling slightly better and slightly… worse having Granger's vinewood wand in his palm. Yeah, he'd give it back to her.

Once he knew she wouldn't use it on him.

Draco ran his fingers over the twisted vines, noting for the first time the small bumps and grooves that were tiny thorns sticking out every few inches. It felt different this time, and he could sense the magic in it coiling when he turned it on Potter.

" *Incarcerous.*"

Potter grunted as the ropes bound his hands, pulling his shoulders back and making him stumble a little. Draco expected him to say something, to complain, but Potter just shifted his feet, working to balance himself without the use of his arms.

Draco prodded him in the back. "Get moving."

They entered the clearing and Draco pulled himself up to his full height. No more slouching, no more sulking—he had returned to his Master victorious. He should be proud.

"My Lord," Draco had to stop himself from cringing; he sounded just like his father. "I swore that I would hunt Potter down for you." He pushed him forward and Potter stumbled, barely staying upright. "As promised," Draco drawled, "here he is."

He was rewarded with shocked gasps and furious whispers from his fellow Death Eaters. Bellatrix stared at him, her dark eyes bulging from under her heavy lashes. Draco flashed her a sardonic smile then let his face fall back into cool impassivity as he met the Dark Lord's crimson gaze. He found it dry and muted, heavy lines that had never been there before were now cutting through the pale skin.

The Dark Lord looked more dead than alive.

Draco dropped his head, staring down at Granger's wand in his hand. Would she ever want to touch it again, knowing that it had done this to her best friend? He could only hope she would believe him when he told her the truth.

He glanced up to see the Dark Lord gazing curiously at Potter who was staring right back. It seemed they were having some sort of private conversation which made Draco begin to feel nervous. If the Dark Lord cracked into Potter's skull, he'd see the real reason Draco brought him here.

Draco searched the ranks of Death Eaters for Snape, but didn't see his godfather among them. He was never far from his Master's side these days and Snape was the one who had told Draco how important it was that Potter face the Dark Lord, so where the fuck was he?

"Harry Potter," the Dark Lord hissed, his voice thin and worn. "The boy who lived."

"Going to try and kill me again?" Potter said and Draco was a little surprised by the anger in his tone. "Think the seventh time's the charm?"

The Dark Lord's slash of a mouth turned down.

"Insolence!" Bellatrix cawed, straining forward, but not moving any closer. "How *dare* you speak to Lord Voldemort like that?!"

"Bella." The Dark Lord held up one long finger in warning and Bellatrix shrunk back as if he had turned his wand on her. "I admit, Harry Potter has been able to run and hide from me before," he went on, and eyes the color of dried blood locked on Potter. "But I was right in placing my faith in Draco. He promised me the boy and has delivered. Well done. Lord Voldemort will reward you above all others for your loyalty."

Draco dipped his head again, throwing a smirk at Bellatrix who had turned a foul shade of green in her disgust.

"Thank you, my Lord."

"Unbind him."

"My Lord?"

The Dark Lord repeated the command, this time inside Draco's head. " *Unbind him!"*

Draco waved Granger's wand and the ropes fell from Potter's wrists.

"Anything you wish to say?" The Dark Lord sounded curious, as if he was truly interested in Potter's last words.

" *Neither can live while the other survives,"* Potter quoted. "But I have lived. I've lived, and loved, and had friends and family. My life may have been short, but at least I had one. You'll never have any of that. I'm not scared to die, but you'll spend the rest of your life terrified that someone will find a way to end it." His voice rose louder and Potter looked

Parchment… so easily torn, so easily *burned.* Which would be worse? Draco burning or… having him ripped from her? Forever…

She wasn't going to let either of those things happen. Not while she could still fight. Hermione raised her chin and her fist closed around the handle of the wand. She felt it respond to her, wanting her to use it. "You're wrong, Ronald."

Ron shook his head. "Not about him, Hermione. I just hope you realize that before it's too late."

Hermione had enough. She didn't want to hear Ron's skewed perceptions, didn't want to see the bodies burning, didn't want to be here when Draco was somewhere out there. Hopefully, not leading Harry to his death.

Was there some truth to what Ron was saying?

There was only one way to find out. But when Hermione turned to start back towards the forbidden forest, she saw the red light of dawn streaking across the sky.

And right below it, rising up from the top of the trees was a large skull with a snake slithering out of its mouth.

Ron looked at the school behind them and she saw his shoulders tense as he saw the dark mark in the sky. He didn't even turn back to her, instead he shouted at the others helping him burn the bodies. "They're coming!" he shouted, his voice strangely reminding her of both his brother Percy and his mother at the same time. "Get back to the castle!"

The Death Eaters were coming, did that mean… Was Harry… Goodness she wished Draco was here with her right now.

Ron turned back to her. "Are you coming?"

Hermione pulled out Draco's wand and followed him back up to the school.

Draco leaned against the trunk of a tree and watched Potter just stand there with his eyes closed and his arms at his sides, about to walk out of the cover of the trees and into the presence of the Dark Lord.

This was his plan? Really? It reeked of Gryffindor martyrdom.

Ron… Ron would do that to Draco too, if he had the chance. He'd said it to Draco and now had told her too. She still didn't like that Draco had left Ron behind, but she had to shield her eyes from the brightness of the burning bodies and when she closed them she could see Draco there, his face distorted, but his hand reaching out to her. For her.

Hermione took a step back from Ron.

"Where is he?" Ron gripped his wand. "Hermione, where is Malfoy?"

"I don't know," she said quietly, suddenly feeling very cold as Ron stepped in between her and the heat from the fire. "Really, I don't know where he is." She wasn't lying, but Ron didn't trust her anymore. He matched her steps, for every one she took backwards, he took one forward.

"You're wearing his bloody coat!"

Hermione tucked her hands into the pockets and something cool brushed along her fingers. Draco's wand… She had Draco's wand. Her fingers grazed over the hilt. It made her feel a little better, having this piece of Draco within reach, but also it gave her a strange sense of surety.

Hermione shook a few tawny curls back. "Yes, but that doesn't mean I know where he is."

"You're lying," Ron spat. "You're lying to *me* for *him.*"

She had half a mind to pull the hawthorne out and jinx Ron for that. "No, I'm not," Hermione said, annoyed. "That's why I'm out here. I'm looking for him. He and Harry are both missing."

Ron stopped moving. "Harry?" His red brows furrowed, the skin around them edged in white while the rest of his face reddened. "Good Godric, Hermione! How many of your friends does he have to try and kill before you wake up and see that he's not on our side?! Seriously, how thick are you?!"

The lion in her chest roared, filling it with heat strong enough to combat the fiendfyre flames behind Ron. Her expression must have reflected it because Ron shook his head.

"If he does something to Harry because of you—"

"He won't!"

"It will be your fault."

The words rocked through her, shocking her. The wind shifted, blowing a few fallen curls into her face and taking the smell of burning bodies from her. The collar of the coat blew up, shielding her face and for a moment she could smell the creamy parchment of Draco surrounding her.

better than he had in months. He looked strong. He looked… *alive.* "So do it! Kill me like you did my parents. You'll still never know what being alive feels like."

The Dark Lord's eyes flared bright red and then he shouted, " *AVADA KEDAVRA!"*

Potter fell to the forest floor.

And so did the Dark Lord.

Bellatrix shrieked and ran forward to him, but all Draco could do was stand there and look at the dead boy at his feet.

His arm gave an involuntary jerk and red sparks shot out of the wand, narrowly missing Potter's scarred head.

They were dead. They were *both* dead. Snape had been right, they had killed each other. It was… it was over. He couldn't believe it. Draco felt held in suspension, staring down at Potter who was… *dead.* He thought… Even though shrewdness and practicality had told him that Potter wasn't making it out of here, still he believed that… that… that *this* wouldn't happen.

Bellatrix was wailing, kneeling by the Dark Lord's body when he snapped, "I do not require assistance!"

Draco's heart kicked into high speed, thundering as the Dark Lord slowly rose up, looking frightfully around at his Death Eaters.

Oh fuck. *He* was alive. Lord Voldemort hadn't died and Draco had… He looked back down at Potter's body.

Draco had done exactly what he promised Granger he wouldn't. She was never going to forgive him for this. He had tried, he had tried to save them all and he had… failed.

"The boy… Is he dead?" The words were slow and slithering and he barely registered them as actually spoken.

Draco felt his heart cracking in his chest. It was breaking apart, all the little pieces slicing into him like frozen glass. Granger. He had lost Granger. The white walls in his head shook, threatening to come down and stone him to death.

"Tell me! Is the boy dead?!"

Without thinking, without feeling, Draco kicked out, landing his black boot against Potter's abdomen. He didn't react. The only thing that happened was Potter's invisibility cloak fell out onto the rotten leaves.

"Yes, Master."

" *Make sure."*

None of this felt real and Draco leaned into that thought as he pointed the vinewood wand. The curse slithered out of him, bright red light striking out at the body.

Draco remembered quite well how it felt to *crucio* Theo to death. He remembered when the life slid out of him and it was just the body jerking from the curse. No matter how much Draco drank, he could never quite forget that feeling.

It was *not* what he felt right then.

Draco nearly dropped Granger's wand in surprise. There was life inside the body again, he could feel the moment the heart began to beat as his curse coiled around it.

Potter was *alive* .

Instantly Draco recalled the curse, pulling it into his own arm, grinding his teeth together until he thought they would break to keep it going just long enough so no one would suspect Potter was in there. Potter's body still jumped, but when Draco finally ended the curse it lay still again.

He couldn't feel it, not even the ache of his mark burning under the skin. Draco looked down at his arm.

"Nothing…"

"You see?!" The Dark Lord shouted out. "Potter is dead by my hand!"

Death Eaters roared, celebrating their Master's victory, but were drowned out as Draco's heart thumped in his ears.

Every plan Draco had ever come up with had failed and to be honest he didn't have a plan at all right now. But he did have a promise to a girl—his girl. And he was *not* going to fail her.

The Dark Lord's eyes narrowed into slits and he raised his wand up over his head. The skull and snake shot into the sky, illuminated by a rising red sun.

Draco looked back down at the body, no, at Potter. Because somehow, someway, he was fucking alive. *Again.*

The war would continue and they would go on, killing and dying until there was no one left. Hermione would never leave, not now and not if Potter was just going to come back after every time he died. Maybe he really was the Chosen One after all, but Granger had made her choice. Him. Draco. No one else.

He flexed his arm, a bit of a numb, warm feeling coming back to it as the black brand moved rapidly against his veins where his blood was pumping sluggishly as the nerves came back to life.

Biting her lip and unable to stop her curiosity from getting the better of her, after all, maybe Harry and Draco had gone to help? Unlikely on Draco's part, but she couldn't take the risk of not investigating here before braving the forest alone.

It didn't take long for the stench to hit her and when it did Hermione stopped running, choking on the foul smell that she had breathed in. She covered her mouth with the back of her arm, trying to rid herself of it. As she breathed in, Hermione was hit with the strong scent of crisp mint and creamy parchment from the arm of Draco's coat. She closed her eyes for a moment and her lip throbbed as her heart beat a little faster. She wished Draco was here, his arms around her, whispering heavily in her ear that… that…

Hermione wasn't sure what she wanted Draco to say to her right now. That she was wrong. That he would never hurt her. That he was here, with her, and it would be just the two of them soon, just like it should always have been.

But it wasn't. Hermione was alone and as much as she'd like to stay hidden behind her eyelids, she had things to do.

Hermione opened her eyes, squinting against the searing flames, barely making out the long shadows of people moving, coming into focus against the blinding light of the fire.

"MORE! Get them all!" A familiar voice called out and Hermione coughed as a wave of smoke passed by her on a slow breeze. A shadow moved through the smoke, turned, and headed towards her. "Hermione?"

She held up a hand in greeting while coughing heavily into the other. The fit finally subsided as Ron came to a stop in front of her.

"What are you…" His voice trailed off as his gaze fell to the black coat swamping her. Ron's expression hardened and she felt the magical fire behind him blaze hotter. "He's here?"

Hermione squared her shoulders, but still felt small inside Draco's oversized coat. "You haven't seen him, have you?"

Ron's brows lowered and he pointed a finger back to the fire. "If I had, he'd be on that pile with the rest of them."

It was then that Hermione noticed exactly *what* was burning—bodies. Dozens of them, some still moving, writhing with the flames that were melting the flesh and charring the bones, leaving only the metal masks to fall into the embers below.

"Oh God," Hermione whispered. They were Death Eaters, the enemy, but still… The barbarity of what was happening to them was almost too much for her to take. She looked away, horrorstruck, and found Ron's blue eyes, the reflection of the light dancing in them and making them look like blue flames.

Hermione paused as she reached the grounds, looking around for some clue as to which way Draco and Harry might have gone. Were they together? She knew why Harry would go, but Draco? Hermione couldn't imagine him leaving her behind unless…

Her mind spun with a million different questions, but she already knew that they were together. What she didn't know was whether Draco had followed Harry, or led him out was the one thing she couldn't quite decide on. Draco would do anything to keep her at his side, but did that include leading Harry to his death?

But he *promised!* Hermione's throat felt tight and she fought against the swell of emotions rising up in her. Yes, Draco had promised he wouldn't kill or cause Harry's death, but Draco had broken every promise he'd ever made her.

Yet she couldn't help but think that there was something she was missing, like a page torn from the last chapter of a book.

Hermione shrugged Draco's coat further onto her shoulders and started out across the grounds. Was it foolish to come out here without a wand? Yes. Was it madness to think she would be able to find them in the dark? Of course. Was it insanity to think she would be able to stop either one of them from doing whatever their stupid boy brains had convinced them was the right thing to do? Absolutely.

It didn't matter, she had to try. She'd never forgive herself if she didn't try. So Hermione plucked up her Gryffindor courage and headed out into the darkened grounds of Hogwarts. The most direct route to the forbidden forest was by Hagrid's hut. It would make sense they would have gone that way in order to get under the cover of the trees as quickly as possible. Harry did have his invisibility cloak, but she hardly thought both Draco and Harry could fit under it.

Half of Draco's legs would still be visible and she doubted he would ever let himself close enough to rub elbows with Harry. The thought would have made her laugh if it wasn't her best friend and her… boyfriend who were missing the middle of a war. Hermione tried to organize her brain, pushing more and more things into the towering piles at the back of her head.

She was jogging over the expanse of open ground when she saw something painfully bright out of the corner of her eye.

For a brief moment she thought it was the rising run, but when a wide swath of flames licked up at the night sky Hermione recognized the unnatural movement. It was fiendfyre, and lots of it.

One last chance and Draco wasn't about to waste it. Potter could use his to defeat the Dark Lord or get himself blown up, Draco didn't give a shit. He got what he wanted, and this time, he was going to *keep it*.

He knelt down beside Potter and swiped up the cloak.

"My deal with Granger was until your death," he murmured under his breath. Potter's eyes swiveled under his lids. "You died," Draco growled. " *She's mine."*

Hermione moved as fast as she could in the crowd. Years of rushing from class to class and maneuvering around meandering students in the corridors in order to have enough time to set out her books, quills, and parchment before the lesson began served her well now. She slid in between groups of students, professors, and… goodness, the entire Puddlemere United quidditch team.

"Why, Miss Granger!" Horace Slughorm called out as she expertly navigated her way past his portly stomach. "Is Harry with you?" he asked, looking around expectantly.

Hermione opened her mouth to answer, but found it too dry with nerves in order to do so. She shut it and shook her head, ducking away through the mass of people making their way through the entrance hall and out into the courtyard.

She had long since lost Ron, but right now finding him wasn't a priority. It wasn't even in her top five things that needed to be done on the ever running list in her mind.

Too bad the list kept changing and rearranging itself every two minutes to adjust to whatever she was hyperfixing on at that moment. Through all of that mess and all of this chaos, somehow, Draco kept shoving his way to the top.

Hermione finally made it outside and started pushing people out of her way in her effort to get to the front.

And to whatever, or whoever, waited for her there.

Her steps were light, almost as if she didn't trust the earth underneath her feet not to open up and swallow her whole. The sun had risen, breaking through the clouds to cast long rays of pink, yellow, orange, and gold across the sky. The smoke and dust still circulating in the air gave it all an opalescent sheen that muted what would have been a riot of color into dull, tired shades.

Below the defeated sunrise was a line of Death Eaters marching towards the castle. Hermione was careful not to trip over the rubble and debris scattered around the courtyard and picked up Draco's coat to keep it from snagging on anything. She balled it in her fists as she scanned the line of Death Eaters, not sure if she was hoping to see Draco's face among their numbers or not.

But what she couldn't help but notice was the large form of Hagrid walking out in front of the Death Eaters, carrying… carrying…

No…

Hermione felt like her heart was giving out at the sight of Harry limp in Hagrid's arms. Her throat closed so tight it hurt and her vision blurred with tears. Draco's coat fell from her hands, the black wool pooling at her feet. She wanted to sink down into it.

"NO!" Professor McGonagall called out, her voice strong, yet weak at the same time. Hermione saw her streaming forward before Kinglsey Shaklebolt reached out and grabbed her, pulling her back into the relative safety of the Hogwarts defenders line.

"Harry Potter," Voldemort announced, his pet snake coiling itself at his feet, "is *dead!*"

Cheers went up amongst the Death Eaters, a few shot off dark marks that hung in the air before the sun's white light turned them into smoky wisps.

Hermione felt the words rock through her. She had known this was a possibility, but knowing it and seeing it were two very different things. Harry's glasses were broken and perched crookedly on his nose. Tears streamed down from her eyes and turned cold before they reached her chin.

Voldemort continued, but Hermione could barely hear it over the ringing in her ears. How did it happen? Was Harry scared? Was he alone?

No… Her tears stopped. Harry hadn't been alone, he had been with Draco. Draco, who promised her that he wouldn't hurt Harry, wouldn't do anything to cause his death.

Then, Draco must have led him straight to it.

Hermione finally looked away from Harry's body, searching along the line of Death Eaters for a white blond hair that stood above the rest. She couldn't believe it. Wouldn't believe it. The truth was right in front of her, but the facts didn't line up.

Draco had said all of the things he had done had been for her so why would he do the one thing that she had asked him not to? She felt uneasy about it all, like she was reading a translation that wasn't quite correct.

She was missing something.

Either way, she needed to find Draco and she needed to find him now.

Because…

Because he was scared shitless that if he fucked up again Granger wouldn't forgive him this time and not having her, that was… Draco's lids fluttered and he swallowed dryly. *That* wasn't going to happen. He saw what a life with Granger under the Dark Lord would be. Granger would be locked away and in turn, would lock him out of her heart. She'd be in his clutches, but never in his arms.

That's not what he wanted. Not anymore. Now that he knew how it could be, *really* be, with her, there was no choice, and really, never had been.

Not that he wanted one.

Draco only wanted her.

He knew he didn't deserve her, not after what he had put her through, but Draco was a selfish fuck and he hadn't come this far, hadn't done all that shit, not to get *exactly* what he wanted.

"Then don't die, Potter," Draco grumbled.

"What?" Potter stopped midstep.

Draco turned to face him. "So you can explain to her why I brought you out here. This is all your fault, Chosen One." He waved his arm around, pointing back at the direction of the school. "You've got to explain to her that this was *your* idea and I only came out here to help you."

Potter just stared at him for a moment then moved around Draco to start walking again. "You can tell her yourself, Malfoy. She trusts you."

Draco stared at Potter's back, not entirely sure what to make of that, but feeling a little… pleased about it.

Potter spun around. "And tell her…" he let out a low breath. "Tell her thanks, for all her help." Draco noticed the circles under Potter's eyes looked a darker shade of bruised than they normally did and he seemed like he was swaying a little as he stood there. "I couldn't have done this without her."

Maybe it was time they started moving again. Draco took a couple of steps, slowing his stride to make it easier for Potter to keep up.

"Yeah," Draco muttered. "Neither could I."

That shut him up. Draco exhaled, clenched his jaw, and started walking again. They were close now.

"It *is* for her," he muttered after a few long moments. Potter, for the first fucking time ever, didn't seem to have anything to say. But Draco didn't want to be alone in his head right now. It was cold and empty and… the white walls seemed to be bearing down on him the farther they got in the forest. "What was she like?" Draco asked. "Last year, after I… left."

Potter took his time answering, looking off to the side and almost… smiling. Draco glanced over, but there was nothing and no one in that direction. Weird fucking Gryffindors, smiling for no fucking reason.

The expression fell from Potter's face. "She was quiet. She didn't talk much and spent even more time than usual reading, which for Hermione is—"

"Yeah." Draco blew out a breath, lifting the white hair from his forehead for a moment.

"I tried to talk to her, but she just closed up," Potter added.

Draco didn't have to wonder what that was like. He was plagued by too many images of Granger curled up as small as possible on the bed, on the floor, by his desk. He had changed his mind. He didn't want to hear this anymore.

"She cried when she thought we weren't listening," Potter went on, either unaware or uncaring that Draco was highly uncomfortable now. "I don't think she ever stopped caring about you and I think… that made it harder for her."

"Stop." Draco had meant for it to come out as a growl or at least a snap, but instead it was rough and ragged, torn from his tightening throat.

Potter pulled on his arm, turning Draco to face him. "Don't do that to her again."

"I'm not leaving—"

"Don't break her heart," Potter said darkly, dangerously. "She's forgiven you, which is more than you deserve, Malfoy. So whatever you've told her, to get her to do that," he leaned in close and Draco saw the resolution in every line on his face, "don't let it be a lie."

There were half a dozen things Draco wanted to rattle off in Potter's face. That he didn't know shit about Granger, not really. That Draco didn't need relationship advice from an orphan no one had ever loved. That Draco *hadn't* been lying, and yes, bringing Potter to the Dark Lord would assure that Draco wasn't marked for death come the morning, but no that's not why he brought him out here.

He brought Potter here because…

Hermione moved through the crowd again, making her way to the edge to try and see into the depths of the Death Eater lines. Maybe Draco was somewhere back there, maybe he had his mask on. Maybe he was looking for her right now too.

Of course he was. Draco wouldn't let her out of his sight if he could help it, so he was certainly searching for her the same as she was looking for him. Draco wasn't going to let her get away from him, not now that he finally got everything that he had wanted.

" *Just you and me. Like it should be.*"

" *It'll be better once he's gone.*"

" *I'd do something stupid to keep you with me.*"

Hermione bit her lip. Had this been his plan all along? This was what he had always wanted, to take her away and keep her all for himself. Draco had done terrible things to get to her before, could he have done this too?

After all, Draco had just left Ron for dead less than twenty four hours ago. He had told her that he wanted Ron dead, that he hoped he would be killed. And Ron had shared the same sentiments with her about Draco. There was no love lost between them, but… things were different with Harry!

Draco had let Harry go in the woods when he could have handed him over to Voldemort. He could have ended the war months ago with one small choice, but instead had killed Theo because…

Because of her.

Because he loved her and she, *stupidly* , loved him back. She thought showing him how things could be between them had started to make a difference, that maybe Draco realized there was another way, another world, in which they could actually be together.

But Draco had never cared about the world, only her.

For a few painful seconds Hermione felt like her heart was breaking. At least it was still beating, unlike Harry's and in that moment Hermione swore she would use every single second until it stopped to fight against the person who had killed him.

If Draco had broken his promise, she could break hers too. Even if a weak part of her wanted nothing more than to sink into Draco's arms and let him tell her that… that all the terrible things she was thinking weren't real. That he would never have hurt Harry because that would mean hurting her. She wanted to believe he wouldn't do that.

But hoping wouldn't change the truth and it wouldn't bring Harry back either. Hermione gripped the hawthorn wand in her hand and took a shaking breath. Harry wasn't gone, he was right where he always was, the bonds of their friendship still stitched

right into her heart. He didn't *feel* gone, and Hermione wasn't going to abandon her best friend. Her only friend, now.

There was just Nagini and Voldemort now. She watched him walk out in front of his loyal followers, pontificating about the nobility of his cause and regretting the magical blood shed. Hermione felt her anger heat inside her, pumping her so-called dirty blood rushing into her head. She didn't need to pluck up her courage this time, she was ready to fight. She *wanted* to fight. She wanted—

Something brushed behind her and before Hermione could turn, a large hand clamped over her mouth. At the same time a strong arm encircled her, pinning her wand arm against her side as it pulled her back against something solid. A thin veil appeared in front of her and Hermione knew at once she was underneath an invisibility cloak.

A low, relieved breath ruffled a few of the dried curls by her face and Hermione was engulfed in the crisp scent of mint.

"Hello, Sweetheart."

Hermione struggled, fighting against Draco's hold, but his arm only tightened around her and he yanked her firmly back against himself. He kept his head bent low, mouth at her ear, in order to keep their feet hidden under the cloak, but it didn't matter. No one had even spared her disappearance a thought because Neville was limping forward, walking out to meet Voldemort.

"Harry did die!" Neville cried out and Hermione's heart gave a painful thump hearing the words. "But he died for us!"

"You think you can stop me? The prophecy is fulfilled; the only one who could kill me is dead!" Voldemort let out a high laugh. "You, boy, are no one."

Draco's soft chuckle in her ear at her efforts to push him off only made Hermione try harder. "This isn't the time or place for you to be rubbing your ass on me like that, but don't worry, pet, it will be. Just as soon as we get out of here." His lips dragged along the shell of her ear.

Better a broken promise than a broken heart, and best of all, a broken rib. Hermione jerked her elbow back, making it collide sharply into Draco's side. She heard a soft grunt of pain and then his hand slid down from her mouth to her throat, fingers digging in and squeezing hard enough that her breathing became labored.

"That was our deal, Granger," Draco whispered darkly. "You fight until Potter dies. And I played my part, right up until the end."

" *Played your part?"* Hermione whispered hoarsely.

His own felt different now that he had been sharing it with Granger and the image of her casting fiendfyre with his dark hawthorn gave Draco a sense of pride. He always liked watching her use his wand, and it seemed that it liked it too.

He reached down to the holster on his thigh and found it… empty. Draco stopped walking. His hands darted to his pockets, eyes scouring down his body as he tried to see it sticking out of somewhere, but his wand was…

"FUCK!" Draco shouted.

Potter spun around. "What's wrong?"

Draco ran his hands over himself again. Knowing it wasn't on him, but unable to stop looking for it. How could he have been so fucking stupid? How could he have lost his goddamn wand?!

"I'm unarmed," he muttered, hands starting to shake a little, remembering the last time he had it in his hand and he stuck it into the pocket of… *shit.* "I don't have my wand."

" *What?"*

"Hermione has it," Draco snapped, wanting to take some of his frustration out. "It was in my coat and I gave it to her."

Potter just stared at him, face blank in shock.

"Don't fucking look at me like that. It's been a bit of a busy night for the rest of us and we don't get to call timeouts like you do."

Potter blinked. "You called her Hermione."

Shit.

Wait, was that a bad thing? That Potter heard him?

Yes. No.

Sort of.

It didn't fucking matter.

Draco straightened his back. "We need to keep going."

"You're going to walk into Voldemort's camp without a wand?"

Draco smirked at Potter's stunned face. "They're not going to attack *me.* Especially not when they see who I've brought to dinner."

Potter's eyes darted over Draco, and he had the vague sense that Potter was checking for other weapons.

High above their heads, the first bird began to whistle out a song.

Draco raised his brows expectantly. "What, you thought I was doing this out of the goodness of my pureblood heart?"

Potter frowned. "I thought you were doing this for Hermione."

Hermione looked for Draco. It was normally easy to find him due to his height and hair, but nothing was coming to her. He wasn't with Blaise and the wounded, or Seamus, Aberforth, and Dean who were halfway through a bottle of fire whisky. Silently Hermione said a thank you to the enchanted night sky above her for that before looking for him again.

She pushed her way through a group of people and back towards the head of the Great Hall where the dead were lined up. No Draco.

Of course not. He wouldn't be near…

Hermione's eyes went wide as fear wrapped a cold hand around her throat.

The whole Weasley family was still gathered around Fred's body, all but one.

Ron was missing too.

Draco felt a shiver run down his spine as he fell in step beside Potter again. The temperature was dropping. He looked up, but the dark boughs blocked the stars above him, and even though he couldn't see it, Draco could feel it. Dawn was approaching.

"Where are you taking her?" Potter's question caught him off guard, but by his saddened tone he knew Potter was talking about Granger.

Draco worked his jaw. "Somewhere safe."

He could feel Potter's eyes on him, but Draco didn't meet them. The less Potter knew, the better. If this went south, the Dark Lord could very well plunder his mind, or have Snape do it since he outsourced his torture now. Draco wondered if all the times the Dark Lord had called on him to torture people for him it was because he wasn't strong enough to do it himself… Would the Dark Lord even be strong enough to duel Potter?

Scarhead was certainly ready. He seemed resigned to this choice, clutching his wand in his hand. It was Granger's wand. Draco still didn't like seeing something of hers being touched by someone else, but… that wand didn't really seem like hers anymore. He supposed Potter must have won it over.

It was strange, feeling how the cores changed allegiances.

Draco ran his nose up the side of her face. "The dutiful boyfriend. Now it's time to play yours, Sweetheart."

She struggled against him again and while his arm around her middle cinched harder, the one at her throat loosened enough for her to ask, "And that is?"

Draco's fingers curled, clawing at her torn shirt and lifting it just a bit so that his skin touched hers. "Mine," he growled. "All mine. No one else's."

He was pulling her backwards, Hermione tried to dig her heels into the ground but slipped on his oversized coat and fell back against him.

"That's more like it. Be a good girl now and don't fight me."

Hermione's eyes burned with steaming, angry tears. She wanted to be with Draco more than anything, but not like this. Hermione looked back at the courtyard and could barely make out Neville holding something… Good Godric, was that a sword?! She felt Draco pause and tense behind her and then…

Someone cried out, "Look! It's Harry!"

Hermione gasped. Harry was on his feet and running!

He was alive!

Hermione let out a screaming cry of joy and triumph. Harry was *alive!* He was tearing towards Voldemort who looked upon him in terror.

"To me! To me! Protect your Lord!" Voldemort ordered and Death Eaters swarmed around him as the Order and Dumbledore's army rushed forward.

She saw Ron leading the charge and all she could think of was that they had one more chance to destroy Voldemort. One more chance to *win.*

"Fucking hell!" Draco snarled. Hermione had moved so quickly he was grabbing at her, trying to hold onto her and keep her with him.

"Let GO!"

"Like hell!" He yanked her back, almost knocking the air from her lungs with the force in which he pulled her into his chest.

His hand snaked its way up to her throat again, but Hermione was ready and pulled her chin down just in time to latch her teeth over the first knuckle of his hand.

Draco roared out in pain as she bit down and reared back, pulling the cloak off the both of them. "You sneaky little—"

Hermione turned to run, but before she could even fully lift her foot from the ground, Draco grabbed onto her ponytail with his uninjured hand. She felt like her scalp was on fire for a moment as he pulled her back by her hair. He grabbed her wrist, twisting it behind her back and pinning the hawthorn wand in her hand between their bodies.

"If you think you can leave me now, then you're not the brightest *bitch* of your age or whatever the fuck they call you."

Hermione ground her teeth together. "I'm still smarter than you!" she spat and cast a non-verbal knockback jinx. It hit them both equally and Hermione was flung forward as Draco was shoved back from her.

Her hands hit the ground, broken stone cutting into her skin, but Hermione kept a tight grip on her wand. Draco's wand. It had almost been ripped from her as Draco's great black coat was pulled from her shoulders.

She glanced over her shoulder to see the coat still gripped in Draco's fist. He threw it to the ground, eyes turning as hard as iron and for just a moment, she felt a heavy push on the front of her brain and she felt his presence pushing down on her mental image of Harry, alive and running.

"Don't you dare," Draco growled.

" *Don't leave me again,"* his voice echoed in her head.

The sound of that word nearly broke her resolve, but she wasn't going to break her promise. She told Harry she wouldn't leave him and if this was the end, then… then she hoped Draco would be by her side. Fighting. For them.

"Please…"

Hermione bit her lip and tasted Draco's blood on it and then, she swallowed. If she wanted to be with Draco, to try and make this actually work, *despite everything,* then this was what she had to do.

Hermione scrambled to her feet and ran into the fray, firing curses ahead of her.

That fucking—

"Granger!"

Draco pushed himself up, boots scraping across the rubble strewn ground before he had even straightened up completely. He tore through the empty space, chasing Granger into the battle that had broken out.

Furious didn't even begin to cover how he was feeling. There wasn't a word strong enough for this bitter, corrosive feeling spreading through his chest. He watched Granger

would do the same thing if it wasn't for the pretty little witch waiting for him back at the castle.

He *hoped* she was still waiting for him.

The sooner this was over, the sooner he could get back to her. Draco was about to go after Potter, when he walked back out of the dark trees, his face no longer tense, but an odd calmness surrounded him.

"Okay," he said, his voice even and steady. "Let's go."

Hermione thanked Professor McGonagall, a little disappointed that she hadn't had been able to tell Hermione any more about breaking dark curses than she already knew, but at least she could say that she tried. Hermione mentally checked off a box in her ever growing list of things she had to do.

She pulled Draco's coat around her and sighed. No, it was more than a sigh, more like an extended exhale of exhaustion. Maybe she'd ask Professor Slughorn next. He had talked to a young Tom Riddle about horcruxes so maybe he could give her some information on them as well. Another thing to add to the to-do list. When she was finally done with it, she was going to let Draco carry her to whatever surface was closest and let him check off anything he wanted on *his* to-do list.

Hermione started giggling. She couldn't stop, it was as if someone had cast a cheering charm on her, only… she didn't feel cheered, she didn't feel much of anything except worn out from being up for almost 24 hours and doing all of the things she had packed into that time.

Good Godric, she was tired. There had to be a better word than tired, Hermione thought as she started moving through the crowd. Fatigued. Weary. Haggard.

She started to smile again as she thought of how Grawp always called Hagrid that. Hagrid… Hermione looked around. Where was he?

She turned to ask Harry, but… found him missing too.

Suddenly her exhaustion evaporated and the lion in her chest stood up, growling. Something was wrong. Something was…

The forest was quiet in a heavy, eerie kind of way and Draco remembered why he hated this place for so long. After his completely age-inappropriate trip here as punishment in first year, Draco had eagerly avoided it until his fourth. Quidditch was canceled and flying was the only time he felt… that he *didn't* feel. Up in the sky, when it was just him and the sun, Draco finally felt like he could breathe easy.

And he didn't want his seeker skills to get rusty with a year off from matches while Potter soaked up more fame and glory in the *Twatwizard* Tournament so Draco had started taking his broom out over the forest. Diving into the canopy, darting in and around branches and trees, Draco had honed his skills.

Not that it mattered, not anymore. Flying and Quidditch were luxuries Draco couldn't afford even if the Malfoy vaults had still been full. It wasn't as if they were destitute, there would be plenty left for… He looked down at his signet ring. If he died in this fucking war, everything would go to Granger and while he didn't think she'd leave his mother on the street, it wouldn't be the life she was used to.

That is, if he was ever able to find her and bring her back home.

Would she even want to come back?

Ironic, that he and his father had the same plan for the people they loved, yet never included the other one in it.

Maybe he really was his father's son after all, doomed to follow the same path as the last two generations of Malfoys. After all, Draco was doing as the Dark Lord had commanded and was bringing Potter to him, each step carrying them closer and closer to their respective fates.

"Hey, give me a minute." Potter turned and started walking into the gloom of the trees.

Draco went after him. "You might be used to other people doing whatever you say because you're the 'Special Sparkly One' or whatever the fuck they call you, but we have somewhere to be, Potter."

Potter rounded on him. " *You* might be used to other people putting up with your shit, but Hermione's not here to save your ass this time, Malfoy. So when I say give me a minute, *you give me a minute."* His green eyes flashed bright and Draco looked away quickly, rubbing his mark as it ached.

Draco didn't follow Potter this time and instead he cracked his knuckles, sighed loudly, then kicked at a root until it broke.

Potter was taking more than a minute, but… fuck it. Let him have it. He was either about to die or save the world so if he needed to puke his guts out or scream at the stars or… Hell, Draco wouldn't blame him if he just walked off and never came back. He disappear behind as a blaze of green light blinded him, cutting cleanly through the space between them.

Draco cursed.

Loud.

His chest burned for a second, then turned cold as the muscles seized and his scars pulled tight enough to restrict his breathing.

When he tried to fill his lungs again, they emptied immediately, not even holding the air in long enough for him to gain anything from it. Draco's chest burned, the scars felt like they were searing into him, cutting deeper than ever before.

When he caught Granger, not *if,* but *when,* he was going to make that cunt pay.

She promised him. She *fucking promised* him that she would leave and now she was running from him again.

That filthy little liar!

Draco felt like he had run headfirst into a wall as the realization hit him. Is this how Granger—*Hermione* —felt every time he had… let her down? Lied to her and betrayed her trust?

Fuck.

She wouldn't have run from him if he hadn't given her a reason to in the first place. Maybe she would have even waited in the woods for him yesterday morning like she was fucking supposed to if he hadn't broken every promise he made to her.

Fuck.

Draco slowed, his throat burning as he sucked in and huffed out air too fast. He spun around, looking for Granger and the sudden change made him dizzy. He needed to breathe.

He needed her.

"GRANGER!" Draco shouted, but his voice was swallowed up by the sounds of battle; curses streaking, stone crumbling, and people screaming.

A giant fucking spider was heading towards a Hufflepuff Draco recognized from his year. Finch… something. He'd never bothered to learn the guy's name because… he was a Mudblood.

Draco slashed Granger's wand through the air and four of the spider's legs went flying. It gave a sickening shriek, the remaining legs curling up as the bug rolled onto its back, unable to flip itself over.

The Hufflepuff looked around for his savior and when he saw Draco standing there, he fired a hex in his direction.

Draco blocked it, sending it pivoting towards the twitching spider and sneered as he pushed on frantically searching for Granger.

His blood was rushing through his veins, heart beating so hard it *hurt*. He felt his mark moving, but it didn't ache as much as it normally did. Either the Dark Lord was too weak to properly call them or…

Draco tried not to think about what Blaise had told him, months ago, about the damaged nerves. He tried not to think about how many times he had taken his wand to his arm since then either.

Looking down at the twisting snake a thought occurred to Draco.

If his master was calling him, then he needed protection. There was only one person he was afraid of now—the boy who just wouldn't fucking die.

And where the Chosen One was, Granger wouldn't be far behind.

Draco flexed his arm, hoping to feel… something.

It didn't matter. Everything would be fine once he had Granger again.

"Don't worry, Sweetheart," Draco whispered under his breath and headed deeper into the battle. "I'm coming for you."

Finally, for the first time in her life, Hermione's overthinking was paying off. She moved through the chaos, firing off spells and blocking curses before the light had even left the caster's wand. All her training, all her studying, all her hard work had been building to this and Hermione was in her element.

She had the battlefield mapped out in her mind, knowing where friends and foes were. She jumped in to help Padma when a Death Eater began to bear down on her. A well timed *Bombarda* had him crashing backwards into the side of the castle. She didn't know if he was alive or dead, but didn't have time to check. Hermione only shouted to burn the body before sprinting away, searching for Harry in the melee.

But she couldn't help but look around hoping to catch a glimpse of blond hair as well as black. She knew Draco wouldn't be far behind her. It was another reason Hermione kept moving. Along with trying to find Harry and lend him her support, Hermione was

Chapter Twenty Three

Do you have a plan?" Draco asked as he and Potter came to the edge of the forest.

"This is the plan," Potter answered in a monotone voice. He clearly did not want to talk.

Too fucking bad.

Draco wasn't one of his little cowardly friends, he wasn't going to just do whatever Potter wanted because he had that ugly scar on his forehead. Draco had scars too, and he hadn't forgotten who had given them to him.

"Let me guess, a heroic fight to the death?"

Potter slipped his invisibility cloak off and tucked it back into his pocket. "Something like that."

"Please don't tell me you're going to try and use *Expelliarmus* on him again," Draco drawled.

"Stop talking to me, Malfoy."

Draco rolled his eyes, but continued on.

trying to dodge those strong arms enclosing around her again. Even if a small part of her wanted to feel them and hear his deep, commanding voice in her ear again.

There would be time for that later.

Hopefully.

If they won, no… *when* they won, because win they would. Harry was alive, despite Draco's best efforts. Or… maybe because of them? Had Draco somehow helped Harry stay alive? How else could she explain it? She really didn't know what to think anymore.

All Hermione knew was she had to keep fighting.

Casting a conjunctivitis curse at a giant, Hermione ducked underneath his foot as the giant roared and smashed his fists into an archway, causing it to cave in.

People screamed as the stone came crumbling down and she saw Ginny pulling Luna, who was watching the giant rage with a mild interest, out of harm's way.

The giant's great steel-shod shoe came crashing down on a Snatcher. The bottom half of his body disappeared under the giant's foot and the Snatcher's protesting scream was cut short as blood erupted out of his mouth, nose, and eyes.

Hermione closed her eyes, wincing, but only for a moment. Her mind was already telling her where to turn, what to block, and when to run. There was a small line of Death Eaters, dueling the more advanced members of the Order. In many ways, they seemed to be evenly matched, so Hermione rushed towards them, hoping to tip the scales.

Professor McGonagall's wand was moving so quickly through the air, she looked like she was conducting a symphony only she could hear. Mr Weasley's spells were so powerful, that even when they hit shield charms, they pushed his opponent back half a dozen feet, if not knocking them down entirely. Aberforth was casting curses Hermione had never even *seen* before and Hermione thought might have been his own inventions. She made a mental note to ask him the incantations after the battle.

Hermione added her support to the Order and soon the Death Eaters had broken, running, hiding, and disapparating. She had hoped that Voldemort would have been somewhere behind them, maybe even Harry fighting against him, but when she rushed forward, it was only more skirmishes.

Automatically, she looked for Draco, hoping to see him, standing a head taller than anyone else. She wasn't sure if she was nervous or relieved that she couldn't find him. Honestly, she wasn't sure what side Draco would be fighting on.

She wasn't sure that she wouldn't dive straight into his arms if she saw him again.

Even though she had run away from him, Hermione fought herself on each step. She wanted to be here, helping Harry, but… she wanted Draco too. Maybe she should have

asked him what really happened. If she had, he might have fought beside her. Or he might have knocked her out and thrown her under the cloak and hauled her off somewhere where it was just the two of them.

Oh my.

She couldn't think about that or about him anymore. Not until the war was over. *Won,* Hermione reminded herself. She didn't let herself get distracted by thoughts about Draco. She needed to focus, but in a cruel twist of fate, her overactive mind wouldn't *stop* thinking about him now.

If he wasn't here, where *was* he? Was he hurt? Was he… hurting other people? Draco's eyes flashed in her mind, as hard as granite, but right before his expression darkened he had looked…

" *Don't leave me again… Please."*

Hermione took a deep breath and raised her chin, pushing Draco's pleading into the back of her brain. She had a war to fight, and it wasn't the one between her head and her heart. Anyway, she knew which would win in the end. Hermione had made her choice, weeks ago, while she was bleeding on the floor of Malfoy Manor.

And Draco had made his. She knew whatever he had done, he had done because he loved her. And that's why she was doing this too.

For Draco.

For Harry.

And for herself too.

Draco dodged what he could, but the chaos felt like it was closing in on him. He'd fallen over a dead body and twisted his knee when it hit a broken wing of a stone gargoyle he was pretty sure had once been sitting on the north tower. What the fuck was it doing down here?

Nothing made sense. Granger was gone and he couldn't seem to complete any other thought before rounding back to this one.

to bring him down, but then again, Draco was a Malfoy and here he was willing to throw everything away for some common Muggleborn with burnt cinnamon eyes and toffee brown hair and the sweetest fucking smile he'd ever seen.

So maybe Potter *actually* being the Chosen One and somehow able to stop the greatest Dark Lord the world had ever seen wasn't so crazy. And if he could do it, if Potter *lived* , then maybe there was a way to fix this fucked up world after all.

Because that was the only way this could *ever* be fixed, the only way he could be with Granger like he wanted to. He had her locked in a cage for months, but had been in that cramped bed that she had really been his again. How she should be. How she *would* be.

He'd make sure of it.

Potter's voice was low, but steady. "I need to know where he is."

Draco glanced back at Granger, one more time.

"I'll take you to him."

Blaise snorted. "Yeah, you could say that. I have to admit, I didn't think Granger was going to get past that, but you two are…"

Draco leaned against the table. "Yeah. She's… my girl." he added as he caught sight of her again, wearing his coat. She was talking to McGonagall, like he had suggested, and… Potter wasn't with her. Draco looked around, trying to catch a glimpse of him, but he seemed to have disappeared.

"Just one girl," Blaise blew out a low breath. "I can't imagine settling down already."

Draco straightened up, searching over the heads of everyone else, looking for Potter. Where was he? "Doesn't matter to me. She's it. She's my only," he said, not really paying attention.

Blaise stopped what he was doing. "You mean, she's… the one?"

Draco took a step forward. Potter wasn't with the Weasleys, wasn't with the shot takers, wasn't helping people in or sitting beside the dead.

"The only one," he mumbled, eyes still scanning the room.

"Holy shit," Blaise said softly and Draco ignored it.

He looked over at Granger, discussing something and was completely distracted. Blaise was talking, but it faded to the back of Draco's mind and he moved away from the lines of the wounded. He was standing near a broken torch by the entrance when a voice came from thin air.

"Malfoy."

"Fuck!" Draco jumped, knocking into the torch and just barely stopping it from crashing to the ground.

"Quiet!" Potter whispered. "I don't want anyone to know I'm here."

Draco's jaw tensed and he looked around, but no one was paying any attention, not if they couldn't see their precious Chosen One. How Potter had thrown off his adoring followers, Draco had no idea, but he did know what Potter was doing, and why he had come to him of all people.

"I won't let anyone else die for me. This has to end."

Saint Potter wanted to die and Draco… Draco wanted Granger. And there was only one way he would be able to have her.

Draco promised Granger many things; that he would fix this, that he would keep her safe, and that he wouldn't do anything to cause Potter's death. But could he stop it?

Or… could Potter stop the Dark Lord?

Snape said Saint Potter *had* to face the Dark Lord and he was working with the Order, as weird as that was that Severus Snape, the Dark Lord's most trusted advisor was plotting

Blood trickled down his leg, but Draco kept moving forward. She had to be around here somewhere. Glancing down at his mark, he let the snake guide him through the melee. It wasn't much, but it was his only lead on Granger.

He'd gone after less before.

It was impossible to get his bearings with so much going on around him and Draco wanted to run, flee from the disarray of broken lines, screams of curses, and groaning bodies that were starting to move again.

Oh shit.

His chest tightened, a cold fist gripped his heart, and Draco used all the air in his lungs to shout "GRANGER!" one more time before he started to choke on the smoke swirling around the courtyard.

He stopped, just for a moment to catch his breath and heard a familiar hiss, followed by a bellowing voice.

"Gerroff me, you stinking serpent!"

Hagrid was struggling with the Dark Lord's giant snake, trying to pull her from his body. But Nagini was coiling fast, wrapping her large body around his shoulders and neck, squeezing tighter until the roars died in Hagrid's open mouth as he fought for air.

The lack of oxygen didn't stop him though and Draco clenched his jaw as he heard bones breaking wherever the half-giant's hands tore at the snake. Draco wasn't sure when exactly he had started moving towards the pair, but his boots hit the ground deliberately, bringing him closer with every heavy thud.

But he was moving too slow. His knee shot cold pangs of pain up his leg every time he put weight on it and Draco soon found himself slowing.

The snake was too tightly coiled around Hagrid's massive body for Draco to be able to cast anything from afar. He didn't want to miss and hit the wrong one.

The wrong one? What *was* he going to do once he reached them? Which one was he going to attack?

Draco suddenly thought about the guard in the Ministry. The one he had sent the not-very-venomous snake after. The guard was alive, probably, but at the very least in St. Mungo's after his ordeal, and Draco… Draco was here, running towards another snake.

Because even though he didn't want to admit it, deep down he knew which one he was after.

Draco was almost stunned by the fact that now, *Hagrid* —Dumbledore's idiot oaf, wasn't the one he was charging towards. *What in Salazar's name was happening to him?*

But, before he could try and figure out exactly *when* his mind had changed, Draco had to dodge one curse and cast a protective shield around himself to stop another. This battle was out of control and the sooner he could find Granger, the sooner he could get the fuck out of here and to somewhere where he could *breathe*.

Fuck this shit.

He was almost there when Hagrid gripped the snake and Draco heard the snap of bones and scales. The snake answered with a harsh hiss and coiled tighter.

Hagrid's face was purple beneath his black beard, mouth still open, but no sound was coming out. All he did was stumble forward a few feet, and then he fell. Draco slid to a stop, heart pounding and lungs solid. Hagrid wasn't moving.

Draco stopped moving too. His leg throbbed as he stood there, breathing heavily, trying to maintain his grasp on the little bit of control he still had over himself. Everything else was too much, too fast, and it threatened to break down the fragile white marble walls in his mind.

Nagini hissed again as she started to unwind, slithering her broken length from around the body.

Another body.

Everyone was dying.

Everyone but *him* —the Dark Lord. He wouldn't die until all his fucking horcruxes were gone.

And there was one right in front of Draco.

He raised the vinewood wand over his head and let his fiendfyre dragon fly.

Hermione covered her mouth with the back of her hand, coughing as the smoke cleared. The air was still filled with the smell of burning hair and Godric… *cooked meat* . She gagged, pulling herself together just in time to send another stunning spell at a dark body running through the haze.

People ran, *humans* ran. Those… *things,* they didn't. They stumbled, they crawled, they kept coming, until the flames found them.

When he opened his eyes he noticed Blaise staring at something. He'd almost forgotten his friend was there beside him once he had noticed the liquor on the far side of the hall. Draco followed Blaise's gaze and saw the Weaslette with her arm around Looney Lovegood, their heads tilted in close together.

Lovegood wrapped her arm around the other girl's waist, bringing their bodies close enough together so their hips touched and then turned and placed a small kiss on a freckle next to the Weaslette's eye.

Huh.

Well that was new.

Blaise rubbed his eyes and shook his head to clear it.

Draco grinned. "Didn't you have a thing for the Weasley girl?"

"Don't," Blaise warned and Draco perked up, happy to have a distraction. "I liked her Quidditch uniform. That's all."

"With your picky tastes, that's basically saying you were head over heels for her."

"Draco, drop it. I'm serious."

He looked back to the two girls and then back at Blaise who had turned around and was rolling up a bandage that Draco was pretty sure hadn't even been undone a minute ago. "Is that why you started helping them? To get in her pants?"

"I'm not even going to dignify that with a response."

"Did you try to kiss her? Is that why she gave you the black eye?"

Blaise slammed down the roll of bandages.

"Oh shit," Draco laughed. "It is!"

"Shut up!" Blaise snarled.

Draco laughed louder.

"That's it, I'm telling them you're a spy."

"Alright, alright!" Draco did his best to keep it under control. Blaise glowered at him and tapped another loose roll with his wand, making it start to spool back up. He looked over at the two girls for a moment before turning back to his friend. "Save a few more lives and maybe they'll let you watch."

Blaise threw the roll of bandages at Draco, who caught it against his chest. "Roll that back up," Blaise snapped, then after a moment smirked. "I'm going to be a licensed Healer in a year. Do you have any idea how much ass I'll get *just* for that?"

Draco didn't bother with the bandages and sat them back down in a messy pile. "I went into the wrong line of work."

" *HARRY!"* Hermione screamed again, this one tearing out of her bruised throat.

The world should have stopped spinning, it should have been shocked to silence, but instead of everything slowing, it seemed to speed up. Spells shot overhead and shouts of curses and cries filled the air while Hermione just… sat there. Stunned. Staring.

Sobbing.

No. No. Godric, please, no… Not—

"HAR—" Her voice gave out the same time Draco grabbed her again, holding her back from crawling towards… towards…

She collapsed against Draco's chest. Tearing at the braided leather of his ripped brigandine, Hermione buried her face against the white shirt underneath. His arm wrapped around her, holding her there as her mind went… blank, spinning in place, unable to conceive what she had just seen. The only thing she could think of, could *feel,* were Draco's scars against her face.

They were soft, so soft it was hard to believe violence had caused them. That… Harry had caused them.

Harry…

"It's okay, Sweetheart," Draco murmured, running his hand up her back and to the base of her head. "I've got you." She tried to shake her head, but found that Draco was holding it in place. It took her a moment to realize he was doing that so she wouldn't look up and see Harry. See his… body.

"Harry Potter is *dead!"* Voldemort's high voice shouted out and Draco pushed her head harder into his chest and covered her other ear with his hand. Even so, Hermione could hear as Voldemort began to celebrate his… *victory.*

"You all saw it! I was the one to kill him—*I, Lord Voldemort!* It matters not who is the master of a single wand. I am the master of you all and you will submit—" Hermione's bruised and bloodied heart beat with a fresh wave of anger. "*—or die."*

She fought against Draco's hold, glimpsing a giant swatting his club at an Auror who's head sprayed a thick mist of blood before she felt Draco push her head harder into his chest. Between quick breaths, Hermione heard the furious thumping of his heart. Strangely calmed by this, she stopped pushing against his chest and curled her fingers into his shirt, feeling her nails rake over one of the familiar dented scars.

Hermione heard Draco's pulse speed up as he fisted her hair in his hand. Why? She wasn't trying to get away from him now. She… she had nowhere else to go.

Harry was gone and she had promised him… Even if she hadn't, Draco should know by now that she wouldn't leave him. Not now, not ever.

But Draco was still scrambling back, barely balancing to stay upright as he hauled her along with him, kicking his long legs out to get away from—

"Starting with…" that high, cold voice seeped through Draco's hand over her ear, " *you."*

"NO!" Hermione shouted, using all of her strength to wrest herself from Draco's hold. She threw herself across his chest. She had no wand, nothing to defend herself with other than her own body, but her Gryffindor courage wouldn't let her back down. And more importantly, Hermione didn't want to. If Draco was going to die here then… then…

She had lost Harry. She had lost her parents, and Crookshanks, and friends, and teachers and… and after everything… Well, dying next to Draco exactly didn't seem like *losing* to her.

But it wasn't the victory she'd envisioned either.

Voldemort laughed, his thin lip curling up over his starkly white teeth. "Move aside, Mudblood. You are nothing without your Deathstick, but *he* is still one of mine."

"No! I won't!" Her voice shook, but not with fear. Hermione had never been less afraid in her life. The creature in her chest prowled, waiting for its chance to strike. She could feel its claws digging into her with each step, felt the rumble of its roars bubbling in her chest, she could feel the heat of its fire in her heart.

Voldemort's slitted gaze bore into her, but Hermione just stared right back. She felt Draco moving slightly behind her which caught Voldemort's attention, his eyes flaring briefly.

"Give it to me." For a moment, she thought Voldemort was talking about her. It wouldn't be the first time a purist referred to her as an 'it' instead of a person. "Give it to me, Draco, and I will make your death painless."

Curiosity got the better of her and Hermione cast a look back at Draco who was… Good Godric…

Draco was holding the elder wand. Harry must have disarmed Voldemort with his last breath. In the immediate aftermath, the elder wand would have gotten strewn somewhere in the rubble, waiting for…

For her.

That was *her* wand.

For a moment, Draco held it up, looking like he was about to give it to his Master then she saw Draco smirk nastily in the way she knew he saved for when he had a particular kind of torment in store. He had used to look at her like that.

"Make it slow, *Master,"* Draco spat sarcastically. "I want to watch her use this on you."

He grabbed her wrist, pulled it forward, and shoved the elder wand into Hermione's hand.

When Draco looked at her, all of the malice slipped away and his eyes shone like freshly polished silver. "Be a good girl, Sweetheart, and fuck him up for me."

Hermione didn't think, she didn't have to, she just *knew*. The creature inside her burst forth from the tip of the wand, roaring, stomping, and slashing its tail through the air as the flame-wreathed chimera lunged at Lord Voldemort.

He fled from it, pushing his loyal Death Eater out of his way and jumping aside so the flames merely singed his robes. Hermione focused on bringing the beast around, gentle nudging with her wand coupled with a firm resolve eventually made the chimera turn, the fire crackling and spitting as it stepped in a puddle of boiling blood.

Voldemort turned back to them, his eyes landing not on Hermione, but on the wand in her hand. He gave them a wide berth, recognizing the power in the wand and the danger it posed.

"You think that will stop me?" he called out and Hermione was about to retort when she noticed Voldemort wasn't looking at her. "I don't need a wand to kill you. Your three days are up, Draco. Now you will obey me whether it is your will or not."

The red sun shone over the warring battlefield and through clearing smoke Voldemort's lip curled again, this time in a sickening smile and Hermione's concentration faltered as Voldemort opened his mouth, letting out a terrible hissing voice.

Parseltongue. He was speaking parseltongue, but… to what? Nagini was dead and there weren't any—

She didn't get a chance to follow her train of thought before Draco started shouting. "Shit! Fuck!" He was pushing himself back again, but this time, away from her. "SHIT!"

The mark on his arm had come alive once more. The skull opened wide as the snake slithered under his skin. Draco started clawing at it, tearing his skin in thin strips as the snake struck, sinking its fangs into the blue veins at his wrist.

Godfuckingdamnit.

He had said anything, everything, and this… this was certainly *something.*

Gripping what was once his wand, Draco raised it one last time. The Dark Lord's nostrils flared and Draco watched as green light started to spark at the end of the elder wand, making the Dark Lord's slit-like pupils contract until there was almost nothing in his eyes except the color of blood.

That's when Draco threw the wand.

It tumbled through the air, handle over tip and Draco held Hermione back as she rasped out in a shout, " *HARRY!"*

But the Dark Lord was watching the wand fly past him, his snake face falling and looking more human than Draco had ever seen it. The last horcrux was gone and he was mortal again. Potter was fighting back this time which meant maybe… Maybe he could actually do it.

Maybe… Draco could get everything he wanted. He pulled Granger closer to him, shielding her with his body while pushing his face into the caramel colored curls on the top of her head. He could smell the smoke and ash, but underneath was still her sweet scent of cinnamon and vanilla. Still his girl.

And she would be. Forever.

Just as soon as the *Chosen One* finally chose to fucking do something.

Potter dropped the sword, readying to reach out for the wand. The Dark Lord spun around, hissing out a curse arcing the elder wand in the air so that the green light flung out from it the same second Potter's hand closed around the hawthorn wand.

" *EXPELLIARMUS!"*

That stupid fuck.

Potter barely got the word out before he saw the curse shooting at him and just stood there… looking like some tragic hero as the killing curse hit him squarely in his chest. It lit up his eyes for a moment, turning them a bright, vivid green. He looked more… alive than he had in weeks and Draco almost expected the curse to just bounce off Potter.

Maybe Granger had been right all along and he really was the Chosen One.

Then… the light faded out of Potter's eyes. His broken glasses slipped off his nose and hit the ground.

Draco held Hermione painfully close to him and felt his heart beat against her once, twice, and on the third thump…

Potter fell.

Could that old fuck feel it? Draco's lips twisted. Even better. He let everything he was feeling fuel the curse. All the hate, all the frustration and turmoil in him, he turned it into pain, into what it had really been all along.

Then Draco felt… *something*…

No, that wasn't right, he felt… *nothing*.

Oh shit.

The curse recoiled, pulling back out of his body and into the wand without his command.

"What the…" Draco cast again at his arm.

Nothing happened.

He tried over and over, but there were no sparks and no pain.

His arm fell from Granger's neck, loose and limp.

Then his body collapsed.

"Draco!"

For a few suspended seconds, he couldn't feel anything. Slowly it came back and Draco was looking up from what he assumed was the ground and saw Granger's face hovering over him. She was saying something, but he couldn't hear her over the ringing in his ears. The color had gone from the world, everything looked like it was covered in ash.

Granger looked scared, her big eyes went wide and Draco felt his heart give a heavy thump.

And everything came rushing back.

He could see Lord Voldemort raising the elder wand high, readying a strike.

Draco gripped his old hawthorn wand hard, but again, it didn't work. Or at least, *he* didn't. When he had cursed his arm before sometimes his magic would give out afterwards, but… this felt different somehow. It felt like something had… snapped.

Well, he might not be able to cast, but it could still do one thing. Draco grabbed Granger and hauled her over him. His left arm was, thankfully, his again, at least for the moment. Still, he didn't want Granger anywhere near it. Even if it was useless now. But if he couldn't control it, neither could the Dark Lord and right now, that was good enough for him.

Granger landed beside him with a pained huff and… and where she had just been in front of him, Draco could see Potter, crouching on his hands and knees across from the Dark Lord. Saint Potter scrambled to his feet, Gryffindor's sword in hand when Draco saw the resolution as their eyes met. Maybe because they were… *fucking hell* —working to achieve the same end, Draco knew what to do, how to… help.

"FUCK!" Draco yelled, pain tingeing his voice and driving it roughly from his heaving chest. Hermione watched, helpless, as this time the snake didn't curl around his arm to control it, but to kill it, to kill him. Draco. And turn him into…

"Granger," Draco panted, holding his mark tightly, but Hermione could see the black ink sliding up his arm through his veins, staining his marble white skin. "Granger, look at me."

She tore her eyes up at the sound of his deep, dominant voice, to find his, pain and fear shining brightly in his silver eyes.

"You've got to do it."

"No." She shook her head violently, knowing what he was talking about, but not allowing herself to even think it.

"You don't have a choice," Draco gritted out, wincing as the venomous ink carved its way over the thick vein that ran along his bicep. Hermione swallowed dryly, it was moving fast. Very fast. In just a few seconds it had already slithered over his shoulder and she could see it underneath the white shirt. Hermione tried to summon up everything she knew on counter curses or antidotes, but none of it applied to this. What was the use of spending half her life buried in books if she didn't even have the time to *think!*

"Now," Draco said in that deep tone she loved and Hermione felt a rush of anxious frisson run down her spine.

"No!" she repeated, louder and more desperate. "You always… you've always given me a choice and I'm not—" Hermione shook her head feeling her curls move against her face as she trembled. "I'm not going to…"

"You're right, you've always had a choice, but I never have. Not until now and… I'm making it, Granger. I don't… I don't want to hurt you. I won't. But you… you have to stop me."

"Draco," Hermione could do nothing to stop the tears from filling her eyes now. "Draco, please… Don't do this."

"It's done," he gasped. The inky venom was sliding up his neck and Hermione felt like she had been struck by the snake too. What else could be causing his blinding pain in her heart, in her soul? "I've been damned all along, you've just never been able to see that. But now…" he gritted his teeth. "I don't want you to see what happens next."

People were still fighting around them, still dying. Hermione could see Neville, wand lost in the melee, picking up a broken suit of armor's arm and swing it at a Snatcher who fell and thankfully, did not get back up. He hadn't been a Death Eater, he wouldn't turn into… but Draco would, unless she could figure out a way to stop it.

"I don't care!" She sounded like a petulant child, but right now that's what she felt like. It wasn't fair! She had done everything, *everything* she was supposed to do in this bloody war. It wasn't fair that the one thing she wanted most was going to be taken away from her!

And that she was going to have to be the one to do it.

"Yes, you do," Draco's voice turned softer, but was still strained. He took his hand off his darkening arm and placed it on hers, encircling the elder wand. "You love me, and that… that makes everything I had to do worth it. But, Sweetheart—Hermione—"

His hand fell from hers and she knew there wasn't much time left. For him or for… *them*. Seconds were slipping away, quicker than she could count, than she could think, and if she just had a few more of them she could figure this out but… every moment she spent trying to *think* her way out of this just brought them closer and closer to—

"There's only one way to stop being a Death Eater…" His eyes softened from hard granite to hazy grey. "And I want out."

Out.

Out.

Out.

Hermione blinked, and all the messy thoughts she had been stacking up in her mind, making little pathways to conclusions and ideas that rivaled the Room of Requirement, all suddenly slid into place. Organized. Neat.

"Out…" she repeated.

Hermione looked down at Draco's mark, bleeding poison feely into his bloodstream, and clenched the elder wand so hard she felt the wood give under her touch. Dumbledore had said, long ago, that Draco would have to *want* to be saved to stop being a Death Eater. For the first time, that was what he was asking her for, and with the elder wand in her hand, Hermione had the power to do it.

"Hold on, Draco," Hermione took a deep breath and grabbed his hand with hers, intertwining their fingers with no plans to let go. Not now, not ever. "I'm going to get you out."

"Granger…" Draco said her name in a low warning tone.

Hermione ignored him, aiming the elder wand down at his arm and spoke the incantation Draco had taught her so she could use it on him. And by Godric, she was.

" *Ignis Infernalis.*"

This wasn't a choice. It wasn't because how could he ever make a decision between her and… there wasn't anything else. Just Granger.

She was all he had and he *couldn't* lose her.

That had been the problem all along. He'd lied to her, hurt her, cursed her, and all because… because he couldn't let her go.

Draco hung his head, and saw… his old hawthorn wand on the ground between his and Granger's feet where she had dropped it.

He wasn't as talented with his right as he was with his left, but he didn't really have a choice and held it out above the wand, summoning it to please, *please* come back to him… just one more time.

And it did.

Draco didn't waste a single second, the thought was there, it always was, and all he had to do was press the tip of his old wand into the skin of his forearm like he had so many times before.

" *Crucio.*"

It was blinding, pure shock waves of agony pouring forth from his wand and shooting into his body. Draco pushed the curse to its limits. His arm was shaking, vibrating with the power of the curse as the nerves lit up. It made his fingers twitch and tighten, then… loosen, just a little. His hand couldn't hold on as the curse rolled through him.

Draco ground the tip harder, sweat broke out on his forehead and rolled down the side of his neck, sliding along the veins standing out there as he roared, pushing his magic and his body to the limit.

But as long as he held himself there, Granger wasn't pushed to hers. She had broken one of his fingers, leaving it dangling at a crooked angle and was pulling somewhat successfully at another. Granger hadn't given up, and neither would he.

Black dots danced in front of his eyes, leeching the color from his vision, and Draco felt the white marble walls in his head cracking, starting to crumble as the curse worked its way through him, farther, deeper.

"Drac—" Granger rasped. "Draco, *stop.*"

No. He didn't say it, unable to unlock his jaw from where his teeth were wedged against each other. Instead he just pushed his wand in deeper, his muscle hard and straining as the snake writhed and flailed and the skull screamed in silent agony.

Good. Fucking good. He was glad they were hurting. He wanted to hurt them more. Draco had always held back from cursing his mark directly, but now dug his dark wand right into the eye socket of the skull and heard Lord Voldemort hiss in displeasure.

"Draco?"

Draco looked down at his arm, the snake was almost covering his hand, pushing the length of its body down and around his fingers.

"Oh, please no," Draco said weakly and the vinewood wand, the one he had watched Granger use for years, snapped in his hand, the two halves falling uselessly to the ground. "Fuck, no—please, NO!"

His hand shot out and narrowly missed Granger who was now just standing there because… *because she trusted him.*

"Granger," Draco's mouth went dry and he felt his throat closing in fear. Granger looked back up at him as he was a rune she couldn't quite translate correctly. He saw his arm stretching out again. "Hermione—RUN!"

But Granger, this fucking sweet, innocent, *pure girl,* reached out for him, to take his hand, to run *with him.*

Draco watched his black veined hand reach for her again, watched as it passed her outstretched hand, clawing at the air until it reached her neck… and closed around it.

Granger's eyes widened with fear and her hands flew to her throat, dropping the hawthorn wand. "Drac—" was all she got out before his fingers cinched and her air was cut off.

Draco grabbed his arm, ignoring the pain when his hand closed over his mark, and pulled, trying to recall it back to him while Granger grasped at his fingers, scratching them until they bled. His precious pure blood dripped over Draco's pale skin, but nothing stopped his hand from squeezing harder, tighter, until Granger's movement slowed to where she was just hitting his hands. Her strength, her incredible, unbreakable strength, started to wane.

"NO!" Draco growled, actually growled and started hitting his own arm, beating it with his fist to try and break his hold or even break the bone, anything, so he would *just stop hurting her.*

Granger's face had turned red, too red, not that shade he loved, but a darker one, and Draco felt his heart beating faster and faster, knowing hers was slowing…

It took him too long to realize that the Dark Lord was laughing at him. That fucking snake-face bastard was *laughing.*

"Bring her to me, Draco, and I'll spare her life."

Like hell he would. This whole shit of a mess was that fucker's fault and Draco would be damned before he let the Dark Lord lay a hand on his girl. He felt the soft give of her neck under his hand and saw her lids starting to fall over her burnt cinnamon eyes.

Draco had thought *crucio-ing* his arm was the most intense pain he could possibly feel.

Well, that was wrong.

Fiendfyre was worse. *So much fucking worse.*

A curl of curse flame licked at his skin and Draco roared until he tasted the flecks of blood forced out of his torn throat. His eyes were screwed shut, trying to block out—*fuck*—trying to block out anything he could, but he could still see the light from behind his lids and the pain… there was no escaping from the pain, if he could even call it that.

He had a few choice words he *wanted* to call it. It was excruciating. Torture in its purest form. . Cursing his arm would hurt, yes, but then it would go numb. This just kept going, kept burning. Deeper. Farther. It felt like he was dying except for the pesky fact that he was *still fucking alive.*

Draco forced his eyes open to see Granger—Hermione—concentrating hard, her brows pulled together over her big, doe eyes and her lip in between her teeth, biting down hard. He could almost imagine she was just sitting an exam in a classroom if it wasn't for the fucking *agony* she was causing him.

Good thing he was used to burning for her.

"Fuck," he gritted out. " *FUCK!"*

"I'm sorry, Draco," Granger whimpered, not taking her eyes from his arm. "Just a little more."

She was… Holy fucking shit. Hermione wasn't just burning his arm, she was burning his mark. The fiendfyre crackled against his skin, strong and hot enough to make the snake writhe and the skull scream silently under his searing flesh. They looked to be in just about the same amount of pain he was in.

Good. He wanted them to hurt.

But he wasn't sure how much more he himself could take.

Granger had said just a little more, but fucking hell… It couldn't have been more than thirty seconds the fiendfyre was touching his skin, but it felt like an eternity in hell.

Even with his color-bleached vision he could see the brightness of the flames, dimming even the daylight around them. The battle was too dark to see with the flames so close to him and even the image of the Dark Lord directing his Death Eaters to gather around him faded in the blinding light. The flames burned white hot, almost like starlight,

except instead of being far off in the distance, it was right fucking there, burning deeper into him every second until it felt like it was searing his very soul.

It had been hell feeling the venom work its way up his arm, eating away at his veins and spilling out from the holes it created and it was just as painful to feel it recede down his arm again and slithering back to the black brand it had originated from.

The skull was splitting, a deep crack running down its center until it fell away into two pieces and as the layers of his skin peeled and curled back, the ink started to bubble and boil as Granger brought the flame forward just a fraction, but it was enough to make Draco break out into screams again.

He only stopped when his lungs deflated, giving out on him and leaving him breathless and collapsing onto the broken stones behind him. Sweat or tears dripped down his face, catching in the rough hairs that had sprouted along his jaw in the last… shit. How long had it been since the morning he said goodbye to Hermione on the beach?

"Don't you dare give up, Draco," Hermione's voice was strong, but pained. Draco saw her wince and a tear slipped down her face, landing on their clasped hands. "You can do it, Draco. I believe in you. I've always believed in you. Just… Don't leave me."

It would be easier to leave my own heart than you. He thought he said it, but when he opened his mouth there was no air in his lungs to use. Draco felt his head fall to the side, his mind going as blank as the marble walls inside it as the pain lit him up from the inside out.

He let out another pained bellow, his head thrown forward with the force of it.

Somehow, over the sound of his own screaming, Draco heard Granger whimper painfully. The flames flickered for a moment, but she just bit her lip harder and forced them back down on his arm.

The snake twisted and curled, folding in on itself as it hissed and spit, thrashing its head around in its final death throes.

Draco clamped his jaw, so hard it shook. Drops of liquid falling down from his face and mixing with Hermione's tears on… oh shit. He had been holding her hand this whole time. No, not holding, *clenching.* Her fingers were already bruising purple, he tried to let go, tried to make his hand bend to his will, but the muscles were seized up and he couldn't stop it before he felt her hand *break* in his.

Granger cried out and her control slipped for a moment, making the fiendfyre burn hotter.

Draco's skin had turned red and raw, the flesh burning away as the snake under his skin contorted as the flames reached it.

"But I meant it when I told you—" Draco gripped Granger's hand harder. "She is *mine.*"

Smoke blew between them from one of the patches of fire and as it cleared, Draco saw the Dark Lord's face had twisted in anger.

Good. Angry people made mistakes.

Draco knew that better than anyone.

"You will die for your betrayal!" Lord Voldemort's voice rippled with rage and Draco felt Granger trying to move from behind him. He yanked her roughly back, making her stumble into him. The Dark Lord noticed the movement and his red eyes shone like fresh blood. "And so will she."

Draco's blood froze in his veins. He barely had time to raise the vinewood wand before he cried out in pain, doubling over at the sheer shock of it. His left arm had been half numb ever since the forest when he *crucio'd* Potter and took the curse upon himself, but not enough to stop the terrible sensation of something *moving* under his skin.

Draco held out forearm to see… his mark. It was active, and stronger than ever before. The skull's jaw hung loosely open and the snake extended all the way out, slithering and tangling in the blue veins of his wrist. Draco gritted his teeth as the skin bulged out, snagging on the scales as the snake coiled around his wrist, constricting until he felt his pulse pounding under the branded snake.

He let out a hiss of pain and Granger slid from behind him, grabbing onto his collar and face. "Draco!"

She sounded worried, but Draco just snarled and pulled away from her.

"Draco, please!" Her sweet voice broke through to him and Draco lifted his eyes to meet hers. "What's happening? What's… Oh Godric…"

The snake slithered onto his hand, pushing hard against the blue veins that ran down into the dips in between his fingers.

"Get *back,* Granger!" he said as he bit back a groan. Draco could feel a cool sheen of sweat break out on the back of his neck.

She looked back up at him and for a moment, Draco could see himself reflected in her big doe eyes. He was pale and every muscle in his face strained, white blond hair stuck to his forehead. Then her hand was on his cheek. He saw it before he felt it then watched as her expression softened. "It… It'll be okay. We'll find—"

She stopped talking as his arm jerked, shooting out towards her.

That was… but he didn't…

It did it again and this time Granger looked down at it curiously.

Still, Draco didn't move.

"You will have a place at my side and the highest honors." The Dark Lord swung the wand wide in demonstration as he continued. "Your family name and wealth will be restored. Anything you want will be yours. Just *give her to me."*

Draco had never been particularly brave and there was a clear reason why he was sorted into Slytherin, but standing here he could not deny the fact that he did not want to die. And he didn't want what came after either. He was a Malfoy and that should have meant a long life in the lap of luxury, but here he was instead, on this burning battlefield, because of *her*.

Because she hadn't left with him when they had the chance. Because she wanted to fight for someone else. Because she… Because she was his. And the life he wanted, the one he fucking should have, was with her.

And like the true Slytherin he was, Draco was willing to do whatever was necessary to get that. He said anything, he said everything.

So Draco bowed his head.

"I have done all that you asked of me, My Lord," Draco said through gritted teeth. His arm ached under his mark. He could feel the snake moving under his skin, compelling him to obey his master's command. Draco ignored it and went on. "I brought you Potter. *He* is the key to this, not the wand. Kill him and victory is yours." Granger's palm flushed hot against his hand. "You will have the world, I just want her."

The Dark Lord took a few quick steps, agitation clear as his long fingers twitched against the wand that didn't belong to him. He was tired, wearing down and Draco wondered how long he could keep this going for. "You swore to obey me! As one of my Death Eaters—"

"That I am," Draco admitted, nonchalant. "But I'm a really shitty one."

Granger gave a little gasp and a jump behind him, but squeezed his hand tighter. There was no going back, but now, Draco didn't want to. He had fought hard to keep Granger with him when he should have been trying to go with her. He wasn't going to make the same mistake twice.

"Maybe you should have a few more job requirements for your new recruits other than just a pure bloodline. Or at least choose from families that aren't known for lying to get what they want, if you're looking for servants for all eternity."

The shock that was slapped across Lord Voldemort's face was almost comical. Draco curled his lips into his most indolent sneer.

And it began to *burn* . He watched, not believing it as his flesh cracked and curled back, searing off the last remnants of his dark mark.

Her scream turned to one of joy and Draco blinked his eyes hard, trying to clear them enough to see… See…

Nothing.

His mark was… gone.

Gone.

There wasn't much left of the flesh on his arm either, and what was left was smeared with burnt ink, but he didn't care.

He was… He wasn't a Death Eater anymore.

And it was all due to her—his brilliant, beautiful, stubborn as fuck, but he wouldn't want her any other way, *girl.*

"Hermione…"

Draco looked up, meeting her big doe eyes and saw her smiling down at all the pain, all the loss, all the death, Hermione smiled. For him.

He felt his own lips begin to curve up when a high, cold voice sounded through the smoke.

"What have you *done?!"*

Hermione turned over her shoulder to see Voldemort looking at her in horror and fury. He started to move towards them, but stopped when his Death Eaters did not flock to him.

Whispers darted back and forth from the people surrounding them.

" *Did you see?"*

" *It can be removed!"*

Death Eaters were rolling up their sleeves, looking between their marks and their wands.

"It is a trick!" Voldemort cried out to them, voice tight and high. "Do not believe what the Mudblood has done!"

A few Death Eaters shrank back at the sound of their Lord's voice.

A few started to run.

"No! Do not flee!" Voldemort called to his supporters. "Fight for your Lord! *Protect me!*"

Those two words seemed to stir the battle back into motion. Kingsley stepped forward, shouting orders and Hermione watched as Aurors and Order members began to chase down the fleeing Death Eaters. The few that did choose to fight were shaken, their decision made out of fear instead of conviction.

"Take them! Don't let them get away!" Kingsley shouted motioning for Order members to move in formation. They spread out, grouping up in pairs to apprehend and take down Death Eaters.

Voldemort let out a shriek of rage as a few Death Eaters threw down their wands when faced with a large number of Dumbledore's Army. "KILL THEM, YOU FOOLS!" he shouted. "They are but *children!*"

But he was wrong. There were no children anymore, the war had seen to that. Hermione felt pride stir within her as she watched her fellow classmates stun, incapacitate, and bind the Death Eaters who had attacked them. Then something tight and painful struck her so hard in the chest she thought for a moment she had been hit by a spell.

Harry had taught them how to do that. In their lessons as part of Dumbledore's Army, the group *she* had pushed him to form. Hermione looked over to the broken archway he had fallen beside and the tearing in her chest deepened.

"Grang…" Draco panted heavily beside her. "Hermione…"

"Shh, don't try to talk right now." Hermione blinked away tears as she turned and saw what she had done to his arm. The flesh had burned away where the black brand once was and all that was left were a few curled pieces of charred skin peeling back to show twitching raw muscle underneath.

She tried a few healing spells, but knew they wouldn't work. The damage she had caused was from cursed fire; it wouldn't be solved by mere triage methods. Draco needed a real Healer. Hermione looked around quickly hoping to see Blaise, but it was impossible to locate an individual in the throng of people. She didn't even know if Blaise was still… here.

She didn't know if he was still *here*. Until she had proof Hermione wasn't going to entertain any other options. Not that she had many herself. Hermione didn't know what else to do other than cast a small cooling charm and wave her wand slowly over Draco's arm to hopefully relieve a bit of the pain. Her hands, one burned from the blowback and

Chapter Twenty Four

Draco's knee fucking *hurt* , but he stood tall, making himself a pillar of stone, refusing to let an ounce of his discomfort show on his face. He didn't have a plan. He didn't have anything but the vinewood wand he took off of Potter as he stood in front of the Dark Lord.

But he had Granger, tucked behind his back and holding tightly onto his hand, and he wasn't letting go.

The Dark Lord's eyes narrowed, the slits of his pupils flaring then receding. "Yours?" he said softly. Dangerously. "Is this not the creature you claimed to be training in my service? You knelt at my feet and promised she was your way of delivering Potter to me. What use is the Mudblood to you now?"

Shit. Another thing he'd have to explain to Granger when all of this was over. But… she was a smart girl; she would understand. As long as he lived long enough to talk to her about it, that was. Draco didn't dare look back at her though and kept the Dark Lord squarely in his sights where he could easily see his Master's thin lip curling and fingers twitching around the elder wand.

"A Mudblood?" he asked in a hushed voice and Draco felt something scaly twist in him. The Dark Lord looked her over and Draco wanted to carve those eyes out as he surveyed Granger. "If I cannot take the wand…" He raised it up, level with her chest. "I'll take the girl."

Granger began to slide forward, arms pinned to her sides and shoes digging into the rubble to try and slow herself, but Voldemort pulled her on.

Fuck this.

Fuck it all.

Draco was in front of her in a few quick strides, blocking the spell and stopping Granger from getting an inch closer to that flat faced fuck.

Draco pulled off the invisibility cloak, standing tall, between Hermione and Lord Voldemort.

"You can't have her." Draco reached back, wrapping an arm protectively around her as he raised her vinewood wand against the man he had once called master. " *She's mine."*

one broken from Draco's hold, were shaking. "You'll be okay," Hermione said, biting back tears. "We'll… we'll find someone to heal you and..."

Draco shook his head, a damp lock of white blond hair fell in between his eyes. "Hermione, listen to me," he said in a raspy voice.

"You meddlesome Mudblood!" Voldemort hissed, stopping a curse that was headed for him wandlessly. His eyes shone violently and he stalked forward, waving his fingers to clear his path to them. Harry dying seemed to have given Voldemort back some of the strength he had lost, but even with it, the elder wand was still *hers.* Hermione gripped it tightly in her burned palm as he bore down on her. "You will pay for that, but first, *give the wand to me."*

Hermione's heart thudded in her chest, but it wasn't cold fear that spread through her, it was courage. It was strength. It was *rage.*

"Never," Hermione bit out. "You will never have this wand and you will never win this war. Surrender now, and you might be shown the mercy of having what's left of your ruined soul sucked out so you don't have to live with it anymore."

"Valiant," Voldemort said dismissively. "Still fighting even when the cause is lost." His slit pupils narrowed until they were almost lost among the blood red of his eyes. "The prophecy has been fulfilled. *There—"* he pointed a long-nailed finger to the broken archway, "is the proof. I have already won—Harry Potter is dead!"

Hermione calmored forward while Draco tried to pull her back towards him. She only got to her knees, but it was enough that she could raise the elder wand up in front of her.

Voldemort scoffed, but she could see him tense from agitation. "I tire of your insolence. I do not wish to spill any more magical blood, but yours is full of Muggle filth. It is no shame to see it returned to the dirt from whence it came."

Hermione let out a furious scream as light shot out from the tip of her wand. It was at that same moment that Draco pulled her back against him. *Why was he stopping her?!* She fought against him, but there was something pulling on her, something that wasn't Draco. She could feel him, trying to tuck her into his side and shield her with his body. Hermione tossed her head, finally getting her hair out of her face enough to see two stiff hands clinging onto her upper arm.

An *inferius* had a hold on her, their glazed eyes staring back at her out of a partially melted mask. Adrenaline pumped into her brain, kicking it back into action. She fired off spell after spell at Voldemort, but the *inferius* stayed latched onto her arm and made every jet of light miss its target.

"No one can stand against me!" Voldemort proclaimed as Hermione kicked at the reanimated corpse. She could see others rising and… there were too many. They wouldn't be able to stop them all. It was as if the battle was starting all over except this time, they were down almost half their fighters while Voldemort was raising his.

No no no no! They couldn't lose! Not like this, not when—

Hermione screamed in pain as the *inferius* ' grip dug deeper, the nails breaking the skin and sinking bony fingers into her arm. She tried to hold on, but… she dropped her wand and it rolled away among the rubble.

"Get the *FUCK* off her!" Draco growled and Hermione felt him release her. She fell backwards as Draco, face pale with fury, lunged forward, tackling the *inferius* to the ground.

Hermione gasped a lungful of smoke-tinged air as its hand was ripped from her and started looking for the elder wand. Draco was frozen for a moment while he looked down at it. Did he know who it was? Then the *inferius* reached up to try and claw at his face. Draco's arms were too long and she watched as he lifted the Death Eater up by the mask and bashed its head against a rock.

" *Don't—"*

It landed with a wet thud.

" *Fucking—"*

Hermione could see the raw muscle clenching on Draco's burned arm.

" *Touch—"*

She looked away as flecks of grey brain splattered on the surrounding stones and blood shot out of the melted mask.

" *HER!"*

Draco ripped the mask off, pulling away the skin with it to leave only a shattered skull to leak onto the ground around him.

He was breathing hard and blood dotted his face like freckles. Hermione watched it bleed down his pale skin, looking like red veins in marble.

" *Hermione—"* he forced out from his heaving chest. Hermione's hands flew to her mouth to cover her scream as Draco fell forward, catching himself, but not before his burned arm gave out under him and he cried out as he collapsed forward.

"Draco!" she shouted and scrambled towards him. Hermione reached him as he was turning over. She pulled him into her lap, cradling his head in her arms. She did her best to wipe the blood from his face, biting her lip to stop herself from wincing every time her broken fingers brushed over his cheek. "Oh Draco, I'm so sorry."

But what he really wanted was standing right in front of him, biting down on her lip and looking worried as her big doe eyes searched the crowd for him.

What a good girl.

Draco was almost smiling when the Dark Lord started to laugh. "Draco Malfoy? He is a loyal servant of mine. Come forward, Draco! Your master requires your service."

There was a deadly glint in his red eyes as Draco watched him scan the mass of people. There was only one service the Dark Lord would require of him now and Draco's nerves seized at the thought of it.

And what would come after.

Granger was covering her mouth with her hand to stop herself from crying out. He wanted to reach out and comfort her, tell her it was alright, but one false move now could cost him his life.

"At least," Potter went on with a triumphant look on his face like he'd just caught the snitch. "It was his until a few weeks ago. When he *gave it away.* "

Draco's body turned to stone.

Voldemort's face dropped.

Potter smiled, as if he had been waiting for this moment. "I saw it happen. You have been too blind to see that your own Death Eaters don't believe in you! Draco Malfoy was willing to give up his *wand* , for the woman he loves—Hermione Granger."

The wand belongs to… Granger? Oh God, no…

Not his girl.

Not Hermione.

Anyone but her.

Now it was her name on everyone's lips. Granger stood motionless, but some of the people around her took a few steps back, making her stand out in the crowd.

The rising sun lit the air around Potter, creating a long shadow that stretched from where he stood to Voldemort, who looked truly shaken for the first time as Potter closed in on him.

"Dumbledore always said that love was the strongest force in this world, even stronger than death, and the elder wand only submits to strength. Since it wasn't won or stolen this time, it was given to her in love and I don't think anything less than that will make it change masters, or more correctly—mistresses, again," Potter went on. "Hermione Granger is, and will always be, the owner of the elder wand."

Voldemort's head turned in their direction and his crimson colored eyes landed right on Granger.

"Get him!" Chang shouted and Draco, outnumbered five to one, retreated. He dodged what he could and blocked the rest as he ran, limping and cursing his knee with every other step.

He was almost back where he started and no closer to finding Granger who was more likely to run *from* him than *to* him at this point. Which made the discovery of Potter's invisibility cloak lying on the ground where he left it a stroke of luck Draco thought had long run out.

Granger couldn't run from him if she couldn't see him.

In fact, it made moving through the battle a lot easier than it had before, as long as he hunched over so his boots didn't show too much.

He moved relatively quickly now, unimpeded and headed in the direction of the Dark Lord and Potter. If Granger wasn't there by now, she would be and as soon as she did, Draco was going to take her and get out of this hellhole. Granger would come willingly, either by her choice or his *imperius* curse.

If she was breaking her promises, he would break his too.

Everyone was so entranced by Potter and the Dark Lord's lover's spat that no one even noticed the strange empty space moving through the crowd, but Draco had spotted her. Granger's tousled curls were a mess and all he wanted to do was run his fingers through them.

He almost did, but then she turned as if she knew he was there. Draco froze. Then Granger turned back around, leaving her back undefended.

He was just about to grab her when he heard his name.

" *Draco Malfoy* ."

It was Granger's sharp gasp that shocked him back into reality.

Voldemort was staring at the wand in his hand and the last few lines of the conversation caught up in Draco's head. The elder wand… It was… his?

Everyone was looking around for him, whispering his name over and over and Draco felt sickeningly exposed and half expected people to see right through the thin layer of the invisibility cloak.

If it was real and if it was *his,* he would be able to do anything he wanted. The power that wand held was legendary.

If he wanted, he could simply walk up there and *take it,* and with it, everything he had ever wanted. He would be unstoppable.

If he wanted…

"I'm not," Draco breathed out heavily and Hermione gave a strangled sob when she saw he was weakly smirking up at her. "Not for any of it."

And for a moment neither was she. For the smallest second, it didn't matter that they were surrounded by death and destruction. It didn't matter who they had lost or who was winning. It was just them.

Her and him. Like it should be.

Like Draco always said it would be.

And she wanted it. That. *This.*

Draco. Always just Draco.

She smiled back down at him, the pain in her hand unfelt. There was no room in her to feel anything except—

"You cannot stand against me!" Voldemort's high voice pierced from across the courtyard and Hermione turned to see him raising up his arms, commanding dozens of bodies to move once more. With a cry he pulled them up again and they began to shuffle forward, reaching out for anyone around them, regardless of what side they were on.

"It is futile to resist the power of Lord Voldemort!" he went on and Hermione watched *inferi* swarming and pulling people down to the ground. "Throw down your wands and bow! Bow to your Lord!"

Hermione saw some people still trying to fight back and recognized wild, red flames shooting towards a shambling group of *inferi* . Ron was marshaling members of Dumbledore's Army, forming them back into defensive stances and preparing to push forward, but there weren't enough of them and with different people casting *fiendfyre* it was beginning to get out of control.

Hermione pulled her wand away from Draco's arm to send her fiery chimera back out into the field, but at that same moment someone yelled "They're closing in!" and chaos erupted. No one seemed to know what side it came from, but what had once just been a rabble of mindless creatures were now organized and moving.

Voldemort was herding them all in, making quarters too close to summon *fiendfyre* without casting friendly fire. Order members and Aurors, Death Eaters and Snatchers were all pushed together until they were too close to fight. A group of students tried to retreat back into the castle and were swarmed by the rising corpses blocking their way. Thinking quickly, Hermione sent her chimera in their direction, allowing a few of the students to break free before the line of fighters got dangerously close to Hermione and Draco, blocking her spell as they were driven in closer to Lord Voldemort by his army of the undead.

"You will ALL bow to me!"

Hermione felt Draco tense in her arms and pulled him against her. Voldemort spun around, addressing Death Eaters and Order members alike, "Have you had enough?" The *inferi* stopped moving, holding everyone in a tight circle around Voldemort who turned and met Hermione's eyes with a gleeful gleam. "Whosoever pledges themselves to me and brings me the elder wand will be spared. You need not die on this day. Live! Live by serving me."

"COWARD!" Hermione shouted, half choking on the smoke from burning bodies. "Are you too scared to face me yourself?!" She lifted her arm, the handle of her wand pressing against her burned palm and sparking when she shook from the rough feel of it.

Voldemort grinned wide, his snake-like nostrils flaring with excitement. "I have no need to. I have already won." He stretched out his hand as someone stepped forward.

Hermione's heart sunk deep within her as Neville walked out from the crowd and sank down to his knees. Harry's body lay next to him, sprawled over broken stones. He reached out and closed Harry's eyes. "I'm sorry, Harry. But this is what has to be done."

She felt Draco reach out for her, taking her hurt right hand so gently in his right that it was hard to believe he had been the one to break it. But he hadn't meant to, she knew that, and she would have had every bone in her body broken if it meant that Draco got to stay with her. Even if it was just for a minute more, which… might be all they had left.

The slim ring of steel on stone made her turn. Neville was on his feet, limping forward, the sword of Gryffindor in his hand and glinting in the morning light. His face was set, resolute. Blood was leaking down his brow and he was missing one of his prominent front teeth, but Neville stood strong, tall, and proud.

"You dare to stand against me? Lord Voldemort, the master of death?" Voldemort narrowed his eyes until they were slits of red once he realized Neville had no intentions of submission.

"Yeah," Neville pulled the sword up in front of his blood-caked face. "I dare."

The sword sliced cleanly through Voldemort's neck, severing his head and causing a thin spray of blood to shoot into the air. His head fell sideways from his body, hitting the ground with a solid *thunk*.

Blood ran down his severed neck, creating a pool where his body slowly crumpled to.

Hermione stopped breathing. She could barely register the sound of cheering, of people shouting orders, and spells starting to fly again. For the first time, it felt like her brain was moving too slow to keep up with everything that was happening. This had all happened so fast, in just a matter of minutes, but… Voldemort was dead. It was done

Harry's dark hair ruffled in the wind and Hermione could clearly see the determined look on his face, one she had seen many times.

"It's not, Tom," Harry said calmly. "Because it was never Snape's. I was there that night, on the astronomy tower. I was there when Dumbledore died."

Hermione felt shock strike her so hard that she felt every other though fall to the wayside.

Oh God… No… Not…

Voldemort looked unnerved by what Harry said, his upper lip curling back and red eyes narrowing dangerously.

Hermione felt the fine hairs on the back of her neck prickle, she glanced back, but no one was there. When she turned back around, she caught Harry's eye as he glanced her way.

He had stopped walking and held the sword of Gryffindor put in front of him. "The elder wand took a new master that night."

Hermione's heart skipped a beat, stuttered to start, then skipped another, leaving her lightheaded when Harry said, "Draco Malfoy."

Fuck this shit.

Fuck these people.

Fuck this war.

He'd killed the goddamn snake and thought it might buy him some goodwill with the bloody Order, but *nooo*.

Draco had been spotted by fucking Cho Chang of all people, who led her group of girls right at him.

He wasn't really concerned until Chang sent a stinging jinx at his groin, and Draco had to jump back to avoid what was sure to be a most uncomfortable sensation.

He guessed she was still holding onto some resentment that he never talked to her after they hooked up at the end of fifth year. She had needed a rebound and he had wanted to forget that Granger had made better marks on her O.W.L.s than he had.

Face red and shoulders tight, he fought aggressively against Bellatrix. Ron had spent more time than any of them practicing and it was clear that all those hours were paying off.

"Not bad for a boy whose balls haven't even dropped yet!" Bellatrix cackled, but Ron wasn't phased. He didn't waste time trading biting comments with her, that wasn't his style. Ron was a man of action and he let his wand respond for him.

Hermione saw his lips move, his arm lifting the curved wand high, and flinched when the sick green light shot from the end of it, hitting Bellatrix and stopping her manic laughter.

She looked shocked for just a moment, and then she fell face-down into the dust and ash.

The battle seemed to pause and a few Death Eaters shrinked back from the front, as if the death of Bellatrix had marked a turning point. If someone as strong as Bellatrix could be killed, any of them could be killed and they were able to see first hand what they turned into when they died.

Fires burned in random spots around the courtyard and charred remains were scattered alongside bits of Hogwarts. Hermione looked around, starting to worry that there hadn't been any sign of Draco. She knew he wouldn't have fled without her, but she couldn't find any evidence that he was still… here. She refused to consider the alternative.

With the Death Eater line thinned out, Harry started to close in on Voldemort, talking as he got closer.

The other duels started to die out as anyone still standing crowded around, knowing the final fight was approaching.

Harry was talking about Snape; that it was Snape's patronus, a doe, that he saw in the woods. That Snape had always loved his mother, Lily, and had been working against Voldemort since before the end of the first war.

Goodness. Draco had told them Snape was still working to help the Order, but Hermione could hardly believe the details of what Harry must have learned from Snape's memories.

"You say you are the master of the elder wand, but tell me this, is it working for you?" Harry asked. "Does it bend to your will the way you imagined it would? Or is it right now, fighting against you, fighting to get back in the hand of its rightful owner?"

"I care not that Severus Snape was a spy. He is dead and it was I who killed him. That is all that matters. The wand is *mine!*"

which meant… they had more than stolen seconds. They had… *won.* And she, *she* had Draco. Her Draco.

Finally and, forever.

He was wounded and panting, but he was here, with her, in her arms. They had made it. They were alive and now they could be together. Just like *she* always wanted.

Hermione tried to stop her eyes from welling with tears as she watched Order members jumped back into action; stunning, stopping, and even tackling Voldemort's supporters to keep them from getting away.

She kept staring at the fallen body of Voldemort. She almost expected it to keep moving, twisting around like a snake's, but it lay still, bleeding and incredibly… *human.*

Tears were streaming down her face. They… they had won, but… now that they had, it made everything feel more *real.* They weren't events unfolding to an inevitable end anymore. She looked around the battlefield, still burning and covered in broken debris. But most of all she saw the bodies. They were… they were people, just a little while ago. People who had given their lives for… for this. Hermione felt her throat closing up.

Harry…

It was almost too painful to think about and for once in her life Hermione wished she could force her brain to *stop.* Just stop. Please. Don't make her think these thoughts, don't make her feel these things… She stared at Harry, looking so much like he had every night in the tent when he slept. Could it really be the same person who was laying on the ground now?

She blinked the tears out of her eyes and forced herself to look away. Her eyes snagged on the elder wand in her hand.

But she didn't want it. Not like this. She only wanted…

A pained groan jolted her from her thoughts. Draco was pulling his long legs under him while cradling his burned arm to his chest. Hermione winced as she saw the red flesh pull tight as the muscles underneath flexed.

"We need to go, pet," he panted, gritting his teeth as he tried to get to his knees. "We can't stay here."

Hermione looked around, her eyes snagging on the only other person who was still.

Harry…

"...We need to go," Draco repeated, but she barely heard it. Some childish part of her expected Harry to sit up, try and flatten his hair, and say it was all a ploy. Her hope hadn't died, not yet, but Harry…

Harry had.

Hermione looked away, not allowing the tightness in her throat to choke her just yet.

"Hermione… Please."

She felt Draco's unburned hand pass over the back of hers and trembling, Hermione turned her palm up, slotting the handle of the elder wand into his palm. Even with the world's most powerful wand in his hand, Draco still didn't let go of her.

"Keep charming your arm," she murmured, pressing the wand back against his raw flesh. "I'll be right back. I just…" She didn't look at Draco. She couldn't. If she allowed herself to meet his rain grey eyes, she wouldn't be able to stop the tears from falling from hers. "I just need…." The words were harder than she thought to say, and she gave up. She didn't have to fight anymore, but what she felt right now was the furthest thing from peace.

"Granger, I can't—" Draco stopped talking, but when Hermione refused to meet his eyes she gradually felt Draco's hold soften, his hand sliding almost supportively up her arm to wrap around her shoulders. Then, he gently pushed her forward. "Say goodbye. Then we'll go."

Yes. She'd like to leave. Be anywhere but here. But first, or… last… she wasn't really sure what order things should go in anymore. Hermione started to pick up little thoughts as she made her way forward. Get to Harry. Say… She stumbled, catching herself on a gargoyle. Hermione pushed on. Say what she needed to and then…

Then go with Draco and… be with him. It was that thought that kept her going until she got to Harry, and fell kneeling in front of him.

Neville had closed his eyes, which would have made it look like he was sleeping if his… body wasn't carelessly tossed on the ground. Hermione bit her lip, letting the pain of it ground her as she crouched beside him.

"Harry…" she said softly, as if she didn't want to disturb him. "Harry, I'm sorry."

Hermione brushed a bit of blood off of his cheek and tried to push his hair out of his face, but it just fell messily back over his scar.

"You did it," she said tearfully. "You won. I hope…" Hermione trailed off because… she didn't know what to hope for now. The war was over, they had defeated Voldemort. Everything she and Harry had worked for had happened. And she felt awful, because deep down, there was a part of her that said it wasn't worth it. That just wanted her best friend back. That didn't care about any of this because Harry didn't get to care about it anymore. He didn't get anything now. "I hope you're happy. You deserve to be," she finished, not knowing what else to say.

She shot a severing charm at the hand and kicked it off of her, chills creeping over her skin from where it had touched her.

At least it wasn't someone she recognized. At least it wasn't someone she had spent six years in classes with.

At least it wasn't Draco.

Pulling herself together, Hermione plunged on, trying to get to Harry. He didn't have a wand and while he was fending off the Death Eaters with his sword, he wasn't making much progress towards Voldemort.

The longer the battle raged, the more people died.

That's what Voldemort was counting on. He was going to let the Order and his Death Eaters tear themselves apart because he knew that his second army would rise and there wouldn't be enough left of the resistance to fight them.

No.

She wasn't going to let that happen.

Not to her friends and certainly not to Draco.

Hermione fought her way closer to Harry, sending spells flying at the Death Eaters between him and Voldemort. And she wasn't the only one pushing harder. Padma was whipping her wand around, her long black braid twisting in the air and let loose a stream of curses at a group of Snatchers who were trying to flee. Tear trails cut though the ash on her face, but her dark eyes were gleaming sharply as obsidian.

Percy Weasley had caught up with Rookwood, the Death Eater he had chased off of Fred's body, and was dueling him while berating him about poor work performance at the Ministry.

"And you never, NEVER, replied to any memos on time! How hard is it to send back a simple 'yes'?! HOW HARD, ROOKWOOD?!" Percy flourished his wand and Rookwood went down.

Hermione dodged a stray spell and ran into the thick leg of a giant. Her mouth fell open as she looked up to see only a few broken teeth as the giant roared down at her. She raised her wand, but a herd of hippogriffs descended on the giant, tearing at his smashed face and slashing at him until the giant retreated, blood and bits of hair falling heavily onto the ground as the hippogriffs chased after him.

In the wake of the giant's thundering footsteps, Hermione could hear shrieking laughter. Bellatrix was dueling a handful of people and she was *enjoying it*. The witch was just toying with the people in front of her and Hermione's stomach flipped when she saw that one of those people was Ron.

It was a sight, terrible to behold, but it was what the fiendfyre dragon had in its claws that made Hermione gasp.

Nagini, the last horcrux, was twisting and hissing, trying to strike out at the dragon but only burning herself as she did. Her body twisted, but the more it moved, the more it burned.

Voldemort was gathering the smoke and ash, trying to smother the white flame dragon, but it swooped low, arching its neck down to close its jaws around the neck of the snake. Its flesh burned and the fangs dripped poison that evaporated right off of them and curdled in noxious steam until the head fell from the still twisting body and landed at Voldemort's feet.

Smoke wafted out of the snake's open mouth, making it look like a poor substitute for the beast that just slew it.

Voldemort's wrath was quick and deadly. He pushed forward, outside his circle of Death Eaters and aimed his wand at the first person he encountered—Minerva McGonagall.

She stood tall and proud, her lined face set with determination. That was, until the arcing green light hit her in the chest, making her stumble back one step, two steps, and then she collapsed onto the ground.

Hermione wanted to scream, wanted to cry, but the words died in her throat. It was Harry's voice that filled the air. "You COWARD! Fight me! ME!"

"Oh I will, but first, you will see everyone you love… *die."* Spinning around to address his servants, Voldemort snarled, " *Finish them."*

There would be no more mercy and could be no more mistakes. Hermione fought the urge to go to McGonagall's body and to mourn her favorite teacher, but that is what they were expecting and hoping for. Hermione wasn't going to make this easy for them. She pushed the sharp pain back into the messy pile in the back of her head and focused on the task at hand.

Professor McGonagall would have wanted it this way.

Hermione was fighting harder than she ever had before. Her mind spun faster than she was able to keep up, but Draco's wand jumped to attention, obeying her as easily as her own ever had. She struck down one Death Eater with a stunning curse and sent a second crashing back into a fallen stone pillar.

Hermione was just about to head towards Harry when she felt something latch onto her leg. When she looked down the pale hand of an inferius had her ankle in its clutches.

And she did. She hoped that wherever he was now, Harry was resting, happy and content with the life he lived and looking down at her, green eyes bright.

Hermione blinked back hot tears as she looked up into the daylight breaking through the few wispy clouds.

"Harry!" Ginny was running in their direction, tears streaming down her face. Behind her trailed Luna and Mrs. Weasley, each bruised and dirty, but alive. Something about that fact comforted Hermione, but she was too tired, too *hurt* to puzzle through it completely.

They were alive and so was she. And so was—

"HERMIONE!"

Hermione spun around. Across the courtyard two Aurors were dragging Draco backwards.

She didn't even think, her body was still running on adrenaline from the battle and she was running, eyes locked on Draco's as he snarled at the Aurors who were hauling him to his feet.

"Stop!" Hermione yelled. She had to get to him. She had to get back to Draco. *Now.*

Her foot slipped, sliding in the blood that had leaked from Voldemort's decapitated body. Hermione reached her hands out to stop herself from falling and cried out as her weight landed on the broken one.

"HERMIONE!" Draco's voice echoed across the expanse between them. "Get your fucking hands *OFF* me, motherfu—"

Someone was touching her, lifting her back up to her feet. She didn't even turn to see who had helped her, but when she tried to move forward the hands were holding her back. She didn't have to turn to know who had her, the furious expression on Draco's face told her.

"LET HER GO!" Draco pulled against the Aurors, struggling as tried to control him. "DON'T YOU DARE TOUCH HER, WEASLEY!"

Hermione turned and looked up at Ron's face, covered in a mix of ash and blood.

"Tell them!" she shouted at him. "Ron, tell them Draco is on our side!"

" *Our* side?" Ron exclaimed. "Hermione, he sold Harry to Voldemort!"

"GET YOUR FUCKING HANDS OFF OF HER OR I'LL MAKE YOU WISH YOU WERE LAYING INSIDE WITH YOUR DEAD BROTHER!"

One of the Aurors punched Draco in the jaw, snapping his head to the side and Hermione lurched forward, screaming, "Stop! Stop it! You're hurting him!" She needed

to do something and fast. Hermione turned towards Ron. "Please, *please,* Ron. Tell them. Tell them Draco isn't…"

"I'LL KILL YOU! I'LL FUCKING KILL YOU, WEASLEY!" There was no more cool impassivity on Draco's face, it was full of cold-blooded murderous rage. His grey eyes stormed, locked on hers until one of the Aurors enchanted ropes to wrap around Draco and he roared as they spun around his burned arm.

Hermine pushed against Ron, pain flaring in her broken hand, but he held on. "I've told you, Draco *isn't* on our side," he said in a low voice. "Hermione, they'll take you too if you try to stop them! Can't you see that I'm trying to help you?"

It didn't matter. If this was Ron's help, she didn't want it. She couldn't let them take Draco, not when she just got him back. Not now that… He wasn't a Death Eater anymore! He was *her* Draco. He was everything to her. She'd fought for him and she'd won!

They'd won. Her and Draco. Just like… like she wanted it to be. Hermione flung herself against Ron, using every bit of her strength left to dislodge him.

"You're welcome." Ron let go of her and Hermione lurched forward, tangles of curls falling in front of her face. When she pushed them out of the way, she ran forward a few steps and then stopped.

There was no one there.

The spot where Draco had been a moment ago showed signs of a struggle, but the space was empty.

The shock of it knocked the breath from her chest. Her empty, aching chest.

Draco wasn't there.

Hermione rounded on Ron, pushing her wounded hands into his solid chest hard enough to knock him back a few feet.

His face reddened under his freckles and Hermione couldn't stop herself from going after him again, but this time Ron was ready for her and knocked her hands away when they collided with his chest.

"Where did they take him?" Hermione demanded.

"What the hell is wrong with you?!" Ron fired back at her.

"Where did they take Draco?!" she shouted, not caring that her voice broke or that her hand was shaking. She had lost Harry. She couldn't lose Draco too. "You tell me right now, Ronald! Where?!"

Ron pursed his lips, looked down, then glared up at her. "Where do you think?! He's a Death Eater, Hermione. He sold people to Voldemort. He killed them. Malfoy is going

Voldemort had called his Death Eaters to him and as the Order battled them, they fell, only to rise again in service of their master.

She tried not to picture Draco like this, tried to keep the image of him with only half a face, the other side smooth, white bone, out of her mind.

But before she sent curling whips of flames out, Hermione made sure she could see their faces. Or hair. Or height and build. Anything to tell her that it wasn't him.

Wasn't her Draco.

She didn't let herself think about what she would do if she did see him among the inferi. Instead, she let the lion roaring in her chest guide her. Instinct and hours of training took over and Hermione found herself pushing the line of dead back.

They were getting closer. They were *winning.*

There, through the wafting smoke, she could see Voldemort, spinning around frantically as he called Death Eaters to his defense.

Harry faced him, holding the sword of Gryffindor with both his hands. When a curse flew at him, he brought the sword up, deflecting it and sending it back into the half-formed line of Death Eaters.

Hermione could see blood on the sword along with a few inferi missing arms or legs, struggling to still answer their master's call.

She lifted her chin, straightened her arms, and… Goodness, spread her legs. Once she was grounded, Hermione sent streams of flames spinning towards the inferi, driving a few of them back and charring the ones that were closest to Harry. He nodded to her, green eyes as bright as emeralds, and then pushed on, fighting to get closer to the center of the fight where Voldemort was hiding behind his followers.

Letting out the breath she hadn't known she was holding, Hermione quickly sucked in another. A weight felt like it had been lifted off of her, but her work wasn't done yet. Voldemort still had supporters keeping him protected. No one could even get close enough to wound him.

But then, Voldemort gave a furious cry, baring his teeth as he forced his wand, the elder wand, into the air, churning air and calling down clouds from the sky. But what could have made him turn his attention from the battle? Then Hermione saw it, in the smoke heavy sky, was a dragon made of white flame.

Even though she had never seen him cast it, Hermione knew that was Draco's fiendfyre. It… *looked* like him; a long, aquiline face with smoking grey eyes and strong legs whose bulging muscles made Hermione shiver. The dragon rose up, beating its wings and sending waves of scorching air down on the people below.

done was find Granger and keep her safe. At least when she was the one in the cage they had been together.

But now…

He was more scared of losing Granger than he was of Azkaban. He didn't want her to have to sit there and hear all his crimes, listed out and stacked up against him… Is that how he wanted her to remember him? Or would it make her want to forget all about what they had because the truth of what he'd done would be too much to bear?

Granger was strong, yes, but even everyone had a breaking point. Draco had reached his long ago and he didn't want to push her to hers. He didn't want her to feel like… like this.

"Granger,"

"No." She shook her head again.

"Just listen—"

"I don't want to hear it!" Her eyes were brimming with tears, making them shine in the darkness. "I know what you've done, and I know why. If…" She took a large breath and her chest rose dramatically. "If you're guilty, then so am I."

His heart beat a little faster and whether it was from nerves or excitement, he didn't know.

"So you've got to try, Draco," she said quietly. "Because… I can't do this without you. You're… you're all I have left."

Weasley cleared his throat.

Draco's mouth went dry.

"Please," Granger begged in her sweet voice. "Just… talk to them like you would talk to me."

She went into a small explanation of what he could expect in the morning and told him to be honest, to own up to what he did and explain why, that he needed to show remorse for what he had done and apologize for it.

"You helped Harry," Granger's voice broke when she said Potter's name. "He wouldn't have made it as far as he did without you and… you… you saved me. No other Death Eater is getting a hearing, only you. That has to mean something. It has to mean there is a chance so you have to try, Draco! You've just got to."

Draco wrinkled his nose. "Oh yeah, *'Sorry I sold my soul to the Dark Lord and tortured and maimed a bunch of people because I wanted my girlfriend back. Can I go home now? I promise to be good from now on.'* " Draco dropped his expression and Granger crossed her arms over her chest.

"Well, basically, yes."

Draco looked up at the ceiling "I don't have a chance in hell."

Then he felt Granger's hand on his face, turning it down to hers again. "We've already been through hell, Draco. And we're still here. Don't give up now."

Why not? He turned Blood Traitor and had done what the goddamn Order had asked of him and they still threw him in this fucking cage. And the worst thing was, he knew back then they were going to. They had never promised him anything for his help, anything other than being able to stay at Granger's side a little longer and now that they no longer needed him, they would make sure he'd never stand beside her again.

Draco wished the bars weren't here. He wished he could hold her properly. Maybe then he wouldn't feel so… scared. And alone.

Wait… did she feel like this too? Shit, if she did… Draco looked deep into Granger's innocent eyes. He'd hurt her so many times and… he couldn't stand to do it again. They would never let him out, never let him off. But he'd said anything, he'd said everything.

And that was exactly how he knew this trial was going to go. And, where *he* was going to go.

Draco didn't know if he would be strong enough to break out of Azkaban, especially now that his magic wasn't working, but… he'd try. Try to get out, to get back. To her. For her. For *them.*

"Okay," he said in a rough voice. Granger's eyes lit up. "Okay, Sweetheart."

Granger reached through the bars to wrap her arms around his neck and she lifted herself onto her toes to kiss him. "Let them see the man that you are, the man that I love," she breathed out against him. "It'll be okay, Draco."

He nodded. "I know."

"I love you," she murmured.

Weasley tapped his wand on the wall next to them. "Time's up, Hermione. Put the cloak back on."

Draco's heart jumped into his throat and the muscles contracted around it.

"You said we'd have more time!" Granger's voice rose an octave.

"It's already been ten minutes." Weasley snapped a watch shut and tucked it back into his uniform pocket. "Debbins will be back any minute now."

Granger turned back to Draco and bit her lip.

"If you're caught Hermione, we'll both end up in cells down here," Weasley warned and held out Potter's old cloak. "You might be okay with that, but I'm not."

Granger hesitated and Draco felt his chest tighten.

"It's okay, Sweetheart. It's late and I know you're tired." Draco hated himself for saying those words, but… he hated himself for a lot of reasons. Loving Hermione wasn't one of them though, not anymore, and as much as Draco would *love* to see Weasley locked up and miserable, he wasn't going to let *anyone* put his girl in a cage. Not again.

"But…" Granger looked between the two of them. "I've only just got here and the hearing is tomorrow morning! I haven't been able to talk to him about—"

"Tell me tomorrow, yeah?" Draco twisted his face into what he hoped was a reassuring look. Granger seemed to be able to see past it and her bottom lip poked out a little in a cute thinking pout. "After… after, okay?"

He tried to limit his words because his throat was closing up and he wasn't sure what would come out next.

Don't leave me here.

I'm so sorry.

Save me, ***please.***

"After," she repeated, the word ghosting across her lips.

Draco gave her a curt nod and only let his shoulders tense as Weasley draped the invisibility cloak over her, hiding everything but her face from him.

Granger stood up and looked between the two of them and Draco felt a little better when her gaze rested longer on him than Weasley. "But… Draco—"

She had to get out of here before he broke down and everything he had been trying to keep inside came pouring out at her feet.

Draco lifted himself onto his knees.

"Here." He pulled the silver Malfoy ring off his finger, wincing when it slipped over his swollen knuckle, and held it out for her.

He could see Weasley frowning behind her. *Good.* Let the prick see he could put things on her too, and something more important than some dead fucker's old cloak.

Granger looked down at the ring, confused, and then up to Draco.

"Think of it as a promise," Draco did his best to coat his voice in velvet. "Until…" He looked deep into her big brown eyes. "Until I can get you your own."

She gasped, her cute little mouth opening up in a small o and Draco had to stop himself from reaching forward and grabbing her.

Gingerly, she reached out and picked it up. "Sorry about all the blood." He gave her an imitation of a crooked smile, unable to conjure one fully.

Granger brought it up to her lips and kissed it.

If he wasn't already in love with her, he would have fallen right then.

Draco inhaled. "It… it's uncomfortable, but in a numb way. I know it's there and every now and then I can feel it burning..." He trailed off, not wanting her to feel guilty for what she had done to him.

"You need to see a Healer!"

Draco let out a harsh laugh. "Yeah, fat chance of that in here. I doubt I'll ever see daylight again, let alone a Healer." He swallowed dryly and forced the words from his mouth. "Do you know, uh… when they are taking me?"

No one else had gotten visitors, but maybe Granger being here meant his time had come. The cells were getting emptier by the day.

Granger shook her head, making her curls toss and twist. "You're not going."

Something strong and bright flared in Draco's chest. "What?"

Granger's eyes shone like burnt cinnamon. "I talked to Kingsley—" Draco clenched his jaw to stop from cursing the new Minister's name. "—and you're going to get a hearing."

Draco blinked.

Granger started to get excited. "You get to tell your side of things, to the whole court! And once they know everything you did, there's no way they will—"

"Let me go free," he ended bitterly.

"Don't say that!" Granger argued. "You fought for us. For me!"

"Yeah, I also…" Draco glanced at Weasley's back, "did a lot of other things for you, pet, and once they hear about all that I'll be lucky not to get the dementor's kiss." Granger's eyes went even larger than normal. "A trial will only make things worse, trust me."

"Why won't you trust *me?"* Hermione pulled back from him. Draco's hands fell from her face. "Why won't you…" She glanced down at his scarred arm and then back up to him. "Why won't you even try?!"

"I did try!" Draco shouted. "The fuck you think I've been doing ever since you told me you fucking loved me last year? I've been trying to fix this—all of this!" He didn't want to yell at her, but… he didn't think he could say this any other way without breaking down. "All I ever did was fail! What makes you think this time will be any different?!"

Granger's bottom lip trembled and Draco wanted nothing more than to kiss it, to make the most of these few moments they had. Because… it might be all they would get.

He looked down at the bars in between them. Nothing he had done after they left the Manor mattered, not compared to what he had done before. The only good thing he had

Her brows pulled and a cute little worry line appeared in between them. It was then he noticed how drawn and tired her face looked. Draco rubbed his thumbs over her cheeks, hoping to smooth away a bit of the bad.

"How… how are you?" Granger's big doe eyes were practically pouring into him and Draco felt his throat bob as he tried to drink down every inch of her face. Fuck, he had missed her. "How's your arm?"

He glanced down at it, at the flow of scars that now replaced the mark. If he thought his chest was bad, it was nothing compared to this. The ink was faded to grey, twisted around the raised and dented flesh like veins in marble. Some parts were still red and raw and Draco hoped she wasn't too disgusted by the way he looked now.

His outsides were finally matching his insides. Ugly, twisted, and fucked up.

Granger went to touch it, but pulled back, biting her lip as he watched a dozen thoughts speed through her mind.

"Does it hurt much?"

He should lie to her. He should tell her what she needed to hear and not let her know how bad it was. Granger pursed her lips and Draco remembered kissing them. And promising her.

No more lies.

"It…" Draco's face fell. "I, uh, I can't really feel it all that much, most of the time." He left out the part that his elevated pulse at seeing her was causing it to flare back to life, burning so much it almost felt… frozen.

Granger's eyes flashed as she searched his for more answers. He didn't really want to get into it. It wasn't like he had planned on talking to Granger this evening, but now that she was here… he figured he owed it to her to tell the truth. Or at least, as much of it that he could muster without breaking down himself.

Draco tried to ignore Weaslebee shifting from one foot to the other in the corner of his vision. "Can you fuck off?" he growled.

Weasley's face flushed and Draco sneered back at him.

"I told you," Weasley raised his wand, "don't tell me what to fucking do."

"Ronald, please!"

Cold poison shot through Draco's veins, making his scars tighten and twinge at hearing Granger say those words like that to another man. Draco gripped her face tighter and pulled her big brown eyes back onto him.

"Hurry it up!" Weasley snapped, but at least had the decency to turn around.

Granger's face turned serious. "What do you mean you can't feel it?"

"I love you," Granger said softly.

Draco didn't say anything, knowing if he opened his mouth, too much would come out. He just stood up, letting her see that he was alright, that everything would be alright. At least for a little while longer.

"You've really got to go," Weasley said, sounding a little desperate now. "Up the stairs and first door on the left. You remember the way out?"

She nodded. Of course she remembered the way out, Draco was pretty sure she could map the whole layout of the Ministry if she wanted. Granger knew everything.

Except maybe, what was going to happen tomorrow. Because if she did, she wouldn't leave him here.

"Go on," Draco encouraged. "I'll be alright down here one more night."

It wasn't a lie. Draco had no doubt this was the last night he'd spend in *this* cage.

Granger squeezed his hand one more time then pulled the hood of the cloak up and disappeared. A few seconds later, the door opened and closed with a resounding clank.

Draco let out a breath and his chest sagged under his dirty, ripped shirt.

"If she was anyone other than Hermione Granger, she would have been arrested for what she did trying to get you that hearing," Weasley said, still looking at the door. "I hope it's worth it, that's all I'll say."

Draco sized him up for a moment. "Do *you* really think I have a chance?"

Weasley slowly turned to face him. "I brought her down here to say goodbye. She didn't get to do that with Harry and… I wanted *her* to have that chance."

So that was it.

They were letting him have a trial, or hearing, or whatever, as a way to appease the golden girl who controlled the elder wand. It had nothing to do with him or the fact that he had helped the Order, or killed the snake, or gave his fucking wand to Harry fucking Potter. Maybe if the Chosen One had *chosen* to do some other spell than *expelli-fucking-armus* it would have helped his case, but now, it didn't matter.

It didn't matter why he had taken the mark in the first place or that he had let it be burned off of him.

They'd only ever seen him for what he was, what he'd always be.

Weasley tapped his wand on the bars and Draco jumped back as they crackled to life again for a moment.

Draco glared at him and found Weasley staring back at him just as hard. "Did you think I'd forget what you tried to do to me down here?" He stepped up to the bars, the

bright light reflecting strangely in his blue eyes. "I saw who you really were that day and that mark wasn't what made you a Death Eater, Malfoy."

For a moment Draco thought Weasley was going to curse him. There was no one down here who could stop him and Draco had no defense, not even wandless magic. He couldn't do anything, but take a step back from the bars.

Weasley just scoffed and said, "I hope you are shown the same amount of mercy as you showed me tomorrow. It's what you deserve." He headed towards the door and Draco just watched him go, wanting to shout a dozen different insults at him, but found he didn't have the air in his lungs to do so.

When the door slammed shut again, Draco stepped back up to the bars and looked out at the other empty rows around him.

Gritting his teeth, he wrapped his hand around one of the iron bars, watching as the blue light crackled and buzzed, illuminating the scarred skin where his mark had once been branded onto his skin.

If they wanted to try a Death Eater tomorrow, he'd sure as hell give them one.

Hermione picked at her fingers as witches and wizards filtered into the courtroom. Some were wearing muggle clothing, others in long moth-eaten robes, but they all had serious expressions and were talking closely with those around them, bending their heads down to whisper. Draco's hearing had been reported in the Daily Prophet and had sparked outrage and intrigue across the wizarding community.

"It's ludicrous to entertain this! He's a Death Eater, they've already been sentenced. This is a waste of time and resources."

"Personally I'm happy to see him answer for what he's done. You know Abernathy still can't locate his cousin; it's been weeks and they still haven't seen hide nor hair of him! At least this way, people might get some answers."

The pair passed by, finding their seats in the higher levels of the courtroom and Hermione narrowed in on another conversation of two passing wizards.

"They say he passed information over to the Order during the war."

He was on his feet, or at least, trying to be. In reality, Draco was scrambling across the floor, wincing when he accidently used his left arm to try and push himself up. The sudden movement sent waves of pain up his arm, more than he had felt in days, but he didn't care. Not as long as he got to feel Granger wrapped up in them, at least one more time.

"Keep it down!" Weasley harshly whispered, looking behind him to make sure no one had heard.

"Draco…" Granger said his name so softly and Draco felt cracks run through the veins of his marble walls, threatening to shatter and break.

He reached for her, wanting, *needing,* to touch her, feel her, but when his hand neared the bars, they sparked to life, sending curls of blue magic surging into him.

Draco hissed and recoiled, pain flashing through his nerves and making white lights appear in his vision.

"Ron, can you turn that off?" Granger asked, taking her eyes off of him for just a moment and Draco pulled his body as close to the bars as he could get.

The weasel tapped his wand on the iron bars and the blue sparks stopped. The second they did, Draco stuck his hands through, grabbing onto his girl and pulling her into his arms. It didn't matter that one arm was burned to fuck and the other covered in dried blood. All that matters was that she was in them. He breathed in deeply and felt a pressure build up behind his eyes as he smelled her sweet cinnamon and vanilla.

"Fucking hell…"

"Draco—" Granger rasped. "Draco, you're crushing me."

It was then that he felt the cold iron bars digging into the scars on his chest. He let go, but didn't take his hands from her, only moved them up to cup her face.

"Oh, Sweetheart…" His voice was shaking and so were his hands.

Granger smiled at him.

Draco pulled her in as he hunched his shoulders, leaning down to press his lips against hers. He made sure that the bars were pressing into his face and not hers. He didn't want to hurt her and… well, what was a little more pain to him?

"Mm, Draco," Granger said against his lips and he captured them once more. "I don't… much time." Her hands were on his chest and Draco's heart beat so hard it *hurt.* She let out a small little moan and her fingers curled over his heart and Draco grinned when he felt her lips spread into a smile again.

Placing one last kiss against her lips, Draco withdrew.

Granger's hands slid over him and Draco exhaled, his body relaxing under her touch.

Draco knew he should fight, knew he should try everything within his power to get them to listen, to understand, but… he was scared. Terrified.

He'd seen what Azkaban could do to a person. How it could take them and fuck them up until what came out was a shadow of who they were before. Azkaban left its own kind of scars, ones upon the soul.

Draco couldn't move. Couldn't breathe. His chest felt tight, like something was coiling around him and squeezing. His heart hammered so loud for a moment it was all he could hear, then—

"Get up."

Draco lifted his head and looked for who had called his name from under heavy hooded eyes. When he recognized who it was, they narrowed into slits. His hair was shorter and he wore an Auror's uniform, but it was the same dumb fucking expression on his pock marked face.

"Weasley."

"Yeah," he said, voice tense. "It's me."

Draco leaned forward slightly, hoping it would alleviate some of the pressure in his chest.

It didn't.

"Did you request to be the one to take me?" Draco sneered. "Bet this is the best night of your life, finally getting rid of me." Weasley's face started turning red and he cast his eyes to the side before turning to glower at Draco again.

Draco was taking in short, small breaths and heard the strain in his own voice when he said, "Want to hear about the best night of my life? Oh wait, you walked in on it, didn't you? When I was balls deep in—"

"That is quite enough, Draco Malfoy!"

Draco slammed his body back against the wall as Granger's disembodied head hung in the air, curls flung around her face which had the prettiest fucking blush on her round cheeks.

He sat there, stunned for a moment, unable to think or breathe, or… anything, but stare up at her face. Then the rest of her appeared and she folded Potter's invisibility cloak up over her arm.

Granger was… here.

She was here.

She was…

"Hermione!"

"Bollocks. Even if he did, spies can't be trusted anyhow. Throw him to the dementors with the rest of his lot."

The lion in Hermione's chest roared and before she could stop herself, she found herself on her feet. "You don't know what you're talking about!" she said a little too loudly. "The information Draco gave was *vital* in defeating—"

"Please refrain from discussing the case while in the courtroom!" A uniformed guard called out in a thick Irish accent and Hermione's cheeks burned with indignation as she straightened her skirt out and sat back down.

The wizard gave her an odd look and put some distance between them before finding his seat. Hermione fell back into anxious silence. Her head was throbbing, anxiety pulsed with every quick beat of her heart. She hadn't slept last night after leaving Draco, only tossed and turned, wondering if this was the right thing to do after all. She went back and forth, but only succeeded in making her head hurt worse the more she thought about it.

Either way, there was no stopping it now.

She tried to pick at her hands again, but they were shaking so badly she tore a strip of skin from beside her nail. A thin line of red bloomed against her skin and Hermione stuck her finger in her mouth, sucking on it slightly as the doors finally slammed shut and the heavy noise made her nearly jump out of her seat.

"Please rise," the guard announced, holding his wand to his throat. The courtroom was packed full and Hermione felt pressure pushing in from every side. "—for the esteemed assembly of the Wizengamont!"

Twin sets of doors opened in the raised portion of the room and witches and wizards streamed forward, taking up their places as judges. It was impossible to miss the empty seats. At least half of the court had not returned or not made it through the war. The pounding in her head intensified.

Hermione felt faint, her legs were locked into place, but she could still feel them shaking. The last to enter was Kingsley Shaklebolt himself and she felt a small pang of guilt at the state of him. He looked even more rough for wear than he had a few days ago. The purple circles under his eyes had deepened, looking more like bruises and his hat was crumpled as if he had slept with it on.

"You may be seated," the guard said as Kinglsey settled himself in, almost collapsing into the chair.

Kinglsey shuffled a few pieces of parchment in front of him then cleared his throat. "We are gathered here today to address the case of the Ministry of Magic versus Draco

Lucius Malfoy. Accused of being a Death Eater, supporter of Lord Voldemort—" a hush of whispers whipped around the circular room at the name.

"Quiet!" the guard shouted and sent a few red sparks out of his wand.

"Thank you, Thackery," Kingsley said quietly as the murmurs died down again. He went on, "—charges include kidnapping, trafficking, torture, and murder. Who argues this case in representation of the Ministry?"

"I do," came a familiar nasally voice. Hermione's head cut quickly to the other side of the room where Percy Weasley stood up, slicking back his bright red hair with the palm of his hand. "I, Percival Ignatius Weasley, stand as representative of the Ministry in this case."

Hermione's mouth went dry and as her eyes slid back to the Wizengamot, they caught on Ron's. He had the decency to look a little ashamed, after all, he could have at least *told her* that his brother was going to be prosecuting Draco.

Ron wouldn't have… given Percy any personal information on Draco or reported back anything he said the other night, would he? Hermione didn't know. The boy she had been friends with at school wouldn't have betrayed her like that, but… since the war… she wasn't sure what Ron was capable of.

He was the one who broke eye contact, setting his jaw and looking at his older brother while Hermione was sure her face was telling every single thought and emotion she was having at the moment. Before Ronald took her to Draco, he had told her that he wanted to try and make things amicable between them, for Harry's sake. But if he had really meant that then how could he not have told her? And how could he have—

"Bring up the prisoner," Kinglsey said tiredly and Hermione's attention snapped to the center of the room where the floor creaked and began to open.

There was the rattle of chains and grinding of metal then the top of the… Oh God, the *cage,* emerged from beneath the floor.

Draco's white blond hair was dirty, but still unmistakable. His head was bent forward, shoulders sloped and arms weighed down by heavy chains. Hermione's heart lurched, pressing against her ribs and beating hard as if it was trying to break through. She glanced down at his arm which was at least covered in a gauzy bandage. Whether it was to hide the wound so as to not elicit sympathy or hide the fact that his mark was indeed gone, Hermione didn't know.

It looked so… *terrible* last night. Burned and scarred, she had felt sick seeing him like that and knowing she had been the one who did it to him. But his mark was gone, that was good at least, and… it had been healed enough to start to form scars, but they were…

The werewolf jumped up. "If I weren't in his cage, I'd rip your throat out for that."

"Down, boy." Draco rolled his eyes. "Sit."

Greyback growled from deep within his chest. "You fuckin'—"

"I already know what I am," Draco looked down at his arm and whispered, *"useless."*

The next day they had taken Greyback out.

He didn't come back.

In fact, no one they took came back.

He overheard the words "transport" and "Azkaban" before his ears started ringing and a cold sweat broke out over his body. An image of his father flashed before him; bloodshot eyes and thin skin tattooed with numbers, sigils, and runes. Draco looked down at his right hand where the Malfoy ring sat, heavy and cold. He curled his fingers into a fist and threw it into the wall.

He let the blood drip over it, sliding into the cracks and crevices of the design until it didn't fucking shine anymore. An itching numbness spread up to his shoulder. That was better than nothing and better than agony that grew each day, which, he supposed, was all he could ask for at this point.

After that, Draco had settled in the corner of his cell and tried shifting through the shattered walls of his mind, hoping to pile the rubble up enough to block out everything else. The numbing ache resonated through him until it shook the broken foundations of every wall he tried to put up. Even simple, wandless relief charms didn't work and so Draco sat in the darkness and tried not to count everything he'd lost. His freedom, his magic… *His girl.*

Every now and then, when the Aurors changed shifts they would walk through the cages and shine a lit wand in his face. Sometimes they called him names. Sometimes they laughed at him. Mostly they just ignored him, coming to take a Death Eater out and empty another cell.

Draco would just curl his burned arm into his chest and closed his eyes tightly. He tried to count to three in his head to calm down but all he could think about was her.

Hermione. Hermione. Hermione.

She beat through his skull like blood.

"Malfoy."

Fuck.

This was it.

His time was up.

The last thing he could remember was that motherfucking Weasel holding her back as they dragged him off. Then he'd woken up here, in a cell, to the sounds of screaming and shouting. He'd rushed to the bars, trying to see out, but was blinded by the bright white-blue light. Blinded, but not hurt.

Draco looked down at his hand wrapped around the bar, lightning crackling up his arm. And didn't feel a fucking thing.

He let go, jumped back, chest heaving. His arm was a shiny, burned mess of freshly scarred skin. A quick healing charm had been cast on the surface, sealing in the wounded flesh. With the little light he had down here, Draco looked down at the taunt, new skin, still smeared with ash and char, and was glad he couldn't feel it.

Granger had done it, she had removed his mark, but that didn't seem to matter to anyone else. Over the last few days, the skin had continued to grow back, but it twisted into scars. The leftover ink slithered through the tissue as it healed, leaving strange patterns in his new skin. He spent hours staring at it in the darkened light.

Draco never thought he'd see his arm without the mark and it looked… well it looked like shit, but… it was his again. And all he wanted to do was hold his girl with it, to feel Hermione safe with him. That's what all of his had been for, that's why he was here, but all he was left with was the slow creep of pain as the burned nerves began to sew themselves back together and his flesh grow back as white scars with streaks of grey shot through it.

The more it healed, the worse it got.

He could suffer through the pain, he was used to his arm aching constantly, although he wouldn't have said no to a bottle of fire whisky. Or a case of it, honestly. What he couldn't stand was the empty feeling in his chest, slowly filling up with an acrid poison, burning him in an entirely different way than her fiendfyre had. This was cold, caustic, and bitter.

This was what he was without her. Who he had been last year. That was why he was here. Draco held out his arm, the new, strangely smooth skin glinted sickly in the low light. The mark was gone, yes, but underneath was still him. Just as scarred and fucked up as he'd always been.

"Not so pretty now, huh, pretty boy?" Greyback had called from the cell across from Draco.

The silver fangs had been taken from him and his tongue lolled out of his mouth, dripping with saliva.

Draco's lip curled. "Still better looking than you, dog."

Goodness, they weren't like any she had ever seen. They stretched over his forearm, strangely smooth and white scarring with swirls of ink, faded to grey around a few places of burned, red flesh, clotted with blood.

It still looked like his arm, the one he had wrapped around her so many times, but now… it really *did* look like he was carved from stone. The marbling of the ink, spread and bled through the scar tissue like lines in marble. It was impossible, but… somehow, someway, it made him… even more beautiful to her.

The cage ground to a halt and jolted, rattling the chains as it locked in place. Draco's hair was hanging in front of his eyes, and his face was still turned down when Kingsley addressed him.

"Please state your name for the court," Kingsley said, scribbling something down on his parchment.

Draco didn't speak. He didn't move either; he just sat there, his chest slowly moving as he took long, deep breaths.

Kingsley looked up. "State your name," he said more forcefully.

Still, Draco didn't move and Hermione felt the faint cold shock of nervous sweat breaking out over her skin as the thumping in her head sped up.

Kingsley looked at the guard, Thackery, and nodded. He then walked forward and tapped his wand against the bars of the cage. They lit up with curling blue sparks, jolting Draco from his bent over position and throwing him back against his seat. Hermione covered her mouth to stifle a scream as his chains rattled and shook violently.

It was over as quickly as it began and Draco was left leaning back against his chair, gasping for breath.

Kingsley's voice was calm when he repeated, "State your name for the court." At least he didn't seem to have enjoyed watching that, which was more than she could say about some of the other attendees, a few who were even applauding. Hermione's stomach turned sickly inside her.

Draco shook the pale lock of hair back from his face and situated himself until he was sitting indolently, leaning back against the chair with his long legs stretched out in front of him and his forearms resting on the arms of the chair, draping the chains across him and giving everyone a good view of them.

Kinglsey lifted his hand to motion for Thackery again when Draco spoke, dropping the vicious smirk only to speak in a voice as smooth as velvet, "Draco… *fucking* Malfoy."

Good Godric… What was he *doing?!*

Draco sucked his teeth dismissively.

Angry murmurs circled around the courtroom and Hermione grimaced. This was not starting out well at all.

Kingsley tapped his wand on the edge of his pedestal.

"Let us begin."

This trial, if it could even be called that, was utter bullshit. It was a waste of time and he wished they'd fucking get it over with already.

Humiliation wasn't one of his kinks.

Draco wasn't here to plead his case, not that he'd beg *these* fuckers, he was only here to be made an example of. They had to demonstrate their power and control since they had so easily lost it when the Dark Lord took power and the best way to get it back was to publicly humiliate someone who stood for everything that they had fought against, plus the added bonus that his legacy was one of the corruption that had led to the Ministry's weakness in the first place.

Draco was here because he was a Death Eater, yes, but he was also here because he was a Malfoy.

His father had done as much damage as he did, if not more, over the years and Draco had been groomed to take his place. It had only been the Dark Lord's rise to power, and his search for Granger, that had pulled him away from following in his father's footsteps. But as Draco looked around the filled courtroom, he had the sinking feeling that he would be following in them anyway.

All the way to Azkaban.

He couldn't help himself and glanced over at Granger who was sitting in the front row, back straight and brows pulled tight over her big doe eyes. His heart gave a painful beat when he saw her biting her lip. She immediately released it, trying to give him a reassuring smile that only succeeded in making him feel even more hopeless about his situation. Draco couldn't hold her gaze and dropped his eyes to her lap where her fingers were twisted together in knots.

She unwound them and there it was, his silver Malfoy ring. It was too big to fit on any of her fingers, but she was turning it over, the soft pads of her fingers running over the

Ron's cheek twitched, making the freckles on his face dance for just a moment. "I can take you to him."

Was… was Ron… helping her? Helping… Draco?

Hermione narrowed her eyes and repeated *"Why?"*

Ron looked at his shoes and took a breath. "Ever since Harry… Well…" he glanced back up at her from under light lashes. "Look, do you want to see him or not?"

Hermione eyed her once best friend. Ron had changed so much, but… so had she. Was there a part of them that hadn't? That stayed those two kids who never fit in anywhere except with each other? If anyone in the world could understand how she felt since Harry died, it would be Ron. Maybe… maybe that's why he was doing this.

"I'll be there," Hermione whispered.

Ron's mouth tightened then he took a step back, cleared his throat, and said, "Don't be late."

Draco sat slumped against the wall in the farthest corner he could get to. Every now and then the darkness lit up with crackling blue light as one of the other prisoners got too close to the bars of their cell. Or when the Aurors came down and pulled someone out. Draco had watched as cell by cell, day by day, they emptied.

He tilted his head up, his adam's apple bobbing in his throat as it tightened. Even before they started taking people, the cells hadn't been as full as the last time Draco saw them. He knew these cages, they were the same ones that the Muggleborns had been held in. The ones he had helped fill.

Draco wondered if they had felt like this, scared and alone, wondering if they would ever get out of here. Or if it would be worse if they did.

He closed his eyes, trying not to think about that or how many he had put in here.

He hadn't really wanted to, but that didn't seem to matter now. Neither did the fact that he had fucking given the Order information and helped Potter plan stealing the cup. Or that he had killed the goddamn snake and… It didn't fucking matter. Everything he had done, he had done for *her*—Hermione—and… and *they* had taken her from him.

Ron looked like he had been slapped. "Hermione, we are trying to set things right."

She glared at him. "Just because they gave you a uniform doesn't mean what they are telling you to do is *right.*"

His freckles scrunched as his face flushed, turning into a familiar angry expression. "Is that what you told *him* too?"

"Weasley!" Kingsley called out. "You are not to discuss the prisoners with civilians. You know this. Escort Miss Granger to the atrium and then report back to your commanding officer."

Ron gave a curt nod. "Yes, sir."

"Don't bother," Hermione said harshly. "Go polish your badge, Ronald. Maybe if you stare into it long enough, you'll see what a hypocrite you've become."

She turned on her heel, wanting to be out of there and away from the people she had once fought beside. She couldn't understand why they wouldn't just *listen* to her! Draco didn't deserve this. Harry would have, and Hermione's chest tightened at the memory of him. He wouldn't have stood for this either and at least… at least she would have someone on her side. At least she would have still had a friend.

"Hermione, wait." Ron's hand closed over her upper arm as she reached the end of the dark tiled hallway and Hermione spun on him. A few loose curls fell into her face and she used the excuse to push them back to hide the fact that she was wiping hot, angry tears from her eyes.

"What is it?" she snapped.

Ron glanced around, waiting until a few witches moved off into an office before taking a step closer to her. Hermione pulled her arm out of his hand and she watched something pass over his expression before he leaned down. "Do you remember where we stashed the people we polyjuiced ourselves into?"

"Of course." The answer spilled from her lips and a ghost of a smile almost crossed Ron's face as if he was remembering the young girl who used to jump to answer a professor's question in school. Hermione felt embarrassment bloom in her cheeks and looked away quickly.

"I've got overnight watch on Thursday. There will be a short time when my partner will be on break. I can leave Harry's cloak for you." Ron said after a beat, "Meet me at midnight."

Hermione's eyes darted in between his, trying to figure out what he was getting at. "Why?"

deep lines of the scripted M. He watched her trace it three times before she faintly raised her hand and touched her inner arm, making the same movements over the scar hidden underneath her collared shirt.

Draco cut his gaze away, throwing it back to the speck of dust at the bottom of Shaklebolt's podium that he had been staring at for the best part of the morning. They had paraded so called *"witnesses"* who all told sob stories about how Draco had taken their brother or daughter or grandfather in for questioning and the loved ones had never come back.

Draco rolled his eyes. If they really loved those people, they would have gone after them. They wouldn't have let anything stop them from getting back the one they loved. Instead, they had hid and cowered, and then fled at the first chance. Even if his chains fell away and the cage magically sprung open, Draco wouldn't run. Not unless he had Granger right there running with him.

And, that was why he was here, giving his last fuck about the world in an effort to exhaust every option he had to have a life with… Hermione.

He wished he had called her that more often. It was the least he could have done to show her… that he… that *she* was… But he hadn't. He had done all the things he was currently on trial for instead.

"Thank you, Mrs. Byson," Poncy Weaslebee said as a large woman with a larger handbag stepped down from the front of the courtroom.

Of fucking course it was a goddamn Weasley prosecuting him. They seemed to be everywhere, like some sort of freckled fungus or red, fuzzy mold.

Draco sighed and leaned back in the hardest chair in the world. His legs were cramping, being stuck in his cage for so long. Keeping him in this gibbet was nothing more than another way to torture him. Hell, even he had given Granger the whole bed to stretch out in.

No. He couldn't think about her in his bed. Not now. Not when… he might never have her in it again.

That was the *real* torture.

Bile churned sickly inside of him and Draco fell back into the dispassionate disposition he used to hide behind while sitting through classes when he was worrying about fixing the cabinet and how he was going to kill Dumbledore, all the while hoping that Granger didn't notice anything on his face that might stop her from fucking him again. He hoped he could keep the same composure now.

Then he saw who took the stand next.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Kenna.

She looked nervous, but healthier than the last time he saw her. Her cheeks had filled in again and she looked like she was showering regularly, which… was new for her. At least he didn't have to smell gross, old dog while he was stuck here listening to her yap. Her eyes darted quickly around the room though and her movements were jerky and she seemed anxious to be sitting alone on the stand. She had never liked being on her own.

"Kenna McCleod is here to make her statements against Draco Lucius Malfoy—" Draco bristled at the use of his full name. "—in an effort to remind the court of her compliance and cooperation when her own hearing is held."

Kenna glanced at him for a moment then dropped her gaze. So much for fucking loyalty. He *saved* her from torture and death at the hands of the Dark Lord and this is how he was repaid?

Then fuck her.

Fuck them all.

"Gonna tell them how you tracked Mudbloods for me? Huh, Kenna?" Draco prompted, sneering as he did so. "How you got paid for it too? The ones you didn't *eat,* that is."

The courtroom exploded into gasps and sounds of disgust. Shaklebolt tapped his wand against his podium, sending red sparks out to quiet the room again.

"You will only speak when asked a direct question!" Weasley number… middle something snapped at Draco, his face reddening with anger.

"Ask your questions then," Draco sneered. "I've been sitting here for hours listening to people weep and moan. Could have left me down in the cell. At least there I can stand up straight." He kicked at the bars with one of his black boots and let a jolt of the blue energy run up his leg. It was worth it to hear the gasp of the people who had been whispering about him all morning.

"Draco…" Granger's voice was soft, but hearing it still hit Draco like he had been run over by the Hogwarts Express. When he looked over at her he sort of wished he had been. He might not be able to do much for himself, but he didn't have to make this harder on her than it already was.

He didn't want the last time he saw her to be with tears in her eyes.

He had enough memories of that already.

Kingsley picked up a quill and started jotting down notes on a piece of parchment, acting like they hadn't just been at each other's throats.

Hermione collected herself enough to ask, "Can I at least see him?"

"Inmates are not permitted to have any visitors outside the Auror office."

"Just a few minutes," Hermione found herself… begging. "That's all I'm asking. I haven't seen him since…" Since Harry died. Since McGonagall died. Since Hagrid and Fred and countless others died. She wanted to see Draco to make sure he was alright, but also a private, selfish part of her wanted to see him so he could make *her* feel alright.

She'd lost so many people. Draco was the last one… the *only* one, she had left.

Kingsley paused his writing and softly said, "I'm sorry, Miss Granger. Truly, I am."

"No you're not," Hermione answered, voice shaking. "Not yet at least."

Kinglsey's eyes darted up to her before Hermione turned to storm out of his office. As she reached for the door, it opened and Ron of all people stood there, dressed in a crisp new Auror suit.

"Hermione."

"Get out of my way, Ronald."

"He's here to escort you out," Kingsley said from behind her.

"I don't need an escort!"

Ron leaned in close to her. "Don't make a scene, Hermione. It will only make things worse."

He made to take hold of her arm, but Hermione jerked away from him. "Touch me and you'll get much more than a scene," she warned.

Ron's brows dropped and he blushed a deep red. "Threatening an Auror is an offense."

She laughed bitterly, eyes bright with her sparking anger. "Are you going to arrest me, Ronald?"

Ron didn't say anything, he just looked at her with that same expression of disappointment he had given her so many times at Shell Cottage. Hermione raised her chin and stared back at him, almost daring him to do it.

"No," he finally muttered. His new boots squeaked as he shifted uncomfortably in front of her.

"That's the first smart decision you've made in a while," Hermione said waspishly. Then with a glance behind her at Kingsley, she added to Ron, "And that badge on your chest means you are an Auror *in training.* You still have time to make another smart decision before you take a position working for this farce of a government."

least let her visit him. If this didn't work… Hermione felt her throat tighten. She didn't know what she would do.

She was running out of options and Draco was running out of time.

Swallowing, Hermione opened her mouth to mount her defense again when Kingsley waved his wand, sending a shining silver lynx jumping out of it and through the door. With a sigh, Kingsley watched it disappear behind her. "Draco Malfoy can have a hearing." Hermione's heart lept in her chest. "For what he did," Kingsley looked pointedly at Hermione. *"All of it,* his sentence will be decided by the Wizengamont."

With the next beat of her heart, it crashed back down inside her. The same people who decided all Death Eaters were sentenced to Azkaban? What good would this do?!

"But—"

"It is not up for debate."

"Why not?" Hermione snapped.

"You wanted fair? This is the answer," Kingsley said with finality. "I suggest you go home and get some rest. You've been yelling at me for over an hour. I think we both need to calm down before we say anything we regret." He sat down, scooted his chair in, and refused to look at her anymore.

Hermione felt painfully powerless. She wanted to cry. She wanted to scream. She wanted to pull the elder wand out and make them all listen to her. She would have, if she was in possession of it, but when Draco had been taken, it had been too and Hermione assumed it was locked up in the bowels of the Ministry, same as him. She still had his hawthorn, and was lucky to because many people had lost their wands and never gotten them back. But during the course of the war she had lost so much more than just a wand… It wasn't right for them to keep it from her, but Hermione was more concerned with Draco than the most powerful wand in the world.

She could worry about the wand once she got him out. Draco didn't belong down there with the other prisoners anymore than she did. Draco had fought for them! He destroyed a bloody horcrux! He wasn't the same person who had done all those terrible things. Or… was he? She had always thought it was the Malfoy side of him that did the horrible things to others, but it was Draco, the man who loved her, who had done the worst things like leaving Ron to die and taking Harry into the Forest. Hermione bit her lip. It was the best part of him, that did the worst things. And Godric help her, she loved him for it.

She loved all of him. Everything.

Draco's sneer dropped and he settled back, his chains pulling at his wrists when he tried to cross his arms.

"I can have you gagged if need be," Poncy hissed at him.

"Just get on with it," Draco mumbled and went back to glaring at the piece of dust, trying to avoid Granger's tawny eyes.

He sat there, counting his breaths over and over as Kenna, true to her goddamn werewolf nature, fucking betrayed him, to save her own hide. Spilling everything about their hunts and worse, what he had done when Fletcher was imprisoned at the Manor.

He had never told Granger what he did to Fletcher, because he didn't want her to know how he almost went *mad* without her, but now… now he wished he had told her every detail of every act he committed for her because then maybe she would have understood the fucking importance of getting the hell away from the fucking Order as soon as they had the chance! Instead, they were here and she was hearing it all anyway.

By the time Kenna was dismissed, Draco could feel the hatred blaring and blazing from dozens of eyes, all glaring down at him. But the only ones he cared about were the ones he couldn't bring himself to meet, no matter how hotly they felt on the side of his face.

He didn't want to see what lay in their cinnamon colored depths because he was scared. Because if it wasn't hatred, then it would be heartbreak and he wasn't sure he'd be able to hold it together if he knew that he had hurt her again.

Draco stared at the piece of dust on the floor, refusing to even blink, not even when his eyes *burned.*

Hermione winced at the pain in her head as Dean Thomas shouted down accusations laced with insults at Draco.

"He fucking tortured us! For hours! Tried to get us to turn others in and kept asking about Harry and where he was. That was his plan all along , " Dean said loudly and clearly, "Malfoy wanted to be the one to turn Harry over and he fucking admitted it! During the battle, or do none of you remember that? Because I fucking do!"

A low rumble passed through the courtroom and Hermione bit her lip harder. Kingsley cleared his throat, but did nothing else.

"I don't know why we are even here," Dean went on. "We all know he's guilty! Just look at him, the fucking *worm*—he won't even look up! He knows it too! Forget Azkaban…" Dean looked up at the Minister. "Send him to hell, Kings. Do it for Harry."

A hushed silence fell over the room and Hermione's heart clenched in her chest. Dean had just been the most recent in a long line of witnesses against Draco. All of them were bad, but they seemed to be getting worse the longer it went on.

Hermione felt something wet slip down her chin and for a moment she thought it might be a tear; she had been trying so hard not to cry because Draco needed her to be strong for him right now and also if she started she wasn't sure she'd be able to stop. But when she reached up to wipe it away, Hermione saw a smudge of red on her fingers. She had bitten her lip so hard it was bleeding.

Hermione quickly sucked on it and swallowed down the metallic taste, pushing it past the lump that had been sitting in her throat all day.

"Is that all?" Draco's aristocratic drawl pulled every eye in the courtroom back to him. He was lounging back against the chair, making it look like the heavy chains didn't even bother him. He made them look… *good*. Like he owned the place, which, at one time, he practically did.

So many things had changed. Why couldn't anyone see that Draco had changed too?

Dean was glaring down at him so hard Hermione was worried he might have an explosive incident of accidental magic, yet Draco didn't seem to care at all.

"Yeah," Dean snarled down at Draco. "That's all." As he walked by Draco's cage to take his seat in the stands again, he leaned in and Hermione barely caught what whispered out of the corner of his mouth. *"Now* we're even."

Draco, to his credit, merely sneered and shifted to lean on the other side of the chair.

Hermione found herself unconsciously leaning forward, trying to close the distance he had added between them. He wouldn't even *look* at her while she was barely able to take her eyes off of him, scared that he would somehow disappear again if she even dared to blink.

Hermione didn't know why he was pretending she wasn't here and to be truthful, she didn't like it. She had spent years with Draco treating her as if she was something he had stepped in and only looking at her after he insulted her, but even then, there had been something mischievous in his silver eyes. Even when he had her locked away in his bedroom he at least *looked* at her, although his expression had always been blank. Unless

risk that one of them…" Kingsley's face was dark when he turned it back to her. "Enough people have died, I won't risk anymore lives for one of *them.* "

"He's one of us," Hermione said, her voice catching in her throat. *Them*… but Draco wasn't one of them, he was… he was *her* Draco. "I know that anyone who was a Death Eater is going to Azkaban, but Draco… Draco is different!"

The Ministry was struggling since the war ended. Many people fled during the war or went into hiding and not all of them had come back out yet. The ones that did were trying to put their lives back together and that included reforming the Ministry after Voldemort had warped and twisted it to his design. Many Death Eaters had been captured after the battle, Draco included, and like any prisoners of war, they didn't get the right of a trial.

Collaborators got hearings, but anyone with the dark mark was to serve the rest of their life in Azkaban.

Kingsley took a deep breath. "We don't know that."

"I do!" Hermione shouted.

"What am I supposed to tell the people he tortured? Or the people he sold out? What about their families? That we aren't prosecuting him? I'll have another uprising on my hands and the Ministry is barely functioning as it is. Rules *must* be followed—Draco Malfoy is a Death Eater and will be sent to Azkaban like the rest of—"

"This is the precedent you want to start with the new Ministry?! That people don't have rights? That their Minister can just do as he pleases?" The creature in Hermione's chest roared and even though she knew she shouldn't, Hermione let it. "What were we even fighting the war for? What did Harry die for?! This is what Voldemort would do, not you."

Kingsley's dark eyes blazed for a moment and Hermione could practically see him holding back what he really wanted to say.

"Draco helped us defeat him," she lowered her volume, but kept her tone just as firm. "I'm not saying everything he did was right, Godric knows I know that better than anyone, but… not everything he did was wrong either."

Kingsley rubbed a hand over his head and Hermione held her breath as he pulled it back, letting it drag over his face. He looked tired, dark circles hung under his eyes and stubble dotted his cheeks. She felt a pang of pity; when was the last time Kingsley had gotten out of this office?

She could understand how drained he must have felt. She had barely slept in a week herself. Every waking moment had been devoted to trying to have Draco released or at

Hermione fought a recoil at the mention of Harry, instead she dug her heels in and let her indignation drive her on. "Voldemort killed Harry, not Draco!"

"Hermione, please." Kingsley rubbed his temples. "I understand you feel strongly about this matter—"

"You would too if you opened your eyes and saw the truth!" Her throat was tight and Hermione tried to keep her emotion from bleeding into her voice. "Draco gave the Order essential information that helped *save* lives and you are going to let them send him away because he was forced to take that mark! He was still underage when he agreed to take it and only did that under coercion! He didn't…" Hermione was out of breath, not even realizing in her rant she had emptied her chest. "He didn't want to be a Death Eater and in the end, Kinglsey, *he wasn't!"*

She balled her hands into fists to keep them from shaking in front of the new Minister of Magic. The last thing she wanted was to be written off as an overly emotional teenage girl, well, second to last thing she wanted. She didn't care what people thought of her as long as it meant Draco walked free.

"Just because he no longer bears the dark mark does not absolve him of the crimes he committed." Kingsley must have picked up on her deteriorating state because his answer had been given in an even and diplomatic tone, but instead of dissuading her, it just made her even more angry.

Hermione didn't want to be calm. She wanted Draco.

She took a deep breath, ready to start another tirade if need be. *"I understand that.* What I don't understand is why no one is listening to the reasoning behind *why* he did those things!"

Kingsley pursed his lips. "Evil things can be done in the name of good."

"I am well aware." Hermione crossed her arms over her chest. "This wouldn't be the first time the Ministry sentenced a man to Azkaban without hearing the full story. You were working for them too, weren't you, Kingsley?"

Hermione met Kingsley's glaring gaze until he finally shook his head and dropped back into his seat. She knew it was a low blow; Kingsley had worked closely with Sirius when he was still alive on Order business. It wasn't exactly fair to throw Sirius' imprisonment in Kingsley's face, but what was happening to Draco right now was also unfair and Hermione didn't feel like playing nice right now.

"This time is different," he tried to explain. "They weren't hiding and operating from the shadows. They took power and we all know who the Death Eaters really were. The he had been drunk and then he had stared at her like he was trying to see through the lace he dressed her in.

Hermione never thought she would have missed his… leering, but it turned out the only thing worse than having Draco's attention, was not having it at all.

Why wouldn't he acknowledge her now? She was the whole reason he was getting a hearing instead of being shipped off to Azkaban like anyone else who bore the mark. All she wanted was him to look over at her and give her one of those smirks she had come to love or even just a stoic nod. *Something* to let her know that they were going to make it through this.

"Draco!" Hermione hissed, and to her surprise, he swiveled his head in her direction.

She was so stunned that she didn't even speak, just left her mouth hanging slightly open.

"Sweetheart," Draco turned to face her, his voice falling into velvet tones. "Your lip…"

He focused in on it, brows pulling over his eyes and casting them in shadow, turning them a storm cloud grey.

"It's okay," Hermione said hurriedly, wiping at her lip with the back of her hand. "It's… fine."

His lids fluttered a little, then a strange false smile slithered across his face. "Yeah, it is. Everything is going to be fine, pet. Don't you worry."

Draco must have noticed a change in her expression because he tried to give her that fake smile again and even threw her a wink as Percy announced the next witness being called.

"Will the Wizengamot please accept—" Hermione looked up to see who was coming next. "—Pansy Parkinson to speak on behalf of the Ministry versus Draco Lucius Malfoy."

Pansy? But… why? Why would she be willing to speak against…

Oh. Oh goodness gracious...

Pansy sat down at the front of the courtroom, holding a small baby wrapped in what looked like cashmere, but *softer.* The baby was fast asleep, but Hermione could see thick black hair on its head, curling in a strangely familiar way…

"Miss Parkinson, can you tell the assembly what charges you have evidence for?"

Pansy turned her nose up, addressing the group at large. "Murder."

Whispers filled the seats and Hermione's gaze shot to Draco, expecting to see him rolling his eyes, but instead he had gone white. And that was saying something for Draco. It was as if someone had leached the life out of him.

"Murder of whom?" Percy pressed.

Pansy pulled her baby closer to her chest. "Theodore Nott."

Oh… *God*. That's where Hermione knew those curls from, and of course, Hermione remembered Parkinson and Nott dating last year in school. Hermione hadn't even thought about Pansy after Draco came back and told her that he had killed Theo.

Oh God, oh God, oh God…

Had Draco known that Pansy had been pregnant? It wouldn't have made a difference if he did, Hermione knew, deep down, he would have killed Theo a thousand times over to keep her safe.

Hermione looked back at the little squished face of the baby and felt a heavy sense of shame. She was the reason it was going to grow up without a father. She wanted… she wanted to say she was sorry, so sorry. That she never wanted things to be like this, that she hadn't wanted any of this to happen. Hermione felt cold dripping down inside her, making her insides churn and her head throb.

She looked at Draco who was staring at the baby and turning a light shade of green. Was this what he was feeling right now? Is this… how he felt as each person had taken the stand and testified against him? Godric, it had been hours since they started, how was he still holding himself together?

She thought the worst had come and gone. Hearing Kenna talk about the calculated and methodical way Draco had hunted down and captured Muggleborns had shocked Hermione. She knew, she had known all along, but… hearing it was different. And when Kenna said that he *imperius'd* her… Hermione had hated herself a little at the shot of jealousy that Draco had taken control of someone else's mind. Some other woman's mind…

She had to shake her head to rid that irking tingling at the top of her spine. It didn't mean anything and… she hadn't even *liked* it when Draco did it to her. Well, not at that moment at least. But her thoughts were interrupted as Kenna continued and told the Wizengamot that Draco had cut off Mundungus' finger and almost made her *eat it*.

How could Draco have been capable of that? Was that even the same Draco as the one who held her and kissed the top of her head and whispered comforting things in her ear when she needed him to? Or absolutely filthy things when she needed *them?*

Chapter Twenty Five

This is completely unjustified!"

"Miss Granger—"

"Is this how the new Ministry treats people? Arresting them under false charges and holding them in isolation? He was working *with* us, for Godric's sake!"

"You have to consider—"

"And who is considering Draco? Tell me that, Kingsley! He'd been gravely injured when he was arrested—has anyone even treated him?"

"I assure you—"

"I don't want your assurance!" Hermione shouted. "I want to see Draco Malfoy. NOW!"

Kingsley Shacklebolt slammed his hands down against his desk and pushed himself up. "What would you have me do? The boy is a Death Eater. People are dead because of him, your best friend included."

Of course it was. She had spent so long thinking there were two Draco's. One Draco and one Malfoy, but she had found out too late they were one in the same. The man who pulled her onto his lap for no other reason than to shove his fingers in her curls and pull her lips onto his just to make her smile was the same man who had callously sold Muggleborns, people—*humans*—to the Ministry.

The same man who had murdered his friend in cold blood. And now she had to sit here and listen as Pansy Parkinson told the court about what he had done. Because Hermione had asked him to. Because she didn't want him to hurt her friend, so he had hurt his instead. Did that make it any better? Or worse?

Or did it make her just as guilty as Draco?

"Theo wasn't perfect," Pansy's voice trembled and Hermione realized she had missed most of Pansy's statement. "But he was forced to do things that… that he didn't want to." She held her baby a little closer to her. "And you all heard that he was killed for trying to help the Mud-Muggleborns that Draco was—"

"You lying bitch!" Draco pulled against his chains. Rumbles sounded around the room and Hermione glanced at the dark expressions as Draco leaned forward, sneering at Pansy. "He was a fucking Death Eater," Draco growled. "Just like me."

Percy cleared his throat and Hermione jumped. She had almost forgotten he was leading the case. "Theodore Nott is not on trial here."

"Yeah, because Draco *murdered* him!" Pansy stuck out an accusing finger and her baby started to cry. She quickly turned down to it, shushing and cooing at the small figure who stretched out its arms, shaking its pink fist in Draco's direction.

Draco sunk back in his chair, his expression cooling by the second back into the emotionless mask he had for most of the day. Hermione's heart clenched in her chest, there was so much she wanted to say and do, but most of all she just wanted to reach out and hold his hand, let him know that she was here with him, and she wasn't going to leave him.

"Thank you, Miss Parkinson," Percy said stiffly and dismissed her. He turned to address the Wizengamot, pulling at his jacket to straighten it. "These testimonies have shown that Draco Malfoy not only committed the crimes he is accused of, but did them willingly and not under any enchantment or coercion to do so. However, we have to look at his history as a whole and not just particular events."

Hermione picked at her hands, anxiety building up inside her to the point of nausea.

"It is not just that Malfoy captured and sold Muggleborns, it is not just that Malfoy tortured people and creatures alike, it is not just that Malfoy planned and plotted the

assassination of Albus Dumbledore at the age of sixteen, but that these acts were committed because of a lifelong adherence to the values of Pureblood supremacy that led him to ally himself with Lord…" Percy shook his head, "He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named."

Hermione was surprised at Draco's composure. He looked perfectly calm, as if he was merely sitting through another lecture in Ancient Runes instead of having the fate of his future decided while he sat in chains.

"We have heard from his victims," Percy shuffled through a few papers, "all except a… Stephanie Towler, who has left Britain to stay with her cousin in… Vienna," Percy finished as he adjusted his glasses. "She refused to return, even to speak against Malfoy due to, what she called, *'Severe emotional trauma'*. "

Percy glared at Draco and Hermione heard the whispers and murmurings start again.

"What could he have done that she refused to come back?"

"Poor girl…"

"I would say let the dementors kiss him, but he probably doesn't even have a soul for them to take."

Hermione tried to swallow, but her mouth was too dry from heaving in anxious breaths.

"What the Ministry has proven today," Percy went on, talking louder but not bothering to stop the whispers, "is that Draco Malfoy not only chose to join the Death Eaters—"

No. No. Hermione wasn't going to sit here and let them… *judge* Draco when they didn't know all the facts!

"He only joined to save his family!" Hermione shouted. The room fell into a hushed silence. Draco's head swung in her direction and she met his silver eyes for a moment before propelling herself to her feet. The sudden movement had her head hurt worse and she felt a little lightheaded, but Hermione wasn't going to let anyone stop her from saying her piece.

The weight of the Wizengamot and the audience's eyes were on her and Hermione summoned up her courage to push her to do what she needed to. Goodness, there were a lot of people in here. She saw their quizzical expressions and their questioning eyes. How had Draco stood this for hours and hours?

"Draco…" Hermione filled her chest. "He wanted to protect his family. He wanted to help his father who was dying in Azkaban." She shot a look at Kingsley. "But he never wanted to… do all those things. He didn't…" Hermione's hands were shaking and from nerves or anger, she wasn't sure.

to Azkaban for everything he did. He deserves far worse," he sounded almost… disappointed that he didn't get to do whatever he was thinking of to Draco.

Hermione's blood ran cold. "But he…" Her breath was coming in short gasps now. "He didn't want to! He only did them—" Hermione's head spun so fast she felt lightheaded. "…For me."

Ron snorted in disgust. "He still did them."

"I can't believe you!" Hermione shouted, her voice rising in anger. "Harry would have—"

"HARRY'S DEAD!" Ron erupted, his face turning a dark shade of red. "I'd think you'd be a bit more upset about that if you were really his friend! So don't tell me what Harry would have done or wanted because what he wanted was…" The steam died out in him and Ron ran his hand over his face, pushing it into his hair and letting loose a windfall of ash that had been trapped there. "He wouldn't want us to fight. So I'm not." He shook his head slightly. "Not with you."

Hermione stood stock still as Ron headed back to the gathering crowd around Harry's body. She looked around her for anyone who could help or tell her more, but all she could see was the aftermath of the battle. The more real everything became around her, the less she was able to distinguish one feeling from another until they all blurred together in a buzzing thrum of…

Nothing.

Hermione felt numb, even the growing lump in her throat didn't hurt much anymore. Neither did her burned and broken hands, nor the dozen cuts and bruises she had gotten during the battle. Hermione looked out across the courtyard where she'd last seen Draco, fighting to get back to her, her eyes stared straight ahead, dry and unblinking. She didn't feel any of it because in order to feel, she needed a heart.

And hers had been taken from her.

The war had been won, but Hermione… she had lost.

She had always thought winning, *fighting,* meant she would get to be with Draco in the end, but if the war was over…

Hermione looked up, staring at the newly risen sun filling the victorious battlefield with blinding daylight and lifted her chin, swallowing down the tears and hurt and anger she was feeling. She'd need it all now.

Because it wasn't over.

It *wasn't* over.

Not until **she** said it was.

Fuck, he hated it here. Draco slowed as he reached the bars. If the dementors got in the cells this way, then maybe he could get out. He gripped two of the bars, feeling the cold iron against his palms, and tried… pulling. Nothing happened.

Sniffing, Draco shook out his arms, trying to warm them up a little in hopes that he could make some sort of progress this time. He flexed his fingers as he wrapped them around the bars once more. Taking a few deep breaths, he counted to three before he tried again.

One.

Two.

Three.

Feeling the muscles in his neck strain, Draco pulled with all his strength, forcing himself to hold on, to keep going, to… The scarred skin stretched and pulled tight. His arms were shaking, straining—

"Fuck!" Draco was panting when he let go.

Okay, now he was getting angry. He'd been here for a few weeks now and had lost a little of his muscle mass, but something should have happened. Right? Right.

This was bullshit. He was better than this. He was Draco Malfoy for fuck's sake.

Something snorted behind him. Some *thing,* because as much as she looked like his girl, she wasn't. She couldn't be. His Granger had never been this… mean. She'd never been like him.

Now she was laughing. It wasn't the soft ringing he loved to hear, but a bitter, cold thing. Just like her.

"Don't tell me this is your plan."

"Shut up."

"You can't really believe you're the first prisoner to try this. Obviously they are magically reinforced. Any idiot can see that."

Draco ground his teeth as the voice got closer. Why was she here? Why now?

Something fell and rolled across the floor. "Whoops," Fake Granger said with fake concern as his daily cup of dirty water spilled across the floor.

Draco stared at it. If she was just in his mind, she shouldn't be able to knock things over. Or… had he done that when he stepped back from the bars? He tried to remember, but the crying from outside his cell was distracting him. Lots of *"No, please! I'm sorry! I'm sorry! Nooo!"*

"I thought you liked it when people begged."

Draco rounded on Fake Granger. "You know what I *don't* like? You. Yapping in my ear when I'm trying to—"

"To what?" she scoffed. "Break your own arms?"

"Fuck off," Draco snarled.

"Ooh, is that the best you can do?"

Draco clenched his jaw. "I'll show you what I can fucking do." He turned back to the window, gripped the bars, and *pulled.*

He could hear his blood pumping in his ears. Once more, his scars stretched tightly over his straining muscles, except this time, he felt it across his chest and stomach too. Draco held on, determined to make some sort of difference, just to show her, to show himself that… that…

That it wasn't hopeless. That he wasn't useless.

That he wouldn't break another promise to his girl.

Draco held on until he felt his scars were nearly going to pop with the strain and even then, he pushed himself just a little more. Beads of sweat rolled down the sides of his face, cooling as the wind sent a gust rushing in against him.

"It's not going to wo-rk," she warned him in a sing-song voice.

Draco let out a roar as his arms gave out.

"FUCK! FUCK!" He grabbed onto the bars and shook them. ***"FUCK!"***

Fake Granger rolled her eyes. "Are you done?"

Draco sank down against the wall, letting the cold stone cool his heated body. Within seconds he was shivering as the sweat on his skin chilled him to the bone. He wished he still had his water. The heaving breaths had dried out his mouth and he could still feel his muscles twitching in his arms and back. He wouldn't get another cup until tomorrow. Maybe he would try again then.

Was there any point though? He was fucking stuck here. Trapped. It would take a monster to bend those bars. Even if he could, the drop alone would be impossible to survive. What was he doing other than fooling himself? Wasting his time with stupid ideas? If the door didn't open, then how the fuck was he ever going to get out and back to her, to… Hermione.

He hadn't even noticed he said her name out loud until he heard, "I'm right here."

Breathing heavily, Draco closed his eyes for a moment before looking up at her. Her curls fell around her with a dark shadow. From his vantage, she seemed too tall for a moment and her hair fell around her face, darkening it with a shadow until all he could

see were her eyes. Not warm or deep like they should have been, but just glazed and grey and…

It wasn't really her, not his Hermione, but… It was as close to her as he was getting. At least today.

Hermione was perched on the edge of the couch. It didn't matter that she had been sleeping here for the past week, it still felt strange, like she was intruding in the Lovegood's home.

It was a lovely home, with lots of open windows that let the summer breeze blow gently through. Curtains would gently glide across the floors and ring bells hanging from doors, reminding Hermione of birds singing. Which they did, loudly and often at the break of day. Sometimes they even flew into the house which she would have found charming, if they didn't occasionally try to nest in her hair.

It was nothing like the other magical homes she had been in. Not cluttered in a cozy sort of way like the Burrow or decrepit yet buzzing with activity like Grimmauld Place either. And it certainly didn't feel anything like Malfoy Manor, something that Hermione thought she would be grateful for, but now found herself… missing, in a way.

As much as Luna had prompted Hermione to make herself at home, she still found it hard to feel entirely comfortable here. Xenophilius was busy with the Quibbler at its new offices, and the closest Hermione had gotten to exploring was to thumb through some of the strange books he kept on crooked shelves.

A quick look to her they were mostly rubbish, theories about bending Gamp's laws, which couldn't be done by any logic, and conspiracies about different magical governments covering up powers of strange plants and animals she had never even heard of, and which most seemed too fantastical, even for the wizarding world.

It hadn't taken her long to discard them and return to the stack of papers and pile of books on magical law she was working her way through. But even working, Hermione found it hard to lose herself in the information like she usually did. Instead, she would stay nervously balanced on the lip of the couch cushion.

Frozen. Stuck.

Chapter Twenty Six

Draco was pacing. There wasn't fuck all to do in this goddamn cell except walk from one wall, take three long strides, and turn to walk back across. His boots hit the stone ground with resounding thuds, breaking up the alternating sounds of hopeless wailing as he reached the door and howling wind when he turned at the window.

The window, that's how *they* must be getting in. Or at least, he thought so. Draco hadn't seen the door open once since he got here. Food appeared once a day, if it could be called *food*. Even the rabbit food Frenchie had made at the cottage had been better than the stale bread and cup of dirty water that froze if he didn't drink it fast enough.

Sometimes he did. Sometimes he was busy with the Fake Granger, distracting him with some terrible childhood memory of his father snapping the back of his hand against Draco's cheek after he wouldn't stop crying and his grey water froze solid. The thirst didn't bother him as much as the fact that he was starting to think that the Fake Granger was turning solid too.

She thought about Draco, alone, in his cold cell and closed her eyes tightly. Hermione folded her body over, head almost touching her knees. Her hands pushed against her eyes, her fingers diving into the mess of curls on her head. She allowed herself to stay like that for three seconds, then took a deep breath and forced herself back up, opening her eyes to see Luna standing in front of her.

"Good Godric!" Hermione grabbed her chest, her heart jumping into her throat. Luna had a strange habit of moving through the house without making any noise. If it wasn't for her humming most of the time, Hermione wouldn't even know she was here. It didn't help that her mind was elsewhere these days, darting between appointments she had made with different offices at the Ministry and what previous court cases she needed to bring up to try and appeal Draco's sentence.

"I thought you might be hungry." Luna held out a chipped plate with a thick piece of toast on it, dripping with orange marmalade. It wasn't until Hermione saw it that she felt her stomach churn inside her with hunger. She had been so busy the past few days that she wasn't entirely sure when the last time she ate was. It must have been yesterday sometime… probably… Hermione bit her lip in thought, trying to remember.

"Hermione?" Luna asked softly.

"What? Oh! Yes," Hermione said quickly. Luna handed her the plate and sat down next to her. "Thank you, Luna. Would you like to share it?" she asked, already a little embarrassed about how much she had taken advantage of Luna's hospitality already.

Luna's eyes swiveled in her head to look at Hermione. "I've had two slices."

It… wasn't an answer, but… Hermione accepted it anyway. She bit into the toast and almost had to hold back a moan. It was soft, but crisp and she could taste melted butter running over her tongue right before the sweet and tangy taste of orange hit it. "Oh my God," Hermione mumbled as she swallowed. "This is so good!"

Luna smiled, looking a little maniacal as it widened, but Hermione felt her own cheeks lift a little. She wasn't able to smile back, not fully, but it was more than she was able to summon a week ago when she ran into Luna in Diagon Alley while she tried to stifle a panic attack so she wouldn't break down in public. The last thing she needed was to appear irrational or unsettled when she was trying to argue Draco's case.

After a quick discussion, Hermione gave up the room in the cheap Muggle hotel she had been staying in and moved into Luna's living room.

"I'm glad you like it," Luna said with a strange and dreamy expression on her face as Hermione took a second and then third bite of the toast. "You need some extra strength, after yesterday." She turned and looked out the window, starting to hum a soft melody.

Hermione swallowed hard and set the toast back down. It suddenly tasted burnt and bitter.

Yesterday had been the… funeral. It was almost a year to the date since they entombed Dumbledore, that they buried the fallen souls from the Battle of Hogwarts. It had taken a while to organize because there were so many people being honored and remembered. They were turning a portion of the grounds at Hogwarts into a cemetery so that anyone who fell during the battle there, who didn't have anywhere else to rest, wouldn't be forgotten.

There had been discussions of where Harry should be interred; Godric's Hollow was the obvious choice, and Molly Weasley had offered to have him buried with the Weasley family, but Hermione argued that Hogwarts had been Harry's real home and so he was to be laid to rest in a position of honor between Minerva and Remus.

The grounds were full of people coming to pay their respects and say a final goodbye to their loved ones. Hermione had already done that on the battlefield and felt an odd sense of anxiety being here again. When Elphias Doge made a speech about the brave heroes who gave their lives, she couldn't help but think of Draco who hadn't lost his life, but had lost his future, even after giving just as much as anyone did.

And she had lost him. At least until she could get him freed.

Hermione sat the toast back down on the plate, unfinished and wondered what Draco had eaten today or if he even had.

Luna had invited her along to a gathering at the Burrow after the funeral, but Hermione had merely said she had more work to do, which, wasn't *not* the truth; there was still plenty that needed to be done, but she also didn't want to have to hide how she was really feeling just to make Ron and the rest of his family feel better.

When Hermione had caught up to Kingsley after the burial she had tried to talk to him again about Draco. She knew it wasn't the best time or even the most appropriate, but if it helped, it was worth the risk. However Kingsley just stepped to the side, saying she needed to make an appointment with his office to discuss official Ministry business.

"I've tried," Hermione argued. "They just say your schedule is full and refer me back to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, who I've spoken with a *dozen* times—"

She could cut it out from his chest every day and he would just have to sit here and keep on loving her until he died.

Probably after that too.

Because even when he was dead, he'd still be in here, in hell… with and without her.

She came to stand right in front of him and tilted her head back to look up at him. Draco could almost imagine the slight flush to her cheeks she'd have, but when he looked at her, there was no color.

But her voice sounded just like it had when she echoed back to him, *"I don't want someone like you to love me."*

Draco felt like he had been slapped. His hands clenched into fists and the new, tight skin on his left arm pulled uncomfortably. He didn't want to feel that, what *she* had done to him. Draco opened his eyes, trying to run from her and the memory of when she had spoken those words to him, but when his lids flew open, she was still standing there.

In his cell.

In front of the window.

With him.

The little bit of light coming through filtered around her and Draco could see her clearly for the first time. All the color had been leached from her. She was as pale as a ghost. Draco looked her over, trying to conjure the exact color of toffee brown her hair normally was, but no matter how hard he tried, it stayed a dispassionate ash grey.

No. No. No. He couldn't do this. Couldn't see her this way. Couldn't stand it, not for one more fucking minute. He thought being away from her would be the worst they could put him through, but being with… this corrupted, distorted version of the woman he loved… Draco had never known true hell until this moment.

He turned and tried to bang on the door. Tell them that there was someone in here with him. That they needed to come back and… and…

He could hear half a dozen other prisoners shouting as well, some merely screaming, not even trying to form words anymore. Draco backed up from the door until his shoulders hit the bars of the window.

"It's just you and me," Fake Granger said in a saccharine tone. "No one else. Just like you always wanted." She smiled, but there was no warmth in it and Draco felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise as a cold wind blew by. "You finally got what you deserve, *Malfoy."* Draco stiffened, pressing harder into the iron bars. She followed him step for step until she was right in front of him, head tilted back and looking up at him with her big eyes. *"Me."*

This wasn't Hermione. This was some fucking figment he had conjured up, but… she was right, just like she fucking always was. Draco deserved to be punished. He had hardened his heart to the rest of the world in order to keep Granger safe inside it so who else could torture him than the only person who could rip it out from within?

"I understand your frustration, but I can't meet with every concerned citizen, Miss Granger."

"I am not just a concerned citizen, I was a member of the Order!" Hermione shouted, ignoring the way other voices fell hushed around her. "And Draco helped the Order! We would be burying more people today if it wasn't for him!"

Mrs. Weasley appeared at Hermione's side and patted her arm. "Come now, dear. This is a day of mourning, to honor those who died and what they died for."

Hermione didn't want comfort right now and shrugged Mrs. Weasley off to face Kinglsey again. "Yes, we are supposed to be honoring them—" She pointed at Harry's grave, Minerva's grave, and Remus' grave in turn. "By building a world where we don't let injustice stand! If they were still here, you *know* they wouldn't have agreed to that sentence. Not after what he did—"

"What he did?!" Kingsley exploded. "You were there! You heard what he said in the courtroom! What he said to the judges!" Kingsley looked at the graves of his friends, his eyes going dark and soulful. "If they had been his judges then maybe… but they are not with us anymore. And what else was I to do?" Kingsley's brows furrowed. "I know what Draco Malfoy did, all of it… but the boy damned himself. I had no choice."

"Hermione, come away. This isn't the time," Mrs. Weasley said gently and put her arm around Hermione's shoulders to lead her away.

"Stop, stop it!" Hermione cried out, trying to keep the tearful notes from her voice as she pulled away from Mrs. Weasley a second time. *"Don't touch me!"*

Mrs. Weasley looked shocked at first, but then… hurt and Hermione felt a hot pit of guilt churning in her.

"I… I was only trying to help," Mrs. Weasley said softly.

Hermione wanted to say *'then help me, please!'* but Mrs. Weasley was fretting over a thick sweater in her hands with the letter F sewn onto the front and the pit deep in Hermione widened, threatening to swallow her whole. The feeling brought back the image of Harry being lowered into the ground and her throat tightened to the point where she could barely breathe, let alone say she was sorry for shouting at Mrs. Weasley.

"Come on, Mum." Ginny pulled on her mother's hand, leading her away. Hermione caught her eye for only a moment, but saw the disapproval as Ginny shook her head, her long hair shining in the bright summer sun.

Hermione was thankful that Luna didn't bring up her outburst at the funeral and when she declined the invitation to the Burrow, but only said, "I'll bring you back some pudding."

The pudding was sitting there on the table in front of the couch, still wrapped up, next to the plate with the unfinished toast. But what caught Hermione's eye was the still sealed scroll next to the uneaten food that Hermione had nearly forgotten about in all the emotional clamor.

A goblin had tracked her down when she had broken away to walk along the lakeshore after the burial and resulting upset.

"Excuse me, EXCUSE ME!" the goblin had called out when Hermione didn't stop. She wasn't in the mood for… much of anything except looking out over the cool, calm waters of the lake. "Miss Hermione Granger?" he croaked and prodded her in the side with a scroll sealed with silver wax and the familiar insignia of the Malfoy family crest.

Hermione lifted her eyes from the seal to his black ones, magnified by large spectacles resting on a wart nearly the same size as his nose. She wasn't able to summon a smile to greet him, merely nodding and confirming who she was.

"This is yours." He shoved the scroll into her hands. Hermione merely blinked back at the goblin who sighed, hefted his trousers up by the belt, and explained. "This is the will of Draco Lucius Malfoy."

Oh God… The blood rushed out of her head and Hermione swayed on her feet. "Is… Is he…" she barely breathed out.

"No, no," the goblin waved a clawed hand, "and it won't be official until he is dead, but there are quite a few of our clients spending the rest of their days in Azkaban. Adjustments must be made. Any wills with heirs or benefactors listed are entrusted with the caretaking of the estate."

"I'm sorry," Hermione breathed out. "The estate?"

The goblin gave her a long suffering sigh. "Any lands or titles held, along with any goods or gold belonging to the Malfoy line."

Hermione stared at him. Draco had mentioned changing his will, but she hadn't realized the exact extent of what he was doing at that moment. "But I'm not a Malfoy," she protested. "I can't—"

"I just pass it along, as is my fiduciary duty," he interrupted her. "What you can and can't do or will or won't do is none of my concern. If you have any questions about the vaults—"

"Vaults?" Hermione repeated. "Plural?"

He'd never…

The wind blew harshly through the window and suddenly filled Draco's lungs with frigid air.

As much as he needed it, Draco forced it out of him as fast as he could, letting the muscles seize to the point where it felt like shards of ice stabbing through his chest. He might as well get used to the feeling. He was going to be cold for the rest of his life. He'd never feel warm again. How could he when Granger was hundreds of miles away?

It wasn't just the distance separating them, or the bars or the walls or the ocean or the fucking dementors.

It was everything he had done. Everything he was.

It was all his fault and he could still see her big doe eyes filling with tears as they tore him away from her.

His girl. His fault.

He was going to die in here.

In this fucking cell.

Alone.

No. No no no. He hadn't damned himself to end up locked up alone in this cell. Draco squeezed his eyes shut, retreating to the ruins of the marble walls in his mind. He flipped over broken pieces, digging down until his hands bled, until he reached…

Draco lifted the small trap door he'd kept under the heel of his boot and from below came a mess of curly hair. It was her. Or… as much of her as he had left.

Draco exhaled, but as she climbed out into view, his face fell. This wasn't his girl. This wasn't his Hermione.

She… *It*—was wrong.

She lifted her face to look at him. It wasn't with warm brown eyes that looked like burnt cinnamon, but flat, colorless ones that strangely reminded him of the blanched sky outside.

She narrowed her eyes at him. "You deserve to be in here, but why'd you drag me up into this…" She looked around at the broken marble. "God, this place is fucked up."

Draco paused for a moment, half in shock that she had said those words and half in shock that she was actually *here*. Even if here was still inside his head. Finally he said, "I thought you wanted to be with me."

This Fake Granger laughed. "Be with you?" She wrinkled her nose. "Why?"

"Because you love me and I…" He took a breath of icy air. "I love you."

He couldn't do anything, but sit there and grit his teeth until he thought he was about to crack a tooth while they tried to brand him with runes, marking him as a prisoner and an outcast.

At least the dark mark had meant he belonged to something, these meant that he would never be able to go back.

The only small consolation he had while they tore into his skin to imprint him with ink was that the scars Potter had given him got in the way. No matter how hard they tried, and hell—*they tried,* but the prison runes would only blur and bleed into the dented tissue on his chest. They couldn't undo what had already been done. Draco had sneered triumphantly at them, that was, until the prison guard closed up the bottle of ink.

"Don't matter. 'E's never gettin' outta here. Just throw 'im in the old Malfoy's cell and be done wit it."

His father's cell. Well, at least he was keeping with tradition. Maybe he'd go crazy within a year, just like his dear old dad had. He would have laughed at the cruel irony if he had been able to summon it.

Draco had felt the warmth leaching out of him ever since they arrived on this rock and although he hadn't seen one yet, but Draco could feel the dementor's presence, closing in on him and seeping below his skin, trying to find the sliver of soul he had left in him.

Good fucking luck .

They brought him to the cell and pushed him inside. Draco stared around at the walls, the same pale grey shade of his father's eyes. He remembered them wide and wild, staring up at things that weren't there while he was laid up in the villa while Draco tried to fill his broken heart with wine on the beach.

But there was no sun to burn him here, only frozen wind, salt, and stone. Draco felt another rush of it blow in through the barred window. This was the place where his father's mind had… cracked. Where he had stopped being Lucius Malfoy and was just the broken, ruined mess Draco had traded his future for.

He'd damn near lost Granger for that and then swore to do anything, everything to get her back and in a sick sense of cosmic irony, it's what landed him in the one place where he was farther from her than ever. He had begged her to promise him when he knew his own was just a lie.

Draco's head throbbed with a heavy pulse of blood as the door to his cell locked and sealed behind him, solid and stone.

He'd never leave this cell.

He'd never get out.

"Please make an appointment with Horkack Bonegrinder. He's over high security clients since…" The goblin trailed off then wrinkled his nose, making the wart twitch and his glasses almost fall from his face. Pushing them back over the hump on his nose, he went on, "Now, if you will excuse me, I have other clients to attend to."

"Wait!" Hermione called out, but the goblin was already shuffling off, pulling another scroll from a briefcase and heading for his next beneficiary. She followed him into the crowd, but he was a good deal shorter than her yet somehow almost twice as fast.

She glanced around, seeing strangers and people she'd known for years all mixed together. They broke around her, like water around a stone and she suddenly felt very… *alone.*

Hermione hugged the scroll to her chest as she watched the people take comfort in their friends, their families, their loved ones. But she didn't have that because the person she loved was gone. Taken. And she was burning every bridge in an effort to get him back, but… would it be enough? And if it wasn't, then what would she do?

What *could* she do?

Hermione had come back to the Lovegood's, alone, as Luna was at the Burrow and Xenophilius at the Quibbler's new offices to print a special edition with the obituaries of those passed. She sat on the couch, in the same seat as now, in silence. Too nervous to open the scroll and see what Draco had… given her. And what exactly that meant.

"You get the Manor, the estate, the whole fucking mess. The vaults too. They aren't what they once were, but don't worry, I filled them up with enough blood money to keep you comfortable for a few lifetimes."

Taking a deep breath, Hermione tried sorting her mind for the day, stacking thoughts in piles that grew larger every day, but she didn't have time to organize them properly because when she wasn't completely concentrated on Draco's appeal, she was sucked down into the cold, black hole in the bottom of what she was pretty sure was her soul. Sometimes thoughts and ideas would fall down there and Hermione would look around with no idea what she had just read or why she had even walked into a room.

She was worried that Draco had fallen down there too because anytime she was brave enough to push scattered thoughts from the back of her head where he used to lurk, she found… nothing. Like the Draco who had lived in her head last year had been taken too.

All the more reason to work harder, to keep pushing. She needed to go to the Ministry again this morning and put in another request for the transcript of a case where a witch was wrongly imprisoned in 1748 from the archives. She hoped to find some information

about the appeal process, which from what she read already had taken 13 years to fully overturn.

Hermione felt the warm air blow in from outside. June was already gone and Draco had been in Azkaban for over a month. She didn't want to wait for thirteen years for the Wizengamot to overturn their verdict.

She didn't know if Draco would *last* thirteen years. The witch in the case she wanted to research had been innocent, same as Sirius, who had been locked up for twelve years and Hermione knew what condition he had come out in.

Sirius had told them that it was the fact that he hadn't done what he was imprisoned for that kept him going all those years, but Draco was far from innocent.

Hermione looked down at her arm, at the crudely carved letter *M* that was imprinted there and ran her finger over it, remembering the gleeful gleam in Bellatrix's eye as she put the knife to her skin. Bellatrix had been driven on by more than her purist point of view, it had been madness that drove Bellatrix to the horrors she committed. Madness that had been brewed in Azkaban.

Hermione shivered despite the warmth of the day.

"Oh," Luna said dreamily and turned around, the smile finally fully forming on her face. "She's here."

Hermione's eyes went wide, but before she could ask Luna who ' *she'* was, the door burst open. Hermione jumped to her feet, snatching up the hawthorn wand and holding it out in front of her. She hadn't even meant to, but her body naturally fell into a defensive stance, ready to attack whoever—

"Are you in the habit of cursing the neighbors?" Ginny asked as she rounded the corner into the living room. "It's fine, but if you're going to be staying here I'd just like to know."

"Ginny!" Hermione breathed out, her chest sagging with relief. "Good Godric, I thought—" but she stopped, not wanting to finish her sentence. She didn't want Luna and Ginny to know that she was jumping at shadows during the day and running through nightmares of long, cold corridors at night.

Luna moved around Hermione and greeted Ginny by lifting herself up on her toes to kiss her girlfriend. Hermione felt something sharp right through her middle at the sight of them, together. She was a little embarrassed that she hadn't picked up on it earlier, but once she saw them together after the battle, how they consoled each other and how they supported each other… and she had been all alone, just like she was now.

Hermione stood there, with her arms at her sides, as they held each other in theirs.

Everything around her was chaos, utter pandemonium. Some people were cheering, others were shouting obscenities. Hermione stood there, not willing to accept what had just happened, hands red in the middle of a courtroom that had sentenced a man who didn't deserve it to a life in prison. Her hands were still clasped tight and felt something digging into the burn mark on her palm.

She opened up her hand to see Draco's Malfoy ring sitting there, covered in his blood. Hermione looked around at Wizengamot who had made up their minds before they even walked in this morning, and closed her hand and her eyes as she swallowed down her tears. She was so… so angry. At the judges, at the people in the courtroom. At Draco and… most of all at herself. For thinking… for trusting that… that things would be different this time.

When she opened her eyes back up, she wasn't crying anymore, but her hand stayed balled in a fist.

There was a window.

He would have been surprised about this fact if he could really feel anything but It was as if he had gone numb, inside and out and Draco just stood there, the icy wind biting at the exposed skin on his face. The door creaked then slammed shut behind him and Draco's lungs stopped working. He had the thought to breathe, to inhale, but the muscles in his chest didn't respond.

He wondered if this is what a dead body felt like.

Draco looked at the window. At the rusted bars, crusted with frost and salt. This whole place was like that. They had marched him through the prison gate and bolted it behind him as soon as he was through. He was shackled at his ankles and wrists and guarded by Aurors on either side of him. Even if he could somehow get away from them and out of the chains, there was nowhere else for him to go. He was on an island and the boat they had taken here was guided by magic.

And Draco couldn't do magic anymore.

"Hermione?" he asked again as they pulled him back. Now Draco's voice was taunt, strained. Hermione looked up at him with too much she wanted to say and not enough time to do it.

He was already moving backwards, leaving her. Again.

The blood and tears made their hands slip apart, but Draco was still grasping for her as they locked the chains around his wrists again.

It wasn't until Hermione saw them push Draco back into the cage that she was able to narrow in on one single thought which was, *"NO!"*

Draco stilled so quickly it was as if he had been turned to stone. He just looked at her, not even breathing, as lightning struck in his eyes. Then was cursing, grabbing onto the bars and shaking them despite the fact that angry white hot sparks shot out around his hand.

"HERMIONE!" Draco shouted her name, the pain evident in his voice.

Hermione watched in horror as the cage began to sink back down through the floor. "NO!" She pushed past a few people, trying to make it out of the stands and… and she didn't know. But it didn't matter. All that mattered was getting to Draco.

"Please!" he called up at her when all that was visible was the white blond hair on top of his head. "Wait for me! I'll come this time, I swear! I swear it, Hermione!"

Hermione felt like it was thundering in her head, this couldn't be happening. This couldn't be real. Any moment she would wake up and find this was all one of her terrible nightmares and turn over and Draco would be right there and holding her and…

Gears cranked loudly as the cage began to lower down into the floor. "PROMISE ME!" Draco shouted, blood flying from his lips. "HERMIONE!"

The cage disappeared and the floor closed over the opening, but Draco's voice could still be heard as he descended lower. It echoed around them as Kingsley passed down the final verdict of the Wizengamont. They didn't even deliberate. They didn't have to. Everyone had known how this would end, everyone but her and her foolish, hopeful heart.

"For his crimes, Draco Lucius Malfoy has been sentenced," Kinglsey said in his deep voice and Hermione felt her legs begin to shake, "to Azkaban Prison—"

"No!" Hermione cried out, knowing it was useless, but unable to stop herself.

"Where he will remain," Kingsley went on and Hermione held her breath as she waited to hear just how long she would have to be separated from Draco. "For the remainder of his days," Kingsley finished.

Ginny's brows pulled together, causing a crease to form in between her eyes when she looked over at Hermione. "That's not your wand."

"Oh." Hermione looked down at it. "I know. I mean, mine… mine snapped and…" She didn't know why she was finding it so hard to say what had happened, but…

Ginny nodded forward with her chin, making the light catch her hazel eyes in a strange way. "Whose is it?"

Hermione glanced down at Draco's will and gripped the hawthorn wand tighter. "It's mine now."

"Hmm."

Hermione held Ginny's gaze until Luna spoke, pulling her attention away. "Come see the dirigible plums! Daddy doesn't have much time for gardening anymore since the Quibbler has picked up, but they have been doing even better in his absence. They nearly reach my bedroom window now!"

Ginny's expression flickered and softened and she nodded, letting Luna lead her over to the window.

"See up there? That's my window," Luna explained, pointing at the second-and-a-half-story which Hermione still found odd that a house had a half-story even if it was a magical home, but maybe that was just part of its charm.

It certainly was working on Ginny who wiggled her eyebrows and said, "I know."

She and Luna fell into a small fit of giggles and Hermione felt the tension blow away out the open window, causing a few of the larger plums to bump into one another.

"I can…" Hermione cleared her throat a little. "I can give you two some space."

"What? No!" Luna shook her head. "Don't be silly, Hermione."

"Yeah," Ginny chimed in. "You weren't anywhere to be found after…" The funeral. Hermione felt the sharp stabbing in her middle again. "And you didn't come to the Burrow last night."

Hermione expected her to look upset, angry even, but instead Ginny looked… sad. "You were missed."

"I—" She didn't know what to say and with each passing second, it became harder and harder to force herself to answer.

"Ginny, it's okay if Hermione didn't feel like visiting. We are all processing in our own way."

Hermione had never been so thankful for Luna. She wanted to tell her how grateful she was for everything, for sitting quietly with her, for offering her a place to stay, and

for sticking up for her now, but all Hermione found that she was able to do was give another one of those half smiles again, hoping it was enough.

"It's okay, really," Hermione assured them. "Anyway I have to travel to London again today." She gathered up the scroll and a few other papers. "And I know you two have to start on your planning and packing."

"Ooh, yes!" Luna's light eyes brightened. "It isn't long now and we will be in the beautiful jungles of Thailand. I simply can't wait."

Hermione was happy for her friends, she really was. They made it through the war and instead of just surviving, they were thriving. Ginny and Luna had planned a trip starting in Thailand to explore the world and search for a variety of creatures, all of whom Hermione was pretty sure were mythical, but… if it made them happy, then she was all for it.

Who was she to judge?

"Do you really have to go so soon?" Ginny asked. "I mean… I just got here. What are you in a rush for?"

Hermione took a breath, tried to smile and nodded. "I can stay for a bit."

Ginny visibly relaxed and sat down. Luna sighed as she slotted in next to her and Hermione took a seat in a chair across from them, still holding onto the scroll tightly, needing to take out some of her nervous energy somehow.

"How… How was last night?" Hermione asked, trying to break the ice.

Ginny laid her head back on the couch Hermione had been using as a bed for the last week and a half. "Frustrating."

Hermione glanced at Luna; she hadn't said anything like that when she got back last night.

"I told you," Luna said calmly as she sat beside Ginny, "Ron isn't actually upset with you. He's upset at everything that's happened."

Hermione shifted her weight and picked at her fingers, not knowing what to say.

"He doesn't have to take it out on me!" Ginny said angrily. "I… I miss Harry too."

Hermione stopped moving and looked up to see Ginny staring down at the floor and Luna rubbing her back. "We all do, Gin Blossom."

Ginny smiled at Luna, her girlfriend, with unshed tears in her hazel eyes.

They shared a soft, but sweet kiss and Hermione felt her emotions teetering, threatening to spill down from the tall stacks she had piled them all in. It was too much. The mention of Harry, of Ron, getting to see how happy Ginny and Luna were together and then the seeping guilt at how… *envious* she was of them.

"Hermione," Draco said her name like a prayer and she felt a sharp piece of her heart twist and dig inside her. In one long stride he was in front of her, his hands grabbing her face, and his mouth crashing into hers, kissing her roughly. She could taste the sharp tang of his blood in her mouth and before she knew what was happening, she was already kissing him back. He pulled back from her, breathing heavily as he said, "You know I didn't mean it."

Hermione tried to shake her head, tried to pull away from him, but Draco held on, not letting her go. "Draco…" She reached up to pull his hands from her face, but Draco just took the opportunity to take both her hands in his, holding tight.

"No, no," he repeated, taking a second to glance over his shoulder as more guards moved in closer. When he turned back around, he lifted her hands up and kissed them, blood flowing freely over her fingers. "I love you. You know that. I *love* you. But this… this was useless. They were never going to let me go."

So he made it worse?! What sort of Pureblood logic was that?

"Draco!" Hermione cried out as she saw the head guard, Thackery, was heading for him again. Draco threw an elbow back, catching him in the throat and Thackery dropped his wand, stumbling backwards as he wheezed.

Draco's hand was back around hers, pulling them up to his face again. Hermione watched aghast as blood dripped off of his chin and onto their clasped hands.

"They can't keep me from you. Nothing will." Draco dipped his head to look into her eyes, a lock of silver blond hair falling in between his eyes. "We're going to be together. Just… Wait for me. Don't run this time. Please, Sweetheart…" More guards were closing in and Hermione's heart was racing, breaking more with each beat. "Wait for me. I'll come back for you. I promise."

She wanted to answer him, tell him… but she didn't know what to say. She didn't… She didn't… Her throat closed up, too thick to let anything pass through so all Hermione had for Draco were the silent tears running down her cheeks, mixing with his blood and pooling in her palms.

"Promise me." His voice was that deep commanding one and she felt her mouth open, but no words came out. "Hermione?" Guards grabbed onto his arms and Draco hissed as they touched the burned one. Hermione stared up at Draco, thoughts rushing through her head too quickly for her to grab one and voice it. They were pulling him back, but he was still holding onto her.

whatever he had to try and save her, but… did he really mean it? That he had chosen the wrong side? That Harry had… died for nothing?

Her wounds were still fresh so when they ripped back open, they hurt even more. Because this time, it was Draco who had done it. Made her hurt. Again. Hermione's heart stuttered and stopped in her chest, the pressure building making it crack.

"Draco…" she said softly, but he couldn't hear it over the commotion around them.

Draco's lip curled back, baring his teeth dangerously. He reached down and ripped the gauze from his arm and lifted it up to show the burned and scarred flesh where his mark used to be. "I'd pledge my loyalty to The Dark Lord all over again," his voice was low and cold in a sickeningly familiar way, "just to watch him destroy you—*one at a fucking time."*

"Draco!" Hermione cried out and he turned sharply towards her. How *dare* he say that? After she had chosen to remove his mark, to *save* him, instead of… instead of Harry. She could have helped him, dueled Voldemort, done… *something* . But instead she had stayed with Draco. Hermione had *chosen* him.

She had to live with that decision, and she could, as long as it meant that… she got to *keep him,* her Draco. But hearing him say he would do it all again, after all she had given up, after all she had lost…

Hermione felt her heart breaking up inside her. "Please, Don't… *do* this."

The hardness leached from his face and his eyes turned a misty, rain grey. She watched his chest rise and fall heavily. "I already have."

"Guards! Secure him!" Kingley shouted and they ran forward.

Hermione screamed as Draco dodged one spell only to have the other hit him on his wounded shoulder, slamming him face first into the bars of the cage, causing them to spark at the interaction. He snarled as he turned back around, blood running down his face and dripping onto his chest.

Hermione was on her feet. She didn't know how or when, but all she knew was that she had to do *something.* She couldn't just sit there and let this happen, but… like Draco had said, it already had. The heaviness in her chest kept her stuck in place.

Draco rounded on the guards, flinging the cage open and trapping one behind the door against the bars. They lit up in bright, blue curls of magic, making the guard's body seize and shake. The second guard held out his wand and Draco grabbed his wrist, twisting it and causing the spell to fire into the crowd. People screamed and ran out of the way, but a few were hit and collapsed in their seats.

She should have been able to sit with Draco, taking comfort in him so that she didn't fall apart. Hermione gripped the scroll tighter in her hands.

"Ron is being a right prick about everything," Ginny went on. "He was the one who encouraged Harry to… stay away from me and now thinks me not being there for him somehow drove him…" She sighed heavily and threw herself against the back of the couch. "I don't even know! He broke up with me so how could I have possibly cheated on him?!"

Hermione stifled a gasp.

"Harry didn't think that," Luna reassured her. "When I told him… He said he was glad you were happy. He told me I was very lucky to be with you, but he never thought you betrayed him."

Hermione bit her lip, remembering their conversation on the shore. Harry had been upset, but not angry, not resentful. He was glad that Ginny had found a way to be happy. And he had told Hermione he wanted her to be happy too, that one of them should be at least. But now Harry was gone and Hermione was probably the furthest from happy she had ever been.

"Everything is already hard enough. I just don't want to deal with him on top of..." Ginny pushed her hands into her hair.

"You can stay here for a couple days if you want," Luna offered brightly. "It is only a few days before we leave and Dad won't mind. He loves you and anyway, he's so busy with the Quibbler lately because no one trusts the Prophet anymore."

Ginny snorted. "With good reason."

Hermione couldn't help it, she smiled a little at that and it caught Ginny's eye who slowly smiled back. "Only took them what, four years and one evil overlord to realize the Prophet only prints what the Ministry approves?"

"They've taken Rita Skeeter back on," Hermione offered as an olive branch.

"No!" Ginny exclaimed and Hermione nodded, feeling a bit of their old camaraderie again.

"Daddy calls it the Profit," Luna giggled. "Get it? *Profit?"* She began to laugh madly.

Ginny caught Hermione's eye again and laughed so hard she snorted. Hermione covered her mouth to stifle her own, but it came out anyway.

It slowly died down, Luna's lasted the longest and Hermione's cheeks hurt from smiling when Ginny grabbed Luna's hand and beamed at her. "I love you so much, Moonbeam."

Luna's face lit up and Hermione could tell how come Ginny had chosen that particular name for her. Her blue eyes sparkled like stars and she looked radiant as she beamed back at Ginny.

Hermione's heart swelled, then ached from disuse. Goodness, she missed Draco. Her thoughts circled back to him, as they always did. She needed to get back to work.

Hermione looked at a clock on the mantle to check the time. It was upside down and one hand was moving backwards while the other swirled and spun in seemingly random movements. It was entirely unhelpful.

"Oh, look at the time!" Hermione said a little louder than necessary. "I really have to get going."

"Going? Where?" Luna blinked dreamily up at her.

"Uhm, the Ministry," Hermione looked away from them, gathered up her bag and stuffed a few papers and the still-bound scroll into it.

"What for?" Ginny asked.

This was what she was hoping not to discuss with Ginny.

"A request from the archives for a court transcript."

"What for?" Ginny asked more firmly and when Hermione had fastened her bag closed and turned around, Ginny was already standing.

Hermione lifted her chin. "Because I need it."

She knew Ginny knew. She wasn't trying to hide her efforts to free Draco, but she wasn't sure how Ginny felt about it. No, that wasn't true. Hermione knew *exactly* how Ginny felt about it. She had lost a brother in the war, and would have lost another if Draco had his way. It wasn't easy to forgive someone who had fought for the other side, even if Draco had done it for his own reasons.

Maybe Hermione had been too quick to think that Ginny had forgiven her too.

"Don't tell me you're still trying to get that motherfucker's sentence—"

"Don't." Luna was on her feet, her hand on Ginny's shoulder.

Ginny's mouth dropped open. "Luna, you know better than most what that asshole has done!" A flush of red was creepy up Ginny's neck and into her face. The resemblance between her and Ron was unmistakable and Hermione felt warring emotions inside her chest.

"Yes," Luna's voice seemed a bit more rooted in reality. "I do." Her hand dropped from Ginny's shoulder. "I was in his cellar for weeks. I saw how Draco acted as a Death Eater. I saw what he did." She stepped closer to Ginny, looking up at her. "And I saw what he could have done and didn't do. More than that, I saw why."

"I'm sorry that Potter died." Draco dropped his eyes for a moment, but then he lifted them heavily back up and they were as hard as granite and as sharp as steel. Oh no. "He sacrificed himself to give all of you a chance to build a better world and… everyone here just shat all over that."

Oh.

Oh… *God…*

Draco took a heavy step forward towards the Wizangamot who, even on their raised dais, pulled back as Draco's boots thudded in the silent room.

"If I could go back, I'd tell Potter to fuck off and leave you all to the Dark Lord," he snarled and gasp and shouts of outrage broke out. "You deserve it! I wish he'd come back again and finish what he fucking started!"

Hermione's hand shot up to cover her mouth, but what she really wanted was to cover her ears. She didn't want to hear this. She knew Draco didn't mean it, that he was just… angry and upset, but… God, how could he say those things?!

Draco's lip curled back, baring his teeth dangerously. "I'd hunt each of you down for him, and this time, I'd do it *for fun."*

The crowd were on their feet and shouting down at him while Draco just sneered back at his victims and their families. Someone threw a shoe down at him. It slid to a stop in front of him and Draco spat on it, causing fresh outrage to break out.

Kingsley was commanding the guards, ordering them to create a protective barrier around Draco as several people surged forward. Hermione looked around at the angry faces and shaking fists. Her breath hitched in her chest as one of the guards pushed Dean Thomas back roughly.

Hermione had never been happier that they had not allowed wands in the courtroom. It had been for 'security reasons' and she had thought them overly cautious, but seeing Draco's reaction… They might have been right.

Hermione sat stunned. Why… *How* could he say that? Everything they had done, everything they had fought for… he would… give it up…? *No…* Not… not *her* Draco. But… it was.

He was glaring up at his judges, eyes shining like sharpened silver, just like they had in her dreams where he had been her Death Eater. She had taken his mark off, but… he was still the same man he had always been. She knew Draco hadn't believed the Order could win at first, but she thought that had changed. She thought *he* had changed…

She had forgiven him so many times and was willing to do it again; for taking Harry into the forest, for whatever had happened between him and Ron, for telling Voldemort

"Don't worry," Draco drawled. "I don't bite. At least not the likes of *you.*" His eyes flicked to Hermione's and she was hit with the full weight of his gaze. A smirk slipped onto his face. "Isn't that right, kitten?"

Oh, good Godric! Hermione's eyes went wide and Draco's smirk split wider, showing off a flash of his white teeth. The bubbles inside her inflated and rose, making her almost lightheaded. This… this was *wrong,* but… at least he wasn't avoiding her.

"Mr. Malfoy!" Kingsley said sharply as the chains dropped from Draco's wrists and ankles. Draco let out a deep sigh and rubbed the burn scars on his left wrist. Hermione felt a few of the bubbles burst with sick pops of guilt. "Those were removed for you to show the proper respect and if you fail—"

"Yes, I know. Straight to jail," Draco said drolly. He groaned as he stretched and stood up.

Wow. Had… had he always been *that* tall? Hermione felt her face heat as Draco dipped his head to keep it from hitting the top of the cage as he stepped out. He was… yeah… *very* tall. Even now, dirty and disheveled, his presence commanded the room and Hermione wondered if Kinglsey *had* made a mistake letting him out of the cage. There was just something about him… and it was a second too late that Hermione realized he was holding himself the way he normally did when she was on her knees for him.

Her eyes went wide and she gripped the ring in her hand a little harder, until it hurt.

Draco looked at her for a moment, the corners of lips twitching upward, as if he knew exactly what she was thinking just by the way she was biting her lip and… maybe he did.

His eyes softened on hers and Hermione couldn't help but breathe out and sink down a little in her seat as if her insides were melting. His expression slightly tightened into something Hermione could only think was… remorse. Real and true. It was something she had only seen a few times and never in front of others.

Hermione leaned forward again. Something was wrong.

Then as suddenly as it appeared on Draco's face, it was gone and back to its bored, aristocratic expression as he addressed Kingsley and the Wizengamot.

"I wanted to say," he took a deep breath, "that I am sorry."

Hermione's heart skipped a beat. *Oh my.*

"I'm sorry that I didn't do more. I'm sorry that I… chose the wrong side." He gave a one shouldered shrug.

She couldn't believe it. If she wasn't watching him with rapt attention right now, Hermione would have sworn it was some sort of enchantment and not Draco saying these words.

Hermione could feel their eyes on her. She didn't want to hear this. She didn't want to listen to other people's opinions on Draco when they weren't the ones who could decide whether he could come… home or not.

Home… As kind as Luna had been to let her stay here, it wasn't her home and if her being here was going to cause problems between Luna and Ginny, she didn't want to stay.

Luna had been through enough. Ginny had been through enough and… Harry had wanted them to be happy. The least she could do was not get in the way of that.

"Say your goodbyes and then we'll go."

That's what she needed to do. Hermione pulled her bag over her shoulder. "It's fine, Luna. I'll talk to you later," she mumbled as she walked past them. She'd come back, thank Luna for… everything, and then get out of her way. Luna needed to focus on her life and the good things in it and Hermione needed to focus on… research and working.

Like she always had. It was the one part of her life that didn't feel like it was spinning away in the hectic hurricane that she spent most of her time lost in.

Before Hermione opened the door, she turned back and took a deep breath. "I'm glad I got to see you, Ginny. Really, I am."

Ginny looked shocked for a moment, then… nodded, her coppery hair catching the light. "Me too."

Hermione pushed the scroll into her bag, then headed out the door.

She didn't know where else to go so she came here. It looked mostly the same, magnificent in its dark glory, but there was a feel to it, as soon as she crossed the threshold it hit her like wall. This place had been touched, no, more than touched, it had been *infected* by dark magic.

Hermione lit the tip of Draco's wand and held it out before her as she entered Malfoy Manor once again.

She hadn't spent much time in the rest of the Manor, but when she had, Hermione committed to memory each step, memorizing every turn and twist so that if she broke

out, she would be able to make her way out of the house. It felt strange, turning the map in her mind backwards and trying to find her way back to Draco's room.

Hermione breached the top of the stairs and bit her lip.

Their room.

Because this… all of this… was hers now. Or at least, under her care.

She had finally opened the scroll from the funeral after she had spent close to fourteen hours buried in the Ministry archives. Her eyes were dry and scratchy, but had widened when she read what was written there. She read it through three times, making sure it wasn't sleep deprivation making her think this was… real.

Draco had told her he changed his will, but she hadn't really believed it until she read it in black ink and saw the seal of his ring pressed into the wax at the bottom of the scroll. He hadn't just left her enough gold to live a comfortable life like he claimed, he left her *everything*.

Hermione looked over the figures listed, reckoning the accounts in the *seven* vaults the Malfoys owned. This is what was left after Draco claimed his father liquidated them? Not to mention the Manor, the estate it was located on and… a property in France attributed to some inheritance through the Black family line, now that Bellatrix was gone.

It was… a lot. And yet it was nothing to her. She'd trade it all just to see Draco one more time.

Hermione sat quietly for a while as the Ministry archives slowly emptied. She turned the Malfoy signet rings over in her fingers, tracing the silver M again and again as her mind accepted and processed what this all meant.

She wasn't sure exactly how much time passed when she finally had the idea, no, the *courage* to act on the idea she had as soon as she read Draco's will the first time—to go to Malfoy Manor and…

And just be there. Because if she couldn't be with Draco then that was the next best option, wasn't it?

Anyway, Ginny was staying at Luna's tonight, maybe even longer, and Hermione didn't want to be in their way. As much as she was grateful for being able to stay with Luna, she felt like she needed some time on her own and… and Draco had made sure she didn't have any other home to go back to. Only his.

Hermione turned the corner and saw a familiar hallway. A shiver ran down her spine as she started forward. She had been here dozens of times, but almost always in her dreams, running, following the sound of Draco screaming in pain and terror. Then she

Hermione sat down, her head spinning and it was then that she noticed she wasn't breathing. Sucking in a few lungfuls of air, she felt her chest filling with a thousand different emotions, none of them staying long enough for her to process what they really were. And honestly, she wasn't sure if she wanted to know.

She watched as the Wizangamot spoke quietly amongst themselves. Several of them were nodding their heads or murmuring things like, *"Whole family is full of Death Eaters,"* and *"Abraxas was one of the Dark Lord's* ***first*** *followers,"* then finally, *"He is Lucius' son."*

"I'm no one's fucking son," Draco glowered up at his judges, addressing them for the first time since disrespectfully stating his name at the start of the hearing.

Kingsley tapped his wand on his podium, commanding the room back into order. "Draco Malfoy, you do have the right to address the Wizengamot if you so choose. If you elect to do this, you will do it with the propriety and candor in which their positions demand."

Draco's lips twisted into something that was not quite a smirk and not quite a sneer. Hermione felt something fall deep inside her as Draco began to rise. His chains clattered against each other and he stood a little stooped over, the cage he was already locked in not quite tall enough for him to stand completely. Even so, he looked every bit the Malfoy heir he had been raised to be.

Hermione had no idea if that was a good or a bad thing, at least, until Draco opened his mouth.

"This cage is a bit… small for me and I'd like to stand for this." Draco addressed Kinglsey directly. "After all, this… esteemed court demands my respect, does it not?"

Hermione felt bubbles rise up in her at the sound of Draco's smooth, deep tone. She wasn't sure if she was just nervous or… something else that was completely inappropriate to feel in the middle of a courtroom, but seeing Draco so calm and collected in the face of adversity was… Goodness. She needed to get a hold of herself.

Hermione crossed her legs and folded her hands in her lap, pressing them down. Hard.

Draco lifted his hands palms up, displaying the chains hanging down from his wrists. "You've won the war. What are you afraid of, Shacklebolt?"

Hermione twisted the Malfoy ring in her fingers, trying to expel a little bit of the anxious energy building up in her. Kingsley pursed his lips for a few tense moments then nodded to two guards who approached the cage cautiously.

Draco cracked his neck as they began to charm the locks to open. He stretched out a leg, sliding his heavy combat boot close to one of the guards who promptly fumbled and dropped his wand.

She hadn't wanted to argue with Ronald today, but right now she didn't have a choice.

"He saved me," Hermione said, her voice soft but dangerous. "Draco dueled against Bellatrix Lestrange when she attacked me," she said a little louder. "He didn't care that I was a Muggleborn—"

"Only because he couldn't prove you were one of them!" Ron slammed a weathered, leather bound volume on the banister in front of him. Hermione recognized it immediately; it was Draco's copy of *The Sacred Twenty Eight*. What… what was it doing here?

Ron flipped quickly to the back where pages on pages were filled with handwritten notes.

"Malfoy was trying to connect your family to one of theirs." He held the book up. "He wasn't trying to save a Muggleborn, he was trying to give you a place in *his* world, the one he and Voldemort were trying to make!"

The lion in Hermione's chest growled and roared, drowning out the murmuring and Kingsley's attempt to get the courtroom under control again. "Draco doesn't care about blood purity! He wanted to leave that world behind because he didn't believe in it anymore!"

"No?" Ron thumbed through the pages. "Malfoy wrote down all the fucked up shit his Death Eater friends did in here and do you know what he wrote by his name?"

Hermione's legs felt like they were turning to stone. No. No no no.

Ron turned the book around and there, in Draco's ornate script was a single word.

"Blood Traitor," Draco answered, venom soaking in those two words and the room fell into a hushed silence.

Ron glared hard at him. "Yeah. Blood Traitor. Now why would that be a crime worthy of listing in your little book? Oh that's right… because to *you* and *your kind* , there's nothing worse you can be."

Hermione felt like someone was squeezing her heart tighter and tighter until it felt like it was going to burst. Draco didn't say anything, he just hung his head, staring in the same direction he had done most of the day.

"Draco Malfoy never *changed,"* Ron snapped the book shut. "And he never will. It's in his *blood."*

"ENOUGH!" Kingsley bellowed. "Anyone speaking out of turn will be removed from the courtroom and held until their own hearing where they will be charged with contempt of court!"

had seen it in real time, Draco being tortured, the pain flashing through his silver eyes as he called out her name…

Trying not to think about it, Hermione hurried forward, coming to the two large double doors that led to Draco's quarters.

They were open.

Pushing one a little farther, Hermione walked in and froze. It was mostly the same as she remembered, except that books had been knocked down from the shelves and the drawers to Draco's desk were hanging open. She looked at the corner and flashes of Lucius Malfoy hitting Draco with his cane burned the backs of her eyes. She had rushed forward, out of the bedroom, not thinking about anything but the fact that Draco had been lying on the ground, blood seeping into his white blond hair.

Hermione closed her eyes, refusing to let the memories of this place take over her. She picked her way carefully through the room. Draco's hand of glory was lying on the floor and she picked it up, placing it on his desk. She tried not to think about how Draco had shoved her against this very desk and whispered terrible, wonderful things he wanted to do to her. Or how she had sat on the floor beside him while he worked, her chains attached to his wrist and came up with her own terrible ideas she had never dared to whisper out loud.

Not out of fear of them, but out of fear of loving them if she did.

Hermione turned away and faced the bedroom door. The knob was just the same, goblin wrought iron, enchanted to open only under a specific spell, but as she tapped it with the tip of her wand, it swung open. It had never been locked back since they left.

She felt anxiety churning inside her as she walked back into the room she had spent months in as a prisoner.

Even torn apart, it had to be nicer than anywhere she had lived before and certainly better than whatever cell Draco was currently sitting in. The tapestry on the walls was torn. The wardrobe flung open and the mirror shattered on the ground into thousands of sparkling silver pieces. One of the windows had been broken and the curtains were waving slowly at her as the nighttime air whipped through the room. There was plenty of damage, but what caught her eye most was also the thing that made her heart thud so hard it hurt.

The chaise, the one Draco had conjured in the Room of Requirement, the one that she had refused to sit on until the fateful night she drank Draco's stash and let him… let him back in again, was broken nearly in half.

The stuffing was pulled out and the soft velvet charred from whatever spell had hit it and cracked the beautiful piece of furniture in two. Hermione trailed her fingers over it, remembering how it felt when it was whole and unbroken.

Her throat ached around the lump that was growing in it. She wasn't sure what she expected when she had come back here, but… it still hurt to see a tangible piece of her life with Draco so carelessly ruined.

Her whole body hurt. Every muscle ached from holding in the grief and sadness and sheer agony she had been in for… for *so long*. All she wanted to do was have someone hold her, tell her it was alright and they were going to make it better. That she was cared for and… and loved. That she wasn't alone. That she wouldn't spend the rest of her life feeling like she had been broken in half and her heart ripped out of her chest.

She turned away from the chaise, not wanting to see it like that. And there was no one here to see her fall apart either.

Hermione didn't put much effort behind the thought, just letting her body take the action it needed as she climbed into Draco's bed. Curling up under the ripped covers, Hermione grabbed the pillow from his side of the bed and buried her face in it. Faintly, she could smell the creamy parchment of his skin and for a moment, it felt almost like he was there with her.

Wrapping his arms around her, letting her bury her face against his chest, and whispering filthy promises mixed with the sweetest devotions in her ear. Gasping, Hermione sat up, staring into the darkness around her. The grand house was silent around her, oppressively so, but somehow, it wasn't enough.

Hermione flicked Draco's wand and the door locked, the complicated mechanism sliding into place. She bit her lip, then made up her mind and tapped it again.

The iron bars shot up from the base of the bed, caging her in.

How many times had she laid here, in Draco's bed, wishing she could reach out and touch him, that she could pull him to her, on top of her, and forget *everything* until it was just him and her, like it should be.

If she could go back now, would she do it any differently?

Tonight, she could. Hermione blinked in the darkness and slowly waved Draco's wand over herself. Her clothes faded until all that was left was the slip of lace dress she had been wearing the last time she was here. A shiver passed through her, which did nothing to cool her heated skin.

It had been so long, so *incredibly* long since she had enough energy to feel any sort of sexual desire, besides, thoughts of Draco were usually followed up with overwhelming

And she wasn't sure if this would make a difference, based on looks she was receiving from the gathered people. They had all made up their minds about Draco already, they probably had before they even came in the courtroom this morning and almost a full day of hearing some of the worst things Draco had ever done had only solidified that position in their minds.

But Hermione *knew* he was different, *knew* he had changed. He had helped the Order, he had helped Harry! And he had… he had *saved her*. In more ways than one. Godric knew where she would be right now if it wasn't for him so she wasn't going to let him go anywhere she couldn't reach him. Where she couldn't be with him. *Love him.*

This wasn't over until *she* said it was. And neither was this trial.

"Who here can say they wouldn't do something unforgivable to save the ones they love?"

Hermione's gaze snagged on Ron who was sitting with hunched shoulders, his hands balled into fists at his sides. She tore her eyes from him, moving on to address the room as a whole.

"Plenty of you, I suppose," Hermione glared accusingly at the mass of people squeezed into the courtroom. "I see lots of faces I never saw fighting in the battle here today, yet you find it so easy to pass judgment on someone who *did* stand up against Lord Voldemort!"

"Miss Granger—" Kingsley's deep voice was calm as he said her name, but Hermione waved him off.

"He destroyed a horcrux. He freed Muggleborns from the Ministry . He fought against Voldemort, and… and," Hermione implored. "Draco *changed—"*

"And was that before or after he tried to kill me?"

Hermione's head shot in Ron's direction once more. His shoulders were still tense and a flush of red was creeping up his neck from under the collar of his Auror uniform. The courtroom was buzzing with voices, people moving and shifting in their seats to speak to one another and not even bothering to whisper anymore, but all Hermione could focus on were Ron's eyes burning into her like two blue flames.

"Or had you forgotten about that, Hermione?" Ron huffed. "He left me *to die!* He armed a Death Eater when I asked him to help me!" Hermione stood frozen to the spot, only her eyes moved, darting over to Draco who looked bored by the outburst, then back to Ron. Ron shook his head, coppery hair shining in the low light of the courtroom. "I was down there with him when the Muggleborns were set free and let me tell you, the only person Malfoy was trying to save was himself."

Hermione stared straight ahead. "Ronald and I aren't speaking." It was the nicest way she could put it.

"Oh," Neville said softly. "I—I'm sorry."

"It's okay." Hermione gave him a wan smile. "You couldn't have known. I haven't been around much."

They stood in silence for a moment, not needing to talk, and just offering one another a sense of companionship. A cool autumn breeze swept down Diagon Alley, blowing a few of Hermione's caramel colored curls across her face. She pulled her arms around herself, for warmth, but also for comfort.

"Look, erm," Neville rubbed the back of his neck again, then pulled his hand back down, sticking a thumb out behind him, "I was actually on my way to see him and he's asked about you a couple of times. Would you want to… come say hi?"

It was then she noticed his thumb was pointing backwards towards the darkened side street of Knockturn Alley. Hermione bit her lip for a moment, then lifted her chin defiantly. "Actually, I'd love to see Blaise. It's been far too long."

Hermione didn't really know how she expected to find Blaise Zabini, but stretched out on a velvet booth with a girl on either side of him wasn't what she had in mind. He was supposed to be one of the young, leading Healers at St. Mungo's and here he was, in the middle of the day, in a darkened club in Knockturn Alley with bass music loud enough that she was pretty sure it was going to cause damage if she stayed in here for an extended period of time. Not to mention he was drinking something that was a toxic shade of green and so strong she could smell its sweet cloying taste from where she stood.

She stood at Neville's side and waited until Blaise looked up from under impossibly long lashes. "Long—" he started and then stopped suddenly when his eyes landed on Hermione. She placed her hands on her hips. "Granger."

Her eyes narrowed at the use of her last name, or maybe, it was at the tug on her heartstrings at the sound of it again. "What the bloody hell are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same thing!" Hermione shouted over the thudding music.

Blaise tossed his drink back, wincing before licking his lips. "It's my day off."

"And you're spending it so productively," she quipped.

He gave her a strange smile, one she wasn't sure of. "I could be doing worse things."

"You owe me gold, Zabini," Neville chimed in and Blaise's eyes cut over to him, staying there for a few long seconds before he sighed, sat up, and took his arms from around the girls.

"Ten minutes," he stated loudly and Hermione wasn't sure if he was talking to the girls or her and Neville. Either way the girls shuffled off and Blaise motioned to the seats across from him. Hesitantly, Hermione sat down. As soon as she did, she saw Blaise raise his wand up, pointing it directly at her.

She had hers out in a second, but before she could even get a good grip on it, Blaise's mouth moved and the oppressive music that had just been vibrating through her was turned down to a manageable level. He swiveled his arm and did the same to Neville, who tensed as the wand was aimed at him, but had clearly known what was coming because he relaxed the moment after.

Blaise tucked his wand back into his jacket. "I've healed you, Granger, and you still don't trust me?" he said, shaking his head and making a tutting noise with his tongue.

Hermione sat Draco's wand in her lap, but didn't put it away. "You also left me chained to a bed," she snapped and Blaise had the good sense to break eye contact at that. She watched his nostril flare and took mercy on him. "And I've told you," her voice softened a little, "to call me Hermione."

"He did *what?"* Neville asked, his voice rising for the first time.

"It wasn't him, not really," Hermione explained. "It was…" Goodness, was it ever going to get easier talking about this? "Draco. And Blaise did heal me, and did a pretty good job of it too."

Neville looked the Slytherin over warily, but accepted Hermione's answer.

"Is that why you're here?" Blaise asked as he leaned forward. The smooth movement reminded Hermione of a large cat. "To talk about Draco?"

"No." Hermione wasn't exactly sure why she was here other than… than Blaise was someone she felt like she could talk to. "Although I would like to know why you didn't speak up for your best friend when he was on trial."

Blaise raised up a finger. "Technically it was a hearing."

"We both know what that really was," she argued back. If only she had known sooner. "And he could have used your help."

Blaise sighed. "No, he couldn't have." He leaned back against the plush booth. "What could I have told them? That he was fighting werewolves along with employing them? That he had you held prisoner in his bedroom for months?" Neville made a noise of discomfort in his throat. "That he was cursing his arm so much that he might as well cut the bloody thing off for all the damage he was doing to it? And yes, Draco was my friend, but Theo was my friend too. I don't have to choose sides, Hermione, we aren't at war anymore."

Hermione opened her mouth then closed it. She supposed there really was no explanation for the things Draco had done other than… he had done them for her. Blaise might have been able to speak to his self-destructive habits, but the way that crowd had been, they probably would have cheered at that. Finally, she settled on asking, "How bad was his arm?"

Blaise balanced a small metal grate on top of his glass and summoned a sugar cube from the table to rest on it. He looked up at Hermione before he spoke. "You saw how bad it got. I'm surprised the thing still even *moves."*

Godric that must have… Hermione felt her blood still then rush into her head so quickly it made her dizzy. She had handed Draco the elder wand and he hadn't used it against the Aurors after the battle. Even when he had disarmed the guards in the courtroom, Draco hadn't tried to use their wands to free himself. Draco had never tried to use magic because… because he *couldn't.* Not anymore.

Not since he *crucio'd* himself to save her.

Draco had given up his magic, *had broken it,* for her.

She felt like her heart was breaking all over again.

Blaise poured a bright green liquid over the sugar cube, letting it dissolve, before he pushed it across the table to her. "There's nothing any of us could have done."

"Not then, but… maybe now," Hermione said breathlessly. She was surprised the words even came out with the way her chest was collapsing on top of itself.

Blaise's brows pulled slightly. "What do you mean?"

Hermione pulled the silver chain out from under her shirt and laid the Malfoy signet ring down on the table. "You can help me find where his mother has been."

Blaise just stared down at the ring on the table while Neville asked, "I'm sorry, but how is Malfoy's Mum going to be able to help?"

"Not Narcissa, but where she *is,"* Hermione said quickly. "Draco's family has an island—"

Neville blew out a breath. "Of course they do."

"That's great!" Hermione said, a little too loud and Neville gave a friendly laugh when she blushed.

"I'm glad you think my hauling around sacks of dragon dung is so impressive."

Hermione found herself smiling back at him a little. They walked a little further on, passing by Weasley Wizard Wheezes which Hermione refused to look in the windows, instead she turned back to Neville and asked, "So is that something you are hoping to make a career out of?"

Again, Neville looked around a little guiltily and made a few noises of contemplation. "Uh, I… soft of am." Hermione lifted her brows, prompting him to go on. Neville exhaled and his shoulders slumped down. "Look, promise you won't say anything to anyone, but…" he glanced around to make sure they were alone. "I've been working with a new strain of sopophorous plants to help—"

Hermione had stopped walking and was staring up at Neville who looked like he was growing more and more uncomfortable by the second. "Help who?"

Neville looked down at his feet, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. "Zabini."

Oh my. Of all the people Hermione thought Neville might name, Blaise Zabini was so far down on the list, she hadn't even considered him. They had struck up an uneasy alliance during their last year at Hogwarts together, but Hermione had no idea that Neville and Blaise were still in contact, let alone… in business together.

Hermione quickly put two and two together. Neville always had a proclivity for Herbology. Lines of supply had been disrupted while the Death Eaters were in charge and many of them had yet to be restored. If Neville had access to certain magical plants, it would certainly give Blaise an advantage at work. The only thing she couldn't figure out was why Neville was helping Blaise.

"You, er, you wouldn't mind *not* mentioning to anyone that I am supplying him, would you?"

Hermione huffed. "Who would I tell?" She barely saw anyone anymore unless she had a meeting at the Ministry. Now that Ginny and Luna had left on their trip to Thailand, she didn't have much of a reason to leave the Manor at all. Even with her freedom, Hermione spent most of her time locked up in Draco's room, sitting in his bed with books and paper spread out around her.

"Ron?" Neville offered. "He is an Auror now and if he has information on the illegal substance trade then he would be obligated to report it."

"They weren't able to recover it?" Hermione asked. Many witches and wizards were still lacking wands and it wasn't as if new ones were being made at the moment so those without didn't have any options, but hope theirs was turned in and even then, there was a mountain of paperwork they had to apply for through the Ministry.

"I'm getting by," Neville said as they stepped through into Diagon Alley. "Better than some at least."

Diagon Alley had once been a bustling, busy street full of magical shops, but now half the stores were still boarded up and the other half had hasty repairs and paint slapped over broken doorways, trying to hide the damage. Neville glanced around, his eyes catching on a small alleyway Hermione knew led to Knockturn Alley. She had followed Harry down that path two years ago to spy on Draco. Harry had been convinced Draco was becoming a Death Eater and… he had been right.

Hermione bit her lip. What if she had believed Harry? Would… would she be here right now? Would Harry?

Would Draco?

"Hermione?" Neville called her name and she realized she was staring at the dark, twisting alleyway.

"What? Oh, sorry," she said quickly. She had spent too much time alone lately and often found herself getting lost in her thoughts. It was all too easy to retreat into her own mind after the war and sometimes Hermione would find that she had been staring at the same piece of legislation for an hour without even bothering to read it. "I'm glad that you're getting on."

Neville gave her a simple, but encouraging smile. They walked on for a moment and Hermione noticed he looked back at the dark corridor that led to Knockturn Alley again.

"Neville," Hermione glanced up at him. "What *have* you been doing since… then?"

His smile came back only this time with a nervous twitch and Neville rubbed the back of his neck a few times before answering. "Helping Gran out around the house. There are a lot of repairs that needed to be made after the war." Hermione felt for her friend; she knew what it was like to try and patch a life up that was left in shambles. "But I've been able to install a small greenhouse with some of the leftover supplies."

"Really?"

Neville gave her a half grin. "Well, without a wand, herbology is a good hobby to have. I have to lift fifty pound bags of fertilizer instead of levitating them, but…" He shrugged. "It's doable."

"Oh don't act so surprised, Longbottom," Blaise said nastily, but the look on his face was playful. "You're a Pureblood too; don't act like you don't have multiple properties."

Neville blushed heavily. "Yeah, well… only one. In Palermo. Outside of it, really," he added. "Definitely *not* an island."

"How come you never told me you have a house in Sicily?" Blaise exclaimed, sounding almost hurt. *"Parli Italiano?"*

Neville blinked heavily. "Erm, no."

Blaise gave him a dismissive wave of his hand and turned back to Hermione. "Did Draco put you up to this?"

She was surprised by his question. "What? Of course not."

Blaise kept his gaze trained on her. "He asked me to find her—Narcissa."

"What?" Hermione gasped.

"When he wrote to me, the day before the battle," Blaise nodded at Neville, "telling me to not go to London and stay in the school instead. I don't think he planned on You-Know-Who attacking there, so in hindsight, London would have been the safer bet after all. I digress," Blaise went on when Hermione and Neville just stared at him blankly. "He asked me that if anything happened to him or if he wasn't around anymore, that I would try and locate his mother. He knows I have contacts in Italy and their villa was off the coast so he thought I might have some luck."

Hermione could only hope her mouth wasn't hanging open *too* wide. She had nearly forgotten about that, Draco and Blaise's little conversation in the Great Hall where she thought… that Draco was still keeping secrets from her. Goodness, if they had only had more time to talk so many of their problems would have been cleared up.

Then again, talking wasn't what they were naturally drawn to when they were together. Even now, if she had five minutes with him, Hermione might say a few words, but most of them would be, *"Yes, Draco, please"*.

"Okay, okay," Neville cut in and Hermione was grateful for it. She had started biting her lip again. Hard. And judging by the sly look on Blaise's face, he had an idea why. "How is Narcissa Malfoy or… Malfoy's island going to help get Malfoy's sentence overturned?"

Blaise laughed, a full bodied laugh, and clapped his hands in front of him once. "Oh… I should have had more Gryffindor friends in school. You lot are a riot." Neville looked unamused, but leaned in to listen when Blaise lowered his voice. "Hermione's a smart girl. She isn't putting all her dragon eggs into one basket."

Hermione held her breath and found herself biting her lip again.

Blaise's dark eyes glittered. "She needs somewhere to stash him if she gets him out using… other means."

Neville looked worriedly over at her, but Hermione was quick to smooth over Neville's worries. "Draco will need somewhere to recuperate and… his mother might be able to help speak on his behalf."

"Right," Neville said, searching her eyes and Blaise started to laugh again.

"I'm glad we are able to provide adequate entertainment for you, especially since you had to let your previous friends go," Hermione motioned to the two girls waiting by the bar, "to make room for you new Gryffindor ones." Blaise's grin stayed on his face as she continued carefully. "And since you are in such a good mood, then maybe you will agree to help me."

Blaise glanced down at the silver ring and then back up at Hermione. "And what do I get in return for my services?"

Negotiation. Hermione knew this part well. "You owe Draco. Any voice saying he had something other than a cold-blooded heart would have meant something. Not to mention, you already agreed to help find Draco's mother and it doesn't seem like you've done much in that effort so far."

Hermione nodded her head to the girls at the bar and Blaise's eyes narrowed.

"And you owe me," she added when Blaise raised a finger to make a counter argument. He wanted a negotiation? Fine, she had spent the last four months studying court cases and arguing with Wizengamot members, Hermione could easily take on Blaise Zabini after that. "I take it part of the reason you kept your silence was to keep the good name you had made for yourself during the war? Helping Dumbledore's Army certainly would have won you some points back that being a Slytherin would have lost you."

Blaise's lips pursed, but he was still listening.

Hermione shook her hair back. "I don't think people would care to know that you treated a Death Eater's captive Mudblood and didn't think to mention it to anyone."

"Yes, yes," Blaise sniped, obviously not wanting to dwell on this topic. "That's the trouble with playing both sides of the fence, sometimes you fall."

"And…" Hermione went on, wanting to finish strong. "Neville here will give you 20% off your next shipment of illegal potion substances.

"Hey!" Neville shouted.

Hermione looked at his hand, the one that had held the sword of Gryffindor and took Voldemort's head off. She glanced up at him, meeting his eyes; green like Harry's, but a darker shade and shot through with streaks of brown. She clasped her hand in his and Neville pulled her forward.

He was much larger than her and shoved his way through the crowd until finally it started to thin. Hermione felt better when bodies weren't pressed in on every side of her. As they reached the line of guards Neville slowed. For a moment Hermione thought they would be turned away, but when the Ministry guard tried to stop Neville, he ignored him and pulled Hermione quickly behind him.

He darted into the first fireplace available and Hermione squeezed in next to him. She chanced a last look out and saw the crowd chanting as Percy and a few others raised their wands in time to the cheers.

She felt her eyes widen and her mouth fall open as Neville shouted, "Diagon Alley!" and green flames shot up, enveloping her in cool wisps of air.

They landed in The Leaky Cauldron and Neville dropped her hand, brushing old ash out of his hair as he stepped out.

"You alright, Hermione?" he asked as she followed him coughing and hiding her face in her sleeve.

Hermione nodded, clearing her throat and knocking some soot off of the papers she had managed to hold on to. Black smeared across the front of them and she frowned.

"Yes, thank you," she managed to add when she realized Neville was still waiting on an answer.

It was quite obvious that they had caused a commotion coming in as they did based on the looks they were getting from the patrons scattered across the pub. Feeling a little self conscious and not wanting to draw any more attention than she already had, Hermione tugged on Neville's shirt sleeve. "Come on," she said quietly and headed towards the door alley behind the Leaky Cauldron that led to Diagon Alley.

Hermione had her wand out, ready to tap the brinks to let them through when she noticed Neville was empty handed.

"Neville," Hermione said slowly. "Do you… have a wand?"

Neville slid his foot across the broken cobblestones. "Erm," he cleared his throat. "I lost it. Sometime during the battle I was knocked out, typical, I know." He looked up at the overcast sky and sighed. "When I came to it was gone. I got the sword from beside Harry after…" he trailed off. "Well, you know."

Hermione stood completely still, aghast at what she was seeing. She wasn't happy with the way the Ministry was handling things, but… this wasn't the answer either. Inciting people into a frenzy wasn't going to help anything. They were just scared and lost and… and hurt by what had happened to them and their loved ones during the war.

She wanted out of here and fast. This was the last place she wanted to be because she wasn't sure she would be able to keep the creature in her chest from roaring and she didn't need all her hard work to go to waste because she got arrested for a public disturbance. Maybe more if she got close enough to Percy to send a hex at him.

But as she tried to move again, Hermione found herself being jostled around. The crowd was getting more rowdy and Hermione felt herself being pushed back and forth. Some papers slipped from her arms.

"Fiddlesticks." Hermione bent down to try and pick them up, but they were crushed and ripped under the stamping feet around her.

"How can they protect us when they can't even protect themselves?!" Percy was shouting, pointing to the guards who were now being pushed back themselves as they tried to reach him on the base of the statue.

Hermione stood back up, abandoning the documents and hoping they weren't essential ones. There were too many people around her, too much noise. Screaming, yelling, shouting… Angry voices, all too loud. Hermione thought of the sounds of battle and in her head, the two mixed together, deafening her until even her own thoughts were drowned out.

Out out out. She wanted out right now.

Hermione tried pushing her way through again and made it a few feet before she was roughly shoved to the side, almost falling over as a group of people marched up to the statue, lifting their wands just like the stone figures behind Percy.

At first she thought they were coming for Percy, but then they turned and fanned out around him—protecting him.

"Hermione?" She vaguely heard her name, but couldn't tell what direction it was coming from. She tried to turn, but it was impossible to move in this mess. "Hermione!"

Someone strong was sticking their arms through the crowd, trying to reach her and for just a moment, she expected to see a metal mask and shining silver eyes staring back at her. Instead, she had to blink a few times before she was able to recognize the boy—no, the man—standing in front of her.

"Neville!"

"You told her?!" Blaise hissed. "Bloody Salazar, Longbottom! They might not teach you this in Gryffindor, but you *don't tell people about—"* He jerked his head in Hermione's direction quickly, *"—this thing of ours!"*

"Yes, he told me," Hermione pressed on. "So are you going to help me, or not?"

"I'm not giving him 20% off," Neville said firmly.

Hermione rounded on him. "You've got a house in Palermo. You can afford it." She looked back at Blaise and raised her eyebrows expectantly.

"Fine, but not here," Blaise said, cutting his eyes around them and then back to the Malfoy ring sitting on the table. "And put that thing away before someone recognizes it. I'll send you an owl to schedule."

Hermione frowned. "Why not today?"

"It's my first day off in a month." He jerked his head in the direction of the bar and the two girls who had seemingly just bought a bottle on his tab. "And I have plans. Speaking of which…" He reached inside his jacket and pulled out a drawstring bag of gold and tossed it at Neville.

Neville pocketed it swiftly. "I'll bring it by the lab in the morning."

"See that you do," Blaise said seriously, all the levity in his voice gone.

Hermione watched the two carefully, still not entirely sure about their operation, but wasn't exactly in a position to judge at the moment. But if Blaise hadn't had a day off in a month, would she have to wait another to hear from him again?

"Why not later today then?" She didn't want to give up, not now, not yet. "Once you're done here?"

"I have a date tonight," Blaise said simply.

Hermione's brows lowered. "With one of those girls?"

"No." Blaise flashed her a bright smile. "Why? Don't tell me you're jealous now."

Hermione scoffed. "So how long am I going to have to wait?"

Blaise leaned back against the round booth and stretched his legs out, spreading them wide. "Oh, I'll be sure to fit you into the rotation."

"Don't worry, Hermione," Neville said warmly. "Zabini is hard to pin down, but he does show up."

"Thanks for that shining endorsement, Longbottom," Blaise said dryly. "I see I've made a great impression on you during our business dealings."

"I was just trying to help, Zabini," Neville tensed next to her. "Something you might want to try yourself. If what Hermione said is true about the… chains, then you should be less concerned about your… rotation and more concerned about making it up to her."

Blaise pursed his lips for a moment. "I offered to get her out. She stayed. And I didn't speak up for Draco because it wouldn't have done shit. I'm a good healer, but even I'm not going to fall on a sword for no reason."

Hermione didn't want either of them to get distracted by arguing with one another. She was here for a reason and she wasn't leaving until she got what she wanted.

"If you don't help me," Hermione moved to the edge of her seat and let her hand rest on the hawthorn wand in her lap, "you're going to need an even better healer than yourself, Zabini. The war might be over, but I'm not done fighting. And I've learned even more curses than I knew back in school too."

Blaise's eyes flashed and Hermione shook her hair back proudly. She knew he remembered her threat to use every curse she knew on him after he found out she was Draco's girl. She had never followed through on it because after that night, and seeing Draco's mark, she hadn't been his girl anymore.

But she was now and would be again, as soon as she got him back. And if she had to threaten Blaise in order to do that, then so be it.

Hermione heard Neville blow out a low breath beside her.

"Fine," Blaise said darkly. "I'll owl you in the morning, okay?"

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him. "See that you do," she repeated in the same tone he had used himself.

Blaise slid the untouched drink in front of her back across the table and tipped it into his mouth, swallowing it with displeasure. He smacked the glass back down and pointed his finger at Hermione again. "I hope this works," he said, exhaling sharply. "Because you and Draco… you two deserve each other."

It was a little bit funny.

The fact that he had always called Granger a Mudblood, even after he'd plunged his dick in her. But despite her humble origins, she now controlled the elder wand, the most

when Bill interrogated Draco were given to Kingsley. He knew the exact information Draco had passed on. That meant something, that meant… It meant it wasn't a no.

It was all she had going for her, but it was enough to put a bounce in her step so that the heavy looks in the lift didn't bother her one bit. When the doors opened into the Atrium Hermione started to step forward, but was immediately pushed back by the crowd that had assembled in the large area.

It was a mass of people, some shouting at others, some shouting at guards. Hermione saw a few people holding banners, waving them and she squinted, trying to read the words on them.

The most she could see were "Protection", "Never", and "Forever". None of them made Hermione feel any sense of certainty or security.

She did her best to push her way into the crowd. She had heard that the community was in a state of unrest; Kingsley had complained about it enough and it had been in the Daily Prophet when she scanned it over, but she had been so focused lately that she hadn't bothered to look around her and see how much it was affecting people. She had never seen people like this, so upset, so… angry.

Holding her papers close to her chest, Hermione tried to fight her way to the fireplaces on the other side of the atrium. She dodged elbows as people raised their fists in the air, either agreeing with or siding against the people swarming the newly erected statue of witches and wizards holding their wands aloft what she was sure was supposed to look like solidarity, but what really looked like a battle formation.

She got stuck, unable to move as the people around her thickened and Hermione was barely able to lift her hand up to push her unruly curls out of her face to see none other than Percy Weasley standing on the base of the state, face beet red, and yelling into the crowd.

"We aren't going to let them get away with it this time!" he bellowed, throat straining as he held his wand to it in order to magnify his voice. "The Ministry let the guilty walk free last time and look where that landed us!" Large swaths of the crowd cheered him on.

Ministry guards tried to quell the protesters, pushing them back, but this only succeeded in penning the crowd in tighter. There were some people shouting back in disagreement, but those were quickly overwhelmed by the people near them, some by out-shouting them, others by pushing them around until they quieted down.

"We need order!" Percy shouted and the crowd answered him with resounding cheers. "We need laws!" Again, the atrium was filled with voices. "We need JUSTICE!"

with judgment in their eyes. Her efforts to free Draco had not gone unnoticed by the general public.

But even that hadn't stopped her from working on trying to get Draco's case appealed and for the first time in weeks, *in months,* Hermione actually felt… hopeful about it. After spending another two months gathering up all the information she could and filling out more forms than she ever thought possible, Hermione had been granted a meeting with the senior members of the Wizengamot. She laid out her evidence of mishandled cases in the past along with the notes Fleur had taken at Shell Cottage as proof of Draco's willingness to help the Order.

Not to mention he destroyed a horcrux and gave Harry his wand while he was facing Voldemort, but no one seemed to care too much about that and in the midst of the confusion of the battle, no one was able to give an exact account of Draco being the one to do these things. So it was her word on this and unfortunately most Ministry officials didn't put too much stock in a Hogwarts dropout who was trying to free a known Death Eater. But she relayed it all to the three Wizengamont members assembled before her.

"We will take this into consideration," the oldest wizard had said. He had said it so slowly that Hermione nearly felt like she was going to jump out of her skin while she waited for him to get it out. Her mind had been in overdrive ever since… always, and to try and slow it down now of all times was impossible.

"What does that mean?" Hermione asked. "Exactly?" she added, not wanting to be put off as she had so many times before.

"It must be discussed between us," he went on, "and then proposed to the Wizengamot as a whole. If a majority votes to open the case back up, the Minister must ratify the decision and we will enter into session again."

"When do you think—" Hermione started, but was stopped as the wizard held up a wrinkled hand.

"We are currently hearing the cases of collaborators and profiteers, but… this will be added to the docket."

It was as much of an answer as she was going to get right now, and meant Draco would have to go through another trial, but at least it wasn't a no.

It wasn't a no.

There was still a ways to go, but if it got there and Kinglsey had to ratify it… well, he had said he knew everything Draco had done which included the things like breaking out the Muggleborns and destroying the horcrux in Nagini, right? The notes Fleur had taken

powerful wand in existence, and he… he was useless. His own magical powers tapped out, burned away. It didn't matter that his blood was pure, his body, his soul, had been too weak.

It was also a little funny that after months of storms and rain and freezing temperatures that the sun was actually shining. Draco sat on his knees in front of the little window, letting the pale light bleed over him. There wasn't any warmth in it, but that didn't matter. It was the best thing he'd felt since… since…

Since he kissed her in the Ministry.

She hadn't kissed him back. Had it all been too much for her? Had he finally gone so far that she couldn't forgive him? Couldn't love him anymore?

Draco stared at the sun, the light blinding him, searing into his eyes but as long as he looked up at it, he couldn't see the grey, Fake Granger hovering in the dark corner. He wasn't sure if she was actually there or in his head, but it didn't matter. There were only a few hours of daylight left and he wasn't wasting them.

He just wished that whoever was screaming would shut the fuck up already. It felt like they had been going on for hours. He heard screams, cries, and manic, animalistic sounds coming from the other cells all the time, but these were louder. It must have been someone close by. He had half a mind to shout back at them. Tell them to shut the fuck up before he gave them something real to scream about.

Funny, that after having to relive all the memories of torturing others, it wasn't those that made him feel like he was going crazy, but the ones of her. That all it took was seeing Granger's big doe eyes wide with tears as he pushed her down in the mud, or shoved her against the wall of his bedroom, or sneered at her from across the Great Hall to make him feel like screaming himself. Even so, at least he got to see her in those, not the fake, dead eyed version of her that haunted his every waking moment.

She never left him alone now. She had burrowed so deep that he wasn't sure what it was like without her anymore.

Granger.

Hermione.

Draco tilted his head back to let the light hit his face, making the corners of his mouth curve up at the memory of her and even a small, strange laugh bubble up from inside him.

If only that fucker would stop goddamn screaming!

That's when her soft giggle penetrated his ears. "Oh ,Draco," she crooned and stepped a bit closer to him, still careful to stay out of the line of light he was kneeling in. "Can't you hear yourself?"

He tried to ignore her, but it was too hard to block out the question she had brought up from spinning around his head while the endless screaming echoed off of the stone walls.

Draco looked away from the white light of the sun and slowly his eyes adjusted so he could make out the colorless form of her. Fake Granger was shaking her head sadly, her tousled hair bouncing as she entered the stream of light until she had placed herself in front of him while he kneeled before her.

She touched his cheek with her palm and it was… cold.

"It's you."

Draco's brows pulled slightly. What the fuck was she on about now? Couldn't she give him a moment of peace so he could enjoy the sunlight?

Except… it wasn't there anymore. Where the light had once touched was now only… snow.

It was piled on the window sill and scattered across the floor around him. Draco blinked and felt it fall from his lashes. Fake Granger smiled sadly at him and wiped it away and when she did, he noticed his cheeks were… wet with cold tears.

But… he hadn't been crying… he was just smiling!

Wasn't he?

Of course he was. He probably would still be if those god-awful screams would stop.

Fake Granger straighter back up and sighed. "You'll wear yourself out soon enough." She shrugged and moved back to the corner. "You always do."

Draco stared up at the grey sky, watching snowflakes land softly around him. As they had been for hours. There had never been any sun. There had only been…

"You. That's what I've been trying to tell you," she said waspishly.

The truth of it crashed down around him and Draco's mouth fell open, or… would have, if it hadn't already been the one who was screaming.

For a moment she didn't look like herself. A dark circle hung around her head and her hand was cold and… hard. He could feel every bone in it. That wasn't… normal, that wasn't like her. Something seemed to have changed in her, she was looking at him differently and she wasn't as… aggressive as she normally was. Instead she softened her expression and shifted her body in almost a seductive manner.

Fake Granger brought his knuckles to her lips, pressing a small kiss to them. Her lips were stained with his blood, the only color on her, and even though it wasn't her, *it wasn't her,* he *knew* that, Draco felt his heart skip a beat when her red mouth smiled sweetly at him.

Draco drew in a slow, ragged breath and whispered, "Yes."

She seemed pleased by this. "Would you like to keep going?"

"Will you stay if I do?"

She nodded slowly, the curls on either side of her face bobbing with the movement.

He struggled to his feet, head light and blinking heavily, but then held out his injured hand for Grang… Fake Granger to take. She considered it for a moment before slipping her smaller one in his and Draco pulled her to her feet. Holding her close, Draco brushed his thumb over the blood on her bottom lip and hoarsely repeated, "Yes."

Hermione held her papers close to her chest as she made her way back to the lifts, doing her best not to cast a look over her shoulder down the corridor to where she knew the Ministry holding cells were.

She failed and nearly tripped when she took too long to look back ahead. She was saved a tumble only by the strap on her long suffering bag that got caught on a handle to a door. Untangling herself, Hermione pushed her hair back out of her face, blowing it up with an annoyed huff of breath and hurried over to the lifts, catching one right before the grate closed.

"Thanks," she said automatically to the people crowded in together. No one said anything back and after a moment, Hermione looked around to see some people looking away from her and pushing themselves against the walls while a few others stared back

"Hmm, yes," she agreed. "Quite talented at that along with Quidditch, weren't you?"

"Yeah." Draco stared out at the bland sky. No color. No shapes. No nothing.

"You can do that now," she whispered in his ear, sending a chill down the right side of his body. "If you want."

Draco stood up in one fluid movement. He looked down at the line separating the light from shadow at the toe of his boots. He counted to three before stepping over it.

Granger smiled at him as she backed against the wall. "Right here," she said in that same soft whisper.

Draco felt his heart beating, the blood moving down his arm, under the scarred skin, still tight from the burns.

He balled his hand into a fist, watching as the muscles twitched and hardened under the warped scars.

When he looked back up, she was gone and Draco threw his fist into the unforgiving stone of the wall.

He did it again, and again, ripping the flesh from his useless fucking hand. He only stopped when the pain of his bone grazing against the frozen wall made him cry out and sink down to his knees.

The blood ran warm over his fingers, the first bit of heat he had felt in weeks. Even his tears were cold here. Draco cradled his mangled hand to his mangled chest as he hunched against the wall. Gritting his teeth, he ripped a piece of fabric from the hem of his shirt and wrapped his shaking hand. It didn't do much and the blood soaked through it before he tucked the frayed end in against his palm.

What did it matter? Draco leaned his head back and closed his eyes. His blood was as useless to him now as he had been to it his whole life. He had betrayed it, straying from his pureblood lineage and in return, it had betrayed him; his magic was gone. Even if he could somehow break out of here, he had no way to get to Granger or any way to make her go with him.

Or if he did, he didn't have a single reason she should stay with him.

Draco winced as he flexed his hand, black spots dancing in his vision. He gasped, the cold air hitting his chest hard and pulling him back from the dark brink of oblivion the pain had almost pushed him to.

"There," she said softly, appearing out of one of the black spots and crouching in front of him. "Doesn't that feel better?" She trailed a single finger over the back of his hand, softly cupping it and holding it up for inspection. Her expression was innocently curious as she gazed down at his bleeding hand.

Chapter Twenty Seven

Hermione huffed out white puffs of breath as she ran. She should have gotten warmer as she moved, but the further she went, the colder it got. The icy air hit her lungs, making her seize and slowing her down, still; she forced herself on. She couldn't stop, not now.

It was right behind her.

Her nightmares had shifted and changed over time and somehow had found their way back to their earliest formation—Hermione, running away from a persistent foe. Only there were no smooth tiles from the Department of Mysteries or well worn stones of Hogwarts castle. These were crudely carved passageways that seemed almost as if they had been hewn from the rock.

And they were *cold*.

She had never felt cold like this before—not when she went skiing with her parents and not even hiding in the woods with Harry last winter. This was the kind of cold that seeped down into bones, stealing the warmth from the very marrow. This was the kind

of cold that felt like once it got in, she would never be able to get it back out. It felt like…like hopelessness.

Like hell.

She came to the end of the passageway and saw a small set of winding stairs leading up. Taking a risk, Hermione glanced behind her. She couldn't see very far in the dark, but she could hear it.

A slow, but steady shuffling followed by a low and heavy groan.

It sounded almost… human. *Almost.*

Hermione's stomach tightened and she darted up the stairs. Near the top she slipped on a patch of ice, hitting the landing hard. The top step knocked into her middle and pushed the air from her lungs. Stunned for a moment, she watched it cloud and mist in the space in front of her. She needed to get up, to move. She couldn't stay here.

Hermione pushed herself up, tenderly breathing in and wincing when a sharp pain hit her side. It felt like a shard of frozen steel stabbing into her. Looking down, she didn't see any blood. A broken rib then, maybe a punctured lung. She braved the pain as she forced herself to get up again. She would be able to assess the damage once she was—

Something icy encircled her ankle and pulled her down hard. Hermione cried out as she hit the stairs again, hot tears springing to her eyes only to freeze before they even made it halfway down her cheek.

She struggled, trying to pull herself back up, but whatever had her was holding on tight.

It wouldn't let go.

Hermione kicked out at it wildly, but even the kicks that made contact did nothing to stop what was holding her, what was pulling her back, pulling her *down.*

She let out a frustrated scream as she clawed at the frozen stone, ripping the skin from her fingers as *it* tugged her back down a step. There wasn't anything to grab onto, nothing that could help her. Hermione struggled and pulled herself back onto the top stair by leaning on her elbows, but as soon as she took a breath, the stabbing pain was back. She recoiled, falling back to where she was before.

Her mind spun, knowing what she needed to do, but unable to do anything to stop what was happening. She cried out again as it pulled her down a step, then another. Dragging her, kicking and screaming, all the way to the bottom of the stairs.

Hermione was bruised and bloody by the time she fell back to the dark passageway floor. It was bitterly cold and her whole body ached and shivered as the thing grabbed at her, turning her over to lay on her back.

any of that and she hadn't bothered to ask, which, was probably the first time she hadn't gone above and beyond to fucking figure something out.

And it bothered him that she said that to stick up for Potter when none of Draco's friends or his new teammates, who all owed him for getting the new brooms, hadn't said a word in his defense back to her.

Still, seeing her standing there, eyes going big as everyone else whispered behind their hands at what he had just said, made Draco hate himself. Hate that little boy standing there, who had just taken away a little bit of her innocence.

And he hated that he had called her that even after kissing her years later, that he used that as a way to state his superiority over her so she wouldn't be able to tell how nervous she made him or how his skin burned in every spot she touched him so that he felt her there for hours afterwards.

Weasley was pointing his lopsided wand at the younger Draco right before he was thrown back and barely turned himself over before he puked up a slug half a foot long.

Normally, Draco would have still enjoyed watching that little weasel nearly choking on his own vomit, but the short Granger had shot him one last look, as if to say *'how could you'* before running to his side.

"Take me back," Draco said, his voice a little raspy.

Fake Granger craned her neck. "You don't want to watch your practice? You caught the snitch so quickly Marcus told you to slow down because it was throwing off the other players."

"I said," he growled, "take me back."

Granger smiled sweetly at him. "As you wish."

When he opened his eyes, Draco was sitting in his cell, faint light from the window filtering in through the bars. There was no warmth in it, although it must have been sometime in late July, the sun was pale and anemic.

"I thought you would have liked that," Fake Granger said from a darkened corner. "Being my first."

"You don't know what I like," Draco said softly, breathing in deep so that the lump in his throat bobbed a little.

"No?" She moved a bit closer, but stayed in the shadow along the wall. "Why don't you tell me what you like then."

Draco didn't think too hard about his answer, he was trying not to think at all. "I like to hurt."

still in his head somewhere, sunken down wherever all the nights of his drunken stupors were.

"Don't interrupt," Fake Granger scolded him. "Watch." She pointed again and Draco's blood turned solid in his veins at what he saw.

Granger, the real one, was marching across the pitch. She… she was so small. He'd almost forgotten how *short* she used to be. For a moment he wondered if that was a Muggle trait, but then remembered he knew plenty of wizards who had small statures. Not Weasley though. He was trailing behind Granger, his legs long and gangly. Draco, past and present, sneered at him as he took his place between Granger and Potter.

She was arguing with him now, the little Granger and the past version of himself that Draco tried not too hard to look at. Even so, he couldn't help himself from smirking, just a little. Granger had always been such a firebrand; he had almost forgotten how… annoying she could be and how… cute it was.

"No one asked your opinion," the Draco from his past spat. "You filthy little *Mudblood."*

Draco felt the words like a punch to the gut. He didn't need to look at her to see her chocolate colored eyes shade with something he'd never seen in them before—confusion.

He'd never quite recognized what it was, until now, and when he did, Draco quickly looked away.

"You know," the Fake Granger said in her snotty know-it-all voice, "that was her first time."

Draco glanced down at her, face devoid of color, of life. She crossed her arms over her chest and stared back up at him with eyes that were the wrong color, a dark charcoal shade instead of how they should be, how would be, if she were really Granger.

She pushed on, as Granger was wont to do though, nodding at the scene in front of them.

"That was the first time anyone had called her a Mudblood."

Draco felt his stomach churn sickly inside him. He… had never thought of that before. He mostly remembered feeling humiliated and… pissed off that someone like Granger of all people, someone who didn't give two shits about Quidditch when it was practically his whole life at that point, would go out of her way to say he didn't deserve a spot on his house team.

As if he hadn't practiced all summer. As if he hadn't studied plays and strategy out of every Quidditch book and magazine he could get his hands on. He had *earned* his place. He had caught the snitch in half the time as anyone else in try outs. Granger didn't know

She didn't want to open her eyes. She refused to. It was a childish thought, that if she couldn't see it, it couldn't hurt her. Hermione knew better than that, but she couldn't help herself. The thing was on top of her, holding her down with the weight of its body.

Hermione writhed, tossing her head from side to side as it settled down on top of her.

It's breath was like ice as it hovered above her face. "Open your eyes, pet."

Hermione stilled. She knew that voice, that deep, commanding voice. Hesitantly blinking one eye open, Hermione asked in a small voice, "D-Draco?"

The small glimpse she got from between her lashes was enough to make her mouth drop open and her eyes go wide. It was Draco, but at the same time, it wasn't him at all.

She stared up into the gaping dark hole where only the socket was left. The other eye was no longer the deep storm grey it usually was. A misty film covered it, blocking out any light or life that had once been behind it. This was Draco, but as she'd seen him in a past nightmare; as he never wanted her to see him in waking life… As an *inferius*.

"I told you I'd come for you," the dead Draco smirked, but only half his mouth moved. The other side stayed loose and limp. "I told you we'd be together forever. And we will be. Now hold still. This will only hurt for a moment…"

As he lowered his lips to hers, Hermione screamed.

Draco didn't know how or why and he didn't give a fuck. All he knew was that he was walking into his bedroom and his girl was laying on his bed. She was wearing one of the little lace dresses he had bought for her, partially to punish her for holding out on him, but mostly to punish himself for what he'd done to make her do that. None of that mattered right now, not when he could see the rise and fall of her chest and the pool of soft sheets around her waist.

The light from his study spilled behind him, marking him out as a dark figure as he moved further inside. His strides were long and determined. His hands were shaking as he pulled the thick coat off of his shoulders, not even bothering to charm it to hang itself up. It could lay on the floor in a fucking ball for all he cared.

She was here. Finally *here*.

And so was he. No more cold stone floors. No more mix of salt and snow. Nothing but her her her.

Hermione.

"Draco?" she called out sleepily and his breath caught in his throat at the sound of it.

"Yeah, Sweetheart," Draco said softly and crawled on top of the bed. "It's me."

He leaned down to kiss her, but she stopped him with a hand on his chest.

Draco looked down. There was a chain attached to it.

Then he looked at his arm. The black skull's jaw opened wider as the snake slowly slithered from it.

How was that possible? His mark was back, branded onto his skin, like it had been for the last two years.

Draco looked back to Hermione, searching her face for some answer because of course she would have one, but only found furious tears lining her eyes, making them look like pools of melted chocolate.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, the words shaking as she spoke them.

"I… I love you," Draco said helplessly. It was all he could think of at the moment. He had missed her so much. More than he ever thought possible. It seemed like these words would work like a magic spell, that once he said them, everything would be alright again. The chains, his mark, it would all be gone and it would just be them. Him and her. Like it was supposed to be.

Hermione didn't say anything. She just let a single tear slip over her cheek and removed her hand. In its absence, Draco could feel a deep, bitter cold seeping into his chest. She turned over and laid back down, curling her body up into a ball and holding it together with the chain he had put on her.

Then Draco was looking at himself, seeing himself on the bed, watching this play out in front of him. His form sank down next to her, blew out a long breath and ran his hand up into his hair before letting his arm fall next to him on the bed, baring the mark into the dark.

"I don't want someone like you to love me," the words came from beside him, not from the bed and Draco turned to see the glazed colorless eyes of Fake Granger smiling sweetly up at him. "And why would she? Look at you," Fake Granger motioned to the bed. "You're a mess."

When Draco looked back at the bed, he was different. His white shirt was stained with sweat and his trousers were splattered with mud. His head had already fallen to the side, mouth partially parted and a pink flush of alcohol marking his cheeks. He was drunk—

Fake Granger cleared her throat and Draco stopped rolling his eyes long enough to see they had landed on the Quidditch pitch.

Great. He was back here again, in this shit of a school.

Fucking perfect.

"Pay attention," she snapped.

"Or what?" Draco said in a bored voice. "You'll leave? Good. Get the fuck out of my head."

Fake Granger just shook her hair back and directed her attention at the far end of the pitch.

Draco seethed beside her. He hated her. Loathed her. More than he ever had his Granger. He had hated her because of what she was, not who she was, but this Granger, the one he couldn't fucking get away from, he hated everything about her.

But nothing more than the fact that when she turned to glare at him over her shoulder, it was with flat, dull eyes. The softness of her cheeks weren't tinged with that cherry red he loved and her lips were colorless and bland. He'd rather have the real Granger here, hating him with everything she had, than this pale imitation of her.

"Look," she said, pointing as familiar green robes moved across the pitch.

It was him. He was young, but already tall enough that he blended in with the rest of the team. Draco's eye twitched when he saw his slicked back hair. He'd almost forgotten he used to wear it like that. His mother always said he looked handsome with his hair out of his face, but really he thought it was because it made him look less like his father. His father, whom Draco had idolized at this time in his life and who had bought him the Nimbus 2001 he was holding. It had been a gift when he made the team. In fact, his father had been so pleased, he bought each team member a broom, giving his son every advantage to win. Draco frowned at his second year self, looking smug as the Gryffindor team landed and approached the Slytherins.

"Are you going to tell me it was wrong to stop their practice?" he drawled, already annoyed by the thoughts of his father and not in the fucking mood for another one of Fake Granger's morality lessons. So far she'd shown him his memories of torturing people the Dark Lord ordered him to, of throwing Muggleborns in cages at the Ministry, and one particular memory of him stumbling home drunk and his mother yelling at him until he passed out in his father's chair.

He hadn't actually remembered that, having blacked out, but it didn't make it any more comfortable to watch just because he didn't recall his own memory of it. Clearly, it was

How was she going to do that when she could barely even hold herself together? The longer she stared, the more… strangely quiet they seemed. Even the expansive pastures were empty. Something about it made her unsettled. It was as if she could feel the dark magic still hovering here.

Hermione had work to do. She'd start with Draco's study, that way, she would have somewhere to work on his appeal that wasn't the Ministry archives. And who knew? Maybe she would find something among the torn parchment that would help. It wasn't likely, but she was desperate enough to try.

She walked over to the small beaded bag that she was still living out of and pulled out a change of clothes and… Draco's coat he had given her during the battle. She slipped it on and started rolling up the sleeves before she tucked Draco's wand, her wand, into the pocket.

"Will you be here this evening?" she asked Calix who merely blinked his large orange eyes in response. "Well," Hermione shook her hair back, "I will."

She was at the door when she turned and said, "I promise."

"You're a fucking bitch."

"I see we haven't made any progress yet."

The pain had caught up to Draco and everything *hurt*. His arm, his back, his… heart.

It was making him testy.

"I see we haven't made any progress yet," Draco mocked in a high, nasally voice. "GET FUCKED!" Draco nearly bent at the waist with the effort to shout the words, then straightened up and sneered. *"My* Granger did and she became much more amenable after that."

Fake Granger put her hands on her hips. "You're disgusting."

Draco shrugged. "She liked it."

Tilting her head, Fake Granger asked sweetly, "Did she though? Let's check."

He groaned as he felt himself falling into another memory.

wasted—and had climbed into the bed with Hermione and made her put up with him by chaining her to it.

That's what had really happened. Now he could see it. Now he knew.

"I… I don't remember this," Draco said softly and looked between the two people on the bed.

"Of course you don't." Fake Granger said it as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. "You blacked out. There are plenty of nights you don't remember. But she does." She nodded her head in the direction of the real… or… memory Hermione.

On the bed, Granger was holding back tears, screwing her eyes shut tight then opening them when she took deep breaths that shook her whole body, making the chain rattle ever so slightly.

Draco walked over to her side of the bed while the version of him in the bed laid motionless next to her. He couldn't leave her like this, he… he didn't want to. She shouldn't have had to deal with him when he was drunk. She shouldn't have had to go through half of the shit he put her through. And she had, but now, he was failing her again. He promised to get back to her, but he couldn't even get out of his own head long enough to even try to think of a plan.

Right now, he didn't want to. If she was stuck in here, then he wanted to be too.

"I'm sorry." He knelt down beside her. "I'm sorry, Hermione. I really mean it this time."

Hermione was biting her lip, trying not to cry. Then she slowly turned over, the chain clinking softly as it moved across the mattress. It rested on the curve of her waist, pulling the lace tight against her. He wondered if the chain was cold, if she was cold, when Hermione reached out and slid her finger less than an inch from the mark on his arm.

She trailed it down into his palm and then slipped her hand inside his. Her lips didn't move, but Draco heard the words anyway.

"I don't want someone like you to love me."

He didn't blame her. He was a drunken fuck who hurt her over and over and never took responsibility for it. How many times had he said he was going to stop lying to her or that he'd quit drinking? She'd forgiven him for coming at her in the kitchen after his father had died. She'd forgiven him for leaving Weaselbee down there with McNair. She'd done more than forgive him, she had stood up for him, spoken for him, argued for his freedom.

All he'd done in return was left her alone, as he had done so many nights before when he was too drunk to comfort her. Too drunk to hold the girl, *his girl,* in his arms.

The all too sober Draco stood up. His hands shaking, not from lack of drink, but from hatred for the version of him in the bed. He was furious, so much that black spots danced in front of his eyes. He wanted to shake the Draco in the bed, wake him up, and beat the living shit out of him. He wanted to hurt himself. He wanted to *kill* himself.

"I want to go," he said in a firm voice.

"Aw, but we just got here." Fake Granger sidled up next to him. "And look how cute we are, all snuggled up together." She sighed wistfully. "We could slip right into them, right there, in the bed." She tried to put her hand inside his, but they were balled into fists at his sides. Fake Granger settled for wrapping her hands around his wrist and standing up on her toes to whisper in his ear, "I promise not to push you away if you try to kiss me."

Draco growled and grabbed her, slamming her into the wall beside them. Only now it wasn't his bedroom, it was his cell, and Fake Granger gasped as he pressed her into it hard. "You are not her," he said menacingly, lowering his head to stare hard into her colorless eyes. "You will *never* be her."

Fake Granger glared up at him. "And you'll never be him."

Draco searched her face for a moment. "Who?" It was wrong, but he couldn't help but feel the twinge of jealousy deep in his gut. This *wasn't* Hermione, but it was Hermione's lips that he had just watched say that.

Fake Granger lifted her chin and he tightened his hold on her. "The man she deserves. You might not have your mark anymore, but we both know what you really are."

Draco had to fight the urge to wrap his hands around her neck. As much as he wanted to make her hurt for what she had done to him, he didn't want to see Hermione in pain. Even this fucked up version of her.

"And what's that?" he spat back at her.

Fake Granger lifted herself up as high as she could go in her current position, until her lips were damn near touching his. What should have been warm breath crossed his face as cold wind.

"Useless," she snarled. "Do you really think she's waiting on you? *You?!* You can't even use magic anymore. How are *you* ever going to get out of here and back to her?"

Draco let go of her and backed up.

She pushed off from the wall. "She's a smart girl. She'll have figured it out by now."

"Figured out what?" Draco breathed. He didn't want to know, he really didn't fucking want to know, but… he had to. He was scared not to.

"That there's nothing worth waiting for."

A pang rang through her chest and Hermione felt herself on the point of collapsing again when she heard a rustling sound of flapping followed by a demanding screech. Soaring in through the broken window, Hermione saw Calix land on the top of the wardrobe.. He screeched at her again, flapping his wings in agitation.

"Oh!" Hermione hurried over and picked up his overturned perch. As soon as it was upright, Calix swept towards it, settled comfortably on the bar and ruffled his feathers. "Are you thirsty?"

Calix clicked his beak rapidly and Hermione hurried to the bathroom to fill the small silver dish. Tapping the faucet with the wand, cool, clear water came forth. It certainly was easier to exist here with magic. Last time she had…

Hermione lost her train of thought. On the counter next to her was the green toothbrush, sitting there just where she left it.

She wondered if the red one Draco had used at Shell Cottage was still there or… if they had thrown it away.

"Fiddlesticks!" Hermione muttered when she noticed the water running over the edge of the dish. Tapping the faucet again, she wiped her hands off and returned to Calix who gave a sharp cry as if to tell her to hurry up. "Sorry, sorry!" Hermione said quickly as she placed the dish beside him.

Calix took a few long gulps and Hermione stroked his feathers softly. "You're not the world's worst owl," she said thoughtfully. Calix raised his head, then shook it, making water fly off his beak and hit her in the face. "You could use some manners, though."

He hooted haughtily.

"Are you hungry?"

Calix flapped his impressive wings and screeched at her again, lifting one foot to show some dried blood on his talons.

"Well," Hermione tried not to wrinkle her nose in disgust. "I'm glad you've had breakfast."

He took another drink then began to preen his feathers, ignoring her entirely.

"You're welcome," she muttered, but before she could feel upset over Calix's abysmal social skills, an unseasonably cool breeze blew through the broken window. Carefully picking her way through the broken glass, Hermione looked out over the grounds of Malfoy Manor. They were… as far as she could see. Probably more. And she was supposed to look after them now.

join the other between her legs. Dipping her fingers inside herself, Hermione bit her lip. She knew what would push her over the edge, knew what she needed in order to release the tension and pressure surging up through her.

Hermione bit her lip and spread her legs a little farther, trying to find the bruised bite Draco had left on her skin, but…

But it wasn't there.

Hermione's eyes flew open.

She should have known, it had been almost two months since their last night together, when Draco had told her that he'd never be gone long enough for it to heal. With everything going on, she hadn't really had time to think about whether it was still there or not. Last summer she had charmed it so it wouldn't heal, but after the battle she had just plunged headfirst into trying to get his sentence overturned and… and…

Hermione pulled her hand from herself, ripping her own orgasm away at the last minute. Her body screamed in protest, but she didn't want it. She didn't want anything but Draco, here, with her—now. Holding her, telling her it was all going to be okay and that he was going to take care of all of it. That he was going to take care of her.

She curled up on her side, tears streaming from her face as she let out the sob she wasn't able to keep in.

Oh God. Oh God. Oh God.

She was so alone.

Hermione buried her face into Draco's pillow, crying into it until her whole body was shaking. She curled up, pulling her legs against her chest and holding herself as best she could. She had kept so much inside her for so long, but tonight it was all coming out and Hermione couldn't stop it even if she tried. She cried until her body was sore and her eyes hurt. Until her throat burned and her chest ached from the heaving breaths.

It felt impossible, that someone this empty, still had so much in her.

She stayed curled up, caged up, until the early grey shadows of morning crept in from the windows. Eventually, Hermione evened her breathing again as the salty streaks dried against her cheeks. The darkness was fading with every passing minute, making her face another day that she didn't want to.

Daylight showed the ruined mess of the room to her in stark relief. It resembled the inside of her head too much for her liking. She pulled herself from the bed and walked over to one of the torn tapestries. She could still see the missing thread from the bottom that she had torn to play with Crookshanks.

Draco didn't argue back. He didn't even roll his eyes. Fake Granger was… right. Even if he somehow broke out of the most secure prison in the world and got back to Britain, what sort of life could he offer her? He'd have to rip her away from everything she'd ever known, everything she had fought for. She was the master of the Elder wand and a war hero. Maybe she was better off without him.

But what was he without her?

Fake Granger let out a sharp, disappointed exhale. "Like I said," she walked past him, apparently done with him. At least for a while. *"Useless."*

Sitting up in bed, Hermione clutched the silver ring against her chest. A thin sheen of sweat covered her body and the sheets clung to her, tangled around her legs from when she had tossed in her sleep. She was breathing heavily, her hair sticking to the sides of her neck and back as she tried to calm herself in the too-bright morning light.

It helped to dispel the cold darkness of her dream, but Draco's words hung in her head, echoing with every heavy beat of her heart. She could feel it fluttering in her chest, as if she really had been running down the frozen corridors of… Azkaban. She had nightmares like this several times over the past six months, but this was the first one where he had caught her, where she had seen him, felt him… like that.

Hermione's legs were unsteady as she pulled herself from the bed and wrapped Draco's coat around her to dispel the chill of the morning. She walked to the bathroom and started to brush her teeth, holding the brush in her mouth as she waved her wand at the bed for it to make itself. The thick duvet shook itself out and floated softly down on the straightening sheets. She had hoped the fresh bed would help her forget her troubled night, but just like Draco, it was holding onto her.

And she was holding on too. Holding on to the small ray of hope that was still burning in her chest. She'd done everything, *everything,* she possibly could and something had to work out for her. No. Not something, just one thing. She wasn't sure if she could live in this world if there wasn't a chance Draco could live in it with her.

Sometimes, in her weakest moments, in the dark and cold of the night, Hermione wished they had just run off together when they had the chance. But every time she

started to wander down that line of thought, she would shake her head, dismissing it. She was glad she had fought for Harry; fought for all her friends who she had lost. She wouldn't be able to face herself if she hadn't.

Which was why she was still fighting for Draco. Even after everything standing in her way, everything everyone said about him, and everything he had done, she wasn't going to give up. She might spend the next year, the next ten years, or the rest of her life fighting to get him out, but she was willing to do it. Looking at herself in the mirror, Hermione wasn't sure there was anything she *wouldn't* do at this point.

Hermione rinsed off her toothbrush, washed her face, and walked back into the bedroom where Calix had dropped a copy of the Daily Prophet on the foot of the bed.

The black print on the rolled paper caught her eye and drew her towards it like a charm.

Without hesitation, she unspooled it and her eyes scanned the headline quickly.

"Minister of Magic Shacklebolt removed from office after Death Eater attack kills five."

Hermione was reading too fast to even blink. The DMLE had found a hidden nest of Death Eaters, but their attempts at capture had turned deadly after one of the Death Eaters had risen as an *inferius*. It killed an Auror and another Death Eater before it was dispatched. The cycle continued until the Aurors had lost half of their force. Three Death Eaters were dead, one had been captured alive, and one had escaped.

In an uproar, the Department of Magical Law Enforcement had called for Kinglsey's resignation, Hermione could assume at wandpoint, and taken control of the Ministry's efforts of asserting power and control.

While a special election was being planned, Percy Weasley had been placed as the de facto head of the Ministry. According to the article, he had ordered for the captured Death Eater not to be sent to Azkaban, but instead to be put to death as a *"safety concern for the public"*.

Hermione held her breath as she flipped through the pages, trying to continue the article and see what would be happening to the Death Eaters currently in Azkaban. When she did, her legs went weak underneath her. Sagging onto the broken chaise, Hermione felt her heart hammering in her chest…which was strange because there didn't seem to be enough blood in her head.

At least not enough to process what she had just read because the words just kept floating in front of her, over and over.

"Azkaban prison is to be closed and the current prisoners exiled to the island as they pose a threat to wizarding society in any form: dead or alive. 'Protection and preservation of the magical community is the main drive of the new Ministry administration,' says Weasley. 'Any threat will be dealt with efficiently

anxiety building up higher and higher until the messy piles in her head threatened to fall around her. They might get to break down, but she never did. She had to stay strong, stay determined, for Draco.

But tonight she wanted to do something for herself. Hermione hadn't felt like herself in weeks and… she missed it. Missed the girl she had been and the woman she had grown to be during the war. Being with Draco in her sixth year had changed her, opened her up in a new way, and let out something that had always been there. And when she was on the run last year, she had tried to lock it away again, but it had come back as the slumped figure who had stared at her with silver eyes from the back of her head.

Only now, she didn't want him in the back of her head anymore. She wanted him here, in front of her, on top of her. Hermione's hand slid down the hem of the lace dress, pulling it up inch by inch. The sensation of the soft fabric sliding over her made goosebumps rise on her skin and once it was over her hips, Hermione felt her nipples harden, making everything feel more… *more*.

Moving her hand back down, resting it right before her body curved down. Her heart beat a little faster, sending a delicious thrum though her body which reverberated in the small bud at the top of her center. She spread her fingers out and shakily, slipped one in between her fold.

Hermione gasped feeling a frisson run up her spine. It straightened against the bed, her body already responding to the slightest contact. Taking a deep breath, she tried not to think about the fact that the last time she had been touched, it had been by Draco. No. It wasn't the last time. She refused to believe that. He said if she waited, he would come for her this time.

And Godric help her, she believed him. Even after all the lies, she still believed. Believed he loved her. Believed they would be together. Believed she was still his girl, would always be his girl…

Hermione let go of the sheets she had been holding onto with her free hand and grabbed the signet ring she wore around her neck, pressing it against the burn mark on her palm from the fiendfyre curse and squeezing it until it hurt.

Her eyes fell closed, lashes brushing against the tops of her cheeks as her mouth opened, gulping down a breath of air as bubbles rose up in her, higher, faster, almost near bursting…

Draco had always known just the right moments to tweak her pleasure with pain and Hermione let out a small whimper as she let go of the ring and trailed her hand down to

Hermione turned towards the large stables, long empty as well, and forced herself on. She was nearly numb by the time she reached them.

She was sheltered from the wind inside, but there was a different kind of chill in here, one that crept down her nerves, setting them on edge. She had felt this in the Manor when she first came back, the remnants of dark magic. Hermione plucked up her courage and strove on. She could hear him, in a far stall, trying to… to… well she wasn't entirely sure.

Was he still dangerous? Maybe she should have let Neville come along, but no. This was something she needed to do herself. Whatever was waiting for her, she would brave it. Reminding herself that this was for Draco, Hermione rounded the corner.

Lucius Malfoy, or what was left of him, was sprawled out on the ground, nearly bisected by the slices and lacerations across his chest and abdomen.

Good Godric… had… had Draco done… *that?* No wonder he had drunk himself into a stupor after. If his father looked this bad now, Hermione couldn't imagine what it had been like… fresh.

He couldn't move much, but Lucius Malfoy's face held none of the malice she had known it to have in life. In death he looked… Well, there was no other word for it other than *sad.* His mouth hung open and a raspy noise came from the back of his throat. His long hair was matted into dark clumps and his eyes… They swiveled in his head, but did not blink and a film of hay dust covered them.

Hermione was nervous there wasn't any blood left in him, in this state. None of his wounds bled. The skin around them was just a morbid shade of black, surrounded by flaccid, white flesh. Her stomach cramped as her gaze traced along the familiar lines. They were the same ones that marred Draco's chest. He'd cut his father with the same curse that had scarred him—*Sectumsempra.* Hermione wondered how many times Draco had cast it to cause that much damage.

She didn't want to know.

Hermione took a deep breath and immediately wished she hadn't as the smell of it hit her. She nearly keeled over, her body alternating between trying to breathe and holding back from gagging. Godric, it was… foul. Putrid. Rancid.

She would rather have to face another horcrux than force herself to get closer to the body, but Hermione pressed the back of her hand to her mouth until her stomach settled and then, as best she could, pointed her wand at the man at her feet.

Hermione had no love lost for Lucius Malfoy.

He had attacked Draco and put her in chains. He was a purist and a loyal follower of Voldemort. Not to mention that he had been a failure of a father in more ways than she could say, but… she thought he could make up for it, if there was still something left in his heart for his only son and heir.

Hermione crouched over him. Lucius tried to lift an arm, but couldn't even bring it high enough to reach her.

"I made him useless. To the Dark Lord, at least."

But not to her. Hermione felt a strange sense of justice when she pressed the tip of Draco's wand into his father's chest and began to cut.

She tried not to think about what she was doing as she did it, but at the same time, she had to concentrate to make even lines. The slices that were already there were wild and brutal; Hermione's cuts were careful, decisive, and above all else, intentional.

It was a little strange, that the idea of letting Blaise hold her hand had sent shots of anxiety down her fingertips, but the act of cutting a human heart from a chest was done with surprisingly steady hands. Maybe it was some leftover instinct from the war, some effect of fighting in duels and battles, that when her mind had a task to accomplish, it pushed aside the complicated emotions that would otherwise hold her back.

She couldn't help but wonder if Draco felt like this—when he was torturing people for her, had his hands been steady? Had his mind been clear? Had he felt this… calm? She didn't have too long to ponder on this because thankfully, it didn't take her too much time to extract the organ.

Hermione didn't have to worry about damage to the surrounding tissue or trying to temper any bleeding. Not that there was any, but that fact didn't stop her. She had asked Blaise to give her a quick rundown of what she should look out for and what she would have to do. Hermione had always been very, very good at following directions, after all, and like many of the things she had put her mind to, she found that this came easy to her as well.

Lucius didn't have any reaction as his sternum cracked, he just tried to lift his arm again and then let it fall when he couldn't reach her. Hermione ignored him as she twisted the wand, severing his heart from the connective tissue and arteries.

It didn't beat. It just sat there, still and solid.

Hermione pulled the thick muscle from his chest cavity and held it up for him to see. "This is for Draco," she said placidly, although her hand was finally shaking, not out of nervousness, but excitement.

It was then, with the slight tremor, that Hermione saw a few drops of blood leak out of one of the ventricles. It made her own heart flutter in her chest. "You owe him this," she finished and Lucius gave another rasping noise that almost sounded too close to his tone when he was alive.

Maybe she should have put him out of his misery, but… something stopped her. Either a strange sense of pity or the small part of her that thought he *deserved* this but Hermione left him there. Draco didn't deserve his fate, maybe Lucius did.

As she reached the long end of the stables, Hermione slowed and stopped, glancing back over her shoulder. She didn't think anyone would come looking for him, but… this way he wouldn't be able to hurt anyone else. Not her, not Draco, not anyone.

The old ways were done; in their place a new world would rise. Instead of letting the house sit vacant and fall into ill-repair, she was going to offer it to Neville for him to use. There was only one reason he would need the money Blaise was funneling into him and that is if he was still working with what was left of the Order.

Maybe one day, she would finally get Draco's sentence repealed. Her own too.

Hermione raised her wand, straightened her shoulders, and spread her feet. She knew this stance well by now. Her words were drowned out by a gust of cold wind, but it didn't matter. Flames shot out of the end of her wand, lighting the stables on fire quicker than she would have thought. Feeling the heat blow back against her face, Hermione turned away from it.

Now that she had what she wanted there was no time to waste.

Hermione hurried back up to the Manor where she would find the answer she so desperately needed, so that she could not just rescue Draco, but… keep him safe, with her, once she had.

She didn't have a future here any more than he did.

He was her future. He was… hers.

She noted the missing ring that normally hung down on her chest. She had left it on the table where she had been working. But she would get it back. And then she would get Draco back. Her fingers dug into the thick muscle of the heart and she could feel her nails digging in. Hard.

Hermione burst into the conservatory with the heart grasped firmly in her hand. Malfoy blood ran through her fingers and dripped in thick globs.. She slammed the heart down onto the map. Hermione ignored the shocked looks on Blaise and Neville's faces.

"Give me my ring."

Hermione noted her dry mouth as she looked out of the dirty window at the estate grounds before her eyes darted between the two of them.

Finally, she answered. "Lucius is still here."

Hermione had refused Neville's offer to help her. Not that she was particularly looking forward to doing this on her own, but she didn't want either of them to see… what Draco was capable of, what Draco had done. His relationship with his father hadn't been a good one, but Lucius was still the man who raised him and, more importantly, they were blood.

She hadn't given Lucius much thought since Draco told her what had become of him. He hadn't been allowed to destroy the *inferius* of his father, but he had done everything he could to subdue it. What had Draco said he'd done? Make it so Voldemort wouldn't be able to use him anymore? Which meant that Lucius Malfoy's reanimated corpse was still out there. She only had to find him.

Hermione ran onto the grounds without even a coat on in her excitement. Her teeth were soon chattering, but she plunged on, too driven by this idea to stop or turn around now.

She slowed as she passed the kennels. Draco spoke about how he loved hunting with his hounds; how he trained them, spending hours teaching them commands and making sure they were properly cared for. Now the cages stood empty, doors swinging open as a brisk wind blew them back and forth.

It was as if the crisp air and biting breeze cleared her mind of all the messy thoughts that had piled up. She honed in on everything Draco had told her about his home and parents and, just like when she sat an exam, the answers came to her, rushing forward so quickly she almost had to slow her pace to grasp at them.

Draco had loved his dogs, but his father… had loved the horses. He had been trying to chase them, Draco had told her, when he had…

"Out on the grounds just… shambling around. I think he was trying to get to the horses and they kept running away from him."

So that was it.

Without Draco's blood, they could never find a safe place for him, even *if* she could get him out. She didn't want to free him just to hand him back over to those who would lock him up again, or worse. It wouldn't be a rescue mission, it would be a death sentence.

"I suppose… we could still brew it and then once I get there, I could try and extract some safely from Draco in order to…" Hermione trailed off. It was a long shot, and one that even she didn't put much hope in. There were too many variables where this could go wrong and if she was able to rescue Draco, they would both be wanted after that. They would *have* to have somewhere safe to go or it was… useless.

Hermione's heart fell inside her chest and she felt her strength and energy draining from her quickly. How did it come to this?

"I never thought I'd say this," Neville blew out a breath, "but it's a shame there's not another Malfoy still around."

Blaise said something, but Hermione couldn't hear it. She saw his lips moving, but inside her head was too busy rushing with a new thought, a new idea, to process what the two people in front of her were talking about.

"...no one left with Malfoy blood?" Neville asked, sounding very far away even though he was right in front of her.

The Malfoy pages of *The Sacred Twenty-Eight* flashed in her mind. Their family had dwindled to just a single line in the past hundred years. In an effort to stay pure, they had nearly bred themselves out. Now they were paying for their unnatural selection. Or, at least Draco was.

"—closest relatives are Blacks and they are dead. Anyway, that's a separate bloodline. I doubt even Mrs. Malfoy's blood would work. They'd have to be born into it," Blaise finished explaining.

Hermione stood up as they continued discussing… something. Yes. Yes, this would work. He wasn't dead, not… really. And he was a Malfoy through and through.

"There is."

Blaise and Neville stopped talking and looked at her. Hermione's brain was racing so fast that she was having a hard time slowing it down enough to speak.

"What?" Neville asked.

"There is still a Malfoy left," Hermione rushed out.

Blaise looked at her questioningly.

"There is?" Neville asked.

Blaise shoved his glasses back on his face. "Who?"

"You can't go!" Hermione's voice pitched up an octave as she cut Blaise off mid-sentence. "Not yet! We still have to—"

"I told you, there were trace amounts of blood in the grooves of the ring, but not even the strongest blood replenishing potion would be able to produce enough to scry with." Hermione opened her mouth to argue, but Blaise went on. "It's months old now anyway, who even knows it would happen if we tried? Probably nothing."

"But if we know what will happen if we don't!" Hermione retorted a bit too loudly. She was getting upset. It wasn't fair to not even *try*. "You said you would help me!"

The ring has been covered in Draco's blood, *Malfoy* blood, but that was months ago. She was honestly surprised there had even been the small bit left in the deep indentations around the silver M left when Blaise scraped them out with a wicked looking scalpel.

"And healing your hand isn't helping?" Blaise shot back. "Or sneaking out of work to come help you! I could get in a lot of trouble, I hope you know," he said sternly.

There was a time when the threat of misbehaving would have stopped Hermione, but no longer. She felt the creature in her chest rise up, claws out and digging into the ground dangerously.

"It isn't what I asked you to do!" Hermione narrowed her eyes. "I asked you to come here for Draco—"

"I came here, Hermione, because you blackmailed me," Blaise said seriously. "And…" he sighed, "as a friend. I've done what I can, but blood replenishing potions are difficult to brew. If it's not done just right—"

"I know that," Hermione snapped. "But I've brewed complicated potions before and they turned out just fine!" She tried not to think about her disastrous experiment with polyjuice potion in her second year, but that hadn't been caused by careless brewing. Potions that needed personal additions were tricky, but not impossible.

"It takes three weeks to brew."

Hermione's mouth fell open slightly. "There are some studies that show it can be brewed within a week if you substitute in unicorn hair in place of—"

"Do you know where to get unicorn hair? Because the market is dry. It is even difficult for Mungo's to get it and I can't steal any more supplies. The hospital needs them," Blaise said with finality. "Even if we could get it, it probably wouldn't even work unless we had enough Malfoy blood to duplicate. Even then we don't know if replenished blood would even be good enough. I'd bet you all the bulbs in this place," Blaise waved his hand around, "that it has to be straight from the tap."

Hermione sank back down.

"Hermione, are you okay?" he asked worriedly. "What did you do, Zabini?"

"I healed her," Blaise sneered. It wasn't quite as cruel as Draco's was, but it got the point across.

"It's… okay," Hermione said as she sucked in breath. "I'm okay, Neville." She looked down at her hand and her fingers were perfectly straight, as if nothing had ever touched them. "Thank you, Blaise."

He shrugged. "I'll send you a bill. And be warned, I don't come cheap."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Finish helping me with this," she pointed to the map, "and you and Neville can split whatever has been growing in here."

"Really?" Neville marveled. "Some of these bulbs are extremely rare. The Malfoys' had quite the collection." He looked around wistfully.

The conservatory was near bursting with leaves, vines, leaves, flowers, and roots. She had a hard time pulling Blaise and Neville's attention from it when they first arrived. Blaise looked at some of the plants growing here with a greedy gleam in his eyes while Neville looked like he might cry when he bent to smell a particularly exotic looking bloom.

"There's not much I can do for the other," Blaise admitted in a low voice. Hermione turned her palm up, exposing the thin red line running down the middle of it. "Cursed burns are… well, cursed."

"You don't have to be a Healer to figure that one out," Neville commented.

"There isn't… anything that can be done?" Hermione asked. She wasn't worried about her hand or the burn mark on it, but she was hoping that maybe Blaise had experimented with some sort of sap or petals and figured out a way to make wounds caused by dark magic, or curses, heal a little better. She only had a thin red line across her palm, Draco had almost the entirety of his left arm covered in scars. Not to mention all the others he had accumulated across his body.

Blaise started to stand up, stretching after the past few hours where they had sat hovered over the large map Hermione had found in Lucius Malfoy's study, of all places. She hadn't liked being in there. Heads of various creatures, magical and non-magical alike, lined the walls as trophies and while it had been ransacked the same as Draco's, the few things she had found had been… disturbing.

He had been a *true* Death Eater. If anyone deserved a lifetime in Azkaban, it would be him. Not Draco. But they had been working for hours and were no closer to freeing him than she had been in the last six months.

"I wish I could do more, Hermione, really I do, but—"

Chapter Twenty Eight

Draco was shivering so badly his muscles ached from the constant strain and tension. He could feel each one of them, taunt and tight, pulling against the inside of his skin. It was worse under his scars. Draco rubbed his hand over his burned arm, trying to get the blood moving under the marbled skin. He didn't know if it was working.

He couldn't feel anything.

He was numb.

Slowly his wracked body started to still. Exhaustion was finally winning out over his instinctual attempts to stay warm. Still, every now and then, his whole body would give a great lurch and the shivering would start again in an almost maddening fit.

One of these times, he happened to bite his tongue when his jaws snapped against each other. Snarling to himself, Draco ran the sore bit against his bottom gumline. Expelling a puff of thick white breath, he quickly shut his mouth, trapping inside the bloom of heat from his blood.

It was the first bit of warmth he had felt in… how long had he been here? It was hard to tell. The storming clouds covered the sky and blocked out the moon, stars, and sun—anything he might have been able to draw from his Astronomy lessons to keep track of time. It had to have been months though. Azkaban was always cold, but now, it had sunk to a new level, to the very darkest depths of hell, where even the heat of the fire didn't reach.

That's where he was. That's where he'd stay.

Nursing his bloodied tongue and rolling it around in his mouth, Draco made the most of the small amount of warmth he got from his blood. That was all it was good for now. There was a time he would never have believed it, that Malfoy blood, *pure* blood, was only worth a few seconds of temporary relief from a lifetime of suffering. Now he couldn't deny it, even if he wanted to.

Draco swallowed the last few drops and closed his eyes. What had he become? He had been reduced to this—a shivering, miserable wretch. Even if he could get out, would Granger even want him now? He looked down at the torn neck of his shirt, giving him a view of his fucked up chest.

Scar tissue marked him, standing out and sinking in, and all of it a mottled shade of purple with greying edges. He looked disgusting. He looked… like a corpse. Revolted by his own image, Draco closed his eyes and long locks of dirty hair fell over his face. It brushed past his shoulders now which only gave more evidence for the amount of time he had been locked up.

Another fit of shivering took him over and when it stopped, Draco sat slumped against the stone cell wall.

He was so tired—*so damn tired*. His chin hit his chest a few times and Draco blearily roused each time. He had the vague thought that if he fell asleep right now, he may not wake up.

Maybe that was a good thing. Maybe then he could rest.

But he wouldn't.

He would rise again. Even that was taken from him; even eternity.

Draco forced his eyes open. He had to stay awake. At least until the food came and he could get a bit more energy to keep himself warm.

"G-Granger-er?" he called out, stumbling and shivering over her name. "G-g-grang…"

Nothing happened. She wasn't coming.

hand Draco had broken holding onto her, and the skin that had turned raw from the heat of residual heat of her wand while she had held the *fiendfyre* .

They had both been wounded in the battle, but the worst of the damage was what they had done to each other. Hermione pursed her lips at the irony of it. Blaise was looking over the top of his glasses, waiting on her to answer. She shook her head to wave him off. "It's not important."

Blaise was not easily dismissed though and tried to reach for her again, but stopped with his hand hanging over hers. "May I?"

Hermione bit her lip. She told herself that Blaise had healed her before and he was here helping her, but a strange part of her felt… nervous letting someone else touch her now. The war had left more scars than those on her hands. Slowly she held them out in front of her.

Blaise picked up his glasses from where they were resting next to the map and examined her fingers with scrutiny. "Do they hurt?"

Chocolate colored curls tossed on either side of her face as Hermione shook her head quickly. But that wasn't true, not entirely. She was just used to putting her needs to the side in an effort to make things easy and smooth for others. "Actually," she admitted, "a little. When it's cold, the ones that were broken sort of… ache on the inside."

Blaise nodded. "They weren't set correctly."

"I did the best I could," she said, trying to defend her work. She had healed Ron's arm after he was splinched and he turned out alright. It wasn't as if she didn't know what she was doing.

"You did fine, but fingers can be tricky," Blaise explained calmly. Professionally. "And it can cause some problems for you later on down the line with your wandwork."

Well… she didn't want that.

"Can you fix them?"

Blaise nodded sagely. "It'll hurt."

Hermione met his gaze. "I'm used to it."

"I'm sure you are." Blaise gave a soft, dismissive snort, but she didn't take offense at it. Strangely enough, his dry demeanor didn't bother her as it once might have. "Get ready," he warned, spreading her hand out on the table between them.

"I am—*OW!*"

Something crashed off to the side, distracting Hermione from the sudden and intense pain in her middle and ring finger. When she opened her eyes, it was to the sight of Neville rushing over, a trail of dirt in his wake.

Her curls bounced around her face when she shook her head. "There's nothing out there for you."

Draco's hand started to burn. It… it must have been because hers were… warm? But he thought they were cold. When he looked back down his hand was shaking and red. Was that because she was so warm? How else could it have gotten…

He looked back at the window. The bars were covered in frost, not stone dust.

"Nothing," he whispered, more to himself than to her.

She cupped his cheek and turned his face back to hers. Something told him to pull away, to not let her touch him, but… fuck… it had been so long since…

"Her…"

"Yes?" she answered.

Draco looked down at her. It was Hermione, everything about her was the same, down to the tousled curls she never really could get control over. *Everyfuckingthing.* Except the fact that she was the same shades of grey and white as the walls of the cell.

His cell.

His girl.

Draco relaxed into her hand and closed his eyes.

"Hermione."

"How long have your hands been like this?"

Hermione pulled back as Blaise reached across the map for her.

"They're fine," she murmured, folding them in her lap. The skin around her nails was raw and red and the fingers on her right hand tilted in slightly the wrong direction. She wasn't sure if he had seen the burn mark on the palm of her left, but judging by Blaise's serious expression, he must have.

There had been so many more people who were wounded much worse than Hermione had been after the battle and she didn't want to take up any time with the Healers that could have gone to saving someone else's life. A stabilizing charm for the broken bones and a few dabs of dittany for the burn had taken the worst of the damage away from the

But he needed her. He needed to remember what this was for and… and… if he could just see her, just have her here, it would be okay. He would be okay. As he repeated this to himself, it felt… familiar. It had worked before, hadn't it?

It would work again. It had to. He had to try at least. Try… for her.

Draco took a deep breath. "Her-Her…mione?"

"Draco," she cooed too softly. Too smoothly. It wasn't right, *she* wasn't right, or maybe… *he* wasn't right. It didn't matter, all that did was the sight of her made his heart beat a little faster. The sudden rush of it sent a strange jolt through his system, almost… almost like a warm embrace.

Yes. She helped. Whoever or whatever she was… the part of her that was Granger, helped. Draco breathed in relief and felt his eyelids start to fall closed again. He shook his head, trying to wake himself up. Not wanting to miss her now that she was here.

She blinked down expectantly at him. "You know what else will help."

It wasn't a question.

Still, Draco nodded.

He stretched out his burned arm a few times and balled his hand into a fist. Fake Granger nodded encouragingly. Gazing up at her, Draco slammed it into his jaw.

Pain ricocheted in his head. He saw white dots, then black dots, then… her.

Hermione.

"That's it," she said. So kind. So sweet. "Go on."

With her approval, Draco did it again and again, hitting his cheek, his mouth, his eye. Anything to keep the pain alive and his body awake. When his lips were leaking blood, he let it drip onto his chest. The red liquid felt like small kisses of warmth along his scars. Just like she had done.

It ran down the lines in his skin, cooling as it went until it slowed enough to stop. Eventually, he did too. His last burst of energy, beaten into himself. Draco's face ached from his abuse, but… at least he could feel it now.

Through the pain, he managed to look up at her. She was watching him curiously, as if she didn't fully understand what he was doing. Then she nodded again. "Very good, Draco. I'm… proud of you."

Proud of him. His girl was proud of him.

Draco forced himself through the pain, and smiled at her.

Hermione straightened her shirt, pulling it down. She checked that it was tucked into her trousers before running a hand over the side of her head to flatten down some of the fly-away hairs that she was sure had risen up after apparating. It was a convenient way to travel, but goodness, it did terrible things to her hair.

She didn't have time to worry about that now though. Hermione was here for a purpose, a reason, and she wasn't going to let anything stand in her way anymore. And certainly not *anyone.*

Hermione set a quick pace as she walked the two blocks over to the dimly lit side street Neville had told her the Aurors used on their breaks. It was dark, but the shock of his red hair was clearly visible to her. Maybe because she was looking for it or maybe because she had spent years sneaking around the school after hours with Ron, but either way, she recognized him immediately.

And it seemed he did the same. Even in her frazzled state, or maybe even because of it.

Ron paused, the cigarette halfway up to his mouth and burning with a soft glowing light as he took a step in her direction. "Hermione?"

She raised her chin. "Hello, Ronald."

He just stared at her for a moment and Hermione was starting to feel uncomfortable when he let out a low, "Shit!" and sharply shook his hand. His cigarette flared to life with the quick movement. Ron tossed it on the ground, grinding the butt under his shoe.

Hermione frowned and was about to tell him it was wrong to litter, but she just pursed her lips instead. She shouldn't start this off with her scolding him; no matter how much she might want to.

"What are you doing here?"

Placing her best friendly smile on her face, Hermione closed some of the distance between them. "I thought I'd come by and say hello to you."

Ron's brows rose, making the freckles on his face shift slightly. "Hermione, it's three in the morning."

"I was in the neighborhood."

A few moments of tense silence passed and Hermione started to wonder if this wasn't an idiotic idea. They weren't exactly on terms to just drop in for a chat, not to mention,

She was standing right beside him, reaching her hand out to touch his. It was cold, much too cold to be something alive and most importantly, much too cold to be Hermione.

"Stop," she said.

Draco ignored her, turning the bar faster than ever.

"Stop," Fake Granger said a little louder. Her hand closed over his, stilling it. Draco tried to keep going, tried to keep turning it, but… It wasn't turning.

It wasn't turning.

It wasn't fucking turning.

It was just as still and frozen as it always had been. He had been working it for no reason. Nothing changed. Ever.

He'd always been locked in a cell, in one way or another. Maybe he was meant to come here.

Maybe he'd always been here, in his cell. He'd tried to lock her up with him, tried to keep her with him. And that was his punishment, his real sentence, to have her here with him now.

Fake Granger pulled his hand away from the bar and flipped his palm up.

It was red and raw. Lines of blood gathered in the creases from where the skin had rubbed off. His fingers were shaking, the tips burning a purplish-blue and two were stuck in a curled position. Hermione had broken them when she was clawing at his hand around her neck. He could still see where the joints were swollen from where they never properly healed. Such a simple thing that he had once taken for granted, being able to cast a quick *episkey* and set things right again.

Now, he couldn't fix anything. Maybe he never could.

Fake Granger cradled his hand in hers. Somehow, she was making it even colder than the bars had.

"I… I almost had it," he breathed out. "It was coming… coming loose."

Fake Granger smiled sadly at him. "Was it?"

Draco stopped breathing. He searched her dead looking eyes. "W-was it?" he asked. She looked so much like… He had lost his magic, maybe… maybe the color had never come back to his vision after his last *crucio* either. Had it? He tried to remember. Tried to think about Granger, how she had looked when… when…

When what? He couldn't remember that either, not now at least. Not with… *her,* whoever she was, this close to him.

He gritted his teeth, and gripped the bars hard. He thought he was imagining it, but then… one of them… *turned.*

Draco nearly jumped back. His chest rose and fell quickly as short puffs of breath hovered in the air in front of him. He was almost too scared to try it again, but… what did he have to lose? Hope? He'd lost that long ago.

Draco wrapped his fist around it, flexing his fingers and then tilted his wrist. Oh shit. It moved again.

For the first time since he could remember, Draco felt his heart race. If he could get these bars off… If he actually could get back to her, to Hermione—

"I'm right here," her voice sounded from behind him.

Draco didn't bother to turn, he just kept working at the bar. "No, you're not." His thoughts had become heavier and every time he tried to pull something up, it fell away from him like a rock thrown in water. But he knew that she… whoever or what-the-fuck-ever she was, she was not Hermione. He knew it in the core of his being, as broken as that might be.

Fake Granger sighed. Heavily.

Draco started panting with his effort. He could feel it getting looser.

"What are you doing?"

"Getting the fuck away from you," he gritted out.

"Silly boy," Fake Granger's tone was saccharin. "Do you really think you can get out of here?"

Draco felt a faint sheen of perspiration on his forehead. "I think I can get back to her." He was so close now, he could feel it about ready to come out.

"All this time and you still have such… *wonderful* thoughts in your head."

What the fuck was she on about? It didn't matter. Nothing fucking mattered. Nothing but turning this bar. Dust from the stone was raining down on it, covering the rusted bar with a fine white coating.

"If you don't shut the fuck up, I'll show you some not so wonderful thoughts I have," Draco muttered under his breath. Then, for good measure, added, *"Bitch."*

Fake Granger laughed and the sound made him sick. He wanted her to stop. He didn't want to hear that sweet, ringing noise. He didn't want to hear Granger laughing when—*Fake Granger.*

Fake Granger.

She wasn't real. She wasn't her.

She wasn't…

Hermione was clearly in opposition with the faction that had taken control of the Ministry. Still, this was her best shot and… and she didn't really have any other options at the moment.

"Does your mother know you're smoking?" Hermione finally asked.

Ron's face broke into a silly grin, one he had worn many times before, usually because of something Harry said. *Harry*… What would he think of what she was doing? She knew what Draco would think of her here, with Ron of all people. But it was because precisely of Ron, and their history, that she had come tonight.

Hermione did her best to match Ron's expression, hoping it would set him at ease.

"No, and don't you dare tell her," he said. "She'll probably march down here and take over the Minister's office herself if she knew."

Hermione put her hand over her heart. "Your secret's safe with me."

Ron's grin hovered in his expression and then slowly faded. "Well, I uhm… gotta get back inside. I have duty in the Department of Mysteries tonight."

This was it. This was her chance.

"Oh," Hermione said in a small voice. "I was hoping… Well…" she trailed off, leaving it unsaid.

Ron tapped his fingers against the side of his leg then looked up at the clear winter sky, sighed heavily, and said, "Did you want to come inside?"

"You don't mind?" Hermione asked, trying to sound as… innocent as she could. She didn't want to tip him off. Something twisted unpleasantly inside her, but she was doing this for Draco. And for herself too. That thought was enough to get her through this.

She hoped.

Ron seemed to relax a little. "It's okay, Hermione. It would be nice to… catch up."

He opened the door and Hermione followed him in.

The Department of Mysteries looked eerily similar to the night they had broken in during their fifth year. She had been here since then of course, for Draco's trial, but it was different during the day.

Now it was empty of people and full of echoes.

Hermione had to suppress a chill down her spine as they walked down one of the hallways lined with dark tiles. She half expected to see her Death Eater at the end of it, silver eyes shining in his metal mask, like she did in her old nightmares.

She was still having them, but now they were set somewhere else. And it wasn't a Death Eater in dark robes chasing her anymore. Hermione didn't want to think about that and focused instead on her surroundings.

Ron looked different in his uniform, taller somehow, but also more… himself. She had seen him in school clothes for years of course, but they had been hand-me-downs. His Auror suit had been tailored just for him. Hermione eyed the badge on his chest. It might have been her imagination, but it seemed Ron was standing so his chest puffed out a little more.

She bit her lip to keep from smiling at that fact. He used to do the same thing when he first got his prefect badge, that was, before Umbridge had named her Inquisitorial Squad and gave them more power than prefects held. Ron had sulked about that. He had worked hard to achieve his prefect badge and had deserved it too. She had reassured him of that plenty of times when Draco had flashed his silver Inquisitorial Squad badge at them while they were on their rounds together.

It was strange, that when he was monitoring something much more dangerous than the corridors of Hogwarts, Ron was expected to do it alone.

"Aren't you supposed to have a partner?" Hermione asked, trying to make conversation.

When Ron didn't answer right away, she glanced over at him and saw him rubbing the back of his neck. "The Ministry is a little short of Aurors right now," he explained. "Quite a few went out with Kingsley." He stared straight ahead into the darkness. "Sometimes I think I should have too."

Hermione was surprised to hear this. It was Ron's brother who had headed up the new party after all. "Why didn't you?"

Ron sighed again and shrugged. "I made a promise. I made a choice."

Hermione understood that. More than he knew. If Ron knew why she was really here… he'd probably lock her up himself. Like he said, he made a choice and Hermione knew better than to expect Ron to bend over backwards for her. Not anymore.

"Seems like you made a safe one," Hermione said under her breath before she could stop herself. As soon as she noticed what she had done, Hermione covered her mouth with her hand. It was too late though. Ron had stopped and turned to face her.

She expected him to be angry or upset since he always seemed angry and upset with her these days, but instead Ron looked… a little defeated.

"I… I'm tired of fighting, Hermione. All I could think about while we were out there hunting horcruxes was whether my family was alright and what I could do to protect them. That's why I signed up for the Auror training program in the first place. I wanted to keep them safe."

"As an Auror, won't you still be fighting?"

It was only sleeting so Draco walked to the window and stuck his arms through the iron bars. When he first got here, however long ago that was, he could fit his arms up to the elbows in the slots, but now, he could slide his arms all the way through so his chest was flush with the wall. Frozen rain hit his skin, stinging like small sparks from a long dead, burnt out star.

Oh. It was night.

Draco slowly blinked and adjusted his eyes, trying to see past the storm tossed clouds, to the small fires of the stars, but it was useless. There was nothing up there, nothing out there, but more rain, more cold, more clouds. There was never anything different. The only thing that had changed, that would ever change, was him.

He almost cracked a smile at this, *almost*. Change was the one thing he had always fought against and anytime he actually did, it had always been too late. Now here, in this frozen fucking prison, he was forced to stay the same. See the same things. Feel the same feelings. Now the only change that he had coming for him was when he died, and even that change wouldn't matter because he would just come back.

And shuffle around this cell until one of these storms finally brought the tower down. Would he still be… alive down there? Under the rubble?

Would he be able to get to her then?

Draco leaned his face against the bars, letting the harsh iron burn against his cold skin, and rested his arms on the stone. He promised her… He promised he would find a way out and back to her. But she had never promised to wait. Last year he was only gone for two weeks and it had taken him six months to track her down. It had to have been months he was here. Even if he somehow produced a miracle and escaped, would she still be there? Or would she be gone too?

Or worse, would she be with someone else?

Draco's heart clenched so tightly, he felt his scars pull across his chest. No. She couldn't be with anyone else. Hermione was his girl. His only. And only his. She wouldn't…

But he couldn't help but picture Hermione taking comfort in… he couldn't remember the name anymore, but they were… someone. Someone she knew, someone she trusted. She might grow close with them again, open up to them. Fall into their arms when she needed comfort. Her lips parting, her eyes closing, her hands grasping, and her legs—

Fuck.

Even if she was able to get him out or Draco miraculously found a way to break free, they would never let him come back home. The Ministry would kill him before they let an ex-Death Eater be a part of their new world.

But even so, Hermione knew Draco wouldn't break his promise this time, so neither was she.

Hermione wasn't going to run from him. Not this time.

No, this time, she was going to run *to* him. With him. She wasn't going to let anyone stop her and once she had the Elder wand, they wouldn't be able to.

She's done what she needed to, what she had to. It hadn't been pretty, but after the Ministry had collapsed into the feeble structure it was masquerading as, Hermione had started to make new plans. Or maybe, she had started forming them in the back of her mind months ago, just as a safety precaution, just in case. Either way, this was her only option now.

Without the Ministry functioning at full strength, there was a chance she would be able to break Draco out and they wouldn't be able to follow them. But they would still need somewhere to hide, somewhere to… stay. Because once she did this, Hermione would be guilty too.

There was only one place she could think of that they wouldn't find them, *couldn't* find them, and that was the island that the Malfoys had run to last summer. As much as the Order and the Ministry tried, they hadn't been able to locate them, because to find it, one needed Malfoy blood.

She had everything of the Malfoys'; their home, their land, their gold, but that was the one thing she, a Mudblood, would never have. She had never let that fact stop her in the past and she wasn't about to start to let it now. She might be a Mudblood, but she was so much more than that. Draco had shown her that and now she was going to prove it to everyone.

A noise behind Hermione caught her attention. Brushing through the thick leaves she saw Neville and Blaise walking in. Neville was looking around with wide eyes at the overgrown plants while Blaise picked a flower and tucked it into the breast pocket of his jacket.

Hermione turned to face them. "Good. You're right on time."

"Yes," Ron sighed. "But… I can't fight my family."

She understood. Hermione understood that Ron still had the support of his loved ones around him. She understood that she had made her own sacrifices for her family's sake. And she understood that Draco had betrayed everything he ever was, everything he ever knew, just to be with her. Hermione understood it all.

A part of her couldn't fault Ron for his decision. He was just trying to save those he loved. But it still didn't change what she came here to do.

Hermione glanced back over at him a few more times as they neared the end of the hall. Ron's jaw was set, his brow furrowed. Clearly, he had more to say and Hermione was oddly interested in hearing it. When was the last time they had talked like this? When was the last time they had *talked?*

She was debating what to say to break the silence when Ron spoke again. "I heard Kingley's guard started the Order up again. Or something like it at least. I don't blame the people who went with him, but… I didn't want to be on the run again. I didn't want to hide out in broken down houses and sit there every night without knowing what was happening to my mum or dad. Luckily Ginny's out of the country. She wrote to me, asking if she could come home and I told to stay away as long as she could."

A strum of guilt ran through Hermione. She had left things… uneasy with Ginny and after tonight, would she ever have a chance to repair their friendship? Would Ginny even want to once Hermione did what she came here to do? Hermione pushed the thoughts into another messy stack and hoped it wouldn't spill over while she was still down here with Ron.

"She doesn't need to be caught up in this shit," he muttered so softly, Hermione wasn't sure if he even meant her to hear it.

"How's the rest of your family?" Hermione asked softly, finding that she actually wanted to know.

Ron shrugged one shoulder. "Bill and Fleur are talking about moving to France and Mum is in tears over it. They want to start a family, but who wants to bring a kid into all of this?" He blew out a short breath. "Dad was one of the ones who left when Kingsley did," he lowered his voice at this. "I thought things with him and Percy were getting better, but… they got so bad Percy moved in with George."

"What?" Hermione could scarcely believe it.

"I know," Ron fell in step with her. "But George has had a… really bad time of it since Fred and… He's thrown in with Percy." Hermione couldn't help but stare wide-eyed at Ron as he elaborated. It seemed he was glad to talk to her about this, like it was a relief

in a way to be able to speak freely about it all without judgement. So Hermione let him go on and did her best to remember the way he was leading her. "That's why Bill leaving is breaking Mum's heart so much. She can't stand to see her family split up like this."

Hermione had to ask. She had to know. "Is that why… you've stayed?"

He didn't say anything for a time, then, Ron opened a door for Hermione. It led to another, smaller, hallway, this one without sconces on the walls. "Best to light your wand down this one." Ron nodded towards her, making a motion for Hermione to take out her wand.

So she did, slowly, knowing Ron would recognize the wand on sight. His face flushed a little with red, making it look darker in the low light, but he didn't say anything. He just pulled out his own wand and flicked it to light the tip. When he did, Hermione gasped at the curved, black wood Ron held out in front of him.

She had forgotten he had won over Bellatrix's wand.

Ron gave her a thin lipped, flat smile. "I would have tossed it, but…" he looked down at the wand, "It…it works for me, you know?"

Hermione was still a bit too stunned to say anything. Her eyes felt dry from staring up at him for so long.

Ron led her into the darkened hallway, his voice drifted behind him, "You will."

Hermione frowned at this, but lit Draco's hawthorn wand and followed him, feeling a strange sense of tense anticipation churning inside her. Was she getting closer? Or farther away?

Not wanting either of them to think about whose wands they were carrying, Hermione pressed on with her attempts at small talk. "Are you liking being an Auror?"

"Actually yes," Ron answered easily. "I'm good at it too. Some of these people only got their first taste of fieldwork during the war and even that was heavily controlled by Ministry protocol. Everything…" He looked over at her for a moment. "Everything we did with Harry gave me more experience than most of the other recruits. A few seasoned ones as well."

"That's… " Hermione could easily remember Ron's efficiency during the Battle of Hogwarts and even how oriented he had been when Death Eaters had gotten into the castle at the end of their sixth year. He had shown great composure, especially after what he had just walked in on that night. "That's good."

She slowed for a moment and Ron stopped to turn towards her. Hermione felt her face heat. She knew Ron couldn't tell what she was thinking about, but it didn't mean that he couldn't figure it out if she didn't stop biting her lip soon.

and die, this place… What had Draco called it? A conservatory? Whatever it was, it had become wild. Large flowers bloomed on vines that crawled up the glass panes, reaching for the crystalized dome that was the ceiling.

She couldn't help but gaze in wonder as she walked in. It was warm in here, so much more than the rest of the Manor. She didn't remember it being so hot but, then again, the rest of the Manor hadn't felt like a tomb while the Malfoys were living here.

Hermione couldn't shake the feeling that she shouldn't be here, at least not on her own. She had only been here once before, with Draco, the night he told her everything he had done for her. Everything that he was paying for now. Somewhere deep inside of her, she felt she should be paying for it too. Maybe that was why they were separated; some great cosmic force trying to balance out all the wrongs in the world with… even more wrongs?

No, that couldn't be right. Since the world wasn't going to help her, then she was going to do it herself and if it was up to her, then she was doing what felt right, deep down, in what she only could think were the far reaches of her soul—that she and Draco should be together. They *belonged* together, they had *earned it.*

And if she had to go to the gates of Azkaban, to the very ends of the earth itself, by Godric, she would. Hermione had a plan, there were just a few things she needed first. It wasn't a question of if she would do it, it was a question of who could stop her.

Hermione made her way through the overgrown leaves, gently pushing them out of the way until she reached the center of the greenhouse.

Hermione looked up at the glass ceiling and the grey winter sky beyond it. It was while she was standing here with Draco on Valentine's night a year ago that she realized she didn't care. Whatever Draco had done, he had done for love. For her. He had done unthinkable, *unforgivable* things for her. Even after he thought she ran from him, even when he thought that she had left him and was fighting against him. Draco hadn't let anything stop him from getting her back.

"Wait for me. Don't run this time. Please, Sweetheart… Wait for me. I'll come back for you. I promise."

Hermione felt a chill run down her spine and shivered despite the heat of the greenhouse. She had waited. For months. For Draco. And he wasn't coming back. Any progress she might have possibly made to lessen his sentence didn't matter. The new regime would never let any concession for him pass.

Closing her eyes, Hermione pushed through all the bad memories she had to the few good ones sitting in the shadowy corner of her mind. She pulled the one of Draco, with a red toothbrush sticking out of his mouth, to the forefront of her mind.

A wisp of bright light escaped the tip of her wand and her otter patronus swam through the air in front of her. Hermione flicked her wrist, sending it to stand outside and let her guests know where she was waiting for them.

As it bounded away, so did the image of Draco smiling down at her, grinning wide and bright. Her shoulders sank a little and she tried to distract herself by adding buying a new toothbrush to her list of things to do. If everything went well today, then she could do it on her way to London.

Just a quick pop into a Muggle shop before breaking into the Ministry of Magic, yet again. Only this time, she would be on her own. Sort of. But she needed to focus on *today* first, and not get too far ahead of herself. It was easy for her thoughts to run away with her when she didn't have Harry to bounce them off of, or Ron to provide a counterpoint. Or Draco, to make them entirely. Not yet, at least.

On her way through the Manor, Hermione couldn't help but notice the layer of dust that had already started to accumulate on the various tables, vases, and paintings that lined the walls. When she had first arrived at the Manor, she had asked any elves to appear, not to make them work for her, but so she could help them. When none had, she wasn't sure if it was because they didn't have to answer to her since she technically wasn't a Malfoy or if they were gone. Either way, the state of the halls were enough to tell her that they had either found a way out of their enslavement, which was unlikely, or had been the entertainment for some Death Eaters one night.

"Sometimes the snake ate people."

Is that what happened to the elves? Is that what happened to Crookshanks?

Oh God, oh God…

Is that what would have happened to *her* if Draco hadn't helped her?

Hermione felt a hard lump in her throat and swallowed against it. Anger bubbled up inside her, no, not just anger, but rage and fury. She had been so focused lately, but all of her work had led to nothing. At the very best, she had been given a *'consideration'* for *months* of arguing Draco's case. She was tired of working with the system, of playing by their rules. She had done *everything* she was supposed to. In school, in the war, and now, and all she had gotten was…

Hermione opened the door to the greenhouse and looked in on what could only be described as a veritable jungle. While everything else around her had seemed to wither

"Come on," Ron tilted his head towards a door behind him. "Let's go down this way."

Draco was laying on his mother's 15th century Persian rug in the drawing room. Narcissa had spent half her life decorating and remodeling this room, making sure it displayed the ancient wealth and power of their line along with personal touches and effects to show off her own style and addition to the Malfoy family.

He was one of those things, at least, until she had said he wasn't her son anymore.

Draco could still feel the burn of the slap against his face and pressed his cheek harder into the plush carpet, hoping to sink down into it. Anything would be better than seeing… this.

He watched his father cower before the Dark Lord. Watched Death Eaters desecrate and defile his home. Watched the snake unhinge its jaw and head straight for him.

Draco tried to scramble away, but it was too fast, slithering towards him and closing the distance in seconds.

"No!" Draco backed up until he was against a wall. He tried kicking out at the damn thing, but it just hissed as it struck out at his boot. He screamed and kicked again, dislodging it. The snake coiled its heavy body up, scales sliding against one another, as it reared its head and flicked its tongue out in his direction.

Draco was panting; panicking because he couldn't get away. He couldn't get away. Couldn't get out. Couldn't… couldn't breathe. His chest cramped so hard that it hurt and any bit of air he was able to get down was barely enough to keep his heart racing at the speed it was currently pumping.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

He didn't want to die like this. He didn't want to die at all. He was… scared to. Terrified. Goddamn petrified.

Draco couldn't move an inch as the snake opened its mouth again, the jaws widening to show the soft pink inside and the white, dripping fangs flashing as it *struck*.

"NO!"

He was fighting. Fighting with every last fucking ounce of his strength to get it off of him. It was heavy, weighing him down until he could barely move under its weight.

Then it wasn't a snake at all. It was his father. Pinning him to the floor and sending a sharp strike down on him with the silver snake head of his cane, making his vision blot with black spots.

Draco wrestled with him for control of the cane and when Lucius finally let go, he struck Draco with the back of his hand, splitting his lip open with the silver signet ring on his hand.

"Useless boy," Lucius hissed. "The best part of you was left running down your mother's legs!"

"Father…" Draco gasped, trying to block another blow. "Father, stop!"

He was too weak to fight. Not because he was sickly, but because he was seven years old again. Lucius loomed over him like a giant. Like a god.

"You call yourself a Malfoy yet you cower like a dog!"

Draco turned his face away and tried to close his eyes, not wanting to see the malice in his father's eyes or the red stains left on his teeth from the night's wine.

"There's no magic in you anymore, boy," his father leered down at him. "No better than a Muggle. Worse than, even. At least they serve a purpose, a mean one, but a service nonetheless. You… you're nothing. *Useless."*

Draco curled into a ball, trying to cover his ears so he couldn't hear what his father was saying. He didn't mean it. He wouldn't say it in the morning, not in the light of day. If Draco could just stay out of his way until then, he could show his father that he was wrong about him. He would… kick an elf down the stairs and prove that he was better than one of them at least. Yes. That would please his father; and if Lucius was in a good mood, then Draco wouldn't have to worry about receiving another beating the following night.

Maybe, if Draco really impressed his father, they would stop altogether. What would that take?

The image of Granger in her little white dress caught his attention. She was on the floor as well. What was she doing down here?

Screaming. Crying. Pleading.

He knew this. He remembered this. His girl, paying for his crimes. She'd done nothing and yet his aunt was torturing her, cutting into her soft skin with cold steel. Her blood ran out and pooled on the floor next to her.

Draco tried to get to his feet. Tried to get to her, but he couldn't move. Something was wrapped around his body, holding him in place.

The fucking snake.

masters were no longer here to protect them from various Death Eaters tramping in and out. Once Lucius had died, Voldemort had taken the Manor as his residence and it was obvious that his followers had taken liberties in the Malfoy home.

Hermione peered in rooms, some untouched with the furniture still covered and others ransacked and ravaged. More than once she came across strange stains on the rugs, but the splatter marks and lingering smell gave away their true origin. Hermione knew blood stains when she saw them; the war had taught her some things too well.

When she got to the drawing room, Hermione stopped in the doorway, her legs locking up and taking her no further. She could still see it just as it had been the last time she was here, bleeding on the floor with Bellatrix leaning over her, carving into her skin. Hermione absentmindedly rubbed the scar on her arm. She could still feel the knife slicing into her; she hadn't thought four little cuts could hurt so much.

Hermione had tried to fight back and push Bellatix off, but she was already bruised and sore from what she and Draco had done that morning and she had tired quickly. Bellatrix's laugh had echoed around the room, bouncing off the walls and mixing with her own scream and then… and then…

Hermione's eyes were locked on the spot where Crookshanks' body had lain. She didn't want to look at it anymore, didn't want to see it. When she forced her eyes closed, she saw Draco falling to the floor, blood dripping off his face and seeping through his shirt. His mouth was open in a silent scream, but his eyes… Goodness, his eyes, they had been a dark shade of swirling grey and focused solely on her. Like they were the only people in the room, just him and her…

She only pulled her eyes away from his to catch his wand, *her* wand after that moment. Draco had thrown it to her, for her. Hermione pulled the hawthorn wand out of her pocket and held it tight. He had given her so much more than a wand in that moment. He had given her… everything she had always wanted.

"I said… to get the fuck off my girl. ***She's mine."***

His girl. She still was. And he would be her Draco, just as soon as she got him… well, maybe not home, but *back*. She was going to get everything back—that is, everything she still could. Some things were gone forever, but Hermione wasn't going to lose anything else, not while she was still able to fight.

She flicked her wand and the doors to the drawing room closed and locked. There was nothing she needed in there now and… and Neville would want to see the greenhouse anyway. She would have him and Blaise meet her there.

"...do something for yourself instead of trying to save the world all the time…"

Hermione narrowed her eyes. Draco hadn't been right when he said that, but he hadn't been wrong either. It was a paradox that she often found herself in when it came to him, and she actually found it quite annoying. And… a little endearing. Blaise was right, they were perfect for each other. Hermione smiled as the last of the fog cleared from the window pane.

And as she watched thick, colorless clouds gather in the distance, their cold autumn wind blowing the curls back off her shoulders, Hermione settled on the fact that the world that she had fought for, that Harry had died for, was not this one.

So she didn't want it anymore.

All she wanted was Draco.

The world could save itself, she was going to save him.

Hermione had not given much thought to the state of the Manor, but now knowing that she was about to have guests, she looked around with new eyes. The house was charmed and warded, but Death Eaters had made this place their headquarters and it showed the signs in every room. While the Malfoys had inhabited their Manor, it had been kept in form. She remembered how elegant everything had looked the few chances she got to see beyond Draco's room and study.

She thought often about the months she was kept captive here. She had barely ever been allowed out, but now she had free reign of the entire estate. More than that, she was now its… caretaker.

She wanted it to look presentable, for Draco's sake, when Blaise and Neville arrived. Even though she could do as she pleased now, Hermione had really just stuck to the few places she felt comfortable in. Her work was organized in neat piles on Draco's desk and a few books were stacked on the floor. In the evenings, when she would eventually become so exhausted she had to sleep, Hermione would retreat into Draco's room, lock the goblin wrought iron knob, and collapse into his —*their*—bed.

Other than that, Hermione had ignored the rest of the house. She hadn't even seen a house elf and often worried what might have befallen the poor creatures once their

It had coiled its length, enveloping him from knees to shoulders. When it squeezed, a harsh breath was forced out of his lungs and he couldn't get them to inflate again.

Struggling and thrashing, Draco tried to loosen its hold but nothing he did helped. He was as his father said—useless.

Draco watched as Hermione cried while Bellatrix laughed, cutting deeper into her, spilling more blood. Too much blood.

"Her…" Draco tried to say her name one last time. Let her know he was still trying to get to her, still trying to keep his promise, even as the room darkened and his vision gave out.

When he woke up, he was on the floor of his cell with Fake Granger leaning over and looking at him curiously, as if he were some strange specimen in one of Snape's jars. A project to be studied and experimented on. She was inches from his face; near enough that if he wanted, Draco could reach out and touch her.

Feel her.

Kiss her.

"So close," she murmured.

"Get the fuck away from me," Draco spat venomously.

Fake Granger straightened up, narrowing her eyes coolly.

"Don't fucking touch me, bitch." He propped himself up on his elbows and dug the heel of his boots in to push himself a few inches away from her.

She wasn't Granger. She wasn't Hermione.

Fake Granger crossed her arms and cocked her hip to the side. "That pesky little ticker of yours, it just won't give up, will it?"

What the fuck was she on about?

"What the fuck are you on about?"

He didn't have time to mince words.

"You still *love* her."

Draco let out a harsh laugh. "What are you, fucking stupid? Of course I still love her."

Fake Granger sighed. "And me?"

Draco sneered at her, pouring all his own self loathing into it, hoping to drive the point home. "You? You are *nothing* to me."

Her lips twisted and she tapped her foot on the floor. Or… was she even *touching* the floor? Did she… have feet? And since when was Granger—Fake Granger—wearing a cloak? His line of thought was disrupted by her response. "We'll see about that. You're getting weaker every day. It won't be long now."

"Fuck you." Draco sank back down, shivering as his sweat drenched back touched the cold stone.

He waited to hear her rebuttal, but when he lifted his head back up she was gone. He was utterly alone.

Draco stared at the window, disturbed by what he was feeling. Disturbed that he was… lonely, without her.

When she was here at least he could… annoy her. Argue with her. Fight with her. Relive every fucked up thing he ever did to her.

Fucking *remember* her.

Hermione.

His girl.

His only…

And without her, what did he have? Draco curled his body up, trying to conserve what little body heat he had from the winter wind blowing in from the window. Just some thin blood and a cursed name. And the fucked up soul trapped inside.

The one she didn't want to love her.

The one that always would.

No matter how weak it—or he—was. And he was. Because even now, he wished she would come back, even to torture him. Just so he could see her again.

Because as long as he held on, she kept coming.

So Draco didn't let go; not of himself and not of his girl. He couldn't. He never could when it came to Hermione.

Ron led them down another long hallway. It felt like it was getting smaller the further down they went. Hermione felt her arm brush against his a few times and did her best to tuck her elbows into her sides. Ron cleared his throat and shifted a little, veering closer to the wall on his side.

Hermione didn't know if that was a good sign or not.

Was she being too weird about this? Should she be… nicer? Should she—

and effectively and this includes threats we have already identified and imprisoned. We cannot allow such individuals to exist in our world any longer'."

Hermione set the paper down in a strangely calm manner. Maybe because she had spent the better part of the night crying out all the weakness within her, or maybe because she was just so tired of things being snatched away from her at the last minute, she wasn't as upset as she thought she would be at this news. Hermione moved to stand in front of the window, looking out at the grounds as she had done so many times before.

She had thought the lowest she could ever feel was last year at this time, when she had been trekking across the countryside, trying to survive a war that the love of her life was fighting on the other side of. But at least then she had her two best friends with her, at least then she knew that Draco was… maybe not okay, but better than he was now. And at least then she still had hope.

She still had hope that they could win the war, that there could be some sort of life for her and Draco after all of this, where they could be… *them*. And maybe one day, her friends could be happy for them too. Harry seemed close to it, before… Hermione breathed out heavily, watching it fog up the glass in front of her.

Draco had left her all of this, but… she didn't want it without him. What was all the gold in the vaults and the huge house and the grand estate without… without him? What was she without him? Hermione had always thought Draco had broken her heart and he did, but… he had always put it back together again. He had always fixed it, all of it, like he promised to.

But Draco wasn't here to do that now and Hermione was… waiting. She hadn't promised him that as he was hauled away, at least not out loud, but she meant it where it counted. In her heart. Draco had made promises to her too. Her fingers ran over the heavy ring again. They were supposed to be together; they were supposed to be happy.

But Hermione was as far from happy as she had ever been. And as far from Draco as well. If she couldn't help him come back, then… then what was left for her here? Only more heartache.

She wasn't the one locked away in Azkaban, but how she felt right now, she might as well be.

It seemed like a lifetime ago that Harry had sat on the beach beside her and told her that he wanted her to be happy. She hadn't seen it as a goodbye in the moment, but looking back now, it almost sounded like a final request. To give herself the chance to live her life how she wanted to—on her own terms. Not for him or Dumbledore or anyone else.

Chapter Twenty Nine

Draco had always been cold. Ever since he was a child, his mother had bundled him up in fine coats and thick clothes to ward it off. He had hated being in the dungeons at school. The damp got into his bones and stayed there. Some of the only times he felt… right was when he was on a broom, flying out underneath the sun. That was until he started drinking, and then the burn of the liquor replaced whatever he was missing, in more ways than one.

It worked. Until he met Granger.

After her, nothing was enough.

So it was strange that after months of freezing and shivering, he felt warm hands on him again. Soft and small. He knew those hands, but Fake Granger had never felt warm before. Now all he could feel was the heat from her arm around him, propping his upper body up while also hauling him along… somefuckingwhere.

He didn't know. He could barely even see straight. Everything was spinning. And grey.

And oh look, there was the floor.

"No, Draco!" she called out, the frustration and annoyance clear in her voice. "You can't… Get *up!*"

She was pulling on his arm and Draco had the thought, the idea, that it should hurt, but he felt… fine. Great, actually. He felt… Hermione's hand closed around his.

"Please," her voice cracked. "Please get up, Draco. We don't have much time and—" Her voice faded, sounding very far away despite the fact that he was pretty sure he wasn't moving.

Fuck it. He'd do it for her.

Draco forced his eyes open and the image of her swam in front of him. "Sweetheart…"

"Yes," Granger said waspishly. "It's still me. And if you don't want to stay here, you have to get up and come with me."

"Come… with you," Draco repeated slowly. The words seemed familiar, but didn't make much sense to him. Still… Granger had always been smarter than him. Maybe they made sense to her.

"Please," she begged, her eyes were… were…

Weren't grey.

They were big and beautiful and… *brown.*

Like a doe. Like burnt cinnamon. Like…his girl.

The image of her doubled and wavered slightly in front of him, blending in with the stone behind her. Draco tried to blink, tried to focus, but the more he tried, the worse it got until he couldn't tell one Granger from the other.

Had they been brown? Had he *really* seen that? Had he seen the gaping mouth and empty sockets coming at him? Or was it all some trick she had shown him? There wasn't anything warm in Azkaban, but… hadn't he seen fire? Felt it?

Felt… her? Was this real?

His head hurt too much to figure it out. She'd taken him down into his soul and now she was taking him… somewhere else. Maybe this was another memory. Was she going to show him the Muggle family he'd tortured with his Aunt and Uncle? Granger said they got away but… He hadn't. He wasn't ever getting away. Not from the things he had done. Not from himself.

Shit. He was so tired. Dead tired.

Wouldn't she let him rest? Just for a little while. Just for…

"If you don't get up, I'm going to have to charm you and it will be harder to fight our way out so I need you to stand *up!*"

She felt Draco's soul as it slipped back into his mouth. She kissed him deeper, harder, with all the love she had ever felt for him, pouring into that one kiss and hoping, praying, it wouldn't be the last one.

Then suddenly, impossibly, Draco's lips moved. They were kissing her back—*he* was kissing her back!

Draco's hand was in her hair, pulling her curls into a tight fist and pushing her down on him, kissing her fully, urgently, like this life depended on it and… maybe it did because Hermione was pretty sure her own life would have ended if Draco wasn't pulling her closer, on top of him, growling into her mouth like he was *starved* for her.

She felt his teeth graze across her lip before it captured it and bit down, hard. Hermione let out a moan that was half his name and half nothing that could be called language as her eyes started to roll back in her head.

He licked at the tender spot with a swipe of his tongue. "Hello, Sweetheart," Draco breathed out and her whole body shook at the sound of his voice. "I told you I'd come for you, but…" Hermione choked back a tearful sob. "You came to me, didn't you?"

"Yes," she forced out past the painful lump in her throat. "Yes, Draco, I came to you."

She wanted him to… jump up and grab her, but instead Draco just took a deep breath, as if he had been holding it all this time and let his eyes begin to close. Right before they did, Draco's lips twitched into something like a smirk and something like a smile.

"That's my girl."

and the chimera closed its jaws around the dementor's skull. It snapped with a sickening pop and a thick sludge leaked out in a hot stream, hissing as it spread across the frozen floor.

The otter bounded through the air, circling Draco and protecting him. Hermione was breathing hard, too hard, and her legs were shaking as she stepped forward. She barely felt the floor beneath her when she sank to her knees next to him. He was still, deathly so, and looked more dead than alive.

In fact, the only proof that he wasn't was the small ball of light hovering above his lips which were quickly turning blue.

"Oh God, oh God… Draco…" Hermione took him in her arms, pulling him into her lap. Burning tears fell from her eyes freely, raining down around the wisp of his soul, still hovering outside of his body. "I… I don't know how to help you," Hermione sobbed.

She… she *didn't know*.

It was just sitting there, an inch from his darkening lips. No air disturbed it now and Hermione was gripped with the thought that Draco might not be strong enough without it to… to go on.

"Breathe!" Hermione grabbed his face. It was cold in her hands. "Breathe, Draco! Please!"

If he would just inhale, it would slip back into him. But he wasn't. Draco wasn't doing anything.

But she would. Hermione was *not* going to lose him. Not now, not ever. This wasn't over until she said it was and… this wasn't going to be over for a long, *long* time. She has fought for this future and she'd… she'd be *damned* before she lost it.

"Breathe, damn you!" Hermione pushed one hand into his chest and curled it into a fist against his heart. *Her* heart. Because it was hers, and hers was his. Even if there wasn't breath in his lungs or a soul in his body.

She didn't *care*. If Draco was left a shell of a person or… a living corpse, it didn't matter. She would love him anyway. She would love him because she didn't think she could stop. She *knew* she couldn't. Not now, not ever.

Without a thought, without a plan, Hermione did the only thing that she felt she could. What she had dreamed of doing all this time. She kissed him.

Her lips landed on his and she felt something warm, if that was even the right word of it. What it really felt like was… comfort, like safety, like… *love*.

"Bossy… bitch," Draco mumbled and shoved against whatever surface was closest to him. Gradually, his legs bent and straightened under him. As soon as he was upright, he nearly fell over from the effort.

"No no no!" Granger grabbed him around his middle again. "Don't you *dare* fall down on me again."

Fine, fine. She always had so many demands. But for Granger, or… whoever or whatever she was… he would…

He…

"Draco!" Hermione shouted out his name as he felt her arm slipping from around him. "NO!"

Draco was on fire. His skin was burning and coated in a slick sweat which cooled too quickly in the frozen air. Hermione held his face in her hands and watched it flush a bright pink from the fever, followed by a sickly shade of yellow around his temples. A lock of hair stuck to him, long enough to run down the side of his face and to his neck. Hermione tried to brush it back, but he swatted her hand away.

"Don't touch me," Draco snarled. The way he was looking at her was so different from just a few moments ago. He had smiled and called her Sweetheart, but now he was glowering at her like he… like he *hated* her. It was an expression she knew well. Draco had looked at her like that for years.

She'd almost forgotten how much it hurt.

Hermione told herself the gleam in his eyes was from the fever, not from some misplaced or residual anger he was holding against her.

It didn't matter right now. They needed to get out and after that, they could talk about whatever they needed to. Most importantly, they would have the time to talk about it. They had gotten through everything else; the war, the prejudices, *their relationship* … Whatever Draco was upset about now, they would get through it too.

As long as he didn't keel over again.

Getting down the stairs had nearly killed them both. Draco had leaned too far forward and they had tumbled down at least half a dozen stone steps. They were surprisingly sharp

for how old the prison was, but as Hermione bumped and hit various bones and limbs, she remembered Dementors didn't walk so the only people who could have worn down the stairs were prisoners. And there weren't a lot of them coming and going.

Hermione landed on top of Draco with a huff. A few tangled curls had fallen down around them as Hermione gazed down into his hazy grey eyes, pausing and trying to recognize some sort of lucidity in him. She couldn't help but be a little distracted by the feel of him under her. He was thinner, but… he was still Draco.

Good Godric, she had missed him.

"Are you going to kiss me now?" Draco asked, sounding so much like himself that for a moment she couldn't even breathe. She wanted to. Hermione glanced down at his chapped lips. She wanted to lose herself—right here, right now—and just kiss him. Just hold him. Just give in to the dangerous, ecstatic feeling that was floating around inside her and almost enough to make her…

The howling cry of a prisoner reminded Hermione where they still were, and how far they still had to go.

"If you stand up, I'll kiss you." Hermione pushed herself up, removing her body from on top of his because if she didn't… Goodness.

Draco sighed and laid his head back. "I knew you were all talk."

"All talk?!" Hermione said loudly, causing a ruckus to break out in the nearby cells. Prisoners pleaded for help, shouted obscenities, and made strange, barely human noises from within their confines. Even though they couldn't get out, Hermione still held her wand aloft, readying it for an attack.

If one did come, it wouldn't be from the prisoners and it was purely a miracle they had made it as far as they had without encountering more Dementors. Their absence made an eerie chill creep up the back of Hermione's neck. If they weren't here, then where were they? There was only one way to find out.

"Get *UP!"* Hermione pulled on Draco, getting his torso up enough that he was able to brace himself against the floor.

It was hard enough getting here and getting *in,* she didn't think it would be even more difficult getting out.

Hermione had never even ridden on a motorcycle, let alone a flying one, and her experience on a broom or a thestral had been limited. *Very* limited. She wasn't sure she would have been able to make it without the Elder wand. It was powerful, yes, but what she was more stunned by was the way it just *worked* for her, with her, as if it had been hers all along, just waiting for her to take it.

There was only one way to find out.

Hermione took a bracingly cold breath, holding it in her chest, keeping it from collapsing before she spoke the incantation. *"Ignis—"*

The dementor, still distracted by the body in its grasp, bent low enough to… to kiss him. It's mouth opened to a gaping black hole and… and Draco's eyes *fluttered.*

Corpses didn't blink. They didn't have to. But Draco… *did.*

Hermione caught the faintest glimpse of his storm grey eyes before the lids fell closed again.

Hermione's chest seized and her heart thumped heavily inside of it. Draco… Draco was *alive.*

He was still alive!

The dementor made a low, gasping noise and Draco's thin frame gave a jerk, like something was being pulled from deep inside.

She saw it then, the small pale light, flickering faintly as it passed through Draco's shivering lips. It hovered there, in between them.

His soul.

It wasn't black or disfigured at all. It was… beautiful. Perfect. *Pure.*

Draco exhaled, the puff of breath encircling the small speck of light for a moment as he whispered her name.

"Hermione."

It was that sound that jolted her back into the moment, in the cell, into the absolute dire situation she had walked in on.

The dementor's black maw opened wider, gasping as it leaned it to… to swallow Draco's soul.

No.

No.

She wasn't going to let anyone, or anything, put another claim on his soul.

No one. No one but her.

Hermione raised the hawthorn wand in tandem with the Elder wand and the room was engulfed in a bright white light and a searing unbearable heat.

The otter bounded through the air, dancing and diving around the dementor until it drew back, dropping Draco to the floor. When it pulled back against the wall, the chimera pounced, landing heavily on the dementor's skeletal chest.

It roared in the dementor's face, causing the hood to fall back and expose a molting, grey skull, eyeless pits, and a deep, heaving mouth. Hermione focused the Elder wand

It was too late.

She had seen his reanimated corpse too many times in her dreams, her nightmares, but it did not prepare her for seeing it in real life. And that is what this was, all too real. His hair was long, brushing past the tops of his shoulders. It was not the bright, silver blond she was used to, but drab and faded to a dirty, dusty grey. When it fell back, she was able to see his face.

Draco's eyes were closed, but she could see the blue paths of his veins tracing around them, running up to his temple and darkening under the sunken sockets. His face was thin, thinner than she'd ever seen it and hanging open, his colorless lips pulling back over his somehow still white teeth.

This wasn't happening. She couldn't be too late, she just… couldn't. But the proof was right in front of her face. She refused to believe Draco was a Death Eater until she had seen proof, but even now, with his body in front of her, Hermione didn't want to believe he was really… That Draco was…

Dead.

She had worked for months trying to get here and now that she was, everything was happening so fast she was struggling trying to process it all.

It was all so much that she almost didn't fully register the dementor hanging over Draco's body, holding him tenderly, in an almost… intimate way.

Hermione felt her broken heart beat a painful rage in her chest. This… *thing,* this monster, had Draco in its skeletal, boney arms. The same way she had hoped to hold him so many times. Hermione took a step into the cell, and raised the Elder wand up in front of her.

She felt the spark of fury in her start to give way under the crushing weight of her sudden grief. God, no *cruciatus* had ever hurt like this. This was a pain beyond what could be felt, it was overwhelming, all consuming. There wasn't even room in her head for any real thoughts. For the first time in her life, her mind was entirely blank, just blinding, bright white hot pain.

What… what was she supposed to do now that Draco was… was… gone?

"Burn my body when I'm dead."

"I want out."

"There's only one way to stop being a Death Eater."

Hermione watched the dementor bend closer to Draco, embracing him like a lover as his head fell back. She knew the incantation and… it wasn't tested, it wasn't proven, but there was a good chance that fiendfyre would work on the dementor too.

Hermione had always been skilled at magic, having studied it from the day she found out she was a witch, but with this wand she could do things even greater than any magic she had read about.

And she was doing it for him.

It was all for him.

"Come on…" She huffed as she wrapped Draco's arm around her neck and put hers around his middle again, doing her best to support him. He was moving better and they actually made some progress before he started to slow again. "Don't stop now, Draco."

Hermione pulled on him, trying to get him to keep moving, but his boots slid to a stop and a violent shiver ran through him, almost enough to make Hermione lose her grip.

"Her…" Draco rasped and Hermione turned to see a dark and looming figure blocking their path.

"Draco," she said seriously. "We have to go. *Now."*

But Draco did move. "You… You came to me," he repeated, almost affectionately and Hermione froze. "Didn't you… Sweetheart?"

She looked between Draco and the Dementor. It was gliding closer, and against all reason, Draco was starting to lean forward. His boot dragged along the ground in a small step.

Hermione pushed one hand against his chest, feeling his scars through his thin shirt, and held out the Elder wand with the other. "Draco, stop!" Anger and confusion built up inside her quickly. What was Draco *doing?!* And… why was he calling… *that* Sweetheart? Despite everything else she should have been doing, Hermione couldn't help but be a little… jealous.

Draco strained against her, trying to move towards the Dementor. Hermione could already feel the temperature dropping around them. She began to shiver, holding onto Draco tighter to keep him with her, but also because his fevered skin was the only source of warmth. Cold crept through her veins, spreading through her limbs at a slow but steady pace. She swallowed as it moved up her neck, making her feel like…like everything she had done had been for nothing.

There was no way they were getting out of here; she was foolish to even try. Who did she think she was? A great and powerful witch who was going to set things right just by *hoping* they would work out? She was just a stupid girl who wished for the best and was always let down.

The messy piles in her mind closed in, making her feel trapped between them as they loomed heavily over her. Hermione had always done what she was supposed to and it had never been good enough. She had never been good enough.

Even Draco had called her a Mudblood.

Hermione closed her eyes, and blocked out the thoughts that were trying to slither into her head. It was because of the Dementor, she knew that. She also knew this was what Draco had endured for so long and she wasn't going to let that happen to him. She wasn't going to let him suffer, not anymore. She was going to fix this.

So Hermione tried to think of Draco smiling and happy, laying in bed with her, laughing in the restricted section with his arm around her… But the closer the Dementor came, the harder it was for Hermione to think of a good memory. Flashes of Draco drunkenly yelling at her ran through her mind. Draco snarling in her face that he was done with her. Draco… pushing his boot into her chest as he pinned her down in the mud.

Then he really was pushing her away. Draco shoved his hands into her shoulders, trying to dislodge her from him. His eyes were focused on the Dementor with a glassy look in them. "I'll be good this time," he said. "I promise. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

It was everything she wanted to hear from him and he wasn't even saying it to *her*.

Hermione grabbed onto his shirt and felt it rip as he struggled to get away. Her emotions were raw and ragged and she found herself starting to get angry with him too. She knew he was sick and weak and… confused, but she was… she was here! Right here, with him. Didn't he… didn't he know that? Didn't he care?

Draco's body relaxed as the Dementor stopped halfway down the corridor from them. Hermione felt her fingers starting to go numb around her wand as she kept it trained in that direction.

"Draco," she said, trying to turn his face to hers. "Draco, look at me!" His misty grey eyes landed on her. "I'm right here. I'll always be here. I love you."

If she could just get him to snap into sanity for just a moment, she could focus enough to cast a Patronus and get them…

Draco's face twisted, a cruel expression seeping onto it. "You're not her," he snarled and Hermione's heart froze in her chest. "I love *her*. Hermione. *My* girl," he spat. "You're nothing."

What… What was going on?! Hot tears sprung into her eyes, but she quickly wiped them away. Draco had hurt her plenty of times, mostly on purpose, but for some reason this one stabbed into her like a knife.

The light around them was growing dimmer. "Will you still… Will she still be here? After?"

"You'll be with me then."

"But not her."

Granger's face fell. "What difference does it make? Your suffering will be over."

Something sparked in him, something he hadn't felt in a very long time. Draco smirked. "This isn't over until I say it is."

He felt… heat. It burned. He'd almost forgotten what that felt like. So much like freezing, but there was something about it that felt… nice. Something he had missed. Something he longed for.

"I've waited… so long," she sounded almost pained. "I want you, Draco. All of you."

Granger grabbed onto his face. She was surprisingly strong and Draco felt her fingers digging into his cheeks, trying to pry his mouth open. *"Give it to us."* Her voice dropped lower, turning raspy and parched.

"We're…"

Draco pulled back just far enough to see her eyes sink back into her head, forming deep, fathomless holes. Her lips cracked, turning into rotted, grey skin as they pulled back.

He tried to push her away, but he had nowhere to go. His back was against the cell wall and Fake Granger wasn't Granger anymore. It was a putrid, mummified face surrounded by a black hood that loomed over him.

"...hungry!"

Draco opened his mouth to scream, but before any sound came out, everything went a blinding white.

With a long bang and a resounding thud, the door to Draco's cell flew off its frozen hinges and landed on the floor, sliding a few feet before it came to a stop. Hermione stood in the doorway, hardly willing to believe what her eyes were seeing. She had come all this way, done everything she could think of to rescue Draco and…

blinked her cold, colorless eyes at him. "You should recognize it. You made this place after all." A strange cold sinking feeling ran down his spine, making the hairs on the back of his neck prickle.

Fake Granger paused when her face was less than an inch from his. "We're in your soul, Draco."

The blood in his veins froze.

No. Fuck no. This couldn't be… but… there was nothing here…

"I know," she cooed, reaching up to place a clammy hand on the back of his neck. "It's not that…" she pursed her lips, *"impressive,* but…" she pulled herself closer to him and her breath, cold as ice, brushed against his lips. "I'd still take it, if you let me."

Draco's brows pulled together slightly. "Take it?"

"I'd take it all. The pain, the hurt, the worry, the fear…"

His mind seemed to slow. She looked so much like his Granger. So much… "You… you would?"

Fake Granger bit her lip and nodded. "All you have to do," she whispered, "is kiss me."

Draco glanced down at her lips. They were devoid of color, but even so they were still full and soft and he wondered if they would be warm if he pressed his own against them. He missed her so much.

So. Fucking. Much.

Draco gazed down at the Fake Granger.

What if this was all he got?

What if this was what he deserved?

Her nails dug into the skin on his neck, pressing him down. "Kiss me, Draco."

He hesitated. Draco swallowed hard and closed his eyes tightly. "I know that… you don't want someone like me to love you, but… I do." He opened his eyes back up, but she wasn't there. It was just the shadow of her, greyed out, false version of her. But at least she was *here.*

Draco bent his head down in a bow. "I love you, Hermione Granger."

"I know you do," she cooed, pushing her fingers into his hair. "I can feel it."

"Yeah?" he asked quietly.

"Mmm." She pulled her lips into her mouth, letting her tongue run along them before releasing them into a soft pout.

"Will I… Will I feel it?" Draco's voice shook.

Hermione —*Granger*—shook her head. "You won't feel anything."

This wasn't Draco hurting her, this was… Hermione hurting *for* him. Draco was even worse off than she had thought. That fact scared her, almost as much as the dazed look on his face, as if he wasn't even really seeing her, as if she wasn't there… Or, worse, as if *he* wasn't.

"I *am* Hermione Granger," she said solidly, "and you are Draco Malfoy and *we* … " She pulled on his arm, trying to get him to move again. "Urgh!" Hermione shouted, grabbing her tangled hair and almost pulling it out. "We don't have *time* for this, Draco!"

But Draco's brow just furrowed and he blinked, almost like he recognized her for a moment. But it wasn't enough; whatever surfaced slipped back under, and the vague, vacant expression slid over his face again. She hadn't planned on Draco helping her fight her way out, but she at least thought he would be able to walk out beside her.

If Draco didn't work with her, they would never get out of here. And she wasn't going to let that happen. She wasn't going to let anything happen to him. She was going to protect him, take care of him…

The idea popped into her head like a little bubble and without too much afterthought, Hermione decided to do it. She didn't have much of a choice, and well… Draco was making all the wrong ones anyway.

Hermione pointed her wand at Draco. That at least got his attention. He stiffened and stood up a little taller. Adjusting for the added inches, Hermione held Draco's gaze with her own and braced herself as she said, *"Imperio."*

It happened in a split second. She was no longer in that crudely carved corridor, but a vast open space. It looked like… ruins. Marble columns and walls lay broken all around her, shattered and cracked. Some had scorch marks on them and in the distance she could see black smoke rising. What… What had happened here?

"Draco?" she called out and was surprised by the empty echo that sounded all around her. "Draco!"

She looked around, hoping for some sign or… sense of him, but there was… there was nothing. Oh God…

"Draco!"

"Granger?" The sound came from… outside, where she really was. The two images laid on top of each other for a moment. The broken white space and Draco's fever-flushed face. His mouth was open. He had spoken to her. "Hermione?"

She had to stop herself from jumping into his arms when he grinned at her.

"Which one is this, pet?" he asked and Hermione's breath caught in her chest. Draco looked around the stone hallway. "I don't remember…" He looked back at her, but his

eyes were unfocused and unblinking as he waited on her to… to tell him what to do. She could feel the streak of pride and dominance in him, so strong she thought those marble walls must have been made from it, from the very earth they were standing on, but she also felt… *love*. Is *that* what was burning in here?

Draco loved her. Draco trusted her. He always told her that she needed to tell him if he went too far, when he needed to stop. If that's what he needed, then she'd give it to him.

"Listen to me, you have to stop fighting me. I'm going to help you, Draco. I'm going to show you… the way out. Just follow me." Hermione heard her own voice echo again right before Draco started to move and… do exactly what she wanted.

"No." Another voice sounded. At first she wondered if it wasn't just another one of her echoes, but there was something… wrong with the voice, as if it wasn't used to speaking or… shouldn't be. There was an undertone that barely even sounded human when it said, "Why are you trying to leave me? Don't you love me?"

Draco swayed midstep and Hermione felt the white ruins fading.

She willed herself to hold onto them. Focusing on staying there, in Draco's mind, Hermione began to see a shadow forming from the dark smoke. She was stunned by the shape it took. It was… her. Her exact double, materializing out from behind a large chunk of broken marble.

"Stay away from him," Hermione warned, emotion trembling in her voice. She swiveled her wand back to the Dementor. It hung in the hall in front of them, a low rasping breath coming from under its tattered hood. The messy pile of thoughts in the back of Hermione's mind seemed to double in size and threatened to fall, toppling onto her and crushing her under the weight of her own insecurities.

She was a fool for coming here, for thinking she could rescue Draco from this place. Hermione turned to look at him and saw that Draco looked so… so hopeless. He looked like *she* felt. She hadn't been here long at all, but Draco had been here for months. Alone. She couldn't imagine what he must have been put through during that time.

Hermione was near crying herself, but more out of anger than of sadness. This… creature… had used her, had used *him,* for its own sick pleasure. It had been feeding off Draco, all this time, and using her image to do it.

Indignation rushed through her veins. "Draco, don't listen to it," she told him, her own voice echoing back to her around the shattered stone.

Draco was swaying on his feet again, eyes unfocused and a bead of sweat ran down the side of his face.

make out the small, innocent smile on her face. He had loved it once. Loved it still. Even if it wasn't really her that wore it. It was still hers. Just like him.

This would be a lot easier if he hadn't committed every inch of her face to memory.

Draco straightened his neck and looked down at her as she stopped right in front of him, wearing that fucking smile.

"Welcome back."

Draco looked back up at the light. It seemed to be getting dimmer. Shadows danced around the edges, slowly closing in. Or maybe he had just started fucking seeing things.

"No," Fake Granger gave a small giggle as if he was amusing her. "You're not going mad." He had gone *somewhere* though and wherever he was, he didn't like it. He wanted out.

Out.

Out.

Out.

"You're not going anywhere." She blinked her big doe eyes, but they didn't have the same effect on him now that they didn't have to deep dark depths he used to love getting lost in. Draco steadied his legs under him and tried to stand. She just stood there and watched, as if he was mildly amusing to him.

"What is this place?" he asked gruffly.

She tilted her head in a cute, curious way and Draco felt a pang ring through his chest at the sight of it. He preferred this Granger when she was torturing him to… acting like the real one. "You don't know where we are?"

Draco looked pointedly at the void swirling around the single stream of light he was standing in. "Obviously fucking not," he snapped.

Draco felt like shit. All he wanted to do was find the wall of his cell so he could prop himself up against it, but… he couldn't find anything in this fucking place. "Are you going to tell me? I never knew you to hold back a single fact about anything so get shy on me now."

He didn't know why he was getting so agitated, but there was something about… *her* that was unsettling him. She wasn't… she wasn't his Granger. She wasn't, he reminded himself. But the more he tried to focus on that thought, the harder it was. It was like she was pulling… Granger, his Granger, right from him. From his heart, from his soul.

Until… there was just her. Just her and… him.

She took a step forward, her body nearly touching him as she lifted herself up onto her toes. Draco straightened his back, the muscles tensing from having her so close. She

Draco blinked, trying to open his eyes again, but when he did, he had no idea where he was. It wasn't his cell, that was for damn sure. The white walls surrounding him were stained with smoke, laying broken and shattered along the ground. Draco glanced down, between his black boots was the little trap door he had kept the Granger in his mind locked away in. Where he had kept her safe.

Granger…

"Hermione!" Draco shouted as he wrenched it open.

It was empty.

She wasn't there. She… hadn't waited for him.

She was gone.

He was alone.

Completely and utterly *fucking* alone.

"Not entirely," her sweet voice filled his ears and he was falling, tumbling, head first into the black hole. Deeper. Farther. Until he hit the bottom.

Rock fucking bottom.

His breath was knocked out of him and for a moment he lay there, stunned and silent. Then his body curled in on itself as he coughed, sputtering, trying to get his lungs to inflate again.

They wouldn't. They weren't working.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Draco gasped, his mouth open wide, his body burning from the inside out as he tried to breathe. The darkness started to creep in, narrowing his vision until all he could see was the small, pale light shining down on him like a pillar. As he stared up at it, he choked down a single breath. The next was a little easier, still burning, but he was able to follow it with another. And another.

Draco pushed himself up, looking around into the darkness that surrounded him. He could see her, stalking around him in a circle, staying just out of reach. He could just

"Do you…" he asked hoarsely. "Do you want me to hurt myself again?" Draco was holding out his scarred arm in just the same position she had seen him do when he cursed himself. His shaking hand closed into a fist.

"Draco, NO!" Hermione shouted and his arm snapped to his side. She could feel the pull of her *Imperius* , working itself on Draco's body, forcing it to do her will.

"No…" The other Hermione said softly, sweetly as she moved closer. She was almost a perfect double, except there was no color in her, like a black and white photograph. Then it smiled and Hermione's spine stiffened. "I want you to hurt me."

Hermione tensed. The Dementor was going to try and make Draco turn on her. She knew her Draco wouldn't hurt her, but… was that who he was anymore? She could make him stop, but… she didn't want to have to.

She wanted… she wanted him back, the way he was.

Draco. Her Draco. Was he even still in there? Hermione looked into his glassy eyes, but only saw more broken, white stones.

"Think about everything I've done to you," the double in Draco's head said the same time the Dementor took another low draw of breath. "Think about everything I've made you go through. Don't you want to make me hurt too?"

Draco's hand was shaking at his side. The scarred skin pulled tightly over the muscles underneath. "I… I don't…" he said in a low voice. "I… don't want to hurt you."

"Draco…" Hermione pleaded. "Don't *do* this." It wasn't an order, but Draco's arm stayed at his side all the same. She held her wand tighter, feeling the handle press against the burn on her palm. She *had* hurt him, but it was to save him. It was what she was trying to do now too. Hermione just hoped she didn't have to… hurt him to do it.

"Look at what I've made you do." Images of torture, of blood, of drinking, and fighting, and crying, and *everything* Draco had done filtered through the expansive blank space of Draco's mind. Hermione watched herself sobbing, chained to a bed; watched Draco sitting through Death Eater meetings a few floors below as people were tortured for fun.

She saw Muggleborns being shoved in cages. Kreacher being tortured until blood ran out of his overly large ears. Cormac screaming as memories were pulled from his head. Theo backing away as Draco advanced on him. Ollivander gasping on the floor.

Then suddenly it was Ron, shouting furiously, held against bars by a Death Eater with… with Ron's wand in his hand. Hermione wanted to look away, but… couldn't. She was in his head and this… this is what was there. This was what… he'd done.

She saw… *everything.*

And then she saw Draco, his grey eyes storming as he looked down at her.

"All the hurt, all the pain… You did it all for me."

Draco was breathing heavily, his jaw tensing to the point that the muscle stood out sharply.

"Yes," he breathed out. Draco dipped his head slightly, causing his hair to fall around his shoulders.

Hermione's heart lodged in her throat and she just barely got the words out around it. "Draco, you won't hurt me."

A ghost of a smirk slid across his lips.

Hermione held his gaze. She wasn't scared.

"You *won't."*

She could feel her *Imperius* curse working against whatever hold the Hermione in his head had on him, but goodness, it had rooted itself deep in him.

"You love me." Hermione heard the words echo strangely around her, coming from her and from… it.

"I thought you didn't want someone like me to love you," Draco bit back, glaring down at her coldly.

Hermione took his face in her hands. "I didn't," she admitted. "But I was wrong. I was wrong about you, Draco. You aren't all those things you've done. You aren't…" She trailed off, still reeling from seeing it firsthand. His eyes darkened, but the fever made them shine silver. Hermione took a deep breath. "You are so much more than that."

It all happened so fast. Or… all at once. The Dementor had come closer to them, its scaly, rotted hand was reaching out, almost touching Draco. Hermione pushed him back, causing him to stumble and fall against the far wall. His breathing was labored and he started coughing so badly that she thought he was about to tip over. Something, maybe the *Imperius* curse, didn't allow him to though. Thank goodness for small favors. Hermione wasn't sure she would be able to get him up if he fell down again.

Through it all, Draco was still looking at her, like he was just waiting for her to finish what she was saying.

She'd have time to tell him everything later, once they were out of the prison and away from… Oh my. They hadn't been in this hallway for long, but it had been long enough.

There wasn't just one Dementor now, the whole corridor was full of them. It had only taken moments for what seemed like every Dementor in Azkaban to descend on them. She could feel herself growing cold, despair dripping in her, seeping into every crack and

"Of course," Hermione said quickly.

Ron grinned at her, his eyes softening to a clear shade of sky blue as he did. "Obliviate me."

"What?"

He looked a little sad right before he said, "You're the best at memory charms. And I don't want anyone to come looking for you."

Ron didn't know where she headed, other than the obvious, still, she was thankful that after all this, after everything, he wasn't working against her. It made things easier, in more ways than one.

Hermione sniffled a little and nodded. Tucking Harry's cloak underneath her arm she raised *her* wand up. It felt strong in her hand and something resonated in her, like a roar in her chest.

"Wait—" Ron held his hand up and Hermione paused. Was he changing his mind? But Ron only stuck his hand inside his trouser pocket and pulled out a set of silver keys with a keychain of a naked woman hanging from them. Hermione blinked in surprise.

"It's Sirius', " Ron said sheepishly. Then he held them out for her. "You remember that flying motorbike Hagrid used to take Harry from his Aunt and Uncle's?"

Goodness, was that thing still in one piece?

"Well, I've been fixing it up. With Dad's help. I never knew how many *wires* Muggles used. I thought the wheels just went round because they were, well, *round."*

Hermione had to stop herself from laughing at him. "Yes, they use a lot of wires," was all she managed to say.

Ron's eyes were bright and blue and he looked like the boy who had been her friend for years. He dropped the keys into her hand. "It should get you there."

Hermione felt her throat close up. She wanted to say thank you, to say *more,* but she couldn't. Water blurred her vision and Hermione quickly wiped at her eyes.

Ron stepped back. "Erase the image of Malfoy's ass too, while you're in there. I won't miss that." Hermione let out a sound that was half sob and half laugh. "I will miss you though. I'm glad I got to… *we* got to say goodbye."

This was different than saying goodbye to Harry. That had been final, but this… "I hope… someday, we will get to see each other again." Hermione raised her wand again and this time Ron didn't stop her. "I won't forget this," she said softly.

Ron rubbed at his nose, turning it red. "Goodbye, Hermione."

Hermione twisted her wrist, turning her wand in what was almost a farewell wave.

"Obliviate."

Just like Draco.

"If you think I haven't thought this through, then you don't know me at all, Ronald."

He blinked a few times as if he was deciding whether to argue back with her or not. Hermione held firm.

At last, Ron let out a long breath. "I do know you, Hermione," he admitted. "And I can't think of anyone I'd trust more to have the Elder wand." Hermione held her breath. "Way more than Percy, at least. He's my brother, but you're…" His mouth pulled in a sad smile. "You're you."

She wasn't exactly how to take this, but… for a few seconds, things felt… normal between them. Then Ron moved around her, did some strange wandwork and the locked chest in the back of the room opened. He reached in and pulled out two objects. Turning back around he held them out for her.

"Thank you," Hermione breathed out his name, "Ron."

This time, his smile was genuine. "Thank Harry."

Hermione looked down and saw the Elder wand, and… Harry's invisibility cloak. Her mind spun, wondering how and why the Ministry had two of the Deathly Hallows and where was the third, but then memories of Harry wearing the cloak flooded in her brain and she felt tears pricking at the insides of her eyes.

"Why… why are you giving me this?"

"It's not for you. It's for… him," Ron said, a little bitterly.

Blood rushed out of Hermione's head, almost making her ears ring. *What?*

"One of the things Harry said to me that night was that he wanted you to be happy and he knew there was a chance that Malfoy would have to disappear." He shifted a little uncomfortably. "When I stopped you from going to him after the battle, I kept thinking about what Harry said. I really was trying to help you," he said earnestly and Hermione felt herself frown at the memory. "Ever since then I kept wondering… if I could have helped in a different way. If… if that would have changed things between us."

Hermione opened her mouth, but she didn't know what to say. Instead, she tucked Draco's wand into her waistband again and reached out for Harry's cloak. Her hand closed around Ron's with only the thin fabric separating their skin. For a moment it felt like Harry, their third part, was together with them again.

"This does," Hermione said seriously, but allowed herself to give him a reassuring smile. "Change things."

Ron breathed out in relief then pulled his hand back just to place the Elder wand on top of the cloak. He pushed them both into her chest. "Do me one favor."

break in her heart. There was… there was no way that she'd be able to fight them all. It was hopeless. She had… failed. She had failed Draco.

Draco.

Glancing back at him, Hermione had to do a double take. Draco was resting against the wall, slumped, but still looking up at her and… *smiling.* Her heart skipped a beat.

"Hermione..."

Her brain slammed into overdrive, driven on by the fast pace of her heart. She didn't need to fight them. She didn't need *anything* but Draco. Hermione rushed to his side and Draco's hands shot into her hair, pulling her close to him and holding her there.

Holding the Elder wand out in her right hand, Hermione held onto Draco with her left and looked deep into his eyes. The vast white ruins suddenly brightened so much that it *hurt.* She didn't look away. She didn't need to for the silvery-white light to jump from the tip of her wand, wrapping itself around them before bounding off to halt the movements of the black mass of the Dementors closing in on them.

Hermione held onto Draco, letting the feeling power her patronus until he started to lean heavily on her. "Draco," Hermione gritted out, starting to bend under his weight. His eyes slid shut and the white ruins began to fall into darkness.

"Draco!" Hermione shouted as he sank to his knees in front of her. His breathing was labored and he started coughing so badly that she had to hold onto him to keep him from tipping over. She was about to order him to stand up, but worried that he wasn't strong enough for it.

"Oh God…" Hermione felt his temperature plummet as his skin turned cold and clammy. They needed to get out of here right now or… or Draco may not make it.

Hermione squeezed her eyes shut, forcing the line of tears out and not letting any more form. She knew what she needed to do, she just needed the strength to do it. "Draco—" Hermione tilted his head back, making him look at her from under his drooping lids. "Whatever happens, don't let go of me."

She felt his body react to her words and hoped that the *Imperius* would last long enough for them to get out. Draco's arms wound around her, holding onto her with all the strength he had left.

Even if there wasn't a small army of Dementors waiting for them at the end of the corridor, there was no way Draco would be able to make it the rest of the way down the tower. His cell had been on the thirteenth floor and they had only made it down one flight of stairs so far. Hermione looked around, hoping to get some sort of inspiration, but there was nothing in this place.

It was hopeless. It had been built to be hopeless.

Well, what was built could be *unbuilt*.

Hermione didn't think that was a word exactly, but she didn't need it to be, not when she had the Elder wand. All she needed was the willpower and by Godric, she had that.

Hermione pressed the tip of her wand down into a crack along the cold, stone floor. At the same time, she grabbed onto Draco and buried her face in his chest as the very floor gave way beneath them.

"Hold on to me."

He couldn't even walk on his own, where the fuck else was he going to go?

And she was warm. Fuck, she felt *so good*. Draco didn't let his hands leave her, but he did let them move, falling down to her waist and gripping it tightly, pulling her back against him.

Granger let out a small gasp. "Draco—"

Draco couldn't bring himself to open his eyes, but strangely, he didn't seem to be able to stop himself from grabbing onto every bit of her he could reach. His head fell against the back of her neck and he buried his face into her curls. Soft, so soft… His arms wrapped around her, holding her tightly.

"Draco, you're—"

"My girl," he murmured, his lips moving against the shell of her ear. Granger's body tensed against him and he spread his hands out, feeling her hip under one and the swell of her breast under the other. "Mine…"

"I can't…" Something rumbled underneath him. Them. Were they… moving? "Breathe!" Granger gasped out.

He was squeezing her, but this was the first time he had been able to feel her. In the memories she was always… so far away. Now she felt like she was everywhere, all around him. He felt like he was inside her.

Or maybe, she was in him. Had that really been her, walking through the broken wreckage of his head? He vaguely recalled her pointing a wand at him. Mmm, Granger with a wand. He liked that.

him of it, but… he thought that…" Ron looked like he could barely stomach the words he was saying. "That you and Malfoy should be… together." His freckles danced in place as his nose wrinkled. "He told me to just accept it, but I couldn't. I still…"

Hermione felt her blood buzz in her veins, like an electrical current was trapped inside her body.

"Look, are you sure you know what you're doing?" Ron asked, dropping his voice a little. "You're going to be a fugitive after this. It's going to be like it was last year and you were miserable when we were on the run. Is he… Is Malfoy worth that?"

The answer came unbidden to her lips and Hermione whispered it out like a prayer. "Yes."

Ron's brows furrowed above his eyes. "You know what you'll be giving up, don't you? I mean, God Hermione, have you even *tried* to find your parents?"

Guilt ran down her spine and hit a low pit in her stomach, making her feel sick with its weight. That answer was less simple, but she knew it all the same—No. She hadn't tried to track down her parents or even… reach out to them. By now it had been over a year since they were obliviated. As far as they knew, they didn't even have a daughter out there to miss.

They had new lives in Sydney now. If she showed up, managed to reverse her memory charm—which was notoriously difficult the longer they were in place—they would leave all that behind and come back to Britain with her. What sort of life did they have here? They had sold their practice when they moved and Draco had burned their home to cinders. There wasn't anything waiting for them here and she didn't want… she didn't want anyone else giving up their life for her.

Anyway, how was she supposed to take care of her parents while also trying to rescue Draco? It was impossible. She would have to give up Draco in order to get them back and… and Hermione had already said goodbye to them long ago.

Her family was gone; she had lost Harry who was like a brother to her and… Ron too. She had made her peace with the fact she may never see any of them again when she agreed to run with Draco.

And like Ron had said—she made a promise. She made a choice.

Hermione lifted her chin and looked up at him with blazing eyes. He just stared back at her and shook his head a little, like he always had when he didn't like the choice she had made, like not letting him copy her homework or using her free period to study in the library instead of watching Quidditch practice. It didn't matter what the choice was now, all that mattered was it was hers.

was my enemy and who wasn't. The only thing that was muddled was you and now… now it's everything else that is messed up."

He took a deep breath and it was then Hermione realized that she wasn't breathing at all. Maybe that was the reason she felt so dizzy. Or maybe it was everything Ron was saying to her. She didn't have time to decide before Ron went on.

"I keep trying to think what would Harry do, if he were here and… I keep making the wrong choices. I… I don't know what I'm doing anymore. I don't know who I am without… him. And you."

Something in his broken confession pulled at Hermione's heartstrings. She was still so mad at Ron—furious at him—for everything he had done, but… she had forgiven Draco for far worse. And Hermione knew what it was like to feel confused and lost; knew what it was like to lose a best friend.

She knew what it was like to be alone in this world.

"Ron—" she started, but he stepped closer to her, cutting her off before she could say anything more.

"I know what you're going to do with that wand and I know what it will mean. As much as I want Malfoy rotting away for all eternity, I don't want… I don't want *you* to." His shoulders slumped and Hermione could smell the stale smoke on his uniform. Ron had fought for what he thought was right, the same as she did. Maybe she wasn't the only one this new world had let down.

"There's nothing I can ever do to make up for losing Harry and I know we have had our differences. I don't expect things to go back to the way they were, but… well… I guess… I'd like to know… that you at least don't hate me." Ron flattened his lips. "I make a lot of mistakes, but I don't want that to be one of them."

She could hardly believe it. She *didn't* believe it. Ron was… helping her? He was helping… Draco?

"Yeah, I know," he went on, rubbing the back of his neck again, turning it red. "I wouldn't trust me either, but this isn't just me—it's Harry too."

"What?!" Hermione's voice echoed around the empty room.

Ron looked down at his chest then back at her from under heavy brows. "Our last night at the cottage, before…" He made a pained face, but continued. "Harry and I talked. About a lot of things. About you."

Oh God. Oh God oh God oh God.

She didn't want to hear this, which was strange because her ears were straining, desperate to know what Harry thought about… about her. "I don't know what convinced

He liked that very much.

"Let… go!" She squirmed against him.

Draco dropped his head to rest on her shoulder. His voice was little more than a rasp, but he managed to mumble, "You said not to."

A strong wind blew against his face, making his lids fluttered open and he thought he saw a small twist of a smile on her lips. Fuck, he wanted to kiss her.

Didn't she say she wanted a kiss? He'd give her one. He'd kiss her all over her body. He'd never let his lips leave her skin again. Mark up every inch of her so there would be proof that this wasn't just some dream. His head was pounding like he'd had too much to drink and he wasn't entirely sure he was… conscious, despite his body doing things, but if he was doing them, that meant she was there.

Granger was real. She had to be.

Please let her be.

Please.

They suddenly lurched up and Draco slid back. He grabbed onto her waist again, holding on as they moved… higher. Cold wind rushed over him. He knew that feeling. Were they… were they *flying?*

Draco tried to open his eyes again, but only saw water churning below him. Waves crashed against rock and lightning struck somewhere close to them. Granger twisted and they shifted direction. Draco tried to balance himself, but he couldn't find his center of gravity. He had been on a broom more times than he could count and he had never fallen off because he couldn't balance. It was like he wasn't able to control his own movements, his own actions.

Maybe this was a fever dream. Maybe he was still lying in his cell.

Maybe he was dying and Granger was taking his soul…

Then why were they going *up?* Draco's life had always progressed in a downward spiral, why would his death be any different?

Granger could lead him into the depths of hell and he would chase her down, further, harder, faster. His blood rushed in an all too familiar way.

Yeah. They were definitely flying. At least Granger was. Draco was just holding on for dear life.

Trying to rely on whatever Quidditch reflexes he still had, Draco leaned into the curve, letting the momentum roll through his body. His head fell to the side and a gust of cold wind forced his eyes open once more.

He saw a tower. A tall, grey stack of stone with a stream of… was that smoke? No… they were cloaks. Black cloaks flying out of it towards… them.

Granger twisted in his arms, pointing her wand back at them and… Draco closed his eyes as the brightest light he had ever seen sprung from the tip of it. He could feel the power radiating off it, off of… *her.* For a moment he felt like he was flying directly into the sun then a loud cracking noise made him look back.

There was his window. Small, unassuming, and pitiful looking, but his all the same. He could just make out the inside of his cell and it was… empty.

What the fuck? Was he…not *there?*

Was he… Draco was too scared to even think the word.

Then the tower was falling, crumbling in on itself.

It sounded like the earth was breaking in two. The noise seemed to shake the very air around them, churning up the clouds in a storm worse than any Draco had seen while being imprisoned.

A bolt of lightning hit the cascading rubble, sending broken bricks out in every direction. They crashed into the black figures. Some flew back into the collapsing prison while others were battered into they tumbled into the unforgiving sea beneath them.

It was a long way down, but not as high as they were.

From his vantage point, Draco watched the prison collapse in on itself. Dark waves crashed upon the rocks, swallowing it hungrily. His spine shook inside of him, making his whole body tremble, but he did not fall back down into Azkaban.

Draco held on until…

Until Azkaban was… gone.

He was… out.

Out. Out. Out.

What did that mean? No one broke out of Azkaban. They only left when they… they died. The white walls of his mind shook and shattered again, cracks ran through the dark veins of the marble, breaking it down even further.

He was dying.

No. He was dead.

He was dead and… Draco's body started to shake violently. He couldn't stop it, couldn't control it.

Oh shit. Shit. Shit. Shit.

No. Please no.

But Draco's would still work if she had to use it. If it came to it, it would take whoever came on patrol next a while to find Ron down here, which would give her ample time to search the Department of Mysteries for the Elder wand. All she needed was the opportunity to petrify Ron. She didn't plan on hurting him, not if she didn't have to. Draco had left him for dead down here, Hermione was just going to leave him… alone.

The door closed behind them. There wasn't much in the room, just a few shelves with dusty instruments and a chest with a large lock on it in the corner. The only light came from their wands and Hermione kept hers close to her chest, finding comfort in the small bubble of white light.

"Ron, what are we doing in here?" Her heart was beating madly. Why had they come here? What was this place?

Ron was still behind her when he said, "We? There is no *'we',* Hermione."

Her confusion was mixing with her anxiety, making her lightheaded. There were too many thoughts in her head and not enough blood. This had all been too easy; she felt like on some level she had known that all along, but she was so… so *desperate* that she was willing to take the chance, to risk it.

It's what Harry would have done.

Hermione tried to steele herself, summoning up her courage, but her brain was racing so far ahead it was hard to align the two.

"I figured it was only a matter of time," Ron stepped in front of her, "before you came back."

Hermione got herself ready for… for whatever came next. She was down here with him, alone, and no one had any idea where she was. There wasn't even another Auror on patrol so even if she screamed or ran, there would be no one to help her.

But Hermione didn't need help. She needed her wand. The Elder wand. It was what she was here for and she *wasn't* leaving without it.

"I am the only one, Hermione," Ron approached her. He had filled out since being on the run last year. He must have started a physical training regimen to go with his Auror training too. She glanced down at Bellatrix's wand in his hand then quickly back up. Her nose wrinkled a little when she smelled the tobacco on his breath. "—the only one who can help you get your wand back."

The air left her chest in a rush. "W-what?"

Ron shook his head. "I've thought about this a lot, what it would mean, what I would… would do. And… Well, I know I said we weren't friends anymore and maybe we won't ever be again, but… Godric, Hermione—it was all so clear during the war, who

side by side. At first, Hermione shied away from this familiarity with him, but eventually forced herself to relax. She still kept Draco's wand tight in her grip and raised it enough that Ron would see it if he looked in her direction.

But he didn't. It seemed like he was concentrating on where they were going or at least thinking heavily about it. Or something. She knew almost every one of Ron's expressions and that one was normally reserved for long essays or complicated research. The only thing she didn't know, was how she factored into that.

Hermione found herself checking him from the corner of her eye more than was normal. It was hard not to though, she wanted some indication of what was going on in Ron's head to distract her from what was going on in hers.

She had planned it all out, as best as she could. The last time she broke into the Ministry, it had taken her, Harry, and Ron a month to plan it all out. This time, Hermione had only had a few days; and who knew how much time Draco had left? Was she already too late? When she got to him, would Draco even still be Draco anymore?

If he wasn't, who would she be without him?

It was all too easy now for Hermione to get lost in the messy thoughts of her head and it had happened again. She hadn't even noticed that they had reached a simple door at the end of the hall. She only noticed it because Ron slowed and her shoulder bumped into his upper arm.

"Sorry," Hermione mumbled quickly and pulled back.

"Don't be." His voice was strangely loud and Hermione realized just how close he was to her now. Ron turned on her and Hermione instinctively backed into the wall. "I know why you're here, Hermione."

The cold tiles pressed against her back. Ron looked down at her, something strange in his blue eyes. Not bright, but… flashing all the same. His pupils expanded in the darkness.

"And what is that?" Hermione tried not to sound as nervous as she felt.

Ron looked back down the long hallway, making sure they were alone and then said, "Come in here."

He tapped the door beside her with his wand and it swung open with a long creak.

Ron gave her a single nod and Hermione forced herself to turn and walk in; she felt like she didn't have much of a choice. He hadn't given her an inch of space to move in any other direction. Anyway, if she backed out now, she may never get another chance to steal the Elder wand.

That was why she was here, doing all of this. If she was going to break into, and out of, Azkaban prison, then she needed the strongest wand in the world. *Her* wand.

He didn't want to become one of them, a mindless corpse wandering around, waiting for someone to command it. He hated feeling out of control. It was the way his father had made him feel when he was young, how the Dark Lord had made him feel after he took the mark. It was how Granger made him feel every time he was inside of her, like he was going to come apart at the seams.

Now, he nearly was. He felt like he was exploding on the inside; pressure building up, about to burst through his skin, his scars. He hadn't felt like this in a while, like he nerves were frayed and on fire, like his lungs were turning to stone.

Like his body wasn't his own.

He was cursed. Damned.

And he deserved every ounce of it. But… Draco didn't want to die.

He wanted Hermione. He tried to hold on tighter, even if she wasn't real, even if she wasn't Hermione, because she was all he had left to hold on to.

"Draco, you need to calm down." Her voice was loud inside his head, echoing off of the broken stone. "You're going to make us crash!"

Good. Maybe he'd be destroyed that way.

"I'm…" Draco breathed out; if it was his last, he wanted it to count. "I'm sorry, Hermione."

"Breathe," Granger ordered. Draco took a gulp and filled his chest. The cold air brought a little clarity to him, but his body still shook without his consent. "Just stay in here where it's safe," she said, or, not exactly *said,* but he heard it in his head all the same.

Safe. He could do that. He knew where that was. Draco closed his eyes tight and glanced around the bright white broken stones one last time. He ripped open the small door of dark brown wood and went inside; down to the little space he had created for his thoughts of Granger last year. She had been safe down here and… he would too.

There was another loud roar and he felt his body jerked forward again, but even that sensation was fading the deeper he went.

"Don't let go," Hermione repeated and it echoed around his head, forcing his arms to lock around her small frame.

He wouldn't let go, at least, not of her. But he had nothing to hold onto inside anymore.

Draco sank against Hermione, holding onto her as his eyes fell closed and he felt himself sink into the darkness inside himself once more.

The bike had finally frozen up. Hermione had flown it north for at least an hour, fighting the high winds and trying to see in the dim light, before the throttle started to stick. Or at least she thought it was the throttle. Her knowledge of motorcycles was limited and this one was… advanced. She wasn't sure if it had been Sirius or Ron and Mr. Weasley, who added all the extra knobs and dials, but when the engine started to sputter, Hermione decided to press them. All of them.

A jet of fire shot out of the back of the bike, propelling them forward at a breakneck speed. Hermione watched the small dot that was her and Draco on the map zoom across the open sea. They were close, she just hoped, they were close enough to actually make it there.

When she squeezed Lucius' heart over the map, she started in the Tyrrhenian like Draco had. She started to panic when nothing happened before remembering that Draco said it wasn't there anymore. How someone *moved* an island, Hermione still wasn't sure, but she began to move the ring outwards in ever growing circles, covering more and more area.

A numb, sinking feeling started in the pit of her stomach as she began to run out of map. That was, until she moved the ring over the North Sea, then *north* of the North Sea that she started to see the blood begin to pool together and form… a marker.

It was the island, in almost the last place on earth Hermione would have thought it would be.

It was practically in the Arctic circle, for goodness sake. Why on earth Draco's father chose to move his summer villa to… one of the farthest reaches of the planet could only be because he thought it would be safe there.

For the first time in her life, Hermione Granger hoped Lucius Malfoy was right about something.

She pressed the button with the dragon's breath again and closed her eyes as the wind blew her curls back off her shoulders. The beaded bag at her side flapped in the wind, but she had secured it tightly around herself, lest she lose all the supplies she had so perfectly planned and packed. The map was folded out over the front of the seat and had a permanent sticking charm on it so it wasn't going anywhere either. Her *Imperius* curse

"Neville said he ran into you," Ron said, interrupting her thoughts. "I was sort of surprised."

"Why?"

"Didn't think you were talking to any of us anymore." Us. So he still saw battle lines. Or at least groups that she wasn't in. What would Ron think if he knew Neville was working with Blaise? She was glad he didn't, for both their sakes. "You just sort of fell off the face of the earth."

"I've just been… busy." Hermione didn't want to lie, but she couldn't very well tell Ron she had been working on Draco's appeal and sleeping in his bed every night. And she couldn't tell *anybody* about the cage she put up around herself just to feel a little less lonely. "Things have been a bit crazy."

Ron tilted his head back, the lump in his throat moved as he gave a quick laugh. "Yeah, you could say that again."

Hermione gave him what she hoped was an understanding smile. When Ron looked down at her, he grinned back. It was… a good sign. She hoped the rest of this would go as easy as it had been so far.

"This way." Ron opened another door and Hermione glanced back behind her before walking in. She tried her best to remember the different turns they had taken, but this place was designed to be confusing. The only thing that broke up the dark tiles were doors, most of which were closed. Hermione had peered in the few that had been open, trying to get her bearings, but also trying to see what was hidden down here.

Ron, on the other hand, seemed to know exactly where he was. Which meant he knew exactly where he was taking her.

"Where…" Hermione glanced behind her down that dark hallway. Her uneasiness curled tightly inside her. "Where are we going?"

"Just up ahead." Ron looked back at her and Hermione tried to figure out what the strange expression in his blue eyes meant, but, mostly he just looked… like Ron. Like he always had. It gave her a strange mix of reassurance and nervousness. She didn't have time to wander around with him, she needed to—

She needed to make sure he didn't realize what she was down here for.

Ron waved her on, waiting on her to move towards him. Hermione lifted her wand a little higher, casting the light in front of her, and summoning up her courage, continued on.

If she had appeared uncomfortable at all, she wouldn't have known it based on Ron's reaction to her. He slowed his gait a little, letting her catch up to him so they could walk

"Yes," Hermione said in a heartbeat. "Yes. Do it." She reached inside Draco's long coat and pulled out his hawthorn wand, leaving the Elder wand tucked safely inside.

Narcissa gasped.

"Is that…" Her eyes were locked on the breast of Draco's coat. "Is that what I think it is?" Narcissa finished so softly that if they hadn't been side by side, Hermione didn't think she would have heard her.

She wasn't sure where this was going, but Hermione shifted a little on the bed. "Yes. It is."

Narcissa's eyes didn't leave the coat. "How did you get it?"

Hermione paused. "That's a long story."

"Does that mean," Narcissa said breathlessly. "Does that mean that you took it from…" Hermione expected her to say the Ministry, but Narcissa instead said, "the Dark Lord?"

Suddenly a few things all fell into place, and Hermione's mouth fell open. "Do you… do you not *know?"*

Narcissa narrowed her eyes. "News has been a little difficult to come by here."

Of course. How would Narcissa have known what happened after she left? That the war was over? That Voldemort was defeated? That… "Hold on," Hermione asked. "Why do you think Draco was in Azkaban?"

"I thought… the Dark Lord put him there as a punishment. I assume Lucius is there as well? Although I can't imagine you felt the need to rescue him too."

Oh God… Hermione's blood ran cold. Narcissa didn't know. She didn't know her husband was dead. And Hermione was going to have to tell her. Then she was going to have to tell Narcissa that she cut Lucius' heart out and burned his body.

"I'll tell you everything," Hermione offered, "after we try to reach Draco."

Narcissa considered this for a moment and then gave a sharp nod. She reached out and took Draco's wand, holding it tightly and closed her eyes for a moment.

"Whenever you're ready," Hermione murmured.

Narcissa took a deep breath and then placed the tip of the hawthorn at Draco's temple. *"Legilimens."*

Hermione held her breath as Narcissa's eyes moved behind their lids. She expected Draco to do… something, but he just laid there, silent and still.

After what felt like a small forever, Narcissa finally opened her eyes and sat back.

"What happened?" Hermione grabbed onto her shoulder. "What did you see? Was Draco…"

Narcissa pulled away from her and stood up. Hermione was frozen on the spot to the bed. She couldn't move. She couldn't… think. She couldn't… couldn't…

"My son," she choked out. "My darling boy…"

Hermione's mind spun so fast it made her dizzy. Her heart was racing, beating wildly against her ribs like a bird stuck in a cage.

She looked down at Draco, hoping to see some sign of waking, but the only movement was the barely perceptible rise and fall of his chest.

He wasn't waking up.

He wasn't waking up.

Why wasn't he waking up?

Why wasn't he waking up?

Fear constricted around Hermione's body, her hands went numb and the small tears from where she picked at her nails turned a dark red as blood pooled along her nail beds.

"Tell me." Her voice didn't even sound like hers when she said, "I have to know."

"There was nothing," Narcissa choked out, leaning against the mantle for support again. Narcissa's shadow stretched across the cabin, casting darkness over Draco's face. "Just broken stone. I couldn't…"

She dropped the wand and it rolled until it was facing it's once owner. Hermione made no move to retrieve it. She couldn't have even if she wanted to. Not after Narcissa said, "I couldn't find him. Draco's not in there."

Inch by inch, Draco started to look more like himself. Hermione did her best to keep to the way he used to style it, but it wasn't exactly easy with a knife, and even harder when Narcissa would gasp as she cut too close.

"Do you want to do it?" Hermione finally asked, hoping she didn't sound as annoyed as she felt.

"No no," Narcissa assured her."You're…you're doing… *fine."*

Hermione started cutting through a tangled lock and Narcissa winced as it finally came free.

"There," Hermione announced. "It's…"

"It's done," Narcissa finished for her.

Yes. It was done. It was a little too short on the sides, but… it would grow. Even if he stayed in this coma, his hair would fill in. And she would do this again. And again, if needed. She had thought this would make her feel better about the situation, but Hermione felt worse than ever.

"Oh no," Narcissa cooed. "It's not that bad. Don't cry!"

Hermione shook her head causing her curls to fall in her face, hiding it from Narcissa while she gathered herself. "No, it's… it's not that. It's just… I wish… I wish he would just wake up." She felt like a child, saying that, but she had gone through every emotion she was capable of today and she couldn't shove them away to the back of her head anymore. Not while Draco was laying right here, yet still so far away.

She had come so far, done so much, and she still didn't have him. Not like she wanted him. And God, she wanted him so much. She had stolen back the Elder wand for him. She had pulled down Azkaban for him. There were still people inside the prison. The dementors had already taken their souls, but… Hermione had taken what was left of their lives, even if it wasn't much.

But she had done it for him.

And after everything he had done for her, couldn't he just… wake up for her too? She felt small and weak even thinking that, but right now that was exactly how she felt. Small. Weak. And powerless.

"We could…" Narcissa started, but stopped.

Hermione's racing thoughts came to a screeching halt. "Could what?"

Narcissa pursed her lips in thought. "You have a wand," she began again. "I'm not as skilled as my sister, but I know a little occlumency. We could try reaching him." She nodded towards Draco. "In there."

Narcissa dabbed at her face again and Hermione realized his mother had been crying, as she watched her with Draco. Hermione looked away, feeling her face burn again as Narcissa pulled off her gloves. "Yes," she sniffed. "Yes, Miss Granger, I would love that."

From Mudblood to girl to Miss Granger—Hermione was a little dizzy by how quickly she was moving up in Narcissa's good graces. If they continued like this, she would be saying Hermione was like a daughter to her in no time.

Well… maybe not soon, but… Hermione touched the Malfoy ring still hanging around her neck, maybe one day. She had to stop the fluttering of her heart before Narcissa came over here or she might wonder why Hermione's face was even redder than Draco's.

Narcissa came to stand beside her. "What do we need to do?"

Hermione had already stripped his ragged uniform from him and dressed him in a clean white shirt. Narcissa had taken one look at Draco's burned arm and scarred chest and nearly fainted. This time, Hermione was careful to adjust Draco's blankets to keep the worst of his arm covered, but she still caught Narcissa eyeing it nervously.

"I think we should start with his hair first," Hermione said, wanting to brush it away from his face again, but suddenly felt self conscious about doing that in front of his mother. "If you'll help me sit him up, I think I can cut it."

Together they hefted Draco up and balanced him so he wouldn't fall. Hermione expected scissors, but Narcissa handed her a knife instead.

"That's all I have," she said a little sheepishly. The cabin was sparse. It seemed the vaults Lucius had been able to drain all went into the relocation with little left over for the furnishings. Thank Godric he had stocked it up with food supplies and wood. There wasn't anything else on the island as far as Hermione could tell. But even in the few days she had been here, there was a noticeable dwindling of the provisions.

That wasn't her concern right now. At the moment she wanted to focus on making Draco look more like… well, *Draco*. One problem at a time and at least this problem had a solution.

Hermione watched the flames reflect on the blade. "It might not be pretty, but it'll work."

She tried not to think about the awful job she had done on Harry's hair. Draco had been so upset when Fleur shaved his head at the cottage so Hermione separated it off into sections before she started. Although, if she did a bad enough job, Draco might wake up to yell at her like he had before.

There was only one way to find out.

Hermione took a lock of hair and sliced through it.

Chapter Thirty

Draco had always thought dying would leave him cold, but this was… not that bad, truth be told. In fact, it was kind of cozy.

He was warm, all over his body, deep inside too. It was strange, he hadn't felt like this in… in… Shit. He couldn't remember.

Yes, he could. He could remember the last night he spent with her, before the battle, before freeing the Mugglebornns, before Azkaban and… before wherever he was now. He wished Granger was here—not that she was dead too—just that she was with him. Like she had been that night, wrapped up in him, around him. His entirely—his… only.

Draco breathed out. Weird. Did he still have to breathe in the afterlife? That would be annoying. Did his heart still beat too? He thought he could feel it, thumping in the heavy rhythm it always did, except when—

"Hi Draco."

It was soft and far away, but it was her. He'd know her voice anywhere. Even in hell. Even in death.

"When are you coming back?"

Coming back.

He'd almost forgotten.

Basking in the warmth and comfort, Draco hadn't even thought about what it meant that he was starting to reawaken, starting to… *turn.*

He didn't want to, didn't want to come back. Not if it meant that he had to be one of those dead things. Draco dug himself deeper into the darkness.

He just wanted her. Hermione. She had to be down here somewhere. She never left him for too long.

"Please, Draco," It was softer this time, barely a whisper. "You promised…"

He had. He had promised to serve the Dark Lord in life and in death. And if this was it. He was going to run for as long and hard as he could. Hermione had told him to stay down, stay safe, and that was exactly what he was going to do.

He didn't have a choice.

If he rose again, he wouldn't be safe at all. And neither would she.

Refusing her call, Draco sank further into the recesses of his mind. The darkness closed around him like a shroud. He pulled away from her, trying to hide.

While he could.

Just until…

Until he heard another familiar voice. It was muffled, but it was very clearly his mother. What the fuck was she doing here? He was clearly dead then.

"...I don't know why…why he's like this."

"Was… your husband? After he… got out?"

Draco could remember his father after Azkaban, a shrunken shell; more mad than man. He didn't want to be like that, broken and lost. Draco had seen the worst of his father and followed the same path anyway. It was in his blood, after all.

"He wasn't like this. He would go into… states, but he was conscious, most of the time." His mother's voice was barely above a whisper and Draco had to strain to hear it. "Lucius had terrible dreams, ones he couldn't differentiate from waking life at times, but… but he *was* awake."

Silence, so loud it was deafening.

Then finally, "Draco will wake up too."

Odd, that Granger sounded hopeful about this for when he woke, he'd be… just like his father. Again.

He could hear them talking, but it was too far away for him to make out the words. Draco spun in the darkness, torn between trying to hear Granger's voice and wanting to stay hidden under the wooden door. He couldn't resist her though and Draco found himself wandering until he picked up their voices again.

"Lucius… drank too," Narcissa admitted, glancing down into the fire. "He was worse without it though."

Either Narcissa had grown truly lonely during her time here or… Or maybe she had never been able to talk about things like this before. Hermione didn't exactly know how to comfort her or if she even wanted that so she returned to the one thing they had in common. "I think Draco is happier," Hermione offered. "Without it."

"That's… that's good." Narcissa murmured. She picked up the cup and tried to take another drink only to find it empty.

Hermione decided not to comment on that. She didn't know what Narcissa had gone through the past few months alone in this cabin. Or… before either. From the small bit she had shared, it hadn't sounded like Narcissa had it easy during the war, or before it really. She had been so quick to cut Draco off when she thought he was making the same mistakes as his father, but… Lucius had saved her. He had sacrificed his life for Narcissa.

Hermione knew all about complicated relationships so maybe she shouldn't be so quick to judge Narcissa for the choices she had made either. Especially for the ones she made for Draco. Even more so because despite it all, he still ended up here.

It must be difficult, seeing her son like this. She had only been trying to help Draco by giving him the wine, still… there were other, *better* ways to help him.

Hermione walked over to the bed where Draco was lying and brushed back a few of the long strands of hair from his face. It had grown out while he was in prison and reached down past his shoulders now. It wasn't surprising his mother had mistaken him for Lucius when she first saw him. Hermione traced her fingertips lightly over the stubble on his jaw. Draco was still handsome and, asleep, he looked more like his mother than ever.

He was beautiful, even with his eyes sunken in and cheeks hollowed out. Hermione and Narcissa had gotten his fever down with the help of some potions and broths. A bit of color had returned to his face. Mostly it highlighted the bruises, but they were fading, healing. Hopefully, with time, Draco would too.

She dragged her fingers over the scruff on his neck and rested her hand on his chest. She could feel his heart beating beneath the scars. She could have sworn she felt it beat a little faster, but Draco remained as still as he was carved from stone.

But he wasn't. He was here and human and… He would wake up. He just had to. So Hermione focused on doing what she could for him until then.

"Would you…" She looked over her shoulder at Narcissa. "Would you like to help me clean him up a bit?"

witch, the brightest witch of her age. Most importantly, she *wasn't* backing down like she had in school to avoid trouble. If there was trouble, she would sort it herself.

Hermione was so caught up in the thrill of finally telling off a Pureblood, that she almost missed it when Narcissa whispered, *"Thank you."*

Hermione's mouth opened slightly, unsure if… if she had heard correctly. Did Narcissa Malfoy just say—

"Thank you for saving my son." The fire reflected in the line of tears in Narcissa's eyes, melting away the coldness that had been there.

Hermione faltered. She had been ready to argue and stand her ground, but she hadn't been ready for… whatever was happening now.

"Of course," Hermione pulled herself together to say. "I wasn't going to leave him there in that… place." She didn't say it to insult Narcissa, but Draco's mother winced at the implication all the same.

Narcissa took another drink of wine and clutched the cup against her chest as if to ward off the idea of her son in a frozen cell. Hermione wondered how she felt; Narcissa had nursed her husband back to health after his sentence and now was having to do the same for her son. Or would, if Draco would wake up. Hermione swallowed down the thoughts she wasn't ready to face as Narcissa finished off the last of the wine.

Hermione nodded to the empty cup. "Why were you trying to give him that?"

"It's mulled wine mixed with some herbs from my garden." She looked down into the empty cup. "It helped Lucius when he was… recuperating."

Hermione couldn't blame Narcissa for trying to help Draco by whatever means she could, but this wasn't the way. "Then use water." Hermione frowned. "Draco has a drinking problem."

"I know he tends to… overindulge from time to time, but—"

"Draco has a drinking problem," Hermione stated again, more firmly this time. Narcissa's mouth opened as if to argue, but then she closed it and swallowed dryly. "But he's working on it. He's trying to do better," Hermione explained. "Don't give it to him again," she warned. "I'm more than happy to help Draco with whatever he needs when he wakes up, but I won't take care of him if he's in a drunken stupor. I've done that enough times."

Narcissa set the cup down on the mantle. "I understand. I know what that's like."

Hermione felt the same strange sense of… connection with Narcissa again. She wasn't sure that she liked it, but at least they weren't at each other's throats at the moment.

It took much longer than he thought it would, but finally, he could make out what was being said once more.

"Would you like some tea?"

"Oh yes, that would be lovely. Thank you."

This? Tea time is what he came back for?

Yes.

He promised Granger he would come back for her and now he was, the only way he could.

"Miss Granger—"

"Please, call me Hermione."

Draco would have snorted if he could. His mother wasn't one to drop formalities lightly, let alone with someone of Muggle blood who she would consider inferior. Narcissa Malfoy might be the widowed wife of a disgraced Death Eater, but she would never lose her pride.

A cup hit a saucer with a soft clink.

"I wanted to thank you, for helping my son. If you hadn't, he would still be… in that place and I don't even know if he would be…" she trailed off and he heard a sharp intake of breath.

The bed shifted. Granger must have gotten up. Draco was surprised that he recognized he was as a bed, but before he could really think about what that meant, he heard her voice again.

"Oh, Mrs. Malfoy, please don't cry!" Draco held his breath, waiting to hear what happened next. "Draco is… the most driven, determined, *stubborn* man I've ever known. If anyone could survive Azkaban, it's him."

Could have, but clearly he hadn't. If he was still alive he'd be in that cell and not hovering here in this purgatory, half in and half fucking out.

"He is that way because of you. For you."

He could practically see Granger blush at that. Fuck, he'd like to actually see it. See the flush of red on her cheeks, the way her doe eyes would dart away then look back up at him, big and innocent.

"His father is—was—like that as well." His mother sighed. "Although, I don't think he'd like me saying that."

Draco's eyes rolled in their sockets. No shit, *Mum.*

"I know their relationship was… tense," Granger admitted.

His mother sniffled. "It wasn't always like that. They were close once, when Draco was young."

Yeah, before his father got too busy for him. Before the Dark Lord came back and fucked everything up. Before his father got himself carted off to Azkaban and left Draco to clean up his fucking mess.

"What was he like, as a child?" Granger's voice was soft, but curious.

"Oh, he was a good boy, a… sweet one." Draco wanted to laugh at this. "He always loved being outside; running around with Lucius' hounds or when he got older, flying over the grounds. Always much too high for me to be comfortable, but that never stopped him. He just kept going."

"That sounds like Draco." It sounded like Hermione was smiling.

He wished he could see it.

"He was smart and ambitious. I was glad to see it because I wanted so much for him. As a mother, you always want the best for your child and I more than most. Draco could have done… anything, everything he wanted to. I hated when… when he was forced to…" She trailed off and Draco was relieved she didn't finish her sentence. He didn't want to hear what his mother thought about him now.

"To be a Death Eater?" Hermione offered.

He wanted to hear what Granger thought about him even less. He'd let her down. She asked him to try and he had failed. Maybe it was good that he was dead. At least now he'd stop disappointing her. Disappointing them both.

"Everything changed for him after that." His mother's voice was strained, but steady. "I know he was struggling with his father being taken away and even before that, if I'm being honest, but it was once he was made to serve that I started having trouble recognizing him as my son. He reminded me more of… how his father was, when he was Draco's age."

What did she expect? She was the one that married that fucker and had a baby with him. It wasn't Draco's fault who or what his father was.

That was just about the only thing that *wasn't* his fault.

What a disappointment he must have turned out to be when his mother found out that he had not only committed the same sins as his father, but worse ones too.

"Lucius and I had an… unconventional start, and I saw the worst he could do early on. I tried everything I could to make sure Draco didn't inherit those same traits. I… I thought he was different. I thought he was…"

he wasn't her son anymore when she thought he had raped a girl in chains, but Hermione had no idea if learning that he had… a relationship with a Muggleborn would be preferable to someone like Narcissa Malfoy.

Hermione readied herself for whatever response it prompted in Draco's mother.

Finally Narcissa said, "So he didn't…" She trailed off, unable to bring herself to say the word.

Hermione shook her head.

A single tear slipped down Narcissa's cheek and she dabbed it away with a gloved hand.

"That's… that's good." She picked up the cup of wine and moved closer to the fire, resting her hand upon the mantle and took a long drink. "I'm glad of that, at least."

It was strange to see a moral line Narcissa was willing to hold up, since she had spent her life trying to keep others in a place of disenfranchisement and subjugation. So Muggleborns weren't equal, weren't *people* to Narcissa, but they shouldn't be abused? Was that not a form of abuse inherently in itself? No wonder Draco had grown up confused; none of this made sense.

"Draco isn't that kind of person." Hermione crossed her arms over her chest. "You at least taught him to be decent in that way; even if you also taught him to hate people based on their heritage and blood."

Narcissa shot her another strange look, one Hermione couldn't quite place. "Don't be so quick to judge me, girl. I won't apologize for trying to provide my son with the best the world has to offer. If that means protecting the family legacy and giving him every advantage, then so be it."

Hermione wasn't sure they would ever see eye to eye. Narcissa Malfoy was a purist from birth, but then again… Draco had been too. What was so different that Draco was able to see the flaw in that line of thought, but his mother couldn't? Or could she and just didn't *care?* Hermione didn't know which one was preferable. They both left a bitter taste in her mouth.

"Well, just so you know, it was a Mudblood who broke your son out of Azkaban. So, before you start going off on how terrible we are and how I'm not a real witch because my parents are Muggles, remember that without me, he'd still be in that cell."

Hermione felt fire burning in her veins. It was one thing to duel a Death Eater and beat them, but it was another to be able to finally *say* all the things she had wanted to for so many years. She *was* good. She *was* strong enough. She *was* a witch, and not just any

war—she had *won* it! All Narcissa did was run away when things got difficult for her and left her son to clean up the mess and then insult him when he couldn't defend himself.

Hermione had to suppress a laugh. "No? Well I know Draco," she fired back. "And I know he's a good man, despite what you may think."

Narcissa stared hard at Hermione for a few long moments, looking at her as if she couldn't quite figure her out. The firelight flickered between them, casting their shadows down onto the bed where Draco lay. Hermione kept her gaze steady on Narcissa, not willing to back down an inch. Narcissa, though, broke her eyes away, choosing to look at Draco instead, her expression tightening.

"What did he do to you?" she asked softly. Hermione felt an uneasy swooping inside her. Narcissa's tone had changed and when her eyes briefly cut to Hermione's, they were full of confusion and… shame. Narcissa looked less intimidating without the large white cloak, and Hermione watched as her shoulders pulled forward and her chest seemed to sink back into her body.

Hermione was struck by the thought that underneath it all, Narcissa was just… a person. Just like Hermione. Since arriving, Draco's mother had been cold towards Hermione, but now she seemed… remorseful.

"I didn't know who you were when I first saw you, but…" Narcissa pursed her lips for a moment, making a few lines around her mouth pull tight. "How did you go from being… in chains to… helping him?"

Hermione felt her face heat, remembering the shame of Narcissa walking in on her and Draco in his study. "You've got the wrong idea about us," Hermione started. "Draco never…" She looked down at the roughly hewn wooden floor. Why was *she* embarrassed about *this?* "He only kept me like that so I wouldn't run away. Draco was trying, in his own way, to protect me."

The fire crackled loudly, filling the heavy silence with a small pop.

"He didn't…" Hermione cleared her throat. "We were… together. Sort of. And then we weren't, but it… It wasn't… uhm, nonconsensual."

Goodness, that was awkward to say out loud. Even more so to her boyfriend's mother. Hermione nervously pulled out the silver signet ring from inside her shirt and closed her fist tightly around it. This had become a sort of stabilizing habit she had picked up since Draco had given it to her. The hard feel of the metal helped ground her and made the rushing thoughts in her head slow to a manageable pace.

Something changed in Narcissa's expression. It seemed to lighten and yet draw down at the same time. Hermione let this news sink in, as best it could. Narcissa had told Draco

"Mrs. Malfoy," Granger began gently. "Draco… Draco was conflicted, yes, but the things he did, he did… out of love. What he did at the school, that was for his father and… for you too, I believe. I'm not saying this to make you feel guilty, I am telling you so you know what kind of man you raised."

Draco felt sick hearing this. Or was that his body changing?

"And after that, well… I can't say what he did was right, but Draco only did those things because… because of me."

"You?" He could hear the shock in his mother's voice in that one word.

"He was looking for me," Granger said softly. "Once he found me… things got complicated, but… he tried to do the right thing. I want you to know that… Draco never wanted to be a Death Eater."

He just wanted her.

His chest felt tight; his lungs turned solid and his heart beat so hard he was sure it would break through the scars stretched across his skin. This was the first thing he felt other than warm since… dying. So this was it, this was what coming back felt like.

Shit.

He tried to stay as still as possible, to stop whatever was happening in his body. Draco counted to three in his mind.

While he still could.

One.

Two…

…Three.

"That's…" His mother took a shaky breath. "That's good to know."

He would have fucking told her that if his mother hadn't slapped him and said he wasn't her son anymore. After that, what did it matter what she thought of him? It had been worth losing his mother's love, in order to keep Granger with him and keep her safe.

He'd do it again if he could, except this time, he'd lock himself in that cage around the bed with her and throw away the key so they'd never be apart again.

Granger cleared her throat. "I know you think he was like his father and… maybe he was, to an extent, but… I think there is a part of Draco, a large part, that is like you."

Draco strained his hearing until his ears were ringing.

"He could be… sweet, when he wanted to. Or, I suppose, when he *felt* he could be. And how he loved… *so deeply,* it… it shocked me sometimes. He treated love like it was… was a fact, not a feeling."

Of course it was a fucking fact. Granger should know that, after all, being as brilliant as she was. He was the dumb fuck who was turning brain dead and even *he* still knew that. Draco *loved* Hermione. Not even death would stop that.

"That's not something someone just wakes up and starts doing," Granger prattled on, getting worked up in that cute way she always did when she was explaining something. "That is something someone has to experience to know… know that no matter what, the love… won't die. That it's not over," she finally finished, almost out of breath from trying to talk as fast as her thoughts moved.

Draco could imagine her biting her lip, looking down at the cup in her hands, and resisting the urge to pick at her fingers.

Silence. They were either looking awkwardly at each other or…

"You raised a good man, Mrs. Malfoy. And I… I'll take care of him. I promise."

There was only one way to stop being a Death Eater. And Granger knew it too. She'd do the right thing. She always did.

"Thank you for saying that." His mother's voice was fading, getting farther away, but… no. He didn't want to go. Not now, not yet. "...you've done. I… I didn't think I would ever get the chance to see him again… or get to say goodbye."

So this was it. He really was dead.

Fuck.

Fuck…

At least she was going to burn him. He wasn't going to die cold so that was something. And if her goal was to… destroy him, he doubted it would be as painful as his arm. Granger would make it fast. She wouldn't want him to hurt.

But he did. He'd take a lifetime of *Cruciatus* curses and an eternity of *Fiendfyre* even if it meant he only got to spend one fucking minute with her.

With his girl.

His only.

Hermione.

His chest started to feel like it was caving in and he was having trouble pulling air into his lungs. Probably because they had stopped working. Would he still breathe as an *Inferius?* He didn't think they needed to, so the fact that he couldn't… started to scare him.

He didn't want to die. He didn't want to leave her. He wanted to open his eyes and open his arms and have Hermione run into them. He wanted to hold her and kiss her

That was about as far as they had progressed. They had barely even spoken, which made what Narcissa had just said even more surprising to Hermione, especially when she took a deep breath and elaborated without any further prompt.

"I watched my husband wither away under the Dark Lord, not once, but twice. Believe me when I say that was not the future I wanted for my son. *My only son."* Her voice quavered a little, but she held her head high.

Narcissa Malfoy had certainly fallen from grace; her clothes were fine, but wrinkled and worn, her hair was simply pulled back into a ball at the nape of her long neck, and fine lines laced across her face. Her face… which was so familiar to Hermione, with its high cheekbones and arched brows.

Draco shared physical aspects with his father, the straight nose and the strong jaw, but he *looked* like his mother. It was striking enough that it stilled Hermione into silence.

Narcissa looked down at the cup of wine on the small table. "There were many things I wanted for my son, but… even more that I didn't."

She couldn't help herself. Hermione had to know. "Why? Why did you let him then?"

"I couldn't stop it," Narcissa said, barely audible. "My sister, Bellatrix, suggested it as… restitution for what Lucius had done and… If I would have refused, he would have killed us both," she finished in a whisper. "I thought… I… I didn't think…" She looked back at Draco, sleeping, but looking more dead than alive and closed her eyes. "I didn't think he would turn out like he did."

Something squirmed in Hermione. She had a strange sense to reach out and… comfort the woman in front of her. That was before Narcissa added her last statement; Draco hadn't turned out… bad or wrong. Misguided, yes, but that wasn't his fault. And when it counted, Draco had, well maybe not done the *right* thing, but he had done them for the right reasons. He had done them for her.

Hermione felt the creature in her chest extend its claws. "You raised him."

Narcissa's head snapped towards her, blue eyes cold as ice again. "Yes. I did. And I did my best to make sure he didn't repeat his father's… *mistakes."*

Hermione scoffed. "So you didn't want him to fail as a Death Eater, like Lucius did, you mean."

Narcissa shook her head and raised up a thin finger in warning. "You have no idea what you're talking about, girl."

Girl. It was an improvement on Mudblood, but Hermione still didn't appreciate being reduced to another label. She was so much more than just a *girl.* She had fought in the

Narcissa rounded on her from where she was trying to get Draco into a sitting position. "What is that supposed to mean?"

The air was bitterly cold and Hermione could feel it piercing her right down to her bones. Still, she stood her ground even if she was shivering while she did it. "You've been hiding out here while he's been rotting in Azkaban prison. Which is where he still would be, if it wasn't for me!"

Narcissa's mouth fell open and she looked back and forth between Hermione's eyes then down to Draco. "You… You…saved him?"

Hermione pushed past Narcissa, who stumbled into the back unceremoniously. Hermione didn't bother to help her, instead, she reached for Draco again, looping her hands under his arms and pulling him further up the snowy embankment. She had landed on the island of Azkaban before dawn and it didn't seem that long ago yet somehow, the sun had already set.

Somewhere in the back of her mind she remembered, from primary school science class, that this far north the days were short. It was shortly followed by years of Astronomy telling her the placement of the moon, sun, and celestial bodies at different times of the year. It was all almost too much until she looked up and saw Narcissa standing there, staring at her with the strangest expression on her face.

Hermione huffed and hauled Draco's body a few inches at a time. "Do you want him to freeze?" she said waspishly. Hermione didn't feel like she had to be particularly polite to Narcissa Malfoy—even though she was Draco's mother—after being called a Mudblood by her as a greeting. "I just spent the last eight months trying to prevent that from happening so it would be nice—" she said in between shivers, "—if you could do what I asked you and *help.*"

She left out the 'us' this time. Hermione didn't expect anything from Narcissa at this point, but maybe she would for her son's sake.

Her sharp tone must have reached Draco's mother because she seemed to snap from whatever thought she was lost in. Narcissa hurried up to the pair of them and unclasped her white fur cloak. Draping the beautiful thing over Draco's body as best she could, Narcissa then grabbed his boots by the ankles and nodded to Hermione.

It wasn't an apology; it wasn't anything more than a mutual desire to help Draco, but together, the two witches carried him up the beach, over the rocks and ice and snow, and finally into the surprisingly small cabin, warmed by a crackling wood fire inside.

and… spend the rest of his fucking life with her. He should have had years, decades with Granger and now he had seconds—moments.

If that was all he had, then he wanted to spend them with her. Really with her, but… he couldn't get out. He couldn't get to her.

Something was keeping him down here, dragging him deeper into the darkness. He could feel the darkness swallowing him up again, weighing down on him until the pressure made him black out.

He knew that feeling. He knew… *her.*

The sudden weight of his realization hit him like a stone crushing his chest. It was her.

It was fucking her.

It was still *her.*

She'd drug him down here, just like she had in his cell. She just *made* him think he had gotten out when all he'd gotten was… her.

She hadn't left him. She had *kept him.*

And now he'd never leave her.

His body might burn, but his soul, was hers. She'd taken it.

He was… *hers.*

But, hadn't he always been?

Granger was talking, but he couldn't hear her over the rush of blood in his ears, pushed there by what was probably his last heartbeat.

It felt right, knowing that it's last beat was allowing him to hear her voice.

"Please…" It was so muffled and Draco wanted to shout out he'd do anything, everything, whatever she said… "Call me Hermione."

Hermione.

Narcissa left a few days later. Hermione was surprised to find that she… missed Draco's mum, in a way. She couldn't say that they were friends, but they shared something and Hermione didn't know how she would have gotten through these past couple of weeks on her own. Well, Draco was here, or at least…

No. He was here. She knew it. She *felt* it. Like a celestial body orbiting her, circling her; just out of reach, but always there. An equal, but opposite force of gravity. It held her in place. And she held on too.

Whatever Narcissa had seen in Draco's head must have been a mistake. After all, she had said that she wasn't a strong *Legimens,* just enough to skim minds and protect her own. But when Hermione had pressed her on what she had seen, Narcissa only said it was broken.

Hermione found it too difficult to keep asking Narcissa for details. She remembered the crumbled white ruins she had seen in Draco's mind all too well herself.

They talked about other things though. Hermione did tell Narcissa about the war and the Battle of Hogwarts. She hadn't been prepared for Narcissa to be so upset when she listed the Death Eater casualties, but then again, Draco didn't have much love lost between him and his compatriots. However, these were people that Narcissa knew; who were family to her. She took the news of Bellatrix hard, but not as hard as Lucius.

"How did it happen?" Narcissa's tone was oddly emotionless, unsettlingly so.

Hermione pursed her lips. "I'm not sure exactly, I only know what Draco told me and he wasn't there for… his father's passing. Just after."

"The Dark Lord killed him?" Narcissa asked and her blue eyes went ice cold when Hermione nodded. She sat stiffly, almost painfully so as she said, "I'm glad he was defeated then. I only wish the Longbottom boy would have run him through a few times before cutting off his head. Maybe started with a few limbs and worked his way up."

Yes. Draco certainly took after his mother.

Hermione's nerves frayed knowing she would have to confess what she had done to Lucius. She made sure the fire poker was out of arm's reach before she breached that subject. Hermione left out what Draco had done to his father's body. He had paid enough for his sins; he didn't need anyone else judging him for what he had to do. Narcissa remained stoic as Hermione told her how she got Malfoy blood and waited for… whatever Narcissa was going to do.

She wasn't ready for Draco's mother to pat her shoulder. "You saved him. You… saved them both."

Hermione wasn't sure how she felt about this, but sitting with it later, she was comforted by the sentiment. Especially when she applied it to what she had done to Azkaban and the prisoners left there. There hadn't been much of them; Hermione had peered into a few cells on her way to find Draco and what she had seen had horrified her.

A few blonde hairs fell into Narcissa's face as she spun around. For a moment her blue eyes were as cold as ice, but they did nothing to quell the fire burning in Hermione's chest. By the time Narcissa narrowed them, Hermione was on her feet and storming to the bed where Draco was sleeping. The cabin was small, just one room with that included the bed, a small kitchenette, and an incredibly out of place leather sofa in front of a round fireplace.

She must have fallen asleep in front of it and Draco's mother had taken advantage of that time to give Draco some potion or draught that Hermione was sure to object to.

Grabbing the cup from Narcissa, Hermione smelled it. Worse—it was wine.

Hermione glared down at Draco's mother. "You know he has a problem with this?" she snapped. "And you're force-feeding it to him!" She had half a mind to throw the wine in Narcissa's shocked face. "Godric, is there anything else you want to do to him?! You already abandoned him and left him in the middle of a war!" Hermione was screaming now. She knew she shouldn't be, but she was just so… so *angry*.

And scared. Draco hadn't woken up yet and showed no signs of when, or if, he would.

Naracissa huffed out a sharp breath. "I—"

"That was after you sold him to Voldemort to save your husband!" Hermione slammed the cup with wine down on the table next to the bed. A bit of it splashed over the side and landed on her hand. She felt sick at the smell of it, remembering how Draco had changed, or, changed back, when he had showed up at the cottage smelling like his father's wine. She closed her eyes for a moment, trying to block out the painful memories before they took hold of her.

"I didn't…" Narcissa stood up, her expression more defensive than aggressive now. "I never wanted my son to be a Death Eater."

Hermione was a little surprised to hear this. It seemed Draco had been groomed since adolescence to be the third generation of the Malfoy family to serve Voldemort and about the hundredth generation to suppress Muggleborns and carry on their Pureblood agenda. Hermione eyed Narcissa carefully. They had entered an uneasy truce since she and Draco had washed up on the shore two days ago and the tension still rang between the two witches despite their mutual goal.

It had started while Hermione had been trying to pull Draco from washing back out with the tide. Narcissia stormed down the beach and shoved her away back.

"Get away from my son," she hissed.

"I'm trying to help him!" Hermione argued back. "Which is more than I can say for you!"

"L-Lucius?" Narcissa's voice shook with emotion. "Lucius, is that…" She trailed off as her eyes landed on Hermione.

Hermione was barely staying on her feet, but held onto Draco as she looked up at the mother who had disowned him. "Help us," she gasped. "Please."

Draco's weight finally pulled her down and they both fell to their knees. Draco's hand was bleeding badly, and left a melted imprint in the crisp snow. Hermione pulled it back towards her. His blood was warm, almost sickeningly so. He needed to get out of the cold. They both did. In their wet clothes, in the snow, in the dark, it wouldn't be long before hypothermia set in.

Hermione wrapped her arm around him, half holding him and half preparing to try and lift him up again. But she could barely move herself. Hermione's muscles were cramping from the cold and Draco leaned even more heavily on her, making her sink deeper into the snow.

She pulled out her wand, trying to decide if she should just move Draco by magic or start trying to heal him right there when she heard Narcissa's footsteps crunch in the snow and stop right in front of them.

"Draco?" His mother looked shocked to see him, as if she didn't believe what was right in front of her.

Draco's head rolled back on his shoulders only to fall forward heavily. Hermione clasped her hand against his chest, and pressed her wand against the scars there in a protective and defensive manner.

Tossing the waterlogged curls out of her face, Hermione watched Narcissa's blue eyes flicker back and forth between Draco and herself, then narrow dangerously.

Narcissa's lip curled in a familiar way as she glared down at Hermione, practically shooting daggers with her eyes. *"Mudblood.* What have you done to my son?"

"Get AWAY from him!" Hermione shouted. She had awoken to see Narcissa bent over Draco, tilting his head back and pouring a dark red liquid down his throat. "What are you *doing?!"*

Most of the prisoners were fragments of their former selves; shells of human bodies, devoid of… souls. She had stopped at Greyback's cell for too long. He had sniffed the air and swung his head towards her. Hermione had gasped when she saw his jaw hanging open, tongue lolling out and an icicle of drool frozen to the tip of it. Before she could even move, he rushed the door, clawing out at her and Hermione had jumped back, slamming herself into the crudely carved wall opposite of him.

The frozen trail of saliva broke off and shattered on the floor as he tried to speak, but between the missing teeth, the broken jaw, and the… madness, all that came out were pitiful and pained howls. The man was gone, but the wolf was still within, hungry and haunted.

He might be dead now, because of her, but at least he wasn't like that anymore.

Sometimes, she supposed, everyone needed a little bit of Slytherin rationality for their actions. Hermione more than most because while she felt remorse for the prisoners, she didn't exactly regret what she had done. It was how she felt about many of the things, and it took longer than she expected to relay it all to Narcissa, who for her part, listened as attentively as Hermione had in any lecture, until it was done.

In return for her long tale of how the war ended, Draco's imprisonment, and Hermione's treason for rescuing him, Narcissa divulged how she had ended up here, stranded, on an island in the arctic circle.

"Lucius would have done anything to keep us safe. At the time, I thought…" Narcissa glanced over to Draco's sleeping form. "He had rejected the Malfoy name and the things he did… I thought my son had been lost. I didn't know that… that he had found…" Her eyes cut to the Malfoy signet ring hanging around Hermione's neck and then up to meet hers. "I didn't know he had found something worth fighting for."

His mother explained how after Hermione had taken Draco from the Manor, Lucius had unveiled his plan to get his family, or what was left of it, away from the war. At first Narcissa hadn't agreed to leave her son behind, despite what she thought was blind loyalty to the Dark Lord. It was only when Lucius tricked her, slipping her a sleeping draught and whisking her away here, that he promised to go back to retrieve Draco.

Whether he meant it or not, they would never know. The Dark Lord had gotten to him first. But based on what Hermione knew about his memories and how Lucius scrambled his own head to keep the Dark Lord out, she was pretty sure his father had no intention of telling Draco.

But who had sent him the ring then, if not his father?

Hermione didn't have long to ponder over this as Narcissa explained just how an entire *island* moved across a continent.

It seemed moving great masses of land was something that goblins were adept in. It made sense from an outsider's perspective, sort of. Hermione had read about the vast colonies they had in places like Germany and the great strongholds they had built deep underground. Apparently shifting an island from the Mediterranean to the Arctic was within their wheelhouse.

It was also costly. Lucius had emptied vault after vault for the service of transporting the island through, what Narcissa explained as, an intricate transition using ancient volcano shafts under the earth. Hermione's mind buzzed with curiosity and questions and she had to bite down on her lip to keep from interrupting every other second.

"But… why?" Hermione finally spit out. "The goblins were neutral in the war, and if anything, disliked the treatment they received from the Purebloods in power. Surely it wasn't just gold that they wanted. Goblins have plenty of that."

"Clever of you, Miss Granger," Narcissa said with a small smirk. Hermione pressed her mouth together to keep from beaming. "Lucius had… a contact who held sway with some influential goblins. They put in a good word for him, as a favor."

"Must have been a close companion to do something like that," Hermione commented, hardly believing it.

Narcissa's expression was a mystery, but Hermione caught a glimpse of… something familiar on it that she just couldn't place. "She was family. *Is* family," Narcissa corrected then waved her hand to dismiss the subject. Hermione had learned quickly that when Narcissa Malfoy was done talking about something, the conversation was over.

But Hermione wasn't one to give up easily. Her Gryffindor pride didn't allow for it. "Would you want to see her again? Thank her for her help?"

Narcissa eyed Hermione warily. "Of course. There are a great many things I would like to do, if I could leave."

"Why can't you go?"

Narcissa just stared at her for a moment and Hermione felt a bloom of embarrassment.

"You arrived here by flying and whatever… contraption you did it on is long gone. Just how do you propose I leave? Apparate into the ocean and hope I can make it to land before I drown? I think not."

Hermione merely nodded at the fireplace. "It's not glamorous, but you can always floo."

Draco's body moved like someone was pulling its strings. Finally, between the two of them, they got Draco to his feet. He was stumbling, but moving and Hermione half carried him as the waves pushed against their legs, trapping their feet in shifting sands. Draco's heavy boots were weighing him down and it took just about all the strength he had left just to take one step at a time.

"That's it, just keep going," Hermione said between chattering teeth.

His head was hanging low. With her short stature, Hermione wasn't able to support much of his upper body and his shoulders stooped almost so he matched her height. His long blond hair fell in front of his face in wet locks, nearly freezing in place.

"Just a little more," Hermione prompted, feeling the cold so deep in her body it made her spine shake inside of her.

As soon as they got out of the surf, she would be able to work on getting them dry. Hopefully this wand wouldn't shrink her clothes like Ginny had accidentally done. Maybe if it did, that would finally snap Draco out of the delirious state he seemed to be trapped in. At least he was moving under her guidance.

The ground turned into black rocks, sharp and rough, but more firm than the sand. Hermione tried her best to support Draco as he dragged himself alongside her. They had made it halfway up the frozen beach. However, every few steps, Draco would lose his balance and only when Hermione cried out for him to "Watch out!" did he thrust a hand in front of him to stop from falling on his face.

The rocks cut into his palm and red blood ran freely from his pale hand. Malfoy blood. She had fought so hard for just a drop of it, and here it was, pouring out of him abundantly. Hermione took his hand in hers again and added it to the list of things to heal once they got…

She looked up, hoping to see some sort of structure they would be able to take shelter in.

Instead she saw someone rushing down from the snowy scape to meet them.

It was impossible not to recognize Narcissa Malfoy, even if Hermione hadn't already known she was here. Her blonde hair was tied back in a long, fraying braid and she wore a white fur cape that caught the wind, spreading it out around her and reminding Hermione of… an angel.

But Narcissa's face was anything but the peaceful expression Hermione had seen in paintings of angelic beings. She looked surprised at first, but when her eyes landed on who had come to her place of hiding she stopped short and pressed a gloved hand to her chest as she stared at the slumped figure of her son.

mouth, she felt a tug from her wand. It seemed to have responded to her even without a spell. It… knew her.

It *was* her.

Quickly Hermione latched herself onto Draco more firmly and hoped to Godric this worked. "Hold on, Draco," she said between gasps.

Draco, head lolling, wrapped his arms back around her. That little feeling, that small act, lent her bruised and aching body the strength to push on, just a little bit longer.

Pointing the elder wand at the shore, Hermione pictured her and Draco on the beach, walking hand in hand. He would pull her to his chest and she would smile up at him. Draco could brush her hair back and lower his face to hers. He'd tell her he loved her and she'd tell him… Hermione wasn't sure she could put what she felt into words.

She didn't have to. She just had to want it that much and her wand would respond.

Hermione wrapped her arm tighter around Draco and then… and then…

All the air was squeezed from her lungs. An unimaginable weight was crushing down on her. She was afraid that they were sinking, drowning, but then she felt the shifting sand of the shoreline underneath her.

Suddenly Draco was much too heavy to hold up and they collapsed, both landing hard on *land* as waves of slush and ice rushed up around them. Hermione turned over onto her hands and knees, but Draco was completely still and water crested over him.

She grabbed onto his hand and pulled his arm around her shoulders, bearing as much of his weight as she could. Even with his emaciated frame, Hermione was barely able to get Draco's torso up off the ground. She felt heavy enough herself and the strap of her beaded bag cut across her body sharply.

"Draco, Draco…" Hermione said as she started to shiver. "I need you to get up. Come on, do it for me."

Draco's body moved slowly, sluggishly, as if he was half frozen. Or half dead. Her body had been running on adrenaline for hours now and the cold water had stolen the last bit of her strength. She had never felt like this.

The cold was burning her skin, turning it a violent shade of red where it was exposed to the icy wind. Her whole body was shaking so much that she could barely trust her legs to walk.

"Please, Draco!" Hermione begged. She… she couldn't do it all on her own. In all her other adventures, Hermione had always had Harry and Ron with her. She needed Draco to help just a little bit and then she would take care of him. But she couldn't do that if they *both* got hypothermia. "Just *get up!*"

Among the many things Hermione packed in her beaded bag, a container of floo powder was somewhere in there. It took her almost an hour of unpacking and sorting through things to find it, but it was there, along with a small library of books, various potions and droughts, and a few items she made sure to tuck even further down so Draco's mother wouldn't see. She'd already seen Hermione in chains and lace once before, she didn't need to picture her in it again.

Draco's mother changed her mind several times before finally deciding to go. There wasn't much else they could do for Draco in their current position. He would either wake up, or… he wouldn't. It didn't matter to Hermione though. She had made her choice long ago and she wasn't going to leave him again.

Not now, not ever.

But having someone who could try and find a way to help him, or at the very least, send supplies to refill the dwindling stocks would be helpful. And who knew? If Draco woke up then maybe they could… Well, not go back, neither of them could do that anymore, but Narcissa spoke of a friend she had in the French Ministry of Magic who might be able to grant them refugee status.

It was worth a try, at least, so Hermione listened and offered her opinion as Draco's mother debated on what to do and Narcissa, shockingly, listened to what she had to say. In the end, it wasn't anything to do with Draco or Hermione that influenced her.

"I need to bury my husband." It was the thing that finally made up Narcissa's mind. Hermione did tell her that his body had been burned in the stables and she had taken the news as well as to be expected. Maybe it was just so painful that she wasn't able to feel it all at once. Maybe she considered her husband dead long before that. But for whatever reason, Narcissa felt it was her duty to honor his remains.

And Hermione understood. She would do the same for Draco, if it came to it.

She worried that the reason Draco wasn't waking up was because there was something stopping him. Hermione had removed his mark, burned it off his arm, but she didn't know if it was enough to stop him from turning into an *inferius* when he died.

Every time she thought about this, she rushed over to Draco's side and checked his breathing, his pulse, and all his vitals again and again until she had proven to herself that he was very much alive. His muscles would flex and tighten, but nothing else would happen.

It didn't stop her though. Hermione would hold his hand, rub her thumb over the scars on his wrist, and hope he'd come back to her. Even if he didn't, Hermione didn't have anyone or anything to go back to. Whereas Narcissa did.

She said goodbye to her son silently, with a hand on his head and her eyes closed. Hermione busied herself by stacking books up in the corner until his mother was done. Narcissa cleared her throat and her heels clicked against the wooden floor as she came to a stop in front of the fireplace.

"You have to be careful," Hermione warned Narcissa as she applied lipstick, or actually, that the lipstick hovered in the air and applied itself to her puckered lips. "If the wrong person recognizes you…"

"I am more capable than I look, Miss Granger," Narcissa said haughtily and snapped shut the compact mirror. "I was a Black before I was a Malfoy."

If the names were supposed to conjure something other than the list she had read in *The Sacred Twenty Eight* , it was lost on Hermione. She supposed being a Black meant something different to Purebloods. Something good, or… bad, actually. She didn't ask.

But she did do the next best thing.

"You should take this." Hermione held out Draco's hawthorn wand. Narcissa's gaze locked on it for a few long seconds then cut up back to Hermione's face. "It's Draco's—"

"I know what it is," Narcissa hissed. "I…" She gingerly touched the side of her hair with her palm, smoothing its perfect coifs down. "I bought it for him. We tried almost two dozen wands before he found that one." She nodded down to the wand in Hermione's hand. "As soon as he touched it, it shot out—"

"Red sparks," Hermione finished for her and Narcissa nodded. "It always did that when he was… frustrated."

"Yes, he certainly was that day," Narcissa's eyes softened and a slightly wistful expression came over her. "He wanted to go look at the new racing broom, the Nimrod, or, Nimbulus… something or other. Either way, I wouldn't let him and he was quite cross with me over it."

Hermione's heart pricked in her chest. It sounded so much like Draco. He had loved Quidditch just as much—if not more than—Harry and Ron. It had been because she insulted his Quidditch abilities that he had first called her a Mudblood, something she would never forget. But… it had also been on their first… date, if it could be called that, that Draco had taken her flying.

And that he had first…

Hermione blushed, not wanting to think about *that* right now.

Narcissa took Hermione's hand in hers and closed it around Draco's wand. "Keep it. In case he wakes up."

mouth and floated up past her. Hermoine turned her face up to see… just more water. How far down were they?

It was one thing Hermione did not feel the need to find out. Lifting the Elder wand, Hermione pointed it in the direction Draco's bubbles had gone and prayed it would be enough to reach the surface.

She was surprised when a rush of steam exploded from the end of her wand. Oh, it was enough alright. She would have to get used to the power of this wand and the ability to make just about anything she wanted happen.

No wonder people killed for this wand. Hermione could feel the strength of it, of *her,* as she was pulled to the surface. It was closer than she thought and before she knew it, her face had broken through and she was coughing, desperately trying to get air into her lungs. Draco bobbed to the surface next to her and his body convulsed, spitting forth a mouthful of seawater.

"Draco!" Hermione wrapped her arm around him, trying to help him stay afloat. His eyes flickered open, but they were rolled to the back of his head.

A wave crashed over them and Hermione fought against the cresting water and chunks of ice swirling around her. Draco's body was flung into hers so she wrapped her arm around his chest. She kicked her legs, hard, to keep them both from going too far under again.

Hermione sputtered and coughed seawater from her lungs again.

Draco's face was mere inches from her own, but he wasn't coughing. He wasn't doing anything, just floating there, as still and cold as the ice around them. Hermione's heart skipped a beat, and then another, until she heard him breathe out, and water leaked from the side of his mouth. At least his lungs were clear now. She tightened her grip around him, making sure they stayed together.

In his unconscious state, Draco gently bobbed on the surface and Hermione found herself leaning on him to help stay afloat.

Wet curls stuck to her forehead and cheeks as Hermione looked around. They were actually closer than she thought they had been! She could even see the shoreline! But the current was pulling at them, trying to drag them further out to sea.

Hermione kicked hard, fighting the rough waves, but Draco was dead weight in her arms. She barely could hold both of them up, let alone actually move them anywhere.

But they were so close!

Hermione felt like she could scream with frustration. So she did. Turning her face up, Hermione let out a loud yell. Right as a wave crashed over her, pouring seawater into her

Hermione pointed her wand at the ocean below and caused a force of wind to blow upward, keeping them in the air a little longer. She couldn't feel her hands or her face or… much of anything else, but she could feel the mist from the water hitting her. And then she felt Draco push his face into her hair again and had to bite her lip to keep from smiling.

The magic kept them going, but not for long. They were still over the water when the bike's engine stopped turning. It was eerily quiet for three seconds before the deafening sound of wind rushing by her ears was all she could hear. Her stomach lurched into her throat, stopping her from screaming as they… fell.

It didn't feel too different from flying, at least not to her, that was until the bike slipped out from underneath them. At least she didn't need the map anymore. Without the support of the seat, Draco's body unwrapped from hers until his hands were just barely grazing her body. Hermione gripped her wand tightly and grabbed Draco's hand tighter as the water rushed up to meet them.

The motorbike hit a large piece of sea ice, shattering it and clearing a small patch for her and Draco to fall into. Hermione barely had a chance to take a breath before they collided with the surface of the ocean.

It wasn't just cold.

It was cutting into her, flaying her nerves and making her whole body seize. She was glad she took a last gulp of breath because she wasn't sure when her lungs would be working properly again. Or when she would reach the surface. She was tossed and turned under the waves, unable to right herself in the impossibly strong pull of the currents.

She thought it would have been quiet under the water, but there was a deep rushing noise and Hermione felt herself being twisted and pulled down. Draco was sinking. And she was going with him.

No.

This time, Draco was going with *her*.

Her hair was floating in front of her face and she had to dive down a little to get it out of the way so she could try and see which way was up. When she did, Hermione saw the motorbike falling into the dark depths. The light on the front flickered a few times before going out. In another second, it was gone as well, too deep for her to see anymore.

Draco, however, was floating there a few feet below her, only their clasped hand stopping him from following the bike to the bottom of the ocean. Hermione felt her need for oxygen start to burn in her lungs. A few bubbles drifted out of Draco's slack

Hermione didn't know what to say, and wasn't sure she'd be able to with the lump growing in her throat, so she merely nodded.

Narcissa gave her a thin, flat smile, which Hermione interpreted as a sign of understanding between the two women.

Hermione stood at the foot of the bed while Narcissa wrapped the white fur lined cloak around herself. "Blaise Zabini might be able to help you as well. It should be easy enough to find him." She picked at her fingers. "I let him, and Neville Longbottom, use the Manor as headquarters for the Order."

She could feel Narcissa's gaze on her. "My home…"

"They helped me," Hermione interrupted. "In freeing Draco. They deserve it."

Narcissa did not share her thoughts, but merely nodded, accepting Hermione's judgment in the matter.

"There is a wood shed past the rocks and up to the left," Narcissa instructed. "I will send supplies as soon as I can, but you should be comfortable for a few more weeks. If you like lentils."

"As long as it's not brussel sprouts, I'll be fine," Hermione joked.

Narcissa didn't laugh, but did look at her strangely before saying, "I wondered why the house elves were preparing so many. I thought we had just had a good harvest of them and they were trying to…" She shook her head lightly, patting her blonde hair even though not a single strand was out of place. "I honestly don't know what the elves do."

Hermione pursed her lips at Narcissa's obvious unconscious privilege over the magical beings that shared her home. She didn't want her last interaction with Draco's mother to be an argument. She had enough of that.

"We had a fight," Hermione explained. "Draco and I." She took a breath. "He knew I didn't like them so…"

Narcissa looked between her and Draco once more and then shook her head in an all too motherly way. "Well, I will be sure to leave those out of the care package, Miss Granger."

They stood side by side, both watching Draco sleep for a few peaceful moments. While Hermione could not imagine leaving Draco's side, she could understand how difficult it would be for his mother to sit and watch her only son like this. Narcissa felt the need to do something and Hermione was not going to deter her.

"My gloves," Narcissa's sharp tone cut into Hermione's thoughts. "I need my gloves!" She started looking around, pulling out drawers and throwing around cushions frantically as she searched for them.

Hermione watched in shock for a moment but was jarred into action when Narcissa knocked over a pile of books.

"I have to find them!" she shrieked. "I have to—I can't leave without them!"

Hermione started to look around, but couldn't understand why a pair of gloves were so important. She could hardly believe Narcissa's strange turn in behavior. She had been so collected, even in emotional instances, but now she was practically unhinged. Something else crashed to the floor with a loud noise.

"Here they are!" Hermione picked them up off the bedside table beside Draco. Narcissa must have left them there when she was saying goodbye to her son. "They're right here." She held them out.

Narcissa deflated with relief. Then practically snatched them and struggled to slip them on her shaking hands.

"Thank you." She wasn't meeting Hermione's eyes. Narcissa stretched her fingers out in the dark leather gloves, a slight snakeskin sheen glinting as she curled her hand into a fist and released it. They fit her perfectly, with a small tuft of fur sticking out of the wrists, that looked so soft it almost didn't seem real.

They must have been made specifically for her, the way they fit to her like a second skin. Narcissa had lost most of her possessions, but still, that was quite a fuss over a pair of gloves. Even if they looked like they cost more than Hermione's entire wardrobe.

"They are very nice," Hermione offered, hoping the compliment would distract from what she was sure was a wary expression on her face.

"They were a gift." Narcissa flashed her a thin lipped grimace. "From Draco."

Oh. Well Narcissa's reaction made a bit more sense then. Hermione felt a little pool of guilt having judged the other woman so harshly. It hadn't been about the gloves at all then and that might be the last bit of Draco that Narcissa had left.

Hermione touched the ring around her neck, checking to make sure it was still there. Her hand closed around the cold metal and she felt it leech a little heat from her palm. But she didn't let go.

Narcissa noticed the motion and her eyes softened for a moment before she said, "He has good taste."

Hermione's heart melted a little. She didn't know what to say to that, but she appreciated Narcissa's hidden compliment all the same. Hermione didn't fit the mold of the kind of person Narcissa would have chosen for Draco, but the fact that she respected Draco's choice and… even approved of it, meant more than Hermione could say.

was still working on Draco despite him being unconscious for the past hour. As long as Hermione could hold on, they would make it.

She hoped.

Hermione gripped the handlebars and urged them on, feeling an exhausted ache running up her arms and knotting in the middle of her back, right below where Draco's head rested against her shoulders. The feverish warmth from his body helped keep her muscles from cramping too hard. She was thankful for the relief, but knew it came at Draco's expense. Worrying about how long he had been burning like this, Hermione pushed the bike on faster.

They had come too far to turn back now so this was it. All or nothing.

She knew it had been a risk to rescue Draco, but Hermione was a Gryffindor, tried and true; she would rather risk it all than live with nothing. And a life with Draco, even here in the frozen north, it was *everything.*

There, in the distance, she saw something growing on the horizon. Hermione dipped the bike down, trying to get a better look at it. Glancing between the map and the dark spot a few times, she just *knew* it had to be the island. It loomed above the flat surface of… Oh. That wasn't water.

That was…ice. It floated in white chunks, bobbing in the dark water.

But darker than the water was a large cone-like shape that looked like the inverse of an iceberg.

Yes—that was the island!

"Draco!" she shouted happily. "Draco, I found it! We're almost there!"

He didn't respond, but that didn't matter. Soon they would be…

One of the dials spun all the way around then fell limp pointing ominously straight down. Oh no. That couldn't be good. Hermione tried pressing a few more knobs, but the only thing that happened was the bike skittered in the air, almost knocking her out of her seat. Another one of the dials went all the way around and kept spinning, faster and faster.

They were falling. Fast.

Very fast.

Hermione pushed the bike on, trying to make it cover as much distance as it could as it descended. They were less than a kilometer away, but if they were to crash here, there was no way they would be able to swim to shore at this distance.

Hermione hadn't come all this way, just to come all this way.

She came here to come *home.*

But he was.

Without his white walls, Draco wasn't able to hide anything anymore, not even from himself and goddamn it he couldn't help but wonder was that…

Granger?

Hermione?

"Draco?"

He was staring so hard at her, he hadn't even really noticed that she was looking back at him.

"Are you hungry?"

Yes, he was fucking hungry. He had never felt like this before. Not even when he hit a growth spurt at 13 and started stealing food from the Great Hall like Crabbe and Goyle just to keep the ache at bay. He was starving and his body felt like he had just gone through an entire season of Quidditch training in one day. Every part of him was sore and worn.

Everything hurt.

But nothing hurt quite like the deep ache inside of him because it had nothing to do with his physical body.

It was her.

He wanted her.

More than just a want, it was like a force of nature, drawing him into her and he could fight as much as he wanted, but he never got any further away than he was now.

"I can make—"

He turned his head towards the wall, letting it fall into the corner he refused to move from unless he knew for sure that she was sleeping.

Had she slept before?

He didn't think so. But, maybe he… He didn't fucking know.

Draco pushed his head harder into the wall.

He heard her sigh and from the corner of his eye saw her run her fingers through her hair, making it even messier than it was before.

It looked like it did when he had her on her knees, cock in her mouth and his hands holding her head down on him.

Fuck.

Fuck fuck fuck.

Draco shook his head, trying to get the image out of it or at least shift the rubble enough that he could make a… barrier or sorts.

Nothing worked.

Without his magic, he couldn't do anything.

"Fine. Well if you get hungry, then just… grunt or something."

Draco swung his head back around to glare at her.

And she glared right back, gaze burning with fire and… Courage. Pride. Strength.

Fuck, she looked like Hermione.

She even huffed and spun around like her, making her toffee curls fan out around her body as she marched back over to the couch.

Draco went back to watching her, even if all he could see was the back of her head. He'd seen it enough to know it well after spending years watching her sit in the front of classes and play teacher's pet.

Just like then, he couldn't do anything but… sit here and watch.

So he did.

Draco stared at her, waiting for her to show who she really was. *What* she really was.

The uncomfortable feeling inside him, which he now recognized as his soul, seemed to already know.

But Draco had always made the wrong choice, the wrong decision. He didn't want to fuck up again. There had been a time when he was so sure of himself; who he was and his place in the world. It had been so easy to discount others as less than, as inferior just because he was told they were.

But Hermione had shown him she was… so much more. Or maybe he had known it, deep down, all along.

Maybe he knew it now.

Draco wasn't smart or brave like she was. He was scared. Scared that he'd lose her. He had already lost himself and without Hermione, who was he? What use was he?

He didn't even have any fucking magic anymore. Why would Granger still want him when she had… everything?

Only a fool would think she would want someone like him to love her.

He didn't need her voice in his head telling him she would be better off without him, he already had his own.

Useless.

Well, he could still do one thing.

Draco watched her, made himself do it too, made himself see her for what she really was.

But all he saw was a girl.

His girl.

Hermione.

Hermione came in carrying a load of wood in her arms. They ached from the strain, she welcomed the distraction from the stream of never ending questions in her head. She felt the more she worked towards her goals, the farther they got. After Draco had woken up and called her… that again, Hermione had almost given up on herself. How much more did she need to do, need to give, to get *something* back in return?

After crying until her eyes felt bruised from the effort, she forced herself to get up and start doing things again. The only problem was there wasn't much to do up here. A few simple cleaning charms kept the place in order, not that there was much that could be out of place. She was down to the last of the supplies which mostly consisted of jars of canned beans and lentils, porridge, and the flavorless broth. The only thing that had any sort of taste was a particular blend of rose tea Narcissa had been fond of.

It was floral and sweet, but Hermione missed the tannic bitterness of the strong black tea she usually drank. Still, beggars couldn't be choosers and Hermione drank it all the same.

More out of habit than anything else, but it was a decent way to wash out the flavor of the potion she was still taking, for whatever hopeful reason, all the same.

Hermione did her best to make the food edible, but Draco still threw it across the room the first time she placed the bowl next to the bed. She didn't give him the pleasure of a reaction and just sat down with her back to him and ate hers in silence. The next day Draco let it go cold, still not trusting her. However when she woke up, the bowl was empty. By the third day, he just sneered at her as she set it down, but ate it anyway.

It was progress.

Having Draco glower at her from the farthest corner he could get himself into weighed heavily on her. All she wanted was him to put his arms around her, hold her tight against his body, and tell her everything was going to be okay. She didn't even care if it was a lie. She just wanted him to… *talk* to her.

Chapter Thirty One

He watched her. His eyes were dry and he needed to blink, but Draco wasn't going to take his eyes off her. Not for one fucking second.

The bitch had gotten better at her tricks. After his mind had broken, and she had broken into it, he was sure she rifled through all his memories and… perfected herself.

Because, *fuck,* she was perfect.

She moved like Granger, acted like Granger, fucking *smelled* like Granger. The whole cabin was filled with a sweet cinnamon and vanilla mixed with the smoke from the fire and it made his stomach growl.

It made his dick hard too, but he wasn't paying attention to that. Not right now. Draco pressed it down with his palm only to have to strain back up, trying to…to get to her.

It shouldn't. It never got hard for her before, but maybe that was because…

No. No, no no.

Hell no.

He wasn't going to even think it.

But she *wasn't*. And if he lost himself now, he'd lose her too. He could stand the torture and madness, but he couldn't stand that.

Hermione was his. And she'd stay like that. Even if that meant he had to stay like this.

Draco closed his eyes so tightly that he saw white spots. Broken marble and remnants of a life he had fucked up. He kept them like that, closed tightly, and refused to shed the tears that were building up behind his eyes.

Instead, Hermione was left alone with her thoughts, replaying everything she had been through, everything she had done, and trying to find where she had gone wrong. Maybe this was a punishment for what she'd done to the people in Azkaban. But judging by Draco's state, a quick end had been a release for them. Maybe if she had gotten there sooner she could have saved Draco some of the pain and torture he had gone through.

Had she taken too long trying to free him the legal way? Hermione had only spent all those months doing that so Draco would be able to come back home. For them to have the kind of life they should be able to have, one where they lived together and… that was about as far as Hermione's dreams had ever gone. Just getting to *be* with him.

That was all she ever really wanted. The glory from the war and the praise for her intellect were things she would, and had, easily given up. For him. It was a fair trade, a compromise she willinging made.

If only Draco would just… come back. Come back to her like he promised.

When the silence got too heavy and her mind rushed with everything she couldn't say, Hermione would find something to keep her busy. While she could easily just summon the wood from the shed outside, trudging out there gave her something to do. That small break from the once cozy, now claustrophobia-inducing cabin stopped her from losing the shaky control that she had from letting all her emotions rush forth.

Even if she wanted to. So much. More than that, she wanted to let it all go and let Draco tell her what to do in that deep, commanding tone of his. But when he didn't, she donned his big black coat and ventured outside into the endless night and let the cold brace her until her heated heart settled back down in place lest she sob and tell him she loved him or better yet, shout and slap some sense into him.

The second best thing was feeling the strain as she hauled logs in from outside and let the tension work itself out of her body physically. It was satisfying in doing a task menially; it got her blood flowing and gave her a sense of accomplishment even if it was something as tending the fire and keeping it going.

At least it kept her warm.

It was always cold when she stepped away from the fire and Hermione wondered how Draco managed it, hidden back in his dark corner. No point in asking him though, he'd probably just call her another nasty name again and then go back to his glaring.

She was starting to wonder if there was any truth to what Narcissa had said. Maybe… Maybe Draco was… No. Draco was here, with her—*that* is what he was.

End of story.

Except, it wasn't exactly because she wasn't going to give up. Draco hadn't given up on her even when she shunned him for months so she wasn't going to let a few weeks locked in a cabin change what she felt or what they were.

Draco was in there, just like he always was, she just had to get to him.

Hermione knelt down by the fire and fed it a few logs. They hissed and spit as the frozen snow on them melted, but soon the flames were radiating enough heat to fill the small room. Sighing, Hermione brushed the dirt off her hands and stood up. She was about to head over to the kitchen and boil some water for tea, but when she turned, she ran into something solid.

Draco was standing right behind her.

"Oh!"

Her hands instinctively went out to steady herself and they landed on his chest. Usually Draco would have grabbed her waist and held her against him, moving a hand up her spine and into her hair so he could hold her head in place while he bent to kiss her. However, Draco didn't move an inch this time. His arms hung uselessly at his sides.

"Granger," he said her name carefully and Hermione looked up at him, hopeful that—"You're touching me."

Hermione blinked, her eyes wide and staring up into his hazy grey ones. He was looking at her like… like he used to, back in school. Like he was waiting on something;, like he was watching for something.

"Yes," she breathed out, making her touch light, but not removing it. "I'm touching you."

So slowly she almost didn't realize he was moving, Draco lifted his burned hand up to cup hers, pressing it against his chest. He had put on a little weight from the regular meals, even if they were mostly porridge, but she could easily feel his heart pounding so hard in his chest, he was almost shaking from it.

"Your hands are cold," he muttered under his breath. His grey eyes stormed and darkened. "Her hands were warm."

He pulled her hand from his chest and shoved it back at her, leaving only two dirty handprints marking the front of his clean white shirt.

Maybe it was the stress and mental exhaustion she was dealing with day in and day out, or maybe it was the fact she had spent the last half hour out there gathering up wood to keep the fire burning for *him,* but most likely it was because Draco Malfoy was being an absolute *ass* to her again, that Hermione snapped.

"Oh I mean it, *Sweetheart."* He leaned forward, wanting to drive his point home, straight into her fake fucking heart. "I mean every goddamn word when I say I'm fucking done with you, "Draco said with every ounce of venom he could muster. "Fuck. You."

Granger was completely still, not even breathing. The only sign of life on her were her cheeks as they flushed that shade of Gryffindor red he loved so much.

Fake Granger had never blushed before. She had never looked *this* much like his girl, but maybe she picked up some new tricks. Or maybe she had perfected her fucking lie when she kicked him out of his own fucking head and exiled him down to that black space Hermione had burned into him.

Down into his soul.

He should have known she would have taken it, it was hers from the start.

The only surprising thing was how long Draco had held out against her. Not that it mattered now.

He had given in. He had broken down. But he wasn't going to do that this time.

Draco had promised he would get back to her. He had *promised,* but he had broken every promise he ever made her. Except one.

He still loved her.

And he wasn't letting this… whatever she was take that from him. If all he had were memories of her, he wasn't going to let anyone else use them. He might not be able to kill her, but he could ignore her. He'd done it before, for five fucking years. Eternity couldn't be that much longer.

The hurt in her eyes was replaced with fire and Draco felt something spark deep inside him. He stamped it out as quickly as he could.

"If that's how you feel, then fine." Granger wiped the moisture from her eyes and climbed off the bed stiffly, walked across the small room, and sat in front of the flames.

Draco stared at her back, unmoving except for a barely perceptible shake of her shoulders every now and then, and repeated to himself—over and over—she wasn't her.

She wasn't her. She wasn't her.

She wasn't fucking her.

But he was still him, and he always would be.

And he *loved* her.

Fuck, he loved her.

So much it hurt.

Draco welcomed the pain, wanting to feel it for what he'd done. He wanted to feel it until he burned with it. It felt like… love. And she felt like… Granger. Like Hermione.

missing, to be able to hurt people for caring for him. It had been his first act of self harm. And once he got a taste of it, he couldn't stop.

He never could.

Especially when it came to Hermione.

It was what he was trying to do now.

But it wasn't working on her. She was too goddamn smart.

Fuck her.

Granger was speaking to him, but he refused to listen. He could hear her talking. Hear her shouting. Hear her pleading.

There was a muffled buzz in his ears, probably because he wasn't getting enough oxygen with his desperate gasping. He needed to breathe.

One.

Two.

He needed…

She reached out, placing her hand, her fucking *warm* hand on the top of his knee. "It's me. It's Her—" She paused. "It's Granger. Draco—"

It wasn't Hermione.

He kicked out at her, missing her on purpose, but dislodging her hand.

"Don't fucking touch me," Draco spat, trying to keep the emotion from his voice. It was harder to keep himself in check now. No longer could he hide behind his white walls. He was laid bare before her.

Draco did the only thing he knew how to, the one thing he promised never to do again. "You dirty fucking M—"

He couldn't do it. He couldn't hurt her.

But it was done. It was all fucking done.

The look on her face nearly broke his heart. It probably would have, if it had really been on *her* face, not just on this fucked up, lying version of her.

Granger stopped moving. She didn't do anything but look straight at him, holding his gaze and *making* him watch as unshed tears welled up in her eyes.

Draco felt his resolve weakening. He was breaking down all over again. He didn't mean it. He didn't, but… it was the only thing he could think of that would be enough to… to make her *stop*.

Because if she didn't, he wouldn't be able to either.

"You don't…" she said softly. "You don't mean that."

She shoved her hands into his chest, smearing more dirt onto him and making him rock back slightly. "Of course my hands are cold!" she shouted. "I've been outside in a snowstorm!"

Draco shook his head and then leaned in so close their faces were almost touching. "You. Are. Not. Her." He enunciated each word and they pieced her deeper than the cold ever could have.

The fire snapped and popped behind her and she felt a wave of heat expelled from it. Or perhaps it was the rage flooding through her veins.

"I AM!" She threw her arms up and let them slap down against her legs again. "I am Hermione! Granger! Whatever you want to call me! I gave up *everything* for you so the least you could do is—"

"Is what?" he sneered.

"Trust me!" Hermione screamed. Right in his face. His stupid, smug, handsome… fallen face.

Draco straightened up so quickly it was as if being that close to her was painful. For half a moment Hermione wished it was. Guilt and shame sank over her along with the sore, tired feeling that seemed more of a companion to her than Draco was these days.

"Trust you?" he questioned. "I do trust you, Hermione." Her name. His said her name. "That's not the problem."

Hermione searched his face for some inkling of what in the world he was talking about. How could he say he trusted her when he didn't even think she was real?

As if he was reading her mind, Draco went on, "I just don't trust myself."

What? What did that even mean? She couldn't even chase that line of thought because… because how was she supposed to convince him when he wouldn't believe what was right in front of him? It felt like trying to prove Muggleborns were just as capable as Purebloods all over again.

It felt like they were back at the beginning.

What did she need to do? What more *could* she do? She was… who she was and that… that just wasn't good enough for him.

Hermione's shoulders fell, the last bit of indignation leaving her as Draco turned and headed back to his dark corner. His heavy boots scuffed across the floor with each step.

Even though the fire burned brightly behind her, Hermione felt the coldest she had all day watching as Draco slid down the wall, one leg stretching out and the other bent at the knee. The shadows hung over him, making only his eyes stand out. They narrowed as he watched her, not even blinking when her own filled blurred with hot tears.

Hermione roughly brushed them away. "Well I do!" she fired back at him. "I trust you, Draco. I trust that you won't break your promise to me. You'll come back and I'll be—" Her voice gave out, dying as her heart choked in her throat.

Draco stuck his chin out. "Be what?" His voice was so cold, bitterly cold.

His girl. She touched the ring under her shirt, like a promise. She had no idea if he'd keep his, but she was going to keep hers, even if she had never had the chance to make it properly.

Hermione took a deep breath and said, "Here. Waiting for you. I'm not going anywhere, I promise."

Something flashed across his face, but she didn't have the energy to stay and puzzle it out. Hermione quickly walked over to the small stove and set the kettle on, busying herself with straightening up the place that was already perfectly clean, but at least it gave her something to do. She tried to think of anything else but the aching in her chest and the fact that Draco was so… so *mean* to her again, after everything they had been through, but trying not to think about it only made her think about it more.

She jumped when her quick movements knocked the tea cup onto the floor.

"Fiddlesticks!" Hermione huffed. She bent down to gather the pieces up. She could repair it, and she would, but… there was something comforting about doing a task with her hands that she needed right now. She needed normalcy, routine, she needed… some amount of control in her life. She reached for the last piece, nearly tucked under one of the cabinets when the fire dimmed. It was just for a second, but it was enough that she didn't see the sharp edge before it cut into her finger.

Hermione winced and pulled back. A thick drip of blood bloomed on the pad of her finger. It looked strangely both light and dark in the casted fire light. Hermione set the other pieces down on the counter and reached for the tea towel to wipe it off.

His hand closed around hers, pulling it towards him as his thumb and forefinger slid up to her cut and squeezed the tip of her finger. She hadn't even noticed he had left his corner, but how, she didn't know. Draco seemed to take up half of the kitchen area all by himself and his shadow was so long it stretched to the opposite wall.

His hand dwarfed hers as he held it.

"Ow!" Hermione tried to pull it back from him, but Draco held fast. He seemed confused or… entranced by the drop of blood that was now running down her finger and into her palm. He squeezed harder, drawing more out of the small wound. "Draco, stop! That hurts!"

He ignored her, his gaze intent on her finger. "You're bleeding."

He had killed for her before, he could do it again.

Couldn't he?

Draco answered his own question, along with hers, in one word. *"No."*

As much as he wanted to rid himself of this farce of the woman he loved once and for all, he couldn't.

He fucking couldn't.

Not her. Not… *Hermione.*

He was a failure. Just like he'd always been.

Draco's hands shook and he ripped them from her, pulling his body off of hers as swiftly as he could and tucked himself into the farthest corner of the bed. He didn't want to touch her, didn't want to feel her.

But he couldn't help it. She had burned a hole straight through him and he was… empty. Nothing felt real without her. The anger, the hate… it was nothing without her love. He was nothing.

Useless.

Draco bent his long legs, bringing them up to his heaving chest. He was breathing heavily. He was unable to slow it down even when it became so short and shallow that he was barely getting any oxygen. Draco wrapped his arms around his legs, trying to hold himself together like he had in his cell.

Granger lifted herself up onto her elbows, her shirt pulling tight across her chest.

Draco closed his eyes so he wouldn't look at the curves of her body.

It wasn't her.

It wasn't her.

It wasn't Hermione.

He always fucked up and… he didn't want to anymore. It didn't make sense that this was real. It made perfect sense that this was Fake Granger's… *his Granger's,* newest way to torture him.

Because she was his Granger; the one he made up in his head. The one he deserved. She was his hell. Because he'd been hers.

Who would have ever let him be happy after what he did? Draco always knew he was damned. That's why he fought so hard to keep Granger with him, while he could. How could he have known it was just going to drive them further apart?

He should have. That's what he always did. Push everyone who showed him an ounce of kindness as far from him as he could. It gave him the sense of control his life had been

She looked up at him in confusion and then something in her expression changed. Good. So she finally understood what was happening. That he was going to end her once and for all.

Granger melted under him, her body softening as she… she gave up fighting him and let him take control.

Like she always had.

Like he needed.

Like he *loved* .

Draco tried to remember what it was like to hate her. The acid burning in his veins, the confusion clouding his mind, the… fear pricking in his heart; that is what hating Hermione Granger felt like.

Loving her wasn't all that different.

If anything, it was worse. A hole had been burned straight through him. Right down to his soul.

And he hated the how much he fucking loved it.

Draco's hands slithered up to her throat, wrapping around the smooth skin easily. Her eyes widened and he watched as something flashed deep in them. He had expected it to be fear, but instead Draco was surprised by her lids dropping softly so that her lashes hung heavy and dark over her expanding pupils.

Instinctively, he bent over her, leaving barely an inch between their faces. He watched the firelight flicker in her eyes, making her look… look…

Look *just* like Hermione.

"Did you think that you could keep me down there like a fucking pet?" he snarled in her face. "Oh no, Sweetheart. That's not how this works. You don't tell me what to do." Draco glowered down at her. "You *beg."*

Granger lifted her chin, giving him a better hold on her and parted her lips as if welcoming him to kiss her. "Draco… please…"

Draco could feel her heart beating against his palm.

One.

Two.

Three.

His own heart clenched so hard in his chest, he feared it would crack like a stone.

Every muscle in his body strained and tightened. In fact the only thing that didn't harden was his grip on her neck. He held her with a controlled pressure, but it wasn't her he was controlling. It was himself. He needed to do this. He had to.

"Yes, I'm bleeding," Hermione said waspishly, finding the heat of her anger returning quickly. "And you're making it worse!"

"Yeah," one half of his mouth curved in a devilish smirk, "I tend to do that."

"So stop!" Hermione tried to pull her hand back again and when he still wouldn't let go, she dropped her other hand to her pocketed wand.

His brows pulled together slightly. "You never bled before."

Oh good Godric. This was getting ridiculous. "I've actually bled quite a lot! I fought in the war, in case you've forgotten that along with who I really am," she retorted. "So if you don't let go—"

Draco's gaze suddenly cut up to hers, locking on her and freezing her in place. There, deep in the storming grey of his eyes, there was Draco, *her* Draco. Hermione stilled, unable to do anything but watch as Draco lifted her hand up and slid her bleeding finger into his mouth.

Oh God, it was wrong, so very wrong, but his mouth was warm and his tongue was soft as he curled it around her finger, sucking on it slightly. The small cut throbbed, but not from pain, it was because her heart was thudding in her chest at the sight of Draco's lips wrapped around her finger.

He kept his eyes on hers as he slowly slid it from his mouth. This time when he smirked it was full and… and red. Oh my.

Draco licked his lips. "Sweet."

"Oh…" Suddenly it wasn't her finger throbbing anymore. Hermione's legs started to go weak underneath her and she might have just sunk to the floor if Draco hadn't pushed her back against the wall that very moment. He pinned her there with his body and slammed her wrist above her head, grabbing her other hand in a crushing grip as she went for her wand again.

He clenched his jaw, working it a few times and making the muscle along it tense and pop. The sudden movement had knocked the air from her chest and Hermione took a few gulping gasps trying to fill her lungs again. Draco pressed his body harder into hers, almost crushing her against the panels of wood.

"You're not *her..."* He said it almost like a question, as if he didn't fully understand something, but that was the only thing he wasn't certain of. Everything else, every movement, every touch was calculated, carefully controlled. After seeing him in his weakened state, she had almost forgotten how easily he could overpower her. Hermione would have been shaking if she could move. "You're *you* , aren't you?"

Oh… God…

Hermione's mouth fell open as he spoke those words to her. Something hot and sharp ran through her veins, pricking at the tips of her fingers before seeping into her muscles, making them almost numb yet at the same time feeling every inch of Draco's body against her own.

She could hardly breathe, but she found her voice just enough to say, "I'm—I'm… your girl."

His eyes shone like polished silver and a smirk slid so easily onto his face, it was like it was there the whole time. "Oh, Hermione," he breathed out and she could feel his breath on her lips. "You're so much more than that."

It was him. It was him, her Draco. Whatever haze or fog had barred him from recognizing this as reality seemed to have lifted from him. His eyes were sharper, his movements smoother, and his face… Godric, his face broke into the largest smile she had ever seen on it.

Her heart fluttered and bubbles rose up in her pushing it higher until she cried out, "Draco!"

"Hello Sweetheart," Draco breathed out and crashed his lips against hers.

It was more than a kiss, it was a collision.

Draco crushed her against the wall and Hermione let out a surprised moan. As her lips opened, he took the chance and plunged his tongue inside her mouth.

Hermione softened against him and Draco took control, running his hands over her body, wondering why the hell did he not realize she was *real* before when she felt like *this?*

"How… How is this possible?" Draco held Hermione's face in his hands, hardly believing she was really here, in front of him. He didn't want to let go, even when his grip on her cheeks made it hard for her to talk.

Her face split into a wide smile and the sight of it sparked something in his chest. God, she was beautiful. He didn't tell her that enough. He never had. He should have told her how gorgeous she was every day. How smart. How clever. How capable and… powerful. Hell, he had barely told her that he liked her most of the time.

Well, he wasn't making that mistake twice.

"Come to finish me off?" Draco glared down at her, curling his lip.

Granger stared up at him and he fought not to get lost in her big doe eyes. Fuck. Did she have to look so much like her? His scars strained across his chest as his heart thumped heavily inside it.

She had made a mistake. She had let him out. Did she think keeping him in that dark place would have quelled him? Would have made him do what she said? He could still feel the hold she had over his mind, the pressure she had put on him that kept him down there this whole time.

He needed to act before she took control of him again.

She needed to remember that wasn't how this worked.

"Draco, I—"

He shoved her harder against the bed, stopping the words coming out. Her mouth stayed open, a perfect little pink circle that his eyes caught on, staring too deeply and thinking about how it had felt to kiss her.

She had been warm. She had been real. She had been…

"You're not her," Draco snarled, hardening his heart and refusing to let her into it, no matter how much she looked like his girl. His Granger.

Hermione.

The memory of her made his soul ache.

The pain he was feeling was reflected in her eyes, filling up with tears and making them look like twin pools of melted chocolate.

He squeezed her arms harder, making a tear slip out of the side of her eye and run into the tangled mess of her curls.

"I know what you *really* are," he sneered, more of a reminder to himself than anything else.

"What are you talking about?" she whispered, trying to play on his emotions and manipulate him into trusting her, into thinking she was… she was really Granger.

But he couldn't. He couldn't fall for her lies again. He wouldn't.

Even if he wanted to.

"You're. Not. Her." Draco ground out. "Not Hermione."

She was laying flat on her back on the thick rug in front of the fire. The sound of the kettle whistling was ringing in her ears, along with the echo of that terrible roar. The longer it rang in her ears the more… *pain* she heard in it.

Hermione pushed herself up, quickly glancing at Draco who was still sleeping in his stiff, statue-like way, before she flicked her wand across the cabin to end the heating charm she had cast on the kettle.

"Finite Incantatum," Hermione said sleepily, but was… surprised when the stream of light that came from her wand did not go to the kettle, but to the corner of the cabin where the bed was.

And then something struck her like a bolt of lightning. The two synapses sparking together to illuminate the answer she had been searching for all this time.

Hermione had told Draco to stay safe, stay *down,* and he had done just that. He had to. Because she had put him under an *imperius* curse.

She was so used to Draco *not* listening to her, that she had forgotten she had *made him do it.*

Everything rushed to the forefront of her mind. Draco had only walked when she told him to. Only caught himself when she told him to. Only *moved* when she told him to. And when she didn't tell him what to do, he stayed as still as a statue.

She had never told him to wake up. She had only asked him to. Pleaded with him to. Begged him to.

He had been waiting, this whole time, for Hermione to come to him. The kettle's screech had died out on its own, but left a strange ringing in her head.

Hermione moved without thought towards the bed where Draco slept.

Except Draco wasn't asleep.

His eyes were *open* and he was staring right at her.

Hermione held her breath, not believing it, at least, until he *struck.*

His hands grabbed her arms, pinning them to her side with a strength that surprised her. She was flipped over and thrown down on the bed. His body, heavy now, laid on top of her, holding her in place. She was shocked by his sudden movement and even more shocked by the cruel expression slithering over Draco's otherwise pale face.

When he opened his mouth, a deep rasping noise came from it in the sound of her name. Not Hermione, but a growling… *"Granger."*

Draco had learned his fucking lesson.

"It doesn't fucking matter."

Granger opened her mouth to answer him, but Draco just crashed his lips back onto hers instead. She squealed into his mouth and he groaned as he slipped his tongue into hers, tasting her. Draco felt his knees go weak under him.

Fuck… He had missed her.

So damn much.

Draco pushed her back against the counter, placing his feet on either side of hers and pushing his hips into hers, trapping her there so she couldn't go anywhere. But she wasn't trying to leave him. Granger's hands grabbed at his arms, squeezing them, and she stayed perfectly still, only tilting her head back a little more so he could kiss her even harder.

What a good fucking girl she was.

And most importantly, his.

His girl.

His fucking only.

"Mmm," Granger moaned into his mouth. "Draco—" Her hands pressed into his arms a little, but he didn't fucking care.

He had her in them again for the first time in… forfuckingever and now that he did, he wasn't letting her go. Not ever again.

"Draco," she said against his lips, half laughing half still kissing him. "I need… to breathe."

He was smiling too. He couldn't help it. It made kissing her more difficult, but he didn't care. Draco just planted smaller ones against her lips, nipping at them and pulling on her bottom lip a little until she gasped.

"There," he mumbled. "Air." He cut off her next breath with another full kiss. Draco wrapped one hand around the back of her neck, holding her to him as he pressed his lips firmly against hers until he felt lightheaded from the lack of oxygen himself.

Breaking apart, he rested his forehead against hers, breathing hard. His chest pushed against hers with each gulp. He tried to time it so that when she breathed out, he breathed in so he could have more of her. Always more. Never enough. Not even if he spent the rest of his life doing this…

The rest of his life…

How was he even alive?

He knew the answer to that. He was looking right at it.

"Hermione…" Draco breathed out.

Granger let out a small whimper in response and her nails dug into his skin a little.

Fuck, that felt… *good.*

"Draco…" Her voice was soft and sweet and… Fuck it. He kissed her again. Because he could. Because he couldn't *not.*

"Mmm!" Granger's eyes flew open then fell closed as he thrust his fingers into her hair, tangling them in the thick curls.

Draco groaned again. If he wasn't careful he was going to—

"Oh God!" Granger gasped as he pushed his hips into hers, making her feel the hard length of him.

"That's right, Sweetheart." Draco grinned. "Your boyfriend's back."

She just looked up at him with her big doe eyes and… *moaned.* Goddamn. If she didn't stop looking so fucking good he was going to fuck her right here, right now.

Actually, that was a pretty good idea.

Draco growled and dropped his hands to her thighs. Reaching around to grip them tight, he wrapped one hand around each one and lifted her up onto the counter behind her. Draco stepped in between her legs and wrapped them around his waist, then pulled her flush against him, shoving his straining cock against her abdomen.

"Draco, wait—" Granger said quickly.

"Funny," he said dryly and went in to kiss her again.

She stopped him with a hand to his chest. She was touching him. Draco cock throbbed painfully at the feeling.

"Draco, don't—" He stopped immediately. Granger lips pursed like she was holding back a smile. "Don't you want to know how you got here?"

"I know," he said simply and Granger's head tilted to the side in curiosity. Draco shrugged. "Love. Fate. You. Take your pick."

Granger giggled. "Well, in a sense, yes."

"Told you." He grinned and leaned in again.

Granger stopped him a second time and Draco couldn't help but from letting out a low sigh.

"We need to talk," she said seriously.

He just looked at her and waited for her to go on. Like the little know-it-all he knew and loved, Granger began to speak.

"I need to make sure you're… you're alright," Granger said. "You've been… unconscious for weeks and when I found you, you were…" Her deep eyes darkened as a small frown marred her face. "Draco, you were nearly…"

She had to… She had to know.

She had to.

Reaching out, she pulled it open and…

And…

Nothing.

No, not nothing.

Darkness.

Black so black that it didn't seem possible. Even with all the bright light around her, she couldn't see more than a few inches into the deep. Nothing permeated it. It was as if it was a solid, living thing.

Hermione wasn't breathing. Her heart beat once, twice, a dozen times in a second.

She knelt down next to the opening.

"D-d…" Her voice was shaking so badly she could hardly speak. "Draco?"

Her whole body was going to shatter if… if he didn't answer her. He had to.

He *had* to!

"Draco Malfoy, come out of there right now!" Hermione shouted. "Come… come back to me," she added softer, quieter, but it wasn't begging, although she would gladly do that for him, but this had been something more like *control.*

Something… something moved in the darkness. No, that wasn't quite right either. Hermione had the strange sensation she had seen this before when… when the *darkness* moved in an eerily familiar way.

Oh… God.

Then she was staring into a pair of shining silver eyes, the same ones she always dreamed about.

Draco's eyes.

Hermione would know them anywhere. Her heart swelled and rose in her chest as bubbles surged up from deep inside her. Her brain slammed into overdrive so hard it stalled out, stopping her and keeping her in place.

She wanted to jump down there with him, to reach out to him, to scream, to shout out his name, but before she could land on one single action to do, the silver eyes gleamed dangerously and a roar filled with rage filled the entirety of the blank white space around her, practically throwing her back.

Hermione woke up.

pieces barely bigger than pebbles. Hermione made sure not to step on them as she made her way through the wreckage.

How… how did this even *happen?* If this was what was going on in Draco's head, how was he still able to function? Well, maybe this was why he wasn't. Hermione placed her palm against one of the stones, feeling its cool, smooth surface. She had hoped that she would feel… something when she touched it, but it just felt… lifeless.

Hermione moved through the rubble slowly, taking her time and enjoying the peaceful quiet. Not that the cabin was noisy, but this was different, like an absence of distraction. It felt purposeful, meaningful, poignant. She wished she could have seen it when it was still intact, but it wasn't unsalvageable now. It just needed a little tidying up.

It wasn't like she had much else to do at the moment. Hermione began sorting the broken hunks of marble, making a path for her to push forward. She didn't want to go back. Not to that dark cabin and the endless night. She'd like to stay here, with… *if* Draco showed up.

He must have spent years building this place up in his head, somewhere he could go to get away from… everything else. Even with all the destruction around her, Hermione was impressed by what he had done, building, brick by brick, a safe place for him to…

Suddenly her brain shot off *sparks* and her whole body went numb. Hermione dropped the hunk of marble in her hands.

Safe.

The rock tumbled to the ground, rolled a few feet, and then thudded on something that sounded… hollow.

She was almost too scared to look down, even her Gryffindor courage shook as the spark in her head burst into a shining ray of hopeful light. Even though she was completely terrified, *petrified,* of having her heart broken again, Hermione forced herself to look down.

It was the only splotch of color in this otherwise monochrome world and it was a familiar shade of brown, one she saw in the mirror.

There, through the thick line of water gathered on her bottom lashes, was a simple, wooden *door.*

Oh God…

Oh dear God…

Her heart was in her throat and Hermione had to cover her mouth to stop it from leaping out of her body and trying to dive down into wherever the little slatted door led to.

He knew. He remembered. He would never forget that hell. Draco blew out a low breath and rested his hands against the edge of the counter on either side of Granger, hanging his head a little. He watched her pick at her fingers nervously.

"I thought I was too late," Granger said in a hushed tone. Draco raised his gaze to meet hers again. "I thought I'd lost you."

"Kitten," Draco straightened up. "Do you think I'd ever let you go?"

Granger's mouth twisted, fighting a small smile.

"Do you think," Draco lowered his voice, "that after all I did to get you, I'd let anyone take you from me? Or—" He felt his adam's apple bob in his throat right before the corners of his mouth curved. "Take me from you?"

Something dark passed over her face and Draco's brows drew together, worried that something was bothering her. Which was… new. Not exactly, but his acknowledgement of it was. He didn't want Granger to be unhappy. It made him upset that she was.

"They did though." She dropped her eyes down. "They took you and… and I didn't know if I would ever see you again."

Draco held his breath. "I promised you—"

Granger lifted her face and looked him dead in the eyes. Brazen. Bold. "You promised me a lot of things."

"I know. I…" His chest seized so hard it cramped. "I'm sorry."

Granger blinked. "What?"

Draco swallowed. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry that I fucked every chance you gave me. I'm sorry I hurt you. On purpose. By accident. Because I put myself first. I'm sorry I didn't… didn't treat you like I should have. And I'm sorry I got myself taken away from you."

He watched her big brown eyes fill with a line of tears. He watched as she reached up and played with something on a simple string around her neck. She should have gems hanging off her, not whatever that was. How much had she given up to get him out? Draco had promised her so much and… had failed at all of it. But she was still here. She had brought them back together again, not him. And he owed her for that. He owed her *so fucking much.*

"I don't want to make you any more promises," Draco paused and Granger's eyes darted between his, trying to get a read on him. "I want to make you happy." He watched them light up the exact same shade of cinnamon. "I want to make you smile for every tear I made you cry. Double that. And double it again. It might take the rest of my fucking life, but…I don't want to spend it any other way. You're… you're it, Hermione. The only… *My* only."

Her eyes had never looked bigger as she stared up at him. He only dragged his gaze down to watch her bite her lip, indenting it and digging her teeth into the soft flesh as she reached up and placed her hands on his chest, running them up until they were on either side of his neck. Draco swallowed. Hard.

"You're…" she started, then stopped. "Draco, you…" Granger trailed off a second time and Draco felt his heart skip a beat, sending sharp pangs down his arms. Granger's lip trembled against her teeth. "You're… *everything* to me. I thought I'd lost you," her voice softened to barely a whisper. "I did so much, for you."

He felt like the floor had disappeared from under him, but he wasn't falling. He was flying. He didn't need a broom or… or anything, not now that he had her.

Draco had always known, deep down, that he wasn't worthy of her. Even back when he said she wasn't fit to lick his boots. But now… Shit. He'd never be the man she deserved. Even if he did spend the rest of his life doing everything he could to make it all up to her, it would never be enough.

That wasn't going to stop him though and there would be hell to pay for anyone who did.

Let them try. He'd rip them limb from limb. Fucking turn them inside out.

Or maybe he'd turn them over to his girl and let her curse them to bits.

He did like seeing her use a wand and while it wasn't his, he was the reason she had the Elder wand, in a way. Strange that he didn't mind losing it or the power it brought its master, not if it meant he got to have her. He put his hands on her waist and felt the wand sticking up from the waistband of her jeans. Draco pushed his fingers under her shirt and ran them along the length of the wand, feeling goosebumps rise on her skin as he moved them around to the button on the front.

"For me, huh?" Draco asked in a low voice.

Granger nodded. "All for you."

His blood was humming under his skin.

"No, Sweetheart," he said slyly and pulled her forward again by the front of her jeans. Granger gasped as her body collided with his and she grabbed onto his shoulder to steady herself. Draco rolled his hips against her, rubbing his cock against the warmth of her center. *"This is all for you."*

She let out a small whimper and oh hell… he *loved* that sound. Almost as much as her laugh. But right now he wanted to lick the moans from her mouth. And from other places. But what he wanted to hear more than anything was—

What surprised Hermione was the fact that his muscles were clenched, in a steady state of contracting even though he wasn't using them at all. She pushed up his white shirt and saw his scars stretched tight across his torso. He had put on weight again and his build was the slim athletic one he had before. It was almost like he was back to normal. Except he wasn't back at all.

Just his body was. Still, it was proof of life, that there was something still working in him, but… what would be causing him to be so… hard? She had slept next to Draco enough times to know that it wasn't normal for him to be like this. To feel like he was made of stone. Carved from marble. She worried that he was going to break too. How long could he stay like this before he… cracked too?

For what she assumed the next two days, Hermione didn't sleep. She was too on edge to find enough relaxation to rest. Eventually, she had drifted off out of pure exhaustion.

When she woke up she made another mark on the scrap of parchment and got to building the fire again.

That was all there was to do.

She set the cup of tea down in front of her and pushed her fingers into her thick curls. She was sure they looked frightful and this wasn't helping, but there was nothing else for her to do, but… wait.

Patience wasn't something Hermione was exactly good at. She liked to be proactive; researching a topic, asking questions, doing *something* .

It had been a year ago that Draco had locked her away in his bedroom with chains and cages. At the time, she had hated it; the waiting around for him to show up, the endless hours with nothing to occupy her, the dread of wondering if Harry was okay… or if Ron was. She had never felt so… trapped.

It was the worst thing that ever happened to her, being locked in a cage with Draco every night, but now she thought the worst thing was being locked *out* of wherever Draco was.

He said he'd come back to her. He *promised.*

And she… She believed him. She trusted him.

Wherever Draco was, he'd come back for her.

Hermione rested her head on her knees and closed her eyes. She didn't even realize she had fallen asleep until she started dreaming.

Broken marble twisted through with veins of grey were cracked and scattered around her. It was clear to see they had once been wide walls, strong and thick. Some of the pieces were sharp, as if they had crashed to the ground while others were crushed into

Hermione had been ignoring her own emotions long before the war started. There had always been something she had to prepare for, something she needed to research and get more information on. Ever since she came to Hogwarts, Hermione had been working to help Harry with whatever was trying to kill him that year.

She hadn't noticed how few times she made time to take care of her own problems or internal thoughts. Now, she had little choice but to confront all the things she hadn't let herself get distracted by. And like a true Gryffindor, she faced them head on.

Taking her battle stance, sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of the fire, and arming herself with her weapon, a steaming cup of tea, Hermione looked deep into the flames, and into herself.

She did this every day. Or, what she could assume was day. Without the sun rising or setting, it was easy to lose track of time. Of days, even. There wasn't a clock or a calendar here, so Hermione had started keeping a tally on a small scrap of parchment she tacked up on the wall. Draco would ask how long he had been out once he woke up and Hermione wanted to be able to answer him.

When he asked her a question, she was supposed to answer him.

Hermione took a sip of her tea, but was too lost in her thoughts to taste it. She went over everything, over and over, looking for what she missed, for what would help, but came up… empty. Where normally her brain would pop up with some long stored bit of information was just…black. Dark. Nothing.

She knew it was there, she just couldn't… find it. It was infuriating.

The books she had packed in her beaded bag shed little light on Draco's condition. She read everything she could about enchanted sleep and cross-referenced it with Muggle medical texts. When Ron was splinched last year, she didn't even have a field guide to try and address his physical, *human* wounds and this time, she hadn't wanted to make the same mistakes.

Draco's hand and bruises had been easy enough to heal and she continued administering healing and strengthening potions along with broth and plenty of water. It was all working. Draco was looking stronger and more himself every day, but… that was the very part he was still missing—himself.

And God… she missed him. It was awful being this close to him, having him right there, and still not having *him* at all.

One cold and lonely night, she had crawled into the bed next to him, just wanting to feel the comfort of his body. He smelled the same, the creamy scent of fresh parchment and his skin was cool to the touch, but she was used to that.

"Draco," Granger wound her fingers around the back of his neck, pulling his face down to hers. "I need you."

Someone up above must have felt sorry for him because there was no other reason that he was getting everything he ever wanted, everything he had worked so hard for, all at one time. His girl, in his arms, moaning his name and begging him to…

"No," Draco breathed out and Granger's eyes went wide, searching his.

"W-What?"

"I'm not going to fuck you," he said simply.

Draco could practically feel her shrinking in his grasp. Gripping her waist, he picked her up off of the counter and placed her in front of him. He could see the ring shining brightly as it hung in the middle of her chest. Slowly, Draco lifted his eyes back up to hers.

"You have my ring…" The fire light glinted against the silver, making it look molten.

Hermione bit her lip nervously. "Of course, you gave it to me."

Draco just stared at her, hardly believing that… that she kept it; the promise she hadn't made.

"I don't know if you… if you still wanted..." She lifted her hands up to her neck to take it off. "You can have it back."

"Stop."

Hermione stilled instantly.

Good girl.

"You're never to take that off. Ever," he commanded. "Not until I replace it with a better one. Do you understand me?"

His heart beat heavily as he waited for her to respond.

Hermione released her lip as her face broke into a wide smile. "Yes sir."

Oh fuck.

"That's my girl," he purred and kissed her, sucking at the tender spot on her lip that she had just had in between her teeth.

"Show me," Hermione gasped. She blinked her eyes up at him. "Show me I'm yours."

Draco dropped to one knee. "I'm going to do this right."

"Oh my God, Draco…"

Draco smirked up at her. "You'll be saying that again soon, but…" He pulled her jeans open roughly. "That's eventually where we're going to end up."

He didn't let her think too long on what he meant by that. Draco struck quickly, before she could say anything else. He pulled her jeans halfway down her thighs and only

stopped to reach up and grab her knickers in his hands, tearing at them until they gave way under his touch. Granger gasped as she was bared in front of him. Draco couldn't move fast enough.

His tongue was already diving in between her legs and he groaned, open mouthed, as he tasted her again. God, she was like fucking heaven. He needed more, wanted more. Draco shoved his face against her, holding onto her hips and pressing them against the counter to keep her still so he could push farther, move further, until he had her little bundle of nerves firmly between his lips and could lick at her all he liked.

"Oh God!"

Granger's hands were gripping the sides of the counter, her knuckles blanching white as she clenched harder with every swipe of his tongue. Draco dropped his hands to the bunched waist of her jeans, cutting tightly into her thighs and yanked them down roughly.

Spreading her legs, Draco ran his hands up to her inner thighs and felt them quake underneath his touch. So sensitive, he loved that about her. That a single touch could get her going. And a single kiss?

Hermione moaned as he brought his mouth to her again. He couldn't get enough. Draco hooked one leg over his shoulder, giving him a better angle at her and gave a long, slow swipe of his tongue over her center.

Her hips bucked forward and Draco smirked against her clit as he took it back in between his lips. She was already so wet, practically dripping for him and it was easy to slide a couple of fingers up into her pussy, curling them inside her and making her whole body vibrate with another moan. Pumping his hand quickly, Draco flicked his tongue over her, feeling her tighten around him.

Fuck, and that was only on his fingers. He could give her so much more with his cock buried deep inside her. Make her come until she saw stars. *His* stars. Him. Only him.

"Draco," she panted. "Draco, *please!*"

Well, how could he stop when she begged so sweetly?

She wanted him to show her she belonged to him?

He'd fucking stake his claim on her, stain her skin so she'd feel him always.

Lifting his mouth, Draco tilted his head just slightly and let out a small chuckle at her whining at the loss of him.

"You're mine, Hermione," he growled up at her and felt his cock leak when her big doe eyes widened. "Fucking mine."

He bit into her thigh at the same time he forced another finger into her and felt her contract around him. Her skin was almost as sweet as her pussy and Draco sunk his teeth

His soul was still in there. Hermione knew it the same way she knew the ingredient list and brewing instructions for Polyjuice potion. The same way she knew the proper wand movement for *Wingardium Leviosa.* The same way she knew, by heart, the table of contents for *Hogwarts, A History* . More than facts and figures really because she had only read about those, but she had *felt* Draco's soul slip back inside him when she kissed him.

She had *felt* it, and that left her with more certainty than any text or book ever had.

Draco was still there. She just had to… find him.

Those shattered white walls had been little more than rubble when she had seen them, but he had still been in there when she cast the *Imperius* curse. If his mind was that broken, then… then where was he?

Hermione stared into the flames. They twisted and flickered, looking more alive than anything else on the dark island. And it was dark. The sun no longer rose this time of year so the few instances Hermione had gone outside to gather wood from the shed, she had to light her wand to see her way. The sky was an inky black, dotted with small stars that burned with a cold light.

The snow was thick and deep, but at least it was white. Hermione had to squint when her wandlight caught it directly or it would reflect back, blinding her out in the cold for a few moments. And every moment out there counted. She would wrap up in Draco's big black coat and cast warming spells on herself, but there was only so much she could do against the bitter frost, even with the Elder wand. There was no fighting nature.

And she didn't like to be gone longer than she had to be. Not only did it take her hours to properly warm back up, but she worried about leaving Draco alone. Not that he moved or showed any signs of waking, but every time she closed the cabin door behind her, a gnawing unsettling panic stirred in her that somehow, some way, she wouldn't be able to get back in to him. It was irrational, she knew that, but… it didn't make her stop feeling it.

Here, in the quiet cabin, that was just about all she could do—feel. The messy piles of thoughts in her head closed in on her until she couldn't hold them back anymore and she was forced to suffer through all the things she had shoved aside last year, and the years before too.

And he couldn't even try. Something, someone, was stopping him.

"Fucking Granger," Draco grumbled to himself. She had taken his soul and stuck it somefuckingwhere and… and wouldn't even show her cowardly face to him anymore.

And Draco… missed her.

Not the Fake Granger, not really, but he did miss seeing her face. Missed hearing her voice. Missed… He had smelled warm cinnamon and smooth vanilla, right? That hadn't been… Maybe it was just the last pulses of his brain as it died. He hadn't seen his life flash before his eyes, not that he cared to, instead Draco had seen…

Hermione.

At least, he thought it had been here. It was hard to tell where the madness ended and the memories began.

It was that Fake fucking Granger who had done this to him. Who had made him feel like… like he was getting out when all he was doing was dying.

Fuck her.

Fuck *her.*

Fuck…

A cluster of nerves frayed behind his eyes and made pressure build up in his skull so much that he thought he was going to explode.

But he didn't.

He didn't do anything.

He couldn't.

The only thing Draco could do was promise something, either to himself or to Hermione even though she'd never fucking know, but she was so goddamn smart maybe she just would somehow.

Draco gathered whatever of himself he could and swore, swore on Slytherin's watery grave, swore on his own goddamn grave, and swore that it would be over his dead fucking body that he would not let that bitch get away with this.

If she ever, *ever* , fucking showed her face, he'd kill her.

He hadn't wanted to hurt her before, but Fake Granger had taken away his one chance at ever being with the real Granger, *his Granger* , again.

She made him break his promise.

So Draco promised his sweet, beautiful girl that he would break her instead. She wanted his soul? He'd make her choke on it.

Draco settled back down into the darkness, and waited for her to come to him.

into the soft flesh, biting down hard enough to hurt. Hard enough to bruise. Hard enough to stay.

Hermione shook and Draco shoved his burned arm against her midriff to hold her in place as she came on his hand. The leg tossed over his shoulder tightened around him, almost in an embrace as she held him close. Draco didn't let go of her thigh until her orgasm was waning. Only then did he pull back to look at his work on her.

A bruise was already forming, showing that he had been there, that she was his.

"Please, please," she begged from above him and Draco rewarded her with a few teasing flicks of his tongue, finishing her off and making her throw her head back as she pushed her pretty pink pussy onto his face.

Fuck, she was perfect. Like she was made for him. And he for her because Draco couldn't think of anyone else, any place else, anything else he would rather spend his time doing than making love to his girl.

Which sounded like heaven and while he might not deserve it, he would tear down the sky if it kept him from her. And from now on, nothing would.

Draco stood up swiftly and scooped her up in his arms. Hermione was still limp from her orgasm and she clung onto him, wrapping her hands around his neck and pushing her face into his chest. He could feel her warm breath on his scars through the thin white shirt. That would have to go. He wanted to feel her tits against his chest, bouncing as he thrust into her.

Draco laid Hermione down on the soft rug in front of the fire. Reaching back, he pulled the t-shirt off over his head, ruffling his hair a little. He watched her eyes scan over him and her cheeks redden a little as they did. It was cute that she thought he was hot. It made him love her even more.

"Your turn." He reached down and ripped the neck of her sweater, making her gasp with surprise and exposing a pale pink lace bra underneath. Shit, how could she be so innocent and so *sexy* at the same time? Hermione reached behind herself, unhooking her bra and shedding it and the sweater, tossing them in the same direction her jeans lay in.

She was bare underneath him and Draco cock throbbed so hard it *hurt.*

She spread her legs and pushed her hands down her body. "I need you," she said softly, her mouth still open even after she stopped speaking.

Draco pulled his trousers open, his thick cock springing free as he took it in his hand, stroking it a few times to the image of Hermione laid bare underneath him; wet, willing, and whining for him. "Damn right, you need me," he ground out. "I just made you come and you're already begging for more. Greedy slut."

Her eyes darkened, looking like two pools of melted chocolate and Draco felt his cock twitch in his hand. He leaned over her, still working himself as she wrapped her hands around his neck and shoulders, whining as she tried to pull him down farther.

"Does my pretty little whore need to be fucked?" he whispered thickly.

She nodded eagerly, so much in fact that Draco didn't even punish her for not answering his question. He ran his tongue over his teeth in anticipation, tasting her again. He had made her so many promises, and now, Draco swore on Salazar's watery grave that he was going to keep them this time. All of them.

"I'm going to fuck you like you deserve to be fucked."

"And how is that?" she asked between quick breaths. Of course she was asking a question right now. She was Hermione Granger after all.

And Draco loved her for it.

He lined himself up with her entrance, already feeling the warmth and wet of her on the head of his cock.

Draco placed his arms on either side of her head, leaning down over her and caging her in. "Like I love you."

Hermione wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling his body down against hers. "Make it hurt."

Draco took her lip in between his teeth and bit down. Hard. Hermione moaned at the feeling, her eyes rolling back as her lashes fluttered over them. "I always do."

He slid inside her with a heavy groan.

Hermione clasped her hands to his back, inhaling sharply at his sudden intrusion.

Dropping his head beside hers, Draco let out a deep, almost pained breath. "Fuck, Sweetheart," he said in a hoarse voice. "You're so… *Fuck…"*

Draco pulled back, his shoulders flexing under her fingers and his eyes bore straight into her, piercing her like two silver daggers. "You're so tight, I can't move."

She gulped down a heavy breath. "Neither can I."

Her expression wavered between trying to smile and still pulling tight from the pressure of him inside her. Slowly, Draco rocked his hips, creating a little friction between them and easing her into a steady movement. He'd make it hurt for her, but he'd make it good for her too. Draco had always been good at being two people at once, but now all he needed to be was here, with her.

Fuck the world. Fuck everything else that wasn't her.

She was all that mattered to him.

"Take care of him, Miss—" Narcissa pursed her lips slightly then slowly let them turn up into a small smile. "Hermione."

Oh my. They had made it to a first name basis. That… that was certainly something.

Narcissa didn't strike Hermione as a hugger, so she just took a deep breath and gave Narcissa a friendly smile and raised her chin. "I promise."

The flames flashed a brilliant shade of green and Narcissa gracefully stepped into it. Soon the only sound in the cabin was the crackling of the fire as it settled back down to a glowing orange.

Hermione turned and looked back at the all too still figure on the bed. If she didn't know better, she would think he was made of stone.

"Well, Draco," Hermione took a few steps towards him, "it's just the two of us." She sat down on the side of the bed, half mad with hope that he would suddenly just open his eyes and be her Draco again. When he didn't, she took his hand in hers, holding it gently. "Just like it should be."

It was bad, in the cell; Draco would be the first to admit that. But at least there was *something*. At least there he saw her. Or a version of her, even if it looked more dead than he currently felt.

Here, there was just… nothing.

Less than nothing. Draco didn't even want to imagine what that was, what that meant. If Fake Granger had… done what she said she would and took his… his soul, was this what he was left with? Or was this… where she had put him?

He had been confused for so long, but the one thing he did have down here in the darkness was time. Time to think over everything and try to figure out what the fuck had happened to him. Because there was no getting out of here. He couldn't even try to and whatever that meant, Draco didn't want to fucking know.

He hated being told what to do, being forced to do what someone else wanted him to. It was almost a physical sensation, like slowly being turned inside out. Every inch of him, every part of him, wanted to get away from here.

Out. Out. Out.

She needed…

Hermione wrapped her arms around Draco's neck and pressed her body into him. He snaked his hand around the back of her neck, hooked his thumb under her jaw and forced her face up so he could kiss her. He rocked himself underneath her, driving on, over the edge and she could do nothing but melt around him.

"That's it," he grunted as he pushed himself up into her. "Soak my cock, Granger. Fuck, I love when you…" He bit off his words. "Come for me," Draco started again. "Come for me, Hermione."

He took her cheeks in his hand and held his lips on hers, diving his tongue into her mouth as he drove himself up into her.

Her core heated and the bubbles boiled inside her, bursting in her brain. Her body quivered around him as Hermione collapsed with a high pitched moan, shaking against Draco's body.

Draco coiled his arms around her, almost crushing her with the force of his strength as he worked himself in and out of her from below. Hermione could do little else but try to hold on as she allowed herself to shed the last strain of control and…

Let go.

Hermione wasn't sure how much time passed; it could have been years, a lifetime, and it still wouldn't be enough for her.

And Draco just held onto her, for a long time. Until Hermione felt him slightly soften and moisture slip from her. She tried to shift away, but Draco pulled her back, moving them down onto the bed to lie face to face.

"No," he said in what almost sounded like his commanding tone, except it had an ounce of… longing to it. No, not longing, not exactly more like… love.

Hermione went perfectly still.

"Just… stay," he breathed out. "Stay with me."

Hermione's heart swelled to the point she feared it might burst. This was… it. Her and Draco, just the two of them. Like it should be. Like she… *wanted* it to be. What was the world compared to this? It could burn, it could freeze, it could fall apart—as long as she could stay right here.

And she could.

She could do anything she wanted.

She could go back, fight for her and Draco's place in the wizarding world. She could stop the Ministry from taking their freedom, she could take theirs, if she wanted.

Maybe one day she would.

But right now, Hermione had everything she wanted.

She just had *one* question. She always did.

"Draco?"

"Hmm?" He tilted his face down towards her.

"You never told me…"

"Told you what?"

Hermione bit her lip. "You said I was so much more than…what I was. So… what am I?"

She watched something dark and possessive swirl in Draco's eyes and had to stop herself from smiling at the sight of it.

"You're mine." Draco brushed his lips across hers, making her shiver at the sensation. "You're all mine. You were then and you are now." He reached down and pulled the ring from where it hung in between her breasts and slipped it onto her finger. It was too large for her, but he interlaced their hands together, holding it in place as he held her in his arms.

Hermione held his hand back as tight as she could.

Draco's smirk spread wider, turning into a grin. "And you always will be. I'm never letting you go."

"Don't," she breathed out and felt Draco's body tense slightly. Hermione shifted a little closer to him. "Don't ever let me go again."

"Oh, Sweetheart," Draco smirked, his lips pulling back and showing the straight line of his teeth. "You'll be lucky if I ever let you out of this bed. If I had a way, I'd chain you up and… What? What is it?"

Hermione bit down on her lip, feeling the weight of Draco's eyes on her, watching her.

"I, uhm," She didn't know why it was hard to say the words out loud. She was *excited* about this. "I do. I mean, *we* do."

He cocked his left brow up in a sharp arch.

"I…I thought they might come in handy. I didn't know what I would need on a rescue mission. Or… after…"

She could barely meet his eyes, but at the same time, couldn't bring herself to look away.

His grey eyes glinted. "You dirty girl."

"Your girl," Hermione corrected.

"That's right." Draco clasped his free hand against the side of her face, spreading his fingers out into her hair. "Tell me you love me."

He never tired of hearing it and Hermione… never tired of saying it.

She smiled a little. "I love you, Draco. I love every inch of you. Scars and all."

Draco grinned down at her. "I bet I know what inches you love best."

"Shut up," she swatted her hand against his chest and turned her face into the pillow.

Draco gently pulled her back until she was looking up at him again. "I mean it though," he said seriously. "I mean every fucking word when I say you're…" He breathed out heavily. "You're it for me. *My only."*

Hermione didn't care if the sun ever rose again because right now she felt like she could shine brighter than it ever could. Who knew that it would have taken Draco's darkness to make her see what she really was?

His.

And she could see what he was too. He had been her tormentor, her enemy, her someone, her captor and now, her…

"Everything," she whispered. "You're my everything, Draco."

His face broke into a wide smile. "I like the sound of that."

Hermione returned his expression. "Enough for a reward?"

Draco chuckled softly. His hands slid down the slope of her body, causing a cool trail of goosebumps rising in its wake. Brushing the backs of his fingers over her cheek, Draco's voice lowered. "You want it?"

A frisson ran down her spine as Draco leaned over her, the crisp smell of mint making her mouth water.

Hermione lifted her head slightly, running her nose along his. "I want *everything."*

Draco forced her legs apart with his knee and hoisted himself on top of her again. And Hermione sunk deeper, falling even more as he pushed her back against the bed and pulled her body flush against him.

Where she belonged. Where *they* belonged.

Just the two of them.

Like it should be.

"Mmm, I dare say you've earned it." Draco grinned at her. "Go on, kitten." He jutted his chin out. "Play."

Hermione could barely contain herself. She leaned in, and dragged her tongue along the scar stretched over his heart.

"Oh shit…" Draco ground out. Hermione smiled up at him, making sure to widen her eyes until his lids hung so low over his eyes she wasn't sure he could see her at all. "Fuck me," he ordered. "Fuck me until you can't move anymore."

"Yes sir," Hermione answered and placed her hand on his shoulders for leverage. Lifting herself up a little, Hermione let her body slide down. Slow. *Painfully slow.*

"Fuck, fuck," Draco hissed. His hands ran up her sides and he swiped his thumbs over her breasts, tweaking the hard nipples there.

Hermione's eyes closed and her mouth fell open as she focused only on moving her body in a steady rhythm. She pushed against his shoulders, using his body as an anchor to move herself against. The feel of his hands on her and his cock filling her was almost so distractingly delicious that she almost felt like she was losing her mind. The piles of thoughts stacked up were suddenly swept to the side and there was only—

Draco.

Draco.

Draco.

Her lips formed his name and only stopped calling it when she bit down on the lower one hard enough to make her cunt squeeze him tightly.

"Fuck!" Draco held her back a little so he could easily gaze down between them to watch his length disappearing into her again, and again.

Hermione wasn't holding back, not now, not anymore. There used to be a time where she thought it was… bad, in a way, that she liked things like this. That being told what to do and being called names wasn't something she should be excited by, but… giving into it, it was the one time, the *only* time, she wasn't bound by someone else's rules.

That she got to be who she really was. And more.

It didn't make sense, but it wasn't supposed to make sense. It didn't need to. It was what she wanted. Wanted to be free to explore her desires, to not worry about anything else, but how good she felt. And it felt *so good.*

Pleasure was surging up in her, sparking and igniting every nerve in her body until her movements became heavy and irregulated. She was already falling, but still there on the brink.

She wanted…

Draco shoved her breasts together, she pulled her arms from the straps. Draco gazed down to where his Malfoy ring peaked out from in between her breasts.

Slowly he dragged his gaze up her chest, over her neck, pausing on her mouth for a moment, then back up to hers. "I love you, Hermione."

She felt heat run straight through her and settle low in her stomach. "I love you too, Draco."

"I know you do, Sweetheart." He smirked at her. "So slide your hot little pussy down on me and show me just how much."

"Oh, *God…*"

Draco's hands gripped onto her hips and held her in place. "Easy, pet," his tone was low and he clenched his jaw as if he was trying to control himself as well as her. "Don't hurt yourself."

Hermione keened as she tried to move, but found herself unable to do much with Draco's hold on her. "But…" She stuck out her bottom lip in a small pout and watched his eyes dart down to it. "I want to."

Draco made a noise of frustration and she could see him warring with himself. Hermione wiggled a little on him, hoping to entice him enough that he'd set her free. All she got for her efforts was a heavy twitch inside her and Draco's fingers digging painfully as he squeezed her hip bones.

Hermione let out a breathy moan at the bite of pain. Her eyes closed and her head fell back, making her long curls cascade down her back. She felt Draco loosen his hold, but didn't expect to feel a sharp smack on her backside.

"Greedy girl," Draco chided and Hermione leaned forward again, already gasping for breath. "You need it?" he asked, breathing just as heavily as her. "You want it?"

"Yes, please," she whined and watched his smirk spread. "Please… Sir."

Draco's muscles hardened under her hands, making the scars stand out sharper against his pale skin. She watched his throat move as he swallowed. Then, Draco let go of her. He bent his arms and locked them behind his head, flexing his arms as he did so. No more burns, no more ink swirled in skin, just marble white skin, with a few blue veins standing out against the… the muscles.

Hermione felt herself clench around him.

EPILOGUE

Shades of green, blue, and purple swirled in the sky overhead. Hermione tilted her head back, resting it against Draco's chest, gazing up at the magnificent pattern, glittering and gliding in the dark sky overhead.

It didn't seem real or… possible, but here it was, happening right in front of her. And did most every night. Or, at least, what she could keep track of as night. It was a little difficult without the sunrises or sunsets. But using the stars and her almost bottomless knowledge of Astronomy, she could just about make out the date.

And today was a special day. It was special, because it was going to be *day*.

The last time she had seen the sun was on her way to rescue Draco from Azkaban. Ever since then, they had been in total darkness.

Not that she was complaining because nights with Draco were… *very* good, but it was a little disorienting, not having a sense of if it was day or night, only the vague sensation that she should be asleep or awake.

But for once, Hermione didn't have to run on a strict schedule. She didn't have to monitor every minute of every day, making sure she was being as productive as possible

and that any free time was devoted to catching up on research or work so she could squeeze in a few more tasks the next day.

She didn't have to do anything but just be.

Be her.

Be Hermione.

And thanks to Draco, she was finding out who that really was.

He was adjusting as well.

Without the pressure of a Pureblood lifestyle or a Dark Lord hanging over his head, Draco was surprisingly… pleasant. Well, he was still an ass from time to time, but he wasn't cruel. He was still moody, especially when they stayed cooped up in the cabin for too long, but most of the time, he was content just to be with her.

Whether she was reading or charming the bed to make itself, he was most happy when he was able to come up beside her, wrap his arm around her and pull her in for a kiss.

Sometimes she would ask him what it was for and Draco would just shrug and smirk at her, as if she already knew. And she did, mostly because Draco took any opportunity he had to tell her that he loved her.

But now, he was showing her.

"I told you it would be better up here," Draco whispered in her ear.

Hermione reached out and the colored light danced across her fingers. "I feels…"

Draco pulled her back into him. "Mmm, tell me how it feels, pet."

Hermione giggled, tucking her face into the large collar of Draco's black coat. She wasn't worried about falling, even this high up. After riding a flying motorbike from London to Azkaban and then from Azkaban to the island, Hermione had lost any fear of heights she might have once had.

And she knew if she fell, Draco would catch her.

He kept the broom balanced perfectly even beneath them. His Mother had sent it, along with enough food and supplies to fill over half the cabin. Calix has swept in from the fireplace with a small package tied to his talons.

"This is it?" Draco shook the box and looked down at his owl. "This is all you brought?"

"Draco, be nice to him!" Hermione chided. "He came a long way!"

"He came through the floo." Draco rolled his eyes. "Lazy bird."

Calix screeched at him and hopped with spread wings over to Hermione. She stroked his feathers softly. "You did very well, Calix."

The owl clacked his beak happily.

"Just like you?" Hermione asked in her sweetest voice, blinking her eyes as big as they would go.

A low growl rumbled up from Draco's throat and he dropped his hands to her ass, squeezing it hard then giving it a sharp slap.

Hermione let out a high-pitched squeal and jumped forward until she was flush against his chest.

"Get on my fucking cock, Granger," Draco said in his low, commanding voice. "And ride it like a good girl."

A frisson ran through Hermione's whole body, settling deep in her center and making it quiver. "Yes, sir," she said in the same sweet tone.

Draco groaned as he leaned back against the headboard, still watching her while she shifted on top of him from under heavy lids. He still looked at her like he used to, but now Hermione could tell what he was thinking when he did. His gaze was hungry and desperate, dominant and reverent all at the same time. He used to keep so much from her, but here, hidden away in the darkness, Draco let her have everything.

Hermione's hands were shaking as she reached in between them, opening his trousers and sticking her hand in. She was greeted with another deep groan as she gripped him, stroking him as she pulled his cock free.

"Mmm, your hand's good, pet," he breathed out heavily. "But I want to feel your pussy working me like that."

Hermione couldn't move fast enough. All it took was a few dirty words from Draco and she was already aching for him. As always, Draco made even the most vulgar things sound… like exactly what she needed. What she wanted. God, she wanted him *so* much.

Draco lifted her up as she struggled out of her pants. It was cold, but she barely felt it. Certainly not enough to stop Draco from pulling her shirt over her head and diving in to kiss her neck as he unclasped her bra.

"I don't know why you fucking wear this thing," he mumbled as he squeezed her breasts together and took a nipple in her mouth. He moved to the other and Hermione let out a low breath, loving the sensation of the hot moisture from his mouth cooling on her skin. "Just to tease me with a little bit of lace, I assume."

"I thought you liked lace."

Draco pulled on the cups of her bra, bringing her face close to his again. "I like *you,* Granger." Her surname, which had once been a point of contention between them, had turned into nothing more than another one of his terms of endearment for her. Now, she was Hermione to him. His Hermione.

Hermione looked down at the slashes across his chest and stomach. She had gotten so used to them that she barely even thought of them as not part of Draco. If she could heal *fiendfyre* burns, some dark slashes didn't stand a chance. Still… She liked these.

A mix of dark dents and white lines cut into his otherwise marble-white skin. They didn't take away from him, if anything they made him more… Draco. Like his outsides matched his insides. Dark and light, all in one. Everything.

Hermione reached out and traced the deep scars with the tip of her fingers. Even with that light touch, she could feel Draco's heart beat faster inside his chest.

"I'll miss these ones," she admitted. Draco had always hated them, but she… she thought they were, well… kind of sexy.

Draco's hand closed around hers, holding it against his skin. "Leave them."

Hermione's eyes cut up to his. "What?"

Draco smirked at her. "I'll keep them. For you," he added, dipping his head down a little.

Hermione felt her heart skip a beat. Would she ever stop being impressed by the little things he did? Godric, she hoped not.

"Are you sure?" She didn't want him to do anything he would regret later. It wasn't right for him to have something on his body he disliked just because she liked looking at them. And touching them. And kissing them. And—

"Yeah." His voice dropped a few octaves and when Hermione looked back up at his eyes, they were shining like freshly polished silver. "I'm fucking sure."

He grabbed her, fisting one hand in the hair at the back of her head and the other snaked around her waist, pulling towards him until she was straddling his lap. Hermione let out a little gasp and Draco took that opportunity to force his tongue past her lips, sliding it alongside hers while he tightened his hold on her hair until it hurt.

Hermione moaned into Draco's open mouth.

He pulled back just enough to let out a low chuckle. "That's right," Draco said in a hoarse voice. "You like it when it hurts too, don't you, Sweetheart? See, I knew all along you were just like me."

Her brows pulled together as he kissed her again, pushing his hips up and pulling her down onto them at the same time. Hermione braced her hands against Draco's chest and felt his muscles flex under her palms. She curled her fingers, feeling the smooth skin of his scars and… and dug her nails in.

Draco hissed against her lips. His pupils contracted then expanded until they were merely ringed in silver.

"Why don't you go get warm by the fire?"

"He didn't even go outside!" Draco interjected. "He flew through the *floo!*"

Hermione tossed Draco a harsh look over her shoulder as she carried Calix to the mantle and placed him gently on it. Draco waved them off with his hand, but she saw him quickly scan over Calix's wings, making sure no feathers were singed or out of place.

When he was satisfied with his owl's appearance, Draco opened the box and dozens of packages immediately fell out onto the floor. It seemed Narcissa had been impressed with Hermione's beaded bag and used the same charms to send everything they needed in one convenient trip.

The packages piled at Draco's feet and he sighed. "It's like first year all over again."

Hermione started to sort through them, trying to organize the boxes into piles when Draco picked up a long package wrapped with a green ribbon.

"What's that?" she asked curiously.

Draco tore it open quickly and his face fell.

"She… doesn't know," he explained while running his hand along the smooth handle of the broom. "That I can't use magic anymore."

"But…" Hermione racked her brain, trying to remember the passages she had read her first year at school after her first flying lesson to improve her abilities, or even something Harry might have mentioned about broom riding… but when she came up with nothing, finally tried, "But the *broom* is magic. All you have to do is—"

"Fly?" Draco said dryly.

Hermione moved to stand in front of him and raised her chin. "You're the best flier I've ever seen." Draco scoffed, but Hermione noticed the way the corner of his mouth curved up. "If anyone can fly without magic, you can."

"And when I'm standing there and nothing happens, what am I supposed to do then?" he snapped.

"What?" Hermione asked. "Are you scared to try?"

He narrowed his eyes, glaring at her a little and Hermione smiled smugly right back at him.

Draco snatched the broom up and marched outside. There was enough light coming from the cabin that Hermione was able to watch as he swung a leg over it and… stopped. He bent his neck from side to side and flexed his fingers before gripping the broom tightly in his large hands. Hermione felt her pulse start to speed up as he bent his knees and….

Flew.

Draco darted in and out amongst the stars, dipping, rolling, and speeding so quickly Hermione had a hard time keeping track of where he was.

Every time she did catch a glimpse of him, Hermione cheered and yelled as he soared past. Calix joined him, but even he tired of Draco's twists and turns and flew off inland towards easier currents and calmer skies.

When Draco finally descended, his face was flushed pink from the wind. He promptly dropped the broom in the snow and picked Hermione up, spinning her around a few times before carrying her back into the cabin and kicking the door closed behind them.

She wasn't sure where Draco got the energy from after his exertions in the sky, but Hermione didn't care. Draco thrust into her just as hard and fast as he had the first time and Hermione… Hermione let him. She let him do everything, anything he wanted to her.

And that included taking her up to not just see the *aurora borealis,* but be a part of it herself. Long ago he had promised to treat her like a queen and fuck her like a slave and well, *neither* of them were breaking promises anymore.

"This is…" Hermione whispered, barely breathing, "incredible. I've… I've never—" She turned to look at Draco over her shoulder, only to find him grinning at her. The ethereal colors danced across his pale skin, lighting him up in a way that made him look *magical.*

"You've never what, Sweetheart?"

Hermione couldn't help but smile back at him. "I've never been happier."

Draco touched her cheek, turning her head more towards him and kissed her gently. At least, at first. It wasn't long before his hand was wrapped around her neck and he was kissing her with a precise balance between passion, and control.

Hermione arched her back, pushing her ass into his groin and grinding slightly against him.

His teeth closed around her lip, biting down on it with a low growl. "Behave, Granger," he warned and pulled on the chain around her neck where she still wore the Malfoy signet ring. "Or I'll fuck you on this broom."

"And what if that's what I want?" Hermione asked against his lips.

Draco chuckled. "I won't stop," he warned. "Not even when we crash. I'll fuck you straight through the goddamn earth."

"Hmm, but then we'd miss the lights." She gave him a wan expression. "And you promised to show them to me."

Draco tensed for a second and then a pale light came out of the tip of her wand. It looked eerily like the *fiendfyre* had, except the flames looked blue and white; stronger, but softer as they swirled and whipped against his skin.

Draco's hand tightened on hers and Hermione did her best to keep focused when he let out a low groan of pain.

"Fuck… *FUCK!"*

Hermione held his hand back just as tightly, trying to keep him steady as his arm began to shake.

"Just… hold on," she murmured, concentrating on what she wanted. Draco, whole and healed. Draco, here and holding her hand.

Draco. Draco. Draco.

"Hermione—" Draco bit out, his face going pale. "God *damn* it!"

"I'm almost done!"

Draco's face twisted painfully then he let out a roar of sheer agony.

Hermione waved her wand up the last… few… inches, and—gasped at what she had done.

Draco's arm looked like it had never been touched, not by *anything.* There weren't any marks on it, just the crease at his elbow. Other than that it was…

"Holy shit." Draco was staring unblinkingly at it.

"I know," Hermione answered, sort of astounded at what she had done, what she was capable of.

She glanced down at her wand then back at Draco's immaculate arm.

"You… you fucking…" Draco reached out and took her face in his hands. Both of them. "Brilliant—" He kissed her. "Beautiful—" He kissed her again. "Powerful—" And again. "Witch."

Hermione beamed up at him. Maybe it should mean so much to her, but hearing Draco compliment her, or even just acknowledge her, what and who she was, never failed to make her feel special.

This time when he kissed her, Draco pulled her close to him, making her fall into his chest.

"Mm, Draco," Hermione said against his lips.

Draco growled in response.

"Let me," she mumbled, "at least–mm–put my wand–away."

Draco broke the kiss. "Not yet," he said breathlessly. "Can you do these too?" He motioned to his chest. "Can you heal them?"

His expression was unreadable and Hermione just waited, not knowing at all how he would react to her question.

Draco merely pulled his brows a little tighter. "Can you do it?" he asked. "With that?" He nodded at the wand in her hand.

She bit her lip. "I… I think so."

Draco gazed down at her, something storming in his grey eyes. Then he raised one brow slightly. "How do you want me?"

Hermione wanted to jump up and down, but contained herself, only raising to the balls of her feet and rocking backwards again. "Uhm, on the bed," she said, trying to remain composed. "In case it… hurts."

She didn't know for sure, but she couldn't imagine healing a cursed burn would feel nice. Blaise had said there was nothing to be done for cursed scars, and while Blaise was a good Healer, he didn't have the Elder wand. Hermione did.

She had to try, at least.

And she would, for him.

Draco led her by the hand over to the bed and Hermione had to stop herself from thinking about how much she enjoyed even that small action. Being with Draco was better than she had ever imagined. Without the world pressing in on them, he was affectionate and playful. He still had his mood swings, but now they went from teasing to domineering in the blink of an eye. It kept her on her toes, but more often on her back.

Hermione couldn't think about that. She needed to focus right now, not get distracted by… her base instincts. Even if Draco let her indulge in them to her heart's content.

"Sit down," she instructed and Draco had a small smirk on his face as he took his place in the middle of the bed, backing up until he was leaning against the headboard. His long legs were spread wide and he held out his burned arm. She could make out the muscles that he had built back over the past few weeks under the scarred skin. The wood chopping was really working for him. "That's… that's good."

Yes. Very good.

Draco's smirk spread as she sat down beside him.

"This probably won't feel good," Hermione warned.

"I've had worse," Draco said with a drawl of sarcasm.

If anyone could take the pain, it was him. Still, Hermione didn't want to cause any more than was necessary. Hermione took Draco's hand, just like she had when she burned him and pointed her wand at his skin.

Draco rolled his eyes, then gripped the broom stick right in between her legs, pressing his fist against her center. "I did. And I meant it. Just like I mean it when I say I'm going to fuck you so hard tonight, you're going to see better lights than this behind those big, brown eyes of yours." He kissed the side of her head before looking up at the stream of colors dancing around them.

Oh my. Well, that certainly was something to look forward to.

Hermione sighed and settled back against him again.

They had time. Time to heal the wounds from war. Time to talk about and work on their problems. Time to grow together, and learn how to be with one another when the world wasn't forcing them apart. And most importantly, they had one another. Truly. Wholly. Only.

And that was enough. It was more than enough.

It was everything.

Hermione and Draco hung suspended there, high above their little bit of earth, and watched the darkness finally fade into daylight.

Hermione shot to her feet. They had plenty of wood. And magic! There was no reason, no excuse, for ripping up a book like that! She marched across the cabin, ready to give him a piece of her mind, before she saw what book it was.

The sight of it made Hermione stop short. Draco didn't look over at her as he ripped out another page of his old copy of *The Sacred Twenty Eight* . He tossed it into the fire, his face expressionless. The page uncurled a little as it caught fire, the edges charred and the flames spread quickly over the old parchment, turning it to a wipsy piece of grey ash that disintegrated into nothing.

"Draco, don't—" Hermione stopped talking and Draco's head swung in her direction. His eyes were red and there were wet tracks running down the sharp angle of his cheeks.

The sight of him like this ripped her heart like it was nothing more than paper.

"I can't…" He took a breath. "I can't stand having it written down, what… happened." He closed the book softly. "I had to relive it all, when I was… there. I watched it all happen again, and again." Draco looked over at her. "It was like I was still a Death Eater, like I never got out." His voice was so soft, Hermione could barely hear it over the crackling fire.

"I've got enough scars," Draco sniffed harshly. "I don't need this fucking thing to remind me what I was." He tossed the old volume into the fire. The book fell open as it landed on the burning logs. The leather cracked and charred and a foul smell came from its burning. Hermione had to cover her nose and mouth to keep from breathing it in.

She pointed her wand at the fire and a large paw made of flame swiped out at it, engulfing the entire fireplace and creating a vacuum of wind that cleared the smell from the room. In just a few seconds, every trace of it was gone.

Draco had taken a step back at the sight of the *fiendfyre* and was still staring into the flames when Hermione slipped her hand inside his. He gripped hers back and she could feel the scarred skin, twisted and swirled with the remnants of the black ink that had once marked him.

She had noticed that Draco did not use his left arm much anymore, even though it was his dominant hand, and she knew it was because of his scars. *Her* scars, because she had done that to him. Hermione wondered if they hurt him like his mark used to. She wondered if he wished they were gone too.

Looking down at their hands clasped together, Hermione suddenly got an idea. She was actually shocked she hadn't thought of it before.

"Draco," Hermione said carefully and he glanced down at her. She bit her lip for a moment before she asked, "Do you want me to… heal you?"

Draco lifted his eyes to the leather couch behind her. It was long enough that he would be able to stretch out his legs fully, but not very wide. Still, it had its uses. "Hermione," he said, barely restraining the excitement in his voice. "You took Numerology, didn't you?"

"Four years of it," she said quickly. "I made an O on my O.W.L.s too. Did… did you have a question about something?" she asked curiously.

Oh yes. He had a question for her. Draco grinned wolfishly. "Tell me, do you know the significance of the number… sixty nine?"

Hermione had gotten used to Draco's restless sleeping. He never seemed to want to be still for more than a couple of hours. She wasn't sure if it was because his natural rhythm was off due to the lack of sun or because he didn't like being stuck in his own head. There were plenty of times that she had woken up to the sound of Draco chopping wood outside. It had turned into something of a therapeutic action for him; fighting his nightmares with a sharpened axe.

She didn't mind the burst of cold air when he came back inside, brushing snow out of his white blond hair and glistening with a sheen of sweat, his muscles bulging and veins straining.

Hermione didn't mind that at all.

But tonight she woke up to see Draco standing in front of the fire. His tall frame blocked out the light, leaving him as just a dark silhouette with a glowing outline around his head. It looked like a crown or… as Hermione rubbed her eyes, it looked more like… a halo.

She pulled the covers up to her face and laid back against the pillow, just enjoying the sight of Draco standing there, shirtless and in a low riding pair of pants for a little while. That was, until she heard the tell tale sound of a page being ripped out of a book.

She had to stop the strangled gasp that threatened to escape her. Draco crumpled the page up in one hand then threw it into the fire.

is absolutely *not* happening, thank you very much! Just remember that my list of crimes is almost as long as yours."

She crossed her arms over her heaving chest.

"So don't push me, Draco, or I'll turn this wand on you and then you'll be the one stuck here with *me,* NOT the other way around!"

Maybe the fever *had* damaged his brain because… that all sounded *insane.* Yet at the same time, it sounded exactly like her. Like Hermione.

"You did all that… for me?"

"Draco, I…" She took a deep breath. "I love you. *I* love *you.* I don't think you understand what that means." Draco was sure that she was about to tell him. In detail. But he wasn't ready for what she actually said. "That doesn't mean I just love having sex with you or… being able to call myself Draco Malfoy's girlfriend or whatever. It means that… that I love you when things aren't easy, when things are hard between us. I love you when we're apart and when you… when you do stupid things or when you are being a complete *ass."*

Draco couldn't breathe. He couldn't feel anything, other than his heart skipping every other beat. He couldn't do anything but stare at her and watch as her cheeks turned red and she went on her tirade about… about loving him.

"I love you, Draco Malfoy, and *that's* it for me. *You're* it. You're… *everything."*

Well… shit.

"If you try to break up with me now, I will—"

Draco pounced on her, pushing her back against the base of the leather couch.

"Never," he breathed out and kissed her fully. "If you think I'd leave you, then you're the one with brain damage. Which would be a shame because it's a *very* nice brain."

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him and Draco felt the corners of his mouth lifting. So this was it. They really were… together. Just like he always wanted.

And like she wanted too.

"You really did all of that?" he said and Hermione nodded shyly. Something coiled pleasantly deep inside him. Draco just couldn't resist… "But you're such a good little girl…"

Hermione gave a small giggle. "Yes," she said sweetly. "But I'm *your* good little girl."

Oh shit. Oh fuck. She was going to kill him with talk like that.

"That's fucking right," Draco growled. "I want to hear all of it. Everything you did for me. Right after I give you your reward."

Hermione's eyes shone like burnt cinnamon. "Oh?"

"You're the brightest witch of your age, Hermione," Draco said sadly. "You have the Elder wand. You can do anything you want. I wouldn't blame you if you… If you didn't want someone like me to love you."

Draco finally looked at her. He could see her brain spinning behind her eyes even in the low firelight. He had no idea how long it had been since their… reunion on the rug. Or the second or third time either. In fact, since waking up, he'd never seen anything but darkness outside the windows. It was one of the things that made it so hard for him to believe she was real when he woke up.

There hadn't been a sun in Azkaban and there wasn't one here either.

He still wasn't entirely sure where *here* was, all he knew was this was where Hermione was, and that was good enough for him.

"I think that fever damaged your brain," Hermione said blatantly.

Draco was… shocked. She was staring at him with an annoyed look on her face and he had no clue why.

Even with his perfectly, not rattled, brain trying to figure out what the fuck she was on about right now.

"Draco Malfoy," Hermione started in that know-it-all way she used to spout off in all the time. "Do you have any idea, *any idea,* what I went through to get you out?"

"I'm sure it wasn't easy—"

"Months—MONTHS!" Now she was shouting. Great. This must be a new record. They had never gotten in an argument this fast before. "Working to get your case appealed. And when that didn't work, I blackmailed Blaise—Oh don't look so shocked," she scoffed. "I made him help me so I could find the island your father *moved* and I cut out his heart to do it."

How the *fuck*—

"I broke into the Ministry—*again* ; I stole the Elder wand back after it was overturned and they were going to let you die, I…" She huffed, blowing a stray curl from where it had fallen in between her eyes. "I drove a bloody *motorbike* over the North Sea—Do you have *any* clue as to how strong those winds are?" Before he could answer, she was already plunging on. "I stormed Azkaban and leveled it to get you out!"

Draco's jaw dropped. She did… *what?!*

"I'd daresay that the Ministry, which has been forcibly taken over by a militant group of rogue Aurors, yeah, you didn't know about that, did you? Would be happier to take me in than you at this point. So before you say anything else about me leaving you, which

"You don't…" he started and then stopped, his will giving out on him. Draco clenched his jaw and forced himself to go on. "Look, you don't have to stay here if you don't want."

Hermione sat up, her doe eyes wide. "What? What are you talking about?"

His chest rose and fell a few times. "I had a lot of time to think, over the last few months." Draco was having a hard time looking at her. And her having her tits out wasn't helping. "I was stuck there, with someone I…"

He looked at the fire until his eyes hurt.

"Draco?" Hermione prompted.

"I don't want you to be stuck here with me, if it's not what you really want."

She didn't move. She didn't even breathe. His scarred arm wrapped around her went numb.

"I can't go back. Even with Azkaban gone, they'll just find somewhere else to lock me up. Or just kill me and be done with it."

She was looking at him like she didn't understand which was *crazy* because she was so bloody smart, she normally knew what he was saying before he did.

Draco blew out a low breath. "I kept you locked up with me and… I hated it." Hermione raised her brows. "No, that's not right, I didn't hate it," Draco corrected himself. "I hated that you hated it. I hated that I had to force you to stay with me. I… I like tying you up and having you all to myself, don't get me wrong, but I like that *you* like it."

Draco shook his head slightly. This was all coming out wrong. Of fucking course it was.

"Look—" He sat up. "I'd gladly spend the rest of my life right here, but you… you don't have to." He didn't know how to fucking say this. Why was simply *talking* to her so goddamn difficult?

"You came back to me before. You can do it again. So if you… need to go… do… things. I… I get it. I… I won't…" Draco hated himself right now. He fucking hated himself. But he loved her. "I won't stop you."

He was going to throw his fist into the wall, maybe his head too, but he wasn't going to keep her anywhere she didn't want to be. Not anymore.

Hermione still wasn't saying anything and after months alone, Draco couldn't stand the silence. It would be the first time Hermione Granger didn't jump to give an answer, but maybe… Draco already knew it.

was curled around it. Her head lay on his chest and she was tracing the twisted lines of his scars with a small finger. All of her fingers were much too small to fit his signet ring. Not that it was an engagement ring, or even resembled one, but it was… something.

He had hoped to be able to give her a proper one, but seeing it tucked between her tits and knowing she had kept it there for months was an acceptable compromise.

Still, he'd love to see a big rock on her finger as she stroked his cock. Watching it catch the light and have his come spill all over the precious stone. Maybe she'd even lick it off. Or fuck herself with her fingers like that.

Oh shit. He didn't need to get hard again. Hermione was still tired and there was nowhere else they had to be. Draco frowned and glanced down at her. At least, he hoped not.

He brushed his fingers over her tousled hair. He always loved how she looked like she had just been freshly fucked and she certainly did now. Her curls were tangled together and damp with sweat. At least he knew she couldn't go anywhere looking like that.

Draco hugged her to him and placed a kiss on the crown of her head. She smiled against his skin. Sated, he sighed and played with a stray curl; picking it up and winding it around his finger just to drop it and do it start to motion all over again.

He was happy. Happier than he had ever been.

Draco wouldn't have believed it, locked away in that cell in Azkaban, that he could ever feel like this again. It almost seemed impossible now, but… his clever little witch had done it. She had gotten him out.

Out of the cell and out of himself.

He owed her… everything.

And he would spend the rest of his fucking life making it up to her. Even if it killed him. Which, losing her might, but Hermione didn't deserve give up on the life she had fought so hard for just because Draco had fucked up time and time again. She had said she wanted to be with him, but… he wasn't going anywhere. It didn't mean she had to stay locked up here.

Even if he wanted to barricade the door and never let anyone into their cozy little cabin. It was a bit cramped, but… he liked things small.

But Hermione was made for great things, which made what he had to do so hard.

He hated himself for it, but he would hate himself too if he kept her here when she didn't want to be. He'd done that before, he wasn't going to do it again.

He was still buried inside her, but she didn't stop him. Instead, Hermione held him tighter, wrapping her legs around his back and digging her heels into his back, pushing him deeper where she imploded, squeezing him as she came on his cock.

Her whole body shook and Draco held her as she rose to her heights and plunged down into pleasure. He watched her as she lost herself to the feeling, letting go of any control she had over her body and giving it all up to him.

It was too much. He needed more. He needed…

With a few rough fucks, Draco was pushing her head to the side, diving down onto her neck; licking, biting, sucking, kissing, *fucking everything,* as his cock swelled and Draco released himself inside of her.

He was shaking, sweating, and swearing as he collapsed on top of her. "Fuck, fuck, fuck…"

He gave everything to her, his heart, his soul—it was all hers. And she took it all. Like the good fucking girl that she was, Hermione took every drop he had to give her and still her cunt worked him for more.

For a few moments he couldn't move. Black spots dotted his vision and it swam until it settled on the image of her face, gazing up at him with a mixture of love and lust swirling in her eyes.

Finally Draco lifted his head back up. A few blond hairs fell down in front of his eyes. "I thought I had died before, and maybe I was right because that was… No. No heaven could compete with what you… what you are."

Hermione's lids were heavy, but her eyes sparked as she said, "I guess you finally figured out what, or who, I am."

"I always did, Sweetheart." Draco placed a soft kiss against her bruised lips. "I just didn't know who I was. Not until you showed me."

Hermione smiled up at him and Draco... Draco smiled back, only stopping to press his lips against hers again.

Draco curled his burnt arm behind his head in place of a pillow and pulled one knee up into a bent position. He left the other laying how it was since Granger—no, Hermione—

imprint of him there. "Answer me," he ordered, his lips moving against her ear as he pressed in further. "Answer me, Hermione."

Her eyes opened wide and Draco pulled back to stare down at her. He pinched her nipple and watched her wince and felt the pleasure he gave her contract in her cunt, tightening around him until he thought he might burst.

"Yours, yours," she said breathlessly. "Oh God, Draco, I'm all yours."

His heart skipped a beat. Then another. Then it beat for her. With the hand on her head, Draco brushed back a few strands of hair that were sticking to her forehead and planted a soft kiss in the same spot.

"Hermione," he said softly, lovingly, and slowly pressed himself down into her.

"Draco…" She lifted her arms, wrapping her hands around the back of his neck and running her fingers through his shorn hair. He took a deep breath and tried to keep from coming right then and there with the way she was looking at him. She looked like… like she loved him.

She loved him.

He didn't have to question it anymore or worry it would fade away.

Hermione loved him.

And he loved her.

His girl. His only.

Hermione.

They moved together and everything slowed. He watched as the dark pits of her eyes expanded, but still left two circles of rich brown. Once the color of mud to him, now… the only color he ever wanted to see again. His breathing quickened and he swore he could feel her heart thumping in her chest, pressed against his; the signet ring digging into skin and her soft tits pressed against his scars.

The fire burned hotly beside them, but all he could feel was her.

Her. Granger. Hermione.

"Come for me," she said softly. He wanted this to last, but she was asking him to come? How was he supposed to say no to *that?* "You promised."

With a rumbling growl that rose from deep within, Draco started again, thrusting swiftly and fully to the point where he wasn't sure he would ever be able to stop. Hermione took it all, her small body sliding underneath his and closing around him in every way; arms, legs, lips…

His whole body was straining as he drove into her again and again. "Fuck," he groaned. "Fuck, Sweetheart, I'm going to…"

Hermione let out a stuttering breath mixed with a moan, tilting her head back as he began to move faster.

He had to close his eyes. Looking at her like that… She really was beautiful. Wild curls spread out around her head, pretty pink lips that opened every time he pushed into her, and long lashes that brushed against her full cheeks as she blinked and looked up at him with eyes like burnt cinnamon.

Her cunt closed in on him and Draco hissed as his brows drew together sharply. "If you squeeze me like that again, I'm not going to last." Hermione bit her lip to keep from smiling. He grinned down at her, loving that after everything they had been through, everything they had done, she could still affect him so strongly.

"Fuck," Draco's voice broke on that one word. Then suddenly, his mouth was on hers and before she could react, he had rocked his hips then slammed himself so deep into her that she moaned out into his mouth. Draco wasted no time and latched onto her bruised lip, sucking on it eagerly as he moved himself in and out of her, the pressure building up against his spine and weighing heavily in his balls.

Hermione whimpered as he drew himself out and dug her nails into the strained muscles on his shoulders. He released her lip with a hiss. He stared down at her for a moment, hoping he hadn't hurt her, but she writhed up against him, her body begging for more.

Draco snapped his hips and brought them flush with hers.

"Oh God!" Hermione cried out, clinging onto him desperately as her body moved with the force of him. She curled her legs up around his waist, tilting herself so he had a better angle to drive down into her.

When he arched his back, Draco's length dragged against a spot in her that made her body curl and shake around him. "Yes, yes," she breathed out. "Please, Draco…"

He could never resist her begging and so he didn't even try to now. Draco leaned forward, putting one hand on top of her head to keep her in place as he thrust with rough, quick motions. She held onto him, gasping for breaths in between his forceful movements.

"Is this what you want?" Draco growled. "Huh? You want me to fuck you like a dirty little whore?"

"Yes," she keened.

"And whose whore are you?" He pressed his mouth to her ear, his words soft but loud at the same time. "Hmm?" he prompted when she didn't answer fast enough. Draco palmed one of her breasts, digging his fingers into the soft flesh hard enough to leave an