

EXIT

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/44015281) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/44015281>.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Category:	F/M
Fandom:	Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling
Relationship:	Hermione Granger/Draco Malfoy
Characters:	Draco Malfoy , Hermione Granger , Blaise Zabini , Ginny Weasley , Harry Potter , Dennis Creevey , Luna Lovegood , Neville Longbottom , Ron Weasley , Dean Thomas , Zacharias Smith , Pansy Parkinson , and more
Additional Tags:	BAMF Hermione Granger , Pining Draco Malfoy , Slow Burn , Morally Grey Hermione Granger , Sexual Tension , Occlumency (Harry Potter) , Alternate Universe - Voldemort Wins , POV Draco Malfoy , Wartime Romance , Touch-Starved , Draco Malfoy Has Patience , Combat Gear Kink , Enemies to Lovers , Minor Character Death , Uniform Kink , Angst with a Happy Ending , Bickering , Resistance , Combat , Draco Malfoy in Denial , Action & Romance , Banter , they really try to stay away from each other, but they're not very good at it
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of EXIT-Universe
Stats:	Published: 2023-01-02 Completed: 2023-08-04 Words: 159,844 Chapters: 39/39

EXIT

by [TheDae](#)

Summary

Draco defects to the Resistance. His Dark Mark is gone, he renounces Occlumency, the deadness abates. And mysteries intrigue him. Granger is such a mystery. A dark, magnificent, awe-inspiring one.

[Wartime AU. Seven years after the Battle of Hogwarts. Slow Burn.]

Notes

This story is about a journey from darkness to light with a very different Hermione and an understandably distracted Draco as our somewhat unreliable narrator. There definitely will be moments to smile or even laugh, but please mind the tags and warnings nonetheless.

Inspiration: Emma Watson Portrait-Shots by Peter Lindbergh

Warnings: Mature Content, War, Combat, Violence, Blood, Wounds, Torture, Explicit Sexual Content, Explicit Language, References to Sexual Assault, Death of (important) Minor Characters

Translations:

[German](#)

[Italian](#)

[Spanish](#)

Prologue

*The sky of brightest gray seems dark
To one whose sky was ever white.
To one who never knew a spark,
Thro' all his life, of love or light,
The grayest cloud seems over-bright.*

- Paul Laurence Dunbar

Prologue

How do you know you're still alive?

Perhaps because the biting wind, untypical for early summer, whips the rain mercilessly in your face and drops get caught in your eyelashes, blinding you, gradually numbing your skin.

Or because your leg muscles tremble after a long walk, refusing to carry you even one more step, alternately spasming and relaxing, sending waves of pain up your spine.

Maybe because your staccato-like breathing increases your heart rate, which in turn pumps more blood through your arteries. And because your pulse is louder than the pounding in your ears.

No doubt because Harry Potter has his wand trained on you, flanked by a bunch of black-robed cohorts, barely distinguishable from the night. And because his *Lumos* blinds you so much that you would never have recognized him if you hadn't committed his voice to your memory.

I raise my hands, calming, pacifying.

My own wand is already lying somewhere in the grass next to me, swallowed up by the darkness that surrounds me. I dropped it as Potter ordered me to. Made me vulnerable, assailable. To show him how fucking serious I am.

A whole swarm of light-spitting wand tips is aimed at me. Water runs from my hair into my eyes. I blink for both reasons.

Another command echoes over to me and I obediently sink to my knees. Immediately, the muddy, leaf-covered ground soaks both my trousers and robes, and I almost sigh with relief at

the contact. My shins gratefully absorb the cooling wetness. It relaxes my burning muscles. I close my eyes for a moment.

I'm completely worn out.

I've been on the road for more than two weeks. Made my way through the British woods, on foot like a Muggle, always far from civilization, without attracting any attention, and in the protective shade of the conifers.

But I have reached my destination. The watch's velvet-black tent flaps in the wind, just as I expected from the descriptions, yet more menacing than I could have ever imagined.

Potter approaches me. There's a squelching sound as he trudges through the wet, dead leaves in his heavy combat boots. The light cone of his *Lumos* dances. I raise my hands a little higher and show him my bare palms in a gesture of surrender. My arms are shaking from exhaustion, but I'm not ashamed.

Do I respect Potter? At least I accept him. I trust his beliefs. Maybe I should even fear him. There are definitely enough reasons to do so.

These days, they are called *rebels*, and they chose that name themselves. A rather eccentric term for such a well-organized resistance movement if you ask me. With their guard posts and their bootcamps, their well-trained warriors and their smart strategists. They used to be called Aurors. Well, they don't wear blue anymore.

Why defect to them? Mh, maybe I'm a rebel too.

Potter's wand can't decide whether to threaten my head or my throat while the rain seeps ignominiously down the sleeves of my robes.

He instructs me to reveal my identity. A show of strength, or a formality? I can only guess. He doesn't *really* have to ask, because he knows me. I'd even bet my good right arm that he only had to take one quick look at my hair to realize who dared to disturb his night watch.

However, I have no other choice. So I tell him, hissing hoarsely through the rain into the pitch black night.

"My name is Draco Malfoy."

Seven years have passed since the Battle of Hogwarts. A few days ago, I turned twenty-five. I was already on the run then.

Now I'm here and I give you everything. Take what you want. I have nothing to lose.

The biting wind whips the rain in *my* face and drops get caught in my eyelashes, blinding me, gradually numbing my skin.

It's *my* legs that are shaking after this long walk. I've been tramping for a fortnight and they don't want to carry me one more step.

My rapid breathing increases my heart rate. And I can hear my pulse. It's louder than the pounding in my ears.

Saint Potter has his wand trained on *me*. The light from his wand tip blinds me so much I can't see his face, but I recognize his voice because it's etched on my memory forever.

My name is Draco Malfoy.

And I'm still alive.

1. INK BLACK

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

1. INK BLACK

Four walls *sans* windows, a table, two chairs, a door. That's all I've been seeing for hours. Too small for a meeting room, far too empty for an office, probably an interrogation room.

However, no one is interrogating me yet, and I wonder when they'll finally deign to do so. At least they were kind enough to dry my clothes *before* locking me in. Very attentive.

All of this is indeed more than I dreamed of. I could hardly believe my luck when Potter magically blindfolded me with an *Obscuro* on the damp grass in front of the watch tent. And absurdly, it was even more reassuring to be pulled up by his followers afterwards, to feel their tight grips, and to know they wouldn't let me go anytime soon.

I was so fucking relieved.

My plan to turn myself in worked out better than I could have ever imagined. The rebels didn't attack me, they just captured me. It's exactly what I was secretly hoping for all those days in the forest when I had enough time to think about the possible outcome of my escape.

Some alternatives weren't as pretty as others.

In fact, *this* is my favorite.

So I'm sitting in an interrogation room in one of the rebel quarters, maybe even their headquarters. It's just guesswork, I'm not entirely sure, but it's warm, dry and against all expectations I'm still alive. Nope, I *really* couldn't have imagined it any better.

Thrumming my fingers on the tabletop, I sigh and stretch. I'm incredibly tired but I won't make the mistake of complaining about the fact that they keep me waiting. When I fled, I did so knowing there wasn't much to expect from the rebels, let alone claim. Instead, I have to take every little inch that's given to me. And I'll be content with that. *For now*.

Voices in the hallway catch my attention. Potter apparently forgot to cast a Silencing Charm on the room. How unfortunate. I may be locked in, but I can hear them loud and clear.

"I refuse to accept that."

"Well, it's not your decision to make."

"And since when do you make decisions like that all by yourself?"

"I didn't. The others agreed with me."

"And here I thought you would place more value on *my* judgement."

I hear Potter sigh with exhaustion. The second voice is female, distorted with rage and therefore not clearly identifiable, but I still think I know who it belongs to.

Splendid. Potter already has to justify himself for not killing me straightaway when the opportunity presented itself. That's not a big surprise. I'm sure many would have done so without batting an eyelid. That was one of the reasons I picked *his* shift to turn myself in.

"You're making a mistake, Harry. They probably sent him to spy."

"There's a way to find out."

"Not even Veritaserum will make me trust him."

"I'm not asking that of you."

"Tsk, he is and will always be a traitor."

Damn right.

"But maybe a traitor with the right motives?"

"Fine, I warned you. Don't ask my forgiveness once he's betrayed you."

Dramatic.

"I will not."

"Brilliant."

A lone pair of feet marches away. The conversation is over.

There is silence behind the door for a while, then the lock gives a clicking sound and Potter enters the room. I lean back in my chair and look at him slyly. I want him to know that I overheard him letting his authority be undermined.

"Who's the one that doesn't want me here?" I ask, my lips twitching.

Potter frowns. He sits down across from me and places his hands on the table top as well, twirling his wand casually between his fingers. He's not threatening me yet, but he wants to show me that he's ready to do so at any time.

"Well, where do I start? The list is long," he replies, unimpressed.

A bitter grin curls my lips.

It wasn't a serious question anyway, because apart from the fact that I think I already know who it was, I don't give a rotten Knut if they'll accept me. If *she* will accept me. I'm here now and the only opinion I care about is Potter's. From now on, his benevolence means my safety. I never thought I'd have to get back to that one day.

We stare at each other in silence for a few minutes, mentally weighing whether we can at least try to cooperate with each other. Given our shared past, it's not an easy task for either of us, and the past seven-plus years don't make it any less tricky.

At most, we used to be rivals in earning House points, on the Quidditch pitch, and in the pursuit of prestige and popularity. *Gryffindor and Slytherin*. Since then we have been enemies on the battlefield, in politics and because of our opposing ideology. *Rebel and Death Eater*.

My change of mind ruined that balance. Potter wasn't forewarned and so it caught him off guard. I, on the other hand, was able to consider the consequences of my decision beforehand. So I'll give him a moment to ponder. I'm sure he'll open his mouth as soon as something clever comes into his mind. I have plenty of time.

"What makes you turn yourself in, Malfoy?" he eventually asks.

"You're my last resort," I reply promptly. It's a simple question to start with and I'm more than prepared for it. "I'm banking on the protection that was once offered to me. By the Order. But that's not what you call yourselves these days, is it?"

Potter huffs.

"Your decision to accept this so-called offer comes quite late. Especially considering that the very person who was kind enough to make it has been dead for *years*."

I just shrug.

"So it was a one-time offer, yes? You didn't follow in his footsteps after all?"

With that, I can't elicit a reaction from him. Talking to him about Albus Dumbledore doesn't bring the desired emotional effect. I guess I miscalculated in that regard.

"Why now?"

Potter eyes me suspiciously.

In response, I slowly roll up my sleeve, gradually exposing my left forearm. I take my time to build up the tension I want to play with. Only when I reach the crook of my arm do I turn it around and present the maltreated skin to him.

The Dark Mark itself is no longer recognizable, but one can still guess that it was once there. In its place is now a huge, ink black stain. It's clearly visible, despite the myriad scars from my previous unsuccessful attempts to remove the Mark.

For the first time something akin to curiosity crosses Potter's face. His expression is out of control for just a second, but of course I notice because secretly I've been waiting for it.

"Took me a few years."

My answer to his question sounds serene. The efforts that led to this *stain* were the exact opposite.

"How?" he asks, puzzled, and that's a more than appropriate reaction.

"Patience. Diligence. Brilliance. *Rebelliousness*?" And a lot of dismantling higher magic.

I only dare to mock him because I'm confident that I can give him something he *really* wants.

His face is like an open book to me now. He craves more. However, this information will hardly be of any use to him, but I don't want to rub that in his face for the time being. Instead I continue.

"But I'm deeply shocked that you didn't even check, Potter—"

I have to try not to be too cheeky, but I'm really surprised that he doesn't seem to have thought about it at all.

"—because if the Mark were still intact, I certainly wouldn't be sitting here casually exchanging niceties with you."

That's the truth. To disappear for a day as a bearer of the Mark and without a good explanation? Feasible. Two days? With a bit of luck. A two-week escape heading for the rebel areas? No fucking way. The Dark Lord would have tracked me down now at the latest—including their sacred hiding place.

They would do well to improve their security measures, but I'm probably the first *real* Death Eater to defect to them. They're in uncharted waters here, so I'll forgive them their stupidity.

Potter is thinking hard, I can see that clearly. I pull my sleeve back down and let him do just that. Meanwhile, I sit back, clasp my hands behind my head and wait patiently.

"You'll have to explain that," he informs me at length. I return his gaze stoically and spare myself any answer. "Apart from that, do you have anything else to offer? Something to keep me from killing you right here and now?"

Inwardly, I applaud him cynically for his threat, which he actually utters without hesitating or faltering. He has obviously evolved as well. Fantastic. I still don't take him seriously. He can fool neither himself nor me. Basically, it's a stroke of luck for the Resistance that I, of all baddies, am here because I know too much. And that, in turn, *he* knows. I hoped, well, even expected that this fact would keep me alive for quite a while.

"The usual. Names, hideouts, strategies," I list, bored.

"Give me a taste," he demands, and I do as I'm told.

Of course, I don't reveal anything earth-shattering. *Not yet*. I don't want to play all my cards in our very first conversation. I just want him to understand how serious I am, just in case he hasn't already.

Thirsty for knowledge, Potter's gaze rakes over my face as I tell him how big the inner circle is at the moment. Who has a say and who doesn't. Who I trust to climb the ranks soon.

He likes it. I guess he's already positive that his decision to spare my life was the right one; that I will be useful to him. He also knows, at least since he saw the remains of my Mark, that I can't go back, because my lot would tear me limb from limb, no doubt. And with me, all my valuable information would go up in smoke.

When I fall silent, he reaches into one of the pockets of his robes and produces a small vial.

Ah, the Veritaserum.

I scowl at him. It's an affront, as even without the potion, I'm willing to tell him anything he wants to know. But I want to do it my way. By choice.

"You've already asked your questions," I remind him through gritted teeth.

I can feel a vein pulsing in my left temple.

Potter's lips curl into a smile, but it's not a real one. It doesn't reach his green eyes.

"I know." He slides the vial across the table. "Drink. And then I'll ask them again."

The door slams shut, locking itself magically, and I'm alone. A strange sense of imprisonment washes over me, for (of course) Potter hasn't told me when he'll be *visiting* again.

What he seems to have retained in all the years we haven't spoken to each other? His disgusting chivalry. Because he kept his word by asking exactly the same questions under the influence of the Veritaserum as before and not one more. Although this fact should actually relieve me, I find it sickening. I wish I had a reason to reciprocate his distrust. But no, he just demonstrated in an unprecedented move how much I can trust *him*. And how much I owe him from now on.

The tension and the mortal fear of the last few days eventually catch up with me and I gasp for air.

I close my eyes and sink to my knees. It seems like a strange caricature of the scene in front of the watch tent, except this time I'm the only one witnessing this admission of my own vulnerability.

My hands press down on the cold floor, desperate for support. I gasp, moan and tremble, but that's all I allow myself. Bile rushes up my throat, but I choke it back down. I forbid myself everything—the vomiting, the crying, the screaming. If I give in, I'm doomed.

Using Occlumency isn't an option either, although I know it would help me. But the day the Mark disappeared from my arm, leaving nothing but the *stain*, I vowed to myself never to do it again. And I'll try to keep that promise.

Occlumency is undeniably a powerful tool. It can save you in many ways. Not only when facing an enemy, but also on days when even *you* are wondering if you deserve your next

breath. You can get rid of all the unpleasant thoughts, push them away, segment them and then banish the individual components to the furthest corners of your mind. You can lie to someone's face without worrying that they'll see through you. Even an escape can be planned and no one will ever know. Occlumency sharpens the senses, makes you tough and efficient. Yes, it might even literally save your life one day. But if you use it day in and day out just for *survival*, it cuts the soul into pieces as much as it preserves it.

For *years* I have used this tool to segment and banish my thoughts. It undoubtedly saved my life on several occasions and I'm grateful I once learned it. But nonetheless, I don't want that anymore.

So instead of closing my mind, I breathe against the thoughts and feelings. My fingers twitch on the floor as I frantically suck in air.

In, out, in, out, in, out, in, out.

It's over. I'm in Potter's hallowed halls and safe for now. There is no longer a Mark that can tell the Dark Lord where to find me, and I used no traceable magic during my escape. So far nobody has attacked me here and I think that's a good sign.

I discipline myself.

In, out, in, out, in, out.

The rebels didn't welcome me with open arms, that's for sure, but my stay with them is unlikely to get any worse than the past seven years in the Dark Lord's orbit.

With that last thought, I finally relax.

In, out, in, out.

I slowly sit up and raise my head to take my first proper look around the room Potter escorted me to. I was expecting a cell and have to discover that it isn't. In an unsettling way, the room reminds me of the myriad rooms in the various Death Eater hideouts I've inhabited over the years.

Functional and spartan, but *not* a cell.

I doubt anyone has ever been held captive in this room before. They probably put me in the sleeping quarters of a Resistance fighter because, despite the modesty, it's much too nicely furnished for someone like *me*. I can't help but wonder if all of their cells are occupied at the moment or if they just don't have any.

Well, I won't complain.

I let my gaze wander.

A freshly made bed, a desk, a chair, a wardrobe, a bookshelf. There's a door to my right and I could swear there is a bathroom behind it, which admittedly would be a relief. Because I smell. And have been for days.

I rise from my kneeling position and peer into the second room. I was right. Toilet, sink... *shower*.

My hands are already unbuttoning my uniform while I'm still absorbing the new impressions. Anthracite colored towels, a bar of soap, an empty water glass on the edge of the sink.

I kick off of my heavy leather boots. The soles are worn through and they're stiff with dirt. My robes fall to the floor, followed by the leather breastplate. I pull my shirt over my head.

In less than twenty seconds I'm completely naked. Another ten and the water finally touches my body. I sigh and tilt my head back.

Thank you, Potter.

I allow myself a moment of weakness and even say it out loud. However, he will never hear it from me. If I survive the rebels longer than two weeks, I'll probably even start insulting him again to restore a not inconsiderable part of the lost balance between us. But now, in the solitude of my new sanctuary and under the gloriously hot spray of water that washes the sweat and dirt from my hair, I accept and acknowledge it. I am *indeed* grateful.

Groaning, I close my eyes and remain motionless under the water until my skin starts to tingle. Only then do I reach for the soap and wash myself, enjoying the ritual I was denied for so long.

When I'm done, I stagger out of the shower and topple down onto the bed, naked as I am. I don't have time to think about who might possibly find me like this because my eyes close the second my head hits the pillow.

Stark-naked, I stand in front of the window of the room that I can now call my own and meticulously inspect the frame. I can't verify it without my wand, but unless I'm very much mistaken, it's a magical window. Which in turn means that these quarters are underground. A hint that is of no use for the time being, but at least I know now that the view doesn't provide a reliable indication of the daytime.

Fabulous. I've already lost track of time, although I've *probably* been here less than twenty-four hours.

I try to mentally reconstruct the timeline: I turned myself in late at night. After that, I had to wait for Potter in the interrogation room for hours. Also, due to my extreme exhaustion, I certainly slept more than I normally would. So it *should* be evening again. The window, however, gives me a view of a lush green meadow in blazing-bright sunlight.

Even though I was so sure that this room wasn't originally designed for prisoners, the window is still a ruse. And that realization fills me with anger, because not even knowing what time it is inevitably takes a lot of control away from me. It bothers and scares me in equal measure.

I sigh and turn away from the window, only to realize that my Death Eater uniform has vanished into thin air. The floor on which I carelessly tossed everything is bare again. Instead, a pile of neatly folded clothes suddenly materializes on the desk in the corner.

Mildly intrigued, I reach out and quickly look through the garments. I should probably be thankful because my uniform was not only dirty but also damaged from my escape through the woods. I'm quite surprised by the new selection, though, and frown for a moment before plopping back down on the bed thoughtfully.

The next time I open my eyes, a delicious scent reaches my nostrils. My body reacts immediately and I sit up with a jerk.

Next to the pile of clothes is a tray with a bowl of soup and a few slices of bread. Almost, but only almost, I thank Saint Potter again, and loud and clear. But there's no need to overdo it, so I swallow the words and just swing my legs out of bed.

I eat with appetite. It's been far too long since my last warm meal. Only when the last spoonful of soup has been slurped and the last crumb of bread has been eaten do I decide to finally cover myself. I've pushed my luck long enough.

Time for my new outfit.

I get dressed and also slip into the heavy combat boots that are on the floor next to the desk. While they're a perfect fit, they're not nearly as comfortable as the dragonhide boots of my old gear. These are definitely cheaper, but what did I expect? The rebels do damn well not to let me walk through their quarters in my Death Eater uniform. We don't want to take the risk of arousing envy, do we?

I stroll to the mirror and contemplate my reflection.

Another surprise: it's not a prison uniform that I was provided with. In addition to the boots, I wear black cargo trousers with practical pockets on both sides and an anthracite-colored long-sleeved top. The close-fitting, cool fabric has protective properties, defensive magic humming against my skin. I can't help but wonder why the hell they let me wear clothes that could save my arse. The only explanation I have? They probably gave me the exact same clothes they wear themselves because they just didn't have anything else at hand. Touching, really.

So this is what I look like in a Resistance fighter's outfit. (Or at least in their everyday clothes; it's hardly the full combat gear.) The sight is unfamiliar, but I can't say it doesn't suit me. Black is undeniably my colour.

I blow a strand of hair out of my face and turn away from the mirror. As I wait for Potter, I pace up and down impatiently, wondering what they'll do to me the next time I'm allowed to leave this room.

I'd really appreciate it if Potter would hurry up for once, because now that I'm rested, properly dressed, and well fed, I'm dying to learn more.

For years I've waited patiently to come here, but now it feels like I can't spare another minute.

Three more meals, several naps, and plenty of boredom, only occasionally interrupted by spontaneous, uncomfortable heart palpitations, until the door of my *cell* opens again. From now on I will refer to the room in which I am *allowed* to spend my time as that again, since it's nothing else. Aside from its original purpose, it's now used to hold me captive, so it simply doesn't deserve a friendlier name.

I look up to see Potter standing in the doorway. With a curt nod, he signals me to get up and follow him, which of course I do immediately. Nothing is further from my mind than stagnating in the *cell*, even if Potter's appearance means that I'll be interrogated again. But that's not a surprise, so I'll just take it as a chance to squeeze some information out of him as well.

Before I'm allowed to leave the *cell*, Potter flicks his wand and magically ties my hands behind my back, just like he did after our first conversation. I accept it without comment. Basically, I can't compete with Potter without a wand. And I would never take the risk of attacking him unarmed because that would be bloody stupid anyway. Who defects, only to flee at the next best opportunity? We both know that, so I assume Potter is only fettering me to show me where my place is. And that he doesn't trust me yet.

He works to rule, I'll give him that. If our roles were reversed, I would do the same.

I saunter along behind him obediently, letting my gaze wander. We cross several corridors without windows. *Definitely* underground.

Everything down here, from the light grey linoleum floor to the bare concrete ceiling to the tar black metal doors that break the walls at random intervals, seems strangely sterile. I really have no idea where we are.

That's something the rebels are exceptionally good at. We've been trying to track down their quarters from the start, and until the day I escaped we rarely succeeded. For once, I have nothing to criticize. They really have perfected hiding.

Suddenly, footsteps echo through the hallway and after a few seconds a young woman turns the corner. She rushes past us, giving me only a fleeting, blank look.

She doesn't look familiar to me, but something catches my eye: she's wearing exactly the same clothes as me. Her cargo trousers are tighter than mine and she's wearing the black robes I left in my *cell*, but I recognize the long-sleeved top right away. It feels like a confirmation of my earlier suspicions, but doesn't change the fact that I don't get it.

The woman disappears as quickly as she appeared. Her footsteps are getting quieter and only when I can hardly hear them anymore do I ask my question.

"What are these clothes for, Potter?"

He gives me a quick, annoyed look over his shoulder.

"Workout," he replies tersely.

I'm surprised he answers at all, and that's exactly why I fear he's telling the truth. (Which doesn't solve the mystery, by the by, and means I can't come up with a clever retort.)

We continue the rest of our march in silence.

I didn't memorize the route from the interrogation room to my *cell*. There are hardly any reference points in here and if you don't have an eidetic memory or are good at remembering the permanent *left, right, left, right* in order to act it out backwards later, you are lost in these tunnels. Also, I was too tired after the first questioning. So I can't say for sure if it's the same door that Potter is holding open for me now. At least it looks like the same. So *maybe* it's the same chair I drop into and *maybe* it's the same table I put my hands on.

Potter sits down as well and adjusts his glasses. He stares at me, I stare back. Before I can preempt him by asking my own questions, the door opens once more. Pretty energetic even.

Weasley stomps into the room. And in this case, by *Weasley*, I mean Ronald Weasel King Weasley, although I suspect the entire ginger-haired clan is lurking around here somewhere. Because where else would they be if not at the side of their Chosen One?

The fact that he, of all people, will be present during my second interrogation triggers two different feelings in me. On the one hand, I'm almost relieved that some things never seem to change. Potter and Weasley are obviously still a dream team, and since I'm in dire need of some normality to cling to, the familiar sight should actually comfort me. But on the other hand, it can end badly for me if Weasley participates in our little, snug get-together because the last time I saw him we were standing in a crowded battlefield in the middle of one of the combat zones. I don't even remember which one, because I (too important, too valuable) wasn't in the field during every attack, so it's been quite a while since that encounter. But if I remember correctly, it was the day I fired an *Avada* at the former Miss Delacour. And how shall I put it? It was a hit.

So I'm afraid Weasley isn't very fond of me. His sister-in-law is dead and I'm the one responsible. Not a good basis for a level-headed conversation, I have to admit.

I allow myself to give him the once-over.

Unlike Potter, who hasn't changed much (aside from that ridiculously scrubby beard), Weasley has really evolved over the past few years. He's half a head taller than me (which is remarkable considering how tall I am), has his fiery red hair cropped short, and is no longer lanky-athletic but rather broad-shouldered. I'm muscular myself, but if I had to fight him without magic I'd have to surrender, that's for sure. There are some old and some fresh scars

on his face. They're barely visible as he's downright freckle-infested, which must mean he's outside a lot, but I notice them anyway. The muscles under *his* long-sleeved top are tense and not only give an idea of how strong he is. I suspect he's aware of that fact, and that doesn't make it any better.

So now they're both sitting across from me. Potter examines his fingernails while Weasley crosses his arms and stares openly at me. His eyes are full of hate.

"Nice to see you," I say with an undertone that leaves no doubt that I don't think it's *nice* at all.

"Ditto," Weasley snaps promptly.

I have to suppress a smirk. I really need to pull myself together because the reason I'm here isn't funny. And it's even less funny that I'm only here *now*. It's not a tea party, we all know it, but every thought, phrase, and reaction that make me forget the *before* help me keep my composure.

"We have a few more questions to ask, Malfoy."

At his words, I shift my gaze to Potter.

"Where's the Veritaserum?"

"I don't have any with me today."

My right eyelid twitches uncontrollably. So at some point, while I was bored to death in my *cell*, Potter decided to give me a chance. Well, it must have been a bloody complicated train of thought considering how long it took him to figure it out. Three meals—that means a whole day, roughly estimated.

"Why?" I ask anyway.

Potter adjusts his glasses once more.

"We've come to the conclusion that you have nothing to lose. You managed to remove your Dark Mark and then came straight to us. Besides, you didn't lie during the first interrogation. What would be the point of doing it now?"

Exactly my thoughts, Potter. Brilliant. Then let's crack on.

I can just stop myself from rubbing my hands.

"What happened then? After the Battle of Hogwarts?" Potter asks and Weasley, that bastard, actually pretends to stifle a yawn.

"My mother wanted us to go into hiding at the first opportunity. However, once we won the battle, that was no longer an option. We were summoned to the Manor along with the other Death Eaters and with that, our fate was sealed. There is no hiding from the Dark Lord."

The truth in a nutshell.

I hear Weasley mumble something that sounds like "won the battle", "fate sealed", and "touching" but studiously ignore him. Again, my focus is completely on Potter.

"Why did it take you so long to defect?"

I roll my eyes.

"...The Mark, like I told you before."

"So it took you seven years to figure out how to get rid of it?"

"Pretty much."

Weasley snorts and I glare at him. He doesn't have to believe it, but it's true. Admittedly, it was a few months before the thought of trying to remove the Mark first occurred to me, but once I had the idea, I continuously puzzled over the problem—and just as continuously failed. Well, until now.

"And when did you succeed?"

"Two weeks and a day ago... or two days? How long have I been here?"

Potter doesn't answer my question, just raises an eyebrow.

Weasley clears his throat and intervenes.

"So you want us to believe that you *suddenly* had a brilliant idea and then *spontaneously* trotted off to grace us with your presence?" he asks.

Gods, what an oaf.

"Of course not. Ever since the Battle of Hogwarts, it was clear to me that if the opportunity arose, I would defect. As I tried to get rid of my Mark, I simultaneously worked on the perfect escape plan so I would be ready for immediate departure should I ever succeed. I did, as you can see, and so I fled," I spit at him angrily.

One of my hands clenches into a fist, but thankfully Weasley can't see through the tabletop. (Well, unless he's the lucky possessor of a magic eye, just like that utterly inept and unhealthily pessimistic Auror they adored so much, but I doubt that.)

"And *how* did you plan your escape?" Potter chimes in again.

Unlike Weasley, he maintains his neutral demeanor and speaks in a calm voice. Obviously he also knows that it's better if *he* conducts the negotiations.

"I gathered information. About your guard posts in front of the magical villages, the locations of the tents, the times of the watch relief, the maximum number of rebels on site, and when it's your turn to keep watch, Potter."

Weasley snorts again. I don't even bat an eyelid this time.

"It was your plan all along to explicitly defect during *my* watch?"

Does that really surprise him?

I don't answer, just stare at him stoically with a slightly raised eyebrow. He's a reasonably smart boy, he'll be able to answer the question himself if he thinks about it seriously. For my part, I have no intention of buttering him up.

Realizing I won't comment further, Potter sighs.

"So you've been on the run for two whole weeks?" I nod. "On foot?" I nod again. "Why?"

This time it's me who snorts.

"Forgoing magic is the method of choice when you don't want to leave a trace. The Dark Lord's followers aren't stupid—not all of them, at least. After noticing my disappearance and making sure I wasn't coming back, they probably tried a tracking spell first."

"*Appare Vestigium?*"

I smirk. Ten points to Gryffindor, Weasley.

"They could have assumed we were responsible," Potter says. "That you were ambushed and captured by us."

Their reasoning is way too naive. We urgently need to work on that.

"Aside from the fact that you would certainly have bragged about having someone like me in your grip, which I *really* hope you haven't, by the way, the Dark Lord will likely have excluded that possibility when I didn't follow his call. *The Mark...*" I drawl, raising my left arm in an extremely bored manner. "If he summons us, we have to react quickly. Since I didn't do that, he must have tried to use the Mark to track me down. And since that obviously didn't work either, there are officially only two options left: I'm dead or I cut off my arm. Frankly, I doubt the latter is an efficient method when it comes to the blood magic that binds us to the Dark Lord, so I hope he thinks I'm dead. Dead as a doornail."

I meet Potter's gaze and wallow in the surprise that flickers in his eyes. He seems a little impressed. And he really has every reason to be.

"We *didn't* brag about it," is his only answer to my detailed explanation.

At that, I have to suppress a relieved sigh. Thank Merlin. Relying on the rebels on that front could have backfired, but everything seems to have turned out exactly as I was hoping. They exercised caution because they were unsure of my intentions—a wise decision on their part that saves my arse for the time being.

"And your mother?" Weasley grunts, eyes flashing. "Aren't you afraid that she might betray you? Or didn't you tell her about your plan to run away like a coward? Is mummy all upset

now because she thinks you're dead?"

He puts on a mock pitying expression and I have to pull myself together not to strike out at him, broad-shouldered or not. My jaw clenches and I grind my teeth.

"I suppose so," I reply tersely, doing my best not to raise my voice. "She didn't know about the plan. I intend to get her out and bring her here as soon as possible."

"Funny, I didn't realize we are now a rescue center for Death Eaters who are fed up with their own breed. Are we, Harry?" Weasley asks snidely, facing Potter for the first time.

Potter frowns thoughtfully, completely ignoring his companion, which in turn soothes me a little.

"Where is she currently housed?" he asks.

Weasley jumps up, mumbling angrily to himself, and begins pacing the room.

The situation gives me an inside into the dynamics of their relationship. Potter is a thinker, Weasley a fighter. I remember never seeing Potter when we attacked the rebels or vice versa. He's obviously too important to get his hands dirty, just like I was in the end. Having climbed the ranks rapidly over time, I haven't had to be on the front line very often either. At least not in the last year.

Weasley, however, is *always* present. His name was on almost every of the countless military reports I had to read and sign off on. He's obsessed with this war, hence the rage. No wonder he's upset that they're wasting their precious resources on someone like me.

Sorry, Weasley, I didn't ask for your ridiculous workout clothes.

"The last time I spoke to her, she was at the Manor," I say. "The house is still used by the Death Eaters, as you probably know, but not nearly as frequented as it used to be."

For my mother, the Manor is still the closest thing to a home.

She doesn't fight, never has. Ever since my father died on the battlefield, she has been a shadow of the woman she once was, and it's awful that my disappearance will cause her even more suffering. But it was the safest solution. Unlike her sister's, my mother's Occlumency skills are limited, so involving her in my scheming was just too risky. At least I can be sure that she will be taken care of. Bella will comfort her Cissy no matter how insane she may be, the house elves will be there for her as well, and one day I'll make it up to her.

Potter acknowledges my answer with a curt nod. He doesn't ask any more questions about my mother, but that's fair enough. In this regard, I must and *will* be patient.

"And what do you expect from us now?" he asks instead.

That's a good question. Above all, protection, I guess. For now, I'm not very demanding.

Take what you want. I have nothing to lose.

I take my time to answer. A touch of dramatics never hurt anyone.

"That you accept my help." Another loud snort comes from the corner of the interrogation room where Weasley is still sulking. "You want to kill the Dark Lord and there are no more Horcruxes. The last piece of his soul is in his current body and that's why he's so well hidden that you haven't been able to track him down for seven years. I want him dead too, *surprise*. And I am your best chance, if not your only one, to finally be successful."

It's quiet. No more snorting, no further questions. They didn't expect me to know about the Horcruxes and that was my trump card. I fucking did it. Now they are intrigued and won't even consider not cooperating with me, I'm sure.

Take what you want. And kill him already.

Chapter End Notes

All right folks, let's get started! I'm so excited. As always, if you have any suggestions for improvements regarding grammar or phrases, please let me know. I'm always open to constructive criticism. Apart from that: Kudos are love! I'd be very happy about your support if you like the story. Thanks to everyone who is reading! ♥

2. CAULDRON BLACK

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

2. CAULDRON BLACK

Lying on the bed in my *cell*, I stare at the ceiling and try to distract myself from my swirling thoughts by being bored. Dismal failure is bound to occur.

I sigh and roll onto my side, then fiddle with a loose thread on the pillowcase and gaze through the magical window diagonally above me. All I can see from this angle is a blue sky flecked with some far too perfect cotton-wool clouds. Always gorgeous weather *out there*. Oddly enough, the cheerful sight spoils my mood.

What the outcome of the conversation with Potter and Weasley was? Their curiosity, accompanied by a sudden tinge of willingness to compromise. Even Weasley eventually calmed down. Apparently, thanks to my revelations, his birdbrain realized that my intelligence could be crucial to their perpetually failing endeavor. He *is* obsessed with this war, but he, too, wants it to be over at some point. Preferably, of course, with the death of the Dark Lord.

Tom, as they call him now. As if he were a real person and not the splintered eighth part of a thoroughly black soul.

They left the room to confer (once again without casting a Silencing Charm, naive as they are) and despite their whispering I heard a few scraps of conversation.

"I never thought Tom—" was one of them.

Merlin help me. To me, it sounds beyond wrong, but who am I to judge? I can't help but wonder what other surprises the rebel quarters have in store for me. Anyway, I will *never* call him Tom, that's for sure.

My thoughts wander to my father, who in a careless moment fell victim to the Killing Curse from a Resistance fighter's wand. He was probably drunk that day, which makes the whole thing kind of inglorious. It happened during one of the first clashes after the Battle of Hogwarts and I wasn't in attendance. At that time, I was still unblemished and therefore relatively unusable. It took them a while to get me to the point where I could actively participate in the fighting.

From then on, the way up was easy. However, it was not *as easy* to ascertain who was responsible for the curse that finished off my father. I guess I'm lucky I don't know. One less problem to deal with now that I'm here. Say what one will about my father, but I'd probably have high blood pressure problems similar to Weasley's if I knew I was sleeping beneath the

same roof as his murderer. (Or rather, in the same bunker, if my suspicions should turn out to be correct.)

What I told Potter about the Battle of Hogwarts itself is virtually ever-present in my mind, although I've carefully locked away the associated emotions like almost any other. Indeed, I've vowed to myself never to use Occlumency again, but I'll do whatever it takes to keep the feelings I've previously pushed away where they are. I'm safe as long as they're corked up. It's easier to live when they don't painfully knot my heart and brain all the time.

I just take a quick trip down memory lane, like I've done so many times before. I remember how Hagrid carried Potter out of the Forbidden Forest. How Potter (surprise) rose from the dead. How the Dark Lord issued the order for the massacre. And how incredibly successful the Death Eaters were at obeying him.

I can still hear their screams. And then I also see in my mind's eye how wildly they scattered back then. Longbottom, the unsung hero, somehow managed to kill that disgusting snake, but at the time I didn't realize the significance of the act. I've only known about the Horcruxes for about two years. Let's just say it was a leap of faith that I successfully abused.

Panting, I swing my legs out of bed and jump up. I must not get too bogged down in these thoughts or the urge to close my mind will become overwhelming. Instead, I remind myself of what those memories actually are: very far away.

I quickly shed my new gear, tossing everything over the back of the chair, then peek in the wardrobe on my way to the bathroom. As expected, there are more sets of the workout clothes and (who'd have thought that) they all look the same.

The rebels took a good leaf out of our book. They give up their identities when they're in their quarters, and at least *that* is strategically smart. It's so much easier to live and fight collectively when nobody stands out from the crowd. Except Potter, of course. Maybe they should all carve a lightning into their foreheads as well.

With that last thought, I take a shower and wash away the feeling of having voluntarily jumped from smoke into smother.

A few hours later, there's a knock on my door, which makes me flinch. I don't know what that means or what is expected of me now.

Potter, who definitely *didn't* knock last time, was kind enough to magically lock the door again after escorting me back to the *cell*, so it will avail to nothing if I try to turn the handle from the inside. But it's unnecessary anyway, I realize, because the next thing I hear is a clicking sound. Whoever thought they had to announce themselves is about to come in without any prompting on my part.

As a precaution, I brace myself. I certainly don't trust every rebel just because Potter saw the potential in me.

The door opens and I freeze.

"Seven years, Draco! Bugger me! And I was afraid you'd changed your mind," he says mischievously, grinning broadly.

Blaise Zabini. Once my best friend and closest confidant, luckily never a bearer of the Dark Mark, a Resistance fighter for seven years now and, as I've been told over and over again, a traitor of the first chop.

I didn't see him often when I was in the field. Here and there I caught a glimpse of his face as he pursued, threatened, injured and, yes, killed our people, but that's all. I've known for ages that he's one of them, but the fact that he is standing in front of me *right now* exceeds my expectations.

Back then, after the Battle of Hogwarts, everything happened much too quickly. I didn't get the chance to exchange another word with him; didn't even know for sure whether he was still alive. He could very well have been dead. The Death Eaters wouldn't have hesitated in that respect if they had caught him and found that he had no ambitions to join them. It was only much later that I learned where he had ended up, when he was spotted during an attack on what was then still a makeshift Resistance camp—on the enemy's side. Since then he has been ostracized in our circles and the name Zabini has been little more than a swear word.

It took me quite a while to get rid of my anger towards him. I was so jealous, so crestfallen, that I had to bear the Dark Mark while he was free to go his own way. Eventually, I managed to put those feelings behind me with the help of my Occlumency, and ever since I've always secretly hoped that he would survive his next combat.

Well, obviously he's done more than well because Blaise is here.

He hasn't changed much. He's tall, black-haired, blue-eyed, seemingly healthy, and before I can control myself I'm attached to him like the sea anemone-like growth to a Murtlap's back. In fact, I give him such a tight hug that it's rather embarrassing, so I let go of him pretty quickly.

To his credit, he rarely loses his composure. His gaze flickers briefly, but the smile remains.

I can't speak. My throat is dry, constricted even, and I have to fucking get my shit together.

"Missed you too. Though I have to admit that at times I wasn't sure if you were still in there somewhere." He nudges my upper arm. I close my eyes to collect myself. "Good to know that I wasn't wrong about you. All the years that I've told them almost daily that you'll show up here one day, they just laughed at me. Well, Dean Thomas owes me quite a bit of gold. Thanks for that."

Blaise has always had a talent for using his humor to either completely destroy situations like this or at least make them somewhat bearable. I decide that I prefer the second option and open my eyes again. I look at him with trembling lips.

"It's good to see you," I croak out.

I sound hoarse, but we both ignore it. As if I wasn't on the verge of crying. As if I hadn't had a *successful* Death Eater career. And as if I wasn't a fleeing coward who has been playing dead just as *successfully* for over two weeks.

I feel the urge to mentally thank Potter again. Aside from his and Weasley's (mostly snorting) company, Blaise is my first contact in days. Ever since I've been here. And Potter sent him of all people, which must mean he trusts him implicitly—or maybe feels something like pity for me.

I don't know what to think. My head is literally spinning and I rub my temples.

"What are you doing here?" I finally voice my question.

"I volunteered to show you around."

Well, now I'd *really* like to see my own face.

"To show me around... *where*?"

"Headquarters, of course."

Fuck me, so I was right. If it was just a vague guess thus far, I can now be sure: I'm in the lion's den. And apparently I'm now allowed to leave my cage and throw myself to them.

"And why would they just let me walk around like that?"

I'm seriously confused. So confused, in fact, that I've already forgotten my joy at the unexpected reunion with Blaise. I was hoping that if I proved myself they wouldn't lock me up permanently, yes, but it's unusually negligent of them to abandon that security measure *so* quickly.

"You don't have a wand, so what harm can you do?" Blaise replies with a shrug, eyeing me casually. "Our outfit looks good on you." I frown. "I'm curious what the others will say about it."

The others.

I have no idea who and what awaits me here. Of course, I know most of the rebels. I've seen them fight and read their names in the reports. But I don't know which of them are *here*, in this particular hideout. Since this is their headquarters, as Blaise just revealed to me, probably a few. But they don't just have one lair, they don't fight twenty-for-seven, and no rebel does the same job for years. Basically, their structures resemble ours more than they probably care to admit.

"Why you of all people? They know we were friends. I figured, if anyone, they would send Weasley to avoid any risk," I point out gruffly, even though I'm already in the process of fixing my hair.

In fact, I'm dying to leave the *cell* and see the rebel headquarters with my own eyes. Although I don't understand it, I won't question their decision if it means I'm more or less free

after such a short period of time.

Blaise's expression lets me know that I unintentionally offended him. For a brief moment he doesn't look quite as friendly as before.

"Just for your information: I'm held in quite a high esteem here. Seven years is a long time, Draco, and I've been a part of them for just as long. If you try anything stupid, I won't hesitate to hex you." He looks at me unswervingly, not intending to threaten me, just to clarify something. "The moment you force me to make a choice, I will be loyal to the Resistance."

The message is crystal clear, so I nod.

Maybe sending Blaise wasn't Potter's worst idea after all, because what I'm feeling now is mainly respect.

That's probably what differentiates them from us: their solidarity, their team spirit, their devotion and their loyalty for the right reasons. Death Eaters are also *loyal* in some way, but always driven by fear. At the end of the day, everyone is just trying to save their own bacon. I'm the shining example. The rebels, on the other hand, would die for each other and that's so much more honorable.

"Ready?" Blaise asks, lifting an eyebrow.

As if I could ever be ready for this.

"You don't have any further questions?" I reply drily.

"Harry has kept me updated on your conversations. That being said, I know pretty much everything about you that has leaked out in the past few years. But we'll have plenty of time to chat, don't you worry."

Blaise's smile recovers. He pats my shoulder encouragingly and opens the door.

And then I'm allowed to step out of my *cell*, disguised as a Resistance fighter and without any shackles.

I find that my Occlumency-spoilt brain is overwhelmed with processing Blaise's sudden appearance in my *cell* and the related emotions. Not to mention the additional impressions it now has to gather as I follow my former friend through the labyrinth of underground corridors through which he leads me as if he knows it better than the back of his hand. (Which he probably does.)

With buoyant steps and a few no less euphoric hand gestures, he tells me that we are in the wing that houses the rooms of the fighters who currently live here.

He confirms all of my assumptions. So instead of putting me in a *cell*, they put me in one of their sleeping quarters, and I've unknowingly spent the last few days and nights next door to members of the Resistance who would certainly have killed me in my sleep if the opportunity had arisen. A disturbing realization. Potter did well to keep my door tightly locked if he still wants to benefit from my inside knowledge.

I'm taciturn, letting Blaise show me where his own quarters are and then philosophize for a while about how much more comfortable the rooms could be and how unaesthetic he finds the furnishings. I'm not interested in any of that, although I can't blame him for not appreciating how lucky he's been. He's been hopping through the rebel quarters for seven years and has no idea what it's been like in the Death Eater boltholes where I had to assert myself.

"It's underground," I observe when Blaise pauses for a breath.

He gives me a quick look and nods curtly, a small smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. He knows he doesn't have to deny that fact because he also knows I'm not stupid.

"Where are we?" I ask, but Blaise just laughs in amusement.

Well, it was worth a try.

Leaving the sleeping quarters behind, we enter another long hallway through a cauldron black double door. Also empty. Secretly, I'm grateful for every additional minute that we don't encounter anyone and I can recover from my shock, and so I breathe a sigh of relief.

"The trauma room," Blaise informs me as we come to a halt in front of a wide open milk glass door. "This is where first aid is given to those injured after attacks."

He lets me step closer and I peer into what I assume must be some sort of hospital wing, like I was used to at Hogwarts. What I see instead almost makes me whistle in approval, but I pull myself together at the last moment.

What stretches here for at least a hundred feet (roughly estimated) is no simple infirmary. It's a professional, probably extremely sterile, and more than well-resourced healing facility. I've only seen anything like it on my few visits to St. Mungo's Hospital. The gleaming steel surfaces, clean cots, and seemingly endless shelves of tinctures, potions, and paraphernalia make my head spin.

No wonder.

It is indeed no wonder that some of the rebels have reappeared in the combat zones within a few weeks, even after suffering the most severe, near-fatal injuries. They are very well supplied and how they manage that is a mystery to me.

The art of healing is not particularly widespread among the Death Eaters. We also have healers, but most of them don't serve us voluntarily. At St. Mungo's we are still treated grudgingly, even though the hospital has officially been under the Dark Lord's control for years. And he, of all bastards, has never shown any sympathy for his injured fighters, insofar

as they managed to return to him alive at all. Being injured means weakness. A condition the Dark Lord does not even remotely tolerate.

With all my might, I tear myself out of the whirling thoughts about this injustice and its consequences and refocus on the here and now.

I notice that all cots of the *trauma room* are empty at the moment and no healer seems to be present either. I'd really like to know who works for the rebels here, and I'm about to ask Blaise when there's a sound of footsteps.

Ginny Weasley struts around a corner. Her red ponytail swings defiantly back and forth with every step she takes, almost perfectly matching the expression she puts on as soon as she catches sight of me.

"No workout today?" comes Blaise's voice.

I give him a quick look as Weasley comes to a halt next to him.

They look (and smile) at each other and from their body language alone I get the picture, although they don't give me any other obvious clue.

I *can* read people. And Blaise and Weasley fuck, that's for sure.

The glint in Blaise's eyes tells me all I need to know. I've shared a dorm with him long enough. And it probably shouldn't surprise me, because even then he had a soft spot for the Gryffindor brat. It *does* surprise me a bit, though, as I've assumed to this day that Weasley is still Potter's girlfriend. And the Dark Lord thinks so, too.

My eyes dart between the two of them.

They make trivial small talk, with Weasley expertly ignoring me, which in turn gives me the time I need to process my secret realization and ponder it further.

Maybe Weasley *is* still Potter's witch. Maybe Blaise fucks her anyway. Or maybe she was never Potter's girlfriend and it was just a clever charade that fooled us all. *Maybe, maybe, maybe.* I'm really not here to grapple with the abysses of human relationships, but I tend to get my teeth into mysteries when they're thrown in my face so unexpectedly.

Before I can delve deeper into my musings, Weasley saunters off.

"See you at the meeting," are her last words to Blaise.

Side note: It was definitely not *her* voice that I heard in the interrogation room while waiting for Potter, although I could swear she secretly agrees with that other person.

I brush the thought aside.

"After breakfast?" Blaise makes sure, to which Weasley nods.

Her gaze falls on me one last time, flickering, suspicious, then she's gone. A door slams shut behind her and it's quiet again.

I feel Blaise's eyes on me, but only lift an eyebrow. He probably knows I saw through him because he still knows me well enough too, but we come to the unspoken agreement not to talk about it. *Not yet.*

Instead, we continue on our way, leaving the trauma room behind and entering a small atrium, which is also empty, mostly concreted, and shockingly bland.

Two water dispensers are lonely in their corners. I count a total of five closed doors, including the one through which we just entered the atrium, and to my chagrin find no indication of an exit or even a lift. However one can enter or leave their quarters, they made sure I wouldn't find out. And without my wand, or at least a little clue, I'm unable to detect their Notice-Me-Not Charms. There's no point in looking for them, so I drop it. Basically, I want the exact opposite of *out* anyway. I want to *stay* no matter how uncomfortable it'll get.

"This," Blaise points to the first door on our left, "is the dining hall with kitchen next door. It's where we usually have meals together. Most of our larger gatherings also take place there." He glances at his timepiece. "Breakfast is in twenty minutes, then I'll show you the room. And here you can check when the meetings are held."

I turn around and follow his gaze to a magical black board I haven't noticed before. Hanging right next to the door through which we entered the atrium, it not only tells the time (with the numerals of the minutes and seconds replacing themselves autonomously), but also seems to contain something like a daily schedule. I allow myself a first glimpse, but instantly know that I will have to come back to examine all of this more closely.

07:00 Workout

08:00 Breakfast

08:45 Meeting, Dining Hall

10:00 Combat Training

12:00 Lunch

After skimming half the schedule and realizing that I'm impressed with how well organized the rebels are at their headquarters, I notice a few more posted lists.

Well, fuck me.

Three parchments are headlined with the terms *Camp Black*, *Camp Grey*, *Camp White*. Listed below are countless names of Resistance fighters who, as I strongly suspect, are currently housed in these so-called camps. There are also watch schedules similar to the class schedules that Severus once slammed onto the Slytherin table in the Great Hall at the start of each term. Back then, in a different time.

Before I can take a closer look, the words blur before my eyes.

Blaise lowers his wand with a sigh.

"Not yet, mate," he says, patting my shoulder once more. I'd really like to tell him to stop doing that. "Forgot to cast the spell *beforehand*. Sorry if it piqued your curiosity."

His voice is full of mischief and I'm immediately sure that it was his intention to let me see the lists and schedules. I do my best to keep my face neutral and try to hide how much I'm itching to find out more.

I was aware that the rebels have good strategists in their ranks, after all they fought us successfully for seven bloody years. However, the fact that they work in such a structured way gives me ideas that I'm not ready for yet because I instinctively know who must be behind all of this. And I don't know what it's going to do to my mind when I'm confirmed that the person who appears to be the mastermind of this conceptually brilliant movement is the same person who recently accused Potter of not killing me outright.

Again, I push the thought aside, because I'm sure that this confrontation won't be long in coming anyway.

Blaise continues with his tour and I try to focus on his words again.

"This is the briefing room, as one might say. Strategic planning and smaller conferences take place there," he explains, pointing to the first door on the right-hand side of the atrium. "If you need to exchange a word with Harry, you'll almost certainly find him there, at least for most of the day. Right next to it," he now means the second door on the right, "is the equipment room, including the changing rooms."

Fucking well organized indeed.

"And that's the training room over there." Now he grins and nods towards a large set of double doors that are just opposite the entrance to the atrium. "I guess I don't need to explain the benefits of it, but as long as you don't have to use it, consider yourself lucky. The training is relentless."

His sparkling eyes are on me, and I finally understand why he's in such a good mood all the time. He knows how much all of this impresses me. And I was wrong about one more thing: He is *perfectly* aware that the Death Eater hideouts can't keep up with their headquarters in any way.

Blaise is a proud soldier of Camp Black.

Chapter End Notes

Yep, I am a lost cause! I just couldn't contain my excitement, so here's an extra chapter for you. The next one won't come until the weekend, as announced, but with an encounter that we are all looking forward to! ♥

3. PITCH BLACK

Chapter Notes

As a quick reminder, my inspiration for Hermione were the portrait shots of Emma Watson by Peter Lindbergh. The picture I used for the [Wattpad cover](#) is my favorite.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

3. PITCH BLACK

I don't know what perturbs me more: that the breakfast in the Resistance dining hall is so good it would be worth staying for that alone, or that I have to eat it under the watchful eyes of countless suspicious rebels, all of whom trickled into the room shortly after Blaise and I. Only the hunger ensures that the buttered sandwiches, the tender scrambled eggs and the sweet fruit salad find their way into my stomach without any of it getting stuck in my throat.

We've been sitting at one of the long tables for a full twenty minutes. It's no surprise that ours has remained mostly empty, while all the other tables are downright packed with rebels chatting loudly and sipping their coffee. Though everyone present is doing their best to pretend that I'm simply not there, the air in the room is thick with disapproval and a touch of bloodlust. And, of course, they certainly don't want to sit near me.

Still, I have to secretly congratulate Potter, because he seems to have his lot under control. I wouldn't have imagined my first breakfast in the heart of the Resistance to be nearly as *peaceful*. They pull themselves together and pay little attention to me. I'm merely the victim of a few frosty looks, which make it clear that if I'm ever allowed to walk through their headquarters alone, I'll definitely have to be careful.

In contrast to my inner unrest, I do my best to appear outwardly unaffected by chewing mechanically, avoiding every single one of the aforementioned looks, and remaining silent. Blaise fills this silence with useless and uninteresting information about world affairs, the weather, and the sore muscles he got from his last workout. I barely listen to him because I'm busy scanning the room for Resistance fighters I know from days gone by.

The first two familiar faces I spot are Longbottom and Lovegood. Aside from them, there are more former Hogwarts students among the rebels currently residing at Camp Black than I would have expected.

Sitting next to Lovegood and Longbottom are Katie Bell, Susan Bones, Dean Thomas, Seamus Finnigan and Dennis Creevey. The only reason I remember the latter's first name is that in the last few attacks I commanded, he did more damage than I ever thought possible.

Next row sits Ronald Weasley, flanked by two of his brothers—Charlie and George, if I'm not mistaken. The fact that Miss Delacour's widower doesn't seem to be around is probably my luck.

I see at least one Patil twin, but she immediately disappears back into the crowd and ultimately, I have no idea which of the two sisters it was. I also recognize Terry Boot, Cho Chang and Anthony Goldstein.

At the next table, the penultimate, Lee Jordan, Hannah Abbott, Oliver Wood and Alicia Spinnet catch my eye.

I can't see the last table, but there are already so many people I know from my school days that it would actually be reason enough for a blind panic. (Not that there's much left to worry about on my part.)

Aside from these faces, which I remember all too well, there are still enough Resistance fighters that I either don't know by name or that I've simply never seen before. To give a rough estimate, I'd say there are about fifty rebels dining here. Considering that this is only Camp Black and that, as I now know, there are at least two other quarters that may not be better but at least as well manned, that's extremely impressive. Then there would be the witches and wizards who are currently on their guard posts or doing other tasks.

The Resistance is in good shape, I have to admit. The number of their members is presumably quite comparable to the number of the Death Eaters, at least including those who claim to be one.

The moment I push my plate away, the door opens and Potter swaggers into the room, causing Blaise to shut up for a moment. The other tables fall silent as well, but when the rebels realize that Potter only pours himself a coffee and makes no move to open the meeting, the conversations continue.

It's almost laughable. And if I wasn't in a room with about fifty armed Resistance fighters, certainly just waiting for a reason to train their wands on my throat, I would *actually* have laughed.

They are obedient little sheep and Potter is their shepherd.

Of course, I'm aware that he's nothing like the Dark Lord. That's why I came here, hoping for his protection. But it verges on hypocrisy that they, too, have established an army of sorts over the years. They have a leader, they look up to him, and they probably do whatever he asks of them. What I thought of Blaise, I now think of all of them: they're just soldiers in the war of a *Chosen One*, for whom they spy, stand guard, kill and even die. I feel once again confirmed that they no longer differ from us in many ways.

A coffee mug is slammed onto the table, snapping me out of my trance. I wince and raise my head in alarm.

Ginny Weasley gracefully sits down on the bench across from us. The presence of a more or less Death Eater with motives unclear doesn't seem to deter her from joining Blaise. Again,

she skillfully ignores me and sips the pitch black brew she brought with her with a concentrated expression. Rebellious witch indeed.

"When is she coming?" Blaise asks.

The hand I've wrapped around my own mug gives a telltale twitch. The confrontation I dread is approaching, I can feel it.

"She should be here soon. The watch relief must have taken longer than planned," Weasley replies serenely, twirling her thick braid with her free hand.

"Merlin, what is she doing there?"

"You know her. She always double and triple checks everything and gives instructions."

"Smith must've been *thrilled*. Whenever he has to relieve her, he grumbles about it for hours."

Smith as in *Zacharias* Smith?

"Tsk, authority is good for him. He just likes to be the drama queen."

Well, that actually sounds like him.

"Yep, I know."

Blaise and Weasley blink conspiratorially at each other and I (who wasn't part of their conversation anyway) again threaten to lose myself in my thoughts about whether or not they're a couple when the door opens once more.

And there she is.

She, whom the two of them were just talking about, and whose appearance I've been secretly waiting for ever since I got here.

She, whose intellect I suspect behind most of the strategic decisions of this movement, and who is on the battlefield at least as often as Ronald Weasley. (With a more lethal efficiency, mind you.)

She, who followed Potter all the way to the interrogation room where I was waiting for him, only to point out that killing me outright would have been better than taking me to their headquarters.

And *she*, who made it abundantly clear that she won't trust me no matter what I offer the rebels, and Veritaserum or not.

So one of the mysteries of the Resistance is solved. I've suspected all along that it was Granger's voice that reached my ears through the closed interrogation room door a few days ago, but now, as she offhandedly greets some of the rebels, I'm even a hundred percent sure.

Watching her stride across the room raises my hackles.

Although I've seen her in action in the combat zones a few times and been told about her (more often than I would have liked), it's still a different matter to watch her up close without any distractions.

She's not the girl I remember from my school days, I realize that immediately. And it probably shouldn't surprise me because the statements of the Death Eaters who managed to escape her were unequivocal in that regard. Being directly confronted with her aura, however, surpasses any description. She's almost completely across the room before I can even begin to process the first impression.

Granger is dressed all in black. *Surprising*. She's wearing the combat gear Potter was wearing the day I defected. That makes sense, because if I got it right, she's coming straight from one of the night watches.

Heavy laced boots, tight cargo trousers. In one fluid movement, she shakes off her robes and drops them onto one of the benches that line the dining tables. Underneath, alongside the long-sleeved top I'm already familiar with, is a dragonskin breastplate, which is strapped tightly at the sides. There's also a leather wand holster attached to her right forearm.

In addition to this unusual attire, the details of which I drink in with lightning speed, it's especially Granger's hair that inevitably draws my attention, because it has nothing in common with the wild, hazel curls she wore when we went to school. It's pinned up in a loose bun at the back of her head, with a few strands falling across her forehead in bangs. These days, her hair is only slightly wavy and much darker than it used to be. I would describe it as a silky smoky brown and for some reason I doubt she dyed it. Considering that it has lost *both* its brightness and bounce, it occurs to me that it might have something to do with her magic.

And then, as she turns to speak to Potter, I get a better look at her face as well.

Tough. Relentless. Fatal. Those are the first words that cross my mind as I take in her clean-cut features. Granger appears to be in good physical shape, yet is exceptionally thin, her jaw and cheekbones giving her face sharp contours. Her mouth is relaxed and yet I can't spot any laughter lines. But what I *can* see are the dark shadows under her eyes. She hasn't gotten rid of her freckles though, as I notice next. The latter probably means she's outdoors a lot, and I guess that's no wonder because I secretly bet she undertakes any task that's offered to her.

Potter nods in my direction and I quickly lower my gaze, not wanting her to catch me staring.

I'm still not sure if I can respect Potter, but oddly enough, I don't doubt it with Granger. At school, she beat me in every class and her marks were better than mine from the very start, although I truly wasn't bad. Then, as a young adult, she accomplished things that some witches and wizards will never achieve in their lifetime. These days, from what I've heard, Granger is a weapon to be feared. I, of all people, would probably do well not to forget that.

Someone clears their throat. The sound makes me grip my mug even tighter.

The meeting begins.

"All right, folks." Potter's voice. "I don't want to spoil your breakfast, but there was a little incident at Hogsmeade last night that we need to talk about."

As a collective groan echoes through the room, I slowly raise my head.

My gaze automatically wanders back to Granger. I suspect that this so-called *little incident* was the reason why her night watch lasted longer than it should have.

By now, she's leaning casually against the buffet. Her eyes are on Potter.

"Our Intruder Charms went off around three in the morning, whereupon the guards spotted a bunch of Death Eaters near our defensive line." I frown. Odd. "They made no attempt to attack the village or penetrate our wards, so the watch made them believe they hadn't noticed them. It appears they have been systematically checking out our defensive measures, leading us to believe an attack on Hogsmeade is imminent. It's been quiet there for a remarkably long time anyway."

Potter glances at Granger, who gives a slight nod in return.

"No attack on Hogsmeade in over a year," she verifies his assertion.

Her voice is firm, confident and clinical like I've never heard it before. Realizing I'm staring at her again, I avert my eyes once more.

"A successful invasion of Hogsmeade would be a disaster," Potter continues. "It's still the most populated magical village we guard, and since we lost Tinworth, there's an awful lot of children there. Charlie is already working on relocating them, but that will take a while."

I remember that well. The attack took place about three months before I defected, and it was our intention to surprise them with the choice of target. Tinworth was far from the combat zones and therefore less well guarded. We also had the information that they had set up some kind of substitute Hogwarts there. And what do you do when you want to press your point? You attack where it hurts the most.

It was Bellatrix's idea. Obviously. I wasn't in attendance and looking back I'm fucking glad about it. Most of the children were evacuated before the wards were broken, but I know from reliable sources that they didn't manage to get all of them out in time.

Thanks to my mental digression, I missed Potter's next words. I follow the others' gazes to the hologram of a map that Granger is projecting into the center of the room. She flicks her wand and flips through what appears to be a listing of the wards placed around Hogsmeade.

"We're going to double the defense," she explains curtly. "We will also redistribute the night watches. From each of the other guard posts, one person will be withdrawn to support the watch at Hogsmeade. New tents here, here and here. The schedules will be posted."

A few heads nod slowly. For my part, I snort and realize at the same moment that it is a careless, gross mistake.

In the blink of an eye, about fifty heads swivel in my direction—including Potter's.

Only one person continues to ignore me: Granger doesn't look at me. Her attention is fixed on a random spot behind Potter, and if I couldn't see the knuckles of her wand hand slowly but surely turning white, I might assume she just didn't hear me. But no, she knows very well that I'm here. And all she radiates now is disapproval.

"Have something to say, Malfoy?" Potter asks calmly from across the room.

Blaise shifts nervously in his seat, making me feel like I'd do better to keep my mouth shut. But that's basically why I'm here, isn't it? To provide information. And it's also my chance to prove myself in front of as many rebels as possible right on my first *official* day. (At least if they believe me at all, which I'm not completely convinced of.)

"It's a ruse," I reply as bored and level-headed as I can.

"How so?"

"If they wanted to do a recce because they *really* are planning an attack on Hogsmeade, they would have done it in a way that would have gone unnoticed."

They are too naive. I don't care to repeat myself, but we *urgently* need to work on that.

"A diversionary tactic?"

I nod slowly.

"I'm sure they're banking on you weakening the guard posts elsewhere to better secure Hogsmeade. You can expect an attack on one of the other villages if you really do that. It would probably be exactly what they are hoping for."

It's uncomfortably quiet. My eyes dart to Granger.

Her neck is stiff and her face is taut with anger. Uh-oh, I should be careful. She's probably not used to having even one of the countless orders she barks at the rebels every day being questioned.

"Do you know anything about it?"

I shake my head.

"Must be a spontaneous operation," I drawl.

Potter scrutinizes me thoughtfully for a few seconds.

"And what's your recommendation?" he asks at length, causing another turmoil in the room.

Robe rustling, tongue clicking, indignant murmuring.

He ignores it, just keeps looking at me expectantly.

"Reinforce the wards, but leave the watch schedules as they are," I reply, shrugging. "In the worst case they'll think that their little charade went unnoticed and come up with something new. In the best case they'll realize that they've been seen through. That will keep them busy for a while."

Suddenly, there is silence.

"The new watch schedules *will* be posted by tonight," Granger finally announces coolly, as if I hadn't spoken at all.

She still hasn't looked at me once.

As she flicks her wand to dismiss the hologram, grabs her robes, and stalks out of the room, I hear Potter sigh softly.

Well, this could get interesting.

There's a rebel within the Resistance.

"You shouldn't have done that," Blaise grumbles as he escorts me back to my sleeping quarters.

I've already given up the term *cell*, after all I'm now officially allowed to leave the room.

"But that's why I'm here, isn't it?" I verbalize my previous thoughts. "That's the *deal* between me and Potter, so to speak. Besides, he asked."

"Sure, but at your first meeting and in front of everyone? Stupid idea, Draco. You should have asked Harry for a one-to-one after the meeting if you really thought you knew better. I wouldn't have been surprised if Granger had hexed you on the spot. Nobody questions her decisions."

"Well, I didn't know she calls the shots," I snap at him.

"She doesn't. But the strategic placement of the guard posts is her range of duty, so her opinion and decisions matter. Usually the schedules are accepted the way she draws them up," he informs me, shaking his head slowly. "She's had everything under control these past few years and she certainly wasn't waiting for you to show up and patronize her from day one."

"That wasn't my intention," I half-heartedly defend myself. "If anything, it was an addition, an endorsement. There's little point in keeping me here if you're not willing to take advantage of my inside knowledge, is there?"

Blaise snorts and doesn't reply, but I notice his amused expression.

"I see. *She* doesn't want me here, inside knowledge or not," I deduce, cocking an eyebrow. "I heard her arguing with Potter the first night."

"Of course she doesn't want you here."

"Then why *am* I still here?"

Blaise sighs deeply.

"Granger is our best strategist, a brilliant fighter and everyone values her opinion, but to put it in your own words: she doesn't call the shots. Neither does Harry, for that matter, even though most members of the Resistance see him as some kind of leader. We're *not* the Death Eaters, Draco. All our members enjoy equal rights. When you showed up there was a democratic vote and most of us felt that you should at least be given the opportunity to explain why you are here. Then, after your first interrogation, Harry informed us that you had managed to get rid of your Dark Mark. So there was another meeting where we almost unanimously decided that you could stay and prove yourself. Even Granger can't change that, all right?"

After this lecture, I follow him silently. It's only been a few hours since Blaise knocked on the door of my sleeping quarters, and yet I'm exhausted. The impressions, the excitement, the constant fear of being jinxed from behind—it all makes me feel like I just stumbled out of the woods, even though it's been days.

When we arrive at the door to my sleeping quarters, Blaise pauses and eyes me intently for a few seconds. I have a feeling even he isn't entirely convinced that I have good intentions, although he's been consistently amicable since picking me up. I can't blame him for that, of course, but it still gives me a pang. He knows I never asked for the Mark, and he should also know that I was just waiting for the right time to defect. And yet there is an indefinable flicker in his eyes.

"Do yourself a favor and be careful with Granger," he says, suddenly serious.

I lift an eyebrow.

"She respects Harry and the decisions of the Resistance, but I wouldn't count on her to comply if you get in her way. Don't provoke or underestimate her."

That he even says such a thing makes me shiver. So I was right about Granger. The reports on her have been clear, yes, but the fact that even Blaise feels the need to issue a serious warning tells me all I need to know.

Watch it, Draco, she's unpredictable. And she hates you more than ever.

"I won't," I reply, holding his gaze.

He looks at me ruminatively, his tongue pressing against the inside of his cheek while he thinks. Then he sighs, nods in surrender and opens the door for me.

"See you tomorrow," are his last words before the door slams shut and is magically locked from the outside.

Ah, so I'm not *entirely* free after all. But walking around with Blaise as my personal nanny is still better than being bored out of my mind.

I throw myself onto the bed with a groan, not even bothering to take off my boots first.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed this chapter. What's your first impression of this Granger? ♡

4. GRAPHITE BLACK

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

4. GRAPHITE BLACK

I stare stoically at the concrete grey wall of the room Blaise took me to a few minutes ago. It's been a week since I was last interrogated, and I assume my reprieve is over.

So far, my days have consisted solely of attending meals under Blaise's supervision and then being escorted back to my sleeping quarters. It was quite monotonous and I started doing various physical activities in my room to somehow pass the time. Still, I didn't complain once because that would have been more than ungrateful and stupid, especially after what Blaise told me about the Resistance's disgustingly harmonious, democratic decisions. Instead, I just enjoyed our little trips through headquarters, although no one but Blaise and Dennis Creevey ever spoke to me.

As I found out, Creevey is kind of Blaise's shadow. Wherever Blaise goes, Creevey follows and he downright idolizes him, which Blaise doesn't seem to notice at all. If my memory serves me right, Creevey is only three years younger than us, but he seems more like a teenager to me. Or a puppy. At least when he's in Blaise's orbit. The upside of his devotion to Blaise is that after the first few days he almost completely shed his shyness towards me. By now, he participates in our conversations so animatedly, as if I weren't a Death Eater, intruder, traitor, semi-prisoner.

I have to admit that I like him. He's a good bloke and when I think about how his brother lost his life and that he might face the same fate in the course of this war, it makes me sick.

That's the problem with my absent Occlumency: I fucking *feel* again. In this case, a strange sort of affection. Disgusting, really.

The door opens and I straighten myself.

Potter enters the room, followed closely by Lovegood and Longbottom, which is a surprise.

Meanwhile, I know that they're a couple because at one of the meals in the dining hall I had the *pleasure* of witnessing Longbottom patting Lovegood's arse. It was my luck and that of everyone else at the table that I didn't have anything in my mouth at that moment, because I would certainly have spat it out. Apart from this one public display of affection, I haven't learned much about them, let alone what kind of work they do for the Resistance. At least they aren't fighters, I already know that from the reports.

"All right," Potter sighs as the three of them put their chairs in place.

Lovegood produces a graphite black notebook from her pocket, then her other-worldly gaze falls on me and she examines me curiously.

Longbottom, for his part, doesn't come across as nervous or frightened as I remember him from our school days, but maximally disgusted. His facial expression actually rivals Granger's. (At least the one she displayed during that first breakfast in the dining hall, because I haven't seen her since.)

"It's about time we receive some information from you," Potter continues, placing his hands on the table top in a relaxed manner. "And we decided to start with the ones that interest us most and could be useful to us."

Ah, I know immediately what he's referring to.

"Why this unusual combination?" I ask defiantly before he can start his questioning, nodding towards Lovegood and Longbottom.

Lovegood's lips curl into an indulgent smile, which I find both inappropriate and disturbing. Longbottom, on the other hand, snorts.

Wow, maybe he spends too much time with Weasley.

"Luna and Neville run our trauma room," Potter informs me tersely. "With a few other healers, they tend to the sick and injured."

I raise an eyebrow.

Longbottom as a healer? Maybe that makes sense with Lovegood, after all she's a Ravenclaw and thus smart enough by nature, although I can't say much about her other qualities, but Longbottom was always clumsy and dumb as far as I can remember. Either he only cleans the work surfaces or he has evolved somehow. Well, maybe I'll find out at one time or another.

"So, the Dark Mark." Lovegood's voice is calm and clear as a bell. It doesn't sound nearly as dreamy as it used to. "We'd like to know how you managed to get rid of it."

"And what do you intend to do with this information?"

I only allow myself to ask such a bold question because I know that my knowledge is valuable enough.

The three rebels exchange a few quick looks. Eventually Potter nods slightly, indicating that Lovegood is *entitled* to answer me. Gracious. Longbottom remains silent and crosses his arms.

"We simply want to be prepared. Am I right in assuming that you didn't tell anyone how it works before you fled?" she asks formally. I nod reluctantly. "Well, that's what I figured. So we need to be able to provide assistance if anyone else wants to defect and the Mark causes problems."

"Nonsense," I hiss, glaring at her. "Start speaking plainly or this conversation is over."

It's an utterly fearless statement, but I'm just too sure of Potter's protection.

"What makes you think we're not being honest with you?"

Potter looks at me questioningly.

I give a false laugh.

"Let's get one thing straight before we talk any further, Potter. I'm anything but stupid and I know what you're up to. Frankly, I already knew before I even got here. I knew what would be going through your more or *less*," my gaze darts to Longbottom, "pretty heads once you found out there was a way to get rid of the Mark."

Potter leans forward in mock suspense. "And what would that be?"

"You will try to take prisoners during the next few combats and forcibly remove their Mark, if they bear it at all, in order to then brainwash them or at least be able to question them in peace before finally killing them. Am I right or am I right?" I look from one to the other. "That would be quite a good plan if that's how it worked, which it *doesn't*."

Potter smirks, shrugs nonchalantly, and then raises his hands in surrender. He has really changed, that sarcastic bastard. What he's displaying right now are proper Slytherin airs and graces.

"All right, you saw through us. But that's exactly why we're here: We want to know how it works and, above all, what *doesn't* work. Enlighten us."

Lovegood expectantly dips the tip of her quill into the ink pot and gives me an encouraging nod. I return her gaze as annoyed and dismissive as I can. Then I square my shoulders, take a deep breath and place my forearms on the tabletop.

"The spell, or rather curse, used by the Dark Lord to subject his followers is based on blood magic. Accordingly, the spell cannot be broken until the one you committed yourself to dies." A triple nod from across the table. "I pored over countless rune charts, centuries-old texts, and books on dark magic until I finally came across something that, in theory, seemed like it could help break the curse."

The eager scratching of the quill sounds. As I continue speaking, I lower my gaze to my fingers, absently tracing the wavy grain of the black tabletop.

"Whenever I had the time or it came about thanks to some mission, I sought out old warlocks and sorcerers who I could be sure weren't devoted to the Dark Lord and therefore wouldn't betray me. It took me quite a while to find someone who knew a thing or two."

"Who?"

This time the question comes from Longbottom.

"Doesn't matter. I have sworn not to share this information. The fact is that it's an incredibly lengthy, multi-sequence ritual that can only be performed by someone other than yourself. It's

enormously complicated, dismantling higher magic. Painful, but far less severe than most of the things I've done in my previous attempts to remove my Mark." I roll up my sleeve and let a finger dance over the *stain*, complete with scars. "The magic decomposes the original spell, ultimately severing the connection with the person you're bound to."

I clear my throat quietly before looking up and consciously addressing Lovegood this time.

"I can teach you. However, there is one problem: The magic I spoke of is solely dependent on the will of the person whose servitude is to be broken. If someone isn't a hundred percent sure they want to defect, isn't telling the absolute truth, is insecure, or even feels a shred of loyalty to the Dark Lord, then it won't work."

Silence. Now they know why the fact that the Mark can *theoretically* be removed is pretty much useless to them, because most likely that description won't fit many of the Dark Lord's minions.

"And what happens in that case?" Lovegood asks, furrowing her brow in concern.

She is clever. I think she already knows.

"The traitor dies," I reply evenly, covering up the emotions swirling inside me.

That fact actually scared the shit out of me when the time finally came, even though I was so sure that if it worked for anyone at all, it would be me. The sheer memory of how it felt not knowing if I would survive the procedure makes my stomach churn.

And there's another reason why thinking about it for too long makes me sick.

As long as the Dark Lord lives, any attempt to remove a Dark Mark means gambling with the life of the person concerned. A dance on a knife edge. And when the day comes and I try to save her, the same is true for my mother. On that day I'll have to pray. (And I'm not religious at all.)

"But *you* made it," Longbottom murmurs, suddenly looking at me very differently. "So that means you *did* prove it. That you are not devoted to Tom and feel no loyalty to him."

"Exactly," I drawl.

Potter takes a deep breath.

"That *is* wonderful, Draco."

At her words, Lovegood's lips curl back into that confusing smile, and when I meet her eyes, her gaze is warm.

Bloody lunatic.

I'm almost afraid she'll reach across the table and pat me on the cheek, but luckily she seems to have herself under control on that front. She only gives a quick, satisfied nod, then lowers her quill to the notebook once more.

"What's this spell called?" she whispers softly. "We need a name for it."

I pinch the bridge of my nose, rub my face wearily, and turn back to Potter because this witch is rather driving me insane than making me feel comfortable. I don't know what to make of her reaction. Even though I've successfully distanced myself from the Dark Lord, I'm still an equally successful Death Eater and have killed for him countless times. That I managed to remove my Dark Mark certainly doesn't wipe my slate clean.

I remember that she asked me a question, so I brush the thought aside and then, after another pause for effect, open my mouth once more.

"*Relinquere Malum*," I finally say. "At least that would be the rough rune translation. Or as I put it very simply," my lips quirk at Potter's curious face, "*Exit*."

"Your grace period is over," Creevey informs me with a grin as I join him in the hallway.

I hesitantly follow his swinging steps.

Well, when they don't even send Blaise to accompany me anymore, but leave the task to the pup, then my so-called grace period is probably over *indeed*.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I ask anyway and quickly catch up with him.

"Harry said that you should attend training and integrate yourself into everyday camp life," he explains succinctly.

I frown. How generous of Potter.

On the one hand, I should probably be relieved that from now on I will be able to escape the dreary four walls of my sleeping quarters more often, after all I have been here for over three weeks and have hardly seen anything other than my own room. On the other hand, it also means that I will be more exposed than ever before, and hardly anyone will welcome me as politely as Creevey, that's for sure.

I hope Potter knows what he's doing. Perhaps he purposely displayed me in the dining hall three times a day for those first few weeks so that the rebels would get used to the sight of me? Maybe he is finally sure that they will follow his instructions and not attack me at the first opportunity?

In the end, I can only speculate about Potter's motives. Maybe I'll ask him about it the next time I run into him.

We cross the atrium, where I try to catch a glimpse of the black board, but Creevey's steps are quick, purposeful, and it's too early for breakfast anyway. So, for the first time since I've been here, I enter the training room, as Blaise called it, and promptly freeze in the doorway.

Well, apparently it's more of a training *department* because it's not a single room at all.

Creevey leads me through a large hall with more doors leading off it, and when he notices my questioning look his face lights up. Naturally. He loves to explain things to me that I don't yet know, I've noticed that much in the last few weeks.

"This is where primarily the combat training takes place." He pauses for a moment, makes a sweeping gesture that encompasses the entire hall, and then points to the two additional doors, one after the other. "Simulations. Workouts."

It's hard for me not to scoff at those two words.

Creevey grins.

"Ha, the Death Eaters don't have something like that, do they?"

He seems absolutely unmoved and looks me in the face so open-heartedly that I have to swallow.

Bugger. I've been here less than a month and I *really* like him. Fuck. Something like this would never have happened if I was still occluding myself.

"The simulation room is cool if you want to train on your own. It's designed to cast spells of any kind at you from any direction with no discernible pattern. Nothing super dangerous, of course, but there are different levels of difficulty. You can even measure the time if you want. It was Granger's idea."

Obviously. I don't have the time to ponder why the hell Creevey calls Granger *Granger* (as almost everyone seems to do) because he's already babbling on.

"And it turns out there's no harm in training stamina and dexterity in addition to combat. Hence the gym!"

I return his proud gaze with mild amusement.

"I don't see the benefit of that," I retort.

Creevey chuckles.

"Well, you *are* athletic, as I can see, but not everyone is. And it saved my arse quite a few times when we were outnumbered by the Death Eaters or I had to flee for some other reason. Speed and endurance can be the crucial advantage in any situation."

He seems extremely pleased with himself and his lecture.

"Let me guess," I drawl. "That wisdom also comes from Granger?"

He blushes and now I actually have to grin.

"All right, Creevey, let's go."

Creevey is right. I *am* athletic and always have been. I kept fit although there was no real reason to do so because the Death Eaters don't give a fuck if you're swift, agile or overly strong. Come up with the darkest curses and cast them without hesitation—that's what they want. And admittedly, it hasn't been any less efficient so far.

However, the workout of the Resistance makes *even me* break a sweat, and I notice that I've gotten a bit out of shape in the last few weeks.

Nevertheless it feels good to burn off some energy. This way I can get rid of at least a small part of the agitation that has been building up in me over the past few days. My muscles ache, the anthracite-colored rebel top clings to my chest, and my damp hair falls across my forehead. The physical challenge is a pleasant distraction because meanwhile I'm missing my wand.

Not quite as *pleasant* is the fact that my favorite Weasel is overseeing today's workout. We're a group of about twenty people, and while there are far worse candidates among us, I'm still the only one who has to do extra push-ups. (And for the fourth or fifth time, I've lost count.) Apart from that, though, he leaves me alone. And I haven't received more than a few suspicious and disapproving looks from the other rebels either, which is something, I guess.

Jaw clenched, I do the last two push-ups before flopping onto my backside and resting my head on my knees like my fellow campaigners.

An amused laugh reaches my ears and I have to realize that firstly Blaise is the source and secondly it's meant for me. He's sweaty too, but I have to admit without envy that he's in top form. Plus, he is not the one Weasley has it in for, so he indeed has every reason to laugh.

I glare at him before propping up my arms behind me, closing my eyes and tilting my head back.

The workout is over and I can't wait to take a shower and have breakfast. If every day here starts like *this*, then Blaise wasn't exaggerating when he told me during our first tour of headquarters that I'd be lucky as long as I didn't have to use the training room.

The creaking of the door makes me open my eyes. I stiffen involuntarily.

Granger marches into the room. In contrast to our first and so far only encounter at Camp Black, today she is not wearing combat gear, but sportswear. In her case, mud-caked trainers, black running tights, and a dark grey sports bra. Her midriff is bare and she, too, is sweaty. The bun on top of her head is messy, with a few strands of hair clinging to her temples in damp waves. I can make out a few small, black numerals on her rib cage. A tattoo?

Considering the unexpected sight, it takes my brain quite a long time to deduce that she has already completed her own workout—alone and outdoors. By the look of her, midsummer must have finally arrived in Britain.

A nudge on my shoulder reminds me where I am and who I'm staring at. I snap out of my trance.

Blaise is standing in front of me now, holding out a hand to help me up. His gaze is absolutely unmistakable. I promised him I wouldn't provoke Granger, and apparently I'm already doing that just by looking at her.

With a neutral expression I accept his offer and let him pull me to my feet.

Granger meanwhile has crossed the room and is now exchanging a few whispered words with Weasley. From her posture alone, which I perceive from the corner of my eye, I can tell she's fuming again. Or maybe it's just her chronic condition, how would I know? These days, I don't know her at all. Everything I ever knew about her is buried seven years deep in the past, and even that wasn't much.

With a curt nod, Blaise signals we should go, and I obediently start walking.

That's when it happens.

Granger makes one last angry gesture, then turns around and walks energetically towards the door and thus past us. When she is level with us, she lifts her head and looks me straight in the eye. For the first time in years. For the first time since that one day at the Manor.

Her eyes are dark, almost black. Fiery, angry and dangerous. I meet her gaze and despite the beads of sweat on my forehead, the fine hairs on my arms stand up.

Then the moment is over and, ahead of us, she rushes through the door of the workout room. All that remains is the sound of her rapidly retreating footsteps.

"What the hell is her problem?" I demand to know.

I'm sitting next to Blaise at the breakfast table.

We're alone for now, thank Merlin, but that will probably change soon because, provided she's not out and about, Ginny Weasley joins Blaise at every fucking meal. Only to then ignore me, exclude me from their conversations and, of course, punish me with her frosty looks. I haven't spoken to Blaise about their *relationship* yet. So far, it has somehow never been the right time.

A few moments ago, Blaise let me know that Granger *usually* attends morning workouts when her shifts allow. Apparently, I was the reason she decided to break her habit for today. Very mature, really.

Blaise doesn't seem to have a real answer to my question because he just shrugs his shoulders.

"Haven't we talked about this already? What did you expect? That she would welcome you with open arms, ruffle your hair and be all palsy-walsy with you?" He scoffs. "I guess she's

still mad that you were taken to headquarters. That being said, I hardly know her any other way."

"Ridiculous," I huff. "If Potter and even Weasley can pull themselves together, then so should she. I defected voluntarily. And now I'm providing information to the Resistance. Also, it's not like I can do any harm, since I'm pretty much unarmed."

"I'd say that's beside the point," Blaise replies vaguely before biting into his sandwich. He chews and swallows. "But it doesn't matter anyway. You can't expect anything from her, so just avoid her and drop the subject."

I know he's right, but it still peeves me. I have no idea what happened to her. Why she's transformed from a perpetual minority apologist, the brains of the Golden Trio and a justice-fanatic Gryffindor into a vengeful, irrational harpy.

Basically, thanks to the rumors I heard about her, I was prepared that she wouldn't be the Granger I remember from my school days. So no, I did *not* expect her to welcome me with open arms and ruffle my hair, as Blaise so eloquently put it. However, reality is... *confusing*. And I simply hate it when I don't understand things. Or people, for that matter.

Granger seems unpredictable and merciless; full of hate and unbridled anger. The other rebels are willing to at least tolerate my presence if I pass helpful information on to the Resistance in return. At worst, they simply ignore me; act like I don't exist. She, by contrast, is unable to do so. Instead, she even bickers with her closest friends just because I'm here. She is a lone warrior among countless fighters who *should* all want the same thing.

Her demeanor interests me more than it should. I really want to figure it out and don't even know why. That, too, must be due to my absent Occlumency. I wonder when I'll get used to not closing my mind anymore; how much time will have to pass before I finally learn how to handle my thoughts and feelings without the help of this tool.

Before I can say another word to Blaise, a tray clatters onto the table.

It's Ginny Weasley. And with that, my permission to speak vanishes into thin air.

I silently focus on my breakfast, content to ponder why the hell Granger seems to be the only person who would rather kill me than give me a chance.

Seven years ago, she would have done so.

Chapter End Notes

Well, now you know why the story is named Exit. What do you think of the idea? Plus, there will be more Granger in the next chapter, I promise! Have a wonderful weekend!



5. STORM BLACK

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

5. STORM BLACK

Another week goes by. It's unbelievable how quickly time flies in the retreat of the Resistance. Everything blurs between the grey concrete and the black-clad rebels, between the meals and the workouts and the meetings with Lovegood, where I tell her all about the *Exit* and fish the rune incantations out of my mind for her to write down.

It'll take a few more of these meetings to teach her everything I know. (And test subjects at some point, but we're still a long way from that.)

In the meantime, I get lost in space and time, which may be mainly due to the fact that I have no idea what's going on outside. Or rather *on the surface*, as I now secretly call it. For my part, I keep my head *above water* by reading the weekdays from the schedules on the black board in the atrium. Other than that, I'm completely cut off from any information I'm used to being one of the first to receive. Knowing nothing simply drives me insane.

After interfering so unfavourably at the very first meeting in the dining hall, I wasn't *invited* back, although I'm pretty sure there have been a few since. I probably have Granger to thank for that. Perhaps she threatened Potter with her own absence to force him to withdraw my permission to attend.

Well, luckily I still have Creevey and at least he is reliable because he generally talks too much and as a result often divulges things I don't think I'm supposed to know. Which eventually (and unexpectedly) led to him telling me that this week the Death Eaters attempted to attack a magical village in the western part of the country—one of the very ones where Granger has recently cut down the guard posts to increase the security in and around Hogsmeade.

At least they were unsuccessful in doing so. The attack failed and the guards on site managed to adequately defend the village despite being shorthanded. Some of the rebels on duty that night sustained minor injuries, but (according to Creevey) were quickly released into their respective tasks after a brief visit to the trauma room.

Lucky me. If things had gone differently, I might have felt Granger's wrath just for being right. Honestly? I wouldn't put it past her to react in such a way.

Now it's Thursday morning and for the first time (if you don't count my cursory walkthrough) I'm standing in the hall where the combat training sessions take place. It doesn't make much sense that I'm here because I don't have a wand and thus can't contribute much, but I have to admit that I'm curious. Even though I'll only be watching, it's still a welcome change from my daily routine at Camp Black.

Creevey is standing next to me, talking to Boot and Abbott. Ginny Weasley and Blaise are here too, and I have a sneaking suspicion that Potter sends at least the latter on purpose to every activity I need to attend. (Either so he can keep an eye on me or I don't feel like a square peg in a round hole, I'm not entirely sure.)

About fifteen other rebels are also leaning against the walls, waiting for the training to begin. Most of them are younger Resistance fighters. I recognize a few faces from the workouts and the meals in the dining hall, but some I've never seen before. I would really like to know if they rotate between the camps on a weekly basis. Maybe I should ask Blaise about it when I get a chance. Or rather Creevey, he's more talkative.

The door opens and Ronald Weasley marches in. Inwardly, I roll my eyes because I assume that he will lead *this* training as well. But just as the door is about to click shut, it's slammed open once more and Granger sweeps into the room, her storm black robes swirling around her legs.

To my surprise (and respect), the rebels who have gathered here this morning immediately stand at attention. Even Blaise abandons his relaxed stance against the wall and steps forward to join them. Soon there is silence.

I, on the other hand, don't move an inch. Arms folded, ankles crossed, and my back against the wall, I stay right where I am, blinking incredulously at Granger.

"She's in charge of the combat training?" I ask in a whisper and Creevey, to whom I then turn my head, nods imperceptibly. "Is this always the case? Why her of all people?"

He gives me a sideways glance, looking at me like I'm pretty daft.

"She's the best at Duelling and Martial Magic," he breathes, then quickly averts his eyes.

What the fuck? Is he afraid of being caught whispering?

I shake my head in exasperation. Ridiculous. We're not at Hogwarts anymore and this isn't McGonagall's classroom. Granger isn't Head Girl either, and she'll hardly deduct house points. Then again, of course, I don't know what she does to inattentive or *rebellious* rebels. Like I said, I wouldn't put it past her to act like a bitch.

"We're going to start with a four-on-one, just like last week," Granger calls loudly into the hall in lieu of a greeting.

As she stands in the middle, she slowly lets her gaze wander over those present, as if to make sure that everyone who is supposed to be here *is* there.

Needless to say, she completely ignores me. As far as she is concerned, I obviously don't exist. And once again, I'm wondering why I'm even here. It will hardly have been her decision. Well, maybe Potter just likes to argue with her.

Weasley appears to be the only one not participating in the training, as he conjures a chair in a corner of the room, spins it around and straddles it, one arm casually on the backrest. His

wand is dangling in his other hand. I have a feeling that he, too, is only here for one reason: because I am here. To help Blaise babysit me. The question is who he will have to protect if the worst comes to the worst: Granger from me or vice versa.

"I want to see if you've improved. Last time the performances were more than miserable," Granger declares haughtily.

Although her face is hard and her eyes radiate heat, her voice is calm. *Yet.*

A nervous rustling of robes prompts me to let my gaze wander. Some of the younger rebels actually seem tense, if not latently frightened. Hmm, maybe she *does* inflict punishments after all.

"Parker, Hensworth, Abbott, Creevey," Granger barks, slipping off her robes in a fluid movement and tossing them in Weasley's direction.

I watch the black fabric flutter through the air before the Weasel grabs it and drapes it over the back of his chair.

At the sound of his name, Creevey lets out a small groan, but then obediently moves forward and positions himself next to the others on one side of the room. Now I realize what the meaning behind Granger's previous words is. Her four-on-one means nothing more than a four-on-Granger. I can barely keep myself from snorting in disbelief.

"It's reps," I hear Blaise murmur at my side. "Not everyone needs constant combat training, but some just don't master Martial Magic as well as others. There are people who have to attend training every week and still don't improve." There's a hint of amusement in his voice as he nods discreetly in Abbott's direction. "Hope dies last, I suppose."

"Then why are *you* here?" I reply just as quietly.

I know very well that Blaise doesn't need the training.

"You shouldn't keep asking questions that you already know the answer to," he whispers gleefully, and I roll my eyes in annoyance.

"As always, I will only fend you off in the first round," Granger shouts. "Your job is simply to hit me *once*, got it?"

When she slowly rolls up the sleeves of her rebel top, I just can't help it. Thanks to the movement, my eyes reflexively dart to her forearm, but she's too far away for me to see anything.

"Only basic disarming spells. I'll give you a sign before I attack. Ready?"

Granger's wand obediently slides from its holster into her hand.

I fix my gaze on her. I've heard so much about her—now I want to see it with my own eyes.

And then they get down to action.

The first few disarming spells are brushed aside by Granger in a pretty languid way. Creevey immediately takes charge and loudly encourages his allies, which almost elicits something like a smile from me. (Of course, I pull myself together in time.) The spells are hurled at Granger faster, but she doesn't even flinch.

A few moments later she raises her free hand and I can see her chest rise and fall once, as if gathering strength for something. She turns her palm to her opponents, adjusts her footing, and takes up a defensive stance. Then she casts a powerful Shield Charm and holds it in place with her left hand alone, while continuing to block any *Expelliarmus* that gets out of line with her right wrist. Most of the opposing spells hit her shield, where each of them instantly fizzles out. After about a minute, the shield wears off and Granger immediately summons it again.

I just gape at her because I've never seen anything like this before. Conjuring up protective shields is an exhausting and magic-sapping business. Holding one for a certain period of time is even more tiring. Deflecting other spells in the meantime or even casting some yourself is virtually *impossible*. At least that's what I was firmly convinced of. Up until now. Because at this very moment, Granger is proving me wrong.

"Faster!" she demands.

The four rebels on the other side of the room have a hard time meeting her requirements. Abbott is already sweating.

Granger vanishes her shield and raises the index finger of her left hand in what must be the agreed signal. And yes, I'm right, because now she's starting to attack.

After each *Expelliarmus* she parries, she sends two or three of her own at her students. Compared to *her*, they are simply nothing more than that. She hardly moves, only occasionally dodging a few ricochets when she can't avoid it. Sometimes she takes a step forward and, with that, inevitably gets closer to the others, which remarkably increases her accuracy. The four rebels facing her quickly become hectic.

Parker and Hensworth are disarmed first and pick up their wands with pink cheeks. I'm not sure exactly how much time has passed because I didn't check the clock when they started training, but it can't have been much. To my secret chagrin, Creevey is hit shortly after them, leaving Abbott alone in the middle of the room. Panic is written all over her face, although the *Expelliarmus* is by far the most harmless duelling spell there is.

"You're supposed to attack, Abbott," Granger reminds her.

She has stopped casting her own spells and once again contents herself with blocking Abbott's (nonverbal, at least) attempts.

I notice that Granger looks bored. My eyes dart across her face and I see no sign of exhaustion or pleasure in the task. Her expression is absolutely neutral. I can't help but wonder if she's an Occlumens too, but then immediately dismiss the thought. If she was, she would have had herself under control at that first meeting in the dining hall, right? I scratch my chin uncertainly.

My eyes drift to her wrist, which, with an almost rhythmic flick, is making the movements necessary to deflect Abbott's spells. And then Granger confirms my silent observation by suddenly raising her other hand and putting it on her eyes. Tilting her head slightly to turn her ear to Abbott, she blindly blocks her measly attempts—every single *Expelliarmus* Abbott casts.

It would be quite impressive if it weren't so humiliating at the same time.

"You have to change your rhythm every now and then," I say loudly.

Blaise groans in resignation and shifts his weight from one leg to the other.

"Moron," he whispers.

And he's probably right about that.

Granger yanks her hand away from her eyes and hurls an angry *Expelliarmus* at Abbott, which instantly disarms her and makes her stagger back, then spins around.

Oops.

Butting in is apparently one of the things that provoke Granger, at least when it comes from me.

She marches towards me and I struggle briefly to maintain my casual stance against the wall. Her eyes are fucking *flashing* at me. As she stops two feet away from me, I realize just how *tiny* she really is. She even has to tilt her head back to look me in the face, but I find that her (missing) height doesn't make her any less menacing.

I meet her gaze with what I hope is elegant nonchalance. I respect her, yes, but I'm not afraid of her. I've served the Dark Lord, for fuck's sake. In direct comparison to him, Granger is just a furious woman under Potter's thumb. That being said, the always-snorting Weasley is still sitting in the corner. I'm sure he'll intervene when things get too hairy. (Admittedly, I'm a little wistful that these days, with Granger's new look, the pun is totally lost.)

"You dare to meddle in my training?" she hisses.

Her voice is so sharp I feel like it could cut me, but I still don't shy away.

"I merely gave Abbott some advice," I reply, unperturbed.

That's hardly a reason to kill me, Granger. Keep your hair on. (*Ah*, wistful indeed.)

"Before you give advice to anyone, do it better first," she spits irately.

"*Unfortunately*, I don't have a wand."

"Oh? You don't say! Take Creevey's."

That, I didn't fucking expect. I hear Weasley say her name, but she completely ignores him. His red-haired sister sways in the line as if about to take a step forward, but then holds back. Blaise sighs once more. Creevey hands me his wand with an apologetic look on his face.

So here I am, armed with a wand of which I don't even know if it will obey me at all. Granger is already back in her initial position, staring at the opposite wall.

As I begin to move, the hall is so quiet that every step I take echoes unnaturally loud off the walls. Positioning myself across the room, I face Granger and raise my hand. Magic hums through my arm and at least that is a good sign.

She attacks without warning, not even bothering to cast her Shield Charm first. Her jaw is set, she's incredibly angry, and she won't look me in the eye, but rather fixates her gaze on my body as a whole, as if I were an object she wants to destroy. (Which I probably am.)

At first, I merely deflect a few of her nonverbal spells to make sure Creevey's wand is really doing what I want. Only when I'm positive about it, do I fire off a few *Expelliarmus* as well. (I highly doubt she would tolerate me using any other spell.)

Although I move fast, I'm more occupied with blocking than casting, and after about a minute I break a sweat. Meanwhile, I can almost empathize with Abbott.

Granger approaches me like a feline predator and I take a few steps back. There are some columns in the room and a reflex makes me jump behind one of them. After all, there was no instruction to stay in the same place during the entire duel.

Again and again I send my spells blindly around the column while her own ricochet off of it or whizz past my head.

She comes nearer. I can hear the threatening sound of her heavy boots on the bare floor.

When I feel like she's too close, I give up my hiding spot and unleash a volley of disarming spells, all of which she wrathfully deflects. Her eyebrows are drawn together and she is breathing rapidly. Not because she's overchallenged, I'm sure.

Eventually, she summons her protective shield and that's the moment when, with this wand and thanks to my week-long abstinence from magic, I don't have the ghost of a chance anymore. All my attempts to disarm her end up in her shield, which she relentlessly pushes in front of her with her left hand as she marches towards me.

She peppers me with one enraged *Expelliarmus* after the other, finally hitting me so hard that I stumble and fall backwards to the ground. Creevey's wand clatters across the grey concrete, but I quickly scramble to my feet and dive after it. It never crosses my mind to surrender, even though it might be the wisest thing to do.

The heel of one of her boots lands hard on my outstretched hand, which is only about eight inches from the wand, and I lose my balance. My knees hit the hard floor once more and I huff in frustration.

Breathing heavily, I let my eyes rest on her foot and focus on her tightly tied shoelaces. Not because I'm ashamed that she defeated me so quickly, but because Blaise's words are running through my mind. I must not provoke her and I certainly would by looking up now. (Though I highly doubt there's *anything* that doesn't provoke this witch.)

Granger's slender hand comes into view and quickly tugs at her cargo trousers, allowing her to squat down comfortably in front of me. Then I feel the tip of her wand on my neck. It glides over my skin, follows my aorta and my jawbone, and pauses under my chin. As the pressure builds, I finally lift my head and meet her gaze.

She's not out of breath and her face is completely expressionless, but her eyes are burning.

"You're pathetic," she whispers, and I realize she's not even doing it to embarrass me in front of the others. This is between her and me. It's meant for my ears only. "One more word from you if you're not asked a question, and I'll make sure it's the last thing you ever say. You are tolerated here, Malfoy, but as for me, *my* tolerance is limited."

Her pupils are blown wide and only slightly blacker than the irides around them. I stare at her breathlessly. Her wand wanders from my chin to my cheek, and then, just as I feel the urge to lower my eyes at her withering look, the wood disappears from my skin and the pressure of her boot from my wrist.

Eventually, when I manage to shake off my rigidity and sit up, all I see is her leaving the room, her robes billowing out behind her.

"Save it," I mutter to Blaise as I sit down across from him at lunch.

The 'I told you so' is more than visible in his blue eyes; he doesn't even have to voice it.

The positive surprise of the day? I'm now allowed to leave my room on my own. Which in turn means I can shower and get changed without having to be picked up and escorted to every meal by either Creevey or Blaise afterwards. And, lo and behold, nobody hexed me on my way to the dining hall. Wow. If I wasn't so miffed about what happened in the training room, I suppose that would be a reason to celebrate.

The right corner of Blaise's mouth quirks imperceptibly. Then he silently continues to pick at his grilled vegetables.

Granger is nowhere in sight, and that's a good thing. I still don't know which of my feelings towards her dominates: admiration or fury.

"Great show, Malfoy," comes a sarcastic voice, making my head snap up.

It's the first time Ginny Weasley speaks to me. And by the way, also the first time that I see something like amusement on her face, even though I'm present. Encouraged by her

expression, I address her directly for the first time since I've been here. Quite a lot of *first times* for an ordinary Thursday when I think about it.

"Why is Granger so obnoxious?" I ask.

Blaise gives me a reproving look, but Weasley seems surprisingly unimpressed.

"She doesn't like you."

"No shit."

"Just avoid her."

I scowl at her.

"You know what I find rather odd?" My eyes dart back and forth between Weasley and Blaise. "The two of you give me exactly the same advice, which would be all well and good if I had asked to join your super exciting training sessions. But I didn't. If Potter wants me there, there's only so much I can do about it. So why, pray tell, can't she pull herself together?"

"She has her reasons," Weasley replies with a shrug, "but they're none of your business, so don't even start racking your brains about them. You can be thankful that Harry was able to convince the most of us to leave you alone. Or not eat you alive, for that matter."

She gives me a quick, appraising look. Then she turns to Blaise and thus her back on me, and our very first conversation is over just as quickly as it began.

Fine. Then I'll avoid Granger if it's possible for me. And I'll also try not to rack my brains about her so-called reasons. But I definitely won't let her browbeat me unless she has a *real* reason to do so.

Here at Camp Black, I'm the traitor, the pariah, the loathsome Death Eater, I'm bloody well aware of that. But I'm also paying for it—with my inside knowledge and my intelligence.

I will earn my place within the Resistance; maybe even a level of trust if I'm smart about it. And I will prove that I came here with good and honest intentions. I can't undo the things I've done, but I can at least try to make amends in some way. Granger can't stop me. She would literally have to walk over my dead body to do that. And until then, she's free to make her personal war on me if she wants to. I'm ready to play her game.

With a touch of fresh enthusiasm, I drop my cutlery and push away my untouched plate. I rise from my seat, ignoring Blaise and Weasley's raised eyebrows, and quickly leave the dining hall.

My next lovely, little session with Lovegood isn't due for another hour. So now that I'm free to roam around headquarters as I please, I will do just that.

And finally get an overview of this bloody labyrinth.

Chapter End Notes

Folks, since your feedback is so wonderful, I decided to just upload when I'm done instead of waiting until the next Saturday. However, please don't expect a new chapter every two days. I'll continue to upload at least one chapter per week, but maybe some weeks more or in smaller intervals. ♡

6. OBSIDIAN BLACK

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

6. OBSIDIAN BLACK

Alongside my obligatory, increasingly disturbing chats with Lovegood (she's decided to be invariably overly friendly to me), the new week began with another *enjoyable* exchange with Potter and Weasley. They asked me to list all the hideouts that I'm sure are currently being used by the Death Eaters and, of course, I was more than willing to help. However, something during our meeting made me feel that an attack by the Resistance is imminent.

The rebels don't often attack first; never really did, to be honest. Usually it was *us* who first invaded *their* territories and opened up a new combat zone, a new battlefield. But I suspect that now (given their newly acquired information about the *Exit*) they will go on the offensive for the first time. They want my statements confirmed at all costs and I can't even blame them. If roles were reversed, I would do the same.

Potter also informed me that our appointments (as he puts it) will take place on a regular basis from now on. Over the next few weeks, I'm supposed to write down everything I know, draw blueprints and make guesses as to who is currently in which lair.

Committing my information to writing will probably be the easiest part of the whole thing, as I've precautionally memorized everything I found useful during my preparations for my defection. So I agreed to Potter's demands.

What's in it for me? Well, I'm now allowed to use my own wand in combat training. If I need to attend one of the training sessions, either Blaise or Creevey will bring it for me.

When Potter broke this *good news* to me, I couldn't help but burst into gales of laughter. Gods, they're lucky I'm the one who defected and not some other Death Eater. For my part, I have no intention of betraying that trust, that stupidity, that naivety, but with most of us they would have had trouble in that regard.

But hey, my principle still applies: I won't complain.

And something else has changed. While the watch schedules and other lists posted in the atrium remain unreadable to my eyes thanks to Blaise's sneaky magic, Camp Black's daily schedule is available to me as of now. Probably another instruction from Potter, after all I have to know when to pitch up where.

So now, as I glance at the black board in passing, I learn the following: I'm scheduled for both the morning workout and the afternoon combat training.

I take a deep breath, cross the training room and push open the door to the workout room. I have a bad feeling because the schedule also noted who else would be there.

Among others, Granger's name was listed for today's workout. And unless she decided to skip it to avoid me, today will be our first encounter since I lost that duel. Which, by the way, would also mean that we even have to put up with each other *twice* today, because I am very sure that she will be in charge of the combat training again.

I spot Blaise and Creevey in a corner and walk over to them, purposely keeping my eyes on the floor. If Granger is already here, it's probably best to ignore her for as long as possible.

"Today is our little one's favorite day," Blaise proclaims, giving Creevey a friendly pat on the shoulder. "The official brawl day."

Creevey grins.

I raise an eyebrow in doubt.

"Fist fights? Are you serious?"

It's not that I don't have any experience, because the Death Eaters don't treat each other with kid gloves either. They, too, sometimes become violent when they grow tired of their wand-waving. Still, it's not exactly my preferred way of fighting. Forced bodily contact is just not my cup of tea, and thank you very much.

"Yep," Creevey confirms happily, pushing me to the middle of the room.

"Want to know what the best part is, Draco?" Blaise asks mirthfully. In contrast, his expression strikes me as rather ominous. "This time I'm the leader."

Fabulous. Before I know it, I'm standing in front of Creevey, fists raised, dodging his quick and skillful punches. He's small and agile, which makes it difficult for someone my height to keep up with his pace. And he's really doing his best, but it's still not enough. After a few minutes of bobbing and weaving, I grab his arm, twist it behind his back, bring him down, and pin him to the floor. He surrenders with a chuckle and immediately demands a rematch.

Blaise, meanwhile, has walked on and is chatting with a few other rebels who are more or less enthusiastically doing the same exercises. Not all of them are as energetic as Creevey, but then again, Blaise isn't as strict a teacher as Weasley. I could really get used to this type of training.

We repeat the procedure a few times, and every now and then Creevey manages to launch a blow at me. When he brings me to the floor for the first time and then looks so happy as if I had made him a personal gift, I'm the one who has to laugh. It's my first laugh since I've been at the Resistance headquarters. To be honest, I can't even remember the last time I had a genuine laugh, so it surprises me just as much as probably everyone else.

And it was too loud.

Biting my lip quickly, I let Creevey pull me to my feet and lift the hem of my t-shirt to wipe the sweat and the last vestige of my grin off my face. When I let go of the fabric and raise my head, she's suddenly there: a few feet away from me, with a somber expression on her face. Her gaze is on my stomach, right where my bare skin must have been visible a few seconds ago before the t-shirt fell over it again.

Granger's eyes dart to my face and we stare at each other. Me panting but still calm, she downright outraged. She has clenched her hands into fists and pressed her lips together so tightly that her mouth forms a thin line.

I quickly break eye contact, after all I'm not allowed to provoke her, even though I've probably already done that with my laughter anyway. (An unforgivable crime, no question.)

Creevey engages me in another round and eventually Blaise comes back to give us some advice. I try my best to block out Granger's presence, but I can feel her glaring at me the entire time.

When I'm finally allowed to take a break, during which Blaise starts a playful scuffle with the over-motivated Creevey, I just can't help it: I scan the room and spot Granger next to Ginny Weasley. Both women are on top of a strange-looking, obsidian-black apparatus, jogging in place. I have absolutely no idea what these things are supposed to be, but here, at Camp Black, I don't question anything.

Weasley is already pretty fast, but Granger is faster. She moves like she's running from something. Her eyes are firmly fixed on the wall she's facing, and it's impossible to tell from her facial expression if she's even listening to Weasley, who seems to be recounting something while gesturing wildly with her hands.

Today Granger's midriff isn't bare but thanks to the tight sports top she's wearing I can see her muscles moving all the same. Slowly and unobtrusively, I let my gaze roam over her, taking in her slim form, her grim posture and the way her chest rises and falls with every breath she takes. I can even see the fluttering of her pulse just above her collarbone. Then I focus on her face, which is framed by slightly damp curls. Freckles, worry lines, and her eyes are rather—

Granger jumps off the jogging thing and storms across the room.

Uh-oh. Now her gaze is on me, which can only mean I wasn't as inconspicuous as I thought. Maybe she'll smack me. Does she have her wand with her? My eyes dart quickly over her sports clothing, but at first glance there is nowhere enough room to hide a wand, which makes me frown in confusion.

I look back at her face and realize that giving her the once-over *once more* wasn't exactly a smart idea, although this time I had a good reason. Granger is unmistakably on the verge of exploding.

Weasley gets off the odd device as well, calling Granger's first name as she stumbles after her. For the first time in seven years I hear that name spoken aloud. It sounds strange to my ears. I can no longer relate it with the woman approaching me.

She's almost there, and I'm still trying to figure out what to do. Jump out of the way? Steady my footing? Brace myself for a slap or a punch?

While my brain is still feverishly searching for a way out, she's suddenly level with me and... rushes past me. Not without jostling against me, though, which makes me sway slightly. Considering that she is actually so small and thin, there is admittedly a pretty brute force in the contact. I slowly turn around and watch her departure with a blank expression on my face.

Weasley hurries after her, giving me a confused look as she does. Only when the door slams shut behind her fiery red ponytail do the other rebels shift their attention back to their current activities.

"What have you done?" Creevey asks, clearly puzzled as I turn back to him and Blaise.

"Nothing," I reply, shrugging and avoiding Blaise's eyes.

I'm pretty sure that a "I was curious, got lost in the sight of her, so I stared at her longer than I wanted to" wouldn't be an appropriate response to Creevey's question, but that's what it was.

Granger is a mystery and I tend to get lost in mysteries. (Especially now that I no longer close my mind.) Still, I don't think I did anything to justify such an overheated reaction.

"In any case, I'm not surprised," Creevey snorts. "Granger is weird if you ask me. I mean, she's brilliant and all, but still—"

He rolls his eyes, taps his forehead and gives a distinct sound.

Now I *do* exchange a quick look with Blaise.

He hasn't discussed Grangers and my history with Creevey, I'm sure of that. What happened at Hogwarts or the Manor is old news anyway and can hardly be responsible for her being so aggressive towards me. And conversely, that can only mean...

"Are you saying she's always like this?" I ask Creevey, deliberately nonchalant.

Blaise crosses his arms and looks at the ceiling in exasperation.

"Well, she's extremely nasty to you in particular, but you're new here." I give Creevey great credit for putting it that way rather than saying out loud that I'm a Death Eater who only recently defected. "But she's always pretty mean, isn't she, Blaise? Especially towards men. A real fury. Do you remember what Dean said?"

Blaise lets out a suffering sigh. He rubs his forehead in obvious discomfort and looks resignedly at Creevey, the incorrigible blabbermouth. Oh yes, that's exactly why I embosomed the bloke so quickly. I turn to him, raising my eyebrows expectantly.

"What did Thomas say?" I ask deviously.

"That she has a—wait, what did he call it, Blaise? A strange..."

"Kink," Blaise grumbles.

"Yes, exactly! That she has a strange kink."

I snort in disbelief, not sure if it's wise to dig deeper or if I'd rather not know.

"She's dating Thomas?" I ask instead, before Blaise can intervene and thus end this most intriguing exchange.

"Merlin, no!" Creevey rolls his eyes. "I think it was just a fling. I don't even know if she's ever had a real relationship since I've been here?" A quick glance at Blaise, who shakes his head. "And before?"

"Not that I know of," Blaise admits with a shrug.

He nervously tugs at his bottom lip. Obviously he doesn't like the topic. Well, that's too bad, because I find it quite exhilarating.

So Creevey just confirmed that Weasley and Granger haven't been a couple since school. I already figured that they weren't seeing each other (at least these days, after all she snaps at him all the time), but the fact that they ended their relationship right after Hogwarts is a surprise. Not that I care.

However, my curiosity is now piqued. That's how it is with me and the mysteries—anything that helps me solve one gets my attention.

"And what kind of *strange kink* is that supposed to be?" I ask at last, for which I get another warning look from Blaise.

I return it with a quirk of the corners of my mouth.

"She doesn't let anyone touch her," Creevey blurts out, even blushing a little in the process. "At least that's what Dean said."

I cock an eyebrow and finally his courage fails him. As he looks bashfully at the tips of his shoes, he tries to backpedal, even though we all know exactly what he was implying.

"Well, she *basically* doesn't allow anyone to touch her. She's just a control freak—that's what Dean must have meant. She even went nuts at a birthday party once, remember, Blaise? Cormac McLaggen tried to hug her and she blew him across the buffet table with her wand. After uppercutting him, mind you."

"I'd rather say he groped her, not hugged her, but yeah, I remember," Blaise replies. "And now enough about Granger. This is a training session."

Creevey nods submissively and rushes to the middle of the hall. I follow suit and resume my defensive stance.

Shockingly insightful. Not. That Granger seems to be an absolute control freak in every condition of life doesn't surprise me. But while I can't imagine she really *never* lets anyone

touch her, I have no intention of convincing myself otherwise or investigating the matter in any other way.

Nope, that lovely, little Granger anecdote didn't help me one bit. The mystery remains, with or without a kink.

My hawthorn wand hums contentedly as I wrap my fingers around the smooth handle, and I sigh with relief. Magic pulses through my arm and I conjure up some useless red sparks to get rid of at least some of the energy.

"Thanks," I say to Blaise.

He inclines his head and winks at me before making his way over to where Ginny Weasley is waiting for him in a corner of the room.

In my usual disinterested stance, I lean against the wall and tilt my head back. It's an unexpectedly tough day. First the workout, then another meeting with Lovegood, and now the combat training. I stretch and my spine cracks. I've probably gotten too used to the naps in my sleeping quarters, but my *grace period* is definitely over. Potter is serious. My daily routine is now pretty much the same as that of the other rebels.

The door opens and Granger comes in. Her mask is back in place and I relax a little. From her expression alone, you wouldn't be able to tell what happened in the workout room a few hours ago, and I try to look just as unmoved.

This afternoon I'm going to make it a point not to stare at her or 'meddle in her training' in any way. That should at least get me through this session without another incident. However, my hopes in this regard are mercilessly dashed after just a second, because the first word she spits out is my surname.

"Malfoy!"

Fuck.

I raise my head and straighten up to my full height.

"You got your wand back?"

At first I just nod, but then I remember her whispered threat from last time. She asked me something. Which in turn means I'm now *allowed* to reply. So gracious.

"For combat training only."

I bite my tongue, barely stopping myself from adding a mocking "Miss Granger" to the sentence, for which I should probably pat myself on the back. Because if things continue like *this*, they will soon get dicey.

"Splendid," she scoffs, obviously meaning the exact opposite.

I'm sure her annoyance stems from the fact that from now on I'll be armed for the duration of the training sessions. Apparently, she wasn't asked for her opinion on the matter. A shame. Her authority has really taken a beating since my arrival at headquarters.

"Let's see how bad you are with your own wand, then."

Don't roll your eyes, Draco, just don't, I can practically hear Blaise's admonishing voice in the back of my mind.

Granger knows I'm *not* bad. If I were, I wouldn't be alive, let alone here. I wouldn't have risen in the ranks of the Death Eaters over the years, nor would I have managed to get rid of my Dark Mark. That being said, I was one of the best students at Hogwarts and therefore always close on her heels in earning house points. But that's probably what this is about. I suppose that in her eyes anything that isn't of *exactly* the same quality as her own spellwork is bound to be *bad*.

I put on my most bored expression and calmly walk to the center of the room before slowly turning to face her.

"Disarming spells again?" I drawl.

She just lifts an eyebrow, which could mean anything, for fuck's sake. It could mean "You can cast whatever spell you want, but you still don't stand a chance against me" or it could mean "If you dare cast even a single other spell in my direction, I'll slit your throat"—I have absolutely no idea. I'll stick with the *Expelliarmus* to be on the safe side. (And not to give Blaise reason for another lecture.)

Again she attacks without giving me a clear signal or starting a countdown. Apparently, such a concession on her part is reserved exclusively for members of the Resistance. Thank Merlin I have good reflexes. Also, it's easier for me to deflect her spells with my own wand, resulting in me being able to return fire in seconds.

She immediately summons her shield and I have to admit that I'm impressed again, even though I've seen it from this perspective before.

Block, *Expelliarmus*, block, deflect, block, block, *Expelliarmus*, deflect.

I contain her attack for minutes before she corners me, leaving me with no choice but to duck behind one of the columns again. As I circle it, she follows me with brisk steps. I fire a few more disarming spells blindly over my shoulder.

Despite Granger's persistent pursuit, I'm much better and faster today, which visibly annoys her. I notice her movements getting angrier and more forceful, though she's probably still nowhere near her full potential.

There's a brief moment when I think I might manage to disarm her: the second her shield wears off, she needs to concentrate and take a deep breath to refresh it. It's definitely a

vulnerability, but I notice it a little too late and thus don't get around to taking advantage of it. I make a mental note for a possible next encounter, and refocus on deflecting her spells. I clench my jaw because, slowly but surely, it's getting tiring.

And then, of course, she defeats me.

Her shield is relentless, and so are the whippings of her wand with which she hurls her spells at me in quick succession. My wand is knocked out of my hand and clatters onto the concrete somewhere near the door. This time I don't even try to pick it up. We just stare at each other, both panting and with narrowed eyes.

"That was decent," comes a voice.

I turn to see Potter standing in the doorway, twirling my wand in his fingers. He steps forward and holds it out to me with a neutral expression on his face. Then he glances at the clock on the wall.

"Six and a half minutes in a one-on-one against you, Hermione. Did Malfoy set a new record?"

Potter's eyes are sparkling teasingly.

"I found it rather pathetic," Granger replies with a defiant gesture. Her voice is calm. Calm-before-the-storm-calm, to be precise. "You know, Harry, I wish he had fought on the front line more often instead of hiding all the time. Because if I had caught him in one of the combat zones, at least he wouldn't be wasting my time these days."

She slowly puts her wand away, her eyes never leaving my face. I meet her gaze for a few long seconds, until I feel like I'm passing my self-imposed Granger provocation limit, then avert my eyes. I return to the wall and lean against it, trying not to let show how much her words upset me and how angry *I* am now.

Granger acts like I've been nothing but a coward all these years, and that's just not true. I wasn't *hiding*. I fought hundreds of times until I climbed the ranks high enough to not have to do it quite as often. Curses, pain and death have been a part of my everyday life for years, just as they are still a part of hers. If we had met in one of the combat zones, then we would have fought against each other, no doubt. Whether it was her luck or mine that it never happened will forever remain a mystery.

She claims I'm merely a liability to the Resistance, when in fact I'm a powerful tool—for the rebels, for Potter and for her, too, if she would let me. In the mud outside the watch tent, I begged on my knees to be that tool, and now I've been proving for several weeks that I really am. I behave, I obey, I share my knowledge. I even hop through their fucking boot camp. Granger has absolutely no idea what she's talking about.

I grind my teeth to keep the rage in check and resist the enormous urge to occlude myself—to block it all out, to keep my casual façade, not to feel this anger.

But I *vowed* to myself not to do it anymore, so I resolutely swallow that urge.

I inhale. I exhale. Another deep breath. Then I finally calm down.

With one last look at Granger, Potter leaves the room. He doesn't seem to feel the need to watch the other rebels train, which leads me to believe he was only here because of me. Maybe he wanted to see what I would do with my wand once I got my hands on it. But I played by all the rules and at least *that* is a small triumph.

As the door clicks shut behind Potter, Granger continues with the training undeterred. Her show of force is over and she ignores me for the rest of the session. I don't have the pleasure of using my wand a second time.

Occasionally, I feel Blaise's thoughtful gaze on me.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for all your kind words! It's always a pleasure to read the comments with your opinions and guesses. The next chapter is one of my absolute favorites as it is the official kick-off of the Dramione part. Are you ready? ♡

7. ONXY BLACK

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

7. ONXY BLACK

At the weekends there are only voluntary training sessions at Camp Black, which means I have a little more *leisure time*. However, I spend most of it on drafting blueprints of some Death Eater hideouts and recalling the security measures in place.

That's exactly why I stop by the command centre (as I've come to secretly call Potter's personal briefing room in the atrium) on my way to breakfast on Sunday. His "In!" comes shortly after my knock and I open the door.

The countless flip charts, mug shots and handwritten notes on the walls distract me, so I'm already halfway across the room before I even realize Potter isn't alone.

She is here, too.

Granger sits in one of the chairs, her combat boots resting on the parchment-cluttered surface of the large, circular conference table, her fingers thrumming on her thigh to a beat only she knows. I stop dead in my tracks and quickly glance from her to Potter and back again.

She turns her head (presumably to see who dared to disturb her private audience) and when she spots me, she swings her legs off the table and jumps lithely to her feet. As she marches past me, I deliberately fix my gaze on a random spot just above Potter's left shoulder. After she talked so much shit during the last combat training session, I'm far less inclined to heed Blaise's warnings and act subservient towards her, but there are more important things than revenge right now.

The door slams shut behind her and I let out the breath I was unconsciously holding.

Potter cups his chin in one hand and thoughtfully taps his lower lip with the appendant index finger.

"Didn't mean to disturb," I apologize half-heartedly, dropping the blueprints onto the table unbidden. When it comes to Potter, that's the maximum civility I can bring myself to. "These are the layouts of Malfoy Manor, a Death Eater safehouse near Sheffield and a smaller hideout near Bristol. The latter would be the first to consider when it comes to capturing some human guinea pigs for Lovegood."

The words come out more brusquely than I intended, but Potter doesn't seem to mind. He just takes a quick look at the parchments before flicking his wand, levitating them over to the wall and magically sticking them next to the other plans and papers.

"We'll talk about a possible target when we're ready," he replies calmly.

I raise an eyebrow in astonishment. *We* will talk about it?

"Currently we are still busy defending the villages we protect. There were two more attacks last night, and at the same time. *Not* on Hogsmeade, mind you." Potter gives me an unmistakable look. "We won't start planning a counterattack until the situation has calmed down a bit."

So the Dark Lord must be pretty angry.

Multiple attacks in quick succession usually happen for a reason. Also, I don't know anything about *this* plan, so it must have been drawn up in the last few weeks—when I was already gone.

While some of the Death Eaters are definitely unpredictable (my own aunt is a shining example), their pushes into the rebel areas normally *have* a purpose. They either want to achieve something, punish the Resistance for something, or think it wise to invade a certain location for other strategic reasons. Attacking three different magical villages, even two of them in a single night, seems pretty shambolic to me, especially since the Dark Lord must have given his permission for it, otherwise it would never have happened.

For a brief moment I simply digest the information, clenching my hands into fists.

"It has something to do with my disappearance," I then deduce, but Potter shrugs.

"We don't know that. Maybe we'll find out if we manage to capture someone who sings. What makes you think that?"

"It's just a feeling." I shake my head slowly. "Maybe the Dark Lord suspects something. Is there a possibility that the information that I'm here was leaked?"

"No way. So far, only the residents of Camp Black know about your defection."

Unconsciously, I rub the spot on my forearm where the *stain* is.

"What about the floaters?" I ask. "I've seen people in the dining hall and the training room over the past few days who haven't been here before."

"I trust every single member of the Resistance who trains here," Potter replies serenely but firmly. "Like I said, we'll find out when the time is right."

Since he obviously won't change his mind, I remain silent. It's not my problem anyway. For now, I'm safe here. My job is solely to provide information. And the determined look that flashes at me from Potter's bright green eyes lets me know that I'm not entitled to anything else at the moment.

So I just nod, turn on my heel and leave the room.

Apparently, fate wants to test me today, because even though it's Sunday and there's no training session that would require both Granger's and my presence, right after my conversation with Potter I unexpectedly find myself next to her at the breakfast buffet. Holding a cup of black coffee in one hand and a green apple in the other, she absentmindedly scans the room as if trying to decide where to sit.

I'm quite surprised she's here at all, because I've never seen that witch eat since I've been attending meals in the Resistance dining hall on a regular basis.

I ignore her, pour myself a coffee and reach for a plate.

That's when it happens.

She turns her head and finds me right behind her, causing her fingers to twitch unintentionally, which in turn results in the apple slipping from her grasp. A millisecond later I snatch it out of the air.

Seeker reflexes.

I glance down at the apple, the corners of my mouth quirk, then I hold out my hand and offer Granger her *breakfast*.

She stares at me in disgust. Her dark brown eyes dart across my face, down my outstretched arm (the left one, by the way), and come to linger on the fruit.

"Fuck off," she hisses. "I won't eat anything you've touched."

It's probably a big mistake, but now my lips curl into a *real* smirk.

I raise my hand, bring it slowly to my mouth and, with a noisy snap, bite off a large piece of the apple. I even let out an appreciative moan. Then I chew slowly, swallow *even more* slowly, and finally cock an eyebrow in *slow motion* while licking my bottom lip.

"Thank Merlin you're as well-resourced as a fucking hotel, Granger," I murmur for only her to hear. I jerk my head towards the overloaded buffet table. "Today, just this once, I haven't touched all of it yet. So you will not die of painful starvation."

Granger's nostrils flare, but I just grab my coffee and push past her. (Admittedly closer than I should have.)

"Be my guest," I whisper when I'm level with her.

Then I ditch her.

Instead of sitting down at the usual table where Blaise and Ginny Weasley are already chatting, I decide to put on an act and join Lovegood, who is dreamily buttering her toast. As I sink into the vacant seat next to her, she lifts her head and smiles at me.

And oh, it's not hard to imagine how angry that little gesture makes Granger, because I can practically feel her hot gaze on the back of my head. I'll probably bitterly regret this little show at the next combat training session, but today it gives me satisfaction.

I'm truly done playing games with her, despite Blaise's words and all other warnings. I'm still me. Let's see how she'll deal with *that*.

Only now do I realize that I forgot my plate. All I have in front of me is a mug of black coffee.

But hey, I still have Granger's apple.

I take another bite.

"Today we're going to practice countering Stinging Hexes."

Granger's voice echoes loudly off the bare concrete walls of the training room. Today she's wearing combat gear instead of her usual training clothes, which leads me to believe she either just finished one of her guard shifts or will be on duty right after the session.

I take in the rare sight of her in this attire while she strides up and down in front of the rebels and delivers her lecture. Oddly enough, it's not so unfamiliar to see her all in black anymore, although back then (in the old world without war) she never wore black clothes. If this wasn't about Granger of all people, I would even go so far as to say that the color suits her.

"Some of the Death Eaters like to use these when it comes to weakening the opponent, since burns are particularly painful. How do you fend them off, Boot?"

"With water-based defensive spells?"

"Exactly! It's the easiest method if you want to defend yourself efficiently without wasting too much energy by summoning magic-draining shields. Water reduces the effectiveness of a Stinging Hex. When using magic, we play with the elements and none are more contrary than fire and water."

Granger is clearly in her *element* now. Here, at headquarters, I've never heard her say so many words at once. Even her face looks relatively relaxed today. Damn, I'd really give anything just to be inside her head for a second.

"Today we train in pairs. Turpin, Creevey—you begin."

This training session is different. It's less boring and definitely more *heated* than just exchanging disarming spells. The Stinging Hexes whiz through the air so quickly that it looks like lightning is flashing across the room.

In fact, I'm so distracted by watching the others dueling and listening to Granger giving her harsh advice that I don't realize what's going on until the last pair (Boot and Abbott) is called

up.

Splendid. I'm the fucking *only one* still standing against the wall.

"You need to surprise your opponent, keep that in mind, Abbott. Do you remember what we talked about last time? Perfect. Go ahead then."

Granger must be in a good mood today because, for once, there's no annoyance on her face as Abbott takes up her defensive stance, just neutral expectation.

For my part, I'm *definitely* annoyed because I've put two and two together and know that Granger will pick me as her partner once Boot and Abbott are done. Since we are an odd number of fighters and I'm the only one who hasn't had a turn yet, I'll have to deal with her personally. Again.

It's most likely her revenge for my audacity last Sunday. It's been four days since our encounter in the dining hall and I immediately erased it from my memory. Granger clearly didn't, and making an example of me is obviously her form of punishment.

I try not to let the realization spoil my mood and instead watch the ongoing fight attentively. Abbott does more or less well, although she completely fails to *surprise* Boot.

Blaise was right—she *is* a lost cause.

And then, a few minutes later, it's time.

As soon as Abbott and Boot leave the dueling area to join the other rebels on the opposite side of the room, I push myself off the wall. So when Granger spins around with a determined look on her face, I'm already on my way to her.

Her mouth opens, but then she pauses and quickly bites back the "Malfoy!" that was probably on the tip of her tongue. For a few seconds she looks confused.

Well, I guess I *surprised* her. My lips give a telltale twitch, but apart from that I pull myself together and calmly position myself across from her.

Fortunately, Blaise isn't here. He certainly wouldn't approve of my behavior. In fact, I have no idea if Potter has finally pulled him off his permanent surveillance job or if he just has more important things to do today. Creevey and Ginny Weasley may be here, but to put it bluntly: I don't give a fuck what *they* think about what I plan to do next.

I give Granger a prompting nod and she doesn't hesitate for a second.

Her Stinging Hexes are powerful, and I have to remind myself several times to stick to her oh-so-great water-based defensive spells instead of doing it my way. However, after a few incantations, I have to admit that she's actually right. It really *is* easier, and I wonder why I never came up with the idea myself.

After a few seconds of just parrying, I'm warmed up and start hurling my own hexes at Granger. She blocks them without much difficulty; even brushes them aside rather casually.

I redouble my efforts and pretty quickly sparks are literally flying between us. Sometimes we cast our spells at the same time and they clash in the middle of the room, getting deflected and dashing against the columns or the walls. In my periphery, I can see Ginny Weasley summoning a wide protective shield for our audience.

Granger is quick and her spellwork is precise, but I'm not *bad* either. And even less *pathetic*.

Today I don't even let it get to the point where she hits me first. Becoming more arrogant than she already is wouldn't do her any good anyway. So instead I just wait for a weak moment in her defense and when that moment finally comes, I cast my nonverbal spell without thinking.

Granger tries to deflect my attack, but she's expecting a Stinging Hex.

And what can I say? It's *not* a Stinging Hex.

My magic dives effortlessly through her defense and spills onto her face and torso in the form of an icy gush of water. Granger gasps in shock. Quite satisfied, I lower my wand.

"What - the - *fuck* - Malfoy?" she hisses, still sucking in air as she brushes a few wet curls away from her face. "Didn't I make myself clear? Fire to attack and water to defend!"

My lips bend into a devious smirk.

"You need to *surprise* your opponent, Granger," I retort, parroting her expertly.

For a few seconds, the training room is completely silent.

Granger stares at me in bewilderment. She's dripping all over the floor, but inside she's on fire, I'm sure.

"Get out!" she suddenly snaps.

I roll my eyes, throw my wand to Creevey, and set about leaving the room.

"Oh, not you, Malfoy."

Frowning deeply, I stop dead in my tracks and meet her fierce gaze.

"Out!" she barks again, now facing the other rebels, some of whom actually look a little terrified.

Creevey's brow furrows in concern, Ginny Weasley's alarmed eyes are on Granger.

"Hermione," she says in a low voice.

"I - said - *out*," Granger shouts unwaveringly and the first rebels hesitantly start moving. "All of you!"

One by one they leave the hall while I remain in its centre and stoically surrender to my fate. I'm almost a little curious as to how Granger plans to top the Dark Lord's torture curses, but I,

too, am open to *surprises*.

Merlin, I guess I'm getting sarcastic.

Weasley is the last to leave the room. She gives us another worried look, then turns away, shakes her head with a sigh, and finally the door slams shut behind her.

Granger flicks her wand and I hear a clicking sound. When she casts an additional Silencing Charm on the door, my throat goes dry, but I try my best not to let show.

She turns around and points her wand at something behind me. A moment later, the chair Ronald Weasley usually sits in when supervising the training sessions slams into the hollows of my knees and I land hard on it. Another flick of her wrist and my arms snap back. Her magic ties my hands behind the chair and I involuntarily let out a low grunt.

Bloody Creevey and his gossip. Because what comes to my mind right now is Granger's alleged *kink*, and it's probably the most inappropriate situation to think about *that* of all things.

The chair is pulled back in an abrupt movement that successfully dispels my unwelcome thoughts. With a disgusting sound, the wooden chair legs scrape over the bare concrete before Granger's magic slams me against one of the columns with a thud. The impact jars my ribcage, making me gasp, and my head hits the stone hard. Groaning softly, I close my eyes for a moment. When I open them again, Granger is already marching towards me.

Her wand is trained on me as she undoes the clasp of her drenched robes and angrily rips them off with her other hand. They hit the ground with a wet, smacking sound and she steps over them undeterred.

When she reaches me, her eyes are dark. She rams one of her boots on the edge of the chair, right between my legs, then leans forward, grabs my hair roughly, and tilts my head back. I can feel the tip of her wand digging into the soft flesh below my jawbone.

"I don't know what sick game you're trying to play, Malfoy, but I am not Harry," she spits at me, lowering herself a few inches.

The knee of the leg she placed between my thighs presses against my sternum.

I blink up at her tensely.

"Guess what, I noticed," I force out with difficulty thanks to the hyperextension of my neck.

Granger fucking *growls*. The sound sends a shiver down my spine.

"You don't deserve to be here. To be safe while *our* villages are under attack," she gasps out. I can feel her hot breath against my chin with every single word. "You are not worthy of breathing the same air as our fighters, much less receiving the same protection."

Her face is now hovering directly over mine.

"And why not, Granger?" I reply, panting. "Just because it took me seven years to get rid of my Dark Mark? Because there was no way for me to escape before? Let me tell you, I wish it hadn't taken so fucking long."

She lets out a bitter laugh and quickly wets her bottom lip.

"Don't be such a hypocrite. You could have attempted to escape right after the Battle of Hogwarts, with or without your Mark. But you are a coward. You always have been."

"Nonsense! You know very well that an escape attempt without a carefully thought-out plan would have been my certain death."

"As certain as the death of every innocent you've killed?" she sneers. "At least *you* had a choice. Dumbledore offered you help *before* it was too late, and even then you didn't take your chance."

"That's how it was, but I can't undo it," I say angrily. "What's your point, Granger? You can't change the past and neither can I. But now I'm here. And I'm on your side!"

My head jerks back further as she tugs at my hair even harder.

"You - are - a - murderer!" she hisses, looking me straight in the eyes.

"And that's what *you* are, if I'm not mistaken," I retort, unblinking. Her left eyelid twitches. Yes, Granger, I've read all those lovely reports about you. "Tell me, would you really have killed me outright if we'd met out there? Or would you have thought about it first? Are you so sure that it would have been the right thing to do?"

The fingers pressing her wand firmly to the skin of my throat tremble slightly against my jawbone, but the hand in my hair is still unyielding.

Granger is breathing heavily, but otherwise remains silent.

"I don't think I could have brought myself to kill you," I continue in a whisper. "I'm afraid I would have spared you, Granger, silly as it sounds. After all, I've done so before, have I not? That one day at the Manor?"

"Shut the fuck up, Malfoy," she snaps at me. Meanwhile, our noses are almost touching.

"Don't waste your time trying to manipulate me. You didn't *spare* us at the Manor. That was just another gutless moment of yours."

I snort loudly, barely keeping myself from grimacing.

That, too, is simply not true.

At the time, I just didn't know what else to do. Keeping my mouth shut seemed like the only way to save the lives of the Golden Trio after the Snatchers took them to the Manor. What then happened to Granger on the marble floor in the grand drawing room I could never have prevented, no matter how much I wanted to.

I feel a strong urge to occlude myself, but once again I manage to resist. Instead, I decide to provoke Granger to distract myself from the troublesome thoughts and the emotions that accompany them.

"Then what's stopping you from killing me right here and now?" Her breath mingles with mine as I continue. "Just do it, Granger. Potter won't be thrilled, I suppose, but he certainly won't kick you out either."

Her wand hand trembles even more while her eyes dart frantically between mine. Back and forth, back and forth.

I return her gaze, panting, waiting.

Water drips from her hair onto my face.

"What the hell are you up to?" she chokes out at length. "What do you really want?"

"I want Potter to kill the Dark Lord."

"Tsk, and what's in it for you?"

"My life."

"It's always about you, isn't it?"

"Among other things."

Granger laughs in my face, but it sounds more desperate than amused. The tip of her wand taps restlessly against the skin just below my ear, the rhythm pretty much matching my racing pulse. I'm aware that she's *perfectly* capable of killing me off the cuff, but her demeanor tells me that the time is not yet right.

"Just stay away from me," she finally says menacingly.

One of her curls escapes her bun and lands damp and cold on my cheek.

I exhale as slowly as my shaky composure allows. Her wand holster will probably leave a fair pattern on my jaw.

"Only if you do," I hiss.

"Oh, I will."

"Brilliant."

"Yeah, *fucking* brilliant," she whispers, her breath brushing against my lips once more.

Then I feel her wand tip disappear from the spot under my jaw. Her hand wriggles out of my hair. The damp curl peels away from my cheek. Her knee releases my ribcage and I can breathe freely again. The boot disappears from the chair, causing it to tip forward.

Granger takes a few steps back, her onyx black gaze still fixed on me, then abruptly turns on her heel, picks up her soaked robes, and crosses the room with long strides. The door bursts open before she even reaches it. As she leaves the room, the magical shackles that were holding my arms firmly in place behind the chair vanish.

I remain seated as if she had petrified me, concentrating solely on my breathing.

I'm half-hard.

Fuck.

When I leave the training room about fifteen minutes later, Ginny Weasley and Creevey are still outside the door, waiting for me. Instead of joining them, I stroll (as calmly as possible) to one of the water dispensers in the corner of the atrium. I can feel Weasley's inquiring eyes on me, but I ignore her.

My mouth is still dry, but I'm in control again. Whatever *that* was, it's gone. And even without Occlumency. I guess I'm making some progress in that regard, or at least that's what I tell myself.

"Malfoy."

The voice comes from a point directly behind me and I feel a delicate hand gently tap my shoulder. The contact is brief and reserved, but it's there. And it is indeed Weasley, whose worried face I find hovering next to mine as I turn my head and wipe a few drops of water from my lips.

"Are you all right?"

"Everything's fine," I reply calmly, trying to put on a condescending expression.

Quite fabulous, Weasley, thanks for asking. Granger just threatened me and I was merely a little aroused as a result.

What the hell is wrong with me?

I was *actually* aroused by this dangerous, angry, wary, lethal witch I no longer know. Why? Because of her bared teeth, searing hot eyes and damp, dark curls? Because she's a challenge; a mystery? Because my hands were tied behind the chair she forced me to sit on? Or because she held her wand to my throat?

Fearful that the strange feeling might come back, I quickly push the images aside and distract myself by teasing Weasley.

"You were worried about me? I'm touched!" I lift one corner of my mouth. "And here I thought you'd enjoy Granger giving me a beating."

Weasley's gaze instantly darkens and she resolutely pushes a strand of fiery red hair away from her face.

"I wouldn't say I was *worried*," she replies nastily, "but Hermione isn't herself right now. And it would be more than unfavorable if something happened to you before you even got around to telling Harry where to find Tom."

I'm sure that's not her only concern, but I don't probe into it because her words make me prick up my ears for some other reason.

"He doesn't really think I know, does he?" I ask.

Potter and I haven't discussed the subject since my first interrogation under the influence of the Veritaserum. Instead, we rather work through a list. One thing at a time.

"Come again?"

"Does Potter *actually* think I know where the Dark Lord is currently hiding?"

Weasley raises an eyebrow in confusion.

"Harry told us that during your first interrogation you said that you were our best and probably only chance to track down Tom."

"Correct, but only because I can pave the way for you. If I knew for sure where he was, we wouldn't have to play that little game with the *Exit*, would we?"

Her (absent) response confirms my suspicion that she's already in the loop.

"Is Harry aware of this?" she simply asks.

I shrug my shoulders.

"I'd think Potter is smart enough to figure it out. So far he hasn't asked me about the whereabouts of the Dark Lord, which leads me to believe he knows it won't be *that* easy."

"But you still believe that you are the key to our success?" she snorts in disbelief. "Your information is so crucial?"

"My information is better than none," I drawl and then count my personal advantages on the fingers of my right hand. "Neatly sketched blueprints of all Death Eater hideouts? The names of the people you can expect there and detailed listings of the spells they use to protect themselves? My inside knowledge of their strategies and thought patterns? The incantation for the *Exit*? So you don't think all of this is more than you've ever had before?"

"Depends on whether it's enough. Well, is it?"

Weasley crosses her arms and looks at me expectantly. I cock my head and eye her thoughtfully for a few seconds.

"I hope so," I say honestly. She blinks at me in surprise. "At least that's what Granger seems to think, because as you can see, I'm still alive."

With these last words, a wink for Weasley and a pat on the back for Creevey, I end the conversation and take my leave.

I need to think. Preferably in my sleeping quarters and alone. Far away from the rebels, the training room, and especially Granger with her dark, piercing gaze.

Chapter End Notes

A Drapple a day keeps the doctor away (or so they say)! I hope you enjoyed the chapter! Now we can really get started! ♥

8. RAVEN BLACK

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

8. RAVEN BLACK

A few days later there's another official 'appointment' with Potter. I was actually expecting an ordinary interrogation (perhaps regarding the blueprints I gave him last weekend), but it doesn't seem to be one. It's obviously more of a strategy meeting, which is why I feel quite out of place as soon as I enter the command centre. Not least because *she* is present.

Granger is leaning against the wall in which the door is inserted, so I don't notice her right away. Only when I stop next to the conference table and shift my gaze to the parchment-covered wall in front of which Thomas is loitering and studying some layouts, do I spot her in my periphery. My gaze automatically darts to her face and when our eyes meet, my whole body goes rigid. We quickly turn away at the same time.

At least she doesn't rush out of the room straight away, which can only mean that *this time* it's no coincidence that we're both here. Potter apparently summoned her as well. Considering each of us swore to stay away from the other, that's pretty unfortunate.

But hey, Potter's headquarters, Potter's rules.

Standing rather pointlessly in the middle of the room (because Potter and the Weasel are still talking quietly to each other and not paying any attention to me), I notice that Granger's body language towards Thomas is almost as hostile as it is towards me. He, in turn, expertly avoids her gaze, which seems promisingly grim to me today. Mm, maybe there's some truth to Creevey's story after all.

"Malfoy," Potter finally says, rising from his chair. I slowly turn to face him and cross my arms. "Glad you were able to spare some time."

I let out a small snort at this equally inappropriate and sarcastic remark. Potter's sense of humor is almost on par with my own. I guess I have to be careful not to accidentally laugh at one of his *jokes*. We don't want anyone to get the wrong idea, do we?

"My pleasure," I deadpan, causing the corners of his mouth to quirk.

"You suggested that if we intended to make our own push, we should start with the safehouse in Bristol," he casually continues.

I nod slowly.

What's going on here? Does he seriously want me to *actively* participate in their briefing?

"That would make sense, yes. The house isn't much-frequented and therefore not well guarded. However, as far as I know, there could be a few people there at the moment who might be good candidates for the *Exit*."

"People who do not serve Tom out of conviction?"

"It's just guesswork, Potter—in Death Eater circles, you don't boast about something like that. But at least there should be a few bearers of the Dark Mark there, yes."

Apparently, this explanation is enough for him, because he steps closer to the parchment that shows the floor plan of the Death Eater hideout in Bristol, as I remember it. It's been a while since I was last there, but I'm pretty sure no one has *renovated* in the meantime.

Weasley steps up to Potter, and now that it seems like I'm actually expected to put in my two Knuts worth, I pull myself together and do the same.

"Aside from the usual Muggle-Repelling Charms, there will most likely be some common alarm spells. Definitely here, here and here." I tap the respective spots on the blueprint with my index finger. "You will have to disarm them before you enter the house. After that, there shouldn't be any big surprises. There's a back door, but frankly I'm not sure which wards they put *there*, so it's probably safer to take the front door. The building itself may be protected by a *Repello Inimicum*, as are most of our safehouses, but in Bristol they are a bit lax about regularly renewing that ward. If you're lucky, you'll catch them on a careless day. I assume you know how to deal with it otherwise?"

"Of course," comes an arrogant voice.

Granger has snuck up on us and is now pacing slowly behind us, scowling and frowning. A sense of foreboding washes over me.

"When do you plan to do it?" I ask, turning to Potter.

"We don't know yet," Granger says before Potter can even open his mouth. "First of all, we're going to recon the area to verify your information."

I give her an exasperated look.

"Means *you* want to verify my information. I'm telling the truth, I can assure you. A reconnaissance is a waste of time and an unnecessary risk."

Her eyes flash defiantly at me. Visibly impatient, she presses the tip of her tongue against the inside of her cheek.

"For one thing, it's none of your bloody business, and for another thing, I like to be as well-prepared as possible."

All right. If she insists on having her way, let her do her beloved recce for all I care. She will be disappointed to find everything exactly as I wrote it down.

"It's standard procedure," Potter adds with a shrug.

He obviously wants to make me feel like it's a normal precautionary move that has nothing to do with me personally, but I know better. Nevertheless, I keep any further comments to myself.

"We will send out two people for the first assessment," Potter decides. "After that we can think about how many fighters we will need to attack."

"Who is going to accompany Granger?" I allow myself to ask another question, the answer to which is probably 'none of my bloody business' either.

Even before Granger rubbed her distrust in my face, I had no doubt that she would do the recce herself. But for some unfathomable reason I'm interested in who will support her.

"My humble self," Thomas drawls.

Granger lets out a huffing noise, the meaning of which I don't immediately grasp. In its echo it appears as a combination of derision and dissatisfaction.

"I asked for Blaise," she hisses in Potter's direction.

I hear Weasley snort loudly.

Well, good to know I'm not the only victim of such reactions on his part.

"You know Blaise isn't here right now," Potter replies calmly, "but we can spare Dean, and he's great at disarming wards."

I let them bicker and eventually stop listening. Instead, I succumb to my own musings. So Blaise currently isn't at headquarters, which at least explains why he doesn't show up everywhere I go like a fucking shadow. I'd like to know more about the reasons for his absence, but I doubt I'm allowed to ask too many questions today.

Thomas cracks his knuckles, which brings me back to reality. I could swear he just muttered "always so stubborn" or something like that. Whatever was going on between him and Granger doesn't seem to have ended very peacefully. I suppose I could ask Creevey about it, although that's probably a pretty stupid idea. I already find myself brooding over Granger and her strange behavior far more often than is good for me. Not to mention my unusual physical reaction in the training room. But I'm curious by nature. I just can't help it.

"You won't need more than two good fighters to attack Bristol," I get back on topic to end this little exchange of niceties between Granger, Potter and Thomas. "There are never more than three or four Death Eaters there at the same time."

"Any familiar faces?" Potter reverts to a professional tone as well.

I expected this question.

"It's possible that Pansy is there," I reply cautiously, giving him a quick sidelong glance.

I'm not a hundred percent sure, but she's in Bristol quite often. On the day of my escape it was still planned that she would spend the following weeks there. So unless the Death Eaters have completely played havoc with their schedules since I left, she should be there now. I hope so and at the same time pray that she isn't.

"Parkinson?" Weasley asks, snapping me out of my thoughts once more.

Gods, why is it so bloody hard for me to stay focused?

Oh yeah, the Occlumency. Or rather the lack thereof.

"No, the other Pansy," I reply irritably, eliciting a mirthful chuckle from Potter.

Oh Merlin, we *do* have the same sense of humor.

Weasley gives me a look that lets me know he's going to break my neck the next time I talk to him like that. I return it no less unfriendly.

"What about her... intentions?" Potter asks after wiping his glasses on the hem of his t-shirt.

Of course, I know what he's getting at.

"If she's really there, then you should definitely try to get her out alive. She has borne the Mark since the Battle of Hogwarts, but she didn't take it voluntarily. I suspect she would be a very good candidate for the *Exit*."

I sincerely hope I'm right about that. Talking to Pansy about our (dis)loyalty would have been too risky, so I never revealed to her that I was plotting my defection all along. But I know her. She's a good person, and I'm convinced that the odds are in her favor.

"So you're only suggesting Bristol as a target so we can get your girlfriend out first?" Granger taunts. "Touching!"

Judging by the volume of her voice, she's standing right behind me, and I can barely stop myself from flinching. While the resentment Granger generally exudes was palpable in the room from the start, I otherwise ignored her pretty well.

"I don't see how it's any of your business, Granger—" I murmur, purposefully not turning to face her. *Stay away from me.* "—but Pansy is not my girlfriend."

At that, she doesn't say another word.

Potter slowly raises an eyebrow while glancing between us appraisingly. After a few seconds or so, he squares his shoulders, claps his hands once, and declares the briefing over.

Granger and Thomas remain in the command centre with Potter (probably to plan their delightful little trip to Bristol) while Weasley and I leave the room. We part company right outside the door and march off in different directions—I to my sleeping quarters, he to the dining hall.

As I walk down the long, grey, and mostly empty corridors, I wonder if Thomas and Granger's foray will end with her tying his hands behind his back too.

Creevey's words run through my mind again, and then so does Granger's face. How she leaned in and snapped at me while the water of my sneaky if harmless spell dripped from her dark curls onto my cheek.

Fuck.

I clench my hands into fists.

Occlumency is still not an option.

Instead, I consciously let my thoughts wander to Pansy and a wave of fear washes over me. What if I'm wrong? I won't get over it if the *Exit* doesn't work for her. If Pansy dies because I told the rebels where to find her and that she would make a good test subject, it will break me.

My panic has a more than welcome side effect: Granger completely disappears from my mind for the rest of the day.

It's past midnight when I plop down onto one of the sports mats in the workout room. I feel positively drained and that's a good thing.

I couldn't sleep, eventually gave up trying, and then came here to take my anger and restlessness out on something. One of the punchbags that Creevey used to proudly demonstrate his best right hook to me just last week finally did the trick.

Now I rub my sore knuckles and stare gloomily at said punchbag, which is still swinging in place.

I'd really like to talk to someone about how I feel about the whole *Exit* thing. For me, the best go-to person within the Resistance would probably be Blaise, but he's unavailable at the moment and I have no idea how long he'll be gone. Lovegood would certainly love to have a cosy little chat with me, but she's just plain weird and whenever we meet she treats me far too politely for my comfort. Ginny Weasley only speaks to me because she's gotten used to my presence. (Or for Blaise's sake, I'm not entirely sure.) And Creevey would never understand, even if he's the only one talking to me these days. He's too young, too naive, and I don't want to load my worries onto him.

So I do what I seem to do best: I keep my thoughts to myself. Of course, it's more difficult without Occlumency, but striking blows upon a punchbag actually has a comparably soothing effect.

The door creaks and I jump. I'm on my feet in a matter of seconds, squinting warily through the darkness. It's so late (or rather early) that I wasn't expecting anyone else to come to the

gym, and even though the rebels have left me in peace so far, it feels strange to bump into someone in the solitude of the night. Unarmed and unescorted at that.

To my relief (or chagrin, I don't know) it's just Granger who slips through the crack of the door.

A sprinkling of moonlight streaming through one of the magical windows set into the walls illuminates her face. I notice that she looks tired, but the moment she spots me, that exhausted expression gives way to her usual tense mask. She stares at me suspiciously for a few seconds, then her eyes dart around the room as if she were looking for the person accompanying me, but of course there's no one there.

The door clicks shut with a rich sound. We both flinch, then immediately straighten ourselves in unison.

Granger glances at the still moving punchbag before taking in my outfit, consisting of the usual cargo trousers and a black t-shirt. Her inquiring look lingers briefly on the *stain* on my forearm.

Her mind is working, I can see that clearly, but I stay calm and quiet and *good* until she finally breaks the silence.

"It's getting late," she says, taking two barely audible steps into the room.

She slowly shrugs off the outer robes of her combat gear. I watch the raven black fabric fall to the floor.

"Couldn't sleep."

"Mm."

"Night watch?"

"Bristol."

I lift an eyebrow in surprise. I didn't realize they were going to put the planned reconnaissance into action *tonight*.

"Well? Satisfied?"

I can't stop myself from adopting a slightly mocking tone, but to my astonishment she doesn't get flaming mad right away. Instead, she busies herself with detaching the wand holster from her forearm with practiced movements.

"Everything as you described it."

I merely nod. No complaints from Granger is good news.

She unstraps her breastplate and this time I even raise both eyebrows. As she takes the armour off, my breathing quickens. What the hell is she up to?

Before I can ponder the question, footsteps sound from somewhere and Granger pauses. She turns her head and thus her ear towards the door, but keeps looking at me. Her eyes are dark but not belligerent.

Completely *mystified*, I meet her gaze until her lips curl into a sardonic smile of sorts. It's the very first time I've seen her mouth do something like that. My eyes instantly dart to her lips.

"Must be Dean." She's whispering, but I still hear every single word. "Bugger off, Malfoy."

And although I don't understand anything and have difficulty processing the whole situation, my feet immediately begin to move and I obey her order.

Our eyes meet one last time as I walk past her. Then I reach the door, step through it silently and quickly duck behind one of the columns. Just in time, because at that very moment Thomas enters the training room. He crosses the hall with brisk steps. I hold my breath until he has disappeared into the gym and the door closes behind him.

After a few more breathless seconds, I snap out of my trance and make my way to my sleeping quarters.

I'm furious. And I don't even know why.

"So, you and Weasley?"

Blaise is back.

This morning I found him at our table in the dining hall as if he had never been away, and actually I was quite relieved. The sight of him signifies familiarity. That being said, I'm just glad that whatever he was *on the surface* for, he seems to have come through it alive and well.

Thanks to the unexpected change of subject, Blaise raises his eyebrows. Then he slowly reaches for his coffee mug.

"You've been biting back that specific question for quite a while, haven't you?" he asks laconically, a faint smile playing around the corners of his mouth.

I shrug nonchalantly.

"I've been waiting for the right moment."

"And now this right moment has come?"

"I guess I was just too curious in the end."

"I see."

Blaise doesn't seem to take offense at my inquiry. In fact, he looks rather amused. His silence is sufficient confirmation that I was right about him and Miss Stubborn, although I never *really* doubted it. So far, my instincts have rarely failed me.

"Since when?" I probe.

"A few years," he replies, pushing a few strands of hair out of his face.

"I thought she was dating Potter."

"Mm, she *was*. They broke up right after the Battle of Hogwarts. I suspect they didn't have the time, let alone the leisure, to really get into it. And then..."

Blaise doesn't finish the sentence, but smirks. I got it anyway. *Then* he took his chance.

Oh, he really has had a thing for that little restive Gryffindor for *ages*.

"The Death Eaters don't know," I inform him, feigning indifference, although this remark has been on the tip of my tongue for weeks.

"Why should they? A few members of the Resistance know about it. Ginny's family knows. Other than that, we try to keep a low profile."

"But why?" I ask, confused. "As long as the Dark Lord is of the opinion that Weasley is Potter's girlfriend, she is in permanent, imminent danger. Aren't you afraid for her?"

"I'd rather you called her Ginny, you know," Blaise says in an attempt to distract me, pushing his empty plate away. "I associate her surname mainly with her brothers, our dear Ronald in particular."

"I'm serious, Blaise. What if someone tries to kidnap her to put pressure on Potter? Why take such a big risk?"

Getting his hands on someone like Ginny Weasley would be just what the Dark Lord is waiting for. He is convinced that she is the key to breaking down Potter's reserve; that she is the very person Potter loves so much that he would throw all his precautions to the wind to save her.

I'm not so convinced of that anymore. Of course, the Weasleys are still important to Potter. All of them. After all, they are his holy foster family. They have been by his side since the day he first set foot in the wizarding world. But Ginny (I have a hard time even *mentally* using the name) belongs to Blaise now. And Potter is working towards a greater good. She wouldn't be the first to lose her life for the cause.

Blaise sighs and rolls his eyes. Realizing that he has no choice but to answer my question, he surrenders.

"Do you really think it would be safer for her if Tom—" It's still unfamiliar to hear that name coming out of his mouth. "—knew she was *my* girlfriend? I'm Blaise Zabini, remember? The traitor. If they catch me, they won't spare me. And they won't be gracious and just give me

the *Avada* either. They will torture me, humiliate me in any way they can, make me feel that I chose the wrong side, and squeeze as much information about the Resistance as possible from me. She's no safer with me than with Harry, Draco. It's a choice between the devil and the deep blue sea."

I think about his words for a while and eventually come to the conclusion that he's probably right. I haven't looked at it from that perspective before.

And while I have no noteworthy relationship with the red-haired witch whom Blaise seems to love so much, I suddenly hope that nothing will happen to her. I'm glad they found each other, strange as it sounds and as naive as it may be, at least in this world we're living in.

As if reaching an unspoken agreement, we both turn back to our coffee and remain silent until the meeting begins.

Yep. One of the very meetings I'm now allowed to attend again, as a quick glance at the daily schedule on the black board told me this morning. Perhaps this is the reward for my information about Bristol being correct. Or maybe Potter finally got his way.

As he stands in front of the rebels and tells them that there will be an attack on the Death Eater safehouse in Bristol before the end of this week, I scan the crowd. Granger isn't here, and it's actually pretty pathetic that I double-check, after all I would have noticed if she had entered the dining hall during breakfast.

I spot Thomas next to Finnegan at one of the tables and glare at the back of his head until Potter says my name, snapping me out of my reverie.

Fuck.

A few rebels give me quick, surprised looks. Potter must have announced that it's my intel that makes the attack possible in the first place. I'm glad he didn't ask me a question because I wasn't even listening.

The combat training that is scheduled for the same day comes in handy.

Thomas is present and because we are free to choose our partner, I ask him casually whether he dares to compete against me. He immediately agrees. I don't even know why I want to challenge him so badly, but for some reason I feel provoked by him.

As I position myself in the center of the room and wrap my fingers around my wand in anticipation, I avoid looking at Granger, who has just arrived.

She was late today and is still wearing her combat gear, which probably means she took a detour after her shift. So that's why she wasn't at breakfast. I'd really like to know what she's always up to when she's *on the surface*. But maybe it was just another of her extended night watches.

Granger counts down from three and we begin.

Today there are no rules, which suits me even better. It's a perfectly normal duel and I can use any fucking curse I want. When it comes to Thomas, I can think of a few that I haven't been able to cast for far too long.

I've already hurled an *Expulso*, a *Confringo*, and an *Impedimenta* at him before he even gets around to casting his first spell.

Today, Thomas is my punchbag.

To my chagrin, his defensive spells are decent and I don't manage to immediately sweep him off the dueling area like I originally intended. He probably doesn't deserve me wreaking my *whatever* on him, but that doesn't make me any more lenient.

After a few minutes we're warmed up and the curses fly back and forth between us at breakneck speed. I'm confident that I can defeat Thomas, I just have to decide *how*. A simple disarming spell? A Stunner? Or maybe something that hurts at least moderately?

I carefully consider my options while deflecting a *Stupor* and a Stinging Hex, but then something else catches my attention. Or rather *someone*.

Up until now, Granger has been leaning against the wall and watching us, just like the other rebels, but now she slowly strolls through the hall and finally comes to a halt diagonally behind Thomas. She whispers something to him and that only makes me angrier.

I hurl a *Locomotor* and another *Confringo* at him.

But then my gaze falls on Thomas's face and his enraged expression makes me pause for a moment. I quickly deflect two of his hexes with one single *Protego*.

And then the scales fall from my eyes.

Granger is fucking *correcting* him. She's criticizing Thomas because I'm too good. Because she thinks I'm going to beat him.

My eyes dart to her face and I notice that tiny, scarcely perceptible tug at the left corner of her mouth and the resulting dimple above it. There's a glint in her eyes, and if I had to guess I'd say it's an indication of amusement. Except that until now I've been firmly convinced that this witch isn't even capable of such an emotion.

Another *Protego*. And another. I got distracted by her and therefore gave up my attack completely. All I'm doing now is blocking Thomas's spells.

Granger crosses her arms expectantly. Her eyes follow my wand movements and the deflected curses that keep buzzing against the walls and the columns, where they fizzle out. She examines my shield, my defensive stance, and the position of my feet. Her gaze travels up my legs and my torso, roams over my shoulders and my tense neck and then flits back to my face.

Our eyes meet and a wave of heat washes over me.

Thomas's *Stupor* hits my chest hard.

The next thing I see is Granger's face again. This time, though, it's hovering directly over mine, wearing her usual dismissive expression. She slides her wand back into its holster. Apparently she's the one who cast the *Rennervate*.

There's the rustling of robes, Thomas's laughter, and the sound of a door opening and closing. The training seems to be over.

"Quite the lousy performance," Granger drawls.

I prop myself up on my elbows and stare up at her blankly.

She knows full well that my performance wasn't *lousy*. I saw her looks and I know what they meant. And I would have easily blown Thomas away if she hadn't distracted me. However, I'm unable to tell if she realizes it was her fault.

Thomas, for his part, is probably pretty smug now and I begrudge him that massively. But at some point the time for revenge will come. I just have to be patient.

I get to my feet and meticulously smooth down my long-sleeved top. Standing closer to Granger than I probably should, I look down at her calmly.

"It was not," I reply boldly. "If it had been, you would have been on *my* side of the room lecturing *me*, am I right, Granger?"

She returns my gaze unwaveringly, even though she has to tilt her head back to do so.

I sneer at her.

"Wand," she demands crisply, not answering my question.

As I obediently place my wand in her outstretched hand, my fingers accidentally brush against hers. We pull our hands back at the same time, but she does it much more jerkily and even with a quiet hiss.

Ah, the *untouchable* Granger. How could I have forgotten?

Now I also remember that we actually wanted to stay away from each other, so I turn around and leave the training room without another word. I have to admit that it's quite difficult for me to walk away from her. I wouldn't mind bickering with her for a while longer, but I know I mustn't push my luck.

I skip lunch and retire to my sleeping quarters.

As you can see, the tension between the two shifts. What do you think of Draco's reactions? Happy weekend to all of you! ♡

9. TAR BLACK

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

9. TAR BLACK

"That's it," I praise, nodding encouragingly as Lovegood imitates the wand movement I just demonstrated to her. "I think you're ready."

She furrows her brow, appearing both thoughtful and concerned.

"I don't want to be responsible for anyone dying," she whispers through trembling lips, turning away from me to carefully pile up the parchments on which she's written down everything I've explained to her over the past few weeks.

I'm surprised at her sincerity, especially with me.

"It's the only way, Lovegood," I reply, shrugging. "I survived the *Exit* and I will certainly not be the only one."

"Yes, but *you* did it voluntarily." She wrinkles her nose anxiously. "It was your own choice to risk dying in the first place. That was incredibly brave of you, by the way."

Her renewed kindness makes me huff in frustration.

"I didn't have any *other* choice, did I? Should I have just carried on like all the years before, knowing that there is a solution after all? Just because I wasn't sure if I would survive?"

"That's exactly *why* it was brave," she insists, giving me a look that tells me false modesty is not welcome. "You were scared but did it anyway. And now you're here. Nothing else matters."

Some days I feel like Lovegood is the only person at Camp Black who really sees me. She's clearly nuts (and far too trusting and kind towards a Death Eater and murderer who certainly killed some people she liked or was at least well acquainted with), but she fucking *sees* me. Even without being aware of all my private motives, she seems to appreciate the effort that it took me to get here after so many years. She understands how big the risk was and sympathizes with the fear I endured. But above all, she recognizes the significance of the act itself.

The more I think about it, the tighter the feeling in my chest, so I quickly change the subject.

"If the rebels actually manage to capture someone in Bristol, you'll have to be quick," I continue, as if she hadn't said anything at all. "In any case, the prerequisite for trying out the *Exit* is that the attack goes unnoticed for as long as possible. Or in other words: nobody must escape. Once the Dark Lord learns that Bristol has been attacked, he will attempt to use the

Dark Mark to summon those who were there. And if that doesn't work, the next thing he'll do is try to track them down. You don't want him to do that while they're in the trauma room with you."

"Nobody must escape," Lovegood echoes, worrying her lower lip.

For clarification, I slowly shake my head.

Any Death Eater who resists arrest will have to die.

"But even if nobody escapes, I'll have to hurry," she adds uncertainly.

It's half statement, half question.

"Absolutely. I've told Potter that it would be better not to perform the *Exit* here at headquarters, but as far as I know they haven't decided on an alternative location yet."

We stare at each other in silence for a few seconds. On the spur of the moment, I decide to give Lovegood some comfort.

"I'll speak to Granger if I get the chance. I'm sure that if she knows what to pay attention to, she will assess the situation correctly. She will *not* put you at risk."

Lovegood nods, an odd combination of worry and relief on her face. The latter probably because she knows Granger will have everything under control. But the former? I have not the faintest idea, but I won't probe into it.

There's one more thing I need to get off my chest, although it probably sounds pretty presumptuous coming out of my mouth, since I'm the only one who has successfully completed the procedure so far. Nonetheless, I hope my next words will dispel at least some of Lovegood's concerns.

"Always remember: Who doesn't survive the *Exit* isn't worth your grief anyway."

Then I take my leave.

To be honest, I rather hope that her highly sensitive soul will *survive* the task at hand, because meanwhile I understand why Lovegood doesn't fight and instead dedicates herself entirely to healing. She can't bear the mere thought of being responsible for the pain, let alone the death, of another person, even if it's an enemy. She is too kindhearted, too pure.

It will be almost a miracle if the *Exit* doesn't break her.

It's already late at night when a brusque rap on the door puts an abrupt end to my woolly trains of thought. I'm just about to get up from the bed and answer the door when it's pushed open energetically.

Wow, privacy is *clearly* undervalued at Resistance headquarters.

I prop myself up on my elbows and put on a scowl to greet the intruder, who eventually turns out to be Granger. She struts into my sleeping quarters as if it were her own, glancing around with quick head movements.

"Can I help you?" I ask with irritation, not bothering to give up my comfortable position on the bed.

Since the consistently beautiful weather *out there* drove me mad at some point, I curtained the magical window with my robes, which is why Granger doesn't spot me right away. Her gaze flickers through the darkness, finally falls on my silhouette on the mattress and then briefly lingers on my bare chest. A second later she glares at me, frowning deeply.

"Would you get dressed?" she hisses.

Even though she phrases it as a question, there's that usual commanding tone in her voice. Bossy witch.

I lazily raise an eyebrow, but still stand up and cross the room. Every step I take is deliberately calm. My mind, on the other hand, is a mess because I have no idea what she could possibly want from me. I push past her, the fabric of her robes brushing my thigh, and reach for the t-shirt I carelessly tossed over the back of the chair before going to bed. After pulling it over my head, I turn back to face her.

Granger's neck is stiff and her eyes are still fixed on where I was lying on the bed just a moment ago. When she notices that I am looking at her expectantly, she snaps out of her trance and leans against the wall with her arms crossed.

I stroll to the opposite side of the room, exactly to the spot furthest from her in the cramped space.

"Luna said you wanted to talk to me about Bristol—" I suppress a sigh. Didn't fucking mean it like *that*, Lovegood. I rub the bridge of my nose as I endure Granger's arrogant scolding. "—and since we're planning to leave in a few hours, I had no choice but to run after you, which, to be frank, is an impertinence. I hope what you have to say is worth the effort and that coming here wasn't an enormous waste of time."

I recall the look on Lovegood's face when she confided in me. She's clearly uncomfortable with the thought of being the one responsible for the *Exit*, apparently even panicked that something might go wrong, so I'll forgive her for sending me the lioness herself. The very woman I'm supposed to stay away from.

I shouldn't have mentioned Granger to Lovegood, for fuck's sake.

"Just made a few remarks," I mutter wearily. "I didn't think she would bring it up right away."

I'm too tired to argue with her, but there's something else that keeps my voice calm and level-headed: I want to avoid at all costs that the situation escalates in any way tonight, because

that would probably do things to me again that should never result from it. Physical things, mind you. And that's not an option.

"Well, I'm listening," Granger replies just as calmly, making me look up in surprise.

There's doubt in her dark eyes, but for once she doesn't seem to be on the verge of hexing me into space. So I decide to tell her what I've already told Lovegood, except I don't have to be careful with Granger or go into great detail. She doesn't need to be treated with kid gloves. Plus, she knows exactly what I'm talking about.

"Don't let them escape and, come what may, do *not* leave them for dead. Even if you're sure they're *actually* dead. This is essential."

"Tsk. Go on."

"It's catch or kill, Granger."

"Gladly."

"The Dark Lord will attempt to locate his followers as soon as he becomes aware that an attack has occurred. If someone escapes—"

"No one will escape me."

"—that means full retreat. No *Exit*. Don't take them to one of the camps."

"I wouldn't be that stupid."

"I don't doubt that."

"Oh, really?" she scoffs with an incredulous laugh.

"Well, when I defected, there was a security lapse. Potter didn't check my Mark before I was taken to headquarters. While I'm sure you won't make the same mistake, I wanted to mention it anyway, just to be on the safe side."

"This *security lapse*, as you call it, was due to surprise. So far there have only been defectors without a Mark, and not many. Harry didn't think about it because you caught him off guard. It was a once-in-a-lifetime mistake."

"I hope so."

"I will make sure."

We stare at each other appraisingly for a few seconds. By now, both of Granger's hands are clenched into tight fists. She obviously doesn't like it when I give her advice, and tonight she can take it even less because she knows I have a point. Well, she will have to get used to it, because that's what I'm here for. And besides, she fucking *asked*.

"If you're interrogating someone and you feel like they have no ambitions to change sides, then don't waste your time with them," I continue.

"The *Exit* takes too long?" she deduces, to which I nod.

"The whole procedure takes at least thirty minutes. You don't have enough time for trial and error. Only give it a shot if you're profoundly convinced it might be worth the effort."

"And what if I'm not convinced? Instant execution?"

I grit my teeth, feeling the muscles in my jaw ripple. I can't help but think of Pansy, my mother, anyone I like in the Death Eater ranks who might fall into that category of individuals. Still, I nod.

The rebels can't risk holding loyal bearers of the Dark Mark captive. There is no place safe enough to hide them from the Dark Lord once he starts looking for them. If they don't want to turn their backs on him (or if the bloody *Exit* just doesn't work for them), they'll have to die, it's as simple as that. This is the time we live in; the time in which we try to *survive*.

"Where are you going to take them?" I ask. "Have you finally decided on a location?"

"This is classified information that you are not cleared for," Granger replies smugly, brushing the question aside with an impatient wave of her hand.

I huff in exasperation, but otherwise remain silent.

Her gaze roams over me once more. I endure it unmoved, even though my getup isn't exactly professional. T-shirt, boxers, tar black socks, bare legs, hopelessly tousled hair. Well, she's the one who barged in here. Her loss, I'd say.

Eventually her eyes linger on my forearm, and despite the darkness of the room and the distance between us, I can see her frowning.

"How did you do that?" she demands to know.

"I'm sure Potter and Lovegood told you how the *Exit* works," I drawl, rolling my eyes.

If she woke up this morning as the reincarnation of the nosy swot I remember from school, I'd rather she left me alone—especially in the middle of the night.

Granger clicks her tongue.

"That's not what I meant."

I watch suspiciously as she crosses the room and stops right in front of me. She raises her hand and her wand slides out of the holster strapped to her forearm. In spite of myself, I flinch. I'm still unarmed and she's perfectly aware of it. But apparently Granger has no intention of using her magic at all. I only realize what she's up to when the tip of her wand nudges my arm, causing me to rotate it so she can examine the *stain*. She merely uses her wand as an extension of her hand so she doesn't have to touch me. Minx.

"How did *you* do that?" she repeats while looking down at my arm.

Her voice and face are devoid of any emotion, but this time she lays stress on a different word. And at last the Sickie drops.

"Oh, that was just a happy coincidence," I deadpan. "What the fuck, Granger? How do you think I did it?"

All of a sudden I'm furious again. Furious because she had the gall to burst into my sleeping quarters, if only for Lovegood's sake. Furious because she's still doubting my motives, even though it should be proof enough that I stand before her as fresh as a daisy and *stained*. Furious because she seems to despise me so much that she can't even touch me to look at my fucking Mark but prefers to use her bloody wand to do so.

"You tell me," she demands adamantly.

From the thin line that now represents Granger's mouth, I can tell that she's angry as well.

"Unfortunately, once I had gathered enough courage, there was no way out," I spit, although it's hard for me to openly admit to her that I was (at least for a while) the coward she thinks I am to this day. "It was *literally* too late. Be a good girl and spare me another lecture on chances and choices. I'm fully aware. I remember every single second on that bloody tower even without you spelling it out for me every few days, thank you very much."

I withdraw my arm and lean back against the wall to put distance between us because it feels like her gaze is burning my skin. She lifts that very gaze from where the *stain* was just a second before and her eyes flick to my face instead.

"So no devotion, no loyalty, no Death Eater at heart?" I remain silent and simply return her icy stare. "Then how did you manage to keep going all these years? To play the faithful servant? To climb the ranks and carry out all of Tom's megalomaniac orders without even batting an eyelid?"

"I'm an Occlumens."

Fuck, I don't even know why I'm telling her.

"A Legilimens too?"

"Nope. The Dark Lord has always insisted on conducting the more important interrogations himself. In his eyes, there was no reason for me to learn Legilimency."

"But Occlumency? That doesn't make sense."

I shake my head with a sigh.

"It wasn't his decision. Severus taught me from fifth through seventh year and after the Battle of Hogwarts I continued to perfect the skill on my own. He never knew. Or at least he didn't know I was *that* good at it. Otherwise he would surely have killed me. As a precaution, if you will."

She eyes me, clearly analyzing. I'd really like to know what's on her mind right now. Whether she's picturing how I pushed all my dark doings to the back of my mind, whether she can somehow comprehend, or whether it only makes me weaker and more despicable in her eyes.

"Well, that explains a lot," she scoffs at length.

"It can't explain anything at all because I don't do it anymore. Not since my defection."

For a second, something akin to surprise flickers across her face.

"And why is that?" she asks immediately.

My response is merely a derisive smirk. I will certainly *not* tell her that I want to feel something again. That I'm trying to fix myself. That I haven't given up hope of becoming a better person. It's simply none of her business. And what's even less her business is the fact that it's quite difficult for me and I've been on the verge of closing my mind several times since I got here, not least because of her and her confusing presence.

After a moment of silence, I reply with a counter-question. It's something that has been on my mind since I first watched her in the training room during her beloved *four-on-one*. Now seems like an opportune moment to give in to my curiosity.

"Are you capable of it too?"

Granger barks out a laugh, the sound of which makes my blood run cold. It's not genuinely amused, just dead and hollow. I try to recall what her laugh used to sound like. Back then, in the library, in class, in the Great Hall. For the life of me, I can't remember.

"Oh, I've often wished for it, but no," she spits her venom at me, giving me one last cynical look. "Not everyone is so fortunate to be able to protect their sanity with the help of such an ability, Malfoy. Some of us simply have to deal with our shit."

And with those words, which indeed answer my question but stir me up no less than if she'd just left me in the dark, she turns on her heel and walks to the door. Her robes billow out behind her in a dramatic swirl of black fabric.

"We'll leave at the crack of dawn," her voice comes again—loud, clear, determined. "For your sake, I hope that your *Exit* works."

She still doesn't believe me and probably won't until she sees it with her own eyes at least once. This realization makes me desperately want to give her something else. Something that, aside from the *Exit*, will show her that I'm well worth listening to.

At first I try to hold myself back, but in the end my tongue is faster than my brain.

"Granger."

Contrary to my expectations, she actually pauses, even though she doesn't turn to face me again.

"Stay alert. If for some reason the Dark Lord suspects that I'm still alive, circumstances may have changed. There may be things waiting for you that I can't predict. If something strikes you as odd, even if it's just the tiniest detail, that means full retreat as well."

For a moment there is only silence, pounding heavily in my ears, then Granger takes a deep breath.

"You're not *that* important, Malfoy," she replies harshly.

She leaves the room and the door slams shut.

The next day passes in a vortex of nervous tension. Whenever my thoughts drift to Pansy, I try to distract myself with something else. I prepare more blueprints and lists for Potter. Names, safety measures, attack patterns. Only when my head is literally spinning do I give up the task and head off to dinner.

Maybe my worries are unnecessary. Perhaps Granger and Thomas are long since back and nobody told me. And why would they? It's surely not one of their priorities to inform me, of all people, about the success or failure of a Resistance operation.

Still, my jaw clenches from sheer uncertainty.

I pass the trauma room, but it's absolutely quiet behind the milk glass door. All the corridors are disconcertingly empty, as is the atrium.

When I finally enter the dining hall and spot Blaise and Weasley (no, *Ginny*) at one of the tables, I breathe a sigh of relief. I grab a plate of *something* and quickly sink into my usual seat across from them.

Conveniently, they're already talking about the subject that has been on my mind since I opened my eyes this morning.

"—if it went the way it did during the reconnaissance," Ginny sighs, to which Blaise nods, scowling.

My stomach churns.

"Bristol?" I interpose, unable to wait any longer.

They exchange a quick look, seemingly making the tacit decision to let me join their conversation.

"Something went wrong," Blaise explains. "Harry didn't have much time to talk about it when I bumped into him half an hour ago. He only dropped a few vague hints."

"She's going to kill Dean," Ginny chimes in ominously, which makes me frown.

"What happened?" I dig deeper, barely refraining from asking about Pansy right away.

A double sigh comes from the other side of the table.

"We don't know much yet. Four Death Eaters were there, just as you prophesied, but they were only able to get two of them out. And apparently only one of those two was a bearer of the Dark Mark." When I gasp, Blaise quickly adds, "Pansy wasn't among them."

"And the two they didn't get out?"

"Dead. Must have been a carnage. Luckily, Dean and Granger are doing well, but things haven't gone quite as planned."

I stop eating altogether and just stare at Blaise.

"And the *Exit*?"

"Harry didn't say anything about it when I met him."

"What was the problem in Bristol?"

Blaise and Ginny exchange another meaningful look.

I'd really like to lean over the table and smack both of them on the back of the head to make them speak faster, but I'm afraid that would greatly exceed my authority within headquarters, so I don't. Instead, I press.

"What did you mean earlier, Ginny? What happened 'during the reconnaissance'?"

Her head snaps up and she looks at me in surprise.

In my periphery, I can see a small, satisfied grin spreading across Blaise's face, but I completely ignore him and focus solely on his red-haired witch.

Maybe it's her first name coming out of my mouth that sets her talking. Anyway, she now opens her own and the words tumble out of it almost hastily.

"During the recce, Hermione had a bad gut feeling. She had the impression that the wards were stronger than you described them. Dean disagreed. He referred to them as 'ridiculously easy to disarm' and they had a heated argument about it the very same night. Luna heard them when she went to bed, even though they locked themselves in the workout room so they could yell at each other in peace."

Ginny takes a deep breath. "This morning, Hermione felt confirmed in her previous observations. She wanted to abort the mission, but Dean insisted on going through with it. It was more or less a trap. Dean missed a hidden alarm spell, which ultimately gave them away. The Death Eaters weren't *literally* waiting for them, but they were at least somewhat prepared for an attack. It escalated completely."

I narrow my eyes as a myriad of different thoughts flash through my mind. There are two things about Ginny's revelation that I find extremely confusing.

For one thing, I suddenly realize that until now I assumed that Granger and Thomas had shagged in the gym the night after their first trip to Bristol. The confusing part is that I'm actually relieved they didn't, and I don't know what to make of it. And for another thing, Granger wanted to call off the attack. So she considered taking my advice, after all I told her to be overcautious. *If something strikes you as odd, even if it's just the tiniest detail, that means full retreat as well.* She remembered my words. Her gut feeling matched my warning and she would have heeded it.

Thomas, that fucking tosser.

I resist the urge to rub my temples, but have to shake my head to clear my mind. The lack of Occlumency is becoming more and more noticeable.

"Draco." Blaise's voice brings me back to the here and now. "What are you thinking about?"

Rolling my bottom lip between my teeth, I discipline myself to be able to answer in a firm voice.

"Something is going horribly wrong. They shouldn't have been prepared for *anything*, let alone increased their security measures. Especially in Bristol. The focus of the Resistance has never been on this particular safehouse, so it has never been overly secured either. I fucking *knew* it has something to do with my disappearance," I hiss, greatly perturbed, and bang my fork on the tabletop. "I need to speak with Potter."

"He's not here right now."

That makes sense. He will have gone straight to wherever Lovegood is attempting to perform the *Exit* on the nameless Death Eater Granger captured for her.

"But how is Tom supposed to know you're still alive?" Ginny asks, alarmed, subconsciously revealing that Potter spoke to her about my suspicions.

So he *did* take my remark seriously, even though he acted so unconcerned. Bastard.

"Maybe he doesn't know for sure." I frown, thinking hard. "Perhaps it's just a guess on his part. I have no idea."

This is not how I imagined my stay with the Resistance. The Death Eaters provoking attacks and altering their plans because they suspect I might have defected is a part of the equation I haven't factored in. I was so sure that the *Exit* would make me disappear off their radar; that they would assume I was dead and simply put up with it. Well, maybe I underestimated my worth to the Dark Lord.

"Let's wait for the outcome of the interrogation," Blaise says at length. "If there is one, I mean."

I just nod slowly because what else can I do?

"And how's Granger?" I ask before I can stop myself.

For a brief moment there is silence. Eventually it's Ginny who takes pity on me while Blaise merely eyes me curiously.

"She's all right, *Draco*. For her, a four-on-one is a waltz."

Chapter End Notes

Well, who fell for the Hermione / Dean thing like Draco did? And were you just as relieved? We're picking up speed! Buckle up, folks. ♡

10. LIVID BLACK

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

10. LIVID BLACK

The unexpected four-on-one was definitely not a 'waltz' for Granger, as I can see for myself the very next morning.

On my way to breakfast, I stop by the command centre to ask Potter about the *Exit* Lovegood should have performed by now, desperate to know if she was successful. But Potter isn't there (if he's even back at headquarters yet), so I head for the dining hall instead. And there the harrowing sight awaits me.

I sink into a seat at one of the long dining tables and sip my black coffee, blinking discreetly through my eyelashes at Granger from time to time. She's sitting at the table furthest from mine, absentmindedly picking at a sandwich, while a Weasley (George this time, if I'm not mistaken) talks to her insistently.

The fact that she's distracted gives me enough time to take in her battered face, the current state of which suggests that the Death Eaters were indeed not entirely unprepared when Granger and Thomas attempted to infiltrate their hideout. A brightly colored bruise adorns her sharp features and her lower lip is split open and caked with blood.

There are several possible explanations as to why these visible injuries are still there. Either Lovegood hasn't returned to headquarters yet, or Granger made the conscious decision not to go to the trauma room. I could even understand the latter, since in recent years I, too, have often forced myself to let my non-fatal wounds heal naturally—as a reminder of how much I deserve to suffer. Well, maybe we don't differ that much from each other when it comes to our masochism.

Today Granger is scheduled for the same workout as me (mid-morning this time) and I can't help but wonder if she'll even show up in this poor condition. I have no idea if she sustained any other injuries, but the haematoma alone looks pretty bad. It covers most of her left cheek from the bridge of her nose to her jawbone, giving the impression that something heavy has hit her in the face. I catch myself thinking that she should be checked for a concussion as soon as possible.

Aside from the injuries, I take notice of something else: Granger looks bloody tired. She barely manages to hide it, even though she knows I'm here because she definitely saw me entering the dining hall. In my opinion, she needs a fucking break.

Suddenly aware of my disturbingly maudlin concern, I shake my head and look away. Why do I feel so responsible when it's none of my business? Plus, it's fucking *Granger*. She would

probably laugh at me if she knew I was worried about her health, after all she hates me from the bottom of her heart and the feeling is mutual. Basically.

Distraction comes in the form of Ginny Weasley.

She flops down in the vacant seat next (!) to me, but shakes her head in the negative when I ask her if she knows anything about the captured Death Eater or the *Exit*.

I'd really like to know who it is they've caught, but once again the rebels are trying my patience. I should probably get used to it.

"She looks awful," Ginny murmurs, glancing at Granger.

"Tsk, someone called it a *waltz*," I reply, much more accusingly than I intended.

I immediately feel Ginny's curious gaze on me, but purposely don't return it. Fuck, I sounded way too upset. I really need to hold my fire.

"She'll be fine," she says matter-of-factly.

In response, I just nod tensely, which ends our conversation.

Ginny eats her scrambled eggs in silence while I sip my coffee, just as taciturn. Blaise doesn't show up, but we still maintain our *comfy* togetherness, although (probably thanks to me) no one else sits down at our table.

Secretly, I'm grateful that Ginny doesn't just stand up and leave.

Instead, Granger does.

She crosses the room with brisk steps and flapping robes, George Weasley close on her heels.

When they reach the door, he lifts an arm and places his hand on the small of her back to guide her into the atrium. I can tell right away that he has no ulterior motive, but Granger reacts in such an extreme way as if he hadn't just touched her but jinxed her. Visibly cringing, she backs away from him.

I look at her face in surprise. For the blink of an eye, her mask isn't in place. Her lips are slightly parted and her dark eyes flicker in panic. Even her nostrils begin to tremble.

Weasley quickly whispers an apology. Granger gathers herself and nods, but as she continues walking her wand hand is shaking badly.

My gaze follows her until she's out of sight.

And a small part of the mystery is suddenly solved.

Whatever rumors Thomas, that absolute wanker, is spreading about her, Granger clearly has no *kink*. I have no idea what happened to her and I'll probably never get to know, but her fear

of being touched (because that's what it is) has absolutely *nothing* to do with an odd sexual preference. And I have a strong suspicion that said fear is related to her overall behavior.

The only question is *why*.

Of course, Granger doesn't skip the workout. She's either overly conscientious, insanely reckless, or indeed a masochist—I simply don't know.

While I still have questions (maybe even more than before), I'm determined to stay away from her as per our agreement. Again, she's jogging on one of those weird Muggle devices that I still don't understand and really need to take a closer look at sometime, so I retreat to another corner of the workout room where I obediently carry out Ronald Weasley's instructions.

About twenty members of the Resistance are present today, so the room is scorching hot. After what feels like the hundredth push-up, I struggle to my feet and take off my long-sleeved top. I use the fabric to wipe a few beads of sweat from my forehead before turning to Creevey, who is sitting on the floor and audibly fighting for air.

Actually, I want to use the short break to ask him if he's heard from Potter. Like Blaise, Creevey missed breakfast and was even late for workout, so I haven't had a chance to question him yet. But before I can even open my mouth, someone barges into me from the side.

Suddenly, Thomas is standing in front of me. There's a wrathful expression on his face, his cheeks are flushed and he's not wearing training clothes but his full combat gear. Which on the one hand makes sense, since he wasn't listed for this workout, but on the other hand doesn't, because logically he shouldn't be here at all.

"What collusive game are you playing, Malfoy?" he hisses, a few drops of saliva flying in my direction.

He gives me a powerful push. Unprepared for such an immediate act of violence, I stagger back before quickly steadying my footing.

"What are you talking about, Thomas?" I snap at him, exasperated.

My pulse is already quickening because I think I know what he's getting at. He's trying to pin his wrong decision on me.

In my periphery, I can see Creevey regaining his feet, but I make a swift gesture to show him that I'm in control of the situation. *For now*.

"That was the plan all along, wasn't it? That you come here, draft your pretty blueprints, and then send us to all your pack's hideouts where an ambush is already waiting for us?"

With one hand, I crumple up my t-shirt and toss it aside. In contrast to my angry arm movement, I grin broadly at Thomas.

Oh yes, this could be the revenge I've been waiting for. I don't have a wand, but I'm taller than him. And definitely stronger.

"Absolutely, Thomas, that was the plan. Sending two people into an *ambush* with four Death Eaters, half of whom can't even fight properly. How dumb can you get?"

I take a step forward and bring my face so close to his that I can feel the heat emanating from him. He wets his bottom lip, then bares his front teeth in anger.

"But that's the way it is, isn't it? A first cautious approach before trying it on a large scale? How many rebels would you have sent into a death trap next time? Twenty? Fifty? You want to weaken us from within! I really didn't think a filthy Death Eater would act so cleverly."

I laugh out loud, the sound echoing off the walls of the workout room. Thomas talks so much shit, it's unbelievable.

"Bugger me, you saw through me," I deadpan. "Now I can't put my devious plan into action because *you* already know what I'm up to. What a bother!"

He tries to push me once more, but now I'm standing before him like a rock. I was secretly waiting for him to try again so I could use it as an excuse to shove him in return. And that's what I do.

What Thomas is doing here is dangerous. My jaw muscles are already ticking.

"So I guess my efforts to cut the Dark Mark out of my arm were all for nothing," I continue provocatively. "Pity!"

"You can't manipulate me, Malfoy," he grumbles through his teeth. "I don't believe a word you say. However you fool the rest of us, it doesn't work with me."

"You're just worried that Granger won't take you on her missions anymore," I laugh in his face. "Because you're exceptionally stupid—"

Thomas's fist hits my face with an unpredictable blow and there's an ominous crack.

Well, if *that* was my nose, I'm gonna fucking kill him.

I taste blood and swallow it before pouncing on him, utterly furious. The workout room immediately becomes chaotic and there's a chorus of outrage. Undeterred, I bring Thomas down, unexpectedly benefiting from the fact that I took my t-shirt off just a few minutes ago. I'm sweaty and he can't grab me properly.

In one fluid movement, I straddle him, hook my left hand into his shoulder holster where his wand is still uselessly stowed, and pin him to the floor. Then I pull back my right arm to strike him in the face as well. Some of my blood is auspiciously trickling onto his forehead. I think it looks incredibly well on him.

"Stop it!"

The sudden, authoritarian exclamation makes me freeze mid-movement and just in time.

If it wasn't for *her* voice, I'm sure nothing would have stopped me from beating the living daylights out of Thomas, but now I lift my head and blink up at her, breathing heavily.

Granger is standing right next to us, wand (wherever the hell she's been hiding it in those damn tight workout clothes) at the ready in a rather nonchalant manner. To my surprise, it's not trained on me, but rather on Thomas. Her bruised face is expressionless, but her eyes, fixed firmly on her ex-boyfriend, former lover, *whatever*, are flashing.

"Get off him," she then adds quietly, obviously meaning me, although she's not looking at me.

I let go of Thomas, push his torso back onto the concrete (admittedly a little harder than necessary) and stand up. Neck stiff, I step to Creevey's side and shift my gaze to Granger.

It's dead silent now. The other rebels aren't training anymore, and I'm afraid that has been the case since Thomas first shoved me. I completely blocked out our audience.

"Aside from the fact that you, Dean," Granger begins, even sounding bored, "disobeyed my orders and put us in this predicament in the first place, Malfoy did indeed give an accurate assessment of the situation *before* we left for Bristol."

I gape at her, feeling a strange mix of consternation and satisfaction.

"And just for the record," she now addresses those around her, "the Death Eater we *freed* from the safehouse last night got rid of his Dark Mark. He is no longer bound to Tom, which means Malfoy has been telling nothing but the truth so far."

For a moment or two, her gaze is on me, but instead of meeting my eyes, she stares stoically at my bare chest—at my faded *Sectumsempra* scars. I wonder why she would admit something like that out loud when she can't seem to even look me in the face. But when her mouth forms the next sentence, the scales fall from my eyes.

This time it's not about me at all.

"What weakens us from within are fighters who make stupid decisions and put their partners in danger," she says condescendingly, lowering her gaze back to Thomas. Then she slowly squats down next to him and nudges his upper arm with the tip of her wand. "People like you."

Creevey clears his throat, clearly uncomfortable.

Only when Granger jumps to her feet, turns around and leaves the room with brisk steps and without another glance in my direction do the rebels come to life again. They leave the scene, whispering to each other. Weasley claps his hands loudly, causing most of the others to eventually resume their training, then he helps up Thomas, who is flushed with shame.

Frankly, I wouldn't want to be in his shoes either. Granger didn't even yell at him and yet made him look like a fool in front of everyone. Beastly witch.

I know she didn't do it for me. All she needed was a reason to publicly humiliate him, and siding with me for that purpose suited her just fine. Still, my pulse is pounding in my ears. And I find myself staring at the door she disappeared through.

I have a long conversation with Potter in which he tells me that the name of the Death Eater captured in Bristol is Hector Saunders.

So Granger told the truth. The *Exit* actually worked, and according to Potter, Lovegood did pretty well. However, that doesn't really help, because Saunders is one of the younger Death Eaters and therefore doesn't have any significant information that could be of use to the Resistance.

Well, at least it proved to them that I wasn't lying, and that's something, I suppose.

Lucky for Saunders, one would think. He is now under surveillance at Camp White and will be questioned a few more times. Potter just hinted that if he behaves well, they will allow him to prove himself, much like it was the case with me. I sincerely hope that Saunders will seize this unexpected opportunity.

Potter interrupts my train of thought.

"Hermione said they weren't very well prepared," he says, pushing his glasses up his nose.

Spread out on the table between us are the Bristol blueprints, taunting us.

"Not good enough for Granger, but they *were* prepared," I insist. "It's no coincidence, trust me, Potter. Bristol was a good target for an initial attack, but that doesn't change the fact that the other safehouses will be even better guarded from now on."

"And you still think Tom suspects you're alive?"

As always, I shudder at the sound of the name.

"We cannot rule out the possibility."

I'll stick to my opinion. Even if the Dark Lord entertains only the *vaguest* guess that I might still be alive, the rebels must be careful from now on.

"All right, how do we find out?" Potter demands to know.

I'm glad he's asking because, of course, I already have an idea.

"Malfoy Manor," I reveal, rising from my chair. Under his surprised gaze, I saunter over to the wall that still has the floor plan of the Manor taped to it. I tap the parchment. "If he really

believes that I defected, he will also expect me to show up there at some point, after all my mother is there."

I give Potter a meaningful look and take a deep breath before continuing.

"My suggestion is a reconnaissance. If I'm right, they'll have significantly increased security around the property by now."

Potter nods slowly. My words seem to make sense to him.

"I'll discuss it with Hermione and consider a mission."

My shoulders relax. So this is what it feels like when Saint Potter does exactly what you want him to do. It's the second time this week that one of the leaders of the Resistance has consulted me and even intends to follow my advice, at least to some extent. I could get used to that. And I want it to stay that way.

"You're obviously very important to him," Potter states after a moment of silence. He clasps his hands and puts both index fingers on his lips. His green eyes are on me, curious and determined. "Seems like you're an extraordinary loss. Why is that, Malfoy? What makes you so special?"

I knew this question would come up one day; was even a little surprised he didn't ask it sooner. The answer is as terrifying as it is disgusting, but I decide to tell him the truth because, in the end, there's no getting around it anyway.

"First and foremost, I know too much," I drawl, even though he's already aware of that.

Of course, the fact that I've risen in the Death Eater ranks hasn't gone unnoticed by the rebels. They just don't know *how high*, let alone the consequences that came with it.

"I ended up being his right-hand man, Potter. Worked my way up by successfully handling most of the strategic planning and commanding the other Death Eaters. I was his Granger, if you will. It was a good disguise. The best way to stay alive."

Potter sniffs at the inappropriate Granger comparison. My lips curl into an ironic smile.

"I even got him to tell me all about the Horcruxes, which makes me one of the very few people who know how vulnerable he is these days. But I think the information should also prepare me for what he had in mind to remedy this unfortunate circumstance."

For such a dark truth, the words fall comparatively easily from my lips. It's a knowledge that, with the help of my Occlumency, I've banished to the deepest corners of my mind, lest I choke to death on the feelings it arouses. There it slumbers peacefully, kept at bay by my mental barriers.

"His powers are constantly dwindling. If he dies, this time it will be for good. There is no soul piece left for him to resort to, so he did some research." I blow a few strands of hair out of my face. "And indeed there is one last silver lining, at least in his eyes. It's a dark magic ritual that should be somewhat familiar to you, as you were part of a simpler version of it a

few years ago. *Bone of the father, flesh of the servant, blood of the enemy.* Does that ring a bell?"

Potter stares at me so perplexed that it raises my hackles, even though I've known what the Dark Lord is up to for almost a year.

"It turns out there's an incantation far more potent than the one Pettigrew used to brew the Regeneration Potion back in fourth year. Don't look so surprised, I know everything there is to know about it. Anyway, the Dark Lord is convinced that thanks to this incantation he will regain his real, primordial body *and* all his magical and physical powers. That's why he hides so well—because he feels he can't take any risk until the ritual is carried out."

"And how does it work?" Potter asks.

His slightly shaking voice tells me that he already has a faint idea. He sounds just as shocked as I felt when I was brought in the loop.

"I think it's not very different from the ritual you participated in, fundamentally at least. A bit more crass, I'd say," I reply with faux cheerfulness. "Well, the bone of a powerful, magical ancestor. In the case of the Dark Lord, both Salazar Slytherin and Cadmus Peverell are possibilities. To save you the next question: He's already solved that problem by violating Peverell's grave to get the first *ingredient* for his *potion*."

"And the other two?"

I lift an eyebrow.

"The life of the most faithful servant and the soul of the greatest enemy. As you may notice, it doesn't really change things for you. He wants to kill you anyway. For my part, I pretty much fucked up. When I made my mark among his followers—wow, quite the pun—I didn't know such a ritual even existed. Like I said, I just figured it would be the best way to stay alive, at least until the opportunity to escape presented itself. When he finally revealed to me what else he would need me for, I barely managed to occlude myself, I was so *delighted*. Now we're both screwed, Potter. Doesn't feel good to be in your skin, I have to admit."

Potter is silent. I'm sure it will take him quite a while to process this news.

I allow myself another quick look at his pensive face.

"When the Dark Lord gets confirmation that I'm still alive and even left voluntarily, despite being so essential to his insane endeavour, then he'll want to punish me," I sigh matter-of-factly. "Especially since I took shelter in *your* headquarters of all places instead of dragging you to him for the ritual. If he gets his hands on me, he'll kill me in the most horrendous way. I'm no use to him now anyway, after all loyalty looks a little different, doesn't it? And revenge, Potter, is one of his favorite pastimes when he's not busy."

My hand is already on the doorknob, but Potter's voice makes me pause for a few more seconds.

"And that doesn't scare you?"

I just shrug.

"Basically, I've been dead inside for the past seven years. And at least since I found out about the ritual, I have nothing left to lose. How much worse can it get?"

With that, I exit the command centre and make my way to the trauma room so Lovegood can fix my bloody (ha!) nose.

That evening, Blaise, Ginny, Creevey and I sit at *our* table for quite a while after dinner. Eventually we are joined by Lovegood, who is mostly preoccupied with ogling the result of her healing in the form of my once again utterly aristocratic nose. Thanks to the recent success with the *Exit*, the atmosphere is relaxed. At least until I tell them what I also confided in Potter this afternoon.

I don't know what makes me open my mouth in the first place, but I just feel the nagging need to get it off my chest.

The reactions are quite different. Blaise turns white as a sheet and squeezes my shoulder with a shaking hand. Ginny blinks at me thoughtfully, worrying her lower lip. Lovegood looks equally concerned and compassionate. And Creevey is literally struck dumb with horror.

We are silent for a few minutes, then the subject is dropped. And for the first time since I can call Camp Black my new home, I feel like I'm conversing with acquaintances, maybe even friends.

They talk about Quidditch, the training sessions, the meals, and all their little aches and pains. As if it were completely normal for us to sit together in this constellation. As if I didn't just reveal to them why I had no choice but to defect and what the consequences might be. I find it feels easy to sit with them and just listen to them. Well, until the door opens.

Granger slips into the dining hall. From the jolt that goes through her body when she spots us, I can tell that she didn't expect to encounter anyone at this late hour. The sight of our unusual grouping seems to snub her even more. Her gaze slowly rakes over the heads of the others before falling on me. I return it for longer than I probably should, then give her a curt nod.

She breaks eye contact and saunters over to the buffet. I use the time she's inspecting the leftovers from dinner to examine her face.

Granger is quite pale, except for the bruise on her cheek, which has turned a deep shade of blue over the course of the day, and the shadows under her eyes, which are a matching livid black. Despite the exhaustion she radiates, her expression is hard and unyielding as she stuffs a plain roll into one of the pockets of her robes.

At this sight, two thoughts flash through my mind. For one thing, I'd really like to know if she has already spoken to Potter and therefore knows what the Dark Lord had in mind for him and me. And for another thing, I wonder if that plain roll, along with this morning's measly sandwich, seriously represents her entire food of the day. (And whether she really plans on eating it all alone in her sleeping quarters.)

And then suddenly I blurt out her name.

"Granger."

I can feel Blaise and Ginny's eyes on me (his alarmed, hers mildly surprised), but I studiously ignore them both.

Granger turns to face me. One of her hands is casually hooked into the strap of her breastplate, with the other she quickly brushes a curl from her face. Our eyes meet and she blinks reflexively.

"Yes, Malfoy?" she replies with a theatrical sigh.

"Come sit with us," I prompt her, utterly fearless, my eyes never leaving hers.

I hear Creevey choke on a sip of pumpkin juice. Lovegood's kind, light blue eyes flash at me, as does her smile. Ginny is quick on the uptake and comes to my help.

"Yes, Hermione, at least sit down to eat," she pleads, craning her neck to look at Granger.

"No, thanks," Granger replies brusquely, and Ginny winces.

At that, I slowly rise from my seat because I'm pretty sure I'm the only reason for her refusal. And if that's the case, I don't want to stand in her way. She seems like she needs a lighthearted conversation more than I do. Not to mention a reasonable dinner.

"I'll go," I offer, stepping over the bench.

I wave my hand in the direction of the now vacant seat.

Granger stares at me so flabbergasted as if I had asked her to sit on my lap. Her nostrils flare with irritation, then she shakes her head, glares at me one last time and stalks out of the dining hall without another word.

Completely demoralized, I roll my eyes before sitting back down.

"It was worth a try," Lovegood chirps, smiling to herself.

I avoid Blaise's gaze until he turns away from me and the conversation picks up where it left off. However, I no longer listen to them. I'm still brooding over Granger. Over her exhausted facial expression and her dismissive attitude. Over everything I've learned about her so far.

It's *her* friends who are sitting at the table with me. Ginny and Lovegood, with whom she once experienced adventures—back then, when she still wore her unruly curls. Blaise, whom

she would have preferred to Thomas as a partner for the reconnaissance in Bristol. Creevey, with whom she's connected at least through their work for the Resistance. And yet *she* is the one who left and not me, even though I offered.

I'm starting to have a feeling that Granger is the real captive here. Except that she built her *cell* all by herself. And I have no idea how it could come that far.

Chapter End Notes

Well, what do you think of Draco's secret? And are more and more questions about 'The Granger Mystery' popping up, or have you already solved a few? Thank you for your overwhelming support! That really means so much to me. ♡

11. PEPPER BLACK

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

11. PEPPER BLACK

"So, what do we have to pay attention to?"

It's my new role as a consultant that once again allows me to attend an official briefing. The reconnaissance of the Manor is pending, just as I suggested. And apparently Granger had no objections, otherwise I wouldn't be back in the command centre to discuss the next Resistance operation with the rebels just three days after my conversation with Potter.

Aside from me, Blaise, Creevey, the Weasel, one of his brothers (George again, I think) and Zacharias Smith are present. From their whispered words I gathered that the latter has been staying at Camp Grey for the past few weeks, which explains why I haven't met him yet. He's been ignoring me ever since I entered the room, but that's fine with me. Apart from the fact that I already didn't like him at Hogwarts, I don't feel the need for more new *friendships* for the time being. My involuntary bonds with Creevey, Ginny, and Lovegood are definitely enough for now.

Granger is here too and that's no big surprise as I'm sure she'll insist on doing the recce herself. *Again*. Meanwhile I'm certain that Creevey was right about one thing: she definitely has control issues.

Right now she's sitting casually in one of the chairs while everyone else is standing in front of the wall and examining the blueprints of the Manor that I've prepared. Her legs are resting on the tabletop, her arms are crossed and her face is shimmering greenish. So she really didn't let anyone heal her injuries, which confirms my secret assumptions regarding her masochism.

At least she looks relatively rested today. The shadows under her eyes aren't quite as dark as they were that night in the dining hall, and she's not quite as pale either. Maybe she hasn't been on duty for the past few nights, but I'm still not allowed to see the relevant schedules, so I can't be entirely sure. In fact, I've been on the verge of asking Blaise to undo his Concealing Charm several times, although I don't understand why I care when and where Granger is on night watch.

Suddenly, her dark eyes meet mine and she lifts a well-shaped eyebrow. With a start, I realize I still haven't answered the question Potter asked me a few seconds ago, I was so busy staring at Granger.

Bugger.

I quickly look away.

"The Manor has always been fairly well secured. These are all original wards and defensive measures," I begin, tapping one of the parchments attached to the wall. "You can be sure to find them exactly as I listed them. What you should be looking for are additional alarm spells. Anything not known to me would confirm my suspicions as to the Dark Lord's train of thought. If he truly believes that I am alive, then he will have taken appropriate measures to prevent me from simply marching into my own house."

I grit my teeth and purposely keep my gaze on the wall rather than meeting anyone's eyes.

"Apart from my mother, who doesn't pose a serious threat, there are a few permanent *guests* at the Manor," I continue. "Definitely Bellatrix, Rodolphus and Rabastan—a lovely, little family reunion. Rowle and Dolohov have taken up residence there as well. Avery is there at times. There aren't many Death Eaters there, but pretty much the *élite*. Any other person you spot there is an indication that the Dark Lord suspects something. There are usually no extra guard posts as the Manor is already sufficiently protected by its own magic. So if there are any now, then—"

"—that's also an indication, we get it," George Weasley interposes, to which I nod.

"We'll send two people," Potter decides.

I shrug to show my agreement. As long as they don't get caught, two rebels are enough to get an initial overview of the situation.

"Hermione will undertake the *recce*," he continues.

I give Granger another quick look. She's now clasped her hands behind her head, but her eyes are still on me, which admittedly makes me a little nervous.

We haven't crossed paths since I offered her my seat in the dining hall to sit with her friends, and stupidly, she's been on my mind constantly ever since. Whatever the reason, I just can't stop thinking about her. I can call it a mystery I want to solve, idle curiosity, or lack of comprehension—without my Occlumency, I'm unable to deal with it properly. I urgently need a solution to this problem.

"Blaise will accompany you," Potter now addresses Granger directly.

I turn to Blaise and nod in satisfaction. Since Thomas isn't attending today's briefing, I was secretly hoping that Granger would get her *first choice* this time, and I'm glad Blaise agreed. He knows the Manor well and is a decent fighter.

"I want Malfoy," comes Granger's voice, calm but determined.

What the fuck?

And I'm not the only one who can hardly believe his ears. A collective rustle of robes tells me that everyone else is turning to Granger. For my part, I'm completely paralyzed in front of the wall with the blueprints, still staring at Blaise, who frowns deeply.

"Come again?" he asks, his voice leaving *no* doubt that he *clearly* doubts Granger's sanity.

"He should finally make himself useful," she replies lightly, swinging her legs off the table and standing up. "No one knows the Manor and its wards better than he does. No one but him will be able to tell at first glance if they've really stepped-up the security measures. Taking him with me is the most efficient and easiest solution."

Granger slowly crosses the room. I break out of my rigid state and turn to face her, my pulse roaring in my ears.

I wonder if she's gone completely insane. Not mainly because I'm concerned for my safety, but because her proposal poses such a great risk to the Resistance. I would never have expected something like that from her, especially considering how she's been acting towards me the last few weeks.

Well, unsurprisingly, she doesn't seem overly concerned about said risk.

"He won't do anything stupid because that would be his certain death. The *Exit* works, which means Tom will tear him limb from limb if he gets his hands on him. Ergo, he's dependent on our protection. That being said, I can handle him." She stops in front of me and gives me a challenging look. "Or are you too scared, Malfoy?"

"That's a shitty idea, Hermione," Weasley chimes in, shaking his head.

Granger ignores him. All her attention is on me.

"Harry, weren't you the one who told me to accept the situation and just live with it?" she adds calmly. "And that we should try to benefit from Malfoy as much as possible?"

My gaze slowly wanders to Potter.

There's a calculating expression on his face, his eyes darting between Granger and me. He's thinking hard. And I have a feeling he'll agree with Granger, even if it's just to give her what she wants for once.

"I'll do it." The words leave my mouth before Potter can open his own. In my periphery, I can see the corners of Granger's mouth quirk. "I could make a vow."

"Oh, that won't be necessary," Granger says quickly. "I'll make sure you don't do anything that could endanger the Resistance."

My eyes flick back to her. She looks smug. And pretty dangerous. There's something else she hasn't said out loud yet, but I think I already know what it is.

"All right, but only on one condition," Potter says at last.

Blaise, Weasel-Weasley, and Smith protest loudly, but Potter signals them to shut up, which they eventually do.

I take a deep breath.

"Before I send you anywhere together, I want to see you fight side by side at least once. In an emergency, you need to be able to function as a *team*." As Potter speaks, he gives Granger an unambiguous look that she doesn't even notice because her gaze is still fixed on me.

"Convince me that you can pull yourself together, both of you, and we'll give it a shot."

"Brilliant!" Granger replies contentedly. "Shall we go straight to the simulation room?"

Potter nods hesitantly.

And with that, my fate is as good as sealed.

The simulation room is less spectacular than I imagined. There is no indication of what spells are installed or how it works in general. I only vaguely remember what Creevey told me about the room before my first workout, and I have to admit I'm quite curious.

Blaise hands me my wand with a worried look on his face. I'm not sure what exactly he thinks about all this, but unlike Potter, he doesn't seem particularly comfortable with the idea of me and Granger being sent to *the surface* together. To be honest, I don't know what to think of it either. I'm still busy processing the new circumstances.

"Ready?" Potter asks, leaning against the concrete wall right next to Blaise.

The Weasel, Smith and Creevey are also present. George Weasley, however, sauntered off towards the dining hall after we left the command centre, shaking his head. Apparently, he's the only one who doesn't care about this spectacle.

As Granger positions herself next to me, I peer down at her.

"Ready when you are," she says nonchalantly.

I suppress a sigh of incomprehension. Only Merlin knows what's going on in her head.

"Maximum level?" Potter makes sure, to which Granger nods.

Why, of course! She designed the simulations and therefore knows what to expect from this so-called maximum level. Starting at a lower level because she has an advantage over me either way would probably have been too much to ask. But never mind. I'm almost looking forward to tearing apart her simulations.

Potter starts a countdown. *Three, two, one*. He activates the simulations with a nonverbal spell and within the blink of an eye we find ourselves in a volley of attacks.

Stupor, Confringo, Diffindo, Bombarda. It's not just friendly *Expelliarmus* that are hailing down on us now.

It takes a few seconds for me to get back into my routine. Since I wasn't allowed to use my wand for weeks, except for combat training, my magic initially pulses uncontrollably through

my arm, but after a few spells it gets better. I concentrate, calm my breathing and finally get into a good rhythm. I parry a *Deprimo* and an *Everte Statum* while Granger brushes aside a *Flipendo* and two Stunners like a couple of pesky Doxys.

We deflect each and every spell, gradually feeling our way into the room. Side by side. As Potter requested. Granger is right next to me and I can feel the warmth she radiates.

Fighting alongside her is almost more impressive than fighting against her. She's quick and precise and exudes a laid-back calmness that rubs off on me. I let it consume me and block out everything else: Potter, Blaise, Creevey, Smith, Weasley; the fact that I might not come back from the Manor if something goes wrong; the constant musings about why Granger would want me to accompany her in the first place.

Everything blurs and even the sounds around us become an atmospheric noise.

Granger and I are an entity now.

And we're fucking good.

Granger summons her protective shield and holds it up in front of me with sheer willpower. I take the opportunity to spin around and cover her back as well.

And so we work our way through the room. Block, deflect, refresh the shield, block, block, deflect. I cast a water-based defensive spell on Granger just in time before an *Incendio* can hit her in the back. She's busy deflecting two different curses, but still seems to sense my magic because she gives me a curt nod.

We're almost on the other side of the room when a *Relaschio Ingens* races towards us from the left. Granger drops her weakened shield and summons a new one.

Then she stands there, teeth clenched, fighting the incessant stream of red sparks that electrifies her hair, causing some stray curls to rise and dance gently around her head.

I deflect one last *Stupor* before turning around. My hand shoots out, right over Granger's tense shoulder, and I augment her shield with my own *Protego*. The force of our combined magic and the still buzzing *Relaschio* pushes Granger back against my chest. Her body feels far more delicate and fragile than her whole demeanor would ever suggest, but I quickly shrug off the thought and redouble my efforts.

We begin to slowly move forward. One step at a time. Granger is still right in front of me. Our joint shield fights the spell until it eventually fizzles out.

And then it's quiet.

My chest rises and falls against Granger's back and a few strands of her hair tickle my jaw. My eyes dart around the room, trying to detect the next attack, but nothing happens.

The moment Granger steps away from me, smooths down her robes and turns to face Potter, obviously triumphant, I realize the simulation is over. And I, absolute moron that I am, can't help but stare at her while she doesn't even spare me a glance.

She squares her shoulders, lifts her chin, and slides her wand into its holster in one graceful movement. Then she exchanges a quick nod with Potter and makes her way to the door.

"We'll leave in the morning," she says, before marching out of the room without looking back.

Potter, Weasley, Creevey, and Smith follow her one by one, but before they step through the door I can feel the eyes of each of them rake over me with a different emotion: contentment, distrust, amusement, confusion. Exactly in that order.

Only Blaise stays behind. He's still leaning against the wall with his arms crossed. As he studies me, his eyes sparkle gleefully. He doesn't look quite as somber as he did during the briefing in the command centre.

"Well," he says slowly, a small smile tugging at his lips, "*that* was quite impressive. If I weren't talking about you and Granger, I'd almost be inclined to say that you make a pretty decent team."

I just lift an eyebrow.

"Granger is a good fighter and so am I."

Wiping the sweat from my brow, I stroll over to Blaise, but when I try to hand him my wand he just shakes his head and makes no move to take it.

"Keep it until tomorrow morning," he decides.

I nod in relief and pocket my wand.

This gesture of trust feels good. Besides, I'm not going to abuse it anyway.

Blaise pushes himself off the wall and we leave the room together. The training room is empty, as is the atrium, so we can walk to our sleeping quarters undisturbed.

"You know, I didn't realize that you had to huddle together so trustingly to summon a collaborative *Protego*. I mean, it worked wonderfully, no doubt—" Blaise smirks. "—but I'm sure that even without any physical displays of affection, you could have convinced Harry that the two of you were capable of working together without killing each other in the process."

My neck gets hot and I stiffen.

"Do me a favor, Blaise, and just shut up," I snap at him half-heartedly.

The entire rest of our way is accompanied by his suppressed laughter.

"Thanks," I murmur as Blaise hands me the shoulder holster that vaguely resembles the

harness of my old Death Eater uniform.

I strap it on with practiced fingers before attaching my wand to the matching forearm holster.

For the first time ever, I'm wearing full Resistance combat gear, and I have to admit it doesn't even feel bad. Defensive magic is woven into every single piece of clothing, which is admittedly pretty clever. I bet I know who came up with this idea. (As pretty much *every* idea that keeps Camp Black running smoothly.)

And here comes said person.

Granger struts into the room, already in her own gear.

Her gaze falls on me and for a few seconds she takes in the sight of me in the unfamiliar get-up, sizing me up from the heavy combat boots to the pepper black robes. Finally she looks me in the face and our eyes meet. I'm pretty sure that Blaise, the traitorous idiot, is watching us very closely, so I turn away with deliberate indifference.

"Preliminary briefing, Granger," Blaise demands.

He produces a quill and a small piece of parchment.

"Three hours maximum," Granger drawls. As soon as she starts speaking, my eyes dart back to her. I'm such a lost cause, really. "Should there be an incident, I'll use the *Proteus* to inform you."

"Who do I send but my humble self if I don't hear from you after three hours?" Blaise asks casually.

Granger gives him a tiny grin and with a leap, my heart begins a surprisingly hard and rapid rhythm in my chest. I close my eyes in exasperation.

What - the - *fuck*?

Well, this is the first time I've seen Granger's face do anything resembling a happy expression. That might be the reason then.

I blink several times while fighting the urge to occlude myself on the spot.

"It won't come to that, but Smith and Boot aren't on watch today. If two companions aren't enough for you, take Creevey with you as well. He hasn't been on duty with you for ages anyway." Granger sighs deeply. "He begs me every sodding day to be assigned to you. A real menace, that bloke."

Now it's Blaise who grins.

"Okay, so we'll see each other later either way."

With these words, he takes his leave. At the door, however, he stops briefly and turns to face me one last time.

"Behave yourself, Draco. And take good care of Granger."

All right, I'm definitely going to kill him.

Granger rolls her eyes, but doesn't seem too upset by the comment. Nevertheless, I remain silent. I don't want to blow my chance before we're even on our way. (My chance to prove myself to the rebels, of course—*not* my chance with Granger.)

The door of the equipment room clicks shut and we are alone.

Granger puts her hands on her hips and shifts her gaze back to me. In order to do something supposedly useful, I busy myself with double-checking all the clasps on my combat gear.

"Are you done?" she asks after a while.

I clear my throat and nod.

"You were passable," she says suddenly. "Yesterday. In the simulation room."

"I was damn good," I correct her haughtily.

She snorts quietly.

"Acceptable."

"Excellent."

"Well, you'll at least be able to save your own arse if push comes to shove."

"Oh? I thought that was your job."

"Maybe I'm the one you need to save your arse from."

"Tempting idea," I reply with mock delight. "But if you just want to get me out of camp so you can finish me off in private, we could have saved us yesterday's performance."

"Mm."

She doesn't say anything else.

I take advantage of the abrupt end of our little exchange to ask her the question that's been on my mind since the briefing in the command centre.

"The fact that I know the Manor better than anyone isn't why you want to take me with you, am I right?" I ask, nonchalantly shoving my hands into the pockets of my cargo trousers.

"While it was a good argument to get Potter to agree to your proposal, it's not the real reason."

The look Granger gives me is actually answer enough. So my secret guess was correct. My knowledge of the Manor and its wards is *not* decisive—not at all. She doesn't really need me.

"No, it's not," she admits freely after a short pause.

"Care to share?" I ask, although I think I already know the answer.

Granger shrugs, not even bothering to look caught. She eyes me for a while, appraisingly pressing her tongue against the inside of her cheek. Then she decides to answer me.

"Harry has made it clear that he believes you and even trusts you to some extent because everything you said about the *Exit* was true. So far, so good. But thanks to your escape and Tom's suspiciousness, each of our operations is now more dangerous than ever. I think it's only fair that you face these new threats as well."

"And because I'm not a great loss if something goes wrong," I add, deducing.

She nods without hesitation.

I feel a slight pang in my chest, although I don't understand why.

"You don't have anyone here waiting for you to come back, Malfoy. But Blaise does. Every Weasley does, of course. Even Smith has a girlfriend and his brother is also a member of the Resistance. Unlike them, you won't be missed if something bad happens to you, so why risk their lives when I can just take you with me instead? We allow you to hide here with us, so you might as well make yourself useful. This is what I said yesterday and I stand by it."

I return her unyielding gaze. It's cold and expressionless again, as I'm used to from her. The lightness that prevailed at the beginning of our conversation is gone. The atmosphere in the room is suddenly dark and heavy.

"I see," I reply in a low voice.

And I really do, because she's absolutely right.

Why would Granger drag Blaise with her and risk not being able to bring him back to Ginny when there is another solution? She knows I'll do whatever it takes to stay alive, but if I fail, it's indeed no great loss to the rebels, especially now that I've already passed on and written down so much information. There is nobody who would shed a tear if I didn't return to Camp Black; nobody who would be devastated if they lost me. The only person who cares about me is still convinced that I'm already dead. And even if she knew that I'm still alive: my mother is not yet a member of the Resistance. So no, nobody will miss me *here*.

But something about the explanation bothers me. Something doesn't add up.

"If that's the case, Granger, why put your own life on the line every day?" I ask impulsively, immediately biting my tongue.

Of course, I'm aware that she would be a huge loss to the Resistance in general, after all she is the fucking brains of the entire movement, but the emotion I now see flickering across her face gives me a first glimpse of a partial truth.

She takes a deep, telltale breath. My eyes dart between hers as I process this silent confession.

So Hermione Granger, former member of the Golden Trio, tireless advocate of justice, brightest witch of her age, thinks no one is waiting for *her* to come back from her missions. In her eyes, she doesn't have what makes her want to protect the other rebels: no significant other, no family, no concerned friend. That's why she takes so many risks day in and day out without batting an eyelid; why she takes on more tasks than her body and health can handle.

Granger considers herself expendable. Maybe not as expendable as me, but still.

The realization is surprisingly sad.

Before I can say anything else, she mutters harshly that we have no time to waste and heads for the door.

Sighing, I square my shoulders and follow her.

Chapter End Notes

Well, who would have thought? As you can imagine, the next chapter will be so much fun. Thanks for still being with me! ♥

12. VELVET BLACK

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

12. VELVET BLACK

It's only when I step into the atrium that I realize I'm about to find out where Resistance headquarters is located. Fucking finally. And while I obviously have no intention of misusing this information in any way, my heart is suddenly beating a little faster. Well, I just love solving mysteries and *this* is definitely a big one.

To my surprise, Granger leads me into the command centre, which is currently deserted. She closes the door behind us and silently flicks her wand. What then becomes visible opposite the wall with the notes and the blueprints is a goddamn lift.

I glance quizzically at Granger but refrain from asking a hasty question. Instead, I just follow her into the lift cage, whereupon the door grilles rattle shut. The sound vaguely reminds me of the lifts in the former Ministry of Magic. However, I'm pretty sure that we're *not* in the Ministry building since it's been occupied by the Death Eaters for years.

The lift starts moving. I lean against one of the walls, trying not to let show how curious I am. When the lift cage comes to a stop just a few seconds later, I have to close my eyes for a moment. After being *down there* for so long, I'm not used to the natural light of a sunrise or a biting breeze.

I squint against the sun before following Granger onto what appears to be the roof of a fairly large building. Quickly, I let my gaze wander. As I figure out where we are from a few easily identifiable visual cues, I whistle through my teeth.

"You've gotta be fucking kidding me," I say appreciatively.

I turn to face Granger, who is looking at me with a mixture of unconcealed satisfaction and pride, one hand on her hip.

"Let me guess—" I could swear she's stifling a smirk. She controls herself very well, but her voice is a few octaves higher than usual and her eyes sparkle as she continues. "—it's your first time on the roof of St. Mungo's?"

The first thought that comes to my mind at this particular choice of words is disconcerting. (And so fucking inappropriate.) I quickly brush it aside because there are clearly more important things to figure out than what the bloody hell is wrong with me.

"How?" I simply ask, utterly perplexed.

Granger shrugs so casually, as if she's not presenting me with an absolutely brilliant move.

"Took a while to build in the hidden basement and install the lift. An infinite number of Notice-Me-Not Charms had to be cast, and all while the hospital was in full swing. But it happens to be the safest place, especially considering that, to this day, Tom firmly believes it's under his control."

Ah, now I see why the rebels are so well-equipped when it comes to their healing facility, their sacred trauma room.

Once again my head is spinning, but there is more. All of a sudden, a certain admiration washes over me. I realize that Granger is responsible for this as well. It was her idea, no doubt. I can practically see it in her face. That damn genius.

"You can't Apparate in or out of St. Mungo's," I say eventually. "How do we get out of here?"

"Portkeys," she replies, pointing to a pile of clutter in one of the corners of the flat roof. "Each of them takes us to a specific location from which we can then Disapparate to wherever we want. I think it goes without saying that I'm not going to tell you where this location is. It's just a meadow. Don't rack your brains about it. It would be nothing but a waste of time."

I simply nod as I'm sure this is non-negotiable for now.

"And why do you have so many of them?" I dig deeper. "Portkeys used to be created in a dedicated Department of the Ministry and distribution was tightly controlled."

"We're lucky to have some *Portus* experts in our ranks."

Very well-resourced indeed. I wonder how many times this thought will cross my mind over the next few weeks. How many more surprises await me here at Camp Black?

"And how do we get back?"

I lift a questioning eyebrow.

"With a Return-Portkey." Granger pats one of the pockets of her cargo trousers. "I'll deposit it at our stopover. Taking a Portkey on a recce or even a mission would be far too risky. There is always the possibility that one of us will be captured. Is your curiosity finally satisfied?"

Granger doesn't wait for my answer, but turns on her heel, her velvet black robes billowing out behind her, and marches toward the inconspicuous, seemingly randomly discarded items she pointed to earlier.

Still completely overwhelmed, I hurry to follow her.

As promised, the Portkey brings us to a lush green meadow that could be any fucking meadow in the depths of Great Britain. No houses as far as the eye can see; hills here and there; a few groups of trees on the horizon.

"From here we have to Apparate twice to get to the Manor," Granger informs me once we're both steady and she's hidden the Return-Portkey. "We're still too far from Wiltshire to do it in one jump."

Before I can ask any more questions, she grabs my upper arm. We Disapparate with a *crack* and reappear in a small piece of forest.

"Wands out," she instructs me.

I obey, although I'd like to tell her that I'd rather have a quick briefing than just carrying out her gruff orders all the time.

"Shall we disillusion ourselves?" I ask with a sigh, determined to forestall her with at least *that* question.

She nods and flicks her wand twice. When she's done, she grabs me again. A blink of an eye later, we materialize on top of a small hill that's adjacent to my family's land.

"Welcome home, Malfoy," the invisible Granger murmurs with quite a bit of sarcasm in her voice.

Knowing she can't see it, I roll my eyes extensively. Cheeky witch. I don't give her an answer to this insolence.

"There are the Anti-Disapparation-Perimeters along with the Muggle Repelling Charms," I explain quietly instead, indicating it with a flicker of my translucent hand. "We need to get closer so we can get a proper look at the wards. Spot-checking should suffice. Walking round the whole property is utter nonsense and would take a lot longer than the three hours you've scheduled."

"All right," she replies simply, no resentment in her voice this time.

Now, she's the Granger with a job to do. A rebel on a mission. It's professional, I'll give her that.

We trudge down the hill in silence. Our heavy boots arouse soft, squelching noises on the damp grass. As we approach the defensive measures, I allow myself a glance into the distance.

Given its sheer size, the Manor is clearly visible, although I know there are still miles between us and the house. The mere sight means nothing to me anymore, but knowing that my mother is somewhere behind those thick walls makes me swallow hard. Well, I don't have time for such poignant thoughts—literally.

We're still several yards from the Muggle Repelling Charms when a deafening howl cuts through the air. At the exact same moment, I feel a magical shockwave sweep over us.

"What the hell was that?" Granger whispers.

"Fuck," I mutter. "We must have missed something."

She grips my arm and gasps, "I can't Disapparate."

"Then that's what we just felt. The Anti-Disapparation-Perimeters have automatically expanded. Fucking devilish. Run!"

And that's what we do.

I'm glad Granger trains regularly on her Muggle device because despite her much shorter legs she's just as fast as me. The ground and botany appearing to our left and right blur in my field of vision. Every few seconds, Granger's hand touches my arm, but the stifled curses coming from her direction tell me that she's still unable to Disapparate.

Just as the first curses start whizzing past our heads, we reach the edge of a grove and throw ourselves between the tree trunks. They were damn fast, which can only mean that the security measures have actually been increased. So I was right, and that's more than inconvenient. We start blindly firing our own curses—over our shoulders, through the trees, onto the pursuers we can't even see yet.

As we keep running, I try to orient myself. Only Merlin knows how far the Anti-Disapparation-Perimeters have stretched, and we can't keep up our current pace forever, workouts or not.

After a few seconds, loud screams echo down from the treetops.

"They have brooms," I hiss to Granger, panting.

In unison, we raise our wands in the air.

Unfortunately, the downside of firing off curses is that it makes it easier for the enemy to pin down the source. A *Finite* hits Granger and she loses her Disillusionment. She hurls an angry Stunner in the general direction of her attacker and just a moment later a loud thud announces that the person has fallen off their broom. Well, I really hope they broke their neck.

Granger tugs on my arm and maneuvers me into a small pit. She cancels my Disillusionment so she can see me and we stare at each other breathlessly. One of her index fingers is pressed to her lips. I prick up my ears.

"It was the alarm spell that's only supposed to go off when he's near," says an angry voice. "So the bastard is actually alive."

That voice definitely belongs to Rowle.

"And who's the witch?" someone shouts back.

Dolohov, if I'm not mistaken. I fucking *knew* it.

I hear the characteristic whirr of brooms and a noise that sounds like a bumpy landing.

"Bollox! She hit Travers. He's dead."

To my surprise, Granger's eyes flash at the words. She looks at me and cocks an eyebrow. Her hand appears in front of my face, first raising three fingers, then two. She purses her lips thoughtfully, eyeing me questioningly. In response I just shrug my shoulders silently. Aside from Rowle and Dolohov (and the dead Travers), there don't seem to be any other Death Eaters in the small forest at the moment, but that doesn't mean backup isn't already on the way.

"That was Granger," Rowle snarls. "I'd recognize that Mudblood cunt anywhere."

Granger's lips twitch in amusement. Now I'm the one who raises an eyebrow.

"Draco, you fucking coward! Act like a man and come out, you traitorous wanker."

One of the two spits on the ground. A few more insults reach my ears, but I hardly listen, instead using the breather to look around once more. This time with success. A vague memory wells up in me and I have an idea.

"I know where we can hide," I whisper, barely audible.

Granger turns her head, bringing her ear closer to my face. I lean forward and the scent of her shampoo fills my nostrils. It's definitely the wrong moment, but I suddenly realize that this is the first time I've ever been this close to her, at least without being threatened by her. And she smells fucking edible.

"Out of this pit," I begin to explain what I have in mind in as few words as possible. "Opposite direction. Impossible to avoid a duel. Use your shield."

Granger nods slightly, her dark brown eyes mere inches from mine and the tips of our noses almost touching. Then her warm breath brushes my lips.

"On three?"

There are two things that completely throw me off balance: firstly, the realization that Granger seems to want to blindly follow my suggestion without even remotely questioning it, and secondly, the fact that her eyes are sparkling almost gleefully.

You'd think she's enjoying this little chase. And perhaps she really is. Maybe this is the only way for her to break out of the *cell* she's locked herself in. Curious.

Well, I'll have to ponder that later because her lips are already moving again. She's mouthing the countdown, which makes me think back to our performance in the simulation room.

One, two, three.

Granger shoots out of the pit. She's already activated her shield and spat out an *Avada* before I'm even behind her.

I have to admit I'm a bit surprised, although I know what she's capable of. The eyewitness reports of her behavior in the combat zones should have prepared me for this sight, and yet it's strange to see it with my own eyes.

Her *Avada* gets deflected and Rowle and Dolohov, standing in a clearing a few yards away from us, immediately return fire. For my part, I stay close to Granger and thus behind her protective shield.

As we duel the two Death Eaters, we slowly feel our way in what I sincerely hope is the right direction. Step by step, one foot in front of the other.

Countless curses buzz across the clearing, half of which end up in Granger's reliable shield. We take turns at blocking the rest while simultaneously firing our own. Every single one of Granger's curses is deadly. And finally, she hits Rowle in the throat with one of them.

A long cut appears in the pale skin just above his collar, then a gush of blood spurts from the gaping wound. Rowle lets out a gurgle and slumps to the ground. Dolohov swears and hurls a *Bombarda* at us before summoning a shield and crouching down next to Rowle to see if he can heal him on the fly.

This is the chance we've been waiting for.

"Run!" I shout to Granger.

She dismisses her shield and we plunge back into the forest. A few lackadaisical curses follow us, but Dolohov is clearly distracted. And apparently he decides to at least try to save Rowle's life, because a few seconds later there's silence. That's no reason to slow down, though. I'm pretty sure once he's managed to stabilize Rowle, he'll promptly call for the backup.

"There it is," I yell eventually.

Between the thick bushes, a small tree house comes into view. The forest has adopted it as its own over the years. It's weather-beaten, almost entirely ivy-covered, and doesn't look as solid as I remember, but hey, at least it's still there.

"Where's what supposed to be?" Granger gasps out, looking around in confusion.

"Here."

I sprint to the small wooden ladder and put my hand on one of the rungs. Only then does the tree house become visible to Granger's eyes.

She gives me a look that is both suspicious and disbelieving, but follows me as I begin to climb the ladder. Once again, I admire her courage. It could be a trap, but she does it anyway. Maybe Granger really doesn't care if she dies today.

When the warped wood gives way, we tumble through the shack's small door and into the darkness that awaits us beyond. I slam the door shut and take a few gulps of air.

"What the hell is this?" Granger asks once she's caught her breath.

She takes a big step to the only window in the two-square-foot room and uses her wand to remove some ivy vines so she can peek out. It's still quiet in the grove, but I'm pretty sure it

won't be long before they send out a search party.

"My old tree house," I inform Granger, leaning against one of the wooden walls and tilting my head back.

"Your *tree house*," she repeats, raising a doubtful eyebrow. "And you seriously consider this a safe hiding place?"

Without waiting for an answer, she grabs my arm and tries to Disapparate, but it still doesn't work. Of course it doesn't. Even if the Anti-Disapparation-Perimeters hadn't expanded, we would have re-entered them long ago. The tree house is located on the extended grounds of the Manor.

"I do. There's some sort of simplified *Fidelius* on it. Ultimately, it's just a hoax, but it works just as reliably as the real spell. My mother invented it when I was a child. She's the Secret Keeper, if you will. No one but me can see or enter the tree house—unless I want them to, of course."

"Touching," Granger snorts. "Then let's hope that your little *hoax* hasn't melted into thin air over the years and that your mother will keep her mouth shut if the worst comes to the worst."

I glare at her.

"If Dolohov actually consults her, which, frankly, I very much doubt, she certainly doesn't have the tree house in mind right away. Besides, she would *never* betray me. She would rather die than do that, I can assure you."

We stare at each other hard for a few seconds, then Granger turns away. She takes another look out the window. Except for the chirping of the birds and the soft swishing of the branches, which are repeatedly pressed against the wooden walls of the tree house by the wind, no noise reaches our ears.

After a while I open my mouth again because I just can't stand the silence.

"I didn't think you'd cast deadly curses so quickly," I admit, eyeing Granger intently.

She gives me a quick glance.

"And why is that? You made it very clear that you regard me as a murderer, so what did you expect instead?"

I shrug. Unfortunately, I have no real answer to that.

"I don't know. I just remember you differently, is all. Basically, I know you've killed people before, but standing right next to you when you're trying to do it is weird. I mean, you were part of the famous Golden Trio, the epitome of innocence and white magic. You used to give tons of second chances."

"Those days are long gone."

"Well, what has changed?"

It's probably not for me to ask her a question like that, but ever since I've been at Resistance headquarters, I've been racking my brains about it. I want to solve the mystery and since I haven't occluded myself in weeks, my musings only stop when I'm momentarily distracted. Whenever I have enough time to think, an insatiable curiosity gets the better of me and I just can't shake it.

"I don't think that's any of your business," Granger hisses warningly.

"Just trying to comprehend."

She laughs scornfully.

"How was it with you, then? Why did you *suddenly* start killing people or doing other horrible things?"

Well, that's something else entirely, isn't it?

"I simply had no other choice, I would think," I reply casually. "Plus, with a good dose of Occlumency, pretty much anything is possible."

Granger sniffs.

"Well, apart from your *fantastic* Occlumency, the same is true for me. If we want to win this war, we must not be squeamish. I will not spare anyone who unhesitatingly unleashes a Killing Curse on a friend of mine on the battlefield, and that goes for every single Death Eater, loyal or not." She makes a dismissive hand gesture. "You don't think about it, you just do it, right? *Everything* we do, we do solely to keep ourselves and the people close to us alive. There is no more profound justification, at least not for me."

I return her gaze thoughtfully.

In a way, of course, she's right. After all, I've already noticed that the Death Eaters and the rebels display mostly the same behavior these days. But I disagree with one of her statements. Unlike her, I would never have lasted this long without my Occlumency. Simply 'not thinking about it' doesn't seem like a sufficient explanation to me. That's not how black magic works, and certainly not the *Avada* in particular. You have to *really* want to kill to cast the curse. It takes a lot of hate and at the same time a certain mental strength to keep your soul from being torn apart by it. How this is supposed to work without Occlumency is beyond me, but obviously Granger is an expert at it.

Loud shouts and footsteps suddenly break the silence of the forest and tear me out of my complicated thoughts. I step to Granger's side and also glance out the window, clutching my wand.

Some black-robed figures come into view, but they are too far away for us to make out their words. I can clearly see their eyes darting across the clearing and towards the tree house, but

there's no indication that they can see it. The spell actually does its job, even after all these years. Relieved, I let out the breath I was unconsciously holding.

"Fantastic," Granger mutters cynically as she watches the Death Eaters fan out in all directions to search the surrounding forest. "And what now?"

"I'd say we wait," I reply, shrugging. "You should let Blaise know we're going to be late. Let's stay here until we feel they have given up their quest. If they don't track us down by tomorrow morning, they'll most likely assume we escaped the Anti-Disapparation-Perimeters."

"Splendid," she says with even more irony, if that's even possible. "It's always been my dream to be locked in a tree house with you for almost twenty-four hours."

I have to smirk, which is rewarded with a scowl.

"My pleasure," I deadpan.

Granger produces a Galleon from her trouser pocket and taps it with her wand to change the inscription before leaning against the wall next to the window, visibly vexed.

For my part, I sink to the floor, stretch out my legs with a sigh, and let my head fall against the wall again.

And then we wait.

Chapter End Notes

Yay, I did it! That was the last chapter before my one-week vacation!

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for already more than 100 Kudos. Kudos are love and our only reward, but it means a lot more to me personally as English isn't even my first language and I put so much effort and brainpower into translating my own work. So thank you, thank you, thank you!

We'll continue in a week with another really exciting chapter that will bring a few new facts to light. Also, it slowly gets a little more intense as far as the relationship of our two protagonists is concerned. I am really looking forward to the further journey!

Hugs to all of you. ♡

13. ABYSSAL BLACK

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

13. ABYSSAL BLACK

I wake up to the warm morning sun shining directly on my face. The birds are still (or again) chirping and I squint in confusion against the blinding brightness that makes me its victim by pouring relentlessly through the small window.

It takes me a while to remember where I am. And there's something else that suddenly makes my heart skip a beat. A warmth, a pressure, an unfamiliar weight—right on my chest. None of it belongs there.

Even more confused, I lower my gaze and catch a glimpse of the brown, slightly wavy shock of hair that rests on my long-sleeved top and moves in time with my breathing.

Granger must have sat down at some point too.

The tree house isn't particularly large, which inevitably leads to a certain *nearness* when two adults sit next to each other on the wall opposite the door. (Which is indeed the safest place to sit in case you're afraid someone might break into the little shack you're hiding in.) However, Granger surely had no intention of dozing off. But that's obviously what happened, because her muscles are perceptibly relaxed and she's breathing slowly and evenly.

Maybe she was too exhausted in the end? And my chest was just there?

Granger's hand, still clutching her wand, rests on her thigh. With every breath she takes, an unruly strand of hair that has slipped out of her bun moves gently up and down, reflecting the sunbeams falling on it.

Eventually, I realize that apart from her head on my chest, I can feel even more of her warmth and softness pressing against other parts of my body. My right arm is resting loosely behind Granger and the appertaining hand has strayed onto her waist.

On the instant, I'm wide awake. I feel the strong urge to push her off me and jump up, but I pull myself together at the last moment. What would surely result from such a sudden movement is one of her indignant curses, and I don't want to take the risk.

So instead, I do my best to regain control of both my heartbeat and my breathing, which has also increased slightly. Then I carefully lift each finger of my *stray* hand from her hip—one at a time, so it doesn't wake her up. Thumb, index finger, middle finger, ring finger. With the last finger, the pinky, I let go of her completely, even holding my breath for a moment.

As slowly as possible, I lower my arm to the wooden floor. Then I lean my head back against the wall and close my eyes. I give myself another brief moment, putting all my strength into a convincingly sleepy expression, before finally letting out a cough.

In a split second, Granger is on her feet. I hear her panting, but it's only after three more calm breaths that I allow myself a purportedly first blink.

"What's wrong?" I murmur, looking up at her with feigned concern.

For good measure, I have a good fake yawn next.

Granger's wand and eyes are trained on the door, but what I can see of her face looks so appalled you'd think someone is actually trying to break into the tree house. Only that I know what the real reason for her horror is.

"I thought I heard something," she chokes out breathlessly.

Apparently, she's not very good at lying. I quickly memorize the look on her face. If I ever see *that* expression on her again, I'll know I can't believe a word she says.

I slowly struggle to my feet and glance at her. There's a clearly visible imprint of my shoulder holster on her cheek, and before I can take my eyes off it, her gaze shifts to me and she notices where I'm looking. Her free hand shoots up to her face, her eyes widening.

Bugger. Now *she* knows that *I* know.

However, she doesn't comment on it. Instead, we just face each other for a while, both motionless and speechless. This time, she's the one who breaks our mutual silence.

"Do you think it's safe to go?" she asks in a decidedly indifferent tone.

Her mask is back in place. She's cold and professional again.

"Probably. In any case, we have to try. Let's disillusion ourselves. Then we'll search for the end of the Anti-Disapparation-Perimeters."

Granger doesn't object, so that's exactly what we do.

"So now Tom knows you're still alive," Blaise states with a sigh.

There are five of us sitting at the large conference table in the command centre: Potter, Weasley, Granger, Blaise and I.

I simply nod in response. Although this is exactly what I wanted to avoid until yesterday, after we returned to headquarters I came to the conclusion that it no longer makes a difference. Whether the Dark Lord wants to kill me for this reason or for his revitalizing ritual—it all boils down to the same thing at the end of the day.

The decisive advantage that comes with the end of my charade is that I can now go *to the surface* at any time without having to fear that my cover will be blown. At least in theory and, of course, at my own peril. Yesterday the mere thought would have tormented me, but today, oddly enough, that's no longer the case. Rather, knowing that the Niffler is out of the bag and I can fight the Death Eaters openly fills me with a certain satisfaction. I tell myself it has absolutely *nothing* to do with Granger and I making a pretty decent team in combat. (Blaise's words.)

"Has it ever occurred to you that if you hadn't fled, it would inevitably have ruined his plans?" Granger asks suddenly, unknowingly answering my private question as to whether Potter told her what the Dark Lord had in mind for us. "After all, you *weren't* his most faithful servant, so the ritual wouldn't have worked with you, would it? That would have saved us a lot of hard work. Now he will simply pick the next best."

She's obviously mad at me, and I'd bet it has something to do with her little nap on my chest. Frowning, I open my mouth to answer, but Potter forestalls me.

"That would only have mattered if I had been available as well, Hermione, so what's your point?" They exchange a stubborn look. "Now that Malfoy is here, Tom is already missing two crucial components, ingredients, whatever. That gives us more time for now. Even if he eventually gets his hands on me by some unfortunate coincidence, he'll first have to find a suitable substitute for Malfoy. It was the right decision to defect."

Oh wow, thank you, Potter.

"It was just a mind game," Granger replies stiffly. "I merely wanted to know if he even thought about it before he fled."

"I did," I snarl. "Extensively so. And I came to the conclusion that there was no point in sacrificing myself. Enriching the Resistance with my inside knowledge seemed much wiser to me. Potter is absolutely right."

For Potter and I both to admit that the other is right in the same conversation is definitely a first and at least as creepy as the fact that we seem to have the same sense of humor. My fingers twitch on the tabletop and I purposely avoid looking at him. I don't want him to get used to it.

Granger is silent. Her face is tense and her fingers are thrumming an indefinable beat on her bent knee. Strangely enough, it pisses me off that she's so deluded to even consider that I could have just sacrificed myself to outwit the Dark Lord. What, pray, did she expect? That I would have accepted my own death full of anticipation? Of all the rude things she has said to me so far, this is probably the most insulting.

I turn away from her, fighting with all my might against the rising anger.

"Anyway," Weasley chimes in, "we need to decide how to proceed further, and quickly. The Manor is no longer an option. Instead, we should focus on the other safehouses and try to capture more *Exit* candidates, because right now that's the only thing that gets us any closer to our ultimate goal: finding out where the bastard is hiding. Now that the Death Eaters know

that Malfoy betrayed them, they will drastically increase, or at least modify, their security measures. We must use whatever time we have left to take advantage of Malfoy's intel."

For once, he's right. My inside knowledge won't be of use for much longer. If we're lucky, they won't immediately abandon or relocate all the hideouts and safehouses, but they will definitely strengthen their wards. And they will be more vigilant than ever.

"The hideout in Sheffield," I suggest.

"All right," Potter agrees immediately. "This time we can save ourselves a reconnaissance, I would think. We stick to Malfoy's information and attack them head-on. What awaits us apart from the defensive measures Malfoy has listed is unpredictable anyway."

"He's definitely coming," Granger says in a tone that leaves no doubt that she won't brook any dissent on the matter. To top it all off, she says it like I'm not even there. "Blaise, Smith and Creevey as well, if time permits."

After a quick glance at a schedule he produces from one of his robe pockets, Weasley nods.

"None of them are on watch duty today."

"All right," Blaise murmurs, rising from his chair. "When will we leave?"

"As soon as night falls," Granger insists. "We have no time to waste."

"Okay."

Potter dismisses us. I enter the atrium just after Granger and before I can stop myself, I open my mouth one last time.

"You should take a nap," I advise, blinking slyly in her direction. "It will do you good. After all, you didn't get a wink of sleep last night and it was certainly tiring to keep watch the whole time."

And with these words I ditch her. I even manage to resist the urge to glance over my shoulder and take in her probably delightfully scandalized expression.

All the way to my sleeping quarters, my rage doesn't subside. I can't even shake it by having a wank in the shower, desperately focusing on some distant memory of a blowjob from a nameless Death Eater. (Whether I didn't ask her name back then or simply can't remember it, I don't even try to fathom.) When I collapse on my bed afterwards, the rage is still there, hovering over me like a dark cloud.

Nevertheless, I remain steadfast and do not occlude myself.

We leave right after dinner.

Our way leads us out of the equipment room, through the command centre, into the lift and thus onto the roof of St. Mungo's. We use a Portkey, Apparate a whopping three times in a row, and finally materialize in a dimly lit industrial area of the Sheffield suburb that houses the Death Eater hideout that we're going to attack. I briefly take the lead with Granger walking right next to me. Each of us is disillusioned and highly focused.

When the building comes into view, we stop so Granger can give her final instructions.

"Blaise will disarm the wards, just as we discussed. Remember that in addition to the two floors, there is a basement. Blaise, Smith, Creevey—you comb the ground floor before securing the cellar. It's unlikely that someone is hiding there, but make sure anyway. Malfoy and I will take the upper floor."

Nobody answers, but that's completely unnecessary anyway. Granger is used to having her commands executed blindly, I've learned that much by now.

"Here we go," she hisses.

The rippling air to my left tells me she's beginning to move. I keep up with her strides.

We reach the house and Blaise sets about disarming the wards, which takes no more than half a minute. There are no additional security measures. Maybe they haven't got around to setting any up yet, maybe they haven't been forewarned—either way it suits our book.

As Blaise steps aside, Granger takes the lead. She opens the door silently and we scurry, one by one, into the dark entrance area of the sordid warehouse.

I have to suppress a disgusted groan. It reeks and I'm afraid I know why. The smell that greets us is definitely the stench of a wolf, and unfortunately Sheffield is one of Greyback's favorite hideouts. I sincerely hope that he, of all people, isn't here today.

Without hesitation, Granger and I climb the steel staircase to the upper floor. The others encounter their victims quicker than we do. Before we even reach the top of the stairs, loud screams and the buzzing of curses ring out from the darkness below. We ignore the din and hurry on undeterred.

Granger pushes open the first door in the long hallway. The room is empty, but there are three more.

Now at the latest, anyone who might be hiding up here has definitely been forewarned, because the sounds from the ground floor are gradually developing into a proper duel noise.

My *Bombarda* hits the door of the next room. Also empty. Apart from a few ratty mattresses scattered all over the floor, there's nothing and no one to be seen, and there's no furniture to hide behind either. For good measure, I cast a *Homenum Revelio*, but it doesn't reveal anything.

"The right door is yours, I'll take the left," Granger whispers, to which I give a grunt of agreement.

Simultaneously, we turn to the last two rooms. I take the right door off its hinges with another heavy spell and slip into the darkness beyond.

This room is *not* empty.

Several curses are hurled wildly in my general direction, but I'm still disillusioned, so I can easily offset the advantage they have from the darkness. I summon a blue flame to flicker in the middle of the room and illuminate the scenery, then quickly leap aside, dodging an *Avada* and a *Confringo*.

I have two attackers. One of them is (to my chagrin) Gregory Goyle.

It's not like Goyle and I maintained our friendship after the Battle of Hogwarts. Unlike me, he actively and voluntarily chose the Dark Side and followed in his father's footsteps by fighting for the Dark Lord out of conviction. Still, it's pretty unfortunate that, firstly, he's here at all, and secondly, I'm the one who has to deal with him because I can't kill him. In order to cast an *Avada* on a childhood friend, I would definitely have to reactivate my Occlumency, and I want to avoid that at all costs. However, Goyle is also not a good candidate for the *Exit* and therefore not predestined for capture, because if he's anything, it's a loyal Death Eater.

In the end, I opt for a Stunner. Goyle goes down like a felled tree.

Now that his fellow has been immobilized just like that, the second Death Eater gets nervous. He spins around and points his wand in my general direction.

"*Avada Ke—*"

A *Locomotor* on my part freezes him mid-movement and I watch as he collapses as well. I cross the room and bend over his limp body, cursing in frustration when I recognize him.

Scabior. A former Snatcher and not a bearer of the Dark Mark, which also makes him pretty fucking useless. But it probably doesn't hurt to ask him if the Death Eaters plan on relocating their safehouses any time soon.

I kick his wand out of his hand, dismiss my Disillusionment, press my knee onto his wand arm, and lift the spell that rendered him immobile. As soon as his muscles relax, he starts thrashing wildly. I wrap my hand around his neck and apply pressure to keep him on the floor.

"It's you," he snaps at me, to which I nod patiently. "Argh, you motherfucker."

"Yep, it's me," I reply with a bitter smile and a *friendly* pat on his cheek. "Time to talk, Scabior. Better with me than in one of the Resistance torture cells, right?"

Which, of course, is a completely spontaneous fabrication on my part. It still has the desired effect, as his eyes widen in panic and he even forgets to defend himself for a moment.

"You know I don't know anything," he gasps out.

"Mm, we'll see about that. What about the hideouts? The safehouses?" I ask, unperturbed. "Is there any information that they will be relocated in the near future?"

"I don't kn—"

Scabior pauses, takes a rasping breath, then gurgles. I furrow my brow in confusion. It's only when blood oozes from beneath my wrists that I understand what's going on. I take my hands off his collar and stare in disbelief at the deep gash that now adorns his neck just above his Adam's apple.

My head snaps up.

Granger is standing in the doorway, her wand trained on Scabior. Her face is oddly contorted and her eyes are wide open and abyssal black. I can't even see her pupils anymore.

Not expecting it at all, I'm caught off guard when she flicks her wand at me. Her magic flings me away from the other wizard and I skid across the bare floor to the opposite wall.

"What the fuck, Granger?" I shout, jumping back to my feet.

Expertly ignoring me, she bends over Scabior, who is pressing his hands to the wound on his neck in a desperate attempt to stop the bleeding. From the rattle in his throat, he's already about to choke on his own blood, but Granger isn't done with him yet. She straddles him, wraps her small hands around his neck and squeezes, blood spurting out between her fingers. Scabior starts kicking again, but it's no use. Granger leans on him with all her weight, which, due to his severe injury, actually keeps him down, even though she is much lighter than him.

I stare at her breathlessly, having no idea what's going on.

"Granger!"

I say her name once more, but again get no answer. In the absence of a better idea, I cautiously approach her and reach out to pull her away from him, but the moment my left hand touches her shoulder, she spins around and shoves me so hard that I actually have to take a step back to keep my balance.

"Don't you dare, Malfoy!" she hisses menacingly, causing me to withdraw my arm.

My wand hand twitches, but before I can even think of a way to bring her back to reason, she spits out an *Expelliarmus*. (Which is probably just a foretaste of what she'll do to me if I put my oar in a second time.) Cursing under my breath, I dive after my wand and pick it up.

I eye her with irritation before trying to get through to her once more.

"Granger, what's the matter with you? Stop it and come to your fucking senses!"

She continues to ignore me, giving no indication that she even heard me. All I can do is watch helplessly as she leans on the writhing wizard beneath her with all her body weight.

Scabior's own hands are now on Granger's upper arms, trying to push her away, but even though disgust is clearly written all over her face, it doesn't stop her from finishing what she started. She only throttles him harder and finally, after what feels like an eternity, Scabior's body goes limp. His arms fall to the floor and his eyes stare lifelessly at the ceiling.

Granger takes a deep breath, lets go of him, and slowly pushes herself into an upright position, blood dripping from her hands onto the floor. She still seems pretty disconnected from reality, but now there's a flicker of relief in her eyes that I can't quite place.

While I stare at her in bewilderment, she doesn't even glance at me. She simply wipes her hands clean on her cargo trousers, straightens herself, and prepares to leave the room. Before she reaches the door, however, she turns around one last time. Her gaze falls on Goyle.

Frowning, she slowly shakes her head. Then she slips her wand out of its holster once more, points it at the stunned figure on the floor, and hurls an *Avada* at my former friend.

Since Granger has long since Disapparated by the time we leave the warehouse, Blaise is the one who accompanies me back to Camp Black.

A total of six followers of the Dark Lord were present today. For this petty hideout in Sheffield, that's an extremely high number. Five of them are dead now. With the only person eligible for the *Exit*, Smith is on his way to where Lovegood is waiting for him.

"One of the Greengrass sisters," Blaise informs me after we've made fast work of the first Apparition and are therefore more or less safe. "Astoria, if I'm not mistaken. I only saw her briefly before dealing with Mulciber Junior. Is she a good test subject?"

I nod absentmindedly.

I suppose I should be glad that Astoria, of all people, was captured today. She's indeed an excellent *Exit* candidate, as she's only had the Dark Mark for a few years and didn't take it willingly either. (That being said, I've slept with her on a handful of occasions and generally feel a certain sympathy for her.) However, Granger's odd performance has completely thrown me off course and I'm having a hard time even thinking about Astoria right now.

In fact, I have no idea why Granger attacked Scabior so brutally whereas she almost casually killed Goyle. I just can't get the scene out of my head. Her distorted expression, her tight jaw, her dark eyes. The sight of her choking the bleeding man plays in a continuous loop in my mind's eye. And then that flicker in her gaze. As if this unexpected act of violence had given her back some lost peace for a brief moment.

Granger is unpredictable, dangerously so. If I had harbored even one last spark of doubt in this regard, it would be gone by now at the latest. What I witnessed today was cruel, even if Scabior's life meant absolutely nothing to me. He was a rat, a murderer, and certainly didn't deserve any better, but seeing the cold determination with which Granger wrapped her hands around his neck while his blood seeped through her fingers was oddly disturbing.

She's a ticking time bomb.

The whole way back, I struggle with that very thought. I mull it over during the last two Side-Alongs with Blaise; while we return to the roof of St. Mungo's using one of the Portkeys we deposited in the meadow before the mission; and as we step into the lift.

It's only when the grilles open and we enter the command centre that my attention is drawn elsewhere, for Potter is present. He was probably waiting for the last mission participants to return to headquarters safe and sound.

Blaise leaves to check on Creevey, who was hit by a Stinging Hex and Apparated right after Granger to go to the trauma room. For my part, I stay behind and cross my arms. The opportunity to have a word with Potter in private comes in handy.

"Good job," Potter says, giving me the once-over. "Hermione has already reported back to me. I'll be off to see if Luna had any success performing the *Exit* on Greengrass."

"Do you actually know what she's doing out there, Potter?" I hiss, completely ignoring his previous words.

He looks confused.

"Luna? Well, I suppose—"

"Granger, you twit," I interrupt him harshly.

For a moment, there is silence.

"What did she do this time?" Potter sighs in resignation.

Well, that sounds like this isn't the first time Granger has gone nuts during a mission.

Now *I'm* the one reporting back to him, noticing that he visibly pales as I speak. Finally, he takes off his glasses, wipes them thoughtfully with the hem of his long-sleeved top, and shrugs.

"Scabior was just a Snatcher who had an awful lot of skeletons in his closet," he says, raising an eyebrow in a decidedly calm manner. "What exactly are you worried about?"

"Granger's sanity, to be perfectly honest," I snap at him. "You didn't see her, Potter. What the hell is wrong with her? I fucking know she's dangerous. As for her, the Death Eater combat reports were pretty precise, believe me. And I also know what she's capable of. But today? What she did there wasn't normal."

It relieves and scares me in equal measure to finally voice these thoughts. I clench my hands into fists. Mystery or not, it's not just about *understanding* Granger anymore.

I continue, "If I had tried to stop her, she would have cursed me, if not killed me as well. She was bloodthirsty. Out of things, really. So again, what is *wrong* with her? I have a right to

know, at least if you expect me to go on more missions with her and trust her with my life. The very life that is already on a knife-edge, as you bloody well know."

Potter groans, throws his head back and briefly closes his eyes. For a few seconds it looks like he's fighting an internal battle with himself, but then he seems to come to the conclusion that there's no point in lying to me.

"It was a one-off, I'm pretty sure of that," he begins, dropping into one of the chairs grouped around the conference table.

I blow out my cheeks in disbelief and scowl at him.

Potter ignores it. He just folds his hands on the tabletop as if preparing for a lengthy explanation.

"I thought you knew, but you don't seem to, so—" He takes a deep breath. "During the Battle of Hogwarts, Hermione was captured by two Snatchers. Greyback and Scabior. There was a moment when she was wandering around the castle all alone, and unfortunately that was exactly when it happened. Once the battle was over, we were busy rescuing the injured and retrieving the dead. Things were chaotic—well, you know how it was, I hardly need to remind you. Anyway, it was the reason why we didn't realize that Hermione was missing until a good two hours later. We just thought she was helping somewhere. In the end, they had her in their grip for almost three months."

I stare at Potter in shock because, *fuck no*, I didn't know. I spent the entire first year after the battle being trained by Bellatrix while obsessively working on my Occlumency skills to keep from going insane. I wasn't involved in the fighting or strategic planning until my father was killed. My *career* only started after that.

"When we finally found out where they had taken Hermione, we launched a large-scale rescue operation. In fact, I doubt Tom was ever informed they had her, otherwise he would surely have killed her. Both Greyback and Scabior had cast an eye on her long before the battle, so it's safe to assume they've made it their little, shared secret. After we freed her, however, she wasn't the same. She can't stand the touch of hands anymore and there's this constant anger inside her. In the first few weeks after her rescue, she needed intensive medical care because she was injured and severely underweight. She endured each and every treatment without objection, but never spoke about what had happened to her. So I don't know the details either. All I can tell you is that she never fully recovered. I suppose Scabior deserved what she did to him today."

With these words, Potter ends his monologue.

I don't know what to say, so I look away and grit my teeth, making a muscle in my jaw tick.

Yes, I wanted to unravel the great *Granger Mystery*. I wanted to find out what drives her, why she's acting so strange and why she seems to have irrevocably lost everything that once distinguished her. But what Potter has just confided in me doesn't bring the kind of relief or satisfied curiosity that I expected and secretly hoped for. The only thing this new knowledge evokes in me is pure hatred.

Hatred *and* guilt.

Hatred, because I remember very well how Greyback and especially Scabior sometimes talked about what they'd like to do to 'Potter's Mudblood Cunt'—nothing harmless, that's for sure. What my imagination is now piecing together from what I heard at the time probably doesn't even come close to what they actually did to her, but it's enough to make me so nauseous I'm afraid I'll throw up.

Guilt, because I realized halfway through Potter's speech that I probably could have prevented all of this.

Well, fuck.

Chapter End Notes

Some of you should be able to make a connection after reading this chapter. Any theories? If all of this still seems confusing to you, there will be a more detailed explanation in the next chapter, I promise. ♡

14. SMOKE BLACK

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

14. SMOKE BLACK

Lying on my back on the roof of St. Mungo's, I stare into the turbulent, cloud-covered night sky. Tonight the stars are hiding, which only makes my mood worse than it already is, after all it's the very first time I've been alone in the open air since my escape through the woods. I really would have liked to see the stars, but well, no luck.

Blaise just shrugged lazily when I asked him if I was allowed to go *to the surface*.

"Nothing can happen up there," he said. "The entire roof is surrounded by strong wards. And as to the risk of flight on your part: If you take one of the Portkeys, you'll end up in the middle of nowhere, not knowing where you are or how to get back. Not a particularly promising prospect if you ask me."

There is nothing to counter this argument. The Return-Portkeys we used to get back to headquarters both after the Manor reconnaissance and the Sheffield mission were only distributed in the equipment room shortly before each departure. It's an additional security measure that the Portkeys aren't readily available to everyone. A measure that makes perfect sense and actually keeps me from leaving this roof. Camp Black is the safest place for me and I would never take the risk of not being able to come back. Blaise knows that, Potter knows that, and so I can *hang around* up here, let the wind blow in my face and grapple with my dark thoughts.

And dark they are.

I'm still deeply shocked by what Potter revealed to me last night.

It was my fault.

That's the thought that now constantly and inexorably haunts me, although I can't be a hundred percent sure. However, it would be far too much of a coincidence (or rather fluke) if it weren't the case.

I believe I was present. No, that's a lie. In actual fact, I'm *positive* I was the last person to see Granger before she was abducted by the two Snatchers, only I wasn't aware of it at that moment. I simply didn't consider that something like this could happen, I was so preoccupied with my own fear, which I was no longer able to control at that point.

I was hiding in one of the countless corridors on the ground floor. Behind a rickety suit of armor. Like a bloody coward. Greyback and Scabior showed up, but they were arguing so fiercely about something that they didn't notice me. For my part, due to the aforementioned

fear, I paid no attention to their words. Only when the two had disappeared around the next corner did I briefly snap out of my trance. Namely when my gaze fell on her. Granger. With a frightened expression, brisk steps and her wand at the ready.

Thanks to the dust and noise-soaked air, I didn't recognize her until she had already passed me. And I didn't give a single thought to whether she might be running straight into her misery, even though she was heading in exactly the same direction as Greyback and Scabior.

At the time, all I was concerned with was my own supposedly imminent death. It seemed inevitable to me, no matter which side I ultimately would have chosen. Even then, there was no question for me which side *actually* would have been the right one. I would never have willingly fought for the Dark Lord, but unfortunately that was exactly what was expected of me.

Of course, I had no way of knowing what was going to happen, and Granger probably wouldn't have listened to me anyway if I had tried to stop her. So it's most likely stupid to blame myself *these days* for being so selfish *back then*. But maybe I could have prevented it. Just hypothetically. Could have. Should have. Whatever.

The scene that the conversation with Potter pulled out of my memory and that I suddenly remember in such detail is playing over and over in my mind's eye. It's my latest horror flick in a loop. Greyback and Scabior, then Granger.

There's not much room for doubt—she must have encountered them shortly after the situation in the corridor. And I *probably* could have prevented it.

Goddamn bloody shit.

How could I ever assume that Granger and I were even? That my silence on that one unspeakable day at the Manor had already settled my entire debt? (Which she then thought was nothing but gutlessness and, by the way, still thinks to this day, as she so kindly told me herself, but that's another matter.)

Now the cards have been reshuffled. Not only do I feel oddly responsible for what happened back then and seems to haunt Granger so much to this day, I'm also angry. In fact, I'm fucking *furious*, and I don't even know why.

The urge to reactivate my Occlumency is stronger than ever, but before I can seriously consider it, a soft *whoosh* tells me that someone has just Portkeyed onto the flat roof.

I glance at my timepiece and realize that it's already early morning. The rebels are returning from their night watches. Apparently, I spent the whole night on the roof and didn't even realize it. I really *am* a lost cause.

Sighing, I stand up and half-heartedly brush the grit off my cargo trousers before pausing at the edge of the roof and peering through the darkness toward the arrival point.

"You're not going to do me the favor of jumping, are you?"

It's Granger's voice that the balmy breeze carries over to me. And it's probably inappropriate and overly melodramatic, but for some unfathomable reason her harmless provocation gives me a serious pang.

"Want to get rid of me that badly, yes?" I lash out at her, unable to sound unaffected.

"Because now that the Dark Lord knows I'm alive, for which *you* are responsible, by the by, I'm no longer of any use to you? In that case, I have to disappoint you, Granger—I haven't considered jumping yet. But when the day comes, I'll be happy to let you know beforehand so you can be a part of this, in your eyes, fantastic moment."

While I hiss my words into the smoke black dawn, she slowly approaches. She stops just a few feet away from me, casually hooking her thumbs into the straps of her breastplate. Her eyes flash at me in that now-familiar way. She's obviously angry too, but as always, I have no idea what today's fuel for her fire is.

"Merlin, that was a *joke*, Malfoy," she snarls at me, her brow furrowing.

"Hilarious," I deadpan.

"Tsk, what are you doing up here?"

There's that usual imperious tone of command in her voice, but I find that it's starting to wear off on me. Well, at least *one* bloody thing about her that I seem to have gotten used to over the past few weeks.

"Not jumping," I simply retort, exasperated.

She eyes me appraisingly for a moment, as if weighing whether it's worth digging deeper or even forcing me to answer her question seriously, but then she seems to come to the same conclusion as Blaise regarding my options on the roof. Instead of harping on about it, she changes the subject.

"Since we haven't got around to debriefing our lovely, little trip yet—" she begins, slowly looking me up and down. "If you ever try to get in my way again, I will personally make sure you *fall off* this roof."

I really shouldn't like it when she talks to me in such a condescending way, but I do, even though I'm still angry. In fact, it's not the first time I've noticed this, which doesn't make it any less disturbing. I also like it when she threatens me. I like the indifference on her face when she snaps at me and her casual posture, meant to show me how superior she is to me. It's undeniably sick, but yeah, I like it. Gods.

"You can hardly blame me for being a little... baffled." Bafflement doesn't even begin to describe what I felt when she strangled the already bleeding Scabior, but she doesn't need to know that. "It would have been wise to let me know upfront that something like this can happen when you run into certain people."

Granger's left eyebrow gives a telltale twitch, then she sucks her bottom lip between her teeth. Deciding that offense is the best defense, I continue.

"Potter told me. I have no idea what Scabior did to you in detail, Granger, but believe me, if I had known why you were freaking out in the first place, I wouldn't have tried to stop your personal vendetta."

She visibly pales. Her face now reflects the same shock that I also feel thanks to my honest words. That being said, she actually seems speechless, which has never happened before, at least not in my presence. Her lips part, only to immediately press back into a thin line.

For a few seconds, there is an oppressive silence.

Just when I'm beginning to suspect she won't answer at all, she croaks, "Harry had no right to tell you *anything*."

"I didn't give him much of a choice, so don't blame him," I reply dismissively. "Just try and put yourself in my position. My life is already hanging by a thread, and yet you demanded that I make myself useful by fighting out there at your side. I get your point, so *basically* I'm fine with that. But only as long as I don't have to constantly expect some moment of madness on your part to jeopardize our operations, or that I'm suddenly fair game because you disarm me whenever I do something you don't like. Have I made myself clear?"

The way I put it, you'd think we were actually a team, which is pretty weird. But then again, we kind of *are* a team when we're on a mission together, right? So, in theory, I have every right to have such a conversation with Granger if I feel the need. Or at least that's what I tell myself.

"It's not for you to make conditions if I may remind you," she snorts, her posture not quite as casual as before.

I straighten to my full height and step closer to her.

"I want to end this war, Granger, just like you do," I say, meeting her gaze steadily. "And I can still be of service to you, even though my cover was blown faster than I would have liked. *But* I need to be able to rely on you not being a ticking time bomb."

Her facial muscles twitch uncontrollably.

"I am not," she rasps.

"Really? And what happens if we encounter Greyback during our next foray?"

She narrows her eyes in suspicion.

"What are you getting at, Malfoy?"

My next words are absolutely improvised. I don't know where they're suddenly coming from and I certainly haven't thought them through, but I let them fall from my lips anyway.

"I'll help you find him."

Granger stares at me skeptically.

"And why would you do that?" she asks, lifting her chin defiantly. "So that I'll be in your debt afterwards?"

A sound escapes me that is equal parts derision and despair.

"If anything, I'm in *your* debt, Granger," I sigh in resignation.

"And why is that?"

"You know why," I answer vaguely.

Of course, Granger has no idea what realization I've been struggling with since last night. She doesn't know I was behind that fucking armor in that bloody corridor. And I'm not sure I *ever* want her to find out that her potential savior was hiding in the shadows just a few feet away, too cowardly to intervene.

I take a deep breath and discipline myself. Only then do I continue to speak.

"Let me do this for you. I know Greyback's favorite hiding spots and where he hangs out most of the time. We track him down, you do what you need to do to find your peace, and then we get back to what this is really about."

Granger looks absolutely nonplussed. Her gaze is wary, but also greedy. As she ponders my offer, she studies my face so intensely it's almost disconcerting.

For my part, I'm having a hard time processing the fact that I made said offer in the first place.

Well, I just had to do it.

While it will probably only lead to a temporary truce (since I doubt we'll ever be able to fully overcome our mutual dislike), it's still my chance to make amends somehow. Amends for this grave mistake on my part, the result of my cowardice, which contributed to something that, if Granger had her way, I shouldn't even know about. Something that must have been so awful that it completely destroyed her. Since I don't want to resort to Occlumency to deal with this new knowledge, the only option left is an attempt at redemption. There is simply no way around it.

"What's your ulterior motive?" Granger mutters.

She steps forward until she's so close I have to look down at her. I can even feel her breath brush against my jaw. She holds my gaze, her eyes darting back and forth between mine.

"There's no ulterior motive," I say sincerely.

I grind my teeth, but that has nothing to do with my answer. Rather, it's what I don't say that gnaws at me and makes me swallow hard.

I'm sorry.

Why would I want to say such a thing? I've never wanted to say those words to anyone before. What is it that upsets me so much that I want to say them to Granger, of all people? The absence of my Occlumency? My reactivated conscience? An oppressed part of my battered soul that is gradually reconnecting with my consciousness? Whatever it is, it's strong. The short sentence works its way relentlessly through my heaving chest, up my dry throat and straight onto my tongue, which I have to press hard against the roof of my mouth to keep the words from leaving my lips. And there's more.

I'm sorry this happened to you, Granger. That I was indeed that gutless. And that it took me so long to get rid of my Dark Mark. I'm sorry.

Of course, I don't say any of this out loud. I manage to hold myself back, but there might be some of the sentiment showing on my face, which Granger is still studying.

Her lips part and thanks to the movement, my attention involuntarily shifts to her mouth. But before she can ask another question, the same *whoosh* sounds twice in quick succession, signaling the return of more rebels.

Granger takes a step back.

"I'll think about it," she says coolly, before turning on her heel and leaving the flat roof with long strides, her black robes flapping in the wind.

I stare after her while the sun slowly rises behind me.

Granger takes her time to *think about it*, which leads me to believe she does it thoroughly. In the three days that have passed since our chance meeting on the roof, I haven't seen her once. She doesn't even attend the briefings in the command centre, though I'm sure Potter keeps her updated on anything he and I discuss.

Just a few minutes ago, one of those very briefings ended.

Today we agreed that if we want to generate more test subjects for the *Exit*, we'll have to launch another attack soon. Astoria also got rid of her Dark Mark and that's what ultimately won Potter over. I told him which safehouses I believe are suitable targets, both in terms of the security measures in place and the residents. I'm curious to see which one he'll choose and whether I'll have to play Granger's partner again.

As I stroll down one of the concrete grey corridors, wondering whether we'll run into Pansy this time (a prospect that is as frightening as it is electrifying), a door suddenly opens to my left. Before I can react in any way, two hands grab my shoulder holster and drag me into a dark room. The door is resolutely kicked shut by a combat boot and my back is pressed against a cold wall.

The only reason I don't fight back is simply because I can sense how small my attacker is—at least a head shorter than me. This time, I'm immediately sure who it is.

Well, it's definitely not Thomas.

"I've been thinking," her voice whispers against my throat.

"As you promised," I tease. "So reliable."

I make a move to loosen Granger's tight grip on my shoulder holster, but before I can even grab her wrist, she swats my forearm away.

Ah bugger, I forgot about that for a moment.

I give up trying to free myself and lower my hand obediently. Instead, I listen to her mutter an incantation. A blink of an eye later, the small room is illuminated by a flickering flame.

A storeroom. Barely two square meters in size and crammed with all sorts of useless stuff, which at least explains why Granger doesn't back away from me as soon as she realizes how close we are to each other.

"You could have just approached me in the dining hall, you know," I drawl, successfully concealing the fact that my breathing, the bloody traitor, has quickened. "There's no need to fake an ambush to be near me. I'm open to pretty much anything."

Her eyes flash at me, but I can't tell if it's with amusement, irritation, or something even more dangerous.

"I didn't want anyone to hear us," she simply replies.

I lift a mock suggestive eyebrow, but she ignores it. Which is a fucking good thing because I have absolutely no idea what *the hell* I'm doing. Am I seriously trying to flirt with Granger? And if so, why? It borders on a death wish.

Granger doesn't give me time to ponder my disturbing realization, but continues.

"I accept your offer. You will lead me to Greyback and I will kill him." Her voice is cool and determined, as if she had actually given the matter the most detailed thought in the last three days. "We won't take any risks. Not a word to Harry, not a word to anyone. We'll do it at night. A quick in and out." My, my, Granger. "And don't expect me to ever talk to you about what happened back then. I don't owe you anything after that, is that clear?"

So that's really her biggest concern? That I might force her to share her darkest memories with me just because she accepted my help? I almost smirk because it's so absurd. If only she knew how much I *don't* want to know what happened to her. Without my Occlumency, the wealth of detail would most likely drive me insane.

"Crystal—you don't owe me anything, we do it at night, in and out, we don't talk about it," I repeat dutifully, although my voice is much hoarser than I would have liked.

Her hand comes off my shoulder holster so quickly you'd think it burned her. So now she knows what my sick brain has cobbled together thanks to her words.

I'm delighted to see Granger's cheeks flush. Again, I don't know if it's anger or something else that triggers this physical reaction, but I quite like it. Even in the dim light of the lonely flame, it gives her face an appetizing color I've never seen on her before.

"When do you want to do it?" I ask as my eyes roam over this new discovery.

"As soon as possible," she replies.

She takes a deep breath and tries to put some distance between us, her robes brushing against me.

"Just let me know when you're ready and I'll meet you on the roof."

"Mm, any plans for tonight?"

"Funny, Granger."

She shrugs innocently.

"Harry just recently admonished me to finally consider you a full member of the Resistance. So the assumption that you might have other commitments tonight isn't completely unfounded, is it? For your information: I don't know your daily schedule by heart."

"You don't?"

"Of course not."

"Oh? And here I thought you'd memorize it so you could avoid me even better."

"And what's that supposed to mean?" she huffs with irritation.

Now I'm the one who shrugs.

"Sometimes I don't see you for days. Isn't that on purpose?"

"Oh no," she breathes without answering my question, feigning dismay. "Don't tell me you miss my company."

We stare at each other. And I'm dumbfounded.

Until now, I didn't even notice that I actually *always* notice when I don't run into her for a few days in a row. Although I don't really have a reason to, I always keep an eye out for her. I quickly tell myself it's only because I want to avoid her so badly myself. *Stay away from me.*

"Anyway," she sniffs when I don't answer. For a few seconds her face shows the same confusion I'm feeling, but then she rolls her jaw, clears her throat, and puts her mask back on. "At midnight on the roof then."

With these words, Granger flings open the door, pushes past me and disappears down the concrete grey corridor from which she so briskly kidnapped me.

"Midnight on the roof it is," I murmur, even though she's already out of earshot.

I lean my head against the wall, close my eyes and take a deep breath.

Something I never wanted in my life? Feeling guilty because of Hermione Granger.

Something that even surpasses that? Thinking about her all day long. About her eyes, her voice and her dangerous aura, which completely captivates me.

Something I never thought would happen to me? Getting sweaty palms while waiting for the very witch I'm about to help commit murder tonight, at least if everything goes smoothly.

I shove my clammy hands into the pockets of my cargo trousers. It's almost midnight and I'm back on the edge of the roof, staring into the darkness.

Nobody asked me any questions when I made my way up here. I've been here every night since Blaise first encouraged me, and not a single rebel seems to give a fuck. Meanwhile, they trust me more than they did a few months ago, or at least they trust that I'm too scared to leave headquarters all by myself, which is a very correct assumption.

I hear the clatter of the lift and a few seconds later the crunch of footsteps on the gravel that covers the entire flat roof. I slowly turn to face Granger.

Ready? her posture seems to ask, but she doesn't speak.

I give her a slight nod, then follow her to the pile of worthless junk, where we simultaneously touch the Portkey she's pointing to.

A few seconds later, we are standing in the usual meadow and she looks at me properly for the first time. There's an odd expression on her face. If I had to guess, I'd say it's fear. Maybe Scabior was just a taste of how she feels about Greyback? Well, I can hardly ask her, after all I agreed to her request not to bring up the subject.

"Are you okay?" I simply ask.

She gives me a sharp look.

"Where do we have to go?" she asks without answering my question.

After making sure we're absolutely alone, she produces the Return-Portkey from one of her robe pockets and casts a Notice-Me-Not Charm to hide it in a nearby clump of bushes.

"Greyback uses a variety of hideouts. The warehouse in Sheffield is one of them, but he's unlikely to be there after we tore the place to pieces just a few days ago. There's a Death Eater safehouse on the Isle of Sheppey. I would look there first. He loves this shithole. Might get nasty. Mainly Snatchers and werewolves hole up there. I've already made blueprints of

the house, but Potter hasn't given it much thought yet because it's not exactly crawling with suitable *Exit* candidates."

"All right, let's Apparate there first. What are the other possibilities?"

"Swansea, Plymouth and Portpatrick."

"Seriously? That's in Scotland," Granger huffs, referring to the latter.

I just shrug.

"Hogwarts is also in Scotland, Granger," I scoff. "Why the surprise? Because werewolves can't cross national borders these days?"

To my surprise, the corners of her mouth quirk.

"Highly entertaining, Malfoy. Of course not. But the potential locations are pretty scattered. It will take us quite a few jumps to comb each of them. If we haven't found him by dawn, we'll have to stop."

"You don't want Potter to know," I deduce, studying her tense expression.

She quickly shakes her head.

"My *personal vendetta*, as you so eloquently put it, is a completely unnecessary safety risk. Harry and Ron would never agree to something like that, after all Greyback isn't an *Exit* candidate and that's the only thing they care about at the moment. If he happened to fall into their hands in combat, they would interrogate him instead of killing him outright, yes, but they would never actively search for him. He currently has too little to offer. There is no sufficient justification for endangering our fighters just to capture him."

"But an interrogation isn't what you want anyway," I conclude, "even if he had useful information."

"Exactly."

For a few seconds we just stand motionless in front of each other.

Granger seems lost in her own thoughts while I use the silence to mentally review the layouts of the safehouses we're about to visit.

"We could take turns," I suggest at length. "Apparating, that is. The fewer jumps you have to do, the less exhausted you'll be when we get there."

"Absolutely not," she says resolutely.

I lazily raise an eyebrow.

"I'm not trying to kidnap you, Granger," I sneer. "If I had bad intentions, our night in the tree house would have ended a little differently, believe me."

In fact, it was a real surprise that she followed me through the forest that day without even thinking about it. She, of all people, who had claimed a few weeks earlier that she wouldn't believe me, let alone trust me, even under the influence of Veritaserum. So what the hell is her problem tonight? Even if I would Side-Along her to a place that seemed odd or dangerous to her, she could extricate herself from the situation and leave me there, which in turn would mean my certain death.

And then, all of a sudden, I get it. Merlin, of course.

I feel a strong urge to smack my forehead with the flat of my hand. I really did an excellent job of pushing it to the back of my mind, but now that her gaze flicks to my hands, the realization hits me again with full force.

She doesn't want me to touch her.

Wrapping her own hand around my upper arm to Apparate is no problem for Granger. The other way round, however, it would probably be pure torture for her.

I'm a prize idiot.

"Granger, I didn't—"

"It doesn't *exhaust* me to Apparate," she interrupts me gruffly. "I will do it. I know the approximate destination, that's enough. Once we're on the island, you can take the lead."

Given the unyielding look on her face, I don't even try to finish my sentence and submit the counter-proposal that's on the tip of my tongue.

Why the hell do I keep forgetting her phobia? Because of the night in the tree house? Because I can't reconcile it with her and her confident demeanor? Or because now that Potter has revealed to me why she's displaying her crude behavior in the first place, I'm dying to get the reason out of my head?

Perhaps, I reluctantly admit to myself, simply because of the ridiculously selfish desire to touch her just once. To feel that she's actually a real person of flesh and blood. That she's still in there, the witch I once knew. The laughing, face-slapping, kindhearted, swotty Granger.

What I can't fathom, however, is why this desire exists at all.

Chapter End Notes

Well, where are my Project readers? Anyone who has read [Project 137.43.M.D.](#) should have had a flashback by now at the latest. If you weren't expecting it at all, it worked out the way I hoped. Those of you who already suspected it, on the other hand, will now feel confirmed. Guessed right! This story is indeed an alternate reality of an alternate reality, sort of a butterfly effect.

If you want a more comprehensive explanation, please let me know in the comments—I'll answer you there. I won't go into this publicly as I don't want to spoil anyone who hasn't read the project yet but might want to read it in the future. (In any case, I can reassure you: the two stories are otherwise unrelated, so you don't necessarily have to read the Project to continue reading EXIT.) How do you like the idea? Since I have an affinity for hidden connections and Easter Eggs, I'm really interested in your opinion!

And last but not least: Buckle up for the next chapter, folks! I just know that you will love it. (I'd even bet my MacBook on it; you know what that means.) And until then, hugs. ♡

15. SEPIA BLACK

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

15. SEPIA BLACK

The Isle of Sheppey was an absolute flop—two werewolves and three Snatchers, all so drunk it wasn't even fun crashing their little party. We were back on the road within five minutes.

Now we're standing in front of the unremarkable semi-detached building in Swansea that was my next suggestion, working through a whole series of revelation spells to get an idea of the defensive measures in place.

"They've set up more wards than I expected," I murmur thoughtfully.

"They're prepared," replies the disillusioned Granger at my side. "Which means we might run into some of the more important arseholes here?"

I nod slowly.

In fact, given the circumstances, it's not unlikely that Greyback is here. He is no longer part of the Dark Lord's inner circle and lost his former status within the ranks of the Death Eaters years ago, but he is still a familiar face. He leads the werewolves who fight for the Dark Lord and is relatively successful on the battlefield. So yeah, maybe the increased security means he's here tonight.

"Let's get started then," Granger says firmly.

We systematically work side by side, taking turns at disarming the wards. After about ten minutes we reach the front door and I square my shoulders, bracing myself for the combat at hand.

Granger opens the door with a nonverbal *Alohomora* and we step into a dark hallway.

This hideout isn't as bare as the warehouse in Sheffield. It's just as dark, but full of nooks and crannies and completely furnished, so I hold out an arm to signal Granger to pause for a second. I mutter a *Homenum Revelio* that tells us there are currently four people in the house. And once again luck is on our side, because every single one of them is in the room at the end of the very hallway in which we are currently standing.

We tiptoe forward until we hear quiet voices through the dark wood of the room door. And I notice something else: Greyback's wolf stench. Just like in Sheffield, it's very present here and I can't help but hold my breath.

Granger brings her head closer to the door panel, then holds that position tensely for a moment. Thanks to her disillusionment, I can't see the expression spreading across her face,

but the waves of discomfort radiating from her body tell me everything I need to know.

Greyback is here.

She taps my forearm whereupon I give a barely audible noise of agreement. Then we burst through the door with a *Bombarda* and, without much ado, hurl so many curses at the four wizards present that the whole room is thick with crackling magic in a matter of seconds.

Granger almost immediately fires a Killing Curse in the direction of a small, black-haired, hunchbacked Snatcher. When he hits the ground, the light has long since gone out of his eyes. I manage to disarm and stun one of the other men before being hit by a *Finite*. Now visible again, I quickly duck behind Granger's shield that she just summoned.

We don't benefit from the element of surprise for very long. Greyback and his only remaining partner, a dumb but agile Snatcher whose name I can't remember for the life of me, return fire no less vehemently. Granger is also hit by a *Finite*, mainly because her shield covers more of my body than her own. I'm just making a mental note to have a serious word with her about this later when Greyback's eyes widen in surprise.

"Well, well!" he roars. "*Crucio!* To what do we owe the honor? *Impedimenta!*"

Neither of us answers. Instead, we hurl curse after curse while the opposing spells slam into Granger's shield and the wall behind us.

Greyback focuses on Granger. And since I'm confident that she's capable of keeping him in check without my help, I turn to the other wizard and give him my undivided attention.

I deflect two curses and fire off three of my own in return. He tries to cast a Killing Curse several times, but each time I distract him with my own spellwork. Two more curses whiz in my direction and I parry them both. Then, finally, I hit him with a *Sectumsempra* and watch with satisfaction as he slumps to the floor. I can't kill him, but the curse, as I know from personal experience, will do so in no time. When Severus told me in sixth year what spell Potter had hit me with, I learned it and (true to the motto 'our enemies teach us life's most valuable lesson') added it to my repertoire. Granted, it has proven very useful many times since.

As an extra precaution, I disarm the bastard, but as I turn to back Granger, my wand suddenly flies out of my hand.

Confused, I look first at my empty hand and then at my wand, which rolls across the dark wooden floor a few meters away, only to come to rest in front of the skirting board with a soft, sad *plong*.

My gaze flicks to Granger and Greyback and all the breath leaves my body.

I'm not sure how it happened, as I wasn't paying attention to their fight while I was busy with my own magic, but now Greyback is standing squarely in front of Granger, who is also disarmed, his wand pointed loosely at me.

I take a step toward my own wand.

"Stay where you are, traitor," Greyback snarls warningly.

I freeze.

My eyes dart back to Granger and my stomach churns. Her face is ghostly pale, almost apathetic, and her eyes are wide open with greatly dilated pupils.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

In spite of myself, I wish back the fuming Granger who choked Scabior while he lay on the floor, twitching in agony. Unfortunately, all she's radiating right now is pure panic. The only way I can tell that Greyback didn't stun her is that she's still on her feet.

"Granger, look at me," I demand.

Not a muscle moves in her face. It seems like she didn't even hear me.

"Shut the fuck up," Greyback spits, giving me a disparaging look. "I should tear you limb from limb for fooling the Dark Lord, Malfoy, but I've just changed my mind. Whatever farce the two of you were trying to pull off here, *you* will be the one watching the grand finale!"

With these words, he raises a hand and wraps it around Granger's neck. Her knees buckle, and I realize that if it weren't for his grip, she would collapse. My pulse is pounding in my ears at the mere thought.

"Didn't know you missed me so much, Mudblood," Greyback purrs, his thumb tracing Granger's trembling lower lip. "You could always have come back to me after your little friends separated us. I would have welcomed you with open arms, you know? After all, we had so much fun together."

His face is now hovering right in front of hers. He takes a deep breath, his nostrils flaring, and I can practically see the last bit of color draining from Granger's face. It's truly a miracle she hasn't passed out yet.

And then something else happens that I didn't expect and that puts an abrupt end to my observing, assessing immobility. Greyback leans in a little further and his tongue darts out of his mouth to lick along Granger's jawbone, eliciting a sound from her that could be both a gagging and a whimper.

Without thinking twice, I lunge at the werewolf.

I have the advantage on my side that he considers me harmless without my wand and therefore doesn't expect a physical attack. Without magic I normally wouldn't stand a chance against him, but right now he's fixated on Granger and ignoring me, which in turn benefits me. So when I ram him sideways with all the force I can generate from my three-step run-up, it actually throws him off balance.

We go down with a thud.

I react in a flash and deliver a blow to his right forearm, causing him to lose his wand as well. There's the loud clatter of wood on wood a few feet away. Before I can strike him in the face, which I'd really like to do, Greyback yanks us around and rolls over me. I try to shake him off, but he's at least twice my weight and therefore much stronger. He slams my head on the ground and I see stars.

"Who would have thought you were into Mudbloods, Malfoy," he pants out, a few drops of saliva falling onto my face. "Your abysses are darker than I thought. Don't tell me she's the reason you turned out to be a defector—that would be more pathetic than anything."

I open my mouth to spit out a snarky retort, but his hands are already on my neck.

And then he squeezes.

Now I can almost understand how Scabior must have felt. But only *almost*, because it certainly makes a difference whether a small, slim witch or a three-hundred-pound werewolf is sitting on your torso, pressing all their weight onto your larynx.

I can't breathe and immediately start squirming. My fists hit Greyback's chest, but he just grunts unperturbed. Rather casually, he grabs both of my arms with one hand and presses them to the bare floor above my head, while his other hand chokes me even harder.

My legs spasm. And all I can think of is Granger, still standing behind Greyback, petrified with horror, and making no move to help me. I can only see a part of her: a stiff shoulder and a dangling arm. Her head isn't in my line of sight, obscured by Greyback's angry face.

Merlin, please don't let her get the idea that *this* is a more convenient way to get rid of me than just shoving me over the roof edge of St. Mungo's.

Sepia black spots begin to dance behind my fluttering eyelids and my lungs protest and ache as they desperately wait for the oxygen they're being denied. I twitch one last time before my limbs eventually become too heavy to continue fighting. My senses are fading.

And then, just as I'm about to give up, as my eyes close and my heart begins a slower, discouraged beat, I hear a pained roar. A gush of metallic liquid spills over my face and hair, then suddenly the pressure on my throat is gone.

I roll onto my side, sheer survival instinct driving me to my hands and knees, and cough up blood, spitting out the thick liquid as quickly as humanly possible so I can breathe. I retch once, twice, then *finally* fill my lungs with the dusty, foul air of the safehouse, which strikes me as nothing but delicious right now. I suck in a few deep breaths. The black spots in my vision disappear, my heart rate normalizes, my limbs regain strength.

Why the hell am I coughing up so much blood?

I look up and realize it's not mine. It's Greybacks, resulting from a deep, fatal gash in his throat, which he's clutching. Granger's trademark, obviously.

She's standing directly in front of him, still shaking and pale, but now with a blank expression on her face. Her wand is trained on the werewolf, who has already spilled about two quarts of blood on the floor. He can no longer speak, she has expertly taken care of that, but his gaze, which returns hers, is filled with hatred.

I heave to my feet, struggling to catch my breath.

"You really know how to keep a man in suspense, Granger," I croak hoarsely, before crossing the room as fast as my trembling knees allow to pick up my wand.

I just can't think of anything else to say because, firstly, I feel like the near-death experience has blown my brain completely blank, and secondly, Granger doesn't really deserve applause for her remarkably slow reaction time. (Not to mention the fact that I pounced on a man twice my weight for her sake. But be that as it may. Actually, I don't want to make any more debt comparisons.)

A quick glance at the wizard hit by my *Sectumsempra* tells me he's already over his own bloody ordeal. Next, I step over the man I've only stunned so far, casting another *Stupor* at him for good measure. Granger can deal with him later, for all I care.

I return to her just in time to see Greyback making a grab for her in his death throes.

"Nah-ah," I drawl.

My leg shoots out and stomps his forearm back down before I flick my wand and cast a Sticking Charm on his hands, pinning him to the floor. Abandoning myself to an impulse, I turn my head to look at Granger.

"He'll never touch you again," I say seriously.

Her dark brown eyes are on me. She still looks like she's in a trance. A stoic, grim, unrelenting, deadly trance, mind you. But then she blinks, takes a deep breath, cocks her head, and shifts her gaze to the werewolf.

"You'll never touch me again," she repeats my words firmly while locking eyes with him.

And then we stand side by side in silent harmony and watch life leave Fenrir Greyback in powerful, viscid, crimson waves.

Granger is waiting for me outside the house. After she almost routinely killed the last wizard with an *Avada*, I stayed behind to make sure we didn't leave any evidence. Now I step up to her on the quiet street and scrutinize her.

She's still pale and the dark shadows I've gotten used to seeing on her are forming under her eyes again. Yes, Granger is definitely tired. But once more there's that flicker in her eyes that

I also noticed the day she killed Scabior. A kind of relief. A deep contentment. As if a part of her had come to terms with itself.

For a while I just stand there and behold her. This mystery. This dangerous, feral, clever, arcane, beautiful, fragile and at the same time strong woman. She's nothing like the girl she used to be, and I'm intrigued by what I see these days, although I have no idea why. For weeks I refused to accept it, but basically the first stirrings of this fascination have been there since the day she first strutted into the dining hall. It exists and I can't deny it, let alone suppress it, because I just don't know how to do something like that without Occlumency.

Confused by my thoughts, I slowly shake my head. The movement causes Granger to emerge from her own.

"We should go," she whispers, glancing at the sky.

There's a faint streak of twilight on the horizon. Her wand hand is shaking.

"Let me Apparate," I say seriously. "You're magically drained and it's four jumps. You can make the final jump to your mysterious meadow yourself, all right? Just hold on tight. I don't have to touch you."

I say it like it's not an odd conversation at all, putting on a decidedly impassive expression. It's bad enough that my mind is an absolute mess, I don't want her to notice on top.

Her eyebrows shoot up and her gaze darts to my arm, which I'm holding out to her. Then, hesitantly, slowly, as if weighing whether she should really allow this to happen, she reaches out and wraps her fingers around my wrist.

It's nothing new, after all she's done it before (when she had me in tow, that is), and yet it makes my heart beat faster because this small gesture is remarkable. It's a touch of something I wouldn't have even dared to dream of. Just a glimmer. A precious gift that's worth so much more when it comes from Granger.

Trust.

When we materialize on the flat roof of St. Mungo's after using the previously hidden Return-Portkey, I'm still extremely confused.

We stride across the roof in tandem, the gravel scrunching under our heavy boots and the lift only flickering into existence when we're close enough. I reach it ahead of Granger, pull open the grilles, step aside and let her enter first. She wrinkles her nose at me and I roll my eyes. Apologies, Granger, but some men just have more manners than the ones you usually spend your time with.

As the gates begin to close, I lean against a wall of the lift cage and glance at her. There's blood on her cheek, right where she's brushed an unruly curl from her face.

The sight of her is probably pretty harmless compared to mine, after all I was practically bathing in Greyback's blood when she slashed him open while he was on top of me. I can even smell it on me, and for the first time since we left the safehouse, I wonder how battered I look. Up until now, I haven't wasted much thought on my appearance. The adrenaline is still in my system and I'd like to know if Granger feels the same way. If so, she doesn't let it show.

When she finally lifts her head, my breath hitches. Right now she doesn't seem particularly dangerous, nor feral, nor arcane, nor fragile, nor strong, but she's still beautiful.

Her eyes are hot. I try to decipher her gaze. What is she trying to express with it? Gratitude? Curiosity? Wonder?

The lift starts moving. And then so do we.

I'm not sure which of us pushes off our respective walls first. Maybe it's even a synchronous movement. In any case, my brain gives the command to reach for her before I even know what I'm doing.

Granger swats my hand away and I stop mid-movement, equal parts confused and angry at myself for once again forgetting her fear. For a moment I quarrel with myself, internally debating whether I should take a step back or not.

But then her hands are on my collar, firm and confident, pulling me down a little so she can press her lips to mine. I groan in surprise and allow her to push me back against the wall. My arms dangle uselessly at my sides, but my mouth returns her attack no less fiercely.

Granger doesn't kiss me gently. It's a hard and unyielding kiss that she alone is in control of, but for the first time in my life I don't mind submitting.

Our teeth collide, I find her tongue, she nibbles at my bottom lip. I taste blood and again I'm not sure if it's my own. She presses herself against me. Flush. Full body contact. Her fingers explore my stomach, my abs, my chest, then greedily hook into my shoulder holster.

I give her everything in these few seconds—panting, aroused and driven by the shock that we both still seem to be suffering from, because otherwise this would *never* happen, right?

My hands find their way into the pockets of my cargo trousers. They're far better off there because they're literally itching to touch the witch in front of me and memorize every fucking inch of her body. To be on the safe side, I bury them even deeper in my pockets. As deep as possible.

There's a quiet *pling* and Granger immediately pulls away from me. My head follows her movement and I desperately suck on her lower lip one last time. Pathetic, really. Then we break away from each other, both breathing heavily.

Her gaze is fiery, but not in the same way as during the training sessions, at the briefings in the command centre, or after any of my previous provocations. That heated look isn't a promise, I'm not daft enough to assume that, but it's a first-rate temptation.

Now *she* is the one provoking *me*.

I try with all my might to get my breathing back under control, but it doesn't work at all.

Granger's fingers fly to her lips, then she presses the back of her hand against them, as if unsure whether to keep the feeling or wipe it away. My eyes are drawn to the touch and I have to bite the inside of my cheek hard. The corners of her mouth are fucking *quirking*. Gods.

And because in this situation it's the only thing I can do to preserve the last remnants of my dignity, I give her my most smug, most Malfoy-esque smirk.

She slowly lowers her hand. Then, without warning, she spins around and sweeps out of the lift with brisk steps. Her black robes billow out behind her as she crosses the command centre.

I'm unable to move until I hear the door click shut.

When I finally step out of the lift cage, my hands are still shaking with excitement. Plus, this time I'm more than just half-hard. The words that both Granger and I have already spoken out loud and that actually have a completely different meaning suddenly flash through my mind and echo mockingly in my ears.

You don't owe me anything. We do it at night. We don't talk about it.

Oh, I'm in fucking trouble.

Chapter End Notes

Surprise! I'm more than curious what you have to say about this chapter. By the way: I've been working on a Oneshot inspired by my holidays for the last few days, which ultimately developed into a Twoshot due to its length. I think I'll upload the first part soon. Maybe you'd like to keep your eyes open for it? Have a great weekend. ♡

16. PIANO BLACK

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

16. PIANO BLACK

As a concession from the Chosen One, they let me speak to Astoria a few days later.

Accompanied by Lovegood, I have to use a Portkey as I'm not supposed to know the exact location of our destination, which is (surprise!) Camp White. Because yes, that's where the rebels are housing the Death Eaters who have survived the *Exit*, as I found out a few days ago. Apparently, I'm the only defector tolerated at headquarters (probably thanks to the wealth of information they have received from me so far), and I wonder if that's going to change anytime soon. After all, my cover was blown, so I'm not as useful as I was in the beginning, right? Or maybe they just got used to the sight of me? Well, whatever.

Astoria is exactly the woman I remember. Though pale and latently frightened, she still exudes the natural elegance and countenance of a witch raised in a pure-blood household. Her blonde hair is pinned up in a chignon hairstyle of sorts and the rebel training clothes she's also been provided with fit perfectly and are immaculately clean.

It takes a while before I manage to free myself from the tight embrace she has pulled me into with relief. She has lost weight. I can feel her ribs.

Our conversation is short (Lovegood's precious time is limited), but in the few minutes we have I tell her everything about the *Exit* and assure her that as long as she abides by the rules, she will be safe.

It quickly becomes clear that Astoria has already come to terms with the new circumstances. She has no information that could be of use to us, but is willing to seize the unexpected opportunity for a fresh start on her part. That's excellent because I know her spellwork is decent. Once the rebels trust her enough to put her to work, she'll be an asset to the Resistance. A good *Exit* candidate indeed. I'm glad I wasn't wrong about her.

After saying goodbye to Astoria, I make my way back to headquarters at Lovegood's side.

An impromptu gathering in the dining hall is on the agenda for today, which is equal parts blessing and curse because, of course, I know who I'm going to see there. And while I'm determined to put on a brave face and hide what happened between Granger and I less than a week ago, I doubt I'll be very convincing.

Because she's already haunting me. In my day and night dreams. During workouts, although she hasn't participated in any since I last saw her. Under the shower. At meals. Whenever I lie on the roof and stare at the night sky.

She is in my head. Sometimes dangerous, sometimes feral, sometimes clever, sometimes arcane, sometimes fragile, sometimes strong. Tempting with increasing frequency. Always beautiful. In my visions, she watches me train. Then we fight side by side. Usually, she ends up pulling my head down to kiss me.

I just can't shut her out.

Blaise and Ginny flop onto the bench across from me at our usual table in the dining hall and stretch out their legs simultaneously. Creevey appears less than two minutes later and, with a groan, does exactly the same.

"Why are we here?" he asks, cocking his head questioningly.

"There's this one trait that you're obviously immune to, but I'd like to encourage you to acquire," Blaise teases him in a fatherly voice. "It's called *patience*."

"Haha, very funny."

Creevey sticks his tongue out at him, once again proving how young he is. Too young to be here, and *definitely* too young to endure the horrors that are currently afflicting this world. I sigh softly at the thought.

"What the fuck is that?" Ginny's voice suddenly rings out.

She leans forward and curiously tugs at the collar of my long-sleeved top. I stiffen instantly. Not because of the unexpected touch from a longtime enemy, but because I know exactly what she discovered.

Blaise whistles through his teeth and raises an eyebrow.

"I didn't even notice that," he murmurs, leaning over the table to inspect my neck as well.

Well, fuck. This morning I actually forgot the *Glamour* I usually cast on my throat before leaving my sleeping quarters to go to either one of the workouts or one of the meals. By now, Greyback's strangulation marks are shining in a pretty green and yellow color. A real eye-catcher, I suppose.

"Who did that?" Creevey asks, eyes wide.

"No one. I slipped in the shower."

One of the dumbest excuses in the world. Brilliant, Draco, just brilliant. Three pairs of eyebrows shoot up in a single, synchronous movement.

"Slipped in the shower," Ginny repeats, a hint of amusement in her voice.

"Did someone attack you?" Blaise asks, sounding a lot more serious than his girlfriend.

He's probably worried that there might still be rebels who don't want to accept that I'm allowed to stay at Camp Black.

"It was an accident," I reply gruffly. "Stop bugging me. Merlin."

"Did Granger do that?"

My gaze shifts to Blaise and I have to suppress a snort because, of course, it *is* kind of Granger's fault. But I'm afraid that even if she had intervened sooner, I would still have been bruised. The force Greyback used in his attempt to strangle me was brutal.

"Do you seriously think Granger would be content with choking me a little, Blaise?" I retort, trying to add some humor to the conversation. "Besides, if she wanted to hurt me, there'd be other options, right? Magical options."

Ginny, who has also seemed slightly concerned since Blaise's accusation, visibly relaxes. Creevey, for his part, chuckles. Blaise studies me for a few more seconds, his teeth maltreating his bottom lip, then turns away with a shrug.

If you say so, his eye roll seems to mean.

Our conversation comes to an abrupt end as the door opens and Potter marches into the dining hall. Directly behind him, in a whirl of black robes and dark curls, Granger slips through the door. I tense up and cross my arms as if this pose could somehow keep her and her aura away from me. Of course, it doesn't help at all.

As Potter positions himself in front of the gathered crowd, Granger crosses the room with long, confident strides. In her usual manner, which actually reminds me of Severus on some days, she does a half-twist, her robes billowing imposingly, then unclasps and removes them before leaning her hip against the buffet table.

I take a deep breath.

"The reason for this last minute meeting is an enemy attack that took place last night. To get straight to the point: A group of Tom's werewolves managed to break through the wards around Hogsmeade." A murmur goes through the crowd. "Fortunately, our guards were able to prevent the worst. No one was seriously injured or bitten. Ultimately, it paid off that we increased the number of guard tents there."

Potter clears his throat and continues, "Most of the werewolves fled, but a few were captured and interrogated. As it turns out, it was some kind of revenge campaign. Apparently, Greyback was *slaughtered* a few days ago. In the truest sense of the word. And the werewolves blame the Resistance."

More whispers. My gaze flicks to Granger, but she seems so unmoved by Potter's explication, as if he were merely reciting what's for dinner tonight.

I wonder if Potter knows. After all, he's aware of the connection between Granger and Greyback, and it must seem strange to him that the old wanker also fell victim to a brutal

murder so soon after Scabior. Well, if he really knows, or at least suspects something, he doesn't let it show.

"We don't think they'll launch another attack any time soon, but we've taken some extra security precautions nonetheless. Hermione?"

Now that it's safe to let my gaze linger on Granger for more than a millisecond because everyone else is looking at her as well, I regard her a little more intently.

She seems to have recovered in the last few days. The dark shadows under her eyes are gone and there's that familiar look on her face again—a mixture of boredom and a certain haughtiness.

When she raises her wand to project a hologram of the map of Hogsmeade, marked with the latest wards and defensive measures, into the center of the room, I lean back for a better *view*—albeit in the completely wrong direction for the projections.

I pull my gaze away from her eye area and let it wander. First to her lips, which I hadn't imagined being as soft as they actually were, now blowing a stray curl out of her face; then down her slender neck, over her tight-fitting shoulder holster, along the curve of her breasts, down to her small waist.

She's talking, apparently explaining the newly installed wards, but I'm not really listening. Her voice reaches my ears and I absorb the sound of it, but the words don't make sense.

Granger is still leaning casually against the edge of the buffet table. Hoping to catch a glimpse of her bum, I lean back even further and peer past Longbottom's huge head.

I take my time giving her the once over from behind, biting my lower lip. Curls, neck, shoulder blades, back, slim waist. And then from bottom to top. Boots, calves, strong thighs and finally her arse in those tight cargo trousers.

Suddenly a small hand appears in my field of vision. It slides unobtrusively down Granger's side, dances over her belt and lands on her bum. It's the left one that isn't busy holding her wand.

The small hand clenches into a fist. And then, without pausing or even taking her eyes off her presentation once, Granger gives me the middle finger.

"Has the day come?" comes a voice from somewhere behind me.

I'm sitting on the edge of the roof, my legs dangling into the piano black depths, enjoying the hum of the wards against my shins. It's kind of comforting, or at least it *was* before *she* showed up.

"I said I'd let you know in advance if and when I was going to jump, did I not?" I drawl without turning to face her.

It's better not to look at Granger. *Safer*. Who knows what ideas I'll get when her dark eyes meet my gaze. Up here. On the huge roof of the hospital complex. In the loneliness of the night.

"Then what are you doing here?"

Merlin, is she really going to ask me that question every time we happen to meet on the roof?

"I don't see how that's any of your business, Granger."

All of my senses are suddenly heightened. There's the scrunch of her combat boots on the gravel that tells me she's approaching. Then I hear the rustle of her robes in the breeze. Next, I can feel her hard gaze on my back, which inevitably raises my hackles.

"Where have you been all week?" I ask to distract myself.

It usually pisses her off when I answer one of her questions with a question of my own, so I secretly expect an annoyed riposte. (My guess is, 'I don't see how that's any of *your* business, Malfoy.') But to my surprise, Granger doesn't seem to seek a quarrel tonight.

"I took some time off."

Took some time off. In the sense of what? A break? Aside from the fact that it's Granger and I doubt she even knows how to spell the word, I'm quite surprised that something like that seems to be an option. A break from war, tsk. Then again, as a third of the Golden Trio you can probably allow yourself such a luxury. At least it explains why she seemed so rested and healthy when I saw her in the dining hall. Her little vacation was surely badly needed.

After a few seconds of rumination, I push the thought aside and change the subject.

"Have you told Potter who killed Greyback?"

"No, but I think he strongly suspects me. Especially after I asked him if I'd be allowed to seclude myself for a few days."

Her honesty confuses and fascinates me in equal measure.

"If he saw through you, why would he let you get away with it?" I demand to know.

The shadow falling on the gravel next to me shrugs.

"I think he expected it to happen eventually, so why argue about it now? Greyback is dead. The fact that they attacked us in return was... *untoward*, but it can't be undone anyway."

A strand of hair falls into my face and I blow it away in annoyance.

"But now Potter certainly suspects that I was involved too. Otherwise you would have sought *and* found a way to wreak revenge on Greyback much sooner, wouldn't you? Potter is many things but not stupid."

"So what? Does it make a difference?"

"Can't imagine he's happy about me going solo behind his back."

"Ah, you're afraid he might kick you out as a punishment," she deduces slowly. "Don't you worry, Malfoy, I will protect you."

There's a little too much condescension in her voice for my liking. That fact alone makes me turn my head and give her a sharp look.

"Oh? Like you did in Swansea? Tell me, Granger, did you briefly consider letting Greyback strangle me that day, or did you just want to enjoy the sight for as long as possible?"

An indefinable anger propels me to my feet. I brush the grit off my cargo trousers and face her fully. Granger's eyebrows are drawn together, but other than that she's the embodiment of cool composure.

"You're pretty sensitive," she says.

"Sensitive?" I snort, barking out a cold laugh. "Apologies for not cheering about being almost choked to death. Seriously, I should be ashamed. As is well known, *everyone* loves near-death experiences and only I, the ungrateful arsehole that I am, dare not appreciate them. So annoying, you are absolutely right!"

My sarcasm must be overwhelming because Granger rolls her eyes extensively, sighing loudly. Then she mutters something that sounds vaguely like "absolutely childish" and "what a stupid idea", but before I can probe into it, she holds up a hand and motions for me to be quiet.

"Well, I don't have all night. Actually, I wanted to, um, thank you. For pouncing on Greyback without a wand. I know things could have ended badly if you hadn't intervened. And, Merlin, *iamsorry* I didn't react immediately when he started choking you, all right?"

I stare at her in bewilderment. On the one hand, because I was just getting used to the idea of us yelling at each other, which would have forced the other unwelcome visions of her out of my head for a while. On the other hand, because I was convinced that this witch was incapable of giving her thanks or apologizing to *anyone*, let alone me. And certainly not within three or four sentences.

She looks at me expectantly, one fist on her hip, the other hand hooked into her shoulder holster. It's obvious she's waiting for an answer, but I have no idea what to say.

"Well, I owed you," I choke out at length.

I grit my teeth so hard my jaw muscles protest.

"Brilliant, then your mysterious debt would be settled," she says, waving her hand dismissively.

She slowly turns away.

"Granger."

We don't talk about it.

She turns back to me and raises an eyebrow. I swallow dryly.

"How did he manage to disarm you?" I ask, breaking our agreement that I won't press her for any explanations.

With all my might, I suppress any further thought about what happened in the lift afterwards, at least as far as my brain allows without the use of Occlumency. But I want that one question answered because since Swansea it's been on my mind constantly. The invincible, ever-triumphant Granger, disarmed and defeated in a matter of minutes? That just doesn't make sense.

She's not happy about the question, I can tell right away. Her expression darkens, she purses her lips and her eyes flash dangerously at me.

"I was distracted."

"Distracted."

"Yes."

My eyes dart between hers, trying to get a glimpse of her thoughts, but of course it's futile. Shutting people out is something she has perfected. She masters it far better than many well-trained Occlumens. You just can't read Granger. And it's driving me insane.

We stare at each other for a while—a silent battle between my question and the answer that hangs unspoken in the air between us.

Eventually, she straightens herself and takes a deep breath.

"Ginny's birthday is Friday," she says.

The change of subject catches me as much off guard as her attack on my mouth last week.

"Well, good for her," I scoff in lieu of a clever reply.

"There will be a small celebration."

I narrow my eyes and look at her doubtfully.

"Wow, your headquarters is not only a hotel and a hospital, but also a pub?"

"You're absolutely insufferable," she informs me, exasperated.

I just give her a wolfish grin. I'd love to tell her how absolutely insufferable *she* is, but I'd probably have her wand at my throat then. Or her hands. Or her lips on mine, which admittedly is quite an enticing prospect. For a second my gaze strays to her mouth, but I call myself to order.

She continues, "You know, she actually wanted to invite you, but wasn't sure if I would approve. I've only just convinced myself that, for Ginny's sake, I could tolerate your absolutely insufferable presence for a single evening, and now you're promptly proving to me that that's simply impossible."

Her tone isn't nearly as venomous as I expected. Rather, it sounds a bit playful, and despite the darkness I can see the corners of her mouth quirking. So I join her game.

"The party isn't about you, so you should respect your friend's wishes," I tease her. "You and I can just *stay away* from each other all night, after all it's worked out well so far, hasn't it?"

She doesn't respond to my dig.

"I don't think Ginny *really* wants you to show up. If you ask me, she's just doing Blaise a favor."

"Oh no, Ginny likes me."

"She does *not*."

"Of course she does." I raise a hand to count the undeniable evidence of our newfound friendship on my fingers. "She calls me by my given name, shares a table with me in the dining hall, gives me more or less helpful advice, worries about my health—"

Granger follows the movements of my fingers with her eyes.

"Can you do the whole hand?" she deadpans, casually shifting her weight to the other leg.

"—laughs at my jokes," I finish, pleased with myself.

"I haven't noticed any of that," she replies, unimpressed.

I run a hand through my hair and give her an arrogant look.

"Yeah, because you never want to sit with us," I muse, biting my lower lip mock thoughtfully. "Plus, Ginny probably doesn't dare tell you how happy it would make her if I actually came."

Granger sniffs.

"Whatever. So I can tell her that you will grace us with your insufferable presence, yes? Then she can at least issue warnings beforehand—to all the people you'll keep from showing up."

"Yes, please, tell her that."

She nods and shifts her gaze to somewhere in the darkness behind me. I'm not sure if she's trying to suppress one of that tiny, appealing smirks of hers. At the mere thought, my heart starts beating a little faster.

"And you're really going to stay away from me?" she makes sure. "So I can have my peace and don't have to flee after the first Butterbeer?"

"Only if you do," I repeat my words from the day she tied me to the chair in the training room.

I look at her lips again. This time she notices. She takes a deep breath, squares her shoulders, and gives me a warning look. *We don't talk about it.*

With a few harsh words she lets me know that she needs to report for her night watch, then spins on her heel and rushes towards the Portkeys, one of which will take her to the usual meadow, from which she will then Apparate to unknown climes. I gaze after her until the darkness swallows her up. It's only when I hear the *whoosh* of the Portkey that I'm sure she's really gone.

As I leave the roof and take my personal *lift of fate* to the command centre, I realize that Granger sets the terms for absolutely everything. She decides, she defines and she determines when, what and how much to give.

The only question is: Do I really want to play with fire?

Or rather: Will I manage not to?

Chapter End Notes

Folks, I hope you enjoyed this chapter, even if it was a little quieter. As you can see, a brief, unexpected snogging session doesn't mean the end of the slow burn, hehe. So the Granger mystery isn't solved yet. I hope that's to your liking? And: Thank you so much for your tireless support, your cheering, your kind words, your kudos, just everything! That means a lot to me. At the weekend I will upload the first part of my latest Two Shot, as a little extra. I've been busy translating. Hope to see you there. Lots of love! ♥

17. NIGHT BLACK

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

17. NIGHT BLACK

The days leading up to Ginny's birthday party flow by in a stream of good and bad news, as well as scenes that are both enthralling and disturbing.

The Resistance manages to capture two more *Exit* candidates. Ultimately, Adrian Pucey is the first Death Eater to fall victim to the procedure while in rebel custody. When Potter informs me that Lovegood failed to remove Pucey's Dark Mark, I realize I don't feel sorry for him, but rather for her.

At some point I give in to the inner urge and visit Lovegood in the trauma room. She's pale and looks like she hasn't slept in days. I try to encourage her, reminding her of the advice I gave her a few weeks ago and even bringing myself to put a hand on her shoulder, but she remains silent, thoughtful, and so bloody sad that I leave her alone after a few minutes of useless monologue.

It annoys me that Lovegood, of all good people, was chosen for the task. And once again, I feel the fist of guilt clench around my heart, after all I was instrumental in putting her in this predicament in the first place. I wish I could somehow lift the burden from her shoulders.

The second person (who surrendered almost ruefully, as Blaise confides to me over lunch) is Daphne Greengrass. This is fantastic news for a change because, unlike Adrian Pucey, Daphne survived the *Exit*.

I'm relieved for three reasons.

Firstly, because Daphne has always had excellent contacts within the Dark Lord's inner circle thanks to her arranged marriage to Mulciber Junior, which will surely benefit us when we interrogate her. Secondly, because, as I also know from Blaise, Daphne will be reunited with her sister after the interrogations, which actually warms my little, black heart. And thirdly, because Daphne's quasi-staggering straight into the arms of a Resistance fighter makes me suspect that rumors about the possibility of defection are slowly but surely spreading among the Death Eaters.

The latter is a substantial progress. Once they understand that as long as they surrender to the Resistance with good intentions, they have to fear neither torture nor death, we will no longer need to capture test subjects. With a bit of luck, they'll soon come voluntarily.

My guess is that Daphne just had nothing left to lose, after all Blaise killed Mulciber Junior during our attack on the Sheffield safehouse. Without her husband and especially her sister, there was probably no reason for her to stay with the Death Eaters any longer. She, too, did

not have the opportunity to choose her side at the beginning of this war, so she did not serve the Dark Lord out of conviction either. It seems that the prospect of seeing her sister alive was the main reason Daphne allowed herself to be captured without putting up a fight.

Ergo, we have to hope there are more Daphnes out there.

And maybe I was wrong. Maybe the fact that my cover was blown isn't the worst thing that could have happened to us after all.

I should tell Potter to show the other surviving *Exit* candidates on the frontline as well, once he's confident he can trust them. That would be an excellent message; a bold move the Dark Lord certainly doesn't expect.

The equally enthralling and disturbing scenes befall a day later, on Wednesday, and thus two days before Ginny's party.

Blaise is on watch duty, so I make my way to the workout room in the company of a constantly babbling Creevey. Ever since he heard there was a birthday party coming up, he's been so bubbly I can't decide if I still find him amusing or just plain exhausting.

"May I ask you something?" his voice rings out as we enter the workout room one after the other.

He's excitedly jumping up and down.

"Of course," I sigh, resigning myself to my fate by leaning against a wall.

We're way too early. Apart from us, hardly anyone is present so far. I glance at my timepiece, only to realize I'll probably have to endure at least ten more minutes of Creevey's chatter before the start of today's workout will interrupt him. Well, I suppose I've survived worse torture.

"Let's say you like someone—"

"I don't like *anyone*."

"Haha, very funny. So, let's say you like someone and you suspect they like you too, but you're not entirely sure—how do you find out?"

I cock an eyebrow, fold my arms and turn to face him.

"Are we talking about a witch?" I ask mischievously.

"I'm asking for a friend," Creevey replies quickly, blushing.

"Of course you do. Who is she?"

"You, um, don't know her."

"Creevey," I mutter impatiently. "*Who?*"

Creevey rolls his eyes, sighs theatrically, and blushes even more. But then he seems to realize that if he doesn't answer my question he won't get any advice from me, so he blinks and reluctantly opens his mouth again.

"Alicia Spinnet."

All right, Draco, don't laugh. Nope, you will *not* make fun of him.

"She's quite a bit older than you, mate," I choke out, quickly schooling my expression into something neutral.

"So what?" he flares up. "We're at war! What does it matter?"

I think about it for a moment, but then I have to secretly agree with him. Yes, what does that actually matter in times like these?

"Do you talk to her often?"

"Tsk, I *never* talk to her. If anything, I sit by when she's talking to other people. But she's just —*brilliant*. Smart and talented at fighting and all. She's also great at Quidditch, although of course she doesn't play it anymore these days. And she has a beautiful smile, you know? She smiles at me quite often."

Now I just can't help it anymore—I have to grin.

"Well, then take the first step, for fuck's sake. Just approach her. If you never exchange a word with her, you'll never find out if she likes you back."

"And what, pray, should I tell her?"

He raises his arms in a gesture of utter despair, then lets them fall noisily to his sides.

"How about a classic?" I suggest with a shrug.

"What's a *classic*?" Creevey asks in confusion.

Sighing, I reach up and scratch the back of my head before smoothing my hair down and rubbing my face next. This isn't a conversation I'm prepared for. That being said, dating isn't a subject I've given much thought to over the past few years. Obviously. Still, something about Creevey's earnest and trusting expression makes me try to come up with a viable response.

"A *seemingly* insignificant comment in passing. Something like 'Hey Spinnet, you look great today' for example. Give her a sincere compliment, but keep it casual like it's no big deal. It doesn't have to end up in small talk, you just want to get her attention, right? Then, next time,

ask her opinion on something when the topic is relevant. Show her that you care what she thinks. Just try to be present, you know, and then you'll see if she notices."

Creevey stares at me like I'm a first-class womanizer. Which is ridiculous because I'm probably the exact opposite. (Or at least I haven't bothered to be one for years.) But he's thinking hard now, I can see that clearly. I suppose he's envisioning how he might be able to put the scenes I've described into action.

"I'm not sure I can do that," he finally admits bluntly.

"No guts, no glory," I reply, quite pleased with myself. I shift my weight to my other leg. "Didn't you say we're at war? What do you have to lose?"

"But you're not even heeding your own advice!" Creevey argues.

He crosses his arms defiantly and frowns deeply.

"And what's that supposed to mean?" I ask, completely dumbfounded.

He sniffs.

"Well, I've never seen you compliment Granger or ask her opinion on *anything*. Okay, that one time at dinner—you offered her your seat. That was polite in a casual way, I guess? But I don't get the point of that, because if she had accepted, you would have left, right? And then you wouldn't have been able to talk to her at all."

All right, I'd pay a few Galleons to see my own face right now.

I stare at Creevey in disbelief, even subconsciously abandoning my relaxed stance against the wall. Is he serious? Did Blaise talk him into that nonsense? Are they maybe even making fun of me behind my back? Or is it, Merlin help me, actually so bloody obvious that I'm attracted to Granger in some twisted way? (Which, by the by, I haven't been able to puzzle out myself yet.) Have I underestimated what my body and facial play reveal when I'm not occluded?

It takes me a few seconds to recover from the shock enough to even answer Creevey. I clear my throat.

"Granger hates me to the core and it's mutual," I snarl at him dismissively.

"Tsk, whatever you say," he replies, sounding just as pleased with himself as I sounded a few minutes ago. "But I'm not blind, you know. I noticed the way you look at her. Can't say I understand *why* you fancy her, though. She's always so rude to you. But—"

"I do *not* fancy Granger," I quickly cut him off, vigorously shaking my head.

Just in time, because at that very moment the door opens. And speaking of the devil...

Granger enters the workout room. She's wearing her running tights and a form-fitting Lycra top. Her hair is pinned up in a messy bun on top of her head and there's a—well, *fuck me*—pillow imprint on her cheek.

Behind her, Ginny slips through the door, but I hardly take notice of her, although she raises her hand and waves at us. She then walks to the corner of the room where Granger is already bending down to pick up a skipping rope. First I take in her arse in those tight leggings and then her slender neck as she rolls her shoulders to loosen her muscles.

A pointed elbow is playfully rammed into my side.

"Yeah, you really don't fancy her *at all*."

Creevey smirks before slowly sauntering over to one of the punchbags.

"Shut the fuck up, Creevey," I growl.

At first, the workout goes without any further incidents. No unlooked-for brawl with Thomas, who is also present, no unintentional (or intentional) glances in Granger's direction, no provocations. Aside from the fact that the rebels become more talkative once they've shaken the tiredness out of their bones, it's pretty peaceful.

I complete my very first training on the jogging apparatus and immediately resolve to *never* do it again if there's any way I can avoid it. Although my ideological views have changed drastically over the course of the war, I still don't feel comfortable having to train with, or rather on, something that is so unmistakably Muggle. (Mainly because I don't get it, I have to admit. The whole time I'm afraid I'll lose control and be shot off the thing.)

Setting up these devices in the workout room was (of course, how could it be otherwise) Granger's idea. That she, Miss Control herself, obviously enjoys this type of physical activity strikes me as utterly absurd. But then again, what do I know?

In fact, thanks to Creevey's silly remarks, I'm trying so hard not to look in Granger's direction that I don't immediately notice what's happening on the other side of the room. It's only when Creevey elbows me in the ribs a second time, for which I almost snap at him, that I look up. My complaint gets stuck in my throat.

Granger appears to be engaged in a rather heated conversation with Thomas. Their faces are mere inches apart and their expressions at least give an idea of the nasty words they are hurling at each other. We can't hear them because they're too far away and also too quiet, but the furious glint in Granger's eyes tells me that it won't be long until she explodes. Thomas looks similarly angry. His face is scarlet red and his teeth are bared.

As I take a few steps towards them, I see in the corner of my eye that Creevey is following me. Ginny has also given up her previous task and is now standing diagonally behind Granger. Smith is just lining up behind Thomas.

Well, this could get interesting.

Now that we're getting closer to the group, I can finally hear most of their discussion. No, actually it's neither a *heated conversation* nor a *discussion*—it's a proper dispute.

"—and that's *my* decision," Granger hisses.

"But you can't choose him over me!" Thomas pants out. "We're partners!"

He obviously has to pull himself together not to get loud. As he speaks, his Adam's apple bobs up and down uncontrollably.

"We haven't been partners for a long time—in no condition of life," Granger taunts him. "And there are good reasons for that. I want you to fucking leave me alone."

"Referring to your so-called reasons again, yes? This is so bloody stupid, really. Those are shite reasons. They're ridiculous."

"*Ridiculous?*"

"Yeah, ridiculous. If you can't get your life back together on your own, get help somewhere, but don't expect me to be—"

"—to be what? Considerate?"

Granger laughs in disbelief. Now *she* is getting loud.

"Hermione," Ginny says in an imploring voice, frowning with concern.

I'm sure she's trying to keep her friend from making a scene in front of everybody. For my part, I am trying to understand the coherence between Thomas and Granger's statements, the fact that I missed the first part of the conversation making it quite difficult. Creevey seems to feel the same way, as he first mumbles "Huh?" and then "Uh-oh!" when Thomas raises his voice as well.

"I've been considerate long enough!"

"I wouldn't call your attempts at persuasion considerate."

"That is what we're talking about now? Really?" Thomas spits. A vein is throbbing in his temple. "I thought this was about the missions?"

"Fine, let's talk about the missions. You are no longer my partner. Full stop."

"You know what? I don't mind! Go with Blaise if you want, although I don't understand what he seems to be doing so much better than me, but not with *him*."

Oh. Ah.

This is about me.

"The decisions I make regarding combats, reconnaissances, or the Resistance in general are none of your bloody business, Dean."

"And the decisions you make for yourself? Are they none of my bloody business either?"

"Oh my god, you are... I'm *not* having this conversation with you."

Granger spins around, apparently about to leave the room. Our eyes meet just as she completes her half-turn and she glares at me as if I'm personally responsible for their argument. Then Thomas makes a crucial mistake.

"We're not done yet," he hisses angrily, stepping forward quickly, grabbing her wrist and yanking her back to him.

And all hell breaks loose.

In a flash, Granger draws her wand, unknowingly solving one of my secret mysteries. Right at the seam of her night black running tights is a tiny, barely visible pocket that you'd never recognize unless you know exactly what to look for.

She is fast, but Ginny, who already has her wand at the ready as if she had sensed what might happen, is faster. She disarms Granger with a whip-like flick of her wand, which unfortunately doesn't snap her out of her furious trance. With a guttural scream, she wriggles her wrist out of Thomas's grip and lunges at him.

Both Ginny's eyes and the tip of her wand are already sparkling with an imminent Stunner, but that would be a bad idea, I'm sure. I instinctively know that Granger would never forgive her for something like that. So I step forward and stop Ginny with a quick wave of my hand.

"Don't," I whisper.

Granger, meanwhile, has landed a good punch in Thomas's face, but she doesn't look like she'll let up on him any time soon. He, in turn, reaches for her again (this time to keep her at bay) and, of course, that enrages her even more.

It's undeniably stupid. It might even be dangerous. But my disbelief at the situation I've stumbled into and my anger at Thomas, which is now probably almost as great as Granger's, make me no longer realize but only react.

Leaping forward, I wrap an arm around Granger's middle and clamp her under my armpit like some sort of Granger-shaped laundry bag. I'm careful not to touch her with my palms, although I'm not sure that's *considerate* enough to avoid becoming the next target of her wrath.

She thrashes about and growls, but without her wand (and with her small size and fly weight) she is all but incapacitated in this position. Well, besides her fists hitting my stomach and chest and her feet kicking my lower back and the backs of my thighs. That bloody unruly witch.

"Fuck's sake," I rasp out as I carry her across the room.

I ram the gym door open with my shoulder and stumble along with my writhing cargo into the training room, which, thank Merlin, is currently deserted. As the door slams shut behind us, I set Granger down and take a deep breath.

I'm not granted a real breather. She immediately pounces on me, hissing and pounding my chest with her hands.

"Granger. Look at me."

No reaction.

Clasping my hands behind my back for good measure, I brace myself against her blows with sheer muscular strength alone, then I use my body to slowly back her into a corner of the room. With every step I take forward and every step she has to take backwards as a result, she fights me a little harder.

"Stop it already. I'm not touching you. Look at me."

Granger's face is contorted, her eyes are spitting fire, her chest is heaving erratically. She's going to give me some fresh bruises. Merlin help me.

Two more steps and her back finally hits the wall. I stop in front of her, bowing my head slightly so that we are face to face, but still keeping our bodies the appropriate distance apart.

"Come to yourself, Granger. Thomas won't touch you anymore. Look at me. I'm not touching you either. Here are my hands. Look."

I unclasp my hands, pull them from behind my back and present them at head level, palms open and fingers spread wide. At that, she actually pauses.

A final smack of her small fist hits my sternum and I stifle a groan. Instead, I breathe through my nose and briefly close my eyes to compose myself. *Gods*. When I open them again, Granger's gaze is fixed on my face. A steep crease has formed between her eyebrows. She's still breathing heavily, but she doesn't seem so irrational anymore.

"You *can't* be serious," she gasps out, nodding her chin toward my still raised hands.

I would like to give her a smile, and a real one at that. Partly out of relief, partly because of the skeptical look on her face. Suddenly it seems like she's the one who's worried about *my* mental health and not the other way round. Even her nose is wrinkled in a kind of mild concern. It's somewhat adorab—

Wait a moment. What - the - fuck?

With a tremendous shock I realize that maybe something *is* wrong with my mental health.

I brush the thought aside, suppressing any further amused or otherwise odd reaction, and opt for casually blowing a strand of hair out of my face.

"Ah, there she is," I tease, slowly lowering my hands. "Welcome back to the land of the living."

Granger blushes a little, but still scowls at me.

"You shouldn't have intervened. I was in control of the situation."

"Sure, Granger," I snort. "You were in so much control that Ginny almost stunned you."

There's a tense silence for a few seconds as she tries to steady her breathing and I watch her do it. When she finally manages to collect herself, her hands slide down her body, searching for something. She stiffens.

"Where's my wand?" she asks accusingly.

"Ginny disarmed you."

"Did she?"

"Bugger me, you really didn't notice?" I make sure, the corners of my mouth quirking.

"Shut up, Malfoy," she says through gritted teeth.

"Don't get me wrong, Granger," I begin, shaking my head. "Thomas *is* an idiot. And I quite liked the way you punched him in the face. With a bit of luck, you managed to break his nose as well. Would serve him just right."

I smirk and tap my own nose.

"But," I continue, "I don't think it would have been wise to let you keep beating him up in front of the others. After all, you are the role model witch of the Resistance."

Granger huffs and glares at me.

"It was *your* fault it happened in the first place," she then spits her venom at me.

Right. Of course it was.

"Oh? And why is that? If I understood correctly, Thomas and you were bickering about your decision to take me on your missions, right? He certainly wasn't referring to our little wolf-killing excursion, unless you actually told him about it, which, frankly, I very much doubt. So I assume he was talking about other plans that I don't know about yet. Is that so, Granger? And here I thought you wanted to stay away from me."

It's probably not the smartest idea to provoke Granger after she's just physically attacked another wizard, but I just can't help it. Try as I may, I can't see through her, and slowly but surely the concomitant frustration is destroying my hard-won restraint.

Before I know it, she reaches for me, digging her fingers into the fabric of my long-sleeved top and pulling me towards her. I have to step forward to keep my balance and press a hand

against the wall behind her for extra stability. Our faces are now hovering right in front of each other.

"Were you even listening?" she hisses. Her eyes dart wildly between mine. "What I said to Dean applies to you as well. I don't have to justify myself to *anyone*. Each of you can rest assured that I always have in mind what is best for the Resistance. And when I say that I will stay away from you and that I want you to do the same—"

Her voice grows dangerously low. When I suddenly feel her hands let go of my shirt and slowly slide down my upper body, my muscles start to flex of their own accord. Her eyes flicker as she accidentally touches my abs through the thin fabric. If I had to guess, I'd say she's surprised she hasn't pushed me away long ago. Then her lips move again and her breath brushes my jaw. She's whispering, so I lean forward even further.

"—I mean any situation that has nothing to do with the strategic planning, the training sessions, or our search for Tom," she continues firmly. "Apart from that, we *will* stay away from each other if possible, yes."

"I see," I mumble thoughtfully. "For example at birthday parties, at unintentional nightly encounters on the roof, at short preliminary briefings in some cramped storeroom. Oh, and rides with the lift fall into that category of off-duty activities, too, I suppose."

We don't talk about it.

Granger gasps softly and wets her bottom lip. My eyes flick to her mouth and I clench my hand, which is still resting on the wall next to her head, into a fist. My heart is beating indecently fast and my ears are ringing. I breathe in the air she exhales and her eyes go *dark, dark, dark*.

The gym door is flung open and a whole bunch of rebels pours into the training room. I quickly push myself off the wall and back away.

As I turn around, I almost collide with Ginny, who has come over to us. She gives me a fleeting, confused look before pushing past me to hand Granger her wand.

I use this very moment to bolt.

Chapter End Notes

Oh, this one has given me so much trouble. I hope the grammar is okay. Feedback would be most welcome. I've caught a nasty cold and it feels like my brain is working at half speed.

Next stop—birthday party! ♥

18. OPAL BLACK

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

18. OPAL BLACK

I would never have gone to Ginny's birthday party if I had known that everyone else would turn up in their everyday clothes. Basically, it makes sense, but I simply didn't think about it beforehand. (Not to mention the fact that I came here without any luggage and therefore wouldn't have been able to do the same even if I wanted to.) So, in accordance with my role as pariah, intruder, defector, I'm the only one sitting at one of the long tables in the dining hall in my obligatory workout clothes. Gods, I could have at least thought of asking Blaise to lend me something.

I try not to let my outfit spoil my mood because, contrary to expectations, the evening is going pretty well for me so far. Of course, it's not really a party that Ginny is throwing here but rather a cozy, carefree get-together, but I've already spoken to a few people who have been very adept at ignoring me ever since I arrived at Camp Black.

Paradoxically, Hannah Abbott was the first to approach me. Probably no great gain for my acquaintanceships within the Resistance, but I was still pleasantly surprised. Her openness earned me a brief but polite chat with a group of familiar faces. So now I know that Oliver Wood, Anthony Goldstein and Padma Patil have accepted me at headquarters and are no longer toying with the idea of jinxing me from behind. Terrific.

After that, I hung out with Lovegood and Longbottom for a while, which the latter accepted grudgingly at first but more and more indifferently with the increasing number of his Butterbeers. Now that I'm alone again, since Blaise and Ginny are still otherwise occupied, I'm already sipping the fourth beer myself.

I can't remember the last time I had a drink (let alone for pure enjoyment), but I have to admit that it feels kind of good. The alcohol calms my nerves, which comes in handy considering all the social interactions I'm more or less willingly engaging in tonight.

As I eagerly take another sip, I accidentally catch a glimpse of Creevey, who is actually standing next to Alicia Spinnet, interviewing her about how she likes the food. I shake my head, smiling to myself. It's not exactly what I meant by my advice, but I decide it's good enough. Creevey says something to her and she laughs. I'm rather happy for the little bugger.

However, it doesn't take long before I'm distracted because suddenly the door swings open. I quickly tear my eyes away from Creevey and Spinnet's hopelessly romantic union.

And ah, there she is.

Granger lingers on the threshold for a few seconds to survey the situation, which I, in turn, use to survey *her*.

She's wearing white trainers, form-fitting, dark blue jeans, and an opal black, albeit modest, satin blouse with trumpet-shaped sleeves that caress her wrists. The color of the latter suits her incredibly well. It makes her slightly tanned skin glow and her dark eyes sparkle. She's also wearing her hair down tonight. It cascades down her back, just slightly curly and looking soft as hell. I swallow hard.

As I take in this unfamiliar (and exciting) sight, she reaches up and, with a few practiced movements, gathers some strands of her long bangs. She then twirls them into a messy bun at the back of her head, through which she eventually pushes her wand. Once that's done, she slowly feels her way into the room.

Her gaze wanders around and first falls on Thomas and Smith, who are leaning against a wall and return her suddenly frosty look no less belligerently. She immediately turns in the opposite direction to avoid them, but then she spots me, which makes her search for a suitable seat much more difficult. I watch with amusement as she alters her course once more and performs some kind of slalom through a group of rebels until she reaches the buffet.

Finally, I avert my gaze with a sigh.

Absolutely everything about this situation is god-awful, really. And by that I mean neither the 'birthday party' itself nor the chipper Resistance fighters around me. I mean Granger and her bloody allure. It's maddening.

"Dennis told me about your flirting tips," comes a cheerful voice. "And they even seem to be working. Well done, Draco."

It's Blaise who plops down next to me and just a second later happily shovels the first fork of potato salad into his mouth.

"Mm, good for him," I reply absently. "He could use some normalcy, I think."

"All of us," Blaise agrees clipped because he's busy stuffing himself.

"Are you responsible for him thinking that I fancy Granger?" I ask bluntly.

This question has been on my mind ever since Creevey opened his mouth in the workout room.

Blaise, fucker that he is, takes his time answering. He calmly chews and swallows, then takes a generous sip of his Butterbeer. Finally, he puts down his fork, clasps his hands under his chin and gives me a mischievous look.

"Nope," he says, letting the "p" pop out of his mouth rather gleefully, "but Dennis told me about his observations—extremely insightful. And he told me how vehemently you denied it—also very interesting. He's quite the chatterbox, I'll have you know."

"No shit," I deadpan, rolling my eyes.

"Well, is he right?"

"Blaise."

"Oh? He actually *is* right, isn't he?"

"No, he's not. Shut the fuck up."

I rise from my seat to replace my empty Butterbeer bottle with a new one. It's a welcome opportunity to escape Blaise's annoying presence. I really didn't think I'd ever consider this in a room full of rebels, but there it fucking is. I give him the middle finger and leave the table.

At least Merlin is on my side because Granger has since disappeared into the crowd, which means I can linger at the buffet table and stuff my mouth with random finger food. I uncork my new Butterbeer and look around for an equally new conversational partner. Perhaps it would be better just to leave and return to my sleeping quarters. The whole thing is absolutely pointless and ridiculous. Pathetic even.

After a while, the tingling sensation of a piercing stare snaps me out of my self-pitying trance. I let my gaze roam until I discover the source.

Granger is leaning against a wall on the opposite side of the room, as far away from me as possible. Still, she looks me straight in the eye. Her lips are twitching, I can see that despite the distance. She's noticed how annoyed I am and it amuses her. Minx.

I slowly push myself off the buffet table and begin to wander through the crowd. Whenever I take a peek at her, I see that she's doing the same. First right, then left, around a bunch of rebels, along one of the walls. I walk around a table and so does she. Her fingertips dance across the tabletop as she walks past it. By the time I reach the wall she's been leaning against, she's back on the other side of the dining hall, leaning over the buffet with feigned interest.

My breathing quickens. This cat-and-mouse game is stimulating. Literally.

Giving Creevey and his beloved a wide berth, which is basically unnecessary since he doesn't pay any attention to me anyway, I mingle with the crowd again. The next time I look up, Granger is gone. The buffet, in front of which she was just standing, is deserted. I stop abruptly and glance in all directions, quite confused.

When I finally turn around, I almost drop my bottle.

Granger is right behind me, looking up at me deviously. A tiny, dangerous smirk curls her lips.

"So this is what your attempts to stay away from me look like?" she asks mockingly.

I sniff and square my shoulders before taking an extra large sip of my Butterbeer. Over the neck of the bottle, I watch her pop a grape into her mouth.

"I gave my best, but you're just too pushy," I inform her nonchalantly.

At my words, her eyes flash. Amusement maybe?

"I've heard that before," she replies simply.

There's a moment of silence that I use to take my eyes off her face and let them rake extensively over the rest of her.

"For not wearing your uniform, you look surprisingly good tonight, Granger," I say.

"Oh? Don't tell me you've grown fond of our combat gear," she replies, expertly ignoring the second part of my statement.

She puts on a mock flattered expression and even has the nerve to place a hand on her heart. Bold as brass, that witch.

"Yeah, your beloved combat gear is passable," I admit. "Almost made me forget that you also exist in other clothes."

Granger takes a sip from her mug and the unmistakable scent of Firewhisky reaches my nostrils. Well, well, well. The lioness is drinking the hard stuff. Obviously she's not on watch duty tomorrow, otherwise she certainly wouldn't take the risk of getting drunk.

Instead of responding to my comments about her looks and clothes, she changes the subject.

"We questioned Greengrass. The older one. She had little information that could be of use to us, apart from the locations of some Death Eater safehouses that have recently been relocated. Harry posted the interrogation record in the briefing room. Take a look at it soon, yes? We urgently need a new plan."

My gaze darts between her eyes, which are on me with a new seriousness. It probably shouldn't feel so good when Granger implies that she values my opinion, but it does. It flatters me, no matter how stupid and pathetic it may be.

I nod slowly, whereupon she seems satisfied.

"May I ask you something?"

The words fall from my lips before I can change my mind. She looks at me calmly, then slowly raises an eyebrow, which I take as her way of prompting me to continue.

"If we capture more Death Eaters and there are more casualties—" She clicks her tongue at the terminology. "—will Lovegood be able to bear it?"

I don't know what makes me confront Granger, of all people, with my concerns. In theory, I could have talked to anyone about it. Blaise, Potter, even Ginny. (Well, except maybe Creevey.) But for some reason I want to know what *she* thinks. I'm curious if she's realized how much Lovegood is suffering because of the *Exit* and whether she thinks it's justifiable. And I want to know if she might even come up with another solution.

At least I've figured out why I care so much about Lovegood's well-being in the first place. It's because I've developed a feeling for her that, for a change, I don't want my Occlumency back for because I don't want to suppress it at all. In fact, I've learned to accept it, even appreciate it.

It's gratitude.

Lovegood has been kind to me from the start, never judgmental, which is outstanding and by no means expectable, especially given my past. Also, working with her made me see her in a different light. So yes, I want her to be okay. She may be a little strange, but her heart is in the right place. I worry that this very heart will soon be broken.

Granger takes a moment to formulate an answer. Meanwhile, her gaze wanders attentively and, if I'm not mistaken, even a little curiously over my face. Finally, she opens her mouth.

"I hope so," she says seriously, her index finger tapping the rim of her mug in an irregular rhythm. "But if there's even the slightest sign that she can't take it anymore, I'll personally see to it that the task is taken off her hands. I'll keep an eye on her from now on, I promise."

I sigh in relief and nod.

Eventually, someone calls Granger's name and she saunters off. I'm left with a half-empty beer, a madly pounding heart, and a devastating realization that hits me out of nowhere like an expertly batted Bludger.

Without realizing it, I applied the two pieces of advice I so cockily gave to Creevey the other day to that brief conversation with Granger. Not only did I give her a sincere (if casual) compliment, I also asked for her opinion.

Fucking brilliant.

After my confusing encounter with Granger, I couldn't stand the celebration in the dining hall much longer. About an hour (and two more Butterbeers) after our conversation, I bolted. Now I'm in the training room, lost in thought and slightly tipsy, sitting in the very chair Ronald Weasley normally occupies when he's watching me during training sessions. Absentmindedly, I pick at the bottle label of the Butterbeer I made off with.

Aside from the shocking realization of my unconscious flirtation, I have no regrets voicing my concern for Lovegood. Granger didn't give the impression of having thought about it before, but at least she took my words seriously. I'm sure that sharing my observations with one of the leaders of the Resistance was the right decision, especially since they're apparently too blind to make said observations themselves.

Maybe I should talk to Longbottom too. Perhaps after our cautious, alcohol-induced approach, he'll grant me an audience. Then again, it's actually not my job to tell him that his girlfriend is slowly but surely getting into serious emotional distress. I wonder why *he* doesn't

perform the *Exit*, after all he also works in the trauma room. Suddenly, it occurs to me that I still don't know what his duties are. It's probably about time to—

I'm abruptly snapped out of my woozy musings when the soft squeak of the door hinges announces that a second person has chosen the training room for a brief respite. My head jerks up and I peer through the darkness.

To my surprise, it's Granger who slips into the hall.

Merlin. It's starting to feel like I'm summoning her with my thoughts alone.

Again, only the moonlight falls through the magical windows, so she doesn't see me right away. This circumstance gives me a few seconds in which I can look at her undisturbed.

Now that she feels so completely unobserved, Granger's mask isn't in place. Her expression is relaxed, unguarded, a little thoughtful at most. Also, tonight she doesn't seem to be as tired as the last few times I've been able to secretly eye her because she wasn't aware of my presence. As she slowly ambles into the room, she plays with one of her curls. In the other hand she is now also holding a butterbeer, which she lifts to her lips just as she spots me.

She freezes in mid-movement.

I meet her gaze but remain silent. It's so quiet in the hall you could hear a Knut drop.

As I quickly run a hand through my hair to brush a few stray strands from my forehead, her eyes follow the movement intently. Then she shakes off her paralysis by taking a slow sip of her beer. I lower my eyes to her mouth at the bottle opening and involuntarily bite my bottom lip. Granger notices and her eyes darken visibly.

And then I do something I never thought I would do in my life. Not in front of anyone, let alone Granger. Never willingly. Not even (as I now realize) in some wild fantasy or lewd daydream.

Without breaking eye contact, I lean forward and place my bottle on the concrete floor, then sit back and slowly, inch by inch, bring my arms behind the back of the chair to cross them there.

The sharp breath Granger takes is music to my ears.

My full attention is still firmly on her face. Her gaze, on the other hand, flies over me blazingly fast, down to my boots and then up again, taking in my casual posture.

She takes a step forward and hesitates for a moment, then her hand darts to her hair to pull her wand out of the bun at the back of her head. A second later, I feel her magic coil around my wrists, fixing them in place behind the chair. My heart starts racing immediately.

Granger puts down her Butterbeer as well and slowly approaches me. Through the moonlight-flecked darkness. Like a feline predator hunting for prey.

Gods, I wish she was wearing her combat gear. I lied when she asked me about it earlier. The rebel uniform isn't just *passable*. In actual fact, I find it incredibly appealing, especially on her. I would even go so far as to say that of all Resistance fighters, Granger wears it best. By a long chalk.

When she reaches me, she looks me in the face. Her expression is serious, her eyes are inquiring. I return her gaze unwaveringly.

Take what you want. I have nothing to lose.

In one fluid motion she straddles me, causing my pulse to lapse into the fastest beat of all. First I feel her warmth, then her determined fingers on my abs and finally her lips on mine.

My eyes flutter shut.

It's not quite like that one night in the lift. Tonight I taste no blood, only the Firewhisky on her tongue. But a few things are exactly as I remember them. Her teeth exploring my bottom lip, for example. Or that unfathomable urge to savour her to the fullest that makes me crane my neck.

It's a fierce kiss, despite the invisible manacles my hands are greedily tugging at. But her magic keeps me in check, and that's a good thing. It's safer. I wanted it that way.

She buries a hand in my hair and tilts my head back for better access, pressing her body against mine. I'm already hard and I'm sure she can feel it, but she doesn't seem to mind. Quite the contrary. She moves her hips and grinds down on me, making me groan into her mouth. Her answer is a soft gasp. Her grip on my hair tightens even more.

I take what I can get in this short amount of time. My lips memorize the curve of her upper lip and the corners of her mouth. My lungs fill with the enticing scent of her shampoo. My tongue caresses hers, then I take her bottom lip between my teeth. Meanwhile, she runs her fingers over my shirt, *up, up, up*, to my throat and wraps her hand around it. Her thumb rubs my fluttering pulse point and the sound that escapes me as a result is indefinable.

Breathing heavily, Granger pulls away from my lips, causing me to blink in both confusion *and* annoyance. Fuck, I'm so close to begging her not to stop.

"Thought you wanted to stay away from me?" she whispers.

The hot breath that brushes my jaw as she speaks is more than a temptation. I want to fucking drown in it.

"*You* are the one not staying away, Granger," I remind her. It's supposed to sound composed, but my voice is far too throaty. "I left the dining hall first."

The hand on my neck squeezes, but not hard enough to feel threatening.

"Touché," she breathes, her lips curling into a smirk.

This unexpected sight accompanied by a roll of her hips makes me moan.

"And you don't want to touch me?" she asks almost challengingly.

One of her hands slowly slides down my right arm, leaving a trail of goosebumps in its wake, until it stops where my wrists connect. She has to bend forward to do it. Her breasts press promisingly against my torso. A lonely kiss ghosts over my lips.

"Not yet," I pant out. Her eyes flash at me in surprise. "I plan on driving you insane until you can't think of anything else to do but beg me to touch you, and when the time comes and you actually beg, I'll happily oblige."

That salacious promise might be a little overkill, but luck is on my side tonight. Granger doesn't get angry, just huffs in disbelief. I'd even bet my wand there's some amusement in it this time.

And then her lips crash onto mine again. She even kisses me so hard it literally takes my breath away.

Her hand slips out of my hair and finds my jawbone, the other releases my wrists and moves purposefully to the hem of my long-sleeved top. Just as it slides under the fabric and each of my absolutely oxygen-free breaths presses my abs against her inquisitive fingertips, a door in the atrium slams open and cheerful voices ring out. Rebels on their way to their sleeping quarters.

Merlin, please don't let anyone consider a detour to the training room.

At the noise, Granger withdraws and gets off my lap. (Frankly, I would have preferred to get her off *on it*, but hey.) Just like the night in the lift, my head and body follow her as far as my tied hands allow. I pull away from her lips with great reluctance, even letting out a frustrated growl.

She laughs softly at me. It's the most beautiful sound I've ever heard. Then she spins around and scurries silently through the training room. Not without picking up her Butterbeer bottle and taking a deep swig, mind you. So bloody cheeky.

I stare after her, still breathless.

Granger's magic doesn't release my hands until the door clicks shut behind her. Tilting my head back to take a deep breath, I pull my arms out from behind the back of the chair and rub my wrists.

Stay away from me.

Well, all things considered, we're pretty fucking good at that.

Well, did the party live up to your expectations? Those of you who were wondering how this is supposed to work when Hermione doesn't want to be touched will probably have a clue by now, hehe. Already convinced? Or do you need more evidence?

Oh, and don't forget to check out [Kismet!](#) ♡

19. DIAMOND BLACK

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

19. DIAMOND BLACK

To my secret relief, I hardly see Granger for the next few days.

However, since I still succumb to a motley mix of emotions every time I even *think* about her or our last encounter in the training room, I gratefully accept any distraction that comes my way. With increasing frequency, I visit Lovegood in the trauma room (not only because of the *Exit*, but also because of her soothing nature) and spend hours poring over the new information Potter has received from Daphne.

Eventually, I even talk to Daphne myself.

From her I get a first-hand account of the changes that have been made to the security arrangements of the Death Eater safehouses since the Dark Lord found out that I'm still alive. As we wrap up this purely strategic part of our conversation, her blue eyes catch and hold my gaze. And then she thanks me. For saving her and her sister's life. She doesn't blame me for keeping my plan a secret for so long, nor does she see me as a traitor. Instead, she claims to be deeply indebted to me. I hate that notion and don't even remotely share it. So I just tell her that, if anything, she needs to thank Saint Potter. Shortly thereafter I take my leave.

The conversation with Daphne upsets me. It's incredibly exhausting to keep the memories of the past seven years and the associated feelings where they (thankfully) still are to this day: in the furthest corners of my mind. The longer I'm at Camp Black, the more Death Eaters we rid of their Dark Mark, the more strategy meetings I attend, and the more I have to deal with myself, the harder it is to organize my thoughts. Every feeling that I used to quickly brush aside with the help of my Occlumency because it was unwanted or even dangerous, I now experience very consciously. Guilt, concern, affection, fear. And constant anger. Mainly at myself. Some days it's almost unbearable.

I wish I could turn off the chaos in my head, but it doesn't work without Occlumency. This inability to control my emotions only makes me angrier because it creates a feeling of mental overload and failure that I haven't had to endure in quite some time. It's a perpetual spiral that's slowly but surely driving me insane.

And then there's the thing with Granger—the icing on the pumpkin pie, so to speak. She awakens in me a temper so strong that it's truly overwhelming. An unfamiliar craving. The uncontrollable urge to look at her whenever she enters a room. A wildly pounding heart when I think of our kisses. An insatiable curiosity that keeps driving me to her as if she were the delta of a raging river and I was a piece of driftwood in its current.

For weeks, I've been telling myself she's nothing more than a mystery I want to unravel. I still want to, but that's not the only reason I'm attracted to her, I've realized that much. There's also a spark between us, at least physically, and that doesn't make it any less interesting.

On the contrary. When you taste something and find that you like it, you want it again and again. And when it's even forbidden and you're supposed to *stay away* from it, it's all the more tempting.

I don't dare label my feelings towards Granger in any way. Instead, I try to accept this something between us for what it undeniably *also* is: a temptation, a challenge, a game. Admittedly, not a game I should be playing, not a challenge I should be chasing, and not a temptation I was hoping for. But at least these terms are an explanation I can live with.

For now.

The next escalation at Camp Black is not long in coming.

A few days after my visit to Camp White, we launch an attack on a Death Eater safehouse that Potter and I carefully selected based on Daphne's intel. To my surprise (and secret irritation), Potter informs me that Granger and Blaise will be a team and also the vanguard while I'm supposed to keep an eye on Creevey. I don't question that decision, although I *do* wonder if Granger actively asked for Blaise to be her partner.

A voice in my head whispers that it might have something to do with the words Thomas shouted in her face in the workout room. That maybe, after this public humiliation, she wants to prove something to herself and to all of us. Or I'm wrong. Perhaps she simply regrets what happened after Ginny's birthday party. Maybe this allocation of teams is her latest attempt to stay away from me. But didn't she say that we would only have to stay away from each other in situations that have nothing to do with our work for the Resistance? I rack my brains about it for hours, but eventually come to the conclusion that it's pointless.

The mission goes horribly wrong.

There are eight of us. In four teams. Granger and Blaise, Thomas and Smith, Weasel-Weasley and his brother George, and Creevey and I. The number of Death Eaters we encounter in the safehouse is twice as high, and we didn't expect that. Both Daphne and I estimated that there would be eight to ten of them at most.

It's a massacre. An absolute, bloody mess.

Nine Death Eaters die and seven are captured, although I'm not convinced all of them will survive the *Exit*. Miraculously, there are no losses on our side, which is probably mainly due to the element of surprise and the incredible ineptitude of our opponents.

Granger, Blaise, Weasley and his brother portkey the partly stunned, partly unconscious Death Eaters to where Lovegood is waiting for them to perform the *Exit*. She will have to

hurry as there are so many candidates that it's not unlikely that the Dark Lord will get wind of the attack *before* she can complete her task.

What has me stomping across the roof of St. Mungo's in anger now that I'm back at headquarters, though, is another matter: Pansy was there. And Smith hit her so badly with one of his curses that she was covered in her own blood from head to toe when Blaise levitated her into the air before activating his Portkey.

In fact, I'm so fucking furious that I don't even consider going to the trauma room and letting Longbottom heal me, even though I'm bleeding quite profusely myself. A ricocheted *Confringo* sent some huge splinters of wood flying and one of them got stuck in my lower abdomen at a pretty awkward angle. I can feel hot moisture oozing from the deep puncture, but I ignore it.

"You definitely need to go to the trauma room," insists Creevey, who stumbles into the lift right after me and leans against a wall, panting heavily.

We were the last ones in the safehouse and took on the job of covering our *tracks*, by which I mean, of course, the dead Death Eaters. Thomas and Smith sloped off right after the others left with the *Exit* candidates. As far as I know, they weren't injured, so I'd bet they just didn't feel like doing the dirty work. Those bloody fuckers.

Creevey, by contrast, has bravely persevered, although he's also quite battered. There's a huge laceration just below his hairline. Blood runs down his forehead and eyebrows and drips onto his shoulder holster.

"Later," I say gruffly, waving my hand dismissively before angrily smacking the lift button to get the sodding thing to move.

Nah-ah, before I let anyone heal me, I have to kill Smith. And if I bleed to death in the meantime, then so be it.

Creevey seems to realize there's no point in arguing with me because, for once, he keeps his mouth shut and just tilts his head back in exhaustion as the lift lurches down. A few seconds later, the grilles open and reveal the command centre.

We get out.

Well, Creevey *gets out* and makes his way to the trauma room. For my part, I practically *storm* out of the lift and have Smith by the collar before anyone in the room even realizes what's happening.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" I growl, shoving him back vigorously.

He stumbles against a flipchart, sending a whole heap of parchments fluttering to the floor.

My rage threatens to suffocate me. But not only because Pansy, of all people, was injured so badly. I know I can consider myself lucky if she survives, after all, by suggesting her as a test subject, I consciously took the risk that something might happen to her and it would be my

fault. The main reason I'm so angry is the fact that Potter gave clear instructions before we left and Smith didn't follow them. Namely, that we should be careful with any Death Eaters who we suspect might be good *Exit* candidates, and especially those who don't put up a fight.

Pansy falls into both categories. Despite the chaos, I noticed that she only defended herself and never attacked. She's not a fighter, never has been, and Smith still cursed her, that irascible bastard. In doing so, he provoked the death of a person who might survive the *Exit* and thus be useful to the Resistance. His behavior was exceptionally stupid. I actually thought Potter's orders were sacred to the rebels, but hey, idiots are obviously everywhere.

"Fuck's sake," Smith huffs, steadying his footing. "Everything went well and neither of us died, so don't get your knickers in a fucking twist, Malfoy."

"You cursed Pansy even though she was absolutely defensive," I snap at him in exasperation, wetting my chapped lips. "Do you think I'm dense? Or blind?"

"She's alive, what more do you want? Don't play the goody-goody. You fucked her a few times, that's what this is about, isn't it? All you care about is saving your little tart. You're such a hypocrite, Malfoy, it's—"

I lunge at him. Livid as I am, it doesn't even occur to me to use my wand.

Someone grabs my shoulder holster from behind and pulls me back. It's Blaise, who appeared out of nowhere and is now keeping me away from Smith, whose face is turning fiery red.

"This isn't about relationships or friendships," Blaise says rather diplomatically. "Pansy is a good *Exit* candidate who could have important information for the Resistance, and you knew it. We discussed it at length before the mission."

I'm glad he's putting into words what I'm unable to say through my gritted teeth. My jaw muscles tick as I wriggle out of Blaise's tight grip and, breathing heavily, push my slightly damp hair away from my forehead with one hand.

"Still, no reason to get so upset," says Thomas, who now stands next to Smith like the disgustingly smug version of a bodyguard. "Let's wait and see if the *Exit* doesn't kill her anyway, then we can talk."

Without knowing it, he hits the nail on the head regarding my concern for Pansy. It's my absolute sore spot. Gods, I want to curse him so badly.

"You can shut up too, Thomas," I hiss, threateningly holding out my index finger.

Blaise puts a comforting hand on my shoulder, then Potter comes into view and says something to Thomas and Smith that I don't understand because it's suddenly ringing unnaturally loud in my ears. I have no idea if it's due to my anger or the ongoing blood loss.

Shaking Blaise's hand off once more, I spin around to remove my breastplate. Despite the injury, my fingers are steady, which I'm grateful for because I don't want to make a fool of myself in front of the two fuckers. Annoyed, I toss the leather aside, then undo the shoulder

holster that held the armor in place. I strip it off and carelessly let it fall to the floor. With one hand, I tuck my wand into the waistband of my cargo trousers while simultaneously using my teeth to undo the straps on my forearm holster. A few seconds later, it's hurled across the room as well.

Ah, I need to calm the fuck down.

I take a deep breath and discipline myself before pulling the blood-soaked long-sleeved top over my head, which has turned diamond black where the wood pierced it. I inspect the wound, noting that it's deep but not life-threatening, and settle for pressing a hand over it to stop the flow of blood. Only then do I turn around again.

Potter is still arguing with Smith and Thomas. Blaise is watching me with concern. And right behind him, at the large, circular conference table, she's sitting—feet on the tabletop as usual, arms crossed, brow furrowed.

I wonder if she's been here the whole time. Probably, after all Blaise was her partner and they must have returned to headquarters together after bringing the captured Death Eaters to Lovegood. Still, I can't believe I just swept past her in my rage.

Granger regards me intently. Her dark eyes wander over my naked, blood-smearred torso, my still-trembling muscles, my anger-contorted face, and my disheveled hair. I swallow hard. Her gaze is undefinable. If I didn't know better, I'd say there's a hint of approval in it, but what reason would she have for that?

"You have to go to the trauma room," she says seriously, sounding a lot more authoritative than Creevey.

"I don't have to do anything," I reply a little more brusquely than necessary. "I can heal myself better than Longbottom ever could."

"It's a serious injury," she retorts, unperturbed.

"I appreciate your *concern*, Granger," I scoff, my lips twitching, "but I've been through far worse, believe me."

I crumple up the long-sleeved top with my free hand, then avert my eyes and strut past Blaise. In a fit of childish anger coupled with carefully honed immorality, I give Thomas and Smith a fervent middle finger before kicking open the door.

"Let me know if Pansy made it, Potter," I call over my shoulder.

Then, with purposeful steps, I march into the equipment room to treat my wound.

I'm not even thinking about going to the trauma room because what I said to Granger is true. I've *been* through far worse. The wound is nothing compared to some of the injuries I sustained during my time with the Death Eaters. I don't necessarily have to waste someone else's magic and time. All I want is quiet and a breather. Just for one bloody moment. My reserves of restraint and patience are definitely exhausted.

I just manage to remove a few small splinters and disinfect the wound with my wand before the squeaking of the door hinges heralds the end of my respite.

Inwardly, I steel myself for Blaise's impending lecture regarding my rude behavior.

"Don't waste your breath," I murmur exasperatedly, pressing a towel to my stomach to soak up most of the blood before I can start closing the wound.

"I guess I can decide for myself if it's a waste," comes a much higher and even slightly amused voice.

Oh. It's not Blaise who followed me.

I spin around and spot Granger, who then slowly approaches, her eyes on my stomach. As she stops in front of me, her wand obediently slides from its holster into her hand.

"Let me do that," she demands, nodding toward the towel still covering the wound.

"I'm perfectly capable," I drawl, rolling my eyes.

"I don't doubt that," she replies, "but the scar will be prettier if you let me do it."

She lifts a challenging eyebrow.

I drop the towel in resignation and toss it on the floor with a sigh, then put my hands on my hips and blow a strand of hair off my face. I know instinctively that there's no point in arguing with her, so I don't even try.

Granger steps forward, narrowing her eyes at the injury, and raises her wand. Then she begins with her healing spells, carefully rejoining the damaged tissue layer by layer. Muscles, veins, fasciae, skin. She works slowly and deliberately. Her expression is blank, but she is focused and takes her time to get the best possible result. While she almost silently murmurs the necessary incantations, my gaze rests on her mouth.

It takes a few minutes for her to fully close the wound. When that's done, she casts a few simple, nonverbal spells to keep the scarring to a minimum. I endure the procedure in silence.

Eventually, Granger takes a step back and critically examines her work. She seems satisfied with the result because she nods once and then looks up at me.

"You should still get a Blood-Replenishing Potion from Neville," she recommends. "You've lost quite a bit of blood."

With another flick of her wand and a *Tergeo*, she siphons the very same blood off the towel, the floor, my stomach, and my hand.

"Still so worried about me," I tease her, shaking my head slightly.

Granger doesn't react to my provocation, but silently finishes her work. Then she slides her wand back into its holster and cocks her head.

"It was just a well-meant advice," she replies calmly. "You're a big boy, I suppose you can decide for yourself what you need. By the way, you were right. Smith definitely intended to hurt Parkinson, I noticed that too. He ignored Harry's orders, so there will be consequences."

"Good," I say with feigned indifference, although I feel a touch of triumph.

Basically, it's utter nonsense because this objective validation on her part doesn't mean she's fundamentally on my side, and yet it feels bloody good.

"Are you good friends?" Granger asks suddenly. "You and Parkinson, I mean."

I look up in surprise.

She's never asked me something so personal before. That being said, I still remember that one meeting in the command centre where she accused me of just trying to get my *girlfriend* out. But today there is neither distrust nor derision in her eyes. Instead, I detect a flicker of genuine curiosity in them, maybe even a little empathy.

"We are," I answer simply. "Many friendships fell apart after the Dark Lord came to power. In Death Eater circles you can never be sure if you can trust someone, but Pansy and I had been through so much together that we had no doubts about each other in that regard. Of course, I couldn't talk to her about *everything*. She's not an Occlumens, so it would have been too dangerous to let her in on my plans. But we were just... just there for each other, I guess. Unconditionally. In fact, she's probably my best friend considering how many years I haven't seen Blaise."

If Granger is surprised by my candour or the detailed answer, she doesn't let it show. Instead, she looks at me thoughtfully. One of her hands is casually hooked into her shoulder holster, the other is resting on her chin. Her ring finger keeps following the curve of her lower lip. Back and forth, back and forth.

I swallow audibly. Talking about Pansy inevitably reminds me of the fact that she may be undergoing the *Exit* at this very moment and may not survive it, which would ultimately be my fault, not Smith's. Despite my determination not to panic until I know for sure whether or not Lovegood has managed to remove Pansy's Dark Mark, my heart sinks.

"What did you mean when you said that you've been through far worse?" Granger asks her next question, tearing me out of my thoughts.

I bark a hollow laugh.

"Well, what do you think I meant?"

"Have you often been injured in combat and then had to heal yourself?"

She comes a little closer, her eyes sweeping attentively over my body. Aside from the prominent scar that stands testament to Potter's *Sectumsempra* in sixth year, there are a few new ones. However, there are not too many and most of them are hardly visible on my fair skin anyway.

Granger's fingers flex, but she doesn't reach for me. I'd really like to know what she's thinking, but her expression is completely unreadable.

"I've done more harm on the battlefield than was done to me, Granger," I inform her, sighing. "That's not what I meant."

"So they tortured you."

It's a statement, not a question.

I frown deeply and roll my shoulders. The memory fragments, the segmented thoughts, the carefully locked up feelings forcefully rock the Occlumency barriers that keep them in check, but I don't allow them to break through.

"It took me a while to become what they wanted me to be," I reply vaguely, rubbing the tactile stubble on my chin. "I wasn't very *useful*... at the beginning."

Granger just keeps staring at me; with jet black eyes, a furrowed brow and flared nostrils. She's feverishly searching my face for something. I suppose I would try to give it to her if I only knew what it was.

She takes another step forward. Now we're mere inches apart and she has to tilt her head back to be able to keep looking into my eyes.

"Hence the Occlumency," she concludes in a whisper, sucking her bottom lip between her teeth. She seems a little abstracted, as if lost deep in her own visions and memories.

"Bellatrix?"

"Mostly. Her methods are questionable but effective."

"And you had to endure that for seven years?"

"In the end it wasn't as bad as it was at the beginning."

"You survived."

"Yes."

"Seven years."

"Yes."

It's an odd conversation and I'm not sure what to make of it. It almost seems as if Granger is gaining some important information and insights from it; as if my confession is somehow essential to her. Well, I won't ask her in what way. This exchange is unlike any conversation we've ever had before, and I don't want to ruin the moment. Not now, when she seems to be trying to truly understand me for the very first time.

When her hand suddenly touches my bare breast, I wince slightly. Her fingers trace the *Sectumsempra* scar that runs from the base of my neck down my pectoral muscles and along

my rib cage.

"You shouldn't do that," I murmur hoarsely.

While I obviously don't *really* want her to stop, it's still a serious warning.

My initial desire for quiet has completely transformed into the longing I've come to feel around her. I'm so close to kissing her again and I'm not sure I'd be able to stop this time. Gods, even my hands are twitching at my sides, but I doubt we're ready for *this* kind of escalation.

"I shouldn't," she says just as quietly.

She pulls her hand back and I immediately mourn the sensation. Where she touched me, it's suddenly cold.

Stay away from me.

When our eyes meet for the last time, I think she would like to take back her own words. But she's Hermione Granger, after all. Rebel, fighter, deadliest witch of her age. And I'm Draco Malfoy. Death Eater, traitor, loathsome enemy. That's how it is, isn't it? Aren't those enough reasons to stick to our agreement?

We don't talk about it.

She slowly turns away. Her steps are hesitant, small and not as energetic as I am used to from her. I wonder if she wants me to ask her to stay. It almost seems so.

I don't take the chance. For her sake, for my sake.

The door clicks shut behind her.

Chapter End Notes

Well, that was a different kind of progress, wasn't it? What do you think about it? The next chapter should be a fine mix of emotions, and then there will be plenty of action again. I'm really looking forward to the upcoming chapters! By the way: We have a chapter count now! Hugs to all of you. ♡

20. EBONY BLACK

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

20. EBONY BLACK

"Merlin, you're all right!"

Pansy literally flies into my arms as I step into her sleeping quarters. I return her embrace, hugging her tightly and burying my face in her ebony black hair to deeply inhale her familiar scent. She's warm, apparently unharmed, and fucking alive. Gods, I still can't believe that luck seems to be on our side for once.

A few seconds pass in which we just cling to each other, both shaking, until I wriggle out of her tight grip and gently push her back. I reach for her left forearm to inspect the *stain* that now adorns it. Her very own beautiful *stain*.

"I knew it," I whisper. "I was so sure you'd make it, Pans."

When I raise my head to look at her, her slightly teary eyes flicker with a mixture of relief and joy of reunion. I let go of her arm, reach up and affectionately brush a strand of hair from her forehead. Less than a second later, she gives me a resounding slap in the face.

Well, that was unexpected.

"You are such a monumental arse, Draco Malfoy," she gasps out reproachfully. "I thought you were dead, you git. We all thought so! I cried and mourned you for *weeks*. And then suddenly you are spotted at the gates of the Manor."

Her hand lands on my cheek again, this time to caress the burning skin apologetically. Despite the undeniably serious situation we are in, this uncontrolled storm of emotions makes me grin.

I put my hand on hers and squeeze it.

"I'm so bloody sorry," I murmur, leaning in to hug Pansy once more. "I couldn't have told you what I was up to, you know that. The risk was too great, Pans, especially since I wasn't sure if the *Exit* would even work."

She nods against my chest, takes a deep breath and pulls away from me.

"*Exit*, you say?" she mutters, brushing a lonely tear from her cheek.

"In the absence of a short and snappy rune translation," I reply, shrugging.

"A bit macabre, don't you think?"

She smiles weakly.

"Quite the contrary. A way out of hell? An emergency exit? I find my creation pretty *creative*, thank you very much," I sniff, pretending to be offended.

Pansy giggles, then her eyes fill with tears again.

"You were incredibly brave, Draco," she sobs, placing a hand on my chest at heart level. "I'm so proud of you."

A lump forms in my throat because I know that *she* really means it.

Lovegood said something similar to me in one of our first sessions together, but this is Pansy. My friend. My confidant. And not a particularly sentimental witch, by the by. Hearing something like this from her, of all people, touches me so much that I suddenly have a hard time swallowing.

A little embarrassed, I blink down at our intertwined fingers and clear my throat. Then I change the subject to distract myself from the unfamiliar (and unwanted) feeling.

"How have your interrogations gone so far?" I ask.

"I can't complain," Pansy says honestly, letting go of me to sink onto the edge of her bed with a sigh. "However, I don't have much information that could help your lot, I'm afraid."

Your lot.

My mouth promptly goes dry as I realize what those two little words mean in this context.

It's not that I never thought 'we' when poring over the blueprints with the others in the command centre, sweating next to them in the workout room, or fighting alongside them on a mission. Still, there was always a subliminal separation that I never questioned.

Me and the Resistance. The rebels and I.

Mentally, I continued to associate the 'we' and 'us' primarily with the Death Eaters.

For Pansy, on the other hand, there seems to be no doubt that I really and truly have changed sides. Not just in the broader sense of terminology, but in the overall meaning of the act. For her, I'm one of them. A rebel. A member of the Resistance. A fighter under Potter. Camp Black is my 'we' now, even if that includes idiots like Thomas and Smith.

Apparently, another person, an *outsider* to be precise, had to say it out loud for that fact to get through to me. And I have to admit that it feels good to finally understand and accept it. I suppose some of the rebels would give a different answer if asked about my affiliation, but does it really matter what some morons think of me?

I quickly brush this extremely profound and complicated train of thought aside and refocus on the here and now.

"Does Potter treat you well?" I make sure.

"He's... surprisingly kind. Very understanding." Pansy sighs and bites her lower lip. "How about you? You fought alongside the rebels like you had for ages. Took me a few nights to digest the sight, I have to admit. Are they behaving well?"

At that question, a few vague images of Granger cross my mind. How she pressed the tip of her wand against my throat, glaring at me. Her curious fingers slowly tracing my *Sectumsempra* scar. The look in her eyes when she tied me to that chair. You can't really call it good behavior, I suppose, no matter what perspective you look at it from. I can't help but smirk.

"Well, you know the Gryffindors—there's an awful lot of roaring, but deep down they're tame little kittens," I reply cockily, eliciting a chuckle from Pansy.

My tone is facetious, but somehow it's true. Potter and his entourage didn't treat me badly. They gave me a fair chance after a democratic vote. I got my wand back. They listen to me. I'm even sure that some of them trust me by now. While I ridicule them to see Pansy laugh, I still appreciate their benignity.

The truth is: I am grateful. Still. Even after all these weeks.

For the first time ever, it occurs to me that maybe one day I should thank Potter after all.

As Lovegood and I make our way back to headquarters, she tells me what happened to the rest of the Death Eaters who were brought to her after the attack on the safehouse.

Four of them didn't survive the *Exit*, which explains Lovegood's ruffled appearance. She is pale, has deep shadows under her eyes, and generally looks pretty exhausted. I really need to talk to Potter about this soon.

Aside from Pansy, two other Death Eaters got rid of their Dark Mark, but both are too young (about Creevey's age) to have any information that might be of use to the Resistance. They will remain at Camp White with Pansy, Astoria, and Daphne until the rebels decide what to do with them. I hope they'll give them the same chance as Saunders, the very first *Exit* candidate, because as far as I know he's now free to go about his own tasks. What exactly these are, however, has not been revealed to me. At least he's not intended for combat yet, that's for sure, because all the fighters the Resistance educates, instructs, keeps in shape, whatever, train exclusively at Camp Black.

So I was indeed in the lion's den from the start. Amidst the absolute elite troop, if you will. Although I already suspected it and even mentally referred to rebel headquarters as a boot camp more than once, I can now be one hundred percent sure. *Now* that Blaise has removed his clever Concealment Charm from the black board in the atrium and I can see all the schedules and lists. I first noticed this new concession the day after our last mission, and I've been wondering ever since if it was ordered by Potter or maybe even Granger.

Basically, it should be a relief that I now have full access to the watch and work schedules. I'm no longer in the dark, no longer left out. But annoyingly, it has also led to me discovering a new weakness of mine that resurfaces as soon as Lovegood bids me goodbye and scurries off in the direction of the trauma room.

With narrowed eyes, I step up to the black board for what feels like the hundredth time in the last few days and let my eyes wander over the lists until I spot *her* name.

It's ridiculous and I hate myself for it, but I check her daily plan anyway.

Granger was at one of the guard posts in Hogsmeade last night, which means she's *probably* asleep now and won't be attending today's workout.

Truth be told, since Blaise lifted the spell on the black board, not a day has gone by that I haven't checked her schedule. And to be perfectly clear, I'm not (I repeat: not) using the information I'm gathering to *stay away* from her.

I'm a pathetic prat.

"What are you looking for?" comes a curious voice, snapping me out of my self-destructive thoughts.

I flinch, take my finger off the list with Granger's name and spin around.

To my chagrin, it's Blaise's amused face that my eyes fall upon. He steps forward, glances over my shoulder at the schedule I've been studying and then leans against the wall next to the black board, arms crossed.

"None of your business," I reply brusquely, but I sound half-hearted and even a little desperate, which Blaise unfortunately notices.

"Are you familiarizing yourself with Granger's watch schedules?" he deduces slyly, waggling his eyebrows.

"Are you going to leave me alone if I don't answer that question?" I grumble.

"No."

"Blaise."

"Oh come on, Draco. You've been here for almost three months now and you always keep your cards close to your chest. Please let me take a look inside your pretty head," he purrs, looking at me with twitching lips. "I'm not blind, you know. Aside from what Dennis told me, I actually noticed how quickly Granger jumped up after you left the briefing room to lick your wounds. And something tells me she followed you. Am I right?"

I scowl, but it doesn't impress him, which, frankly, doesn't surprise me. Blaise is one of the most persistent people I know. He probably won't leave me alone until I tell him something that satisfies his curiosity. That being said, he answered honestly when I asked him about Ginny, which now makes me feel like I should place the same trust in him.

In a rush of desperate hope, I quickly scan the atrium. It's completely empty. No one is going to save me from this conversation any time soon. Bugger. I let out a suffering sigh.

"She kissed me," I finally admit resignedly.

Blaise's reaction lets me know he wasn't expecting such a revelation in the slightest. He draws in a sharp breath and straightens up, visibly baffled. Then he shifts his weight to his other leg and leans forward, so I have to look him in the face again. His eyes sparkle with unconcealed fascination. I fear the worst.

"Sweet fucking Circe," he says, then whistles softly through his teeth. "After we got back to headquarters that night?"

"No," I drawl. "A few weeks ago. After I helped her kill Greyback. And then again after Ginny's birthday party."

That completely frazzles him out. His face is now twisted with a mixture of absolute bewilderment, a hint of amusement and latent concern.

"Greyback?" he gasps out. "You two did that?"

For a moment, he seems to have forgotten my second (and, in my opinion, more disturbing) piece of news. Apparently, werewolf murder beats hot snogging. Good to know.

"Don't tell me it didn't occur to you that Granger might have had something to do with it. No need to look at me like that—I know what Greyback did to her. As do you and Ginny. Hence your weird *weasel* words and cryptic statements whenever I asked about Granger, right? And you also know that she doesn't actually have a *kink*, which is why you were so tight-lipped that one morning in the gym. Pretty sneaky of you to keep me in the dark for so long."

My voice has taken on a somber tone, although there's actually nothing I can blame Blaise for. It was neither his duty nor his right to publicly discuss the reasons for Granger's behavior. Plus, at the beginning of my stay with the rebels I was hardly the right person to confide in, I know that myself. Still, it annoys me that, to this day, he hasn't once considered discussing the matter with me, even though he's been teasing me about Granger for weeks.

Blaise shrugs calmly.

"Frankly, I didn't think that knowledge would ever be relevant to you," he replies honestly. "Besides, Ginny and I don't know exactly what happened to Granger back then. She doesn't talk about it."

"Yeah, Potter said that too," I mutter.

"Well." Blaise clears his throat and rubs his hands together. I suppress another sigh. The interrogation continues. "So you secretly helped her find and kill Greyback? Pretty badass, Draco, even for you. And then she kissed you? How did that happen?"

Now it's my turn to shrug.

"I don't know, Blaise. Maybe it was the adrenaline? Or she was just grateful for my help? Don't ask me. It just happened."

"But she did it again, didn't she? My, my. Once is a fluke, twice is a pattern! This is by no means a coincidence."

At these lighthearted musings, I raise an amused eyebrow. Why do I suddenly feel like we're having a nightly conversation in the Slytherin dormitory? We're at war, for fuck's sake. Aren't we a little too old for this kind of nonsense?

"Tsk, kissing someone is never a *coincidence*. What would that even look like? Granger and I accidentally tripping into each other and topping the unexpected collision with a clash of our lips?" I scoff. "But I agree with you. In principle. I also doubt that *anything* Granger does is a coincidence. Only her motives are a mystery to me."

I roll my shoulders, rotating my head from side to side to loosen my tense muscles.

Despite my cynicism, I find the conversation uncomfortable. Whether that's because we're talking about Granger of all people, or because for the first time in years I'm being forced to talk about something that unsettles me, I don't know.

"And why are you telling me this only now?" Blaise grumbles, as if I hadn't said anything at all. He punches my upper arm before grabbing my shoulder and shaking me. "I just can't believe it. We're talking about Granger, Draco! When Harry brought you to headquarters, she offered to kill you herself, and now you two are snogging? That's fucking surreal."

Indeed it is.

"I didn't realize it fell into the category of anecdotes I'm not allowed to keep to myself," I mutter, raking a hand down my face.

"Hogwash!" Blaise snorts. "You don't keep something like that to yourself—it drives you mad. But back to her motives. Do you think she just wants to get you into bed? Or did your little death-trip really bind you together so much? Whatever it is, it must be strong, otherwise she wouldn't have softened up on you of all people, would she? After all, you couldn't stand each other even before the war. And what about you anyway?"

His spurt of questions is accompanied by an investigative expression. He scratches his chin impatiently and scrutinizes me, equal parts curious and prompting.

"I - don't - know - Blaise," I repeat, my patience wearing thin. "I doubt it had anything to do with genuine sympathy. She's just a huge," I pause, groping for the right words, "*inexplicable mystery*. One moment she confuses me and the next she attracts me. I just can't describe it any better, all right? Is that enough now?"

Finally, Blaise's hand slips off my arm.

"A mystery," he repeats softly, sticking his tongue between his teeth as he ponders my words. "I'm not sure what to think of that. Whether it's a smart idea or whether you'll end up

regretting it, I mean. But hey, who am I to jump to conclusions?"

"Don't talk about it like we're a couple," I snarl. "I can assure you that we are not. *And* will not be. It's just—I think we just needed to vent some intense emotions."

Blaise rolls his eyes.

"Whatever you say. But the more I think about it, the more it makes sense."

"And what's that supposed to mean?" I hiss defensively.

I'm starting to get the feeling that everyone here thinks they understand me better than I understand myself.

"Well, come to think of it, you're quite alike. Clever, stubborn, brave, self-confident, cagey, talented," he muses to himself, "and even dangerous. You've both been through a lot. You know what it means to suffer in order to achieve a particular goal. Which, by the way, you now also share. And you're both pretty lonely in your own way."

At his last words, Blaise's eyes soften a little. He looks sad.

My head, however, is spinning.

So far, the explosive encounters with Granger have not given me any such thoughts. I'm not even sure Blaise is actually right. I'm physically attracted to Granger, yes, and she must feel something similar otherwise she would never have allowed herself to lose control around me, I agree. But the conclusion that we're even a good match is, in my opinion, quite far-fetched.

What do we have in common anyway?

Where she is fire, I am ice. Where she always gives free reign to her wrath, I mostly keep it in check with my mental barriers. Where she recklessly dashes forward, I patiently wait for the coast to clear.

But wait, there's actually more to it than that.

We're both hard, especially on ourselves. We both take calculated risks in order to achieve that particular common goal, as Blaise so eloquently put it. We are two lone wolves who deal with almost everything that affects us deeply on our own.

Fuck. Now I feel like Blaise triggered something with his words.

However, I can't intensify my thoughts because the door to the command centre suddenly swings open. It's (fittingly) Granger's steady voice that then bounces off the concrete walls and echoes through the atrium.

"Malfoy, I need you here," she calls.

Her tone leaves no doubt that it's an order, but Blaise still pretends it's a suggestive comment.

"Yes, Draco, she *needs* you," he whispers to me, grinning broadly.

He playfully slaps my shoulder once more and saunters off. But not without blowing me a last-minute air kiss that Granger (thank Merlin) doesn't see because she's already averted her gaze. That bloody bastard.

I stand stock still for a few seconds, rolling my eyes extensively and wondering if bringing Blaise into the loop wasn't a huge mistake after all. Then I pull myself together and walk past Granger into the command centre.

With a quick glance, I notice that we are alone, and when the door clicks shut, my heart immediately beats a little faster. Bugger. This is clearly Blaise's fault.

I lean against the conference table in a decidedly nonchalant manner.

"What is it?" I ask as casually as possible.

Granger slowly turns to face me.

I'm delighted to notice that she's still wearing her combat gear. (Pathetic, pathetic, pathetic.) However, that also means that she didn't go to sleep after her night watch, as I suspected, but has been on her feet non-stop ever since. The dark shadows under her eyes support this theory, which makes me frown in disapproval.

"There was an enemy attack on Mould-on-the-Wold last night," she comes straight to the point. "They weren't very subtle so we got the situation under control quickly, but it was still a pretty brutal attack. I'm afraid we're running out of time. They are desperate and we are now feeling the effects of that. That's why I want you to think about *who exactly* we ought to be looking for. No more random pecking at random safehouses. I want to know who has the highest authorization, highest rank, and most information—in accordance with a suitability for the *Exit*, of course. Consult Parkinson and the Greengrass sisters if you must."

I nod slowly, but at the same time narrow my eyes in suspicion.

"You want to attack again so quickly, even though we've only just captured seven Death Eaters to perform the *Exit* on them? Does Potter approve of this?"

Granger lifts her chin defiantly and gives me a sharp look.

"*They* are attacking *us*, Malfoy. Frankly, I don't give a fuck whether they're doing it out of panic or out of revenge. They won't stop as long as they feel we're weakening their ranks. And I, in turn, will not allow us to risk the lives of our fighters by simply waiting and twiddling our thumbs. Since you've been here, we haven't come any closer to Tom's whereabouts, and I intend to change that in the near future. Harry is informed, that's all you need to know."

I hate to admit it, but Granger is right.

Those who have survived the *Exit* so far either had no information at all or only ones that I had already passed on to the Resistance. It's only a matter of time before one of the Death

Eater's counterattacks succeeds. Or before they ramp up their defenses to a point where I'm no longer of any use to the rebels.

"All right," I therefore agree.

A look of confused surprise flickers across Granger's face. I assume she expected more *resistance* on my part or at least a proper discussion. Is she disappointed? Well, maybe she actually enjoys arguing with me.

Stay away from me.

For a few seconds, there is silence. She seems to be waiting for me to say something else that she can pounce on to tear it apart. Vixenish witch.

"All right," she echoes at last, putting her hands on her hips.

She wrinkles her nose and seems to be frantically contemplating how to proceed. If the air in the room wasn't already so thick with jittery tension, it would probably be amusing to watch her be this flustered for a while.

As if on cue, her gaze fleetingly rakes over my body. I reflexively shove my hands into the pockets of my cargo trousers (just in case), but Granger notices, stiffens, and blinks, once, twice, then quickly looks me in the face again.

"How's your injury?" she asks.

Her voice is emotionless, but a few octaves too high.

"Fine," I scoff. "No need to worry about me, Granger."

Does this comment count as provocative? Probably. Oops.

My lips curl into a smirk.

"I'm not *worried* about you—"

"Obviously."

"—I merely wanted to make sure you're ready for operation in case there's another mission soon, that's all."

"Mm, just so you can assign me to Creevey again? Or have you finally decided to get over the nonsense Thomas spouted?"

Actually, I swore to myself that I wouldn't bring up the topic or ask this specific question, but once again my curiosity gets the better of me. And yes, maybe I want to tease her a little too.

At my words, a single spark flares up in her eyes, but it's gone too quickly for me to say what exactly ignited it in the first place.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Granger says.

"About the *advice* he gave you in the workout room." I raise an eyebrow laconically. "That if it were up to him, you could choose any partner you wanted, except me, of course. Now you remember, right? You claimed that you always have the best in mind when it comes to the Resistance. And we've been a decent team so far, I would think. So why did you send me off with Creevey?"

I'm not sure if it's my imagination (and even if it's not, I can't make sense of it), but as I utter my subliminal accusation, a few strange things happen.

For one thing, Granger audibly gasps, her dark eyes widen, and the hand on her shoulder holster clenches into a fist. For another thing, the slightest hint of a blush crawls up her neck as she searches for the right words.

"That had absolutely nothing to do with Dean," she says through gritted teeth, which is actually a pretty vacuous answer.

"Enlighten me then?"

Guess what, Granger, I can be *pushy* too.

As if shocked at what the honest answer to that question would be, she grimaces and slowly shakes her head. As a result, a strand of hair comes loose from the bun at the back of her head and gently falls across her face. I follow the movement with my eyes, but she blows the curl away resolutely as soon as she catches me staring. Then she presses her tongue against the inside of her cheek and knits her brows.

"Mind your own fucking business, Malfoy," she finally snaps at me, spinning around so suddenly that I actually flinch.

I throw my head back, roll my eyes *again* and ask myself resignedly why the hell I keep making my own life so bloody difficult.

"This *is* my own fucking business, Granger," I call after her, utterly vexed, but she ignores me.

On the threshold, she gives me one last look—part appalled, part furious—then pushes open the door and disappears in a whirl of black robes.

I'm left alone in the command centre. And all I can do is sigh.

Chapter End Notes

For this chapter I promised you a fine mix of emotions. When things went well, these were: relief, amusement, confusion, and frustration. In pretty much that order. Also, we

had three very different conversations here. I hope you liked them. Next stop: action!
Buckle up, folks. I wish you some happy and sunny Easter holidays. ♡

21. DEEP BLACK

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

21. DEEP BLACK

Four days later, as I stand in the gym waiting for Blaise to start giving instructions, I find myself still angry. It seems to be becoming my chronic condition as well. *Anger. Anger. Anger.*

So today's fist fight workout comes in handy. Unfortunately, Creevey is the one who's going to take the brunt of this emotion I'm so bad at handling. He doesn't yet know what's in store for him and happily fidgets at my side.

Why am I so angry? Well, the question should probably be: Who am I angry at? And, of course, the answer is: Granger.

I'm angry because she wasn't honest with me the last time we spoke. Irate because she's definitely hiding something from me. Livid because I suspect that thanks to my inquiries, she won't request me as a partner for the next mission either, out of sheer stubbornness. Furious because, to make matters worse, she's been pretty successfully avoiding me since our brief conversation in the command centre and is therefore, for the very first time, really and truly *staying away* from me. But what even outshines all of these reasons is the fact that I meanwhile dream about her every fucking night. So clearly, so graphically, so vividly that it usually takes me several minutes after waking up before I manage to shake off the unwelcome images.

It's so pathetic, I want to vomit.

However, a small voice in my head keeps whispering to me that I'm actually the only person I'm allowed to be angry with. After all, it wasn't Granger who implanted these disturbing images and thoughts into my mind. I'm the only one responsible for their existence. And if I had heeded Blaise's warnings during my first few weeks at Camp Black, I wouldn't have to deal with them now, would I? Or would Granger's metaphorical river have carried me off either way? Am I her driftwood whether I want to or not?

My rumination comes to an abrupt end when the source of my mental chaos enters the room. I knew she would be here today because I checked her schedule. Of course I did. Pathetic, like I said.

And again, I can't help but stare at her.

Granger crosses the workout room with brisk steps. Her gaze darts around, accidentally falls on me, and quickly wanders on as if she hadn't seen me. When she then promptly changes direction and retreats to a far corner of the room for her warm-up, my hands clench into fists.

She's obviously running away. From me.

Anger. That's all I feel.

I'm already halfway across the room to ask her what her bloody problem is when the alarm goes off. It's a wailing sound, so loud and piercing that some of the rebels reflexively reach up and cover their ears. I can barely stop myself from following suit, even though my arms are twitching at my sides.

My gaze immediately flits back to Granger, who freezes for the blink of an eye only to switch to her absolute combat mode the next. Her face becomes expressionless, her gaze sharpens. In a split second, her wand is in her hand, and I don't even have time to wonder how she manages to fumble it out of that tiny pocket on her skin-tight running pants so quickly every time. As she walks back to the door she only just entered the room through, she presses the tip of her wand to her throat and mutters a *Sonorus*. Then she starts spitting out orders.

Most of the rebels, including Blaise and Creevey, don't even hesitate for a second before following her, which is why I finally understand what's going on.

The Resistance is under attack.

"I want all fighters currently on standby fully equipped in the briefing room in five minutes or less," Granger's magically amplified voice echoes through the room. "Each of you will find a partner. No solo actions today. Blaise, I need you as a strategist. Ron is on watch duty. Find out which village it is and then give me an overview of the situation. You have two minutes."

Blaise merely nods, then breaks into a run and disappears through the training room towards the atrium and thus the command centre.

My eyes are on Granger. Not just because she's taken the lead, but also because her current demeanor is so awe-inspiring. It's another image that will find its way into my dreams, I'm positive about it. By now, I've seen her fight several times, attended her training sessions, and heard her speak to the other rebels, but none of this compares to the authority with which she commands an entire body of soldiers.

She is magnificent.

Granger calls out names, decides who gets to stay and who has to rush to the equipment room, and lets her gaze wander in calm concentration over the rebels who scurry past her through the door to obey her orders.

Confused and overwhelmed by the situation, which I have never experienced in this form at headquarters, I end up being one of the last people in the workout room. Apart from me, there are only a few younger rebels left who are also not called up. And Abbott. Naturally.

As Granger is about to turn away and enter the training room, her gaze falls on me one last time. I'm expecting an order, an instruction, *anything*, and that's why I can't believe what she

does instead. Her eyes follow an indefinable path across my face, from my temple to my jawbone to my lips, then she turns away abruptly and leaves the room with determined steps.

She leaves me behind. And the door slams shut.

Anger. Anger. Anger.

My hands clench into fists once more. The alarm is breathtakingly loud, but I don't even hear it anymore. Before I can think about it any further, I'm on the move, crossing the dueling hall, then the atrium and marching into the equipment room.

Most of the rebels are already donned and busy tightening holster straps and lacing up combat boots. More of them have joined in the meantime. The alarm probably caught them at the breakfast table or even woke them up. The atmosphere is tense but not chaotic—everyone knows exactly what their next steps are. Secretly, I'm quite impressed by how controlled and coordinated everything is, even though the wailing still echoes off the bare concrete walls.

With a jerk, I pull my t-shirt over my head, then reach for a long-sleeved rebel top lying around. Next thing I grab is a shoulder holster, which I strap on with a few quick, practiced movements. The usual breastplate of the Resistance combat gear follows.

"What do you think you're doing?" a voice hisses to my left.

Granger is in the process of fastening her wand holster. She stares at me in equal parts disbelief and indignation, her dark eyes flashing dangerously.

I meet her gaze only briefly, then turn away and swap my joggers for the next best pair of cargo trousers that look like they might fit. I can feel Granger's eyes on my bare legs as I do so, but I don't care. She's seen me in my boxers before and now isn't the time to wonder if changing clothes in front of her is weird.

"I'm coming with you," I tell her in a tone that leaves no doubt that I'm serious.

She lets out a fervent snort.

"No."

"No?"

We're interrupted by Blaise, who bursts into the room and informs us that it's an attack on Hogsmeade.

Bellowed numbers and facts reach my ears. Sixty Death Eaters, at a rough estimate. More than three times as many attackers as Resistance fighters at the guard posts. Ronald Weasley as commanding rebel in the field. Shambles. Bloodbath. Two minutes. Temporary lifting of the Anti-Disapparation-Perimeters on the roof.

I refocus on Granger and notice that she's listening just as intently and attentively as I am, but as soon as Blaise has shouted his final words, her attention shifts back to me.

"You're not coming with us," she repeats harshly.

I slip on a pair of unclaimed combat boots and ram the first of them onto the bench next to us to tighten the laces.

"And why not?" I snarl, giving her a fierce look. "You need every man out there, if I understood Blaise correctly. So what's your bloody problem, Granger? Save your revenge for another day."

There must have been a touch of bitterness in my voice because she knits her eyebrows together in confusion. Or maybe she's just wondering why the hell I accuse her of thirst for revenge. Because of our kisses, of course, you stupid bint. Because I didn't stay away from you like you asked me to. Because that's what this is all about, isn't it?

I don't say any of this out loud.

"Malfoy, joining the fight could mean your certain death. We don't yet know what to expect, but I'm sure you're aware that—"

"So you're no longer of the opinion that I should jump off the roof?" I ask as casually as possible. I finish my work on my second boot, push off the bench, and take two long strides to her. Then I look down at her and return her fiery gaze without blinking. "Flattering! But weren't you the one who told me there was no one waiting for me here? Let alone that someone would miss me if I didn't come back? That I'm no great loss to the Resistance when push comes to shove? You remember? Good. Then you know why I'm *definitely* coming with you. What I certainly won't do, however, is just sit idle and wait for *you* to come back."

My last sentence is an unplanned outburst and yet it's the truth. The thought of Granger fighting out there while I'm safe here, even though this attack is probably largely my fault, makes me sick.

I immediately regret the slip-up, but don't have enough time to defuse the situation with a scathing remark or a bit of well-placed cynicism. I said it, and Granger's flickering eyes tell me that she understood it exactly as I meant it. She obviously remembers our conversation before the reconnaissance at the Manor.

Her lips press into a thin line, as if she can't think of a suitable answer. Frankly, I can't even blame her.

"Well, all right," she chokes out at long last. "Then find yourself a partner!"

With that and one last resentful look in my direction, she spins around, grabs her black robes, and almost flies out of the equipment room to follow the other rebels to the command centre.

It's much worse than I imagined.

After I entered the command centre, we received the final information and instructions from Blaise. Meanwhile, Granger counted the fighters present and finally ordered Ginny to team up with me while she positioned herself next to Oliver Wood. Then, in groups of eight, we rode the lift to the roof of St. Mungo's and Apparated straight to Hogsmeade. The rebels got rid of the Anti-Disapparation-Perimeters pretty quickly, I'll give them that.

Now I'm in the middle of a duel with a bunch of masked Death Eaters. Right at my side, Ginny whirls across the cobblestones of Hogsmeade's run-down main street as if she's trying to create a hurricane with her movements alone. Her hair is nothing more than a fiery red blur in my peripheral vision.

I'm extremely relieved to find that her spellwork is decent and intuitive. We haven't had a chance to test our compatibility in combat yet, and sending us out together without preparation could have backfired. *Could have.*

The other rebels have thrown themselves into the fray with a strategic finesse that I can only admire. I'm aware that they've evolved over the years, having fought them often enough myself or at least read the relevant battle reports, but fighting *alongside* them is something else entirely. I realize that what I am witnessing here today is the result of Granger's efforts. The combat training, the workouts, the simulation room—all of this contributes to us regaining control of the situation after just a few minutes, despite our numerical inferiority.

"*Depulso!*" I shout, violently pushing back a few Death Eaters.

Ginny takes advantage of the moment they're staggering, swaying, and trying to stay on their feet to cast her own, more dangerous curses.

"*Sectumsempra! Confringo!*" she hisses, each of her spells finding a target.

Simultaneously, we turn to two other approaching Death Eaters and sweep them out of the way with a joint *Bombarda*.

Suddenly, there's a loud scream behind us and I spin around to see Alicia Spinnet collapse. A Stinging Hex hit her right thigh badly. She convulses in pain as she tries to cast an emergency healing spell, but then Creevey appears out of nowhere and does it for her.

I turn away, take a deep breath, and stun a masked figure right in front of me.

In fact, the masks are the only clue when it comes to distinguishing friend from foe. The Death Eaters wear black, so do we. What is actually a pretty smart move by the Resistance also means double caution. If it weren't for the masks, you would definitely run the risk of injuring or even killing fighters from your own ranks. I can't help but wonder why the Death Eaters never thought of getting rid of this telltale feature, but I don't have time to ponder the question in detail.

We're forced back against a shop front by five Death Eaters. I only understand why they're trying so hard to kettle us in when one of them rips off his mask and hurls it away.

It's Rowle. And his hateful gaze is firmly fixed on my face.

"*Avada Kedavra!*" he roars, and I quickly summon a *Protego*.

Ginny and I return fire. We are fast. And better than I ever deemed possible. I never thought I would one day fight alongside a member of the Weasley family, but surprisingly we make a formidable team. Our attack is no less offensive than that of our opponents.

I'm not even surprised when Ginny also spits out her first *Avada* after a few curses. That she's capable of something I'm not, at least momentarily, gives me a pang, but I brush the thought aside and instead focus on my defense.

It's an unfortunate series of events that eventually lets me grow inattentive. First, a bone-breaking curse hits Ginny's right upper arm, causing her to stagger backwards and crash into the window of an abandoned shop. Then there's another pained scream. This time it's Creevey who falls to his knees and presses a hand to his chest, where the charcoal grey of his long-sleeved top instantly transforms into a significantly darker and therefore much more menacing color.

As I unleash a volley of Stunners and Body-Bind Curses on the Death Eaters still coming at us, I try to figure out who to help first. But then, fortunately, I see Blaise crouch down next to Creevey and make that decision for me. I spin around to look after Ginny.

In one big leap, I'm with her. I summon a protective shield and hide us both behind it before bending over her. The opposing curses crackle ominously into my *Protego* as the Death Eaters close in.

"How bad is it?" I shout over the noise.

"It's my wand arm," she yells back. "The bloody fucker broke my humerus, I'm sure. I have to go back to camp."

Ginny's voice is clear and firm. She's not afraid, she's not panicking, she's not even close to tears, although the pain must be unbearable. She's simply following the instructions drilled into her (presumably by Granger) over the years: *If you get injured, go to the trauma room, get patched up, and come back as soon as possible.*

Her bravery is impressive and makes me nod in awe.

"I'll get you out of here," I reply, wrapping a hand around her uninjured elbow and gently pulling her to her feet.

Despite my words, I can't help but glance in the direction where Creevey and Blaise were just crouching. And that puts the final touches to the aforementioned inattentiveness on my part.

I'm not used to having to look after someone when I'm on the battlefield, let alone worrying about them. For seven years, combat and emotions were two completely unrelated things for me. In the extremely rare moments when sentimentality threatened to break through, I could always count on my Occlumency to keep me on track.

Sharp senses. Tough. Efficient. Occluded.

But *these days* I don't occlude myself anymore.

As it is, I don't notice my *Protego* dissolving as I scan the nearby fighters in a slightly panicked search for Creevey and Blaise, nor do I sense the Killing Curse coming from behind. The only thing that warns me what feels like a millisecond before the impact is the deadly whirr of the curse in the dust and magic-filled air. My eyes flick to the right. I only just register the flash of green light, Rowle's triumphant face and Ginny's horrified scream.

And then the shield appears.

It's so massive, so strong, it literally makes my hair stand on end.

The *Avada* slams into the shield with a forceful, green-sparkling explosion, its dark magic draining away like water on either side, mere inches from my face.

Rowle aimed for my head. That arrogant bastard.

I steady my footing, renew my own *Protego*, and let my gaze wander to find out who saved my arse.

It doesn't take long until I detect my guardian angel.

Granger stands motionless in the middle of the crowd—with wild, deep black eyes; her wand arm still outstretched to hold the powerful shield that protects me and Ginny like an impenetrable, immovable wall; facing away from the duel she must have been involved in just a few seconds ago.

It's precisely this meeting of our eyes, this absurd situation, this slow-motion moment in which Dolohov's curse hits her in the back.

For the second time I hasten through the long underground corridors of Camp Black.

After taking Ginny and Creevey to the trauma room, I immediately Apparated back to Hogsmeade and mingled with the fighters once more, although my heart was stuttering quite unhappily the whole time.

Now the fight is over, surprisingly with more dead and wounded on the enemy side, but the Resistance has also been hit hard. The first time I was here, the trauma room was already crowded, but now the rebels who can still stand are even scattered throughout the hallway, waiting patiently for the healers to tend to them.

What I feel as I make my way through the injured is pure panic.

When Dolohov's curse hit her, Granger collapsed on the spot and I couldn't see her anymore due to the chaos in the street. The only thing that snapped me out of my stupor and spurred me to remove Ginny and Creevey, whom Blaise pushed towards me only seconds later, out of harm's way was Ronald Weasley's sudden appearance. And he, in turn, hit Dolohov so badly

with an indefinable curse that I wonder if he might be one of today's casualties on the Death Eater side.

Well, I hope so, because what I'll do to him if he ever crosses my path again will be far worse than a simple *Avada*. Or any other deadly curse.

Ultimately, I had to rely on Weasley to help Granger. Not least because I was sure that she would have cursed me personally for the decision to leave my injured partner to check on her. But now that the battle is over, my adrenaline is gone, my help is no longer needed, all I can think about is her. And for good reason.

When I'm only a few meters from my destination, a strong arm along with a rough hand stops me and pushes me against one of the concrete walls.

"Where are you going?" Weasley snarls, grabbing me by the collar.

With an irritated snort, I shake him off and return his angry gaze. He came from exactly where I want to go: down the corridor to the milk glass door that presumably separates me from Granger's hopefully still-breathing body.

"Where is she?" I simply ask.

My gaze wanders back to the entrance of the trauma room. I need certainty.

"She's alive and that's all you need to know," he hisses.

I don't even wonder why he seems to know right away who I'm talking about, I'm so relieved. My shoulders sag and I blink several times while taking deep breaths.

"Let me see her," I demand.

Well, it actually sounds rather pleading. Awkward.

"Surely not," Weasley spits, shoving me back against the wall as I try to step past him.

"You're the reason she's in there in the first place, Malfoy. Dolohov only managed to hit her with his curse because she was busy saving your worthless life. Whatever the reason, I won't let you—"

"Do you think I don't know that?" I bawl at him, successfully cutting him short. "I was there, Weasley. I have eyes in my head. I know what she did, for fuck's sake! Let - me - see - her."

Thanks to our shouting, the entire hallway is suddenly quiet. I take a quick look around and notice some very confused faces, but to be honest: I don't give a shit.

Granger saved my life. My (quote Weasley) worthless life. The life of a Death Eater, traitor, former enemy who has no one waiting for him to come back. I wasn't even her partner and she did it anyway. She lowered her defenses to cast her powerful Shield Charm between me and a Killing Curse; completely sacrificed her own safety. *For me*. Fuck.

The milk glass door swings open and Ginny sticks her head through the crack. She's pale, but her right arm is in a sling, which leads me to believe Lovegood has already removed her bone and given her Skele-Gro.

"Let him through, Ron," she says firmly.

She gives her brother an unambiguous look, then shifts her gaze to me and beckons me over.

I shoulder Weasley aside, paying no further attention to him, and march past the waiting rebels to follow Ginny through the door. She leads me past a row of occupied cots where the more seriously injured members of the Resistance are being treated by the healers.

First I spot Lovegood's long, blonde ponytail whirling from one cot to the next. Then my gaze sweeps over two other healers I've yet to meet and falls on Longbottom, who appears to be the epitome of stoic composure even as he performs a finicky healing spell on an unconscious, bleeding body. Well, another mystery solved, I'd say. The sight of him healing is so unfamiliar that I pause for a moment, but then I remember why I'm actually here.

Creevey is sitting on one of the cots, waving at me with a faint grin. I return his greeting with relief. His cargo trousers are blood-stained, but the wound on his exposed chest has been expertly healed and he's holding a half-empty vial of (unless I'm very much mistaken) Blood-Replenishing Potion. In a knee-jerk and utterly ridiculous show of affection, I pat his lower leg as I pass.

Ginny has already opened a second door, so I hurry to follow her into the small room beyond.

And there she is.

Granger is unconscious. Her face is as white as snow and her lips and fingertips are the shade of an unnatural dark blue. She is lying on her side. Although two thick blankets cover her body, I can guess she's still in full uniform because the toecap of a combat boot is sticking out over the edge of the mattress. She looks unusually small, fragile even, and the sight makes me so uncomfortable that I suddenly have trouble swallowing.

"What did he hit her with?" I ask hoarsely, stepping closer.

"*Durus Rigidus*," Ginny mutters. "The perpetual ice. Blast-freezes the victim. We suspect he then wanted to use an explosive spell to shatter her into a million pieces. Just didn't get around to it, the wanker. Pretty macabre if you ask me. You'd think killing us would be bad enough, but apparently—"

"That's Bellatrix's trademark," I break in on her. "I've seen her do it before, but Dolohov is just as prone to nasty games. He must have copied it from her."

I promptly feel nauseous, although I have no idea why. Actually, I'm used to seeing badly injured, even *fatally* injured, wizards and witches. Sometimes I was responsible, sometimes not. It was and is my everyday life, so what the hell is wrong with me?

The door opens and Lovegood slips into the room.

"Why did Ron just shout half the trauma room down?" she asks blankly, before rushing to Granger's side and murmuring some quick diagnostic spells. "Shite, I just can't get her temperature up. I've already given her three different potions."

It's the first time I've seen Lovegood so tense. *And* heard her cursing, mind you. Nonetheless, her movements are calm, fluid and practiced.

"He wouldn't let Malfoy see Hermione," Ginny explains with the faintest hint of an eye roll. "Where is he now?"

"Harry sent for him. His luck. I was about to stun him because he tried to sneak past me to march through to you. Mumbled something to himself about having to strangle someone *because these days Hermione would rather risk her own death than do it herself*." Lovegood imitates Weasley's voice quite aptly as she repeats his words. "I didn't get it at first, but now it makes sense."

She gives me a knowing look and I quickly avert my eyes.

There's an awkward silence for a few seconds.

"Can I help?" I ask when she's done with her diagnostics.

"There's not much we can do," she murmurs, biting her lower lip thoughtfully, "other than hope the shock doesn't leave any permanent damage. Ron immediately reversed the curse, but it was quite a heavy freezing spell. She'll have to recover on her own, I'm afraid. If the potions don't help, we can only treat her manually."

Even as she utters the last words, Lovegood gives me a quick, assessing look. Then her eyes suddenly light up.

I frown warily.

"Body heat would be an idea. You seem to have enough of it, and if you want to help and aren't needed elsewhere—"

An incredulous snort from Ginny cuts her off mid-sentence.

"This is a bad idea. Hermione will freak out when she wakes up and—"

For my part, I'm already in the process of ripping off my shoulder holster. I hurl it to a far corner of the room. Next, I unstrap my wand holster before kicking off first one boot and then the other.

"Malfoy!" Ginny exclaims in bewilderment and takes a big step forward, momentarily blocking my view of Granger. "You know perfectly well that she doesn't want to be touched. She will be terribly angry with you. What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"I have no intention of molesting her, Ginny. That being said, she's pretty much *always* terribly angry with me, so what? She saved my life. Let me do this for her."

"Draco."

Even though Ginny is now using my first name, she still looks worried, her eyes darting indecisively between me and Granger's limp body on the bed.

"Let me do this for her," I repeat calmly and seriously.

Ginny stares at me for what feels like an eternity before finally stepping aside. My jaw clenches and I feel a muscle under my eye tick vigorously.

Lovegood looks content and prepares to leave the room.

"I'm needed outside. I will stop by regularly and check on her. If you have the time and feel fit enough to pitch in with your left arm for a while, I could use your help, Ginny."

The tone of her voice leaves no doubt that she doesn't *really* need Ginny's help. She just wants to give me the moment *I need* to collect myself. To regain my goddamn composure. I don't know if my face actually reveals that much or if Lovegood is just generally good at reading people, but I'm incredibly grateful that she seems to understand. Yet again. Once and for all, I mentally add her to the list of people I'll have to thank one day.

Ginny reluctantly turns to leave but pauses at the door. I avoid her gaze as I sink onto the bed next to Granger.

Swallowing hard, I lift the blankets and lie on my back. Then, as gently as possible, I pull Granger against me and position her halfway on top of me before tucking her into the blankets as if my life depended on not even an inch of her being visible.

This is not how I wanted to touch her. While she's unconscious. With this iciness that her body radiates as if it were generating it internally. Under the watchful eyes of Ginny, who seems rooted to the spot, one hand hesitantly on the door handle. No, I didn't want it like this, especially not the very first time.

My final act is to carefully rest Granger's head on my chest—exactly where it was during her little nap in my old tree house. Then I wrap my arms tightly around her above the blankets, purposely placing my palms on my own upper arms, and stare stoically at the ceiling.

I hear Ginny sigh deeply, then there's a soft clicking sound as she closes the door behind her.

From this point on, the same sentence keeps echoing through my head. Again and again.

I won't get through this without occluding myself.

This week's extra-long chapter is perfect for saying thank you for over 200 kudos and countless lovely comments. You can't imagine how much that means to me. Hopefully the action was to your liking? And I hope you had a nice Easter weekend. Hugs! ♥

22. LACQUER BLACK

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

22. LACQUER BLACK

I actually get through it *without* occluding myself.

Granger is unconscious for almost forty-eight hours and I hold her in my arms for precisely forty-six hours and thirty minutes.

The first time I leave her hospital bed, I do so only to take a quick shower and replace my blood-soaked combat gear with clean workout clothes. After that I'm consistently with her (apart from a few sporadic, unavoidable visits to the bathroom) while the trauma room outside the door to her private room grows quiet. Peace and calm gradually return to Resistance headquarters.

Lovegood stops by every so often to check Granger's vital signs and perform the diagnostic spells, just as she promised. Blaise visits once and brings me a book that I don't even look at. Five rebels are dead, he tells me that much. Among others, Padma Patil and Angelina Johnson, to name two of the victims I know personally. *Knew*. They will be buried within the next few days. After getting this devastating news off his chest, Blaise stays for a while, albeit mostly silent. The fact that he refrains from commenting on me being in bed with Granger shows me how sad he is. After an hour or so he squeezes my shoulder and leaves the room without another word.

Blaise and Lovegood aren't our only visitors. Ginny regularly provides me with meals and looks a little less suspicious each time she pops in. And eventually even Potter shows up. However, he confines himself to standing in a corner of the room with his arms crossed and looking at Granger with concern. Weasel-Weasley doesn't come. I don't question whether it's his own decision or whether the others simply won't let him in.

For my part, I stare almost constantly at the ceiling, only occasionally turning from left to right and back again to relieve my protesting back, and dwell on my dark thoughts.

Granger was bloody right. In his wrath at our, or rather *my*, betrayal, the Dark Lord is unpredictable. We urgently need to make progress to prevent more people from dying. I feel more responsible than ever and slowly but surely it's becoming unbearable.

When Granger first moves, we are both on our sides and her back is against my chest. One of my arms is under her head, the other is wrapped around her, but luckily both of my hands are clearly visible on the mattress in front of her. Nevertheless, I quickly close my eyes and do what I seem to do best these days: I pretend to be asleep.

It's not at all like that one morning in the tree house. Today, I purposely give her more time. No fake coughing, no yawning. I feel her body stiffen as she realizes the situation she's in. Still in my more-or-less embrace, she slowly turns to face me. It suddenly occurs to me that she has absolutely no idea whose face she's about to look at, and my heart starts beating a little faster. But I stay perfectly still, keep my eyes closed and mentally brace myself for the punch (or at least the slap in the face) that's likely to come.

What happens is... *nothing*.

It must be several minutes where she just lays there and silently stares at me. I can imagine the face she's making—furrowed eyebrows, flared nostrils, trembling lips—but I don't dare blink and look at her to see if I'm right, even though the urge to do so is almost overwhelming.

And then Granger does something I definitely didn't expect. Something that makes my carefully scraped-together indifference of the last two days collapse like a house of cards.

She scoots closer and leans into the warmth of my body.

It takes a lot of self-control on my part not to gasp in surprise.

She's not really snuggling up to me, not quite hugging me, but I can feel her cheek press against my chest as she takes a few deep, long breaths. She stays in this position for a few minutes that feel more like hours before she pulls away and lifts the blankets.

Then she stands up, slowly and carefully, probably to test whether her legs still obey her. There's the sound of her hesitant footsteps on the sterile linoleum that covers the entire trauma room floor.

Only when the door clicks shut behind her do I open my eyes.

The next day has several surprises in store for me. The first comes in the form of an unexpectedly overheard dialogue between Lovegood and Longbottom on the way to my sleeping quarters after lunch.

"—really wasn't mad at you?" I hear Longbottom's disbelieving voice as I walk past the milk glass door of the trauma room.

Even though I instinctively know this conversation isn't meant for my ears, I freeze in the middle of the corridor and prick them up.

"No, I showed her the evaluations of my diagnostic spells," Lovegood replies in her distinctive, bell-like voice. "I think that calmed the waves."

"How so?"

"Apart from the aftereffects of the curse, it was her best data in years. She has never had such good results at any of the routine quarterly check-ups."

"Well, she was unconscious, wasn't she?" Longbottom interjects cautiously.

"Oh, I'm not just talking about her resting heart rate or her breathing frequency," Lovegood flutes, "but the rest of her vital parameters as well. Her hormone release, for example."

"Why did you even check that?" he asks in confusion.

"Wanted to make sure I wasn't wrong, I guess." Lovegood clears her throat softly. The next time she speaks, it sounds like she's suddenly much closer to the door, which makes me step back, slightly startled. "I figured her body would be comfortable around Draco, and I'm glad he agreed to stay with her. She never lets anyone near her and that's so bloody unhealthy. Everyone needs someone, you know."

"While I highly doubt Malfoy's presence is healthy for *anyone*, darling, I'm curious nonetheless: What makes you think she's comfortable around him?"

Lovegood lets out a low, amused chuckle.

"Honestly, Neville! The body language between the two of them is so conspicuous that it's a miracle hardly anyone has noticed yet. It's ridiculously obvious. I asked Blaise about it and he agreed with me. And besides, why do you think she summoned that shield in front of him? Did you even listen to Ron when he told us what happened out there?"

There's silence for a while, causing me to tensely clench my hands into fists.

"So you're seriously trying to tell me that Hermione-touch-me-and-I-will-kill-you-Granger has a soft spot for Draco-flagship-Death-Eater-Malfoy as of late?" Longbottom snorts in confusion.

"Don't call him that," Lovegood murmurs. There's a sound that tells me she's most likely kissing him before I hear her footsteps again, louder and clearer this time. "Convince yourself. See you later?"

I immediately start moving and turn the next best corner, where I end up leaning against one of the bare concrete walls, my heart and thoughts racing.

So now it's kind of official: this strange tension, this attraction between Granger and me is anything but a figment of my imagination.

The second surprise awaits me three hours later at the afternoon combat training, which I'm actually pretty sure will be led by either Ronald Weasley or Blaise today. That's exactly why I stop dead in my tracks when I spot Granger in the crowded dueling area.

She's standing in the middle of the room as casually as I've come to expect from her, although she's still pale and the fingers hooked into her shoulder holster are still slightly bluish.

Merlin, can't this witch give herself a couple of days rest before she gets back to business after only just being cursed? Apparently not, because as the last rebels enter the hall, she starts spitting out orders and allocating teams. At least, I notice somewhat appeased, she doesn't seem to have any intention of taking part in the duels herself.

"Malfoy," she suddenly calls out brusquely, making me wince. "Just a word with you."

I sigh, but still slowly follow her to the workout room, which she heads towards with determination. Several possible scenarios immediately spring to my mind, and I find that most of them involve her pressing her seductive (albeit blue) lips to mine. I vehemently brush the images aside. Definitely the wrong moment.

I step into the gym, the door clicks shut and we are alone.

Granger turns around and stares at me with a completely unreadable expression. I slowly raise an eyebrow, but get no reaction from her.

"So, how do you feel?" I ask at last to break the oppressive silence.

"Good enough," she replies off-handedly. She clears her throat before continuing. "You shouldn't have done that."

I gape at her in disbelief for a few seconds because *this* is *not* what I expected.

"Excuse me?" I ask, utterly perplexed.

I can practically watch her cloister herself away. Her shoulders stiffen, her eyes darken slightly, and her posture grows dismissive. She even crosses her arms and lifts her chin. It looks a little defiant. And suddenly I realize that while Granger doesn't master Occlumency, she basically does the same thing, just in the non-magical way.

"Well, if I remember correctly, you said you wouldn't touch me. What made you abandon this principle?"

Anger. Oh, she really is an expert at evoking that emotion in me.

My jaw clenches and I feel a muscle in my cheek tick.

"I did *not* touch you."

"Oh? Then how would you describe what—"

I take two big steps forward and plant myself in front of her threateningly, successfully silencing her. While she doesn't shy away from me (the days of Granger being intimidated by me are definitely over), she has to tilt her head back to keep looking at my face, which is at least a small satisfaction.

"Oh no, Granger, you're not doing that to me. Absolutely not. I refuse!" I hiss in her face. If I didn't know that I wasn't allowed to do it under any circumstances, I would probably grab her by the upper arms and shake her. As it is, I pull myself together, even though I'm vibrating with displeasure. "Don't you dare twist the truth just to make yourself feel better."

"I don't twist—"

"Shut up," I interrupt her once more. I'm a little taken aback when she actually closes her mouth and presses her lips into a thin line, but I hide my surprise and just keep talking. "You saved my fucking life out there. Only Merlin knows what you were thinking, giving up your defense for me of all people. And I swear to you, if you're stupid enough to *even consider* doing that ever again, I'll kill you myself!"

My heart is racing and so is my tongue. I pant out the words before I can think about if it's really wise to say them. But I just can't help it. Granger makes me *livid*.

"For a few hours I didn't even know if you died on that sodding street. Do you know how that felt, Granger? Do you have any idea at all?" I growl. My hands flex at my sides, itching to either shove her away *or* pull her close. To press my point. To show her how upset I am. "How was I ever supposed to forgive myself if you died? I was just trying to make it up to you for risking your life for me. So don't you dare—*don't you dare*—use that of all things to punish me. Or should I rather say to fucking fool yourself?"

She stares at me, visibly shaken, and lets out a quiet, breathless huff that is probably meant to sound derisive, but completely fails to have the desired effect. Her dark eyes dart tensely between mine.

I allow myself a deep breath before continuing my tirade.

"And you *knew* something like this could happen, didn't you?" I gasp out, raising a hand to point first at me and then at her. My voice almost cracks. "You knew it, or at least suspected it, which is why you didn't want me as a partner. Why you insisted I stay at headquarters. You were afraid you might worry about me. You feared you might lose control. And you're *always* in control, aren't you? You're not used to giving it up, or looking left and right. You haven't done that for years and now you don't know how to deal with it. Tell me Granger, am I right? Is that what this is about?"

"No," she replies weakly, but averts her eyes and lets her gaze drift around the room without any focus, which is enough of an answer for me.

"Well, let me tell you then: Unfortunately, I feel the same way, and I certainly don't appreciate it any more than you do." She flinches. It's the first time I've seen this witch flinch, for fuck's sake. "But ignoring it and twisting the truth at the expense of the other just to make yourself feel better is a pretty fucked up solution. So don't you dare!"

And with this last harsh sentence I turn around, leave the workout room and cross the dueling hall with long strides. I skip the entire combat training session.

I didn't expect a 'thank you' from Granger. Rather, I intended to give *my* thanks to *her*, or at least something like that. But her defensive reaction has thrown me so off balance that there is no room for gratitude. What I'm feeling instead is so foreign to me that it takes me all the way to my sleeping quarters to classify it.

It's disappointment.

Her behavior hurt me.

It's already late when there's a knock on my door. I'm still awake, lying on my bed in just my boxers and socks, studying some notes of Daphne and Pansy's intel that Potter graciously provided me with.

"Yeah?" I drawl, frowning and squinting through the dim light of the lamp on the bedside table towards the door.

I'm expecting Blaise, Creevey or even Potter himself, so I'm more than surprised to see Granger enter the room. To say that this surprise is mainly due to her being the one I least expected to knock would be an flat out lie. I simply didn't expect to see her again today *at all*—and certainly not in my own sleeping quarters.

As I put the parchments down and prop myself up on my elbows, her gaze darts briefly over my bare chest. I watch her warily as she slowly and silently wanders into the room. Her fingertips brush the wall, then she stops at the corner of the desk.

She's still pale. So bloody pale.

"Why are you here, Granger?" I ask bluntly.

Even to my ears it sounds a bit weary, which makes me realize that I'm indeed too tired to argue with her tonight. Odd. It's always *these* nights that she chooses to visit me.

"It's been a while since anyone scolded me like you did today, I'll have you know," she informs me calmly, without answering my question.

Contrary to expectations, she doesn't sound accusatory or as if she's expecting an apology (which she wouldn't get anyway), but completely matter-of-fact.

I look at her face, mildly confused. If I didn't know better, I'd claim to detect a slight uncertainty in it, but otherwise her expression is absolutely blank. She meets my gaze with dark eyes, which is probably mainly because she has positioned herself as far away from the lamp as possible. I see no sparkle in them, no glint, no reflection. Strangely enough, the sight makes me somewhat nervous.

"I think I should thank you," she continues rather unceremoniously. One of her fingers taps the lacquer black wood of the desk in a restless rhythm. "Luna told me it was good for me

that someone stayed with me."

Well, now she really caught me off guard. I find myself gaping at her again and quickly close my mouth. She avoided saying that it was good that I, in particular, stayed with her, but I suspect that in her case these two sentences are still the closest thing to a sorry-thank-you combination. However, I refuse to leave it at that.

"Oh? Well? So you just *think* you *should* thank me, or will you actually do it at the end of the day?" I tease her, slowly cocking an eyebrow.

Granger shifts her weight to her other leg, her workout clothes rustling softly, and lets her gaze wander around the room (presumably to avoid mine), finally focusing on a spot just below the still carefully curtained window.

"Thank you," she says after a few seconds, then swallows hard.

"You're welcome," I reply without hesitation. "Thanks for saving my arse."

Her gaze flicks back to me and we lock eyes for a moment. I slowly lean back against the pillows and clasp my hands behind my head. Her posture also visibly relaxes. I guess I only notice because I've been watching her so bloody often lately.

There is silence for a while.

"Why are there robes hanging in front of your window?" she asks suddenly.

The abrupt change of subject surprises me so much that I'm speechless for a moment, but then I blink and pull myself together.

"Well, some bumbling idiot—" It's a bold provocation, but tonight I'm taking the risk. "—seems to have had the idea of installing magical windows in the sleeping quarters that simulate blazing bright daylight twenty-four-seven. How are you supposed to sleep under such conditions? When I got my wand back I tried every fucking spell I could think of, but the window is pretty resilient."

Her mouth forms a small 'o', then she slowly raises a hand and presses it to her lips.

I don't understand what's going on until I hear the sound that finally escapes her. It's a quiet, breathy, beautiful laugh that promptly sends a shiver down my spine. Fuck.

"What's so funny, Granger?" I ask gruffly, trying to cover up this pathetic physical reaction on my part.

"I totally forgot about that," she murmurs, shaking her head.

She reaches out and rips the robes off the window, causing me to narrow my eyes with a hiss. I hear her muttering an unintelligible incantation and not a second later it's dark again. I blink cautiously. Now only the moon shines through the pane, bathing the room in a soft light that is similar to the one I've often envied in the training room.

A faint, indignant suspicion spreads through me.

"Please don't tell me you did that on purpose," I groan.

"Mh, *actually* I wanted to undo it after a few weeks," she says and seems a bit—*guilty*? "I'm afraid I forgot."

"Granger," I growl.

"I swear it wasn't meant to be permanent." She chuckles again, the minx. "In retrospect, it's pretty juvenile, I'll admit it."

Scowling, I run a hand through my hair and shake my head in resignation.

"You do realize that this is an effective method of torture, right? Constant light that doesn't allow for a proper sleep pattern, that is. You're a cruel witch."

She turns back to me and, all at once, the mood shifts. The air in the room is suddenly so thick with tension, it feels like you could cut it into slices. All easiness evaporates. Granger's eyes are fixed on me and my bare chest and this time I *can* read her expression. I suck in a long, shaky breath and hold it.

Well, fuck me.

"Why are you here, Granger?" I repeat my question from before, and now it's demanding, merciless, though I suspect she still won't give me a *real* answer.

She too takes a deep breath, the fingers of her left hand playing with the edge of the desk in a reflexive displacement activity and her right hand brushing a strand of hair from her cheek that doesn't even exist, then she slowly opens her mouth.

"I'm still cold," she whispers.

I stare at her. One second, two, three, four. I even have to bite my tongue to keep something stupid from popping out of my mouth, which would surely ruin everything about this incredibly fragile situation. My eyes dart between hers, but this time she holds my gaze steadily. I let out the breath I've been holding, throw back the covers, and then clasp my hands behind my head again.

"Come here," I say.

My voice is deep and rough. It almost sounds like an order.

And Granger obeys.

Her feet start moving immediately. As she approaches me, she kicks her boots away—first one, then the other. Her wand, complete with forearm holster, lands on my bedside table. When I see her hands fly to the button of her cargo trousers, I have to close my eyes. *Oh no, no, no*. I can't open them again until I hear *and* feel her slip under the blanket. At least she left her long-sleeved top on, thank Merlin.

And then she's all there, nestling against me. Flush. With the full length of her small, delicate body. One of her arms snakes across my stomach; her head lands half on my chest, half on my flexed biceps. And *fuck*, I'm so glad my hands are clasped so securely behind my head because I can't trust them anymore.

My heart is pounding violently in my chest. But hers too, I can feel it, and that's a scrap of comfort. I stare hard at the ceiling, trying to ignore the soft skin of her bare thigh against my leg because the touch threatens to drastically increase my breathing rate.

Three surprises.

One strange day and at least three confusing surprises.

I'm not angry anymore.

Chapter End Notes

Well, well, well. What do we think of this development? (:

23. CHARCOAL BLACK

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

23. CHARCOAL BLACK

The first thought that crosses my mind when I wake up the next morning is one full of determination to finally find an adequate alternative for my Occlumency. Something, *anything*, to distract myself or at least blow off some steam with. Because not only is Granger haunting my dreams at more and more regular intervals, the images are also becoming more and more vivid. To make today's experience perfect, my brain even deludes me into thinking I'm smelling her shampoo. What a torture.

And then I stiffen, because with the first blink I notice that a soft golden light is falling into the room. A rather unfamiliar light, coming from the morning sun just rising behind the pane of the magical window and shyly sending its first rays through the immaculately clean fake glass. Rays that make the dust dance in the air and remind me that *actually* my robes should be hanging in front of the window like all those months before.

My brain is still working with drowsy slowness, trying in vain to recall the supposed dream. Then I take a deep, incredulous breath of belated realization that promptly carries another whiff of Granger's scent into my nostrils. In a merciless, volley-like sequence of various physical sensations, I suddenly become aware of the situation I am in.

Well, fuck.

I'm in my bed. In my sleeping quarters. At Resistance headquarters.

Granger is in bed next to me.

Correction. By definition, Granger is beneath me rather than next to me.

Our bodies are so intertwined that, due to my semi-comatose state, I don't immediately know where I end and Granger begins.

I can feel her breathing, slow and even, right at my throat. Her hair has come loose and is all over my pillow, which explains why the smell of her shampoo is so strong. Her arms are definitely wrapped around my torso, but I'm not sure where her hands are. One of her legs is somehow tangled between mine, the other is around my waist in a circus-worthy contortion, causing my pelvis to pin her into the mattress. And not just my pelvis, as I realize next. What's throbbing against Granger's lower body in indecent anticipation is a full-grown, rock-hard erection.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

And the stream of perceptions continues to flow and even surpasses all previous ones. Because my hands are no longer behind my head, where, as I now remember, I clasped them so securely last night. Quite the contrary. One of them is currently resting on Granger's hip and the sudden tremor in my fingers alerts me to the delicate fabric beneath my palm, which can only mean I'm touching Granger's *knickers*. My other arm is under her head and the appendant hand is cupping the back of her neck to hold her tightly against me, my fingertips lost in her silky curls.

Bloody fucking hell. This witch is going to kill me.

Panic doesn't even begin to describe what I'm feeling. I'm suddenly wide awake. And this time, it doesn't even occur to me to pull the treehouse-proven one-finger-at-a-time stunt, because she would surely wake up before I managed to withdraw completely. So I opt for a solution that is a tad more radical.

I leap out of bed, sending her tumbling back onto the mattress with her limbs being roughly shaken off of me. Then I practically fly to the other side of the room, grab my wand and dismiss my erection with a soft hiss before jumping into my cargo trousers. I fish yesterday's t-shirt off the back of my desk chair and hectically pull it over my head. I'm already halfway in my boots when there's a faint rustling sound behind me.

"Where are you going?" comes Granger's sleepy voice.

And I just can't help it—I look at her over my shoulder, which I immediately regret.

She is now sitting upright. The blanket covers her bare legs, thank Merlin, but the sight of her sitting in my bed, propped up on one arm, is devilish enough. Her eyes are alarmed, not fully awake yet, but definitely suspicious. Other than that, her expression is completely blank.

"I forgot that Blaise and I agreed to meet up this morning," I say vaguely as I tie the laces of my combat boots. "Brainstorming, just like you asked for. There are a few theories I need to discuss with him."

Absolute improvisation.

Granger glances at the clock on the wall.

"It's six in the morning," she notes coolly.

"We wanted to do it before breakfast," I lie brazenly. "I'll see you at the next training session."

With that, I turn around and storm through the door.

It takes me all the way to the workout room to get my rapid breathing under control. I hole up there for a full hour before daring to return to my sleeping quarters to shower and collect the scrolls of parchment I studied last night. The room is empty. There's no indication that Granger was even here, save for the window through which a slightly cloudy sky taunts me.

My mind is a mess of wildly spinning thoughts and my body is still humming with arousal, stubbornly refusing to cool down. I give in and wank in the shower to even feel ready for breakfast.

Ultimately, I have to admit to myself that I would be lying if I said I didn't know exactly why I was so incredibly panicked. It wasn't because I woke up next to a witch whose mere presence gets my blood pumping, after all said witch decided for herself to stay overnight. I will also no longer deny that this physical attraction between Granger and I actually exists, as I have long since passed that point.

Trust is the reason. Her blind trust *in me*, which I wanted to keep at all costs. I didn't want her to think I abused it.

This realization is the strangest thing ever.

Luckily, I see Granger neither at the morning workout nor at any of the meals. Also, I'm not scheduled for the afternoon combat training, so I make good on my white lie and ask Blaise to meet me in the command centre.

First we talk about the new information we've received from Pansy, then about any Death Eaters who might be good *Exit* candidates. After a good hour, Potter joins us. However, he does not actively participate in what I dubbed 'brainstorming' this morning, but merely plays the silent listener for most of the conversation.

"There's one person we haven't talked about yet," I say at length, rubbing the faint stubble on my jaw. "It didn't occur to me right away because so far I've categorically ruled out all Death Eaters who are more or less our age and haven't risen significantly in the ranks."

"Because you thought they might have too little information to be worth the risk?" Blaise deduces, crossing his arms.

He purses his lips and grimaces as if he's mentally going through all of our former schoolmates with Death Eater backgrounds.

"Exactly. But then I thought about it for a while and—"

I'm cut off mid-sentence as the door swings open and Granger struts into the room. Spotting the three of us in front of the parchment-covered wall, she stops short and lifts an eyebrow.

The first thing I notice is the fact that she looks absolutely rested. A healthy color has returned to her face and her lips are no longer blue. Also, there are no dark shadows under her eyes today. Realizing that all of this is probably to my credit, my heart lapses into an erratic, fluttering beat.

I tear my eyes away from her face and take in the rest of her get-up. She's wearing her workout clothes—mud-spattered trainers, tight black leggings and a charcoal black sports

bra, which, of course, distracts me for a moment. There's also a hoodie draped over her arm, which makes sense since autumn has long since arrived.

Granger isn't sweaty yet, which probably means she plans to go outside for a jog. Which *also* makes sense since she has to use the lift to leave headquarters. And the lift, in turn, happens to be here, in the command centre. This train of thought leads to the secret, concerned question on my part as to whether it is safe for her to go jogging in Muggle London. Or maybe she intends to take one of the Portkeys to the Apparition meadow? But is it really better to jog through some lonely grove in the depths of Britain? Will she use a Glamour?

I'm so deep in my worried musings that I don't even realize how quiet it is until Blaise softly clears his throat, breaking the silence. Slightly confused, I shift my attention to him. And then I realize I've been staring at Granger the whole time instead of just continuing to speak like any normal, *sane* person would have done.

Oh, I'm positively screwed.

"How convenient," Granger says.

I suppose she's trying to sound carefree, but frankly her tone seems pretty ominous to me.

My gaze automatically snaps back to her.

"Malfoy, just a word with you."

Shite. She used the exact same words yesterday and it ended in half a disaster. I bite my lower lip tensely. This is not good. This is not good *at all*.

"Hermione, we're in the middle of a meeting and Malfoy was about to—" Potter begins dispassionately, but she successfully silences him with a single wave of her hand.

"Malfoy. Now."

It's definitely an order and I can feel Blaise's disbelieving gaze on me as I immediately obey. (Just like she did last night when I told her to come to bed.) A flicker of triumph crosses Granger's face when I don't contradict her, then she spins on her heel and marches purposefully out of the command centre.

I roll my eyes extensively, which I hope will take the wind out of Blaise's sails for the time being, and generally do my best to stroll out of the room in total nonchalance.

Granger opens the door to the deserted equipment room before signaling for me to go inside, which I eventually do. I stop in the middle of the room, turn to face her and fold my arms expectantly. As the door snaps shut, she raises her wand. I hear a clicking sound and swallow hard.

Well, so much for the *total nonchalance*.

"What's the matter?" I ask. "Are you still cold?"

I'm actually hoping that the inappropriate reference to last night will give me the upper hand right away, but of course it wouldn't be Granger if she didn't firstly know how to prevent that and secondly say something that totally catches me off guard.

"Is it another principle of yours to bolt head over heels and leave women all alone in your bed after a night together?"

I raise an eyebrow, quite baffled. This isn't a conversation I ever thought the two of us would have one day. It's downright absurd.

"Guess what, Granger, for the past seven years in the Death Eater safehouses, that's been the least of my worries."

I smirk halfheartedly and shrug.

"Well, you're not in one of those safehouses anymore," she says. She slowly approaches, her intense gaze sweeping over my face. "Why did you turn tail and flee?"

"I did *not* flee," I huff. "Like I said, I wanted to meet up with Blaise to—"

She interrupts me with an impatient "tsk" and finally stops right in front of me.

"Blaise was at his guard post in Godric's Hollow this morning. Night watch." Bugger. "Think of a better excuse, Malfoy."

In fact, this morning I didn't consider that Blaise might not be at headquarters and therefore my lie might not be ironclad. I was so overwhelmed by the situation that the possibility of Granger seeing right through me didn't even occur to me. Now I feel pretty stupid. And since offense is known to be the best defense, I decide to do just that.

"All right, Granger, you've got me there," I sneer at her, also taking a step forward so we're mere inches apart and she has to tilt her head back to look at me. "But you can hardly blame me for following my survival instinct. I didn't want to take the risk of you cursing me on the spot or giving me one of your famous throat cuts just because I can't control myself. And control is so important to you after all, isn't it?"

I intentionally put on a menacing expression. Appropriately enough, my hands are already twitching at my sides.

"Yes," she replies calmly. Her gaze is dark, challenging, captivating. And not a jot concerned. "*My* control is important to me, but perhaps I would have preferred if you had lost yours."

I inhale sharply.

Stay away from me.

"Are you serious?" I make sure after a few seconds of tense silence. "You *wanted* me to lose control?"

She merely nods.

I bite the inside of my cheek so hard it hurts.

"What if I'm about to lose it? Now. Right here."

Her eyes sparkle as she meets my gaze.

"Feel free," she breathes.

Oh, I must have gone *insane* indeed.

I give her one last chance to change her mind; one last way out of this situation that is already making me shiver with anticipation. Just uttering the words is a bloody feat.

"Do you realize what you're saying, Granger?"

She returns my gaze unwaveringly and the right corner of her mouth quirks, creating that adorable little dimple above it. Even before her 'yes' has faded into the room, I tear myself out of my perplexed rigidity and bridge the last few centimeters between us.

My lips crash onto her mouth.

Granger is there in an instant, pressing against me and digging a hand into the fabric of my long-sleeved top as I uncoordinatedly push her back against the nearest row of lockers.

It's a wild, desperate, ravenous kiss, but I'm not the only one squeezing those emotions into this unexpected touch.

Granger bites my bottom lip and I let out a yearning groan, my hands hitting the black metal on either side of her head with a deafening thud. I need something to hold on to, otherwise I can't guarantee anything. As my tongue licks into her mouth, I simultaneously slide one of my legs between hers so that my thigh presses against her centre.

And she moans.

Granger fucking *moans*.

My demanding fingers flex helplessly against the smooth surface of the lockers as I pin Granger to them with all my weight. Her hands follow a determined path down my torso until she gets hold of the hem of my t-shirt and yanks it over my head. Well then...

As the black fabric flies across the room, I lunge at her once more, this time attacking her neck with my lips, causing her to throw her head back. There's a dull *plong* as her skull hits one of the locker doors. And I taste, lick, nip, suck and bite without taking a breath, while my mind is still trying to figure out what the hell is happening.

Granger's hands begin to explore my abs, my pecs, my shoulders, my biceps, and every other inch of bare skin she can reach. Within seconds I'm on fire. Then she holds onto my neck, pushes herself off the floor and wraps her legs tightly around my waist. My lips find their way back to her mouth. Breathing heavily, I press my pelvis against her so she can feel what she's doing to me. For the second fucking time today.

We moan into each other's mouths at the same time.

I push myself off the lockers and turn around, frantically scanning the room with my eyes. Granger meanwhile clings to me, contenting herself with burying a hand in my hair and letting her open mouth along with her hot breath dance over my jawbone. I let out a soft hiss as her tongue finds my pulse point.

The temptation to put my hands on her arse as I carry her across the room is great, but I just manage to hold myself back. Instead, I let my arms dangle rather uselessly at my sides as I turn around in a circle once more. Then I finally discover a piece of furniture that comes closest to meeting my requirements.

In a fit of frenzy, I carelessly push a whole pile of neatly folded long-sleeved tops off the table and set Granger down on top. I press my hands onto the tabletop as I lean forward and claim her mouth again before using my upper body to push her down, forehead to forehead, until she's lying flat on the table and looking up at me, panting.

Merlin, this sight.

I grab the edge of the table for support.

Granger's eyes are darker than ever, even darker than the day she tied me to that bloody chair in the training room and thus began our strange game. Her pupils hardly stand out from the irides around them. Her cheeks are flushed, her chest rises and falls rapidly, and a few curls have escaped her usual bun. There is an expression on her face that I have never seen on her before. I would describe it as a mix of desire, anticipation and, yes, *loss* of control.

Since her legs are still tightly wrapped around my waist, I literally have to push myself away from the table with all my strength to get her off of me.

"Take off your shoes," I order hoarsely, staring at her breathlessly.

The noises that immediately follow tell me that she shuffles off her running shoes one by one with the respective other foot and then carelessly drops them on the floor. My gaze is still fixed on her and she returns it unwaveringly.

I take a deep breath, then lean forward, grab the edge of the table again, and press my lips to the exposed skin beneath her sports bra. Directly to the tattoo, which I'm seeing up close for the first time but still don't understand. It consists solely of Roman numerals. Granger's eyes flutter shut and her back arches as I work my way down, kissing, licking, sucking. I wonder if every single spot on her body tastes *this* good.

When I finally reach the seam of her leggings, I sink my teeth into the waistband and start dragging the fabric down her legs.

Well, what can I say? I'm not allowed to use my hands.

Granger has the presence of mind to cling to the table lest I pull her off of it in the heat of the moment. She lets out a breathless laugh as her running tights follow her shoes with a jerky

motion of my head.

"What?" I growl before burying my face in her inner thigh.

Oh, *here* she tastes even better.

"Nothing, really," she gasps out, winding one of her hands into my hair. "It's just—*Merlin, Malfoy*—ever since you ripped off your wand holster with your teeth in the briefing room, I couldn't stop thinking about what else you could—*uhh, gods*—do with them."

I let out an unintentional groan. If I hadn't already been so hard, that statement on her part would definitely have done the trick.

My, my, so she *was* thinking of me.

As a reward for this revelation, I gently bite into the soft skin above her hipbone, causing her pelvis to buck. I feel her fingers on my cheek and look up. She traces my jawbone appreciatively, her eyes getting even darker.

"Fuck, Granger, you're going to be the death of me," I pant out.

My hands are gripping the edge of the table so hard I'm afraid I'm about to get a cramp. In my periphery, I can see how white my knuckles are.

"Then I guess my Shield Charm was for nothing," she replies, her lips quivering with a suppressed chuckle.

She slides her hand back into my hair and tightens her grip. I allow her to pull me back up, then lose myself in her hooded eyes for a moment until I feel her other hand on the button of my cargo trousers.

And I'll be damned if I don't comply with this obvious request to shag her right here on this table.

I let go of the edge of the table to help her pull down both my trousers and my boxers. Her gaze flicks to my cock with open curiosity. A second later she wraps her hand around it and squeezes. My eyelids flutter and my knees go weak. It feels even better than I imagined and I instinctively thrust into her hand as she gently moves it up and down.

Oh yeah, loss of control.

I look down and watch breathlessly as nimble fingers push her knickers aside. It almost makes me come in her hand. She's *really* driving me insane, that witch.

When I look into her face again, her lips form what is probably a silent plea. It's no surprise she doesn't say it out loud. Expecting Granger to beg me to fuck her would be far too megalomaniac, I'm bloody well aware. Besides, she already has my respect for showing me so clearly what she wants in the first place. That she wants *me*. So I obey without further prompting.

My hands slide up the tabletop where I place them next to her head, fingers spread, while my lips return to her neck. I take the moment to trail a few hot, open-mouthed kisses down her throat to the top of her sports bra. It occurs to me that next time I'll have to somehow make sure she's completely naked, and if I'm not allowed to undress her myself, then I'll order her to do it and watch.

Okay, wow. *Next time*. What an ambitious bastard I am.

Granger whimpers and arches towards me again, one of her hands running down my back, probably leaving a fair pattern of scratches.

"Hold on tight, Granger," I whisper against her soft skin. "As much as my teeth turn you on, they won't help us any further."

I raise my head and our eyes meet. I'm relieved to see the exact same grin curling her lips that I'm feeling on my own face. The hand on my back is joined by a second on my neck, and then she *does* hold on. Firmly.

I sink into her with one powerful thrust.

My eyes fall shut. She's warm, wet and feels absolutely perfect.

"Fuck," I groan.

I snap my hips once, twice, three times—until I'm sure Granger's grip is tight enough for me to fuck her properly without touching her. Because I'm still not allowed to, I'm sure of that, and I know better than to do it without her permission.

No, I'll be patient. I'll be good.

Her grip *is* tight enough, so I pick up pace.

My lips hover a few inches above hers and I suck in her hot breath as I greedily watch her pleasure-contorted face.

"Harder," Granger demands, and I'm only too happy to oblige.

Our mouths meet again and I moan deeply as I feel her tongue curl around mine. The kiss is stormy, violent, almost punishing. Why punishing? Because we've been sneaking around each other for months instead of doing this from the start, or because we're *actually* doing it now?

Suddenly there is a loud knock and shortly afterwards someone rattles at the door to the equipment room. In vain, mind you. Thank Merlin. So Granger actually locked us in. Why am I so sure that she had a very specific idea of what was going to happen in here? This little minx.

My gaze darts to the door.

"No, no, no," I growl desperately against Granger's jawbone.

"Hermione? Malfoy?"

It's Potter's voice.

I close my eyes in frustration. I'm on the verge of losing my rhythm.

Granger's hand cups my chin and firmly pulls my head back to her face. She sucks my bottom lip between her teeth and holds it for a few seconds. My groan is swallowed by her breath. Then she wraps her legs relentlessly around my waist and gives me a pleading look.

"Fuck it," she cheers me on. "Keep going."

I curse under my breath and thrust into her even harder. Her head lolls back and her eyelids flutter. My hands slide feverishly over the tabletop.

The noises she's making are clearly suppressed and yet music to my ears. Also, I can feel the violent trembling of her thighs, which hold me between her legs like a vice. I don't know if Potter is still at the door, but even if he is, I don't care anymore. Granger's facial expression is a first-rate distraction because now she looks like she's about to explode—in a good way for a change.

"I want you to come, Granger," I squeeze out through gritted teeth. Because I'm fucking *dying* to see it. "Can you do that for me?"

I move my lips purposefully down her neck once more. From below her ear, over her throbbing pulse point, along her collarbone and then straight into her cleavage. I make more room for myself by impatiently tugging at her sports bra with my teeth until I can at least press my mouth to the upper swell of her breasts. At the same time, I move my hips at an angle that I hope will give her just the right amount of friction.

Granger spares herself an answer. Or not, depending on how you look at it. Just as I taste the warm skin of her breast and pick up speed once more, she clenches down on me and begins to tremble all over.

Her orgasm is as intense as it is beautiful to look at. She looks me straight in the eyes as she comes. Her hand grips my hair tightly, her stifled moans turn into panting, and her hips buck several times. I follow her over the edge in less than a few seconds and spill into her in one, two, three, four spurts. The intensity surprises me. Actually, I was completely sure that I got rid of most of it this morning.

Our breaths mingle as I lower myself onto her with my full weight, bringing my head back up. I lean my forehead against hers and hum. My arms and hands finally relax and come to lie limp on the tabletop. Then I press my lips to hers and kiss her again.

This last kiss is different than all the ones before it. Seeking, savouring, almost a bit lazy. Our noses bump against each other gently. I move inside her a few more times as she contracts around me in one final post-orgasmic, wave-like shiver. It draws a sigh from both of us.

And then, as I slowly pull myself out of her and step away from the table, her head follows my movement. She stretches until her abs protest and she has to release me. With a rather vulgar sound, she lets go of my lower lip and sinks back onto the tabletop.

I *could* laugh about it, like she did that night in the training room after Ginny's party when our roles were reversed. I could also make a remark about how she just can't seem to get enough of me, or that I understand why you always want more of what tastes good. But I don't. I don't make fun of her. I don't laugh at her.

All I do is look down at her. And I realize how incredibly beautiful she is when she's so satisfied.

I'm fucked. In the truest sense of the word.

Chapter End Notes

Just in case someone asks: At least one of the two adult participants was using a contraceptive. :) And here we are! I know you've been waiting for this, so I'm curious what you think! Don't worry about the Slow Burn though. I think you know me by now, hehe. There will be no new chapter before next weekend for several personal reasons. If you want to sweeten your week in a different way and haven't already, you might want to read [Kismet](#)? I would be very happy about it. Either way, I wish you a sunny weekend. ♡

24. MIDNIGHT BLACK

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

24. MIDNIGHT BLACK

When I return to the command centre twenty minutes later, I find that our group has grown. Lovegood and Longbottom are now seated at the large, circular conference table. They aren't talking to Potter and Blaise, however, but are busy with some parchments on which (for me only incomprehensible) diagnostics are charted. Healer stuff, I suppose.

I have to stop myself from fixing my hair once more as I saunter over to Potter and Blaise, who then fall silent and turn to face me. Potter seems a little concerned, while Blaise clearly looks like he's about to burst thanks to all the comments he's biting back. I come to a halt next to them and put on what I hope is an utterly indifferent expression.

"All right, where were we?" I ask, crossing my arms.

I actually forgot what we were talking about before I left the command centre. You'd think I left my brain with Granger in the equipment room.

"Why did that take so bloody long?" Blaise asks laconically, expertly ignoring my question.

There's such an amused undertone in his voice that I feel the instant urge to break his nose. I narrow my eyes at him and frown deeply. Finally, I fake a smile before deigning to answer him.

"You know her, Blaise. She gave me one of her lectures because, in her opinion, I misbehaved during the last combat training session," I reply drily, because I simply can't think of anything better. "Once Granger starts ranting, it always takes a while."

At those words, Lovegood looks up from her oh-so-interesting parchments. She peers at me furtively, taking in my overall appearance, then her lips curl into a wide, knowing grin.

Gods, this literal *luna*-tic.

"Were the two of you in the equipment room?" Potter interposes, clearly suspicious.

He, too, seems to have noticed Lovegood's facial acrobatics.

"No," I drawl. "Why?"

"The room was locked."

"Well, that certainly wasn't us."

"You weren't in the dining hall either. And I also checked the training room."

"That's... *quite* strange, Potter, even for you."

"Well, where were you then?"

"Where we—? Bugger me! What is this ridiculous interrogation about?" I snap at Potter. I look from him to Blaise and back again and raise my eyebrows. "We resolved our conflict and didn't kill each other in the process. That's all that matters, isn't it? So get your head out of your arse, Potter, and stop being a fucking pain in the neck."

The essence of my statement isn't even a lie, but the corners of Blaise's mouth quirk uncontrollably nonetheless. Such a prat, really.

"And where is Hermione now?" he asks mercilessly, while Potter actually *pouts* and also crosses his arms. "I thought she was about to leave headquarters to go for a jog."

"Why would I know?" I snarl at Blaise, giving him a venomous look, which he returns with a rather suggestive expression. "Believe it or not, Granger doesn't keep me updated on spontaneous changes in her schedule."

I roll my eyes and turn on my heel to stalk towards the wall with the countless notes about the Death Eaters' hideouts and their respective blueprints. My cheeks feel hot. I really hope they don't look like it.

"Yeah, whatever," Potter grumbles under his breath. "You said there's someone we haven't talked about yet. A person you believe has information? Crucial information?"

"Right, Potter," I sigh and nod.

I take a few seconds to compose myself, then turn back around, put my hands in the pockets of my cargo trousers, and fix my gaze on him.

"The person that came to my mind would probably be a very good *Exit* candidate indeed," I begin. Potter and Blaise are eyeing me intently. Both the former's suspicious look and the latter's amusement are gone, thank Merlin. "As far as I know, *he* didn't take his Dark Mark willingly, which so far has been a good indicator of whether the Death Eater in question is truly loyal to the Dark Lord. However, there's a not inconsiderable catch that will cost us a lot of preparation time."

"What's that *catch*?" Potter asks, shifting his weight to the other leg.

"The Death Eater I speak of is not actively involved in the fighting. Accordingly, a coincidental capture on the battlefield is not very likely. Also, he never stays in any of the usual safehouses or hideouts. The place where I think he is at the moment is *much better* guarded and that could actually be a problem."

"Cryptical, Draco," Blaise remarks with a small snort.

"Ah, always so impatient," I scoff, giving him a quick look, which he acknowledges with a raised eyebrow. "I'm just trying to make it a little exciting. Let's have some fun for once, shall we?"

I get no answer to that.

"And why would someone who is supposedly such a good *Exit* candidate know where we can find Tom?" Potter asks. "Even you didn't know anything about his whereabouts, although you were something like his right-hand man, you said so yourself."

"Good point, Potter," I admit, tapping my chin thoughtfully. "I don't know why the Dark Lord didn't trust me in that regard. Maybe he would have confided in me at some point and I forestalled him by fleeing? After all, he waited *years* before telling me about the Horcruxes. Perhaps this secretiveness was another precautionary move on his part after he told me that one day I would have to sacrifice myself? Or maybe he just didn't think it was necessary for me to know where he was since I was always available to him thanks to the Dark Mark? I can only guess. But to get back to the point, the person I'm talking about won't *officially* know either."

"But unofficially?" Longbottom's voice suddenly rings out.

I wasn't aware that they were listening, but now that I turn to them, both Longbottom and Lovegood's eyes are on me.

"If we're lucky," I confirm, giving Longbottom a slight nod.

"This person has contacts?" Blaise deduces, biting his lower lip.

"Yep, even extremely exclusive contacts," I reply with a small smile on my lips, before elaborating, "in the Dark Lord's inner circle."

"The inner circle," Potter murmurs. "That includes people like the Lestranges. Wizards and witches who already served Tom before I was even born. The first *real* Death Eaters, if you will. The hard core."

"You could put it that way, yes."

"Why didn't he choose one of them as his most faithful servant?" Potter asks, as if the thought had just occurred to him. "For the ritual, I mean. Bellatrix is also an excellent candidate if you ask me. Why you of all people?"

"Ah, now we're getting somewhere," I say with feigned enthusiasm and clap my hands. "I'm afraid he cares too much about Bellatrix to sacrifice her. He has a soft spot for her, as one might say."

Everyone present grimaces in disgust, but I wave my hand dismissively and just keep talking.

"And most of the others have either shown before that they tend to throw in the towel in times of need, or at least have given sufficient reason to believe that they will do just that

when push comes to shove. Why do you think he used Pettigrew the first time? For exactly the same reasons, of course. Also, apart from Bellatrix, very few Death Eaters master Occlumency. It's not a particularly common ability. So I could well imagine that he took a quick look inside one or the other head before making his selection. It didn't work for me, though, because I was always so well occluded that he didn't even know I was capable of it. So he had no reason to doubt me. I resolutely worked my way up and did whatever he asked me to do. *Et voila*, a faithful servant."

"That sounds logical. So you think that the members of said inner circle know very well where Tom is. While he doesn't count on their loyalty when their own lives are on the line, he still trusts them enough to inform them of his whereabouts," Potter sums it up. "And you're convinced that your Death Eater has such a good rapport with at least one of the members that he might be in the loop even though he's not cleared for the information himself?"

I nod slowly. "Exactly."

"Holy shit!" Blaise suddenly gasps out.

His eyes widen, leading me to believe he finally has a clue who I'm talking about. Took him long enough.

Potter's eyes dart between us in confusion. He is visibly vexed because he still has no idea who I'm referring to. But Blaise actually seems to have solved the riddle, as he leans forward, rests his hands on his thighs and whistles softly through his teeth.

"That's a bloody bold theory, Draco," he says seriously.

I merely shrug.

"You know how he is. Curious. Eyes and ears everywhere. Cunning and clever, but careful nonetheless. A genuine Slytherin. It's worth a try, I'd say."

"Wait a moment. Who are you two talking about?" asks Longbottom, who seems to be just as clueless as Potter.

He rises from his chair, walks around the table and repeats all the qualities I just listed, counting them on his fingers.

"Doesn't fight, doesn't spend time in the safehouses, didn't take the Dark Mark willingly, would therefore be a good *Exit* candidate, but still has close ties to the original Death Eaters?"

I nod again and smirk, even though it's probably inappropriate in this situation.

"Exactly, Longbottom. *Family* ties even."

Ultimately, Blaise is the one who can't take the tension anymore.

"Theo," he blurts out.

"Theo *who*?" Potter and Longbottom echo in unison, while Lovegood gasps and also stands up excitedly.

Her mouth opens in silent understanding.

I turn back to Potter and decide to finally enlighten him.

"*Nott*, Potter. Theodore Nott."

When I step onto the flat roof, it's already after midnight. Nevertheless, as I realize after a few seconds, I am not alone up here, because *she* is here too.

I haven't seen her in two days, but I've spent a fair amount of time thinking about her. For example, whether she might show up in my sleeping quarters or summon me to the equipment room. Or how much I would have to provoke her so that she would tie me to a chair again. All in all very naughty thoughts.

"You're not going to do me the favor of jumping, are you, Granger?" I repeat the words she said to me what feels like ages ago.

Granger probably heard the lift or at least my footsteps because she doesn't flinch or turn around.

My heart involuntarily beats a little faster when it occurs to me that I might be the reason she's here—on the roof; in the middle of the night; despite the unpleasant weather conditions. Maybe she was waiting for me to show up here. What did I say to Blaise again? Absolutely *nothing* Granger does is a coincidence.

The gravel scrunches under my boots as I approach. I study her back while the icy wind whips through my hair and tugs at the hem of my robes. It's bitingly cold tonight. I'm afraid it won't be long before winter descends on London, plunging its streets in the traffic chaos of the Muggles and covering the roof of St. Mungo's with the typical British snow slush. The air already tastes like it.

Granger is standing very close to the edge of the roof, the tips of her boots sticking out into the darkness of the night and her robes fluttering menacingly, but despite the freezing wind she doesn't shiver or sway.

"What if I meant to?" comes her firm voice.

She slowly raises her hands until she is standing with her arms spread wide. Like an archangel—all in black, with wings made of fabric and dramatically whirling curls.

"In that case you would bitterly regret it, because I would *definitely* reach for you," I reply.

There is more seriousness behind my words than I care to admit. As if on command, my hands begin to flex at my sides because the sight actually makes me feel uneasy. It is as awe-

inspiring as it is worrisome. I'm not afraid of heights, and I've dangled my legs over the edge of this roof enough times myself, yet I don't want to see Granger slip or (even worse) actually jump.

She drops her arms, turns to face me, and takes a big step from the ledge onto the gravel, inevitably leaving the danger zone.

Somewhat reassured, I shove my hands in the pockets of my cargo trousers and look at her expectantly.

"You would *reach* for me, Malfoy?" she repeats, her eyes sparkling teasingly.

"You bet. I would *save* you," I clarify, which wipes the hint of a devious smirk off her face.

She looks at me thoughtfully while the wind howls loudly and drives a few heavy raindrops into our faces. I choose the moment of our mutual silence to take another step closer, and another, until we're mere inches apart and she has to tilt her head back to be able to keep looking at me. Mm, I've grown fond of our height difference, I have to admit.

"Now, will you give me some answers tonight?" I ask challengingly, my gaze roaming extensively over her face.

"Answers to what?"

"To the questions I asked you in the gym after the attack on Hogsmeade."

She furrows her brow and purses her lips, which tells me she knows what I'm getting at. I repeat said questions anyway.

"Were you afraid of worrying about me? Of wanting to *save* me too if the worst came to the worst? Was that why you didn't want me as a partner anymore? Why you insisted I stay at headquarters?"

It's quiet for a while, but I'm patient because I'm dying to know. Ever since the thought first crossed my mind, I can't get it out of my head. When I asked her about it in the workout room, she denied it, but I didn't buy her weak no. And while I don't know if learning the truth will change anything at all, that doesn't stop me from investigating.

"Yes," she says simply.

I gasp softly and my heart begins to pound hard and erratically against my ribs. I hadn't imagined it to be *that* easy. Granger is always good for a surprise.

"And why?" I probe cautiously once I've regained my composure.

The time has come. I'm finally getting my answers.

Granger tilts her head back and rolls her eyes at the night sky. A few raindrops get caught in her lashes and brows, leaving glittery trails on her still freckled skin. She brushes a damp curl

from her forehead and closes her eyes in resignation for a moment before looking at me again.

"I take it you wouldn't be satisfied with the explanation that the Resistance is dependent on you and your intel?"

I immediately shake my head.

"That would be more than contradictory. Before the first reconnaissance at the Manor, you told me that, despite my inside knowledge, I was expendable. Back then, you didn't give a fuck that I might die on one of the missions. Better me than Blaise or Weasley or Smith. Those were your words."

Her eyes flash at me. Once again, I have no idea if it's a sign of amusement, impatience, anger, or some other unknown emotion.

"Yes, I said that, and at the time I believed it. But then—" She falters as if it would take her a lot of effort to utter the following words. "Swansea was the turning point, if you will."

"Greyback?" I help her, whereupon she nods.

"The conversation we had before we left that night bothered me. I didn't tell anyone I wanted to search for Greyback because I knew the others wouldn't approve, let alone give their blessing. Rightly so, I have to admit in retrospect, because it was a completely selfish endeavor. With that, I threw all of the Resistance's security protocols, most of which I drew up myself by the way, to the wind. And even though I knew the risks, I accepted your offer and took you with me. Without any scruples. Just like that, I dragged you into my *personal vendetta*."

Granger lets out a small laugh, as if the term were some kind of private joke between us, but it sounds pretty mirthless.

She averts her eyes, gazes into the midnight black distance behind me, and wraps her arms around her torso. Maybe she's freezing. The urge to just put my hands on her hips and pull her close is suddenly incredibly strong. But I'm not allowed to do that, so I discipline myself.

"It simply no longer felt right to gamble with your life, after all you had already proven that you didn't *really* deserve it." She clears her throat hard. "When we finally found Greyback, I realized that at the end of the day, getting you back to headquarters safe and sound was more important than killing him, so I kept an eye on you."

And suddenly, a piece of the vast Granger mystery falls into place. With a deep sigh I close my eyes, because now I remember our conversation the day after Swansea—also here, on this very roof.

"You said he managed to disarm you because you were distracted," I murmur, rubbing my face wearily. "Distracted because of me?"

Granger nods slowly and I have to bite back a curse. So I was bloody right. My secret suspicions match the truth almost like a template.

She still doesn't look at me, but keeps her gaze fixed on that random spot behind me.

"The whole trip was a mistake from the start," she claims, her voice shaking. I can't tell whether it's because of the cold or because of the meaning of the words that seem so difficult for her to utter. "But then you pounced on Greyback. Without thinking. Wandless. You pushed him away from me. Almost let him choke you to death. And then you told me that he would never touch me again. Like *you* decided that. Like you'd see to it, even promise—"

Accompanied by another howl of the wind, her voice cracks and her eyes dart back to me. Now I'm the one avoiding her gaze, which seems to encourage her to continue. She starts sputtering as if to make sure it's over as quickly as possible.

"When it came to protecting me, you didn't hesitate for a second, and I suddenly realized that if it had been the other way around, I would have done the same thing. In fact, I *had* already done the same thing, which enabled Greyback to disarm me in the first place. But something like that must not happen in combat. *Never*. You have to stay in control. Of course, you also look out for your partner, but your own life always comes first. It even has to. If your partner is seriously injured, you still need to be able to bring them back to camp. Being headless, getting sidetracked, worrying excessively—in an emergency there is no room for such sentiments. It scared me how fucking *headless* we were that night. Both of us. In my opinion, continuing to take you with me was a huge safety risk. A risk I wanted to eradicate, it's as simple as that."

Absolutely nothing about this is *simple*, for fuck's sake.

"Granger," I groan, slowly shaking my head. "You shouldn't have given up your defenses to protect me of all people. Not in Swansea and certainly not in Hogsmeade. We weren't even *partners* anymore when we were there."

As for the latter, her logic makes absolutely no sense, and I'm surprised she doesn't seem to notice it herself.

"That's true, but I owed you—"

"Stop it," I snap at her. "You don't owe me *anything*, do you understand? Neither then nor now. I'm the one who had a debt to pay."

"Yeah, you said that before," she snorts, now sounding angry as well. "Even though I still have no idea what the hell you're referring to. The day at the Manor? If that's what this is about, I can assure you—"

"It's not about the bloody day at the Manor," I hiss.

"Then what are we talking about? All your insults during our time at Hogwarts? Well, that would be beyond ridiculous. I don't give a fuck about—"

"I was there," I blurt out, interrupting her for the third time.

She's not used to not being able to finish her sentences, so she frowns in extreme irritation. I frantically inhale a gulp of icy air before continuing.

"During the Battle of Hogwarts I hid behind a suit of armor in one of the downstairs corridors because I simply didn't know what to do. Greyback and Scabior had just walked past me when you appeared. I didn't think anything of it, so I just did *nothing*. I didn't stop you, I didn't warn you. It's *my* fault all these bad things happened to you, Granger." I tear my hair in desperation. "Fuck. When we're out there together, I don't want your sympathy, let alone your protection, because, Merlin knows, I don't deserve any of it."

Bugger. I had no intention of ever telling her all of this, but the words are out faster than I can question them. Now the damage is done.

I stand in front of her, fists clenched and panting, as she gapes at me in bewilderment.

"You were there?" she asks at length. Her brow smoothes in her disbelief and her eyes dart between mine, searching. "Did you *know*? Did they tell you they were holding me captive?"

"*No*," I implore. "I didn't know until Potter told me, I swear. Only then did I remember. Only then did I draw the connection."

It's the truth and yet it sounds like a flimsy excuse.

Granger's jaw tightens and she presses her lips together so hard they turn white. Her hands clench into fists as well.

"So *that* is why you offered to help me find Greyback?" she asks. Her voice is icy. In fact, it sounds colder than the vibrating air around us feels. "To salve your conscience? Because you thought it would be a good opportunity to make amends for your putative lapse?"

Yes, that was the original thought. But now, considering the past few weeks and everything that's happened between us, I find it pretty silly myself.

My silence seems to be confirmation enough for Granger, though. The look she gives me is so contemptuous that I automatically become defensive.

"Well, now you know," I say emotionlessly, shrugging and meeting her gaze. "I was exactly the coward you thought I was and still think I am. Congratulations, you were right. But now we're even, Granger. All debts are settled. There's no reason for you to worry about me during a fight and catch life-threatening curses for my sake, let alone kiss me out of sheer gratitude or even let me fuck you just because I warmed you a bit."

We don't talk about it.

I immediately regret my words and bite my tongue so hard I taste blood, but it's already too late.

Granger recoils as if I'd slapped her across the face, then the message hits home and her expression goes blank. In a split second, she's back to being the woman who treated me with nothing but scorn and indifference during my first few days at headquarters. A menacing fire burns in her dark eyes.

"Just for your information," she whispers, but her voice is so sharp and piercing it's almost physically painful, "there were other reasons for the kissing and the *fucking*. Actually, you don't deserve it, but I'll be so kind and enlighten you. Let's see if I can do the whole hand as well."

She steps closer and raises that very hand to count said reasons on her fingers. I swallow hard, remembering I did the same thing when trying to prove to her that Ginny likes me.

"Your friendship with Creevey."

She taps her thumb.

"How seriously you, unlike Smith and Dean, took the mission where we got Parkinson out."

She touches her index finger.

"And remember when you asked me if I thought Luna could handle the *Exit*? You said it like you were one of us and no longer one of *them*."

Fuck, so Pansy wasn't the only one who noticed.

Granger raises her middle finger. I grit my teeth.

"Maybe even the fact that you said you wouldn't touch me until I asked you to."

She wiggles her ring finger.

"Oh, and definitely your words in the equipment room before we left for Hogsmeade. That you wouldn't stay behind and wait for me to come back."

She snaps up her pinky, then mockingly holds her spread hand in my face.

I secretly wonder if she could continue with the other hand if she wanted to. Outwardly, however, I remain stock still and silent.

"But as I now realize," she continues when I don't respond, "it was probably more of a big *lapse* on my part to attach too much importance to all these things. Don't you worry, Malfoy, it won't happen again."

With that, she spins around and strides towards the lift, her posture proud and upright.

I'm left alone in the cold and dark of the flat roof, still panting, heartstricken and completely at a loss as to why this conversation has taken such a wrong turn.

Why do I feel that, despite my revelations about my guilty conscience, the situation would never have escalated to such an extent if I hadn't reacted so defensively?

I'm a first-class tosser.

Chapter End Notes

The drama is no surprise, I guess. What do you think of this development?

There is also exciting news: EXIT will get a second part!

It won't be a sequel, though. Instead we'll look at the storyline from Hermione's point of view. You've said so many times that you'd like to take a look inside her head and now I've already written the first few chapters. It definitely won't be boring. REBEL will be shorter (thanks to prior knowledge) so you don't have to worry about reading the exact same thing. Draco didn't catch everything, after all, and there will be even more surprises as to Hermione's thoughts. I won't start uploading REBEL until EXIT is finished, but I wanted to share this news with you anyway. I hope you're happy about it.



25. COAL BLACK

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

25. COAL BLACK

Ever since our conversation on the roof, Granger has been successfully avoiding me.

I'm on the verge of asking Potter where her sleeping quarters are several times, but always dismiss the idea at the very last moment—mostly out of shame, because deep down I know that I have wronged her with my accusations. Once again, my emotions were to blame. It was an unfamiliar mixture of guilt and desperation that overwhelmed me to the point of ruining any chance of retrieving the situation, and now I have absolutely no idea how to set things right again. Pride also plays a small role, though. While I'm well aware that I'm the one who fucked up, I don't want anyone (including Granger) to think that I'm crawling to her on all fours.

However, it annoys me that, hypothetically speaking, she doesn't even give me the opportunity to do so. Despite the official decision to target Theo as the next *Exit* candidate, Granger avoids all meetings. Also, she never shows up in the dining hall during mealtimes, and instead of participating in the morning workouts, she's back to her solitary jogs. She continues to lead the combat training, but I only have to attend twice a week and on those days she constantly ignores me. Neither does she challenge me to a duel, nor does she give her usual cocky advice. As far as she's concerned, I simply don't exist anymore, and it's driving me insane.

I think a lot about what she said that night on the roof. Not everything came as a surprise, like the fact that she didn't want to take me to Hogsmeade because she was afraid of worrying about me. *That*, I had already figured out, after all. Some of her statements, however, were unexpected and only added to the great Granger mystery. Among other things, I felt that my original motivation to help her find Greyback disappointed her. I wonder what she would have preferred to hear.

What bothers me the most, though, is her list of things that made her soften up on me, at least physically. Her *handful* of arguments, so to speak. Because with that she basically admitted that she was watching me the whole time and also that she kind of liked what she saw.

The more I think about all of this, the more confused I am. So I give up my musings after a few days and brush them aside for the time being.

To distract myself, I start a task force of sorts with Pansy and Daphne. Apart from me, they're the only members of the Resistance who have ever been to the Nott Estate before, so it makes sense to consult them for the preparation of the blueprints and the listings of the wards. Since there is no one with enough time to accompany me to Camp White every day, Potter, in his new, pragmatic way, orders Pansy and Daphne to be housed at Camp Black until the mission.

From then on, the three of us use the command centre to sift through our memories and write down everything we remember.

After a week, our notes are detailed and decent enough, although we can't necessarily assume that the wards and security measures haven't been replaced or at least reinforced in recent months. This time we won't be spared a reconnaissance, so Blaise begins strategic planning.

Another week passes before it's decided that six of us will be going to the Nott Estate. Blaise and Smith, Ginny and Creevey, and Granger and I. And yes, that is apparently also the allocation of the teams. When Blaise announces it at one of the meetings, I raise an eyebrow in surprise, but don't question the decision.

It's only when I'm back in my sleeping quarters that I realize what kind of game Granger is playing. It's too blatant, too conspicuous, to be sheer coincidence. Also, as I've discovered on numerous occasions, *nothing* Granger does is a coincidence. The constellation of the teams is clearly a message—from her to me. The decision that we're partners again is meant to be a nod to the fact that I'm no longer a distraction; that she doesn't worry about me anymore; that everything is back to normal. Allegedly.

Her behavior is juvenile, but at least it allows me to finally shake off my shame. What I said to her wasn't fair, but her game makes it a little easier for me to deal with that awareness. While I can't rule out the possibility that at the end of the day I'll still have to get on my knees before her to get what I want, for now I'm surrendering to this *new, old* dynamic.

I accept Granger's challenge. This constant back and forth between attack and defense. Between murderous intent and unbridled desire.

We'll see where it takes us.

We leave at dusk the following Saturday.

Granger is the last to enter the flat roof that is our meeting point, looking so fucking hot in her combat gear that for a few seconds I forget the two-week silence between us. I downright *absorb* the sight of her. Then my gaze falls on her face and I promptly come back down to earth. Her facial expression is guarded, dismissive even, and her head is deliberately turned away from me, chin held high.

I roll my eyes, but immediately make my way to her anyway. Since, according to her, everything is back to normal, I'll also provoke her again, it's as simple as that.

"Everybody here?" Blaise calls out, and there are murmurs of assent.

I stop right behind Granger, my *partner*, and casually hook one of my thumbs into my shoulder holster. She does her best to pretend not to feel my physical proximity, but subconsciously shifts her weight to the other leg. The corners of my mouth quirk.

Well, it's her own fault. It's *her* game we're playing.

Blaise hands out the Return Portkeys (one per team; Granger grabs ours) and gives the others a brief summary of the information Pansy, Daphne, and I have gathered over the past few days.

I don't really listen to him because I've long since internalized it all. I could locate every ward, every escape route, every Anti-Disapparation-Perimeter with my eyes closed. I think I could even recite them if I was woken up in the middle of the night and quizzed. So instead of taking part in the preliminary discussion, I occupy myself with ogling Granger's slender neck and reminiscing about our physical encounters.

Even though the feeling has been simmering inside me for days, I now notice with increased intensity that I miss her. Granger in general. The sight of her, our kisses, her closeness, the exchange of blows with her, *everything*. It's been two pretty long weeks.

Fuck. Focus.

"And remember, we especially need to keep an eye out for the alarm spell that exposed Draco at the Manor," Blaise says, to which everyone nods. "If the Notts have a similar spell installed, I'd rather we not trigger it. I've got my good shoes on today and I'm not keen on dueling."

Creevey snickers. I shake my head and roll my eyes once more. Blaise continues.

"Our goal today is simply to collect additional information so that we can then prepare for the actual operation under the best possible conditions. No mistakes allowed, have I made myself clear?"

Granger absentmindedly turns our linen-wrapped Return Portkey in her hand. And for some reason (call it the irony of fate or, say, Merlin's taunt) we simultaneously open our mouths as Blaise finally shuts his.

"Crystal, boss," are the two words that fall from our lips in unison.

At least (because everything else I could only have explained with magic) we say it with a completely different emphasis. While Granger says it rather neutrally, affirmatively at most, I lay so much stress on the second word that it should be clear to everyone that it's a quip at Blaise's expense.

Granger's shoulders tense as four pairs of eyes dart towards us and a few eyebrows raise in confusion. Blaise, for his part, is grinning like a Cheshire Cat. He has no idea it's inappropriate because he doesn't know that Granger and I aren't even on speaking terms at the moment, let alone what has happened between us in the last few weeks. So I can't really blame him for his amusement, but that doesn't change the fact that, once again, I'd love to break his nose.

After a few seconds of awkward silence, Granger spins around and tilts her head back to look at my face. She glares at me, her nostrils flaring ominously.

"Stop parroting me," she hisses so menacingly that a few months ago I might have reached for my wand. These days I just huff, although her tone still sends a shiver down my spine.

"Tsk, we said it at the same time," I reprimand her with a smirk. "Who says *you* weren't the one who parroted *me*? After all, you know me *inside and out* by now. I'm your favorite partner."

I hear a stifled chuckle—from Ginny, I assume—but I don't dare take my eyes off Granger to see if I'm right.

"Shut up," is Granger's extremely sophisticated reply.

"Make me."

"*Malfoy*, I'm warning you."

Gods, I want to kiss her. Badly.

"*Granger*, you can warn me all you want, it won't make me any wiser."

"Too bad, because in that case, I'm—"

"—going to kill me because I accidentally used the same words as you? Why, how perfectly rational and mature of you."

"—going to push you off this roof like I should have done ages ago."

"Really? Then why haven't you done it yet?" I ask, my lips twitching.

"That was another absolutely foolish *lapse* on my part!"

"Yeah, just as foolish as summoning a Shield Charm to save my arse and—"

"Oh, don't you dare! Shut - the fuck - up!"

"—*and* getting me safely back to headquarters. Huh? Did you expect me to say something else?"

Granger is now standing on tiptoe, her hot breath puffing into my face and her dark eyes darting between mine. It really is a miracle that sparks aren't literally flying between us yet. My lips curl into a grin, then I hear someone clear their throat.

"And who, pray tell, came up with the extraordinarily stupid idea of making the two of them a team?" Smith snarls in exasperation as he impatiently paws at the gravel with one of his boots. "Oi! Are you two done now? The sun has long since set. We have to go."

I don't let him distract me; my gaze remains on Granger.

She exhales slowly, presumably to calm herself, creating a cloud of breath in front of her face, then she squares her shoulders, takes a big step back, and nods.

The others are standing next to the pile of junk on the edge of the roof and their hands are already hovering over the Portkey that will take us to the meadow, from which we will then Apparate to the Nott Estate.

Granger and I fall into step as we cross the roof—she totally stiff, I pointedly casual.

"Since you insist on me being your partner again," I murmur so quietly that only she can hear me, "you should stop doing two things: hiding from me and reacting to every word I say like I'm making you all flustered. It's just too conspicuous, you know?"

Granger inhales sharply and her gaze, which is trained on the other rebels, flickers once.

"First of all, let's see if you survive this night," she replies through gritted teeth.

A grin tugs at the corners of my mouth.

Deciding that her answer is good enough to start our game, I reach out to place my index finger on the Portkey.

The night is so black that our disillusionments are hardly worth it. Even so, we're invisible while walking the Notts' property lines. Metre by metre. Past the Anti-Disapparation-Perimeters, the Muggle-Repelling Charms, and a truly impressive magical defense. We keep sufficient distance from the installed wards and curses while assessing the situation.

Smith and Granger do the actual recce by repeatedly casting revelation spells. Blaise takes notes, Ginny roughly outlines a blueprint. Creevey and I play the guards, carefully watching the area. Apart from our whispers here and there, it's almost eerily quiet. The silence is better than the wail of an alarm spell, though, so I won't complain.

The grounds are so vast that the house itself can hardly be seen from our position. I grudgingly have to admit that getting Theo out of here is going to be a pretty tricky mission indeed—not to mention the fact that there is no guarantee that the *Exit* will actually work for him or, if so, he really *does* know something that will help us. While my suspicions are definitely not unfounded, it's still an absolute shot in the dark. It's dangerous and undoubtedly a risk.

At least the reconnaissance passes without any incidents. As I feel Granger step up to my side for the first time in a few hours, I tilt my head, and with it my ear, in her direction.

"That should do. The wards repeat at regular intervals and there are no big surprises, although the magic is quite challenging. I don't need to see more. We can go."

I don't need to see more, I ape her in my mind.

This attitude is just typical of Granger. It's incredibly annoying and yet somehow sexy.

Bugger, I really am a lost cause.

Our teams line up side by side and I extend my arm, which Granger grabs with a jerk before she Disapparates almost silently. She repeats the procedure twice until we materialize at the edge of the meadow where the Return Portkeys are hidden. I intend to worm out of her where this bloody meadow is as soon as she forgives me for my behavior on the roof. Or rather, *if* she ever forgives me.

With a flick of my wand, I cancel my disillusionment. The others do the same, then we start moving. We trudge silently through the grove that lines the meadow to get to the Portkeys that will take us back to Camp Black.

And then it happens.

Something rustles in the undergrowth to our left, causing us to spin around in a single collective movement and draw our wands. I can just make out a bushy, auburn tail in the darkness before Smith, who is standing right behind me and Granger, loses his nerve.

He fires a *Confringo*.

And aims outstandingly lousy.

The fact that Granger goes down without a sound is impressive. Smith's curse only grazed her, but the force of it was still brute enough to break her leg, I can see that immediately. When she comes to lie on the damp leaves, her combat boot sticks out at an odd angle from her lower leg.

Any other woman would probably have screamed or even passed out just by seeing the injury, but Granger remains perfectly calm. Only her face, from which all color drains within the blink of an eye, proves how great the pain must be. Her eyes are wide open and she clutches her knee with a shaking hand, pressing her lips together for a few seconds before moaning softly.

"You idiot," she finally snaps at Smith. Her voice is unusually throaty—just another indication of how hard she's trying to pull herself together. Brave witch.

The only thing stopping me from rushing over to her is the fact that Blaise and Smith are already crouching down beside her.

"It was just a fox," explains Creevey, who, breathing heavily, stumbles out of the bushes into which the reddish-brown tail has disappeared.

That makes me look up in surprise. I didn't even notice that he followed the animal into the forest. From the moment Smith's curse hit her, my full attention was solely on Granger. When I realize that, I also notice how violently my hands are twitching at my sides.

Well, so much for Granger's theory regarding the re-established indifference between us. The rules for our game left my brain in a matter of seconds. Splendid.

While Smith sputters a whole string of apologies, Blaise stoically rummages through the pockets of his robes until he produces a small vial.

"Here," he murmurs, handing the vial to Granger. Then he casts a simple diagnostic spell over her ankle. "Clean fracture. Shite. We can't heal that on the fly. We need to get you to the trauma room so Luna can remove the bone and regrow it. Take the pain potion. It's not particularly strong, but it's better than nothing."

Granger swallows the contents of the vial in one gulp, but judging by the look on her face, the potion doesn't seem to be helping. She also completely ignores Smith by neither responding to his apologies nor looking him in the face. In fact, she acts like he's not there, and I guess she has to so she doesn't explode.

"Well, what do we do now?" asks Ginny, who has meanwhile fetched the Return Portkeys, looking down at her hands.

Blaise frowns thoughtfully.

"You and Dennis take one each," he decides, nodding in Creevey's direction, whereupon Ginny hands him one of the cloth-wrapped Portkeys. "Zacharias, Draco and I take the third. One of us has to carry Hermione and the other two have to support them lest anybody else breaks their leg upon arrival."

Blaise glances at Smith and sighs, not angry but definitely exhausted. For the very first time I notice that he, too, has dark shadows under his eyes. For me, Blaise has always been the epitome of cheerfulness and nonchalance, but yeah, now it's obvious: this war is leaving its mark on all of us.

While the others start discussing the best way to use a Portkey when carrying someone, I remain very quiet.

I'm still busy keeping my emotions in check. Only my hard-won self-control and the knowledge that there were four other people present kept me from completely losing it when Granger went down. Like a fool. Like a raving idiot. And even though I know that Granger is as fine as can be expected under the circumstances and that she will be back on her feet in two days at worst, my hands are still shaking.

I take a few deep breaths before glancing at her face.

Aside from the pain, something else is now flickering in her eyes. It's clearly fear. And that makes sense, I belatedly realize as I stop tuning out Blaise and Smith's conversation.

"It's my fault, so I'm going to carry her," Smith declares, unknowingly causing something like a short circuit in me.

"You'll keep your hands off her."

It's the first words I've said since we Apparated.

Everyone turns to me. Ginny merely raises an eyebrow, but Blaise's face instantly takes on a knowing expression. If he needed any confirmation for his secret suspicions, then he has it now at the latest. Fuck.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Smith asks with a sniff. "I didn't do it on purpose! I thought someone was following us. Besides, I've already apologized."

"You won't touch her," I repeat without explaining myself.

We glare at each other, both furious. I feel a muscle in my jaw tick. Smith is lucky we're not alone. I'd love nothing more than to beat the living daylights out of him for hurting Granger, accident or not, but I manage to control my temper.

"Stop it," comes her shaking voice. "We don't have time for something like that."

"I agree," Blaise says calmly. "I think Hermione can decide for herself who should help her, right?"

He shifts his (now extremely amused) gaze to Granger and folds his arms expectantly. I turn my attention to her, too, unconsciously holding my breath. I'm not sure what answer I'm hoping for.

Granger doesn't look happy. Her mouth is a thin, pale line and her brow is furrowed. But then a jolt goes through her body and her expression becomes unreadable, blank and pragmatic.

"Malfoy," she growls reluctantly.

Gods, Blaise will tease me to my dying day.

I quickly hide my shock and straighten up to my full height before firmly shouldering Smith aside and crouching down next to Granger myself.

It probably doesn't mean anything. Surely she only chose me because she's so mad at Smith. But even as I try to tell myself this, a quiet, triumphant voice rings out in the back of my mind. She *could have* asked Blaise for help, after all she likes him, but she wanted *me*. I'm the option she's most comfortable with. I wonder if there are other reasons for this than the undeniable one that quite recently various parts of my body have been near her. On her. In her.

Oh, for fuck's sake. Focus.

"Up you go, Granger," I murmur.

It's a subtle warning so she can mentally prepare herself that I'm about to touch her.

I slide one arm under her knee pits and the other under her torso, then stand up slowly and carefully so as not to cause her any additional pain.

Granger grabs the back of my neck with an ice-cold hand and holds on tight, her whole body tensing up. I risk a scrutinizing look at her face. Her lips are trembling and she stares determinedly at a nearby tree trunk. She looks slightly disturbed, but at least not like she's on the verge of a nervous breakdown, which is something, I suppose.

"Is this all right?" I ask quietly.

She bobs her head once, then our eyes meet.

"No need to be smug," she hisses gruffly.

I have to suppress a smirk. Well, as long as Granger is still able to scold me, it can't be that bad.

"I'm not smug at all," I reply.

Actually, I'm *pretty fucking* smug.

It's hard for me to take my eyes off her face, but I don't want to make the situation any more uncomfortable for her than it probably already is, so I pull myself together.

Everything about the whole thing is so absurd that none of the others say another word. Ginny and Creevey use their respective Portkeys and are gone with a *whoosh*. Smith and Blaise step up to my side and each of them clasps one of my arms before placing their fingers on the last Portkey.

Our arrival on the roof is quite bumpy despite their firm grips. We sway in place for a few seconds before we all regain our footing. Granger makes an indefinable sound, her eyelids fluttering.

"Merlin, I'm so sorry, Granger," Smith tries again.

"Shut up," she merely chokes out.

We start walking and follow Ginny and Creevey into the lift. I put on a neutral expression, not meeting anyone's eyes, and try not to think about how many rumors could arise if anyone sees me carrying Granger around headquarters. We're lucky that it's still pitch black and most of the rebels are probably still lying peacefully in their beds.

The command centre, however, is *not* deserted. As the lift grilles open to reveal the large conference table, both Potter and Weasley jump up and rush towards us.

"What happened?" Weasley roars and immediately lunges at me.

Not wanting to risk him knocking me and Granger over and inadvertently injuring her even more, I quickly take a step back.

"I'm fine," Granger says calmly.

Ginny steps protectively in front of us and gestures for her brother to simmer down before beginning to explain to him and Potter what happened to Granger. With a jerk of her head, she signals me to leave. I'm only too happy to oblige and step through the door that Blaise opens for me into the, thank Merlin, empty atrium.

The door slams shut and we are alone.

Wow, they allow me to carry an injured Granger to the trauma room without guarding me. We've really made progress, there's no other way to put it.

"Does it hurt much?" I ask to break the silence, blinking down at my precious cargo.

"No, not at all," she scoffs, half-heartedly rolling her eyes.

Granger's face proves otherwise. She is ghostly pale and a light film of sweat has formed on her forehead and above her upper lip. Finally she gives in, closing her eyes and resting her head on my shoulder. The hand that has been tightly gripping my neck relaxes a little. She waited until we were alone before she let herself go. Brave witch indeed.

"I'll kill him," she whispers.

With every step I take, her head bounces up and down on my shoulder.

"Smith's reaction was far too impulsive," I agree, generously sugar-coating what I *really* think about him. "Losing one's head over a fox—ridiculous. I could kill him for you if you want."

"Mm."

"You should schedule him for combat training more often. He lacks the routine."

"Mm-mh."

"Now that I have you and you can't run—"

"Malfoy. Can't we just get it over with in silence?"

"All you have to do is listen," I mutter.

She makes another indefinable sound, then sighs resignedly, her breath brushing against my jaw.

"I didn't want you to find out like that. That I was in that corridor, that is. And I'm sorry I didn't do anything, didn't prevent it." It's hard for me to say the words without any preamble, but I realize this might be my only chance. I didn't expect to get it so soon, but I'll be damned if I don't take it. "I didn't get to tell you that on the roof. Our conversation went differently than I would have liked."

I take a quick look at her. She has opened her eyes again and is staring me straight in the face. Her coal black pupils are dilated, her eyebrows drawn together. I can't make any sense of her facial expression. For a brief moment she seems to have forgotten her pain.

"It doesn't matter," she says stiffly, shrugging.

"Doesn't matter?" I repeat, confused, as I turn the next corner.

It's the hallway where the trauma room is, which means our conversation will end soon. But now I want to know exactly what she means, so I involuntarily slow my pace.

"Yes, *that* doesn't matter. As far as I know, you are not a seer. Besides, I certainly wouldn't have listened to you if you'd tried to warn me or even stop me." Granger clicks her tongue impatiently. "We were children. I can hardly blame you for being scared back then. That would not only be stupid but also presumptuous of me."

Frowning skeptically, I stop in front of the milk glass door and study her face.

"You've told me multiple times that you thought I was nothing but a coward."

"I did. But in that particular situation, how were you supposed to know that I would run into them or what would happen to me afterwards? I'm not deluded enough to blame you for any of this," she explains calmly. "In fact, I think you're giving far too much weight to your *role* in the matter, if you can even call it that, so don't make such a fuss about it."

"I see," I say, perplexed. "Then why have you been avoiding me for the last two weeks? Why are you so bloody mad at me when you don't think I bear part of the blame? When it supposedly doesn't even matter?"

Granger lets out a low, incredulous laugh.

"Tsk, I'm certainly not mad at you for hiding behind a suit of armor more than seven years ago. That would be beyond ridiculous. I'm mad at you because you implied that your guilty conscience was the only reason you helped me with Greyback. And because less than two minutes later you accused me of—how did you put it?—*letting you fuck me* to return a favor. I can assure you that such a thing is beneath me. It wasn't a gratitude fuck, forgiveness fuck, pity fuck or whatever you want to call it."

I swallow hard. So I was right. She was actually hoping for some other explanation regarding my offer to help her find Greyback.

"It was just—just—a reflex," I admit hesitantly, frowning deeply. The next few words are even harder for me, but I choke them out anyway. "It wasn't right to say something like that. I didn't mean to offend you and I'm sorry."

Her head, which she lifted slightly during our conversation, sinks back onto my shoulder. She closes her eyes again and lets out a deep sigh, the vibration of which I can feel against the fabric of my shirt.

"Yeah, it wasn't right," she agrees wearily. "By the way, I didn't assume that you really meant what you said. You're far too narcissistic for that. But you *wanted* to hurt me. You wanted to lash out. I think that made it clear that the *fucking* was a mistake."

I flinch, but Granger continues, unperturbed.

"From now on we *will* stay away from each other if it can be arranged, just as it should have been from the start. And, for the love of Merlin, I'd really appreciate it if you'd finally open that door so Luna can do her fucking job."

None of it sounds angry, not even upset, just passive and indifferent, which somehow makes it even worse. And, shockingly, I have to find that I don't agree with her. For me, it wasn't a mistake. Quite the contrary. After all, I was already thinking about the *next time* before I was even inside her. And I don't want to stay away from her. I've never wanted to, to be honest. Also, for some reason, I doubt that's really her wish. I wonder if I just witnessed, once again, Granger locking herself in her cell.

I study her face thoughtfully for a few seconds. Then I decide not to try her patience any further, but to obey her command, after all she *is* badly injured.

Without another word, I push open the milk glass door.

Chapter End Notes

So now we know what Hermione thinks about Draco's guilt trip. Did it confirm your suspicions? By the way, it makes me very happy that you are so looking forward to REBEL. It's going to be great fun! And I think another big thank you is necessary: EXIT has already received over 250 kudos and that means the world to me! A beautiful weekend to all of you. ♥

26. THESTRAL BLACK

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

26. THESTRAL BLACK

The only reason I don't jump out of bed immediately when there's a knock on the door of my sleeping quarters the night after the reconnaissance at the Nott Estate is that it can't be Granger, as she's still in the trauma room due to her regrowing ankle. I know this because Blaise told me over lunch, shaking his head, that since she has to stay there another night, she's requested all the blueprints and notes so she can review them in her sickbed. (Classic Granger.)

I sigh and grab my wand, which is thankfully within easy reach on the bedside table, before opening the door with a quick flick of my wrist.

The sight of the person who then enters the room surprises me so much that I sit up with a jerk. For various reasons. Firstly, because I least expected her. Secondly, because she's not wearing Resistance workout clothes or combat gear but sweatpants and a thick Thestral black parka. And thirdly, because she's holding two bottles of Butterbeer, which she clinks together with a grin before nodding toward the door.

"Can I talk you into a drink?" is her nonchalant and unexpected question that makes my head spin and my jaw drop.

It takes me a few seconds to process her words, then I nod, swing my legs out of bed, slip on my boots and robes, and follow Ginny into the hallway.

As we step onto the flat roof of St. Mungo's, a whirl of thick, white snowflakes awaits us. So far they aren't staying on the warm roofing felt of the building, but if the weather holds, it won't be long before they do. Temperatures have been below freezing for several nights.

Ginny hands me one of the two bottles before drawing her wand and pointing it first at herself and then at me, casting a Warming Charm on each of us. Then she leans against the outer wall of the lift cabin and looks calmly into the snow-flecked night. I follow suit, uncorking my Butterbeer and taking the first sip.

As I watch the snowflakes dance, I consciously relax my shoulders and try not to worry about why we're here in the first place; what kind of conversation Ginny might want to have with me. She'll speak when she's ready, I'm sure.

The silence that the snow brings in its wake is breathtaking. It's so quiet, so peaceful, you'd think we weren't in the middle of a war that's been raging for over seven years. The minutes fly by and I have to admit that I'm enjoying the unlooked-for joint trip. The fresh air is good.

My bottle is half-empty when Ginny breaks our mutual silence for the first time.

"You're not the kind of person who gives up easily."

It's a statement, not a question. I frown and give her a quick questioning look, but don't answer. I assume she'll get to the point any time soon—at her own pace.

Of course, I'm not let down.

"When you really want something, you're persistent, aren't you? After all, you've been trying to get rid of your Dark Mark for a whopping seven years, even though you couldn't be sure it would ever work."

"I had no other choice, I'd say," I reply, shrugging.

My eyebrows knit together. What is she getting at?

"Well, I beg to differ," she says quite seriously. "There's always a choice and you made yours. You could have chosen to accept your fate, but you didn't. For what it's worth, I don't think you're the type to just put up with something you're convinced is wrong."

There is silence again for a few minutes. Feeling slightly uncomfortable, I shuffle my feet and, in order to do anything at all, raise my own wand to refresh Ginny's Warming Charm. She acknowledges it with a grateful nod.

"That was quite a show you put on yesterday."

My gaze darts to her face. From the faint smile that now curves her lips, I finally understand what we're talking about. This is about Granger. Or rather, Granger and I.

"First your little entertaining squabble on the roof and then your heroic defense of Hermione when Zacharias offered to carry her. That was very enlightening."

My neck gets hot, so I turn away. Instead of meeting Ginny's eyes, I stare over the edge of the roof into the flurry of snow. After a while, I clear my throat and slowly open my mouth. I can only manage a single word, but I'm sure Ginny is smart enough to understand what I'm trying to say, or rather ask.

"Blaise?"

The rustling of the hood of her parka tells me she's shaking her head.

"Nope, he didn't say a word," she grumbles. "At least not until I confronted him with my own observations this morning." Out of the corner of my eye, I see her glance at me and lift an eyebrow. "I've been making these observations for a while, you know. For weeks, to be precise."

Caught off guard by her words, I look at her again.

Ginny's gaze is warm and she's clearly not making fun of me, which is probably why I'm not ending this conversation right here and now with a cynical comment and an abrupt exit, even though everything in me is screaming to escape. I don't feel ready to talk to anyone about Granger, after all I don't know what to make of all this myself yet. So yeah, *normally* I would bolt, but the fresh seriousness with which Ginny is regarding me makes me stay where I am, as if rooted to the spot.

"It's good for her. Bloody good actually." She falls silent for a moment and takes a deep breath. "I didn't think I'd ever say something like this, especially to you, but I really hope you don't give up on this anytime soon either. Hermione, that is."

This statement hits me like a bludger. I was expecting another warning or perhaps some well-meant advice regarding my supposedly provocative behavior. What I definitely wasn't expecting, however, is the sincere plea from a *longtime* enemy not to give up on her *longtime* friend so easily.

I pick at the label on my Butterbeer bottle, frantically searching for an appropriate answer, but I can't think of anything. I guess I'm lucky that it's so dark and the snow is being driven into my face despite the Warming Charm because my cheeks are fucking burning. Within seconds the flakes melt on my hot skin.

Ginny clears her throat and continues.

"You know how smart she is. What an excellent strategist she is. That she always has a solution ready. But when it comes to herself, she tends to make things harder than they need to be. As I've gotten to know you over the last few months, you're not one to be dissuaded from something you've set your mind to. That's exactly what she needs. She just doesn't know yet."

The implication of her words finally makes me speak.

"What makes you think I—"

"Please, Draco," she cuts me off, "spare us the part of the conversation where I list the things that prove you fancy her, okay? It would only be embarrassing for both of us."

She playfully elbows me in the ribs, causing the corners of my mouth to lift. I relax a little, but since I'm still uncomfortable with her saying such things so bluntly to my face, I shift my gaze to a spot above her right shoulder.

"I'm not sure Granger even appreciates that," I say honestly after thinking about it for a few seconds. "She's a master at avoiding me. And we are—I think we are—totally incompatible."

Ginny's eyebrows travel so far up her forehead that they almost completely blend into her fiery red hairline. She clicks her tongue rebukingly.

"Tsk, you're the exact opposite of incompatible. Basically, you two are ridiculously alike."

I glare at her.

"Oh, why do I suddenly have the feeling that Blaise whispered that to you?" I ask, narrowing my eyes in suspicion. "In that case, you can save your breath. He already gave me this lecture."

Ginny is neither irritated nor impressed by my words. Instead, she just takes a swig of her Butterbeer, then sets about answering.

"Yeah, Blaise told me why *he* thinks the two of you are compatible. It's not that I disagree with him—he *has* a point—but like I said, I've made my own observations. You are welcome to consider my speech an addition to his *lecture*."

Her lips curl into a grin. Cheeky witch.

I don't know what to make of the fact that they seem to have put so much thought into me and my relationship with Granger, but as I've found with Creevey and even Lovegood and Longbottom, there's only so much I can do about it. So I swallow the harsh reply that's on the tip of my tongue and just look at her expectantly.

"Aside from the fact that, purely visually, you two are pretty hot together—"

I promptly choke on my beer. As I cough, Ginny chuckles to herself. However, she doesn't give me enough time to recover, but continues before I can breathe properly again.

"—you're the perfect degree of provocation for her. You challenge her, don't let her demoralize or shaft you, and question her decisions when it's appropriate. I find that extremely refreshing. And I daresay Hermione feels the same way."

I first wipe my lips with my sleeve and then a cough-induced tear from the corner of my eye before letting out a small snort.

"Right after I defected, Blaise enjoined me *not* to provoke Granger," I say, shaking my head. "And *you* advised me to avoid her, if I may remind you. How does that fit together?"

"True enough." Ginny nods slowly. "As to that, we were pretty deluded, I guess. Old habits die hard, right? Looking back, we probably handled her with kid gloves for far too long. In the beginning it was because everyone wanted to give her the time she needed to process her captivity. Then, as she consolidated her position within the Resistance, that caution turned mostly into respect. Hardly anyone dares argue with her these days, except maybe Harry, but even he doesn't do it very often."

She blinks at me and shrugs innocently.

"Oh please, as if my sudden appearance changed everything," I sneer at her. "I highly doubt that, Ginny. Besides, I'm not the only one Granger argues with. What about Thomas? She's always at loggerheads with him. What, pray tell, is different about us?"

Why does my voice sound so pleading? So bloody desperate? At first I have no idea, but then the scales fall from my eyes. These questions have plagued me for weeks, and I'm dying for

someone, *anyone*, to help me solve this riddle. To help me deconstruct this vast *mystery* that feeds my recurring anger, the guilt pangs, my anxieties, and, most notably, the craving for Granger's proximity.

Apparently today is my lucky day because even though Ginny rolls her eyes, she continues calmly and patiently.

"Don't get me wrong—Dean is actually a good bloke, but he's the exact opposite of *compatible* with Hermione. Their discussions don't take place at eye level. He also lacks the calm necessary to deal with her temper, as well as the authority to put her in her place when she goes too far. You, on the other hand, possess both of these qualities. *Plus*, you respect her boundaries, which Dean never did. Hermione isn't easy, but there's a lid for every cauldron and that's simply not Dean."

Noticing my dismayed expression, Ginny gives me an apologetic look. She's probably just realized how far I'm from calling myself the lid for someone's cauldron.

"Listen, Draco, it's really none of my business and I don't expect you to tell me exactly how you feel about her. It's not my intention to make wild speculations, to read too much into the whole thing, or to embarrass you. But it was important for me to let you know that if you ever need it, you'll have my support. From now on."

I blink at her in surprise. Our eyes meet and she smiles, friendly, encouraging. Once again, I can't think of an answer, but Ginny doesn't seem to be expecting one.

"All right, that was pretty much my mission for tonight," she adds, before gently touching my almost-empty bottle with her own and perkily toasting me. "The rest is up to you."

I take a deep breath, run my free hand through my hair, and nod, carefully sorting away all the insights I've gleaned from her little *additional lecture* for later analysis in the quiet of my sleeping quarters. But there's one more question I can't help but ask.

"What did you mean when you said Thomas didn't respect Granger's boundaries?"

I place my empty bottle on the gravel at my feet and fold my arms.

"I think you know what I meant by that," Ginny replies firmly.

The look on her face is answer enough and also makes it clear that she isn't keen on elaborating. Even though I accept this, my face involuntarily darkens. I grind my teeth and take another deep breath—this time to keep my anger in check.

"He's a wanker," I blurt out. "You don't have to know what exactly Greyback did to her to respect her boundaries. And it's not like I found it particularly *easy* to stick to them. Quite the contrary." I huff in exasperation and shake my head at myself. "Still, I don't understand why Thomas—"

Ginny's eyes light up, causing me to quickly shut my mouth. Shite. Thanks to my indignation, I revealed more than I wanted to. I can feel the blush crawling up my cheeks

again. Now she can probably guess how close Granger and I have become. How deep I'm already in. Pun intended.

I anxiously wait for Ginny to start pestering me with questions that I'm definitely not going to answer, but it doesn't happen. Instead, she does something I didn't expect at all.

With a flick of her wand, she makes her now-empty bottle disappear before standing on tiptoe and wrapping her arms around my neck to give me a brief but firm hug. I gasp quietly.

A few seconds later, she holds me at arm's length and looks me in the face. I'm so shocked and overwhelmed by the situation that all I can do is stand stock still and stare at her breathlessly.

"That's exactly what I was talking about," she sighs softly. "That's the difference between you and Dean. That's why you *are* the better choice. Look, Draco, what I'm about to say next really needs to stay between us, because if Hermione ever finds out, she *will* kill me. But after listening to me for ages without complaining, I think you deserve to hear this, too."

Ginny pauses, grinning. A snow-damp strand of red hair strays into her face, but she vigorously brushes it away.

"If you ask me, Hermione is positively smitten with you. All you need is a little ingenuity and a touch of patience. Personally, I believe you have both."

Then she lets go of me, claps me on the shoulder and disappears with a last mischievous smile and rather buoyant steps in the direction of the lift.

Ginny's words really bother me.

I lie awake most of the night brooding over our conversation, leaving me feeling not only drained but even more confused the next morning. It's quite annoying because actually I need a clear head to prepare for the mission at the Nott Estate. Since Occlumency isn't an option, I resort to another, much simpler method. I make a pro and con list.

The pro side of this imaginary list fills up quickly:

- I'm attracted to Granger
- she obviously feels the same way
- I'm not ready to give up being close to her
- she probably doesn't want that either, even if she says she does
- according to Ginny, she's smitten with me
- all our previous attempts to stay away from each other have sucked anyway
- being with her feels good
- every patch of her skin that my lips were allowed to touch felt good
- I want her to be okay

The con side is much shorter:

- we bicker all the time
- we actually have enough other problems

Recalling the conversation I had with Creevey about Alicia Spinnet, I discard the second con-argument. Yes, we're at war, but that's exactly why we have nothing to lose, Creevey was right about that. Then I mentally cross out the first item on the list as well. After all, the fact that we're constantly arguing is what brought us together in the first place.

Secretly, I'm even a bit proud that I came to a conclusion so quickly.

Granger loves being in control but expected me to give up mine. Now it's time to turn the tables. I may have to break the unspoken rules of her game to do so, but I'm willing to take the risk. There's no harm in trying, right? I'll see what comes out of it.

Fueled by the fresh composure that this resolve brings along, I head to the command centre. I've been distracted the last few days, which has caused me to neglect a certain project, but now nothing is stopping me: I'm going to talk to Potter about Lovegood and the *Exit*. While we will need a few more days of deliberation and strategic planning before we are ready to attack Nott Estate, I would still like to have this conversation sooner rather than later.

"Malfoy," he says upon spotting me.

"Potter." I give him a nod. "Do you have a minute?"

Silently, but with an inviting gesture, he points to the conference table. I push myself off the door frame, cross the room, and drop into one of the chairs.

"How's Granger?" I ask, immediately biting my tongue hard.

Bugger, that's not why I'm here, but I just can't seem to help it.

"Better. As good as new. Luna shoed her out of the trauma room this morning. She advised her not to attend the training sessions for at least a week, but I doubt Hermione will stick to that."

Frankly, me too.

Potter eyes me curiously, but doesn't comment further on my concerned inquiry. Thank Merlin. I vehemently brush the thoughts of Granger aside. This is important.

"I'm here because I need to talk to you about Lovegood," I abruptly change the subject. "Or rather about her work with the *Exit*."

Potter sinks into one of the chairs as well. He takes off his glasses and calmly cleans them before putting them back on his nose.

"What about her?" he asks, raising an eyebrow.

"I think it would be better to delegate the task to someone else," I say in a deliberately neutral voice. "Lovegood is too sensitive. She suffers from being the one who has to perform the ritual. Is it possible to train another person?"

"Already done," Potter replies, which throws me completely off track.

I stare at him speechless for a few seconds.

"Did she ask for it?" I then ask cautiously.

Did I misjudge Lovegood? While she hasn't hidden how much the procedure bothers her, she has never complained and has been brave the whole time—the Gryffindor part of her heart, I suppose. I didn't think she would take care of the problem herself.

"No," Potter sighs, frowning. "After the last mission where you freed Pansy, Hermione came to me and brought it up. She shared your concerns with me and insisted that we take them seriously. I then spoke to Luna myself and ultimately found that your objections were justified."

As he speaks, I notice two things. For one thing, there's a hint of deviousness in his voice, which gives me the feeling he already has his own suspicions when it comes to Granger and me. The rebels are attentive, you've got to hand it to them. For another thing, he falters briefly when he says Pansy's given name, which makes me realize that this is the first time I've heard it come out of his mouth. Odd.

"Well, that's good," I say, relieved. "Who will do it from now on?"

"Pansy volunteered."

All right, what the fuck?

For a brief moment, I lose control of myself and my mouth hangs open. Potter ignores my expression and continues.

"We discussed it and came to the conclusion that there is basically nothing wrong with it. She wants to make herself useful, so why not? As a precaution, Neville will learn the incantations as well. It won't hurt if we have two people on site in case multiple Death Eaters are brought in at once. He also has the appropriate healing expertise in case something goes wrong."

I clear my throat and run a hand through my hair.

"Okay," I drawl. "Can I help?"

Potter shakes his head.

"Don't bother. Luna will teach them everything they need to know. Pansy will be given a permanent room at headquarters while Daphne will return to Camp White for the time being."

Which actually reminds me of a so far unanswered question. Since the conversation is so casual and open, I pull myself together and ask it.

"What are the purposes of the other two camps? I understand that headquarters is something like your boot camp, but other than the fact that those who survived the *Exit* are being housed at Camp White, I don't know anything."

Potter casts a quick, checking glance at his timepiece, but answers without hesitation. The second surprise of the day. Apparently, we don't keep many secrets from each other anymore.

"Camp Gray is the contact point for all members of the Resistance who work undercover—mainly witches and wizards who still have steady jobs in the magical world and have not yet publicly committed themselves to the Resistance. It makes it easier for them to gather information and obtain equipment. I like to call them spies." He smirks. "Camp White is more of a safehouse. There we harbour all those who cannot or do not want to fight, but still need our protection. They contribute in their own way: research, logistics, brewing potions, refining wards—things like that. For example, half the Weasley family is there, as are the captives. Is that enough of an answer for you?"

Potter gives me a look over the rim of his glasses before grabbing a roll of parchment and rising from his chair. He's obviously about to leave and I have no intention of detaining him, so I stand up as well.

"Yes, absolutely," I say and nod. I eye him speculatively. Seems like the right time for one last test. "Just one more question."

Potter shoves his free hand into his trouser pocket and meets my gaze patiently. I cock my head and open my mouth once more.

"Where is the meadow we use for arrival and departure whenever we take one of the Portkeys? I would feel better if I knew."

"Box Hill, National Trust," he replies without batting an eyelid. My heart jumps into my throat. "I guess you've been there enough times by now to be able to Apparate there without knowing the area, but just in case: The nearest street is the *Zig Zag Road* and yes, that's really what it's called."

And with these words he pushes past me, chuckling, and makes his way to the lift. I stare after him until he enters the lift cage, then I make another quick but very conscious decision.

"Potter?"

He turns back to me and raises an eyebrow. His hand is already hovering over the button that will set the lift in motion.

"Thank you."

Two very important conversations took place in this chapter. What do you think of them? Also, any guesses as to what Draco will do thanks to his pro and con list? He's up to something, that's for sure. The next chapter will be so much fun! (: Unfortunately, you will have to wait a little longer this time. Since I'll be on short holiday from the middle of next week until Sunday, the next chapter won't come until after the weekend, but then I'll hurry, I promise. If you haven't seen it yet, you can already subscribe to the second part of EXIT so you don't miss anything. Click here for [REBEL](#). ♡

27. SHADOW BLACK

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

27. SHADOW BLACK

Both the conversation with Ginny and my list of pros and cons ensure that, in addition to the preparations and plans regarding Theo's capture, there is suddenly another brain-teaser that is taking up quite a bit of my time. Which is: How to make Granger lose her bloody self-control.

The road to success consists of a total of seven stages. Some of these are carefully selected and thought out in advance, as I'm pretty sure (based on my experience with Granger so far and thanks to Ginny's statements) that they will break down her reserve. Some others, however, I've included because I (egoist that I am) simply want to try them out. And two of them are even pure strokes of luck, because Potter is responsible for them.

But one thing after another.

My Granger mission begins on the third day after her release from the trauma room. At breakfast. In the dining hall.

Stage One. Humanness.

It's hardly a coincidence that I slip into the room filled with the sleepy, murmured conversations of the other rebels just a few minutes after Granger, for the black board in the atrium is my new accomplice. Meanwhile, I glance at it several times a day and catch up on spontaneous changes in the schedules, which gives me a pretty good overview of Granger's daily routine. I don't even find it pathetic anymore. Well, what can I say? I've decided to approach things a little more pragmatically from now on.

Granger is standing at the breakfast buffet, pouring herself a coffee, so she doesn't notice me right away. I seize the moment and slide into the gap between her and Oliver Wood, who is balancing a plate in his hands that can only be described as exorbitantly overfilled, but still doesn't seem to be satisfied with his selection.

I frown and grimace in disgust, then quickly turn away to focus on my actual scheme.

As I lean in to bring my lips to Granger's ear, her scent reaches my nostrils. I blink once, twice, before pulling myself together and opening my mouth.

"It was kind of you to take the *Exit* off Lovegood's hands," I murmur. Granger flinches and her head whips around. I calmly return her surprised look and take another step forward so that her shoulder touches my chest. "That was the right thing to do. Well done."

She doesn't back away from me, but clears her throat with irritation.

"Well, I promised you that if I felt the *Exit* was bothering Luna too much, I'd personally take care of the matter," she replies, ostensibly bored, "and I usually keep my promises."

"Very good," I hum, letting my gaze rake over her face for a few seconds before meeting her eyes again. "*Thank you*, Granger."

Then I flash her a smile. And a real one at that.

Her gaze immediately flicks to my mouth—or rather my teeth, come to think of it. I give her a few seconds to take in the sight before leaning forward and reaching past her to grab a plate.

"I'll see you at the combat training session," I mumble before turning away.

Stage Two. Competence. (And the arrogance of being aware of it.)

During the aforementioned training session, I participate in a two-on-one. I get two fairly demanding opponents (Creevey and Smith and therefore not novices), but I'm not allowed to return their attacks. All I'm supposed to do is defend myself and, if possible, disarm them.

This time, I don't allow myself to be distracted by Granger. I'm totally focused, stoically blocking every single spell they fire at me and waiting for the right moment to spit out my *Expelliarmus*.

It's about reflexes, about speed, about the ability to read your opponents, spot their weaknesses and use them. I'm brilliant at these things and I know it, which is why I volunteered for this particular duel in the first place. It's my chance to impress. And I put on quite a show.

Creevey is disarmed after just a few minutes. Smith, ultimately without a partner, barely thirty seconds later. With a flick of my wrist, I summon their wands into my outstretched hand, then pocket my own wand and nonchalantly smooth down my long-sleeved top as if I've been doing nothing but dusting bookshelves.

"All right, who's next?" I call into the room, whereupon Smith gives me the middle finger and Creevey grins breathlessly.

My gaze wanders to Granger, who is leaning against one of the columns with her arms crossed. She seems unimpressed, but her eyes are still on my torso—on the fabric of my long-sleeved top that I've just pulled tight.

Stage Three. Inscrutability. (With a touch of swagger.)

Two nights later, my fresh knowledge of the location of the meadow we use to Apparate comes into play. Although I'm quite reluctant to do so, I take Ginny up on her offer of support by letting her know what I'm up to. Cackling, she promises to pick me up if I'm not at our breakfast table the next morning. And with that, I set about putting my plan into action.

Granger is on watch in Godric's Hollow that night, so at six in the morning I take one of the myriad Portkeys on the roof and casually lean against a tree trunk at the edge of the Apparation meadow. I fold my arms and wait patiently.

Exactly half an hour later, the first rebels Apparate. They emerge from the shelter of the trees, collect their Return Portkeys and, one by one, disappear with the unmistakable *whoosh*. Of course, Granger is one of the last and I have to suppress a grin as the thought crosses my mind that she's probably been bossing around the watch relief again. I hope it was Smith. Or Thomas.

Only when she enters the clearing (with dark shadows under her eyes and an exhausted expression on her face) do I leave my safe hiding place. She spots me and stops short.

"What are you doing here?" she asks, visibly confused.

She scans the darkness behind me, as if expecting to detect a companion there, which of course doesn't exist.

"Waiting for you," I reply, unperturbed.

Her eyebrows shoot up. I deign to elaborate.

"More specifically, I'm waiting for you to come back from your night watch unscathed."

I slowly step closer and let my gaze wander thoroughly over her entire body while she stares up at me, speechless.

"And why the hell would you do such a thing?" she snorts gruffly.

"You're my partner," I reply calmly, as if that explains *everything*, when in fact it's my intention to confuse her even more. And apparently I'm succeeding because I can practically watch her brain at work. Her eyes dart back and forth between mine. "Will you share your Portkey with me?"

She lets out a cloud of breath that gracefully dissipates in the freezing December air. Then she clears her throat and rolls her shoulders to loosen her muscles.

"You took the risk of leaving headquarters all alone just to *wait* for me? Are you serious, Malfoy? You don't even know where we are."

I let out a soft chuckle. Good thing you can always count on Granger's uppish replies.

"Box Hill," I reply with a dismissive wave of my hand.

That completely throws her off track.

"*What?*"

"Stop scowling, Granger, it doesn't suit your pretty face. I have long since been cleared for this information. Don't tell me you didn't know?"

I watch with amusement as she tries in vain to put on an indifferent expression. It's quite exhilarating. I also notice that even when she's completely exhausted, she's absolutely gorgeous. A hint of those affectionate thoughts must be visible on my face, for she suddenly snaps out of her trance and quickly holds out the hand with the Return Portkey.

I smirk and put my index finger on it.

Stage Four. Friendship. (With a proper pinch of sex appeal.)

Which, by the by, is the first stage of my intrigue to have an effect on Granger.

This morning, three days after my appearance on the meadow, there is a workout that I have been secretly waiting for. Fistfights.

I grab Creevey's arm before he knows what's happening to him. He probably would have offered to be my partner anyway since Blaise, his actual idol, is leading today's session and is therefore unavailable, but I don't want to take any unnecessary risks. After all, I have to seize my chances as they come.

We lightly warm up. After that, I purposely usher Creevey to a corner of the room that's not too close to the jogging things that Granger and Ginny are already exercising on, but still within their exact line of sight.

As soon as I feel my t-shirt sticking to my chest, I take it off. I crumple it up and throw it on the floor before turning to Creevey and signaling him to attack with my index finger.

Casting the most fleeting of all glances in Granger's direction, I'm satisfied to see that her eyes are indeed on me. Or rather on my upper body. Which is damn good, because so she doesn't even notice that I'm checking to see if I have her attention.

Everything after that is a carefully planned display of my friendly feelings for Creevey with the bonus of my bare, sweaty pecs. It's not even acting, because I've had said friendly feelings for weeks, if not months. However, it still takes a lot of effort for me to show them so openly. I'm afraid if I didn't have a mission to accomplish I wouldn't do it, but the thought of Granger's gaze on me spurs me on.

I casually fend off Creevey's ambitious attempts to fell me, but let him strike a hit every so often to keep him motivated. Explaining tirelessly, I teach him all sorts of tricks and dodges,

make him imitate my movements and then praise him for it. I throw him on the mat, put him in a headlock and laughingly pull his legs away. All in all, I'm the epitome of a patient, good-tempered mentor with his eager protégé.

When Blaise declares the workout as over, I ruffle Creevey's hair before pushing him away. He grins and hurls my t-shirt at me. I pluck it out of the air and, for the first time since the beginning of my little charade, glance at Granger.

She's standing right next to the weird Muggle device, blinking in my direction as she dabs her neck with a towel. Ginny, who has also just finished her workout, looks from her to me and raises an eyebrow in amusement.

The last thing I do is wipe the sweat off my chest with my t-shirt and give Granger a youthful grin.

She drops her drinking bottle.

After lunch, I actually plan on heading to the trauma room to check on Lovegood. I haven't spoken to her since Potter told me she no longer needs to perform the *Exit*, and I'd also like to ask her how Pansy and Longbottom are faring with the rune formulas and the incantations. As soon as I enter the atrium, however, that firm intent immediately disappears from my mind, because Granger is standing in the doorway of the command centre, full combat gear donned.

"Malfoy," she barks over the heads of some rebels.

Quite startled, I stop dead in my tracks for a moment, then pull myself together and casually stroll over to her, shoving my hands into the pockets of my cargo trousers.

I step into the room and she promptly closes the door. With raised eyebrows, I watch her march past me to the conference table and lean her hip against it before taking a deep breath and fixing her dark eyes on my face.

"What do you think you're doing?" she asks with an accusatory undertone in her voice.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I reply innocently, but slowly step closer.

"You're doing it right now," she hisses. "What the actual fuck? Are you trying to seduce me?"

"Oh, does it work?"

"No!"

"Then what makes you think it's an attempt at seduction?"

I've got you, Granger.

I grin sardonically. She, on the other hand, sucks in the air as if I'm costing her all the nerves and patience she can muster. Suddenly, there are so many wrinkles on her forehead that I feel the urge to raise my hand and smooth them out with my thumb. Instead, I just let my eyes dance across her face in amusement.

"We agreed that it was a mistake to even let it get this far," she says, apparently as calmly and collectedly as possible.

"Nah-ah, we didn't."

"Oh, we most certainly did. It was only a light pain potion, so I remember every word of our —"

"Nope. That it was a mistake is *your* awry way of looking at things, not mine," I reply, shrugging. "My only mistake was throwing those stupid comments at you. A moment of panic, I'll admit it." The corners of my mouth quirk. "I know it's hard to imagine, but I'm not perfect."

I'm right in front of her now. One of her hands is gripping the edge of the conference table so tightly, as if she needed its support.

"That being said, I don't think you *really* regret it, otherwise you wouldn't have lured me into an empty room again," I tease, "with a tabletop behind you, I might add."

I nod my chin towards the piece of furniture in question.

It's a haughty statement because I did indeed notice that she *didn't* lock the door this time. Also, thanks to the schedules on the black board, I know she has to report for her watch in Hogsmeade soon. But I'm in total provocation mode and it's already paying off.

As she thinks back to our encounter in the equipment room, Granger's eyes grow almost black. She studies me, nervously pressing her tongue against the inside of her cheek.

"I've never *lured* you any—"

"Right," I interrupt her once more. "My mistake. You even issue pretty clear *orders*."

"*Malfoy*, I'm warning you."

"*Granger*, you're repeating yourself."

"Shut up!"

"Make me!"

It's an almost perfect re-enactment of the scene on the roof before our reconnaissance at the Nott Estate, only this time we're alone.

And suddenly, Granger's hands are on my shoulder holster, pulling me forward with a strength you wouldn't believe she possessed. My body slams into hers, making the

conference table behind her groan with the force of the impact.

She glares at me menacingly, obviously about to snub me, but I lean forward, unfazed, and press my hands onto the tabletop next to her thighs. When my mouth hovers right in front of hers, I smirk.

Granger's tirade fails to materialize. Instead, she just gasps hotly in my face.

"Stay away from me," she whispers a few seconds later.

"So you really mean it this time?" I murmur, cocking my head so that the tip of my nose brushes against hers.

Granger's eyelids flutter.

"Yes," she breathes.

Simultaneously, her hands release my shoulder holster and wander restlessly over my torso, eventually tangling in my t-shirt.

Oh, *now* I've got her.

She stands on tiptoe and tilts her head back.

The door flies open, causing Granger to jump so hard that our heads collide. She makes a small noise—a combination of a whimper and a squeak—and pushes me away to put some distance between us. For a few seconds, she just stands there, trying to control her breathing with a shocked expression on her face and visibly shaking thighs. It's only when she straightens herself, gives me an expert death glare, and heads off at a brisk pace that I turn to greet the intruder.

It's Blaise.

He raises both eyebrows but makes way for Granger before turning back to me with his arms crossed. Meanwhile, my eyes lazily follow Granger's arse until it's out of sight.

"Well, fuck me!" Blaise snorts, highly amused.

"Not you," I answer lightly.

Stage Five. Well, sex appeal again, I suppose. (Rather the other way round.)

A few days later, the Resistance's top leadership, including Pansy and my humble self, meets in the command centre to discuss how best to carry out the attack on the Nott Estate.

Granger appears in her combat gear, which prompts me to actively show her that she's driving me completely insane by staring at her rather hungrily throughout the meeting. I do it

subtly, almost unnoticeable to those present who are primarily focused on the ground plan of the Nott Estate, but my gaze is unambiguous nonetheless.

This, too, isn't acting. And eventually she notices.

When she first looks at me after successfully ignoring my concentrated attention for a while, her eyes spit fire. I bite my lower lip and my right hand, which is hooked casually into my shoulder holster, involuntarily clenches into a fist. My biceps muscle flexes, causing Granger to silently gasp.

I slowly let my gaze rake over her. Over her chest, which suddenly rises and falls a little faster, over her fingers, which are clinging to the arms of her chair, over her slender legs, which (as always) are resting on the table top in a rather nonchalant manner, then back to her face.

And even though she's been so steadfast all along and tried so hard to push me away and make me feel like she doesn't give a fuck about me, all of a sudden she's not very convincing anymore. Her eyes darken visibly. They still spit fire, but in a different way. Neither of us looks away.

Eyefucking. That's what it is.

Despite the distance, I can see Granger's pulse fluttering and her nostrils flaring. I tilt my head to the side and blow a strand of hair off my forehead before wetting my bottom lip. She squeezes her thighs together. I'm sure that it's a completely unconscious movement; that she doesn't even realize what she's doing. Nevertheless, at this sight, my own efforts become my undoing, because I grow hard in an instant.

My head sinks against the wall I'm leaning against and I blink at her through heavy lids. She maintains eye contact until—

"Anything to add, Malfoy?"

It's Potter's voice that makes us both wince. I turn away abruptly and try to get back into the conversation.

Stage Six. Unexpected revelations.

Which heralds the two stages Potter is responsible for.

This time, it's sheer coincidence that Granger and I bump into each other on the roof of St. Mungo's. Actually, I just want to get some fresh air and the black board in the atrium didn't say she would be out tonight. Accordingly, it's quite a surprise that she Portkeys onto the flat roof at the exact moment I step out of the lift cage.

And apparently we're not the only ones who have chosen this shadow black, ice-cold December night for a little *pleasure trip*. The second Granger opens her mouth (probably to throw some scathing reproach at me) a low moan breaks the silence.

We spin around in unison, wands at the ready.

The noise rings out once more. Granger snaps out of her tense rigidity quicker than I do and circles the lift cabin, muttering a *Lumos*. I follow her on her heels.

Surrounded by the unmistakable flicker of several Warming Charms, two figures come into view. One of them is busy pinning the other against the wall that Ginny and I were also leaning against during our last conversation, and it doesn't take more than a second for me to realize what kind of situation we've just stumbled into. Granger seems to get it straight away too, for she audibly gasps.

"Harry?" she chokes out as Potter yanks his head out of the crook of Pansy's neck and squints against the light from Granger's wand tip, looking rather caught.

I lower my own wand and survey (half stunned, half amused) Pansy's swollen lips, Potter's hair, which is even more ruined than usual, and their entwined limbs.

Interesting. I decide to grill Pansy about this the next time I catch her alone.

"What's the matter? Are we occupying your favorite spot?", Potter asks deviously when he has regained his composure.

Pansy, biting her lower lip sheepishly but grinning nonetheless, eyes Granger and me intently.

When Granger visibly stiffens at Potter's comment, he merely gives her a knowing look. She seems speechless, so I answer for her.

"Never mind. We'll find another one."

I give Potter a saucy grin.

Then I turn around and, whistling softly, stroll towards the lift to leave the roof.

Stage Seven. Authority.

I really didn't expect that Potter would ask me to introduce the Nott Estate to the rebels assigned to the impending attack at the next meeting. But he has a point, after all I'm the one who knows the place best, so I agree. (And also because it plays into my hands in terms of my Granger mission.)

So, on a snowy Thursday evening about a week before Christmas, I find myself confronted with almost twenty-five faces expressing a wide variety of emotions. Distrust, curiosity, unconcealed excitement (Creevey), amazement, expectation and anger (Smith)—it's all there.

I understand that not all of the rebels Blaise has scheduled for the mission are happy that I'm the one giving the instructions, but I won't let that deter me.

I'm used to giving speeches and issuing orders, having done it for the Dark Lord for years. That's why it only takes me seconds to settle into my new, old role. I explain in detail what our strategy looks like and what else we have to pay attention to. I recite wards, describe the grounds and the house. I announce that we will attack on Christmas Eve, because yes, even the Death Eaters celebrate, and we will take advantage of that.

Per usual, Granger stands in front of the buffet table and uses her wand to project flickering images of the Nott Estate into the air behind me while I recount the most important information in an authoritative voice. As I finish my remarks, I turn my head and look at her for the first time.

Her eyes are on me and since I think I see a sparkle in them, I spontaneously decide to exacerbate the situation a little.

"Any questions?" I call into the room and briefly let my gaze wander over the crowd. The rebels present, whose faces have now mostly relaxed, remain silent. "Splendid. Then all that's missing is the allocation of the teams. I yield the floor to the boss."

I gesture towards Granger with a smirk before giving a small bow. Quiet laughter fills the room and I watch with satisfaction as a faint, barely visible blush creeps up her neck.

When our eyes meet, I top my comment off with a wink.

I've only just stepped out of the shower when the door to my sleeping quarters opens with a loud bang. A smile crosses my face, but I quickly suppress it and calmly tie a towel around my waist before opening the bathroom door and entering the bedroom. My hair is still dripping water, but I don't care.

Granger is standing in the middle of the room, hands on her hips and breathing heavily. I casually push past her and sink even more casually onto the edge of the bed. Her eyes wander over my bare chest, whereupon she blushes again. Delicious, that sight. I could get used to it.

"You're insufferable," she snaps at me.

"And yet you're here," I reply with a shrug.

She huffs and purses her lips for a brief moment before taking a hesitant step in my direction. I lean back, propping myself up on my elbows, and look at her expectantly.

Come on, Granger, get over yourself.

"I have no idea why," she chokes out at last.

The look on her face leaves no doubt about how much she is struggling with herself.

"I do," I say confidently, letting my gaze roam over her.

I purposely drop my mask and look at her with exactly the same desire I've felt in her presence for weeks, even *months*.

"That's—I don't—you're *Draco Malfoy*, for fuck's sake."

There's a hint of desperation in the way she says it, yet the sound of my given name coming out of her mouth sends a shiver down my spine.

"And you're *Hermione Granger*," I reply, gleefully rolling the pretty syllables of her name on the back of my tongue.

Then I give her the final nudge towards the tipping point where she can and *must* decide whether, for once, she will give up the control that she holds so dear or lock herself back in her cell.

"I want you anyway. Or maybe even because of that. And certainly not because we owe each other anything. Neither of us would make such a serious mistake, and you know it."

We just stare at each other in silence for a few seconds, then Granger pulls her wand from its leather holster. I watch, motionless, as she slams the wand onto my desk, the holster hitting the floor with a thud. With deft fingers, she unzips her cargo trousers while at the same time, using a bit of nonverbal and wandless magic, she unlaces her combat boots and kicks them away.

I swallow hard.

There are so many things I would like to say or do, but I remain silent, *good*, and breathless as fuck while she strips down to her underwear right in front of me. It's exactly what I want, exactly what I hoped the outcome of my seven-stage mission would be, and I dare not spoil the situation with any idiotic comment.

She pulls the long-sleeved top over her head and elegantly steps out of her trousers. Just a few moments later she is on my lap, impatiently untying the knot on my towel. I have to dig my fingers into the sheets to keep from doing something stupid.

"You're still insufferable," she repeats against my lips before burying a hand in my hair and kissing me desperately.

Her mouth is absolutely perfect; even better than I remember. I groan softly as she expertly takes my breath away.

She tilts my head back while her other hand moves purposefully down my body and wraps itself tightly around my erection. I let out a quiet hiss. Without breaking physical contact in any way, I slowly slide back on the bed until I can lean against the wall.

"Take off the rest," I plead hoarsely as Granger lets go of me for a moment to catch her breath.

And she obeys. Yet again.

The hand in my hair disappears and a second later her bra falls onto the mattress next to us. I lean forward to place my lips on the exposed, soft skin, worshiping every inch I can reach. Next, I flick my tongue over her nipples like I wanted to do so badly last time. Granger's uninhibited moans are the best reward.

She presses one of her hands against the wall next to my head to lift herself up so she can get rid of her knickers. I take the opportunity and let my mouth run down her stomach until she impatiently pulls my head back up. She huddles against me even tighter than before and kisses me even harder. My hands frantically tug at the sheets as I return her kiss no less eagerly.

The things that are different this time? It's not an eating-each-other-alive, not a punishment, not a wild clash of teeth, tongue and lips. It's an admission, I can feel it. Granger's kiss is firm, yet gentle. She doesn't devour, but rather tastes, savors and internalizes.

I give you everything. Take what you want. I have nothing to lose.

The kiss lasts what feels like an eternity. An eternity in which I gratefully accept every touch from Granger's curious fingers and at the same time regret that it's not a mutual experience. An eternity that results in my erection throbbing painfully against Granger's lower belly and her own arousal moistening my thigh with an auspicious wetness. An eternity that almost makes me beg, but I hold myself back and don't push.

When she finally makes the decision herself, it feels all the better, and I can't stop my head from falling back against the wall.

It's heaven and hell on earth at the same time. Heaven, because she feels so fucking good that I'm afraid I won't be able to last two minutes. Hell, because the precision of Granger's movements is a testament to how much experience she has with having sex in this position. Presumably because this way she runs the lowest risk of being accidentally touched, can escape quickly, and is in full control at all times. The thought gives me a pang and I bury my hands even more determinedly in the mattress. I will not disappoint her.

Instead, I kiss her neck tenderly and attentively until she shivers above me and goosebumps spread wherever my lips touch her skin. I whisper in her ear to touch herself like I normally would and she actually does, my eyes fluttering shut as her hand slides between our sweaty bodies.

From this point on, I'm just a wreck of nerves on fire, completely under her spell.

My brain shuts down and praise, clandestine truths, and hoarse encouragements begin to fall freely from my lips. Sometimes I murmur them against her mouth, sometimes against her collarbone or her jawbone.

"Fuck—yes—just like that—beautiful—you feel perfect—think about you all the time—so *hot*, Granger—I want you—gods, you're going to be the *death* of me—wanted you so badly

—*fuck*—fucking *beautiful*—you can—every order—ah, you're doing so well, love—I've wanted you all *week*—I'll do what you want—I'll be—"

My voice dies in my throat as she comes. She whimpers and keens, but somehow manages to get her lips back on mine as she flutters around my cock. I snap my hips up a few more times. That's all it takes to send me over the edge too, my vision going white for a moment.

Granger moves above me for another full minute, gently rolling her pelvis and kissing me lazily, then gradually slows down and sinks against my chest, breathing heavily.

We're both struggling for air.

"Stay with me tonight," I demand huskily.

Granger doesn't answer, but she nods.

Chapter End Notes

Folks, I'm back from my short holiday! Not only is this chapter slightly longer than most, it's also one of my absolute favorites. I hope it was worth the wait? Hugs to all of you! ♥

28. SLATE BLACK

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

28. SLATE BLACK

I'm not quite sure what wakes me up: the golden morning light streaming through the pane of the magical window into my sleeping quarters and warming my upper body, or the rushing of water from the bathroom. Either way, when I open my eyes, the first thing I see is a narrow strip of light blue sky. Judging by the position of the winter sun, it's already late midmorning, which means Granger and I have missed both breakfast and the morning workout.

Well, I definitely won't complain because, for once, I slept exceptionally well.

I have a good yawn, stretch myself luxuriously and swing my legs out of bed. Then I slip into my cargo trousers before following the sound of the running water and entering the bathroom.

Granger in my shower—that's a sight I could get used to. Regarding her intently, I blindly reach for my toothbrush and lean against the sink.

She is beautiful.

Again, that's the first and only thought that flashes through my mind as I take in the sight of her. Her hair may not be as voluminous as it was when we were in school, but I like the new version too. When she tilts her head back, as she is doing right now, it cascades down her shoulder blades in dark, shiny waves. It invites you to bury your hands in it, at least in theory.

Next, my attention shifts to her face. To her eyebrows, which are drawn together in pleasure, to her freckled, gracefully curved nose, to her full lips, which curl into a small, dangerous grin when she spots me in front of the shower stall.

As I dutifully continue brushing my teeth, my gaze drifts downward. Slender neck, delicate collarbones, small, shapely breasts that would probably fit perfectly in the palms of my hands if I were allowed to touch them. A real shame.

And damn, I'm not even fully awake yet, but already hard.

As Granger turns off the water and steps out of the shower, I quickly lean over and spit the toothpaste into the sink. When I straighten up, she's standing right in front of me, unashamedly and calmly toweling herself. I follow the slow, circular movements of the fabric against her creamy skin with my eyes, losing myself in the sight, until something very specific catches my attention.

"What does that mean?" I ask bluntly.

Granger looks down at herself.

In the bathroom light, the black letters of the tattoo stand out sharply against the thin skin of her ribcage. She doesn't answer right away, but slowly dries her hair before carefully putting the towel away. A few lonely drops of water fall out of her curls and trickle down her body in the most beautiful rivulets. I'm a bit wistful because I can't trace the glittering tracks with my fingertips.

"It's the date of the day the Resistance freed me," she explains tersely.

Ah, Greyback.

"Why?" I ask cautiously, stepping forward to take a closer look at the Roman numerals.

Last night I had neither the wits nor the leisure to inquire about them, Granger made sure of that.

"Because since then I've been the woman I am today," she replies absentmindedly. Out of the corner of my eye I see her frown. "The old Hermione Granger is gone."

At those last words, I lift my head and stare at her with my mouth slightly open. The statement hits me surprisingly hard and I don't even know why. My fingers twitch and I have to keep myself from touching her face, maybe even caressing her cheek. She doesn't miss my reaction.

"Do you think that's macabre?" she asks, raising a defensive eyebrow and putting her hands on her hips—an impressive sight, after all she's still completely starkers.

"No," I say quickly and leave it at that.

Granger's shoulders relax.

After a few seconds of consensual silence, my eyes continue their extensive traverse over her body. Having her standing so close to me (without the cover of darkness or her combat gear) is an unexpected surprise that I want to take advantage of. It doesn't take long, though, before I discover something else that catches my eye. This time, I let out a soft sigh.

Mudblood.

"I'm so sorry," I whisper, abandoning myself to an impulse.

Her right hand darts from her waist to her left forearm, rubbing the old but barely faded scar.

"It wasn't your fault," she replies firmly.

I see that quite differently, but there is no point in arguing about it. Granger has made it clear that what happened at the Manor means nothing to her these days, and I'll be damned if I reopen those old wounds.

"You were occluded that day, weren't you?" she continues. "I've been thinking about it a lot lately. You had to do it to get through it, am I right?"

My gaze snaps from her forearm to her eyes. Both the abrupt change of subject and the question itself throw me off track. With a deep frown, I consider whether I even want to answer it. Do I really want to make myself so vulnerable in front of her?

Ultimately, I come to the conclusion that she deserves an honest answer.

"Yes," I say simply and without further explanation.

"Then why the change of heart?" she asks. Her gaze is now open and curious. "You seem to have been pretty good at it from a young age and it's an impressive ability. Why did you decide now of all times not to do it anymore?"

Her questions are legitimate. I roll my shoulders to relax my neck as I search for the right words. The mental exercise actually makes me forget her nudity for a moment.

"Constant Occlumency is..." I begin hesitantly, then clear my throat and go for a more detailed answer. "Yeah, I'm good at it and it's saved my arse many times, no doubt. But if you do it all the time, you don't really have a life worth living. Feeling nothing, never worrying, locking everything away—that makes a lot of things easier, but it's also addictive, like anything you can numb yourself with. Drugs, Alcohol. Suddenly you find it difficult to complete the simplest of tasks when you are not occluded. It's all too much. So you do it again and again to survive. Literally. It's a spiral. The day I defected seemed like a good time to try and start over."

She looks at me thoughtfully and processes my words, twisting a damp curl around her index finger. My eyes drop to the movement and I unconsciously bite my lower lip.

"And does it work?" she asks.

"What do you mean?"

"Are you *feeling* again?"

"Yes."

"Is it good?"

"Yes."

"Are you going to tell me what exactly you're feeling?"

I look her in the face again. The corners of my mouth quirk.

"Mostly you," I reply, my voice rather hoarse.

My answer ignites a fire in Granger's eyes. She cocks her head and gives me the once-over as well. Her gaze roams leisurely down my bare chest and abs to the waistband of my cargo

trousers and up again. Then she sucks her bottom lip between her teeth.

"You have a cheeky tongue, Malfoy," she informs me. "Did you mean what you said last night?"

"Mm, what exactly?" I ask.

I raise an eyebrow, even though I think I know what she's getting at.

"That you will obey my every order."

Oh, now she's definitely up to something. I have to suppress a shiver of anticipation.

"I fear so," I reply, returning her intense gaze.

"Very well," she says quietly, but at the same time so promisingly that I have to swallow a groan. "Down on your knees."

My body reacts immediately. A few weeks ago, I would have found it pathetic, but I've long since passed that point. After all, I've even taken on a seduction mission with no less than seven stages. So it's not much of a surprise, at least not to me, that my knees hit the slate black tiles as soon as Granger finishes her sentence.

I give her my most Malfoy-esque smirk.

She meets my gaze smugly, but with twitching lips. Then she reaches out and buries her hand in my hair before swinging one of her legs over my shoulder, forcing me to tilt my head back. My breath is already hitching, but her next words take it away completely.

"Now put that cheeky tongue to use."

After lunch I make three visits.

Granger did her best to distract me for the rest of the morning, but the fleeting exchange of truths that lead up to this *distraction* still bothers me. The shared moment actually has a downside.

For this very reason, my steps lead me to Blaise first. He agrees to my request, which is why I leave the command centre after just a few minutes and make my way to the trauma room next.

I chat with Lovegood, who tells me (among other things) that Longbottom and Pansy are now able to perform the *Exit* on their own in case we take more captives soon. She looks happy and relieved. Once again, I'm glad I brought myself to share my concerns about Lovegood and the *Exit* with Granger. It was clearly the right decision.

My third and final stop are Pansy's sleeping quarters. The door is open, so I lean silently against the frame and watch her stand in front of the mirror, critically examining her new rebel outfit. Eventually, I clear my throat, causing her to spin around with a loud gasp.

"So you and Potter?" I ask, wiggling my eyebrows.

"Merlin, Draco!" she snaps at me, placing a hand on her chest at heart level. "You scared me to death."

"The door was open," I remind her with a shrug. "Or is it because you were expecting someone else? Black-haired? Scrawny? Bespectacled? With a lightning-scarred forehead, perhaps?"

With a grin, I tap my own forehead and take a few steps into the room.

Pansy's sleeping quarters are an exact replica of mine. Given the equitable-collective concept of the Resistance, this is not a big surprise. I still cast a curious glance into her bathroom (yep, looks exactly the same) before turning back to her.

Hands on her hips, she eyes me with a mixture of annoyance and amusement.

"Well, that's rich, coming from you," she sneers. "You and Granger? Unbelievable, Draco."

I cock my head and give her an innocent look.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I reply calmly.

Pansy lets out a rather unladylike snort.

"Quite apart from the fact that I'm pretty sure *this*," she sticks an accusatory index finger in my face, "is your post-orgasm visage, rumors travel around this camp almost as fast as they did at Hogwarts. You'll only get an honest answer from me if I get one from you. So? Did you really meet up with Granger for a rooftop quickie?"

I shake my head, whereupon Pansy raises an eyebrow in disbelief. But it's true. Granger and I *didn't* set out to shag on the roof, although I have to admit the idea is tempting.

"Nope," I affirm verbally. "We just met by chance and would certainly have gone our separate ways if *something* hadn't stopped us. Wait, how did that sound again?"

I imitate a throaty, high-pitched moan, then have to duck as Pansy hurls one of her pillows at me.

"Don't make fun of me," she snarls, but her eyes sparkle with suppressed mirth.

I raise my hands in a conciliatory manner.

"I'm happy when you're happy, really, but does it have to be Potter of all people?"

Now she's the one who shrugs.

"It just happened. We talked a lot and—"

"He *interrogated* you, Pans," I tease her. "That's something else entirely."

"It wasn't like that!"

And here comes the interesting part of the story.

I notice Pansy sheepishly fiddling with the hem of her long-sleeved top. There's also a telltale blush on her cheeks. I quirk an eyebrow to let her know I'm still all ears.

She sighs in resignation.

"After the *Exit* I was pretty distraught. That's why he stayed with me a little longer after the second interrogation. Don't look at me like that! At first we only talked." She pushes a strand of hair out of her face and clears her throat. "At some point it just clicked between us, if you will. Harry's quite forgiving and understanding, I'll have you know. A good listener. Very empathetic."

I pretend to gag, which is rewarded with another pillow being thrown my way, but then I drop my mock disgusted expression.

"Yeah, I guess *Harry* is a good sort," I admit reluctantly.

Pansy's lips curl into a smile. There is silence for a while.

"But you and Granger?" she finally gets back to her own question. "That's actually a lot more absurd, don't you think? You used to *loathe* each other."

"Well, despite the Resistance rumor mill suggesting otherwise, we're not at Hogwarts anymore," I mutter, rolling my eyes.

I watch as Pansy gracefully sinks onto the edge of the bed and crosses her legs. She props herself up on her elbows and gives me a sly look.

"Regardless! Also, she seems to be quite the bitch. The rebels wet themselves whenever she enters the room. It's ridiculous."

"Mm," I hum in agreement. "She *is* awe-inspiring."

"Beastly," Pansy corrects me.

"Confident," I counter with a small smile.

"Pedantic."

"Diligent."

"Irascible."

"Passionate."

"Ew, that's how much you fancy her? Gross."

I cross my arms defensively. Pansy's eyes widen and she lets out a soft gasp.

"Oh wow, you have a *crush* on Granger," she chokes out breathlessly. "May Merlin help us!"

My head starts spinning.

Having a crush is a concept that, in this world, in this moment, in this war, I don't really have the mental capacity for. There's something between Granger and me, that's for sure. I'm even willing to allow it if she allows it too. But having a crush? A weak term. It's too sweet, too innocent, too carefree for how I feel when I think of Granger. When I look at her. When I obey her orders during a mission. Or when I get on my knees in front of her to get her off with my mouth.

"What, no comment?" Pansy probes since my lips are still tightly pressed together.

I slowly shake my head. No, I really don't have an answer to that.

"But you are shagging her."

I nod hesitantly.

"How long has this been going on?"

I grind my teeth.

"A couple of weeks," I confess. "It's complicated."

And that's probably the understatement of the century.

As if we had reached a tacit agreement, we fall silent again and dwell on our respective thoughts for a while before eventually I take my leave. When I'm almost through the door, Pansy softly calls my name. I turn to her one last time.

"Gryffindors, right?" she murmurs and smiles.

"Gryffindors," I agree with a curt nod.

In the whirlwind of preparations for the big Theo mission, Christmas comes faster than expected. Granger spends the rest of the week's nights either in her own sleeping quarters or at one of the guard posts, so I only see her at the training sessions or the now-daily meetings. At least I think I often sense her looking at me when we're in the same room, and that soothes me. For the time being.

Blaise and I spend the day that is supposed to end with the (hopefully successful) attack in the command centre, reviewing all the notes we made after the reconnaissance. Time flies by

and before we know it, it's getting dark behind the panes of the magical windows.

At some point, Blaise blinks into the dusk and rises from his seat with a sigh. In about two hours we'll meet up to head to the Nott Estate. Since Blaise is the strategist in charge, he will be the first to enter the roof and check the Portkeys made specifically for this mission. I nod to him in farewell and lean back over the parchments we've spread out on the conference table.

After another half hour I can't stand it any longer either and leave the command centre towards the equipment room to get changed.

I'm already half dressed in combat gear when the door opens and Granger marches into the room in her usual fashion. When she spots me, she stops in surprise.

"You're early," she states as I strap on my shoulder holster.

"So are you," I retort, glancing at the clock on the wall.

"I like the quiet before the storm," she says, stepping closer.

She looks me over in my rebel uniform, biting her lower lip. This time, I'm even a hundred percent sure that the glint in her eyes isn't a figment of my imagination. Normally, I would take advantage of this situation and her blatant appreciation, but unfortunately there is this one little thing I have yet to tell her.

I decide to make it quick and easy.

"Creevey is my partner today," I inform her, fiddling with my forearm holster instead of meeting her eyes. "I asked Blaise to swap teams with me."

She inhales sharply. It sounds annoyed, which is understandable, after all allocating the teams was her job and she planned us together for today's mission. She is not used to having her orders disobeyed.

"Why?" she asks unceremoniously.

I assume it's meant to sound harsh and disinterested, but I can't help but notice the slight tremor in her voice.

"You know why," I sigh, forcing myself to look up.

At my words, her nostrils flare and her lips press together. A worry line forms on her forehead and the hand that was resting firmly on her waist slips away and dangles next to her body, fingertips twitching. She looks at me silently and with flickering eyes.

I close the distance between us until I'm directly in front of her and clear my throat.

"Listen, Granger," I begin. I run my tongue over the edge of my front teeth and hesitate. It's not a conversation that comes easy to me. "When we're out there, I want you to be focused.

You must *not* allow yourself to be distracted, watch out for me or even cast protective spells in my direction. Just do what you do best."

Granger tilts her head back to look at my face. Her eyes dart back and forth between mine and she grits her teeth. Oh, what I would give to read her mind just once.

"You have no power to mess up the teams," she chokes out, ignoring my words.

I have a faint idea of what really lies dormant under the guise of her anger, so I don't let her haughtiness provoke me, but lean forward and bring my face so close to hers that I can feel her agitated breath on my lips.

"Not long ago, *you* were the one who was convinced that it would be better if we weren't partners. For various reasons, which I certainly don't need to remind you of. And this time, Granger, it's the other way around, it's as simple as that. I want you to come back, do you understand me? So don't be *headless* and, for the love of Merlin, don't do anything reckless—yeah, I know, this is a formidable challenge for you." I smirk at her. She doesn't smile back. "And I'll do whatever it takes to stay alive, too, I promise. I'm far from done with you."

I intentionally say my last sentence in a suggestive tone to take the edge off the conversation.

Granger takes a shaky breath, her gaze darting to my mouth. Then she rolls her eyes extensively and shifts her weight to her other leg.

"You're insufferable," she mutters.

"Yeah, you've said that before—" I whisper before leaning in and briefly but tenderly brushing my lips against hers. It's a completely intuitive act, driven by this urge that I can no longer seem to control. "—but I think you like it."

I quickly pull away before either of us can attach too much importance to this intimate gesture. Then, in a decidedly calm manner, I don the rest of my combat gear. The last strap of the forearm holster. The left boot. The right boot. The breastplate.

Granger follows my lead and starts changing as well. When I'm done, I plop down on one of the benches, rest my elbows on my knees and observe her practiced movements.

I can practically watch her face get a little harder with every piece of workout clothes she takes off and every piece of combat gear she puts on. Finally, she holsters her wand and turns to face me, black robes billowing.

Suddenly, she is the mystery again. The vision of a steeled warrior. But the fire in her eyes is still there. And until the door opens and the first rebels pour into the room, it only burns for me.

Despite our thorough preparations, including the reconnaissance, breaking through the wards

of the Nott Estate is taking much longer than we anticipated. Smith, Thomas and George Weasley, the curse breakers for today's mission, have been trying to give us access to the grounds for over an hour—so far without success.

Granger is standing directly behind the three wizards, tapping her foot impatiently as she sternly oversees their work. My gaze, in turn, is on her the entire time.

The fact that she didn't contradict me in the equipment room tells me that whatever is going on between us, she is aware of it too. It was also the first time that Granger and I were able to agree on something without almost ripping each other's heads off. (An absolute miracle that just has to mean something.) And if we want to get to the bottom of this mutual, say, *attraction* in the future, we simply can't take any risks today. Ergo, I made the right decision.

A hissed command ("Spread out!") snaps me out of my musings. Weasley, Smith, and Thomas finally managed to penetrate the wards and actually didn't set off an alarm, allowing us to cross the grounds, sneak up on the house unnoticed, and storm it.

Blaise's strategy is: A full steam surprise attack.

My suggestion of launching the attack on Christmas Eve appears, at least at first glance, to have been a wise decision. Not only are the Death Eaters present all more or less drunk, it's also a surprisingly small group. Granger's *Homenum Revelio*, which she casts after we've blasted the mansion's huge front door with a well-aimed *Bombarda*, lets us know we're dealing with no more than twelve people. And that's only half of our own manpower. A positive development.

We fan out, just like we discussed. Creevey and I, along with Granger and Blaise and two other rebel teams, burst into the room where most of the Death Eaters currently are: the drawing room.

While the first spells are already whipping through the air around us, I take a quick look around and notice that Theo is not among those present.

I curse under my breath. That would probably have been too easy.

According to Blaise's plan, which he adjusted after I asked him to swap teams with me, it's actually Creevey's and my job to find Theo and get him out of the house as quickly as possible—whether voluntarily or unconscious doesn't matter. As it is, the search for him will have to wait because now we're under fire.

"Let them know!" I hear one of the Death Eaters shout from across the drawing room, which doesn't make much sense.

I don't have time to think about it any further, though, as the person's attention promptly shifts to Creevey and me. Through the smoke from the explosions and the shimmer of magic in the air, I think I make out Nott Senior's face. I quickly summon a shield and immediately hurl my own curses at him, all of which are blocked.

In my peripheral vision, Granger and Blaise are each dueling several Death Eaters at the same time. As always, Granger is impressive, and it's hard not to be distracted by the sight, but then my eyes fall on one of Blaise's opponents and my stomach turns. Dolohov.

It's bad enough that the bastard is here today of all days (*why?*), but I'm even more appalled that he seems to be very much alive. Until a second ago, I was firmly convinced that Ronald Weasley annihilated him in Hogsmeade, even though it was never officially confirmed.

Anger wells up in me as I remember Dolohov's blast-freezing spell hitting Granger in the back right before my eyes. With an effort, I pull myself together, quash my desire for revenge, and focus solely on my own magic.

After a few minutes, the first two people go down. Thanks to our mayhem and the speed of the duels, it's hard to tell who got hit. Friend or foe?

I allow myself another quick glance at the other rebels to make sure they're all still on their feet, and notice that the fighting has spread into the hallway and the other rooms. I can't see Blaise and Granger anymore, but Dolohov is still there, now attacking Alicia Spinnet and Ginny.

Just as Creevey and I feel our way clockwise along the wall, bright green flames flare up in the opposite corner of the room. I immediately hurl a few curses towards the fireplace, through which several black-clad figures suddenly rush in.

"What the hell?" Creevey swears right next to me. "We didn't even set off an alarm spell! Why are they getting back-up so damn quickly?"

"I have no bloody idea," I hiss. "Watch it! *Protego!*"

I realize we've miscalculated again. While it *generally* wasn't a bad idea to attack during the festive season, it seems like they were expecting another push from the Resistance anyway. They, too, are prepared. Even with a second reconnaissance and three times as many notes, we could never have predicted that things would spiral out of control so quickly.

Considering how often the green flames of the Floo soar up, the number of our opponents increases drastically in a matter of seconds. Suddenly, there are more masked Death Eaters in the drawing room than rebels. Some of them throw themselves straight into the fray, others charge out of the room with purposeful strides to chase the rest of us.

I've just greeted one of the newcomers with a Stunner and shouted to Creevey that we need better cover when Spinnet collapses a few feet away from us. Her agonized cries, amplified multiple times, echo throughout the large room, the sound raising my hackles. I instinctively know what's happening to her, but where Dolohov gets the composure from to cast a Cruciatus for the sheer joy of torture in such a chaotic situation is beyond me.

There's a loud crash in the entrance hall, then Granger appears and, with a face like thunder and a rhythmically flicking wrist, distracts Dolohov from the slumped rebel on the floor. Ginny is still in a duel, with her back to the wall, and Blaise is nowhere to be seen.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Creevey leap forward and sink to his knees next to Spinnet, leaving me completely exposed. Cursing wildly, I hurl two lightning-fast disarming spells at two masked figures who just flooded in.

"My, my, the Mudblood's still alive," I hear Dolohov taunting Granger over the din of battle. "You fucking stubborn cunt just don't want to die, eh?"

And I see red.

I incapacitate one of the two Death Eaters directly in front of me with an *Impedimenta* and the other with a *Stupor* before spinning around and training my wand on Dolohov.

I don't hesitate for a second; don't think about the fact that I haven't done it in months; neglect the knowledge that this would normally require my Occlumency; ignore the circumstance that I requested Creevey as a partner precisely because I wanted to avoid such a situation. But most of all, I don't give a fuck that just a few minutes ago I vowed to myself not to take any of Dolohov's bait tonight.

"*Avada Kedavra!*" I shout, my jaw muscles twitching with wild rage.

My curse hits Dolohov in the left shoulder. He slumps down and comes to rest on the floor in a tangle of limbs and black robes.

Granger whirls around in surprise. Our eyes don't meet for more than a millisecond before we're under fire again. I don't even have time to process the effects of the dark magic coursing through my body like a deadly cold tidal wave.

"Creevey!" I bark, glancing over my shoulder. "How's Spinnet?"

"It's okay," comes Spinnet's weak voice. "I'm fine."

She tries to push Creevey away, but he stubbornly insists on helping her to her feet. Despite the distance between us, I can see how much her arms and legs are shaking and twitching. It's a violent tremor that I know all too well from my own experiences with the Cruciatus, and that in turn means that this mission is over for Spinnet.

I cast a *Protego* in the general direction of the two, then a Stinging Hex and a Body Bind Jinx on my current opponents. There are three of them and I am alone. I hear Granger, who has been busy supporting Ginny in the meantime, cursing loudly.

A few seconds later, I feel her next to me. She summons her permanent shield.

"I can handle them," I force out.

I give her a disapproving sidelong glance, after all she's doing exactly what I asked her *not* to do.

Her expression is blank.

"I know that," she replies sharply, "but Blaise doesn't need me right now."

At that, I keep my mouth shut. I know there's no point in arguing with her, and besides, she's right. I'm surrounded and Creevey is still busy with Spinnet. *Here*, Granger is definitely needed.

We fight side by side in silence for a few minutes, concentrating solely on sucking enough oxygen into our lungs.

"Where's Blaise?" I ask once I'm granted a brief respite, then fire off another Stinging Hex.

"He has—" Granger begins, but is cut off when Nott Senior comes back into view.

He sends a volley of deadly curses our way, all of which Granger deflects with a few angry arm movements before refreshing her weakened shield.

I seize the moment and take a quick look at the others. Ginny is just wrapping a hand around Spinnet's upper arm. A blink of an eye and a *whoosh* later, the two are gone. Very good. Ginny has used her Emergency Portkey. The wizard she fought with earlier is lying motionless on the floor, bleeding profusely.

Creevey rushes towards me with a relieved expression. Along with the crackling sounds of the curses bouncing off Granger's shield, his "She's safe!" reaches my ears. He gives me a weak grin.

I yell at him, not even understanding my own words. It's just a bunch of incoherent, rushed instructions—something about him needing to reactivate his defense, having to concentrate, and "Watch the fuck out!"

And then Granger's shield breaks.

Actually, we're in an advantageous three-on-three situation, but one of us is inattentive, not fully focused, and Nott Senior recognizes this vulnerability.

Time slows down and expands in a frighteningly unnatural way, so that the events suddenly unfold before my eyes in slow motion.

It happens precisely in this window of a few seconds when Granger's powerful shield is no longer hovering in front of us because she's busy deflecting the curses of one of the other two Death Eaters. In this short period of time when I'm distracted because I have to fend off a ricochet. In this little moment when Creevey raises his wand far too slowly because he's probably still worrying about Spinnet.

Nott's Killing Curse hits him square in the chest.

Chapter End Notes

I know, I know. *sniffle*

My heart broke writing this chapter, although (as some of you may have guessed thanks to the warnings and tags) it was planned that way from the start. But there are a few other things worth talking about: another clarity-bringing Draco/Granger conversation; an amusing Draco/Pansy chat about the newfound affection for lions and lionesses (or rather tame little kittens, cf. Draco's masterful observation in chapter 20); and a lot of action. Well? How do you think Draco will handle all of this? Hugs. ♡

29. CHROME BLACK

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

29. CHROME BLACK

With the aid of my Emergency Portkey, I materialize in a grove, where I immediately Disapparate with a loud *crack*. A second later, I'm standing in the meadow near Box Hill. I allow myself a breather before taking one of the hidden Return Portkeys to the roof of St. Mungo's.

Meanwhile, my knees are shaking from the weight my legs have to carry.

Creevey is heavy. Much heavier than I would have thought.

I ride the lift. Cross the atrium. Follow the eternal, labyrinthine *right, left, right* of the grey concreted corridors. Kick open the milk glass door of the trauma room with my combat boot. Stumble into the healing facility.

Lovegood rushes towards me. Her eyebrows furrow with concern as her gaze falls on the limp body in my arms. All color drains from her face.

I lay Creevey down on one of the cots. After taking a deep breath that doesn't deliver nearly enough oxygen to my brain, I look at Lovegood. She's on the other side of the cot. One of her hands is on Creevey's cheek, the other suddenly reaches for me. I pull back abruptly.

Why is she just standing there?

Shouldn't she be doing something?

Isn't it her fucking job to help him?

Lovegood's eyes widen. I must have said all three questions out loud. Maybe I even shouted them, I'm not sure. My ears are ringing. From the fight? The buzzing of the curses? Or the shock? Anyway, it feels like I'm underwater. There's an unusual pressure on my eardrums.

I shake my head to get rid of the feeling, but it's no use. Lovegood's lips move, but to my ears she remains silent. She circles the cot. I feel her hand on my arm, then on my wrist. What the hell is she doing? Is she feeling my pulse? I withdraw for the second time. Step back. Avert my eyes. Flee from the trauma room.

Someone bumps into me in the hallway. Or maybe I'm the culprit, I have no idea. It was probably some Weasley, because out of the corner of my eye I think I see a mop of fiery red hair, but I don't turn around to check. I just keep walking. I'm on the run.

It's fucking ringing in my ears. And I can't breathe.

The atrium is empty, as is the command centre.

I get back in the lift. Hit the button. Ride up to the roof. Stagger out of the lift cage. Frantically breathe in the fresh, crisp night air.

My mind tells me I have to go back. I should make sure that they made it. That Granger is safe and that Blaise found Theo. Right? I brought Creevey to Lovegood, fulfilling my duty as a partner. And now I have to go back. Isn't that so?

Go to the trauma room, get patched up, and come back as soon as possible.

That's how it is, isn't it?

But I don't feel patched up at all. I feel like a vortex of a million little shreds, splintered shards, confused atoms.

Granger and I defeated the three Death Eaters who remained with us in the drawing room within a few minutes. She finished one with her signature throat cut and immobilized another with a Stunner. Nott Senior, on the other hand, received an *Avada* from me. After Creevey went down, that was the only thing I was capable of.

Two Killing Curses in one day.

I don't know exactly what happened after that. My memories are blurry. I think Granger told me to get Creevey out. But why would she have ordered such a thing when Lovegood can no longer help him? It makes no sense.

I feel an uncomfortable tingling and realize that I've fallen to my knees. Through the thin fabric of my cargo trousers, the gravel that covers the flat roof pricks painfully into the skin of my shins. It's a welcome distraction.

My palms also find their way to the ground and my fingers dig into the wet pebbles.

Then I have to vomit.

Pathetic. When was the last time I threw up? That must have been ages ago. And it seems to last just as long.

After a few minutes, it's over. I'm still gagging, but my stomach stops spilling dinner onto the gravel, so I sink back to my heels. I'm shaking all over.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

In the back of my mind a voice speaks up and mercilessly spits out the truths I don't even want to hear: *You fired two Killing Curses in less than thirty minutes. And you watched someone you care about die. In both cases you were not occluded and that was an absolute first.*

Creevey is dead.

I have to gag once more.

I've seen a lot of people die and I've often been responsible for it myself. Besides, I barely knew the boy. Only for a few months. But I fucking liked him. He was my *friend*. My first ally within the Resistance, aside from Blaise. And today he was even my partner. Fuck.

Whoosh. I spin around and squint through the dusk.

It's Granger. Her face is pale, but she appears unharmed. She spots me immediately, casts a *Lumos*, and slowly approaches.

"We have Theodore," she informs me in a steady voice. "Blaise got him out. They are now on their way to Camp White. The fight is over. Everyone is fine."

No, not *everyone* is fine, for fuck's sake.

Creevey is dead.

Why is Granger so composed?

Since I don't respond, she says my name.

"Malfoy."

She crouches down in front of me and looks me over as if to make sure I'm okay. Then her eyes dart to the pool of sick on the ground. She vanishes it with a quick flick of her wand and examines my face even more intently.

I notice that Granger looks worried.

She shouldn't be worried about me, should she?

I try to say something, but my voice doesn't obey. My head keeps spinning. And I still feel nauseous.

Granger frowns deeply. She leans in even further so that the light from the tip of her wand shines directly into my eyes. I have to blink.

"It wasn't your fault," she says gently, as if she knows what's wrong with me. She has no bloody idea. "You are *not* responsible. It was just, um, an unfortunate moment."

I can't stand any of it. Neither her soothing words nor the feelings they trigger in me. Because suddenly all I want to do is reach for her. But I'm not allowed to. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Oh, pathetic indeed. I'm dying for Granger's comfort, knowing full well I'll *never* get it, at least not in the way I obviously need it.

Not knowing what else to do, I try to mentally push Granger aside and distract myself. It only works to a limited extent, because instead of thinking about her and the supposedly comforting embrace that I'm denied, other images suddenly flash through my mind.

Creevey, cheerfully explaining the benefits of the training room. Creevey, lying on a mat and having a laughing fit after I pulled his legs away. Creevey, asking my advice about Spinnet.

My efforts to regain control of myself are completely in vain. Rather, I feel like throwing up again. In front of Granger. And that's the final nudge for me to do something that I know will help me.

I give in to the urge and occlude myself.

There must be a hint of it on my face because Granger notices the shift immediately. Her wand hand twitches and she focuses on my eyes, confused and breathless. I can't help but wonder what she's seeing there. I've never looked in the mirror during the act, but given the way she's staring at me it must be a horrifying sight. Her eyes dart wildly between mine.

"Malfoy," she gasps out. "Stop it. Don't do that."

But it's already too late. I get rid of today's images. I push them away. I segment them. I banish the individual components to the furthest corners of my mind, just as I once learned.

I slowly struggle to my feet as I erect the mental barriers, my Occlumency walls. With their help, I can keep everything that hurts and is unpleasant in check: memories, thoughts, feelings.

I square my shoulders.

Creevey disappears behind the first barrier.

A wall. Bare, indestructible black marble. Stone after stone crunches into place. The marble is so heavy that I don't need mortar. I build the wall so high that it seems infinite.

I tilt my head from side to side and hear a cracking sound. My neck muscles relax.

The two Killing Curses I cast today and their dark magic that still drains me end up behind the second barrier.

A portcullis made of chrome black metal that shoots down with tremendous speed and a deafening whirr. My mind sways briefly as it snaps into place.

I straighten up to my full height and close my eyes.

The third barrier is for Granger.

Impenetrable grey mist. The smoke of a battlefield. With a jerk, I push the witch and the desire to pull her into my arms and bury my head in the crook of her neck through that final wall. Within seconds, she disappears in the heavy fog.

My hands relax and I blink once, twice, then open my eyes fully. The trembling has subsided. I can breathe again. The ringing in my ears is gone.

Sharp senses. Tough. Efficient. *Occluded.*

I look down at Granger and notice that she's shaking. I think this is another first. She stares at me with a mixture of fear and disbelief, causing me to lazily raise an eyebrow. I bend forward and casually brush the grit off my cargo trousers.

"Why did you do that?" she whispers, lowering her wand.

About time too. Meanwhile, her dazzlingly bright *Lumos* is superfluous. The sun is already rising behind her. We survived the black of the night.

"Well," I drawl, blowing a strand of hair away from my forehead and fixing the rest of my combat gear with a few practiced moves. I can't help but remember the words she threw at me months ago in my sleeping quarters. "I suppose that's *my* way of dealing with my shit, Granger."

I smirk at her before pushing past her and slowly strolling towards the lift.

"As soon as you know, tell me if the *Exit* worked for Theo, yeah?" I sneer over my shoulder. "And tell Potter that I want to be present at the interrogation. If Theo survives, that is."

With those last words, accompanied by Granger's sharp inhalation, I step into the lift cage and head to my sleeping quarters.

Basically, the next day hardly differs from any other. Well, except for a few minor adjustments on my part perhaps.

After a well-deserved nap, I make my way to the dining hall. Breakfast is already in full swing, although I can't spot any of the rebels involved in the night's mission at the Nott Estate. I fill my plate, pour myself a coffee and make my way to the usual table. Before I reach it, however, my limbs lock and refuse to move any further. I turn on my heel and choose a seat that is as far away from my former seat as possible.

A few minutes later, Ginny enters the room. She looks around, spots me and frowns. After she has also helped herself at the buffet, she comes over to me and drops down next to me. She reaches for my hand, but I pull it away. She doesn't try again. We eat in silence.

After breakfast, I take a look at the black board in the atrium. I'm scheduled for the morning workout and since I'm already wearing the right clothes, I head straight for the gym.

Some rebels are already there, including Blaise, who looks tired and sad. I scan the crowd and realize that fistfights are on the agenda for today. All of a sudden, it occurs to me that I no longer have a partner and would have to look for a new one. Determined, I turn around and leave the room without looking back.

I spend half the day being bored out of my mind in my sleeping quarters. This condition vaguely reminds me of the days when I wasn't allowed to roam freely around headquarters. A

time when Blaise would pick me up and escort me to every activity. And sometimes also...
No.

A black marble wall vibrates in the back of my mind, but I ignore the menacing crunch of the stones. Instead, I throw myself onto my bed and stare out the magical window, which now reflects the real sky over St. Mungo's. A blizzard is raging behind the pane. The weather goes perfectly with my frosty mood.

I skip lunch but arrive on time for the afternoon combat training session.

We're back to disarming spells. Fucking boring.

I don't even look at Granger as she allocates the teams, and instead of following her instructions, I hurl angry spell after angry spell at Abbott until she is hit by a Stinging Hex and bursts into tears.

Granger banishes me from the dueling hall with a few heated words. Even though I don't really listen to her and roll my eyes extensively, I ultimately comply. However, since I'm not particularly keen on returning to my lonely sleeping quarters, I lock myself in the simulation room and activate the highest level.

It's only when I'm standing in the middle of the room, sweaty and breathless after half an hour of defensive magic and three rounds, that I'm remotely satisfied.

I slowly turn around to see Granger standing in the doorway with a scowl on her face and her arms crossed. So the combat training must be over. In response to her disapproving look, I merely raise an eyebrow, then shove my wand into its holster and march past her.

"Nott's interrogation is about to begin," comes her voice as I'm halfway across the training room. "Harry asked me to let you know."

I don't answer, just give a two-finger salute to indicate that I heard her.

The room is exactly the same room in which I was interrogated months ago. I'm leaning against the wall next to the door with my arms crossed, frowning as I stare at our newest, albeit involuntary, member.

As implied by Granger, Theodore Nott actually survived the *Exit* and admittedly looks as hale and hearty as one would expect under the prevailing circumstances.

But while I was right in my assumptions about his loyalty to the Dark Lord, I was wrong about something far more important. Just a few minutes ago, he revealed to us that he has no idea where the Dark Lord is at the moment. Which in turn means we've hit another dead end and need to start all over again. It's so bloody annoying.

"Do you know if your father knew?" Potter asks.

He's sitting across from Theo with his hands clasped on the tabletop, looking as calm and collected as ever. That's his way of dealing with this war, I guess. He never loses his nerve and rarely allows anyone to break down his reserve. On that front, he's the exact opposite of Weasley, Granger and, yes, me. Basically, it's admirable.

"No," Theo replies with trembling lips. "We've never had a particularly good relationship and it hasn't gotten any better in recent years. Quite the contrary."

"It's not that we assumed he'd confided in you of his own free will—" Blaise interjects with a dismissive gesture. I'm not surprised that Potter 'invited' him too. He's probably hoping Theo will share his knowledge a little quicker when there are a few familiar and supposedly friendly faces around. "—but rather that we hoped you'd overheard something."

"I didn't," Theo sighs. He rubs (probably unconsciously) the *stain* that now adorns his left forearm. "Whenever possible, I stayed away from the machinations."

Blaise grimaces in disappointment.

"Anything else that might be of use?" comes Granger's voice.

She's sitting right next to Potter and, as fucking always, has her feet on the table.

Her chair only touches the floor with two legs because she has been rocking it backwards and forwards ever since Theo's interrogation began. It irritates me beyond measure because every time she wobbles dangerously, my eyes reflexively dart to her. What a stupid habit.

"Not right now. I'll think about it."

Theo sounds exhausted. He runs a hand through his hair, positively disheveling it, and bites his lower lip as he looks from one rebel to the other.

"So you're useless," I conclude drily. "Brilliant. That means we need a new plan as soon as possible. Let Daphne and Pansy know, Blaise."

In a single, collective movement, all heads turn to me. Granger's scowls at me, Blaise narrows his eyes, Potter frowns. Only Theo doesn't seem surprised.

"What's the matter with you?" Blaise asks with a huff. "No one is *useless*, Draco. Anyone who survives the *Exit* is an asset to the Resistance. Besides, you haven't contributed much new information yourself since your cover was blown, have you?"

"Just ignore him," Granger tells Blaise in a cool voice. She has already averted her gaze again. "He's been occluding since last night."

"*What?*"

Blaise jumps up and comes over to me, his legs quickly eating up the distance. When he grabs my face with one hand and turns my head so he can look me in the eyes, I abandon my relaxed stance against the wall. I free myself from his tight grip and forcefully push him away.

"Get your bloody hands off me," I snap at him.

He ignores my gruff tone; just keeps inspecting my eyes.

"Why the hell are you occluding?" he asks, confused.

"Good grief," I scoff, clutching my chest theatrically. "I didn't realize I had to ask your permission first."

"Did I miss something?" Blaise grumbles, turning to face Granger, who now has her arms crossed. "Has he ever done that since he arrived?"

She shrugs.

"Don't think so. He claimed he didn't want to do it anymore, but well, here we are."

"I can still hear you," I remind the two of them through gritted teeth. "And no, this is the first time. Great idea, by the way, because I can *finally* think clearly again."

Blaise audibly sucks in air, Potter clears his throat, Granger remains silent. Her eyes flicker, but I don't bother to speculate about what that might mean.

Theo, who seems uncomfortable that his own interrogation has taken such a strange turn, shifts in his chair. Our eyes meet and he quickly looks away.

His discomfort makes sense because of those present, he is the only one who has spoken to me more or less regularly over the past seven years. Our paths crossed from time to time, although he strictly stayed out of active combat and almost never attended the Death Eater meetings. Come to think of it, it could very well be that he hasn't seen me *un*-occluded once in all that time. He, too, had no idea I possessed the ability. Now he probably has to process the surprising realization that there is actually another version of me that he doesn't yet know.

"Why did you do it?" Blaise pipes up once more, snapping me out of my thoughts about Theo.

"None of your business," I reply curtly.

If he's really that worried, he can ask Granger. Given her resigned demeanor, I suspect she's figured it out. For my part, I have no interest in talking about it. It's exhausting enough to constantly keep the mental barriers up. I'm out of practice.

Realizing that I'm unwilling to answer any of his questions, Blaise tries a different tactic.

"Draco, if this is about Dennis—" I glare at him. "—you can talk to me, you know? You don't have to close your mind. It's not healthy and there's not even a reason for it. You are here. With us. You are safe. There's nothing you have to hide."

He tries to put a hand on my shoulder, but I shrug it off.

"Blaise, I'll only say it once, so listen carefully," I drawl. "Don't meddle in things that are none of your concern. I can occlude as much as I want and don't have to justify myself to any of you. That being said, I was almost permanently occluded before I came here, and surprise: I'm still alive. So how unhealthy can it be? Do me a favor and leave me the fuck alone."

With these words, I put my hand on the doorknob. My gaze wanders past Blaise and Theo, lingers briefly on Granger and finally settles on Potter.

"If he comes up with something clever, I want to be informed," I demand firmly.

Then I leave the room.

Chapter End Notes

In case you were wondering what it looks like when Draco occludes, here it is. The short syntax at the beginning of the chapter was intentional, as I tried to convey Draco's mental state of emergency as graphically as possible. Did you expect this? Is it now more understandable how Draco survived all those years as a Death Eater? And did you find this chapter even sadder than the last one? (Because that's how I feel.) I'm very curious about your opinions!

Also, if you enjoyed Draco's seven-stage mission in chapter 27, you should probably check out my latest oneshot. Freshly uploaded yesterday. [Click here.](#) ♡

30. SOOT BLACK

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

30. SOOT BLACK

Two days have passed since Theo's frustratingly inconclusive interrogation. Two days in which the everyday life of Camp Black caught up with me again, in which I studiously avoided Blaise, Ginny and especially Granger and in which I did not allow myself a single look behind my carefully constructed Occlumency barriers.

I'm on my way from the dining hall to my sleeping quarters when suddenly a door opens to my left and I'm yanked into a room I've never been in before. Even before the door closes, I spin around, wand at the ready.

Standing in front of me is Granger, eyes flashing and a scowl on her face. She kicks the door shut and leans against it with her arms crossed.

I pocket my wand and step forward, glaring down at her menacingly.

"Would you stop doing that?" I hiss. "If you have something to say to me, there are other ways and means than dragging me into some dark chamber every few days."

She returns my gaze unwaveringly, puts on her most condescending expression and raises her index finger so that it hovers in front of my face in warning.

"For one thing, this isn't a dark chamber," a second finger joins the first, "and for another thing, you're avoiding me," she explains haughtily. "So I had no other choice, right? And now sit down."

Brazen witch.

Although I have no intention of obeying her command, I turn around and take a few angry steps into the small room. After looking around for a moment, I sniff.

"What the hell is this?" I scoff. "The private library of the Resistance?"

"These are my sleeping quarters," Granger replies emotionlessly.

Well, I probably should have known. Apart from a few pieces of clothing carelessly tossed over the back of the obligatory chair in front of the desk, the room is downright crammed with books. They are on countless shelves on the walls, on the floor, on the bedside table, on the desk and even on the bed. I bet if I peeked into Granger's bathroom there would be a few stacks greeting me there, too.

I slowly shake my head.

The feeling of being in Granger's sleeping quarters, her sanctuary, causes a strange buzzing in my gut that I choose to ignore. Instead, I focus on her and raise an eyebrow.

"What do you want?" I ask brusquely.

Granger takes her time answering by unclasping her soot black robes, calmly shrugging them off and pushing past me to swing herself onto the desk. Only when she has made herself comfortable does she look at me.

"I felt it necessary to remind you that you do *not* hold a leading position here, Malfoy," she drawls. "You made quite a scene during Nott's interrogation. I don't know what gave you the idea that you had the authority to give Harry orders, but you don't. To be frank, you don't have the right to give orders to *any of us*. Quite the opposite."

At those words, I do the Weasley. Ergo, I snort.

"And how does that fit with your precious principles?" I provoke her. "I thought you were a democratic association with equal rights for all members. Or does that not apply to former Death Eaters? Have I not proven I'm an asset to the Resistance worth listening to?"

"So now you're an asset?" she deadpans, ignoring my other questions and raising an eyebrow of her own. "We haven't made any progress so far and your intel hasn't helped us much, I might add. What makes you think you deserve special treatment?"

"Let me think about it. Maybe that we sha—"

"*This* is definitely not a valid argument."

"Oh? And what about my help regarding Greyback?"

"An equally private matter."

"Mmm. I'm the only reason you can turn ex-Death Eaters into rebels overnight. *Magic*."

With one hand I imitate the explosion of a firecracker.

"True." Her tone is sharp now; not quite as relaxed as before. "The *Exit* is indeed a key advantage that we owe solely to you, but that doesn't mean you can behave however you want."

Granger straightens up, folds her arms and crosses her legs.

She's now sitting on the desk like the prim swot she probably secretly still is. (At least judging by the amount of books lying around in her quarters.) To be honest, I quite like the pose, which is further accentuated by the fact that she's wearing her combat gear. I don't let it show, though, but keep my eyes on her face. I know she's not done yet.

"Care to know what I blame for you acting like a total *arsehole*?" she snaps at me.

"Please, fire away!" I reply nonchalantly. "I'm listening."

"Your Occlumency."

For a few seconds it's quiet, at least outside of my head. Inside it, a marble wall crunches, a portcullis rattles, the smoke of a battlefield swirls up and momentarily clouds my mind. But then I regain control of myself and reinforce each and every one of those barriers.

When I don't answer, a triumphant expression spreads across Granger's face.

"I spoke to Blaise," she continues. "He told me that, originally, you were taught it for one reason only: so that you would be able to protect yourself from Tom's Legilimency. What Blaise didn't know was that for the past seven years you've been using it to push away pretty much *everything else*, too. I know we talked about it briefly, but I didn't think much of it at first. However, given the current circumstances, I did a little research. And lo and behold, using Occlumency to shield one's mind from feelings such as fear, regret, pain, or grief is a very rare practice. Although you implied that you did exactly that to survive your time as a Death Eater, I didn't realize the extent of it."

I remember our conversations in the bathroom of my sleeping quarters and in the equipment room. Her perspective on things elicits a low, hollow chuckle from me.

"Then what *did* you think when I said I was practically addicted to locking everything away?" I scoff. "That I was exaggerating?"

It doesn't feel right to bring it up again, but her naivety keeps me from turning on my heel and leaving the room. I also can't believe she just accepted what I told her and didn't immediately pore over countless books on the subject. The old Granger would have done just that.

"I've never heard of anyone using Occlumency the way you do," she says through gritted teeth. "I've always thought of it as nothing more than a tool to hide one's memories or shield oneself from a mental attack. After you told me more about it, I thought you might have found a way to combine it with a psychological technique for coming to terms with the past and processing unpleasant experiences, nothing more."

"Well, it's not like that," I snarl, not knowing why I even bother to explain. "Occlumency isn't a coping mechanism, Granger, it's a magical ability. You put up *real*, solid barriers. And I was *always* occluded. During every command I had to execute. During every fight. During every single Cruciatus and every Killing Curse."

"Yes, I get that now," Granger murmurs thoughtfully. "In retrospect, that explains a lot. A serious misinterpretation on my part, I admit it. I didn't realize that you're sort of able to just—just—just *switch yourself off*."

My gaze flits over her face. There's that flicker in her eyes again.

"I'm still me."

"Really?"

I wince at the question, my hands flexing at my sides.

She continues, "Because to me, it doesn't seem like it. And what you've told me about it so far and what I've observed make me doubt it even more."

"What the hell do you want, Granger?" I repeat, exasperated.

Her next words completely throw me off course, because I was expecting a lecture, a tirade, a sharp reproof, not an anxious whisper and certainly not a pleading look from dark brown eyes.

"Please stop doing it."

I avert my eyes so quickly that the jerky movement of my head makes me dizzy for a moment. Instead of looking at her face, I fix my gaze on a random spot above her left shoulder. I take a deep breath and wet my lower lip.

"It's none of your business," I finally say coolly. "Besides, it doesn't have an impact on my decisions if that's what you're worried about. I will not betray the Resistance."

"*That* is not what I'm worried about," she breathes.

Her voice sounds strained, as if the conversation is even more difficult for her than it is for me, but that doesn't make it any more understandable. Why is she even putting us in this situation if it makes her so uncomfortable?

"Then there's no problem," I say conclusively.

"I beg to differ," she replies stubbornly.

I take another deep breath to keep from snapping.

"What is this about, exactly?" I ask, louder this time. "You don't even like me, so you don't have to worry about how I'm *processing my unpleasant experiences* either."

"I slept with you twice!" she blurts out in disbelief.

"You don't have to like someone to fuck them," I deadpan, shrugging.

Granger makes a small noise of frustration, causing my eyes to flick back to her face. The pleading expression is gone (thank Merlin) and she looks completely like herself again—angry, tough and, above all, *provoked*.

I can't help but go one better.

"There's nothing wrong with continuing that, by the by." I casually point my finger first at her and then at myself. "Basically, I'm still a willing participant. All you have to do is ask."

At these words, Granger slides off the desk and pushes herself off it forcefully. A second later, she's standing so close to me that her chest touches mine. Fuming mad, she looks up at

me, and that's no exaggeration. Even her nostrils are flaring. I wouldn't be surprised if hot steam shot out of her ears as well.

"You know what?" she growls.

She stands on tiptoe and puts her hands on her hips. The corners of my mouth quirk. I don't know when exactly I stopped taking Granger seriously, but I did.

"Enlighten me," I purr.

"As long as you're like *this*, I don't want you."

Her hissed statement wipes the hint of a smirk from my face. I square my shoulders, blink twice and then roll my eyes, demonstratively unmoved.

"Fair enough," I reply. "So we're back to staying away from each other?"

"No," she grumbles before taking a step back.

Granger doesn't resume her previous seat on the desk, but creates some distance between us by leaning against the tabletop. I cock an eyebrow because, once again, I don't understand anything.

"There was another reason I wanted to talk to you." Now she's the rebel Granger again. The leader of a resistance movement. Professional, all business, distant. "We spoke to Nott again this morning and—"

"Without me?" I cut her off angrily.

"Why, does that hurt your feelings? Oh no, wait, you don't have any right now."

Bloody minx.

We stare at each other hostilely for a few seconds.

"Anyway," she continues, "he remembered something after all. Apparently, due to the increasing number of renegade Death Eaters, Tom is planning to hold a crisis meeting with the inner circle. Theodore only caught it in passing. When we attacked the Nott Estate, the date wasn't yet set, or at least he didn't know about it, but he overheard *where* this meeting is supposed to take place. Three guesses."

"I'm certainly *not* going to guess," I say with an impatient huff.

Granger waves her hand in a *you-are-truly-no-fun* sort of gesture and rolls her eyes.

"Malfoy Manor," she reveals at last.

Well, this is indeed a surprise.

The Dark Lord hasn't visited the Manor in years. Since the house was effectively his headquarters before the Battle of Hogwarts, he felt it was too dangerous to stay there once the Resistance had formed. The risk that Potter would suspect him there and immediately set his rebels on him and his followers was simply too great. Nevertheless, it seems plausible to me that he would want to hold this so-called crisis meeting in the Manor, after all the majority of his closest confidants 'hang around' there. First and foremost, the Lestranges. I don't doubt for a second that Theo is telling the truth.

"So this is why we suddenly don't have to stay away from each other anymore?" I deduce, mildly amused. "Because we're going on a Death Eater hunt together until we find someone who the *Exit* works for and who can tell us when this meeting will take place?"

"No," Granger says with a stern face, shaking her head. "We won't *hunt* anyone. Aside from the fact that the only people who know about the meeting are probably people for whom the *Exit* won't work anyway, we can't take the risk of Tom becoming suspicious and changing his plans as a result. We, or rather you, accompanied by me, will question someone who *definitely* knows when the meeting will take place. And after that we will let that person go. For the time being."

I puff out a faint laugh. This is one of the most absurd ideas I've ever heard from her, including our years together at Hogwarts.

"Interesting plan, Granger. And who, pray tell, is that supposed to be?"

Apparently, our distracting tit and tat has gone to my head. There's no other way I can explain how much Granger's answer catches me off guard. Not to mention that, for the second time within twenty minutes, she manages to wipe a grin off my face.

"Your mother, of course. Would've thought you'd figure it out quicker."

It was never my intention to exploit my mother in any way for the purposes of the Resistance. Nevertheless, I'm now sitting in the command centre and taking part in a strategy meeting on exactly *this* topic. (While simultaneously tinkering with my latest Occlumency barrier. Old habits die hard, I guess.)

At first I refused. I even yelled at Granger to put that outrageous idea right out of her mind. However, I realized pretty quickly that I seem to have forfeited my say for the time being since the entire plan has already been worked out.

While I was making myself scarce, Theo remembered something that is unfortunately true. And that's what Potter is summing up for us at this very moment.

"So Narcissa is in Diagon Alley every weekend to run errands. We'll have some people from Camp Grey verify this information. Have them keep an eye out for her and give us the approximate time window she's usually there. If Nott's statement is confirmed, Malfoy and Hermione will intercept Narcissa and—"

"—hope we don't get caught and torn limb from limb by the Dark Lord himself," I interject sarcastically, rolling my eyes.

"Exactly," Potter says simply and nods.

Cheeky bastard.

"What's your problem, Malfoy?" Weasley scoffs, turning to face me. "You were so sure that your mother wasn't devoted to Tom. Didn't you even say during your interrogation that you intended to bring her here one day?"

"Absolutely, Weasley," I spit at him. "I have no doubt that *if* she even knows when this meeting is to be held, she will tell me. What I'm less sure about, though, is the answer to the question of whether I want to risk her being held accountable for treason afterwards, got it?"

That is indeed my biggest concern. Even though my mother will be surprised to see me, she will try to help me if I ask her for it, I'm sure. But one problem remains: she is not a good Occlumens. If the Dark Lord or Bellatrix become suspicious or even invade her mind at random, there will be consequences for her. Fatal consequences, mind you.

"We will ensure that no one will be able to get this information out of her," comes Granger's voice, "at least as long as she is not interrogated under torture."

I turn to her and frown.

"If you have an idea, just spit it out, Granger," I snap at her.

"We will *Oblivate* her."

"No fucking way!"

"There's no getting around it, Malfoy," she sighs. "You said it yourself: No one must find out that we spoke to her or were even there, because that would mean her certain death. And you don't want that, do you?"

What a stupid, self-righteous question.

"I will *not* allow anyone to tamper with my mother's memory," I reiterate my point, giving Granger a sharp look.

"No one will *tamper*," she retorts, slightly annoyed. "I will do it. And I'm damn good at it."

I'm about to answer when Blaise, who's been playing the silent listener so far, clears his throat.

"Hermione pretty successfully *Oblivated* her own parents before the Battle of Hogwarts, Draco, and I'm sure you know that. She's more than capable of casting the spell properly, so pull yourself together and stop acting like a first class tosser."

At those words, my mouth closes and I actually shut up, my jaw clenching so hard that I inadvertently grind my teeth. Of course, I know what Granger did back then, but I seem to have done a pretty good job of repressing that knowledge. Then again, it's been over eight years now, so I don't blame myself.

When the rumor of what she had done reached the Death Eaters, Granger's *Obliviate* skills were a pretty big topic for quite a while. Not least because she *Obliviated* Rowle and Dolohov in a Muggle café that same summer. The latter was a move that earned her even more hatred than was already directed at her. Maybe that's why Dolohov is still so keen on getting his hands on her.

I can't help but wonder if Granger ever saw her parents again. Well, probably not. Even after all this time, they would still be extremely vulnerable targets.

My curiosity is piqued, but I don't think now is the right time to delve deeper into the topic, so I remain silent, tune out the conversation and thrum my fingers on the tabletop in an indefinable rhythm.

The next time I look up, it's just me and Blaise. Everyone else has already left the room and I didn't even notice. Since I occluded myself, I've gotten pretty good at blocking things out, I have to say.

Blaise clasps his hands under his chin and taps his bottom lip thoughtfully with one of his index fingers as he contemplates me. I give him a challenging look. It's obvious he has something to say and I don't want to put off the evil hour.

"I'm worried about you," he finally mutters seriously. "So is Granger, although it's difficult for her to admit it, let alone show it. She confided in me. Do yourself a favor and don't shut her out."

At that, I set about wordlessly leaving the room. Not only have I endured enough lectures for today, I'm even less interested in talking about what is, or rather *was*, between Granger and me. I have enough on my plate—like my mother being part of the Resistance's latest scheme.

"Draco," Blaise sighs. "Wait. Please."

I pause, but don't turn back to him.

"*What?*" I hiss, exasperated.

I hear the scraping sound of wooden chair legs on bare concrete, then Blaise's footsteps. He walks around me, stops right in front of me and grimaces.

He looks bloody exhausted. A little sleep would do him good.

"We'll bury Dennis tomorrow morning."

The change of subject catches me off guard, causing the marble wall in my head to quake. I quickly close my eyes, take a deep breath, and pinch the bridge of my nose to ground myself. Only when the barrier seems solid and stable enough again do I allow myself to open my

eyes, although I avoid looking at Blaise's face, instead fixing my gaze on the strap of his shoulder holster.

"You're coming, aren't you?" he asks quietly, sounding so crestfallen that I almost lose control. But only almost. "We'll leave after breakfast."

"Sorry, Blaise," I reply without really saying no.

I declare our conversation over once and for all by pushing past him and leaving the command centre with brisk steps.

"You're not the only one who's lost a friend, you know," he calls after me.

Undeterred by his tearful voice, I simply do what I do best.

My next mental barrier is for Blaise.

Chapter End Notes

So Draco is still occluded. But I can reassure you: The next chapter will be a little lighter, maybe even a bit funny? (And definitely extra long!) There will be a few surprises and I'm looking forward to them.

Just a small question to ease my author conscience: Is it a bit more understandable why both Hermione and Blaise didn't react 'appropriately' (subjectively speaking) in the last chapter?

I wish you a wonderful weekend. ♡

31. GREYISH BLACK

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

31. GREYISH BLACK

"—stupid idea and I won't go along with it," I say firmly.

"And as always, you're severely overestimating yourself, Malfoy, because it's *not* your decision to make," Granger replies haughtily.

"Oh, so I'm supposed to go on a mission that I'm not convinced will be successful, just—"

"We have carefully weighed our options and—"

"—because it worked out that way for Potter, Weasley and you a couple of times at Hogwarts, which—"

"—all strategists of the Resistance have agreed that—"

"—was probably pure luck? *Strategists*? Since when do you refer to yourself in the plural, Granger?"

"—it's worth a try. Tsk, Blaise was also involved, for example."

"Tell me how this is supposed to work when I'm not even allowed to touch you."

"I have no idea what you're getting at, Malfoy. It's a mission we are planning here, not—"

"One stumble, one narrow alley, one collision with a passerby and—"

"—a lovely little trip into the countryside!"

"—our cover is blown and we are *dead*."

"We'll concentrate. Problem solved."

"Not good enough. Give me permission to touch you if necessary."

"Don't be ridiculous, Malfoy," she hisses.

"Alright, then I refuse. End of discussion."

"Refusing is not an option. It's an official order—"

"—that I will *not* obey, Granger."

"—and I'll make sure you do as you are told!"

"And how are you going to do that, mh?"

"I have my methods and—"

"Uh, *mysterious*."

"—so far they have worked very well for you."

"Do me a favor and shut that talented little mouth of yours."

"Or *what*, Malfoy?" she provokes me.

"Or I'll make you," I threaten.

"Well, you can't."

"Wouldn't be the first time, would it? I have my own methods, as you bloody well know."

"That's enough," she hisses.

Granger's wand tip under my chin ends our dispute.

We're standing right in front of each other, breathing heavily, full body contact. Her free hand is gripping my shoulder holster and it seems like she can't decide whether to push me away or pull me even closer. Her pupils are blown wide, her cheeks are flushed, and her eyes are clearly on my mouth. I'm actually toying with the idea of leaning in and showing her that it wasn't just an empty threat on my part. Ramming my point home with an unyielding kiss suddenly seems like a perfectly appropriate solution.

Gods, this witch. She unhinges me; makes my hard-won indifference sway.

I shift my gaze down a few inches and swallow hard. Her lips are slightly parted, which is why I can feel her enraged breaths brushing against my jaw.

"Wow, I wish I hadn't heard the last part," comes Weasley's disgusted voice. "I'm out, folks."

I hear the sound of a chair being pushed back.

"Same," Potter agrees. "Although I can't decide whether I find it mostly disturbing or even a tad amusing."

"At least it livens up the joint," Blaise chimes in, his grin practically audible in his voice. "It's been a pretty boring two weeks."

"If you ask me, I'm pretty surprised things haven't gotten *a lot* livelier," Pansy says, rather wistfully. "Would've bet a few Galleons on her hexing him."

"Nope," Blaise snorts. "They somehow always manage to solve their problems in other ways. So far, they've never gotten physical."

"Pity," Weasley booms before his heavy footsteps ring out and the door of the command centre slams shut.

Granger lets go of my holster, takes a quick step back and sniffs, effectively breaking the spell. I back away as well and try to get my breathing back under control. My eyes, though, remain on her. With a stiff neck and a few brusque movements, she pockets her wand and adjusts her combat gear, then lifts her chin, tears her gaze away from me, and turns on her heel. She leaves the room, following Weasley with long strides.

As if rooted to the spot, I stay where I am for a few seconds before slowly turning to face Potter, Blaise and Pansy, all of whom are eyeing me intently.

While Potter frowns and Pansy quirks an eyebrow, Blaise regards me with twitching lips. Then he throws one of the peanuts, which he has been nibbling noisily the entire time, into the air and deftly catches it in his mouth.

"I'll go see if Ron has thrown up," he says cheerfully, rising from his chair. "Brother-in-law duties and all that, you know."

With a wink for Pansy and a pat on the back for Potter, he saunters off.

Since I don't want to be the only one left behind with the new flagship couple of the Resistance, I also start moving, albeit silently. (In this particular case, I think a farewell is quite superfluous.)

As I step through the door into the atrium, Potter's voice reaches my ears one last time.

"I didn't realize I had officially declared the meeting closed," he grumbles. "I fear my authority is past its peak."

"Don't worry, Chosen One," Pansy says, surprisingly gentle. "You have me now, and I will obey your every command, I promise."

I'm not physically capable of rolling my eyes as hard as I'd like to.

"This is insane," I mutter, shaking my head.

"It's the only chance we have, mate," Blaise replies seriously.

He's sitting on one of the benches in the equipment room with his arms crossed, looking me up and down thoughtfully.

Potter, standing right next to him, uses the brief moment of silence to shake out the bundle he's been carrying folded over his forearm. The glittering, oddly translucent fabric of the Invisibility Cloak billows once, then spills onto the grey concrete floor. I eye it skeptically.

"I don't see why we can't just disillusion ourselves," I add indignantly. "What about Glamour Charms?"

"Don't be silly," Granger's sharp voice rings out behind me.

Although I don't look at her, instead keeping my gaze on Blaise and Potter, I can feel her stepping right to my side. Her body heat seeps through both her robes and mine, and I have to resist the impulse to shift my weight to the other leg to get even closer to her.

"We've already discussed this at length," she continues impatiently. "Disillusionments are too unsafe in busy places. If someone gets suspicious and randomly casts a *Finite*, we're fucked. Ricochets are just as dangerous. Also, we don't know if they put up security barriers at the entrances and exits of Diagon Alley. A permanently installed uncovering spell like the Thief's Downfall in Gringotts would be *our downfall* if we were disillusioned. The same goes for the Glamour Charms. The only alternative is Polyjuice Potion. Would you prefer that?"

Of course not. A few times in my life I have had the *pleasure* of transforming into another human with the help of this potion, and I don't feel the need to repeat the experience.

In Granger's eyes, my silence seems to be a sufficient answer, because she becomes complacent.

"Figured as much. Have at it, Harry."

Potter steps forward, swings his arms, and throws the Invisibility Cloak over us.

As the fabric envelops us, I notice that it's not only pleasantly silky and airy, but also hardly obstructs the view. Well, I suppose that's one of the perks of owning one of the three Deathly Hallows. The invisibility cloaks I'm used to, which can be bought for a lot of gold at any joke shop, don't offer nearly the same level of comfort.

"Your boots are showing," Blaise informs us, shaking his head. "Move closer together."

When I cross my arms but otherwise remain stone-still, Granger lets out a soft sigh and steps closer. Ever the dutiful soldier. I can feel her thigh and upper arm pressing against my side.

"That won't do," Potter murmurs.

He has his fingers steepled in front of his chin, with both index fingers resting thoughtfully on his lips.

I bark out a hollow laugh. Well, it's not as if I had predicted exactly *that* at least five times during our preparations for today. *I am too tall. You were kids when you used it regularly. We are two adults.* Those were my words, among other things. But I don't bother to repeat myself because it wouldn't change anything.

The whole thing is firstly ridiculous and secondly doomed to fail. With the cloak over our heads, the mission is a total suicide commando.

"Try it behind one another," Blaise suggests.

Granger obeys once more and slowly steps in front of me. She doesn't touch me, but I can't help but glance down and eye the back of her neck. The muscles and tendons there are tense. A few strands of hair have come loose from her bun and are curling over the collar of her long-sleeved top.

"Good idea, Blaise," Potter nods. "Now I can only see the soles of your shoes. Just a tad closer and it should work."

The step Granger then takes backwards forces me to uncross my arms. I drop them to my sides, then quickly shove my hands into the pockets of my cargo trousers.

Granger's back is now touching my chest.

"And how are we supposed to *walk* like this, you two geniuses?" I snap angrily, swallowing what feels like half of Granger's bun as a reward.

Annoyed, I blow her hair out of my face and tilt my head slightly to the left to look past her. When Blaise answers, his gaze misses me by several inches. I remember he can't see me at all.

"*Slowly*, I'd say," he replies with a grin, but his mouth is still tense.

He clearly has concerns, even if he tries to keep a stiff upper lip. I can relate, though, because I have them too. But as a general rule, Granger's word is law at headquarters. And I guess I'll have to comply because she has already threatened to go alone or find another willing partner. Both options are out of the question. I tell myself I made this decision for my mother's sake and not because I'm worried about Granger.

Greyish black, heavy fog dances through my mind. As I force it back, it swirls around even more violently, eventually sweeping Granger's face away and swallowing it whole.

"All right," Granger says, quickly stepping away from me. She takes her warmth and her scent with her. The Invisibility Cloak is pulled off my head and I take a deep breath. "We're leaving in two hours. Don't be late, Malfoy."

"Did you feel that?" Granger asks under her breath as we step out of Knockturn Alley onto the uneven cobblestones of Diagon Alley.

I give the tiniest of nods.

My hand is clutching my wand, my cheek is resting against Granger's temple, and with every step she takes, one of my legs immediately follows suit.

It's a strange feeling. As if we were one being and not a duo of two angry people under a scrap of nothing meant to protect us.

I hate to admit it, but Granger was actually right. They have indeed secured the borders of Diagon Alley. The magic that just swept over us like a wave was clearly noticeable. Disillusioned or with a few Glamour Charms, our cover would have been blown by now at the latest.

"Good, then let's crack on," Granger murmurs, slowly making her way towards the back alley we choose beforehand to lie in wait for my mother.

"Would you stop babbling?" I mumble into her ear, noting with satisfaction that goosebumps are spreading beneath her earlobe as a result.

Alluring, but definitely the wrong moment.

At least she's quiet now.

Although today marks the beginning of the weekend in the wizarding world, the shopping street is not particularly busy. Most of the shop windows are boarded up, a few others are only dimly lit. The wizards and witches who go about their businesses today merely scurry from door to door. There are no crowds chatting, no families eating ice cream, no happy kids laughing. The faces of the people who cross our path are tense.

It's been like this since the Battle of Hogwarts. The war between the Death Eaters and the Resistance is ever-present, even though the greater part of the magical population is not actively involved. The Dark Lord's reign of terror does the rest.

Since the street is so empty, we hardly have to dodge anyone and, contrary to expectations, reach the aforementioned back alley without a single incident.

I lean against a brick wall and Granger in turn leans against me, just like we discussed. So we will wait in cozy togetherness under the Invisibility Cloak until my mother shows up. I can't believe how macabre this whole thing is.

As a precaution, I slide the hand that isn't holding my wand behind my thigh. My Occlumency barriers are back in place, but I still don't trust my hands.

"You have the sequence in mind?" I whisper and Granger nods.

"Naturally," she replies just as quietly.

"Good," I hum. "We'll have to be quick."

"I know."

"And you will stay under the Invisibility Cloak."

"Merlin Malfoy, I know the plan. As *you* know, I'm the one who devised it."

"No need to get your knickers in a twist, Granger," I reply nonchalantly. "Just wanted to make sure we're on the same page for once."

"I'd rather you shut up," she huffs. "Busy yourself with something else while we wait, will you?"

"Oh? What do you have in mind?" I ask, feigning sudden attention. Then I start musing out loud. "Do you want us to make good use of this smoochy situation we're in? Come to think of it, we could switch places. I could pin you against the wall and—"

"For fuck's sake, get your mind out of the gutter, Malfoy!"

"Considering the way you're pressing your arse against me, that turns out to be a little difficult."

Granger audibly gasps.

"You - are - absolutely - *unbelievable*," she squeezes out.

"Why, thank you."

Despite the tension in the air, I have to grin, but then Granger shifts her weight to her other leg to find a better position, which only results in said arse rubbing against me. My grin promptly disappears.

"You know, that doesn't make it any bett—"

"Shush!"

Granger interrupts me by pressing her free hand firmly against my thigh. I tense and look up. From where we are standing, we can still see a few meters into Diagon Alley.

And there she is.

My mother's face is ghostly pale and she is thinner than ever. (Or I simply can't remember because I haven't seen her in months.) The sight of her gives me a pang. I know it's mostly my fault that she's in such bad shape. She probably felt the Dark Lord's wrath after he found out I wasn't dead, just defected. It's an agonizing, almost unbearable thought.

I feel Granger raise her wand hand.

"*Imperio*," she whispers.

I grit my teeth so hard it hurts.

I didn't like that part of the plan any more than I liked the *Obliviate* Granger suggested, but eventually I had to accept that dragging my mother into the back alley with my bare hands wasn't an option. No matter how few people are here today, one witness is still one too many.

My mother stops and sways, then her gaze flickers and finally goes blank. She clutches her purse a little tighter and takes long, determined steps towards our hiding place.

Only when she steps around the corner of the back alley does Granger jump back into action.

With a few quick, practiced movements and some nonverbal incantations, she casts a Repelling Charm, a Privacy Charm, and a *Muffliato* over the area before eventually canceling the Imperius Curse. Just as my mother's eyes clear and she fumbles for her wand in terror, I pull the Invisibility Cloak off my head. Granger remains hidden underneath, as agreed, and presumably has both her eyes and wand trained on the back alley's entrance.

"Mother," I say, taking a step towards her.

Her eyes widen in surprise at the unexpected sight she has probably given up hoping for.

"Draco?" she whispers, lips trembling.

Her eyes flit nervously from left to right.

And she *ought* to know better.

She should be aware that just because someone looks like me it doesn't mean she can automatically trust that person. But she doesn't seem to be in control of herself at all.

Her hands reach for me before I manage to say another word. She pulls me into her bony arms and clutches my neck like she's a drowning woman on the open sea and I'm her life line.

"I don't have much time," I choke out, keeping my eyes on the brick wall behind her. Now is not the time to get sentimental. "Is it true that the Dark Lord has called a meeting at the Manor?"

She takes a shaky breath and blinks up at me in confusion.

"Pardon? What's wrong, Draco? Are you all right? Oh Merlin, you look healthy."

"Not now, mother." I shake my head resolutely, a muscle in my jaw rippling. "The next time I see you, I will answer all your questions, I promise, but today I am the one who needs answers."

I don't know if I can keep the promise to explain everything to her one day, and yet I give it to her. My chest constricts painfully, but I ignore the feeling and instead roll my shoulders to regain focus. Her hands slide from my neck to my chest and dig into my robes.

"I need to know when the Dark Lord will be at the Manor," I repeat, as she's still speechless. "Tell me. Now. Please."

"The second weekend of February," she whispers, her eyes filling with tears. "Saturday. What are you up to, darling? Please don't come there. That would be your—"

"Thank you. Don't forget, I love—"

"*Stupor. Obliviate.*"

"—you."

Granger's quiet words hit me like a torrent of ice-cold water, although of course I knew they would come as soon as we had our answer. Merciless witch.

My mother's body goes limp in my arms and I slowly lower her to the ground. We'll cast the *Rennervate* as soon as we exit the back alley, and hopefully she'll assume she passed out on her way to the shops. In fact, it's not even unlikely given how thin and frail she looks.

I crouch next to her for a few seconds, pressing the heels of my hands into my eyes until I see stars. Then I swallow hard and leap up to my feet.

Granger lifts the Invisibility Cloak and I duck my head to slip underneath. This time, we're standing chest to chest. She looks up at me with a worried expression on her face and takes a deep breath.

And then she does something completely unexpected. She stands on tiptoe and puts her free hand on my cheek. A moment later her lips are on the corner of my mouth.

It's not a real kiss, and both its ephemerality and my surprise prevent me from even attempting to return it. But the touch is there and so are her whispered words.

"I'm sorry," she breathes against my lips.

Then she lowers her hand and wraps her fingers tightly around my left wrist. I catch one last glimpse of my mother before Granger casts the *Rennervate*. Her grip on my forearm tightens and she taps the back of my hand with her index finger.

I know what I have to do.

When my mother opens her eyes, blinking hard, and stares confused at the cloudy, grey sky, I shove my free hand into the pocket of my cargo trousers and activate our Return Portkey.

A second later, we're gone with a barely audible *whoosh*.

Apparently no one seriously expected our mission in Diagon Alley to go so smoothly, because when Granger and I step out of the lift that has, as usual, taken us from the roof of St. Mungo's to the command centre, Potter, Blaise and Ginny jump to their feet in unison.

"Was she there?" asks Blaise, who is the first to recover his voice after scanning us for any obvious injuries with a quick glance. "Everything went well?"

Granger nods and hands Potter the Invisibility Cloak.

"And when will the meeting take place?" he demands to know.

"The second weekend of February," I reply flatly.

The sight of my mother still grips me to the marrow. As does the feel of Granger's lips on mine and the gentle touch of her hand on my cheek. I don't dare look at her because I feel fucking unstable. Instead, I prefer to watch Potter circle the date on the calendar hanging on one of the parchment-covered walls.

"We don't have much time left," he says through gritted teeth. "Only two weeks to get organized and come up with a plan. And this time we mustn't make any mistakes. I will call a meeting as soon as possible."

The murmurs of Potter, Blaise, and Ginny blend into a single static noise. I stop listening and concentrate on maintaining my Occlumency barriers. One in particular. Which, by the way, isn't an easy task when the person I pushed behind it chooses that precise moment to wrap their little hand around my upper arm.

Granger's fingers squeeze and my gaze flicks to her face.

"Come with me," she says quietly and nods towards the door.

I don't know what makes me comply with her request without objection. Maybe the flicker in her eyes. Maybe her unyielding grip as she drags me out of the room. Maybe the fact that she doesn't pay any attention to Potter when he calls after her.

We silently cross the atrium and enter the training room. It's early Friday evening and the training is over for today. There will be dinner soon. All rebels are either still in their sleeping quarters or already in the dining hall. So when the door clicks shut behind us, it's suddenly dead quiet.

Granger lets go of my upper arm, but instead of pulling away completely, she slowly runs her fingers down the sleeve of my rebel shirt until they come to rest on my wrist. Her breathing quickens and she starts shaking all over.

I knit my brows in confusion.

Nothing went wrong during the mission. Nobody saw us, we have our answer, my mother is *Obliviated* and therefore cannot betray us. What is she worried about?

"I want you to stop occluding," she whispers without preamble.

At the last word, her free hand twitches and she quickly clenches it into a fist.

"No," I reply promptly and then grumble, "Why should I?"

I search her face for a logical explanation for this command, which seems to come out of nowhere. Why is she so intent on making me stop occluding? Besides, we've already discussed the subject at length. Two weeks ago. In her sleeping quarters. I just can't get my head around why she feels entitled to interfere. Why she thinks I (and her) would be better off if I dropped the barriers. Why she doesn't understand how much strength that would take from me. It's easier to keep up the walls than to pick up the debris that would inevitably result if I broke them down.

Granger's gaze wanders anxiously over my face and then she screws up her own. The hand still resting on the hem of my sleeve is shaking so badly now that I can feel it. Whatever it is she wants to say, it seems to take a tremendous effort.

Her eyes find mine. I notice that her black pupils have dilated to the maximum, almost completely superseding the dark brown irides around them.

Pure panic. That's what's suddenly dominating her face, and I can't make any sense of it.

"What's wrong, Granger?" I ask impatiently. "Just spit it out."

She takes a deep breath. When she finally speaks, her voice cracks several times.

"Neither of us knows if we'll survive the attack on the Manor," she murmurs.

"I'm aware," I reply, still uncomprehending.

"Maybe asking you to stop occluding is selfish," she continues, ignoring my words. "I understand why you're doing it. I really do. You're trying to protect yourself and your mind, and it's not like I'm unable to relate. On the contrary, I—"

Her voice breaks again and she shudders.

Then the hand that is still on my arm moves and suddenly I feel her fingers wrap around mine. One by one. Ice cold. Trembling. It's the first time our hands touch. The first time that she allows, even *actively* encourages, me to touch her, apart from that one day when I had to carry her to the trauma room because of her injury.

I stiffen and look down at our hands, watching her slowly interlace our fingers. My heart skips a beat and my breath hitches. Thick, black smoke floods my mind.

"No, it's *certainly* selfish," she continues. My eyes flit back to her face. Her attention is still on our hands. "But there's no point in always repressing everything, locking away all emotions and pretending that they simply don't exist. Sometimes we need to feel and accept them, right? You're stronger than I thought. And I think—I think I want that, too. Especially if it might be over in two weeks."

Granger gasps for air. I'd really like to say something in response, but I can't think of anything clever, so I keep staring at her in silence.

Her hand twitches in mine. It sends little shockwaves all the way up my arm.

"You're stronger than I thought. It just dawned on me today, in that alley with your mother, although deep down I've probably known for months. You always do whatever it takes, even if you don't like it or it scares the shit out of you. I think that's incredibly brave. I want—I *have to*—apologize for calling you a coward so many times."

I blink once, twice.

"Granger—" I begin, but she shakes her head.

"I'm afraid I am. The coward, that is." She shudders again, but the grip on my hand tightens and her fingers stop shaking. "And fuck, I'm so fed up with it. If I really only have two weeks left, I don't want to be a coward for another second. And that's why I'm asking you to stop occluding yourself. So I can do something brave, too."

She lets out a small, desperate laugh. And then, before I even realize what's happening, she lifts my hand and pulls it towards her.

My fingers flex and the instinct I've drilled into myself over the past few months almost makes me wrest my hand free and back away from her. But only *almost*, for Granger's grip is firm and determined.

She releases my fingers, grasps the back of my hand, and then presses my palm onto her chest. Directly onto the spot where her racing, wildly pounding heart is.

We both gasp at the same time. Granger's gaze snaps to my face and our eyes meet.

Now it's *my* fingers trembling on the soft skin just above the collar of her long-sleeved top, but her hand is relentless, holding mine in place.

As if controlled by a foreign power, I take a step forward and blink down at her with slightly parted lips. My head is spinning. And then a whole series of random memories flash through my mind so quickly that I feel dizzy.

Granger, casting her shield to protect me. Granger's lips, curling into one of her tiny, dangerous grins. Granger, straddling my lap, her hands buried in my hair. Granger, crouching down next to me on the roof of St. Mungo's, concern and horror on her face. Granger's dark eyes, contemplating me during Theo's interrogation. Granger, snapping at me that she doesn't want me as long as I'm like this. Granger's index finger, pointing at my face as she argues with me. Granger's scent, enveloping me as she steps closer before Potter throws the Invisibility Cloak over us. Granger's lips, gently touching the corner of my mouth after she Obliviated my mother.

And isn't that worth the pain after all?

"Please come back to me," she whispers longingly.

She's never asked me so desperately for anything before.

Granger isn't the type of witch who asks. She demands, she commands, she takes what she wants, when she wants and where she wants. She doesn't beg. She doesn't plead. But now she's standing on tiptoe, looking up at me hopefully, and my hand is on her heart.

And... fuck.

Thick, black smoke vanishes into thin air, spiraling upwards until the view is clear.

A chrome black portcullis begins to glow, the metal melting and seeping away until nothing is left of it.

And a black marble wall quakes. Cracks become visible in the heavy stones until the wall collapses piece by piece and finally, with a loud rumble, disappears in a cloud of dust.

Once again, Granger's eyes dart between mine. I still have no idea what she's seeing there. Maybe I should ask her about it one day.

As my mental barriers fall, my shoulders relax. I obediently bend down to her and rest my forehead against hers. Gently and carefully, I run my fingers up her collarbone until they come to rest on the back of her neck. Inhaling her now-familiar scent deeply, I surrender completely to the touch. And when her hand finds my cheek, my eyes flutter shut.

Granger leans against me, then wraps both arms around my torso and pulls me into the embrace I thought I'd never get. My breath hitches for the second time.

I grab one of her soft curls, weave it around my fingertips and bathe in the feeling that comes along with it. I'm instantly addicted to it.

We don't kiss.

We just stand there.

And breathe.

And feel.

Chapter End Notes

What a ride! I hope you enjoyed this chapter. Attentive readers might have noticed something; I'm so curious about your theories!

And it's time for me to say thank you again: for already more than 350 kudos. You are the best! Hugs. ♥

32. SILVER GREY

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

32. SILVER GREY

It fucking hurts.

That's my only thought as I sink to my knees in front of the freshly heaped up mound of earth. As soon as we left the training room, I asked Granger to bring me here. It's a long overdue visit.

We're in a plain meadow near the grove where we use to hide our Return Portkeys. It's not really a suitable place for a grave, but the surroundings are pleasantly quiet and green, or at least what I can still see of it in the twilight.

It's drizzling lightly. My cargo trousers are already soaked at the knees, but I hardly feel it. There's something else that makes up for this inconvenience. A delicate hand on the back of my neck, just below my hairline. The hand is steady and warm, its thumb rubbing comforting circles into my skin.

I think a tear escapes my eye, but thanks to the weather it's hard to tell. Either way, I don't feel the need to wipe it away. Creevey deserves it. He was a good lad.

After a few minutes, I stand up with a sigh. I raise my wand and make a few lilies of the valley break through the loosened earth. It's still far too cold for spring flowers, and most likely they'll freeze to death in the next few nights, but that doesn't really matter. I can come back here and conjure them up whenever I feel like it.

"Let's go," I say quietly to Granger.

"Are you okay?" she whispers.

She steps to my side and looks up at me, concern clearly visible on her face.

"I'm fine," I reply, nodding.

"All right, then."

Her hand grabs mine. It's an unfamiliar feeling. An alarmingly *good* feeling. I gently interlace our fingers and pull her close before she activates our Portkey.

The way from the roof to Granger's sleeping quarters is a whirl of color and sound. The

rebels who cross our path in the underground corridors all give us strange looks, which could be because we're still in our combat gear and completely drenched, or because Granger hasn't let go of my hand once since we left the meadow. Not on the roof, not in the lift, not in the empty command centre, not in the atrium, not in the tunnels.

She only breaks away from me when we reach her room, and even then only to close the door behind us and cast a locking spell. When that's done, she carefully places her wand on the desk and slowly turns to face me.

Out of habit, I shove my hands into my trouser pockets as she stands on tiptoe to kiss me, wrapping her arms around my neck and pressing herself against me. Her lips are so bloody soft. I have no idea how I survived for two full weeks without kissing her.

When she pulls away after a few seconds, I growl in frustration, but she puts a finger on my lips, stopping me from protesting.

"I want you to touch me," she murmurs, almost seeming... *shy*?

"Granger, you don't have to—"

"I know," she replies firmly. "But I *want* it."

I search her face for signs of the panic I saw when she first grabbed my hand in the training room, but there's none left. Just brown, trusting eyes. A warm feeling spreads through my chest at this realization.

I slowly pull my hands out of my pockets. Then, hesitantly, I lift them to cup Granger's jaw before leaning down to kiss her.

It's a tender kiss. The slowest, gentlest and most savouring we've ever exchanged. I caress the soft skin of her cheeks and feel her shiver under my fingers in response. When I look at her again to make sure everything is all right, she returns my gaze with hooded eyes.

She reaches out and deftly undoes the straps of my shoulder holster. I allow her to take it off and drop it on the floor, then I return the favour and she quickly shakes off the leather. Impatient witch.

I pull the long-sleeved top over my head and throw it away, kicking off my boots at the same time. They land next to Granger's in front of her desk. She takes a shaky breath and grabs the hem of her shirt.

"No," I whisper, shaking my head. "Let me do that. Please."

And she nods.

I sink onto the edge of her bed and watch her expectantly, letting her decide whether or not she wants to join me.

When she sits down next to me, the mattress barely dips. She needs to fucking eat more. I want her to sit next to me at every meal in the dining hall from now on, and if I have to feed

her personally, then so be it. Well, actually I'd *love* to feed her, come to think of it.

The thought makes me smirk.

"What's wrong?" Granger asks anxiously.

"I want to feed you," I inform her mirthfully.

"You want to—" she begins confused, but I shake my head.

"I'll explain later," I assure her. "Lie down."

Once again, she surprises me by not asking any more questions, but simply doing as she is told. She obviously meant it when she said she wanted to do something brave. Encouraged by this, I place my hand on her hip and gently stroke her. Then I get on my knees and look down at her. At her pretty, curious, *hopeful* face. Gods.

"If I do something you don't want me to do, tell me," I insist. "I'll stop immediately, I promise."

She nods again, and that's my starting shot.

Granger has no idea how many times I've imagined what it would be like to touch her. And I, in turn, had no idea it would feel so bloody fantastic. After Ginny's birthday party, when I claimed I wouldn't touch her until she begged me to, I had a pretty big mouth. What I feel now, however, is not triumph. It's humility. Affection. *Gratitude*.

I start with Granger's cargo trousers. Carefully, I roll the fabric down her legs until they are bare in front of me. I touch her ankles. First the right, then the left. I caress her calves, her knees, her thighs. My lips follow the path of my fingers. Slowly, cautiously, devotedly.

Granger runs a hand through my hair and I think that's a good sign.

Next, I push up the hem of her long-sleeved top. The exposed skin is treated in the same way as her legs. I fondle her pelvic bones, her belly button, and the quivering spot below her sternum. My mouth breathes soft kisses on her stomach until it is completely covered in goosebumps.

I help Granger out of her shirt and toss it aside carelessly. My fingers trace her collarbones, dance over her shoulders, travel down her arms. As we hold hands for a brief moment, I lower myself and nip at her neck with abandon.

My breathing has quickened drastically, and I'm so hard it's almost painful, but that's not what tonight is about.

"You feel fucking perfect," I murmur against her jawbone. "I want it to feel as good for you as it does for me. Or better. Do you trust me?"

She turns her head and presses her lips firmly against mine.

"I trust you," she whispers against my mouth.

I let out a relieved sigh.

Granger opens her legs for me and I slide between them. It's easy. As if I was made for it. As if *we* were made for each other. Merlin, it feels so good.

I nestle against her and let my hands wander over her arms once more. *Up, up, up*. As I draw out our kiss, I slide one hand into her hair and the other under her back to undo her bra. I've seen her completely naked before, but finally being able to touch her makes my hands tremble. It takes a total of three attempts before I manage to conquer the clasp and peel the annoying fabric off her beautiful body. Only then do I break away from her lips and turn to her breasts.

Granger's breathing quickens too, and her nipples pebble as I stroke the underside of her breasts with my thumbs. I lean in and kiss her there, too, until she starts to whimper. The hand she's buried in my hair tightens its grip. She gasps and arches her back, prompting me to slowly roll my pelvis against hers. She keens longingly.

God, all those little noises she's making. Her reactions to my body are divine. I wouldn't mind shagging her right away, but today I'll be patient. I'll take my sweet fucking time and savor every single second.

I look up and notice that her eyes are on me. And no, there is actually no panic in it. No fear. No doubt. All that is visible in her dark eyes is desire, and I could swear that my face wears the same expression.

"Please," she whines, pulling me closer.

A groan escapes me.

I gently cup her breasts and flick my tongue over her nipples a few more times, then push myself off the mattress and sink down next to her. I pull her against me with one arm while my other hand makes its way down her stomach. I pause questioningly at the edge of her knickers. Only when Granger cranes her neck and kisses me in a way that is both impatient and clearly inviting do I slowly slide my fingers under the fabric.

I ascertain two things.

Firstly, Granger actually seems to trust me, because she closes her eyes almost immediately and begins to grind against my hand rather needily. And that's fucking hot.

Secondly, she's incredibly wet. She *is* ready for me, even more so than she was the first time in the equipment room or that one night in my sleeping quarters.

Fuck, maybe I'll come in my trousers.

With difficulty, I refocus on what this is all about and send my fingers on the journey. The reaction I get when I touch her where she seems to need me most makes up for my restraint over the last few months in a matter of seconds.

Her eyes flutter shut, her pelvis bucks and her mouth leaves mine, her head sinking back onto the pillow as she lets out a deep moan.

I lean down to pepper her neck with a myriad of open-mouthed kisses.

"You should *always* be touched like this, Granger," I pant earnestly against her skin. "Every day, every hour, every goddamn minute."

She takes a sharp breath, and when I look at her a moment later, her eyes are a little wet. I lean my forehead against hers and kiss her affectionately as I ease two fingers inside her and find a good rhythm.

The kiss becomes heated and after a while I have to pull away from her so as not to lose control. Instead, I prefer to watch her. I analyze her facial play, her moans and gasps, her whispered words. I find out what she likes and what she likes *even more*. I'm a quick learner.

Granger is absolutely starved. When she shatters in my arms after just a few minutes, whimpering softly, I instinctively know I'm fucked. I would give *anything* to be able to do that to her every day. Every hour, every minute, whenever she wants, really.

After her orgasm has subsided, she crawls on top of me and pulls the covers over us. My erection protests, straining against the zip of my trousers, but I studiously ignore it.

All I can think about is the fact that Granger is completely relaxed as I wrap my arms tightly around her; that she sighs contentedly as my hands move over her body in circular, soothing motions. Over her buttocks, her thighs, her spine, her shoulder blades.

I carefully memorize the feel of her skin under my fingertips. And also her gaze, which rests on my face the entire time as she patiently allows me to hold her, shivering with pleasure. I could swear she's never looked at me like that before. What does this expression mean?

Affection. Yes, that's it. Satisfaction. Bliss. *Happiness?*

It's hard to believe how much everything can change in a single day.

If *this* is my reward, I'll happily never occlude myself again.

It's inquisitive fingers that rouse me from my half-sleep.

I blink, rather disoriented, and watch for a few seconds as a few silver grey dust particles dance through the air. A strip of morning sun falls into the room through the magical window. The sight promises a beautiful January day. It occurs to me that I could have my morning coffee on the roof.

As my gaze wanders and falls on some tower-like stacks of books, I remember where I actually am. I'm in Granger's bed. In her sleeping quarters. And that, in turn, explains the gentle touches that woke me up.

Said inquisitive fingers are joined by a soft pair of lips. Instantly panting, I turn my head to shift my fresh attention to the responsible witch.

Granger is kneeling over me and kissing her way down my torso. I let out a hoarse groan and sit up a little to get a better look at her.

Then I freeze in shock and intuitively clench my hands into fists to make myself physically aware that they're not doing anything forbidden.

All clear. They are safely on the mattress on either side of Granger's thighs. Relief washes over me and I sink back into the pillows.

Granger, who has not missed my reaction, looks up at me through her eyelashes in amusement.

"Your self-control is impressive," she whispers, a faint smile on her lips, "but you're allowed touch me, Malfoy, remember?"

Huh? *Oh.*

Tags of memories of last night flood my mind and I involuntarily breathe a little faster. It will probably take me a while to get used to the new circumstances.

"Old habits die hard," I reply with a smirk as I relax my hands.

"I see," she murmurs, running her palms down my chest and abs until they find their already rock-hard target. "I think you should be rewarded for internalizing them so eagerly."

Then she bends down and falls silent quite effectively.

When her lips close around my cock and her tongue begins the *reward*, I tilt my head back and moan. My hips jerk upwards and I bite my lower lip. This witch.

It feels way too good. Oh, I should have known. After all, she always strives to be the absolute best in everything she does and *tackles*.

"Fuck, Granger," I rasp in a rather throaty voice.

I reach out a hand and gently weave it into her soft curls. When my thumb strokes her cheekbone tenderly, she doesn't even bat an eyelid. Instead, she raises her eyes and gives me a hot look. Still firm around my cock, her lips curl into a wide, smug grin.

It's the best morning in years.

I have unfamiliar feelings for Hermione Granger.

That's what I secretly admit to myself as I lie on her bed less than an hour later with my hands clasped behind my head, watching her don her combat gear.

Her curls are still damp from our shower together and her face is more relaxed than ever. She seems absolutely at ease, satisfied, *happy*. The look on her face mirrors the tingling feeling of contentment in my chest, and I don't mind how disgustingly maudlin that thought is.

"Stay," I demand in a deep voice. "Let's spend the whole day in bed."

Granger glances at me, grins mischievously and tightens the straps of her wand holster. Then she slowly strolls over and stops right in front of me.

"As tempting as that is, and believe me, you're actually *quite* tempting," she says, amused, tracing the dips and edges of my naked upper body with her eyes, "the others won't appreciate it if I'm late for the watch relief. And I can't even lie and say I misread the schedule because I drew it up myself."

She winks at me before grabbing her robes from the end of the bed.

"You could take me with you," I suggest, feigning nonchalance.

I don't want to sound desperate or clingy, but for some unfathomable reason I'm not ready to let her go just yet. Ever since my occlumency barriers fell, I've felt raw and vulnerable. Maybe I don't trust myself either, at least not one hundred percent. That being said, I still have questions that I suspect Granger will finally answer. With a bit of luck.

At my words, she lifts an eyebrow in surprise. I can imagine what's going through her head. Aside from the missions and recces I've been a part of so far, I've never left Resistance headquarters. I haven't seen any of the rebel guard posts up close, except that one watch tent in front of which I surrendered to Potter last summer. The same goes for the other camps. Allowing me to come along would be another vote of confidence, and I think she's aware of that.

It only takes Granger a few seconds to make her decision.

"Fine with me," she replies with a shrug. "Are you someone who starts whining when you're bored? In that case, I'll have you—"

But I'm already on my feet, jerking her towards me and silencing her with a firm kiss. Then I let go of her, return her sparkling gaze with an exuberant grin and get dressed in a flash.

Granger was right. The Hogsmeade day watch *is* boring, but I'm not going to complain. While she spends most of the time pacing up and down in the same spot, vigilantly scanning our surroundings, I content myself with watching her from the outside wall of the house I'm leaning against.

The other Resistance fighters keeping watch today are spread out at regular intervals around the village and are therefore not in sight. However, Granger has assured me that in an emergency, a Patronus can cover the distance in a matter of seconds. In addition, the guard posts have been set up in such a way that everyone can hear the alarm spells of the others.

I have to admit that even though I've been with them for so many months, I'm still impressed by the rebels' organizational skills. With every piece of information Granger divulges, I understand a little more how they have been able to defend themselves so successfully all these years. What the Death Eaters start with sheer attack power, dark magic and ruthlessness, the Resistance ends with wits, discipline and perfectly used resources.

It's only after Granger has told me everything there is to know about the guard posts and we've stood in silence for a while that I carefully broach the subject that has been on my mind for months.

"May I ask you something?"

Granger nods and gives me a prompting look.

"Don't get me wrong," I begin hesitantly, shoving my free hand into the pocket of my cargo trousers. In the other, I twirl my wand. "At the beginning of my stay at headquarters, I had the feeling that you were pretty much constantly angry. About everything and with everyone. Even with Potter and Weasley. There was nothing but *wrath*. I was wondering why. Quite apart from the fact that we are stuck in a perpetually raging war, of course."

She stops dead in her tracks and shifts her attention from the edge of the grove that lines Hogsmeade entirely to me. Her gaze flickers slightly, leading me to believe she already knows what I'm getting at.

"I would have called it *gruffness*, and that was only the case when you were around."

I smile indulgently at her, but remain silent.

"You've given that a lot of thought, haven't you?" she asks, to which I slowly nod. "Care to share?"

I take a moment to carefully choose my words. Especially after last night, when she completely let herself go and put her trust in me, I don't want to hurt her, much less argue with her.

"I think you feel like nobody cares about you."

I think back to the brief conversation we had in the equipment room before we left to check the Manor's security measures.

Granger draws in a sharp breath, which tells me she remembers, too.

"I suppose you're about to tell me that's nonsense," she mutters, frowning and pursing her lips.

I cock my head slightly.

Well, *meanwhile* it's definitely nonsense, Granger. Because I care. I fucking do.

I don't say it out loud.

She continues, "I know I'm important to Harry and Ron, but I can't say I got over it quickly, let alone particularly well, that it took them so bloody long to free me from Greyback's clutches." She sighs softly and shrugs. "Or that they didn't immediately notice that I was no longer with them when the battle was over. Maybe it's unfair, but after the whole thing there was a certain distance between us and I never really managed to take the necessary step to bridge that gap."

It's a surprisingly sad confession. So I was right in surmising that she has built her own cell; that she is consciously isolating herself from those who would normally give her the support she needs to fully recover.

Granger gazes into the distance.

"It was easier to focus on work. To build up the Resistance and strategize. And at some point that was my new everyday life."

Another piece of the great Granger mystery falls into place.

"I understand," I say honestly, because I really do. It was the same for me for years.

I approach her, reach out and brush a strand of hair from her face. Slowly but surely, darkness descends on the village, making her dark brown eyes sparkle in the light of the street lamps.

"But now you have a follow-up question," she deduces.

I have to grin. Attentive, clever witch.

"Yeah," I admit, letting my gaze roam over her face. "You just said that you were mainly *gruff* in my presence, or even because of me. And that's true. You didn't treat Pansy, Daphne, Astoria, or Theo that way. I, on the other hand, was a huge thorn in your side. Why?"

It's another mystery I've been puzzling over since day one because I just don't understand it.

Yes, I was a Death Eater, even a coward in her eyes. And even before the war we didn't like each other, I'm aware of that. However, her behavior always struck me as a tad exaggerated. Irrationally so. To this day, I can't shake the feeling that there's more to it than that.

Granger lets out a soft laugh. It sounds a little desperate.

"I *knew* that one day we would have to talk about it," she says, shaking her head and raising her eyes to the sky in resignation.

"And?" I probe. "Is that day today?"

She remains silent for a while, even turning away and going back to observing the edge of the forest.

Odd. Why wouldn't she want to look me in the face while she answers?

And finally I get it, because her words positively rock my world.

"Fine," she begins hesitantly, the tone of her voice suggesting that she's rolling her eyes. "Let's just say that back at Hogwarts, I had a... soft spot for you."

What - the - fuck?

I stiffen and shake my head in confusion.

"No way," I reply incredulously. "You didn't."

"Oh, I did," she mutters and sniffs. "No need to panic, though. It's not a touching story about an unrequited first great love, if that's what you're worried about. For something like *that*, you were far too rude. It was just a stupid, little infatuation. Trivial, really. Without rhyme or reason. Not continuously either, just from time to time. Under other circumstances, it would not even be worth mentioning."

The confession catches me so off guard that I am absolutely speechless.

I stare at Granger's back, silent and motionless, until she turns around to face me. Our eyes meet and I have to swallow hard. She's clutching her wand so tightly that her knuckles are white, which is why I'm sure that she's telling the truth. Apparently, she's having a bloody hard time admitting all of this. Well, no wonder.

"A little infatuation," I echo tonelessly.

She nods slowly and brushes a stray curl out of her face.

"Well, and after you defected, it turned out pretty quickly," she takes a deep breath, "that you appeal to me even more these days. In spite of everything. It was pretty confusing. And *that* made me incredibly angry, yes."

Understandable. So that's why she never managed to stay away from me, even though she was beastly to me most of the time. Many of her reactions, which I've often brooded over for days, suddenly make sense, as do her gazes. Still, I can hardly believe it.

"How? Why?" I stammer, not very eloquently.

Granger frowns and narrows her eyes a little as she thinks.

"Hm, I believe it started in our third year," she murmurs. "Right after I smacked you in the face for making fun of Hagrid? Yes, that must've been it, I think. I started pondering your behaviour and what might be behind your controlled façade. I didn't want to believe that it was just a matter of character, so I started watching you, analyzing you. With the unexpected side effect that I realized how handsome you were, especially when you felt unobserved and

weren't busy insulting someone. I wondered what it would be like if we were just classmates, not arch-enemies. Just a girl and a boy, you know."

She huffs and grimaces.

"In any case," she continues, "I well and truly racked my brains about you. At one point I was certain that thanks to your parents and the pure-blood society you grew up in, you had no choice but to act like a little shit. That you just didn't know any better. I felt sorry for you. It even went so far that, in sixth year, I was genuinely worried about you. You were in such bad shape it scared the hell out of me. While I constantly defended you, Harry was adamant that you had *voluntarily* joined the Death Eaters and were up to something. I argued with him about it more than once. Kept telling him he had no proof and to just leave you alone."

Now Granger moans softly and rubs her face.

"After he'd injured you so badly with the *Sectumsempra*, I didn't speak to him for days. I was furious. It made me so angry that he wanted to make you the scapegoat for something that, *in my eyes*, you weren't responsible for. Well, you can imagine it was quite a kick in the teeth when it turned out that he had been right all along."

Oh yes, I can.

"I felt somewhat betrayed," she finally whispers, looking down at her boots. "After the night at the Manor that feeling manifested, I think. Not to mention the fact that you then climbed the Death Eater ladder. For *years*, I believed in your innocence. Persuaded myself that you were better than you let everyone believe. Even found you, well, kind of attractive. Hence the huge disappointment. I wasn't necessarily disappointed in you, though, but rather in myself. I always thought I had a good knowledge of human nature and then you turned out to be the villain. I was ashamed that I defended you so often and even felt sorry for you. That I found you cute at times, even though you were nowhere near nice to me. I felt like the most foolish girl in the world. It's probably silly, but the *thorn* ran pretty deep."

And with that, and a twitch of her eyebrows, Granger ends her utterly insightful monologue.

So there it is: the *mystery* fully revealed, laid bare at my feet.

Oddly enough, it gives me a pang. Her last few sentences in particular don't make me feel any better, although I finally understand what was going through her mind when I showed up at Resistance headquarters after a whopping seven years as a Death Eater. I don't feel flattered. In fact, now I'm the one who's ashamed.

"I didn't realize you were giving me so much attention—" I say lamely, unable to think of anything better. My brain is literally blank. "—and even defending me."

"It's not like you *should* have known," she deadpans. "Besides, it wouldn't have made any difference if you'd known, would it?"

Granger's smile recovers. She takes a step forward and tilts her head back to look up at me.

"I'm so sorry," I mumble. "I made so many wrong decisions and I was—"

She lifts a finger and puts it on my lips.

"Stop it," she replies, shaking her head. "Firstly, it's been ages, and secondly, looking back, I *was* right about you, wasn't I? I didn't tell you all this to make you feel guilty, but because you asked and I wanted to be honest with you. And *maybe* I overreacted a bit when Harry brought you to camp, yes."

"That's the understatement of the century," I quip, the corners of my mouth quirking.

Then I get thoughtful.

"I'd like to know how it would have been under different circumstances," I say, frowning. "Without the war, without any prejudices. Maybe we would have actually become friends. Maybe I would have asked you out at some point. Or we would still have been at loggerheads all the time, who knows? I mean, you *were* annoying."

Granger snorts. I quickly lean in, take her face in my hands and kiss her.

"Self-righteous, swotty, boisterous and stubborn," I whisper softly against her mouth before nibbling at her bottom lip. "Oh wait, you haven't changed at all."

She sighs, rolls her eyes and half-heartedly slaps me on the chest.

"And you're still insufferable," she mutters, though she's grinning, "but also still very handsome."

"So it's a perfect match after all," I muse.

"Well, we'll never find out what would have happened under different circumstances," Granger gets back to the actual topic. "Because we live in *this* world."

"You're right," I reply, stroking her jawbone. "Then I suggest we make the best of it. In the here and now."

I pull her closer and steal another kiss.

Oh yeah, I *have* feelings for Hermione Granger.

Chapter End Notes

Oh, I just love unexpected surprises. Well? What do you think? Will [REBEL](#) be huge fun? For everyone who was at a loss after the last chapter: We've officially gone from black to grey! Plus, those of you who enjoyed the seven-stage chapter might be looking forward to the next chapter, hehe. Have a nice weekend. Hugs. ♡

33. SOFT GREY

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

33. SOFT GREY

The public display of the 'peace' Granger and I have made with each other is not an active choice by either of us.

Rather, it creeps in. Like the soft grey moonlight that's recently been pouring into my sleeping quarters through the no longer curtained magical window. Or like the tidewater of the North Sea that lapped in gentle waves against the gritty sea shore of the Isle of Sheppey on the night of our Greyback mission. Or like the glistening morning dew on the Apparition meadow near Box Hill.

Although we spend almost every spare minute together, shagging on every imaginable surface of our sleeping quarters and sitting for hours on the roof of St Mungo's talking in whispers about anything and everything, the true nature of our relationship remains hidden from the other Resistance fighters for a few more days.

The revelation happens step by step, unconsciously, and (funnily enough) in exactly seven stages. That seems to be our thing.

On *Day One*, the Sunday after our day watch in Hogsmeade, Granger enters the dining hall where I'm already seated at the usual table with Ginny and Blaise. She only discovers us when she steps away from the buffet with a plate in her hand. Her gaze darts to me, then to Ginny and Blaise, and finally to the empty seat next to me. And since I think I know what's on her mind, I give her an encouraging, if slightly crooked, smile by lifting the left corner of my mouth.

She takes a deep breath, squares her shoulders and makes her way over to us.

As Granger sinks onto the bench next to me, Ginny falls silent for a moment, but then recovers and continues her monologue about Smith's annoying behaviour during the last watch relief, as if it's not at all unusual for Granger to seek our company at dinner.

My gaze falls on Granger's hand, which is shaking slightly, and I adjust my sitting position so that my knee lightly touches her thigh. *Take it easy, Granger. I am here. All is well.* I'm pleased to see that, probably thanks to my reassurance, the tension in her shoulders eases.

She's silent for most of the meal, but eventually Blaise asks her a trivial question and she actually answers with a small smile. After that, a completely normal conversation develops

and Ginny in particular beams a little more with every word Granger speaks.

As she pushes her empty plate away and I see Blaise's stunned look, I realise that it's probably the first time he's seen her eat a full meal. I'm not prepared for the feelings that this thought evokes in me.

I'm proud of Granger. Proud because she overcame her inhibitions. Because she gave in to the urge to be near me. Because she's finally trying to break out of her cell.

Brave witch.

On *Day Two*, Monday, I find myself with Potter and Granger in the command centre, where we carefully go over every single blueprint of the Manor I've drafted over the past few months.

Granger is seated at the huge, circular conference table, studying the parchments intently, her brow furrowed in concentration. I'm right behind her, one arm resting casually on the back of her chair, ready to answer her myriad questions. Potter, on the other hand, is sitting across from us, watching us with a blank expression on his face.

Ever since he found out we don't even have two weeks left to prepare for the day at the Manor, he's been tense and often absent-minded. I can understand that. The outcome of the mission is more than uncertain and it's not unlikely that we will all pay for it with our lives. But he knew that day would come. We all knew. And now we have to make the best of it, it's as simple as that.

At some point, there's a knock at the door and we raise our heads in unison. I'm in the middle of a detailed listing of all the entrances the Manor has apart from the front door, so I have to stop in mid-sentence.

It's Ronald Weasley.

"May I borrow your brain for a moment, Hermione?" he asks, not giving Potter and me a second glance. "It's about the watch schedules. They collide with a few things that need to be done at Camp Grey in the coming days."

"Of course," Granger replies, lithely jumping to her feet.

As she circles me, her hand lands on my shoulder blade and follows the curve of my spine, then moves to my arm and gives my wrist a quick squeeze.

"Remember what you were going to say," she murmurs, blinking sheepishly in my direction. "I'll be right back."

She rushes over to Weasley.

It's only when the door clicks shut behind them that I shift my attention back to Potter. His green sparkling eyes are on my forearm, right where Granger just touched me. Then his gaze flicks to my face and his lips curl into a knowing smile. He gives me a slight nod. I hold his gaze for a few more seconds, then lower my eyes to the parchments in front of me. My cheeks are fucking burning.

On *Day Three*, Tuesday, I trudge out of the gym after a fairly demanding workout.

Knowing that the most important battle of all is just around the corner, Weasley has pushed us harder than ever, which is why I'm actually planning to go straight to my sleeping quarters to treat myself to a hot shower. But before I can leave the training room and enter the atrium, the door to the simulation room catches my eye. It's ajar and through the crack I can see that the room is currently in use. I'm curious who decided to do some lonely extra training today of all days.

When I reach the room, I'm surprised to find that it's Abbott. She's out of breath and sweaty, which tells me she's been at it for quite a while.

I watch for a few minutes as she struggles to deflect the curses the room is firing at her. When the magic runs dry and the simulation is over, I make my presence felt by clearing my throat.

"May I show you a few tricks?" I ask as casually as possible, whereupon Abbott stares at me in shock.

It's probably no wonder that this astonished expression quickly morphs into utter distrust. When we last met, I was freshly occluded and, against Granger's clear orders, attacked her with angry Stinging Hexes. Instead of apologizing, I let actions speak by standing next to her and beginning to show her some of my more tried and tested parries.

It turns out that Abbott is a quick learner when she's not under the pressure of an actual attack. She is alert, watches me closely and perfectly copies my defensive stance. After about an hour she has already made significant progress and I realize that she is not such a lost cause after all. While the tough combat training of the Resistance is just not her thing, she still has potential.

After a few more demonstrations, I end our little training session. I tell her we can meet up again to practice if she wants. At that, Abbott smiles.

It doesn't matter that it might already be too late; that I can't be sure if she'll be alive in two weeks, private lessons or not. I don't allow myself to get bogged down in any dark thoughts. Suddenly, all I want is for Abbott to not lose hope.

"He makes a decent teacher, doesn't he?" comes a voice.

I turn around and spot Granger in the doorway. She scrutinizes us with crossed arms and an indefinable expression. Slightly embarrassed, Abbott murmurs her agreement before quickly

taking her leave.

As soon as we're alone, a spark ignites in Granger's eyes.

She casually pushes herself off the door frame and slowly strolls over to me. When she is right in front of me, she stands on tiptoe, takes my face in her hands and kisses the corner of my mouth. Her lips form a silent "thank you" that makes my heart pound so hard against my ribs as if it's trying to break free.

On *Day Four*, Wednesday, I'm scheduled for combat training under Granger's supervision.

While the others duel in pairs, her gaze flits to me again and again. When she eventually challenges me, I have the feeling that, for once, she's not doing it to prove something to herself or me, but simply because she enjoys it.

Our fight is heated, lasts for what feels like an eternity and, of course, she defeats me in the end, which is fine with me as I generally don't like winning undeservedly. Nevertheless, she praises me afterwards and even flashes a satisfied grin. The looks of the others let me know that this is an absolute first.

That same night I practically fuck the living daylights out of her.

On *Day Five*, Thursday, I find myself next to Granger at the breakfast buffet.

I make some silly comment about Oliver Wood's ever-overfilled plate that unexpectedly makes Granger laugh.

Her giggles are melodious and as clear as a bell and I'm instantly certain that I've never heard anything more beautiful. As she quickly presses her lips together to stifle the sound, I bend down to her with sparkling eyes.

"Don't you dare be quiet, Granger," I murmur in her ear, causing goosebumps to form on the back of her neck. "Your laughter is music to my ears."

She looks up at me, the corners of her mouth quirked, and there is so much warmth in her dark brown eyes that I let out a soft sigh. The urge to kiss her is overwhelming, but I'm not that daft. We're still in the packed dining hall, and besides, I want to leave that decision up to her. So I just meet her gaze, smile at her, and allow myself a moment of genuine, fluttering, dizzying happiness.

Basically it's disgusting, but right now I don't care.

Eventually she breaks eye contact. Her hand, however, grabs my shoulder holster and holds me close for a few more seconds. Her fingers dance over the muscles beneath my long-sleeved top, finally squeezing my shoulder.

Then she's gone — in her usual swirl of black robes.

As I turn around to scan the room for an empty seat, Lovegood catches my eye. She gives me a subtle thumbs up. I roll my eyes, grinning.

On *Day Six*, Friday, Granger and I return from one of her day watches. This time *she* was the one who asked *me* if I would like to accompany her, and of course I agreed without a second thought. The watch is a welcome change from the hours of training and strategy meetings in the command centre.

As we cross the atrium, we talk to each other in low tones. Granger's eyes are fixed intently on my face so that, unlike me, she doesn't notice the danger approaching from the side.

"Granger," I say warningly, but it's already too late.

Before I can reach out and pull her out of the way in time, she collides with Smith, who appears to be on his way to the dining hall. (To my chagrin, followed closely by Thomas.) Just as surprised by the impact as she is, Smith grabs her upper arms to steady her. Actually a kind gesture. *Actually*.

Granger lets out a hiss and recoils. Her right hand reflexively shoots to her wand, with the other she blindly reaches for me. This unconscious mark of confidence touches me to the quick and prompts me to take a big step forward so that her back is against my chest. Her fingers immediately dig into the fabric of my cargo trousers. I can feel her shaking.

"Watch your step, Smith," I growl before placing one of my hands on Granger's waist and pressing her against me protectively.

Simultaneously, both men lower their eyes and follow the movement of my hand.

To my surprise, Smith merely cocks an eyebrow, shrugs disinterestedly, and marches on in silence. Obviously he's not out for an argument. His luck. Thomas, on the other hand, stops dead in his tracks and stares at us in disgust.

"My, my," he whispers, shifting his gaze to Granger's face. "Not so untouchable after all, eh? Interesting."

Granger sucks in a sharp breath. Then she squares her shoulders and lifts her chin.

"Well, I suppose it has something to do with patience, understanding and respect," she replies coolly, "and the trust that comes with it."

I feel her lift the hand that was resting on her wand and gently wrap her fingers around mine. That (in combination with her previous words) is the loveliest gift. However, I don't have time to savour this precious moment, because Thomas destroys it in a rather despicable way.

"Or maybe it has something to do with the fact that he's just *another* filthy Death Eater," Thomas hisses in her face. "Familiarity breeds fondness, as the saying goes."

Granger starts to answer, but I'm quicker.

With a jerk, I push her behind me and step right in front of Thomas, bringing my face as close to his as I can without touching him and baring my teeth.

"Shut your foul mouth, you wanker," I grit out. "One more abusive remark from you and nothing will stop me from breaking your jaw. Patch up your bruised ego and finally start acting like a fucking adult."

Thomas's gaze flickers vaguely. I'm immediately sure he won't leave it at that, as if his subliminal reference to Greyback and Scabior wasn't inappropriate enough.

He ought to be careful. This time it won't end well for him.

But then suddenly Granger's hand is on the back of my neck. She moves to my side and looks up at me, completely ignoring Thomas.

"Don't bother," she says quietly. Her thumb runs over my tense neck muscles with a calming pressure. "He's not worth wasting your breath on him. And I don't care what he thinks about me. Look at me, Draco."

My head snaps around so quickly that my field of vision blurs for a moment. I stare down at Granger, whose lips are still forming the last syllable of my given name. Then they curl into a small smile. Her hand slides from my neck, over my shoulder and down my arm to interlace our fingers once more. She pulls me away from Thomas, who is frozen in his own bewilderment. Without objection, I let her lead me to her sleeping quarters.

On *Day Seven*, Saturday, we both attend one of the extra workouts, but part ways right at the door. While Granger trains on her jogging thing as usual, I complete my drills of the day next to Blaise. Push-ups, crunches, burpees. It's always the same.

Only when Weasley declares the workout over do I make my way back to Granger.

With deliberate nonchalance, I lean against the Muggle device she's running on, eye it sceptically and finally lift an eyebrow.

"This thing..." I drawl, running my hand over the smooth black surface and frowning. "How did you even get this to work in here?"

Granger slows down before using my shoulder for support to elegantly hop off the device. Then she stands in front of me, breathing heavily and sweaty, and I can't help but longingly take in the sight. So bloody seductive.

"This *thing* is called a treadmill," she explains in her best know-it-all manner, but her lips twitch in amusement. "Normally it's powered by electricity, but I tinkered around a bit. Now it draws its power from the magic of the person using it. The speed can be controlled with sheer willpower. It's actually pretty simple, but it took me a while to come up with the idea."

I regard her appreciatively, because I'm pretty sure this *tinkering*, as Granger put it, was anything but *simple* magic. Also, I finally understand why my first and only attempt at training on the so-called treadmill was so damn clumsy.

"Blaise should have explained that to me before he forced me to try it," I huff, pouting a bit. "How are you supposed to know that you can control that thing with your mind? I could have broken all my bones."

"Oh, you shall have my sympathy," Granger says with amusement, poking me in the side before changing the subject. "How was training?"

"Monotonous," I reply with a sigh. "If you ask me, Weasley could put a little more effort into the variety of exercises. He's not very creative."

"Mm, maybe *you* should lead the next fitness training," she teases, her gaze leisurely raking up and down my body. "You seem to have a secret recipe. It would only be fair to share it."

I can't help but smirk smugly.

"Was that a compliment, Granger?"

"First and last you'll ever get from me."

"Oh, I don't think so."

"No?"

I take a step closer, but hesitate.

There are about a dozen rebels in the workout room with us, either in the final stages of their training or talking to each other. After our playful banter, the urge to pull Granger close and kiss her is pretty hard to ignore, but I don't want to embarrass her. It's far from my mind to do anything that she might not approve of, and perhaps I'm also a bit afraid that she might reject me.

So we vacillate in that in-between stage for a few seconds, mentally weighing the pros and cons.

Ultimately, it's Granger who makes a decision.

There's a telltale flicker in her eyes before she stands on tiptoe. She wraps her arms around my neck, snuggles up to me and presses her lips to mine. Her heart is racing in her chest, I can feel it, but her kiss is determined. I obediently bend my head down to her and run my hands down her waist until they rest on her hips, but otherwise I let her take the lead.

We're both sweaty, but it doesn't matter. *This* is proof, admission and glimmer of hope at the same time.

I hear the chuckle of a deep voice and the snivel of a much higher one. A second later, we find ourselves in another pair of arms that belong to Ginny, I realize as I reluctantly pull away from Granger's lips.

"Oh Merlin, I'm so happy," she breathes, smiling through tears.

Granger stiffens noticeably and I quickly wrap an arm around her to tuck her firmly against my side where she is safe. *I am here. Nothing will happen to you. All is well.*

"Don't crush her, Ginny," I mutter warningly, but still have to smile when Granger buries her face in my chest.

Her cheeks are a pretty shade of pink.

"Sorry—it's just—it's just—that's all so—"

Ginny falls silent as a sudden jolt goes through Granger's body. And then, miraculously, she reaches up and wraps an arm around her friend, pulling her closer to us. Her eyes are a bit glassy. Gods. Just the sight of it makes me, besotted idiot that I am, swallow hard myself.

Brave witch indeed.

So here we are, in a rather awkward and strange triple hug, yet one that means so much. To top it all off, Blaise comes up behind us and pats me and his girlfriend on the back. A broad smile adorns his face. I give him great credit for still being careful not to touch Granger.

Blaise gives her time. Like I did, like Ginny did.

Patience is always rewarded.

Prior to the full meeting regarding the attack on the Manor, a detailed strategy briefing takes place in a smaller group consisting of the best fighters and most talented curse-breakers of the Resistance.

Representing the fighters, Granger, Weasel-Weasley, Blaise, Ginny, Smith, and (of course) I attend the briefing. The leading curse breakers are George Weasley, Oliver Wood and (again, to my chagrin) Thomas.

Granger, sitting on one of the chairs with her feet crossed on the tabletop as usual, is skimming through the notes listing the Manor's wards and other safety measures. I'm standing right behind her, my hands resting on the back of her chair—partly because all the other chairs are occupied and partly because I want to provoke Thomas, that bloody bastard.

"There will be two assault waves," explains Potter, who is standing in front of the wall with the blueprints and has his arms firmly crossed. "The first wave will set off an hour earlier. Their task will be to disarm the wards in two different spots so that the second wave can then storm the grounds in two groups. There will also be scouts who will be on the lookout for anything unusual. Under no circumstances must we be discovered before we are in the house. That would jeopardize the whole operation and we can't risk that. We won't get another chance like this anytime soon."

Everyone nods gravely and Potter continues.

"Once Tom has been located by the second wave, Ron, Hermione and I will enter the Manor as a special command of sorts. Our only goal is to get to him, so we won't bother too much with the fighting. The risk that he might manage to disappear in the meantime is too high. Everything clear so far?"

"I want to be part of this special command," I say promptly, to which Weasley snorts.

Classic. Some things never change.

"That's out of the question," he mumbles before Potter even gets a chance to answer me.

"Why?" I ask, already exasperated. "Because once the Golden Trio, always the Golden Trio? Then make it a quartet, Weasley. I'm in."

"You just don't get it, do you?" he replies, now louder and clearer than before. "It's not *at all* about us being the famous Golden Trio, you fuckwit. We've been waiting for this chance for ages. Seven years to be exact. During all this time, Harry has been protected by the Resistance so that one day he can do what I hope he will do next weekend. Hermione and I are not only the most experienced fighters, but also Harry's best friends. Our job is to get him safely to Tom so he can kill him. Regardless of any consequences. That has always been and still is our duty. *We* know what we're getting into. That's why we will remain a *trio*."

Quite apart from the fact that Weasley has never said so many words to me in one go, I suddenly see him in a very different light than I did all those weeks and months before. The message is crystal clear, even if he wasn't blunt. Should the need arise, Weasley and Granger will sacrifice themselves for the cause. Without so much as batting an eyelid.

Come to think of it, it's been like this since our first year at Hogwarts. In terms of Potter's everlasting struggle against all evil forces, they readily put their necks on the line for him. They neither complain nor hesitate. They voluntarily put themselves in danger to keep others safe. And they don't do it for fame or recognition. They do it because they believe it's the right thing to do; that it's their destiny.

All I feel for Weasley now is the same frustration and empathy I felt for Granger when she confided in me that she couldn't forgive her friends for how long Greyback was able to keep her captive.

We really are a nice bunch of stupid fucking martyrs.

"That doesn't change my request," I say curtly, swallowing hard. My fingers are trembling on the back of Granger's chair. "I know what I'm getting myself into, too. You'll just be one more person to cover Potter's back, so what?"

It is, of course, not the full extent of my motivations. However, I will only verbalize them if they leave me no other choice.

"It's still not an option," Potter says firmly.

Now even Granger, who's been staring stoically at the parchments throughout the conversation, slowly raises her head.

"And why not?" I ask, dumbfounded.

"Because you won't be there at all. We will not use you in the first wave, nor in the second, nor in the special command."

It's quiet for a few long seconds. Far too quiet. I actually shake my head, trying to get rid of the ringing in my ears. Then I push myself off the back of Granger's chair and take a few long steps around the table.

Potter squares his shoulders as I plant myself in front of him threateningly.

"What was that?" I rasp out through gritted teeth.

For his sake, I sincerely hope I misheard.

"We don't know if there's still an alarm spell installed that might go off when you're around, Malfoy," Potter sighs. He takes off his glasses and calmly cleans them with the hem of his long-sleeved top. "Ergo, you will stay here."

"What nonsense," I flare up. "You plan to send a whole fucking armada of curse-breakers ahead. They can keep an eye out for it. Granger and I can describe exactly where the spell that betrayed me last time was installed. What's your bloody problem?"

My chest rises and falls rapidly. I hook both hands tightly into my shoulder holster to keep from grabbing Potter by the collar and shaking him.

"You're a security risk," Weasley grunts.

"That's the—" I start, but then I'm cut off.

"Shut up, Ron." It's Blaise's steady voice. "Draco has been a staunch member of the Resistance for almost nine months. Not once has he put any of us in danger or otherwise

given us reason to distrust him. He's no more of a security risk than me, or you, or even Granger, and you know that perfectly well."

If I wasn't so angry I would give Blaise a grateful look, but as it is I just stare at him.

He's sitting right next to Ginny, who looks just as perplexed as he does. Apparently, the two knew nothing of Potter's plans. That would have surprised me anyway, because I'm positive they would have at least tried to forewarn me, after all they are my friends. And then, all of a sudden, I realize who, unlike them, must have known with a hundred percent certainty.

I spin around and glare at Granger. Her dark brown eyes meet mine and she blushes. All right, so she was *actually* in the loop. For fuck's sake.

However, I immediately understand that it was not spite that made her keep this information from me. I can easily classify the emotions flickering in her eyes: a hint of hope, and a concern that I can understand all too well, because I've been feeling it myself a lot lately. Namely, whenever it's about *her*.

It plays into her hands that Potter wants to leave me behind at headquarters because that would keep me safe. And that's obviously her top priority these days.

Well, as flattering and touching as that is, Granger will have to accept that, for once, it's not her making the decisions.

I turn away from her and refocus on Potter.

"If it's just about that stupid alarm spell, then I'll do another recce at my own risk. First thing tomorrow if you want, Potter."

He opens his mouth, but I quickly raise my index finger.

Nah-ah, I'm not done yet.

"As for the security risk I seem to pose, my answer is: fuck you. Quite apart from the fact that it's my own bloody house and I'm the only one who knows every corner of it, my mother is there. She's the only family I have left. And to complete my reasoning: Granger is my partner. Where she is, so am I, got it? I have no intention of letting her down, and there is nothing you can do about it, Chosen One."

I practically spit the last two words at him.

It's an unfamiliar feeling, talking to Potter in such a fury. In the last few months, my dislike for him has almost completely dissipated, even reversed itself into its opposite. We have the same sense of humor, we worked well together, we agreed on most things. Today we don't and I let him feel it. I will not abandon Granger even if my life is at stake. And there's no way I'm going to sit in the command centre, staring at the lift and waiting for her to come back to me. Or waiting for her to come back *at all*. Nope, and thank you very much.

"I don't get it," comes Thomas's voice from behind. "So the time of hiding is over, yes? Isn't that what you've always preferred? And suddenly you don't want it anymore? How noble of

you."

"You have no idea what I want or don't want, Thomas," I say without turning to face him. "That said, I've *never* hidden from anything, so shut the fuck up."

I'm trying my best to stay focused on Potter, but find that in my current state, it's beyond difficult. Thomas goes one better.

"So now you want to risk your life? Tsk, a likely story."

"Wouldn't be the first time, but what do you even know?" I reply, my jaw muscles ticking violently. Potter's face blurs in my vision, I'm so angry. "I will only say this once more: Where Granger goes, I go. End of discussion."

"Don't act like she's your girlfriend, Malfoy," Thomas drawls. "You're making a fool of yourself."

At these words, I just can't help it. I whirl around and draw my wand, which wipes the smug grin off Thomas's face. He, George Weasley and Smith follow suit immediately.

Ah, a lovely, little *three-on-one*.

"Knowing what an enthusiastic gossip you are, Thomas, I'll be so kind as to enlighten you. If I have my way, Granger is indeed *my* witch. I'll give her what she wants and as long as she wants it. And you know what? I'll even happily risk my life if it might save hers." I take a deep breath before casually adding in Granger's general direction, "Sorry, love. Wasn't the way I intended to tell you."

"Your witch?" Thomas echoes mockingly. "Cute. But if you're calling Hermione your girlfriend, it's against security protocol for the two of you to go out as a team anyway."

He gives me a superior grin. Apparently he is convinced that he has finally come up with an unbeatable argument.

"Firstly, I don't give a shit about your fantastic security protocol," I growl, "and secondly, we all know that Granger and I are more capable and reliable when we're out there together. We've been separated and assigned to other partners several times, and it's always ended badly. If you *really* want to take care of each other, it doesn't matter if you're sent out as a team or not."

And suddenly it's quiet.

Thomas is still glaring at me, but I pull myself together and slip my wand back into its holster. The wiser head laughs best or whatever. I've never been good with Muggle proverbs.

George Weasley and Smith lower their wands as well.

I smooth down my long-sleeved top.

"Anyway." I roll my jaw before turning back to Potter with one last disdainful look in Thomas's direction. "I'm in. That is non-negotiable."

Then I turn on my heel and cross the room with brisk steps. I've had enough for today.

To my surprise, Blaise and Ginny aren't the only ones who seem amused by my emotional outburst. What I see on Ronald Weasley's face when our eyes meet isn't exactly a full grin, but it's pretty close. When my hand is already on the doorknob, he gives me a short nod of approval.

Well, well. So *my* message hit home, too.

I leave the room.

It's only a few seconds before I hear quick footsteps behind me.

I glance over my shoulder and see Granger break into an easy jog to catch up with me. I stop with a sigh, mentally bracing myself for the tirade I suspect is about to happen.

Contrary to expectations, it completely fails to materialize.

Instead, Granger doesn't even slow down, but throws herself into my arms and, after a little hop, wraps her legs around my waist. And then she kisses me so vigorously and persistently that, after a while, I'm literally out of breath.

Chapter End Notes

Don't we all love a Draco who stands his ground? Also, another surprising revelation awaits you in the next chapter. Any ideas or guesses? Buckle up, folks, the end is near! Have a nice weekend. ♡

34. LIGHT GREY

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

34. LIGHT GREY

"Did you mean it?"

It's Granger's voice that makes me tear my eyes away from the London rooftops and slowly turn around. Apparently, I was so lost in thought that I didn't hear the lift or her approaching footsteps.

Wow, meanwhile, I feel way too safe up here.

"Still such a mystery," I say, shaking my head with a sigh. "When are you going to stop talking to me in riddles?"

At my words, Granger's brow furrows in confusion. No wonder, because until now I haven't told her what I've been calling her in my mind all these months. But contrary to expectations, she doesn't probe into the matter. Admittedly, she handles her curiosity much better than I do. Or her priorities lie simply elsewhere.

"Did you mean what you said," she repeats, slowly crossing her arms, "last weekend. In the briefing room."

Oh. Ah. So that's what this is about.

I frown and consider her attentively.

For Granger to follow me onto the roof of St Mungo's two days before we leave for the Manor just to ask me this specific question can only mean that she has grave doubts about my sincerity. She's probably been mulling it over all week, which, to be honest, is quite a surprise.

After she lunged at me in the corridor to kiss me almost unconscious, I slept with her more gently and slowly than ever before. Since then I've spent every night in her sleeping quarters. I've held her in my arms and worshiped every inch of her skin with my fingertips, reveling in this new privilege that was so unexpectedly bestowed on me. And yet she doesn't believe me? Once again, I wonder what's going on in her pretty head.

"By the by, I named the room 'command centre'," I reply casually, without answering her question. "Appropriate, isn't it?"

The remark doesn't even make her smile. Fuck, so she's serious.

"What you said was kind—" she begins, clearing her throat.

Kind? Well, there's a pretty thin line between kind and shite.

"—but you didn't have to do it just to defend me. I suppose you got the impression that, once again, nobody gives a fuck about me. But what happened with Greyback and Scabior doesn't matter in the current situation. Ron is right. I know exactly what I'm getting myself into. Plus, I understand your real motives. It's legitimate that you want to come to the Manor with us because your mother is there. She's the only family you have left, you said so yourself, so—"

I interrupt her whacky monologue with a fervent snort.

"Wait a moment. You think I only said all that to teach Potter and Weasley a lesson?" I ask, irritated. *Kind* choice of words this time, indeed. "Tsk, you can't be serious, Granger. Do I strike you as someone who would say something like that if he didn't mean it? In front of people, some of whom I can't even stand?"

And again I have to watch as Granger corks up her feelings. I find that it's beginning to try my patience. If that's how she felt when I occluded myself before her very eyes a few weeks ago, then I can relate to her desperation at the time. It's fucking frustrating.

"You don't have to do this," she repeats stubbornly. Her shoulders are tense and her eyes suddenly avoid mine. "Your mother is sufficient reason and I would be the last one not to understand that you—"

"All right, that's enough," I say, before taking a big step toward her and holding my index finger in her face like she's a petulant child and I'm a disappointed father who has to lecture her.

It doesn't even feel weird anymore. I guess I've had enough experience setting Granger straight over the past few months.

I can't help but think of that one winter night on the roof when Ginny claimed that Granger needed the rebukes. I'm beginning to think she was bloody right about that.

"You are sorely mistaken," I growl. "I'm not a fucking mediator. It wasn't solely about rubbing in Potter and Weasley's faces that they don't treat you with the respect you deserve and don't give you the attention that is due to you. And yes, my mother is there. I won't deny that's a factor. But the most important reason is that, meanwhile, I consider you mine. Now you might think I'm still a selfish little boy who only wants to prevent his favourite toy from breaking, but the exact opposite is the case. I look after those who are important to me. Whoever belongs to me, I protect. For those who are mine, I would die. This is my way of devotion. That's all I can offer you. Unless—"

I take a shaky breath and close my eyes for a moment. Actually, I thought I had put it behind me, but suddenly it's back: the anger.

I am here. I give you everything. I have nothing to lose.

But what the hell do *you* want, Granger?

Her gaze rakes nervously over my face, her eyes flickering.

"Unless what?" she asks quietly. It's little more than a whisper.

"Unless you don't want me," I say through gritted teeth, pointing my still outstretched finger first at her and then at me. "This. Us. I'll accept it because, Merlin knows, I've done everything I can to prove to you that I've changed. I'm trying to be a better person. Accepting the decisions of others is part of that. If you don't want me, just say so. Tell me to stay away from you and I will obey your command one last time."

"We don't have a future anyway," she mumbles promptly.

Excuse me?

"There's no way I'm going to discuss *that* with you," I snap at her. "Tell me to stay away from you, or don't. You are in control. Well?"

There is silence for a long moment, then she drops the bombshell.

"I was the one who killed your father."

Ba-dum, ba-dum, ba-dum.

And all of a sudden my pulse is louder than the pounding in my ears. In one fell swoop, I'm catapulted into the past. Suddenly, I'm back on my knees. In the goddamn mud in front of that fucking watch tent.

Since arriving at Resistance headquarters, I've only thought about my father once. Right at the beginning, after Potter escorted me to the *cell*, my current sleeping quarters. At the time, I wondered if I was sleeping beneath the same roof as his murderer. *Or rather, in the same bunker.* My fleeting thoughts from then mock me now, echoing in my ears and taking my breath away.

I can't believe Granger kept this information to herself for so bloody long. We are only two nights away from the Dark Lord's gathering at my childhood home. We have only forty-eight hours until the battle that will decide the life and death of thousands of people and at the same time the future of the entire magical world. She had almost a year for this revelation. In the meantime, she has given me the cold shoulder, reproached me, confused me, kissed me, bewitched me and stolen my heart. In that exact order.

But even though I feel like the ground is shaking under my feet thanks to her confession, I suddenly realize why she chose to make it now of all times.

Since my eyes are still on her, I detect the small changes in her posture and face. I wouldn't have noticed them a few months ago, but these days I know Granger. I've regarded her so many times that I could pinpoint each of her freckles with my eyes closed.

I notice that her hands, desperately clutching her shoulder holster, are shaking. She swallows hard several times in a row, causing the muscles in her throat to flex. The thin skin of her

cheeks vibrates and she blinks too often. Her pupils are dilated and there's a telltale sheen in her eyes.

The latter is why I refrain from occluding myself on the spot. I'm not that person anymore; don't want to be. And basically, Granger doesn't deserve me doing it for the sole purpose of punishing her.

My shock subsides quicker than I thought possible. As if I had secretly suspected it all along.

Maybe that's why I've been pushing the thought of my father's death aside for the past few months? Because it wasn't unlikely that one of my new friends was to blame? Because of the fear that this revelation would eventually come? Yes, I probably did *in fact* suspect it.

Instead of completely losing it, I take a deep breath, consciously relax my shoulders and close my eyes for the second time. I allow myself a moment to control my temper.

"Well, he deserved it," I finally say quietly.

Granger takes a sharp breath. When I open my eyes, she looks so shaken it makes my heart ache. I continue quickly so I don't have time to change my mind.

"He wasn't a good man," I mutter. "And I'm sure you had your reasons for casting the *Avada*. I doubt he would have spared your life if you hadn't. We're at war, Granger. Before I came here, I've killed more of you than I can count on two hands. Quid pro quo."

I clear my throat and shove those very hands into the pockets of my cargo trousers.

"It's not the same. He was your father—" she begins weakly.

"It's very much the same," I interrupt her harshly.

"But you only did the things you did because you had to," she argues. "You've proven to all of us that you're not really who we thought you were. That I was right!"

Despite the serious topic, I can't help but roll my eyes.

"That doesn't change the fact that the things I did were horrible," I snarl, "and that it was an active decision on my part to do them in the first place. I simply took another path. The path that was easier for me. I'm not an angel and we both know it."

"You did it to survive."

"Oh, and what about the *Exit*, for example? The ritual could have cost Pansy her life, and yet I suggested her as a test subject without turning a hair. At a time when I was already safe, mind you. I had already survived the *Exit*. I had already gotten rid of my Dark Mark. And yet I took the risk that Pansy might die, even though she is more important to me than my father ever was. This is what war looks like, Granger."

I don't know if it's really this last argument on my part that leaves her speechless, but at least her mouth snaps shut. I let out a low, triumphant huff. Small clouds of breath form in the cold

February air between us.

"I saw through you," I continue confidently. "You feel guilty, don't you? Since you hadn't planned on ever remotely liking me, there was no reason to tell me right away that you were the one who killed him. And then there was just no good moment, am I right?"

She nods, whereupon I hum in understanding. I let my gaze wander through the light grey dusk and think about it for a while. Granger is very still, so silent and motionless like I've never seen her before.

"Now you've panicked," I deduce slowly, "so you've decided to push me away. Because it's easier and because you don't expect the two of us to survive the mission at the Manor anyway. Why risk heartbreak when you can end it the way it started, right? With hate."

I cock my head and shift my gaze back to her. Her lips are trembling, her eyes are squeezed shut.

"Look at me, Granger," I sigh. Her eyelids flutter open. "I already did horrible things when you were still an innocent, eager, inquisitive swot. In the very beginning, I even did them out of conviction. At times, I was just a coward, as you bloody well know. Correct me if I'm wrong, but I think you've forgiven me for all of that by now. And I forgive you."

Even as I say the last word, the unthinkable happens.

Granger bursts into tears.

It's not a sobbing, sniffing, heartbreaking hiccup crying. She's still silent; doesn't even make a face, even though the tears are streaming down her cheeks and dripping onto her anthracite-colored long-sleeved top.

When I see her finally, *finally*, giving free reign to her pain, I feel an incredible sense of relief. I made the right decision, I'm sure of that. Granger is worth swallowing my pride and being honest with myself; with both of us. She, too, is in dire need of absolution. She's always been respected, even feared, and revered by enough people, but there's never been anyone who really tried to *understand* her.

And as for my father... What can I say? It's been six years since he died, which is a hell of a long time. We didn't even have a good relationship. Also, I think Granger was right about a lot of things she said to me during our Hogsmeade watch. She spent whole school years racking her brains about why I acted the way I did. To answer this question honestly: yes, it all boils down to my father.

It's probably the irony of fate that Granger, of all people, punished him for it. A woman with the supposedly impure blood running through her veins that is responsible for all this madness.

"I forgive you," I repeat seriously, now completely stable.

Granger still hasn't said a word, but she reaches up and nervously wipes her cheeks.

"I'm scared shitless," she admits quietly.

At these words, I take a big step forward and reach for her. It's an instinct I'm thankfully allowed to follow these days because I really don't know how to convey to her that I'm serious without touching her.

I take my time kissing away every single tear that runs down Granger's cheeks. Then I slip my right hand in the back of her neck and wrap my other arm around her waist. When our lips meet, her sigh is filled with despair.

"We're all scared, Granger," I whisper, resting my forehead against hers. "I, for example, am awfully scared for *you*. And that wouldn't change even if we went back to staying away from each other. You know how many times we've tried that. So it's not an option, nor is giving up."

"Not an option," she repeats insecurely.

"Exactly," I say firmly. "Tomorrow, I will hold the last briefing with Potter. It will take hours. I will tell them everything I know about the Manor. Any rebel who Apparates there on Saturday will be perfectly prepared, do you understand me?"

"Yes."

I press my lips to hers again, and this time it's more urgent. Curling my tongue around hers and running my hands down her back to her arse, I slowly push her backwards. I spread my fingers and squeeze before lifting her up with a jerk. A blink of an eye later, she's pressed against the outer wall of the lift cage. I pin her to it with all my weight.

"So," I say, breathing heavily, leaning back a little to get a better look at her face. "Do you really want me to stay away from you?"

"No."

It's almost a whimper.

"Good," I murmur, gently rubbing her thighs that are already shaking around my waist. "And do we have a future together?"

"Possibly."

A faint smile curls her lips.

I press myself against her even tighter, eliciting a soft moan from her. Then I lean in and run my lips down her throat until I find her racing pulse. She starts shivering.

"Not good enough," I growl against her skin. "I want you to remember this when we're at the Manor. And, more importantly, I want you to remember that if we survive, you can have this every day. I for one want it. Every - fucking - day."

With every word, I roll my hips against hers so that she can clearly feel the proof.

Past or not, now I'm here. *And I give you everything.*

"Yes," she breathes.

Her head lolls back against the wall.

"Well?" I gasp close to her ear.

I put a little pressure on her thighs to create more space so I can position myself exactly where I want to be. Granger lets out another hoarse moan.

"I want it too," she whimpers. "I want you. So much. We will live."

My lips crash onto hers. And then she finally takes control again, which in this case is a bloody relief. I don't know what else I could have done to coax her out of her depressed state.

She buries one hand in my hair and her legs wrap around my waist like a vice. When I feel her other hand snaking between our bodies to tug at the zipper of my cargo trousers, I have to smirk.

Ah, there she is again. The lioness.

I pull away from her lips, panting heavily.

"You want it on the roof?" I make sure.

Granger's tears have completely dried up. Now there's that glint in her eyes that I could lose myself in for hours.

"I think it would be a worthy farewell," she replies, shrugging innocently. "Who knows if we'll ever come back here."

I frown in disapproval at which Granger rolls her eyes.

"Not because we're dead then—" she says with a sigh. Demonstratively she slides her hand under the waistband of my cargo trousers. My eyes close as she firmly wraps her fingers around my cock and squeezes. "—but because we don't have to hide anymore."

I can only huff in agreement.

"Well?" she asks patiently, mimicking me.

Her hand goes over to stroking up and down with determination.

Oh yeah, she *literally* has a hold on me, but I find I'm rather happy with it. I've given my lecture, we've forgiven each other, we're here, we're alive and we'll do everything we can to keep it that way. What else could I possibly want? Everything that happens on Saturday is fate anyway. I no longer have any influence on that.

"As you wish," I reply breathlessly.

I push myself off the wall, set her down and turn her around so that her arse is facing me, then I give her a light smack that makes her moan before I squat down and peel her cargo trousers off her beautiful legs.

As it turns out the next day, Granger actually needed the rebuke.

The active Resistance fighters gather in the dining hall around noon for the final and most important briefing before our attack on the Manor. Potter has clarified that participation in this particular mission is voluntary, but not a single member of the Resistance has opted out. I have nothing but respect for my new comrades.

I'm doing my bit by doing exactly what Potter asked me to do. Which is to hold the meeting with him.

His part of the speech is much shorter than mine, as he only tells the rebels what formations we will use to attack. I, on the other hand, spend hours reporting on the Manor while Potter casts the floor plans into the center of the room with his beloved projection charm.

Among other things, I talk about the wards installed, the house's centuries-old defensive measures, and the Death Eaters likely to be on site. I explain where the secret passageways are, detail who has which vulnerabilities, reveal what hiding places to look for if you're surrounded. It's so much information that Blaise, Pansy, Daphne and I have gathered over the past week that I'm slowly but surely getting hoarse.

The briefing lasts forever, just as I predicted, and yet Granger's eyes never leave me.

For the first time ever, she's sitting at one of the long dining tables instead of just leaning against the wall or the buffet. She's sitting in one of the front rows, which allows me to catch a glimpse of her every now and then.

The observations I make are intriguing.

Although I'm sure Granger is listening intently, there's an unusual look on her face the entire time. I'm narcissistic enough to know what it basically means, and yet it takes a while for the message to get through to me because that almost glorifying expression is far too unfamiliar. (On her face, at least.) When it finally clicks, my breath hitches.

Granger is making mooneyes at me.

If I hadn't already been convinced that yesterday's discussion on the roof had put an end to her (self)doubts, I would be sure by now at the latest.

Her gaze follows my every move, but always quickly returns to my face. When Potter and I crack some silly joke to lighten the (admittedly extremely tense) mood, her lips twitch. Once, when I blow a strand of hair out of my forehead, I'm positive I hear her sigh.

Gods, the way she's looking at me.

I've been an arrogant arse most of my life and I've never lacked confidence, but I've also always been a realist and a good observer. And (I don't care to repeat myself, but it's the truth) I *can* read people. What I see in Granger's eyes, her facial expression and her general demeanour doesn't leave much room for interpretation.

There are two revelations today.

For one thing, Granger has a kink after all. Which is: competence paired with authoritarian behavior. It really shouldn't surprise me.

And for another thing, Granger is in love with me. I'm suddenly very sure of that.

But what hits me even harder and throws me completely off track, is a different realization. Because as I stand there—in front of the rebels, arms casually crossed, my gaze fixed on Granger, who looks up at me from her table as if she's seeing me for the very first time—I realize that I feel the same way.

No doubt. In fact, I'm even *madly* in love with her.

Chapter End Notes

Well, did you expect this development?

By the way, we are now at a point where the [REBEL](#) prologue will no longer spoil EXIT. What do you think? Would you like to read the prologue in the middle of next week? Tell me in the comments!

Also, the chapter count has gone up. (Only one chapter, but hey!)

Have a nice weekend. ♥

35. STORM GREY

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

35. STORM GREY

The weather suits today's endeavor perfectly, not only in terms of mood, but also in terms of attack. A freezing wind is howling through the shadowy woods of Wiltshire and the sky is storm grey and draped with clouds. The concomitant downpour, the thick, pattering drops of which are fighting a duel with our impregnation charms, also does its bit. Even if someone were to cast a cursory glance out one of the windows as we approach the Manor, it will be extremely difficult for them to spot us. The conditions are definitely playing into our hands. A blue sky and a clear view would have been disastrous. When the weather is nice, you can overlook the surrounding countryside for miles from the house.

I look at my timepiece for what feels like the umpteenth time and sigh softly.

The curse-breakers are already at their posts, slowly working their way through the thick wards of my childhood home, just as we discussed. Barring anything unforeseen, Oliver Wood's Patronus, the signal that we can send the second wave on its way, should reach us in the next few minutes. I can't wait to get going. Not only because the tension is so great, but also because the small clearing where we have gathered is bursting at the seams.

Only when the rest of our lot has stormed the Manor and ideally located the Dark Lord will Potter appear. His safety is still the top priority, so he will wait at headquarters until someone tells him it's time. As soon as he arrives in the clearing by Apparation, he will follow the second wave, flanked by Granger, Weasley and myself, in order to reach his actual target as unscathed as possible. At least that's the plan.

"I have to find Blaise," comes Granger's voice. She steps up to me. "Preliminary briefing."

I brush a few soaking wet strands of hair out of my eyes to get a better look at her. There's a concentrated expression on her face, but her hands are steady and casually hooked into her shoulder holster.

A few months ago, such indifference in the face of such a delicate mission would have unsettled me, but today it gives me a good feeling. Granger is in her absolute combat mode and that's a damn good thing. Over the last few days, I've often feared that the pressure might ultimately be too great. The fact that the opposite seems to be the case calms me down tremendously.

"Preliminary briefing?" I repeat, confused. "Are there still any unanswered questions?"

"Nope," she says, the right corner of her mouth giving a telltale twitch. "But we always do that before one or even both of us go on a mission. Blaise is pretty superstitious, I'll have you

know. He doesn't like to break tried and trusted habits, no matter how specific the situation. But that's not all. Once, during a night watch, we saw a black cat scurrying under a ladder. After that, he claimed for weeks that it was a bad omen. He was pretty out of it. You'd think he's clever, but he *has* his quirks."

I stare at her with a mixture of bewilderment and amusement.

"And you simply play along?" I ask. "You of all people? You're the witch who dropped out of Divination. Don't look at me like that. Everyone knows that."

Her cocked eyebrow smoothes and her lips curl into a small smile. Then she shrugs.

"Blaise is my friend, you know. If it makes him feel better, that's reason enough for me to stick to our routines."

And wow, I'm so close to just saying it. *So bloody close*. But I bite my tongue at the very last moment. Instead I just think it. Fuck, Granger, I really am head over heels in love with you.

Merlin, please let Blaise's superstitions work their magic today. Thank you. And amen.

Granger, oblivious to my maudlin thoughts, stands on tiptoe and supports herself on my forearm to scan the crowd in search of Blaise. It's a pretty pathetic attempt considering that few other Resistance fighters are shorter than her.

"He's over there," I say as I spot him, "with Boot and Spinnet."

I gently push her in the right direction, then give her a goodbye pat on the bum.

And - what - the - *fuck*.

While Granger doesn't even bat an eyelid, I stiffen and shoot a stunned look at my hand. That's *not* something a sane person should do in public, seductive arse or not.

"Holy shit," I whisper in horror. "I'm Longbottom 2.0."

I look up only to find myself confronted with Ronald Weasley.

He has folded his arms and is also eyeing my hand very sceptically. Not a second later, an amused smile spreads across his face. It's the first time ever that I've seen him smile in my presence, let alone *because* of me. I return it warily.

"You know, Malfoy," Weasley drawls, "I think this new touch of Gryffindor actually suits you quite well. And she deserves it. Do me a favor and stay alive, will you?"

I gasp in surprise. We stare into each other's eyes for a few seconds.

"Ditto," I say at length.

Involuntarily thinking back to our first exchange of words during my second interrogation at headquarters, I smirk at him.

Suddenly the clearing lights up, making us both flinch. Oliver Wood's Patronus bursts through the trees, announcing in his calm, composed voice that the curse-breakers have managed to break the wards.

"The second wave can set off."

Instantly, Weasley's expression turns serious. He raises his wand and conjures up his own Patronus, a small dog. Potter Apparates less than half a minute later.

The time has come.

The first corridor we cross after entering the Manor through one of the back entrances is empty. In the distance, I can hear screams and explosions. I can't tell exactly what part of the house the din is coming from, but that information isn't relevant to us anyway, so I don't waste time racking my brains about it.

George Weasley's tracking spell revealed that the Dark Lord has entrenched himself in the library. In the west wing. So that's where we're headed.

I have to admit that installing our own Anti-Disapparation-Perimeters right after disarming the wards was a masterstroke. It was Granger's idea. Obviously. I'm sure that without this precaution the Dark Lord would have disappeared long ago. Thanks to this measure, however, it will be quite a while before he finds a way to escape. I know all too well that the Death Eaters don't have Emergency Portkeys. They lack Granger's brilliance.

"You take over, Malfoy," Weasley whispers.

I nod and switch places with him. Now I lead our *quartet*. Granger and Weasley are right behind me; Potter is between them, hidden under his Invisibility Cloak.

We climb one of the marble stairs to the first floor.

Just as my head is level with the top railing, I notice a movement in the shadows. It's a masked Death Eater leaning against one of the walls, slowly twirling his wand in his hand. He keeps looking from left to right.

I silently signal the others to stop, then take the last few stairs in one bound, whipping my wand through the air. The Death Eater, seemingly positioned as a guard, collapses and gurgles. He presses a hand to the deep cut just below his mask. His wand rolls away across the marble, clattering softly.

"Wherever you learned that," Granger murmurs as she pushes past me, "I fancy your technique."

She hurls an *Avada* at the hunched figure on the floor. In this case, it's a genuine act of mercy. I suspect she did it because the Death Eater didn't attack us, but was ambushed by us. My

witch isn't cruel—she doesn't let anyone bleed out slowly and agonisingly for no reason. I fucking love her for it.

I lift my head and meet her dark gaze.

"Learned from the master," I reply nonchalantly and wink at her.

"Would you two save your dirty talk for later?" Potter's voice sighs.

I look at where I assume he's standing and give him a roguish grin. Weasley and Granger roll their eyes at the same time.

"Let's go," Weasley orders impatiently.

We start moving and approach the second staircase. This time I hear Granger mutter a revelation spell beforehand. She curses under her breath.

"A total of seven people in the hallway diagonally above us," she whispers. "Shite. We have to go upstairs, don't we?"

"Yeah," I reply through gritted teeth. "There is no other access to the library."

"Then brace yourselves," Weasley grumbles.

I grip my wand a little tighter and take the first steps. Already halfway up the stairs, the characteristic crackling of magic and the buzzing of curses reach my ears. No one is screaming here, though. It's a relatively silent fight.

We cross another short corridor until we arrive at a large set of double doors that give access to the west wing.

"On the count of three," Granger says.

She steps to my side and thus in front of Potter and Weasley. I glance at her out of the corner of my eye to watch the movement of her lips as she counts almost silently. *One, two, three.*

We powerfully break through the door and plunge into the ongoing duel. With a quick glance, I register that there are three rebels fighting three Death Eaters. Another person is lying motionless on the floor.

Granger and I charge forward, firing a volley of violent curses at the masked figures. Thanks to our sudden numerical superiority, it's a quick fight.

I hit one of the Death Eaters with a *Confringo*. He is thrown against a wall and slumps silently to the ground. A Full Body-Bind Curse from Granger finds its target. I top it off with an *Avada*, studiously ignoring the effect its dark magic is having on my psyche. There's no time for that now. The third Death Eater is hit by an acid curse from someone to my right. As he falls to his knees screaming, Granger flicks her wand twice more.

"*Silencio.*" He immediately falls silent. "*Sectumsempra.*"

No mercy with this one.

I turn around, panting, and quickly survey the rebels present. Blaise, Smith, Abbott. It was the latter who cast the acid curse. Her wand hand is shaking like a leaf, but other than that, no one seems injured.

"Devilish," Blaise says with an appreciative look at Granger, then nods towards the Death Eater who is still fighting for his life in silence.

She doesn't answer him. I look at her and notice that her attention is on something behind me. It's only then that I remember that there was another person who was unconscious from the start.

I spin around and march towards the prone figure. As I get closer, I notice the long, light blonde hair fanned out around the masked woman's head. It's partially streaked with scarlet.

Cursing, I sink to my knees and pull the Death Eater mask off my mother's face.

She is pale. So fucking pale.

Granger crouches down next to us and presses two of her fingers against my mother's neck to feel her pulse.

"She's alive," she murmurs, but gives me a worried look.

She's probably afraid I might occlude myself. Well, not if I can help it.

"We should go," Weasley says, causing Granger to flinch.

I pay him no attention, but think feverishly. There's a severe laceration just below my mother's blonde hairline. I doubt she would be combat-capable even if she regained consciousness.

"What happened?" I hiss, turning to face Blaise, who is now standing directly behind us, looking rather startled.

"She was already here when we arrived," he says, confused. He bends forward and rests his hands on his thighs to take a deep breath, then inspects the injury. "And that wasn't one of us. I didn't even know it was her, mate. Didn't have time to take off her mask. We were attacked immediately. Bugger. What do we do now?"

My hands are still tightly gripping my mother's upper arms. I glance at Granger. Her face reflects the same conflicting emotions raging inside me.

"Clock is ticking, folks."

Weasley again.

Although his comment annoys me, I don't talk back to him because I know he's basically right. We have a clear mission and delays are unacceptable.

Granger frowns deeply. I make a decision for both of us.

"Go," I say firmly. "I'll be right behind you."

We exchange another quick look. Though she doesn't seem particularly keen on leaving me behind, she nods and jumps to her feet.

Weasley is already halfway down the corridor. He's mumbling under his breath, leading me to believe he's talking to Potter, who still hasn't removed his Invisibility Cloak. I watch as Granger sprints to his side. As the half-visible trio disappears around the next corner, behind which is the corridor that leads to the library, I have an idea.

"Abbott," I call out, causing her to jump. She gives me a panicked look. "I need you to do something for me."

I say it as kindly as I can and even give her a small smile. Immediately, a flicker of comprehension crosses Blaise's face. He gives me a nod of approval before turning on his heel and hurrying over to Smith. The two exchange a few whispered words before setting off with brisk steps. Back through the double doors. Probably to support the rest of us. Without a single look back.

Abbott wrings her hands as she steps up to me.

"I want you to take my mother to the camp with you," I say emphatically. "Take her straight to the trauma room so someone can tend to her head injury. Tell Lovegood not to perform the *Exit* until they know if we've been successful. She will know what that means. Can you do that for me?"

She lets out a faint squeak.

"I—I—I don't have a Return Portkey anymore," she whispers, grimacing. "I used mine to send Terry back. He was unconscious. I didn't find his."

Trying not to seem too frustrated, I close my eyes for a moment and take a deep breath. Before I look at her again, I school my features into something neutral.

"No problem," I reply in a decidedly calm voice. "I'll give you mine."

"B-But I won't be able to return once I'm at headquarters. And then you don't have a Portkey to—"

"Doesn't matter," I interrupt her. "I'll come back with Granger. You've done enough here, all right? Your duel was excellent. Good job."

When she nods, her eyes are glistening with tears. Meanwhile, the trembling of her hand has spread to her whole body. If I had a little more healing expertise I'd probably diagnose a shock, but I'll leave that to Lovegood, Longbottom, and their colleagues. Sending Abbott to headquarters with my mother is the right decision. She doesn't deserve to die today.

I carefully lay my mother's head on the floor, slip a hand into the pocket of my cargo trousers, and produce my linen-wrapped Return Portkey. In the meantime, Abbott waves her wand to slowly levitate my mother into the air. She positions herself next to her and slides her arm through the crook of my mother's elbow. Then she holds out her free hand and looks at me uncertainly.

"Take good care of her," I say, giving her one last smile.

I hand her my Portkey without hesitation.

A *whoosh* later, the two are gone.

Something is wrong.

That's what I'm thinking as I take the first tentative steps into the library. It's dark and quiet. Much too quiet considering the fact that there should actually be several people here, one of whom is even supposed to die today.

Through the centre aisle I can see the other side of the room. There, the countless rows of shelves open into a lounge area of sorts with wing chairs and a large fireplace. A cauldron sits on the flat tea table. Strange. I don't recall the library ever being used to brew potions. At least the cauldron doesn't seem to be in use. I don't see fire or steam spirals and I don't hear any bubbling either.

Apart from the cauldron, I don't detect anything unusual. No movements. No flickering shadows. No light sources that don't belong here. However, the library not only extends to the front, but also several meters to the left and right. The shelves are huge, the sections long and winding. If you don't count the ballroom, the library is by far the largest room in the Manor.

It's a trap.

That's what I'm thinking as I slowly feel my way into the unknown. Step by step. Past the showcases with the ancient, priceless first editions and the sensitive illustrations under all sorts of complicated preservation and stasis charms.

I pause after each row of shelves before quickly stepping into the next, aiming my wand first one way and then the other.

Empty, empty, empty. Where the hell are they?

I hear a creak and stop dead in my tracks. Completely tense, I slowly turn around in a full circle, my eyes scanning every dark corner I can see from my position.

Maybe George was wrong. Perhaps the Dark Lord was never here and Potter, Weasley and Granger changed their course. But wouldn't Granger at least have sent me a Patronus if that was the case?

With a controlled exhalation, I turn back to the fireplace, from which I am only separated by the last few rows of shelves.

I almost drop my wand in shock, because now a black-hooded figure is standing right in front of the table with the cauldron.

"Hello Draco," the person says in an all too familiar voice. "You're just in time for the party. What can I offer you? A Butterbeer, a Firewhisky, a Stunner?"

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

That's what I'm thinking as there's a rustling sound behind me. Not a second later, the tip of a wand bores into the back of my neck. The owner of the wand cackles.

"Sleep tight, darling," someone breathes.

Then everything goes dark.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so, so much for now over 400 kudos and all your lovely comments. You can't imagine how much they mean to me. *tears up* In case you haven't read it yet: the prologue of [REBEL](#) is online!

Next stop: Showdown. ♡

36. DIRTY GREY

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

36. DIRTY GREY

When I come to, I don't allow myself to grunt, moan or stretch out my aching limbs. All I do is blink.

The first blink reveals an unconscious Ronald Weasley in a pool of blood, the scarlet hue clashing unfavorably with his fiery red hair.

The next blink confirms the suspicion that flashed through my mind just before the Stunner knocked me out. Bellatrix, Rabastan and Rodolphus. Fuck. They're standing in front of the tea table, deep in whispered conversation.

The last blink gives me a glimpse of Granger kneeling on the floor a few feet away with her back to me. Her hands are tied behind her back, her feet are bound at the ankles and she appears to have been *Silencio'd*. The rhythmic rise and fall of her upper body gives me the idea that she's screaming at the top of her lungs. And with rage.

"The traitor is awake," Rabastan says, causing Bellatrix to spin around.

A moment later, her wand is trained on me.

I give up pretending to still be unconscious and open my eyes to give her a hateful look. She cackles. Unfortunately, the sound is all too familiar to me. There's no doubt that she was the one who stunned me.

"My Lord," she calls out and quickly turns to the side. With a flick of her wand, the contents of the cauldron I noticed earlier begin to bubble. "Your *most faithful servant* is among the living again."

I use the few seconds she's distracted to let my gaze wander. No sign of Potter. I sincerely hope that he isn't already dead, but is still safely hidden under his Invisibility Cloak.

A figure emerges from one of the darker sections of the library and slowly walks towards us.

The Dark Lord is still a terrifying presence, even if his increasingly dwindling powers have left their mark on him in recent years. His face is almost translucent pale, with the skin stretched taut across his cheekbones and jawline, his posture is hunched and his steps are unsteady, but his red eyes still spit fire.

"*Crucio*," he says almost gently.

First my body tenses, then, as if of its own accord, it curls up into a ball on the old carpet I'm lying on and lapses into spasmodic convulsions. The pain is unbearable and I'm not occluded, yet I don't allow myself to make a sound. No scream, no groan, no gasp. I endure it stoically until my vision blurs and I feel like I can't breathe.

When the pain finally subsides, I take a wheezing breath. My gaze darts to Granger, who has meanwhile turned around on her knees and is staring at me with wide eyes. Tears are running down her cheeks. She's still moving her lips silently, but she's stopped screaming, I can see that clearly. I think I know what she's trying to tell me. *I'm sorry. Hold on. I'm with you. Giving up is not an option.* That or something similar.

The Dark Lord sinks into one of the wing chairs in front of the fireplace and briefly closes his eyes. The curse took a lot out of him. He is no longer used to torturing himself, he has his minions for that.

"Where's the boy?" he hisses before opening his eyes.

Gathering all my strength, I struggle to my knees. Only now do I notice that I'm also bound hand and foot. Splendid.

A drop of sweat trickles down my temple. Or maybe it's blood, I have no idea. I halfheartedly rub my cheek against my shoulder, then straighten up.

"How did you know we were coming?" I ask as demanding as my hoarse voice and dry mouth allow.

"You're not in a position to ask questions, blood traitor," Rodolphus sneers.

He's standing right behind Granger, holding his wand to her neck. With every word he says, he taps the tip of it against her skin. An implicit threat.

It occurs to me that Bellatrix, or even the Dark Lord himself, might have used Legilimency on me while I was unconscious. If I had been occluded when Bellatrix stunned me, the barriers would have held, but I wasn't. And besides, thanks to my time with the rebels, I'm pretty out of practice.

"Behave yourself, Draco," Bellatrix whispers smugly, "or we'll kill your little Mudblood as slowly as possible and let you watch."

That's all I need to know. She definitely was in my mind, otherwise she wouldn't be threatening Granger's life to keep me in check. It doesn't make sense, though, because if that's the case, why does the Dark Lord ask for Potter's whereabouts? If Bellatrix had searched properly, she would know he was with us, Invisibility Cloak or not. Maybe I wasn't unconscious for long. Or she just skimmed the memories without listening or looking closely. Has she become careless in her old age?

A jerky movement in my peripheral vision tears me out of my thoughts. My eyes flick to Granger. I have to watch as Rodolphus digs a hand into her hair and pulls her head back. At

this sight my blood starts to boil. His wand disappears from her neck and is replaced by a dagger.

"No," I yell, trying to scoot forward on my knees. "Get your dirty hands off her, you bastard."

"Stay where you are," Rabastan intervenes warningly, pointing his wand at me.

Bellatrix laughs again, even tilting her head back.

"Pathetic," she shrieks, flicking her wand.

The shackles on my wrists and ankles vanish. I try to get to my feet, but the aftereffects of the Cruciatus make my knees buckle. Instead, I crawl forward on all fours.

When I'm only a few feet away from Granger, I'm thrown backwards. My back slams into a shelf and a shower of heavy books crashes down on me. Panting, I try to protect my head. A thick tome still hits my temple and I see stars.

"That's enough," comes the Dark Lord's voice. "You had your fun, Bellatrix. We'll have more important things to attend to soon, but first Draco shall ask his questions. I want him to know why he failed so spectacularly at betraying me. And then he will answer *my* question before we put him out of his misguided perversion."

That's the moment when I realise that I won't leave this room alive, and my anger gives way to resignation and regret. I can only hope that it will be quick.

I blink through a veil of involuntary tears and face the Dark Lord. Something runs down my forehead again. This time, I'm sure it's blood. I make no move to wipe it away, just lift my chin.

"How did you know we were coming?" I repeat calmly.

I won't give him the satisfaction of begging for my life.

"Enlighten him, Bellatrix," the Dark Lord commands with a weak wave of his hand.

My aunt steps forward, tossing back her dark brown locks and eyeing me disapprovingly. She places a hand on my cheek and slowly slides it down my jawbone before reaching up and burying it in my hair. She applies pressure until I tilt my head back and look up at her, then she grins.

"Draco, Draco, Draco," she whispers, and tuts softly. "You should have figured we wouldn't take our eyes off Cissy as long as you were on the loose. It was so predictable that one day you would try to use her for your little games."

I close my eyes and exhale noisily through my nose.

"What did you do to her to get that information?" I ask through gritted teeth. "Did you torture her?"

"Wasn't necessary," Bellatrix replies succinctly. "After you abducted Nott's son, our Lord knew you would find out about the meeting sooner or later. Theodore was under surveillance anyway. His betrayal was only a matter of time. And it was also likely that he knew about the meeting. He was such a despicable snoop. Always has been, hasn't he, Rodolphus?"

"Oh yeah," he says. "Annoying little rat, that one."

Again, I have to look at Granger, who is completely frozen in his grip. I know how terrifying it must be for her to be at the mercy of his touch, but when our eyes meet, her gaze is clear. She looks exactly how I feel—resigned, but unwilling to show weakness. My brave witch.

"So you had mother followed?" I deduce with a snarl, shifting my attention back to Bellatrix.

"Of course, you stupid boy," she hisses, pulling my hair painfully. "And rightly so. This strange incident in Diagon Alley—my, how conspicuous! We knew immediately what it meant. What information your rebels were looking for. What other reason could there have been for ambushing Cissy, of all people, interrogating her and then letting her go? Maybe you were even there yourself, mh, Draco?"

I merely give her a weak sneer.

"Traitor!" she shrieks.

Her hand slips out of my hair and lands on my cheek with a sharp smack. My head jerks to the side, but I don't feel the pain. I'm already busy with the next terrible thought.

"So it was you," I blurt out angrily. "You left her in the hallway to die in her own blood, didn't you? You're such a piece of shit. She's your sister!"

"Tsk, couldn't risk her rallying to your support, could we?" Bellatrix snaps, no less furious. "And given that you actually dared to show up here tonight, it was the right decision. She doesn't deserve better. She's as miserable a traitor as you are. The honor of the Malfoys died with your father, Draco."

With these words, she spits in my face. Her saliva drips from my cheek onto my shoulder holster. I glance up at her in disgust. She only grins her toothless smile, then takes a step back and looks at her master.

He seems almost bored with our exchange.

"Well, have all your questions been answered?" he drawls. One of his spindly thin fingers taps impatiently on the armrest of his chair. "Then I'll repeat mine. Where - is - the boy?"

"Who are you talking about?" I scoff. "Speak plainly to me, *Tom*."

The three Death Eaters gasp in unison.

"How dare you—" Rabastan begins indignantly, but the Dark Lord waves him off.

"*Crucio*," he says.

Again, his voice is completely indifferent.

Pain floods my chest, limbs, brain and causes me to collapse on the dusty carpet once more. This time I can't suppress it: I let out a low, agonized groan.

As the curse wears off, I catch a glimpse of Granger struggling against Rodolphus' grip with all her might. His dagger has punctured the thin skin of her throat, causing a fine red line to seep into the collar of her long-sleeved top.

"Where's Potter?" Bellatrix bawls.

The heel of her ankle boot bores into my ribs.

"I haven't the faintest idea," I reply, panting.

It's a miracle that I manage to utter the entire sentence without my voice cracking.

"Liar!" she screams.

Knowing that denying her my attention will drive her insane, I deliberately direct my gaze back to the Dark Lord. His nostrils are flared—a sign that his patience is beginning to wear thin. I almost wish for it. If he snaps, maybe he'll at least kill me quickly and painlessly.

"What do you still need him for anyway?" I spit at him fearlessly. The days of formality and respect are clearly over. "Your ritual won't work because you don't have a faithful servant. There is no one truly devoted to you. You will die in the humiliating way you fear so much—like a weak old man. And there's nothing you can do about it."

For a moment, there is an oppressive silence.

"You are sorely mistaken," he says softly.

A shiver runs down my spine as a devious smile spreads across his face. It's more than menacing. He continues calmly.

"The ritual will be performed today. Everything is prepared."

I follow his gaze to the cauldron on the table in the center of the room. I feel sick.

Noticing my expression, the Dark Lord rises from the wing chair with a groan. He circles the table, running his fingers almost fondly over the rim of the cauldron, then gestures for me to stand and come closer. When I don't immediately obey, Rabastan steps up to me, grabs my upper arm and pulls me to my feet.

As I stumble forward, I feverishly think about who the two new *ingredients* might be. The bones of a powerful magical ancestor? Check. But the life of the most faithful servant and the soul of the greatest enemy? I was his most faithful servant, but now I'm useless. Potter is his greatest enemy, but he's not here. How is this supposed to work? My mind is having trouble keeping up.

I look down at the dirty grey liquid slowly simmering in the cauldron. The coloration alone leads me to believe that Peverell's bones have already been mixed in. Bile rushes up my throat and I can barely suppress a gag.

"Who?" I ask hoarsely.

I'm no longer able to form coherent sentences.

Rabastan's grip on my upper arm tightens. A bad sign.

"Well," the Dark Lord whispers, bringing his face closer to mine.

I stiffen, but don't shy away from him. He's repulsive, but unfortunately I'm used to it. The past nine months have not made me forget how it feels to be around him, distracting and therapeutic as they have been.

"Do you really think you deserve to know who has proven to be my most faithful servant?" His upper lip curls up to reveal a row of sharp, yellow teeth as he studies my face. He looks amused. "Hardly. You'll die *before* they show up, Draco, one way or another. As for my greatest enemy: if you're not willing to tell me where Harry Potter is or if he's even in this very building, we'll try the second and the third choice first. What do I have to lose?"

A claw-like fingernail traces my cheek. My hackles raise and I suck in a shaky breath.

"The third choice," the Dark Lord continues, "is of course you, my boy. No one has ever fooled and disappointed me as much as you have. A shame. You had so much potential. Do you want to guess who the second choice is? I'll give you a hint. She's killed more of my followers than anyone else, even though she's just an impure, worthless Mudblood who doesn't belong in this world. A superb enemy indeed."

"No," I croak, and this time it's actually accompanied by a gagging sound.

Rabastan pushes me around so that I have to face Granger. Her eyes are still wide open. I can see everything I feel in them: pain, fear, a deep grief for a future that we will never have, especially not together.

Bellatrix steps forward and trains her wand on Granger, canceling the *Silencio*. When she speaks, her voice is hoarse but firm.

"It's all right," she says. "It's okay, it's fine, everything will be okay."

Her sustained succession of reassurances, which, of course, have no effect on my racing heart and unbridled anger, makes all three Lestranges laugh. The Dark Lord, on the other hand, is very still, looking down at Granger as if she were a most disgusting creature.

With a firm tug, I shake off Rabastan and take a step forward, but Bellatrix's wand stops me. Her face turns serious.

"You fool!" she hisses. "As if it wasn't bad enough that you fucked that filthy Mudblood, you're also acting like a besotted idiot. You are a disgrace to this family and the centuries-old

line of respectable witches and wizards of which you are the privileged descendant."

I lean against her wand tip and bare my teeth.

"I don't give a fuck about this so-called *family*," I growl. "If you so much as lay a finger on her, I'll strangle you with my bare hands and—"

"Draco."

My gaze snaps to Granger.

"It's okay. Just occlude yourself. Please. You don't have to endure this."

She says it calmly. Much too calmly. There's not a glimmer of hope left in her eyes. The realization takes my breath away.

I know that she's right; that this situation is hopeless and we're both going to die anyway. In the library of my family home, of all places. The place where I used to love to spend my time. Back then, in a different world.

"How cute," Bellatrix screeches. "As if you were her dog. Are you a dog, Draco? Will you be a good boy and do as the Mudblood tells you?"

Rabastan woofs and Rodolphus bursts into laughter once more.

"He can still save her," the Dark Lord's voice sounds behind me.

I can hardly believe that I have simply blocked out his presence in the last few seconds.

That must be love.

Bittersweet, the way this thought crosses my mind.

I sway, torn between Granger's prompting and the loophole implied by the Dark Lord's words. It's probably just another trap, but my stupid heart wants to believe him so badly.

"How?" I breathe desperately.

"If you tell us where Potter is, we won't need your Mudblood," the Dark Lord explains, stepping next to Granger to look down at her. "I might even choose to spare you both. Consider it an act of kindness. A reward for your commitment over the last few years and for your honesty."

There's that devilish grin on his face again. The last part of his statement is undoubtedly a lie. He's just playing with us. No one will be spared tonight. Especially not the Mudblood and her traitorous lover.

"I don't know where Potter is," I choke out breathlessly.

The Dark Lord gives me a mock disappointed look.

"Bellatrix," he says, shaking his head. "Let's give Draco an incentive to think a little harder."

Bellatrix giggles in delight, steps forward and points her wand at Granger. Before I can react in any way, the incantation falls from her lips.

"*Crucio!*"

Granger collapses and whimpers as the curse shakes her body. With a disgusted grunt, Rodolphus pulls his hand out of her hair and her head hits the floor with a breathtakingly loud *plong*. She lets out a quiet sob.

"No!" I shout and tear away from Rabastan for the second time.

I leap forward and fall on my knees next to Granger, then pull her halfway onto my lap, carefully cradling her head. There's blood on my fingers. The fall must have caused a laceration on the back of her head.

But even though I actually start begging at this horrible sight, Bellatrix doesn't lift the curse. I don't know what I'm saying or for how long I'm holding Granger's convulsing body in my arms. All I can think about is that for the second fucking time in her life she is being tortured by my own aunt and all I can do is watch. Again, I can't help her.

Impuissance threatens to engulf me.

"I don't know where Potter is!"

I yell it as loud as I can. What is now running down my cheeks is hot and tastes salty.

"Please," I whisper, leaning in to press my lips to Granger's forehead. "I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry."

"Enough," the Dark Lord says.

Bellatrix lowers her wand in disappointment. There is total silence for a few seconds, save for my frantic breathing and Granger's quiet sobs.

"If he prefers to pretend he doesn't know, then we'll move on. He had his chance. Prepare her for the ritual. Take her soul."

"No, no, no," I gasp as Rabastan and Rodolphus simultaneously grab one of my arms and yank me to my feet and thus away from Granger.

She lies limp on the floor. A lonely tear escapes the corner of her eye and drips onto the dark carpet. Her sleeve rode up as she writhed in pain. Now I can see three quarters of this terrible scar, which is largely my fault.

d b l o o d

Yes, I guess all of this is indeed my fault.

My whole body starts shaking as our eyes meet one last time, then Granger sighs softly and closes hers. And even though she asked me to, I can't bring myself to erect my Occlumency barriers. If I can't help her, at least I'll stand by her. Consciously. To the bitter end.

Bellatrix moves into position and raises her wand. I have no idea what nasty curse it takes to take someone's soul. The Dark Lord didn't fill me in on the details when he told me about the ritual, and probably for good reason.

I instinctively hold my breath.

Suddenly, everything happens very quickly.

Rodolphus drops my arm to stand next to Bellatrix. Nothing but morbid curiosity is the reason, I'm sure. Rabastan also loosens his grip, if only a little. And then I feel something brush against my shoulder. It's just a quick touch, just a subtle nudge, but I know exactly who must be responsible and what that means. I don't hesitate for a second.

When Bellatrix opens her mouth and utters the Latin incantation, which I pay no heed to, I wrench my arm free and throw myself in front of Granger. Without thinking twice. Right in the line of fire.

My gaze flicks from the Dark Lord to Bellatrix. Both faces show the same look of incredulous surprise.

Bellatrix throws her arm up and her voice falters at the last word, but the curse has already left her wand. It doesn't quite miss me, but doesn't really hit me either. Instead, it grazes my rib cage just below my armpit. The fabric of my long-sleeved top sizzles as a part of the curse seeps through. The rest of it slams into the shelf behind me, accompanied by a massive blast of dark magic.

Pain.

It feels like someone is trying to cut my heart out with a blunt knife. I gasp and reflexively press a hand to my chest.

The next time I blink, I'm on the floor. I felt neither the fall nor the impact.

Pain and oxygen starvation.

My head lolls to the side, allowing me to watch what happens next.

Weasley suddenly stands in the middle of the room, a rather deadly look on his face. Rabastan lies lifeless at his feet. How did he do that?

Bellatrix screams. She and Rodolphus attack Weasley with a volley of curses. The Dark Lord turns on one foot. Is he trying to Disapparate?

Pain, oxygen starvation, numb limbs.

A black-haired figure appears out of nowhere. With a shimmer, the Invisibility Cloak flutters to the floor as Potter steps forward and trains his wand on the Dark Lord.

I don't hear him say anything, and yet a flash of green light shoots out of his wand.

My field of vision is starting to fray at the edges.

Pain, oxygen starvation, numb limbs, blood in my mouth.

The last thing I see are millions of little black and grey scraps and flakes hovering motionless in the air. They look like the ashes of a big fire, except that they don't whirl around; don't fall to the floor. How peculiar.

Then my heart stops beating.

Chapter End Notes

Oh, I can practically visualize those of you who were already in despair by the end of the last chapter throwing up your hands in horror. I'm so sorry! I know the cliffhangers are mean. Stay strong, we're almost there! (Only one chapter and the epilogue left, can you believe it?) I can't thank you enough for your lovely feedback and all this appreciation. It means so much to me that we will end this journey together. *sniffle* Have a nice weekend and hugs. ♡

37. STEEL GREY

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

37. STEEL GREY

I slowly open my eyes, only to immediately squeeze them shut again. It's way too bright.

White, white, white.

Am I dead? Is that the only thing you see when you're dead? An eternal, all-pervasive light, so bright it even hurts to blink? How unpleasant.

My neck protests as I turn my head. I allow myself another cautious look.

Mint green and steel grey.

Ah, this is better. I heave a sigh of relief.

As I focus on the sterile-looking metal, partially covered by some kind of gown fabric, I become aware of more and more sensations.

My throat is sandpaper dry and my tongue feels furred, but apart from the pinpricks behind my conjunctiva caused by the bright light, I don't feel any pain. My limbs are weightless. I have no contact with the ground or any other surface. There's a dull pounding in my ears.

Death isn't as bad as I've always imagined it to be.

I slowly let my gaze wander and finally discover two figures who have their backs to me. One is dressed in white, the other in black, but they have the same hair color. A pretty white blond. One might think that the two women were related. But they are not. Not even distantly.

This single finding triggers a whole series of insights.

First: Apparently I'm not dead after all.

Second: Right next to me, or rather right next to my sickbed, because that's what I seem to be lying in, are my mother and Luna Lovegood. This in turn makes me suspect that the latter healed the former and that I'm in the trauma room of Camp Black.

Third: If I'm at Resistance headquarters, it probably means the battle at the Manor is over.

Fourth: And wow, I'm *actually* not dead.

I laboriously clear my throat, causing both my mother and Lovegood to spin around. Whereas Lovegood immediately presses two fingers to my neck to feel my pulse and simultaneously begins muttering diagnostic spells, my mother rushes to my other side and grabs my hand.

"Oh darling, you're awake," she sobs.

I feel like I have cotton in my ears because it sounds more like *udalinjuwaig*, but I still know what she's trying to tell me.

I open my mouth, but nothing comes out except a hoarse croak. A blink of an eye later, Lovegood holds a glass of water to my lips. I sip greedily, gratefully meeting her warm gaze.

"And now a Pepper-Up," she chirps with a kind smile.

The water glass is replaced by a small vial and I swallow obediently once more. My hearing immediately returns to normal and my limbs become heavier. Suddenly, I can clearly feel the mattress beneath me. My vision sharpens noticeably and the light is no longer as bright. Thank Merlin.

And the first thing I say is, "Granger?"

My mother lets out a little snuffle, but Lovegood gives a relieved laugh. She continues to evaluate her diagnostics as she answers me.

"She's fine. As far as I know, she's interrogating some of the Death Eaters who were arrested today, but she should be here any minute."

I suck in a sharp breath and my eyes flutter shut.

Relief doesn't even begin to describe what washes over me at Lovegood's words. The feeling is much more intense, much more powerful. I bathe in it for a moment, then wrap my fingers around my mother's hand and squeeze it gently.

"The Dark Lord?" is my next question.

When she answers, my mother's voice is still heavy with tears.

"Harry Potter is here to answer your questions, darling."

I open my eyes in surprise and quickly survey the rest of the room, which I haven't paid any attention to before.

It's only now that I realize I'm lying in the same bed Granger was lying in after Dolohov hit her with his freezing spell. Hence the calm and quiet. The actual trauma room that (as I know very well) stretches out in front of the door of this private room is probably pure chaos. That I'm here must mean I'm the one who sustained the most serious injury. Contrary to expectations, that doesn't even bother me. In fact, I'm glad none of the other rebels are worse off than I am. I don't want to think about the death toll yet. I'll probably find out soon enough.

My eyes zero in on a tousled head of black hair. When Potter notices how much I have to crane my neck to look at him, he slowly steps closer. He stops at the foot of my bed and gives me an exhausted grin.

"He's dead," he says. "For good."

I exhale shakily. It takes me a few seconds to process this statement, then my lips curl into a small smile.

"Well done, Chosen One," I squeeze out.

Potter adjusts his glasses and clears his throat.

"I have to apologize to you, Malfoy," he says seriously. My throat tightens. "For taking so long to intervene. And for the fact that you were injured so badly. Admittedly, I was hoping you'd distract Bellatrix in some other way than simply stepping into the line of fire. I probably should have known better."

For a moment there is silence. Potter suddenly seems unable to look me in the eye. He shifts his gaze to the headboard of the bed.

"My only justification is that I knew an element of surprise was our only chance. I want to thank you for that. If you hadn't kept your cool and lied for us to the very end, an opportunity would never have presented itself. This time, you are the hero of the story."

I swallow hard and slowly shake my head.

"Nonsense," I reply gruffly. "It was our Anti-Disapparation-Perimeters that tipped the scales. Before I lost consciousness, the Dark Lord attempted to Disapparate. So thanks to Granger I'd say, after all it was her idea."

My modesty makes Potter sigh. Lovegood makes room for him to come a little closer. He looks me in the face again.

"No," he says, shaking his head. At first I don't understand what he means by that, but then he continues. "You didn't just lose consciousness. In fact, you were dead."

I wince and frown. He rubs the back of his neck with one hand and gives me a contrite look.

"I should probably also thank you for deciding to come back to us. And Luna for keeping her nerves when I brought you here. Hermione would have killed me if you had bitten the dust after throwing yourself in front of her. Especially since it was pure luck that Bellatrix bugged up the incantation. If she had hit you right, you wouldn't have stood a chance. What you did was bloody brave, Malfoy. We are all very grateful to you."

We stare into each other's eyes for a few seconds. Then a jolt goes through Potter's body and he extends his hand. I look down at it. It takes a moment for me to understand what he wants from me. Surprised, I let go of my mother's hand before slowly raising my arm.

We shake hands in silence. I'm speechless.

Lovegood, having the right instinct as always, steps forward and resolves the somewhat awkward situation by beginning to explain what happened.

"Actually, several things were responsible for us being able to bring you back," she explains patiently. "On the one hand, of course, the fact that the curse only grazed you. On the other hand, the protective properties of our combat gear. Your breastplate absorbed most of the magic. And last but not least, the circumstance that Bellatrix *buggered up* the incantation, as Harry so eloquently put it. She didn't finish it."

"Ah," I mumble. "This curse, whatever it was, was meant to take the victim's soul. What happened instead?"

"I can only make assumptions," Lovegood says with a shrug. "My diagnostic spells showed parameters that someone having a massive heart attack would display. And there was multi-organ failure. Since we didn't have a textbook solution ready, we treated you intuitively. First we cast the *Rennervate* a couple of times, then we pepped you up with all sorts of things until your system stabilized. Long-term damage cannot be ruled out, but I don't want to speculate. Time will tell. I've never seen anything like it. It was *indeed* pure luck that our treatments worked. Probably only because Harry brought you here immediately. You weren't gone more than a minute and a half, but that was a few hours ago. We're glad you're awake now."

That's just unreal. Have I seriously contested Potter's title? 'Draco Malfoy, the man who lived.' Doesn't sound too bad.

"I've never heard it's possible to bring people back from the dead," I whisper. "Why doesn't that work with the *Avada*?"

"It's a completely different principle," Lovegood explains with a wave of her hand. "The *Avada* is called 'The Killing Curse' for a reason. It's meant to kill for good. You, on the other hand, died as a result of another curse, the primary goal of which was not your death. Ultimately, what we did is comparable to Muggle methods. They bring people back from the dead all the time, at least when they're too young to die."

"Is that so?" my mother asks, quite stunned.

I let out an equally astonished huff.

"Thanks Luna," I finally murmur, and she gives me one of her bright smiles.

Potter clears his throat once more and shifts his weight from one leg to the other. He probably has a lot of important things to do, so I give him great credit for being here and patiently answering my questions. The next one will be my last anyway.

"What about the supposedly most faithful servant?" I ask. "The Dark Lord said there was someone. Who did he mean? A Death Eater? Or—"

I don't dare finish the sentence. Even at the Manor, I had the horrible thought that there might be a traitor within the Resistance.

"We're assuming it was a bluff," Potter replies, rolling his eyes. "We had similar thoughts, but the interrogations so far indicate that he intended to use Bellatrix. She was his last resort, so to speak. We don't know if she ever volunteered or if he just kept her in the dark until the end. However, we can no longer ask her. She's dead, too."

There's a telltale flicker in his eyes. Out of respect for my mother, I don't give voice to the follow-up question that pops into my head. I think I know the answer anyway. I'd bet that Granger was the one who killed Bellatrix. Excellent. If anyone deserved to wreak revenge on Bellatrix, it was her.

Suddenly, the door slams open and the typical sounds of a healing facility drift in. With them, three people enter the room.

Ronald Weasley, Ginny and Blaise.

Oh, the relief is back. I look from one to the other to make sure they are all unscathed. They fucking are. Blaise even grins at me. But before I can say a single word, an angry, authoritarian voice rings out in the trauma room.

"Where the fuck is he?"

My mother's eyes widen in concern; Lovegood cocks an eyebrow in mild amusement; Potter sighs and rubs his face. He steps away from my bed and leans back against a wall. It looks a bit like he doesn't want to miss the spectacle.

And there she is.

In her usual whirl of black robes, she sweeps into the room and fixes her dark gaze on me. A few strands of hair have come loose from her bun and are dancing wildly around her head. There's blood on her cheek. I conclude that it's her own, because now I remember the laceration on the back of her head. Her wand hand trembles and her combat gear is a little askew, but her eyes spit fire.

Uh-oh.

"You!" she hisses.

Granger stalks towards the bed, staring at me like a predator at its prey. In any other situation, the sight would turn me on, but right now it's a little unsettling. When she reaches me, her hands land on the pillow on either side of my head. She leans over me and glares at me menacingly.

"Easy, Hermione," Weasley admonishes, still sounding quite amused.

She completely ignores him.

"What the hell were you thinking?" she spits at me.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," I reply wearily.

I have a hard time not smiling stupidly at her. I really am a besotted idiot, as Bellatrix so brilliantly assessed. To distract myself, I let my gaze wander extensively over her face. Her freckles, her lips, the cute worry line on her forehead.

Mine, mine, mine. Forever and ever. At least if I have my way.

"How dare you throw yourself in front of me and take that curse for me?" she growls. "Have you gone completely insane?"

I wet my chapped lips.

"If I remember correctly," I begin slowly, "then I said I'd happily risk my life if it might save yours. That's what I did."

"That was reckless and stupid of you," she snorts promptly. "You could have been dead!"

"I *was* dead," I deadpan.

Oops, that was clearly the wrong thing to say. Granger pales visibly. For a few seconds she just breathes hotly into my face.

"Gods, as soon as you're on your feet, I'll kill you myself," she finally hisses, but her bottom lip is trembling.

"Looking forward to it."

"Shut up, Malfoy."

A "Make me!" is on the tip of my tongue, but I pull myself together.

"All right. One last question."

It's gotten pretty quiet in the room. None of the others makes even the slightest peep. I swallow before opening my mouth again.

"I'm still alive. Or again. So why exactly are you scolding me?"

We stare at each other for a moment, then Granger takes a shaky breath. The ire fades from her eyes and is replaced by a telltale sheen. Ah, my strong, stubborn witch. I've seen through you.

"Why am I...? Because I love you, you git!"

She practically snarls it in my face, but her voice cracks on the last word.

My heart skips a beat. I suspect it would be dancing if it hadn't already been through so bloody much today. A faint smile curls my lips.

"Oh," I murmur, grabbing a strand of her hair and gently twirling it around my finger. "I'm glad we're on the same page for once."

Granger makes a strangled sound, a mixture of an incredulous laugh and a sob, then crawls onto the bed and snuggles up to me. I wrap my arms around her as best I can.

My face is in her hair. Her body is flush against mine. Her lips find my jaw. I've never felt better. I inhale her scent and sigh contentedly.

"It's so touching," Weasley groans, "I might throw up."

Then there's a soft *oomph*, which leads me to believe that someone elbowed him in the ribs. I bet on Blaise or Ginny.

I peek past Granger's head and see that Weasley, despite his words, is grinning broadly. Ginny has tears in her eyes. Blaise looks absolutely delighted. Potter smiles sheepishly. Luna beams. My mother is totally confused, but how could I blame her? She will quickly get used to the new circumstances, I'm sure.

I run one of my hands up Granger's back until it rests between her shoulder blades and hold her even tighter. Then I bury my face in her hair again.

"Please don't tell me you're considering jumping," I call out through the crisp morning air. "I would do it all over again, of course, but right now I'm not particularly keen on another heroic feat."

Granger slowly turns to face me, then hops off the edge of the roof.

We smile at each other in silence for a few seconds.

I was bed-stricken for four days.

Four days in which the Resistance captured all remaining Death Eaters. Four days in which an interim government was formed, which will now decide on the prison sentences of those very Death Eaters. Four days in which the wizarding world was in an extraordinary delirium of joy.

I've made a full recovery, thanks to Lovegood.

Granger slowly approaches.

When she is directly in front of me, she stands on tiptoe and gently places her lips on the corner of my mouth. My hands automatically drift to her waist. I pull her close.

"I see you're up and about again," she murmurs. "I've been wondering how much longer I'll be stuck here. After all, we've already said goodbye to the roof."

"We can say goodbye to the roof a second time if you like," I reply innocently, rubbing my nose against hers.

"Don't be so cocky. Luna said you have to take it easy."

"Oh, I have all the time in the world to take it easy."

She smiles against my mouth.

"I love you," I whisper.

I saved those words for a private moment. It wasn't even difficult for me to wait out the four days, after all, from now on, I can say them as often as I want.

Granger blinks up at me. Her gaze is so warm that a sigh escapes me.

"I'm glad we're on the same page for once," she replies teasingly.

I smirk at her. Our lips meet again. I kiss her idly, lazily, as if I had all the time in the world for that, too. And basically that's true.

"So what's the plan?" I ask as she pulls away from me. "I guess St. Mungo's wouldn't mind getting rid of its subtenants. Where will we go?"

Granger gives me a sly look.

"Oh, I already have an idea."

Of course she has.

I raise an eyebrow, but she doesn't bother to explain. There's a mischievous glint in her eyes. I decide to let her surprise me. And why not?

It's exciting. *She* is exciting.

My mystery.

I hope she will never stop talking to me in riddles.

Chapter End Notes

Um, folks? More than 450 kudos even before the last chapter? I literally had tears in my eyes when I saw it. You guys are amazing, thank you so much! *sniffle*

EXIT officially ends here. What a journey! But please, please, please don't skip the epilogue because there's a lot of love in it and it's super important to the story. You'll know why when the time comes. If you want to sweeten your time until the upload and haven't read it yet, then feel free to take a look at my latest oneshot: [The Epitome of Hot](#). Hugs, hugs, hugs! ♥

Epilogue

Chapter Notes

For the perfect reading experience, I strongly recommend re-reading the prologue beforehand. You will not regret it! ♥

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Epilogue

How do you know you're still alive?

Perhaps because the balmy breeze carries the sweet scent of summer into your nostrils and golden rays of sunshine peek through the treetops, caressing your skin and making you squint as you look up at the azure sky.

Or because every step you take on the lush green meadow feels light, for your whole body is rested, completely relaxed thanks to the little nap you took in the red-white striped hammock.

Maybe because the laughter of your friends is louder than the chirping of the birds, which in turn tells you where to look for them and makes you climb the stairs to the large terrace where they seem to have gathered.

No doubt because Hermione Granger is wearing a colorful, floral sundress as she steps through the patio door, followed closely by Ginny Weasley, who is balancing a baking tray in her hands and beaming from ear to ear. And because there's a flickering candle on the Slytherin green cake that you'll probably have to blow out.

I run a hand through my hair, abashed, insecure.

For the first time in ten years my birthday is being celebrated and I don't know how to act.

Today I turn twenty-seven. Almost two years ago I defected to the Resistance. Nine months later we defeated Tom Marvolo Riddle. It's been over a year now and I've never been occluded since.

I let my gaze wander over those present, all of whom are looking at me expectantly. Harry and Pansy, Ginny and Blaise, Luna and Neville, Ron and Theo. And Granger, of course.

She takes my hand and pulls me over to the table. As feared, she asks me to blow out the candle and make a wish. Basically it's pointless because I already have everything I've ever

dreamed of. Fate was kind to me. Luck was on my side. I lean forward anyway and oblige her. Maybe there is a wish after all. Just a small, last, humble one?

The others applaud as the flame goes out. I only have eyes for *her*, though, and how could I not? She looks absolutely stunning.

Granger's skin is sun-kissed and covered in freckles. No longer because she has to be on watch so often, but because we spend every nice day in the gardens of the Manor. Her hair is curly, not as wild as it was in our school days, but it has regained some of its bounce. These days it's honey-blonde, bleached by the sun or maybe thanks to her magic, I'm not sure.

And she smiles. With her mouth and her pink lips, but also with her eyes, light brown and warm. She stands on tiptoe and kisses me.

"Happy Birthday, Malfoy."

I tighten my grip on her waist like she might vanish into thin air if I don't hold on for dear life. Most days, being with her still feels like a dream to me. She squeezes my hand reassuringly, as if she knows what's on my mind.

"Fancy a walk?" I ask as the others dig into Ginny's cake.

And Granger nods.

Side by side, we stroll down the marble stairs and into the wildflower garden we laid out this spring. It's a paradise of colors, scents and honeybees. A little oasis. A sanctuary. I think the garden becomes the Manor quite well. Even my mother praised it on her last visit.

Why the Manor of all places? Well, you could call it a coping strategy of sorts. Or an act of *rebellion*. Proof of how *resistant* we are. But there are also practical reasons. As a matter of fact, it's the only place where there's enough room for all of us. Everyone has their own wing, but nobody has to be alone unless they want to be. It was Granger's idea. Naturally.

I purposefully head for a small fountain, the contents of which reflect the sunbeams and make the white gravel shine even more. In fact, it's so bright that Granger has to blink a few times, which plays into my hands. So she doesn't see what's coming and can't bolt head over heels.

I seize the moment and quickly produce the small object I've been carrying around with me all day from my trouser pocket, then I grab her hand and slip the ring onto her finger.

It's neither a classic engagement ring nor an old family heirloom. I don't want to see anything on her that has the Malfoy crest on it. I wanted something new. Something that I picked especially for her and that can't be found anywhere else. Custom-made. This ring is exactly that. A delicate, golden band (because she loves gold and no lioness wears silver) with an oval-shaped, smooth-cut moonstone. Now that the sun is falling on the gem, it oscillates in a wide variety of hues.

Turquoise, Pale Pink, Magenta, Seashell White, Lavender, Sea Green, Silver Grey, Dove Blue, Lilac, Opal, Mint Green, Aquamarine, Pearl.

Granger's ring finger is now radiating as many colors as she has brought into my life. Nowadays there is no darkness, no black. Everything is colorful and bright and cheerful.

She stares at her hand as if she's been Stunned.

"Draco," she whispers before her eyes dart up to my face.

Ah, there it is. My given name.

Continuing to call each other by our last names has become our new shared *kink*. It's equal parts old habit and affectionate teasing. Our given names, on the other hand, are reserved for the more serious moments. The fact that she just used mine tells me that she knows what this ring means.

Clever witch.

I clear my throat and put my hands in my trouser pockets.

"I'm not going to debate this with you," I begin in my lecture voice, which I rarely use these days. "It's my birthday and that's what I wished for when I blew out the candle."

Although there's a telltale sheen in her eyes, one of her brows and the corner of her mouth lift at the same time. Her dimple appears, making me sigh.

"That's not exactly how a birthday wish works," she notes.

"Well, I don't care *how* it works," I reply with a nonchalant shrug. "I just wanted to make sure *that* it works."

She still looks at me in bewilderment. Her facial expression is unreadable and that makes me a little nervous. I swallow hard.

"It—It doesn't mean it has to happen anytime soon," I stammer, averting my eyes. "It just means it would make me very happy. Some day. Whenever you want. And it means we belong together. Because we do."

My voice shakes at the last few words, but I bite back the "right?" that's on the tip of my tongue. When it comes to Granger, I'm still a pathetic moron who can't believe he truly deserves her. This incredible woman. This mystery.

"Ask me," she says seriously.

My gaze snaps back to her face.

"What?" I ask, confused.

"Ask me to marry you," she clarifies with an extensive eye roll. "Do it the way it should be done—properly. Otherwise you won't get a *proper* answer. And I think it would do you good to hear it, with all due respect to your eccentric way of urging birthday wishes to come true."

After everything we've been through together, she's never unlearned how to speak authoritatively to me. She doesn't have to do it often anymore, thank Merlin, but when she does, it's still impressive. (And besides, I quite like it.)

She has mercy on me and takes my hand. Her fingers squeeze mine, then she pulls me closer.

"Ask me, Draco," she repeats patiently, blinking up at me expectantly.

I take a deep breath and gather all my courage. Then, obediently, I bend my head down and rest my forehead against hers.

"Will you marry me?" I whisper, losing myself in my favorite shade of brown.

"Yes," she replies without missing a beat.

I exhale shakily.

"When?" I ask promptly and she laughs.

It's a beautiful sound. Clear and free and alive. I adore it. Every day that I get to hear it is a gift.

"Today, tomorrow, next week, whenever you want," she says before standing on tiptoe and wrapping her arms around my neck. "We don't have to wait. I don't see why *I* would have to wait. I love you. And yes, we belong together."

My heart is beating so hard that my pulse is suddenly louder than the pounding in my ears. It almost aches, this pure happiness.

The balmy breeze carries the sweet scent of summer into *my* nostrils and the golden rays of sunshine caress my skin and make me squint.

Every step *I* take on the lush green meadow feels light as I walk back to the terrace. There's a hand in mine. It feels incredibly good.

It's *my* friends who start cheering as Granger shows them the ring on her finger with a mischievous smirk. The cork of an elf wine pops. There's even a rather awkward group hug.

I'm the one Hermione Granger looks at like I'm the best thing that has ever happened to her. Whom she tells five times that afternoon that she loves him. (Yes, I'm counting because I'm a pathetic moron and that's okay.)

My name is Draco Malfoy.

And I'm fucking alive.

Chapter End Notes

And that's a wrap! Needless to say, I cried my eyes out several times while writing, proofreading and translating the epilogue. I'm such a lost cause.

Now it's done. EXIT is fully uploaded and I can't believe it. In June 2022, I was walking to work on a rainy summer morning and had a vision of Draco surrendering in front of a pitch-black guard tent in similar weather. Shortly thereafter I wrote the first sentences and this story has accompanied me ever since. I spent hours and hours writing, proofreading, editing and translating every (!) week for over a year, but it was worth it.

Your feedback in the form of comments, kudos and bookmarks is incredible. I never thought people would like EXIT, but it makes me so happy. I want to say THANK YOU a thousand times. You are wonderful.

If you haven't already, please subscribe to [REBEL](#) so you don't miss the updates. The first chapter is coming soon, but the prologue is already online.

The only thing left for me to say is: It was such a party! I hope we read each other again sometime.

Hugs, hugs, hugs! ♥

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!